Catalysis

by aventria, iluxia

Summary

Work in progress. "Search for the value of that which you seek, for alchemy already knows." Alchemy knew what Edward wanted when his fingertips touched that circle, but Edward did not yet understand how value differs from price, how equivalent differs from equal. The Gate calculates with one small difference, and Trisha Elric lives - but the cost may be too high for Edward to afford.

[ Originally published on FFN 16 June 2009. A very detailed, very slow exploration of the creators’
headcanon through Edward's eyes - and sometimes Roy's - with lengthy discourses on alchemical theory, juicy helpings of political intrigue, a few near-death experiences here and there, and maybe an assassination attempt or two. Explores in detail the political and social spheres of Amestris and beyond in the context of Roy's ladder-climbing, aided by Edward's presence as a researcher. You could consider this a fix-it, but it's more like a highly involved worldbuilding reboot. Long-running, takes time between updates, but chapters are 20-30k long. Be prepared to indulge and suspend your disbelief. Leave canon at the doorstep; this is something else entirely.

Notes

NOTICE: Yes, Catalysis lives! No, it's not going to be scrapped. Catalysis will now be housed & updated on AO3 only. Makes it easier for me to up chapters.

PERTINENT LINKS:
➤ Detailed references can be found here, as well as at the end of each relevant chapter.
➤ Pinterest page for inspirations & sundry related to our worldbuilding!
➤ The story can also be found at Fanfiction.Net where it was first archived. (FFN is no longer being updated.)

A NOTE TO READERS:
While I have been very fortunate with some amazing readers who have stayed with this story for years, there have also been a fair number of those who have not liked this work. 'Don't like, don't read' is a good policy to abide by in these trying times, folks. If you dislike what you are seeing, there is such a thing called a 'Back' button. No need to set fires. I acknowledge that there are issues discussed herein that may be sensitive to some people, but I cannot please everyone, nor do I aim to do so. We write this story firstly to satisfy ourselves; if we did otherwise, this story would have been long dead. When you read this, remember that like life, no one in this story is perfect: everyone is flawed, people will do things you do not like, and not everyone will agree with you all the time - nor do they have to! Read the tags, I update them every chapter with appropriate warnings, from the important things (Morally Grey Characters and Angst) to the mundane (such as the fact that this will be a very, very slow burn). So if you are going to comment and say that the pace moves too slow, please shelve it and save yourself the effort. You've been warned. Don't like, don't read. - On the other hand, if it is constructive criticism you have, bring it! We'd love to hear from you & exchange ideas; we are always open to discourse if done in a purposeful, contributive manner. Don't be a stranger!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Even as you look into the abyss, the abyss looks also into you.
( Friedrich Nietzsche )

~

Something.

There was something quite captivating about how the blood seeped into the cracks of their rundown dank basement. Past the whiteness of chalk and down the veins of the hundred-atom-wide crevasses, it flowed and spread like a plague pushing itself upon the cleanliness that was its victim. Even in the half-darkness he saw its path quite clearly, a gleaming crimson red in the bluish-white glow of the still crackling circle. But by this time reality was lost on him—the pain the pain the pain

my leg is not there my arm is not there

was eating him from inside out and there was nothing he could do about it, nothing at all. Left there lying prone on cold, cold stone he stared at the still form of his brother across the basement and he felt a speckle of relief. At least, he told himself with a dead inward laugh, Al will live on.

His mother too. Bare-naked in the middle of the circle and splayed for all to see but whole and breathing and alive. They had done it—he had done it. He allowed himself one moment of basking in the enormity of what he had accomplished almost entirely single-handedly. Al had backed out midway, left the house and ran out somewhere only to come back right when he was about to perform the transmutation. He vaguely remembered his younger brother’s scream of warning as the sputter of energy surged into life with one touch on the edge of the circle—Alphonse had not believed in their theory enough to try it out on their own very dead mother.
But he had.

It was his theory, after all, a solid and fibrous thing. It lived (which for some reason his brother did not see) and it breathed its own air and it grew itself until it was complete. He had his father to thank for the basis of it (if he ever got out of this mess, which was at the moment looking highly unlikely) but most of the work he really did on his own. All of it in the end paid out.

The blood was beginning to ebb and his vision was beginning to blink out. As time passed—a minute, a minute, a minute—his awareness meshed with memory and the preconscious, a ton’s worth of jumbled information and images as head-splitting as his two-time trip into the Truth. (Bullshit; that was no Truth.)

The very last thing he remembered before the creeping black engulfed him was a frantic voice somewhere in the distance and warm arms wrapping around him.

“Hold on,” the voice said, “you’ll be fine.”

~

And so very rudely he was jarred awake by a loud whirring he could hear even in the drowning pain. What that was he had absolutely no idea, though he was not quite sure he wanted to find out. There were voices but sometimes they faded too, just as the darkness faded into the haze. The constant whirring noise was all that stayed.

The pain was somewhere below the sounds. The pain was there, a saturated but ever present monster hiding its ugly head inside its little cave of bones, and that was all he did know.

it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts make it stop make it stop make it stop

For some amount of time that seemed incredibly long to his pain-inebriated brain, he floated side to side with these waves of appearing-disappearing noises. Those were the only outer realities he had. He had no idea who he was or where he was or why he was here, only that he was, and that was more than enough for him, because he really could not process much else.

As time slowly crept by, he became aware that there were other noises too—crackle-and-boom in the background, an insistent discordant pattering on glass, boots on wooden floor walking about with heavy thuds for steps. And voices. The voices were getting clearer and clearer, and for the first time since emerging from the black nothingness into the haze, his mind formed a thought, an image, coherent and relevant to whatever his current situation was.

Alphonse.

Alphonse.

Alphonse.

Each echo of the name in the stuffed emptiness of his head tugged him back, closer towards the sounds, closer towards the light, farther away from the darkness.

And then he was screaming—a loud, hoarse scream as his senses fully woke and the pain slammed hard and fast as a tidal wave against his brain, and it kept slamming one after another after another, and he kept screaming, and screaming even louder—
The base of his head ached and added only to this cacophony, and the ache spread like dribbling water on parched land, upwards until he could feel the weight of the world in between his eyes. Such was his agony that he failed to notice the hands on his chest keeping him against the bed. 

*it hurts it hurts my leg it hurts my arm it hurts Alphonse Alphonse*

...he failed to hear the voices, the jumble of words he was given until the height of the pain peaked and shot past his threshold, and all he felt then was a dragging, stiff, light-headed numbness. There was a massive easing of the ache—now only an invisible weight—in his head as the cacophony quieted and the scramble of impulses ended. Coherent but not quite, he heaved breath after glorious breath into his starving lungs. He tried to open his eyes but found that he could not—there was a wet towel draped over them.

“...calmed down,” a frail voice, somewhere to his right, “He probably can’t feel the pain anymore.”

“Do you think he can talk?” somewhere to his left.

The one on his right—*Pi... Pinea... Pineapp... Pinako?*—gave a snort, “You’re asking for too much. The boy just lost his arm and leg.”

He opened his mouth to speak but all he could do was pant; he could not see, but he could hear very well—in fact, everything seemed obnoxiously and unnaturally loud. The storm outside was raging, raging against the windowpane, and the pitter-patter on the roof was a repetitive and maddening thing.

“The boy *did* perform human transmutation *and* soul transmutation.” Ed did not know this voice from his left, but the voice knew who he was—or at least, what he had done, and quite well at that.

“Edward is *eleven*, Lieutenant Colonel, and with all due respect to alchemists, an eleven-year-old boy remains an eleven-year-old boy no matter what groundbreaking thing he has accomplished,” Pinako sounded extremely annoyed, which would be right if the person was a person of the military. It did not cross his mind to question why such a person was here, now. “If you could hand me the towels, please.”

Something wet and rough dabbed against the sides of his wound, making him hiss and jerk in the sudden sensation of stinging pain.


“Ed?” Pinako placed a hand on his forehead, and though he could not see her, he could imagine the crumpled look of disappointment and anger and worry in her aged face. “Edward, can you hear me?”

“Yes,” he rasped, and then broke into a cough. “A—Alphonse? Mom?”

“They’re safe,” the unknown voice said, deep and comforting.

“Alive?” his voice was a mere whisper now, fearing and childlike.

There was a pause as if the voice was contemplating something. Ed remained tense through the silence, and when the voice confirmed, “Yes, they’re alive,” Ed sagged tiredly into the bed (which he only now realized he was on). The silence returned, disturbed only by the noise the pouring rain made against the walls and roofs of the old house. Pinako was clanking about
somewhere to his right, perhaps getting more water to wash the blood away from the towels. He would have to thank her after all of this is over.

“That was an impressive thing you did,” said the unknown voice, “human transmutation, followed up by soul transmutation.”

Ed gave a snort, which faded into a rough cough and catch of breath. His throat felt like sandpaper, dry and irritating. A cold nudge of glass on his lips, and soon water was saturating the dehydrated cells again.

“Better?”

He grunted.

“Do you know what a State Alchemist is?” no dillydally, curt and straight to the point. It was a blank question. Somewhere from inside the room came a loud clank of metal against metal, a protest. Pinako.

“No dogs of war,” he sneered—or at least he thought he did. He had realized that he had patchy control over his muscles under this pain, after having quietly attempted (in vain) to raise his remaining left arm.

The faceless voice gave a quiet chuckle. “Yes, indeed.” A pause. “But it is also true that State Alchemists get the most impressive amount of research funds from the military.”

“This boy will not be going anywhere,” Pinako declared stoutly. Her steps were light against the floor, and she returned to his side and began dabbing at his wounds again. “This boy will stay right where he is with his mother and brother. I will not allow you to make him into a murderer.”

Another stretch of tenser quiet. Pinako did not cease her motions, clanking about with metal things Ed could not see, but were probably the equipment for automail.

Automail...

“Granny,” he bit his lip, “do you think you can equip me with automail?”

Again, Pinako paused her dabbing.

“You’re too young, Ed.”

“If it’s just the pain, I can take it,” he gritted his teeth and tried to shift position. His arm was responding a little bit better now. “I can bear it, just—I don’t want to be an invalid, Granny—” he tried moving the stub of his leg and quit that immediately when an outrageous number of now woken pain demons shot up to the base of his spine and began stabbing their evil little forks into it.

“Edward, do you realize what you’re saying? Grown men die of the procedure! Just from the pain!”

He laughed a dry and mirthless laugh. “Well, having my arm and leg ripped away separately was good warm up for it, then.”

“This is no laughing matter, Edward.” If Ed could see her face, he would probably have backed off. But he wasn’t seeing her; that was the thing.

“I’m serious, Granny, please. I know I really can’t pay for it now, but I promise I’ll pay it off
in the future, alright? Please, Granny.”

Her light footsteps reached his ears again as she took the basin of water and the presumably blood-soaked towels to the washbasin to rinse and drain. She was mumbling under her breath—he only caught, “...child’s not even in his right mind...” But he was, oh he was.

There was the pain, and it was painful, but it was being nice for a change, and the fangs were sheathed for the moment. He could think clearly, though he could not move, because that would wake the pain again. He was lucid, maybe because of the adrenaline, yes it was because of the adrenaline—he understood what he was asking for. He was asking for some semblance of a life returned to him. Spending the rest of his days—a lot of days—missing an arm and a leg, unable to walk and do the things he used to do and hell, unable to hold up a goddamned book, would be unimaginable. He did not want that. He seriously did not want that.

“I’ll pay for the automail, then,” the other voice said, up until now quieted, “if you still decide to go for the operation.”

Ed stilled for a heartbeat, a heartbeat, another heartbeat—reached up with his good hand and removed the towel from over his eyes. Blinking against the offensively bright white light, he squinted to his left at the figure standing there.

Standard issue blue military uniform, with specks of blood on the front—probably his. Damp hair hanging limply into dark, dark eyes; smooth brows sloping into aristocratic cut of jaw. Ed had to admit---this person was rather handsome.

“...it’s expensive, you know,” he blinked stupidly at the person.

“I believe I can afford that much,” there was an air of arrogance and amusement about the statement that Ed could not bear to stomach. He scowled up at the man for good measure before turning to Pinako.

“Granny, I’m getting your best set,” Ed declared in a solid and demanding voice. “The most expensive set.”

“I have not agreed to anything, young man.” Pinako had a set glare for him as she carried the umpteenth basin of water and a fresh towel over.

“Granny,” he pleaded. “I don’t want to be like this for any longer than necessary!”

“Then you should have considered that before you played around with your alchemy!” she was obviously close to losing her temper, and since she could get rather scary when pushed, Ed shut his mouth. For now. Even if he itched to tell her that he was not playing around. She took a calming breath and secured the bandages around the stump of his arm. “I do not understand you, Edward. I do not understand why you did what you did. But I will not ask you of it now—I would rather have you explain it later, when your mother has woken up and is here to listen to your reasons. Do not mistake this as my condoning your actions. You were rash, Edward, and you hurt your own family.”

He collapsed back into the bed, limp from the exertion of inching upwards to a somewhat upright position. He was careful to keep his eyes closed against Pinako’s seeking ones. She failed to understand his reasons, and she failed to understand his science (he had not been rash, thank you very much; in fact, he had been very careful about the entire process!). Moreover, nobody else but he and Al knew about Trisha’s sudden death (but Pinako could probably hazard an accurate guess by now).
“I still want the automail, and I don’t really care if you like what I did or not,” Ed petulantly barked. “Why else do you think I went ahead with it? Things could have been much worse than this. I’m lucky I only lost two limbs.”

“Lucky, ha!” and she was really pissed now, Ed could see it in the spit of her eyes. “Still a child, you are, Edward. Don’t you realize the value of your own body?”

“I do, but in exchange for what I got, I think this much is cheap fare,” he mumbled, turning away from her.

The Lieutenant Colonel leaning against the wall nodded wryly. “Very cheap fare.”


“Oh but I know you,” the person smiled again, and it raised Ed’s hackles for some very strange and unexplainable reason. “Think of it as a token from a friend of your father’s.”

Ed froze. “...you—“ he began, but his voice caught in his throat, and he had to struggle and push it out. “You know my father. You know Hohenheim.”

“Yes.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know.” Ed could not tell if the person was being honest or not. He was too far away to see into those eyes properly, and he was too far away to threaten with a punch. “I was hoping you would know, so I went here in search of you. I received one of your letters.”

Ed itched to ask which one, but the Lieutenant’s tone was so final that he was hard-pressed to continue the conversation. The nameless arrogant bastard obviously did not want to talk about this now.

“So are you getting the automail?” the person asked again, “Because I need to know so I can write a note for the money.”

“Well, Granny won’t let me.” He turned to Pinako again. “Granny, please?”

“Edward—“

“You might as well let him now,” the Lieutenant gave a nonchalant shrug, hands in pockets and silver watch gleaming under bright light. “The wound is a clean cut, and it’s still fresh. It would be much more painful for him if you let it stay and heal and then cut it open again later for the attachment.”

“He’s got a point,” Ed followed up cleanly, though he felt off having to agree with this stranger.

“Winry’s occupied with watching your mother and brother; I’m missing a pair of hands,” now she was only making excuses, and worst, he could see right through them.

“Well, this, err, Lieutenant can help.” It shamed him to beg, but he could not help it. He turned to the stranger with imploring wide eyes. “You will, won’t you? I heard military people had medical training...”
Wheedled he did for a little bit more, with the help of the (much amused) stranger, until Pinako sank into a contemplative silence, and it was then that Ed knew he had won. That particular sheen in the old woman’s eyes only appeared whenever she was deep in thought about automail—she was probably weighing her choices and building in her head prototypes of the best kind of port and arm for him and his body make-up.

He settled back into his bed, gave the stranger a grin while Pinako had her back turned, and closed his eyes. He did not notice at all when he fell back into a light and tired sleep.

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“Brother, let’s not do this,” Al said.

Ed turned away from the perfect circle and disbelievingly set his eyes on his little brother. “We’re stopping now?” his voice was rough from disuse—he had gone nowhere but the basement for the past two, almost three days now. “We can’t stop now. It’s done, Al, we can bring back Mom —“

“But—there’s no guarantee this will work.” There was fear in his brother’s voice.

“There’s no guarantee it won’t,” Ed set his mouth in a grim, determined line. “We’re doing this, Al.” He looked again at the circle, and at the middle, where their mother’s body lay supine and still.

“You’re just doing this now for the sake of doing it, not for Mom!”

His eyes tightened and before he could stop himself, he was lashing out with a fist, squarely cracking against Al’s jaw. “Don’t you dare say those words again, Alphonse. Don’t you dare accuse me of experimenting on Mom.”

Al sneered, “Well, aren’t you?”

Another punch, but Al dodged and threw a kick in retaliation—Ed’s back hit the side of the table and lost his footing, stumbled, and fell against the circle, his fingertips grazing the static circle —

Rush-crackle-boom was the energy against his ringing ears, and he struggled to right himself against the gust of it, placing his palms flat against the floor, his skin colder than the concrete. Screaming—there was screaming somewhere behind him, and then the weight of the transmutation was lighter, and beside him was Al, a frantic Al, a scared Al, flattening too his palms on the circle, their fingertips almost touching as they spread over the glowing limit glyphs.

They watched, both of them, wide-eyed and wary and in wonder as the crackling light, pure energy, rushed through the sweeping lines and was bound and shaped and directed by Ed’s chalk script. The body their mother their mother Mom please please please work

was lifted and before their very eyes renewed, the hue of healthy skin—not blue and not dead —returning lost vivacity to her. He could even see, yes he could see when her chest stuttered into life once more as she drew a staggering first breath, and with her his chest staggered as well, in joy and relief and victory and
she’s alive it worked we did it

then Al was collapsing beside him and his pain in his leg was tearing him apart and the light was gaping its mouth open wide so he could see a black hole in its midst and as if being slammed against the wall face-first his head began aching the longer he looked at it

what what what what

oh but he could not look away because it was all too captivating, all too fascinating, the information, the knowledge

show me show me show me more

~

He sprang up in bed and heaved for breath, forcing his eyes open wide and bowing his back until his forehead touched his one remaining knee. Sweat poured in gratuitous rivulets underneath his shirt and down his spine, slithering as if it was a snake seeking shelter somewhere south. Over and over in his brain he convinced himself he was awake. He was awake now. He was awake.

“Easy, mind your leg,” it was the stranger again, with another glass of water to offer. Ed wondered absently if this guy used water alchemy and had some sort of affinity for it. “Here, drink this.”

And so he drank, and with each gulp he felt more like himself. Water really was a wonderful little molecule, so very versatile, so very life-giving, and yet still so very dangerous. He ended up draining the entire glass.

The light-headed numbness was still there, and he still felt like his head was rounded and filled with air. Lucidity was not lost, however; he was more than glad to still be capable of logical thinking. It was the one thing he would fight tooth and nail for to retain at all times; it was the one thing that defined him as Edward Elric. Otherwise, he was just another organic body here to pass and rot.

“Your grandmother is preparing the tools for the operation with the young girl—Winry?—as we speak,” said the stranger as Ed reclined back into the bed. It was a different bed, he noticed. It was the operation bed. “She said she was going to set the ports up for now and leave the limbs for later, since they’ll take time.”

Sleep held him for more than just a few hours, he realized, when the stranger pulled the curtains back to let in some sun, revealing then the sprawling hills of Resembool, soggy and laden with rainwater and storm debris. He faintly smiled. Even then, it was breathtakingly beautiful. A couple of simple minutes in silence under the morning sun left him pleasantly refreshed.

A short while afterward and as if on cue, Winry knocked on the open door and brought in a heavy tray laden with food for two. She walked up to Ed, eyeing his injuries mindfully, and after a split-second’s consideration, beamed up at him.

“How are you feeling, alchemy freak?”

“What do you think, mechanic freak?”

“Call me that again and I’ll poison your food,” she snarled, dumping the tray on the small coffee table the stranger dragged up to Ed’s bedside. A wary glance was all she gave the stranger,
before she hurried out of the room with a faint, “Unlike you, I’m busy, since I’m helping Granny
with your ports,” in parting.

Grimacing at the door she disappeared through, he was left mumbling acid words and
unceremoniously stabbing a sausage from one of the plates. And toast. He was busy with his
mastication when the stranger casually asked:

“Do you like her?”

He choked.

“Do I what?” he sputtered, blinking owlishly up (damn that height) at the stranger.

“Like her,” and the bloody bastard was smiling. Coyly smiling. “You know, possible
blossoming future romantic interest? She is rather catching.”

“...you’re a pedophile, aren’t you,” he said it more as a morbidly horrified statement (which it
was), and this time it was the stranger’s turn to choke.

Indignantly, the stranger drew himself up and sternly frowned down (damn that height!) at Ed,
“I am most certainly not. I will have you know that I have perfectly healthy relationships with legal
adults—“

“—which is more than I need to know, thank you very much,” Ed’s face fell into a grimace
again when his prodigious brain quickly picked the lack of specified gender in that statement. He
quietly and very subtly inched as far away from the older man as he could without paining his
injured leg any more than it already was.

They lapsed into a somewhat awkward-non-awkward silence after that, and through it they
made quick work of their breakfast. Once or twice Ed filched himself a piece of ham or toast from
the bastard stranger’s plate, and though each time he was given a sharp glare for it, the stranger did
not retaliate.

The longer they lulled within the silence (with the food entirely gone), the deeper Ed fell into
thought. Now that he was well-fed, rested, and in substantially less pain than the previous night, his
lucidity was heightened and his awareness was whole enough for some rigorous analytical thinking.
Clearly there were things to be picked apart, given his current situation. He had lost two limbs,
which had not been part of his initial calculation, but so remained the fact that he had lost them,
therefore there had to be just reason. (He consoled himself with the thought of his mother and brother
alive upstairs and resting. That was a relief.)

Finding the discrepancy was easy enough: the theory itself was perfect in all its parts, but the
problem was with the execution. He had a major lapse of judgment, and forgot about the exchange
for the soul altogether. Forgot. It shamed him, the thought. He struggled and failed to reconcile
himself with his careless ego. Izumi had warned him against this. He had forgotten the simplest and
most obvious thing in his mindless haste and subsequently endangered his brother’s life in the
process. How stupider could he get.

“Don’t beat yourself up now,” Ed’s eyes snapped up to the stranger’s passive face. “I don’t
want a sulking brat on my watch.”

“Who asked you to watch me anyway?” Ed grumbled.

“Your grandmother, with whom I most certainly do not wish to argue with again.”
“...how do you know I’m beating myself up anyway?” Ed scowled.

“Your face,” there was disapproval in the stranger’s dark eyes, though why, Ed could not figure. “You wear your heart on your sleeve, kid.”

‘Kid’—fuck this infuriating bloody bastard is trying my patience—“Who the hell are you calling so sub-microscopic he would fit a hundred million times in the smallest cell of the human body!!”

“How did you do it?” the shift in subject was so sudden that Ed was left staggering in wordlessness. In a soft and patient tone, the stranger repeated, “How did you do the transmutation?” as if he was deaf and retarded, either of which he was not, how dare the bastard patronize him. And insult him, all in one sentence. (Only he was allowed to do that to people.)

“You’re a good alchemist?” he frowned in slightly (only slightly, since he was being nice) condescending evaluation.

Lieutenant Colonel Bastard smiled indulgently. “Why don’t you try me yourself.”

Slowly, his eyebrow—one—crawled up towards his hairline. A devious grin, an inheritance from Izumi, spread upon his face. “Try not to be left too far in the dust, bastard.”

Mentally he debated where to start, and decided to begin from the crux of the matter.

“Well, our Mom died, as you probably already figured,” he shrugged. “It was the epidemic, I think. She collapsed once a long time ago—about three years now—but the doctor dismissed it. Stupid. I knew there was something wrong.” He fisted his well hand into the bed sheet. “Anyway, she got sick really easy after that one time, but then she would always bounce back as if nothing happened. You know, normal flu, or maybe tiredness. We—Al and I—we were away too, training with our teacher for most of the time, so we didn’t get to look at her well enough.” Maybe we shouldn’t have left.

“She’s been sick for a while now since we got back. She tried to hide it, but I could see. She wouldn’t listen to me, though, and Granny Pinako was gone with Winry to East City for their yearly supply trip. Then three days ago, she just—collapsed and—“

Something was holding his throat tight and captive, and it took him a good while to loosen it well enough to speak again. He did not cry, though. He could not bring himself to cry.

“So I thought, maybe I could bring her back,” he allowed himself a dry grin of triumph, “and I did, didn’t I. The theory was perfect—I was the one who fucked up.”

“Your theory?” prodded the Bastard, “and watch your language,” to which he wapishly snapped:

“Don’t interrupt a story while it’s telling!”

The Bastard returned to his quiet.

“The premise of it is simple, really,” he shifted against the bed, his brain racing ahead as the pieces fell together into a neat picture. This time they were even faster, and among them were bits of information—they were from the Truth. They were not there before, he did not know them before—but now he did. Now he did, now he owned them, now he realized his mistake. Which he should have realized even before he saw the Truth, idiot that he was. “Human transmutation is a conglomeration of two ideas—“
“—creation of a body and creation of a soul,” the Bastard nodded.

“Nice to know you remember your basics,” Ed rolled his eyes, to which the Bastard mumbled a faint, “Human transmutation isn’t basic,” but he ignored that and continued.

“The body is simple,” he began again, “painfully so. The ingredients are easy to get a hold of—but we didn’t even need those, in our case. Our mother’s body was still there, even though it was decaying by the minute, which was why I was hurrying. The more she decayed, the more I had to pay.” He turned to the Bastard. “You saw the circle?”

“Yes. Those were rather ancient seals.”

“They’re just barely over two hundred years old, that’s hardly ancient,” he snorted. “The Khalic seals are lateral to the Aryan seals. Khalic’s for body, Aryan’s for soul, to make it simple. The limit glyphs are a mix of both to balance and limit both kinds of the energy drawn. The two reactions begin separately and pull together by a conjoining script crossing all three of the major seals. So basically the circle would restore the body and create the soul separately, and then bind them together into one.” The Bastard was quiet, so he added (rather cheekily), “If you have no idea what I was just talking about, go do some research. You’re probably getting rusty.”

The Bastard glared at him; he smirked back.

“So then what went wrong, if your theory is so flawless?” the Bastard was in fact serious and not goading, though Ed half-expected him to. “How come you lost your limbs?”

“I miscalculated,” and he did, magnificently so. He only now knew how hard this was to admit aloud; his teeth and tongue refused to cooperate, and he had to pause before continuing, “The Gate took my leg for my Mom’s soul. I forgot to calculate for the soul.”

“You saw this Gate.”

“Yes.”

“No mistake?”

Ed scowled. “You think I’m lying.”

“I have good reason to,” the Bastard leaned against the windowsill, “but I’m not.” Only now did Ed notice that the Bastard, clearly at ease, had removed his blue military top. The sleeves of the white undershirt were rolled up and the topmost buttons undone, revealing a small patch of creamy white skin. He looked away.

“Well, I’m not,” Ed could still visualize the bright light and the gaping darkness within it, the flash of a shitload of information being rammed into his head, the eyes and the hands taking his leg away—“I saw it, okay? Twice.”

The Bastard was quiet for a while, looking out the window into the sundrenched hills and fields, where it was as if a storm had not passed at all—a markedly different atmosphere from inside
the tense house. Try as he might, Ed could not read what the Bastard was thinking, so he gave up and immersed himself in his bisection.

Question marks peppered his understanding of what happened. He understood that his leg he had exchanged for his mother’s soul (totally worth it) and his arm was taken for Al’s (equally worth it), but how was a limb equal to a soul? It could not be, he could not fathom it—but it was. He had revived both his mother and his brother by giving only two of his limbs. Would a soul normally not be equal only to another soul, like how a pail of water was only equal to a pail of water? He was confused. He did not like being confused.

True enough, he had miscalculated. (Actually, now that he looked at it, that statement was a mistake. He had not calculated at all, which was where he fucked up.) But even then, the Gate should have taken his soul in order to revive his mother. And Al should have been safe, even if he participated. Which reminded him—

“He lost blood, a lot of it, but he’ll be fine,” the Bastard spoke reassuringly, with deep and understanding eyes. He wondered if this man had a brother too. “He was almost entirely dry when I got him here. We got him immediately on transfusion; it’s quite lucky your grandmother has blood stocked for her customers.”

“Blood,” Ed echoed. He could feel the lines marring his forehead in the intensity of his thought. “But—that’s impossible, he wasn’t wounded at all, unless—”

“Maybe the Gate took his blood, too,” suggested the Bastard, following his line smoothly. “Because surely a soul can’t be worth one limb—” he stopped, frowning at Ed, and then haltingly said, “Wait, you said he was dead. Does that mean—your arm, you—?”

Self-conscious, Ed placed a ginger hand on his shoulder, fingers tracing where the limb had been attached once. The wound was a clean shear-through, from what he could see of it and what he remembered. But it was securely bandaged now, thankfully so; he was not all too eager to see that again. There was something incredibly nauseating about seeing one’s own disfigured body, despite his desensitization to such gore. He knew it was just a human body missing some parts but—

“I had to,” he said, slumping against the bed. “I had to, he was dead. I couldn’t just let him die. He’s my baby brother, you know.” Suddenly he felt tired, drained of energy. Blindly, he reached for the glass of water, only to be harshly reminded by a stab of vengeful pain that he had no right arm anymore. He sighed and swallowed his pride. “Could you hand me that glass of water?”

The Bastard did—not much of a bastard now at all. For a stranger, he was unusually kind and conscientious.

Ed paused.

“How can I be so sure you won’t be babbling all the information I just gave to you to anyone else?” his eyes narrowed into suspicious slits of gold, and he glared up at the man, as if to dare.

The Bastard only gave him as much as a smirk. “You should not have told me in the first place, then.” He returned the now half-empty glass. “An important thing to remember, Edward,” he started at the use of his name, “that very few people respect intellectual property rights. Many pretend
to, but given a good chance, they would take hard-fought research and assume the credit for it, unjustly. This happens often—information out in the open is free game for any alchemist. Which is why you need to be careful with what you know. You know quite a lot, for such a young age.”

Ed’s scowl deepened even further. “What does age have to do with it? It’s a science. Anybody can learn it.”

“Ah, but there are those given a talent others can only dream of.” The Bastard slipped his hands—long and tapered fingers, calloused from heavy use, neat nails and a strong wrist—into his pant pockets. Again there with the casual pose. “Unfortunately for me, and fortunately for you, I am a State Alchemist. The military watches my research attentively, and will want for proof. I cannot prove something I admit I only half-understand.” Ed itched to crack an insult, but could not—the Bastard’s eyes were painfully intense. “And I do not wish to stain my friendship with Herr Hohenheim by plagiarizing his son’s work.”

“Hah!” Baring the column of his neck, Ed threw his head back—and winced in pain. With a pinched frown, he eased his head against a pillow. “I don’t think the bastard would care at all, wherever the hell he is.”

“Language,” the Bastard reprimanded again, the prude. “And he would care. He is very proud of you. He talked about you a lot. You look exactly like him, did you know that?”

“Yeah, I’ve been told,” darkly muttering he decided to turn the conversation around. Being reminded of his father made him itch for a nice, long, loud rant, which would be nice, but he figured it would be wiser to conserve his energy for later (the operation, still weighing on his mind) instead. (He refused to admit it, but he was rather apprehensive about the looming pain. From what he had seen in the past, the process was not very nice.) “I don’t think the blood was for the soul. If it was, then I should have lost my blood when I paid for Al’s soul. I didn’t.”

There was a momentary pause, and then, “Didn’t you say she was decaying, and the more she did, the more you had to pay?” Ed gazed at the Bastard, an increasingly human-seeming bastard the longer they talked, and the blocks in his brain clanked into place even before the man could get the rest of his thoughts out. “The blood must have been—“

“—for what her body lost while she was dead, of course, of course. Genius.”

Epiphany was a funny thing, coming at odd times from odd places. He was left staring at the Bastard’s face, mind racing a mile a minute. He had assumed the body was fully in tact and that he needed to give nothing else. He was stupid. He had entirely forgotten about the soul factor and lost his leg in the process. He was stupid. He had Al die for his stupidity, and gave an arm in exchange for the soul, and bound it back into—

“Did you—was there a seal on my brother’s skin? On—on his chest or back or something—“

“There was a red multi-chord circle on his chest, why?”

“...oh, okay, yeah.” Ed nodded, closing his eyes and releasing a momentous sigh. “That’s good.”

“The connection of the soul to the body?”

“Yes.”

He remained with his eyes closed, running over the big picture in his head. It was clear to him now exactly what had happened, and what was paid for by which exactly—but that was not where
the questions ended. In fact, that was where they really began. What was the Gate? How did it work? What did it use as a quantifier? Because clearly there was a quantifier, a standard, a value it used to decide what was worth how much. If a limb was equivalent to a soul, then it was either the soul was very cheap, or the limbs were extremely expensive. Or both.

One thing he did glean from this little escapade of his was the truth about creating a soul—that it was impossible. That was the one part of his theory that was ill-conceived. Human transmutation was not about creating a new soul; it was about retrieving a soul from the Truth, paying for it, owning it, and attaching it to a body.

He itched to get out of bed and experiment. He desperately itched to read a book, a decent one, one that had something significant about the Gate. (He refused to call it the Truth, what bullshit; by giving him his mother and brother’s soul each for one limb in exchange, it was telling him that their souls were that cheap. Fuck that.)

Opening his eyes and settling them on the Bastard—again gazing through the window—Ed remembered the previous night. Faint and hazy in his memory, but still somehow concrete; he recalled being offered the title of State Alchemist. It was a weighty achievement, this much he knew from what he’d read and heard, terribly tempting with all its benefits. Simply imagining the amount of money and resources for research he would have at his disposal sent a wanting shiver down his spine. But of course, as everything in life, the title came with its strings attached, and being a State Alchemist meant being an obedient soldier to the state when called for duty. Now, while this was all well and good if he was going to serve people and help build houses, the world was not so gracious. He would be called to war, to massacre people, to destroy lives. He did not want that.

And he figured he should not be thinking of such things at all, in the first place. He sighed and looked away. He had his mother and brother to take care of. He did not think he was up to leaving them again. The simplicity and quiet of Resembool was something he would just have to live with. Research would be easy enough to conduct even in a small and relatively old town like this; he would simply have to go to East City every now and then to buy his supplies (after earning some money for himself, of course). Maybe, he thought absently, I should write a book.

In the lengthy process of fantasizing and formulating what he would write if ever he should, he fell into another light sleep.

~

And was again quite rudely woken by a loud noise, this time Winry’s voice grating against his ears. He flinched away, turning his head and screwing his eyes shut. The light was far too bright for comfort, and he was uncomfortably warm. He could feel the back of his neck beginning to sweat and his hair sticking to the skin there. Incredibly unsavoury.

“Are you awake, Ed?” Pinako.

He grunted.

She sighed. “It would have been better if you continued to sleep. We’re beginning the operation. Your ports first, and we’ll finish your limbs within a week. Time enough to let your body rest.”

"I’m fine,” he opened his eyes and blinked furiously under the light, averting his vision towards his left, where the Bastard was standing a ways away in close watch. He closed his eyes
again when Winry placed a towel over them. “No anaesthetics, please.”

Winry balked. “Hah?!”

“Edward!” Pinako sounded offended. “Grown men—”

“—die of the pain, yes, I know, damnit,” he growled, baring his teeth. “But anaesthesia can cause significant memory loss and impairment of short-term memory. I value my brain highly, thanks; I’ll take the pain.”

“You can’t be serious—don’t underestimate it, Ed!” Winry rapped something thin and metallic on his chest, a blunt and sudden sensation. “You’ve seen our other patients! They scream and cry and lose all that pride!”

“It’s not pride, it’s practicality. Two totally different things. No anaesthetics, period.”

Pinako and Winry were both quiet—in disbelief, no doubt. Ed waited (rather impatiently) for them; he had no choice but to. However, there was nothing they could do to change his mind. They probably knew it, too, from the set of his jaw and the clench of his fist. He had grown up with them, after all, and Pinako had known his father. The old lady had always remarked on how much he mimicked Hohenheim in pigheadedness. In this right, Al was left in the dust.

The tense quiet was abruptly brought to an end when the wet roughness of a towel touched Ed’s lips, and he heard the Bastard say, “Here, bite on this. I don’t think you’d want an injured tongue and broken teeth to add to your list.”

Obediently he did, seizing the towel with his teeth and sucking on its wetness. He was scared, of course—who would not be? He knew it was going to be painful; he had seen other automail patients. It was not pretty.

But what other choice did he have? None.

“Come on, let’s get it over with,” he grumbled into the towel, words garbled and funny but comprehensible nonetheless. “Make it quick.”

As such, they had no choice but to proceed according to his wishes, since he was the patient, and he had rights to his own body. Technically he was a minor and was legally unable to decide for himself, but they knew that they would never be able to stop him anyway, even if he had to crawl to another automail shop to get his arm and leg substituted. It was their best reassurance that they were the ones operating on him; at least, they would be sure to do the job properly. Ed knew how the Rockbells prided their work as much as he prided his alchemy. It was in the blood, and hesitate though they might, they never turned away from a job.

“Brace yourself, boy,” Pinako said with a resigned sigh. “This is going to hurt.”

Yeah, duh, he wanted to snort, but then there was a lightning surge of bright white burning hot painshooting up his neck—he strained to keep still, grunted and gasped and grit at the towel, hand fisting into the sheets, remaining leg jerking up in reflex. The towel over his eyes was dislodged when he turned his head away from the pain by instinct, panting and in shock.

“About three more of that for your arm, two for your leg,” Pinako idly informed him. She was doing something to his arm wound, he could feel the pressure of something cold against it, but he could not see, and he could not feel that pain anymore. He was temporarily numbed, that spike having shot even through his heightened threshold. “Think you can take it?” she asked him.
Gasping for breath, he grunted and resettled into the bed, resolute. “Yeah, this much is nothing —”

(oh but he was lying because the pain the pain the pain)

The second time he had his eyes open but the world swam in his vision and all he could see of the Bastard was a blue-and-white blotch against the quiet grey. There was a static hum in his ear, and through it he could barely hear Pinako’s voice—but he was not screaming, he knew this, because his throat was locked, his teeth clenched, his tongue still in the wake and break of the pain.

He was given time to breathe.

And then again—slam came the pain—this time he did make a sound, a grunt, into his gag, muffled and dead the moment it left his lungs. Suddenly he felt suffocated, and turned his head to spit the towel to the side. He gasped, gasped, air air air oh dear god what the hell possessed me to do this it hurts it hurts make it stop

the next one was the last one for his arm, and he heaved upwards for breath, gasping, his back straining into an arc as shockwaves rippled through his spine. Sweat poured in buckets off his skin and on his clothes and on the sheets, bathing him. His hair was matted and sticky now, all through. He collapsed against the pillow in dizzy shock.

There was a muted quiet.

“I’m surprised, Edward,” Pinako’s voice was subdued. “Even the toughest of men scream in this pain.”

He only blinked.

“Your leg’s next. Do you want me to continue, or do you want to rest for a while?” she asked. “It might be best for you to rest a bit—”

“Now, please,” his voice was hoarse and unlike him. His voice was suffering in pain, pinched, rough, used, shackled. “Now while I’m still in the aftershock.”

No more questions were asked. Pinako moved her station and switched places with Winry, who was hovering behind her grandmother, watchful but wary, her face twisted in a horrid mix of sympathy and fear. Both for Ed, doubtless; she had always been a kind girl.

(PAIN)

His back snapped into an arch, taut, his one fist white as the sheets. It dragged, this time, and Pinako had given no warning at all. Air stuttered and caught in his chest, rattling as his throat clenched and unclenched and he gasped and gusted air. In the background was some noise—coming from upstairs? who else was upstairs?—but he could not be bothered about that at all, no, no, because

pain pain pain he was in worlds worlds worlds of pain

and there were only so many ways one could describe that to someone who had yet to experience it before, from one who has experienced nothing quite like it before, so he stopped thinking, stopped likening it to anything else, because he could not think of anything else.

As the surge ebbed, he registered a firm hand on his right shoulder, keeping him steady and
down, keeping his recently wired nerves in tact. The warm was hand, no, the hand was warm

he swam in warmth and heat

unbearably hot now through his shirt and against his feverish skin. Blearily he blinked up at
the man but could not muster a word. His brain was busy being overwhelmed.

Only very slightly did he note it when the door banged open and there was hysterical
screaming—and then the screaming was gone and the warm hand on his shoulder was gone
—shoved away—and frantic cold hands were on his face and he jerked away

cold don’t want the cold warmth warmth where’s my warmth

“No,” he groaned, straining away from the insistent palms, his left hand seeking for the
warmth, pleading for comfort. The warm hand seized his almost immediately and he sighed, in relief
or in joy or in ease it did not matter any longer, just that he sighed and sagged against the bed. The
hand was firm and reassuring, unlike the frantic cold ones offering no shelter but fear.

“Your Mother, Edward, she’s awake,” the Bastard was saying; he was the only one Ed could
pick out from the cacophony.

“…nish it,” he mumbled, weak. Tiny droplets of saltwater tickled and threatened to fall from
the edges of his lashes, but this was excusable—he was in pain. “Finish the wiring.”

The confusion of babble continued above him, dragged for longer and longer as the pain
ebbed away, farther and farther like a retreating wave, leaving him dry and shivering in the wind—
he did not want this, he wanted the pain constant, because it lessened the next shock, because the
brain could only take so much at a time

“…boy asked for it, Trisha, you know how he is—”

“He is eleven, Granny! Eleven, do you understand that?!”

“Mrs. Elric, please calm down, you are in no condition to be—”

(noisebabblebabblebabbleabablescreambabblemold)

He snapped. “SHUT UP!”

They shut up.

“Finish the wiring,” he panted in pain, “now.”

“Edward—”

“I said shut up!” and yes he was fully aware that he was yelling at his mother, but he was in
pain goddammit, how could any one of them miss that? “Granny, finish it.”

The warm hand kept firm in holding his smaller, fistng, pale one. The last nerve—tibial nerve,
a memory of a book from somewhere parroted into his ear—blotched the ceiling in black and blue
and hazy shapes of different hues. The white-hot was a stabbing blade up into his brain, and when he
sank, finally, into the darkness, he felt the warm hand still there.
There was something quite captivating about how the blood seeped into the cracks of their rundown dank basement. Past the whiteness of chalk and down the veins of the hundred-atom-wide crevasses, it flowed and spread like a plague pushing itself upon the cleanliness that was its victim. Even in the half-darkness he saw its path quite clearly, a gleaming crimson red in the bluish-white glow of the still crackling circle. But by this time reality was lost on him—the pain, the pain, the pain. My leg is not there, my arm is not there. was eating him from inside out and there was nothing he could do about it, nothing at all. Left there lying prone on cold, cold stone he stared at the still form of his brother across the basement and he felt a speckle of relief. At least, he told himself with a dead inward laugh, Al will live on.

In exchange for his sacrifice, Al will live on.

From inside his head, the Truth laughed.

~

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I : Culmination

02

_Hate is the consequence of fear; we fear something before we hate it._

( Cyril Connolly )

Deep it was into the night when Ed woke again, finding himself in a pleasant wash of lethargy and painlessness. Though he could still feel the aching throb of the still-lingering shock underneath his bones, he was better than he had been since the transmutation—certainly better than half a day earlier, when they were performing the operation. The last he could recall was the sensation of his smaller hand being held by a larger, warmer one, and the Bastard’s voice telling him his mother was awake. Things were rather hazy after that.

By instinct, he raised his left hand to his right shoulder where it felt odd and heavy, and jerked in surprise at the feel of the cool ridges of metal sliding beneath the pads of his fingertips. He tried shimmeying upwards to look down at it, but he could only see a faint glint under what meagre moonlight filtered through the curtains—and his neck protested painfully at the strain.

He laid there, fingering the blade-thin edges of the steel plates where it met his flesh. It felt strange, a conglomerate of hard and soft, of cold and warm. But this was him now, this was his new body—and he took an absurd amount of comfort from the fact that soon, _soon_, he would be up about on two legs with two arms again, as if nothing had ever happened.

Now if everybody else would be so kind and play along—

But of course not, who was he kidding?

There was no way Pinako would ever look upon his alchemy favourably anymore after this. There was no way Trisha would be able to look at her son without wondering what ever went wrong. They would start asking questions soon; he figured he had to set his story straight pretty quickly. Al was a quick study; Ed was sure his brother would pick things up in speed when he woke. All in all, it was better if they knew nothing at all. Especially Trisha; their mother was frail and innocent, unused to such turbulence in her life. The only major break within her normalcy and calm was Hohenheim’s departure, and in that instance she had been warned, prepared. That instance was milder on her heart. This one would not be—after all, resurrection from the dead was practically unheard of and outlandish.

Releasing a momentous sigh, he closed his eyes and half-sank into the darkness of the semi-conscious. Since his father’s disappearance, he increasingly took on the responsibilities Hohenheim left behind, such as caring for their little family and keeping it in tact. It was only now, though, that he found himself making decisions for the family on his own, without the knowledge of their mother.
It was as if—he cracked a wry smile—it was as if somewhere down the line he had slipped seamlessly into the role of the man of the house.

He was taken from his thoughts by the weighty but somehow discreet sound of boots down the hall, and twin conversing voices: Pinako and the Bastard.

His door creaked open—he remained motionless, listening—and the Bastard stepped in.

“As you can see, he’s still asleep, Lieutenant Colonel. I can take any message you would like for him to receive,” Pinako was stern and unforgiving. Ed figured she was kicking the Bastard out of the house. The storm had abated, and the necessity for extra hands solved by Trisha’s waking; there was no longer any need for his extended stay.

The Bastard looked markedly disappointed. He turned away from the bed. “Never mind, then. I shall take my leave now. I appreciate your hospitality.”

“Wait,” Ed rasped, turning towards the man. “I’m awake.”

The Bastard paused.

“Go back to sleep, young lad,” ordered Pinako, a pinched frown marring her face.

Ed ignored her. “You wanted to talk, Lieutenant Colonel Bastard?”

“Well, yes,” he gave a pointed look to Pinako, who sighed and shook her head, closing the door behind her as she left. The Bastard chuckled, walking over to Ed’s bedside and seating himself on the chair. “How do you feel?”

“Like shit,” Ed rolled his eyes. “How else would I feel?”

The Bastard inclined his head, a slight smirk lifting the edges of his mouth. “I understand I cannot persuade you any more than I already have about the State Alchemist title,” he began, “but should you ever visit Central, come and see me. I’ll gladly lend a hand if you need any help.”

Scoffing, Ed shifted against his pillow. “Who would want help from you?”

“Oh?” the Bastard had a mocking eyebrow raised. “Who was it who reached out for me in askance for comfort earlier? Because I quite clearly remember—“

“Shutup,” cheeks burning in heat, Ed turned his head away. It was no use; the tips of his ears glowed red in his embarrassment. Using such moments of vulnerability against him—this Bastard was not just a Bastard, this Bastard was a dirty and underhanded Bastard.

Said Bastard gave a mild chuckle. “Well, anyway. I shouldn’t take too long, or your grandmother will come barging in here again. She has this thought in her head that I’m doing some evil on you to convince you into the military.”

“Aren’t you?” scowled Ed up at the man, but the Bastard ignored this.

“Remember, Edward,” the man’s expression was grave now, “never tell anyone about what happened here, what you did, the circumstances of your mother’s illness and collapse. Note collapse, not death. As far as anybody else is concerned, she did not die—you merely revived her health with a little medicinal alchemy you learned from your father’s books. Warn your brother when he wakes
up; I’m quite sure your grandmother has her mouth sewn shut by now, no worries about her. Do you understand?”

“What about the doctor?” one loophole he had noticed earlier; it would be hard to cover things up with an extra involvement. “What did you tell him?”

“Your grandmother talked to Dr. Thomas earlier, she ‘explained’ what happened.” The Bastard shrugged. “Your mother collapsed, Al tried to transfuse his blood with the medicine you made into her, and he succeeded but bled too much. You healed their wounds. You lost your arm and leg in the process of obtaining the ingredients for the medicine. Keep with that story.”

Nodding, Ed digested this and began to build around it, to arrange how he would tell his version of the lie to his mother and Pinako. Nobody else needed to know; the more people knew, the more potential danger they faced. By the sheer impossibility of what he has accomplished, he—his entire family—was worth a fortune right about now, and many would want to put them under close study. If what the Bastard was saying about the military had any truth to it, then the military would be one of the unnamed many.

“Another thing,” the Bastard was saying; Ed grudgingly paused his thinking to listen. “If you want to avoid being conscripted by the military as a State Alchemist against your own will, keep a low profile. Should they ever catch wind of your abilities, they won’t hesitate. They will want your talent, and mark my words, they will have a use for it—and you won’t like it.”

So he would not be able to do public research after all. He sighed and rested tiredly against his pillow. He had hoped to earn some money through publishing scientific journals and the like, but if he was to keep a low profile, publishing would be out of the question. This was why he scorned the country’s lack of an alchemical university. If such a place existed, there would be freedom for alchemists to practice their science and improve upon it without having to become State Alchemists. Research money, after all, was not easy to come by. A university would eliminate the need for exorbitant amounts of money to conduct study, and also allow varied practices of alchemy come in touch with each other—surely a most ideal environment for the growth and improvisation of theoretical and practical applications.

“I understand,” it was but a faint whisper in the darkness, a resigned thing. “I’ll be careful.”

“Good.” The Bastard drew his black cloak on over his standard issue blue uniform—now cleaned of the specks of blood—and stood poised by the door. “Take good care of yourself now. This is your second chance.”

“I know. You don’t need to tell me that, I’m not stupid.” Ed ground his teeth. Even to the last second, this Bastard never failed to annoy him. This was not the last time they would see each other, though. He was quite sure of that. “Wait—you never told me your name.”

“Ah, I never did, did I?” the man had the door open, and the hallway light washed and pooled over him as he stood in its path. Again, amusement twinkled in the man’s eyes. “My name is Roy. Roy Mustang, Lieutenant Colonel.”

Ed gave a grunt. “Lieutenant Colonel Bastard it is,” this made the man smile. “You know? That’s a mouthful. You should get a shorter title. Like Colonel, or General, or Fuhrer.”

This time, the man—Roy Mustang—did throw his head back in a jovial laugh. “The next time we meet, I’ll have a shorter title for you to insult.” With that, the man who had saved his life stepped out
of the room and made to close the door. However, before the last slice of light thinned into nothing and the door closed tight, Ed called out:

“Counting on that, Bastard.”

The door slid shut.

This was not the last time they would meet, because for some unknown reason, he felt a pull towards this person—a person he knew would eventually shape his life.

He could not figure out, however, if he was more disconcerted by the fact that someone else would be shaping his life, or the fact that it was the Bastard who would be that person.

~

Three days, and Al had yet to wake.

Tension permeated every corner of the entire house, and there was not much opportunity to dissolve it at all by way of much-needed conversation. All of them were unable to speak to each other at length: Trisha was preoccupied with caring for herself and the still-comatose Al; Ed was half-incapacitated and always deep in thought; the Rockbells were bustling about in their preparations. Ed was thankful that the pain, at least, was cooperating, and had ebbed into a dull throb in the back of his head, allowing him some freedom of movement. Walking was possible with the help of a crutch, and though it would have been easier if they had attached a temporary leg on him, Pinako refused to pain him any more than what was necessary. He was left to a depressingly short crutch with which to support himself for the meantime.

The one person in the house who suffered the least stress was probably Winry, who, in her lack of alchemical understanding of exactly what had happened, was relishing the joy of being able to take active part in the design and construction of Pinako’s best piece of automail yet. She had goggled incredulously at the lump sum of money Roy Mustang had left behind in their care, all for use in the construction of his limbs. Holding nothing back, the girl immediately launched into what Ed dubbed her “mech-freak” mode, blueprinting the make-up of two deceptively simple but in truth very durable and unique pieces of mechanical genius. As per Ed’s request, they were to make their most expensive set, using their best alloy and best design. She was, not unreasonably, within close reach of her paradise.

On the other end of the spectrum was Trisha, suffering in the grips of justified anxiety. Her younger son was comatose by fault of her elder son, and said elder son was just finishing recovery from a fiery fever, the result of an autoimmune reaction from recently rewired nerves. Suffice to say, she was not having an easy time.

And she was confused, Ed knew. Ed could see it, in her eyes, in her words, in the way she moved, in the way she acted around him, cautious as if afraid. She had just reason for her actions, he understood this, but it pained him anyway—and it pained him even further to realize that there was
nothing he could do to ease her anxiety, not if he wanted to keep his secrets. All that was in his power to do was to smile in her presence, to assure her that Al would wake soon, to tell her that yes, *everything will work out fine.*

He had hoped that this would deter the questioning, but of course, his hope was in vain, dashed very early on the fourth morning after the transmutation.

“Edward,” she approached him as he sat on the porch steps, a tight look on her face, “I need you to tell me everything that has happened.”

Immediately, Edward realized the tone in her voice, and knew of what she was asking. It was something he had already decided not to give. “I thought I already told you, Mum,” he shrugged. “Al bled too much when we tried transfusing the blood into you.”

“Why do I not remember any of this?” she was frowning now, carving deep valleys into her forehead.

“You were unconscious,” he was careful to keep a straight face. “We were panicking.” That much was not a lie, though his panic was a different kind from what most people would expect.

She stood there, still and quiet, eyes intently watching him. She stood there, and he sat, and he watched the sun slowly go up, its rays dappling through the branches of the tall tree in the yard.

“I know you are lying, Edward,” she said. “I can see. You are my son. Do not think you can lie to me that easily.”

And what was he supposed to say to that? What was he supposed to say? Right at this moment, he wished for someone else to be here for him, to explain. To act as a buffer from the rest of the world, so he could be by himself even just for a while. He wished for the Bastard, almost, to be here and talk for him. The Bastard always seemed to know the right thing to say, when to say it, and how—Ed needed that.

“…I can’t tell you, Mum,” and the words barely left his mouth with sound. “It’s better if I don’t tell you.”

“Edward!”

She was livid, hands fisting and tense at her sides. She looked like she itched to hit him, an expression Edward had never seen on her face before. It hurt him, more than he could have ever imagined it would—but he knew he deserved this.

He cast his eyes down. “I’m sorry, Mum.”

She stood there, and he sat.

She left.

He remained on the porch steps long after she was gone, and to her shadow he murmured, “I’m sorry, Mum. Really, I am.” Clutching his shoulder port, he hunched into himself, rocking back and forth—but still he could not cry.
A week, and Al had yet to wake.

Today was the day for Ed’s limbs’s attachment. Suffice to say, he was not looking forward to it; he had seen, as a child, the pain the Rockbells’s old clients had to go through for the attachment operation itself and the rehabilitation afterwards. It was not an easy path he was going to have to go down, but he steeled himself with the courage and determination pounded into him by his training with Izumi. He managed to survive his teacher; he would survive this.

With a curious mix of dread and fascination, Ed ogled over the polished metal pieces that were to be his limbs. Behind him, Winry was arranging the attachment machine, while Pinako checked over the finer details of the automail itself. Even to his amateur eyes, their work was a splendid piece of mechanism. He traced with wondering eyes the engraved bell motif at the ball of the arm that was to go into his shoulder port’s socket. The sheer detail of the work must have taken considerable time, especially since everything was handmade. (But perhaps it was only him; he was beginning to become more and more reliant on his alchemy these days, ever since they left Izumi and her watchful warnings against overdependence and laziness. But how was he to separate himself from alchemy? Apart from its convenience, the pull of his science was just too much for any amount of willpower to stand against.)

“On the bed now, young lad,” Pinako hustled, positioning the limbs within easy reach. “Winry, mind his leg, will you?”

Ed climbed into the bed—by all rights an operation table—and reclined against the pillow, trying to relax. The scars of attachment on his shoulder and side tingled as his brain anticipated the pain to come.

From the door, he knew that Trisha was watching, quiet as a spectre. She had not talked to him in days, not a single word given between the two of them. He could see in her eyes, even now, the blame that was growing and burgeoning. The longer Al remained in his deep unresponsive sleep, the more she seemed to look at him with those dark eyes.

There was something in there, in her, that he could not fathom—something in her eyes that was building by the minute. It was tiny right now, but soon, soon it would become substantial enough—and maybe then he would be able to see what it was she was thinking and feeling. With the same trepidation he had for the attachment of the automail, he dreaded that day when he did.

But, he thought idly, as they arranged the two attachment machines around him, the reward of knowing would be worth it. Yes, in the same way that walking again would be worth the pain of attachment, being able to respond to what was bothering Trisha would be worth the pain of knowing her troubles. Because try though he might to deny it, he knew, in the end he was the root of all her troubles—he just hoped there was something he could do to make it up to her.

“We’re going to attach the limbs simultaneously,” Pinako’s voice jolted him from his peripatetic thoughts. “It will reduce the length of pain, though the initial shock will be significant.” Perhaps she saw his face, because she added, “It should be somewhat less than the pain of the wiring. I can give you painkillers—“
“—not anaesthetic—”

“—not anaesthetic—afterward,” she rolled her eyes at Winry, who giggled as she took the leg and positioned it by its port. “Ready when you are.”

Ed took a deep breath, gritted his teeth, and nodded. “I’m good—"

fuck

and the pain slammed, furious against his senses, burning up his spine and searing his brain. The ceiling moulded into flashes of lightning white and blots of grey-black, and his consciousness scrambled to keep up with the overload. Pinako had not given him a warning at all—and perhaps it was better that way, but it was not very nice of her. (Then again, she had never been a particularly kind person.)

He only belatedly realized that he had vocalized his pain—when the light-headed shock tided in, his throat felt tight and scratched, the way one would feel after a sudden and particularly loud yell. He laid there for many minutes of heavy breathing, body struggling to unwind as he forced relaxation into his tensed muscles. Tingles of burning heat still shimmied up and down the nerves on his right side and chest; he dared not try and move his new limbs just yet, keeping as still and motionless as possible to minimize stimulation. It would probably hurt if he tried to rush things; he did not want more hurt, thank you very much.

“I strongly suggest against moving much for today.” He watched as Pinako tightened a screw at the elbow. “The port will sting for a while; the nerve ends are still raw. Tomorrow, you start your rehabilitation, and I’m sure you already know it won’t be nice. I’ll have you walk around the yard five laps, morning and afternoon. We increase that as we go.”

“How long will it take?”

Pinako paused to look at him. “How long will what take, Edward?”

“Rehab.” Edward gave her a candid look.

“Why, do you have a deadline to catch, young man?” the cast of the old lady’s tone was critical and probing. “Rehab will take a long time. Grown men—“

“I’d appreciate it if you could stop comparing me to your other clients, Granny,” sighed Ed. “Clearly I’m not anything like them.” He fidgeted in the bed, inching upwards so he could be in a somewhat upright position. “And no, I don’t have a deadline to catch. I’m not going anywhere, Granny; I just want to know how long it’ll take. You know me; I’m impatient.”

Ed knew Pinako’s nagging suspicions about Roy Mustang’s offer for the State Alchemist title, and while he understood her distrust of outsiders (especially military men), the fact that she was doubting him boggled his mind. She, of all people, should know that he was not about to leave Resembool, not now when his mother needed his support and his brother had yet to wake. And even after that, even after they resettled into their peaceful lives, he would not leave. He had no reason to leave. Research was easy enough to conduct on his own; he would be able to make do with his alchemy and occasional trips to East City for some books, maybe even to Dublith to borrow some ideas from his teacher. But he was not about to leave his family when he was needed.

A heavy sigh was all Pinako could give in reply to him.

Winry offered quietly, “On average, rehab can take six months to a year. Maybe you can scale it in about three or four months, if you work really hard. But it’s not going to be easy.”
Grinning wryly, Ed echoed his earlier thought, “If I was able to survive my teacher in Dublith, I’m going to survive this too. Don’t worry.”

She grinned back at him. This was what Ed liked about Winry; she asked the least questions and accepted life as it came to her. In that sense, they made a good pair: Ed with his closely held secrets, and Winry with her willingness to let people keep their secrets.

“We’ll be making lunch, then,” having tidied the work desk near the bed, Pinako folded her arms behind her and walked to the door. “Keep yourself in bed, boy. Your body needs the rest. Come, Winry.”

Obediently, Winry followed, stopping only when Ed called out, “Hey, Winry, d’you think you can get me a pencil and some paper? I’m really getting bored of lying around doing nothing.”

“Sure, but can you write with your left? I don’t think you’ll be able to control your right arm that well right now.”

“Yeah, that’s no problem. I had to learn at our teacher’s place.”

She shrugged and walked out of the door, “I’ll be back in a bit.”

Only when her back disappeared into the hallway did Ed notice that Trisha was not there anymore.

~

Valiantly, he tried to convince himself that he should not be hurt by such things. Trisha was merely confused, distressed. After all, Al was as good as dead to the rest of the world. But being left like that while he was in the throes of pain hurt. He would have thought she would have at least stayed, like Roy Mustang had—even if she only watched from afar, by the door. Leaving him behind—that was too cold a treatment from her. Never had he seen this side of his mother, a facet of her reflecting fear and uncertainty strong enough to suppress her inborn compassion and kindness.

He could not deny that he had a huge part of the blame. After all, he did push her away when she was trying to comfort him during the operation, and abandoned her hands in exchange for Mustang’s. But at that time he was not fully coherent—hell, he was in pain, why could nobody understand that—and so should he not be pardoned that one time?

Sighing, he blinked up at the ceiling. The sun was going down now; his stomach growled for dinner. His sheaf of blank pages lay on the work desk beside his bed, the pencil on top, diagonal, as if to hold the sheets down. He had wanted to scribble earlier, but the pain bothered him too much for concentration. True to Pinako’s words, the nerves were still raw and unwilling to operate properly.

But he was tired of lying down. He was tired of idling when there was so much to be done. He wondered if somebody had already cleaned up the basement. The blood and the chalk should still be there, drying and crusting into a thick layer of brown. Or maybe Pinako already took care of it sometime while he was asleep. He spent too many hours sleeping these days.

*(the circle is the guide and the energy flows within it)*
He never realized when he closed his eyes, but in the darkness of his mind he saw flashes, images, information. A ton’s worth of it, hidden there and waiting to be used. And he heard a voice.

*(all matter exist in a never-ending flow and we are but tiny individuals in its wake)*

Or was it really a voice? Maybe they were just words, and he was the one giving voice to them. He did not know for sure. All he knew was that this thing in his head—whatever it was—gave him endless things to ponder, endless things to theorize and build research around.

*(the flow of energy is boundless, endless, and within each person the potential to harness the flow lies dormant)*

It was not very conducive to socializing, this constant flash-and-flow of information. At random times, he would get images, and he would space out, inciting further worry on Pinako’s part. The old lady was already fearful enough of any kind of damage the pain of the raw operation might have caused. It was getting rather bothersome to assure and reassure her time and time again that he was fine.

*(the value is decided upon—)*

Stopped.

*(the Gate is—)*

Stopped again.

Ed frowned.

*Why does it not tell me anything about the Gate?*

He tried again—the flow stopped, as if a stream of water slamming against a solid dam. Cursing quietly to himself, he ground his teeth in annoyance and shifted in his bed. His fingers—the new metal ones—curled into a fist, and though he could not feel it by way of skin, he knew the force behind it. These limbs had the potential for incredible strength—he had to be careful with them.

*(the Gate—)*

Stopped.

*Fucking hell.*

Sighing, he sagged into the pillow, watching the shadows elongate in his room the further the sun sank into the horizon. It was no use; whatever was in his head refused him knowledge of any sort about the Gate’s existence.

Which, of course, in the true fashion of a scientific mind, made him wonder *even more.*

What exactly was the Gate? Who created it? Was there even *an entity* capable of creating something so powerful? How did it operate? What was its job? Was it really the calculator for the equivalency? How did it calculate the equivalency? What were its standards, its quantifiers? How does one open it without losing something? Was there a way to open it again?

“—ward!”

He jerked, affright, and scowled at the upset Winry.
“Spacing out again! Are you sure that hard head of yours is alright?” she huffed, crossing her arms.

“I’m fine. You and Granny worry too much.” He sat up, wincing slightly, and swung his legs—two of them now—over the side of the bed. “Is dinner ready yet?”

“Yes, glutton,” she helped him balance, awkward as he was on his new limb. She saw the blank stack of paper and frowned, “You didn’t write after all. I can’t believe you asked me to get all that paper for nothing.”

“I’m going to use it; I just have too many things to think about that I don’t know where to start,” he sighed again, his shoulders sagging as he used a crutch to balance for his first few steps. The weight of his body pressing down on the leg port sent clips of pain up his back, but he gritted his teeth and bore it. It was gone by the time he was by the door.

“Make a table,” she said suddenly.

He turned. “What?”

“Make a table of the things you know, the things you want to know, the things you know you don’t know—and from there find the things you don’t know you don’t know.” She smiled at him, easy and comfortable. “It’s what I do when I’m not sure I have all the right parts, or if I’m uncertain which base design to use.”

And before she could even finish her sentence, his mind was racing, putting together columns of lists and crossing them against each other. Mumbling to himself, he surged towards the work desk and seized the pencil, sketching a table as she had instructed, and began scribbling with his left.

“Oi! Do that later! Dinner first!”

He did not hear her until she bopped him on the head, bodily dragged him from the desk, and sat him in the dining room. With him he took his paper and pencil, though, and throughout dinner he was quiet, absorbed and efficient in his work. He failed to notice his surroundings, and the darkening look Trisha had in her eyes.

~

One and a half weeks, finally Al woke.

Ironically enough, he woke while Trisha was gone to the market with Pinako to restock on their food. None of them had left the household for days, and the pantry was easily emptied through Ed’s insatiable and ever-growing appetite. It was near-unbelievable how much his tiny body could intake and metabolize into energy. Winry constantly complained about having to make too much food, and asked him incessantly where he stored all that he ate; he retorted quite indignantly that he burned up all of it by using his brain for rigorous mental work, unlike her.)

Ed was walking about past Al’s room’s window, exercising his new limbs despite the (now much lessened) pain, when Al croaked groggily, “Brother?” and Ed had all but toppled to the ground in his
Righting himself and forgetting all about retaining some semblance of dignity, he scrambled over the window and into the room, making his ports twinge and ache, but disregarding it. He rushed to Al’s bedside, hands patting all over his little brother’s body as if in reassurance that yes, his brother was here, alive.


“Too fast,” Al coughed, turning slightly to the side. “You’re going too fast, brother.”

Ed clamped his mouth shut, but only managed total stillness for two seconds; his mismatched hands were already rubbing Al’s back before he could even order them to. He assisted his brother upright, gave him a sip of water, and drew a blanket around thinner, frail-looking shoulders.

“Are you alright?” he repeated, and Al gave him a faint smile.

“I’m fine, brother, just a little… disoriented.”

Sitting by the bedside, Ed kept tight grasp of his younger brother’s hand. The relief he felt blossoming in his chest was absurd in its intensity, but he did nothing to hide it; it was only in front of Al that he could be this open now. He could trust Al to keep his secrets, to understand his reasons, to understand what he was going through. Just as they had always been together, in this they could be, would be together too.

“…Mum?”

Al’s voice was tiny and afraid. Ed could empathize.

“She’s fine. Alive, perfectly healthy.” He hushed his voice. He knew Winry was supposed to be in the automail workshop, tidying up the mess there, but one could never know. Trisha or Pinako could sneak up on them anytime.

His brother stared at him, uncomprehending, for a few heartbeats of silence, and then choked out: “B-But how—how?”

Ed shrugged. “I managed, somehow.”

Another stretch of silence—with gentle fingers, Al lifted new metal hand and turned it over in close inspection.

“…you lost your arm,” Al murmured, “It took your arm.”


“Not much, actually.” Al rubbed the back of his head the way he was wont to do whenever uncertain of what to do or say. “All I remember is white. Big doors. A voice…”

“Tsk.” Ed chewed thoughtfully on his lip.

“Brother, what was that? Do you—have any idea what that was?”

“I really don’t know much yet. I just know it’s some sort of… of energy source? Channel? I don’t know,” and he sounded almost like he was whining—which inwardly he was, but refused to admit
it, forcing himself to act more adult-like. “I think it decides the equivalency. You know, it calculates what is worth how much.”

“But that’s—how? I mean, what—the standards?”

“Yeah, exactly.” Ed grumbled to himself for a little bit, jiggling his knees in his seat. His leg no longer hurt. Just the simple presence of an awake and aware Alphonse seemed to abate his pain. “I need to hurry up and get used to these limbs so I can start researching again.”

They were quiet for a while, watching the sway of the big tree in the yard through the window. Ed had a myriad of things waiting to be explained to his brother, and an entire list of facts he needed Al to get straight so their cover-up would seem authentic. However, he had no idea where in the world to begin

*oh to hell with it*

he plunged straight into the heart of the matter.

“Look, Al, Mum doesn’t know anything,” he sounded frantic and panicky even to his own ears. “She doesn’t know that she died. She doesn’t know—she doesn’t understand what we—what I did. She doesn’t understand what happened to me, what happened to you—she’s kind of mad at me, right now, since I haven’t been telling her anything.”

Al stared at him with measuring eyes, and for a heartbeat there Ed thought Al would judge him for lying to their own mother, but then he gave an understanding nod.

“That makes sense, I guess,” Al sighed. He grabbed the glass of water again; his throat was rasping from dryness and disuse. His hand trembled in holding the glass; Edward figured he must be starving by now. It had, after all, been a week since Al has had any real food. “It’s all for the better if she doesn’t know.”

“Exactly,” Ed was glad there was someone who understood him now. He had been desperate for the past few days for someone to talk to—so much so that he was actually *almost missing* the Bastard. “Our cover story goes: Mum collapsed from her illness, we panicked. We tried to heal her with medicinal alchemy we learned from Hohenheim’s books and from our training with teacher. I gathered the ingredients for the medicine—lost my arm and leg—made the medicine; you tried to infuse it into her bloodstream, with your own blood. You bled too much and went into shock.”

“You lost your leg too?!”

And it seems he had not noticed after all. Ed lifted his automail leg for Al to peer at in part-horror and part-fascination.

“How? Why?”

Ed opened his mouth to explain, but heard a light clatter from the kitchen. He bit his lip and said instead, “Long story, I’ll tell you later—"

“Alphonse!”

Both boys’s heads whipped towards the doorframe, where Trisha stood in surprise. She rushed into the room, pushed past Ed, and gathered her youngest into her arms, tearfully patting Al’s back and mapping his face and holding him close.

“Good morning, Mum,” Al smiled, tentative and wondering as he gazed up at her in adoration.
Trisha choked back a laugh of joy and took him in her arms again, rocking them back and forth. Over Trisha’s shoulder, Al gave Ed a look of pure awe as he held his mother close.

Ed just gave him the usual roguish grin, leaning back against the rest of the chair. He remarked, “See, I told you, Mum, he’d be fine.”

Trisha said nothing to that. In fact, Trisha acted as if she never heard him speak at all. She drew back and held her son’s face in the cup of her hands. “How do you feel? Are you feeling alright? Do you want some food? Oh, you must be hungry, my poor child, you haven’t had anything in days!”

She bustled about, removing the blanket Ed had draped over Al’s shoulders and replacing it herself, tighter and snugger, as if to secure Al in place. She refilled the now-empty glass of water, insisted that Al take a sip, and refused to let her eyes part from her revived son’s face.

Awkwardly, Ed stood and muttered, “I’m going to go help with lunch.” With an apologetic glance to Al, he removed himself from the scene and made his way towards the door, where Pinako stood watching Trisha fuss over her son.

“Be patient with her, Edward,” the old lady said when he passed her by. “She’s confused. She’ll come around.”

Edward paused momentarily, and with a grim smile said, “Yeah. I know. I understand.”

He trudged down the hall towards where Winry was happily clanking about in the kitchen preparing lunch. Desperately, he tried to purge from his mind the way Trisha had so easily brushed him aside to care for Al, and when he rounded the corner into the kitchen, he had a ready smile for Winry, a cover, but good enough to throw them all off. He could bear this much—this was his punishment for the committed taboo. He would bear this much, because it was only right. She might be angry at him for the moment, and a little bit afraid, but soon it would fade away—as long as she did not hate him, he could bear this silent treatment.

Because soon, soon, it would fade away.

~

Days passed in a blur after Al’s waking. His little brother was up and about again, walking around and helping with some chores, though Trisha forbade heavy work and lifting. Al only gave a wry smile whenever she fussied about; Al was always the better one when it came to tolerating people. By nature Al was a far more social creature than Ed could ever be, and so it was by no one’s fault that for the next few days, Ed was left to his own devices, practically unnoticed in the background except when he spoke up in reply to whatever taunt Winry threw.

Ed kept his quiet, letting Trisha do as she wished, letting her have her reassurance that Al was going to be fine, letting her see that eventually things would settle down again and they would be able to return to their old lifestyle. He had quite a bit of a trouble with finding some alone time with his brother, time sufficient enough for him to outline what meagre theory he had on the Gate and on what had happened to them. Pinako was a great help in that respect; again, she took Trisha out to the markets for a second shopping trip, buying the things they were not able to buy since they be unable to carry it all back the first time.
Rightly so, Al’s interest was piqued by Ed’s theories, and soon they were both digging into their books again, searching for any nuance at all about a Gate or a deciding entity or a channel of energy, something. Even more than that, Al was interested with Roy Mustang, the Bastard, and unabashedly impressed at the offer for the State Alchemist title. They knew both about the unsavoury nature of the job, but there was no denying the prestige that came with it, and the high qualifications a practitioner had to meet in order to claim such a privileged title. Being offered one was nearly unheard of, especially to a child of barely twelve.

Time and again Al questioned why Ed refused the offer, and this irritated Ed beyond imagination. He had already explained that he was not going to abandon their family, not now when they’d finally been reunited, but Al insisted upon his point, saying that the research grants—the opportunity itself was far too rare to miss. And what was even more irritating—if that was even possible—was the way Al would look at him once every now and then, with awe and admiration and this sort-of almost pseudo-worship, doubtless because of what he has achieved with their mother. His temper flared on edge whenever Al looked up at him like that, because damnit, they were supposed to be equals, and Al was not supposed to be lower than he or he higher than Al. He did not want hero-worship; he just wanted their family back together, that was all.

But as he’d learned, the simplest wishes were the hardest ones to make into reality.

Once he tried voicing this concern to Al (in a most roundabout way but Al got the gist anyway) and he was simply rebuffed. Regardless of all of this, Al continued to look up to him and listen attentively in matters of alchemy. Ed feared for Al’s individuality and personal style; he did not want his brother’s talent covered up by his own.

Thankfully, they did not get to talk much at all about alchemy, given Trisha’s persistent shadowing of Al. Ed tried to minimize her exposure to alchemy, at least for a little while until she loosened up again. At the very mention of it, or at the very sight of them poring into their father’s books, her eyes darkened with something he was only beginning to fathom. Wistfulness was forever gone from her eyes, and would never return to shadow them whenever she saw alchemy in action. It used to remind her of Hohenheim, but from now on, it would remind her of her younger son half-dead and her elder son half-whole.

Ed was slowly beginning to see the fine distinction between his thinking and his mother’s, between alchemists and non-alchemists. Before her death, he would have never thought to distinguish, to discriminate between the two. Before her death, before the Gate, he had believed the ideal of equality, in that everyone had a fighting chance, and everyone saw the world more or less the same way.

But encountering the Gate, not once but twice, had changed him, even if he tried his best to deny it. The ideal of equality was fake; every one was created much different from everybody else. This was where the diversity responsible for evolution stemmed from, and this was what society was ultimately built upon. It was foolish to think otherwise.

Alchemists tended to have a different view of the world in comparison to ordinary people, given the much varied knowledge and different upbringing they had (though of course he was generalizing at this point). He—and Al—they were both more open-minded than Trisha could ever be. They were thinkers-out-of-the-box; they were scientists who asked questions, and it was in their blood to do so. They welcomed things they did not know and understand; they sought the answer to them with relentless passion and pursuit.

Non-alchemists could never understand this, at least not to the same extent. Trisha certainly did not,
for when she saw something she did not understand, in the true fashion of a sheltered human being, she began to fear—
—and fear, he knew, was the very foundation of hate.

He did not want that.

He did not want to be hated by his own mother.

So he tried his very best not to upset her, to please her by taking good care of Al while she was away. He never used alchemy in front of her, and he took pains wearing long pants and long-sleeved shirts even in the sweltering late summer heat, if only to hide his automail from her sight.

He struggled to convince himself that yes, she still loved him, and yes, he was still a member of this family. He struggled to maintain confidence in her affection—but he was slipping, oh yes he was, because she was not showing him one inch of affection, not one ounce of kindness at all. They had not talked since that last time when she asked him for what had happened—and whenever he thought of this, he was nagged by a desperate urge to just confess everything that had happened to her surely willing ears, because maybe, maybe—

Maybe that would let her see just how much of himself he had given in order to keep this family together, alive.

~

Light streamed in bars of sunlight through the window, slanting into and cutting through the gloom of his bedroom. His floor was a clutter of books and notes, and his bed a tousled mess of either sleepless or restless nights. This was the one place Trisha never went into, and so he stashed all the alchemy books in a trunk at the foot of his bed. The trunk he had lifted from the basement (which was perfectly chalk-less and blood-free when they moved back into their house) and the books he had gathered from Hohenheim’s study and library.

He feared her fear—and yes, he was fully aware of how absurd that sounded—because he knew not just how far she could go to satisfy the drive to abate the fear. Perhaps he was just being paranoid now, but he did not care. The books—Hohenheim’s journals and notes—they were too precious to risk. She could take them anytime and burn them if he had left them in the study; what a waste of good resource it would be.

But if anything, he knew preventive action best. He had learned a whole plethora of things from his teacher; this was one of them. He kept his precious things close to him, in plain sight but not quite. The clutter in his room served to hide his important notes and the special journals Hohenheim had doodled countless blindingly intricate and equally incomprehensible circles in.

He was nearing midway into one of these journals (there were twelve of them Hohenheim left behind, and he had them all under lock and key) when he came upon a tiny little sketch at the edge
of the page—a simplified ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail. The snake ate itself and used its flesh to reconstruct itself, killed itself so it could rebirth itself. Ed blinked, shaking his now boggled head. The circle was endless, in which life leads to death leads to life. This strongly reminded him of Izumi’s tenet, “One is all, all is one,” the truth of the universe stuffed into such small and almost inconsequential words.

Closing his eyes, he reclined against his bed and placed the journal on his chest. In his mind’s eye he could picture a dragon, a snake, coiling around on itself and biting its tail. It made sense that the symbol was a symbol of immortality, because indeed the snake did not truly die—not if it was able to rebirth itself in its constant flow of energy.

(The circle is the guide and the energy flows within it)

He snapped upright.

“The circle is the guide and the energy flows within it,” he looked down at his palms, one flesh, one metal. “All matter exist in a never-ending flow.”

Swinging his legs over the side and sitting taut at the edge of his bed, he slowly brought his palms together, until they met in a quiet clap.

(spark)

He felt that. He felt that tingle of energy, even through his automail, even through insensitive metal. Audibly, he swallowed and blinked—an image, a circle, flashed into his mind. He let go of the rounded arch of his arms and touched with his right hand a piece of scrap paper on the floor

(cracklespark)

rush went the energy as the crumpled paper turned into a perfectly folded paper crane.

Dubiously, he stared at his hand.

And then at the paper crane.

And then back at his hand.

“Bloody fucking hell.”

Stunned and incredulous, he scrambled for the journal and rifled through its pages, finding the page he was on and gazing at the sketch again. This time, the thing in his head was cooperative; it showed him flashes of the older versions of the ouroboros, and unlike unreliable human memories, these flashes remained burned into his retina for a prolonged period of time. He seized a pencil from the bedside table, snatched a piece of scrap paper from the floor, and began sketching the previous version of the ouroboros, and then the one that came before that, continuously, and soon he was deriving the circle to its most ancient form.

He stared at the sheet of paper and set it against Hohenheim’s notes, his eyes frantically scanning back and forth across the line of circles progressively more intricate and ancient. There was a pattern, a script and two sigils pertaining to command, somehow condensed as the circle evolved, and eventually it disappeared. Indeed, to an untrained eye, the simple form of the ouroboros would be no more than a symbol of infinity and eternity and wholeness, nothing else, but in the old ages, there was some other use for it.
And he knew—he just knew—that if he could decode that, then he would be able to figure out what he just did.

But first he needed to do that again, and observe.

Eager as a child given a new toy for Yule, he scrambled to the door—and paused, turning back and stuffing the journal (with the paper full of his derivative circles) back into its trunk. He made sure to lock it before he shot out of the room, down the hall and stairs, and straight through the kitchen into the backyard.

There he stood bouncing on his heels, looking about for something to transmute. Over by the wall, there were chops of wood they stocked up for when the winter came; it was still summer, and they were not going to need any of them for a while, so it would not be a problem if he took one or two to play with.

Walking towards the stack, he clapped his hands, visualized the circle he wanted in his head, and touched the topmost chop of wood. Smoothly with a crackle of blue-white light, it morphed into a wooden soldier toy.

“Brilliant.”

He grinned to himself and took the wooden toy, rushing to where the backyard faucet was. Setting the piece of wood down on the ground, he ran the water and let it flow and wet the earth, until there was a generous pool around the wood. Then he clapped his hands—again, the circle in his mind’s eye—and touched the top of the piece of wood—and slowly, a sprout of wood came out of the top, and then a little fold of green, and then a tiny leaf, until the piece of wood was a medium-sized leafy sprout rooted in the wet earth.

“It works with acceleration reactions too,” marvelling breathlessly at the tiny tree he made, he rolled back on his heels and sat on the ground. Again, he brought his hands together and touched the tiny pool of water directly beneath the faucet—it froze and aggregated into a flower made of ice.

“What are you doing?!”

Startling out of his wonder, he jerked in fright and looked up at his mother—his very angry mother. Breath caught in his throat when he saw the burning fire behind her mother’s eyes, the same fire Al had in his whenever he felt strongly about something. Theirs was a quiet fire, normally, but when stoked, it spit and sputtered just as aggressively as Ed’s.

“M-Mum, I was just—”

“Do not do that hateful thing in my presence ever again, Edward!” she hissed, eyes narrowing and mouth clenched in anger and fear and—Ed recoiled—hate. “I do not want you performing that alchemy of yours inside this house ever again, are you listening, young man?”

Ed could not believe what he was hearing. Was this really his mother, his mother who had so loved alchemy?

“It has done no good for this family, none at all,” she straightened herself as if attempting to rein her emotions in—she was close to failing. Ed’s eyes caught the tautness and snap of her neck; she was afraid. Of him.

His mother was afraid of him.

“Alphonse will be going to town with me. I am taking him to the clinic for a check-up,” declared
Trisha, before turning her back on him. “I want you to clean all of that up before we come back.”

And not even a goodbye as she disappeared back into the house, leaving Ed struck speechless and still on his perch by the dripping faucet.

He struggled to reconcile the Trisha he just witnessed with the kind soul he knew as his mother. He struggled to reassure himself that she was still confused, just confused, and did not know what she was talking about. How could she? He had told her nothing. She knew nothing. Not one thing about alchemy, about his blood’s science, about Hohenheim, about him, her own son—she knew nothing about how the science had saved her, revived her from the dead.

Oh, she was probably immensely shocked to wake up finding both of her sons incapacitated. Al’s prolonged condition did nothing to allay her doubts and fears. But was it fair to despise alchemy just because of that? Was it even normal?

For a moment Ed was struck with a stagnating fear—what if he had not brought her back whole and right after all? What if dying—what if the Gate affected her somehow? Because surely, surely a limb cannot be worth a whole soul

(she was whole she was brought back whole the price was paid and the soul given back)

but the Knowledge told him he had succeeded. The thing in his head was reassuring him—and it felt right. Besides, he did not think he failed at all. Everything was perfect—well, okay, not everything, since he lost two limbs—but all in all the transmutation’s results were far beyond exemplary.

Which only left behind one explanation for her contempt: that she truly felt it.

Ed did not want to believe it. He did not want to believe it—because this was his mother, his beloved mother, not just some stranger, and she could not hate him, she just could not

but she does, you saw her eyes, she does hate you

and he could not deny that now, no, because he did see her eyes. She had glared with utmost contempt at the branch of wood and frozen flower and she had called alchemy a “hateful thing”—and, since alchemy was an intimate part of him (hell, by extension, alchemy was him, his very being), that just meant she hated him too.

She hates me too.

And what had master said about hate? People feared something before they hated it. Well, she had—still does—fear his alchemy. She fears him. Therefore, by way of perfectly logical reasoning, it would be safe to conclude that yes, she could hate him too.

She hates me too.

Realization slammed against his heart much like how a fully speeding train would ram against a solid brick wall, except unlike the rewiring of his nerves, he felt no pain. Only a spreading, deadened numbness in his chest, and an urge to throw up.

He did throw up.
Leaning over by the faucet he heaved his last meal—but the acid in his throat and mouth was nothing compared to the stinging behind his eyes. Losing his mother, effectively killing his brother, losing two of his limbs—none of that made him cry, but this, this—

*Perhaps*, he thought, *this is the payment.*

*I lost only two of my limbs for my mother’s and brother’s souls—but in the end, we can never be family again. And this is my payment for breaking the taboo.*

The thing in his head remained deathly quiet.

He remained hunched by the faucet, tear streams splitting his cheek, until they dried into near-invisible saline tracks and remained there, sticking and tight against his skin, much like how the stain of his mother’s hate would remain forever etched on his heart and soul. And then in a flash of awareness, in a bout of coherency amidst his jumbled emotionality, he realized:

*I can’t stay here.*

His spine stiffened.

*I can’t stay here—not if Mum hates me. And not if I can’t do alchemy. I can’t not do alchemy—I can’t.*

The thought of leaving his hometown for good, leaving his family *for good*, brought a seeping sadness to his chest, and it rose like a wave along with nostalgia, choking his throat. Again the stinging came to his eyes, only this time, he screwed them shut and tipped his head back, willing the tears to stop and disappear.

This—his mother no longer wanted him here, so this was what he must do. He must leave, *now*, and not return. He would leave a note to Al—yes—and he would go.

Hurried, almost unexplainably *frantic*, he twisted the faucet and ran the water again, a strong gush this time, and rinsed his mouth three times over, before clapping and returning the branch of wood with leaf sprouts into its old form, a chop of dry firewood. The frozen flower he evaporated into mist, and he brought the chop of wood back into the stacks.

Then he rushed into the house, ran to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. He went into his room and began clapping, binding together the scraps of scattered paper into makeshift booklets and stuffing them all into the small trunk. When all the paper was cleared, he began to sort through the books to decide which he would bring and which he would leave behind. In the end he decided to bring only Hohenheim’s special noted books and the twelve journals, leaving behind the basic books, which he really had no need for anymore. His clothes—what few of them he would bring—fit into a large knapsack, and—

*And that’s all.*

He looked around him, around the room of his childhood, now free of strewn paper. The bed was still tousled—with a few measured movements, he righted the sheets. The books went into neat stacks on the desk, and after that he snatched a piece of paper stuck in between one of the books’s pages.

A quick note to Al—an apology and a bare explanation—and he left it on the table, weighted down by the piece of rock he had always used as a paperweight ever since his early reading and writing
days.

Biting his lip, dragged the trunk and carried the knapsack to the hallway, and without looking back, closed the door behind him.

A deep breath.

*I need to go now. I need to go.*

Yes, he would leave, and catch the first train out of here, and he would go to—

Well.

*I have nowhere to go.*

There he stood, staring blankly at the opposite wall. Dublith was one option—he shuddered. Actually, *no,* Dublith was *not* an option. His teacher would ask questions, and he would have no choice but to tell her. Unlike Trisha, she understood alchemy, and would immediately know about the taboo he had broken. And suffice to say, she would *not* be pleased. He shuddered again, more violently this time. A displeased Izumi was *not* a very nice Izumi to be with.

So he was left with no choices. He knew no one else; he had been to nowhere else apart from Dublith and Resembool. Not even to neighbouring cities and towns—they never had the need to travel, and constant touring was not a luxury they could afford. Trisha was, after all, by all rights and respects a single mother supporting two boys. It was a wonder exactly how they survived this well off at all. Certainly it would not have been possible if they lived in a megalopolis such as Central, or even one of the satellite governing cities like East City or South City.

“*Should you ever visit Central, come and see me. I’ll gladly lend a hand if you need help.*”

Ed blinked.

*Well, the Bastard’s in Central.*

And blinked again.

His hand tightened around the trunk’s handle. He had no other choice. He knew no one else. He would not have to stay for too long; he just needed a jumping-off point, that was all. He would never dream of imposing himself upon the Bastard and depending on charity, no. Never.

Again, he took a deep, steadying breath—his flesh hand still quivered around the strap of his knapsack; he *did not want to leave,* he *was scared* and bloody hell *he had a right to be scared.* He was eleven years old, and he was leaving home.

*Leaving home.*

The thought struck him with such intensity that his head throbbed. Eyes fluttering closed, he leaned his head against the wall and recited to himself, “I can do this. I must do this. I can do this.” Keeping it up under his breath, he slipped the knapsack on and hauled the trunk down the stairs. By the door, he took his sturdiest, best pair of shoes, and trudged out of the house, lugging with him all the intellectual property he had the rights to, and nothing much apart from that but himself.
He looked back up at the white structure, watched the light play upon the house’s eaves from a
dozen steps away. This was his childhood home—he was leaving it behind.

Could he really leave it behind?

When they were children, about three or four, he and Al used to play a game of whoever-gets-
farthest. They would try to sprint away from the house as far as they could without getting scared,
and whoever stopped first and returned to their mother lost. Al always won, which was incredibly
embarrassing, but there was a first time for everything, right?

Ed turned his back and began to walk.

This time, he would win.
We don’t receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.
( Marcel Proust )

~

One step into the bustling night-time station and Edward began to doubt his sanity. Whatever courage that had possessed him when he left Resembool was now entirely gone; whatever certainty he had held in his mind had disappeared into the confusing crowd of people milling around and jostling him. With a sense of inconsequentiality, he slipped through the throng of debarking people, grunting and wincing whenever some careless body nudged his shoulder.

But perhaps it was a good thing that he was not noticed by anyone. He was an eleven-year-old boy travelling alone. He had feared that this might raise questions, but it had not: either it was a common thing for eleven-year-olds to be spelunking across the country alone, or nobody really cared. (It was probably the latter.) This was good, he convinced himself. He was, after all, trying to escape attention—not only because he was a potential interest for the military, but also because he had transmuted his train money from dirt and a little bit of yellow metal he had found near Resembool’s tiny train station. By now, the authorities were probably figuring his little stunt out or maybe not, he glanced about, failing to see any sign of alert from the authorities ushering along the gaggle of commuters. His alchemy was rather impressive.

“Well, this is certainly earlier than I expected,” said a voice behind him, and oh, by the goddamned heavens he knew that voice.

Turning sullenly on his spot, he scowled up (damn that height) at the man. There again was the blue uniform he was taught to distrust growing up. “Hello to you too, Lieutenant Colonel Bastard.”

The man behind the Bastard (also in blue uniform but lacking the rank) coughed none too discreetly into a hand. He gave the man a once over (honey blond hair, slight tan, tall build) and then turned back to Mustang.

“Come, follow me,” the Bastard motioned towards the station’s north side exit. Ed noticed a slighter tightening of the shoulders compared to when they were in Resembool; Mustang was far more guarded and cautious here, probably with good reason. The man was a State Alchemist and a Lieutenant Colonel (at quite a young age as well, if his estimates were correct)—he was bound to have some enemies. “It is best if we don’t linger outside for too long. We can talk later, at my house.” And then, as if to confirm, Mustang added, “Unless you have someplace else to go?”

Quietly and almost meekly, Ed said, “No.”
Mustang nodded. “You can stay at my place for as long as you need. In fact, it’s probably better that way.”

He was led out of the station and towards a sleek black car bearing the military’s insignia on its plate and front. The other man—Mustang’s subordinate—kindly took his luggage and placed it in the car’s trunk. Once they were inside and snugly seated, Mustang’s subordinate began to drive.

“This is my subordinate, Second Lieutenant Jean Havoc,” Mustang introduced when the car began to move. Politely, Ed greeted the man in a non-assuming voice. “He was the one who delivered your telegram. It was almost thrown into the bin—you should put a name next time.”

“You told me to be discreet. I was trying to be discreet,” Ed huffed, crossing his arms. “It’s not my fault if your staff can’t even recognize relevant messages from irrelevant ones.”

“I’m coming to Central” is hardly enough to tell anyone anything, Edward. Especially without a name.” The Bastard shifted easily in his seat and smirked down (damn that height) at him. “If I hadn’t anticipated that you would come, I would have totally ignored it.”

“What—you anticipated that I would run away from home?”

Mustang raised an eyebrow. “Well, no—but I did know that you wouldn’t be able to resist visiting Central for long. I hadn’t expected you would run away from home. In fact, I would’ve thought that would be the last thing you would do.” Had Ed chosen to look, he would have seen the sliver of concern in Mustang’s veiled eyes.

Ed shrugged. “Well. Shit hit the fan.”

The Bastard gave an exasperated sigh. “Language, young man.” And then, “Your brother?”

“Perfectly fine now. It’s not him,” averting his eyes, Ed observed the lively lights of the passing-by restaurants and entertainment establishments outside, most of them high-end and far too posh for Ed’s liking. Soon, though, they passed the main entertainment district and turned into a quieter but still rather expensive-looking neighbourhood, where there were little shops and cafes of the type he preferred: quiet and comfortable, perfect for reading with a nice mug of hot chocolate. The outdoor spirit was still about despite the ending summer; he could see chairs and tables set outside in front of the cafes. There were still people milling about—to be expected from a never-sleeping city as big as Central, he guessed.

They remained in silence for the rest of the ride. Mustang had a good measure of mood, and probably already sensed Ed’s reluctance to discuss the matter of his family any further. This was one of the (very) few things he liked about the Bastard; the man understood the reason for secrets, the need for quiet, and the want for solitude. Just as he would never dabble with the Bastard’s affairs without permission, Mustang would never probe about in his personal matters.

The car turned into a cul-de-sac and stopped in front of one of the three houses in it. Following mutely after his host, Ed stepped out of the car and accepted his knapsack from Havoc. The man offered to carry the trunk to the house as well, but Ed declined. “I can manage,” he said.

“You’re off for the night, Jean,” Mustang dismissed the man. “I’ll see you tomorrow. And watch your drinking. Riza won’t be pleased if you’re hung over—you know how she is.”

Havoc gave a shudder of fear. “Yessir. See you tomorrow, boss.” The Second Lieutenant slid back into the car and drove off, with only a nod of acknowledgement to Ed.

“Come on inside,” and they walked together up to the (rather grand) doors of a large red-brick
Georgian structure. It was a handsome thing, with quaint glass windows and a primly tiled roof. The path curved away from the cul-de-sac driveway as it made its way towards the front of the house, which was slanted away from the public road and concealed from prying eyes by tall hedgerows and a groomed cherry tree in the front yard. Ed eyed the house critically, its front and sides and the backyard (which seemed to be joined to the neighbouring house’s wider backyard). The entire thing was large.

“You live here?”

“Yes.”

“Alone?” Ed was incredulous.

“Yes,” the doors unlocked under Mustang’s key, and they stepped into the gloom. An unseen flick of Mustang’s hand and the hall lights came on, illuminating their path and the grand entrance Ed found himself standing in awe of. He would imagine something so ornate only with a lord’s manor—and true enough, the place was befitting of a lord. Especially that chandelier; the faceted cuts of stone and glass looked sharp enough to slit someone’s throat with.

“Who the hell are you, Mustang?” he breathed, wide-eyed.

The Bastard only chuckled in obvious self-appraisal. “Being single and eloquently employed as I am gives much material benefit. I have no obligations to anyone; thus I am free to spend my money as I wish. The military, while quite constricting sometimes, do give exemplary benefits.”

Ed was not looking at the man anymore—he was far too preoccupied ogling the house. They crossed the entrance hall, a wide space with two sets of stairs coming down from the second floor on both sides. He was led up one of these stairs and onto the second floor landing (a podium, he consciously corrected himself), towards and down the wide central hallway spanning two arm spreads. On both sides of him flanked tall oak doors when they stopped; Mustang opened the one on his left.

“This is the second bedroom, the one you’ll be using,” Mustang helped him haul his luggage in. “My room is the one right across the hall. You have your own walk-in closet and bath; use it as you please. I’ll bring you fresh sheets in a bit.”

Suddenly Ed was feeling awkward; he was not accustomed to being cared for by a stranger. “I—it’s fine, I can take care of it myself.”

But the man only chuckled. “I’m sure you can, Edward, but leaving you on your own would be downright rude. You’re a guest in this house, and a guest is always given one’s best hospitality.”

Ed did not like how the Bastard switched so easily between Bastard and gentleman.

“You can go ahead and wash up; you must be tired. Have you had dinner yet? No? Perfect; I’ll get the food ready in a short while.” Mustang walked out of the room and down the hall—Ed followed curiously.

“What’s this room?” It was dark but Ed could see the faintest silhouette of what looked like a massive circular fireplace straight ahead and smack in the middle.

Instead of offering him an explanation, Mustang simply gave a smirk and lifted his gloved fingers—was that a circle?—snap! and a fire was roaring in the middle of the room, subtly supernatural with the blue-greenish highlights threaded through its orange-red. Ed blinked.

The room was not just a room at all, he realized now that he had light, but a library.
A very expansive library.

Wide-eyed and wordless Ed stared at the sight before him, and after three heartbeats of silence, turned to Mustang to worshipfully say: “Adopt me.”

Mustang stared for a quiet moment, as if gauging his sincerity—and laughed. “I think I’m too young to be your father, Edward, and you’re certainly too old to be my son.”

“I’m serious!”

“You’re infatuated, young man—with my books.” Still chuckling, the Bastard walked into the room, with Ed behind him, careful and quiet as if treading upon holy ground. “And I don’t think I’d make a very good father anyway. You wouldn’t want me as yours, I assure you.”

“You can’t be that bad. You’re a well-established Lieutenant Colonel Bastard with a library. With a huge library. You don’t abandon your children in the middle of the night or bring your women home, do you?” and by this point Ed was only paying half-attention, preoccupied as he was with figuring out how the shelves were organized.

“No, in fact, I don’t; you don’t have to worry about that,” and with this the Bastard was dead serious. Ed looked up. “None but close friends have seen my home, and it will remain that way. I rarely have guests over; you won’t be disturbed here, if you choose to stay for long.”

He kept gazing up at the man, trying to figure out why this bastardly person was being so kind to a lost and homeless kid like him. If it was pity, somebody was going to get a very painful broken jaw very soon—but it did not look like pity to Ed, not at all. In fact, it looked more like concern. He frowned. That was even more boggling.

“History, politics, and philosophy over here, fiction and arts over there, that entire half of the hall for alchemical references and scientific literature,” the Bastard quipped out of the blue; Ed only belatedly realized that he was pointing out the organization. “Feel free to read as much as you like; just take good care of them—some are quite rare and therefore expensive—and please put them back in their place.”

The pleasant tingling in the curve of Ed’s neck forewarned him of a multitude of lazy days spent reading. He could not wait until a good sit-down with the tomes. The very musk of aged paper bound by leather tickled his brain; he wanted to read, and the ceiling-tall bookshelves had plenty to feed his surfacing bibliophile, oh yes.

“If you don’t want to adopt me, I’ll marry you for it,” he offered.

The man paused and looked down at the wonderment on Ed’s face. There was this almost-constricted and severely baffled expression on Mustang’s face; Ed thought it hilarious. In the end, Mustang chose not to grace that statement with anything in retort and made way through the maze of shelves. A maze it would not remain for very long; soon, Ed would know them inside and out. “This way leads to the back stairs—straight down into the kitchen. I find it very convenient.”

Ed could understand that.

“Go and wash up, Edward; I’ll take care of the food. The books won’t go anywhere either.”

But it took another good twenty minutes of peeking at the shelves before Ed could lead himself back into his assigned bedroom for a shower.
Dinner: chicken scaloppini, with baby carrots, roasted potatoes, and broccoli rabe. The dish was simple yet still elegant; then again, Ed was being stupid if he expected anything else from the Bastard. They sat in the kitchen, where situated was a smaller table just enough for two or three people. Mustang had suggested the dining room, but it was only the two of them anyway—there was no reason to bother. (Upon sight, Ed felt intimidated by the long table in the dining room; it looked forbiddingly formal and far too lonely for his taste.)

The kitchen itself was not far behind the house’s grandeur. It was tastefully decorated, surely a housewife’s dream kitchen—but despite this, it never lost the necessary economical quality. The place was simple and clean, exactly the way a kitchen should be.

“I’d offer you wine, but you are only eleven,” Mustang was pouring himself expensive-looking white wine.

“I wasn’t aware you troubled yourself with matters of age,” Ed scowled. “I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself, thanks.” He really did not care much for the wine, but he refused to be treated like a kid (which he was, but never mind the technicalities).

Mustang raised an eyebrow and examined him from across the table. After a while of quite contemplation, the man shrugged. “Alright, then,” and began pouring a second glass of wine. “They do say that starting early develops one a strong tolerance against it. But only one glass for tonight.”

Ed accepted his glass and politely—yes, very politely, for the chicken was making him salivate already—waited for Mustang to begin eating before himself. Contrary to popular belief, he did know manners, and he did have them—only, he found few people worthy of his trouble. It pained him to admit that Mustang was one of them. (The Bastard remained a posing Bastard regardless of the kindness and concern; Ed was beginning to see the horns of an ego beyond the acceptable normal size.)

His thoughts were distracted (but only momentarily) from Mustang the moment he bit into his first piece of chicken.

Damn it was good.

Flavour exploded in his mouth, and underneath it was a delicate ribbon of something silky he could not put his finger on. He could taste every single hint of spice in the meat: parsley, caper, pepper, lemon, butter. This was the first time he had ever had chicken so good; not even his mother could cook this well.

“That good, hmm?”

Ed’s eyes fluttered open, blinking at Mustang’s smirk. He never even realized he had closed them. Uncomfortably, Ed averted them to the food, away from the Bastard who insisted upon fuelling his own ego.

“What did you learn to cook?” and he was (very obviously) dodging away from the Bastard’s prodding, but he did not care. He was not about to stroke the goddamned Bastard’s ego; it had already had enough for the night.
“Books and experimentation, mostly. Cooking is remarkably similar to alchemy.”

“Yeah,” Ed grinned. “My teacher used to say that alchemy was born from the kitchen.”

“Indeed; you have a smart teacher.”

He cringed. “So smart she’s scary.”

“So scary you didn’t even consider going to her place instead?” Mustang paused his eating and sipped a little wine. “You didn’t have to come all the way to Central. Not that I mind, of course, but Dublith is pretty close to Resembool. Surely she would have accepted you?”

Eyes darkening, Ed frowned. “She doesn’t know about what I did,” and he didn’t even have to elaborate any further than that. After a moment’s quiet, Mustang nodded in understanding. “And besides,” Ed added, resuming his food, “she’s very much like Granny Pinako. She wouldn’t have let me out of her sight.”

“So which means no research. Of course. That is why you came here, right?”

He gave a nod. “Part of the reason, yes.”

Mustang pried no further. The man probably already knew. Mustang had been present at the time of Trisha’s waking; if he was as sharp and observant as Ed thought him to be, then he could have noticed even back then telltale signs of Trisha’s fearing and hateful behaviour.

Strangest was how perfectly well Ed found himself coping with this fact. By nature, he was a private person. He disliked other people knowing about and messing with his affairs. Even Al was not exempt from his tendency to secrecy—there were things he talked to his brother about, and it seemed now that this list would only grow even longer.

Following Mustang’s suit, Ed lifted his wineglass and took an investigative sip.

But Mustang, he thought to himself. Roy Mustang.

The man was the only other one who had seen his transmutation circle and the scene of his (dare he admit it?) experimentation upon his own mother. Yes, it was an experiment—and for the past dozen days he had been trying to convince himself to accept this truth. He had not known what the absolute results would be, as was obvious; he had gambled his brother’s life and soul on a reckless attempt to turn over the very tide of nature. As he remembered the Bastard remarking, he came off with a very cheap fare.

But that was not the point. With boulder-heaving effort, he returned his train of thought on Mustang. Mustang.

Surreptitiously, Edward looked up from his plate and watched the man eat. Dainty eating, no way else to describe it. Perfect manners, not even a single thing to insult—a complete one-eighty from the Bastard that surfaced its horns once every half-hour or so.

This man—this oxymoronic, acidly sarcastic, absurdly kind, and outlandishly rich man—was the one witness to the most vulnerable moment of his entire life. This Roy Mustang was the one person who saw him at his weakest moments, who saw his folly and its repercussions, who came upon him while he was well into drowning in his own blood.

And I’m not bothered.
Mustang had seen him in the hellholes of agony, thrashing on his operation bed, reaching out for the nearest barest comfort. Mustang had held his hand—a child’s hand—and Mustang had watched over him in his sleep. Mustang had given him an arm and a leg back. Mustang had given him a safe place to run to.

*I’m not bothered by this.*

Ed forked the last piece of potato into his mouth.

Why was he not bothered by this?

He did not know.

He frowned. He *did not like it* when he did not know.

“Is there something wrong?” Mustang peered at him from across the table, curious.

“Nothing, just thinking,” Ed shook his head. He turned his attention to the wine. “What do you call this wine?”

“Sauvignon Blanc,” Mustang explained, “a dry white wine. I used it to lace the chicken.” Just like that, they segued into the simplest of culture lessons, the first of many Ed knew he would get for the while he stayed in the Bastard’s highfalutin house. “Since the chicken already holds some of its flavour, it accompanies the meal well. As a general rule—though not absolute—white wine does well with lighter meals. A small dinner, lunch, or maybe with appetizers.”

Swirling the citrusy taste in his mouth, Ed willed his tongue to remember the taste.

They finished their meal in relative comfort. Ed willingly helped with the dishes, and while they washed the cutlery and china, Mustang further explained the different uses for different kinds of wineglasses. Most of the time Ed spent goggling at the complete collection of wineglasses the man owned. The short lesson was brought to a halt only when the Bastard realized the time and ushered them out of the kitchen with a promise of a continuation of wine lessons and formal dining etiquette.

“How do you know these things?” Ed asked as they went up the back stairs and back into the glorious library. “I thought—I thought these things are for *girls* to know!”

“It has nothing to do with gender at all.” Mustang glided—how the bleeding hell did the man do that?—towards the little island Ed spied earlier when he snooped around. There was a desk in the middle and overlooking it from the wall a tall arcing window. There were couches around the desk, obviously made for comfortable reading, and piles of what looked like laborious paperwork stacked on one side of the table. Against the wall was a coffee table with a phone, a square writing pad, and a mugful of pens and pencils. “It’s good to know such things if you are to mingle with the bourgeoisie, the important people. Apart from saving yourself much disgrace, you’re able to gauge your host’s likes and dislikes, social inclinations, financial standing, and overall intelligence. Best not to be embarrassed in front of an audience, after all.”

Face faulting, Ed stared incredulously at Mustang. “So what—everything comes down to *mind reading*?”

“Yes, to put it concisely,” the smile Mustang gave him was a dark, sly one—and all of a sudden, an
unbidden feeling of danger bubbled underneath Ed’s spine. This man was a dangerous man. “I should get around teaching you chess sometime. I think it’ll do you well.”

“What, so I can follow after you and manipulate the people around me?” Ed scoffed. “No thanks.”

“No?” Mustang sat and raised an eyebrow—*again* that damned condescending eyebrow—at him. “Are you sure? In this world, Edward, it’s either you manipulate or you’re manipulated. It’s all very simple when boiled down. There’s no such thing as ‘not politics’ anymore. *Everything* is politics.”

Ed stared, *looked* into Mustang’s eyes, hard and long. Beneath the deep blue-black (what a strange colour) was a clever Bastard who thrived and flourished within the very fibre of military life. This person, Ed realized, would probably fail to survive as well without people around him to manipulate and peacock over. Business would be another prime career, but Mustang was already accustomed to being a rising military leader. The Bastard was perfect for it, and the Bastard *knew* it.

“Maybe that’s only you, Mustang,” Ed said, *wondered* aloud. Mustang was a curious person, one of a kind. Ed doubted anybody else had as prime an opportunity as he to discover the face behind Mustang’s many fake faces. “Maybe it’s because you live in a world where you can survive no way else *but* through manipulation and power.”

A slow, this time genuine smile crept upon the Bastard’s face. “Indeed, maybe it’s only me.”

“Well, I don’t live in that world.” Ed’s retort was flat.

They faced each other in momentary silence.

“Indeed, you don’t,” Mustang inclined his head, “but one thing I can tell you is that by being here and being who you are, you won’t be able to avoid it for long. Ultimately, you will face a decision no one else can make for you—” Ed thought he was facing too many of those these days, “—do you *want* to be in this kind of life? Because if you don’t, you need to escape it before it takes you over.”

Ed had nothing to say against that. He had no idea what to say. No longer only mildly frustrated, Ed scowled to himself and bowed his head. The number of things he did not know was growing by the day, and he *did not like* it. Stability was something he had always lived with ever since he was little, and very few things shook his childhood world. But he was no longer a child now, never mind legalities. He was no longer in Resembool—he was here, in Central, and if he wanted stability

*which I do, very much*

then he would have to learn how to take control of his own life. He wanted—*needed* things squarely in his hands. Only within stability would he have peace of mind, and only with peace of mind would he be able to fulfil his research in a way that would not be an insult against his science.

*Yes, I need to take control—*

He paused.

Looked up.

*Needing to take control sounds like something he would say. Fucking contagious Bastard.*

Said Bastard was reclined against the couch, perusing paperwork in hand. Mustang seemed serious about letting Ed decide things for himself; the man did not even bother him the slightest in his thinking, instead leaving him to his own devices, which was how he liked to do things. Alone.
“I’m going to bed,” he announced, abrupt.

Mustang looked up in mild surprise. “Alright. Good night, Edward.”

Ed strode across the library and into the wide hallway. He slipped soundlessly into his room and drew the door shut. Unceremoniously, he flopped onto the bed and wiggled upwards, until he had his head on a pillow and his arms around another. The bedside lamp gave the room a soft yellow glow, faintly reminding him of his home in Resembool. Trisha would light candle lamps for him at night and it would burn only long enough for him to fall asleep on whatever book he was reading. It had always been Al who begged to be read stories before bedtime; in the fashion of their father, Ed liked reading by himself.

No matter how much he tried to fool himself into the comfort of sleep, though, it would not come. He laid there wide awake. The light was faintly similar to his mother’s candle, but not the same. Things were not the same. He had voluntarily thrust himself into this strange world of adults and politics and decisions, and now, not even a few hours into it, he was already faced with the decision (he was beginning to severely hate that word) of choosing whether he wanted to stay or not.

But where else would he go, should he leave? What else would he do? It pained him to admit it, yes, but he liked it here, in Mustang’s house, where he was sheltered, protected, taken care of. He had a (gorgeous) roof over his head, (delicious) food on his plate, and (a nearly endless amount of) free time on his hands to spend solely on reading and research Mustang would never discourage him against. If he went back to Resembool, he would have to face up to his mother, who condemned his alchemy, his very blood. So was there even a real choice?

Yes, things were not the same—and they would never again be.

He screwed his eyes shut, as if to push away the foreignness of this new ocean he would now swim in. In this turf, there would be no half-arsing the job—he would be risking his very life if he did. No—here he would need to learn how to swim properly, how to ride out the big waves, how to navigate the reefs.

A grin of irony stretched his lips. Well, the Bastard seems willing to teach.

He would learn—and was not that what he did best? Eventually, he would be able to stand on his own, and then he would be able to pay off his debt to this one man who was now holding his hand as he took his first baby steps into the world. Scared—oh bloody hell yes, he was scared! But he was eager too. Eager to see what was visible, eager to know what was knowable. His mind was wide open and wanting for more knowledge, because he knew that there was no such thing as knowing too much. His life had always revolved around science, and now he realized that it was the one thing he gained from all of this. By effectively severing his ties from his hometown, he would be able to further his science in the exact way he wished, without anyone stopping him.

Without anyone in the way.

Ed curled into himself, face crumpled in the pain of separation. This was almost as bad as having his leg and arm torn away. Tears leaked at the very corner of his eyes—because at the end of the night, after a barrel of bravado and a bunch of fake faces, was he not only an eleven-year-old boy, bewildered and lost? Deep in his heart, he still longed for his mother’s lullabies, even though he knew he would never hear them again.

Crying himself quietly to sleep, he dreamt of a warm hand cradling his own amidst the roiling waves
of darkness.


Bacon and eggs, _ah_, what a wondrous aroma.

Ed blinked into wakefulness, beckoned into the land of the conscious by the wafting smell of breakfast in the air. Stiffly he turned over in bed and stretched, rolling his neck to ease out the kinks. He ended up sleeping without a pillow to cradle his head, having buried his face against it in his crying.

Muttering an oath underneath his breath, he rubbed at his mildly swollen eyes. He was being needlessly childish about this entire thing. He went into the bath, washed his face, and rinsed his mouth. He straightened his clothes, untied his hair, combed it, and tied it up again. (He had yet to manage a braid with his automail; though versatile, the thing was not as flexible as flesh.) Only when he was certain he was presentable did he make to leave the bath—

—he paused and stared at the wall.

The bathroom was actually very simple. One would step in from the bedroom: to the right would be the walk-in closet, and to the left the bath, toilet, and vanity. But right ahead would be a wall—a very unnecessary wall. If he opened a path up right in place of that wall, there would be no need to go through the hallway door and turn back down towards the library; he could simply take a shortcut through his bath and emerge in the library’s alchemy section.

Tilting his head thoughtfully, he clapped, touched the wall, and restructured it into a folding multi-panel wooden door. He inspected his work and nodded to himself. It was perfect—and he even took pains to model it in such a way that it blended well into the bath’s tan-wood-against-white theme. It was ornately decorated—surely Mustang would be hard-fought to find flaws in it. The door slid open seamlessly, and he walked right past it into the library.

“Perfect.”

Never did it cross his mind that he was tampering with somebody else’s property.

He scanned the shelves and grabbed a random book— _Deconstruction and Reconstruction: The Cycle of Alchemy_—and brought it with him as he crossed the glorious hall of tomes. Now, in the light of day, he gazed in even deeper awe (if that was possible) at the sheer number of books Mustang owned. It was near unbelievable to him that one man owned this much. And to think: Mustang was _yet only_ a Lieutenant Colonel; Ed drowned in the sheer possibilities of the books Mustang would own as a _General_. (Absently, he wondered if the man was truly set against adopting him, marrying him, or both.)

When he padded down the back stairs and into the kitchen, the wholesome aroma of cooking food assaulted his senses so gloriously it had him pause in his steps.

“Good morning,” the Bastard casually placed a strip of bacon on the pan. “Breakfast will be ready in ten minutes. Do entertain yourself for the while.”
But Ed merely stood there and blinked at the image before his very eyes. Mustang had donned a dark blue apron over dark trousers and a white shirt with its sleeves rolled up to the elbows—and the entire attire was so very casual that he was thoroughly taken aback. When had he ever seen the man at such ease?

“Or of course you can remain as you are. I perfectly understand if you consider ogling my glorious self as entertainment. I’m more than happy to provide,” giving Ed a smug smirk, Mustang continued his seamless multitasking. He was simultaneously making bacon and effortlessly flipping omelettes, one on each hand.

Stammering, Ed turned his back on the image—now forever burned into his retina—and stepped over to the small table. “W-What’s so glorious about a smug Bastard like you?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Mustang, and oh bloody hell that airy voice just grated on Ed’s nerves. “My heavenly looks?”

“Right,” Ed scoffed. “Go ahead and fool yourself into thinking that.”

Obviously most amused, Mustang chuckled at Ed’s sourness and brought over two plates laden with strips of bacon, perfectly browned sausages, slices of ham, poached eggs, and pats of butter at the side. This was followed up by a plate of French toast—enough to feed three or four people, but would probably all disappear very quickly between the two of them. The Bastard was well aware of Ed’s appetite, and rightly so; Ed was not planning on holding back.

“I’m not fooling myself into anything, Edward,” the man said, removing the apron and settling into his seat. Ed poured them two generous glasses of orange juice. “Your first lesson for the day: one can be confident of oneself, but one’s confidence must be justifiable.”

Ed stared. “Basically, you can stroke your own ego, but only if you have ego enough to stroke.”

Mustang laughed.

“What? I’m just repeating what you said!”

“Cheeky little brat.”

“Who are you calling so little he wouldn’t fit into the tiniest peapod on Earth?!”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Mustang rolled eyes at him.

Ed ground his teeth.

Short of taking his first bite of sausage, Mustang stood from the table and made way to the cooler, a massive case of steel on the sides of which alchemical circles were etched to provide constant cooling to its contents. The circle was an ingenious piece of work, truly; Ed had examined it the previous night while they were washing the dishes. Energy was fed into the circle through a continuous stream of recycling. When it was first activated, Mustang had probably given more than what was necessary for the activation energy, and the extra he gave was taken by the circle and channelled to the Gate. The Gate then gave the same amount of energy back to drive the circle, and so the cycle went on. The food inside would take longer to spoil—now that was what he could righteously call economical application of alchemy.

“Here,” Mustang placed a full glass of milk in front of Edward, “I guarantee you it’ll work, but you need to give it some time. The body doesn’t fast forward.”
Blanching, Ed pushed the glass away. “No thanks.”

The Bastard raised a delicate eyebrow. “Now, Edward. I wasn’t aware you so liked your height.”

Ed fumed. “I don’t.”

“Then drink the milk.”

“I don’t like milk.”

“Well, then, which one do you dislike more? Your height or the milk?”

Chewing on his lip, Ed glared at the glass of milk as if willing it out of existence. But there was confusion, oh yes there was, because would it not be worth suffering the vile thing if he were to eventually grow taller? It was, after all, scientifically proven that milk increased calcium in the body and thereby encouraged osteoblasts to produce more bone. Oh, but—the vileness!

Resolutely Ed pushed the glass of milk away. He then turned his full concentration towards his waiting food, eagerly forking a piece of the first slice of ham into his mouth. He ignored Mustang’s disparaging sigh.

“You don’t have to go to work today?” this was a very obvious diversion of conversation, but whatever.

“I leave in the afternoon,” again, Mustang displayed flawless table manners; Ed attentively observed and began to imitate what he did not already know to do. “Half-shift today, thankfully. You’d be surprised at how much paperwork a lowly Lieutenant Colonel like me has to suffer.”


“No, that’s low,” Mustang paused his eating to take a contemplative sip of juice. “Very low, in fact, when put in relation to what I aim to achieve.”

This time, it was Ed who rolled eyes. “The only position I can think of that would make Lieutenant Colonel ‘lowly’ in comparison is Fuhrer.”

Mustang inclined his head in silence.

Ed waited for a reply.

None.

Flabbergasted, Ed goggled at the Bastard. “You’re not serious, are you?”

A slow and devious smile spread Mustang’s lips. “I don’t joke about such matters.”

After a moment’s consideration, Ed said very flatly: “That’s treason, you know.”

Mustang shook his head. “If it was, Edward, then the Military Police would do well to seize and lock up every officer in a position equal to or higher than Colonel.” Mustang peered at him, grave and almost stern. “In this world, everybody has ambitions. Everybody, no exceptions. Men and women don’t just join the military—they do so for a reason. And though there are a great number who join to support themselves or their families, the few who have real ambition are the ones who climb up. Now, of course, there’s the concern of surviving the vicious food chain, but that’s an entirely different matter you don’t need to bother learning about at this point. What is important is that you remember that every person you talk to has an ulterior motive, and if you know how to choose your
words and actions, you can make them reveal it to you—sometimes without even themselves noticing.”

“And I’m safe to assume that you’re a master at this,” Ed sighed. This man was unbelievable.

“Well, there still are people I can’t fool out there, but they are far and few in between. Each person has a weakness hidden somewhere.” The stern look had yet to fade from Mustang’s eyes. “You, in particular—you have a devastatingly vulnerable weakness: your family. At this point only I know about what you’ve done and what you can do—and no, I won’t tell anyone else. As I’ve already told you, I won’t betray my friendship with Herr Hohenheim that way, and you are a friend too. I don’t betray friends; it goes against my principles.”

Visibly, Ed squirmed in his seat.

“Things should remain this way, Edward. You must understand—you can trust no one in this city unless you know them very well, unless you are sure they are worthy of your confidence. There are many who would sell out information as valuable as yours for a higher position, or for money, or for favour... I admit it’s a bleak way to view the world, but distrust is something you must always keep. Information is power, I’m sure you’re well aware.”

“Of course,” just nodding along, Ed made good work of his food. He understood what Mustang was trying to say. He swallowed the bitterness in the back of his throat. Indeed this was a bleak way to look at the world, but he was already decided. He would stay—it was the best and most logical choice—and he would survive.

Besides, he thought to himself, surviving did not necessarily mean he had to become a clone of Mustang. He would take Mustang’s lessons, learn them, and apply them in a way that would still be him, that would still be Edward Elric. He did not have to become a manipulating egomaniac; he would just have to avoid people as much as possible and concentrate on what he was here to do. He was never very social, anyway.

Yes, he nodded to himself. This was a good strategy.

He turned his attention back to what Mustang was saying, failing to realize that by beginning to adapt strategies on how to deal with people and situations (instead of just reacting to them like he used to), he was maturing into the very thing he wished to avoid becoming.

“You never did tell me how you knew Hohenheim,” asked Ed, ever-curious. Maybe Mustang knew of what the other Bastard in his life was up to, leaving them just like that in Resembool years ago.

“Well,” Mustang shrugged (still in a very clean and fluid manner). “He was a good friend of my master in alchemy. I met him first when I was about your age, a little bit older. He rarely stayed for long at my master’s house, but he would come back, once every few months or so. I believe he was searching for something. He talked to me about a wealth of things about the world and what he’s seen of it. He is a very wise man.”

“Yeah?” Ed could not bring himself to believe that—with good reason.

Mustang looked up at him with a sigh. “Your scepticism is valid; he did leave you with your mother and brother without an explanation. However, that does not undermine his wisdom and intelligence. Your father was well-versed in many things, Edward, and I believe your intelligence and enormous talent for alchemy stems from him.”

Ed was beginning to regret ever turning the conversation down this lane. It soured his mood to think
of Hohenheim, of the suffering the man could have spared his ill mother all those years had he not left for whatever he just had to search for, damnit. He could not deny, though, that he knew that urge to know more, to see more, to research. Was that what Hohenheim left them for? Research? What research could he not have done at Resembool? If it was space, then they could have just made an outhouse or something for the equipment. He and Al would have been more than happy to help.

(hypocrite hypocrite you left home for research too hypocrite)

Inwardly groaning, Ed scorned the return of the Gate’s bloody detached voice inside his head. The rotten thing was just downright horrid when it was not being nice and giving him information.

“What I don’t understand about the man is how he could have left Mom when she was sick. I know he knew she was sick; I could see. I was already four when he left, you know, and I was hardly blind. I am his son, as you’ve said—though what I wouldn’t give for a better father who would have been there to help us,” he spat drily.

“Even if it could mean you won’t have your alchemy the way you do now?” there was the inquisitive inclined head again. “Herr Hohenheim is a brilliant scientist. His techniques always fascinated me—still do, in fact.”

Ed had no answer to that one. He could not fathom a life without alchemy: one of the prime reasons he left Resembool. Alchemy was his blood, his life, his devotion, his religion. He would probably rail the same way the religious people of the far Western coast countries do if his alchemy was taken away from him. He would rather sooner die.

“You know, my first memory of alchemy was Hohenheim,” he absently remarked, forking about his last piece of sausage. He could remember it, hazily, but it was there. He could still feel the coarse hairs on Hohenheim’s; jaw when his little baby hands touched the sides of the man’s face, played with the funny glasses perched on the tall nose. “He was reading a book to me. I was on his lap, and we were sitting by the fire. Mom wasn’t there; I think she was putting Al to sleep upstairs. The book was... actually, I don’t really remember which book it was or what it was about. But he was talking about taboos—about how even the worst of them could be circumvented.”

Mustang paused to think, reclining against the back of his chair. Both of their plates were empty now, and of the French toast remained only one. “Well, he certainly knew what he was talking about. Look at you.”

Ed shrugged. He was being strangely thoughtful about this entire thing, when usually he would rather not think of Hohenheim at all. He absently wondered if they were going to have these conversations over meals all the time now, like some sort of disconcertingly warm and intimate bonding tradition.

“Come, I’ll give you a tour of the house after we clean this up.” Mustang rose from his seat, taking the plates. Obediently, Ed followed with ears open. There was much he needed to learn.

tbc
Arc II: Debut: 04

Friendship needs a certain parallelism of life, a community of thought, and a rivalry of aim.
(Henry Adams)

“—ward.”

Jolting in surprise, Ed blinked into awareness. The haze of words had consumed his attention so wholly he had not even noticed the passing of time. He found Mustang standing over him, still in the blue jacket but with the buttons undone. The man was obviously just home from work.

“Oh,” he marked his page and closed the book. “Err, welcome home?”

Mustang looked immensely amused. “I arrived ten minutes ago and you didn’t even hear me. Do make sure to lock the doors if you’re going to be floating into your own world like that.”

Ed rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mommy.”

“I’m serious, Edward.” Walking back towards the study island, Mustang removed the standard issue blue military jacket and undid the top two buttons of his white undershirt. It revealed a pale and smooth patch of skin. Ed looked away. “Central is a far cry from Resembool. There are troubled souls here who are not above breaking and entering.”

“Let ‘em come,” Ed shrugged. “Not like I can’t defend myself.”

“Yes, but I do prefer my house in tact, thank you.”

Ed could not find anything to say against that. Indeed the house was glorious. Mustang had given him a tour on his first day, and suffice to say, he had fallen in love with the place—especially the artefacts. They were mindboggling in their rarity and preciousness, almost all of them priceless, in particular that tapestry from Xerxes downstairs in the great hall. It would be a severe crime to damage the property in any way. Ed reminded himself to reinforce the walls and windows of the house—bulletproof, preferably, if they were not already. (Mustang had an admirable amount of paranoia.)

“I don’t like this couch,” rather childishly, Ed flailed his legs over the edge of said couch by the library’s massive central fireplace. “It’s curved.”

Mustang raised an eyebrow.

“I can’t lie down on it for an entire day. It makes my back ache.”

“Then go use the window seat.”

“Not enough space. Too many books piled on it.”
A snort. “Sit here, then.”

Ed inspected the study island’s squishy long couches and nodded. “Good idea.” He stood and moved his small pile of reference books along with the one he was currently decoding. He chose a spot (the one which would usually be Mustang’s spot, but whatever) and made himself comfortable. “You know, this book has some rather interesting theories.” Settling himself across Mustang (who was depositing a small stack of paperwork on the already-laden desk) he spread the heavy gold-gilded tome on the table and pointed to a diagram. “It talks about sub-atomic theory.”

“Hmm.” Mustang paused. “This is a… Persian book? Or Xingese?”

“Persian, I think,” Ed ran a finger down the edge of an image. “Golds and greens.” Furrowing his brows and looking up at Mustang with bewilderment, he said, “Where in the world do you find these books?”

What he got in return was a smirk and a smug statement: “I have contacts.”

“Introduce me,” Ed demanded.

“One day,” Mustang gave him an indulging little smile, before turning to the book and inspecting its texts. “I don’t have education in the old Persian language, but this looks faintly similar to Xingese.”

“You can read Xingese?”

Mustang nodded.

“Teach me,” Ed demanded again.

“It’s better done with a Xingese book, preferably an old one. We’ll make time for it.”

They were, at this point, well within building a solid daily routine. In the mornings, Roy would wake first and prepare breakfast, and the wafting aroma of food would be Ed’s never-failing prompt alarm clock. Over breakfast they would have a light lesson over politics and strategy, sometimes even a quick game of chess (in which Ed was an amateur as well) before Mustang left for his duties. Ed would then spend the entire day holed up in the library poring over tomes and tomes of endless information and forget altogether about food, until Mustang returned in the afternoon and prepared from them dinner.

Which reminded Ed: he was hungry.

“I’ll tell you about the book over dinner?” he proposed, prompting an amused chuckle from Mustang at the eager expectance in his voice.

“Let me change,” Mustang said, “and you go ahead and prepare the ingredients. Cannelloni and chicken with greens.”

With a surprisingly quiet obedience, Ed put down his book and made his way down to the kitchen. Mustang insisted upon culinary education as well. Ed really just wanted the food, though of course his brain absorbed all the details and intricacies of the lessons anyway. Mustang preferred their food rather classily and tastefully; as such, the preparation took longer and at times became more tedious. Ed could lodge not one complaint, however, because the reward of extraordinarily tasty dinners was more than enough to pacify his impatience.

Thankfully, it did not take long before Mustang came down to help him about. Ed had no idea what cannelloni was, though he did retrieve the chicken from the cooler. Mustang promptly began explaining tonight’s dinner to one attentive student, and thus Ed lost himself in the flurry of
When they were finally seated at the table, again with wine (a different kind), Mustang interjected: “By the way, I’m visiting a friend tomorrow. You’re coming with me.”

Ed blinked. “Why?”

“Because I want you to learn,” was the usual explanation. Ed thought Mustang was getting a little far too comfortable with that excuse. Did the man expect him to accept that kind of explanation all the time? But he let this one go, and instead asked:

“Don’t you have work tomorrow? It’s a weekday.”

“I only have half a day tomorrow, providing Hawkeye isn’t able to find me extra paperwork,” the last part was grumbled with a dreading grimace. He’d heard quite a bit about this faceless Hawkeye; whoever this person was, they had Ed’s admiration. To be able to bend the Roy Mustang into work was one very impressive achievement any living being on earth had the right to be immensely proud of. “I’ll call you before I leave the office so you can get ready. It might take a while, but you aren’t going anywhere, yes?”

Shrugging, Ed conceded. It would not be a bad idea to see the city. It was rather idiotic of him to know nothing about where he was living. Such information would certainly be useful in cases of emergency. Besides, he wanted to see where the Central Libraries were. From what he had seen on Mustang’s wall map in the library’s study island, there were five state libraries, four of them open for public access. They were all owned, funded, and operated by the military, though the four public libraries hired civilian employees. The only one that was strictly all-military personnel was the First Library, the most expansive and updated of all five, a hive of information available exclusively for ranked military personnel and State Alchemists. According to Mustang, there were sections of that library reserved only for State Alchemists, Generals, and the Fuhrer—any lower and one would be denied access. Whenever he thought of this, he could feel his spine tingle in wonder and want of what information was locked within those walls.

Ed gently forked a tender piece of chicken and deposited it into his mouth, marvelling at the taste and the apparent lack of char. Part of the reason why they did not take as long to cook tonight was because Mustang roasted the chicken using his alchemy. He had goggled incredulously at the sheer precision of Mustang’s control. The meat was perfection.

“So if your gloves get wet,” Ed asked out of the blue, “what do you do?”

Mustang paused, staring at him across the table with a raised eyebrow.

Ed continued, “You need an initial spark to set off the fire, right? That’s why you use that cloth. But what if they get wet? I’m just asking.” He added a nonchalant shrug to offset Mustang’s suspicion.

Of course, against the master of pretension, it did not work. Mustang smiled. “A smoother and altogether better attempt at subversion, Edward, but there’s still plenty of room for improvement. Don’t hope to beat me at this game anytime soon.”

Scowl. “Answer the question, Bastard.”

“Spares,” the man chuckled. “I have spares on hand. In a waterproof case.”

Ed realized there were still flaws in this backup, but there was not much to be done if Mustang relied
on fire. The most one could do was to prevent the gloves from getting wet at all and refrain from using them when in watery situations. Or…

“Can I see your circles?”

Mustang raised an eyebrow, but handed one over anyhow. Ed inspected the deceitfully simplistic dual-glyph circle with a critical eye, and found next to no flaw in it. The one thing that was missing of it that would be useful was the ability to alchemically dry the gloves should they get wet.

“Have you ever thought of adding a drying component in the circle?” he suggested. “It would be really easy to add, since you already have the molecular manipulation part down.”

“Hmm. Good idea,” the man did not even ask how Ed knew of the workings of the technique. For Ed’s genius, it was not too hard to postulate the theory behind an array at one glance. The two glyphs were glaringly obvious (at least to those who could read them, which would include only a scarce few): volume and precision, the two components of molecular control. “I’ll consider it,” Mustang said, pocketing the glove again.

For some unseen reason, Ed could not shake the feeling that Mustang was omitting something. He frowned and began to turn over the circle in his head for the second time. He sorely hated missing things.

Glancing aside, his eyes were caught by the now-turned-off black iron oven by the far wall of the kitchen. This was yet another interesting piece of alchemical technology right here. He knew that by the arched shape of the wall, the central circular fireplace (which formed a narrowing cone as it went from the first floor to the second) was right behind the oven. He had inquired earlier, and apparently, the fire in the fireplace (the one that was visible in the formal dining and great hall) supplied the necessary heat for the oven to work. Instead of installing an electric oven as was the custom in any affluent house in Central, Mustang had engraved a thermal manipulation array on the oven; effectively cutting down the house’s electric spending by half.

If anything, Mustang the Bastard was ingenious when it came to the practical applications of alchemy. Ed could give him that.

He grimaced. With the mention of fireplaces, he could not help but recall their little unfortunate experience two days past in the library one afternoon, after Mustang had returned from work more than just a little tired and eager for some good food and scintillating conversation. By habit the man had snapped his fingers to ignite the dormant fireplace—and CRACKLESPIT it went, spurting and roaring wildly until a stunned Mustang, after five seconds of confused struggle, had managed to get it under control.

Hair singed from having sat close by the fireplace, Ed had spluttered in surprise. There had been leftover energy from when Ed had earlier that day rid the entire house of dust by alchemy. Mustang’s alchemy had picked up that extra energy, thus the uncontrolled spitfire. Initially it had been funny, seeing Mustang’s flustered countenance, but when Mustang reminded him of the suffering they would both have to go through if the fire caught on the books and burned precious history, he had blanched in terror. He had cleared the surrounding of the fireplace of books and anything flammable with meticulous efficiency after that.

“You were talking about the Persian book earlier,” Mustang abruptly quipped, jerking Ed out of his thoughts. “Sub-atomic theory.”
“Ah, yeah,” Ed nodded. “From what I could decode of the texts—I used some of your reference books—it talks about ‘dividing the smallest unit of matter.’ That would be the atom.”

“Interesting. And this is… what, early fifth century? Are you sure they’re talking about sub-atomic theory?”

“Oh, I don’t know about atomic theory—they don’t mention the concept of an atom at all, as far as I’ve read. But they are talking of something smaller than a molecule, so,” Ed shrugged, “they were on to something.”

“I’m not aware of any prevalent Persian alchemy today,” Mustang said. “From what I’ve heard, the Persian alchemists were castigated and through the ages extinguished in the population by multiple invasions from Western countries. They were said to practice a strange and foreign alchemy the Westerners—mostly the colonial coast countries—could not comprehend.”

“Well, Amestris has always been ahead of everyone else in alchemy and mechanics. Maybe if we were the ones there, we could have figured it out.”

“True,” nodded Mustang. “But they were wiped out nonetheless. As I’ve told you, the very base of human nature does not change even through the ages. What people fail to understand, they fear. Persian alchemy, according to the classics, was also particularly powerful in battle, though how specifically I don’t know. That would only be more of a reason to hunt and kill all the alchemists.”

Face crumpling in distaste, Ed reclined in his chair. “So effectively they wiped out an entire science developed over centuries of hard work and research just for power.”

“Land and resources.”

“Power,” Ed reiterated.

Mustang was quiet again, for longer this time. And then, “If Persian alchemists exist today, they would be rare and hard to find. They would be in hiding—they’re not being hunted anymore, but they’ve been in hiding for so long it would be rather hard to assimilate back into normal society after having been outcasts for centuries. And I doubt they would have knowledge of the science stretching that far back. Information was probably lost through the ages.”

“Still, though. I think it’s worth a look. Think about it. They were talking of something we discovered only recently—half a century ago?—a good thirteen-hundred years before we even developed the technology to know these things. You said their alchemy was powerful—maybe they discovered something innovative ahead of us that we’ve never realized. After all, we’re still new to the idea of an atom.”

“Most don’t even accept it fully yet, and even if they do, they don’t think anything can be done about it at all,” which was a good point, Ed thought. Mustang probably knew some State Alchemists who disregarded atomic theory in favour of combat alchemy, which was all too conventional and easy. It was no wonder Mustang was a highly lauded alchemist; his flame manipulation was about three to four notches higher (and therefore harder) than conventional alchemy, depending on the scale of the reaction.

Ed scoffed. “There are tons of things you can do with atoms; you just have to think!”

“Most people don’t like thinking, Ed. It’s painful. It hurts the brain.”

“It’s a good kind of hurt.”
“Why, Edward, I wasn’t aware you were so…” Mustang tipped his near-empty wineglass with a sly smile, “...masochistic.”

“Shu’up,” Ed mumbled into his own glass, forehead creasing in annoyance. The Bastard was a Bastard and would remain a Bastard forever, never mind the good food.

They sat there for about five minutes of companionable and thoughtful silence, until Mustang stood and began to gather the dishes. “Come on, let’s clean this up. We can talk upstairs.”

Draining his wine, Ed rose and followed, still deep in thought.

Their discussion about atomic theory had rekindled that sense of subversion in Mustang’s voice, that feeling that there was something more to Mustang’s flame theory than atomic manipulation.

Now if only Mustang would give him more clues... Ed sighed. It was useless. Mustang was a master pretender. He would not at all be surprised if Mustang slept with his masks on. It would only be most appropriate for his paranoia. Which meant that Ed would just have to figure the theory out by himself.

Well, Ed thought to himself, a good challenge is never to be turned down. This was what he was taught by his teacher, a prideful and wise woman who would no doubt butcher him to hell and back if she ever heard of him refusing a perfectly nice and mentally exhausting challenge. That was exactly what Roy Mustang was to him right now: a severely mentally exhausting challenge.

He was not going to lose.

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True enough, the following day early in the afternoon, the phone rang from right beside Ed where it sat on the study island’s table. Grumbling at the incredibly rude manner he was jolted from his reading, he picked it up and gave a gruff greeting. Mustang promptly informed Ed (over a somewhat commanding female voice in the background) that he was coming home in a few minutes.

Ed sighed and regretfully closed his book, rising and heading towards his room. He picked out his cleanest, best set of casual clothing and washed his face, having already showered earlier. Once in the clean set of clothes—simple khaki pants with a dark long sleeved shirt—he removed the knot at the base of his neck and combed his hair. It was longer than what he was used to, maybe too long; he wondered if Mustang knew a competent barber.

“Ed?” a voice from the library echoed.

“In the bath, give me a minute,” Ed called back, holding his hair up and redoing the knot, this time neater and up high at the back of his head. Footsteps thudded quietly against the wooden floor, towards Mustang’s own bath. The man was probably going to change into civilian clothing. Mustang despised going out in uniform unless on duty, which was understandable; the uniform set him apart from people, which he did not want, if he was going to charm them into submission.

Mentally scoffing at the Bastard’s Bastardliness, Ed trudged out of his bath, crossed the library, and
rapped on Mustang’s door. “Are you done yet?” He could see the exasperation that would be on the Bastard’s face just about now.

A sigh. “Give me a minute, Edward. I’ll tell you when I’m done.”

“Are you done yet?”

Another sigh. “Hang on, Edward, I haven’t powdered my nose yet.”

“Are you done yet?” Ed was having too much fun to stop.

This time, Mustang’s bath door (the one that led straight into the library like his transmuted one did) creaked open the faintest of a fraction. “Would you rather watch me undress, Edward, so you wouldn’t have to ask me every other second if I’m done?”

Ed froze. “Never mind, take your time.” He walked away, scuffling down to the kitchen and valiantly ignoring both the creeping heat below his collar and the blatant chuckle coming from the bath. Why did the Bastard have to be such a Bastard all the time? A very perverted one, too.

It took a good fifteen minutes before Mustang stepped down into the kitchen, where Ed was idling about munching on an apple. The Bastard looked stunning in light brown slacks and a white collared shirt. A matching jacket was slung on his arm, but that was not what caught Ed’s attention. His eyes immediately zeroed upon the gun slung at Roy’s side, to be hidden by the jacket.

“You’re armed,” Ed noted faintly.

“Always,” Mustang said, “which reminds me: I should have Hawkeye teach you how to shoot.”

“Why?” forehead creasing, Ed finished his apple and deposited the remains into the trash. “It’s not like I’m in any particular danger.”

“Would you rather be caught in a situation first before learning?” Mustang gave him a stern gaze, and again for the nth time that week, Ed felt as if he was a son being reprimanded by a father. It was not exactly a teacher-student relationship between them anymore; Izumi was his teacher, and she was rather irreplaceable. Mustang was different.

He averted his eyes and tilted his head. “Prepare for the worst,” he murmured under his breath: one of his first and foremost lessons from Mustang. Constantly, it was being shoved into his head: a paranoia that would be debilitating for most people, a paranoia that defined Mustang’s success. He sighed as they made their way out of the kitchen and down the hall. “I don’t mean to go against your principles, but sometimes, you can be a little bit too paranoid.”

Mustang laughed. “Yes, I might seem so. But there is no such thing, Edward. My ambitions are well-known within the military, and though I have taken measures to make it extremely hard and costly for people to go against me, there are some who will not be deterred. I must always be on my guard if I want to keep breathing—and so should you, once people know of your association with me.”

“Rather tiring.” Ed remarked. Mustang was now leading him through the front yard and towards an outhouse—a garage, he belatedly realized as they stepped in. He wondered how he had missed this.

“Yes, but necessary.” Mustang lifted the tarpaulin cover from the hulking shape parked in the middle of the detached garage. There sat a well-kept shiny black car.

“You have your own car,” and he could not keep the wonder out of his voice. Just how bloody rich was Roy Mustang? Was there even a limit to the man’s money? Edward was surprised that Mustang
did not have a more ostentatious house. Not that the current one was lacking, not at all, but with this much money, surely...? But Mustang did not seem that kind of man. The neighbourhood, a quiet and modest upper-middle class place, spoke for him.

“Yes, I do,” Mustang gestured for Ed to slip into the passenger seat, which he did, awkwardly.

“B-But that man—your subordinate—doesn’t he drive you around all the time?”

“Yes,” again Mustang affirmed.

“So why waste your own gasoline?”

Mustang brought the engine to life and carefully backed out of the garage. “Havoc is currently on a date,” Mustang shrugged as they drove on a dirt path that led to the main road outside, past a gate that was hidden by the foliage of the hedgerows. “And besides, would you really have him impeach upon our quality time?”

Ed spluttered in indignation but was robbed of the opportunity to bark his retort when Mustang brought the car to a halt in front of the house and got off to close the gate. He watched as Mustang walked up to the hidden gate in the hedgerows to lock it before heading back towards the car.

“Bastard,” he spat when Mustang slid back into the driver’s seat.

Mustang merely gave him a beatific smile.

~

Arriving at their destination took shorter than Ed expected, though perhaps it was only because he was too busy ogling his new city, so urban and so foreign. Mustang parked the car before a medium-sized establishment: a clothing shop. Ed debarked and quietly followed Mustang inside.

“Oh! Master Roy!”

Ed gurgled a laugh in the back of his throat.

“Welcome, welcome! What can I do for you today?” immediately the other shopkeepers ushered aside the couple who came before them. Mustang’s presence now received the full attention of the proprietor, and, if Ed’s guesses were correct, the master tailor. “Is the Master in need of formal wear? A new suit, perhaps?”

Now this person was far too obviously kissing Mustang’s ass. Ed made a face. He could not see what he was here for. There was nothing to learn! He stomped his foot.

“Actually, it won’t be for me today,” Mustang stepped aside to reveal Ed. “This young man here needs a complete wardrobe overhaul.”

Ed stared up at Mustang rather stupidly. “What.”

“You need clothes.”
“No, I don’t! My clothes are just fine! What’s wrong with them?” indignant, he backed away.

“Edward, nothing’s wrong with them apart from the fact that they’re old and worn.” The tailor clucked disapprovingly behind Mustang.

“Well, it’s not like I need grand clothing like you do. I don’t go out that much.”

“I won’t have my charge going about wearing scruffy clothing—yes, even only inside the house.” With firm hands on shoulders, Mustang took Ed and steered him towards the tailor, to whom the Bastard said, “He’s all yours.”

Spluttering, Ed was dragged away, towards a stool whereupon he was made to stand still while his measurements were taken. All the while, Mustang was reciting to the tailor’s assistant: “He needs three sets of formal suits, five slacks—casual, six to ten collared shirts, three to five waistcoats, two summer blazers, a leather jacket, a summer jacket… a few cardigans. Did I miss anything?”

“For a basic wardrobe, that’s just perfect,” the tailor replied, absentminded, as he flitted about Ed, meticulously checking and rechecking various measurements. “You will have to come back for the winter set.”

“Of course.” Mustang made sure the assistant had them all down correctly before prompting, “I would like to see your available hair ties.”

“Bring Master Roy our best sets, Vivianne.” The tailor gestured for Ed to raise his arm, and then clucked again in annoyance. “I cannot say I am getting your correct measurements with confidence, Young Master Edward.” Ed choked on his own spit. “Perhaps it would be best if you removed your shirt?”

Eyes tightening, Ed turned to Mustang. He did not want to, but if he had to, was this tailor to be trusted? Mustang nodded his assent. “Go ahead, Ed.”

Giving a sigh, Ed did as he was told. The tailor’s eyes widened a fraction upon sight of the gleaming metal automail, and the returning assistant was graceless enough to gasp out loud, but the tailor did not say a word. Instead, the elder man simply continued his work in quiet. He was also made to strip his pants off, leaving him standing in his boxers, while Mustang perused the rather extensive (and expensive) collection of hair ties.

The soonest he was allowed to shuck back into his clothing, he did so, and hurriedly stepped off the stool. The tailor checked over the list of clothing as he struggled into his shirt. “What colours would be preferable for the slacks?”

“An assortment of navy blues, greys, and browns. I’ll leave the specifics to you,” Mustang gave The Charmer Smile. Ed rolled his eyes, grumbling under his breath. “For the formal wear, all of them black, please.” Then Mustang beckoned him closer, turning him around.

“Hold still,” the Bastard said, and from the corner of his eye, Ed could see Mustang pick out a silken tie, slate grey and almost silver in colour. With gentle fingers, Mustang removed his old worn tie and let his hair fall. And then, with utmost care, he gathered the hair again, pulling it up and knotting the expensive slip of silk around the golden strands. “There. It looks good.”

Ed sidled to the mirror. He looked at himself sideways, touching the silk tie and tightening it. It felt nice against his hair, and the loose ends did not tangle. He had to admit: it looked very good—but still excessive. “I don’t think the hair ties are necessary. I was actually thinking of cutting my hair.”

Mustang—and the tailor (who drew a gasp)—looked absolutely horrified. “Why? It’s good the way it
“But—isn’t it too long already?” Ed fingered the ends of tie.

“You’re just not used to it,” the tailor bustled. “It looks wonderful, child, very aristocratic. Don’t cut it; it’s such a waste! *Women* dream of hair like yours; it’s *beautiful*. You’re very fortunate. Your mother must have such beautiful hair.”

Faintly, Ed smiled. “Well, yes, but actually, I have my father’s hair. Which reminds me: I don’t want to look like him. I want to cut it,” he whined.

“No, you don’t,” Mustang firmly insisted. “And you aren’t exactly looking like your father. You don’t have glasses, and Herr Hohenheim didn’t have your fringes.” As if to emphasize, Mustang brushed one aside to reveal Ed’s petulant scowl. “Tell you what: if you beat me in chess, I’ll take you to a barber then. *Only* then.”

And Ed, being Ed, could not back away from a challenge. “You’re on.”

Mustang smiled in satisfaction, before turning to the assistant. “We’ll be taking three of the grey ones, three of the black, one of the navy blue, two of the light brown, and one of the Persian green.”

“What of shoes? The Young Master will need shoes to go with his attire.”

“Ah, yes—”

Before Mustang could even complete his sentence, the tailor jumped into action. Quickly stepping out of the store, the tailor went and rapped on the neighbouring shop’s door. In a loud voice, the tailor yelled, “Andrew! I need you to fit me some matching shoes for Master Roy’s charge!”

“Andrew is his brother,” Mustang supplied helpfully. “They’re both good friends of mine.”

Loud clattering and an answering shout came. Moments later, Andrew the shoemaker was shuffling into the tailor shop with tools in hand. Ed blinked in surprise; the tailor and the shoemaker were identical twins. There was a distinct difference, though, in that Andrew had a more fleshed out build. The tailor was narrower and roughly an inch taller.

“Master Roy, good afternoon,” Andrew greeted in the same happily enthusiastic manner as his twin. “Will it be formal shoes for today?”

“Two of those, leather, black, for this young man here,” Mustang pushed Ed forward again for measurements. “Two pairs of walking shoes, one with lace and one without. Two pairs of loafers, one black and one brown. One pair of ankle boots, black—“

“I want high leather boots,” demanded Ed, because if they were going to be spending exorbitant amounts of money *anyway*, they might as well spend it on worthy things. “They’re good for rugged terrain and travelling.”

“And that,” the Bastard conceded, inclining his head with an indulgent little smile.

Content, Ed patiently sat and allowed Andrew the shoemaker to collect his measurements. When smiled upon like that, even though it was from the Bastard, Ed felt free to be a child again, felt free to ask for what he wanted and be given it (though of course still within reason). It was almost as if Mustang was *doing* on him. He wondered absently if this was how it felt like to be taken care of by a loving father.
It was a long while after when they finally stepped out of the store and back into the car. Mustang lingered behind, graciously accepting the twin brothers’ gratitude. Ed was polite enough to wait until they were pulling away from the store before barking:

“Why did you give so much money?! We could have gotten all of that for a much lesser price at another store! You know, generic clothing!” he just could not believe how much money Mustang spent on that little trip. That much was enough to build a nice and comfortable house!

“Please don’t tell me you really are thinking of wearing trash for clothing,” sighed Mustang, ever the elitist Bastard. “And besides, it’s not a waste at all. The money will come back to me anyway.”

“What?”

“I invest in them, Edward,” skilfully, Mustang navigated the busy roads with ease, even while busy talking. “Andrew’s shoe shop and Anthony’s tailor shop, both of them began their business with help from my funding. You didn’t think all my money came from the work I do for the military, did you?”

Uneasily, Ed shifted in his seat. He did think so.

Mustang chuckled. “Money doesn’t grow that way. One needs to invest if one wants to gain. Yes, the military gives me a steady salary, and yes, I have bonuses and allowances due to my status as a war veteran and a State Alchemist. But that’s nowhere near enough to establish a home such as mine. I invest in businesses I see profitable, which is why they accommodate me so congenially.”

“Yes,” Ed grunted. “I thought it was rather strange how they seemed to fall over themselves for you.” He could recall the expression on the twins’ faces when they saw the handsome sum of money Mustang wrote on the note. It was no doubt more than what was necessary; Anthony the tailor blurted out a worshipful, “Oh, bless your soul, Master Roy!” upon receiving the note. They had, of course, tried to refuse it, but Mustang would not listen. This was a truly ingenious way of securing their affection, loyalty, and excellent craftsmanship.

“They are good men with talent,” Mustang explained by way of saying. “They deserve a steady business with which to support themselves and their families.”

They sat in relative silence after that, until Mustang pulled over by a grocer. Ed noted in passing that they were once again within their neighbourhood. He followed after Mustang into the shop, observing the mill of people within the rather expansive place. There were aisles in the back for the non-perishable produce and canned goods, while the front section of the grocer was occupied by small stalls of fruits, fresh meat, seafood, and dairy handed to the customers by a small army of helpers.

Mustang took one of the trolleys and beckoned Ed along, going first through the aisles and pointing out what they needed. It took them near twenty minutes to scour the aisles for whatever else they needed for the pantry and the rest of the house. Whenever Ed saw something he wanted, he asked
tentatively, and he was given. He was not used to such treatment; Trisha had always been on a budget whenever going to Resembool’s relatively small grocer.

They finished the non-perishable aisles—then came the bane of Edward’s existence.

“Ten bottles, please,” said Mustang to the helper behind the counter. The helper nodded and began hauling out ten large glass bottles of fresh milk.

Ed blanched. “Ten?! What do you need ten for?!”

Raising an eyebrow, Mustang began to place the milk bottles within the trolley, making just enough extra space for fruits and some meat. “Well, some dishes require milk in them, Edward. Especially desserts. And there’s the milk for drinking—”

“But I don’t like milk.” Stubborn as a mule, Edward began hauling the milk out of the trolley and back onto the counter, from behind which the helper stood in confusion.

“Regardless, you need you calcium, and you should know this, child genius that you are.” Mustang hauled the bottles back in. “You don’t want to be this small forever, do you?”

“Who the fuck are you calling so minuscule he wouldn’t be visible under a microscope?!”

The lady next to them gasped. “Language, young man!”

Mustang wore a disparaging face for the lady and nodded apologetically. “Do excuse him; he’s yet to be trained.”

“Who the hell are you calling a dog that needs training, Bastard?!”

“Now, Edward, I’m not forcing you to drink the milk at all,” the Bastard soothed, placing all of the milk bottles in the trolley (finally) and ushering his indignant charge towards the fruit stalls. Mustang gave one last apologetic smile to the very much affronted lady following after them. “If you don’t want the milk, that’s fine, you don’t have to drink it.”

“Yeah, because I won’t,” grumbled the child, all crossed arms and stomping feet. Mustang merely gave a chuckle that was dangerously bordering on (dare Ed say it?) affectionate. Never did Ed see the lingering little devious smile on the edges of Mustang’s lips as they walked away from the dairy.

They picked a few vegetables to carry along with them (Mustang appeared to adore tomatoes) and then made their way towards the fruit section. Once every now and then Ed threw a dirty look at the bottles of milk clacking about in the trolley, but said nothing further about it. Instead, he listened attentively as Mustang explained how to choose the right fruits, the seasons different fruits came in, and when and how it was appropriate to have them. Mustang tended to be dead meticulous about matching dishes, desserts, and whatever else accompanied their meal on the table whenever they ate.

Ed expected to be taken to the meat section afterwards, but Mustang took him towards the clerks instead.

“We won’t get meat?”

“We get meat directly from the butcher,” Mustang explained. “Fresher and much cleaner slices. It takes an immense amount of training to get the slices right; not everyone can do it.”

“But—won’t that be expensive?"
Wrong question, Ed belatedly realized.

“Good food, Edward, is worth good money. That you must remember,” declared the Bastard.

Ed rolled his eyes. “Along with every other creed you give me, of course.”

“You’re learning,” and the smile on Mustang’s face was again a fond and amused thing. The man gave him a light pat on the shoulder and pushed the trolley forward. The clerk began counting.

Idling about, Ed stood behind Mustang, people-watching. This was the one thing Mustang did not have to teach him: people-watching had always been a hobby of his since he was a child. People were fascinating in their tiny and near-unnoticeable quirks and idiosyncrasies. They could never escape his seeking eyes, though; his gift of observation and deduction extended far beyond books and laboratories. Contrary to popular belief, he was just as incisively sharp at gauging people as Alphonse. Only, unlike Al, he was not as conscientious and did not care for their emotions as much. Politesse was something he understood and could practice but was too lazy to. Unfortunately for him, Mustang was not giving him much of a choice.

A couple of chattering ladies in line for the counter next to theirs caught his eye. They looked older than his mother, probably around middle age, and much plumper, which was no surprise. Convenience was in fashion in Central; they probably never had to do the same amount of energy-burning work Trisha had to do around the house. They, however, had the similar motherly aura about them; these women, Edward realized, probably had children about his own age.

But this was not what piqued his attention. It was the way their eyes darted about, the way they clustered together, the way their poise seemed guarded and reclusive. As if they were expecting an attacker, even in midday.

“…murders were just grisly, did you see?” one of them was saying in a hushed voice. Ed kept his eyes low but his ears tuned; he did not want them to stop talking until he had what he wanted from them.

“Yes, just awful,” they all murmured uneasily, with different degrees of shock, disgust, and thinly veiled fear.

“It makes one wonder just what the military is doing.”

“They say the last one was the fifth victim, and that the military’s been hiding it from the public, but there was a leak.” Ed’s forehead crumpled in thought. Surreptitiously, he snuck a glance at Mustang, who was still conversing with the clerk. He wondered if the man knew anything about this. The lady continued: “They say it might be a cult.”

“I still think the papers should have published their content with much more propriety and consideration for younger readers. Such detail! And the images! Oh, I had to burn my copy after my husband and I saw it yesterday morning; what if my daughter saw that atrocity?”

“Wouldn’t it be better for them to know, though? It would keep them off the streets late at night.”

“True…”

The conversation petered out from there as the ladies began to check their items out. Impatient now, Ed waited as Mustang handed the clerk the right amount of money and accepted his change. Together, they exited the modest establishment and made a beeline for the car. The sun was near its
setting, rather early for a summer day; it was the signalling of the beginning of autumn.

Quietly, he helped unload the groceries from the trolley and into the car’s compartment. A helper offered to take the trolley back, and soon, they were pulling away from the store and back down towards their street. Ed recognized the route easily.

After a moment’s deliberation, he decided to cut through the dillydally: “I overhead some of the ladies talking about a series of murders earlier,” he began.

Mustang’s grip on the steering wheel tightened the tiniest of a fraction.

“No do not concern yourself with it; it isn’t for you to worry about.” They made a careful turn. Ed could now see within a block’s distance their house. As if to add, Mustang continued: “Do not go out at night, or even in the late evenings, alone. Ever. Stay inside and be sure to lock the doors, especially if I’m not home yet.”

Ed shrugged. “It’s not like I have anywhere to go anyway. You know that there’s nothing anyone can offer me that will make me leave the library.”

“Even still,” Mustang’s voice was firm and allowed for no argument. “I want you to be careful. I want you to stay inside and be safe. I don’t want you hurt.”

Sighing, Ed conceded. “Yes, Mommy.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know,” Ed fiddled with the hem of his shirt. “I’ll be fine. You worry too much.”

“I have good reason to.”

Ed’s forehead creased. The tone of Mustang’s voice suggested knowledge of the murder cases. Ed knew, however, that no matter how much he badgered Mustang about it, the man would not tell. He could tell that the case was confidential from the finality of Mustang’s words; perhaps it was Mustang himself who was taking care of the case, which would certainly explain why the Bastard was so incredibly paranoid about security and safety.

While he was here, in Central, he had no choice but to trust Mustang. He had no one else. Bastard though the man was, Mustang was a good person, and was genuinely concerned for his wellbeing. Ed could not fault him for being paranoid at all, especially if he was dealing with the murder cases.

Mustang parked the car in front of the house and slid out of his seat. “Come; help me get the groceries into the kitchen.”

Restraining his curiosity, Ed asked no more about the case. He simply consoled himself with the thought that if it was Mustang taking care of the case, it would surely get solved soon.

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Watching the nice dust of orange fade as the sun set slowly and the moon rose over Central, Ed sat in one of the sprawling grand parks near the house. After they had come home earlier from the grocer
and fixed their shopping items into the pantry and wherever else they went in the kitchen and the house, Mustang had declared that he was feeling too lazy to cook their dinner, and so resolved that they would, for a change of pace, go out to eat.

Edward could not shake the feeling that this was some sort of date—the place was certainly romantic enough for one. They were sat outside, under the generous branches of one soaring and wide oak tree, probably more than a hundred years old. The restaurant was built into a small clearing in the park and was surrounded by trees and winding paths that took visitors—mostly lovers—into the woods if they wanted to walk about.

Relaxed and idle, Mustang reclined in his eat, until a chef—the chef—rushed out of the restaurant house and made towards them with a great smile on his face. “Master Roy, what a pleasure!”

Incredulous, Ed watched as Roy rose to give his polite greetings and was seized for a (very manly) hug. Again there was that constipated look on Roy’s face, but quick as silver, it was masked with a polite little smile. The man was a master at deception.

“Thank you for the excellent ambiance and excellent service as always, Giovanni.” Mustang turned to Ed. “Edward, this is Chef Giovanni, a good friend of mine.”

“Ah, you flatter, Master Roy,” the chef smiled, and though the smile was bright, the bald head blinded Ed more. “I should be thanking you for your continued patronage. And you’ve brought us a new customer too, a most charming young man.” Edward stood and shook the chef’s hand with a polite smile. Mustang seemed to be approving and amused at the same time; Ed assumed he was doing well. The chef continued, “What would you like for tonight, hmm? We just had a shipment of fine Chianti—I do know that Master Roy is quite fond of his wines, yes? Perhaps you would like red meat to go with that.”

“Well, first we shall have a platter of antipasti—bocconcini, green and black olives, roasted garlic, calabrese salami, genoa, and the rest of them you know of course.” Giovanni nodded, listening closely. The chef was not taking notes at all—but then, Ed figured, if he was doing this for a living, surely he would already know all of it by heart. Mustang seemed to be a frequent patron as well… continuing, Mustang said: “We’ll have one flank—no, actually,” Mustang cut himself in midsentence with a sideways glance at Ed, “make that a Porterhouse, please, to go with your wine. Pasta on the side, I’ll leave the details to you.”

“And how would you like your steak done?”

“Medium rare—oh, and would you add the crumbled cheese on top with herbs, as last time?”

“Of course, of course, anything for you.” Giovanni flashed another smile and excused himself to ready the food, giving sharp orders to one of the older and more reliable-looking waiters.

Ed turned back to his companion as they sat. “Do you own this town or something?” his tone was flat out serious.

“No, I don’t,” Mustang gave a tiny delighted laugh, as if pleased by Ed’s assumption. “I just have acquaintances and good relations with the people, Edward. This much is natural, don’t you think? I do live here. Surely you knew most of the people in your hometown as well.”

Shrugging, Ed noncommittally grunted. He was still disbelieving. These were not just pleasant acquaintances. Such grand accommodations meant that they were somehow indebted to Mustang. This restaurant, just like the tailor shop and shoe shop, was a business Mustang had substantial investment in. That much was certain.
They only had to wait for a few minutes in comfortable warmth under the summer night sky before the waiter came with their platter of antipasta topped with olive oil—extra virgin, Ed was willing to bet. Their wine was brought by another waitress seconds later, but Ed barely recognized it. The bottle was unusual.

“Traditional wine bottles are like this, with large rounded bottoms and a narrow neck,” Mustang promptly explained at his wondering look. “This is Chianti, a kind of red wine. We’ve never had red wine at home before, since we’ve only had chicken this past week, and white goes well with that, but red wine will be perfect for the red meat. It’ll be lighter than Bordeaux, which is what I would have had normally, but I don’t want you tottering drunk after we’re done.”

“It’s not like we have anywhere else to go after dinner,” scowled Ed, before pausing mid-sip, “do we?”

“The antique shop,” and Mustang offered no further explanation, lifting a fork and starting on the antipasti. “Appetizers. Olives, cheeses, salami, garlic, funghi, genoa, torched aubergines, I think, and torched peppers.”

“Torched peppers?”

“The heat bubbles the skin off. Try it.”

Ed did, and after a tentative chew, he made a face.

“You don’t like it?”

“You’re better,” and they were. Mustang was a great cook.

The smug Bastard only gave a smug little smile.

Quickly, they made their way through their plate of antipasti, and soon it was clean. The waiter promptly took the plate, poured more wine into their half-empty glasses, left, and came back with their steak and pasta. There was only one steak on the table (they were to share), but it was huge and certainly more than enough for the both of them. Atop it were crumbles of cheese and a dusting of herbs. The pasta was immaculately prepared, with whole roasted cloves of garlic and small tomatoes Mustang called pomodorino tomatoes.

Eager to compare the pasta with Mustang’s homemade ones, Ed lifted his fork and spoon and made to twirl—but Mustang stopped his hands with a firm touch.

“No spoon, just the fork. Spaghetti is made to be eaten with a fork only,” the man’s voice broached no argument.

Ed sighed and readied himself for yet another etiquette lesson. He relinquished his spoon and held the fork in hand, watching as Mustang first twirled some pasta and then copying the motions.

“Don’t overload the fork—take just enough. It’s not exactly charming to be seen shoving a ball of pasta into your mouth,” obediently, Edward un-twirled and repeated, this time with less pasta. “No slurping—it’s unbecoming and boorish. Be careful with the sauce. Rather disastrous on clothes.”

After that, Mustang began slicing for the both of them the meat, and bid him to observe closely. There was a proper way to slice and eat meat, Mustang said, and one must always observe the rules. Edward was quiet as they ate; only watching and occasionally lifting his fork to bring food to his mouth.
The longer the day progressed, the more he felt like a child being coddled and gently taught. Mustang was always conscientious of his background, generous with knowledge, and strict in observance. Challenges were never taboo, and there were no holds on any question he needed an answer to. The sheer amount of things he learned in one day under the man’s care was more than what he used to learn at Izumi’s house in one week. Then again, Izumi was not much concerned with etiquette and propriety; she was a down-to-earth woman with a down-to-earth house, unlike Mustang who lived in polite society. There was a wide gap. Apples and oranges, Mustang might say.

“When do you care so much?” and it just came blurt ing out through Edward’s lips, startling Mustang’s hands into stillness.

The knife and fork were still lodged within the scrumptious and juicy-tender strip loin meat. Mustang was gazing at him with deep, dark eyes; the throw of candlelight danced against the darkness. Ed suddenly felt like he was back in his operation room in Resembool, and Mustang was at his bedside, looking at him with those same dark eyes. It was as if they knew him, knew Edward and all he had to offer. He felt all sorts of naked, awkward, and vulnerable under that stare.

Just as suddenly as it came, the intense gaze was gone and Mustang was back to the steak. Very meticulously, the knife slid against the meat, releasing juices that mingled with the generous topping of olive oil.

“I guess your suspicion is justified,” Mustang smiled wryly, “since I am yet a stranger who took you in without questions.”

“Yes,” Ed barreled into the conversation with determination, though he felt a twinge of apprehension. This was a dangerous trek, and he had already revealed much to Mustang. Not all, not yet, but he had already laid out a lot. If there was anyone who had enough on him to successfully manipulate him into submission, it was Mustang—and certainly, the Bastard was conniving enough to do so. But as always, Edward needed the truth. Even if it blinded him. “Don’t give me some crap about Hohenheim,” he said. “My father had many friends, but I doubt they would have take me in like you did.”

Mustang chuckled, relinquishing the fork and knife. There were ready bite-sized cuts of meat on the plate, but the man reclined in seat and looked at Ed with fond eyes. “Actually, I think your father’s friends would have taken you in if you’d come to them. Your father was a wise man who knew how to pick his friends.” A sip of wine. “But my reasons—well, there are three, and you’ve already pointed out one of them. Herr Hohenheim is a valuable mentor to me, and it seems a right way to mentor his son in exchange for the invaluable things he’s taught me when I was your age, learning alchemy.”

Edward hated Mustang’s blatant infatuation with Hohenheim.

“The second reason: because you’re an investment,” and Mustang was looking at him over the rim of his wineglass, with shrewd eyes belonging to none else but the most skilled statesmen. Well. At least the man was being honest with him. “Not one soul who has encountered you can deny your genius. What you’ve achieved, that groundbreaking thing: that only compounds it—but I’m not so wicked to use that against you. Apart from violating Herr Hohenheim’s son, I would be breaking my own principles. But because you’re a genius, I don’t need to do anything apart from giving you your freedom, all the while educating you. Eventually, inevitably, you’ll become a star, one of the top intellectuals of the country—then all my efforts will not have been in vain. After all, as Fuhrer, I want nothing more than the prosperity of the state.”

Scoffing, Ed forked a piece of meat and brought it to his mouth. “Of course you do.”

The pompous Bastard looked like he was going to argue, but then decided against it and let the
sarcasm in Ed’s voice slide. Mustang continued, “The third reason would be because I’ve taken a liking to you.”

Ed choked.

“What?!”

“I said,” Mustang’s eyes were dancing with withheld laughter, “I’ve taken a liking to you.”

Speechlessness was all Ed had to give.

“Don’t worry; I’m not going to molest you in your sleep or anything of the sort. It would be terribly unbecoming. I only take willing participants to bed,” the Bastard—fucking perverted pompous pedophile! Ed’s brain screamed—laid the wineglass down and took a small portion of pasta. After a short silence of chewing and swallowing (and on Ed’s part, dislodging the strangled piece of food in his throat), Mustang began again: “I meant it in a platonic way, Edward. You remind me of myself when I was younger, and what can I say? I love myself.”

This time, Ed choked and gurgled on his wine. He ended up in a coughing fit, to which a nearby waiter was alerted. He was brought a glass of chilled water.

“There you have my reasons for housing you, feeding you, granting you free access to everything in my house, clothing you, and indulging you,” Mustang’s list was rather accurate, except Ed felt the “indulging” part looked far too tiny to stand for what it really did. When the Bastard indulged on someone, he smothered them with everything a man could give. Ed knew this now. To Mustang, it did not matter how expensive things were—he only afforded the best. On top of that, material things were the lowest on Mustang’s hierarchy of needs, which was uncommon for most rich people. The man valued comfort, safety, and happiness above all else. Perhaps the man thought Ed failed to notice, but for the past few days he had been staying in Central, Mustang had made sure everything was in order—and all he had to do was lay back, read, and indulge his brain. Everything else was taken care of. It was downright amazing.

“Amazing,” Ed muttered, stunned, under his breath. He dabbed minutely at the corners of his mouth, where the wine had stained them red.

“Am I? Wait—yes, I am.”

He had not intended for the man to hear that.

“Oh, shut your trap,” exasperated, Ed steered the conversation away with improving skill (which, of course, elicited an approving smile from the Bastard). For the rest of the evening, Ed skirted this topic, and this was fine with him, because his questions had been answered truthfully—that was all he really needed.

He was glad that his new mentor, at least, knew what he needed and was gracious enough to grant them. He refused to think of his mother, now removed, alone in Resembool.
Warm and the tiniest bit giddy from the generous wine, Edward quietly followed after Mustang as they made their way back to the car. It was dark now; nearly three-quarters past eight, but the roads and shops were still brightly lit. In fact, it seemed as if the people were only beginning to mill. It was a Friday night, Mustang explained, and people were always out and about for a good time on their weekend offs.

They drove through the streets bathed in the soft yellow glow of lamplight. Ed happily watched young men and women walk about, sometimes alone, sometimes with a group, most of the time in pairs. They looked like they were enjoying themselves. Ed had to wonder, if but in passing, what normal kids his age would do on weekends. Stay up late and play with neighbours’ kids or siblings? He’d only had Al and Winry at home, but he would always spend what he had of his time reading quietly in Hohenheim’s study. Play was occasional and during the mornings, after breakfast while they were helping Trisha with chores.

The car parked in front of a sizable antique shop standing beside a large café. The café sat by a street intersection, and had chairs and tables rolled out and occupied for the pleasant summer night. Inside was brightly lit and comfortable-looking, but in sharp contrast to this bright atmosphere, the antique shop was gloomy with its wide but darkened double-doors and faint lamplight filtering through the show windows from the inside.

For a moment, Ed thought it was closed, but Mustang confidently walked in and rang the bell at the book-laden and dusty front desk. “This is one of my most trusted places,” the Bastard explained. That meant that this, too, was an investment. Ed was severely tempted to poke his nose around and peruse the heavy and sagging shelves. The entire place was cramped, despite the five long aisles extending to the back and the walls that seemed to be made of shelves, ceiling to floor. Every space was taken up with either books or some sort of artefact. If he had been a normal person, he would have found the place anciently freaky—but as it so happens, his curiosity overrode any sort of apprehension or fear.

“Anya!” Mustang suddenly hollered in impatience, making Ed jump out of his skin. The sound echoed loudly—Ed feared something fragile would break.

“Coming, damnit! Ow!” said a voice from the back. Multiple crashes resounded from upstairs, perhaps the living space, until a lady poked her head through the dusty curtains separating the store from the stocking rooms. “Oh, it’s you. Yo.”

Ed stared. The lady was small, but lithe and trod on bouncy feet. She grinned playfully and without pretensions asked, “Where’d you get the brat, Mustang?”

Turning his nose up, Mustang indignantly sniffed. “For your information, it was him who came to me.”

Hackles raised, Ed frothed, “Who the hell are you calling a brat, Bastard?!”

“You’ve got some guts, calling Roy Mustang a Bastard to his face!” Anya threw her head back and laughed. “I like you already, brat!” She tried to ruffle his hair; Ed dodged away.

“Well, this month’s shipment was delayed, so I have nothing for you at the moment,” she easily rolled her shoulders in what Ed supposed was a shrug. Mustang raised an eyebrow. “It’ll come in Sunday; I’ll call you then if I see something I think you might like.”

“Ah, well. I hope you don’t mind if we still look around. Edward wanted to see my source for antiques.”
She stepped back and wordlessly swept her arm in a grand gesture of welcome.

Like a hound set loose, Ed promptly zigzagged through the aisle sections and gravitated to the Persian section. The book he was reading was still niggling his consciousness. He needed some sort of translation reference to be able to decode it faster, and if they had one…

(Xerxes Xerxes is the origin the beginning)

Ed froze.

For some time now, the piece of the Gate had been quiet inside his head. It had done nothing but flash him images and information whenever he needed it, mostly as supplements to his reading. The knowledge, after all, was in reality all his, unless the Gate explicitly forbade it, and that was rare. The Gate acknowledged his rights to the knowledge; he had survived after seeing it, therefore it was his. That did not mean, of course, that the Gate helped him solve his calculations, or anything of the sort. The most it did was give him clues if it was being nice, or taunt him if it wasn’t.

He figured it was being nice, now.

(Xerxes find must find life read void Xerxes must must must)

His eyes shot to the bottom of the Persian shelf before he even had a chance to comprehend what the Gate was saying. It was as if someone else had been controlling his muscles, forcing him to look down

(Catalysis)

the whispers were growing faint. It was going back to sleep.

Catalysis.

He knelt and lifted the flask his eyes were fixed upon. It was a mossy green colour, old and made of some sort of metal. Bronze, he figured—only bronze would turn this colour. It was shaped like an old wine flask, similar to the Chianti bottle they emptied at the restaurant: wide bottom flattening out and a long narrow neck. Obviously made to contain some sort of liquid or gas… it was not translucent, though, which was strange. It was something one would find in a laboratory, but what was the use of a flask if one could not observe its contents?

“Did you find something, Edward?”

Startled, Ed whirled about wildly and almost toppled to the floor. Mustang caught him.

“Are you alright?”

“Y-Yeah, you surprised me. Sorry.” He lifted the flask and showed it to Anya. “Hey, do you know how old this is?”
One look, and she said (through her turkey sandwich), “Oh, that. One of my contacts found it in the Great Desert, a little bit south of the Xerxes ruins. Roughly around two thousand years old, maybe even more. Well-preserved, isn’t it?”

Slightly winded but with his mind racing ten miles a minute, he asked, “Why is it in the Persian shelf?”

Anya blinked. “…because it’s Persian?”

“No it’s not,” Ed blinked back. “It’s from Xerxes.”

Silence.

Anya put down her plate and walked over, dusting her hands on her pants and putting on soft and worn kid leather gloves. She took the flask from Ed and pointed at the greenness of it. “See that ink? It’s traditional Persian green.”

Ed blinked, slowly. “No, that’s the bronze aging. It was probably somewhere near water, someplace damp. An aquifer or a well.” He pointed at the bottom markings. “Those are very similar to ancient Amestrian glyphs, but they’re not. They’re Xerxian—“

He stilled.

“Edward?” nearly hesitant, Mustang prompted after a couple of heartbeats of silence. Mustang recognized an epiphany when he saw one. “What is it?”

Ed looked up to Mustang with a stunned and breathless expression on his face.

“It’s Xerxian,” he stood there and blinked to himself in astonishment. “That Persian book at home—that theory—it’s all Xerxian!”

...tbc...
Edward blinked into wakefulness.

His vision swam as he stared up at the ceiling. Motes of dust danced in and out of his vision as they crossed the lineated bars of sunlight streaming through the library’s tall arched windows. He had, again, fallen asleep on the library couch; he could feel a slight crick in his neck and a faint numbness on his left arm where the spine of the book he had been reading had pressed against it all night.

He closed his eyes.

There in the curve of his ears, just beyond intelligibility, was a whisper of something, sibilant as quietly rushing water. Thoughts. They were thoughts. Still half-mired in the cloudy confusion of dreams and the subconscious but quickly shedding the dregs, he kept grasping for it as the mist slowly faded away.

He sprang up at the slam of information swiftly clicking into place as memories of the previous night rekindled themselves. The book that had been half-lying on his chest slid to his lap, flopping open to a marked page—the Persian book, he realised, relatively thin and light enough that he did not feel uncomfortable sleeping underneath it. Almost instinctively, his eyes slid to the study island table, where the bronze flask sat. Mustang had bought it for him last night.

“Edward.” Ed swivelled towards the back stairs. “Come on down for breakfast.”

Mustang was untying the same dark blue apron he wore every time he cooked, and only now did Ed notice the wafting aroma of food from the kitchen. Seeing no point in resisting the beckon, Ed rose and deposited his book on the table, stretching as he spanned the distance from the study island and took the stairs two steps at a time.

Mustang stopped him at the base of the stairs, turning him back up and shooing him to his bath. “Straighten your shirt, young man, and fix your hair.” He rolled his eyes, but followed anyway. After having washed his face, rinsed his mouth, and made himself presentable, he clambered back down the stairs, eager for some grub after a long night of heavily taxing critical thinking. Mustang was already pouring them generous glasses of pineapple juice, to go along with a hearty combination of focaccia, cheese, and roasted sweet peppers atop cooked ham slices and scrambled eggs. On the side was a small selection of fruits: young grapes and half-sliced strawberries.

Ed politely waited for the wordless cue to begin eating, and when they tucked in, Mustang propped
him the first question: “Have you figured anything out from last night?”

“Nothing yet,” it pained him to admit, but it was the truth. “I’ll need time. I don’t want to make mistakes.” Both he and Mustang were quite intimately acquainted with the costliness of rash action. Mustang inclined his head. Ed continued, “I need to compare the glyphs closely. Things would be much easier if I had a Xerxian book for cross-reference, instead of just a half-decayed flask they used to use for who-knows-what.”

Ed cleanly sliced and forked a piece of ham. It was startling and scary how quickly he was learning Mustang’s manners by observation, just as it was unsettling how he felt so at ease with the man—enough so that he had shared his hypotheses with Mustang the previous night while they were yet incomplete. He had never done that before, not once in his deceptively short life—not even Alphonse got to hear his thoughts before he had them checked, cross-checked, double cross-checked, and triple cross-checked. It was, for the lack of a better word, _freaky._

“It’s not a book,” Mustang began, commanding all of Ed’s attention, “but it might help. The tapestry in the hall is Xerxian; purely authentic.”

Ed stilled.

He had not realised that. Why had he not realised that? Shooting up from his seat, he dropped his knife and fork and made to rush to the living room to get a glimpse, but was stopped by Mustang’s hand on his arm.

“Where do you think you’re going, Edward?” the admonishing disapproval in Mustang’s eyes was not supposed to sting that much, but it did. “Sit down and finish your meal. The tapestry won’t be going anywhere.”

Cowed but still (intrinsically) defiant, Ed sat back down and huffed into his meal. After a moment’s thought, however, he muttered quietly, “Sorry.”

“Quite alright,” Mustang’s disapproval vanished into a satisfied little smile. “I understand what you feel—I understand that near-manic passion you have for your science. But it’s important as well that you mind your priorities. You won’t be able to function properly without nourishment, yes? So eat first—and while you’re at it, why don’t you organise your thoughts? I find it quite easier to begin when I have what I need to do in line.”

Nodding quietly, Ed resumed his meal. His mother had not minded him carrying his books to the dinner table or rushing off in the middle of a meal to record a sudden light in his theory. Izumi was, however, dismayed with this habit, and tried her very best to knock it out of him. She had said that such behaviour was terribly disrespectful towards the generous person who prepared the food for him, and that it was unbecoming of a civilized human being. His brain had not cared; either way, it demanded attention whenever there was an epiphany.

Now, he felt rightfully awkward about the situation. More and more he found himself seeking to follow Mustang’s principles, and what few rules the man had for him while he was in the house. His respect for Mustang was already quite high, and it was continuing to build. The entire thing was disconcerting, to say the least. He was normally a very rebellious child, and to think that it was barely a week since he arrived…

But my priority is learning, he told himself solidly, and rebellion is beneath it. Mustang has the world to give me and teach me. That’s more than enough.

He learned by theory, by example, and by experimentation; as if by some stroke of absurd luck, they
perfectly matched Mustang’s preferred teaching methods. Before he could learn from Mustang, however, he first had to follow and see, and within this, obedience was essential. A teacher, he knew, was not an efficient teacher if unable to make the student obey, one way or another. Mustang was simply very good at this. Even before he was consciously willing to submit to instruction, his mind had already realised the wealth of knowledge and wisdom he could inherit from this man—and his brain already was learning the first of the patterns.

A wry smile came to his face as he emptied his glass of juice. Izumi had always been amazed (and heartily approving) of his self-knowledge. It was an expected personality trait, she had said, but his self-analysing was so incredibly ruthless it went beyond the norm. He strove to be aware of his faults and to correct them—and he was willing to sacrifice pride for the sake of learning the right way.

“I should have maps of the old world in the library,” Mustang abruptly interrupted his train of thought. “They’ll help if you should feel the need to re-examine and trace Xerxes and Persia’s communications.”

The previous night, the similarities between the Xerxian flask’s ancient glyphs and the Persian book’s circles had jumped out at him in a realization so unexpected and so obvious it had knocked him off his feet. The Persians were known to frequently trade with Xerxes, although they had unsavoury relations with Creta and the then tiny Amestris. Xerxes liked Persia’s gold and art; Persia wanted Xerxes’ expertise in alchemy. It made sense that Persia’s advanced theories were rooted from Xerxian theories; the circle modifications were probably because of the time gap. Xerxes had disappeared three centuries before Common Era; the Persian book was from the fifth century after Common Era. There was an eight-century lapse in between.

At the moment, the Persian circles seemed translatable through Xerxian script. If indeed this was possible, then it was no longer a priority to learn Persian (or Xingese to understand Persian) in order to decode the arrays in the mysterious Persian book. Of course, understanding the very book itself would help, but Mustang could do that part of the work. Mustang already knew Xingese, and unlike how Persia only had similarities with Xerxes in terms of alchemical arrays, Xing’s language itself was very much similar to the Persian language. (1)

The engraved glyphs on old Xerxian flask, though a bit laborious to make out, were startlingly similar to the Persian circle’s scripts, if not at times the exact same. Whatever the flask was used for centuries ago, it had something to do with the atomic theory the Persian book was talking about. This much was more than enough for him to begin researching; atomic theory was an obscure field, and obscure was just his penchant. He would not rest until he got to the bottom of this.

“Edward.”

He started and looked up to Mustang. “Sorry—what?”

Mustang smiled, “You blanked out. Never mind organising your thoughts; finish your food first. Go on.”

“Oh, uhh, sorry,” abashed, Ed ducked his head and, with renewed vigour, returned to his food. The ham was almost gone, and he had not even tasted them yet. He hated eating in a daze; all the flavour went to waste.
“If I could ask you one question,” Mustang began; Ed shrugged, “from where did you learn ancient Amestrian? You’re frighteningly fluent. Your teacher?”

Ed scoffed. “No; she hates my old-style alchemy. She doesn’t like how intricate it is; it’s dangerous if I accidentally fail to balance it correctly, after all.”

“Then who?”

“Same as you: from Hohenheim.” Ed polished off the last of his fruits. The scrambled eggs (with chopped bell peppers in them, apparently) were damn good. “Or rather, from Hohenheim’s books and journals. The man was never there to teach me anything. The rest I figured out on my own.”

“Figured out on…” Mustang trailed off, muttering to himself in disbelief, with raised eyebrows and an appraising eye for Edward. “Child, you never fail to surprise me.”

“I’m not a child,” Ed scowled up at the Bastard. “And it’s not that hard, you know. There’s a pattern, like with every other language.” This really was how he understood the ancient Amestrian language (and by extension the Xerxian language, though only roughly). He gave a vague wave of the hand, as if that was meant to explain everything.

Mustang merely cocked a brow at his offhand remark. “A pattern. Edward, have you ever heard of the concept of structured learning?”

“Nope, never,” merrily, Ed emptied his glass of juice and dabbed at his mouth with the napkin. Then he reclined against his seat and patted his full belly. “I’ve always learned by intuition and instinct. It’s just my style. Al learns more with structures than I do.”

“Genius.”

Ed rolled his eyes. “Just talent.”

“No,” Mustang shook his head. “Doing easily what others find difficult is talent. Doing what is impossible for talent is genius. You brought your dead mother back to life—that is no talent, Ed. That is genius.”

Again, Mustang wore the all-penetrating look in his eyes, and in awkward discomfort, Ed looked away. The man’s logic was sound, but was there a need to state the obvious over and over again and again?

“You’re being far too generous with your compliments, Bastard. If you don’t watch it, I’m going to start thinking you’re intentionally flattering me.”

Letting out a delighted laugh, Mustang rose from his seat and began collecting the dishes. “I’m just stating things as they are, Edward. You undervalue yourself, did you know that? And whoever said I wasn’t flattering you?”

“Pervert.”

“Why, thank you.”

Ed paused.

“Did you just say thank you?”

“Yes.”
With a sense of dread, Ed asked: “What’s so great about being a pervert?”

“Perversion is essentially deviance from the norm or the orthodox definition of things, which society does not condone, and therefore is given a negative connotation.” Mustang shrugged as they cleaned the table and he replaced the jug of pineapple juice in the cooler. “I personally don’t see anything wrong with being able to appreciate genius in a way no one else can. In fact, it makes me feel rather special.”

“Of course,” Ed cast his eyes skyward. “Egotistic bastard.”

“Why, thank you.”

“You said thank you again.”

“Being selfish is perfectly healthy and normal, Edward. There is nothing wrong with it, so long as you hurt no one.” Turning and giving him a grave face, Mustang said, “You must shed away society’s prejudices and authoritative opinions in order to understand what I will be teaching you. Society’s rules and norms are for the sheep; free-thinkers like you, surely, will not be satisfied. You should know what I’m talking about.”

“Thinking out of the box.”

“Yes,” Mustang nodded. “Painful, but beneficial. All great wisdom is like that, and they are made to be handed down from one generation to the next—but only to those who are fit to receive them.”

“Elitist.”

“Yes.”

Ed sighed. This Bastard was a bad influence on his morality.

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He excused himself ahead of time when he finished helping with the dishwashing. It would take only a minute or two to put the washed and dried plates away, so Mustang let him go with a knowing little smile. Ignoring this, he dashed up the stairs and hurtled towards the study island, snatching up an inkwell and a sheaf of paper. When he returned to the kitchen, Mustang was already finished and there waiting for him, patting nimble hands dry with a fluffy kitchen towel.

“Careful now,” the Bastard said when Ed nearly tripped over himself at the foot of the stairs. Ed just scowled up at the man, crossing the kitchen and stepping into the formal dining, where he skirted the long table and walked up to the tapestry. The formal dining was the far section of the area he had inwardly dubbed the Great Hall, which encompassed an entire long half of the house, with a spacious section for entertainment and general pleasantries. If cleared out, it would be a suitable ballroom in medium size.

The ceiling was high, just as every ceiling in the house was high. On its flat expanse was a fresco of the Great Amestrian War, the very battle that moulded Amestris into being. If his history was not failing him, Ed knew that this had been a battle between the Drachman empire and the then scattered and largely tribal Amestris, sometime around three to four hundred years into the Common Era.
Generally ambivalent towards each other and rather familiar as well since they were fellow traders, the tribes had banded together in a desperate attempt to push out the invaders. Under the fortuitous command of the first Grand General Friedrich the Conqueror (modern-day equivalent of the Fuhrer), the tribes won, and upon the very heart of Central, a city-state was born, modelling that of Creta’s impressively old and then still functioning system. The young and tender city-state was named Amestris—an old Xerxian (and perhaps Persian) word meaning ’friend’: a testament to the lasting friendship between the tribes. (2)

“Rather expensive, that,” Mustang remarked, coming up beside Ed as he gazed up, head tipped back. “But well worth the money, don’t you think?”

Ed continued to gaze thoughtfully at the fresco. Morning light played its tricks on his eyes, and for a second had him finding movement in the still images. Bodies were prostrate on the ground, arms raised with gleaming swords, warhorses neighing and bucking, and a great man on a great mount raising a green flag over a very dead Drachman General. On the green flag was the well-known symbol of the great white beast with claws ready to grapple and defend.

“You know what I can’t understand about this entire business?” Ed tilted his head thoughtfully to the side. Mustang waited patiently, and quietly, for his continuation. “Creta was an ancient democratic city-state. The books say Friedrich modelled Amestris after Creta. Why is it, then, that we are militaristic and nowhere near democratic?”

“Good question,” Mustang nodded. “Sit down. This is your politics lesson for the day.”

The idea of disobeying never even once entered his mind as he wordlessly set his sheaf of paper and inkwell on the table in one of the sitting areas. There were two, but this one was closer to the formal dining and kitchen. The other lounge was across the blank space of the hall, near where the grand concert piano and a few bookshelves sat. He sprawled himself on one of the armchairs, leaning forward, eager for a good story.

“The reason why Friedrich refused to fully mimic Creta’s democratic system,” Mustang began without preamble, “is because democracy does not work.”

Ed’s eyebrows shot up. “Creta’s democracy lasted for nearly a thousand years, you know.”

“And look at how much incompetent decision-making was made,” Mustang reclined against his chair, forehead crinkling in deep thought. “Creta was a great city-state, with great emphasis on culture, wisdom, and the search for truth. But it had its flaws, and they were grave ones.”

“For one, I’m pretty sure you would not survive at all in ancient Creta. Creta was very similar to the Western colonials. They persecuted anyone who went against the norm. They scorned free-thinkers, accused them of heresy and impiety—yes, they were religious—and sentenced them to death. I can name a handful of influential thinkers brought to their sudden end, all because of petty sheep-thinking.”

Upon hearing this, Ed grimaced. Of all things, he loathed people who were unable, unwilling, or both, to think for themselves.

“For another, it was not a true democracy in Creta; it was an aristocratic democracy. A lot of the residing people in Creta, in truth, were not entitled with voting rights. They were slaves. You have to remember that history is often written with a biased hand, and almost never with absolute truth—it’s hard, you see, for a people to admit their own faults. The greater they are, the harder it gets.”

Ed nodded. That sounded logical, and all too human.
“And lastly, even if it was a true democracy, it still would not have worked. In fact, it only worked that well for that long because it was an aristocracy in disguise, and aristocracy is inherently stronger than democracy. Think about it, Ed. What is the definition of democracy?”

“The rule of the people’s majority.”

“And what is the flaw in this?” the Bastard folded his hands on his lap and expectantly gazed upon Ed with the eyes of one who was no longer a mere guardian and companion, but a strict disciplinarian and mentor.

In a flash, Ed remembered their discussion over breakfast. He muttered with a frown, “The majority of people are idiots.”

“Excellent answer, as always,” Mustang smiled beatifically. “You have real potential for this, Edward.”

“I would rather not, please.” Sullenly, Ed swung his legs forth and back, his heels hitting the couch in a muted thud every time. “Politics is something I think I can do, but it doesn’t mean I’d like it. Much.”

“As long as you are prepared—that is all I wish for,” Mustang opened his palms in a gesture of welcome—an overt indication of his willingness to let Ed have his freedom with both opinion and career choice. “As long as one is educated, enlightened, and prepared, one will fare just fine in this world, with enough hard work. The problem is that most people aren’t educated enough, wise enough, tactful enough, or even just sensible enough to decide for themselves the right things.”

“Imagine the horror, Edward, if Amestris was ever surrendered to the hands of the dumb majority. Rights would be stripped, alchemy grants minimised, defence made secondary, funds wasted on the leisure of the many. Free-thinking would cease to exist, because of the enormous pressure to identify with the majority and avoid persecution. Ordinary people are given to panic and distress, and every little thing would turn into a major catastrophe. No confidentiality on the part of the military; the public would know everything, which does not work in a political scheme, because people are often better off not knowing what is done for their benefit. As you might already know, people predominantly revert to hostility when their innocence is broken, or when faced with something they cannot handle.”

And yes, Ed did know that, quite intimately in fact. Memory of his own mother’s livid face flashed through his memory, and he hung his head low, overcome with a shame he knew he should not feel. It was not his fault; he did nothing wrong. He did everything right, and it was because of him that she was alive. But of course she failed to understand that, so here he was, left with nothing but her oblivious contempt.

A weight on the crown of his head pulled him back to reality, away from the taunting cackle of the Gate and the scalding lash of hurt and shame at the memory of his mother’s words. He blinked and looked up—Mustang had a tentative, gentle hand on his head.

“I apologise,” Mustang said, quiet now, and almost remorseful.

Ed shook his head. “It’s not your fault; you shouldn’t be the one to apologise.” In fact, he thought quietly to himself, I should be the one apologising for all the trouble I must have caused you.

“It’s not your fault either. You shouldn’t be the one to apologise.”
They were sharp and solid words, cutting through the haze of Edward’s scattered thoughts. They snapped him into place, just as the heavy hand now on his shoulder anchored him into reality. It was then, at that moment, that Edward realised just how much Mustang was intent on keeping him grounded and stable. This person, for some utterly unfathomable reason, was trying to keep him from sinking into the mire of depression.

“Well, Mum thinks otherwise,” he snorted, lifting his head, but not drawing away from the comforting hand. It was a reassurance to be touched, he realised with a start. Touch was something he had not had in abundance since the transmutation. He was beginning to sorely miss it.

“It is true,” Mustang haughtily dismissed. He seemed mightily offended at how laxly Trisha had looked upon Ed’s momentous achievement. She really did not understand alchemy at all. Mustang continued in a quieter but more determined voice, “Her opinion is not valid.” And then, as if to remediate: “Please do know that I don’t mean to insult her or her intelligence.”

Lips quirking, Ed uttered a quiet chuckle. “Bastard, by just being in the room, you insult everybody else’s intelligence.”

Caught unawares, Mustang was quiet for a split-second. Never before had Ed engaged in games of wiles with the man and pulled a stump good one. Mouth lifting at the edges in satisfaction, Mustang, with approval in his eyes, playfully parried back, “I’m afraid you have it wrong, Ed. It’s not me who insults intelligence by mere presence; it’s you. After all, you are the genius.”

Ed rolled his eyes. “Oh, shut up.”

He rose and grabbed his sheaf of paper and inkwell. It was high time he moved on to his work.

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On the wide wall of the Great Hall hung on display a giant and inconceivably old Amestrian tapestry. It was, as Ed had expected, protected by seals on the fabric’s four corners, designed to defend against weather and tear. Mustang had not dared to touch the circle painted into the absorbent fabric at all, and rightly so—the ancient thing was a colossal monster, an array that would probably take Ed a good while of time and a great load of help to fully decode.

Already he could feel the eager tingling in his palms.

Suppressing his apprehension, he stood before the wall. He felt a creeping dread when he looked at this circle, though he could not fathom why. Underneath his feet, the rugs felt comfortable and warm. He curled his toes into them uncertainly.

What was there to be afraid of? It was just an array, nothing more. What was there to fear? Nothing.

Inside of his head, the Gate was deathly silent.

“Alright, Ed?”

He jumped.

“Yeah,” sweat began to moisten his palms. “Yeah, fine.”
Taking a huge breath, he closed his eyes, calmed himself, and then opened his eyes again. With a blank mind, he gazed upon the massive array on the wall, absorbing every detail, burning the very threads of the fabric into his retinas. When he had looked enough and his eyes were watering generously, he closed them again, and instinctively brought his palms together.

*Clap.*

He knelt on the soft Xingese rug. With one hand, he touched the sheaf of paper, and with the other, he touched the inkwell

`surgecracklerush`

in a bright wave of blue light the leaves of paper chained together to form one large blank sheet. Another surge of light and on it an invisible hand began inking in an exact replica, albeit smaller, of the Xerxian tapestry circle. When the inking stopped and the light faded, the copy fluttered to the floor, harmless and clean.

“What did you just do?”

Ed blinked.

“Huh? Oh,” he turned towards Mustang, who was gazing at him with an incredulous look on his face. “A copy,” in a not entirely too bright manner, he pointed at the huge fold of paper.

“Yes, I can see that much,” the sting of sarcasm was back in the Bastard. “I meant your reaction. Where are your circles?”

“Oh, those,” Ed shrugged idly. “I—don’t need them?”

Disbelieving, Mustang stood there for a quiet heartbeat, and then two, and then three. And then as if driven by some invisible force, the man lunged forward and took Ed’s palms, examining them as if to search for some sort of cheat device: a set of tattoos or perhaps twin slips of paper. Nothing.

No cheating.

“That, Edward,” Mustang began in a somewhat dazed tone, “is just impossible.”

“No, it isn’t,” Ed shrugged again. “I just did it, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but how?” the words escaped Mustang’s lips in quick succession, as if bursting with anticipation and curiosity—and which the man obviously was. “I mean—the energy has no directional.”

“There is a circle—in my mind,” Ed warily amended, toeing the tasselled end of the rug beneath his feet. He bit his cheek as he was pitched headfirst into a struggle between telling and not telling Mustang about the piece of the Gate inside his head. The latter eventually won out. His words were slow and deliberate: “I don’t know how to explain it. I… project the array I have in my mind onto the circle of my arms…? I still have a circle, but having it down is unnecessary, I guess.”

“You guess,” the arch of Mustang’s brow was clearly sceptical. For some inane reason, this urged Ed to make a more corporeal case, when normally he would have dismissed anyone who could not bring themselves to believe in his genius. For some inane reason, Mustang was different.
“I—don’t know, okay?” desperate now, Ed tugged at the Gate’s strings for help, and though it unraveled for him pieces of information, the smug and mocking nature by which it leered at him was intensely unpleasant. He felt as though a bucket of grime was just poured over his head. “I see it as something similar to psychological projection, except instead of inwards, it goes outwards—if that makes sense?”

Mustang was deep in thought now, eyes bright and roiling with knowledge. The man was rather knowledgeable well-informed in the relatively fresh field of psychology.

“You attribute the circle upon the object with your mind?”

“Uhh, no, it doesn’t work that way,” Ed said. “If I did that, it would mean that I would have to project a circle on every grain of sand or every piece of rock. No—I attribute the circle on the energy —”

“Of course, because the object is of no direct relevance to the circle!” Mustang was now pacing back and forth, back and forth, and Edward stood there watching. The Bastard was a bright bastard; they were, miraculously enough, on the same page. No one apart from Al had ever been able to keep with him this much, not even Izumi. “The circle shapes the energy, and the energy shapes the object. There’s no need for the circle to directly touch the object, as long as it touches the energy and directs the energy to touch and mould the object!”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

Mustang stopped a few paces away from him, arms crossed, chin on chest. “But how can you mentally project a circle on invisible, intangible energy? That’s—thoughtform projection?”

“…I have no idea what you’re talking about,” so it pained him to admit, yet again. This was quickly becoming commonplace between the two of them, and it was beginning to get on his nerves. Normally, he knew more than most people—but this was rarely the case with Mustang. Of course, it should be this way, because Mustang was now his mentor, never mind the informality. But still, it was incredibly annoying—especially to someone like Edward.

“It’s basically harnessing and manifesting mental energy to project a cohesive, solid form of thought on something physical. Yes, energy counts—energy is physical,” Mustang slowly supplied. The man continued to stare; Ed ignored this and lifted the large sheet copy of the tapestry’s circle, collecting it in a neat roll. “I should have you read that Xingese book on mysticism.”

“Mysticism,” Ed scoffed.

“Most of it, if you look close enough, is actually based on solid science and experimental alchemy. We just aren’t open-minded enough to appreciate it fully.”

“If you say so,” Ed was, at this point, unwilling to argue. He still felt conflicted about the Gate’s presence in his mind, and now that he was reminded of it, the unease returned to the forefront of his mind with full force. Hearing voices inside his head was not a very warm reassurance of his sanity, especially to Mustang, who would be incredibly paranoid about these sorts of issues. Genius or not, having the piece of the Gate in his head was not normal, and it was a serious matter he was not sure he wanted to confide in Mustang about.

The secrecy made him feel filthy and rotten. Mustang was giving him so much, and yet here he was, a dirty little liar hiding a potentially destructive secret from the man who provided for him shelter, food, clothing, and generous education. He tried to convince himself that this was technically not lying, but it was all in vain: personally, he considered omission a form of deception, and from the
beginning, he had never been all too exceptional at fooling his own incisive mind.

Walking back up to the library was a quiet and short affair with both of them in deep thought. Mustang immediately made for the shelves, muttering titles under his breath. Ed spread the tapestry’s copy on the study island table (which was, for once, relatively clear of paperwork and clutter). With a few books in arm, Mustang settled himself into a seat across from Ed, borrowing a little bit of table space for a notepad, and easily sinking into informative reading.

Together in quiet and comfortable company, they worked until well into the mid-afternoons, only to be interrupted when Ed’s stomach let out an embarrassingly loud growl of distress. With an affectionate little smirk on the Bastard’s part, they retreated into the kitchen for quick sandwiches and orange juice.

The rest of the day was spent in the same manner, with intense reading and research on Edward’s part. His charting was meticulous and detailed; it would take a while before this research went anywhere significant. But Ed was, if nothing else, persistent.

Dinner was the same: quick, elegant, substantial, and full of conversation. They exchanged theories (Mustang on Ed’s thoughtform alchemy, Ed on the Persian book and tapestry) and bantered playfully, a light reprieve from the extensive heavy reading.

Afterward, they retreated again to the library, where instead of sitting back in the study island with his yet unfinished but generously tagged pile of books, Mustang walked up to the baby grand piano. Now why anybody would have a piano in a library, Ed had absolutely no idea—but Mustang has always been a strange man, and just like everything else in the ridiculously posh and primped house, the reason behind this was probably a combination of indulgence and laziness.

“Please don’t break my eardrums,” sighed Ed as he settled comfortably into his pet couch. He swirled the contents of his second glass of wine (which he was now allowed for the lighter kinds) and relished the short break from his books.

“I will have you know that I was schooled in music by the best instructors from my childhood,” the lid of the piano went up; Mustang sat down.

The very moment those long and tapered fingers descended upon the keys, Ed’s ears were captured by an upward cascade of notes, smooth, quick, and flowing. After a short proem of graceful notes strung in clipped and common melodies, Mustang began a light and sweet summer song—a love song, Ed realized very quickly.

Not just a grand Bastard, but a grand romantic Bastard, he snickered to himself.

He had to admit, though: the piece was a beautiful one, simple but memorable. There was not a single word of reproach he could pull up against the execution, though of course his opinion was an admittedly amateur one. There was no detectable stutter, the tempo was even, the flow was smooth, and the style and flair indeed very Roy Mustang. Not a single doubt.

At that very moment, as Mustang switched to the next song, Ed was struck with the intense desire to learn how to play. The descant tickling his ear was a mystery—how could something so beautiful be created so easily?—and he wanted to unravel it. Music, he had read, was in its nature very mathematical, though it had more of the passion and emotion the physical sciences so refused.
But would he be able to? He doubted it.

He glanced down at his automail hand, and for the first time since that inauspicious night, he felt a wave of self-loathing and regret. In this sense, his rashness had taken away from him an avenue of learning he could have otherwise pursued. There was nothing that disheartened him more.

The music stopped. “Ed, come here.”

Ed looked up. “Why?” he blurted before he could catch himself.

Mustang had that little smile playing on his lips again; Ed felt justifiably apprehensive, if only a little bit. “Come; I have something to show you.”

Leaving his empty wineglass behind (Mustang seemed bent on turning him into some sort of alcoholic), he stood and made his way over. The Bastard pulled over another stool for him to sit on, and when he was safely situated on Mustang’s right, his hands were taken and placed upon the keys.

“These are the basic notes. A to G, starting with the middle C, right here. It’s the basic reference point,” to demonstrate, Mustang played eight notes, one whole octave. “Go ahead; try.”

Sceptically, Ed blinked up at Mustang. “You expect me to learn the piano? I have an automail hand.”

“So?” Mustang arched an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you’ll let such a tiny setback stop you from learning something new. I expected better of you, Edward.”

Successfully refuted, Ed scowled and set his awkward hands back on the keys. Gingerly, he pressed down on the middle C. The single note vibrated in his ears, loud and clear. This, he realized immediately, was good practice for his automail arm’s control, which he had yet to perfect.

“That’s alright; loud is good when you’re beginning to learn,” Mustang encouraged, ever the model teacher. “Scaling volume is something you master later; all loud for now. But don’t bang on the keys; know that there is a clear distinction.”

Gently, patiently, Mustang took him through the core basics of music and the piano, letting him find his own balance with his fingers. Mustang—in moments like these no longer a bastard—said nothing when his fingers slipped, when his automail hand refused to cooperate and gave him minor difficulties. All that was said were quiet words of encouragement, spaced out and even, there for comfort whenever Ed needed them.

Was it disturbing that he found he needed them often?

Yes.

It should not be, he told himself, because he was a child, really. He was eleven, barely going on twelve. It was perfectly natural for him to seek an anchor, if not a guide. It was perfectly natural to feel a pull of gravity towards Mustang: this confusing, charming man who now held his hand as he walked his slow way into the adult world. It was perfectly natural, he convinced himself.

These accidental thoughts and self-doubts, however, tended to stick in the spokes of the mind, so when Edward fell asleep on the couch that night listening to the serenade of Mustang’s fingers, his dreams were occupied by none other than the magnanimous Bastard and his magnanimity.

He had never had sleep so full and satisfying.
No breakfast.

Ed lamented his fate, dawdling about in the kitchen aimlessly. Now he knew that starvation was the painful consequence of unwarranted acts of kindness towards the Bastard.

It was Sunday morning, and he had taken pity on Mustang, who was sprawled and sleeping on the luxurious-looking silk-covered bed in the master bedroom the last time he took a peek to check. Mustang never had any chance to sleep in during the weekdays, and even on the weekends, the man woke early to make him breakfast and accommodate whatever he should need.

Rightfully so, he had felt awkward about poking Mustang awake so that he could have his breakfast made for him. He just could not do it—not when Mustang looked so blissfully worry-free and happy in his sleep. All the stress bled away made the man look so deceptively harmless; more towards a napping puppy instead of a wolf with craftily sheathed sharp teeth. No; he could not do it.

So there Ed stood in the very midst of the kitchen, staring helplessly about, as if a lone and absolutely inept survivor of a capsized ship marooned on an uninhabited island. He quietly pulled the cooler open to see if there was anything edible and was faced with nine happy bottles of fresh milk.

He closed the cooler.

Turning to the countertop where the coffeemaker sat, he saw a loaf of wheat bread, unsliced and fresh. Nodding to himself, he went about making himself coffee, and three sandwiches with slices of cooked but cooled turkey. He adorned this with random cheese he picked out from Mustang’s generous collection and added a few leaves of green. A few strawberries, grapes, a mug of coffee, and he was all set.

He took his breakfast up to the study island, where he was allowed to eat only if he made sure to clean up after himself and avoid food slobber. The sandwiches disappeared quickly as he immersed himself once more into his reading—and he only noticed the passing of time when the phone rang (thrice) and was picked up by a no doubt groggy Mustang. (They did stay up quite late last night.) Fifteen minutes later, the Bastard was up and out of his room, one hand preoccupied with buttoning a black collared silk shirt.

Ed glanced up from his book, took his Bastard landlord’s appearance in, and incredulously remarked, “Work on Sunday? Do you ever do anything else?”

Mustang only chuckled and ruffled Ed’s hair as he walked past. “I need to go somewhere real quick. I should be back by lunchtime. Be a good boy and behave while you wait for me, hmm?”

“I’m not a child, I tell you!” but Mustang was already gone down the back stairs. There was a telltale clatter-and-thud, faint but there, as Mustang checked and double-checked the back door’s lock. It was nearing midday now, but Mustang was as paranoid as ever. Ed had no doubt the obsessive-compulsive Bastard would triple-check the front door’s locks before he left.
Mystified but none too concerned, Ed returned to his book. Mustang was a big boy; he could handle himself, surely. He had seen the gloves go into Mustang’s pant pockets, so there should be no worries. If anything, Ed was far more worried for whoever was unfortunate enough to face against Mustang’s fire. He had only seen the spark-initiated fire alchemy in domestic use; he could scarcely imagine the damage it would do to a human target if the need should ever arise.

(charrrrr)

The piece of the Gate, dislodged and unhinged as it is from the rest of the original Gate’s collective consciousness, sounded far too gleeful for comfort. Curling quietly in his mind, as if a very amused evil little housecat, the Gate flashed him an assortment of images: the salamander array Mustang used, the same array broken down into parts, the sight of a generously cooked something (was that a human arm?) on bloodied ground—

“Okay, stop. Stop.”

This, the Gate, was the other double-edged sword he gained from that night when he transmuted his mother, apart from his automail. The Gate was insane—there was no bloody argument about it—but it was smart. Oh, the sheer knowledge it contained, the bulk of information it allowed him free access to—

But in return for this he was to carry the piece of the Gate in his mind, and it would forever stay with him, just as a piece of the Gate stayed with anybody else who opened the Gate for their own purposes. He had yet to fully explore the capacities of one piece of the Gate, but so far, it was proving itself terribly useful.

And terribly scary.

Struggling against the (very helpful) images the Gate (very nicely) insisted on conjuring for him, he failed to notice the sound of the clatter-and-thud downstairs. Only when a man called up from the kitchen—

“Hey, Roy! You there?”

—did he notice that somebody else was in the house, and he was no longer alone.

“Roy! Wake up!” the person banged loudly on the wall, all the way up the back stairs. “Gracia made quiches to go with lunch! Breakfast for you, I guess,” the person added as an afterthought. Ed watched as a man came up from the kitchen, bespectacled, but with sharp and cunning eyes.


Lightning-quick inductive reasoning told Ed that this person was at the very least not an immediate threat, primarily because the man had a key to the house (on a keychain which was dangling from the man’s finger). The only way for this person to have a key would be if Mustang himself gave this person the spare key for use. If Mustang trusted the man with the house, Ed figured he could trust the man enough not to tackle at first sight.

“Ohh,” the bespectacled man—not old; about Mustang’s age, very close—stepped up closer and grinned at Ed. “You must be Edward. Roy’s told me about you.”
Even more reassurance of the man’s trustworthiness: the man was familiar enough with Mustang to go by first-name basis, and had heard from Mustang about him.

Which he did not like.

“He told you about me,” Ed repeated dubiously. The man nodded. “Fucking Bastard. He promised not to tell anyone from the military!”

“It’s okay!” the bespectacled man laughed, eyes crinkling kindly at the corners. “You can trust me. Roy knows I’m good with information; that’s why he told me about you. He’s told no one else, I’m sure. Well—Hawkeye might have an idea, but I don’t think Roy would tell her explicitly. It’s just not him.”

The person stepped up closer. Ed’s fingers curled tighter around his book. His muscles tingled, warming themselves, getting ready to spring—just in case. Proximity was still an issue for him; it was a miracle how he managed to relax around Mustang at all.

“How did you know I was from the military?” the person looked genuinely curious.


The man smiled. “Do they.”

“Yes.”

They stood in quiet, gauging each other—and they would have remained such if not for the grandfather clock, situated near the phone and against the wall, tolling midday with its usual loud echo.

Almost comically, Mustang’s bespectacled friend jumped an inch into the air, as if waking from some sort of internal reverie. “Oh dear, it’s noon! Mustn’t keep my beautiful wife waiting. Have you had lunch yet, Ed?”

“No,” Ed flinched at the familiarity. What was it with people in Central? They all had a common and unseemly habit of calling him by his first name, or some variation of the sort, immediately after acquaintance. Proximity and familiarity, oh, the two concepts nobody ever seemed to understand!

He could not bring himself to refuse, however, when the bespectacled man herded him down the back stairs, through the kitchen door, and out onto the back yard. The man offered free lunch; he was hungry. Simple equation. He did leave a note in the library for Mustang, though. The paranoid Bastard would probably hernia if he failed to adequately specify his whereabouts.

“My wife Gracia made lunch, and we knew Roy would be off from work, since it’s Sunday, so she made more than the usual,” story-telling seemed to be a fad in Central. “But since he’s not here, I’ll just have to kidnap you and take you with me! She won’t be pleased if I left you in there to starve all by yourself.”

They were crossing a massive lawn between two houses: Mustang’s house, and another house that had a similar Georgian structure but was wider. Around them was a beautifully landscaped garden, with flowerbeds and trees (and on one tree branch, a swing for a child). Clad in flimsy summer slippers, Ed could feel the heat of the brickwork pathway underneath his feet. The sun was beating happily down on Central, harsh in its last few days of summer reign.

“This is my house,” the man said, pointing up to the fatter Georgian house. “I bought it so that Roy
and I could be neighbours. He didn’t want to get *his* house at first, you know—I found it for him. Until I told him that there was this massive central fireplace in a huge hall he could use as the library—*then* he gave in.”

That sounded about right to Edward. (He knew he would have given in, too—though the fireplace really was unnecessary. Mustang was just an unjustifiable pyromaniac.)

“Oh, how rude of me—I never even introduced myself!” the man walked ahead of Ed to open the back door of the neighbouring house. With a warm smile, the bespectacled man said: “I’m Hughes, Maes Hughes. It’s a pleasure to finally meet the very item Roy’s ever-so-arbitrary eyes!”

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Arbitrary, hah! If there was one thing Roy Mustang was not, this was it. Indecisive people were sheep, and inflexible people were fools, so went the creed. Roy Mustang was *neither*, this Ed knew for a fact.

Ed’s train of thought was a little messy as he stepped into Maes Hughes’ house, but he said none of it. Instead, he gave a polite little smile, if awkward and uncertain, and said, “Edward Elric. Pleasure’s mine.”

“My, what a polite young man!” Hughes’ eyes crinkled at the corners again, in some sort of half-suppressed mirth. “Roy must be stuffing you to the brim with all of his impeccable manners. I swear the guy is far too uptight for his own good.”

“You can say that again,” Ed was beginning to like this Hughes person.

He was led into the house, similarly tastefully decorated as Roy’s, though not as blatantly opulent and intimidating. This house had a warmer, homelier feel to it—perhaps because of the presence of a woman’s hand.

“Gracia, darling!” Hughes hollered, taking Ed by the shoulders and steering him towards the dining. “I brought over a guest!”

A lady walked in through the door from the kitchen and gingerly placed a dish on the table with a smile. She had short auburn hair, a kind smile, gentle eyes—and a very, very pregnant belly.

Ed’s eyes remained fixed on her stomach.

“I don’t my wife just absolutely radiant?” Hughes’ infatuated purr into his ear was disconcerting. The man was taking Ed’s speechlessness as awe at her beauty—which was indeed remarkable in its gentle sincerity, but that was not exactly what he was fascinated with. He had never seen a pregnant woman before, and he was—curious.

Yes, that was the right word for it.

*Curious.*

“This is Edward Elric, Roy’s new charge,” Hughes was already introducing them, and Gracia was giving him a gentle little smile. For some reason, Ed was strongly reminded of his own mother. Was he trying to compensate? Perhaps. “Amusing, isn’t it? Roy would be the very last person to take
“Well, maybe Roy’s found an intellectual match,” Gracia remarked, extending a hand for Ed to shake. Ed accepted it awkwardly.

“You’re—it’s—… huge,” he ended lamely, eyes still lingering on Gracia’s belly.

She gave a delighted little laugh. “I’m into my fifth month; it’s nowhere near done growing. The baby can feel touch now. Sometimes it moves, very faintly. Do you want to touch?”

Blinking in surprise, Ed looked back and forth between the two of them. Gracia stood there smiling as Hughes shrugged his assent.

Apprehensively, Ed lifted his flesh hand—and neither of them was shooting his automail hand wayward looks, so he gathered Roy had already told them about his little debacle back home. He hovered tentatively upon the crest of Gracia’s belly, not knowing where to touch and feel, so she took his hand and gently guided it to the side, applying just a little bit of pressure so he could map the faint outlines of the baby’s head.

Wonder thoroughly overcoming him, his fingers splayed and tried to map the baby more clearly. He was afraid to apply any more pressure, though; the hardness underneath the skin was superficial at best, and he knew that it would bend like putty under his strength. He did not want to damage that blooming little life, no.

“If you keep touching, I’m going to get jealous,” Hughes’ glasses flashed in a very sinister way indeed, and Ed quickly retracted his hand. He had a feeling that Hughes was not just any military personnel; the man most likely had some sort of combat experience. It was evident in the way Hughes carried himself.

“I apologise,” Ed flashed a quick little smile at Gracia, who simply waved dismissively. She appeared not to mind in the least, a very understanding woman. “I—well, I haven’t seen a pregnant woman up close before. My mum was pregnant with my little brother, but I was only one year old; I don’t remember anything about it.”

“Mm, I understand,” Hughes was patting Ed’s shoulder now, ushering him into a seat. “That’s alright, as long as you keep in mind that my wife is exclusive.”

Ed stared.

Gracia batted at her husband. “Not everybody is conspiring to steal your family away from you, First Lieutenant,” she playfully said. “Now sit down, be a good boy, and eat your lunch. And mind your manners! Edward is a guest. You don’t mind me calling you Edward, do you?”

Finally—someone who had enough sense to ask for permission first! Ed shook his head and gave Gracia another little smile. He liked her; she was nice and reminded him of Trisha. In a very warm, motherly, good way. And the stew looked and smelled mouth-watering.

Hughes was grumbling in mock hurt beside him as they began to dig in. “Can you blame me for being very territorial? Can you? The kid looked so infatuated with you!”

“I’m not a child!” he huffed for the hundredth time. “And I was not infatuated, just—”

Eyebrows raised expectantly, Hughes prodded in between spoonfuls of rice, “Just?”

“Just—” struggling with the words that were stuck behind his tongue, Ed frowned. Words were
never his forte. That was Al. “Just—I find it—miraculous, I guess, and incredibly fascinating how a mother, a pregnant woman, any woman, can produce a life so simply and easily. I mean—I’m sure there are hardships, little caveats to the entire process, but—” he paused to gather his words again, “—you know, alchemists have been trying to do the same thing: make a life from scratch. And after hundreds of years of labour and research, we’ve gotten nowhere, while mothers just keep on birthing and giving life. I just—it’s—yeah.”

Ed knew he sounded indecisive, jumbled, and altogether generally lame, but he hoped he was getting his point across. He was startled when Hughes gave an immensely amused chuckle.

“What?” he frowned.

“Oh, nothing,” the bespectacled man speared a potato from his plate. “I simply find it incredibly amusing how you’re repeating Roy’s words when I told him that Gracia was pregnant.”

“I told you, didn’t I?” Gracia had that knowing smile that most women held when they were aware of something the rest of the world—namely the entirety of the male population—was unaware. Ed thought it was incredibly unfair how women were granted enhanced psychological insight through sheer natural biology. “Roy found himself an intellectual match. They will make good friends.”

Ed scoffed. “Me and the Bastard? Hell no.”

Hughes exploded into laughter, which turned into hacking coughs as he choked on his beef stew. This was the natural reaction: most people were astounded at his gall to call Roy a Bastard with a capital B, even to the man’s face. He did not understand what was so special about it, though; Roy valued honesty, and he was simply honouring the man’s creeds. It was not as if the Bastard felt hurt.

He waited until Hughes was resettled and calm, which took a full glass of water and much petting from his wife. The bespectacled man was still chortling afterward.

“I don’t get what’s so amusing, really,” he truthfully said. “So what if I call him a Bastard? I mean, he is. The Bastard, I mean.”

Hughes exploded into laughter again. “Nobody would dare call Roy Mustang a bastard to his face, Ed! Nobody.”

“What, for fear of burning?” Ed pulled a sly grin. “Oh, that doesn’t scare me. I’ll just wet his gloves.”

Settling appraising eyes on him, Hughes said in a low, conspiratorial voice, “I’ll give you a hundred if you manage to.”

“Deal.”

“Not that I think he’ll ever snap at you,” shrugged Hughes, returning to his food. “He’s completely taken, from how I’ve seen him talk about you. Most of the time, he doesn’t talk to me about his acquaintances unless he knows they’re lasting and important ones. I don’t think he considers you as just an acquaintance anymore, either.”

“You’re exaggerating now.”

“No, I’m not,” Hughes smiled. “He’s thoroughly fascinated with you. I can’t exactly say why at the moment, but he is. And I think I’ll know why when I see the two of you interact.”
Before Ed could reply, there was a loud knock on the house’s back door.

“Ooh, speak of the devil,” Hughes grinned. “Only Roy raps on the door with that rhythm knocks like that.” He excused himself and rose from the table, briskly walking over and disappearing into the hallway. When he came back, a very eager and very awake Roy Mustang was following after him.

“Ah, I see you’ve met Edward,” the Bastard said, coolly brushing strands of his flyaway hair aside and sliding into a seat. Gracia set a plate and cutlery for Mustang, who graciously thanked her with a heartbreaker of a smile.

“A very intelligent young man, from what I can see,” Gracia said to Mustang. She glanced over at Ed and her smile widened. “The two of you make a dynamic pair.”

Edward grimaced; Mustang gave a wry little smile. “Women always know,” he said. Hughes nodded in hearty agreement. Ed was willing to bet that Hughes was prepared to agree to anything that glorified his wife. Edward scowled up at Mustang when the man turned to him with expectant eyes. “I do hope you kept yourself well-behaved while I was gone.”

“I’m not a child! How many times do I have to say it? I am not a child!” fuming in his seat, Ed angrily forked a cube of meat into his mouth. He graced Mustang with a stretch of wounded silence, before barking sharply as Mustang began to settle into his lunch, “Where were you, anyway? I thought you had no work on Sundays.”

“What—you went to the headquarters on a Sunday? You?” Hughes incredulously followed.

“No,” Mustang said, ever decadent and clean as he spoke in between bites. “Business elsewhere.”

Edward eyed the book bag lying safely on the small table against the wall near the door, beside the dining room’s telephone. The bag was made of familiar kid leather—now if he could only remember where he last saw kid leather—and was carried in by Mustang’s careful hands. The man seemed particularly reverent of it when he put it down; perhaps high-priority files? But Mustang said that he had business elsewhere, which meant that it was not the military headquarters he came from.

Ed boggled to himself as he ate. It did not look like Mustang was going to divulge information anytime soon, so he would have to wait—and he sorely disliked waiting.

When he finally managed to pull himself back from his reverie and enjoy his food instead of agonising over Mustang’s whereabouts, Hughes and Mustang were both involved in a discussion of politics (also hereby known as military gossip). Names—some vaguely familiar, some outlandish, and some plainly plain—flew over Ed’s head as they exchanged bits of trivia, random observations, and occasionally some juicily scandalous incidents with the notorious many of the top brass.

They carefully avoided talking about anything of operational importance, Ed noted, a precaution probably drilled into the both of them from years of protocol and paranoia. But Ed did not care either way; military information was something he had nothing to gain from knowing, at least at the present time. Maybe in the future, he would benefit from it, but not now. He could not be bothered; his brain was far too busy with the Xerxian circle and the Persian book.

Speaking of which—

“Hey Glorious Bastard,” he shamelessly stepped into the men’s conversation, “do you think you could decode the Persian book using Xingese? If you have free time, that is,” he added hastily. He did not want to impose on Mustang any further. He was already as grandly accommodated as it was. “The Xerxian circles will take work; if I do both the text decoding and the circle-breaking, progress
will be slower than snail-pace.”

“Of course; I’ll start on them as soon as we get back,” Mustang’s response was smooth, without a single drop of hesitation. They were finished eating now; Gracia was taking the dishes with her husband’s help, and putting out the quiche. “But on that note, I have something I’m sure will immensely please you.”

Mustang rose from his chair and finally went to retrieve that curious leather bag, bringing it to the cleared table and laying it carefully down. The latch came free under Mustang’s fingers, and gently, Mustang reached inside, pulling out an aged leather-bound book, its pages made of the signature papyrus produced by the desert cultures of Persia, Xerxes, Arabia, and the western tribes of Xing. The binding was obviously recently reconstructed, made tighter, firmer, and sturdier. On the front was a slip of paper adhered to the leather, with a small doodled circle to prevent further wear and tear.

This was not what caught Edward’s eyes, though. It was, instead, the sprawling crest stamped impressed upon the leather and filled in with what looked like gold ink. Most of it was faded, but on a few areas of the crest, the original sheen and depth of the gold remained untouched by time. He recognised the crest from the Xerxian circle and—he started—from inside the Gate. This on the book was the exact same as the centrepiece of the Xerxian tapestry circle; the one in his head, the one he had seen engraved on the doors of the Gate, was an inverted version. Or was this one the inverted one? It would make more sense if the Gate was the original.

Which means that somebody from Xerxes already knew how to perform human transmutation, or at least some kind of reaction that would be large enough—and imbalanced enough—to take them to the realm of the Gate.

Ed blinked.

But that’s more than two thousand years ago.

He blinked again.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” he reverently murmured under his breath, eyes wide and fingers clenching in anticipation. He wanted to seize the book from Mustang’s hands, but he did not have leather gloves, and Mustang did. He did not want to harm the book. If only he had silk cloth to handle it…

“Language, Edward,” Mustang admonished, “and no, I’m not kidding you.”

Gently, Mustang laid the book flat on the table, taking care to avoid any droplet of water or fallen food (of which there was none, thanks to the man’s impeccable manners). Ed loudly dragged his chair over, scooted close to Mustang, and eagerly watched as Mustang’s careful hands turned the cover page to reveal the intricate writings on the thick volume.

“Authentic, unearthed from the Xerxes ruins by accident,” Ed listened attentively, dividing his concentration between Mustang’s voice and the bare awe and reverence he felt for the ancient text. “Taken by grave-robbers who had failed in their original exploits and turned instead to the ruins to collect some precious porcelain. The book was inside a large sealed pot, a common way to preserve and conceal texts. All the ancient scholars did such. Luckily, the bandits had yet to open the pot, so the book was not damaged by exposure or rough handling. Anya’s brother bought the goods from the bandits for a high price.”

“Worth it.”
“Yes, definitely,” Mustang nodded. “I matched their price and gave extra. You did want for Xerxian reference texts, after all.”

“Look,” Ed pointed to the lower corner of the third page, his finger almost grazing the ink but not really. He was afraid to touch, afraid to smudge anything; this was precious information within their hands. “That circle looks like one in the Persian book. The twelve-sequence, do you remember?”

“Yes,” Mustang turned to the next page, which was all scribbles and script. “Do you think you can decode this?”

“Decode?” Ed grinned. “No need. I can read it just this way. It’s similar enough to old Amestrian script. (2) Rough, but I’ll get better over time. As I said, every language has a pattern. Give me a few days and I’ll have the first few pages translated for you, if you want.”

“Overflowing with confidence as always, the genius,” Mustang softly remarked, almost fond, dare Ed even think it. “The book is all yours. Just be careful. There are plenty of circles in there.”

“I’m not so stupidly careless I’d activate a circle in a book by accident, you know,” Ed tugged at Mustang’s free hand, the one not occupied with turning the pages. Quickly he rid the hand of the leather glove and pulled it over his own fingers, so that he too could touch the pages, even if only with five fingers and not ten. (That was okay; Mustang only had five gloved fingers to himself. He was not alone; they suffered together.) “Besides,” he continued, “by the sheer paranoia you’re force-feeding me, I’ll never be careless again in my life.”

“That’s good,” Mustang said. “Constant vigilance. You never know who you are or might be up against.”

Ed rolled his eyes, before ducking forward and poring over the tiny scribbles on the tenth page’s corners. He could barely read them, but they looked like corrections.

**Corrections?**

So this was not a book at all, he realised. This was a notebook, a log of an alchemist—the alchemist—who had developed the Persian circles in the Persian book more than two thousand years ago. The circles in this book—at least from what he could see in the first few pages—were far less holistic in comparison to the Persian ones. These circles were younger, yet incomplete—the alchemist was still experimenting when he (or she) wrote this.

Maybe by the end of the book he’ll have something closer to the improvised Persian circles, Ed thought. The flask’s seals certainly derive from this, but are more advanced. But the flask comes from Xerxes too, which means this man improved on himself over time. There’s a great chance that he created the flask as well.

Ed could not wait; there was nothing like conversing with another mind, despite the separation of generation, culture, and time.

“If you don’t hurry, your quiches won’t be warm enough anymore,” a voice from across the table reminded them.

Ed snapped from his reverie and looked up. “Oh, you’re still here?” he said to Hughes.

Hughes grinned through his own slice of quiche; Mustang sighed. “Manners, Edward.”

“Sorry, Bastard,” he absently, automatically responded, grabbing a fork and digging into his quiche. Before taking a bite, though, he turned to Hughes and repeated, “You’re still here, Mr. Hughes?”
Choking on his food, Hughes smothered a laugh. Mustang had only a tiny smile to offer, having already gotten used (somewhat) to Edward’s inherent cheekiness.

“This is my house, you know,” Hughes chuckled. “And that’s my wife’s quiche you’re eating. It’s best to eat Gracia’s quiche warm, though of course you can take some home, cool it, and eat it later. Go on, don’t be shy. Eat as much as you like. I know Gracia’s cooking is the best!”

“He hasn’t a shy bone in his body, Maes,” Mustang scoffed. “Not one. After all, he’s a prodigy.”

“Shu’up, Bastard!”

“Mm,” smiled the man, gently closing the book and placing it back into the leather bag’s safe confinement. The leather gloves went back in as well. Ed had a feeling they were borrowed from Anya, the last place he’d seen kid leather being used.

He shrugged and turned back to his food, quickly finishing his slice and asking unabashedly for more. So full was his mind of information spiders weaving their webs into a coherent nest of theories that he failed to notice Hughes’ little glances, once in a while thrown his way once in a while, a combination of fond, amused, and impressed.

If he had noticed them, he would have known the little conspiracy brewing inside the man’s head: to bring him and Mustang more time together, because of course, any friend of Mustang would see him, the new charge, as a positive influence on the man’s otherwise lonely and monotonous social life (one-night stands and occasional whores notwithstanding).

Such was the failure of his oversight and preoccupation.

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After that one meal, whenever Mustang was not at home, he would daily cross the lawn at lunchtime and drop by at Hughes’ house to impose himself on Gracia’s kitchen. She was a kind and understanding woman, very practical but at the same time emphatic and knowledgeable when it came to solving personal dilemmas. With one look she had sensed Edward’s unspoken and unsettled misunderstandings with his mother, and encouraged him with a few words to talk to her as soon as he was ready. It was imperative, she said, that they repair their relationship, because a mother to a son only came once in life.

Her pieces of advice did not stop there; she gave Edward her thoughts on Mustang, seeing how Edward seemed to still be a little abrasive and defensive in the man’s presence. She tried her best to persuade him of Mustang’s goodness, which Ed could see, yes, but he could not simply just let go of the natural distrust that was borne into him through years of brainwashing by Pinako. (Besides, he could not help his disbelief when the Bastard acted like a Bastard day in and day out without rest or even a pause for single breath. It was as if the man lived on his own hubris. Which the Bastard probably did, the Bastard.)

Half the time, though, Gracia just talked of small things, random things, favourites, the type of conversation people had when they were getting to know each other at first. It was something he had never done with Mustang, because both of them had monsters to keep in their closets, but Gracia had next to none, and was open about her opinions and preferences.

If only he was as free, Ed thought.
Days passed quickly, almost in a haze but not quite. He spent his hours buried to his eyeballs in scripts, books, scrolls, circles, and codes. There was a lot of work to do, a lot of comparison and cross-referencing in progress between the flask, the tapestry circle, the Xerxian book, and the Persian book. He was alone, but that was alright; he worked better alone (no offense to Alphonse). From time to time Mustang would come to help him with the research, but Mustang too was busy, and often came home drained and lethargic. Only wine and a good meal would bring the spark back.

The established routine endured over the next week, and the following Friday, they were out again, to the same restaurant but for a different kind of cuisine. Everything was a learning experience, Ed found, whenever he was in Mustang’s presence. Never had he ever gotten such a meticulous and intense one-on-one teaching on such a wide variety of themes.

He revelled in it.

*I could live like this for the rest of my life and not have any regrets,* Edward mused to himself, reclining against his chair and gazing up at the sky. The stars were beginning to lean towards the autumn alignment, and the breeze was slowly beginning to chill. By this time, in Resembool, one would already need to wear long sleeves and perhaps a sweater, but here in the bustle of urban Central, the heat lingered after summer.

“What are you thinking?” inquired Mustang from across the table. They were finishing up on their dessert, panna cotta midway submerged in rich blackberry currant sauce.

“Mm, not much.”

“Well, that’s a surprise,” Mustang forked a sizeable piece from the large circular panna cotta. Ed scowled; they were sharing a plate (since Mustang had claimed that having one plate each would mean ingesting more sugar than what was healthy) and here the Bastard was, unconscientiously stealing more than his own fair share! To match Mustang, Ed forked a similarly large portion and dipped it for a little bit more sauce, before savouring it if only to taunt the Bastard. Only recently had he discovered that both of them had a similarly monstrous and very greedy penchant for sweets.

“I was just remarking on the disparity between my life here and how I used to live in Resembool.” Ed coated his fork with sauce and lifted it to his mouth, licking it clean. “Worlds apart. One would think I was transported across dimensions.”

“What are you thinking?” there it was again, the deep eyes. “With what you have here, I mean.”

For a stretch of a few heartbeats, Ed kept his quiet, gazing back at Mustang with an equally intense scrutiny, until he shrugged with a smirk, “It’ll do.”

Mustang’s brows lifted with the edges of his lips in a surprised but pleased little smile. “Is that a challenge I hear, Mr. Elric?”

“Well, there is certainly much room for improvement, Mr. Mustang,” the playful tone never left Ed’s voice, lest Mustang think he was actually being serious. He knew that the man knew that he appreciated what has been done for him, what has been given to him, and he was not being ungrateful. He simply wished to keep this evening’s tone light-hearted and warm. “For example,” he elaborated, “you could get me the same silk sheets you have on your grand bed for mine. They look very comfortable.”
“They are, very much.”

“I find it hard to understand how you can have your guests in such bland accommodations as mine and have silk sheets when you go to bed at night,” Ed pushed a little bit more. He really was not kidding about this; he wanted those sheets. Well, not Mustang’s exact same sheets, but silk sheets. They looked really, really comfortable, and he was willing to bet the library they were.

“Ah, but I give you more than what most families and house-owners would accommodate their guests with,” Mustang leaned forward. “I give you clean, prime linen from the best weavers in all of Europa. I give you a bed that is as soft as the clouds above—metaphor, Edward; I am aware one will fall if one should lie on literal clouds. Why do you say I accommodate you poorly, then?”

“Yes, I have clean, prime linen as you say—but you have silk. Does that not strike you as a tad unfair?”

“But I’m the master of the house, am I not?” Mustang reclined again, satisfied with his simple defence.

Ed rolled his eyes. “And it comes down to your ego, yet again.”

The Bastard laughed. Laughed. But Ed really wanted those silk sheets!

“I wonder when we will have a conversation which does not end or begin or somehow concern your awe-inspiring self.”

“Never,” Mustang declared.

“Ugh. You’re insufferable.”

“Thank you.”

Mustang finished the last of the panna cotta. Fucking Bastard.

~

Their peaceable quiet was dealt a crack when on Tuesday morning Ed picked the newspaper up from where it was left by the gate and read the headlines. Minutes later, he walked back into the kitchen, face drawn as he handed the paper to his companion. Mustang was preparing for them breakfast, refreshed from sleep but grave and obviously dwelling on something. Ed had a strong idea what.

“The headlines talk of a murder last night,” he barrelled into the heart of the matter. He disliked small talk when it came to things that were of importance, and so did Mustang.

Mustang blinked up at him, hands stilling momentarily, as if now only realising that he had company. There was a muted sigh, and Mustang slid quietly into his chair, motioning for him to sit as well before their meal. They began eating. Patiently, Ed waited for Mustang to gather his words, and it was only when he was a third of the way through his plate did the man speak, all business and not an ounce of jest in tone.

“It’s the sixth in a series of murders that began this year’s early spring,” Mustang shortly explained.
Ed frowned. “The papers say it’s the fifth.”

“The media knows nothing; never trust fully on what they say.” Mustang gravely warned. “Anyhow, it’s imperative that they know only the barest details about the murders. If the papers still have yet to connect the first in the six, it means that my subordinates have been doing their job.”

So Mustang was in charge of the murder investigations, as Ed had suspected. It did strike Ed as strange when Mustang had called home the previous night and had apologised for being late. He had told Ed to go to Hughes’ house instead for dinner and to not wait up for his return. The man had not explained much further, but Ed was yet awake when Mustang returned, and had prepared a small and humble meal for his exhausted companion. He asked no questions the previous night and quietly kept Mustang company until late into the night, but now, he could not help but inquire.

“Is there any way I can help?”

Mustang’s jaw tightened at that suggestion. “I would prefer if you remained here at home, Ed. Safe.”

“You know I can take care of myself,” Ed quietly insisted. He treaded with caution, afraid to push. According to Hughes, Mustang’s temper was explosive when triggered. Ed was not quite sure if he wanted to acquaint himself with it so early.

“I know that very well,” Mustang nodded, still with the same taut tension, “but I have seen these murders, Ed, and they aren’t something I’m quite sure I want to expose you to. Furthermore, we have already established that you are steering clear of the military for now, and getting yourself involved in something like this will throw that idea out of the window for good. The military has good intel; Hughes can attest to that.”

Quiet settled between the two of them.

The meal was excellent as usual, but Ed barely tasted the flavour in the depth of his thought. He wanted to rebuke Mustang, to rebel and offer his hand in whatever matter he could be of help with. But with that tone Mustang was using? It was impossible.

Again, Ed felt as if he was a child, coddled, treasured, taught. Again, he wondered if this obedience was natural. Again, he wondered if this was how it felt to have a loving father who cared about his safety and future.

When they finished with their meal and began washing the dishes, Mustang quietly spoke, “I appreciate the offer, Edward, but for now, these matters aren’t your business. Don’t worry about them. Don’t even spare them a thought. I just want you to concentrate your energy in your studies—and I want you to keep yourself safe. Promise me that, will you?”

Ed nodded. “I will.”

“Thank you.”

Mustang’s hand was warm on his shoulder, a comfort, a reassurance. Ed had relinquished to the man for now, but that did not mean he would not look into matters on his own. Oh, he would not leave the house—he was not the type to break promises—but he would read the papers and find out what he could. Perhaps there was something there he could offer to Mustang, something that would ease the investigation through.
He had not liked the stress he had seen the previous night on Mustang’s visage. Though Mustang carried it well, when the masks were down inside the four walls of the house, Mustang was just another human being carrying a responsibility that, borne alone, would cripple most common men.

Ed shuddered to think how much worse it would get as Mustang ascended the ranks, and marvelled at the sheer resilience Mustang displayed with how long he had lasted in the game, virtually alone, with no one to lean against. Hughes was an ally, and there were Mustang’s loyal subordinates, but even then, Mustang had no one to console him at night, when he sat alone in his large and lonely house. Considering how this was only the beginning of Mustang’s steep climb, Mustang would need someone there to stay, and perhaps share part of the personal trauma a job as hazardous and emotionally taxing as this cost.

Ed wanted to help.

He wanted to help, because Mustang had helped him.

Inwardly hardening his resolve, Ed swore that he would find some way to be of use. It was not as if he was going anywhere anytime soon anyway; he would be staying for a long while, and hell be damned if he was not going to find a way to repay his debts.

“Be careful, then,” Ed bid as he strode with Mustang through the hall and into the entrance hall. It had taken Mustang less than fifteen minutes to prepare for work after the meal, having already showered and half-dressed.

“I’ll call home if I have to stay late tonight,” Mustang said. “Gracia will be more than happy to have you over for dinner, I’m sure. Maes will no doubt be staying late with me as well, if I do. Stay inside otherwise.”

“I understand.”

Ed watched as Mustang stepped through the doors and towards the gate, outside of which a sleek black military car sat waiting. The driver, Lieutenant Havoc, was leaning against the side, smoking a cigarette.

“Lock the doors!” Mustang called behind him.

Ed did as he was told.

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tbc
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Chapter End Notes
(1) The Persian book's CIRCLES are similar to the Xerxian flask's seals, while the LANGUAGE/WRITING is similar to Xingese (which Roy can speak). I hope that makes it clearer.
(2) Xerxes is an old kingdom predating Amestris by nearly 800 years. Amestris inherits greatly from Xerxes, especially in language and alchemy. The ancient Amestrian language is almost entirely similar to Xerxian language. But THEY ARE NOT ONE COUNTRY. Please keep this in mind.
"Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to always and forever be explaining things to them."

( Antoine de Saint-Exupery, The Little Prince )

Edward came up with nothing relevant from the newspapers, apart from the bare facts he already expected to find and could have gotten by asking his neighbours. If this was indeed Mustang’s subordinates’ work, they were a painfully thorough bunch. Then again, this was Mustang. Mustang would have nothing less than the best of people for himself, just as he had his way with everything else. From what he’d heard from Gracia, Mustang was plenty influential within the military ranks, despite his young age and lack of rank. Lack of experience was something nobody could accuse Mustang of; the man was a veteran from the Ishbal War, and a more-than-adequate politician from how he had worked his way up so rapidly through the military.

But such was not his point.

The tight security protecting the information was maddening. He had, by nature, a curious soul, and he itched to know about those murders Mustang insisted on keeping from him. He did not blame the man for doing so, not at all—only, he thought that the man was a little bit too overprotective at times.

Alright, that was an understatement. The man was a fucking paranoid Bastard.

He gave a momentous sigh and stretched his limbs, sprawling all over his couch. The table was laden with his usual books, the flask, his references, and his notes; but over them, newspapers dating from February of the same year were spread in a systematic fashion. So far, he had nothing more than what he would bet the military had, probably even less. He did not have nearly the same amount of abundant resources the military had. He only had one library and very unreliable newspapers on hand.

What was he thinking, trying to poke his nose into Mustang’s business? The man was not playing a game.

The phone rang loud in his afternoon stupor, echoing against the walls. He swung up from the couch and grabbed the phone, following Mustang’s instructions to never say anything and let the other side speak first.

“Ed, it’s me,” Mustang’s voice filtered through.
“Oh, hey, Bastard,” Ed relaxed back into the couch. “You’re going to be late tonight, then?”

“About an hour or two, if you can wait. If not, go to Gracia’s house. Maes should be talking to her right now,” there was cacophony in the background, unusual for wherever Mustang worked. Perhaps he was not in his office? Ed did not even know if the man had one. (He probably did.) “We just have a little bit of extra work to deal with.”

“I can wait,” and Ed spent the next few minutes reassuring Mustang that no, he was not going out of the house, yes, the doors were locked, yes, he could wait, and no, he had not talked to anyone from outside. When they finally hung up, Ed was at the verge of giving into an intense impulse to rebel against Mustang’s now somewhat suffocating rules. Seeing the newspapers, however, was enough to discourage any rash action his deviant little brain could cook up.

He languished about, feeling unjustifiably useless and generally incompetent. Mustang would come home tonight tired, no doubt, again with that hollow, drained shadow in his eyes. Ed did not like those alien eyes; he liked the intense and fiery Bastard. But how was he to help relieve the burden if he was trapped here like a caged pet, unable to do what he was good at? These murders, from what the paper clippings said, seemed to have some sort of alchemical component involved; he could crack that, surely. And Mustang knew this, yet here he was, being kept away from the investigation. It was all sorts of infuriating, frustrating, and touching.

His eyes instinctively glanced over at the clock; it was nearing four in the afternoon. Today was a wasted day with no progress on his research—on the Xerxian book, or on the murders. He sighed again; he hated the lack of visible progress.

Mustang had said that he would come home an hour or two late—not very late, but late enough that the man would probably have no time to prepare a proper dinner for the two of them. Ed did not want to stress Mustang any further by demanding food, but he did not want to impose too much on Gracia either…

*I could cook for him.*

Ed paused at the thought.

Cooking was something he had never really tried his hand with, much less study. Mustang had been giving him pointers for the past few weeks, but pointers were really nothing compared to the real thing.

*But isn’t experimentation what I do best?*

He felt rather awkward about experimenting in Mustang’s immaculate kitchen.

*I could easily clean up any mess I might make, and repair any damage I might incur…*

Ed’s eyes idly wandered towards the far bookshelf near the back stairs, where there was a section for the culinary crafts. It was small, smaller than the other sections, but sizable enough for the basic and intermediate lessons. He gathered Mustang learned the advanced techniques from experimenting and improving upon the basic techniques.

Rising from his seat, Ed made his way to the kitchen. He had about three hours. That was more than enough.
By the time Ed heard the opening of the front door and the quiet noise of the military car leaving the driveway, he was finished with the final preparations. His meal was simple, a combination of two different dishes he had seen Mustang cook before. It was a simple salad, with a serving large enough to be a light dinner, with freshly baked bread. (Baking turned out to be easier than cooking—never mind that he had clapped.)

“Edward?” Mustang was removing his jacket when he stepped into the kitchen. Ed turned from where he was preparing the olive oil and spices (to dip the bread in); the salads were already laid out neatly on the table. Mustang gave a slow blink and once-over of the kitchen—free of mess and relatively orderly—before turning back to Ed. “What are you doing?”

“I clapped us some food,” Ed said proudly with a grin.

“…clapped.”

“Well,” Ed shrugged and explained (not whined), “your oven doesn’t seem to work for some reason, and the stove hates me. I managed to fry the chicken alright, but the breading was hell. I don’t know how you do it. So I just clapped. Oh, and I made the bread too.” He gave Mustang another grin.

“…are you sure it’s not, you know, poisonous?” Mustang motioned toward the table, apprehensive as if facing a rearing tiger.

Ed scowled. “I trust you enough to eat what you cook; it’s only fair that you trust me enough to eat my cooking!”


“Yes, it is!”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it so is!” Edward petulantly stomped his foot. “The Gate says that as long as you accomplish a certain temperature, it is so cooking!”

“I thought you didn’t like the Gate,” an eyebrow lifted in surprise, Mustang set down his jacket and slid into a seat, facing the food.

Ed prepared them three loaves of freshly baked (err, clapped?) bread, still steaming and soft, with extra-virgin olive oil with spices to dip them in. The salad was simple: spinach, roma tomatoes, red onion strips, fried onion rings, strips of fried bacon, crumbled gorgonzola cheese, with basic vinaigrette. On top was a chicken breast deep-fried with spices to seal in the taste, and then breaded (crusted with pecan sprinkles, Ed’s personal touch) and baked (err, clapped) into perfection. Then Ed cut it up in strips to make the eating easier. His meal was not as elaborate as Mustang’s meals, but he thought it was rather impressive for an amateur like him.

“I don’t like the Gate,” frowned Ed. “But my opinion or perception of it doesn’t affect in any way its accuracy.”
Mustang merely smiled, as if he had expected that. Ed wondered if he really was that easy to predict.

“I don’t know what wine goes well with this,” Ed confessed after a moment of silence. Mustang appeared to like the bread, enough to savour it slowly and carefully in his mouth. Ed sprinkled a little bit more of the spices into the olive oil dip saucer between the two of them.

“Mm,” Mustang stood and stepped over to the island, where his hand hovered over bottles until he seized one and carefully pulled it out of its little slot. With practiced ease, he opened it for them, letting Ed set out the two glasses and filling it halfway. “Chardonnay. Buttery taste. Perfect for cutting into the gorgonzola chalkiness.”

Ed swirled the wine in his mouth, grimaced when he found it was not chill enough, and clapped for their glasses and the bottle so that the wine would cool. Mustang observed his alchemy carefully; the man had expressed intense interest and fascination with it. Ed did not fault Mustang; he himself was very intrigued.

“How was work?” Ed asked now that they were settled into their food. He knew that it was futile to try and direct the conversation towards the direction he wanted, but that did not stop him from trying. And he was actually genuinely curious about Mustang’s workplace; he was slowly beginning to realize a want to see the outer world, a world beyond this house, and he wanted to see how Mustang was beyond this house. He knew Mustang’s softer, more personal faces, but that was not all of him. Ed was curious; Ed wanted to know all of him. It was only fair; Mustang knew nearly everything about him, after all.

“You’re not going to get involved with the investigation, Edward, if that’s what you’re hinting at,” Mustang wryly smiled over the rim of his wineglass, and then continued, “We were rather busy, as you might have already guessed. Hawkeye was as bossy and overpowering as usual. Things are just a little bit more… ahh, how should I say this—populous.”

“You don’t like it when other people step into your team,” that was so typical of Mustang.

“I do not like it when information is not ferried through me before action is taken. I should be the one to dictate action, but there are some people who perceive themselves competent when in truth they are not,” the stiff, condescending tone Mustang was using suggested intense dislike; perhaps a superior officer poking a nose within Mustang’s jurisdiction. Ed hated those too, the belligerent and quarrelsome idiots.

“So what do you do when you encounter people like that?” and Ed was surprised at how easy it was to make conversation with Mustang—because usually it was Mustang sparking their conversations—such that he did not even have to think too much about what he was going to say or ask. The words simply flowed.

Watching as the tension bled out of the set of Mustang’s shoulders, Ed relaxed against his seat and kept the conversation going. Talking was Mustang’s way of distraction tonight, a way of relieving his brain of the stress of work and murder cases. Ed figured that if he could not help solve the case directly by being a part of the investigation team, then he could at least help the team leader unwind at home, so that the night would be occupied by a nice, deep sleep, and the next day would surface fresh and ready.
Mustang was impressed with his cooking, though disapproving of his ‘shortcut’ methodology. Ed discarded the very word; alchemy was not shortcut. It required the same amount of work, only Ed was better at alchemy, therefore faster and more efficient. (Mustang said these were all excuses; Ed refused to listen.)

Every night, whenever Mustang came home a little bit late, Ed would cook for them, varying his dishes according to what he was reading or what he had seen Mustang cook. At times he would stop over at Gracia’s place, and Gracia would teach him different techniques, show him different dishes. Sometimes, he would even get a taste.

It was Gracia who initially gave Ed the idea of distraction. On Monday noon, before Ed had picked up that newspaper and found out about the sixth body, Gracia had told Ed about the Ishbal War and how Hughes and Mustang met. Gracia had mentioned feeling inadequate in the beginning of her relationship with Hughes; Hughes and Mustang were such close friends that it seemed to the rest of the world that they needed no one else. Hughes and Mustang were each others’ support systems. Gracia was essentially a third wheel.

But eventually, she told Ed, she found her place and her purpose in Hughes’ life. She was able to distract him from the war, and while Mustang remained the one friend Hughes sought to talk about work, she was able to teach Hughes how to begin to live life again, especially after the war.

Which of course led Ed to think: if Gracia helped Hughes, then who helped Mustang?

No one.

Mustang had no one, Ed quickly realized. This house was a beautiful house, but it was an empty house, and no doubt Mustang would have felt the stagnant loneliness pooling within these tall walls whenever he was alone at night, without anyone to talk to about the war. Sure, there would have been other friends he could have sat with, but from the looks of it, it was only Hughes who truly came close to understanding whatever Mustang went through.

Ed felt incredibly uncomfortable thinking about such things. He was unused to the practice of considering other human beings’ feelings this much, especially someone like Mustang, who was still a half-stranger to him. Barely three weeks in Central and he was already so immersed that he was worrying this much about Mustang’s wellbeing. Perhaps it was guilt, or some sort of manifestation of obligation, he did not know—but not helping Mustang in some way bothered him to his very core.

And he saw that at the very roots of this, there was his selfishness as well. It would never go away; Ed knew that it was in his blood. Just like Hohenheim, he was selfish enough to leave behind his family and pursue his dreams; today, Ed knew that he was being selfish by wanting to help Mustang. He wanted to keep Mustang healthy and happy, because by now, he considered Mustang a valuable mentor.

Granted, he could be underestimating Mustang’s resilience under stress, but every man had his limits. Even he had his limit, and he had come very close to it. (He had Mustang to thank for keeping him from that disaster, too.)

He voiced this to Gracia, and she did not even need to hear all of it before she said, “Just do what feels right, Ed. Trust your heart.”
Ed wanted to tell her that the seat of instincts and emotion was in the limbic system in the brain and nowhere near the chest, but refrained. He understood what she was saying, and found it incredibly amusing—and revealing—that since Resembool, he had yet to act in a purely instinctive manner. Everything seemed to be all about thinking ever since he came to Central. Perhaps it was Mustang, who discouraged impulse. Or perhaps it was simply the suddenness and shock of it that he was being overly cautious, as Gracia insisted. He did not know; he was not sure. But something had changed; he began to think too much.

*Maybe Gracia is right. Maybe I should just follow what feels right this time around. Emotions are felt, after all. And that made perfectly logical sense, surprisingly enough.*

~

Somewhere along the way of conversation, they got talking about the military generals, people Mustang particularly disliked, except for those few competent and sane ones. Mustang was in the process of deriding a certain general’s uneducated tastes in art; Edward was in the process of snickering his head off.

Apparently, two days ago on Wednesday night, an auction was held at one of the military-owned public museums. There was a general named Hakuro, who, despite obviously not having enough money to fight for a certain art piece, still went ahead and spent an extravagant amount of money on something entirely worthless. Edward listened as Mustang regaled about Hakuro’s pathetic attempts at showing the bourgeoisie just how ‘enlightened’ he was, while occasionally sipping cold tea spiked with raspberry flavour.

“*But you said he’s a general,*” Ed stepped into Mustang’s little rant. “*How come he can’t afford the art piece?*”

“Well, the… art piece—if you can call that piece of imitative junk a work of art—was going for roughly fifteen thousand marks”—Ed choked, ‘—and there is just no way he can afford that much on military salary. Not with a wife and two children to support, and a house to pay for. That is three-fifths his monthly salary, and double mine.”

The calculations were quick in Ed’s head. Slowly, he blinked at Mustang and narrowed his eyes.

“So your monthly pay is eight thousand marks as a Lieutenant Colonel?” Mustang nods, and Ed continues, “But you paid more than two thousand for those clothes you bought me, nearly three hundred for food and stuff enough to last us *two weeks*—and I’m willing to bet the flask and the Xerxian book didn’t come cheap. Where the *hell* did you learn your budgeting?”

“Every month I gain more than double my salary from the park restaurant alone, Ed,” Mustang had that conniving little smile again. “The businesses I sponsor are more than enough to support me luxuriously, in truth. I stay in the military purely because of my ambitions, though of course, not many people are aware of that. To many, the military’s monetary benefit is already quite grand—and it is, by normal terms.”

“*Ah, of course,*” the slow drag of Ed’s tone is exasperated but amused at the same time. “*Roy Mustang is far too great to be defined by normal terms.*”
“Why, thank you.”

Ed scowled.

There was a stretch of comfortable silence, and then Ed piped up again, “What do you mean when you said that not many people knew about you staying in the military purely because of ambition? Doesn’t the military collect information about their employees’ properties and assets and whatnot?”

“They know I own a house and a car, but other than that, not much else.” Mustang gestured to the grand library surrounding them, towards the hall where rare and authentic paintings hung framed on the walls. “All of this is private property; I am not obliged to list it down. I am also not obliged to list private sources of income—businesses and such. They might track my movements—what I buy and where I go—but as for sponsoring the businesses, all of it is grassroots, done through personal connections. They don’t search that deep. All of them think that my financial standing is just like any upper-middle class citizen, living on a decent and marginally luxurious wage.”

“They don’t know you’re obscenely rich, is what you’re saying,” Ed had to roll his eyes. “So where does this all go if you die or something?” and for good measure, added, “Not that I’m saying you’ll die soon or anything; I’m just curious.”

Mustang chuckled. “If it were any other person, Edward, I would seriously doubt that excuse. But since you’re you, I trust your curiosity.” Ed scowled, though feeling strangely flattered. “My will has Hughes and Hughes’ family as the primary beneficiary. A few close friends also have their parts.”

Ed had expected that. Cheekily, he quipped, “Are you sure you don’t want to adopt me?” adding a little charm by giving a beatific smile. It had Mustang laughing for a straight three minutes. Ed figured this whole going-with-what-felt-right thing was not all that bad of an idea, after all.

An hour later and Ed found himself still immersed in conversation. He listened attentively to Mustang’s line-up of up and coming events for Central’s arts, letters, and history districts for the approaching autumn season. He had mentioned a while ago that he wanted to see more of the city, and Mustang thought it was a good idea to take him to shows and events around the place. Ed found himself eager for it.

“The annual alchemy symposium is also coming up,” Mustang said, and Ed perked in his seat. “We’ll go to that one. I think you’ll find the variety of topics the guest speakers talk of highly intriguing and educational. They’ll probably host it in one of the public halls again, but I’ve heard talk of hosting it at a preparatory school, which might be a good idea. The students—curious young men and ladies, I’m sure—will benefit from it greatly.”

That made sense, Ed thought. They desperately needed more competent researchers, ones that were genuinely interested in the science and not just the monetary or statistic benefit. The young ones were the easiest and best to pick up.

“So have you ever spoken at one of those symposiums?”

Mustang shook his head no. “I rather prefer the smaller, more intimate discussions, than the big halls. I like enabling critics to speak up against me, and consequently arguing my points with them. Besides, there are plenty of other State Alchemists eager to fill that stage.”

Ed frowned as some tension bled into the man’s countenance. Mustang seemed to greatly dislike mingling with his fellow State Alchemists, for reasons Edward can somewhat understand. Mustang was one of a kind, unique within his league; the other alchemists were probably just dogs to use for
the war or slaves for some classified experimental military project. (Now if there were four words that should never appear in one sentence together, they would be those four.)

Smoothly diverting the conversation to lighter matters, Edward jested lightly, “Shouldn’t you be sending me to school, then?”

Slowly, Mustang’s eyebrow rose. “Why?” the tone was very flat. “It’s not like you need it.”

Ed shrugged. “But isn’t that what good fathers do? Send their children to school?”

Mustang gave him a level stare, and for the longest while kept quiet. And then there was a shrug, “Alright, if you so want it.” The man craned towards the desk to reach for the slim leather contact log the size of a thin portrait notebook.

“I don’t want it,” Ed refuted. “Children are immature.” That earned him an amused look. “I’m just saying!”

But Mustang was already lifting the phone to call someone. Ed glanced at the clock.

“Hey, are you serious? It’s nearly midnight; I think schools are closed now,” and nervously, he added, “And I was just joking, you know.”

“I’m calling an acquaintance and leaving a message, Edward; I don’t plan to wake up early tomorrow morning to do this call,” Mustang was dialling. “And I think it might actually be a good idea for you to go to school. It might help you with your social skills.”

“But I already talk to you so much. Isn’t that enough socialisation?” Ed was getting really anxious now; Mustang was being serious. He damned his stupid gut; he was only joking! He should have known Mustang would take it seriously.

“Well, yes, and I would like for our conversations to remain the same, but obviously I can’t be with you at all times,” Mustang gave him a doting little smile. “It must get a little boring here when you’re all by yourself, no?”

Cursing to himself, Ed watched in horror as Mustang talked to the acquaintance on the other side. (Apparently, for the other person, eleven o’clock was still early enough.) He tried to calm his spinning mind by trying to convince himself that school would not be so awful. After all, it would not be his first time attending one with other children. (He then grimaced at that thought. The day school in Resembool had been depressingly lacking for both him and Al. Hopefully, this school Mustang knew would provide better education. They were in Central, after all.)

When Mustang was finished, Ed barked vindictively at him: “Putting me in school makes you my father. I expect to be on your last will and testament as the sole heir—sole heir—to these books, you hear me?”

This time, he had Mustang laughing for ten minutes straight.

“And the map! Don’t forget the map! And the tapestry! And the flask!”

Mustang laughed some more.
What he woke up to on Monday morning should have been enough to warn him of the awfully harassing day he would have. Mustang gently nudged him into awareness, and waking to the aroma of breakfast and Mustang’s admittedly melodic voice would have been pleasant, except Mustang just had to say:

“You don’t want to be late on the first day of school, Edward; come, get up and get ready.”

Pitifully, Ed groaned into his pillow. He was not dealing with immature little children this early in the morning. But ugh! Mustang isn’t giving me a choice, is he, the bloody officious twit! So he began to prepare for the day.

The ride to the school took a lot less time than Ed thought it would, but that was probably because he was anxious. He hoped it did not show too much.

“On your best behaviour, Edward,” Mustang warned as they stepped up to a large red Victorian structure. “Try not to terrorise the children on the first day.”

Ed rolled his eyes, deigning not to reply. He observed their surroundings as they walked up the stairs to the front doors of the subtly opulent private institution. There were four floors, and the building was wide. Behind it, Ed surmised, was a garden, and if he craned his head to look to the far ends of the wide building, he could see other structures behind it. This was a huge school, more than likely catering to children from the ages of six and seven to young lads and ladies aged sixteen.

They went straight to the headmaster’s office, where the paperwork was taken care of very easily. The headmaster’s name totally escaped Edward’s memory, but he figured he would not be seeing much of the very ordinary-looking man anyway. He accepted his schedule and ran a curious and admittedly critical eye over it, and soon after that, he and Mustang were stepping out of the office. He was finally left to his own devices when Mustang had to leave for work.

“You know where to call me if you need anything, Edward. I’ll send Havoc to pick you up at three.”

And so he was left alone.

The schedule for his particular academic level was broken up into two by an hour long lunch break stretching from twelve noon until one. Six hours, Ed steeled himself. Only six hours for today and he would be free. (He tried his damnedest not to think about tomorrow.)

The first class was literature and writing, in a classroom on the third floor. He found himself a seat by the windows and observed as the children around him tittered and talked amongst themselves. They were all approximately his own age, eleven or twelve, but so much more immature, childish. No, he was not being condescending at all; he was merely stating the pure truth.

One of them, a young boy with dark reddish brown hair and bright green eyes, looked particularly eager to strike up conversation with him, but luckily, the teacher stepped in before that and calmed the motley crew of privileged spoiled brats. Ed sighed in relief; he did not think he could actually
hold a conversation with these children.

He moved through the lesson with ease, despite not having taken the prerequisite courses. He knew the book that was assigned, and he remembered Mustang talking about it. Sparingly, he took notes, if only to practice his automail hand; he really did not need them. The class lasted an hour until ten, then came the next class, which was in a room down and across the hall. Natural sciences, Ed grinned.

It turned out to be a pretty basic introduction into chemistry (which by the way Ed learned all by himself when he was four): molecular and atomic theory. He listened, rather annoyed, as the teacher babbled onwards a watered-down version of what he had studied. At least, Ed told himself, he has the principles down correctly.

“…and the atom is the smallest known unit of matter.”

Ed’s chin slipped off his hand in disbelief.

Blinking at the teacher, he (rather loudly) protested, “No, it’s not!”

Heads uniformly swivelled towards him, and some of the smarter students (or at least they thought they were smart) sniggered at him. They were probably thinking that he did not know what he was saying, really, but wanted to sound smart. Ed scowled. No; they did not know what they were saying. They were the ones who wanted to sound smart. Stupid kids.

“I’m sorry, Mr….” the teacher had to look at his roll sheet for his name, “Mr. Elric. Did you have a question?”

“I said,” Ed repeated very slowly, “no, the atom is not the smallest known unit of matter.”

The teacher looked at him with a raised brow. “I understand you have some basic background on the sciences, Mr. Elric, but I must insist. This is an advanced version of the chemistry course, and there will be details here that might be contrary to what you have read in the past.” The teacher took that opportunity to turn to the class and impart another bit of knowledge: “It has been proven that the atom is the smallest unit of matter by a certain alchemist named—”

“—Robert Mahler, research report published 1863, under the wing of General Lucas Armstrong, yes, I know,” Edward sighed. “It was a major breakthrough, and as you said the atom was considered the smallest unit of matter until eleven years later, 1874, when Abel Montague offered the world’s first peek into the structure of the atom, consequently discovering the subatomic particles: neutrons, protons, electrons and such.” The entire class was quiet now. Alarm bells rang in Ed’s head—Mustang had explicitly warned him not to cause trouble in class like this—but he continued anyway, “Therefore, the atom is not the smallest unit of matter. What you said was wrong.”

Slightly red-faced but sufficiently cowed for the moment, the teacher swallowed and straightened himself. “Well, it appears Mr. Elric is rather well-versed in advanced chemistry. Subatomic theory, however, is something we need not concern ourselves with for the moment.” The teacher turned back to the board, continuing rather awkwardly, “Although the atom is not the smallest unit of matter, as we have… established, it is, however, indivisible, and therefore—“

“Actually, that’s wrong too,” he had tried to grit his teeth and prevent from speaking up at all, but he was just unable to ignore such ignoble instruction. Oh, Izumi would be railing at the very thought! “The atom can be divided using certain alchemical procedures.”

The teacher slowly turned to face him again, adjusting the ugly horn-rimmed glasses. “I am not
aware of any published research confirming the division of an atom, Mr. Elric.”

“Well, of course,” Ed rolled his eyes. “At the moment, it’s only theoretical. Research is still in progress. But there’s strong evidence that subatomic alchemy has been around for as long as since the Persians, perhaps the Xerxians.”

Scoffing now, the teacher gave him a patronising smile. “Child, you don’t know what you’re talking about. The Xerxian civilisation thrived two thousand years ago!”

“And how does that disprove their capability to perform subatomic alchemy?” Ed challenged, but before he could launch into a nice, loud, long rant, the bell rang.

Reclining against his seat, Ed held the teacher’s stare, only letting go as the class began to move. He gathered his things into the one leather folio he carried (enough space for two pens and a notepad), borrowed from Mustang’s extra stock of stuff. He was making for the door when the teacher called out, “Mr. Elric, I would like to talk to you for a moment, please.”

Well, he could not say he did not expect that.

Heading for the front of the room, he stopped short before the teacher’s desk and stood quietly, until the flustered teacher began speaking again, “I see that you are very widely read, Mr. Elric, and rather imaginative at that. But I will have to ask you henceforth to refrain from spouting fantastic theories about science. This is a class, Mr. Elric, not a story book reading. Please watch your remarks from now on.”

Edward stood there, rather incredulous, and released a huff of disbelief.

“So you really do think I was making all that up?” he rocked back on his heels. “Sir, the theories clearly show that an atom can be divided!”

“I make the facts as simple as I can to prevent any confusion on the students’ parts,” the teacher said, holding up a hand. “And I do not contest as much the atomic division theory; but Xerxians! Surely they cannot possibly—”

"Why not?" Ed petulantly demanded, stomping a foot. “Why is it not possible for them? They discovered alchemy for us! They developed it first, without our technology!”

Annoyed now, in no small amount, the teacher said, “Young man, until there is no proof or hard evidence of any such theory existing in pre-modern times, it cannot be taught as fact.”

But I have the evidence! Ed wanted to scream. He held his tongue; he was selfish. He wanted to keep that Xerxian book to himself. (And he could not very well tell a stranger about the Gate in his head, though the Gate was just about all the proof anybody could ever need.)

The teacher continued, “And on that thought, if the atomic division theory truly is sound, then why has there been no breakthrough, no successful experiment reported since?”

“Obviously because you die if you do the alchemical reaction!” it was Ed’s turn to be exasperated. “You’re a chemistry teacher! You should know this! Equivalent exchange! Basic alchemy! The energy required to pull off such a massive stunt of physics is near-impossible to gather! The array would swallow the alchemist for sure!” He meant that in a more than metaphorical way. Inside his head, the Gate purred with a wide diabolical smile.

Rightfully, the teacher was taken aback at his boldness. It took a few seconds of tense silence before the teacher spoke again, in forcibly measured tones this time, “Even then, I cannot teach this to my
class. There is too little support for the theory, no proof from experiment, and not enough details on the process. It is best if they focus on the conventional side of things and learn of the basic without the complicated subatomic theories.”

“You’re saying that it’s best for them to learn things the old way, the insufficient way, just because it’s easier,” Ed shook his head in disbelief. “You’re supposed to give them their building blocks! Just because the theories are advanced doesn’t warrant you condensing and editing them! What you’re teaching them is wrong, incompetent idiot!”

And that was how Edward found himself sitting sullenly in the headmaster’s office, no later than two hours into his first day of school. Mustang was going to be so impressed.

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Upon stepping into the office, the first thing Mustang said to him was: “Edward, what did you do.”

The man’s tone was with such dread that Edward just had to bristle in indignation. “It’s not my fault! He was teaching the wrong things!” he stabbed a finger towards the science teacher. “He said that an atom is the smallest unit of matter. And after that, he said that an atom is indivisible, the misinformed old fart! Misconstrued, I tell you!”

Sighing, Mustang surrendered to Ed’s ire with a learned patience. “I told you this school was a bad idea.” The headmaster gave an appalled gasp.

Ed scowled. “I told you I didn’t actually want to go to school! I was just joking! And no; you said it was a good idea!”

“For you to socialise, not for you to learn from a school,” Mustang gave Ed a dry stare. “No preparatory school would be fit to accommodate you. You need a university.”

“Yes, please!” Ed threw his hands into the air and collapsed back into his squishy chair. Sulkily, he refused to say any more.

“Really, Mr. Mustang,” the teacher appealed, casting a disparaging glance at Edward. “He needs to be disciplined. And I believe he reads too much of the wrong kind. Perhaps too many fantastical tales? There is neither valid proof for his subatomic theory, nor solid evidence for the existence of such in the first century!”

“Actually, I am in the process of researching several Xerxian artefacts which may contain strong proof towards the very thing,” Mustang provided gracefully; the teacher gaped. “You will pardon Edward’s assertiveness, I hope; it’s in his personality to always seek for accuracy and truth. I never discourage such… desirable traits.”

Ed threw Mustang a nasty glance; he just knew that one was a backhanded insult.

“And regarding Edward’s reading—well,” Mustang bowed his head. “If you truly think that through his reading he is ill-educated, then we have significant… ah, differences in our opinions of good and bad literature.” Mustang’s tone was casual, but his eyes were frosty and hostile. Ed thought the teacher deserved a few well-placed barbs; nobody was entitled to insult such a perfectly wondrous
library as Mustang’s and get away with it scot-free.

Mustang then turned to Ed and motioned, “Come along, Edward. We’re leaving.”

“You said I needed socialisation?” but Ed was already rising from his chair.

“I can provide you with all the socialisation you should ever need,” and the matter was dismissed with an idle wave of a hand. Mustang returned to the men and bid them, “Please do excuse myself and my charge. We shall be leaving you to your classes, as I’m sure you need to attend to them.”

Confused now, the headmaster said, “Ah, but—Mr. Elric has afternoon classes, sir—“

“I am withdrawing Edward from the school. I see no point in letting him continue to take classes that are obviously far below him. As I had initially surmised, individual instruction will be for the best.”

The headmaster looked sufficiently devastated at the sudden loss of a patron. Scrambling to pull up the falling pieces, the man added, “Perhaps you would like to hire one of our private tutors, then? We do provide one-on-one instruction for the, ah, special cases.” Ed scowled; that made him sound like a retarded invalid!

“That won’t be necessary. I shall instruct him myself.”

Disbelievingly, the teacher looked at Mustang. “Not to mean any disrespect, Lieutenant Colonel, but while working with the military? Surely, your schedule—“

“—is well-managed and spacious enough to afford Edward daily lessons over a wide variety of topics and genres, as we have been doing for the past few weeks,” Ed avoided that pointed stare. “Rest assured I will give him the best education possible. Edward is also plenty capable of learning by himself. Now, if you will excuse us; my lieutenant is waiting out front.”

“Sir—I must insist,” the teacher pushed, totally unwilling to let Ed go, the bloody cow! “There is only so much a child can learn individually.”

Ed hissed in severe offence. “I learned everything I know today by myself, you know!”

Mustang sighed. “Professor, Edward is an alchemist. Self-taught, self-styled. He is more prolific than any alchemist I know, myself included—a genius hardly worthy of being trapped within conventional education. He can take care of his studies with minimal assistance. He conducts research and experimentation on his own.”

The shatter of china on wood startled all of them into silence. The headmaster had been pouring tea for himself, but had let slip the teacup after hearing Mustang’s statement.

Ed supposed it might come as a shock that somebody his age would be doing individual alchemical research. He saw the open disbelief in the two men’s faces, so he sighed and brought his hands together in a clap, using the convenient situation to demonstrate. Touching a broken fragment of the china on the floor, he watched as the crackle of light easily pieced the parts back together—and the teacup was whole again.

The headmaster was left dumbfounded, the teacher gawping. Ed happily tucked his portfolio under his arm, following after Mustang, who strolled out of the office then.

“I told you this was a bad idea,” Ed grinned. At this rate, they were going to play the blaming game
for days, maybe weeks, but Ed was going to relish every moment of it. After all, such an abundance of opportunities to tell Mustang, “I told you so,” was not so easy to come upon.

“That doesn’t justify shaming the teacher in front of his students, Ed.” They stepped out into sunlight, Mustang guiding him towards the car. “Consider people’s pride a little bit, will you?”

“Be thankful that I even consider yours,” grumbling, Ed quieted down as Mustang instructed their chauffeur to some restaurant nearby for lunch.

After finishing with Havoc, Mustang returned to Ed and said: “Why, thank you, Edward. I’m glad to know that I’m that important to you.”

“Bastard,” Ed spit, wrinkling his nose. “Besides, you only said I couldn’t terrorise the children; you didn’t say anything about terrorising the adults,” his cheeky grin said it all.

~

The rest of the week was spent uneventfully, except for one incredibly tiring dinner with the Hughes household, wherein they (excepting him) spent the entire night laughing at and regaling his scholastic misadventures. Ed knew they did not mind his oft scathing attitude towards incompetent fools (goodness knows Mustang was just as ruthless) so he did not bristle when they poked fun at him. He scowled at Mustang, though; the man was making it look like it was entirely his idea, when in truth it was not.

That aside, he spent his days buried gratefully within his books. Two mind-numbing drone hours inside that posh prep school was enough to ensure his forever-lasting loyalty to the privacy of the library and solitary learning. He was glad to find that with renewed fervour (and with less talk of uncaught serial murderers), he could make more progress on his research. Bit by bit, he was beginning to unravel the flask using the Xerxian book. The flask itself would not take long to decode, if he kept going at the same rate; the next challenge (a challenge he so truly looked forward to) would be to piece apart and analyse the Xerxian tapestry. The Persian book he would leave to Mustang; the script was closer to Xingese than it was to Xerxian, and damned if he was going to let that torture him when he could let Mustang take his place.

On Saturday afternoon of the same week, Mustang wound into the library’s massive shelves and retrieved a slim little book for him. It was obviously a new copy of the book, with the cloth cover in excellent condition. (Then again, very few of Mustang’s books were in deplorable condition; they were treasures, and he was sure as hell Mustang spent money on keeping them alive and healthy.)

Wordlessly, Mustang handed him the slim book, and wordlessly, he accepted it. The cloth cover was black and red, with the title embossed on the side and front: “The Prince” by Niccolo Machiavelli.

“...it’s not some fairy tale, is it,” he deadpanned.

“Do I seem like the type who reads and collects fairy tale books, Edward?”

“Yes.”
A pause.

Mustang coughed. “It’s a book on political philosophy. You’ll gain much from it, I’m sure. Every good and sane politician must and probably have read it. I deem it essential to success.”

Ed raised a brow, “So you’re letting me into your trade secrets? How unnaturally trusting of you, Bastard.”

“Ah,” Mustang said, “but that’s just it. They aren’t secrets at all. In fact, most of that book is common sense expanded into scenarios. The philosophy in that book is nothing new—it has been around for centuries before that was written, and will continue to exist onwards. But the catch—”

“Let me guess,” Ed cut in, flipping open the book and replacing the ribbon marker from somewhere in the middle to the first page. “Not everybody can do it.”

At that, Mustang smiled what Ed thought was a proud smile. Ed could not help the feeling of warmth when Mustang reached over and ruffled his hair; it felt comforting, familiar. Safe.

Home.

“It isn’t that long,” Ed shrugged. “I’ll finish it by tomorrow.”

Mustang nodded, “Then tomorrow we will discuss it. Be sure to take notes; I’m certain you will have plenty to tell me afterwards. And you can keep that copy; it’s yours.”

Ed watched as Mustang disappeared into the kitchen to begin preparing for dinner. No doubt they would have something extravagant once again tonight; Mustang liked having fine food just as much as he did making it. Ed could not find fault in this, not when he too was beginning to settle into the habit of being fed great food on a daily basis. He made a note to begin running laps around the house to burn some of the energy off. Granted, his brain worked and burned twice as much as most other people’s brains, but he had no desire of becoming fat. It would be extremely embarrassing if he fell out of shape and ended up unable to fend for himself like so many of those brains-only alchemists his teacher Izumi so loathed. She saw them as imbalanced souls, unsightly and disgusting. (He did not want her disgust. Her disgust had the tendency to be rather painful, not to mention fatal.)

Attention gravitating away from Izumi’s fists and back towards Mustang’s dinner, Ed rested his back against the long couch, watching as the last of the sun’s rays slanted through the tall library windows and cast the shelves into a most stunning colour of burgundy fire. The nooks and crannies of the house—especially the library and the kitchen—were now so familiar to him that he was completely free of the edge that accompanied him every time he was apart from Resembool. Even Dublith had been foreign to him, and remained foreign throughout their two-year training. Home was Resembool and their mother, and nothing could change that. Or at the very least, he liked to think nothing could change that.

He closed his eyes and sighed. More and more these days, however, he would catch himself thinking ‘home’ whenever he was inside Mustang’s house, or outside and thinking of the house. He would feel the edge of the inborn subtle paranoia dulling whenever Mustang was around, vanishing whenever they were both home.

Ugh, there it goes again. Home.

Absently, he wondered if the Gate had somehow messed with his mind even more than he had thought it did. The Gate bristled, though, as if an offended cat woken from its sleep by its master accusing it of destroying a piece of furniture it had not touched at all. Ed sighed, and, feeling
...well, crap. I have become a self-consumed ass.

But as Roy often said, humans were made to be selfish. Otherwise, there would never have been an existing and persisting concept of self within the human being.

Perfectly sound logic.

~

“...and he made me walk a billion times back and forth the tailor’s shop, like I was some sort of show!” Ed spluttered to a very amused Gracia. Hughes and Mustang laughed to each other over a game of chess; tonight, Ed was helping Gracia prepare them dinner for four-and-a-half. (The baby inside Gracia was greedy.)

Earlier in the morning, they had stopped by at the tailor’s shop to pick up Ed’s finished clothing (and shoes, from the tailor’s shoemaker brother). Another week had passed in silence since he was given the Machiavelli book. Saturday was a good day for the tailor to have finished the clothes, Roy had said; they had plenty of time to make sure things were in order. Ed had not understood what that meant until much later, when his feet were aching and his back was hurting from all the stiff walking and training Mustang mercilessly put him through.

The clothes had fit dashingly, except Mustang had claimed that he had a graceless drag to his walk and a lazy slouch to his back. Thus began a torture session, through which Ed was introduced to the many intricacies of grace and mobility combined in one atrocious, hurtful form, also known as posture.

By the end of the painfully long day, he had modelled all of his new clothes and walked just about one thousand five hundred twenty-something times back and forth across the store’s back room. By the end of the painfully long day, his gait and sway swung like Mustang’s. He was not amused.

“My body’s not even obeying me anymore!” he whined to Gracia, who patted his shoulder in a comforting manner. “My legs walk like the Bastard now!”

“It’s good for you, Edward,” she assured him. “The right posture will ease tension from your back. Since you read a lot, I’m sure you slouch over your books, so you mustn’t do it too while standing.”

“And besides,” Mustang began; Ed threw him a dirty, disgusted glare, “a certain element of your gait gives away your combat experience. The posture training will hide that. It’s always an advantage to
have people think of you less than they think of themselves. It’ll be easier for you to catch somebody off-guard.”

“Paranoid Bastard,” Ed spat, sulking over his curry. The sauce was still steaming; he blew on it. If he had known that the one week of comfortable, perfect quiet was payment for this Saturday’s horror, he would have ensured that each day of his week had been disturbed by *something*, if only to avoid this. He *did not like this*, thank you very much.

But Mustang insisted, so he had to continue. Over the week, whenever Mustang caught him slouching or dragging about, Mustang would snap and singe a sleeve to snap him out of his inattention. The bloody Bastard was a slave-driver!

Ed frowned through Monday, grimaced through Tuesday, scowled through Wednesday, and ground his teeth at Thursday. By Friday afternoon, he tired himself out by rebelling and so he was docile and compliant. Mustang was triumphant; Ed could not find the energy to snarl at the Bastard for flaunting it.

Saturday night, nearly a fortnight after his scholastic misadventures, Ed was having dinner as per routine with the Hughes household and Mustang, when a call from the military came in the middle of dessert. Greedily polishing the custard cake off his plate, Ed allowed Hughes and Mustang to handle the call, remaining glued to his seat. No amount of persuasion was going to separate him from Gracia’s cooking, not tonight. He was so pleasantly full and sated that it felt like heaven simply staying gracelessly slouched against his chair.

However, when Hughes motioned Mustang up and gave a quick peck to Gracia’s cheek, Ed rose from his satiated stupor. There was tension visible in the corners of Hughes’ eyes, and he was not the only one to pick up on it. Gracia and Mustang both noticed immediately, Mustang stiffening up and rising briskly from the table. Gracia took everything in stride with the grace of an experienced military wife, but Mustang was obviously not all too pleased.

Ed jumped in. “Hold on. Where are you going?”

“Work, Ed,” Mustang’s words were clipped. “You don’t have to wait up for me. Stay inside, alright? I’m sure Gracia can use some company for the night. We’ll be back by morning, hopefully.” Ed was about to rise from his chair, but the heavy hand descending to ruffle his hair was heavy, as if intent to hold him in place, secure and safe.

Smiling, Gracia followed, “You’re welcome to stay the night, Edward. We have a spare room. I’ll feel much better if I know you’re not all by yourself in Roy’s house.”

Ed watched as Mustang slipped gracefully into his jacket and followed after Hughes towards the entrance hall, all the while checking for his State Alchemist watch. Ed watched and felt the tension brimming under his fingertips—and suddenly, through lightning-quick deduction, he knew.

“There’s been another murder,” he frowned, stopping both men in their tracks just as they were about to step out of the door. Outside, there was already a military car parked and waiting. Immediately, Ed strode after them. “I’m coming with you.”

“No.”

The snap of reprimand was quick and abrupt, stuttering Ed’s steps. With a scowl, he faced Mustang
Mustang’s jaw tensed, perhaps at his boldness, but Ed was not backing down. Ed had faced Izumi and survived; he could face Mustang.

“This isn’t for you to worry about, Edward,” Mustang’s tone was forcibly imbued with calm. Ed was pushing the right buttons, alright. “Stay here. You’re safe here.”

“I can take care of myself!” he snarled indignantly. “Why won’t you let me help? I can help! You know I can help. Those murders, they have something to do with alchemy, and nobody’s figured it out yet. Maybe I can figure it out. You’re the one who keeps saying I’m a prodigy. Have you lost your faith, now?”

As if physically struck by the words, Mustang stepped back, regarding him with critical eyes. There was concern there, plain for him to see, and Ed appreciated that, he did—but he wanted to help, and he wanted Mustang to let him. Because, as much as Ed wanted to deny it, he now sought Mustang’s approval before stepping into anything, and he would not be able to put a toe beyond the line if Mustang said no. This was how much he respected the man now; this was how much obedience he was willing to give.

“He is a genius, Roy,” Hughes quietly added, after a taut stretch of silence. “He might give us the break we need. We need it even more so now—this is the seventh victim, and if we don’t act fast, we’re going to have an eighth before we know it.”

Mustang’s expression was grim, but defeated. Ed knew that Mustang knew that he could help the investigation immensely if he was allowed, only Mustang’s paranoia and overwhelming concern kept the man from allowing him on board. It was as if he was a baby, Ed thought, and Mustang was a first-time father. Mustang was afraid that somehow he would crawl off and fall overboard.

“Look, you can keep me as close as you want,” Ed insisted, stepping up closer and grasping at Mustang’s second thoughts. “You can keep me within your sight at all times. I won’t wander away from your watch. And I have my alchemy with me wherever I go—you know that. Let me help. Please.”

It was another three heartbeats of silence until Mustang finally surrendered. Jaw still clenching, Mustang took Ed’s jacket from Gracia’s hands (how Gracia knew Mustang would eventually cave in, Ed had no idea) and draped it around Ed’s shoulders. Ed slipped into them as Mustang began citing out instructions.

“You are not to say anything unless you are asked,” Ed nodded along, “and if you are asked, you will not give out important information. Tell them you are my charge, and nothing beyond that. If they insist, tell them to talk to me.” Mustang took him by the shoulders, and continued, this time with a heavier emphasis, “You are only a consultant; you have no jurisdiction with this case, so you must ask permission before touching anything. You stay with me at all times, do you understand? At all times. I don’t want you out of my sight. There is a great chance that this killer is watching the investigation from somewhere nearby; I don’t want you too noticeable. Keep your head low. I want you safe.”

“I understand,” Ed pushed certainty and alertness into his voice, if only to convince Mustang that there was no need to worry so much. Ed had to admit, though, that he was pleasantly flattered that somebody cared for his safety with such intensity.
He walked along as Mustang steered him, a shoulder under hand, towards the military car. Behind them, Hughes was bidding Gracia a good night, and promised he would call first thing in the morning. Havoc was again the one driving them. Immediately as they stepped into the cramped car space and the vehicle began moving, Havoc launched into a quick briefing, through which Ed picked out about an entire list of new information he had not found in the papers. The military really was thorough—or at least, Mustang’s team was.

A ride that would have taken thirty took ten minutes as they sped through the mostly empty roads, and before long, they were stepping out of the car again, into the cool shroud of night. Further down the road, there was a cluster of soldiers in uniform cordoning off an area by a corner alley. A coroner was standing by, but was looking incredibly bored; the man must have stood there for quite a while now, waiting for the military to be over with the scene so he could collect the body.

Ed approached with the smallest bud of trepidation seeding in his chest. As promised, he kept close to Mustang; he had no wish of wandering too far away.

Havoc cleared his throat from behind them, casting a doubtful glance towards Ed. The man removed his cigarette and said, “Permission to speak freely, sir.”

Blinking, Mustang turned the slightest fraction towards Havoc and pre-empted, “If you’re wondering about Edward, he’s with me. He might be able to help with the investigation. Pull the other men away; I want only my team and Hughes’ people on the scene tonight. We’re more than enough. Have whoever else is spare guard the periphery and patrol the neighbourhood.”

“Yessir!” Havoc turned sharply on his heels and sprinted towards a uniformed personnel Edward presumed was the captain of the lower-ranked soldiers.

“Come on,” Mustang said, ushering Ed forth. They made their way through the small throng of people, and when they got there, the sight that welcomed Ed was something else entirely. He had to turn around and take four steps back the way they came, a hand clapped over his mouth in an effort to push his rising bile back down. The papers had definitely been censored.

Ed could feel Mustang’s heavy gaze on the back of his neck, but before Mustang could say anything—most likely to ask if he was alright—another soldier, perhaps one of Hughes’ men, approached them and announced that inquiries into the missing persons database had turned up with no results. They had an unidentified body—an unidentified dead child—in their midst.

“Have you checked the recent reports from the smaller precincts? From today, perhaps,” Hughes asked. “You know there’s a lag time before they get into the general registry.”

“I took the liberty of checking for that, sir,” a diminutive young soldier in thick-rimmed black glasses piped up. To be involved in such an investigation at such an age, Ed figured the young soldier must have some sort of specialty or talent. He looked like he was in Mustang’s team. The young soldier continued, “None turned up. Nobody’s reported a lost child of around this age today.”

“So the parents have yet to notice that he’s missing,” Hughes deduced. “But how unlikely is that? It’s nearly twelve midnight. Most parents would be worried, wouldn’t they?”

“Not if they think the child’s tucked into bed and asleep already,” the blonde lady with two guns pointed out. Ed knew she was the faceless but formidable Hawkeye, ever-present in Mustang and Hughes’ workplace stories.
“Or if the child has no parents and family. A street kid,” Havoc was back now, fumbling anxiously for a missing lighter. When he could not find it, Mustang reached over and snapped, lighting a minute fire at his gloved fingertips. Havoc thankfully lit his cigarette, obsessively puffing as if he felt he would die without the smoke. “We can’t rule out the possibility; there hasn’t been a pattern from the past seven kills. Anything’s possible, right?”

Mustang was about to agree and perhaps issue an order, but Ed stepped in.

“No,” he said, calling everybody’s attention. “No; that kid has a family, I’m sure.”

Ed’s eyes happened to pass over Hawkeye’s face at that moment; there was disapproval tight in her eyes, as if Ed’s very presence irked her. Steeling himself, Ed glared right back.

Hawkeye began, “With all due respect, sir, he—“

“—is Edward, my charge, and will be helping with the circle tonight.” Mustang sighed, “I know, Hawkeye; I didn’t want to take him either, but he insisted.”

“And Ed’s an alchemical genius!” Hughes exclaimed, as if that was enough of a reason for his presence. Ed agreed; it was more than enough. “He already has something to contribute, see? You were saying, Ed?”

The corner of Ed’s mouth twitched, but he could not bring himself to smile. The very reason was right before them, sprawled on the bloodied cobblestone side-alley. “I know this kid,” he declared.

Mustang’s arm jolted beside him, as if to keep him away; it was indeed alarming that he knew the seventh victim of the very murderer Mustang was investigating at the moment. It could mean anything, but it could also mean that he could be targeted.

Continuing nonetheless, he peered at the victim’s reddish-brown hair underneath the mat of blood. “He went to the school. That school you put me in,” Ed looked up at Mustang, who was wearing an expression of surprise, and then back down at the head. “He tried to talk to me, but the bell rang, if I remember clearly.” After a pause, Ed added, “He had the most vivid green eyes I’d ever seen,” though he did not exactly know how that little detail was important in the bigger scheme. His instincts were roiling underneath his skin, however; there was something about the eyes… “Hey, weren’t the eyes missing from the other corpses too?”

Mustang nodded. “They eyes and the overall thematic of the array are the two things that connect this murder to the other ones, in truth. This body is intact; the other ones were decapitated first.”

“What’s so different about this sacrifice?” Havoc was wondering aloud, probably, but it piqued Ed’s attention.

“Sacrifice? What—like a religious sacrifice?” he rounded the body, carefully keeping away from the chalked array. The last thing he wanted was to activate it by accident. It was foolishness to activate a circle without first knowing what it could do.

“Well, the other bodies—except for the first one—were all decapitated, with the body thrown aside, and the head placed in the middle of this strange array, which I’m not sure even works. It certainly doesn’t look normal to me,” Hughes shrugged. “At first we thought it was just an individual, except the array style differs with every kill. The fundamentals remain—missing eyes and decapitation (except for the first one and this one). Oh, and the salt rubbed on the neck, for the decapitated ones. Well, after seeing how each murderer’s array seems to have a certain unique touch to it, we thought that maybe it’s done by a cult, except they do it one by one.”
“The people in the cult might be competing with each other to see who can do an altogether cleaner, worthier sacrifice,” said another soldier who had all along been standing in the corner. The man had grey hair (strange, Ed thought) and slightly slanted eyes, but was clearly not of Xingese descent.

“There are a number of cases where members of a small organisation—religious, mostly—try to beat each other at some sort of game where they use the victims as prey or sacrifices. Whoever wins gets to lead the organisation, so goes the common theme.”

Ed stood there and stared at the body, as if intent to ingrain the very image into his retinas. But in truth, he was looking inwards, rearranging the basic details into a table, piecing them together and pulling them apart in an attempt to see a connection. Hawkeye was saying something in reply to what Havoc had said—about this one being a different sacrifice—but Ed was not listening at all.

The things he knew for certain went such:

The standard from the second to the sixth murder was decapitation. There would be salt rubbed on the neck where the head was severed from the body. The body would be cast aside, nearby but far enough to indicate that it was not necessary to whatever was being done. The head would be in the middle of the circle. The eyes would be missing. The circle would be the same thematically, but some of the sigils and scripts placed and strung differently each time.

Ed fell into a squat, observing the body up close. The empty eye sockets gaped up at him. His stomach roiled, but he ignored it. (He was not going to give up Gracia’s scrumptious dinner.)

This body was intact; the seventh victim was whole. The eyes were still gone, yes. But the body was intact. The array subtly different, the body placed in the middle of the circle.

-With the head.-

Mustang was issuing orders to interview residents and frequent passersby of the area for any possible witnesses. It was a long shot, but Mustang was anal that way; the man would not let the slightest detail rest.

Well, neither would Ed.

“It’s not a cult,” Ed declared, halting everybody else’s respective conversations and pulling attention to himself yet again. The grey-haired soldier opened his mouth to argue, but Ed raised a hand and amended, “I’m not arguing against the established fact that there have been cults with members operating individually, and yes, at first sight, this serial case might seem like that. But it’s not.”

He rose from his squat.

“The papers I read at home didn’t have information on the first body, because they didn’t think to equate it with the rest of the five murders after it,” he tucked his hands into his pockets, “but I’m going to hazard a guess.” Mustang was listening. “The first body was intact, but the face was cleaved off. It was placed in the middle of the circle like this one. The eyes were not missing—or at least, not all of them. Bits of them were probably left there, if your forensic people do their job well enough to
see them."

Havoc let out a low whistle. “You really didn’t tell him, did you, Boss?”

Mustang shook his head no. Hughes just had a curious little smile, as if he had expected all along that Ed would accurately put things together.

“Did you take photos of the circles from the first murder onwards?” as soon as he finished his sentence, the diminutive bespectacled young soldier had a folder containing the pictures ready. Ed murmured his thanks and said to Mustang, “You can tell the coroner to take the body now. Poor guy’s been waiting for forever.”

Ed moved towards the car, where on its hood he laid out the photographs chronologically as they were labelled from the first to the sixth one. Mustang’s team and Hughes followed after him; Hughes’ team began clearing out the body with meticulous care to avoid tripping the circle.

For a few moments, he simply peered from one array to the next, quiet and unmoving, except for the flick of his irises. Mustang and Hughes both knew to wait, but Havoc was getting impatient, and the diminutive soldier was fidgeting in the silence.

And then Ed let out a bark of derisive laughter. Havoc nearly dropped his cigarette; the diminutive soldier jumped, affright. “No wonder you were confused!” Ed exclaimed to Mustang. “Whoever this idiot is, he fucking sucks!”

“Language, Edward,” Mustang reprimanded, but it was half-hearted. Mustang was more curious than anything. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“Look,” said Ed, pointing to a certain string of script on the first array. He then moved his finger to the second and third one: there was a new collection of sigils added. On the fourth was another string of script, on the fifth and sixth narrower baselines for the circle in general. “Don’t they look familiar to you? They should.”

Mustang pushed Hughes aside and squinted closer, looking back and forth between the pictures. And then he rose, with an incredulous face. “Four,” he said. “Four. Why did I not see that.”


“Don’t blame yourself,” Ed absently patted Mustang’s arm. “The idiot fucking sucks. It’s his fault for being so stupid he’s barely intelligible. You’re just too smart for him, that’s all. He could have done this the modern, simpler way! Was he so stupid that he didn’t even realize that? He didn’t need to use four different Xerxian theorems and piece them together—which, by the way, he does so clumsily it’s a surprise the bloody thing works at all.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Hawkeye had an irritated look on her face. Her hand was inching towards her gun.

“One person did this, indeed,” Mustang nodded now, launching into an explanation for the less alchemy savvy people. “And whoever it is wished to seem arcane and—exotic, for the lack of a better word, by using Xerxian arrays: a very old, very difficult style to master. Perhaps he wanted to hide himself too by not using his usual alchemical style, but I think it’s more of ego.”

“Except he sucked,” scoffed Ed, crossing his arms and turning his nose up at the arrays. “Still sucks.”
Mustang had a fond little smile to offer Ed for that remark. “Most of you aren’t versed in alchemy, so you might not know this, but the Xerxian style is nearly extinct. There are very few people who can use it, let alone master it. I can understand it, but not as much as Edward can.”

“He knows this old alchemy too?” Hawkeye was surprised. Ed somehow felt he was being judged because of his age yet again.

“Edward uses it. On a regular basis,” Mustang’s voice was still incredulous, even though the man had already repeatedly seen Ed’s alchemy. Maybe Mustang was incredulous because he had seen it repeatedly. Ed knew he was that awesome.

“See!” Hughes grinned. “It was the right decision to take him along, after all! I told you so.”

Mustang threw him a passing glare.

“So why did the Boss not see it at first?” Havoc asked, perhaps a little tactlessly.

Edward explained, “Xerxian is very similar to old Amestrian, which is the basis for the modern alchemy. Sometimes, it can be hard to distinguish between them—particularly in this case, because the Idiot pieces together different parts of different systems, instead of just using one cohesive system. If he wanted to do this the true Xerxian way, he would’ve had to make his own Xerxian circle from scratch, which he probably failed to do, so he looked up premade theorems and took the pieces he needed, gluing them together in some—amateur collage.”

“Give it a rest, Edward,” Mustang smiled indulgently. “Not everyone is as smart as you.”

“So what does the circle do, exactly?” Hughes asked. “In plain language, please.”

“Well,” Ed looked at them again, “they cleave out the eyes.”

There was then a permeating silence that cloaked over the group.

“But—weren’t the eyes taken out by scalpels? The eyelids are gone,” the grey-haired soldier pointed out.

“No—I looked. The sockets didn’t even have striations,” and it was during times like these that Ed found himself immensely grateful for the biomedical background he had from living in close proximity with Winry’s family. “The cut is too precise, too perfect, to be done by human hands. Or machines, for that matter. The only thing I know that can cut that cleanly is alchemy.”

He repressed the urge to clutch at his shoulder, but his automail hand twitched nonetheless—and Mustang saw it. Thankfully, the man said nothing.

“This still doesn’t prove that it’s not a cult,” the grey-haired soldier pushed. “Why the salt?”

“Of course,” Mustang nodded. “The salt is there to keep the blood in the head. It encourages clotting, so the blood doesn’t bleed out entirely when the head is separated from the body.”

“Because if the blood bleeds out entirely, the eyes are damaged, and the bloody fucker—an eye collector!—doesn’t want that,” Ed could not help it; his face was contorted in a disgusted snarl.

“He collects eyes,” Havoc’s tone was flat, disbelieving. “He killed all of those people for their eyes.”

“Certainly what it seems like,” Hughes sighed. “But we haven’t a way to get him, even if we know
“Oh, that’s easy,” Ed turned to Mustang, tugged a pen out of the man’s jacket pocket, and snagged a piece of paper from Hughes. “Have your people search the library logs for whoever borrowed these books in the last few months or something.” When he finished writing the short list of commonly known Xerxian references, he handed it to Mustang. “The libraries do keep logs, right?”

“Why, yes, they do,” Mustang passed the list to Hughes, who passed it to one of his people to spread it. Hopefully, Ed thought, by tomorrow they would have enough leads to begin arrests and individual investigations into the most probably suspects.

He stood quietly aside as Mustang and Hughes both finished up. The clean-up squad came to scrub the blood and chalk off the pavement, now that the body was retrieved and the forensics had had their run over the place. It was only now that Ed noticed there were people peering through curtains and windows from the surrounding townhouses. The first floor shops and establishments were darkened, closed, but he was willing to bet that there were people in there listening. He scowled. He was glad that he had kept his voice low.

Soon enough, Mustang was separating from his team with a few last minute instructions, most of them for Hawkeye. Havoc was already waiting in the car; Mustang approached Ed with Hughes following along.

Ed looked up at Mustang and said with a self-satisfied little smile, “I helped, didn’t I?”

Mustang rolled his eyes, but the pride was heavy and warm in his hand, and Ed could feel it when said hand ruffled his hair and came to rest on his shoulder. “Yes. Yes, you did. Thank you.”
“The individualist anarchist recognizes nothing above his ego and rebels against all discipline and authority, divine or human. He accepts no morality and when he gives himself to the feelings of love, friendship, or sociability, he does so because it is a personal need, an egoistic satisfaction—because it pleases him to do so. He does not completely reject cooperation; he argues that cooperation is essential for the fulfilment of some needs. But he contends that only the individual of their own definition is capable of genuinely forming a voluntary association with others.”

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Crouched over the desk with a pen in hand, Edward growled at the piece of paper that was well on its way to becoming the bane of his existence. With how much suffering he was going through, he was in no position to feel even the tiniest shred of pity for the paper’s very visible pain. He stared at its scribble-laden, messy surface for thirty more seconds, before—“GAH,”—stabbing it vindictively with the expensive pen he had in hand. Crumpling it up in one swipe, he viciously lobbed it towards the general direction of the fireplace and then collapsed into his couch.

“Edward, how many times have I told you not to do that?”

“Ugh, please, not now,” sliding down to lie on his side, rubbing the back of his neck to alleviate the tension there. “I’ll listen to you later,” he mumbled.

“Such a shame, Edward,” Mustang sighed, cleanly shifting aside a finished sheaf of military paperwork, “that your… towering genius is defeated by a measly little letter.”

Ed just knew that was a stab at his height.

“If it’s giving you that much difficulty, why don’t you use the tried-and-tested formula?”

“What formula?”

“Well, for starters, how about telling him that yes, you’re still alive, and no, he doesn’t need to rush to Central on the next train to gather your bones? Ask him how he’s doing, like how any normal person would begin a letter.”


“Yes, Edward,” Mustang smiled. “That which your brother would be most pleased to know. You can leave the alchemical theories for later.” Ed scowled. “In fact, I highly suggest against sending
any important data through the post; it’s not as trustworthy as we would hope. Just another thing that needs to be corrected for when I become Fuhrer.”

“Of course. It always comes down to you, your paranoia, and your mighty ego,” spat Ed, pulling out another sheet of paper and rotating the pen in his grasp. Al, he began, I’m writing this from Central, and yes, I’m safe. He had long since decided against ‘Dear…’ and such pleasantries; they took up too much space, and he sucked at them anyhow. They were a waste of time.

Writing to Al was something he had only recently thought about (which shamed him, of course) but he couldn’t help it: he had plenty to distract him. Mustang had only reminded him of it when on one occasion, they were talking about array architecture, which Al was exceptionally good at. He had contemplated first on calling home, except he didn’t think he was ready to face up to his mother (who would no doubt answer the phone if he did call home) or, for that matter Winry, who would answer if he called the other house. Besides, writing a letter gave him a much-appreciated leeway—a distance that would help him organise his ever-messy thoughts.

Slowly, he trudged through the words, picking and choosing what he wanted to tell and what he wanted to keep. Never had it been so hard to talk to his brother before, but circumstances were awkward at the moment. All things considered, he was still a runaway.

He made sure to mention that he was staying with The Grand Bastard, Lieutenant Colonel Roy Mustang for the while—and it reminded him of Hohenheim and Mustang’s... relations, but he gingerly skirted that. (Al already knew about it anyway.) Talk of Hohenheim was unpleasant to him at the moment; it left a bitter taste of betrayal in his mouth, and not because his father had walked out on them, but because somehow somewhere along the way, he too became just like his father: a traitor.

This bitterness, however, was something he took in stride; he looked it in the eye, swallowed it up, and steeled himself for the next turbid dose. It was his rightful payment, a compensation he had to pay in exchange for this freedom he now enjoyed. He just hoped that wherever his father was, Hohenheim too was enjoying the same bitter draught. (Hopefully the bastard was dead in some cold, muddy ditch somewhere in Drachma.)

Realising that he had paused mid-word, he rotated the pen in his left hand grip again and continued penning the letter. Now he was apologising for the sudden departure and the delay in contact. With careful words, he explained what Trisha had said that had made him leave. The note he had left behind was less than substantial at best; if anything, his brother deserved a full explanation. This was the best I could think of, he told Al. I couldn’t not do alchemy; I’m sure you understand. It’s all I know.

Perhaps he was being uncharacteristically open, but this was Alphonse anyway; ultimately, it didn’t matter. Al could read him like an open book.

He was more than relieved when the train of thought segued away from himself and towards his circumstances. Picking up his pace, he happily relived every single moment of his memory since he stepped off of the train from Resembool. Storytelling was something he was usually rather sloppy at, but just with this one instance, he put extra effort into making it an experience for Al, who would no doubt be dying of curiosity and of that inadvertent tinge of envy). He made sure not to hold back on anything, evident by the sheer length of his satisfying expository diatribe of none other than Mustang the Bastard. He severely needed the outlet; he was sure that Al would understand. (It doubled as a warning too, for the eventuality that Al visited Central. Forewarned, after all, was forearmed.)

Taking no notice of the time, he only came to realise of the late hour when the grandfather clock’s
repetitive chiming broke his concentration. It was midnight; he and Mustang both had burned half the
night away whittling at their work. Thankfully, he was nearly done; he added a few more details
(Mustang’s office and home numbers, Hughes’ too just in case, a reminder to use code words and to
never reveal too much in the reply) before signing his name at the very end.

Just as he rose from his slouch, a steaming mug of chai with milk was placed beside his arm on the
desk, and Mustang settled across from him with a small smile. “Are you done?”

“I think so,” Ed bit his cheek, looking down at the eleven-going-twelve long pages of his tiny, spiky
script. He gathered them up, put them in order, numbered them, and awkwardly handed them to
Mustang. “Could you see if it’s alright?”

Mustang quietly accepted the sheaf and began reading, all the while sipping the hot drink. Ed gave
his own mug a sniff and a sip as well, in that order. For the last two days, he had grown quite
addicted to this beverage. Mustang had introduced it to him when they’d stopped once at a small
coffee shop Mustang frequented during the mornings on the way to the Headquarters.

Warily, he eyed the man for any response at all. As usual, disapproval was something he wished to
avoid, and he still did not know why. It was as if his psyche had somehow adopted Mustang as some
sort of surrogate father figure within the last month or so that he had been in Central. There was
something unsettling in that thought. Perhaps he was unaccustomed to a father so kind in comparison
to Hohenheim, whose absence was the only thing he had remembered about a father since he was
little. But at the same time, there was always a wash of comfortable warmth, a feeling of safety and
contentedness with Mustang. He wondered if Al would feel this too, were his little brother here.

He sighed, shaking off such melancholic thoughts and retrieving another blank sheet of paper to pen
a short note to Winry. Much as it saddened him, he had no faith in his mother at the moment—there
was no guarantee of Al ever seeing the letter if he sent it directly home and Trisha saw it first. She
could read it, or hide it, or even burn it—he didn’t know, and he wasn’t risking it. Winry, on the
other hand, would be sure to hand it directly to Al as long as he told her to. She had always been the
more emotionally aware of the three of them since childhood. She would understand.

Just as he was shifting to the note’s second line, Mustang chuckled, pursed lips suggestive of
suppressed laughter. Ed narrowed his gaze: “What.”

“A ‘perfectly grand egomaniac,’” Mustang met his gaze with eyes dancing of amusement. “Why, I
wasn’t aware that you thought of me so highly, Edward; thank you.”

“It was not a compliment.”

“I am aware,” and again came the silky shrug, “but I shall take it as such. My, are the next three
pages solely about me? I must admit, I am rather flattered.”

“SKIP IT.”

“Oh, but I won’t be able to evaluate your letter with confidence without reading all of it.”

“You need no further addition to your already far too bloated ego, Bastard!”

“My ego can never be too bloated, Edward; it simply is,” the Bastard reclined against the couch, legs
crossed, and with a sense of extraordinary superiority about him. The air was so thick with it that it
took all of Ed’s effort not to choke on its density. Mustang continued, “If I seem too bloated to you,
then it’s probably just me not coming up to my own expectations.”
Edward thought to himself. He sank into his couch as he listened to Mustang’s intermittent chuckles and uncensored remarks of shameless self-glorification. The Gate snickered inside his head, evidently amused—but he was not! He forced himself to return instead to the note he was writing to Winry—

“Am I truly the first to keep up with your theories, Edward? Oh, how lonely you must have been all those years!”

—and tried his very best to temper the urge to forcibly shut Mustang’s flapping orifice—

“Aren’t you so glad we met? It must have been fate!”

Suffice to say, he had to try very hard.

When he finally finished writing the note to Winry, he grabbed a random piece of expensive stationery from Mustang’s stash—dark blue with silver lining—and transmuted it into an envelope big enough to fit the folded pages. With care, he printed the names and addresses on the front as Mustang finished reading the eleven-and-something pages’ worth of script.

“It’s perfect,” Mustang smiled, handing them back to him. “Absolutely perfect; you need not change anything.”

“Of course you’d think so,” Ed snatched the letters back and stuffed it haphazardly into the envelope. Mustang had offered to take him tomorrow morning to the post office, after which they would stop at Mustang’s favoured cafe to have brunch. “Where else are we going tomorrow, after food?”

“Stationery shopping,” Mustang said, finishing the now-lukewarm cup of chai. “I need to restock, and you need your own stock for your research.”

“But it’s Saturday tomorrow. Don’t you have work in the morning? I’m sure I can go to the post office on my own, as long as you show me where it is. I’m not that directionally challenged,” and he didn’t want Mustang to spend even more money on him yet again.

“I’m not letting you out of the house alone, Edward; not while we’ve yet to catch that eye collector,” there was a sour note to Mustang’s tone at the mention of the serial case. A stretch of heavy silence, and then Mustang shrugged, “Besides, I can use you as my excuse so Hawkeye won’t force me to the Headquarters tomorrow. Saturdays are actually overtime; she claims that it is rightful compensation for my wasting half the week feeding birds.”

“You feed what?”

“Birds, Edward. Those feathery flying creatures you see from time to time if you ever took your eyes off your books and glanced outside the window—”

“I know what birds are; I’m asking why the hell you would feed them at work!”

“Well, they’re certainly more amusing than paperwork from Douglass. My window stares across the courtyard at this old tree, you see, and quite a number of birds choose to nest there. Did you know that crows can purr? Like cats!”

Ed rolled his eyes, smoothly sealing the envelope’s flap. For someone with such distinguished rank and honour at an early age, Mustang was actually rather lazy, and a very prolific procrastinator. The way Mustang did it was almost an art, if it weren’t for Hawkeye and her trusty guns trashing his
Cleaning up his mess took less time than he expected, and when he was done, he sat back and sipped at his drink, deep in thought. His eyes remained on the solitary blue envelope rested on the tabletop. What would Al think of what he had written? Would it be sufficient? Mustang had given his approval, and that was a good thing. But Al was Al. He would think of things differently for sure.

And Ed didn’t even know if Al would still talk to him. He sighed, throwing his head back and closing his eyes. For all he knew, Al could be infuriated with him; his little brother had always hated being left behind. But he couldn’t very well run off with Al and leave their mother alone in the countryside, could he?

Well, yes, I could, actually. Granny and Winry would be there for her.

Yes, he could have run off with Al to Central, and they could have been here now, together, doing research, if it hadn’t been for his selfish impulsivity. On that sunny afternoon when he left Resembool, he had wanted to take himself as far away and as soon as possible from his mother’s hateful, condemning eyes. He hadn’t even stopped to think of his brother then, to be honest. When faced with the grave consequences of what he had done (a taboo, a sin out of misled love), he recoiled as if bitten by a rattlesnake. He ran off to nurse his wounds, to let the poison bleed out slowly, away from the origin of pain. This was him. This was his cowardice. He was a loving son, a pathetic brother—more than what he thought he was, less than what he wanted to be.

“I think I’ll go to sleep now,” he declared.

“You should. Long day tomorrow.”

He left his near-empty mug of chai on the tabletop and went to bed with the feel of the grit of betrayal underneath his fingernails.

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The dreams had started bothering him not long after they had found the seventh body. They weren’t much, really—just a lapping, warm darkness against his skin. Occasionally there would be a flash of light; at once an image, a circle, a glyph—but oftentimes they didn’t make sense, and it was fine that way. Dreams weren’t supposed to make sense anyway, except on the rare occasion that they did. On those days, Ed tended to be irritable beyond imagination; he had these foreboding dreams more than other people did, and he had a niggling suspicion that this was another one of the parasitic Gate’s damnable side-effects.

These dreams weren’t nightmares, not just yet; he didn’t wake in the middle of the night screaming the house down. No; normally the darkness would simply fade away into the grey of the morning, when inevitably he would wake to the beckon of Mustang’s breakfast cooking.

So it was again today, except what beckoned him to awareness was the warm hand resting atop his forehead, steady as if to calm his wandering mind. Wordlessly, he blinked up at Mustang, who sat on the edge of his bed.
“Dreams bothering you?” the man asked, brushing aside his fringe. Ed found himself briefly awkward with the affectionate gesture, but he shrugged it off.

“A little bit,” he rose from the sheets, if a little sweaty. His clothes for the day he already had prepared the previous night; he only had to wash up. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“I’m sure,” Mustang’s tone was wry, but Ed thought nothing of it. Mustang was wry many times during the day.

Ed swung his feet over the side of the bed and made his way into the bath, gathering hair off of his shoulders where they had spilled out overnight. He had yet again forgotten to take the tie off before collapsing into bed. His hair was longer than what he was used to; normally he wouldn’t have to put it into a high tie anyway. Until he won against Mustang in a game of chess, he would have to put up with its length.

“You know,” Mustang began again, “Hohenheim used to say that dark dreams are highly conducive to the overall health of one’s psyche.”

Ed gave a snort. “How is this, exactly?”

“He said that dark dreams are the mind’s way of relieving the volatility we try to keep tightly lidded in civilized society. Violence and aggression, shameless sexuality... things that our stiff-backed mores preach against—and most people listen, for fear of being ostracized. But as human beings, we need an outlet for them, and if we don’t grant them that outlet, eventually, they will overcome us,” Mustang explained. “Hohenheim posited that the mind is ingenious enough to create its own outlet in the form of dreams—perhaps not as satisfying as unleashing one’s anger upon its true item, but enough to keep one sane.”

“Or insane,” dreams were porous, tricky things; Ed knew better than to trust them with the certainty he reserved for facts.

“Or that,” Mustang conceded. “But according to Hohenheim’s supposition, a mild-mannered, passive person would have violent dreams; the vilest, most dreadful murderer would sleep like a babe.”

Ed emerged from the bath, hair tie and brush in hand. “Are you calling me a mild-mannered, passive person?”

“Hardly, Edward,” Mustang gently stole the brush from Ed’s slightly fumbling automail hand. “You don’t scream the house down in the middle of the night, after all.” With meticulous care, Mustang began brushing Edward’s hair straight down his neck and back, past the shoulder, pulling stuck strands out of the shirt’s collar and from behind the ears.

From time to time, Edward felt like a doll of Mustang’s, something to dress up and prettify. Of course, he never complained; as much as he was awkward with the affectionate doting, he loved it, and he basked in it. Growing up, he had never been the spoiled one; there were two of them, him and Al, and there had only been their mother. Trisha had loved him, but she had always been closer to Al, perhaps because they were more alike. Trisha had loved him just as she had loved Hohenheim; loved, but never truly understood.

The doting continued well into the rest of the day. Mustang took him on a tour through the other side of the neighbourhood, one that he had only been to once before, on that night when Mustang had
fetched him from the train station. Under the bright morning light, the place looked even livelier, with more people milling about. This was the Historical District, Mustang explained to him, and the big street they were driving on was the East 3rd. Mustang’s house was still within the boundaries of the Historical District, in the residential areas a little more than five minutes away from the main street.

Quickly, they stopped at the post office, parking the car in front and to the side of the road away from the trams. The trams ran along the seven main streets of Central. Three of the seven main streets formed concentric circles radiating outwards from Central Plaza, while four of them passed through Central Plaza to bisect the circles into eight parts. The city itself was constructed similar to how the skeleton of a basic alchemical circle would be constructed, which Ed found typical of Amestrian city planning, and rather amusing.

Inside the post office, they had to stand in line. While Mustang’s silver watch could have ferried them easily past the queue, they both decided to err on the side of caution and desist from associating the letter with Mustang’s name. It was for the letter’s safety; they wanted to keep it from ending up in one of Mustang’s playmates’ hands.

Ed took that time to observe his surroundings, captivating as they were. The post office and its surrounding buildings were all of the Romanesque style, inspired by the architecture of Rium, a city in the far western country of Viteliu. He remembered from his early reading days that Viteliu was once only a weak country under the shadow of the then looming Creta, but now, it was one of the three powerhouses of the western continent, alongside Ailia and Francia. During the Dark Ages, Viteliu was the western world’s one light, serving as a centre of innovation and art.

Of course, even back then, Amestris was scientifically superior to Viteliu. But while trapped in a particularly bloody bout of fighting with Drachma, Amestris, financially chained, couldn’t show its superiority. It wasn’t until the earliest beginnings of the Age of Illumination that Amestris began to shine as the centre of western science and technology.

They left the post office a few moments later and hurried for food. The cafe itself was also within the Historical District, as with most of Mustang’s haunts. Ed could see why Mustang loved this part of the city. There was an atmosphere of dignity and tradition that came perhaps with the age of the structures towering around them. Past the Riumi section were the grand and intricate Gothic structures: it was as if he was being led through time itself as they drove further uptown towards Central Plaza.

Lunch was quick, consisting of delicious sandwiches made with freshly baked bread and robust coffee roasted especially for them. The entire time was spent discussing history and art, and between the two of them, there never was too much conversation.

Afterwards, they walked down and across the street to the stationery shop, leaving the car parked by the cafe, where the owner had agreed to watch it. Ed didn’t think that there was a high risk of burglary or vandalism in this part of the city, but he decided to indulge Mustang’s paranoia. He needed to walk his meal off anyway.

It was then while following Mustang on foot that Ed realized just how many people were about. Absently, he wondered if this was how Central looked like on normal days. The people were no longer afraid to step out; it was as if the eye collector was completely wiped from the populace’s memory.

The entire thing was irrational, Ed thought. The leads Mustang’s team had gotten from the library logs had prompted several arrests over the past week, but none of them were concrete, and he knew
from what Mustang had told him that most of the suspects in custody were mere pseudo-alchemists—wimpy myth hunters—blindly probing into Xerxes’ past. The military had yet to announce a successful capture or elimination of the serial killer, and yet the people were already forgetting about caution, haphazardly walking about with no care for their own safety. They were practically begging to be killed. Granted, it was broad daylight, but the eye collector could very well abduct his victims during the day, while it was easier to blend into the crowd, and there were more victims—more eyes—to choose from.

“Look at them,” Ed tugged at Mustang’s arm as they turned into a smaller, less crowded street. The stationery shop was situated at the corner where the main street met the smaller one. “They’re having picnics with their children while a killer is lurking out there—and they have no way of defending themselves! Don’t they read the papers?”

“They do, Edward; they just can’t read very well,” Mustang’s tone was dismissive. Ed wondered if he should take that to mean that Mustang already had a plan in place. Knowing how paranoid the Bastard could be, there probably was a plan in place. “The people see what they want to see; it can’t be helped. They’ve been lulled into a false sense of security by the news of arrests being made.”

“The military’s not doing anything about it?”

Mustang stopped and laid a hand on Ed’s shoulder, gently turning him around. “Look,” the man spoke low into his ear, “that young man over there. He’s a soldier—civilian clothing.”

Ed stared. “Is he your subordinate?”

“No; I don’t know him.”

“Then how do you know he’s a soldier?”

“By the way he moves,” and Mustang had that air of superiority again, except Ed could no longer be bothered to try and temper it. “I can see that he’s been trained. The Military Academy is painstakingly thorough with its cadets.” With the hand on his shoulder, Mustang steered him away from the main street and towards the shop. “There are many more of them on the streets every day and night. Uniformed soldiers have also been increased in number; it’ll put pressure on the eye collector. Before long, he’ll slip up and show himself to us—and the best part about it is that we won’t have to do a thing.”

“Lazy Bastard,” Ed had to sigh. “We don’t even know when or where he’ll kill next.”

“Soon. Serial killers tend to escalate; very few of them have enough self-control to hold the urge. Those few are the ones we don’t catch, and he’s not one of them. He’ll move again within two more weeks or so. Until then, we’ll just have to be patient. As for where he’ll kill next, hopefully we can force him out of his normal boundaries. The less variable control he has, the better it is for us.”

“You sound like a cat hunting a mouse,” snorted Ed.

Mustang gave him a wry smile, “Something like that, yes—though I’d prefer to be a bigger cat, if you don’t mind.”

“But how can you hunt a mouse when you’re a fat cat? It’ll outrun you.”

“...big, Edward, not fat. There’s a distinction.”

“No, there isn’t.”
“Yes, there is.”

“No, there isn’t”

“Yes, there is.”

“No, there isn’t! The cat is big because it’s fat! It’s a flawless deduction, and you know it,” Edward was smugly grinning to himself (the image of a fat Mustang cat was too hilarious) when they stepped into the shop. The scintillating scent of fresh paper assaulted Ed’s nostrils, and almost instantly, the tension waned from his shoulders. He gravitated eagerly towards the mahogany shelves against the wall, where there were sample stacks of all kinds of paper, from ordinary trade to the most expensive kinds of decorated stationery.

“Well, well, what do we have here?”

Ed jumped, turning to the deep, booming voice to his left. Upon turning, he had to tilt his head far back to see the other person’s face. The man was a typical Amestrian, down to the brilliant blue eyes and pale blond hair, except the man’s build was massive. Ed was (unpleasantly) reminded of Sig, his teacher Izumi’s husband, from Dublith.

“General Armstrong, what a pleasant surprise,” Ed had to admire Mustang’s fearlessness as the man casually stepped forward to shake the General’s proffered hand.

“Indeed! I rarely see you around these days, Lieutenant Colonel. You must come and dine with us once. My wife will be very pleased to have you over; you know how she’s taken a liking to you. Take Hughes and his beautiful wife along as well,” the General gave a friendly pat on Mustang’s shoulder. And then, surely enough, the General turned to look past Mustang’s shoulder and gazed at Ed with piercing blue eyes. “And who might this young man be?”

“Ah. Edward, meet former General Lucas Armstrong, one of my acting superiors back in the day.” Ed swallowed his intimidation and stepped forward, meeting the General eye to eye. “General, this is Edward Elric, the elder son of one of my alchemical mentors.”

“Lucas Armstrong—as in Robert Mahler’s sponsor, Defender of West City, the Lucas Armstrong?” Ed had to gape, while Mustang took the opportunity to explain his current circumstance.

“Edward is staying with me while he remains in Central for his research,” the Bastard said. “I thought his talent would be severely wasted if he were to suffer East City’s horrendously lacking libraries.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” the General nodded gravely. “East City’s libraries are rather depressing.” Then, addressing Ed directly, the General asked, “So the young man has interest in alchemy! What field are you hoping to conduct research in, Mr. Elric?”

“Subatomic alchemy at the moment, sir,” Ed awkwardly replied. “I’m hoping to build upon what Mahler and Montague had already established.”

“Very good,” the General nodded approvingly, giving Edward’s shoulder a pat with one hand. He had to tense his muscles to keep his knees from buckling under the large hand’s force. “Rest assured you are in capable hands. The Lieutenant Colonel, unlike the rest of the military these days, is very caring of his subordinates,” Ed had to struggle to keep a straight face. “Work hard and you might be able to achieve the same heights as Mustang here, maybe even pass the State Alchemy exam within a few years’ time!”

But before Ed could say a thing, Mustang wryly interjected, “Oh, I think he’s plenty qualified to take
the State Alchemy exam next year, if he wishes to, sir.”

“Ho,” the General raised both eyebrows in surprise. “That skilled, are we?”

“Careful with your expectations, Mustang. Set them too high and you might just face disappointment,” from the back door leading further into the shop’s stock room, a tall, blonde lady emerged in full business attire. She was followed by another blond man of similar stature and facial features as General Armstrong, if younger.

“Brigadier General,” Mustang inclined his head to the lady, and then turned to the other man. “Major.”

Edward blinked and inched just a little bit closer to Mustang. It was quite obvious that the lady and the Major were both Lucas Armstrong’s children. The physical similarities were undeniable. Their entire family is in the military? And the daughter’s a Brigadier General! Wasn’t Lucas Armstrong’s father also a General? What is this, a fucking dynasty?

“Lieutenant Colonel Mustang!” the Major smiled, grasping Mustang’s hand with fervour. “It is always a pleasure!”

“Promoted again?” the lady sighed disbelievingly. “The last time I was here, you were only a Major like my brother—and even then, you commanded your own battalion, which was unprecedented of such rank. No wonder people suspect you of foul play. The way you brush through ranks is unorthodox, Mustang. That annoying face of yours doesn’t help either.”

“Well, I can’t help it if I’m so fabulous, can I? I was born this way. Besides, orthodoxy is overrated,” and there was again that beatific smile.

The Lady General merely shook her head in disgust, a sentiment Ed could understand, before redirecting her attention. “Mr. Elric, was it? Mustang seems to be expecting a lot out of you. You’re capable of performing transmutations of State Alchemist class?”

Ed gave a lopsided shrug. “You would have to tell me what State Alchemist class means. I just transmute as I go. I don’t really care much for ranks and stuff,” he tried to be formal with her, but he just couldn’t, not when she was treating him rather informally herself. General Armstrong didn’t seem to mind, as the elder man stood there and listened with an idle smile.

“Typical,” she said, casting her eyes skyward, before gesturing towards her brother, the Major. “You and Alex and all of your kind—alchemists—you hold so much potential, and yet you never even think of using it in a worthy way!”

“Worthiness is relative,” Ed retorted, a frown tugging at the edges of his lips. For some reason, her words grated at his nerves, even though the tone of it was congruous to Mustang’s usual spiels about power. He must have gotten used to the Bastard after a while of cohabitation.

Their little exchange was broken by Lucas Armstrong, who expectantly offered him a blank sheet of paper. “If you would indulge an old man’s curiosity, Mr. Elric, I would like to see a small demonstration of your alchemy.”

Perhaps the General wanted to see him draw an original array, but Ed had another thing in mind. He turned to Mustang for permission, and, when he was given it, calmly brought his palms together, feeling the now familiar spark of energy crackling against his skin. There was a brief rush of blue light illuminating the shop when he touched the sheet of paper still in the General’s hand. He watched and guided the reaction as the sheet smoothly folded itself into a simple paper crane. It was
one of the earliest reactions he had learned long ago when he was a child, but it was by no means simple. The reaction itself was quite complicated, as it concerned molecular displacement, instead of the recombination process common with typical reactions.

The blue light ceased as the reaction waned, leaving the paper crane sitting primly atop the former General’s palm. The expression on the Major’s face was of pure admiration, which Edward had to admit he was a little uncomfortable with. (It was too pure. It sparkled.)

“Is everything alright?” the shopkeeper stepped into the shop from the inner storage, alarmed. “I thought I saw a flash of—Master Roy! I wasn’t aware you were—I do apologise for not attending to your needs immediately; Chantal and I are both preparing General Armstrong’s orders, sir. Why, you could have given us a call and we could have prepared your usual set in advance!”

“It’s quite alright, Marc; I’ll need more than the usual, anyway,” and no doubt this shop too was another one of Mustang’s investments. The man practically owned the entire Historical District. The cafe they had their lunch at was also another one of Mustang’s shops. Ed inwardly sighed. Perhaps from now on it would be wiser to assume—as much as he hated assumptions—that every single shop Mustang introduced to him an investment.

“We were simply having young Mr. Elric here demonstrate a little of his alchemy, my friend,” said the General, setting the paper crane on a nearby coffee table. “I hope you don’t mind me borrowing a sheet of your sample paper.”

Assured that everything was going well, the shopkeeper returned into the storage room, calling for somebody named Isabel to come down and entertain the customers. Once they were again left alone, the General turned to Ed and remarked, “That was an exemplary reaction, Mr. Elric. You would no doubt be an invaluable addition to Central’s research specialists.”

“I still think using gloves with circles is akin to cheating,” dismissed the Lady General, to which Ed had to scowl, even though it was more of a jab at Mustang.

“I don’t use circles,” Ed retorted. “I don’t need them.” He raised his gloved hands to the Lady General’s eyes for inspection, and then took off the gloves to reveal that he had no tattoos or any such trick to his alchemy. Inside his head, the Gate too bristled, as its gift to Edward—the ability to transmute without a drawn circle—was similarly insulted.

The Armstrongs’ attention was, however, called by the gleam of polished automail. Mustang laid a hand on the back of Ed’s neck and sighed, “What did I say about being careful with information, Edward?”

“I’m sure they can keep secrets,” Ed shrugged, putting his gloves back on. “I mean, they’ve not revealed to anyone else how much of a real Bastard you are,” he gave Mustang a wide grin, “have they?”

General Armstrong laughed, but the Lady General remained quiet, eyes sharp with something Ed could not define. The Major was still gazing at his right arm, now more than aware of his automail. And then, much to his surprise, the Major straightforwardly asked, “Mr. Elric, did you perhaps perform human transmutation?”

There was a quiet pause.

Ed looked the Major in the eye and thoughtfully tilted his head. “Human transmutation isn’t the only way to lose a limb through alchemy, Major.”
Sensing the dismissal plain in Ed’s tone, the Major lowered his eyes and conceded, “Of course. You’re right.”

*I always am*, Ed huffily thought to himself, and was heartened to find the Gate huffily agreeing with him.

The more than just a little tense atmosphere would have quickly become uncomfortable had they not been interrupted by noise from the stock room. A young girl of about seventeen or so walked through the door from the back of the store and approached them with a smile. Ed was busy huffing to himself to hear her greetings, but he did register Mustang’s voice. The Bastard was (imperiously) requesting for the usual stock, and something else called a basic researcher’s set.

As explained to Ed, the basic researcher’s set consisted of three kinds of writing paper, four styles of letter paper, two types of tracing paper, two types of mapping paper, and two types of drawing paper. All of it was for him. He was free to pick what kinds he wanted for each subset, and was also allowed to sample each kind with pencil, pen ink, traditional quill, and colour paint. (Mustang added that they actually allowed customers to test with their own pens, if the customers brought them along.) The mapping, tracing, and drawing papers originally came in rolls, but they could also be ordered in standard letter-size. And of course, since Mustang was a regular of the shop, they kindly included a ream of plain trade paper for miscellaneous use. Scratch paper, basically.

“They also offer binding and printing, in the eventuality that you write your own work and wish to publish it,” the Bastard informed him as he was choosing between two different kinds of writing paper for the last of the three slots. He took a while to finish picking for the entire list, by which time the Armstrongs’ packages were ready to be paid for.

Soon, they were bidding each other a good day, with the Armstrongs taking their leave. The Lady General took the car keys, while the Major easily carried three heavy boxes of paper out of the shop. The former General, however, did not immediately leave. Instead, Ed found himself held by eyes of incredible depth acquired only through years of a fully lived life.

The General said to him, “I see great potential in you, Mr. Elric. I can see why Mustang here holds high expectations of you. I myself hold similar expectations. Your technique is obviously born of a talent that comes along only once in two generations, maybe even more than that; I have never seen anything like it, and trust me, I have seen quite a lot through the many alchemists I have sponsored in my career. I can say with certainty that you will one day become a great pillar for this country, hopefully alongside the Lieutenant Colonel, who will no doubt reach high ranks in the foreseeable future. Whenever you are in need of any assistance whatsoever, know that the Armstrong family’s doors are always open for you.”

Ed struggled against the urge to look away. Upon his shoulders was a heavy, insidious film of pressure; it was expectation, and it was *not* a small amount. It took him an absurd amount of self-confidence to keep looking the General in the eye—an amount of self-confidence he wasn’t even aware he had.

“I’ll see you again, Mr. Elric. Until then, keep yourself safe,” and then the General turned to Mustang to say, “You too, Lieutenant Colonel. Good luck with your latest case. Do give me a call so we can set a date and time for dinner later this week, eh?”

With that, the former General took his leave. Mustang lowered his head a slight degree in a gesture of respect and gratitude just as the General stepped out of the shop.
When they were finally left alone, Ed released a momentous breath and sagged against Mustang’s side. Mustang ruffled his hair and laughed a little. “Look at you. You’re already gathering your own set of loyal sponsors!”

“Let’s not do that again anytime soon,” he groaned, reaching a hand to press at the junction of his neck and right shoulder. The muscles there were taut, pulling painfully at the automail’s port. He would have to be gentle on his arm for the rest of the night; though the wounds were mostly healed, they could easily rip open, if he pushed himself.

Mustang took a seat in an armchair at one corner of the shop, where there was a sitting area. “I understand that the General is rather intimidating at the beginning, but he is a kind man. You shouldn’t put too much pressure on yourself. They won’t spite you for being casual. It’s better if you keep away from pretention and just be as you are. They value integrity and honesty in a person far more than they value knowledge and culture—though of course, having those as well would be preferable.”

“Of course,” he didn’t need Mustang to tell him that. He wasn’t stupid. He simply was unused to such heavy expectation placed so suddenly upon his shoulders. With Mustang, he was more comfortable; between the two of them was a more tangible connection. But General Armstrong was a man he only just met, and yet...

*Is my alchemy truly so remarkable?*

He couldn’t help but wonder. The Gate stirred from where it had been napping—*six people,* it told him. In the entire history of western alchemy, six people, including him, had been capable of grasping the enormity of the Gate’s knowledge without succumbing to insanity. Only six people were found with the skill of transmuting without a circle. Against hundreds of thousands of alchemists in the western continent, that was a very small number.

*(You’re special because you have me.)*

The Gate inside his head was a conceited little piece of shit.

*No; I’m special because I can stand you—because I survived you. Twice.*

It hissed at him, before curling up and settling down again into its little hole in his mind. It allowed him to play with its strands, and he freely sifted through its information, picking at threads and pulling out images. Indeed its presence in his mind was somewhat... *defiling,* but he was growing used to it. The benefits of having the Gate far outweighed its consequences—and besides, he had rightfully earned this information by surviving his two trips into its bowels.

For a moment, he wondered if it was only because he had gone twice into the Gate that this piece of it in his mind had a distinct personality and an individual will. Perhaps the double trauma had reinforced it into his consciousness a little harder than the usual. (Just a little.) But after a moment’s consideration, he dismissed the thought; the Gate really was just a piece of shit by nature, and there were no two ways about it.

He was removed from his reverie by the shopkeeper’s voice. Their packages were ready to go. Mustang momentarily left the shop to drive the car over so they could load the boxes easily in. (“We should have just taken the car with us,” Ed sighed.) While he waited inside the shop, the owner offered to show him their selection of writing implements—and Ed didn’t even try to resist. When Mustang returned, he had a handful of pens, pencils, and three quills (with inkwells) ready to be
It took them little time to get home. Upon arrival, Ed attempted to help carry their purchase inside, but Mustang sent him along his way, and so he prepared for them tea, which they both enjoyed later on.

Ed sat sprawled on the floor in the library with their tea, gazing at a map of Central spread before him. With his eyes, he traced the East 3rd street, from Central Plaza all the way until it terminated before the front steps of Central’s train station at the East End of the city. He could see the rails sprawling out from the station, branching this way and that; some of them skirted around the city to head west, some headed further east, and others made their way straight north or straight south.

Leaning back, he absorbed the big picture, now made even more cognizant of the city’s shape. It was truly like an alchemical array taken straight out of a basics book. He knew that this map of Mustang’s was the latest and most accurate of all issues, and as he gazed at the seven main streets, he found them immaculately straight, as if they were drawn with a ruler, much like how an alchemist would draw array chords. Even the canals were made to guide the river straight down along the 4th street, all the way from the northwest to the southeast, where it split into two smaller canals. The only instance where the straight canal was diverted was where it reached and skirted around the edge of Central Plaza, only to return to the original straight line.

Different colours were used to shade different sectors of the city, and Ed eyed the Historical District, shaded in tones of sepia. He spent the next half-hour studying the map as Mustang read a book nearby, only stopping when he felt the tension gathering painfully at the middle of his back. He straightened his slouch and stretched his neck, gingerly massaging his shoulder where it met the automail port.

“Is your arm paining you still?”

Ed gave an absent hum, still probing at the knots with his flesh fingers. It was hard to apply enough pressure to them with the awkward position, but it was the best he could do.

“Come here,” Mustang gestured him over.

Ed turned and stared.

“Come on.”

Curious, Ed half-crawled towards Mustang’s armchair. He was made to turn around and sit facing away from Mustang. Fingers began pressing into his back, and almost immediately, Ed groaned in relief. Mustang’s fingers were very accurate, and as they probed around the edge of the automail’s metal plate, they released knots he never even knew were there. His head lolled to one side as Mustang pressed a thumb into the junction of his neck where it met the right shoulder, and within ten minutes, Mustang had him pliant and nearly purring.

Only at one point did Mustang press near the automail that Ed hissed in pain, and it wasn’t much. Mustang must have had intimate education in the anatomy of the human body; no amateur would be
able to do such thorough work worthy of a professionally-trained masseuse.

“Are you taking post-surgical medicines?” Mustang asked after a while of quiet kneading.

It took a moment before Ed realised that he was being asked a question, as boneless and dazed as he was. “Drugs? No. Why?”

The Bastard—not so much of a Bastard at the moment, yet again—moved fingers to press at precise points on his neck. Head tipping forward, he let a sigh of pleasure slip past his lips. He desperately needed this massage. So gone was he that he barely heard Mustang say, “Don’t you think your wounds are healing a little too quickly?”

“Mm,” he had been wondering when Mustang would notice the abnormally quick recovery. He had told Winry and Pinako that he would force himself to scale the year-and-a-half—maybe even two years—of rehabilitation for his kind of injury within six to eight months. But at this rate, he was going to reach full recovery within four months or less. “I’m not really sure myself, but I have a strong feeling that the accelerated healing is also because of the Gate.” He shifted forward as Mustang dragged twin lines of pressure parallel his spine. He could feel each muscle uncoiling as the fingers passed them by, to be followed by a warm palm kneading in tight little circles. Mustang had real skill for this.

“...you mean to say that the Gate has influence on you even when you’re outside of its realm?” as usual, Mustang was very perceptive. The man grasped at his ideas with such ease that sometimes he had to wonder if Mustang himself carried a piece of the Gate inside of him. (That could explain the pure egotism the Gate and Mustang shared.)

There was a stretch of silence, within which he struggled against his persisting dilemma. He had yet to decide whether he should tell Mustang about the Gate’s existence within his mind. Because of his respect and affection for the man (which he had already given up on denying), he felt an intense pressure to be honest and forthcoming, just as Mustang was honest and forthcoming with him. He however feared rejection, not knowing exactly how Mustang would react to the news. Having a disembodied foreign voice in one’s head wasn’t exactly the definition of sanity.

Mustang’s hand nudged at the side of his neck, so he opened his eyes and lifted his head from where it came to rest on Mustang’s knee. Nimble fingers undid his hair tie and allowed his hair to fall into a cascade of gold. The same fingers slipped into the strands and began gently massaging his scalp, to which he could only reply with a sigh of bliss.

It took a while for him to regain attentiveness, even after the massage was finished. He remained sprawled against Mustang’s leg as the Bastard sipped tea and patiently waited for him to wake. When he finally did, he felt pleasantly boneless—and in his total relaxation, he threw caution into the air and simply declared, “I have a piece of the Gate in my head.”

In the stretch of silence, Mustang did nothing but look him in the eye. The scrutiny should have unsettled him, but it didn’t. Mustang’s eyes were dark and serene, thoughtful—Ed could see that Mustang was carefully deliberating on his words. More than likely, the Bastard was struggling to understand how such a thing could even be possible.

“This... piece of the Gate inside of you, it doesn’t influence you?”

Trust the paranoid Bastard to ask first that question.
“I wouldn’t say it doesn’t,” Ed shifted easily against Mustang’s leg. “It kind of does, but indirectly. It doesn’t have control over my movements or thoughts or anything like that—not even my alchemy. All it does is stay there, because I own it.”

“You own it,” Mustang echoed.

Ed nodded. “I rightfully gained it by surviving the Gate. I think that whoever sees the Gate is given the bounty of information that the Gate has—which is a lot, so most people don’t remember it, like Al—”

“—or they don’t survive.”

“Or that,” Ed agreed. “The information itself is a piece of the Gate that I keep, except mine kind of has a personality? I don’t know why.”

“Perhaps because you saw it twice,” suggested Mustang, much to Ed’s amusement.

“I was just thinking that earlier, when it was being cheeky,” he laughed quietly. “Those unfortunate souls who survived the Gate but went insane—I think I know exactly what drove them past the brink.”

Mustang was quiet again, deep in thought, fingers still half-tangled in his hair. Ed fought to keep his tongue still, watching a pair of birds flutter about. He itched to talk, to fill the silence, anything to divert Mustang’s attention away from the Gate, if only to delay Mustang’s rejection of him and the parasite he hosted.

“So basically, this piece of the Gate is influencing your healing—accelerating it, because your body is its host,” and Ed had to grin. Mustang really was impressive with induction.

“I think so,” Ed shrugged. “It apparently doesn’t want to die yet.”

“It doesn’t want you to die yet. Perhaps you amuse it,” his landlord only gave him a lopsided smile and gently gathered his hair all to one side.

Ed looked up at Mustang in wonder. From the day of their first meeting, this man had boggled his mind, and when it was decided that he would stay with Mustang, he had hoped to be able to unravel a little bit more of the man. But it seems he wasn’t even close to scratching beneath the surface, perplexing as the man’s behaviour was. Or was he only being fooled? He no longer knew. Summarising Mustang hurt his head; he didn’t think it was possible. This endeavour to unwrap the man would take its time.

“You don’t think I’m strange with the Gate inside me?” the question slipped his lips on a moment of thoughtlessness. When he realised what he had said, it was already too late.

But his worries were all unfounded, it seemed, when Mustang blinked, and then gave a little laugh. “Oh, Edward, you are strange, even without the Gate—but brilliantly so! I would despair if you became anything less!”

Brow twitching, Ed huffed in mock offence. It was, however, impossible for him to deny the bloom of warmth in his chest at Mustang’s acceptance of all that he was—and the underlying acknowledgement of all that he could be. The Gate’s presence changed nothing between them; no matter the circumstance, in Mustang he had somebody to talk to.

Throughout the rest of the night, he couldn’t help the smile occasionally bowing his lips at the comforting thought.
Fidgeting in acute discomfort, Ed adjusted his cuffs for the fifth time during their short ride. Beside him sat Mustang, who quelled his fiddling with the touch of a hand, attention unwavering from Hughes’ story. The two were once again engrossed in a political conversation, but he was more preoccupied with the bloody cufflinks. If only he could figure out a way to loosen them, what such peace of mind it would bring him!

Already crabby as he was, Ed harboured extreme displeasure with his situation. The bloody cufflinks were *evil*, and the cuffs, they wanted his fucking *soul*. He hadn’t gotten much sleep from last night (fucking vainglorious Bastard had had him model countless different attires for today) and this *truly* wasn’t helping his mood. On top of that, the Gate had thought it would be fun to give him its own version of a dreamscape joyride—he had woken early in the morning with a pounding headache from the overload of information as a response to his excitement for the event.

They were on their way to the alchemical symposium, which was to be held in an institution of learning for scientifically-attuned young men and women. A preparatory school, in fewer words, for future State Alchemists. Ed disliked the very idea.

The principle of it was flawed from the beginning. Whatever gave them certainty that they could train *good* alchemists through a *school*? The fundamentals of alchemy were better learned through singularly focused and thematically consistent individual education. Contrary to popular belief, the basics were not *easy* or *simple*. They were *important*—arguably *the* most important—of all of one’s alchemical education. The fundamentals, after all, would serve as the basis of all of the alchemist’s practice.

But of course, the military would profit more from a school, which, in contrast to individual education, could produce a greater number of alchemists at a faster rate. Never mind that they were mediocre at best, mostly only marginally capable; the military needed its cannon fodder.

Though technically privately funded, Mustang had told him that the institution attracted the favour of many prominent military men. Accomplished alchemists were also known to frequent the place to find themselves lab assistants and even apprentices. And of course, the students were always most zealous in competition amongst themselves, if for the coveted title of top student. Alumni were by far the most provident of donators.

Soon the car came to a full stop. Ed hadn’t even noticed the passing of time, distracted with his thoughts as he was. Mustang was already stepping out of the car and giving the concierge a smart nod; he quietly followed suit.

There they stood before a gorgeous Georgian structure, its red bricks vibrant against the white-paned windows. In front of the school was a primly manicured garden, a splash of verdant refreshment for the guest’s eyes. Upon the front steps were pillars, reminiscent of Riumi architecture. The grand doors were of pristine white, grim in its simplicity. Ed could not help but liken it to modern Amestrian alchemy.

*Typical,* he thought to himself. *All too typical.*
Pride was not a stranger to Amestris; the country was shameless in its self-glorification. And since alchemy was its ultimate triumph and treasure, it bedecked every possible nook and cranny of itself with symbols of alchemy. This institution was no exception.

He followed after Mustang into the hall, never straying but with his eyes. And even his eyes, after having reoriented himself, eventually returned its focus to the Grand Bastard. He could not help but goggle at the sheer elegance with which Mustang carried himself. The Bastard was always graceful, true; but today was somewhat different. Today, there was not an inch unchecked, not a button out of place. No; today, the Bastard had a show to run.

“Chin up, Ed,” Hughes quietly chuckled from beside him. “It’s all about self-perception. All that Roy’s doing is puffing up his ego; spreading his feathers like a preening peacock, if you will.”

Stifling his laughter behind a hand, Ed grinned, “The other day he said he was a cat—a fat one. So not a peacock.”

Hughes gurgled in suppressed mirth. “Well. I suppose a fat cat can still preen.”

“What are you talking about? All it can do is preen,” scoffed Ed, picking up his pace so he could catch up to Mustang. He left a laughing Hughes behind and plucked at Mustang’s sleeve when he was within reach. “Why does Amestris not have a university again?”

This topic they had already discussed before, but Ed only wanted to make a point. If there was enough money to fund all of this bullshit, surely they could come up with a workable budget even for the mere beginnings of a university! If properly carried through, the benefits it would bring to the science of alchemy would be tremendous.

“There, now, Edward,” Mustang gave him an indulging smile. “I don’t think the society would appreciate more than a few of your kind. You’re an acquired taste, after all. Though I admit it wouldn’t be a bad idea. Your species is rather endangered nowadays—“

“Exactly!”

“—but perhaps that’s for the best,” Mustang chuckled, laying a hand on his neck and gently ushering him along. “Heaven knows I already have my hands full with one of you.” At that, Ed had to scowl.

Their steps slowed as they approached the main hall. Chatter and laughter were audible through the doors; self-consciously, Ed straightened himself beside, but behind, Mustang. There was no reason for him to have to lead the way.

Inside was a substantial gathering of people waiting for the programme to commence. Before him was a mélange of faces, old and young: all of them foreign. There were students in uniform, gentlemen in smart suits, ladies in dresses, and military men in full regalia scattered throughout.

Reminded vaguely of a royal court, Ed approached warily. Except he needn’t have worried: all eyes were only for Roy Mustang. A moderately audible hush swept over the occupants of the hall, and after a pause, the ladies began to titter. Some were demure enough to cover their lips with their hands, to silence themselves with a little smile. But others—the younger ones—were less so, and amongst them there was much inappropriate giggling.

Ed had to step back a measure from the swarm of ladies that began to flock about Mustang. The Bastard looked like he was thoroughly enjoying his time, though, so he allowed himself to be effectively separated from his sponsor, ushered aside by a highly amused Hughes. They were offered refreshments, but Ed declined.
“Is it always like this?” he asked Hughes, tone grim.

“Always,” Hughes replied without missing a beat. “Roy has always been the lady killer.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I, to tell you the truth.”

“What’s so great about a Bastard like him, anyway?”

“I have no idea.”

“...but you’re his best friend.”

“Ah, I’m but a mere mortal.”

With exasperation in his sigh, Ed turned away from Mustang’s scene—there were other things worthier of his attention. He didn’t have to watch the Bastard bloat his ego, so he wouldn’t. Why suffer?

As they stood by, Hughes took the time to introduce to him the more important faces in the crowd. A number of high-ranking military officials were present, and so were some members of the military police. Businessmen were also present—and of course they would be! Such a fashionable event had to be on everybody’s list as priority.

Speaking of fashion, Ed began to look around and observe how the elite and scholarly of Amestris dressed. It was a spectrum of styles from the most modest to the very epitome of extravagance. One lady had a multicoloured peacock-feather hat, which made the most painful match with her vividly pink cocktail dress. And there was also the matter of her shockingly red hair. Talk about eye-burning.

Ed himself came with an attire Mustang had handpicked for him with great and meticulous care. Hours they spent deliberating on an appropriate colour, until they finally decided on grey. (It was the best set anyhow, and Ed had thought so from the beginning. Mustang was simply a difficult Bastard.) So it was such that he and Mustang were dressed alike for the event: Mustang in full black with a waistcoat and blazer, Ed in grey with only a waistcoat over his white collared shirt. The classic tie he used was a lighter grey in colour, blending pleasantly with the rest of his ensemble. He had chosen it himself; Mustang had approved. His hair Mustang had drawn up into a high tie with a grey ribbon, and a silver wristwatch borrowed from Mustang completed the set. Hughes had very nearly not recognised him.

Naturally, this made Ed rather self-conscious—but yet again, his worries were unfounded. As he swept his eyes along the motley gathering, he could see that Mustang and, by extension, himself were among the most smartly dressed. Black suited the Bastard; he had heard from Izumi that black was ideal for hiding imperfections. (Mustang had plenty to hide.)

“Eye-catching, isn’t he,” Hughes remarked from behind Ed. The man was already finishing his first glass of champagne.

“Who is?” Ed feigned ignorance, averting his eyes.

“Roy,” Hughes smirked, “and you, too. Such an immaculate air about you today! Roy knows best how to prettify people; I have to hand it to him. You look just like him when he was younger!”

Ed shuddered.
“I suggest you observe Roy closely. You’ll learn many things today—you love that, don’t you?” the man gave him a lopsided smile. “The way Roy interacts with people—the way he plays his game—it’s an art form. He has real talent for politics. Watch it closely; you don’t get to see it up close and in action that often.” And then, with a mischievous glint, Hughes procured a hand camera and declared, “It is the beginning of your integration into what I rightfully call Roy Mustang’s Empire—also known as The Playground Where the Sly Mustang Bullies Innocent Bystanders and Arbitrarily Toys with His Subordinates’ Already Miserable Lives. I am not missing this for the world.”

Ed’s face met his palm.

He had to admit, though, that he was, indeed, curious. He wished to learn more about Mustang—and about the rest of the world—so carefully, avidly, he watched. But despite this curiosity, Ed did not wander from where he stood. Mustang had given him explicit instructions not to stray, or talk to strangers; Ed felt like a coddled child all over again, but he obeyed nonetheless. Politics was not his forte.

Of course, this issue had not gone without argument on Ed’s part. When Mustang had warned him not to talk to ‘strange and suspicious people,’ Ed had suffocated with suppressed laughter. “Who am I supposed to talk to, then? I won’t be able to talk to you or Hughes!” At that, Mustang had only given an indulging sigh. “Fine, I’ll talk to my head,” Ed had said. And then he had paused, mumbling to himself, “Oh, but I have a strange—thing in my head too…” and for the rest of the night, the Gate had been prickly and irritable.

(“I’m not strange! I’m part of you!” the Gate had snapped.)

The mere memory of it encouraged bristles of indignation from the otherwise napping Gate. It curled into itself and grumbled and hissed, much like a slighted pet. So, all the while rejecting the acute sensation of insanity, Ed began to soothe the parasite with quiet petting. It began to purr.

Continuing his ministrations, they waited until Mustang’s gaggle of otherwise money-grubbing hormonal harpies dispersed. The Bastard emerged from the swarm, shiny and fresh, truly like a fat cat after a session of preening and petting. It was not a pretty sight to behold.

“That was downright obscene, Mustang,” a familiar voice disparaged from their left as they walked around to find their reserved seats. There the Armstrong family was, congregated around a cluster of seats reserved especially for them. It was the Lady General Armstrong who had spoken.

“Why, if you were a little more sociable, I’m sure you would acquire your own following too, Brigadier General,” ever the slick conversationalist, Mustang easily evaded the Lady General’s parry. Ed scowled. The Bastard gave his warm greetings to the family, shaking hands with the patriarch and son, and, in the matriarch’s case, placing a gentlemanly kiss upon the back of a gloved hand. (The Lady General none-too-politely refused Mustang’s kiss.)

The Armstrong matriarch cut an imposing figure, a perfect fit for her husband without a doubt. Tall, slender, and stern, the Madam towered beside her husband, commanding just as much respect as her husband did. Ed would not be surprised if she, too, had a militaristic upbringing.

“I see the young Lady is missing,” Hughes noted, mimicking Mustang in greeting.

“Catherine is with her friends at the moment, though she should be returning momentarily,” the Madam perfunctorily informed them. There were, in fact, not two, but three Armstrong siblings: Mira the Lady General, Alex the Major, and Catherine, from the eldest to the youngest. Already, Ed felt sympathy for the only son stranded in the middle.
Their reserved seats were a row in front of the Armstrongs, and Mustang was already taking his seat. As discretely as possible, Ed followed suit.

“Mr. Elric!”

Ed jumped.

“We meet again!” the old General Armstrong delightedly exclaimed. “I had a hunch that the Lieutenant Colonel would think to bring you here today! What better way to acquaint you with the brilliant minds of Central than the symposium, no?” Mustang nodded along, much to Ed’s chagrin. “I’m very eager to hear what you think about our lecturer today!”

Forcefully swallowing his discomfort, Ed politely replied, “Truthfully, I haven’t read anything of Dr. Schrum’s literature, sir. Today will be my first acquaintance with his theory.”

“Ah,” the General reclined in his seat with a smile. “Then I hope his exposition today does not disappoint you. As I’m sure you’ve already read from the programme, he is one of the country’s three authorities on bioalchemy. He leads the frontier of human transmutation research, and truly, the only one I can think of who matches his expertise in the matter is Brigadier General Gran’s Dr. Tucker, who leads in chimera research.”

Ed’s face snapped tight. “...I see.”

For sure, his interest was now piqued—but he could not say with certainty that it was in an entirely good manner. Mouth set in a thin line, he turned from the Armstrongs toward the podium, where soon, the lecturer would stand before them and speak.

This, at least, he should have anticipated. Of course the military would be sponsoring human transmutation research. With its command of innumerable talented alchemists—men and women trained through varying schools and themes of alchemy, but all with the same degree of rigor—the military could easily create a team specialised only in a particular field of the science. This team, esteemed and elite, would presumably need no clearance from any other but the Fuhrer. And what Fuhrer wouldn’t like to see the dominion of death overridden? Considering the implications of any such discovery toward resurrection, immortality, or both, the Fuhrer should be most eager to sponsor the work.

The hall lights dimmed; the hall hushed. He remained tense throughout the introductory phases of the programme, lost in the chaos of his thoughts. It was not until Mustang laid a hand upon his arm that he jolted from it.

“Easy, Ed,” Mustang was not looking at him. Instead, the Bastard was seemingly enraptured by the drone of introductions carried out by the master of ceremonies. The pressure on his arm, however, was firm and very real.

Ed forced himself to release a quiet stream of air. By sheer force of will, he reinstated calm upon his thoughts. Mustang was here with him. Nobody in here knew him.

Nobody would find out.

Besides, he drily thought to himself, if they mess up and get themselves killed, they only have their collective contagious ineptitude to blame.

He studiously ignored the small part of his brain telling him that people finding out about his mother and brother was not the only one of his worries.
A round of applause washed over them. The Fuhrer was being acknowledged, though Edward had no idea who the Fuhrer was among the line of crotchety old men in full military regalia. He nevertheless clapped along, waiting for the speaker to be introduced.

Dr. Schrum was a wiry old man with a crooked gait and a mildly humped back. There was nothing particularly distinguishing about him, except perhaps the markedly receding hairline exacerbating the already too wide forehead. But the moment the old man spoke, Ed snapped into attention.
Articulation was the man’s gift, and intelligence sat with every word. This individual was a learned one—there were no mistakes to be made about that.

As he sat in the grey-lit hall listening to the old doctor talk, it was hard to ignore the moderately uncomfortable but thrilling feeling of his horizons being stretched. With each mention of an idea, a theory, a study, a name, Ed grew more and more aware of the world around him, the world beyond him.

Somewhere along the way, between today and the day he transmuted his mother, within the two months he had stayed in Central—somewhere along the way, he had acquired the narcissistic misconception of himself as the absolute authority on all things concerning human transmutation. He was already inherently egocentric as it was, and Mustang did little to better the matter. Somewhere along the way, he had forgotten that apart from him, scattered throughout the country—and, truly, the world—there too were other minds in thought. There too were other beings in existence.

Or was it a misconception? He did have the experience of a successful human transmutation—the only successful human transmutation in history. He did perform its near entirety alone. Was that—was his ability—enough to discount his egocentrism?

He didn’t think it was. (It only meant that his egocentrism was justified, not discounted. He had learned well from Mustang that there was a fine but firm difference.)

Either way, the vertigo did not subside. It was a dizzying sensation as his horizons morphed, stretching towards reaches he could not yet understand. It was like taffy being pulled apart by a hidden hand, edges disappearing into the shadows, only to be thrown back again together and remade. Now he was realising that beyond the things he had yet to know of and understand in the world were other minds he had yet to encounter. Mustang was but one; whatever was it that made him think that Mustang was the world? (Goddammed blinding glorious Bastard!) There were plenty of other alchemists out there, and they had their own themes of thought.

He was now curious. These other alchemists, how did they think? How were they trained? What could they glean from the things Ed was researching, if they were shown the raw data? Oh, how he itched to discuss and debate!

Granted, not all of them would be brilliant. He was among one of the best, as Mustang had said, and in this he believed the Bastard’s words. For the most part, he would be looking down on people from his perch above—and this was not to be arrogant, no, because it was largely on part of the Gate. (The Gate gave a snort.) He believed, too, that Mustang was also among the best—and truly, having the man as his daily companion and complement was more than he could ask for. Ed knew that by Mustang he was spoiled; there would be few who could match Mustang’s acumen.

That, however, did little to dull his curiosity.

“How’s the doctor’s theory coming along so far?” Mustang spoke low into his ear. Ed had to resist the urge to shiver.
“Passable,” he shrugged, making additional notes. “Tell you more about it when he’s done.” He pretended not to see the wry smile the Bastard shot Hughes over a shoulder.

And indeed, the doctor soon finished, collecting an audible sigh from the audience even as the applause burgeoned throughout the hall. From behind them, out of the corner of his eyes, Ed had spied Catherine Armstrong giving several demure yawns behind her hand throughout the lecture. It had lasted for all of an hour and a few minutes more. No doubt many among the audience were similarly bored, but it was their own fault, and Ed could not be bothered with them. They knew the nature of the symposium, and they came of their own volition.

Waiting for everybody else before he did, Ed stood and stretched, distinctly feeling the knots in his upper back. He would need another one of Mustang’s massages tonight before bed, or it would be a painful morning for him to wake up to tomorrow.

People began to mill once more and around them a crowd was threatening to gather, so Ed was ushered away and through the colonnade into the wide gardens. Here was greens and open space, courtyards underscored by tasteful arrangements of flowers and trimmed trees. Far to the back were little alcoves with tables set for pastry and tea, beckoning, as if it was made just for them. They chose one such table at a secluded corner of the garden where there was a semblance of privacy for their little group.

“We have some time to spend before the commencement of demonstrations, and three alchemists are sat around this table,” the old General Armstrong declared across tea. “I would like to hear some thoughts!”

Mira Armstrong gave a quiet groan, but said nothing against her father’s wishes. Ed had a feeling that the Lady General wished she had enough of an excuse to slip away, like the younger Catherine, who had somehow escaped yet again with her friends. He could not help but wonder what the Lady General held so firmly against alchemists.

“Well, Ed?” Hughes prompted, prodding Ed out of his cocoon of thoughts.

“Faulty,” Ed murmured over his cup of tea. “The structural symmetry was faulty in his theory.”

“Truly?” said the old General, sceptically. “There are quite a number of respected alchemists who are enthusiastic about Dr. Schrum’s works,” as if that was enough proof to convince a theory into law. Ed knew he was being tested.

“He isn’t quite cutting it with the structural symmetry of the circle, but I can find few faults in his biology. He’s a very good doctor, but that doesn’t guarantee his abilities as an alchemist,” and this Ed drove home with a clarity that forbade doubt. This point he would not argue; he had seen plenty to know that alchemy consisted of more than just one discipline.

General Armstrong was regarding him with even eyes. Nonchalantly, Ed continued to sip his tea and savour his pastries, seemingly paying little attention to the scrutiny he was subject to.

“I do have to agree with Edward,” Mustang conceded. “Human transmutation, while greatly involved with it, is not entirely comprised of human biology.” Ed caught the undertone in Mustang’s words and wondered if the man truly trusted the Armstrongs—and their current setting—far enough to discuss the process in detail.

“And what else do you propose is lacking in Dr. Schrum’s theory, if he had a good approach on the human biology?”
“As Edward said,” said Mustang, “structure is lacking. He would also do well to reconsider his physiological aspects. I would highly suggest verifying his assumptions first, because at the moment, they are no more than that—just assumptions. Especially on the neuroscience.”

Amending the Bastard, Edward explained, “There is little to no evidence to back his hypothesis of the brain’s neurochemicals being the sole determinant of everything that we know is human. There are still plenty of things we have yet to understand about human behaviour, emotion, and biology to assume so. There could be a million different ways these newly discovered neurochemicals interact with each other—and there could be more of them in there, too. I personally am very wary of fiddling with a mechanism that I barely know anything of. It wouldn’t be very wise at all.”

“In summary,” Mustang quickly followed, “we are both wary that this is all an oversimplification of things. It is admittedly superficial, after all, to think that the human experience can be abridged into a very technical dance of neurochemicals and electric impulses.”

“Why, Mustang, are you implying that you believe in the human soul?” Mira Armstrong incredulously barked. “I must admit my horrified surprise!”

Ed snorted. “He might believe in it, but his possession of one is debatable.”

“Now that’s just cruel, Edward!” Mustang exclaimed, stricken. “What did I ever do to you to deserve such low regard?”

To that, Ed could only give the Bastard a deadpanned stare.

“We are running out of time,” Madam Armstrong promptly informed them, patting her husband’s arm. Together, the two of them rose from their seats, the old General looking highly entertained. “It would not do to be late to the demonstrations.”

So they walked to the courtyards back the way they came, Ed quietly falling into pace beside Mustang. Over Mustang’s words he could not help but still be deep in thought. Excepting Alphonse, Mustang was the one person who knew his human transmutation theory with considerable intimacy. The man was of course incredibly astute as well; no doubt Mustang already understood more than what Ed had shown him. For Mustang, inference came with little difficulty.

But did the Bastard truly believe in souls now? Had Ed convinced him two months ago when he had explained his experience with the Gate? Mustang had already seen the multichord circle on Alphonse’s chest, seemingly branded into the skin with blood. That, if anything, was the closest one could get to the literal symbolisation of a soul. Perhaps they were indeed reading from the same page.

At the same time, he couldn’t be certain. For all he knew, Mustang could have only argued the position for the sake of discounting the Materialistic school of thought. The Bastard harboured an intense dislike for the overly simplistic, nearly apish way Materialists viewed alchemy. They could be incredibly efficient on the battlefield, but within the realms of research, they were useless. To Ed’s eyes, they were not true alchemists. They were but mere embodiments of what the military wanted from most of its State Alchemists—machines for mass annihilation.

This was not to say, of course, that Dr. Schrum was a Materialist. In truth, Ed did not believe that Dr. Schrum was from any of the three mainstream alchemical schools of thought. Dr. Schrum was not an alchemist, but he was exactly what his title stated. He was a doctor.

He now realised the irony in his ignorance of Mustang’s beliefs concerning such things. Was he not the one who daily talked to Mustang of alchemy and all things considered? And yet he could not bring himself to talk to the man about the Gate—or even souls, for that matter. Even today, his shame
still held him back.

But was it really something to be so ashamed of?

In either case, he didn’t know.

When they reached the open courtyards, there was already a substantial gathering of people surrounding some sort of display. From Ed’s vantage point (damn that height), he could not see much. But there appeared to be quite some excitement, so he plucked at Mustang’s sleeve and asked for permission to see.

Much to his delight, the throng parted easily to make way for the Armstrong family. All they had to do was follow suit. Mustang seemed determined not to lose to the imposing gravity of the Armstrongs, and paraded his own kind of charm—a stately, tasteful, and polished one. (Ed wanted to gag.) Most of the genteel seemed to be acquainted with Mustang, which Ed found without much surprise. He kept quiet at Mustang’s elbow as the Bastard expertly handled each of his acquaintances (three minutes apiece). He did not know if this was some sort of unwritten rule, but nobody seemed to take offence. Mustang simply continued sifting through the crowd, shifting from one face to the next without breaking stride.

Soon, they were at the front of the crowd, where a small group of white-decked assistants were laying out a circle before the spectators. Mustang was still busy talking to military people he was just now greeting, so the man was not paying much attention to the circle before them.

Which, perhaps, was just as well—because the circle was a dysfunctional piece of ignominious shit.

“This,” he declared, “is wrong.”

And perhaps he should have better held his tongue, but truth be told, at this point he could care less for reputation or propriety. In face of such a contemptible attempt at alchemy, his temperance (yes, he had temperance) was long gone. Immediately around him was an audible hush.

“This,” he declared, “is just wrong.”

Dr. Schrum’s alchemical assistants gave him a look of utter affront.

He shook his head, covered his mouth with a palm, and stared at the circle in abject disbelief. ‘Faulty symmetry’—who was he kidding? ‘Nonexistent’ did not even begin to cover half of it! Glyphs were scattered about in a manner that resembled toys in a three-year-old’s playpen. The scripts themselves were smooth but their arrangement into phrases was abrupt, much like the way a chopped-up and plagiarised research paper would read. And the energy flow—did these idiots even know about energy flow?

One of the institution’s students, perhaps a fan, decided to break the ice and said to him from across the circle, “You would do well to watch your words, little boy. Who do you think you are to criticise Dr. Schrum’s work? Do you even understand what’s being done here?”

Ed snarled. “No, idiot, I should be asking you that question! Do you understand even just an inch of this... abomination before you? Do you understand what kind of catastrophic idiocy is being done
here? No, you obviously don’t. So shut up and listen.” Whirling, Ed rounded on the assistant preparing the circle for demonstration. “Who is in charge of this array?”

The assistant before him, now recovering from the momentary sting of shock, began in a slow tone, “I’m sorry, sir, I don’t know who you are, but I’m going to have to ask you to watch your words in front of Dr. Schrum.” Standing across the circle was the old doctor in quiet vigil. “If there is anything you don’t understand, rest assured that we will answer any of your questions—“

“I just asked you a question, which, by the way, you have yet to answer, assistant,” Ed drily pointed out. “No matter. Since you act as a group, responsibility is shared. You’re part of the team. So tell me, what is that glyph you’re standing on right now?”

Incredulous and uneasy, the assistant gave a weak laugh. “I’m sorry, sir, but it will take some time—time that we don’t have at the moment—to explain to an amateur the finer points of—“

“Answer the young man’s question, Julius,” it was Dr. Schrum himself who spoke, silencing both the assistant’s floundering and the crowd’s curious titter.

So Julius the assistant, met with the even eyes of his mentor and employer, bowed his head and took a peek beneath his feet. “It’s a Khalic ti.”

“Uh-huh. And what does it do?” Ed prompted.

“It modulates the flow of the energy to the lateral periphery of the circle’s caudal subsection with the proper modifications,” Ed had to groan at the textbook answer.

“Lavaca’s Language of Alchemy, page 166, second paragraph’s second sentence, verbatim. And do you understand what that means?”

“Of course I do! It’s a basic principle! Any alchemist under Dr. Schrum would—”

“Then why, pray tell, is the glyph on rostral subsection of the circle?!” Edward was merciless. “Look, assistant, look carefully at what you’re drawing. Where is your centre? Where is your inner orbit? Where is your midline? Which way is up?!”

“Edward,” Mustang warned, hand tightening on his shoulder.

Hissing Ed took a pause to temper his frustration from boiling over. Across the circle, Dr. Schrum still quietly stood. After a moment of tense deliberation, he gave a huff of air and turned to the doctor, “Your biological theory was very sound, Dr. Schrum, but with all due respect, you are not an alchemist. And this,” Ed flung an arm out, “is not a circle.”

That seemed to be the very end of the head apprentice’s patience. The middle-aged man, perhaps a few years older than Mustang and Hughes, walked up to him and sternly said, “That’s enough. Where are your parents, child?”

“No!” Ed snarled. “Where are your parents, idiot? I bet they aren’t here because they’re too ashamed of this idiocy you flaunt so shamelessly.” From somewhere behind him, Ed could hear Hughes’ snicker, and perhaps a despairing groan from Mustang’s side. “Don’t you dare look down on me when you can’t even construct a proper circle to save your pathetic face.”

Forgetting about the assistants, Ed addressed the old doctor. “You are just what your title says you are,” he continued. “You’re a doctor, and a damn good one. But trust me; it takes more than just sheer physiological expertise to create a fully functional human being from scratch. And you had impressive physiological theories there, but that means you will need an alchemist just as impressive
who can translate the bulk of physiology into alchemical jargon for you—because you obviously can’t do it!”

“This right here,” Ed tapped his foot at the edge of the circle, “is a dysfunctional array. You cannot do anything with it, or I guarantee you will lose more than one assistant to the reaction.” A murmur of anxious tension ran through the alchemically ignorant crowd. “If you or your precious apprentices can even dare, go and try it, so you’ll see what I mean.”

Without missing a beat, Ed rounded on the Fuhrer, who was standing a ways away to the left, in front of the circle, surrounded by Generals and former Generals. The man looked him in the eye, and likewise, he didn’t look away.

“You,” he began with a hiss. “You’re the Fuhrer, am I correct.”

“Why, yes, I am,” the Fuhrer gave a beatific smile.

Mustang’s hand clenched on Ed’s shoulder. Ed scowled. “Why the hell are you permitting a public exhibition of human transmutation when I’m damn sure you know how ugly and unsafe and traumatising it is?” This time, there was an outcry upon his downright disrespectful language towards the most powerful individual in the country. He ignored it, though.

“Were you so confident of Dr. Schrum that you just signed your consent without thinking? How can you be so confident when you haven’t even seen them demonstrate it beforehand? I know you haven’t seen it yet—I know they haven’t done it yet. It’s all just theory at the moment. If it were otherwise, you wouldn’t even have anything to allow, because they would all be dead. Swallowed by the reaction. And your symposium would be shot. This was downright irresponsible—beyond disappointing. I expected better when they told me this would be a gathering of the country’s best alchemists!”

“But what have you to prove that Dr. Schrum’s theory is mistaken?” the Fuhrer calmly replied, to which Ed scoffed.

“What, so now you’re trying to prove a negative? You do know that that’s near-impossible, right? If our methods worked that way, we would get nowhere,” he crossed his arms and gave the Fuhrer a plain frown.

The man, however, had nothing but a chuckle to give him. With a—was he seeing things right?—a pleased smile, the Fuhrer turned to Mustang and asked, “I assume this bright young man is your charge today, Lieutenant Colonel?”

“Yes sir,” Mustang inclined his head with a wry little smile, thumb rubbing soothing circles into the side of Ed’s neck. It did feel good, but it wasn’t enough to distract him—not this time. “Edward is the son of one of my two alchemical mentors.”

Brows rising in enlightenment, the Fuhrer went, “Aaaahh,” and so did the crowd. Within that second, the tension dissipated, and just like that, everybody was smiling again. It was as Mustang had said: identity and credentials went a long way to reassure people of one’s reliability and authority. “I see young Edward inherits the scientific blood.”

“He will be my responsibility while he remains in Central for his studies. Do pardon his... zealous nature,” the crowd tittered. “He’s but young, and very bright.”

“I can see that, yes,” the Fuhrer nodded happily. “I do hope he will become a contributor to Amestris’ alchemical society one day. I’m sure he has great potential.”
Edward, however, was not convinced, and remained cross-armed and frown-faced. Mustang chuckled from behind him, radiating an immeasurable amount of amusement. He was given a light pat on the head, followed by candy. “I think this will help relieve some of that tension, Ed. Eat.”

Grudgingly, Ed did. He hated being coddled in public, but at the moment, sugar was very appealing to his harried temper. The crowd was beginning to disperse, leaving only the more curious bunch of alchemists and apprentices and military men. Ed supposed it was a good thing that Mustang was not angered by his blatant disobedience through his little interrupted (interrupted!) spiel. Only heaven knew what kind of consequence the Bastard could come up with otherwise.

He was about to wander off to some secluded little cubby hole and hide there forever, far away from society’s general ineptitude, when Dr. Schrum approached him. “Mr. Edward, was it?” the old man inquired.

“Edward Elric,” he introduced himself, now subdued and rather put off. He was in the middle of a nice, long, loud rant, goddamnit! Why did they always have to cut in and steal his moment?

“Mr. Elric it is,” the old doctor evenly smiled. “You sounded very certain of your critique a little while back. I must admit I am curious as to what exact portion of the circle you find poorly crafted. Would you indulge an old man’s mind?”

Huffing, he stepped back and took a good look at the circle.

“All of it.”

Again, the head apprentice from earlier spoke up with a disdainful, scoffing tone, “Surely not all of it. You must be mistaken. This is a professional alchemist’s work! It’s far beyond an amateur’s scope.”

“That’s true,” Ed inclined his head. “It should be far beyond an amateur’s scope of error. Even an amateur shouldn’t make a mistake as glaring as this. If you can’t see what’s wrong with this, forget about being an alchemist, because you’ll just make yourself miserable.” He rounded on Julius the assistant. “You. This is your circle. Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

“...uh. Where exactly do you want me to look?” the small group of assistants looked at him incredulously, as if they couldn’t believe he had just asked them that question and truly expected an answer. Perhaps to their ears the question was insufficient—but how were they going to be good alchemists if they needed to be force fed every single inquisition?

“You don’t even know where to look? Dear god, how pathetic are you?” Ed threw his arms into the air, barely resisting the urge to tear his hair from their roots. (Mustang would weep!) “Look at it! Look at it real good! The entirety of it! Look at it as a whole, not as pieces off of your textbook!” Turning to Schrum, Ed added, “You might want to look closely too.” Then he turned back to his little group of spectators and demanded, “Does anybody see anything wrong with this circle at all? Anybody?”

“Edward,” Mustang warned again, “your horns are showing.”

“What?!” Ed whirled about, nearly frothing at the mouth. “I’m proud of them showing! These overconfident third-rate buffoons should be glad they’re showing! They need to be taught, and taught well—if anything, my horns can do that!”

At that, Mustang could do nothing else but to reacquaint his face with his palm. From a short distance, Hughes was wheezing with stifled laughter as he took numerous pictures of Ed’s flailing
little yellow-headed form. Those pictures were sure to go into the Intelligence Officer’s blackmailmaterial boxes.

The Generals and Fuhrer too were watching from the sidelines, with a small group of State Alchemists (as he could tell from the silver watches) flocking them. They all looked very critical of what Ed was doing—perhaps some of them were good friends with Schrum or whatever—but who the hell cared about them? Ed wasn’t fazed the least bit.

When nobody from the group of assistants seemed to have the answer to his question, Ed hung his head and sighed. He tried another approach. “Okay. Has anybody read Topolsky’s *Fundamentals*?”

There was a murmur of assent. It was a basic book, one of Ed’s firsts, and he knew for a fact that most everybody read the book for a basic working knowledge of the processes of alchemy. Being a country that thrived on the science, it was required at the earliest level of education. The children, after all, learned the best and fastest.

“For those of you who haven’t, I wish to know which rock you’ve squished your brains under for the past century and why. For those of you who *have*, I will assume that *all of you* have been in some sort of freak accident and similarly acquired severe amnesia. I will rehash the third chapter for you, which discusses the three basic *fundamentals* of an alchemical circle,” Ed slowly explained.

“Now, I’m sure you all are very intelligent, so you’ll be able to follow me, right? Structure. Energy. Intent. Are those words too big for you? Does anybody not know what those words mean?”

From somewhere behind him, Hughes gave a muffled cough and whispered none-too-quietly to Mustang, “Yep; you taught the kid. That’s your tongue right there, and don’t I know it.”

Ed ignored them and pointed at the circle. “Look at this piece of crap. Do you see any symmetry here at all? Sure, there’s energy. Sure, there’s intent—you want a living, breathing, thinking, eating, crapping human being. But is there any symmetry? Any structure?NO. So what do you need to do? *Make a symmetrical circle!*”

“But there’s no way you could move the glyphs around to form a symmetrical array and still have it work the same way!” one of the assistants exclaimed.

“Then you’ll just have to find another way!” Ed threw his arms in the air. “Seriously, Dr. Schrum, you have got to get a better crop of assistants and alchemists. You won’t get anywhere with this one. They can’t even wipe their asses without being told how!”

“You’re just making it so much harder,” grumbled Julius the assistant.

“Well, why else do you think human transmutation is considered one of the most impressive feats of alchemy?” he spat back. “If it were so simple, everybody would be doing it, and we would have the dead amongst us, alive. If it were so simple, it wouldn’t be *so special*, and you wouldn’t be so *interested* in an apprenticeship with Dr. Schrum. *Think*, idiot. I know it hurts, but it’s *actually good for you.*”

“Now, Edward, I think that’s enough.”

“No!” Ed snarled. “I will *not* stand for such incompetence! It’s shameful! Don’t you feel ashamed? You’re a State Alchemist too! Look at this mess!”

Mustang sighed. “Yes, I understand. However, I don’t think this is the appropriate way to approach the matter.”

“Sorry, I don’t do politics,” he flatly refused. “If I can’t barrel the fundamentals into their little skulls
with force, trust me, no smooth talking will get it through.”

Turning away from Mustang, he beckoned Dr. Schrum closer and pointed at the circle. “Look. This here is the outer orbital. Over there is the inner orbital. The conventional way of doing it—which will work just fine for this—is to divide the circle into four parts, like a pie: the upper two are called rostral, the lower two caudal. The outer rostral represents the upper left and upper right quadrants of the human body, including the head—everything divided midline. The outer caudal represents the lower left and lower right quadrants. The inner circle is different; that part is special. All the glyphs and scripts there should be dedicated to the construction of your higher brain functions, what makes a human being human. Your theory goes like this, so your corresponding script would look something like so…”

Diligently, Ed walked the old doctor through the structuring process. It was nothing new for alchemists to have trouble with the structure of a circle, especially with a reaction as complex as this. Structure required familiarity with the jargon of alchemy; it was something one grew into through years of experimentation to find one’s own style. Each alchemist differed fundamentally and it showed within the style.

Ed had his own, developed through his father’s books and Izumi’s teaching, but he was comfortable with the common, conventional way of doing things—modern Amestrian alchemy, as Izumi called it. She had always approved of the simpler method.

So he spent his entire afternoon, systematically dissembling the apprentice alchemists’ overconfidence and guiding the old doctor through the proper process of array construction. Great care he took as he went about his explanation of how to transcribe theory into a circle. He felt somewhat guilty for setting the old man up for a failure—if they ever tried it, they were sure to fail. But this was as much as he could do. He did not bother to correct the theory; all he was here for was to show them the basics of what they were missing. Everything else they had to figure out on their own.

In any case, it wasn’t as if he could rewrite their theory for them, because that would involve talk of the Gate. Short of confusing them, he would only make them think of him a nutcase. These alchemists were far too set in their ways to consider a paradigm shift as momentous as the Gate—and truth be told, Ed didn’t know if he was ready to share the Gate with anybody else just yet. (”Aaaawwwww,” cooed the Gate. “I feel so loved!”) Maybe after he made it submit, he would.

By the time they were leaving that evening, after Mustang’s lengthy goodbyes and promises to his pretty little ladies, Ed was tired, mentally constipated, and beyond grumpy. He stomped his way to the car, grunting a goodbye to Fuhrer and company, who were standing by the doors to send people off on their way.

Mustang was lagging behind, so Ed paused a few steps down. He could only barely hear the conversation from atop the stairs; the Fuhrer was saying something to Mustang.

“I take it you will have Mr. Elric under your wings when he takes the State Alchemy exam?” the Fuhrer was asking.

Inclining his head, Mustang corrected, “If he wants to take the exam, sir, of course.”

“I’ve no interest in State matters! Now hurry up! I’m hungry!” Ed barked up at them, annoyed at the Fuhrer’s beatific little smile. That face was beginning to seriously grate on his nerves!

His glare, however, obviously could not achieve its intended goal, as the Fuhrer let out a hearty chuckle. A while back, Hughes had remarked that he was quite the adorable little flailing blond
when grumpy; perhaps that was why everybody had been smiling like that at him for the past few hours?

“Do excuse him,” Mustang apologetically smiled. “He’s yet to have his afternoon nap. He gets rather snappish without it.”

Hissing, Ed stomped down the stairs towards the car idly waiting for them by the driveway. Fucking Bastard! He didn’t need to hear any more.

Once inside the passenger compartment, Ed limply sagged against the cushioned chair, willing the tension out of his bones. By the time Mustang slipped into the car, he was a mere half-step away from sleep, and when the car finally began to move, he felt himself slip into his dreams.
It had been a long, tiring day indeed.

~

The following day, he ignored Mustang calling him down for breakfast and slept in. He was bone-tired, and though normally that much activity shouldn’t have taken such toll, it seemed his body was still adjusting to the post-operative changes brought about by the automail. He woke up sometime near midday, trudged blearily to the kitchen, and found a small covered tray resting on the table with a note from the Bastard. Eat all of this, drink juice, and do your laps today. It’ll make you feel better, it said.

So he did, and later that night, when Mustang came home, he was in a much better mood than in the morning.

“Tired?” he grinned, watching as Mustang collapsed into the couch with a heavy sigh. He set tea for the Bastard.

Mustang gratefully savoured the refreshing aroma. “You should know that the entire grapevine is on fire with news about you.”

“Well, I can’t help it if I’m so fabulous, can I?” Ed reclined with a smirk, flapping a dismissive hand. “It’s natural talent. I was born this way.”

All that Mustang gave in reply was a smile, pleased—and the Bastard returned to his tea. Ed had to admit his surprise at the Bastard’s complacency. He had yet to receive admonishment for his no doubt “improper” behaviour at the symposium, and Mustang did not show even the tiniest hint of anger. In fact, in place of anger, Mustang radiated what seemed like pure satisfaction.

He sighed and shook his head. Each and every time, the Bastard puzzled him.

“Ah yes, before I forget,” Mustang suddenly began, “I’ll be scheduling you for a check-up visit with my doctor.”


“I know, but it’s better if we have your baseline established now, while you’re not sick, instead of waiting until you are. By then, it’d be pointless,” Mustang relinquished his cup of tea and began
unbuttoning his military jacket. “Besides, it would be good to have somebody look at and keep track of your automail ports. Your mechanic isn’t in Central, after all.”

“...okay, when?”

“I’ll have to call him first and see when he has a vacancy. He’s a busy man himself. Hopefully we can schedule it on an off-day, but if not, you’re going to have to go on your own. It’s not far.” Ed watched as Mustang stood to make his way across the library. “I’m going to shower. Go downstairs and prepare the beef. Also, get some onions, potatoes, lemons, and soy sauce. And rice.”

So Ed did, and he quickly lost himself in the flurry of preparations when Mustang came down to teach him about their dish for the night (rice bowls with Xingese onion beef). Ed found an easy relaxation in Mustang’s company after their little adventure. The knowledge that this easy companionship would always be here for him to return to for as long as he remained in Central was very comforting to Ed, and he revelled in the security Mustang offered.

Later that night, as he lay in bed, he tried his hardest to think of a way to repay Mustang’s Bastardly kindness. But there was one question keeping him from even taking the first step: what could he give Mustang that the Bastard did not already have?

The next few days, as he followed his usual routine and resumed his research, this question hovered over his head as an unfavourable cloud would over the fields of Resembool. He bemoaned the pains of having to think of a gift for a person who had the world (well, okay, maybe not the entire world, but at least Central’s Historical District) kissing his very feet. Why did the Bastard have to be such a Grand Bastard? It was unfair.

He brought his concern to Gracia, who chuckled and told him, “You know, Riza—Riza Hawkeye, Roy’s First Lieutenant; you’ve heard of her already—she has the same problem with Roy around this time of the year, every year. I had the same problem too before I married Maes. Roy is probably the hardest person I know to think of a birthday gift for.”

“...birthday gift? I’m not asking about a birthday gift—wait a second. Do you mean to say that the Bastard’s birthday is coming up?”

Gracia was surprised. “Oh, didn’t you know? Oh, well, I guess Roy isn’t the type of person to tell somebody else about his birthday. He is quite shy.” Ed scoffed. “Well, his birthday is on the 23rd of October, a week from now. Maes already has a gift ready for him—don’t tell! Maes is quite excited about it. He’s about the only person I know who doesn’t have a difficulty thinking of what to give Roy, and I’m quite well-acquainted with their military circle. Maes never runs out of crazy ideas, the silly thing.”

Ed had to smile at Gracia’s affectionate address of her husband. Her eyes tended to soften into these tender brown orbs whenever she talked of or was with Hughes. They were the type of couple that would make any hardened heart break if they were ever separated, which Ed prayed would never happen. They were good people.

Gracia prepared lunch for them and they settled into a comfortable silence as they began to eat. His thoughts inevitably returned to the issue of the gift, plus his newly introduced deadline. Talk about an insane amount of stress; the 23rd was not far away at all! He wanted to give Mustang a presentable gift the man would appreciate, and that was definitely not an easy feat. He had some serious brainstorming to do.
So he spent the rest of the afternoon holed up in the library, whirling about in his head in an effort to come up with something—anything at all. One idea was a compilation of music sheets, which he came up with while he gazed up at the piano for about an hour—except it was more himself who needed the sheets than Mustang. He didn’t even know what kind of music Mustang preferred playing to begin with. He thought of visiting the antique shop for something, but then that felt like it lacked originality and a personal touch. He preferred making things for important people instead of simply buying them. Somehow, it felt more intimate and real that way.

Before he knew it, an entire five hours had passed without him doing a thing apart from uselessly rolling about on the carpeted floor. Mustang was set to come home from work soon, which would mean that he wouldn’t at all be able to brainstorm in peace until bedtime. He felt awful about wasting more time; one week was such small allowance for somebody so difficult as the Bastard.

He boosted himself upright with a sigh. Picking up a random journal from the table, he made his way outside, where he sat under one of the big trees to read under the waning afternoon sunlight. It was during this time of the day and year that he would climb the tree outside of their house in Resembool and sit on one of its fat branches to read. The red skies would stretch far above, the green far beneath, and his mind would whirl within alchemical theories until there was no more sunlight for reading. Those days seemed so long ago, and had passed by in a wonderfully innocent haze.

He was midway into picking apart a certain Xerxian sigil in Hohenheim’s seventh journal when his eyes came across the precursor of the salamander seal. The sight of it sent a vivid jolt down his spine.

This is it.

The Gate idly flashed him a quick synopsis of the theory behind it, and he could feel the weight of more in-depth information burgeoning behind his eyes. It sent a thrill of energy running rampant through his veins.

This is good!

He scrambled off the grass and ran back into the house with certainty that Mustang would love this gift. It would be a very useful one, something that would be kept close and revisited endless times for the years to come. But for it, he would need to comb all twelve of Hohenheim’s journals, the Xerxian book, and go through the massive amount of information the Gate had for him. He needed to see just how much he was holding so that he could begin to organise them into an outline.

He would be making Mustang a comprehensive journal of fire alchemy, and he would take immense pleasure in watching the Bastard drool over it after he was done.

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The following day, after Mustang had gone off to work, he rifled through the phonebook and found the stationery shop’s telephone number. A quick talk with the owner confirmed the availability of multiple kinds of blank books and journals, all of high-quality make and paper. He needed a good, sturdy journal with enough style and flair for Mustang—but also functionality and strength to withstand wear. As he knew no other place to buy one, he had decided the previous night to check out the shop’s stock. No doubt that shop would be one of the best places in Central anyway—if not
the best—given how Mustang and the Armstrongs were their regular customers.

Over his button-up shirt he slipped a long-sleeved cardigan, decided on casual slacks, and his pair of black loafers. He did not plan on staying out long—he could not afford to stay out long. He wanted to keep Mustang oblivious of this little trip out into the wilderness. (He doubted Mustang would allow him out alone in the first place.) All he took with him were his set of keys to the house, his wallet with identification, and the respectable amount of money he’d managed to save over the years. He wasn’t about to spend the money Mustang had given him on this; that would make the entire idea of a gift pointless.

To his chagrin, he was just as paranoid as Mustang when he checked the house over for any crack a burglar could shimmy into. After making three rounds around the house, he finally stepped out and broke into a brisk pace. He only had to walk down this street, turn right, and walk all the way down the next street to get to East 3rd. However, since the houses and their surrounding yards were quite spacious, it would take more than ten minutes. Plus, Mustang’s street was about five blocks down from East 3rd. (Paranoid Bastard.)

He got to East 3rd just as one of the two trams was coming up his way towards Central Plaza. Mustang had told him that there were no fees for tram use. It was a free service offered by the military, taken out from property taxes. Ed flagged it, quickly hopped in, and got himself a seat. There weren’t too many people at this time of the day; he had thankfully missed the morning rush.

Busy as he was sightseeing, he almost missed his stop, and had to scramble to get off without subjecting his face to an unfortunate meeting with the streets’ cobblestoned surface. He easily found the stationery shop and quietly slipped inside. A pair of prim ladies, no more than four or five years older than him, were thanked by one of the shopkeepers as they stepped outside with their small purchases. He was the only customer left.

Perfect.

Sidling up to the front desk, he immediately called the attention of the shop owner and keeper—Marc, if his memory was not failing him. At a glance, Marc recognized who he was, warmly welcomed him, and inquired about his needs for the day.

“I would like to look at your journals,” Ed began, “specifically leather-bound sturdy ones with lots of pages, thick enough for pens and durable enough for multiple erasures. Something that would typically work as an alchemical journal.”

“Ah,” Marc tipped his head. “This way, young sir.”

Ed was ushered into the back storeroom, where rows more of journals and notebooks and stacks of different coloured papers were at rest. He was led toward the far wall, and there against it was a glass display of leather journals of different kinds and styles.

“These are among our highest quality journals, sir, and for your specific uses, I would recommend that one—“ an earthen brown one, “—the ebony one—“ surely enough with a sleek black shiny leather cover, “—and the jade journal, one of my personal favourites,” the last one was near the bottom shelf, an iridescent gleaming green. It was a curious colour, certainly not of typical leather make.

“Interesting,” he murmured with a tilt of his head. Most certainly it was eye-catching. The shop owner retrieved for perusal, and as he flipped through its pages, he could feel the durability in its make. However... “I like it, but it doesn’t seem quite appropriate for who I’m giving it to.”
“Oh, it isn’t for you, is it, young sir?”

“It’s for Mustang—don’t tell,” Ed warned. “It’s for his birthday. Rather hard to figure a gift for that man, I tell you.”

“I can imagine,” the shop owner gave a fond smile. “Well. If that is the case, then let me offer you another journal that you and Master Roy might perhaps be able to appreciate better than anybody I’ve shown it to so far. Few people recognize the preciousness of this particular journal. As it is, few people nowadays recognize the true value of anything.”

Ed thought that sentiment sounded rather familiar.

The shopkeeper retrieved a wooden box from a large drawer by another corner of the spacious storeroom. Shaped and sized about the same as a voluminous encyclopaedia, it made a quiet thud as it was set upon the table. That a key was necessary to open the box meant that whatever was inside was highly valued and more than likely monstrously priced. He mentally cursed at the Bastard.

No film of dust rose into the air when the shop keeper opened the box. However, the wafting scent of fresh and finely made paper rose into his nostrils and subsequently undid his bones.

“Such fragrance, no?” the shop keeper carefully lifted the contents of the box. “This is my finest piece of merchandise, a true work of art. The paper itself was made from a particular kind of tree that you can only ever find in certain parts of the mountain forests of Viteliu. The fragrance tells it all. The leather was painstakingly crafted and perfected to be impervious from fire—without any use of tricks or alchemy, only sheer perfection of the make. It is the only one of its kind, the only one journal bound with fire leather.”

Ed had to admit that he was impressed. Leather, just like any organic material, should be combustible by its molecular components. To trick it into becoming something resistant to combustion without alchemy—now that was some serious thinking. He did not find it hard at all, however, to understand why few people recognized the uniqueness of this certain journal. For sure it was very plain to the sight, entirely dull and without any form of decoration at all. It was of plain black leather, with a straight, stiff spine (good for support and longevity) and thick, sturdy pages. There was no strap to wrap around it, no button-on flap to close it, no security for it at all—but for some reason, more than the other options, he liked it.

“I’m taking it,” he quickly decided. “How much are you selling it for?”

“Oh,” the shopkeeper said. “But I’m giving it to you, young sir. It’s for you and Master Roy.”

Ed blinked.

“But it’s your finest piece. I’m not about to take it without paying the rightful price!”

His words made the shopkeeper smile, but the man remained unmoved. “Please, young sir, it is my gift to Master Roy as well for his birthday. I never did know when his birthday was; I don’t know all that much about him. But he is a good man, and this business would have long withered without his never-failing support. I know that you plan to transform this into something that he will treasure for life—I can see that you have plans for it. So please, take it. I am more than satisfied with the knowledge that my finest piece will be resting within good hands.”

Again, Ed blinked. Taken aback was an understatement; he was stunned. What the hell had Mustang been doing to demand such devotion from these people anyway? Bloody pompous ass of a Bastard.

“Well, if you say so,” Ed crumbled, holding the journal carefully within his hands. At that, the shop
keeper approvingly smiled, closing the storage box and ushering him out to the front desk.

“Now, how about I give you a cloth to wrap that in? Keeping it from dust and water is essential to its long life. You are of course welcome to bring it here whenever you need an upkeep; we always have special discounts for you and Master Roy,” busily and with expert hands, the shopkeeper wrapped the journal in a dark brown cloth. It was then slipped into a canvas bag before it was handed back to him. Ed awkwardly shouldered it.

“...I’ll be sure to bring the journal back here when I’m done with it so you can see it,” the shopkeeper was delighted. Ed’s awkward smile turned into a smug smirk as he continued, “Maybe then I’ll come here with Mustang and we can both see him drool over what I’ll be making for him.”

Chuckling in approval, Marc the shopkeeper led him to the door and bid him a good day. With a last word of warning not to tell Mustang that he was here, Ed stepped out of the stationery shop into the streets.

The sun was now higher up in the sky, and the crowd was thickening. It was near lunchtime; it was best if he kept himself out of sight. He didn’t know if Mustang frequented the cafe across the street for lunch as well and not only for morning coffee. It would be disastrous if he was found out. He hid underneath one of the neighbouring shops’ sunshades, casually observing the crowd and scanning for a familiar face. He saw none.

As he waited for the tram, he took a little time to observe the shops around the area, never having had the opportunity to pay close attention before. Maybe he could buy a little something extra; he ended up not spending anything at the stationery shop anyway, and the journal needed a little decoration. He wondered what kind of embellishment he could add that would properly embody Mustang’s taste and personality.

“Excuse me, sir,” a mild voice from behind him spoke; he very nearly jumped out of his skin. “If you don’t mind moving, sir, you’re blocking our display.”

“O-Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize,” Ed ducked his head in apology, edging aside discreetly. It was only then that he realized that the shop behind him was a jeweller’s place—specifically, a goldsmith.

Cocking an eyebrow, he took a few steps back to observe the display. (This way, he did not block anyone’s sight.) With interest, he noted the intricacy of each piece’s design (and naturally, their price tags were also quite intricate as well). But there was harmony to the flow of the metal, sheen to each stone. There were few people inside the shop—probably only few people could afford this kind of luxury—but the place seemed quite well-respected despite its tiny stature.

Unbidden, the image of one of Hohenheim’s twelve journals leapt into his mind. The seventh journal had, on its front, a twisting and rather gnarled image of an upside-down tree, similar to the one that had been on the Gate’s front, but not quite as accurate. Hohenheim’s design looked like it was improvised, somewhat styled to be nothing but a design. It was elegant, though, just like everything else that was of Hohenheim’s. The sketch ebbed and flowed with the right amount of power in the right eddies and banks. Perhaps—yes, perhaps—

Stepping into the jeweller’s place, he eyed around for somebody, and jumped affright when a rough, loud voice called from beyond a darkened doorway, “Anything you want in particular?”

Rapidly blinking to adjust to the gloom, Ed stupidly uttered, “Uhh.”

“Dad, you’re going to scare him off!” Ed’s attention was quickly caught by the child—about his age, more or less—standing by one of the displays further inside the gloom. Brushing aside a long brown
fringe, the kid approached him and asked, “What can we help you with today, sir?”

It was then that he realized that this was who had told him to move aside from the displays outside. It took him a moment to regain his footing, and when he did, he immediately barrelled in, “I need gold.”

The boy blinked in surprise, perhaps not accustomed to such a direct and unusual request.

“Well, you’re going to have to be more specific than that,” the voice from the doorway said. A tall, burly man stepped out from the back room, puffing on a large pipe once, and then setting it down. “Bit unusual for boys like you to be asking for gold now, isn’t it? You’re about the same age as Karl here. What do you need the gold for?”

Levelling his jaw, Ed turned his eyes to the boy’s father (and presumably the goldsmith) to say, “I am an alchemist. At the moment, I am in the process of crafting a certain something to give as a gift to a certain someone, and I need the highest quality gold I can get.” Hell knows Mustang isn’t going to settle for anything less than the best.

A rumbling chuckle bubbled from the burly man’s chest. “An alchemist, eh. At your age, that is quite an achievement.”

Ed gave a tilt of his head in concession. “Your son here seems like he himself is quite an expert in metalwork.”

“No; he still has a ways to go,” and the boy, Karl, smiled mildly at his father. “Tell me, now. What kind of gold do you need?”

Ed blinked.

“Perhaps I began with the wrong question,” the man retraced his steps. “Tell me what you want to use the gold for.”

“Well,” Ed tipped his head to the side, “I’ll be using it as an embellishment for a journal, so I need it to be malleable enough but with strength to it. I think I’ll be using it for a lock mechanism as well.”

“In that case, I don’t suggest pure gold,” the burly man began puffing on his pipe again. “Pure 24 karat is too soft for your purposes. However, you want it soft enough for your design, so we’ll try to keep as close to pure gold as possible. White gold will provide you with the best structure, how about it?”

As if on cue, Karl retrieved for him a ring of solid white gold. Ed peered down at the material without touching it.

“Mmm,” he chewed on his lip. “I like it, it’s pretty—“

“But?” prompted the goldsmith.

“—but it’s not appropriate to the person I’m giving it to. If that makes any sense,” Ed clinched his shoulders in an awkward shrug. “I was thinking of something more... yellow. You know. Like fire.”

“Maybe crown gold, then?” suggested Karl. “It’s very yellow. This one down here.”

Ed knelt and squinted at the necklace on the second shelf. “...that’s yellow, alright.”

“But wait, you said fire, right?” dipping even lower, the boy pointed to the lowest level of the shelf.
“That one is rose gold. Isn’t it beautiful?”

“Huh,” Ed blinked again, looking up at the goldsmith, who was watching them quietly. “How many different configurations of gold are there?”

“Seven, I would say, but most people either discount grey gold, or classify purple and blue gold as one,” the goldsmith explained. “It all boils down to composition, as I’m sure you’re well aware, young alchemist that you are. Gold alloys easily with other metals; it’s a matter of finding the right mixture to give you just the strength, colour, and malleability you want.”

All the while, Ed’s eyes were roving over rows and rows of different coloured gold, observing their sheen as his mind raced a million miles a minute. “Could you tell me the configuration for each type? Approximates are fine.”

The goldsmith gave a sharp bark of dry laughter. “Begging your extreme pardon, young sir, but I’ve been in this craft for long before you were born. Approximates don’t make my gold.” Promptly, the goldsmith began enumerating to him the different balances of alloy each configuration of gold had. He quickly snatched pen and paper from Karl, who occasionally gave his own input into the (heavily one-sided) conversation.

Within fifteen minutes, Ed was looking down at a hasty but complete list of common gold alloys. The chemistry of it was something he had no trouble comprehending; in fact, simply by looking at this list, he could already see which kinds he needed and what he wanted to do with them.

He looked back up at the goldsmith and said, “I would like one sheet of your best rose gold and one sheet of your best grey gold, please.”

The trip home took less time, perhaps because he was by now familiar with the sights. He stopped a little short of the road that would take him home to pick up baked pockets of bread with pasta sauce, meat, and cheese inside. And finally, when he had gotten everything he needed, he headed home.

Sigmund, the goldsmith, had graciously provided him with what he needed; the rest of the raw materials he could produce on his own at home. He carried his very light sheets of gold inside the canvas bag, wrapped around thick pieces of cloth to protect them from injury or tarnish. Not that they would tarnish that easily, but he was being cautious. They had cost him a fortune, after all.

Ah, well. At least now I know what I’ll be doing.

His uplifted mood did not last for very long, however. The moment he turned the corner into the cul-de-sac within which Mustang’s house sat, he found a military car slowing down to park in front of the house. The Bastard was home.

Shit.

The bastard would herniate a brain if his little unguarded trip outside was found out! Shoving his snacks into the canvas bag, he sprinted across the street, keeping his head low and ducking into the neighbour’s shrubbery. He skirted around the metal fence separating the neighbour’s garden from Mustang’s yard. When he could finally see the tall tree that stood in the middle of Mustang and Hughes’ joined backyards, he deftly scaled the fence’s height, leaping over and making a mad dash for the other side of the house. He forwent the back door; Mustang would probably see him if he went through.
My best bet is this.

Staring up at the immaculately painted white wall he spied his bedroom windows and hitched the canvas bag higher on his shoulder. He did not dare toy with the house’s structure and foundation by using alchemy, but luckily for him, there were ledges that even he at his height (goddamned tall people) could grab hold of and use as leverage. In no time, he was prying his windows open (this time with alchemy) and slipping inside.

Shoving the canvas bag under the bed, he shimmied out of his clothes to don his usual indoor wear. By the time he stumbled out of his room to answer Mustang’s call, the Bastard was already in the library, looking fairly perplexed at the lack of blond in his house.

“Where were you?” Mustang frowned, draping his jacket across a couch’s arm.

“Uhh, in my room?” Ed shrugged, brushing past Mustang and collapsing into his favourite spot by the table. “I was napping; you woke me up.”

Mustang made a small sound of understanding at the back of his throat. “I didn’t know napping required you to have your fly open.”

It took him a moment to process what Mustang had just said—but the moment he did, a ferocious blush slammed into his face. Spluttering in embarrassment, Ed quickly zipped his fly up and chucked a pillow at the Bastard. He scowled as the pillow was blocked by a quick arm, and the scowl only grew deeper as Mustang began to heartily chuckle. Ed could feel the redness creeping down his neck and to the very tips of his ears, painfully hot and all too vivid.

“I was not doing anything of that sort!”

“It’s quite alright, Edward, you don’t have to hide it. I understand that you’re at that age now. It’s perfectly normal. I just want you to learn to clean up after yourself efficiently.”

Biting his lip and puffing his cheeks, he tried to make himself as tiny as possible by sinking as deep as he could into the couch. A cloak of shame draped over him, growing only more formidable as Mustang passed by and gave his hair an affectionate ruffle.

He needed a diversion.

“You’re home early.”

“Yes; I skipped a meeting and ran away from Hawkeye,” the Bastard’s tone was shameless, instead full to the brim with pride. Ed had to suppress the overwhelming urge to rifle through the phonebook, find Hawkeye’s number, and call her up to tell her that Mustang was at home and not doing his job. “But if I had known that you would be busy, I would have taken a few minutes to stroll through Central Plaza. The next time I’m coming home early, I’ll be sure to call you first before leaving to give you some time to, ah, finish your business.”

Fucking lecherous son of a—

“Now, I’m sure you’ve encountered this in reading already, given your precocious nature,” Mustang sat down across from him and continued, showing no sign of relent, “but when young men—and women—of your age and a little bit older begin puberty, there begin to bud certain... feelings, if you will. I want you to understand that such carnal desires are perfectly normal, and they are nothing to be ashamed of.”

Flushing only deeper, Ed cupped his palms over his ears as Mustang, seemingly oblivious to his
pitiful state, went on with what Ed supposed was an elegantly improvised version of the birds-and-bees lecture. He’d already heard this before, from Izumi, who was as shameless as Mustang, but frank and not quite as mocking. Hearing it once was more than enough.

“Experimentation is a common thing, and it isn’t entirely bad,” the Bastard went on. “You simply must keep in mind your own safety and propriety. Do not experiment with strangers; you never know what communicable diseases they or their previous partners might have had. The safest way is to find somebody you know quite well to experiment with—but make sure that your friendship is strong enough to withstand the initial awkwardness that will come afterwards. Remember to clean up and zip your fly when you’re done.”

“Not listeniiiiing,” Ed droned, loudly so to drown the Bastard’s voice out, with his palms still cupping his ears.

But the Bastard only spoke louder. “Keep in mind that there are other ways of... achieving completion, and that not all of them require intimate contact. It’s best to keep minimal contact with a partner as much as possible, especially if you don’t know them. You will be surprised with the number of things you can pull off with just one hand.”

“Not listeniiiiiiiiing,” Ed droned, even louder to match the Bastard’s voice. “Fuck, Mustang, is there a limit to your vulgarity?”

“I thought you weren’t listening,” Mustang smirked, leisurely spreading his arms to assume a painfully smug and perfectly beautiful pose, the bloody exhibitionist. “And it isn’t vulgarity; I am simply stating the plain and unadulterated truth. Truth is what you prefer, no?”

Cheeks puffing out in a childish pout, Ed crossed his arms, harrumphed, and sat in sulky silence for the next fifteen minutes, leaving Mustang chuckling gaily to himself. This was the only thing he could retaliate with at this point, and it was admittedly rather pathetic; the Bastard was far too good at this, annoying as it was to accept that fact.

A few more words of much amused taunting and Mustang finally grew tired of the game—or so Ed hoped. Mustang took a few minutes to change out of his work clothes. Shortly afterwards, Ed tagged along as they stepped downstairs to prepare dinner for the two of them, plus Gracia, Hughes, and the baby inside Gracia. Tonight was their turn to be the host, Mustang said, and so they were going to make something extra-special.

Not once throughout the rest of the night did Mustang make mention of his little “nap” again, and much later, when he was fixing to sleep, Ed gently toed the edge of the canvas bag under the bed. Tonight, he had clenched his teeth under Mustang’s wicked teasing, but it was all for a good cause. He could not wait until Mustang’s birthday, when he would finally get to see the Bastard’s face grow slack at the gift. It would be downright precious.

Hughes would bring the camera.
The rest of the week and a half before Mustang’s birthday passed in a blur of preparations, blackmail, and bribing. He was quick to learn that Hughes was not someone he wanted to have a friendly blackmailing match with, let alone an unfriendly one. Hughes had an undeniable talent for observation. Coupled with his blade-sharp intuition, it was no wonder how he became the perfect partner-in-devilry for Mustang. The two of them were peas in a pod; brothers by soul, if not by blood. Mustang was the master of exploiting information; Hughes was his reliable source. Needless to say, he failed in his attempts to discover what Hughes’ gift was.

On the day of the occasion, Ed languished about, his grumpiness multiplying tenfold after Mustang left for work again without telling him about the event. The man acted like it was just any other day: Mustang woke him up, fed him breakfast, trumped him in a quick game of chess, and then, with a pitiful groan, left for work.

Why did Mustang not tell him at all that today was his birthday?

Granted, he was yet a guest in this house, and they had only known each other for such a short span of time, but he fancied himself quite close to Mustang, especially when compared against other people who were mere acquaintances and knew nothing of Mustang’s hidden faces. Even Hughes, who knew Mustang better than any other in this world, repeatedly remarked at how affectionate Mustang was with him. He failed to understand why Mustang was hiding something as simple as a birthday.

_The Bastard probably doesn’t want me to feel obliged to get him anything, so he doesn’t tell me at all._

That was what Gracia had told him, and that was the most likely explanation. Still, he felt rather put out. Why did the Bastard have to get shy about the oddest things? It only ever made things more awkward. How was he supposed to act later for the party? Would it be more appropriate to feign surprise, or should he act like he had known all along? Suffice to say, his mind was full of these quiet concerns throughout the day.

By the time he descended from the library, he could already hear a gathering of voices from the great hall. Gracia had warned him to get ready by a certain time, and he was glad he had. His attire was something he had chosen for himself, something simple but stately. His confidence, however, was flagging at that moment, so he ended up dawdling inside the kitchen.

Just then, Hughes emerged from the basement cellar, carrying with him three bottles of prime wine. “There you are! General Armstrong was just asking for you,” shifting his burden into one arm, Hughes ushered him into the formal dining. “Roy, here he is!” and he was taken by the shoulders to the centre of the room where Mustang stood entertaining guests.

But he was not paying attention to whatever Mustang was saying, occupied as he was looking up at the people gathered around the table. There was but select few of them—Mustang’s team, Hughes and Gracia, and the Armstrongs. Giovanni, the owner of the park restaurant, was present and in charge of the majority of the menu. The cafe owner was present with his wife, and so were the tailor and the shoemaker, a couple of other people Ed didn’t know but were most likely also business associates, and much to his pleasant surprise, the stationery shop’s owner, Marc.

Soon, the guests began settling into their places around the long formal table. Ed found himself shuffled to sit right beside Mustang—which, unfortunately, also put him right beside General Lucas Armstrong.

“Ah, young Mr. Elric,” boomed the Armstrong patriarch. He could not help but curse Hughes to hell and back for placing him in such an awkward position. “We seem to be seeing each other plenty
often these days. You must entertain me with more of your alchemical theories tonight, yes?”

“Of course, sir,” he nodded along.

“He’ll be more than happy, I assure you. Alchemists are always such insatiable exhibitionists,” Mustang remarked from his other side. The Bastard was sitting at the head of the table, and for that the Bastard deserved a venomous scowl.

“I believe that rule applies solely to you, Bastard. And you didn’t even tell me about your birthday, shame on your exhibitionist nature! I had to hear it from Gracia!”

Mustang only smiled, tilting his head in what Ed supposed was half an apology and half an acknowledgement.

“Don’t hold it against him, Ed; he just gets shy about the oddest little things,” Hughes winked playfully.

“Yes, well, it’s illogical and therefore annoying,” declared Ed.

General Armstrong’s laughter was hearty. “He has such a strong scientific streak!”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Mustang chuckled.

The happy banter was interrupted when Giovanni and another person whose name he did not know carted into the room a towering cake lathered with the richest kind of chocolate one could ever crave. Ed knew it from the wafting smell: this was first class, shit expensive, handmade Coatl chocolate. The cake had sculpted sugar candles at the top for Mustang to blow—twenty-two of them, arranged in several concentric circles, except Ed was not sure how Mustang would reach that height. The cake was roughly about a meter tall, mounted on a base a foot tall, on top of the cart that was as tall as the formal dining table. All in all, it was rather the impressive thing.

Ed plucked at Mustang’s sleeve. “That’s pure Coatl chocolate, right?”

Mustang smiled. “Well, why don’t you ask Marcel—he’s the one who made the cake.”

Ed turned to the person beside Giovanni. Near-salivating, he echoed himself, “Coatl chocolate, right?”

“Yes; it is pure Coatl chocolate,” Marcel spoke with a distinct accent Ed thought was perhaps Francian. He had heard that the finest patissiers came from Francia.

“But—isn’t that expensive?”

“Ah, but nothing is too expensive for the Monsieur,” and Ed had to blink and pause to realize that Marcel was talking about Mustang.

When everybody had been poured each a glass of ice wine, they all stood to prepare for a toast and the blowing of the candles. A wish was given in a second of silence, and soon enough, Mustang was blowing on his candles. Easily, all twenty-two flames flickered and faded into thin trails of smoke.

Beneath applause and laughter, Ed sat and leaned into Mustang to ask, “What did you wish for?”

But Mustang was a wicked Bastard and said to him, “Wishes die if they’re spoken, Ed. I see you haven’t been read your fairy tales as you should have.”

Ed scowled. “Fairy tales are for children. I’m not a child.”
“Of course you aren’t,” and there again was that indulgent little smile. Though it was Mustang’s birthday, it was him who was being coddled—a strange yet not entirely unwelcome feeling, he thought. He would simply have to make up for it with his gift.

The flameless cake was wheeled aside to now make way for the food. As Ed had expected, tonight was a Vitelian dinner, Mustang’s favourite; Giovanni began laying out the salads and antipasti, only the appetizer but truly enough for a modest meal. But since when did Roy Mustang ever settle for modesty?

“Well, I must say this is quite the spread, Lieutenant Colonel!” General Armstrong remarked, and Ed was inclined to agree.

Before them was a wide variety of nearly everything that Ed could think of that could constitute a crostini. For the cheeses there was fontina, gorgonzola, herb-crusted goat cheese, parmigiano, and fresh mozzarella. For the herbs and spices, basil, sage, oregano, caper, thyme, roasted garlic and peppers submerged in extra-virgin olive oil, lemons, and pesto. For the vegetables, eggplants, fresh and roasted tomatoes both, artichokes, grilled red onions, torched peppers, mushrooms and lots of fresh olives. For the cold cut meats, genoa, salami, anchovies, prosciutto, mortadella, capocollo—so much of everything that Ed had difficulty deciding where to start.

Following Mustang’s suit, he built himself a simple crostini of mushrooms, tomatoes, fresh onions, and a smattering of basil on top. Laughter carried around him, and over the food, conversation was carried out. As always, Mustang was discussing military politics with Hughes and the Armstrouts, while his associates were busy talking business on the other side of the table. Anya the antique seller was having an intense discussion of history with Marc the stationery salesman; Giovanni was busy making rounds and ensuring everybody’s satisfaction with the food; Gracia and Madam Armstrong were both laughing at one thing or another—

Ed paid all of them no attention.

Giving it much-deserved justice, he focused on nothing but the spread of food before him, and barely noticed whenever his name was mentioned within discussion. General Armstrong was most likely talking to Mustang about him, but at this point, his input was unnecessary. All he cared about was the food.

The main course had three parts, the first of which was chicken breast in rich marsala sauce, with mushrooms and cavatappi, accompanied by marsala wine. The second was beef bolognaise with carrots, onions, bacon, celery, garlic, mushrooms, pancetta, and the light lace of white wine in it which Ed was proud of himself for having caught. The third and last one was the richest crab Ed had ever tasted in his life, with lobster ravioli and trout in pink sauce—no doubt a dish that cost a small fortune. Seafood was special fare in Amestris, a land-locked country with little direct access to seawater. All of their sea fare had to go through trade routes crossing Aerugo to the south. By the time it reached Central, the taxes on it were sky-high.

“Giovanni is a very good cook,” he remarked, content as he sank into his seat after finishing his meal. Mustang gave him a fond smile, so he continued tongue-in-cheek, “And since I caught that white wine in the sauce, I think I should get a reward, yes?”

Brow rising, Mustang only sipped on his wine.

“Oh, come on! Doesn’t that mean I’m learning your culinary lessons well? I deserve a reward, and you know it,” so he smugly declared.

“You learn your lessons well precisely because you have a very good teacher, Edward,” Mustang
retaliated, but Ed was not going to be defeated by such egotism.

So he plucked on Mustang’s sleeve and said, “My very good teacher will reward me precisely because he is a very good teacher, yes?”

Hughes laughed, and so did the rest of the table. “Touché, Roy! Ed’s too good for you.”

Admitting his defeat, Roy acquiesced. “Very well, Edward. You can have the first slice of cake.”

“Yes!” Ed shot up in his seat, triumphant as the signal for dessert was given. Watching Marcel retrieve for him the honorary first slice of cake was a sweet torture Ed savoured, only half-listening to the explanation that was being given.

“This cake I made especially for Monsieur Mustang’s birthday; it is a new recipe I have yet to put out for sale. It is the Monsieur’s cake, a decadent triple Coatl chocolate sponge and mousse cake.” Ed picked up his fork and looked up at Mustang only once.

“Go ahead,” the Bastard said.

For the following few minutes, it was all of Ed’s capacity to make little sounds of absolute bliss from the back of his throat. He savoured the stunning depth of flavour that burst forth with each mouthful of rich chocolate cake. Even the Gate, usually but a quiet participant in his daily sensations, squirmed and purred in the rear shadows of his mind. It was cake good enough to make the Gate squirm; it was very good cake.

“I think his brain short-circuited, Roy,” Hughes said from somewhere across the table.

“It’s okay,” the Bastard casually dismissed. “Ed’s brain rewires fast.”

“It is indeed an exquisite delicacy,” Madam Armstrong remarked, savouring her own modest slice. “Of course, Marcel’s confections are always the best of the best. I would most certainly like to see this in your shop. I’m sure Anita and His Excellency the Fuhrer would love this, don’t you think so?”

Mustang chuckled. “I imagine young Selim would love it more. From what I hear, he has quite a monstrous sweet tooth.”

“Oh yes, he devours the snacks I bring from Marcel’s shop every time I go to visit,” Madam Armstrong was apparently quite the influential lady. Ed should have expected nothing less.

“Could you please tell me what this cake is called so I could tell my friends about it?” Catherine Armstrong, the youngest of the family, timidly in her sweet voice. It was the first time Ed had ever heard her speak.

“Ah, I’ve no name for it yet, my lady. I’ve only just completed it, and to be honest, I’ve no idea what to name it.”

“The Roy Cake,” Hughes declared.

Mustang gave his best a friend a flat stare.

“Mustang Cake doesn’t really sound very appetizing,” Havoc remarked from further down the table.

“Why can’t it be just chocolate cake?” Fuery frowned.

“You’d be a miserable businessman,” Breda snorted.
“Epicurean Delight?” Anya suggested while licking her fork clean.

“The Hedonist’s Cake,” Hughes declared again.

“Why, thank you, Maes.”

“You’re welcome. It’s a good name!”

“It won’t sell very well,” warned Breda.

“Are you saying I won’t sell very well, Breda?” Mustang raised a brow.

“Yes.”

The table erupted in laughter.

Reclining in his seat, Ed imperiously brandished a forkful of cake at the table. “You all know that I should be the one to name it since I got the first slice, right? Besides, you all *suck. Zero* naming sense. Quite pathetic, if you ask me.”

“Hey, my name was nice!” an indignant Anya retorted.

“My name was nice too!” a look of betrayal was on Hughes’ face. “I would have thought you would have liked The Hedonist’s Cake, Ed.”

Ed ignored both of them. With a flourish towards the meter-tall confection of pure chocolate glory, Ed declared, “From here on, I dub thee the *Devil Cake*.”

And, amongst much laughter, so became the name.

Dessert was soon finished, with the remainders of the cake packed away into the kitchen for later consumption by none other than Ed. There were actually other things laid out to complement the cake (fruits, brie and other cheeses, feta with nuts and honey) but Ed had been far too preoccupied with the Coatl chocolate to notice them. Bastien, Mustang’s wine merchant associate, stood to circulate shots of limoncello afterwards; when Ed asked Mustang what it was for, he was told that it cut through the rich aftertaste of their meal. And so it did, offering his tongue a refreshing respite.

It was now time for gift-giving. Mustang’s business associates chose to go first, excepting Giovanni, Marcel, and Bastien, whose gifts were their exclusive services for the day. Bastien had an additional gift of a handful of bottles of exquisite wine and self-made limoncello to add to Mustang’s cellar. Each associate had a thing or two to offer, perhaps prime produce, or a one-of-a-kind find, like the antique shopkeeper Anya’s gift.

She had for Mustang an exquisite Albert chain made of white gold, dating from a century ago during the early-middle period of the Victorian era in Ailia. It was made by a craftsman long deceased but whose name remained among the best goldsmiths in Ailian history. Ed was willing to bet that the chain would fetch quite a fortune if put on the market—but few people would be able to afford such a thing anyway, and with Mustang, it would be in very good hands.

When the business associates finished with their gifts, everybody turned to Mustang’s motley crew of military men, who all turned to each other with a wide grin, and subsequently presented Mustang a small golden envelope, sealed.
If only the tiniest bit apprehensive, Mustang slit the envelope open to peek inside. Hughes was listing off the possibilities: money, a girl’s calling card, a blackmail-worthy photo of Bradley, a gift card to an upscale burlesque theatre—and sure enough, Mustang took a photo out.

Hughes’ eyes bugged. “Holy feathery birds in heaven, you didn’t really get a blackmail-worthy photo of Bradley in a dress, did you?!”

Havoc was seized by a flurry of coughs, while Fuery flushed a brilliant beet red from beneath his collar. Breda was forcedly nonchalant about the entire matter, but Falman struggled to maintain a straight face.

“Well, their reactions certainly are suggestive,” the former General Armstrong watched with much amusement.

But Ed was leaning into Mustang’s space to peek at the photo and found no Bradleys in dresses. “What’s that?”

Mustang smirked and flipped the photo over for everyone to see. There within the frames was the image of a big hunk of metal sitting on a table, in what Ed assumed was Mustang’s military office, or part of it, at least “It’s a cappuccino machine, Ed. I see you got tired of Hawkeye’s coffee, yes, Havoc?”

Hawkeye, who apparently did not pitch in with this gift, settled a glare upon the men.


“It was Breda’s idea, actually.”

Havoc cleared his throat and made a point to avoid Hawkeye’s eyes, but Breda kicked his leg under the table and hissed: “Don’t you lie and make yourself look good!”

“Well,” Falman tried to amend, “it is a fact that Major Hawkeye’s coffee is rather stale.”

The table hushed under Falman’s words. Mustang’s face was wiped clean of any expression, while Hughes was torn between horrified glee and pity. Havoc, Fuery, and Breda were all simply frozen in fear.

There stretched a few tense seconds—until Gracia chuckled and gave Hawkeye’s arm a pat.

“Don’t mind the boys, Riza; we’ll just make sure not to include their portions the next time we bake our apple pies.”

This was met with a communal gasp of horror, while Ed quipped, “Can I have their portions instead?” Protests rang from Mustang’s men, while Mustang sat back and shook his head with a chuckle. Hughes shamelessly cackled at their misery; he wasn’t nearly as conscientious as Mustang was.

When the raucous mess finally quieted down, it was Hawkeye’s turn, and she slid across the table a cylindrical tube wrapped in decorative paper. It was about a foot and a half long and quite heavy. Mustang thanked her and began carefully unwrapping the tube. Inside was a long rolled sheet of pyrogenic leather.

Mustang’s mouth formed a tiny ‘o’ and he turned to her with a smile. “Thank you. This is quite a find.”
Ed learned that while pyrogenic cloth was relatively easy to find, pyrogenic leather was a rarity. There were very few species of animals able to produce natural high-quality pyrogenic leather, and even fewer within the continent. This was most likely an import from across the sea to the south.

The roll of leather was covered back up with wrapping paper and put aside, away from the table to prevent any spills on it. Next up were the Armstrungs, and Ed had to admit that he was quite curious about their gift too.

Alex Armstrong stood to retrieve a very wide cloth-covered frame from a corner, brought it over, and held it up for Mustang to see. The Armstrong patriarch drew the cloth back to reveal a captivating painting of an ancient city—was that Xerxes?—lit up by a massive alchemical charge. By the degree of it depicted in the image, it had to be a sizable, very powerful array—perhaps bigger than even the city shown on the painting.

Anya gave a low whistle of admiration, shifting forward in her seat to see. Ed, too, was riveted.

“A brilliant work of art, this one is. The Vanishing—such a title the artist gave it from the epic that inspired its creation. It is the best interpretation of the Xerxian collapse I have seen so far, if I might be so bold. You did mention that you are conducting research on Xerxian alchemy at present, so I thought you might appreciate this piece.”

Mustang looked rather stunned. “General, this piece is priceless. Are you sure—“

“Quite, Lieutenant Colonel; I have no qualms in relinquishing this piece to your care,” the General effectively forestalled any protests Mustang could have voiced. “With you, I can rest assured that it is in good hands.”

Tipping his head, Mustang smiled. “Your words are wasted on me, General. Thank you. I shall take good care of it.”

“See that you do,” the General motioned for his son to put the frame safely away. “It is quite hard to find you a gift, you know that, Mustang?”

“I have been told that, yes,” Mustang chuckled.

Beside the Bastard, Ed grumbled to himself. ‘Quite hard’ was an understatement; it was fucking impossible to find the rich ass anything as a gift! He mourned having to make a new gift for every single one of Mustang’s birthdays in the future. Surely there would come a day when he would run out of options! The man already had everything.

“Well, Ed! It’s your turn!” Hughes grinned happily, pulling out his camera, the overeager paparazzi. “I know you’ve been working on a gift for the past week! Cough it up!”

Mustang smiled. “Aww, Edward, you didn’t have to! How sweet of you.”

“Shush, you,” Ed narrowed his eyes at Mustang, before scowling at Hughes and slamming a fist on the table. “You first.”

“Oh, no no no, you first,” Hughes refused.

“Well, my gift is still upstairs, so you first.”

“Well, my gift is still outside, so you first.”

“What does it matter who goes first anyway? You first!”
“If it doesn’t matter at all, then why are you arguing? You first!”

“Because you go first.”

“No, you go first.”

“Children,” Mustang pushed Hughes and Ed apart with a long-suffering sigh. “Please behave yourselves. We are at the table, and we have guests.”

“Now, Maes, why don’t we let Roy choose who goes first?” Gracia offered, to which Mustang grimaced.

“Oh, fine, Maes, you go first. I don’t see the big deal, anyway. You’re probably going to give me a list of eligible ladies for marriage or something equally ridiculous like last year.”

“Noooo, my gift this year is perfectly appropriate! I was being considerate of you!” Hughes wailed. “Why did you choose me first? Don’t you love me anymore?! That means you’re putting Ed as your most special person because you’re saving him for last! I feel so betrayed!”

“It’s because I deserve it. I’m special, so deal with it, and get your gift!” Ed declared with much relish.

Still bemoaning his betrayal, Hughes trudged out of the house. Highly amused chuckles went around the table, but they were all curious, because apparently, no one, except Gracia, has seen what Hughes had prepared for Mustang. Ed craned his head around General Armstrong to see as Hughes stepped back into the house with something in his arms—

“Arf!”

—and blinked when Hughes dumped an armful of fur into Mustang’s arms.

“Happy birthday, Roy! He’s my gift for you!”

The thing in Mustang’s arms wiggled and squirmed and turned to lick at Mustang’s cheek.

“Dog,” Ed deadpanned.

“Arf!” it wagged its tail.

“Puppy, to be more exact,” Hughes explained, though the dog was far too big to be a puppy in Ed’s eyes. As if cognizant of his exact thoughts, Hughes continued, “It’s a purebred Golden Retriever, about three months old. They’re naturally large even when young. Easily trained, very smart dog.”

“Hughes, whatever made you think that it’s a good idea for me to have a dog in my house?”

“Well, think about it this way! Ed is very lonely when you’re away—“

“I am not!”

“—but now, he will have the dog to keep him company while you’re at work! You need to give him a name, by the way.” Hughes began to pet the dog, and, pleased, it turned to nuzzle into Hughes’ hand. “Look, I even bought him a collar! All you have to do is bring the tag to a metalworker so they can inscribe whatever name you decide for him.”

And sure enough, around the dog’s neck was a brown leather collar, sturdy but light, with a golden plate on the back reading, ‘Property of Roy Mustang,’ and a blank golden tag dangling at the front.
“It seems to like Ed well enough,” the dog was squirming to get into Ed’s lap. Ed was busy trying to push it back into Mustang’s arms. “How about we name you Sebastian?”

The dog turned its head at the name, thumping its tail against the table. “Arf!”

“Trust you to choose some old-style, clichéd name,” grimaced Ed. “I’m not going to be cleaning up after this dog!”

“By the end of the month, he’ll know enough not to make a mess, I assure you,” the Bastard sounded confident of his ability to train the dog. Ed sincerely hoped there was some solid experience behind those words, because he sure as hell had none. He began to earnestly fear for the library. What if the dog mutilated his precious books? No, he would not stand for that! He had to guard the books—with his life, if need be!

“Now!” Hughes slammed a hand on the table, as Ed had done a while ago. “Time for your gift, Ed! Come on!”

Puffing his cheeks, Ed menaced at the dog and declared, “I am not bringing my gift out while this dog is here. I am not about to let it slobber all over my hard work!”

So Mustang relinquished the dog to the floor and let it scuttle under the table. It seemed intent on sniffing at everybody. Ed did not nearly mind that as much as having it sit on the table while he brought his gift.

“Your gift?” Hughes heckled.

Ed rose from his seat with a grunt, by all rights stomping up the stairs. Having to stand up was a pain, what with a full stomach. Oh, what he would not give to simply sit, rest himself, and fall asleep! He could have brought the gift downstairs earlier, except he did not want Mustang seeing it beforehand. Such an inconvenience the Bastard was, as always.

He could still hear chatter from downstairs as he slipped into his room. He had kept the item under his bed, bundled up in cloth. It needed no wrapping, the beautiful and convenient thing; it was bare as he hefted it into his arms. Checking for the sheet of grey gold in his pocket, he made his way down the stairs and back into the dining room, drawing everybody’s attention.

With much glee, he walked up to Mustang and relinquished it atop the table: seemingly an innocuous solid block of gold. “Happy birthday, Bastard.”

Mustang could only blink.

“Well, it’s certainly very... shiny,” noted Hughes.

“Curious,” the Bastard was peering at it as if to try and find a seam. “How do you open it?”

The wide grin stretching Ed’s lips then was Gate-worthy in its catty deviance. “Well, it depends.”

“On?”

“On what kind of jewellery you would like to wear. Necklace? Ring? Bracelet? I highly suggest necklace; it’s the hardest to lose. Trust me when I say you won’t want to lose it. Necklace it is, then.”

Happily, Ed retrieved the sheet of grey gold he had in his pocket and, with it in between, he brought his palms together in a clap. Blue and white sparks of energy crackled into life as he drew his palms apart. Gasps were drawn as he raised his hands. They revealed the sheet of gold twisting and
moulding itself into a beautiful chain, one link after the other, until finally the centrepiece, the pendant, was formed. It was an intricate circular network of strands of gold only a little fatter than pieces of thread. One could say the design was somewhat floral; in truth, it was a series of interlinked tangents forming an alchemical circle. At termination, the beautiful design gave birth to a ball of strands of gold the size of a penny.

Satisfied, Ed handed the chain to Mustang, who took a moment to peer closely at the pendant’s framework.

“Those—are those scripts, Ed?” Mustang gave him an incredulous look. “Those are tiny. Are you sure they’ll work?”

Scowling in offence, Ed slapped Mustang’s hand aside and seized the necklace. “Quit your complaining and just open the damn gift!” but he ended up opening it himself, showing Mustang how to align the pendant to a small dot-like divot on the surface of the golden box.

Red sparks promptly spilled outwards from the centre. Blooming like a flower, the ball-shaped pendant unfurled to reveal a smaller ball inside. Its petals flattened against the golden box, and upon contact, the scripts ignited a subsequent reaction. Bright orange lightning ran across the box’s surface, splitting it open.

The separated sections began to thin into tendrils twining around each other, vines of gold charting a path along the book that was revealed underneath. They wrapped around it to hug it in an intricate tangle that even the best of metalworkers would be hard-fought to mimic. Offering no slip by which the book could be opened, the vines began to settle. And, as they did, the last of the reaction caught fire, a bright yellow fire, seemingly tugging at the pendant’s grey gold chain and absorbing it into the vines. Like the skies and sun approaching dusk, the vines’ colour turned into a vibrant fiery mixture of rose and crown gold—a gradient of yellow and red. The product was a visual illusion of fire, seemingly living and liquid as they shimmered under light.

When the reaction was finished, but the inner ball of the pendant remained, attached to the centre from where the vines spilled and stemmed. Ed gave it a light twist, and with a quiet slither, the vines parted to allow for the book to be opened.

“There,” Ed pushed the book towards Mustang, who was still quite dumbstruck with his little display. “I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

With a disbelieving note, Hughes echoed, “Disappointed? I don’t think it’s quite possible to be disappointed after that.”

Ed’s grin was both smug and cheeky as he turned back to Mustang. “The paper is top quality Vitelian, and the cover is made of handcrafted fire leather. And inside—“ he nudged Mustang to flip the book open “—is an organized compilation of the theory of fire alchemy over time, through different approaches and schools of thought. It includes everything from the most archaic form to the most modern, Hohenheim’s postulations—and also mine.”

There was no need for him to attach extra weight to his words for Mustang to understand the implication. In this book was information extracted with painstaking effort from the Gate, and it could prove disastrous in the wrong hands. It was one of the reasons he had gone through such trouble to create an intricate locking mechanism for the book. (The other reasons were of vanity and experimentation, but regardless.)

“How do you lock it back up?” and Ed nearly thought the Bastard would never ask.
With a deliberate press-and-squeeze, the inner ball snapped open into a six-point star, flattening its script-laden surface against the vine roots beneath it. He gave it a turn, and following the cue, the necklace began to unspool itself from the rest of the vines. The grey gold began to separate itself, turning the vines back into their original rose colour.

It was like watching the reverse bloom of a flower as the six-point star curled itself into its former spherical shape. Similarly, the strands of grey gold began wrapping itself back around the smaller ball, forming the original intricate web engraved with now deactivated scripts. The vines around the book began to widen and flatten, returning to its original box shape. Soon, the necklace’s chain was once more whole, and with a tug, Ed plucked the pendant off of the surface of the box, promptly terminating the reverse reaction.

Ed was actually somewhat relieved that Mustang resolved to look at the book later instead. The last thing he wanted was a leak of information. He disliked the idea of this many eyes glimpsing the very private pages of that book. Granted, these were trustworthy people, but even then, he felt uncomfortable. Mustang probably felt the same, or even more so, paranoid Bastard that he was.

“I think his gift trumps yours, Maes,” Gracia stage-whispered to his husband, who promptly crumpled into a heap of dismay and betrayal. Mustang ignored him in favour of listening to Ed’s explanation of the alchemical process.

“It’s basically just a two-part reaction joined into one,” Ed was explaining to the Armstrongs. “The first part is a transfiguration reaction, which consisted of forming the vines around the book. The second part consisted of a recombination reaction, which was the absorption of the grey gold into the rose gold to form streaks of crown gold in the vines.”

“Streaks of crown gold, you say,” said the old General.

“Yes,” Ed fiddled with the pendant now hanging from Mustang’s neck. “This necklace came from only that small sheet of grey gold—not nearly enough if you ratio it against the amount of rose gold needed to securely box that journal. But I didn’t want to transform the entire box of into crown gold from the beginning. If I only had streaks of crown gold against the rest of the rose gold, then it would create an illusion of fire. It was the perfect effect that I wanted.”

Ed grabbed a pen and paper and drew a triangle for them.

“The middle of this triangle here is pure crown gold. To the far right of the spectrum is the reddish gold, like rose gold—an amalgam of gold and high amounts of pure copper. To the far left is white gold, like grey gold—an amalgam of gold and silver. Grey gold in particular also has elements of manganese and copper, which gives it the telltale darker burnished colour in comparison to white gold’s almost-silver sheen.”

“So if you combine grey and rose gold at the right ratio, you can produce crown gold.” Mustang saw the logic.

“That’s right, because technically, crown gold is a subset of rose gold, in that it has copper as well—but not nearly enough to turn it so red. So if I dilute the red of the copper with the white of the silver, I would trick the metals into assuming a crown gold colour—except it’s not really pure crown gold, but much stronger than that. The manganese, silver, and copper make sure that the structure of the vines will stay intact. At the same time, I produce the fiery effect. It’s quite ingenious, if I may say so myself.”

Laughing, Mustang ruffled Ed’s hair and then rested a hand behind his neck. The man was giving him a little look of fondness and adoration. “That is quite ingenious. I would like to see the scripts
you used. The components would have to be reversible, if I understand this correctly, and that’s not something you see all too often.”

“It’s not that hard,” Ed relaxed into his chair, kicking his feet under the table. “The trick with reversibility is that you have to shape your forward reaction so that the second half of it is actually the reverse reaction.”

“Easier said than done, Edward,” and after a moment’s consideration, Mustang added with an indulgent smile, “for most other alchemists, that is.”

“But who feeds the reaction its driving energy? The person who uses the pendant as a key, I take it?” General Armstrong was an astute observer.

At this, the Gate-worthy grin returned to Ed’s face. “Not quite. The person who initiates the reaction has to already have seen the book’s front cover design and the cover page’s design sketch. Otherwise, the circles won’t initiate properly and the book won’t open.”

Hughes blinked. “Is that even possible? That the circle can know the user’s thoughts?”

“It sounds really difficult, doesn’t it? But it’s actually a very common glyph! Almost every circle I know of, with a few notable exceptions, makes good use of it. It’s just that few alchemists realize the glyph’s purpose and meaning,” Ed said. Mustang nodded along; the Bastard knew which glyph he was talking about for sure. “But if you think about it, it makes sense. Wouldn’t a good alchemist first have to know how exactly he wants a reaction to go and what exact results he wants to get before he begins transmuting? Every circle has a built in glyph that adapts that thought and uses it as a blueprint.”

Hughes gave a thoughtful hum. “It just sounds a far cry from the solid natural sciences most of your kind so covet. What you were just talking about sounds suspiciously like magic. Alchemy works on a plane of equality, where one thing is traded for another, yes? Well, how do you determine the value of thoughts? How do you even factor it into an equation, if it can’t be quantified?”

“A good question to which there is surely a good answer, but this good answer I do not know. Neither does anybody, for that matter,” Ed sighed. “This is the one reason why human transmutation will forever be impossible. Unless you know what you can exchange for somebody’s mind and soul, you can’t get them back.”

Hughes’ eyes narrowed, and Ed thought then that perhaps he should not have said that. Hughes knew of his little debacle back in Resembool; no doubt the man was already wondering about it, and his words only further fanned the fire. But Hughes had more tact than to raise the issue now—and Ed had been honest when he had said that he did not know the answer. What had happened with his mother’s transmutation was but an accident.

Ed turned away from Hughes’ piercing gaze and found that the other side of the table, with Mustang’s associates and men, had long since stopped listening to their conversation. It was only Anya who had moved and intently followed Ed’s explanation, which was to be expected. From what Ed could make out, she seemed to be highly educated in art and alchemy. He would not at all be surprised if she too was an alchemist.

Settling easily into his chair, Ed found his knees occupied by the puppy’s head. He fiddled with the dog’s ears as everybody laughed at a jest or another. Ed was in truth not catching much of it, satiated and heavy as he felt because of the food. But he did hear true and clear Mustang’s words as the man leaned into him and spoke, “Thank you, Edward; it’s a lovely gift. I’ll treasure it. But please, the next time you plan on stepping out of the house, do tell me at the very least, okay?”
Autumn was upon Central, outside the city seemingly bursting into flames as the leaves began to wilt and fall. Not that Ed had any intention of stepping outside; he no longer had a reason to wish to leave the library at all, despite the beautiful weather. He was all of disinterested; Resembool boasted brighter colours.

For the rest of the week, he remained indoors, perusing the books he had forsaken the past seven days for Mustang’s gift. The Bastard seemed to enjoy the journal fine, so he was happy, but it truly did take its time being made, and such time he could not have afforded if the gift had not been for Mustang. (The Bastard was his landlord, after all; he needed to give some sort of payback.)

Mustang had started translating the Persian text for him to read, and already it was proving to be a handy source for a fresh perspective on the theories. With what little he could glean, he could already see that the Persian notes were but mere variations on the original Xerxian theories, simplified and trimmed down. However, they seemed to be developing towards a slightly different direction than Amestrian alchemy, which had been similarly developing around the same time in history. The Persians were trying to introduce their own touch into old Xerxian alchemy.

Such an interesting progression kept both him and Mustang earnestly engrossed in discussion for nights and days on end, reflecting ideas against each other to further them into proper forms. Mustang had a remarkable knowledge of history and culture across the continent and beyond, and Ed found it an immense help. He would never have understood the implications and cultural connotations of the text on his own.

It was a strange feeling whenever Mustang left for work, the twinge of frustration mingled with sadness in his chest. He sorely hated being left alone in the house now with so much information in his hands—so much to discuss but nobody to discuss it with! It was the bane of every intellectual’s existence. He however refused to talk to the dog; he was not so desperate that he would stoop so low. No; the dog stayed where it was, by the fireplace, curled quietly upon a pillow, watching him work with large imploring canine eyes.

He ignored it.

The clock chimed ten and he broke from his reading stupor, laying his book on the table and marking the page. Today was different from his usual routine; today he had an appointment to keep. It was Thursday, the first of November, and Mustang had scheduled him for a visit to the doctor.

Why the Bastard had to bother was beyond his capability to comprehend—it wasn’t as if he was particularly unhealthy! But Mustang was insistent upon the issue, and Ed saw no good in trying to resist. The Bastard could make his life hell, so he obeyed.

Getting ready took little time, because he was not the Bastard, and when he left, he secured all doors and windows with alchemy just once, because he was not the Bastard. The doctor’s office was on East 2nd, a main street running from Central Plaza and extending in a southwest-northeast direction.
He could, in reality, access it through the inner residential roads instead of taking East 3rd, but with Central, he had little confidence in his navigation skills. Plus, he had an appointment to catch. It would not do to be late, so maybe later, he would explore the inner roads on the way back.

It took exactly twenty minutes to get to the office by tram, just as Mustang had said. He had had to switch cars, but surprisingly it did not cost him that much time. He was almost regretful as he stepped into the threshold’s relative gloom, beautifully gentle as the sunlight was outside.

Since he was a new patient, the nurse explained that he had to go through a full preliminary work-up to establish his baseline. So, quietly, he followed through the basic examination. They weighed him, measured his height, had him fill out a health and family history questionnaire, and guided him through a 24-hour diet recall. They gathered his vitals, after which they led him to a quiet room, where he was instructed to sit on the bed and wait for the doctor to arrive.

The room was painted a neutral pale brown, calming to the eyes—a surprising variation from the traditional pristine white. There was a landscape of woods and a path on the wall, spare decorations to make the place comfortable, a neat row of examination equipment, and a sink with liquid soap and tissue paper on the side.

Somehow it all felt wrong.

He never was comfortable within a hospital—or even just a clinic—and his past experiences with them did not help. In his memory, a sick bay meant amputated limbs, Granny Pinako’s hands dirtied with blood, and the pained cries of once strong unshakable men ringing against his ears. In his memory, a hospital bed meant his amputated limbs, Granny Pinako’s hands dirtied with his blood, and his pained cries echoing in the warm burgeoning darkness.

Uneasily, he fidgeted in his seat.

“Mr. Elric?”

Startling, he took a while to gather his wits before him. “Uhh, yes sir.”

The doctor—a tall man with pale skin, dark eyes, and a mild smile—stepped into the room. “I am Dr. Robert Geralds. I believe this is the first time we’ve met, but Lieutenant Colonel Mustang has told me briefly about you over the telephone.”

“Yes,” Ed was quiet, his unease keeping his answers trim.

“From what I understand, you are under his guardianship, yes? We do have some paperwork that we need him to sign for you.”

“I’ll be sure to pass the message on,” Ed said, watching as the doctor laid out a fresh pad of paper and a pen, all in a neat line. “I’m afraid I haven’t had a primary physician before. I’m not sure what you want me to do.”

“That’s quite alright; I’ll tell you what you need to do,” and again the doctor gave him the mild smile, a tired echo of what once would have been bright and full. Being a doctor was painful and demanding work; at times, it took more than what it gave back. This he knew from Winry’s family. “For now, just sit back and relax. We’ll go through some basic questions about your recent health status—if anything has changed at all, I would like for you to tell me. And I want you to know that everything is, of course, confidential.”

Ed kept his answers succinct. Establishing a medical baseline, he now realized, was a lengthy, bothersome process. Necessary though it was, after a while, it was tiring—just like establishing a
baseline for an alchemical theory. It involved a lot of tedious work: things that he already knew and understood, but had to be restated for the sake of definition. Tedious.

The doctor was very kind, however, and knew how to carry a conversation. Impressed with his intellect as most people were, the doctor never talked down at him as if he was a child, which he liked. He was also praised for his good health and workout regimen, apparently something few people did. The doctor seemed quite surprised at how clear and healthy his eyes were still, considering his hobby of relentless reading. It was a good thing the doctor encouraged, however; education was something the doctor strongly endorsed.

He felt no qualms about sharing his family history—though of course he skirted the part about his mother and stuck to his confabulated story of a train track accident about his arm and leg. The automail was something he still felt awkward talking about, regardless of whom he was talking to.

But there was no harm here; the doctor did not judge. Surely he was not the first automail-attached patient the doctor has had. Surely there were others. So as the doctor quietly examined the ports, he held himself still.

“They are healing quite well, I must say. Two months ago? It hardly seems like it,” the doctor moved behind him.

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“Oh, yes; quite stunning, that’s all. The speed of its healing, I mean.”

Mustang had said that too.

“There’s one other thing that’s quite stunning about you, young man,” the doctor sighed from behind him, as Ed felt the lightest touch of the stethoscope against his back.

“What’s that?” he fervently prayed for no more medical complications; Mustang was already enough of a worrywart as it was. Nonchalant as he seemed, he was quite concerned about what the doctor would say about his general status.

“Your eyes,” the doctor said.

“Sorry?”

“Your eyes, they are quite the stunning colour. I never knew that golden eyes survived to this day. They were said to have gone extinct long before Amestris was established, did you know?”

Ed’s nostrils filled with the tang of chemical—

“Ah, of course you wouldn’t. I didn’t expect you to.”

—and, overwhelmed, he sank into darkness.

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tbc
Notes: Finally, right? A long time coming, this chapter! This is for all the people who have constantly nagged and begged and bothered and nattered to me about updates throughout the silent months I’ve been away from writing and fandom in general. Thank you for your endless patience (or lack thereof), your faithful readership, and your dedication to this fandom. Thank you for remaining with us even after two long years of practically nothing from the authors. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

About the chapter: This is a unique one we have chosen to gift you lovely readers with for an arc-ender. (Reviewer zealousfreak27, who pointed out that not many things happened during the first few chapters: this one should satisfy you!) Hopefully, this chapter will illuminate a lot of pivotal points where Roy’s convictions change—points which, in previous chapters, might have been glossed over or entirely left unexplained due to Edward’s very narrow tunnel vision. Those perceptive readers out there (hint-nudge Sinn-san and icedcandy) might have noticed those spots where Roy changed his stance all of a sudden for no apparent reason. This chapter is for you! After this chapter, we move on to greener pastures: Arc III, Growing Pains. Doesn’t it already sound so promising? So stay with us despite the update lags! We have so much in store!

“A simple child,
That lightly drew its breath,
And feels its life in every limb:
What should it know of death?”

(William Wordsworth)
Roy Mustang first encountered Edward Elric through a letter. The envelope was beaten, worn at the edges. The ink spelling his name was faded by its travel. There was no return address on the back or the front; the letter was meant to be a sink or swim.

Inside was a short missive, quick and abrupt, almost as if whoever wrote it feared inconveniencing the recipient. The script was neat, small, and industrial; the paper, immaculate and clean. There was not a single line out of place, and the letter would have been perfect, if not for the twin names signed at the bottom. It said, Edward and Alphonse Elric, sons of Hohenheim, in somewhat disjointed script. Roy thought about how old they would be. From the sound of the letter, fourteen, maybe fifteen—but he knew from Hohenheim himself that the eldest, Edward Elric, was exactly nine and a half years younger than him. Which would make the boy barely eleven years old.

No less could be expected from the son of a brilliant man who had pioneered a great number of things in the history of alchemy. Hohenheim was no State Alchemist, not even a published researcher, but he was a well-connected man, with plenty of influential friends within the alchemic circles of Amestris and beyond. Roy was acquainted with a fair number of these friends: every last one of them only had words of high regard for Hohenheim’s alchemic brilliance. It would only be logical if that brilliance carried on to the sons.

He looked again over the letter and closely studied the tone of the script. There was agitation, excitement, and fear—all tempered, of course, by a curt politeness that seemed a bit forced. Hohenheim was always a mild-mannered person, peace-loving and never given to war, but perhaps some of his underlying passion had passed on to the sons without enough of his restraint. The very thought sent a shiver down the back of Roy’s neck: Hohenheim’s brilliance combined with an unstoppable intensity for the pursuit of knowledge—indeed, his ideal alchemist.

At first, he did not act upon the letter. Though his curiosity was piqued, there was nothing he could give these two young boys. He had neither the knowledge of Hohenheim’s whereabouts nor the intention to find the man, not when Hohenheim exerted such effort to disappear; he refused to make the trip to Resembool if it would only ruin the family’s peace. It was something Hohenheim had left to protect. So Roy restrained his curiosity and kept busy with his work, thankfully now reposted to Central and far away from the temptation of an easy train stop to say hello. East City would have been too close; his control (already admittedly undermined by his frustration at the lack of worthy intellectual stimulation in the abysmal backwaters of the East) would have inevitably crumbled.

It wasn’t until Maes found the letter on his desk at home that he took action at all. Over the days it had become his pastime to study the ink on the paper as if it held some hidden message he needed to decode. Ever the nosy bastard, Maes had read the letter for himself, subsequently took great pleasure in deriding Roy’s new “obsession” (whatever the man was talking about, he of course had no idea), and then said, “Are you sure you want to sit here and do nothing about these kids? If they’re half as smart as they seem, they would have sent letters out to Hohenheim’s other associates. Even the seedier ones~”

Suffice to say that Maes’ sidelong remark unceremoniously shoved him off of his comfortable spectator’s perch. Hohenheim had several questionable contacts, not all of them confined within the familiar political cesspits of the military. Roy wasn’t keen on these boys being exploited by the hands of power-hungry mongrels like them. Not to say that he himself was not power-hungry, because he was; but he prided himself with a more refined taste—a certain amount of finesse—which most of his opponents he found in desperate need. He would not sully Hohenheim’s sons for the sake of the pursuit of petty power.
The following day, no doubt much to Maes’ great amusement, Riza would find the Lieutenant Colonel Mustang’s office desk vacant if for a short notice of temporary leave. His men, of course, were loyal and true, and could implicitly be trusted to valiantly face the temper of the woman’s guns in his stead.

Bloodshed.

He had immersed himself in enough war to notice it from afar. Such things were unforgettable, staining old memories with futility and its accompanying despair. The thickness of it hung around the prim house, muting the off-white fences and red-rimmed windows, a warning and a beckon all at once. The skies responded to the beckon, inking the landscape in a darkness that bled into those unfortunate enough to bear witness. The winds were howling—a low and whistling rumble underneath the quiet, riotous roll of the thunderclouds. As the summer storm brewed over Resembool, so did it under Roy’s skin.

What he found upon arrival in this small, idyllic corner of the countryside was at once a nightmare, at once a miracle: an event with two facets, with two possible paths—and the decision rested on little Edward Elric. Edward, the older boy, was Hohenheim’s son indeed; all doubts were shorn from Roy’s mind by the boy’s overwhelming will and alchemical brilliance. But what that brilliance had just achieved was something Roy’s mind, even clear of doubt, found hard to grasp.

He stood over the last step leading down into the basement, now tasked with the chore of removing the evidence of Edward’s mess. On the floor were pools of blood cloaking precise white lines. He walked around them, around the massive and purposeful array, observing the symbols of Edward’s theory. What was it about this circle—what special aspect or innovation—that made the transmutation succeed? What was unique about this particular reaction that eluded hundreds of years’ worth of research by brilliant alchemical minds? Something apparently so unique and perhaps so unexpectedly fundamental an eleven-year-old could wholly comprehend while wizened old researchers struggled under its weight—and Roy could not see it.

He couldn’t see it. He had seen plenty of experimental human transmutation arrays, even engineered a fair share of his own in his darkest moments after Ishbal, but this particular piece was no different from all of them. (At least, as he understood it in its basic composition, this circle comprised of the same fundamental building blocks—but then again, he reminded himself. Then again, his understanding—along with the rest of the alchemical world’s—has already been undermined by one dismembered child at present restive a few houses away.)

Roy paused. Standing there in the gloom, he felt a great presence, tasted it in the very air he breathed. There were no words to describe it, only the easy and heady crackle of his alchemy feeding the lamplight. His most recent acquaintance with residual energy of such palpable substance, not to mention sheer mass, was on the fire-scorched and blood-soaked streets of Ishbal. This comparison gave him no comfort.

Every alchemist of any worth to his title knew of residual energy, knew that the size and scope of a reaction was proportional to the amount of its detritus. The energy hung in the atmosphere and remained for a period of time relative to its total mass. If the reaction in question was of respectable quality, the energy was as heady and pure as honey; if otherwise, the refuse became comparable to slugs depositing slime.

In the great conquest of early Amestris to secure and construct the Briggs fortress of the north, the
military had used (simple and unimaginative) alchemists who were proficient in large-scale mass-production transmutation (such as the making of steel from mined ore and the preparation of edible food from available organic material) in the efforts of the war. These alchemists were conscripted to efficiently supply the infantry with supplies and rations by performing the transmutations as close as logistically possible to the battleground. Whichever combat-designated alchemist posted on the battlefield then drew upon the residual energy resulting from these massive processes to enhance their own reaction. The results, of course, were stunning—chemically. These processes radiated such power that it was commonplace to find combat alchemists undergoing withdrawal when removed from it. (Roy knew a handful who suffered symptoms after the war.) But little could be done toward prevention, for alchemy customarily siphoned surrounding energy into its purposes, sometimes as if the alchemy itself was sentient.

Such was what Roy’s alchemy invariably did in the presence of Edward’s genius. The energy met him eagerly when he had snapped at the top of the steps to light a fire. The fire had sparked into being with the most minimal of efforts, and to maintain it cost him none. If such energy was visible, Roy knew it would have hung around the room, heavy as a roll of thick white fog.

Drawing more of it into his fingers, he snapped. Ropes of fire scorched the floor, bathing his nose with the scent of burning blood. He snapped and snapped again, letting the finest of tendrils incinerate the symbols beneath his feet. He hoped Edward knew this circle by heart, knew its theory and could reproduce it, because he intended to leave nothing behind. Roy refused to risk the discovery falling into unknown, unfriendly hands.

When he finished, he took a slip of paper from the nearby desk and scribbled a quick circle. It felt silly drawing such an unrefined and simple array after having been stunned by Edward’s genius within these four walls, but he did it anyway, placing it on the floor. It activated with a push of a finger. The floor shone smooth of scorch marks, clean as if a little boy hadn’t lost his arm and leg on its very innocent surface. Vision always lied; plenty of things were never as they seemed.

Roy supposed he should go back now, before the little boy woke again. But he did not feel ready. He was only now beginning to feel the visceral shift of his perceptions, his view of the world and its possibilities. Shock approached with the acceptance of what Edward Elric had achieved.

Human transmutation was reality. And he was there to see its results.

As he walked away from the house, having locked its doors and sealed its windows, the skies convulsed around him in the throes of a storm. For the moment, he hunched and hurried towards cover, but he felt a kinship with the tempest as he began to chart his plans. This downpour would pale in comparison to the storms this event would awaken—and he intended to be right in the very midst of it all.

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“That which does not kill me, makes me stronger.”

( Friedrich Nietzsche )

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He returned to Central and gave the situation some meditative thought. By the window he sat all night, nursing a glass of whiskey even as the evening smouldered over Central. There wasn’t one whiff of a breeze outside.
Against the pane of glass, thrown open to ventilate his rooms, he watched his reflection and he remembered the boy. He kept on seeing himself in Edward’s eyes, suspended in two shining pools of gold, himself dark and tiny, in fine detail, the lines about his mouth, everything there, as if the boy’s eyes were two pieces of amber that might capture and hold him intact. It was suffocating; their sheer intensity burned, so much like the fire he controlled—except unlike his flames, this he was not certain he could tether.

He glanced back out at the city, a city of shadows outlined in grey. How like a mirror Edward’s face had been. He remembered himself in the boy, when he was yet young and full of the optimism that came with innocence. That innocence was shed, now. One’s eyes had to peel open when faced with the horrors of war.

How long had he stayed with the boy? A day, maybe two? But it seemed so much longer, so much larger a span of time. Now Edward was an immense figure invading his thoughts, and for the life of him, he could not figure out why.

All he knew for certain was that one day, in the near future, the boy would come to him, and he would open his arms. Despite the inconveniences of having a dependent, Roy knew he was not going to resist. (Maes, if he were present, would question his very ability to do so, faced with the current set of circumstances.) He had already planted the seed of doubt, that one seed that awakened in Edward an awareness of the world out here in its entirety, entirely accessible and all too tempting. The alchemist in Edward would never be able to resist. One day, Roy told himself, one day he would have the opportunity to know Edward Elric in and out.

Throughout his thoughts, he refused to acknowledge the guilt disquieting his heart, for if he did, he would send the boy back home where he truly belonged. He would tell Edward to stay with his brother and mother, rebuild their family, and remain as Hohenheim left them and wanted them to be.

But no. No. Edward was much too precious an investment for that. Should Edward want for guidance, Roy was equipped to provide that. Should Edward want for companionship, Roy thought himself an excellent friend. And should Edward want for someone to call family, Roy would offer his presence—and should they truly become a family, well, Roy didn’t think that was such a bad idea.

The day came far sooner than he had expected, when he received a missive on the dull hours of work. He had been dozing over the papers, when a puzzled Havoc walked in, a slip of telegraph transcription in hand. It read, “I’m coming to Central,” and if he were not accustomed to thinking fast on his feet, he would have missed the cue. It could only come from one conceivable source, the only person that should ever bother to inform him of a trip to the city, and already he could feel the tingle of anticipation low in his spine. There was nothing he could do to help the unbidden smirk blooming over his face.

“Crosscheck train schedules for trips arriving from Resembool through the fastest possible route,” he instructed Havoc, shaking the cloak of sleep from its perch around his shoulders. Rest was elusive these days, if for the memory of Edward’s screams. They were shaping up to be as bad as the night terrors he brought home from the desert. Only his extent of experience with such dreams gave him leverage not to fall into the trap, and the thought of how much more the boy should be suffering this ordeal humbled him enough to stem all complaints. He had no right, none at all.

Escaping from Riza was Hard Work, but most definitely worth the reward of watching the little
blond boy step off the busy train. The boy’s hair was done up in a simple tie uncannily reminiscent of the missing Van Hohenheim, and Roy could not help a small smile. Edward looked, for all extents and purposes, a lost child with nowhere to go. That the boy considered him a trustworthy enough of an ally to run to engulfed his chest in the same blooming warmth he had puzzled over for so many nights after returning from the countryside. He watched the boy for a moment longer—aimlessly stepping about, weaving to and fro between clumsy human bodies and strewn luggage—before he approached.

“Well, this is certainly earlier than I’d expected,” he said when Edward lingered within earshot. The boy stiffened, alarmed, as if caught in some untoward activity. Roy thought of precisely how the boy could have afforded on his own an express ticket from Resembool—the thought was tucked aside. Edward turned sullenly on his spot and gave him a scowl, formidable and hawkish despite the small stature. “Hello to you too, Lieutenant Colonel Bastard.”

Roy heard Havoc choke back a startled laugh. There weren’t many in this city willing to offend with such crude language a military officer of Roy’s station and calibre.

But Roy himself was delighted beyond measure. “Come, follow me,” he beckoned with a little smile, making for the north side exit where they were closely parked. It was visible how Edward assessed the situation, lightning-quick golden eyes passing over Havoc and the exit and the station and the people around him. Perhaps the boy had had some combat training, after all. “It is best if we don’t linger outside for too long. We can talk later, at my house.” After a short pause, out of consideration, Roy added, “Unless you have someplace else to go?”

Quietly and almost meekly, Edward said, “No.”

Again, the bloom of warmth. Roy nodded. “You can stay at my place for as long as you need. In fact, it’s probably better that way.” If anything, he refused to have the boy lodge at some inn or board where he was at risk. Talents like Edward needed careful cultivation, and Central was not a place conducive to such—or, at the very least, not the side of Central Edward would no doubt have to acquaint himself with if the boy was forced to survive on his own.

No; penniless students and wandering apprentices were best kept away from the boy until he developed his own form of thinking. They hung around the cheaper renting rooms on the backside of the academic parks. Roy expected Edward to gravitate toward the libraries and colleges, and the students there brought naught but trouble. They were poison to new growth, laden with a conglomeration of old and new ideas learned but never fully understood, with anarchists and socialists and sophists among them plenty. They would foul Edward’s freethinking. For now, the best recourse was to have the boy absorb as much information as he wanted and was able, free to explore the world for what it was. Roy would take it upon himself to teach the boy how to critically think.

When they settled into the car, he introduced Havoc. “He was the one who delivered your telegram,” Roy explained. “It was almost thrown into the bin—you should put a name next time.”

“You told me to be discreet,” argued the boy. “I was trying to be discreet. It’s not my fault if your staff can’t even recognize relevant messages from irrelevant ones.”

“I’m coming to Central’ is hardly enough to tell anyone anything, Edward. Most especially without a name,” Roy smirked, shifting in delight at the boy’s spirited conversation. “If I hadn’t anticipated that you would come, I would have totally ignored it.”

“What—you anticipated that I would run away from home?” the boy was incredulous now, and Roy
“Well, no—but I did know that you wouldn’t be able to resist visiting Central for long. I hadn’t expected you would run away from home. In fact, I would’ve thought that would be the last thing you would do.” The very idea sounded ludicrous to Roy—but as the boy pressed lips together and gazed outside, understanding dawned. It was sudden, but it made sense: if Hohenheim was capable of leaving all that he loved behind to chase after some mirage of his alchemy that only he could see, why should his son be incapable of the very same thing?

Roy did not want to presume, of course, that this was the reason Edward left his family. But it was a hard battle not to do so. The questions he itched to ask stumbled into each other at the back of his throat, but he held them and allowed Edward his silence, at least for now. Running head first into such spirited discussions never brought desirable results; even he, master of words and his composure, has in the past lost himself in the whirlwind of uncontrollable confrontation. Such treatment was not something he wanted to dispense Edward, not with so much promise and potential at stake.

Fingers laced and reclined in his seat, he followed Edward’s eyes outside. As ever, the growing obsession consumed his awareness: what did the boy think and see, Roy wondered, looking at Central’s streets, so removed, so alien, from Resembool’s small farmland lanes? The scene was, to Roy, worn and familiar; beloved, but common. But Edward had never seen this before. What a privilege it would be to be able to hear Edward’s thoughts and ideas! He would work hard for the one day that would come when they would be comfortable enough with the other, as friends, to approach such things in the fashion of words.

He resolved to ask the boy about his reasons for leaving home over dinner. It would be a start—a big step for a start. But big steps were better suited for personalities like theirs. If Edward truly did leave home for his alchemy, Roy’s respect and adoration would only kindle further, because he fully believed in alchemy as a just cause—and, once upon a time, long ago before the horrors of Ishbal, he himself left the comfort of home to pursue a dream of fire and power.

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Work the following day brought narrow inquisition from the eyes of a hawk. She stood beside him as he relinquished his coat, wordless inquiries burning at her fingertips and, if not addressed, at the point of her gun.

“He’s a guest,” he surrendered, raising his voice for the ears of his men, too. “A most esteemed one. Son of one of my mentors in the day. You’d know the name,” he told Riza. “Edward Elric, son of Hohenheim.”

Riza retreated, implications tight within her grasp. Her father, Berthold Hawkeye, was Roy’s primary alchemical mentor. Berthold Hawkeye had also been, in life, one of Hohenheim’s closest and most trusted friends. During the span of time that Roy had lived with the Hawkeyes to learn about alchemy and the world, he had seen more of Hohenheim than he wagered Edward and Alphonse ever saw of the man. Hohenheim spent many days visiting with Berthold and his small household of three. It was at that time when Roy had acquainted himself with Hohenheim’s brilliance and thus kindled the dream to be as powerful and wise. After the war, he often wondered if he had gone about it the wrong way around.

“The boy’s an alchemist, of course,” he said, continuing his explanation. “He’s here to learn; staying at my place for the while.” He prepared for coffee himself before Riza could venture to try. She was as incredulous as he.
better to brew tea, as her coffee was a tad stale and a touch too bitter—not that he’d ever say. Again, certain opinions were better left unsaid when in the presence of potentially punitive powers.

“Better than letting him lodge up North 1st,” Falman remarked, echoing Roy’s exact thoughts the previous day. “That place has some nasty corners.”

“The young ones are always the fiercest, as they say.” Maes swept into the workspace, heading straight for Roy. “What is this I’m hearing about a stray kitten you’ve picked up from the streets?”

“He’s hardly so tame,” Roy scoffed. “The boy’s got himself an excessively sharp tongue in exchange for all his shy bones. I’ll bring him over for a meal sometime soon; he’ll like Gracia, I think.”

“Of course he’ll like Gracia! Everyone likes Gracia! She’s everything likeable about the world!”

“Yes, of course, Maes—but more importantly,” he cut into his friend’s impending tirade, “I need you to keep this quiet.” He turned to his men. “All of you. I can’t have top brass hearing about Edward’s background. Hohenheim is quite famous among the alchemic trade. The younger ones might not know him, but the older ones surely will. I’d like to keep him away from such things until he’s ready and willing to take it on. It’s nothing particularly top secret—but you understand, I’m sure. The military doesn’t much care for age weighed against an alchemist’s usefulness.”

Maes could only smile. “Oh, it does care for age, dear old friend; I rather think it prefers them young.”

“Precisely,” Roy pronounced, heavy and slick as the fall of an axe. Sharp, it sheared away further points of dispute. Maes’ sidelong jab at his military debut—far too early, at far too young an age—fell severed, unacknowledged, to the side.

The rest of the day was a humdrum of the mundane, made only faster to pass by the business of his thoughts. They meandered, for the most part, but eventually returned to Edward, like trains crisscrossing the country but at night returning to the station to rest. He thought of the previous night and this morning; he thought of Edward’s awe. It was a startling change—a welcome one, for it did a wonder to refresh his nerves. Most people, when they saw his house, were struck with the envious kind of awe. On his few friends’ part, there was no awe at all; only a resigned, or sometimes appraising, indulgent smile.

But Edward—Edward—approached all things the same. Edward approached everything with the fiercest and most sincere hunger for knowledge, openness and alacrity few souls could boast to possess. The awe that fluttered, unashamed, on Edward’s face was the type of wondering, delighted awe that a child with a ravenous sweet tooth might put on, were he positioned in the midst of a prime confectionery. Edward held nothing of envy, of disdain or disregard. No; Edward was truly and honestly in awe of what he kept and collected at home.

The people who understood what he had spent years and fortunes to attain books, relics, scrolls, and such items—were as few and far between as trusted lifelong friends. Edward was now among them. To don the same kind of awe as Edward required a keen appreciation for the value of knowledge and the effort it demanded to manifest. Roy could not have wished for a better person to invite into his home; Edward understood him, or at the very least was geared towards understanding, and Roy would be lying if meeting that understanding was not a relief.

It had been a long time, he thought to himself as he left the office that afternoon, since the last time he had been so eager for company at home.
When he arrived, what he found was quite expected. Edward was there, supine on the couch, face half-concealed by the squared edges of a book. The tome was familiar, no doubt a piece of his library. Hardbound and thick with pages of aged papyrus, they looked perfectly at home within Edward’s young hands. The boy, however, failed to notice his arrival until Roy stood close and prodded for attention.

“Do make sure to lock the doors if you’re going to be floating off into your own world like that,” he relinquished his jacket on the chair by his desk.

“Yes, Mommy.” Roy could easily conjure Ed’s exasperated face.

“I’m serious, Edward. Central is a far cry from Resembool. There are troubled souls here who are not above breaking and entering,” and he knew it, quite intimately, from his short time renting a space outside of military barracks. Some people liked to think that being employed as a soldier meant trunks stuffed and full of gold. Not that he was particularly poor even then, but his money was in the bank, as most persons with command of logic would have their money kept. There weren’t very many of them, logical folk. Fortune had smiled upon him as always; only the few of his possessions that were cheap and dispensable were taken by the thieves. They had no notion of the value of his antiques and rusting relics and piles of books strewn about the place. They were not alchemists.

“Let ‘em come,” Edward petulantly grumbled, grounding Roy’s peripatetic thoughts with gravity only the boy could command at such an age. “Not like I can’t defend myself.”

And such mettle! Few would be so confident. Perhaps it was his youth, but Edward had a fierce and daring spirit. It also affirmed Roy’s suspicions that Edward had received combat training. All for the better, he thought to himself, mindful of the dangers lurking Central’s streets. Plenty would be willing to swallow Edward whole if they knew of the promise his talents were worth.

“You know,” Edward began, “this book has some rather interesting theories.” The book in question was the same lighter tome, gold-gilded and beautiful upon closer inspection. Roy could not remember ever reading the thing; higher up in the military’s pecking order meant he was getting very busy (not that the slave work ever varied). Such was evident now, as he stacked paperwork on the table where he could find space. “It talks about sub-atomic theory,” Edward was explaining, “but this thing had to have been written before the age of common sense and healthy handwashing. Makes absolutely no sense except for the part where it really does.”

“Hm,” Roy paused. “This is... a Persian book? Or Xingese?” The papyrus pointed Persian.

“Persian, I think,” Edward confirmed, fingers—almost lovingly—tracing the inked lines barely faded by age. “Golds and greens. Where in the world do you find these books?”

“I have contacts.”

“Introduce me.”

Roy had to smile. “One day,” he promised, indulgence brimming over with familiar warmth. There were very few things he could resist the boy. He wondered, half in contempt of such gentle sentiment, if this was how it felt to have a favoured son. Leaving his children as he did must have given Hohenheim unimaginable grief. “I don’t have education in the old Persian language, but this looks faintly similar to old Xingese.”
“You can read Xingese?” again, the awe. “Teach me,” the boy demanded, eyes both set upon what he wanted. Roy had to admire that will, that focus.

“We’ll make time for it,” again, another promise. Perhaps he was getting ahead of himself; time was scarce enough as most his days went. But Edward needed him and the guidance he could offer. Roy took it as repayment for Hohenheim’s patience with him when he was Ed’s age, for he was just as inquisitive, and relentless, even ruthless, for knowledge. (He could recall with much fondness, for instance, several incidences involving himself, Hohenheim, some notebooks detailing sensitive forbidden alchemy, and a handful of exquisite photographs as his pitiless blackmail material.)

They ate and over dinner talked about the book. Ed was a true scholar from the way he picked theories apart. Roy was continually amazed by the boy’s aptitude for alchemy; basic theorems and concepts he skipped while most students would take time to digest them. And even as he skipped steps, he kept an unshakable grasp of the big picture with but instinct inborn. There was no other word for it: Ed was a natural.

Still a child, though, Roy told himself as Ed frowned upon the felling of Persia as an empire and along with it its alchemy. Or perhaps entirely unconcerned about politics and its trappings. If it were so, Roy would rejoice.

Power and greed, more than anything, drove the world as Roy saw it. Some romanticists would beg to differ and insist on love, pure and simple. But what was greed if not love unbound and overabundant? What was power if not the capability to command love, and through it, obedience? Indeed, most dictators who elbowed their way into power failed to command much of love from the people around them and the people subject to them. But the desire for power arguably stemmed from the one common root each dictator and ruler had within themselves: love. Love for money, love for fame, love for glory, for destruction, for excitement and adventure. Love for others, which often equated to love for oneself. It was simple.

Perhaps because of this simplicity, Ed failed to see it. Ed seemed to have a hard time of grasping small, simple things. But Ed himself was driven by the very same substance. Indeed torn, instead of merely driven, by this substance Ed could not see. His love for his family and his love for his alchemy: two forces overwhelming when united (as was the case with his resurrected mother), but now directed towards different goals. One won out when pitched against the other.

“So if your gloves get wet, what do you do?”

Roy paused and regarded Ed. Ed looked back: open, steady, eager, true.

This boy is practically ignorant in the ways of alchemical etiquette! One doesn’t simply ask another alchemist for their secrets, silly child; it is not done. Only fools would stoop to such flagrant disrespect of privacy and intellectual property. Only fools, which in other matters you may not be, but in this you apparently are. Not that Roy would ever say this aloud, but his thoughts were veering and the wine was dampening his otherwise sharp control. He would have to do something about this.
“You need an initial spark to set off the fire, right? That’s why you use that cloth. But what if they get wet? I’m just asking.”

And since you’re Edward, I’ll believe you, Roy resumed his meal. “A smoother and altogether better attempt at subversion, Edward, but there’s still plenty of room for improvement. Don’t hope to beat me at this game anytime soon.”

Ed scowled. “Answer the question, Bastard.”

“Spares,” Roy had to chuckle at the ease with which Ed’s ire was ignited. “I have spares on hand. In a waterproof case.”

Roy could practically see the cogs turning in Ed’s brain. It certainly wasn’t a fail-proof backup, especially in the most emergent instances, but Roy had methods. He had survived this world far too long not to have methods.

“Can I see your circles?”

Again, no etiquette. Roy resisted the urge to click his teeth and instead handed a glove over. Immediately, the boy began poring over it, over the deceitfully simplistic dual-glyph circle. After a moment’s silence, the boy said, “Have you ever thought of adding a drying component in the circle? It would be really easy to add, since you already have the molecular manipulation part down.”

“Good idea,” Roy hummed in quiet assent. “I’ll consider it.” He tucked the glove away. They both resumed their meals, Roy tingling in acute anticipation. His senses were attuned to Edward, watching the boy deep in thought, watching and waiting if the boy would notice anything else.

But soon dinner was finished and the matter of his alchemy was left untouched. Roy felt somewhat disappointed. Ed had been given a close look, a chance to dissect Roy’s alchemy, but he had missed the important clue. Did the boy think that the thought of a drying component never crossed Roy’s mind before? Of course it had; but the very nature of his technique prevented him from excessive additions. If Ed had looked closer, he would have surely noticed.

Not tonight, perhaps; and it was too early, anyway. It was too early to divulge trade secrets with each other, with barely a week behind them in this new life together. Roy was keeping his silence, but he had noticed that Ed himself had yet to show alchemy in action. For all that they discussed theories every night, as if to quench a long-denied need for such intimate intellectual companionship, Ed had yet to show any form of actual practice. Which naturally only beckoned to Roy’s budding and unhealthy obsession. Ed was hiding too.

Roy almost wanted to ask, except he held his mouth in check. He refused to set a terrible example; alchemists did not ask other alchemists for secrets like so. He would have to be patient. He would have to wait. It was only polite to wait for one such opportunity to observe the alchemy in action from the sidelines, without directly asking, without confronting Ed with the uncomfortable decision of what and what not to disclose. Even though Ed had just confronted him with it a little while earlier. Roy fancied himself the bigger man (as he should be, with nearly a decade of experience, and a foot and some inches, over Ed’s young little head).

Perhaps, he told himself, he doesn’t intend to hide, like how I don’t truly intend to hide. Perhaps, he told himself, he has only yet to find the right time and manner to show me, to make me understand. Or perhaps he is waiting for me to figure it out myself—like how I am expecting him to figure it out himself.

It would be a few more days until Roy would see Ed’s alchemy—a few more days until he would
discover that try hard though he might, he would never have come close to an accurate guess.

Roy had to keep himself from forcefully re-inspecting the boy’s hands; there had to be a trick, some sort of catch, like his gloves, or tattoos, or a slip of hidden paper. But he knew Edward. He knew that Edward spoke the truth. A seemingly impossible truth—but was it not this boy who had performed the impossible and brought a dead human back to breathing, beating life? There was neither trick here nor catch. It was alchemy without a circle.

Without a circle!

Or a physical one, at the very least, from how he’d explained it. His thoughts were still ricocheting around the insides of his cranium, and rank adrenalin-surging confusion coursed through his veins like some vile drug. I can’t stand this, Roy thought to himself. I must do something. He was not one to pace, but he now battled with the unbearable urge to do so.

Returning upstairs was a short affair. With zeal returned after a long time of torpor, he made for the bookshelves, titles on his tongue. Vividly he could recall the little room in which he sat with Edward back in that house in Resembool. At the time, he had felt this itch as well, unrelenting until he had burned through two days of extra leave to immerse himself in research. Riza had been furious, and he had only found crumbs for clues, but it was such a refreshing feeling to return to the grind of alchemy once again that he barely minded. The Gate was that much a fascinating and elusive topic.

That Gate, he thought, should have something to do with this. It was at present the most feasible explanation. Edward did not mention it this time, but had spoken of it the first time after succeeding in Trisha Elric’s revival from the dead. Perhaps the boy was attempting to protect information, the same way that Hohenheim had done when Roy had known him. But no matter; Roy was capable of researching on his own. Ed would tell him in due time if the boy wished for him to know, but for now, Roy was on his own.

From the handful of things he had managed to find—a smattering of Persian whisperings, Xingese folklore, and disperse Romanesque sorcery—the Gate was capable of many impossible things. Being a conduit for power, it never ran out, and over time acquired a store of knowledge so vast the best of all alchemists easily drowned in its depths. Perhaps, upon meeting this Gate face to face, Edward had managed to glean information and now put it to use. It was not impossible. (At the moment, Roy reflected, very few things were impossible.)

It was strange to think of this Gate as a being with a voice and a face. It was even stranger to think of how it would have been to meet such a... thing. (Should he call it a god? A deity? A supreme supernatural being? Roy could very well be illiterate in face of such theistic faith.) But the knowledge—the knowledge—and to think that Edward seen it—twice—

Roy’s toes curled into his carpet, plush and soft underneath his feet. Somewhere in between the Gate and gods, he had gotten lost in his thoughts and failed to notice that he was sat. He had a book in hand but his eyes weren’t reading; he was storm-shaken and taken with the ideas spinning round his head. How long had it been since he felt this sort of excitement? He had stopped searching—stopped longing—for knowledge the way he used to, the way an alchemist was always supposed to. Since Ishbal, he had stopped being a true alchemist, his love for the science having lost against the horrors that he’d seen.

But Edward was reminding him of the other side. That other side of alchemy that Hohenheim had
shown him with his simple transmutations, simple efforts to turn useless things into useful things. Broken things into a working whole. How had he forgotten? Alchemy was also capable of wonderful things. No—alchemy was a wonderful thing, at the very heart of it; alchemy was life.

How had he forgotten?

*One is all, and all is one.*

From the depths of memory, Berthold Hawkeye’s eyes stared straight into his soul. *Until you understand this,* his master had told him, *you are not an alchemist. Until you understand this,* Roy.

He looked across the room at Edward, who was sat on the floor drawing a circle. Edward knew nothing of Ishbal, of his past, and of his hardships coming in the future. But he had no right to say that Ed knew nothing of horrors that could freeze a man’s soul; Ed had his own fair share, much fresher and deep-set than Roy’s old scars. And yet here this boy was, single-mindedly forging through near-indecipherable centuries-old theories, seemingly without a single care in the world but for his pursuit of knowledge and the dissolution of the mystery.

Roy was a proud man, but before this boy, Roy was thoroughly humbled.

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“You match each other well,” his friend said from somewhere behind him. Maes was echoing his wife, it seemed, but with a more deliberate and malicious approach. Maes liked peeling at Roy’s ever-present façade—especially when Roy shrieked and struggled like a cat whose tail had been pulled. (In return, Roy took great pleasure in the veritably rare chance to hold precious information—usually Maes’ territory—over his best friend’s unsuspecting head. At least, in his indignation Roy shrieked like a cat, which was an infinitely more elegant animal than the monkey Maes, when out-informed, aspired to emulate.)

“So your lovely wife has told us,” Roy replied, unwilling to let Maes take the lead yet again. The nosy bastard already knew far too much. “I won’t deny her words. After all, a woman knows best.”

“Yes, Gracia knows best!” Maes exclaimed. Roy wanted to tell him there were other women in the world, but refrained from doing so. His friend was as blind in this respect as Roy was not. Roy was caught between amused and thankful. “In fact, since Gracia knows best, you should probably let her talk to Ed more; that ought to ease his transition, don’t you think? Poor kid’s been through quite a lot from what you’ve told me.”

“I was about to ask of you the same thing,” Roy put a dish away and began rinsing another one. “It won’t do for him to become a complete recluse; he needs people if he’s to grow.”

Maes laughed. “Look at you, old friend! Such a model parent! Why, if I’d have known you’d beat me to it, I wouldn’t have wagered a bet with Breda!” An elbow found its way into Maes’ side; the Intelligence officer barely rescued a plate from shattering. “Oy, this thing cost a good fortune, you know!”

“Then be sure to handle it with steady hands, old friend. We wouldn’t want your gorgeous wife missing her china now, would we?” Roy smiled as he rinsed his hands under the tap. He turned and leaned against the counter as Maes dried the rest of the dishes, listening to Ed and Gracia’s quiet laughter coming from next door. Ed needed this, he knew; Ed needed companionship beyond one person. Human beings needed community to thrive, so Roy would give him this. Maes and Gracia
were both trustworthy; Roy would trust Maes with his life. If it was in their hands, he could be sure that no harm would come to Ed. He could be sure—

“There’s that face again,” Maes said, “that grim face you like to wear when you’re contemplating on the sacrifices you need to make to ensure that you don’t lose any of your pieces on the board.”

Roy cursed the heavens for giving him such a meddlesome best friend.

“How do you intend to survive as the King with his kingdom still intact if you intend to cover for all manner of harm that will, despite your best efforts, come upon your subjects?” Maes crossed arms and frowned at him. “Beyond that, how do you intend to run your kingdom if you don’t let the people around you grow into their roles and learn to do their job properly? Roy, there’s no need to protect everyone from everything. Truly. You can have faith enough in us to do our jobs if you can have faith enough in yourself to protect all of us alone.”

Roy sighed and shook his head.

“Come on, start talking,” Maes prodded. “You know I’ll eventually drag it out of you. Make it easier on yourself; spare both of us the blackmail battle.”

That engendered a grimace. Blackmail battles were the worst with Maes as an opponent. He should have never introduced Maes to his most frequented establishments. “Fine, damn you,” he seized the glass of blue-label scotch from Maes’ hand. It was too bright and warm an afternoon for scotch, but he could not care. He deserved the alcohol; here he was being bullied, after all! “I’m worried about the boy. He’s too damn precious—and too damn blind. I’m wondering if luring him to Central was too premature an action.”

“And if you hadn’t, where would he be?” the ice in Maes’ glass tinkled as he lifted his shoulders in a shrug. Ed’s happy chatter was audible through the open door. “I doubt he’d have stayed at home, seeing how much of an alchemist’s soul he has. He’s just like you when you were younger, back in our Academy days: single-minded and stubborn to a fault. I think that’s why you match so well. We always retain the child we were inside of us, you know.”

“And that part of me is screaming caution into my ears, Maes, that’s why,” Roy said, looking out. Central sprawled around and away from them, a world so wide it had drowned Roy in its depths years ago. “Ed reminds me of myself. I don’t want him to go through what I went through. You and I both know there are things in this world that are better left alone.”

“He reminds you of you, but he isn’t you, Roy. And no matter what you do, you can never change the fact that he needs a world to live in. As highly as you think of yourself, you can’t be that world on your own. You have to let him grow.”

Roy downed his scotch and bit at the ice that met his lips. It felt good against the waning summer heat.

“Or will you sacrifice his growth for his absolute safety? Because if you will, I’ll have to pay Havoc a fine sum of money, and that would cause me trou—ow! That hurts, you wicked old man!”

“One of these days, you will have to stop making me a thoroughbred for your betting games,” Roy retrieved his foot and turned to the table for more scotch. “No, I won’t sacrifice his growth. You can collect your money from Havoc tomorrow, rest assured.”

“Actually, from both Havoc and Fuery—ow, damn it, Roy! How do you suppose to make a good parent with such abusive habits?” Maes hobbled and nursed his throbbing foot. Roy knew one
precise spot where if he stepped on it hard enough, the pain would shoot straight up to Maes’ spine. Such were the benefits of having gone to war together: he knew Maes’ old wounds very well.

They lapsed in silence for a while, uninterrupted but for occasional laughter next door and Maes’ mumbled whines. Outside, their unified backyard simmered under the heat. Summer aspired to colour everything in the various hues of the sun; the grass had long since surrendered its green to the vicious invasion of yellows and browns. Sweat was pearling on Roy’s neck as it did on his little glass of slow-moving poison. If they were not to die of bullet or blade, he and Maes would surely suffer the painful death of a failed liver. Though perhaps not quite as failed as Havoc’s liver would be; for one, they weren’t dumped quite so often.

“He’s a smart boy; he should do fine,” Roy said now, more to himself than to Maes or anybody else. “And if he needs any help, I’ll be here.”

“That, my friend,” Maes said, “is the burning spirit. You and I both know there are things in this world a person will face no matter the path he takes. Part of the growing pains, Roy. Perhaps it’s best to let him ease in with guidance into what he cannot avoid.”

“A tall order, Maes.”

“Not any taller than becoming Führer,” and Roy had to curse again for Maes’ infallible sense. One could only be so annoying, surely! For a little while, he contemplated on scorching Hughes’ head. It was a very entertaining image. “Besides, looking at that kid, you’d have to be death himself to be able to keep him from the things he wants to see.”

Roy had to laugh. He put the empty glass down and smiled knowingly at his friend. “Somehow, Maes, I doubt that even death could stop him.”

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“Nisi credideritis, non intelligetis.”
‘Unless you believe, you will not understand.’
( Isaiah 9:7, The Holy Bible )

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It was one of those rare days when he retired from work early. He left Headquarters ahead of Maes and most other men, unconfined by traditional working hours. The very thought was enough to put a shimmer on his smile. Riza was away for the day, and the rest of his subordinates were only too happy to leave ahead of schedule, so he rightly found himself heading for one particular store.

To the passersby, the place was no more than a hole in the wall, a bar, a corner where tired souls drowned. But to Roy, it was open heaven, the beckoning fragrance of flowers wafting from inside. Roy was a warm-blooded male; there was no reason to resist.

He entered, unmindful of his uniform and the declaration it made. There was nothing for him to hide here; it was conventional wisdom that Roy Mustang loved to visit his brothels at the end of an arduous workday. None could cast on him any blame at all, since the military was known to work its soldiers long and hard. Any man would want reprise at the end of a day’s toil.

He gave a passing girl a rakish smile and watched her swoon and stagger away: stupefying women with his bare charm never got old. There was only a small handful of women able to resist him even in his topmost form—Riza, Mira Olivier Armstrong, Madam Christmas—and such exceptions he
amounted to indeterminate anomalies in their basic psychological makeup. In cases otherwise, he made good use of this advantage upon the fairer sex. Necessity was a secondary motive; vanity was the prime.

He never even managed to reach the bar; Emilia, most stunningly dressed for the evening, took him by the arm and led him to the stairs. With a wry wave of a hand, he gave his greetings to Madam Christmas, the store’s proprietor and a long-time business partner. The older lady gave him a gruff, knowing smile.

“You’ve been a while, Roy, I’ve missed you,” Emilia coyly beckoned, leading the way to a sequestered bedroom at the end of the hall. “I was beginning to think you’ve forgotten all about me.”

“Never, beautiful,” Roy followed after her and appraised the creamy length of a leg. It was always Havoc who fell for the ample breasts; he was a modest man who didn’t ask for quite so much. A gentle voice and plenty of smooth, beautiful skin was more than enough.

They slipped into the darkened room and Roy pushed her against the wall, pressing a soft kiss against her scented neck. She laughed and pushed him away. “Now, Roy. Nothing you won’t be paying for.”

Hands raised, he retreated and sat on the bed. “I take it you have quite a bit for me tonight?”

“This won’t come cheap at all,” she sat across from him on one particular chair Roy had very fond memories of. Crossing her legs (she did that on purpose), she began: “Not much has come up on your little killer friend, apart from a lot of talk underground. Even they don’t know who’s doing it.”

“Likely not a cult, then,” Roy sighed.

“Likely not a cult,” she nodded. There went their first hypothesis. “Secondly: Brigadier General Gran let it slip that Shou Tucker’s evaluations this summer did not go well; Tucker has one more year under his contract with the military until he’s stripped of his grants and dismissed. A picture of the chimera he constructed and all the details of the work are in here; I haven’t looked through them, that sort of business is bad for my skin,” she handed him an envelope, looking well pleased to be rid of its contents. Bioalchemy was rarely pretty. He was going to have to pay her a high price for this catch.

“Also, General Spahn was recently in Central,” she continued; Roy nodded, he’d heard of the arrival. “He came to present new research to the Führer and his advisors. Apparently, he’s harnessed a young alchemist to work for him, though this alchemist has yet to take the State exam. Rightly so, he’s just a boy. Details are also in the envelope. Maybe you know him: Tringham. Russell Tringham.”

“That Tringham?” Roy had to pause. “I heard Nash Tringham disappeared a few years back.”

“Nash Tringham’s elder son, apparently. Brilliant, from what I’ve heard. You’ll have to be the judge of him; I know little of alchemy to understand what he studies,” Emilia shifted in her chair and uncrossed her legs, but Roy was too distracted by Russell Tringham’s picture to notice at all. The poor boy had to be no more than ten or eleven, too young to be working for the military. Strongly reminded of Edward, he slipped the picture back into the envelope. Emilia gave him a few seconds, idly remarking, “You’ve got tough competition coming there. The young ones are always the most vicious.”

Roy laughed. “I’ve heard that from somewhere. You haven’t been seeing Hughes while I was gone, have you, beautiful?”
She smiled. “I make it a point not to talk to my patrons about other sources of income, darling.”

“Right, sorry,” he wryly smiled, his apology contrite enough to satisfy her disapproval. “I haven’t been in a while; you might need to refresh me on the rules.”

“I can see that,” she chuckled, reaching over and pushing a fringe of his hair aside. Emilia was a great admirer of Xingese culture and rightly so became fond of his eyes. “Lastly, rumour has it that General Ivan has fallen from the Fuhrer’s favour. We don’t know exactly what he’s done, but it seems like he made the same mistake your old friend General Grumman did before he was demoted to take care of the East.”

Roy had to blink. “When was this? I wasn’t even aware Ivan was here.” The world seemed to like churning whenever he was distracted; since Edward had arrived, plenty had happened and Roy had not even noticed. This was unacceptable.

“Just a few days ago,” Emilia told him. “His arrival was kept quiet. I’m not quite sure if he came as a civilian—highly unusual for you flashy military men—but he got into Central somehow without turning heads. He’s on his way back to the North in a few days; maybe you can catch him and ask him yourself.”

“Highly doubt it,” Roy shook his head, already deep in thought. Though he considered himself a good friend and ally to the old man, Grumman never did tell him what that entire fallout had been about. Grumman was an excellent soldier and a model politician; Roy could not fathom what kind of offense the General must have dealt the Fuhrer to be demoted to such an arduous job as the East. Anything short of an outright attempt at assassination was an unlikely cause for such blatant expulsion. The Fuhrer liked to keep his best men in Central, under the watchful eye; such strategy deterred coups and ensured loyalty by familiarity among the brass. It also allowed the Generals to maintain the highest quality of living with the least amount of hard work possible; satellite posts were never quite as stable and prosperous as Central. Roy understood this very well, and so wondered whatever could have happened.

“So,” she said, “that’s about all I can tell you for this period.” Roy thought that was plenty enough; his pockets were already beginning to ache. She knew this and crossed her legs the other way, as if to mock him; she was gazing at him with a smile he only knew too well. “Now, my Princeling, how about you tell me about this rumour I’ve been hearing about you taking care of a child?”

Roy groaned. “Emilia.”

“Roy, a child!” Emilia exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air and then settling them on her knees. She leaned forward. “What have I told you about safe sex? And who is the mother? I demand to know. None of our girls were pregnant recently—I would’ve known, to be sure—so he must be from someone else. Who?”

“Emilia, he’s almost twelve years old, surely—”

She gasped. “Roy! You’re telling me you sired a child when you were—when you were ten?!” and she actually paused to count. “Heavens, how many more do you have of these hidden children?”

“Emilia, he is not my son,” Roy firmly said, steadying her arms with a solid hand and solid, charcoal eyes. She stopped. “His name is Edward Elric, son of my old mentor Hohenheim. You know the man, you’ve seen him once. Tall—”

“—blond, golden-eyed, yes, I remember,” Emilia’s face was opening up now, brightening like the dawn of day. Hohenheim was a hard figure to forget. “Quite the dashing man, I must say. His child,
I see. He’s married, then? That’s too bad. So why is his son with you?”

“For his studies,” Roy relaxed, reclining now. “Very intelligent child, a most worthy investment. I can’t with good conscience let him wallow in the backwaters of the South, my beautiful, not with that brilliant mind of his. So he’ll be staying with me. I’ll be teaching him.”

“Well, then,” Emilia declared, legs uncrossing and back straightening to its full, “that’s as good as having sired a child, isn’t it? You’ve fashioned yourself a father, Roy! Why, I do hope you enjoy it. Nasty business, children are—from what I’ve heard, at least. They seem to bring about nothing but trouble.”

“Trouble, indeed,” Roy had to give a chuckle, undoing buttons even as he pulled Emilia closer and into the bed. “But if anything, I specialise in handling such things, don’t you agree?”

Emilia could only laugh then, and even that was lost as they tumbled into the sheets, lost in the scent of pine and cinnamon and scotch and smoke. Talk of Edward was very soon forgotten, which was just as well; Roy wasn’t about to share him with this part of his world just yet.

... 

Roy was coming down the stairs when he felt it, the prickling up and down the back of his neck. A telling, an omen, an instinctual urge to stop and listen. Emilia’s words echoed within his head, and it was Edward standing in the kitchen over the morning’s paper that made him murmur her words under his breath. “Trouble, indeed,” he said, half in helpless fondness over the boy that was now his charge.

Edward brought the papers over and asked of the murders. Roy kept a stone countenance. Before Edward came along, these cases were his passports to power, his stepping stones to glory. His superiors—often Douglass—saw fit to encumber him with the cold, hard cases, long-drawn and often entangled in exceedingly delicate webs of politics, power, psychosis, and blood. For the most part they did so to stall him, an attempt to thwart his “too-fast” ascent through rank, but he routinely turned it against them, solving case after case with meticulous handiwork through his team and Hughes’ information. When one had the right friends in the right places, one would have to actively try to fail at such endeavours. (Plenty seemed to be successful at trying, but Roy never understood the logic of spending energy that could otherwise be conserved.)

But now that Edward was here, Roy had gained something to protect. A potential collateral, a strength that was his weakness—what Gracia was to Hughes, what Edward could be to him. It was no longer advisable to be thrust head-first and fast in these cases, dangerous and murky as they could be. There was a high possibility of Edward getting involved—of which Roy had no doubt, and neither did he of Edward’s ability to attract trouble—and Edward was too precious to endanger in such petty, trifling cases.

That was what most of them were: petty, trifling cases.

“I would prefer if you remained here at home, Ed. Safe.”

“You know I can take care of myself,” the boy insisted, quiet and certain with steadfast confidence. Where Edward found such bastion of security, Roy had to wonder. It was as if Edward was thoroughly convinced that he could face down an experienced killer.

“I know that very well,” Roy nodded. And he did; Edward was an accomplished alchemist, with
visible combat training and the instincts of a born fighter. Hohenheim’s blood was in the child, this much was undeniable; but still. “But I’ve seen these murders, Ed, and they aren’t something I’m sure I want to expose you to. Furthermore, we have established steering clear of the military for now, and getting yourself involved in something like this will throw that idea out of the window. The military has good intel; Hughes can attest to that.”

If they were to begin exposing Edward to the world, it would be by his terms, under controlled circumstances. Roy was a firm believer in well-wrought plans. Entropy be damned, he would carve the lines of his life as an alchemist should carve the lines of a circle—firm as a guide for the chaos of energy.

Perhaps seeing his unmoving stance, Edward left the argument for now. To be sure, this wasn’t the last Roy would hear from him about this, but for now, Roy had dodged a bullet. For now.

Roy managed to leave the house with minimal trouble, but he was already unsettled. Edward was beginning to stir. Roy could practically taste the trouble brewing from afar; feel the turbulence promising to come. It was only a matter of time, really, before Edward began to emerge from the temporary numbness of leaving home. It was only a matter of time before Edward began to take notice of Central’s goings-on and ask about them—most prominently about Roy’s work. Because what else did the boy have to occupy himself with but a very long list of books to read and his own thoughts for idle company? Edward’s vast intellect was thirsting for a challenge; books were hardly enough. Roy needed to find a distraction, fast.

He was contemplating his options when Havoc pulled into the Headquarters. As it was everyday, the walls were forbiddingly grey and mingled indistinguishably into the overcast skies; only the banner bearing the insignia of their small country gave life to this dull hulk of structure. Roy was terribly partial to the banner’s shade of deep forest green and had specific plans to tailor the military uniforms in such a colour when he ascended to Führership. He was of the opinion that the current standard of royal blue did terrible things for his complexion, and at any rate blue was too peaceful a colour for the military in the first place. For a country such as theirs with a long and tremulous history of bloodshed and open strife, deep scarlet or the less anaemic colour of green was more suitable.

Fervent murmuring was what removed him from his ambitious fancies, visible by the huddle of soldiers heading for and away from the cafeteria. Breakfast and coffee here were similarly atrocious, so Roy couldn’t quite fathom why these men would bother at all; that was none of his business until he was Führer and could replace the current kitchen staff with properly educated chefs. (He never ate at the cafeteria.) For now he walked slow and watched them, Havoc following lead behind him as they neared the soldiers.

“...Führer and them brass are booting Ivan out permanently, from what I hear. Shady business Ivan must have been doing. Can’t help but feel rather sorry for the man, but his fault for getting caught,” one soldier gossiped. Roy did agree that tracks were best covered and thoroughly if doing things untoward, but he knew Ivan’s stolid principles; the man would never stoop to crime or conspiracy.

“Nah,” another soldier dismissed. “If there’s any shady business being done, it’s on the brass’ side. Absolute power corrupts and all that. Y’know them, they never tell the truth about nuthin’.”

“Why d’you even work here, Gus?” the men laughed, jostling their companion cynic. Havoc huffed behind him, perhaps in acquaintance with cynical Gus. Roy thought there was a valid point. The military was very rarely (if ever) clean.

There wasn’t much else of the gossip that Roy needed to hear, so they picked their pace up and made for their office. Riza was armed to her teeth with paperwork and the day’s agenda when they walked in. Maes was sprawled in his chair, boots canted upon his desk.
“News has broken! Ivan’s gone!” his friend announced, throwing arms up if for theatrics. Roy swatted at Maes’ boots and removed his jacket. The day was muggy enough to demand him only in his white shirt.

“I heard. He was here, did you know? Never showed face, but he was here,” and Roy received the rare pleasure of having a piece of information above Maes’ head. Upon an insistent glare, and to deter headache-inducing loud noises such as the yowling of ill-mannered monkeys this early in the morning, Roy surrendered and tipped his cup of coffee towards Maes. “Emilia; she’s formidable.”

“Ah, well,” Maes reclined, rocking slightly and threading his fingers together. “A man can never best a woman and her wiles.”

“I was under the impression you’d met with her lately; she was talking an awful lot like you,” Roy told him.

Maes was aghast. “I would never,” he brandished his left hand at Roy and his right that carried his Pocketbook of Gracia™. “Married, my friend! Happily so!”

“Right, how could I ever forget,” Roy drily said, setting his coffee on his tabletop to shove Maes off his chair. “Now if that’s all for this morning, I’d like to get started on my paperwork. Busy day; off you go, my friend!” Such was how he sent Maes off (who wailed heartily for the lack of love in the world) and began the day, very much to Riza’s approval.

He successfully played deaf and blind to the ominous atmosphere he seemed to have attracted today, until midday when he no longer could. Louis Armstrong crossed his path in the lavatories where he couldn’t quite escape. Roy cursed his luck.

“Major Armstrong,” he acknowledged his fellow alchemist, taking care to be respectful despite his discomfort with the other. Armstrong was a good man with a sharp mind and solid morals to support his alchemy. They were both veterans of Ishbal and therefore quite familiar with each other’s practice —along with it each other’s wartime pitfalls and tragedies. Such things either brought great respect or equally great abhorrence of one another.

“Lieutenant Colonel Mustang, what a pleasant surprise!”

Roy couldn’t say the same, but returned the sentiments anyway. In truth, he was far more comfortable interacting with Louis Armstrong’s elder sister, Mira Olivier, likely due to her unmistakable gender. She had the loveliest length of blonde hair he’d ever met until he laid eyes on Edward—not that he’d ever say so.

“I trust you’ve heard of the recent shift in seats?” Armstrong kindly twinkled at his own reflection in the mirror beside Roy. Roy focused on the valuable task of washing his hands. “General Ivan is gone, and now the seat must be filled.”

_Gone_, Roy thought. Just yesterday, Ivan was merely in disfavour, and now he was gone, the seats already shifting. “His second, perhaps?” Roy voiced, unless of course Ivan’s second was also involved in whatever mischief Ivan must have done.

“Nothing’s official as of yet, but I’ve heard of a missive from the Führer for Lieutenant General Scott,” Armstrong told him in a hush.

“Not Hunter? Interesting,” Roy had to admire the Führer’s strategic genius, putting the lesser powerful but more gullible Lieutenant General Scott on the seat. Lieutenant General Hunter was too attached to the north, too attached to the region’s independence to be a good fit. Hunter would be
more capable of rallying the region into rebellion, which was a particular evil the brass did not desire to see from the north (Amestris’ ultimate defence) or the east (Amestris’ ultimate offence). Roy would have done the same thing. “Then they’ll soon be in need of a new Lieutenant General. Promoting Beltran, likely?”

“Yes,” Armstrong nodded, “and to replace him, they’re promoting Sister to be a Major General after her training concludes in eight months.”

Roy struggled to hide his flinch.

“...I see,” he said, closing the tap and wiping off his hands. He kept his eyes down, daring not to look up and let the world see the shock in his eyes. Mira was moving faster than ever, and here he was, motionless, trapped by his own great game, too close to the Fuhrer and yet all the same too far.

He was envious.

Jealousy was nowhere near powerful enough a word—this was envy, pure and strong, running in his veins as molten heat. She was going to be one step away from Generalship—one step—and how far was that, in all reality? Not very far at all, he thought, close enough to snatch away. Away from somebody else—Mira was not going to have an easy time of it, taking away somebody else’s promotion as she did. She was going too fast, like he was going too fast, the two of them both, and people would require proof.

But proof is always easy when you’ve already got the seat, this he knew. He fixed his lapel and regarded his hair. In the mirror, Roy Mustang was the very definition of collected perfection.

“Congratulate your parents for me, Major Armstrong,” Roy told his comrade, “for doubtless they must be proud. I will send my regards to your sister myself. Shame will befall me should I let go of such a fine and rare opportunity to test her tempers.”

If Louis Armstrong paled, Roy feigned ignorance. It was not very hard. His entire force of mind—his entire mortal being—was burning with envy, envy and green and mighty envy, green as the high banners bearing his country’s dragon in white. Years have passed since Ishbal and the last time he felt this boil in his blood. At the time, he had stood beside Hughes and looked up at the Fuhrer—looked up at that high-handed tyrant who had made them all into mass murderers—and swore upon the graves of the thousands he’d killed that he would build his kingdom too: a kingdom that would spiral upwards like a tower in a delicate arch reaching for heaven, just as this Fuhrer’s kingdom spiralled downwards like a fortress facing hell.

He mused, as Riza settled him back into paperwork, that perhaps he shouldn’t tailor their uniforms in Amestrian green, after all.

Wanting not to frighten his guest upon returning home, Roy used the well-worn excuse of paperwork to while time and temper away. Headquarters at night was agreeable to his ire; the halls were devoid of soul, rooms dark and desks bare. Workflow was efficient in this office; Riza ensured that there was ample space on their desks for the morning wave of paperwork. Truly, Roy was the only one who often required extra time to finish, his subordinates being timely and having a reasonable load. An alchemist first and an officer second, he was a perfectionist by nature—he had the ugly habit of wanting to do everything by himself. In truth, a great portion of his paperwork was available for delegation, but to ensure that his reports were flawless and congruent, he did it all by
himself.

And that was his problem, was it not? He knew little of compromise and was stubborn in his ways. He mounted a good facade, but underneath he relied on very few and trusted even fewer. Roy Mustang was independent, free, and needed no one’s help. And though he understood the disadvantages, he refused to surrender his pride, for it had undergone such upset and damage through the wars of his life that it now shied from any encounter that could ruin its fortress walls.

So here he was, stuck. He was alone, scrambling for ideas to progress forward and up, stagnating at tasks he needed to complete, and idle while Mira tore her way through the hierarchy. The very thought rankled. He took pride in the fact that he rose through the ladder without riding on the coattails of bloodline or name or pedigree, like Mira Armstrong had done, but it was hard, very hard, not to yearn for the same advantage when he looked at her back pulling farther away. She was the one person he considered a worthy rival for Führership, the only one in their generation capable of topping him should she deign to try. Never mind insulting; her advancement was dangerous if not addressed.

“I need a promotion,” he groaned into the darkness, leaning his head against the wall. But what do I have to be promoted for?

Outside, moonlight washed over Central in shafts of silvery brilliance upon a slumbering metropolis. It offered him no answer.

Soon, there was no more paperwork to clear from his desk. There was none of his ire left, either. The boil that had sat in his veins now echoed an emptiness which he knew as defeat. He disliked the feeling. He disliked being empty. It reminded him of Ishbal, of Berthold, of too many things he lost or had to leave behind in his past.

Sensing the train of his thoughts, he took it as a signal to go home. It was time for rest now. These thoughts were perilous thoughts to follow; it was best he went to bed and closed his eyes to sink the disappointments of the day into the murky darkness of dreams.

The ride home was cool and lonely at best. Havoc was long dismissed and he had to drive himself home. No cigar smoke to distract his senses, no idle chatter, not even sights as the streets were daubed only in a silvery half-light. During the full moon, the street lamps of Central were dimmed, some even doused, to conserve precious energy.

At home, all the lights were off apart from a faint flicker upstairs. He expected to find his house guest labouring on notes under dismal lighting when he ascended, but found the boy sprawled on the desk instead. Clutching a pencil between lax fingers, Edward was fast asleep.

Roy could not help but smile. Such simple, straightforward living—Edward could afford it. Edward thought nothing of the world that was not involved with his alchemy; to Edward, a world without alchemy did not exist, could not exist. Edward’s world was alchemy, plain and simple as day and night.

Roy envied him.

He shook off the feeling and gathered the boy into his arms. Having an armful of Edward like this, it was easy to forget about such perilous feelings and thoughts. Having an armful of Edward filled his
mind with bright flashes of gold and the heady fog of power in that basement and the crackle of active energy and the Gate. Since arriving in Central, Edward had mentioned nothing of the Gate. Strange; he would have thought Edward would have been more preoccupied about its nature.

But perhaps he was yet again underestimating his young charge. Perhaps Edward *was* working out a theory, only the boy kept it behind those blazing golden eyes. Edward was transparent about most things, but that hardly discounted his ability to keep a secret. In fact, Edward probably used the façade of transparency to hide his secrets. Nobody would suspect such a straightforward little boy to be hiding knowledge shattering enough to crumble the very foundations of what the world knew of alchemy.

This boy was in his arms right now, this boy who held a theory of something so improbable and yet if it were true, it would explain an innumerable things about their science and its mysteries.

And it was in that slow and dawning second that a traitorous thought crossed his mind: what other brilliant reason to be promoted for but alchemy?

This was a dangerous thought. Dangerous beyond what he had accepted as the boundaries he would never cross. He would involve an innocent—something he had promised never to do again—and it would not be fiddling things they’d be involved in, but great things. Great and potentially terrible things.

But, he thought! But.

He laid Edward in bed and made him comfortable. The hair tie came off to let a cascade of spun gold spread upon the pillow. Edward curled towards his warmth, an instinctive seeking motion, and went back to the stillness of deep sleep. Roy watched the little puffs of air escape from the boy’s barely parted mouth. He sat there for a while before he pulled the blankets up and left the room to fall into darkness. In the privacy of his own quarters, he drank.

His last thought before sinking into his own slumber was an apology to Hohenheim. Heartfelt and sincere, a true and telling apology—because Roy was going to use his son.

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*Children are people, and they should have to reach to learn about things, to understand things, just as adults have to reach if they want to grow in mental stature. Life is composed of lights and shadows, and we would be untruthful, insincere, and saccharine if we tried to pretend there were no shadows. Most things are good, and they are the strongest things; but there are evil things too, and you are not doing a child a favour by trying to shield him from reality. The important thing is to teach a child that good can always triumph over evil.*

( Walt Disney Company )

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Some obscure divine providence was in his favour. The call came to his office just as Riza was preparing to put him through a round of harsh scolding followed by a merciless pile of mundane paperwork. Something about having orchestrated—a brilliant and cunning, might he add—shortcut through security and customs to smuggle a potentially dangerous and entirely illegal piece of
extremely rare research specimen from Haxamanishiya, which was once a part of the old Persian empire. Riza was displeased about as much as Roy was pleased, for Haxamanishiya was nowhere near friendly to Amestris. It was an achievement, if he might have said so himself!

He concluded his work business with a final tug on his jacket. The cloth fell quite dashingly around his shoulders. Swift and efficient, he parried Riza’s protests as he stepped out the door. Havoc followed him, eager for any excuse to remove himself from her presence. It was difficult to restrain a smile.

“What’s the kid up to now, boss?” Havoc asked as they pulled out of the Headquarters. Central’s streets were bustling today. They drove up the way they had come earlier in the morning after having dropped off Edward for his first day of school. The very same boy had given them an escape route from Riza’s temper today, so Roy couldn’t summon much displeasure or disappointment at being summoned by the principal within mere hours of leaving Ed in their care. In fact, Roy was rather looking forward to the show.

“Knowing him, Jean, it could be a hundred different things,” Roy told him. “I could never presume to know.”

Havoc gave a sidelong snort. “Shaping up to be a handful, isn’t he?”

“Yes, well,” Roy demurred with a smile, eyes trained upon the preparatory school’s main building. “Maes likes to say he’s a chip off the old block.”

Havoc could only chuckle.

It was a quick drive and soon they were pulling through the school’s tall gates. Roy instructed Havoc to wait; he didn’t expect to stay for longer than half an hour. (He was counting on Edward’s ever-timely appetite, as it was about lunchtime. The boy would doubtless keep this short.) The secretary escorted him the moment he was spotted coming down the hall; lo and behold, inside the headmaster’s office sat his petulant-looking charge.

Ah, Roy thought at once. They must have challenged his absolute intellectual authority. Nevertheless, he asked, “Edward, what did you do?” with the appropriate amount of dread in his tone.

The boy nearly doubled over in indignation. “It’s not my fault! He was teaching the wrong things! He said that an atom is the smallest unit of matter. And after that, he said that an atom is indivisible, the misinformed old fart! Misconstrued, I tell you!”

By alchemy, were little Edward’s lungs atrocious beasts! Roy could not have made his voice echo louder. The ceiling was quite high in this room.

He had already figured that these moments would be rare in his life heretofore, so he relished the chance to say, “I told you this school was a bad idea,” with a sigh. Yes, Roy thought. It felt good to say that.

But Edward, being Edward, returned it right back. “I told you I didn’t actually want to go to school! And no; you said it was a good idea!” the boy scowled his hawkish little scowl. It was very formidable; if Roy weren’t Roy, he would be intimidated.

“For you to socialise, not for you to learn from a school,” Roy added drily. This much was true. Roy had been hoping that Edward would find some friends. It likely wasn’t good for a young boy of Edward’s age to be locked up through all the hours of daylight and to only have adults for regular
company. It wasn’t normal.

But then again, since when was Edward ever normal?

“No preparatory school would be fit to accommodate you,” Roy said, running the high risk of offending the headmaster. “You need a university.” They were offended, Roy noted through Edward’s enthusiastic shout of praise. No matter; they were acquaintances through Hakuro. Moreover, once they understood the level of Edward’s genius, they would be obliged to admit their folly—which, true enough, was a folly. How could anyone miss Edward’s intellect? (Another one of those details Roy thought people would actively have to exert effort to miss.) Perhaps they were as narrow-minded and misconstrued at this school as Edward thought. But the teachers likely had to struggle with mediocre minds, in which case a narrow-minded and simple approach might better befit the situation and yield timely results (for some results were better than, heaven forbid, none at all). Such were the pains and foils of standard education.

Roy spent the next few moments concluding the affair with succinct explanations of Edward’s delicate situation. The boy, of course, found it necessary to flaunt his alchemy; Roy let it slip for this one occasion. He felt that the predicament warranted a little display to drive their point.

When the two elderly men were sufficiently befuddled, Roy and Edward made their way out of the preparatory school’s vicinity, Roy all the while contemplating on the next course of action. As he had expected, traditional tactics refused to work with Edward’s disposition. The boy was simply too talented—too advanced, too much of a prodigy—to leave in the company of mediocre, navel-gazing minds. He had suspected as much, but it was his policy to always give a valid method a try. In any case, the experience would instil in Edward—or reinforce, if the boy had ever attended formal education in Resembool—the realisation that most minds were ill-equipped for a lifetime of true learning and discovery. Furthermore, the experience allowed Edward to appreciate the intelligent company which already surrounded him, and most importantly, to comprehend how much power knowledge held over the common minds of common men.

Many would call him a corruptor, a tyrant, taking over the poor boy’s mind and dictating the directions it should dance. (Indeed, Maes made a habit of it.) But Roy could hardly care. Those parents who thought to give their children absolute freedom in daily choice and opinion were the parents who fell into despair as they watched their children squander away that which they worked hard for with years of life in labour.

The increasingly prevailing notion in Roy’s common society was the glorification of open inquiry for all men: or, that every man was capable of making the correct choices for himself and therefore should endeavour to use his capacity for pure reason to free himself from the shackles of prejudice, so that everything should be judged only against one’s own standards. Such unprecedented and ignoble egotism it fostered! It was a prejudice against prejudice, one of the most imbecilic and destructive frameworks of philosophy Roy had ever met.

People often failed to understand that there were dire consequences—not only for those within direct relation to the involved party, but also for others entirely removed from the scenario—should elders fail to inculcate the right kind of prejudices in a child. It was necessary to instil productive prejudices in a child, such as manners of conduct and discipline and respect, for the child to be able to flourish safely until the age in which he can begin to form his own thoughts and pass his own judgments about the world. To assume that children were capable of this on their own at the age of six or ten or twelve would be most unwise. (Some people, for lack of something in their being, whether it be education or character or purpose, were unfit to shoulder this responsibility even in adulthood. Roy saw it all too often.)
Anyhow, it was difficult not to set an influence upon Edward. There was something terribly enthralling in this practice, even more so with such a precocious boy. No other activity was like it, and Roy wondered if Hohenheim or Berthold had ever felt this with himself. To project one’s soul into another’s form and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one’s own intellectual views echoed back with all the added music of passion and youth; to convey one’s own temperament to another, as though looking upon a mirror: there was a real joy in it, perhaps the most satisfying kind of joy, the kind that tied fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. There another prejudice he disliked: were he Edward’s true father, people would look the other way and disregard the attention he paid the boy. But that he was a military man and Edward an alchemist complicated matters for both of them. Society’s eyes were critical and oft unforgiving.

Edward nudged his elbow then and barked, “I’m hungry. Let’s go to Giovanni’s.” The boy turned to Havoc. “We’re going to Giovanni’s. You can come with us too. I’m sure the Bastard won’t mind another person, since he’s filthy rich and deserves to be ripped off from once in a while.”

Roy gave a light laugh at Ed’s abrasive word. “Such a charming lad you are, as always.”

“I learn only from the best,” said the boy, tongue in cheek, with a sidelong smile. Then he crossed his arms and began to frown again. “I should hope the symposium is better than that tripe you forced me through. Wish I had the last six hours of my life back. Miserable old fools cooped up in their narrow little skulls! If I hadn’t known any better, I’d say they were ignorant men who could care less for academia! The likes of them shouldn’t even be allowed to step in the halls of a library! If I’d written even one book in whatever library they walked into, I’d be so insulted by their very presence I’d rise from my grave and strangle their fat necks with my bare hands! That is, if I could wrap my hands around them—that pudgy one had quite the jowls…”

Roy was laughing now, a hearty laugh at the little boy who was beginning to talk so much like him. Maes would be so proud! Havoc, who was driving, failed to stifle chuckles and choked on the smoke of his own cigar.

“It’s pure blasphemy, I tell you! Such an insult to the essence of intelligence! If only I weren’t such a nice person—ah, Giovanni!” Ed hopped off the car and made a beeline for the chef, who was at the doors having just seen another prized customer out. The chef was positively delighted when Roy stepped out after Edward and made for the doors. Ed was saying, “I need meat today. Don’t really know how to pick between different kinds of steaks yet but I need meat, medium-rare, smothered with those mushrooms and onions from last time. Those were good. Can I have some bread too?”

“He’ll be having ribeye, Giovanni, thank you,” Roy smiled, ushering his chattering charge into the store. Edward, when irritated, turned into a veritable box of crackling energy. Much like a circle when its flow was blocked; the energy remained within the confines of the lines, summoned yet unused, restless in its cramped boundaries. Edward was not one for boundaries.

Havoc followed after them, having put out his cigar and parked the car outside. The lieutenant looked happy and was more than willing to indulge Edward’s talkative spell; it was a rare occasion that he was afforded free, upscale lunch by his superior. Roy never minded providing for his subordinates’ meals—during holidays, they would gather at either his or Maes’ house to celebrate together—but his subordinates were always careful to maintain decorum between them otherwise. It was a good precaution; they were friends, but they also existed in rank. A little distance helped maintain the status quo.

Edward darted to the display counter that showcased the available desserts as Havoc and Roy were guided to a table. It was then that Havoc remarked, “The kid’s terribly energetic today.”

“Because he’s itching for a challenge,” Roy smiled, ordering for some salad, bread, and light wine.
“His curiosity is rather hard to satisfy at times.”

“You sound far too happy for that statement, chief,” Havoc plainly stated, perusing the menu with distracted eyes.

“Yes, well,” Roy smirked, “his foils do bring me such pure joy.”

“What brings you pure joy?” Ed asked, hopping most childishly into his seat. He held a small sample of treacle tart within his hands. “Wait—do I even want to know?”

“Well, Edward, that depends,” Roy began, parrying the little inquisitive mind even as he began constructing a careful framework for his plans. This little incident, though disqualifying one way to distract Ed, proved the boy’s capacity for inciting significant uproar. If all went well within the next six months, he would be one rank higher, closer to his goal. All he needed was a curious Edward under his fold—even better as a State Alchemist under his command—and even Mira Olivier Armstrong’s money and pedigree would fail to stand a chance.

Four days after Edward’s eventful first and only day at school, Roy attended a private gathering of State Alchemists and Generals at the Fuhrer’s residence. Dubbed the Palace, it was one of the most defensible structures in Amestris, preceded only by Central Headquarters itself and the Fort of Briggs, and perhaps paralleled by the most infamous Armstrong Manor (of which’s dogged resilience against the biggest mass rebellion in their history was near-mythological). The Fuhrer’s Palace was situated quite conveniently upon the peak of a tall hill a mere twenty minutes away from the capital. As such, it was visible and quite magnificent at night from the winding road that led towards it from the city. This plan of house was rather confounding to most visitors, for such visibility crippled defences when one could aim with a sniper from afar. But all windows and walls were reinforced with alchemy; bullets and bombs were ineffectual tools against this fortress masquerading as a palace.

Trees populated the surrounding acres from the first gates to the innermost gate, but the tree line ended there. The hill was shaved clean of shrubbery to afford from inside complete visibility of whoever was approaching the house. A wide expanse of trimmed lawn and carefully manicured gardens spread in tasteful symmetry around it. Peacocks, a particular fancy of the Fuhrer, were scattered artfully over the green, as if to dissuade suspicion of arrays and glyphs hidden in the patterns. (So artful their scattering was, in fact, that Roy had to wonder if their feet were glued into position.)

Traps were aplenty in those gardens—particularly the hedgerow mazes, which he always made a point to avoid whenever he visited. He was no mediocre alchemist; he could feel the thrum of energy just waiting to snap beneath his feet. He had engineered similar mechanisms for his own residence, of course much more unassuming due to their lesser power and harder to pinpoint (except, apparently, if one was a genius eleven-year-old with the curiosity of a very experienced cat and a propensity for detailed exploration).

The Palace’s structure itself was of the Victorian style, genuine in its age and holding much history within its walls. Roy always enjoyed his time within this house, never mind the perpetual tension in the air as prominent personalities of the nation clashed against each other. He would be a fool to succumb to the Fuhrer’s subtle tricks, one of which was this regular ritual of inducing petty grievances between powerful guests (all alpha males, and, with Mira Olivier Armstrong’s rare exception, alpha female) such that they would all be otherwise occupied running circles around each
other, instead of forming cohesive units capable of neatly overthrowing the current ruler. So he relaxed and enjoyed himself, making the best of his short stay within the Palace by learning as much as he could about its history and mysteries. The Palace had many mysteries.

He was one of the few capable of such unprecedented calm. Being the youngest of his rank, and the only State Alchemist apart from Brigadier General Gran at such a lofty position, Roy was afforded leverage and relieved of some worry. He had a comfortable perch. Though his position could be threatening to those above him, he was not so easily destabilised. He had State Alchemist certification, war hero status, years of military experience, and a long list of achievements credited to his name. (Oh, and Maes for an ally.) They would have to work hard for a convincing case to present to the Führer (who, for some reason, appeared to favour him). Such was evident now, as the Führer stood beside him and most curiously asked for his opinions regarding the subject of the day’s gathering.

In face of such authority, it was always safe to be humbly honest. Roy therefore conveyed his admiration in quiet, steady tones, careful to keep the conversation between only the Führer and himself. He knew, of course, that the picture they painted—talking in low tones, with an agreeable mood, and with Roy’s reputation—would strike unrest in even the steadiest of these military men. Roy was a master at manipulating his opponents’ perceptions and took full advantage of this situation.

It was only when the item of the day’s event came into view that attention was diverted from his quiet discus with the Führer. The boy was surely no older than Edward, perhaps even a tad younger, with flaxen hair blonder than Riza’s and blue eyes brighter than winter. Roy paid close attention.

“Gentlemen, this lad here is our guest of honour for today: young Mr. Russell Tringham, a talent one only sees once in every generation.” And of course such an exaggerated introduction was necessary, for it was General Spahn making the pronouncements. Or perhaps it was only Roy who saw fit to contradict the General’s statement, for only he knew of two more boys, one a little older and one a little younger, both able to make a match against this Russell Tringham. Nothing this boy was capable of would quite be able to usurp the Elrics’ ultimate achievement of human transmutation.

But of course, he kept his peace.

They were led down to a wider room where glass flasks were prepared for a demonstration. The boy made for them without hesitation, lifting two flasks in either hand. His right held a Büchner flask, which in turn held a gently luminescent blue-white fluid within it. His left held an Erlenmeyer Bulb, its round bottom swirling with a viscous liquid so violently red it was painful to look at. Roy was strongly reminded of freshly spilled blood.

“We call this red water,” young Russell Tringham began, lifting the round-bottomed Bulb with no preamble and no pretence. The red liquid within it lurched with the movement. “You might be familiar with it from literature, or perhaps from having personally seen my father’s research. This compound is easily created from a mixture of highly reactive alchemical amplification substances—the formula that you see here is the final product of the last leg of my father’s research before he died. The most stable and viable form of the substance, I have named it Formula 5.5. Now, some of you will be aware that the formula for the Red Stones used during the Ishbal conflict was Formula 4.0. This is because my father had secreted away a large part of his final research, being a man who largely disliked showcasing incomplete works.”

Roy, who had been acquainted with the late Nash Tringham, here began to doubt the extent to which this child knew his own father, for Nash Tringham was a strongly moral man. Tringham had refused the military—at the cost of his life, of course—in a desperate effort to protect innocents from the
horrors of which his alchemy was all too capable. In fact, if Roy remembered well, Nash Tringham only ever publicized his research to revive his economically ailing hometown of Xenotime, in hopes that the abundance of the minerals necessary for red water in the nearby mines would attract military investment and subsequently ease the endemic poverty. Now, looking upon this young, bright child, Roy felt nothing but pity for Nash Tringham’s science. Russell Tringham, so eager and so young, stood there and spoke the secrets his father had died for.

“F5.5 is more stable than F4.0 by 2.63 times, and has 89% higher reactivity potential. In lay terms, F5.5 will be twice as likely to crystallize into viable Stones, which will have near double the amount of amplifying capacity for any alchemist wielding it.”

The generals began rustling. Roy did not like this innovation.

“However, despite its stability, F5.5 is still highly volatile. It has doubled its chances of crystallising, but that only brings it to a total of 45%. The need for usable Stones will be too high for a mere 45% to meet. This will result in a higher demand for a greater amount of red water, which while easy to gather the ingredients for, is not easy to make. It is not expedient for the purposes of most alchemists, least of all the military.”

The Führer was nodding as he rested his hands upon the arm of a settee. General Spahn then wrestled with a smile, surely a vicious one, as was visible to Roy by the old man’s working jaw. One would think he’d be a little less transparent, given his age and supposed experience, Roy thought.

“Now, this,” the boy continued, “is of my own making.” In his right hand, the flat-bottomed Büchner flask contained its swirling white-blue contents. Its luminescence threw Russell’s face into a study of light and shadow; Roy was sharply reminded of Edward’s pale face against the dying crackle of a magnificent and bloody circle. “My particular solution of the red water, as you can see, isn’t red at all. It has a higher concentration of radium than most alchemists would deem safe.” Upon this claim, alchemists present shifted away. Roy did not bother; exposure was already done. Radium was not to be deterred by a mere few inches of added distance. It was a remarkable substance, from what little current science knew of it. It was indeed very potent.

“My rationale posits that the added radium increases the water’s stability without compromising its instability.” Roy smiled for a statement well-put. “That is, radium, being an earth metal in its purest form, lends structure to the liquid that it would otherwise lack. It also helps that a large portion of the chemical base within the original solution comprises of nitrate,” and, as if suddenly realizing that his audience might not be aware of it, he added, “…radium easily bonds with nitrate.”

Russell relinquished the red flask to handle the white-blue one with both hands. Using careful technique, the boy poured most of the liquid radium into a second similar flask which was already connected to the first one under vacuum. The process left only a viscous dollop of glowing liquid resting at the first flask’s bottom. He sealed the second flask, now nearly full, and then with gentle hands unstopped the first flask, holding it up for eyes to see. As the vacuum broke, the dollop of liquid inside visibly hardened to a glowing piece of Stone.

The quick process drew gasps and murmurs from the small, privileged crowd. Roy himself pressed his lips in a stern line; he began to see future wars, bloody conflicts encouraged by this alchemy. It was not a reassuring innovation, this new Stone. But Nash Tringham would have been so undoubtedly proud.

“This Stone, with radium strengthening it, will have a half-life of approximately 575 years if left as it is. If used, it will sustain one average alchemist for all of his basic and intermediate reactions for the span of nearly ten years.”
Roy could *feel* all eyes settle upon the Stone. Major Alex Armstrong, off toward the back, murmured his quiet disbelief. Roy could not help it; he had to ask.

“Mr. Tringham, if you please,” Roy began. “Excuse the interruption, but I must ask.”

“Of course, sir,” the boy welcomed.

“Do elaborate upon *basic and intermediate reactions.*”

Russell blinked. “Well, basic reactions would comprise of commonplace molecular manipulation, such as repairing broken china, where there is no necessity to transmute one molecule into another, since all the original molecules are present and sufficient. The alchemist has only to reunite the molecules into its former shape.” Roy nodded. “Intermediate reactions would comprise of real-time molecular transmutation. Modifying bonds and recombining atoms, for example, to make hydrogen peroxide from hydroxide and water. Usually such reactions are warranted for the more complicated procedures that advanced practitioners such as you, sir, are likely to perform. Flame alchemy comprises largely of volatile molecular transmutation and manipulation at the same time, and the larger the scale, the more so it requires a high level of skill and control. This would place your alchemy on the higher end of advanced intermediate practice by my reckoning, and likely, you will use up this size of a Stone in battle within less than a year.”

Roy then saw fit to grace the boy with a gracious smile. “You are well-informed, Mr. Russell. That is a good trait to keep if you are aiming for State Alchemy.”

The boy ducked as if to physically avoid the compliment, a light flush dusting his nose and cheeks. “I try to keep myself abreast of developments in Amestrian alchemy at large, and Lieutenant Colonel Mustang is the current leading pioneer in flame alchemy. In all truth, I would put your practice at a higher level, sir, than mere advanced intermediate—except I’d like to reserve the classification of advanced reactions for the truly complicated and labour-intensive ones, such as Mr. Tucker’s research with bioalchemy and chimerae. The synthesis or recombination of a living being using alchemy is a highly advanced procedure requiring intimate knowledge that I do not yet possess, though I will aim to be so skilled one day that I might be able to contribute within that field.”

“And I have no doubt that you should succeed,” the Führer kindly added, nodding his approval at the alchemist boy. “When you finally step into the threshold of bioalchemy, the military will be present to support your efforts, as it always is present for its State Alchemists.”

Roy had to blink. It took a moment to register what he had heard. For the Führer, if he was not mistaken, had just affirmed the boy’s admission into State Alchemy ranks, and with such a blessing, the tests were reduced to mere formality! He had never heard of such a case before. Of course, the Führer’s word was not enough to grant the title; the tests were still *necessary*. But the Führer’s approval was priceless. Roy thought of Edward and began to revise his plans.

“Russell intends to finish his research with the Stone within the next year, complete with the publication. It is afterward that he intends to partake of the State Alchemy exam, yes?” General Spahn was glowing more than half as bright as the Stone in Russell Tringham’s hand, such pride was it that he felt. The boy could have very well been his own son.

Russell confirmed and added, “I’d have liked to take the exam this year, but I feel an obligation to finish what I have begun. And—-and I would like to enlist as a State Alchemist only after I have closed the book of my father’s legacy and remove myself entirely from his name. I wish to become my own alchemist and not a mere shadow of my father. I will pioneer greater things in time; I’ll make sure of it.”
Such conviction, such *verve* in those words! Roy’s spine tingled with them as they echoed naught but pure truth. He lamented the boy’s lack of good supervision. It was evident in the way the boy held himself, the way he spoke, the things he spoke of, and how he discussed them. At least, Roy told himself, Ed would be the wiser. At the very least, Ed would never divulge such things—but one did *not* recite one’s motivations in pure truth before potential enemies! It was no wonder, then, that General Spahn was possessed of such happiness, for he had acquired the perfect, unsuspecting pawn.

The next day, before work, he retrieved a slim and cared-for volume from his bedroom shelf. Brushing away imaginary dust, he took it with him to the library, where Edward sat sprawled on the couch with his books and his papers and his flask. When he wordlessly handed it to his charge, Edward frowned. “...it’s not some fairy-tale, is it?”

On its front read *The Prince* in embellished silver lettering; it had served as Roy’s introduction to political philosophy, and he felt a great gratitude towards the text for all that he had learned—and still learned—through it. So Roy was duly amused when Edward thought it a fairy tale, for fairy tales were the farthest things from this book. “Do I seem like the type who reads and collects fairy tale books, Edward?”

“Yes,” the boy deadpanned, taking the title and rifling through its pages.

“It’s a book on political philosophy,” Mustang coughed, “and you’ll gain much from it, I’m sure. Every good and sane politician must and probably have read it. I deem it essential to success.”

“So you’re letting me in on trade secrets?” Edward sounded genuinely surprised. “How unnaturally trusting of you, Bastard!”

“Ah, but that’s just it,” Roy smiled and said, thinking of poor Russell Tringham and his abject lack of anything resembling a true mentor. Such bright minds were a waste to be left like so. “They aren’t secrets at all,” he continued. “In fact, most of that book is common sense expanded into scenarios. The philosophy in that book is nothing new—it has been around for centuries before that was written, and will continue to exist onwards. But the catch—”

“Let me guess,” his boy cut in. “Not everybody can do it.”

Roy glowed brighter than Spahn with his version of the proud fatherly smile. Edward was learning.

Edward was learning too fast. The boy had easily deduced that Roy and Maes were both being called out to look at the latest development in one of their grislier cases. Ed had shown interest in this particular case, Roy distinctly recalled, perhaps due to its alchemical nature. The perpetrator was an alchemist of an unspecified level of skill; this was enough to cause top brass unease. Such unease in the higher echelons filtered to below to the ranks as a crystal of potassium permanganate dissolved to colour a beaker of water. It rapidly spread its influence throughout the system and very soon had the lower ranked officers magnifying the tension in their clamour to please those above them.

Roy was not immune to this process; in fact, it was precisely what he utilised in his campaign to power. However, the item of his eye, the superior that he wished to please, was much higher than his direct commanding officer, Douglass, or for that matter, any general in the military hierarchy. In fact,
this authority was much higher than the Führer himself. This authority he respected and sought to satisfy was the authority of the people. Few, of course, realised this.

When Douglass had assigned him this case, Roy was of the distinct impression that the man wished for him to struggle and fail. If Douglass was not so alchemically disinclined, Roy would truly have reason to suspect that Douglass was behind this himself. But the alchemical circles involved here were too detailed—too arcane and, in fact, exotic—to be the doing of someone so ignorant. No, the perpetrator was surely an alchemist, and herein was the one sole reason Roy agreed to have Edward tag along.

He had known that should Edward truly insist to come, he would never be able to resist. He would try, but Edward’s insistence was if anything unrelenting. It gave him reassurance, however, that Edward sought to verbally convince him first, instead of resorting to some foolish act of rebellion. The boy truly looked ready to comply if Roy should put his foot down and refuse. Roy was heartened that, though their time spent together was still short and friendship premature, Edward now looked to him as a figure of authority, and would seek his permission first before engaging in any major decision. When he had first said no, his voice echoing finality, Edward’s steps had stuttered as if physically restrained by some invisible force. All the while the boy argued his case, but moved not one step away from his spot, until Roy had relented under those insistent golden eyes and under Maes’ heavy hand on his shoulder.

Upon hindsight, of course Maes was right. (Here Maes would insist that he was always right, but of course Roy would ignore him.) Edward was invaluable to any case even remotely related to alchemy, as evident by the progress their investigation had made in one night. Their new leads rendered his and Maes’ core workforce insufficient to cover all the ground, and were it any other case, Roy would request assistance. However, they were unlikely to receive any aid from the military, and Roy preferred not to waste his time. As it was, Douglass was already working hard to waste it for him.

“Maes, I’m leaving you to it,” Roy bid his friend as he fixed his cuffs. “I’ve already sent Falman and Fuery to help crosscheck the list of names; Riza should be plenty of help for you should you need her. I wager this’ll take a while.”

“Roy, old friend, have you forgotten? We don’t wager on military affairs,” said Maes’ voice from behind a wall of papers. Maes’ smaller team was currently represented by said wall, accumulated quickly overnight; his men and women were faster at gathering information on the field, leaving Maes and Roy to play analyst and Roy’s team to wrap up the loose ends.

“Says the man who ripped me off five grand last month,” Roy muttered, walking out of the office to Maes’ chortling.

It was Roy’s team quarters they routinely used, due to its more spacious nature, and also owing to the delicate nature of their arrangement. Team operations were best kept away from the Intelligence wing, given their rarity and subsequent tendency to attract much unwelcome attention. Intel was, by nature, a highly independent and aloof department: the only cooperation between their forces and Central command took place at higher ranks, where commanders would be fed information to contemplate and decide upon. Roy and Maes’ arrangement was peculiar and rare, only made possible through their combined influence (otherwise known as Roy’s fetching charm and Maes’ blackmail material) upon certain well-placed people. Douglass, naturally, did not approve of such an arrangement and sought to destabilise their order with every chance he got. Here was another such chance.

Roy rapped smartly upon the door and was let in by Douglass’ stern lieutenant. Everything about this
office was torturously stern, as if to convey its resident’s inability to achieve sufficient gravity without the help of his environment. Even then, Douglass failed to intimidate Roy.

“Lieutenant Colonel Mustang,” Douglass began, “I hear you have had some good news last night.”

“Sir,” Roy saluted and then stood at attention before Douglass’ desk. He kept his hands folded behind his back, of course: a little tactic that seemed to upset Douglass whenever Roy was doing it. “Another victim is hardly good news.”

“But because of this victim, you have gained plenty of new leads.” Douglass was eyeing him with intensity. “Leads that were given to you by a consultant you introduced into the case last night.”

Roy hid his displeasure. It was barely seven in the morning, and yet news had already spread. He wished to keep Ed’s existence a better-protected secret than this, at least until he was made Colonel, but he knew it was impossible. No matter. All was within his plans.

“An alchemical colleague, sir,” Roy answered, “an expert in the older forms of alchemy.”

“Well, well,” Douglass reclined in his seat, the intense light fading from his eyes. “Roy Mustang, asking for the help of an expert. Whatever happened to independent investigations with your sole expertise, soldier?”

So predictable, Roy dismayed. Douglass always attempted to debase him by little insults such as this. But Roy was unfazed, for he was a soldier, though ranked and distinguished. It was a perfectly applicable title. “I am an expert of modern alchemy, sir, but the ancient art is considered among even our best State Alchemists an entirely separate and most difficult pursuit. If I were privy to any State Alchemist capable of decoding these circles, rest assured I would have already consulted them. If they are capable without our knowing, then I would begin to question their reasons for withholding assistance per their duty to the state.”

Douglass frowned. “This does not excuse you from introducing some random civilian into a state investigation, Mustang!” and then, forcibly composing himself, Douglass said, “There will need to be appropriate documentation of their involvement in this case. You stretch your jurisdiction, Lieutenant Colonel. I advise you be careful.”

No, you don’t, thought Roy even as he dipped his head in acknowledgement. Douglass dismissed him with the wave of a hand.

As he had expected, Douglass was now disinterested with Edward. Expertise in ancient alchemy was not the most profitable alchemical specialisation available, at least to the military. What use did they have of booklovers who insisted upon antiquated and laborious techniques? They were more eager for the cutting edge science of Tucker and Tringham, or for the strategically valuable battle skills of Gran and Armstrong and himself. The military was, if anything, highly practical.

Just as well; until it’s time, I get to keep Edward to myself. The symposium would be the first exposure, but it would be public, effectively cementing his name alongside Edward’s. It was this way that he would be able to avoid having Edward stolen from underneath his very nose to be put under the command of another higher-ranking officer. In these matters, the Fuhrer was fair almost to a fault and did not tolerate the theft of alchemical research, advancement, and innovation. Under Bradley, what was one man’s contribution was his and his alone, although no explicit law existed to dictate it so, and Edward would remain under his command until Roy himself declared otherwise. It mattered little his rank and his competition: so long as he was the one to introduce the boy to society, the boy was his. All in two weeks’ time, he thought. It was with a smile that he walked out of Douglass’ office.
“Could you have taken longer!” Maes exclaimed, shooting from his perch and ushering him right back out of the room. “I am starving, Roy, and Gracia made us some delicious breakfast! She called up here just now—why, I didn’t even get to kiss her for her scrumptious dinner last night, much less kiss her goodnight—I have to be home to kiss her a good morning!”

“I have no desire to talk or think or even imagine anything about you and kissing—”

“Edward’s waiting for breakfast to be served!” Maes shoved a binder into a book bag, grabbed their coats, and shut the door. “Come on, old fellow, move your creaky bones!”

“The investigation—”

“I left Riza in command! I believe you; she is very capable!”

“The files—”

“I left Riza in command! She is very capable!”

“Maes—”

“Riza!” Maes repeated, shoving Roy into the passenger seat. “Gracia, I’m coming home!” his friend sang as they pulled into Central’s streets. They happily drove for a few minutes to Maes’ delighted little rants until they were well away from Central command and Maes shut up.

“You have got to cease using these random fits of longing for your wife’s lips as an excuse to leave work midday, Maes,” sighed Roy.

“Hasn’t failed me yet, my friend! But no worry,” Maes assured him, “for by February, I’ll have the excuse of longing for my baby daughter’s chubby little cheeks!” Roy could only groan as they pulled in front of Maes’ house.

“Bastard! You’re late! Hurry up! My food is cold!” Edward’s little blonde head disappeared from a first floor window, which subsequently slammed shut as Roy stepped out of the car.

Maes gave him a pat on the shoulder. “I am most heartened to see that even in suffering our children, we fight together, old friend.”

Roy fashioned himself the better man per his custom and only gave Maes a withering look as he walked up to the door to give Gracia a peck on the cheek. He shook his head as Maes caught his wife in the promised good morning kiss in the hallway and retreated to the dining to give the couple some privacy. Edward sat sullen at the table, utensils in hand, poised and ready to devour his food.

“May I eat now?” the boy demanded, fingerling his fork.

Roy smiled. “You may.”

“Thank you!” Edward exclaimed, digging into his meal with the usual gusto. Roy removed his jacket and draped it over a chair before settling into a seat beside the boy. Edward was still in sleeping clothes, though his hair was straightened and his person presentable. Manners existed in Edward but only whenever he deemed his company worthy of such effort. Gracia, for her unfailing and timely provision of good food, was more than worthy.
Husband soon ushered said wife into the room and sat her at her seat, insisting upon serving himself and the guests to give Gracia some rest. She was getting bigger by the day, Roy noticed; children grew like weed. He could only hope that the birthing would not be too difficult for her delicate little hips.

“So,” Edward began in between big bites, “what was it you couldn’t talk about at Central command that you had to come home?”

Roy almost laughed. “Do we disrespect Gracia’s cooking so blatantly?”

“Her cooking is the smaller incentive,” Edward said. “Spit it out, old men. You aren’t fooling anyone.”

“Well, he grows up fast, look at him!” Maes cackled, spearing a sausage. “Did you give him *The Prince* yet?”

“We finished it a while back,” Roy said. “I’ll have him read it again later; at the very least once a year.”

“I’m right here, you know!”

“Ah, excuse us, Edward,” Roy smiled, “we were conversing at eye level.”

“*Who are you calling so short he—*”

“These files,” Maes mentioning the binder and ignoring Edward, “are of individual State Alchemists currently in presence within Central. I wanted you to start looking over them, Roy, and consider their possibility as suspects. You know them and their alchemy better. Falman came back while you were with Douglass to let me know a little something that Fuery noticed: half the books Edward had listed are only accessible through the First Library. All of them reference other works, most of which are also exclusive to personnel with level three security clearance. Of the team, you’re the only one with that kind of access; being no State Alchemist or high-ranked officer, I only have until level two.”

Edward swallowed hard. “Are you telling me that the killer is a State Alchemist?”

“The level of alchemical skill narrows the profile down by a lot, Ed,” said Maes. “It’s a good possibility—and these things are better left unsaid within Central command’s walls.”

“If so, then they’re a pretty pathetic State Alchemist,” Edward huffed, clearly unimpressed.

Roy poured Edward more juice. “Not necessarily, Ed; they can be exceptional in modern alchemy but with a limited knowledgebase on the ancient art.”

“Hence pathetic,” the boy insisted, stabbing his omelette with vicious conviction. “One does not learn the variations and stop at that; one learns the *origin* and then studies the variations. How do these people *study* alchemy?! I hope your teacher was a good teacher, Bastard. Mine taught me the truth.”

“The truth?” Maes probed.

Roy blinked. *You are not an alchemist,* Berthold had said to him, *as long as you do not understand this truth, Roy.*

“The truth!” Edward declared. “One is all—“
“—and all is one,” Roy finished.

Edward actually paused his meal to give Roy an appraising look and said, “Look at you, you’re actually decent!” Maes broke into laughter. “It seems our teachers were from the same philosophy; no wonder, then. What was your teacher’s name?”

“I am always decent, Edward,” Roy admonished, “and my teacher was known as the Alchemist of Air.”

“Air?” Edward echoed.

“His name was Berthold Hawkeye.”

“Hawkeye—wait, wait,” Edward blinked and grabbed his arm. “Is he related to your lady lieutenant? The lady who was giving me the evil eye last night.” Maes broke into more laughter.

“She is Berthold’s daughter,” Roy smiled, “and you’ll be best advised not to let her hear these little thoughts, young man, if you don’t wish to be peppered with bullet holes.”

“So she’s an alchemist too?! Holy—crap!” Edward caught himself mid-cuss at Gracia’s sharp upward glance. “What is she doing in your team?! Don’t you know that lady alchemists are deadly?!” Maes howled in mirth, slapping the tabletop as Edward continued, “They always have filthy ulterior motives and seek to control your very soul and they’ll lord it over you that their way of alchemy is better than your own, never mind that you’re the one using your alchemy—oh, and what’s worse, they actually are stronger than you! Physically, too! Even if they should have ten percent less muscle mass!”

Roy was laughing when he said, “I see that you are acquainted with the female variation of humankind, even at your tender age. But as far as I know, Riza is not a practicing alchemist. She had neither interest nor aptitude for it. She took after her mother; a mighty woman in her own right, but not an alchemist, no.”

“As far as you know?” Edward echoed, dubious. “Not good enough. She’s an alchemist, and don’t I know it. I’ll stay far away from her. Far away.”

Maes was attempting to say something that sounded like, “Wise choice, Ed!” except his laughter overpowered his entire body. Roy only shook his head. Trust Edward to reduce his unflappable friend into a veritable heap of giggling child.

“Anyway, my teacher’s name is Curtis,” Edward told him, “Izumi Curtis. She lives in Dublith; my brother and I both trained with her. We lived there for two years.”

“Your mother?”

“She let us go,” Edward shrugged. “It was harder to convince Izumi than to convince Mom. Izumi didn’t want apprentices—especially not two young boys. I was eight and Al was six, turning seven. I don’t think she was very comfortable with the idea of imparting her knowledge to two boys so young; powerful knowledge, at that, and capable of killing. People aren’t very fond of alchemy that close to Ishbal, you see; people think of alchemy there in terms of war.” Roy only nodded.

“Anyway, we managed to talk her into it, through sheer stubbornness. We would come home every few months or so and spend a week in Resembool, but that was it. Training took all of our time, and there were fewer distractions in Dublith. Since Izumi’s husband was supportive of alchemy, we could live with them. Since we lived with them, we could live with alchemy. Live it and eat it and breathe it, everyday. That was how we learned. That’s how real alchemists should learn. Not at
“And you finished your training in—what, a little less than three years?” Maes voiced disbelief. “Surely not; most alchemists I know of, even the more prodigious ones, take more than that. Roy took near seven years to finish his!”

“I wouldn’t say finished,” both Roy and Ed protested at once, and then looked at each other. Roy returned to his meal and allowed Ed to resume his story. The boy said, “We’re hardly finished. We’re both fast learners, Al and I, and her teaching methods are very, err, effective, shall we say—so we’re already at advanced levels. We’ve also been studying alchemy from Hohenheim’s notes since we were young, so we had good background.” Roy clearly heard the grudge in the boy’s voice upon mention of the missing father’s name. “But she hasn’t taught us any of her own techniques. We haven’t gone into her research; so far, we’ve only studied general alchemy, survival, and combat.”

Ed paused to pick at a cube of bell pepper, before continuing in a more strained tone, “And—and after what we—I’ve done, I don’t think she’ll be very happy with us. I don’t think she’ll even take us back. If anything, she’d likely beat us black and blue. She explicitly warned us away from human transmutation, and I explicitly disobeyed her. Al had more sense. Al has always had more sense. He’s very sane.”

Roy chuckled at the apt description.

Edward turned to him. “So? You said you weren’t finished, either.”

“With my training, yes, I wasn’t,” Roy acknowledged, inclining his head.

“Even though you had almost seven years?” Ed echoed Maes’ disbelief, only in the opposite. Roy could almost hear the added thought of, You must suck.

“I did not begin early with my alchemical education as you did, unfortunately,” Roy patiently explained. “My lessons began when I was about eight, almost nine years old, through Berthold, who was short-lived tutor to my half-brother. This half-brother of mine had no aptitude for alchemy, but much to Berthold’s surprise, I did. I was younger, and only included in these lessons because I insisted. They weren’t quite looking at me.” They never did, at anything, he thought. “Berthold soon left the employ of that household, but through certain arrangements, I began studying alchemy in earnest under his wing. It was very fortunate that you had Hohenheim—his notes—as your elementary instructor, Ed, because I had subpar books written by subpar alchemists as mine. I would look at them when I was a child, whenever I had a chance, at the house library. A very poorly equipped library, if I recall correctly. When Berthold finally took me as an apprentice, there were many things to unlearn.”

Edward gave a long and drawn-out sound of understanding. Unlearning was always the hardest part. It pleased Roy how quickly this boy processed implications. Excellent material he was given. Roy would have to send his regards to this Izumi Curtis in Dublith.

“Also, my study under Berthold was frequently interrupted by his recurrent battle with tuberculosis. He would be interned at the local hospital or bedridden for long stretches of time, while I was left to books and experimentation,” Roy continued. “In addition to this, I worked to earn money and studied other arts, such as political science, history, and rhetoric. Berthold had many intellectual connections; I made good use of them.”

“Of course you did.”

“I did, and my making use of them led me to where I am now,” Roy wryly smiled, putting aside his utensils as he finished with breakfast. He sat back to enjoy some finely brewed coffee. “One of them
introduced me to the idea of State Alchemy. –Oh, I was aware of it before then, yes, but I never did consider it until I was exposed to all of its potential benefits, if I played the game right. The idea of having access to the First Library—was irresistible. I’m sure you understand.” To Roy’s satisfaction, Ed gave a tight nod. “So I enlisted and passed the examination when I was fifteen. The military cares little for age.” Maes only smiled and sipped his coffee. “Berthold was far from impressed; he forbade me from returning to his house until I was ‘rid of taint and corruption’.” Ed gave a snort. “Yes, indeed. That August was the last I saw of him alive; he passed away the following winter. With his loss, I also lost contact with Hohenheim. The last I saw of him was the spring of that year. March, I believe—he had just returned from the north after a journey to another one of his friends. The passages are hard to traverse that far in the winter; he was forced to stay until first thaw.”

“No, he wasn’t,” Ed growled. “Couldn’t have been. If he had alchemy, he would be able to traverse any kind of ice or snow. He had his reasons for staying up there. Asshole never tells anyone anything; you’d think he was involved in some worldwide conspiracy with as much secrecy as he keeps around him.”

Roy laughed, standing to help Maes clear the dishes before Gracia could even venture to try. “Indeed. Hohenheim is a very secretive man, for which I am sure he has his reasons. Now, up you get, you’re helping to clean up! Equivalent exchange, Edward; Gracia cooked for you, no?”

Edward nodded and made pointless, happy chatter throughout the rest of their stay. Soon the two of them left Maes to his wife for some rest—as both Roy and Maes and their respective teams had yet to sleep since last night’s debacle—and Roy retreated to his house with his charge in tow. The boy was mostly quiet, in step beside him as a living and breathing reminder of what Roy had been, before the military. What innocence Roy had lost.

Once upstairs, he retreated into his rooms, where he took a quick shower and then went to bed. For a few hours, at least; he was needed back at work by the afternoon. This case was not the only case they were assigned; life should be so perfect. After a quick shot of gin, Roy nestled himself among soft, expensive covers within his spacious, expensive house—things he had toiled for through the past six years of his military life. His sore dislike for remembering things long past was for good reason. When he closed his eyes, he sank into disturbed dreams of smoke, fire, and his own wide and terrified eyes on the night of his first kill. He shortly woke and then fell back into even worse dreams of himself behind Edward on the night of the boy’s first kill. It would come, he knew. Eventually.

Roy’s only comfort was that he would be there behind Edward, because on the night of his first kill, there was nobody behind him.

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“Without doubt princes become great when they overcome the difficulties and obstacles by which they are confronted, and therefore Fortune, especially when she desires to make a new prince great, who has a greater necessity to earn renown than an hereditary one, causes enemies to arise and form designs against him, in order that he may have the opportunity of overcoming them, and by them to mount higher, as by a ladder which his enemies have raised. For this reason many consider that a wise prince, when he has the opportunity, ought with craft to foster some animosity against himself, so that, having crushed it, his renown may rise higher.”

( The Prince, Twentieth Chapter: Are Fortresses, And Many Other Things To Which Princes Resort, Advantageous Or Hurtful? ~ Niccolo Machiavelli )
If on a vibrant, sunny day one walked the streets surrounding Roy’s house, one would not have to walk very far to realise the house’s singularity. It was the sort of house that a common person would attribute to a wealthy man. This was not entirely false, as Roy was a wealthy man, all things considered. But things were not always such. A mere eight years ago, Roy was poor.

The house was naturally older than eight years, with its distinct red bricks hailing from a specific era of Amestrian architecture dating more than a century ago. Its details, foundation, and surroundings were altered in moderation for added strength and practicality over the years, but enough of its personality was maintained such that a learned eye was able to easily detect its noble origins. But age was not the sole contributor to the house’s imposing air. The surrounding houses were mostly of the same era, and yet failed to elicit the same repute. As with plenty of distinguished places, Roy’s house was famed for their original owners, Roy’s predecessors: the Amsels.

Newcomers to Central would not be familiar with the name. But mention it to persons with interests in business or politics or history, or any persons who lived in Central before the socio-political turmoil of the last four decades, and one would learn that for near a century or so, the Amsels were indubitably amongst the city’s most respected and influential families. What was now Roy’s house used to be their residence whenever they were in Central for the season, participating in functions and other similar social events.

Like the Armstrongs, the Amsels owned vast acres of land outside of the bursting metropolis. The Armstrongs were native to the north-northeast territories of Amestris, reportedly closer in ancient blood relation to the Drachmans than they would like to acknowledge. The Amsels, however, hailed from the opposite direction, owning land in the south-southwest of Central, toward Creta’s seldom tremulous borders.

The two families held a lot of bolstering characteristics in common, such as industry and charisma, but in their differences rested the story of the Amsels’ demise. While the Armstrongs were stringent, indeed almost vicious, in their inculcation of strong personality traits in their children (necessary given their proximity to Drachma), the Amsels were more permissive and allowed their children freer rein over personal character and line of work (permissible due to their secure placement). The result was an astounding variety of vocations within the scions of the Amsel lineage, in comparison to the Armstrongs’ near-perfect brood of intelligent, decisive, and ferocious soldiers.

But instead of fostering a cogent and well-rounded clan, the Amsels’ diversity led to incongruity that was left unresolved and assured them a slow but steady decline. The last strong child of the family—a headstrong, industrious lady named Evelyn Louise Amsel—tired of her family’s lack of leadership and found her refuge in one man who in time became her husband, a certain Lucas Olivier Armstrong. Her defection from her family line was the final nail in the proverbial coffin.

Evelyn was a woman, obviously, so according to Amsel tradition, she was ineligible to inherit. However, her two brothers and three male cousins destroyed themselves one by one through an impressive line-up of altercations, accidents, tragedies, and hideous public scandals. Four of them died with the last one landing in prison, leaving the family beholden to five girls. In an ideal world, Evelyn would have inherited, being the most educated and capable of all five. But she was only the second eldest of the girls. Through Amsel tradition, the eldest of them from the last line that hailed a male heir—her cousin Miranda—was in line to inherit before her.

The situation could have been manageable; Miranda was never a decisive person and would have been easy to control. But by then, Miranda was already wedded and pregnant by Landon Markham, the second son of the old and prestigious Markham family. Thus, by Amsel tradition, the inheritance
went into slippery Landon Markham’s hands. Suffice it to say that they were not fastidious hands.

Quickly she grew tired of his management. Though they were provided for in every necessity and never had to starve—indeed, her cousins were endowed well enough that they could still afford their blissfully ignorant high-society lifestyle in Central—Markham’s management of the family’s assets was acutely deficient. The deficiency became so pronounced that the expenses fast began to run over what they could afford. Thus in a final attempt to save what she could of the family business, she implored Markham to sell some of their summer houses, which should make sufficient money to revitalise the system. On the account of her gender and supposed subsequent ignorance of business and management, Markham vetoed her suggestion and sold the farmlands instead.

What horror and shame Evelyn must have felt for her name then! The acres of ancestral land that the Amsels had owned since the beginning of Amestris were summarily divvied up and consumed. Markham felt justified in his decision after acquiring such an enormous amount of quick money. “Land sells quicker than houses, woman,” he extolled, “and they sell for so much more!” But of course the land would sell quicker; the farmlands they used to own were prime soil for a wide variety of crops and cattle. It was also the one asset in their arsenal that still hauled robust revenue. But because of Markham, it was theirs no more.

This momentous loss served as the trigger for the confrontation that alienated Evelyn from the rest of her family, but her permanent departure was not until later, when Markham and her cousins, having again burned through their money, were in need of more assets to sell. It was at this time that Markham chose to heed her old and by now outdated suggestion of selling the summer houses for profit. Being so removed from her cousins, Evelyn was never notified of Markham’s decision, and only knew of it when she visited the old Central house and saw it being evacuated to be refurbished by its new owners.

Outrage was insufficient a word to describe what she felt at the slight dealt to her family. Precious history was being wasted, merely thrown away like some piece of rubbish! The old Amsel house in Central—or what was now Roy’s house—was the second oldest Amsel property after the ancestral home in Karmi. Historic banquets and summer functions were once held within that hall; Generals and even a Führer were once guests within those rooms! Yet there was little else she could do to save her family’s heirlooms. Through age-old Amsel traditions, she was rendered powerless.

It was at this time that Lucas Armstrong at last approached her with an offering of marriage—with promises of a bright future for her and her children. “You are a strong woman,” said Lucas Armstrong, “intelligent and highly resilient. Together, we will build upon the legacy of the Armstrongs. Our children will be the magnificent leaders of Amestris’ future.” Evelyn had been fighting this temptation for long time—she met Lucas through her work as a businesswoman in Central—and so finally she succumbed. There was nothing else for her family; she had done all she could. It was but a matter of time before everything—even the ancestral home—was squandered and lost.

What she was unaware of at the time of her engagement was the wedding gift Lucas had prepared. Having watched her for a long while, Lucas knew of her familial plight and acted accordingly. After a moderately wealthy business family bought the old Amsel house from Markham, Lucas pounced upon them and bought it back. The family only wanted for a pleasant residence in a section of the city that was stylish, safe, and accessible, so Lucas then apprised them of another property for sale on the opposite side of the Historical District. It was of equal beauty as the Amsel house, but bigger and newer, which meant fewer potential issues with disrepair. They were persuaded easily enough after Lucas offered them a generous sum that would cover their costs and still leave a small portion for furniture shopping. On the night of Lucas’ wedding, he presented the reacquired Amsel house to his new wife, who, for the lack of words, simply stood there and cried.
The house remained an unoccupied Armstrong property until nearly three years ago, when a certain Maes Hughes decided he was going to marry and began looking for a suitable house. By this time, the old Amsel house was the last remnant of the Amsel legacy in Central, and also the final connection Evelyn Armstrong had to her old family. She had been attempting to sell the property for a while, but appeared to encounter frequent difficulties with her buyers. By then, she was infamous for her stringent standards, but Maes placed his name—and Roy’s—as potential buyers nonetheless.

Kept in the dark as he was about the arrangement, Roy only knew of it when the Armstrongs sent the two of them an invitation to discuss the terms over dinner.

“Terms, what terms?” Roy had demanded of his friend, highly alarmed as he looked over the name signed at the bottom of the expensive card. Lucas Armstrong, it spelled. The Lucas Armstrong.

“Maes Hughes! You will explain yourself!”

Maes did, in between sporadic bursts of incoherent laughter. Roy caught ‘it’s a business deal!’ and ‘I’m getting married’ and ‘we’re buying a house!’ but not much else. That afternoon, before their dinner date at the Armstrong’s Central residence, Roy took Maes to visit said house (or houses) so that he would at least be privy to the nature of the investment he was about to negotiate. When they left for their appointment afterwards, Maes was triumphant as Roy found himself having fallen in love. The fireplace, it was massive, and it extended upwards to the second floor!

They met the Armstrongs, both of them for the first time, and were indeed impressed by the presence they were in. Ishbal and its dirt, blood, and sand were still fresh on their minds and hands; they were unused to such opulence and elegance. Moreover, they were young then and barely established; Roy was eighteen, Maes twenty. So Roy expressed his surprise at receiving such personal attention from a family of such distinction, “as I’m sure you have plenty of other buyers eager to purchase the house,” Roy cautiously said.

The Lady Evelyn Armstrong went on to explain that over the previous years, a fair number of enquiries had been received for the house, but she had in the end decided to refuse all of them, not for their inability to cover the cost of the house, but on grounds purely of character and achievement.

“It is of great importance to me,” she explained, “that the house of my ancestors pass on to an owner they would approve of and deem worthy. Of course, we are obliged to consider the financial aspect, but it is strictly secondary. A fixed price has therefore been set,” she finished with an intent and quiet tone, as if to impart a deep secret of her soul to them.

At this point, former General Lucas Armstrong, who had barely spoken, presented Maes and Roy with an envelope, and watched sternly as Maes opened it. Inside was a single sheet of paper, blank but for one figure written upon it in elegant calligraphy. Roy was about to express his sheer astonishment at the low price (and for both houses main and second!), but then caught sight of the Armstrongs’ faces and thought better of it. Further discussion of finances would have been distasteful.

“We are not interested in receiving anything beyond the quoted price. What we mean to do from here on is to conduct an auction of prestige.”

The true aim of this meeting, she explained, was to ask formally for the both of them—and Maes’ to-be-wife—to submit themselves to a formal and closer investigation of their background and credentials to discern whether or not they would be suitable owners of the property. It was rather an eccentric procedure, but Roy saw nothing objectionable about it, and neither did Maes; indeed, they both felt somewhat flattered to be considered as candidates by this hidebound family. Besides, there was much to admire in the idea of ‘an auction of prestige,’ as Lady Armstrong put it. Roy had to wonder why things were not settled more often by such logical means. How so much more
honourable was such a contest, in which one’s conduct and achievements were brought as witnesses instead of the size of one’s purse!

When they gave their consent and expressed their gratitude, the former general addressed them for the first time, and said: “I am a curious soul, Major Mustang, and I have much respect for men of science. For alchemists, in particular, who dedicate themselves to the pursuit of worldly knowledge. You will know this, of course, from my work in the past with the military. I have frequently expressed interest in and sponsored the work of numerous State Alchemists in my career. Indeed, I know of your work, Major Mustang—the famous Flame Alchemist. You could say that I am an honest admirer of alchemy.”

Clearly, the former general was responsible for convincing the Lady Armstrong to consider them as candidates. By some miraculous fortune that they were both wary to upset, Maes and Roy acquired the property after a month of the Armstrongs’ scrutiny. The low price still bothered Roy (a problem which he would resolve in the course of a few months by pouring major investment into a business guild that the Armstrongs were in the process of creating) but the house was so beautiful that he found it hard to object.

What became Maes’ house was a detached extension of the original old structure, built on the same property after the necessity for more space and a separate guest house became apparent. Though the second house was bigger, with more rooms and statelier accommodations for the Amsel guests in the past, in Roy’s opinion, he got the better end of the deal. (His house had a two-floor massive fireplace. Not to mention a hall. A great hall.) And as per agreement with the Armstrongs, Roy maintained the original structure of the main house, modifying only the second floor by removing several walls and unifying the two hind rooms to form his spacious library and study. The Armstrongs approved of the modifications upon visiting two months after they settled in.

Thus began a tentative but promising alliance. Their fortuitous interaction gave birth to the most important political alliance of Roy’s career. (Maes, having engineered the entire thing, forever held it over him.) He took great care to establish himself as a valuable and loyal friend to the Armstrong family, and his earnest efforts were repaid in droves by Armstrong assistance in business and politics. It helped to impress the former general, of course, that he was well-renowned in the military for his achievements and respect amongst the soldiers who knew him. On top of his military achievements, he was cultured, well-rounded, and economically savvy; he was the perfect guest to have over for entertainment, companionship, and advice. To their eyes, he became increasingly worthy of their time.

The Armstrongs invited him frequently to functions and dinners, introduced him to many important persons, and widened his circle of influence to create a bigger and more lasting mark upon Central’s political fabric—and these things were but beginnings! Though Roy reinvested into the Armstrongs’ business guild money worth enough to pay the Amsel house’s price in full, he understood that he would never be able to fully remove himself from being indebted to the Armstrongs. They gave him opportunities no amount of riches could buy. The one thing that Roy could do in return was to hold them in the highest respect and treat them as he would family. This was why, when he acquired Edward, he immediately sought an opportunity to present him to the Armstrongs. If Edward was to be introduced to Roy’s society, it would be to the Armstrongs first.

Seeing Edward’s need for his own research supplies, Roy fixed for them to make a shopping trip on the day that he knew the Armstrongs would be at the stationery shop. All went accordingly and indeed Lucas Armstrong was present, though with his children instead of his wife. Just as well, Roy introduced his new charge (Edward naturally gaping) and explained the circumstances to the Armstrongs. As he had expected, the old general was very delighted by Edward’s alchemical talent (which, as heretofore established, blatantly glared at everyone in the eye) and approved of Roy’s
choice in an apprentice. Roy noted Mira looking decidedly jealous as she made several disparaging comments about alchemists, never minding that Alex was there. (Mira never minded Alex at all.) This easily elevated Roy’s mood for the rest of the day. It never hurt to be reminded that despite all of Mira’s advantages, Roy held one thing over her that she would never be able to take away: alchemy.

Upon their return home, the two of them adjourned to the library, where Roy nursed a cup of tea over a book (an alchemy text, since he was in the right motivation for it) while Edward took to the floor with a map of Central spread under his hands. Roy watched him for a moment with a smile. Edward carelessly sprawled with ease only a child can manage. The boy’s eyes were intently tracing lines upon the map; what he could see, Roy could not even begin to fathom. But he need not know such things to understand the rarity of Edward’s mindless focus upon whatever he was learning. At that moment, Roy was hit with a sudden throat-clenching sensation. He missed alchemy.

Edward abruptly straightened, bones popping in his back. The boy rolled a shoulder and let out a long hiss.


Once the boy was situated before him, he placed his fingers upon Edward’s back, probing with care and earning an immediate groan of relief. Unbeknownst to plenty of people, quite a bit of tension was released with the simple act of touch. After a while of mapping Edward’s back, Roy decided that it would be wise to set Edward up with his doctor as soon as possible. He also added a mental note to introduce Edward to his masseuse; the knots in the boy’s back were horrendously tight.

A short while was spent in restive silence as Roy parted, straightened, soothed, and unknotted tense muscles underneath Edward’s skin. He took care not to exert too much pressure around the automail for fear of dehiscing the edges, but in truth, as he examined them, they looked well-approximated and far from danger of reopening. Roy frowned. He had encountered his fair share of automail wounds; these were healing a little too quickly. “Are you taking post-surgical medicines?” He’d heard of such cases before, where the recovery was accelerated by aggressive rehabilitation aided by internal medicine.

But Edward said no.

“How about you think your wounds are healing a little too quickly?” Roy pointed out. Surely Edward would have noticed, as it was his own body. Surely Edward knew that automail should take longer to heal. Roy had been fully prepared to have to assist Edward in daily living when the boy first arrived, but Ed’s mobility was exceptional for such a recent surgery. Roy did not know what to make of it.

“I’m not entirely sure myself,” Edward said after a while of deliberative silence, “but I have a strong feeling that the accelerated healing is also because of the Gate.”

*There.*

Edward finally said it. This was the first time, since Resembool, that Edward ever talked about the Gate. Roy had been waiting—impatiently waiting—and finally, Edward was discussing it.

“You mean to say that the Gate has influence on you even when you’re outside its realm?” Roy clarified, continuing his gentle massage. He was working on a knot precariously close to Edward’s automail, the muscle fibres being pulled upon by the weight of the metal it was now connected to. Underneath his finger pads, the scars felt the same as unscarred skin, the only difference being that it
was lighter in complexion than its immediate surroundings.

Edward remained silent for a while. Roy could sense the turmoil in Edward’s head, could feel it in the slow tensing of the muscles in Edward’s shoulders. He passed his fingers over them again to ease the pull. Slowly, wordlessly, Roy worked his way up the neck and into the base of Edward’s head, kneading deep and gentle until Edward was resting his entire weight against Roy’s leg.

It was then that Edward said, “I have a piece of the Gate in my head.”

First: note to self: massage is the most effective way to extricate information from a hesitant Edward.

Second: the Gate is where?!

Roy was tempted to blink in incredulity, but he kept on staring Edward straight in the eyes. His boy was not lying. No; his boy was telling the truth. Bells of caution rang loud in Roy’s head, however, because Edward’s fear and uncertainty were visible on his face as well—on his too-young and too-open face. Edward was afraid of being shunned, of course, that much was obvious. Oh, deities of alchemy, whatever was this boy to do without him? Roy gave an inward sigh.

“This... piece of the Gate inside of you, it doesn’t influence you?” Roy asked a most relevant—though not his most pressing—question.

Something—perchance a sliver of fear—dissolved away in Edward’s eyes. “I wouldn’t say it doesn’t. It kind of does, but indirectly,” the boy shrugged, shifting against Roy’s leg in a sinuous manner that belied his physical condition. And then, rushing as if to reassure him, “It doesn’t have control over my movements or thoughts or anything like that—not even my alchemy. All it does is stay there and tell me things, because I own it,” at this, Edward sounded smug.

The very idea was so alien to Roy that he had to blink and repeat after Edward’s words. “You own it.”

“I rightfully gained it by surviving the Gate. I think whoever survives the Gate is given the bounty of the information the Gate has—which is a lot, so most people don’t remember it, like Al—”

“—or they don’t survive,” Roy finished for him, a little discomfited by Edward’s postulation. Edward might be closer to insanity than Roy had first realised. All the more reason to keep the boy under close watch and protection, for there was no telling what amount of further trauma could push Edward over the edge. Anything could be his breaking point. Roy did not want to imagine that scenario; he pushed it out of his head.

“The information itself is a piece of the Gate that I keep in my head, except mine kind of has a personality? I don’t know why,” Edward went on.

A personality, he says. Roy was beginning to have doubts here.

“Perhaps because you saw it twice,” he suggested, playing along without much understanding why. The more he dissociated this little confession from the societal standards of sanity, the easier Edward’s words were to believe. For now, that was what he had to do: believe.

This is the boy who performed a successful human transmutation, Roy told himself. An amateur like yourself has no business judging over him what is true and false. At the moment, if he says pigs fly, you can expect Breda to be sailing out of your office window. At the moment, with regards to everything alchemy, this kid’s word is truth—or the closest humans ever get to the truth.
Said boy was of present giggling quietly against his leg. “I was just thinking that earlier when it was being cheeky!” It took Roy a while to realise that by ‘it,’ Edward meant ‘the Gate.’ When he did realise it, it was at that moment that Roy began processing: holy shit, went his ineloquent thoughts, he has a separate sentient being in his head! Holy flying mother of all— “Those poor souls who survived the Gate,” Edward mused aloud, “I think I know what drove them insane.”

Roy’s hands froze in the motion of combing through Edward’s hair. He did not even notice he had been combing through Edward’s hair. It was a calming, repetitive motion; a coping mechanism he had developed in childhood and worked hard to eradicate. (The presence of Edward’s beautiful hair entirely trashed his efforts there, of course.) It was as he thought of his childhood that an unbidden memory of Berthold rose before his eyes, hazy in image but with words crisp as the bite of a winter wind: “At the end of all things,” Berthold had said, “there exists a judge. It sets the equivalence and equates the transactions. It funnels the energy. It exists. But no one can prove it.”

Edward is the proof, Roy thought, but his statements are mere testimony. They cannot and will not be taken for fact.

No one can prove it, Berthold had said. Perhaps because the only way to do so—to ascertain its existence—is to see it for oneself. Roy was not going to perform human transmutation. On this count, he would have to trust Ed.

And this is only the beginning! Roy realised with a start. This is the first of many instances I will have to take his word for truth, if I am to truly use him—if I am to back him as a State Alchemist. Never before had he needed to confer to someone else’s expertise with regards to alchemy. As Douglass had said, he was an expert in alchemy. Except with Edward; he knows more. He understands more. And I have to trust him.

Roy pursed his lips. “So basically, this piece of the Gate is influencing your healing—accelerating it, because your body is its host.”

“I think so,” Edward replied. “It apparently doesn’t want to die yet.”

“It doesn’t want you to die yet. Perhaps you amuse it,” Roy mused, a sentiment not entirely foreign and difficult to grasp. Edward amused him; it seemed he and the Gate already had solid common ground. In an instant, Roy felt better about it. He could deal with a Gate if he factored it as an ally, instead of a wild card. Control agreed with him.

“You don’t think I’m strange with the Gate inside me?” Edward asked him, incredulous and uncertain, with just the right amount of adoring awe that Roy had to laugh.

“Oh, Edward, you are strange, even without the Gate—but brilliantly so! I would despair if you became anything less!” Roy said; may you never become anything less than what you are, dearest child. A rare and overwhelming wave of affection converged over Roy as he gathered the boy’s hair back into its tie, his hands lingering upon the fluid slope of a neck. Edward thought himself unworthy of affection, felt guilty for having committed a miracle of alchemy to save his mother. Roy did not know how to convey it to his boy, but he understood one thing well: the use of alchemy for the returned life of another person was an infinitely more forgivable sin than the use of alchemy for the destruction of life itself.

He gave Ed’s shoulder a pat and stood from his seat. “Come, let’s fix you a snack.”

•
“There is no great genius without some touch of madness.”
(Seneca)

“Will you be alright, introducing Edward to society today?” Maes asked, standing still as Gracia fixed the jacket around his shoulders. Roy himself was adjusting his cravat while running through the symposium’s schedule in his head.

“Today is perfect,” he said to Maes’ contrary, “as we’ll both be there to fend people off despite Edward being eye-catching enough that all the old crows will be caught and naturally enamoured.”

“Naturally,” Maes echoed drily, thanking Gracia with a playful peck on her lips. She smiled, a radiant glow about her enhancing her eyes: a glow that Roy could only attribute to her burgeoning pregnancy. It was due to this that she was most appropriately excused from today’s political gathering. Otherwise, she too would be dressed in her finest to take her place beside Maes, as she had always done until very recently when she could no more. Roy could not help but smile at the sight of them.

The past two weeks had been fast-paced and busy and not entirely too positive, given their puzzling repeated encounters with dead ends by false leads. Suffice to say, the investigation was far from productive, and with preparations for the year-end drills (supervised by the generals) hindering their timely progress, his superior was not very pleased. Then again, Douglass was very rarely pleased with anything that bore his name; this pressure was age-old. The pace with which they worked was punishing, nonetheless, particularly since people were beginning to talk.

Roy’s team had initiated a slow and cursory reconnaissance of State Alchemists who were probable suspects in the case. Their probing, careful as it was, had elicited some reflexive jerks and jolts from places better left alone. He was garnering some glances, most speculative and some suspicious. It was this pressure, and not Douglass, that made Roy anxious for Edward’s distraction—for he had no reservations about his charge’s ability to attract attention. Edward would give people something else to talk about whenever Roy Mustang’s name was mentioned.

“Bastard,” said charge now called out from up the stairs, “I can’t figure out this stupid fucking tie.”

“Language, Edward,” Roy sighed, much amused, “and come down so I can fix it for you. Maes is already here.”

Edward pattered down the stairs, fitted dashingly with attire Roy himself had handpicked. The grey suited Edward well. Long blond hair pulled up high behind the head highlighted sharp cheekbones under bright golden eyes. Roy admired his work with a silent smirk. The boy scowled.

“What,” Edward demanded, presenting him the offending tie.

“I believe he’s admiring the dashing young man before us, Edward,” complimented Gracia. “Look at you! Fit to face royalty.” At her words, a wild flush bloomed beneath Edward’s cheeks.

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“Watch,” Roy said, looping the tie underneath and around Edward’s collar to bring it before the boy’s eyes. “I expect you to be able to do this on your own next time. If you’re able to braid your hair by yourself, this should be simple work.” Ed scowled fiercer, nevertheless attentively watching the motions of Roy’s hands.

“I don’t think I’ll be wearing the blazer,” remarked Edward as he watched, “because then I’d look
too much like you.” Maes chortled. “In any case, it looks very uncomfortable.”

“Only if you aren’t used to it,” Roy contradicted lightly.

“Which I’m not,” Edward declared with finality. “No blazer. It’ll hinder my elbows, and won’t do anything to hide my automail anyway—which, incidentally, I’m not trying to hide. You are.”

“My wisdom, Edward, and your folly. Can’t you see that it will serve you an advantage in battle if they remain unaware that you are with automail limbs? Here, smaller sized gloves. Wear them. They’ll fit quite well with the attire.”

“Will there be no end to your uncomfortable clothing inventions?” the boy complained with much fervour, to which Roy replied, “They are not my inventions; they are only uncomfortable because you make them so; and, if you continue to be most unpleasant about them, they will indeed be endless.”

Such was how Edward’s mood acquired a sour note, which, Roy was later to discover, would only be further perpetuated by certain unsavoury encounters. Their ride to the preparatory school at which the symposium was to take place occurred in grumpy silence on the boy’s part. But all was well within his plans, for it was best to keep Edward irritated and subsequently alert. Roy had noted through his short time with his charge that such frustration built up a veritable charge of energy around the boy that forced inevitable attention from those around him, which was precisely what he needed. Edward needed to shine today, and while he had belief in Edward’s innate capabilities in this endeavour, it never hurt to put in place certain precautions of his own.

Upon arrival, the proceedings were of the usual. Pleasantries and charm have always been Roy’s strong suit, such that polite company was as easy as breathing. Women, of course, converged upon him when he entered the hall, and he smiled for them; Roy knew his standing with women and was not modest about it in the least.

Quite predictably, Edward fanned to the side. Easily carrying five simultaneous conversations at once, Roy watched his charge seek refuge in the relative safety of the shadows between the windows. Maes followed the boy with such merry disposition that only served to further grate at Edward’s nerves. Roy had warned Maes not to push Edward too hard. The boy needed to conserve some of his wits and composure for the day’s speaker. Roy had done his work and knew that Dr. Schrum’s theories would be found much lacking against Edward’s own genius. After all, what Dr. Schrum was yet stumbling about in the darkness with, Edward had already achieved—and Edward had a tendency to be quite intolerant of ordinary minds. They would have to wait and see.

“Such a young lad you bring to this symposium, Lieutenant Colonel Mustang,” was Brigadier General Gran’s greeting to him, the man as tall and imposing as ever in his full military regalia. Having witnessed Gran’s prowess in war, Mustang knew that such stature was not only for pose. But he had also witnessed Gran’s gullible nature, a quality perhaps as enduring in the man as his courage in battle. Hence Roy was not impressed. There were very few things with which Roy was impressed.

“Brigadier General,” Roy saluted smartly, “and Colonel Staurenberg.” Staurenberg was a good man most unfortunate to be under Gran’s jurisdiction. Were it another world, Roy could think of a number of other places the colonel would be most helpful, free to exercise a reportedly creative and steadfast command.

“He looks ten, no more than twelve,” Gran remarked, looking upon Edward above the small multitude of people. His charge was still within his corner, jostled side to side by Maes. “Surely we mustn’t put children like him into the paths of alchemy and war.”
Roy had to stifle a sudden laugh, one devoid of mirth. He so despised how for some people, those two words—alchemy and war—came together with such ease. “He is eleven, Brigadier General, and if we were truly worried for the preservation of our youth’s innocence, I would question the military’s decision to hold this year’s symposium at a preparatory school such as this.”

Gran, to his credit, remained unblinking, even faced with Roy’s deliberate lack of subtlety. Little of the same could be said for some of the ladies and gentlemen milling about them within hearing distance.

“But I, for one, am supportive of an early exposure to alchemy. This is how excellent practitioners and researchers are made.” Roy engendered a charming smile. “I like to believe that alchemy and war are not and will not become so symbiotic that the presence of one is inclusive of the other.”

“Unnaturally optimistic of you, Mustang,” Gran only murmured in response. Past a few more moments of stretched silence, Gran inclined his head and turned to find his peers. Roy turned to do the same.

“Lieutenant Colonel,” Staurenberg stopped him, voice quiet but eyes alight. “Those were well-spoken words.” With a short nod of his own, Staurenberg then retreated after his superior.

Before he could be detained any further, Roy extricated himself from the mill of people and returned to Edward with a smile. Roy hoped Edward was faring well; the boy looked a little peaky.

“That was downright obscene, Mustang,” remarked a very familiar voice approaching from his left. He turned with a plastered smile on his face.

“Why, if you were a little more sociable, I’m sure you would acquire your own following too, Brigadier General,” and Mira Armstrong would remain a Brigadier General to him until she was no longer one, despite the certainty of her impending promotion. Some would call his bitter behaviour childish mulishness; he preferred to address it as justified tenacity.

Mira Armstrong watched him as he greeted the entire Armstrong clan, all present. Yet again, he met Mira’s eyes with a steady smile and offered a kiss to the lady’s hand. Consistently, Mira refused.

The unspoken near-hostility between them was beginning to grow uncomfortably palpable, but an unwitting Edward, simply by being present, dissolved the tension. Whatever words were beginning to form between him and his rival fell away underneath patriarch Armstrong’s heavy voice. The old General was growing ever fonder of Edward by each encounter, and though Edward would be much obliged to differ, Roy knew this as a good thing. The favour of the Armstrong family was highly sought after, hard to earn and keep—but once had, priceless. Roy himself had had to earn it through quite unorthodox methods and had succeeded, despite—and perhaps because of—his requited infamous rivalry with Mira Armstrong. Until today, they remained the two youngest and fastest-rising political figures within the military, and the marked differences between them—direct force against guile and charm, rich pedigree against common man, human soldier against State Alchemist, woman against man—only gave the great game so much more depth.

The introductions had begun and the Fuhrer was the first in line. Old General Armstrong had ceased his talk and now Edward, for one reason or another, was strung tight as a violin. Nerves, he thought, or perhaps the issue to be discussed by the lecturer. Roy laid a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Easy, Ed.” The boy relaxed.

With a satisfied smile, Roy resumed his seat and turned his ears toward the programme. For now, they were set. Edward was sufficiently enraptured throughout the entire lecture and remained deep in thought even after the doctor alchemist finished speaking. Dr. Schrum was a kindly old doctor with
good reputation throughout the significant circles, but Roy had never been a follower of such research. Roy’s primary school of alchemy was one at great odds with the school Dr. Schrum hailed from; it was very little wonder they did not converse often despite the small world they all danced within.

“The generals have been eyeing you, in case you’ve been too busy to notice,” Maes muttered for his ears only, “and Douglass will make his way around in a short while if we don’t retreat soon.”

Most eager to avoid his superior, Roy turned to invite the Armstrongs to a cup of tea in the gardens, now—as they stood in applause to the lecture’s conclusion—before anyone else could. He had noticed the generals, particularly General Spahn, who was generating quite a bit of negative air around him as the symposium wore on.

Much to his dismay, teatime proved Edward to be even more strung. The blond was practically humming with energy, unable to stay quite still in his seat for more than a handful of seconds. Roy could see an effort being made, however; Edward restrained his person and indulged only in a tap-tap-tapping of his foot.

“Faulty,” Edward told the old General when asked about Dr. Schrum’s work. “He’s a good doctor, but that doesn’t guarantee his abilities as an alchemist.”

Well, of course, Roy thought. What else was one who had achieved human transmutation supposed to say when faced with an emaciated half-incarnation of his own theory? But Roy was quick to corroborate Edward’s criticism with points of his own, to assure old General Armstrong, and to draw attention away from the true reason behind Edward’s unshakable confidence. About Trisha Elric, the military must not know.

They concluded tea with a little banter and retrieved themselves from the gardens in time for the demonstration. For the purposes of this specific event, Roy was surprised that a demonstration was even approved. Not all of the national alchemical symposiums have had demonstrations after the lecture, for some theories of alchemy were better left as they were, untouched. Excuses of danger to the audience were often made to cover the true reasons behind halted entertainment. Civilians and non-alchemists were always eager to witness alchemy without understanding how very messy they could become. Roy was immensely grateful that Shou Tucker was a soft-spoken, timid man, and highly unlikely to agree to speak at one of these functions. Roy shuddered to think the kind of demonstration his chimeric studies would yield.

They came to a stop before a massive circle, eerily similar to something he had seen only over a month ago. Roy could close his eyes now and still feel the rolling energy in that tiny basement; the crackle of it, sharp and tangy against his tongue; the heavy scent of blood, smeared on the floor; the naked woman, alive; the two boys, one soulless, one drenched in his own blood—

“This,” Edward said, “is wrong.”

Roy simply had to smile.

“This is just wrong!” Edward declared, voice spearing through Roy’s thoughts. Roy folded his hands behind his back allowed the boy some space. Keeping an ear to the burgeoning rant, he scanned the crowd—ah, there you are—and found a cluster of the generals coming to view the display. Whether they were attracted by the showcased array or by Edward’s dulcet tones was another matter entirely.

Roy kept scanning and found a handful of State Alchemists clustered around Dr. Schrum. No doubt the old doctor already had to field questions in advance before the demonstrations even began. Their kind tended to be a tad overeager at times. Brigadier General Gran was present and attentive from a
little ways behind them, view unimpeded by the grace of his sheer height. Shou Tucker, much to Roy’s surprise, was there beside Gran, quiet and unobtrusive as always but present nonetheless. Seldom was Tucker seen out of the walls of his house as of recent: the grapevine was of the largely unified opinion that the military was keeping the poor man under wrap because of sensitive research material. Biological weaponry, were among the whispered words. Forbidden alchemy and live human testing and Drachma.

“Across, to the right, he just turned and left,” Maes muttered beside him again; Roy turned to catch a glimpse of a tall, ashen-haired man. “Islenhov. He’s back.”

Roy’s eyebrows rose slow in surprise. There was a figure he had not seen in years. Former Major Islenhov, otherwise known as the Venom Alchemist, specialising in the spontaneous production of a veritable range of poisonous agents with the means of alchemy—a long-lost but unforgettable acquaintance from the war. “Didn’t know he was, but I wouldn’t have wagered on him being here today,” Roy mused, “given his grievances with the state.”

“Alchemy is alchemy,” Maes shrugged, “or so you like to tell me.”

“Look, assistant, look carefully at what you’re drawing!” Edward then yowled, exhibiting admirable lung capacity for someone with such a small frame. “Where is your centre? Where is your midline? Which way is up?!”

“Edward,” Roy tightened his grip on the boy’s shoulder. It was effective; Edward simmered for a moment and then resumed in a considerably calmer, less scathing tone.

“Your biological theory was very sound, Dr. Schrum, but with all due respect, you are not an alchemist. And this,” the little blond threw his arm about, “is not a circle.”

Or not, Roy thought in creeping worry. Edward remained plenty scathing. Roy could not help but savour the near-theatrical horror settling upon the audience, though this was thin ice they were treading upon. He had hoped to momentarily slip away, but Islenhov would have to wait until later; Roy could not afford to leave Edward here alone. He knew that if he did, the boy would tear the symposium apart into pieces. He had to be here to be the anchor.

“That’s enough,” interrupted Schrum’s head apprentice. Roy recognized this man as Major Timothy Tabard, a fellow war hero and the acclaimed Bone Alchemist. Tabard was not known for his patience. “Where are your parents, child?”

“No!” Edward then snarled, once more losing rein over his temper. “Where are your parents, idiot? I bet they aren’t here because they’re too ashamed of this idiocy you flaunt so shamelessly.” Roy groaned, quietly. Edward so very loathed being called a child, and particularly in matters of alchemy. “Don’t you dare look down on me when you can’t even construct a proper circle to save your pathetic face!”

“You,” his boy now turned to the doctor, “are just what your title says you are. You are a doctor, and a damn good one. But trust me; it takes more than just sheer physiological expertise to create a fully functional human being from scratch. And you had impressive physiological theories there, but that means you will need an alchemist just as impressive who can translate the bulk of your physiology into alchemical jargon for you—because you obviously can’t do it!”

Roy kept his hand upon Edward’s neck. He could feel the flush of energy under the boy’s skin; his charge was straining, no doubt, with indignation and fire. Roy understood, he did, truly; but this was a delicate situation. They were still before an audience, a very powerful and yet delicate audience. And the Führer—
“You’re the Führer, am I correct,” Edward began with a hiss. The crowd was quiet as the Führer confirmed. Roy’s fingers clenched upon their perch, a firm warning that he knew was to be left unheeded. A great dose of summoned willpower was all that prevented him from grimacing in dismay. Everything else was wonderfully in place, but Edward—Edward—was uncontrollable. Edward was not shining; he was burning, and too brightly.

Roy had miscalculated.

“Why the hell are you permitting a public exhibition of human transmutation when I’m damn sure you know how ugly and unsafe and traumatizing it is?” The crowd reeled from Edward’s sheer disrespect, but the boy ploughed onward, heedless and unrelenting. “Were you so confident of Dr. Schrum that you just signed your consent without thinking? How can you be so confident when you haven’t even seen them demonstrate it beforehand? I know you haven’t seen it yet—I know they haven’t done it yet. It’s all just theory at the moment. If it were otherwise, you wouldn’t even have anything to allow, because they would all be dead. Swallowed by the reaction. And your symposium would be shot. This was downright irresponsible—beyond disappointing! I expected better when they told me this would be a gathering of the country’s best alchemists!”

The Führer is still smiling, Roy reassured himself. No need to worry for Ed’s life, not yet. Not yet. The Führer is still smiling. Still smiling, Roy. He’s still smiling.

“But what have you to prove that Dr. Schrum’s theory is mistaken?” Bradley inquired with what seemed to be sincere curiosity.

Edward only scoffed. “So now you’re trying to prove a negative? You do know that’s near-impossible, right? If our methods worked that way, we would get nowhere,” and the boy even had the gall to cross his arms and give the Führer a plain and hawkish frown.

The Führer only laughed. Some tension unknotted from Roy’s stiff spine; he began to thank whatever deity for Edward’s indispensible charm. The boy’s contrary attitude attracted favour from the most unlikely places, and in this scenario, it was playing out for their benefit. Roy knew that they would not always be so fortunate.

“I assume this bright young man is your charge today, Lieutenant Colonel?”

“Yes, sir,” Roy acknowledged, giving the Führer an apologetic smile. He rubbed gentle circles with his thumb at the nape of his boy’s neck, contemplating on what he should say next—but truly, there was only one option. To neutralise the offences Edward might have dealt today, Roy would have to levy his own status. “Edward is the son of one of my two alchemical mentors,” he said, and watched as the statement took its palpable effect. A good number of Amestris’ high society softened upon this fact. Roy was very well-received within their numbers; and even amongst his contemporary alchemists, he was considered an accomplished practitioner and expert of his field.

“Oh,” nodded the Führer, also an open admirer of Roy’s intellect, graces, and alchemy. “I see young Edward inherits the scientific blood.”

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“He will be my responsibility while he remains in Central for his studies. Do pardon his... zealous nature,” Roy once more apologised with a smile. “He’s but young, and very bright.”

“I can see that, yes,” the Führer was nodding happily along. “I do hope he will become a contributor to Amestris’ alchemical society one day. I’m sure he has great potential.” Roy saw hints of the Führer alluding to Amestris’ other new addition to its alchemical ranks, one certain Russell Tringham. According to Maes, Spahn had allowed Tringham to return to Xenotime to tend to his research and what remained of their family. Roy had at first been slightly disappointed that Edward
would not be introduced to a contemporary, but after this event, Roy saw Tringham’s absence as a windfall. Edward would have been entirely irrepressible had he a direct and active adversary. Schrum was, at least, old enough to know and excuse the follies and passion of youth, but Tringham! Roy had seen determination in those blue eyes of his, of the cold and brittle sort, the penultimate opposite of Edward’s kind. Imagining the two boys crossing paths here gave Roy renewed appreciation of his everlasting luck.

This was made evident as the old doctor now approached Edward, presumably to hear further thoughts. Roy hovered for a while, but eventually decided that the brunt of Edward’s temper was effectively neutralised. Either way, Edward seemed to behave in the calming presence of old Schrum, thusly relieving Roy of babysitting duty. As if to sense his reservations upon allowing Edward out of his reach, patriarch Armstrong smiled and reassured him, “He is in good hands, Lieutenant Colonel. I think I shall sit here for a moment with my wife and watch him. Mira and Alex are milling about, and so should you, for opportunities such as this are never to be missed. Go, now! Society too is important! Allow your charge his freedom with alchemy while you still can, and tackle society for him. Go!”

Knowing better than to refuse, Roy assuredly floated away. He passed a nearby pillar sculpted in the Riumi style and threw Maes, who had been abusing said pillar through the entire length of Edward’s tirade, his most disappointed and withering glare. Maes was still half-clutching and pawing at the pillar in abject stomach-squirming glee, but duly relinquished his post and followed after his friend.

“Temper your disappointment, old friend, and engage with me in a little laughter!” Maes cajoled.

“I don’t see why,” scowled Roy, “as I have only been through one of the most harrowing social entanglements of my life. I thought we had agreed that you would help restrain him should his temper take him! What happened to ‘of course, Roy’ and ‘why, I’d never let anything happen, or Gracia would kill me’? I should notify her of this lapse in your attention. Perhaps I can even persuade her to curtail your petting sessions with her belly.”

“I’ve procured pictures!” Maes dangled a camera before him. “And I’m even willing to share them with you. I’m sure you’ll be most pleased! If you had a moment to detach yourself from your paranoia and notice the boy whose shoulder you were clutching hard enough to dislocate, you would have seen how adorable he is when he gets all hissy and starts flailing! Especially, you know, with his height—”

“Oh, Maes, I’ll tell.”

“No, you won’t!” Maes brightly countered. “Besides, nothing really happened to Ed. It was just a little bit of—excitement, shall we say. Brightens up his day! Ah, Gracia will be most pleased that I’ve managed to record it all!”

“Maes,” Roy asked in mild horror, “exactly how many pictures did you take?”

Maes only grinned and retrieved three exhausted rolls of film from three different pockets. Roy could only raise his brows and pass a disbelieving hand over his face. Roy would sincerely worry for the Hughes family’s state of expenses had he not known that Maes developed his own pictures in an upstairs darkroom in his own house. The sheer number of pictures Maes took of everything and nearly every day would cost a fortune to have professionally developed.

“In any case, I managed to hold up Islenhov,” Maes informed him, still with a smile and a camera in hand. “He’s waiting out front by the gates. He seemed most eager to leave but he likes you enough to stay until you were done babysitting our dear Edward. I’ll let you run along now and go back to take more pictures!” True to his word, Maes careened away in enthusiastic search of the next lurid
scandal procurable. Roy sighed and turned towards the hall.

Once having navigated through the veritable obstacle course of famous persons and attention-seeking insects present inside the building, he made a beeline for the gates and sought out Islenhov. With what he found, he was somewhat impressed.

The last he saw of Islenhov was not much of a view, both of them having been shrouded in half-darkness and grey fog as Central sat in the grips of an early, grim winter. It was on one Thursday morning when Islenhov met with him briefly before leaving the city (and consequently the military’s employ) to wander Amestris in search for some intangible, elusive purpose, of which most of them, particularly the younger State Alchemists, were deprived by the war. Nobody knew what they were doing anymore, Islenhov had told him, least of all us. We are all lost, Islenhov had told him, and the state is taking advantage of it. Roy was powerless to deny him then.

I still am now, Roy mused, at least on the latter part. The state does take advantage. I should know. I’m doing it to Ed.

As if in commune with his thoughts, Islenhov’s eyes darkened. “I see you have a new recruit,” said the man. Islenhov, even long ago, highly disapproved of the military’s disregard for an alchemist’s age. But these opinions were barely aired, as the man was never one for overt confrontation, somewhat evident by his more discreet and deceitful alchemy. Moreover, Islenhov used to be a fragile slip of a person, thin and bony, white-skinned and sallow, quiet and barely conversant if at all. But always very intelligent conversation whenever one could entice him, and Roy had been one of the few who could. Roy never knew the man well enough to confidently call him an ally, but Islenhov easily gained Roy’s respect with his few well-chosen words and his attentive mastery of alchemy. Now, the Islenhov before him stood tall and strong, echoing a more solid confidence and purpose behind dark eyes.

“Edward, and no, he’s not a recruit,” Roy easily replied, knowing where this conversation was headed. “He’s the son of one of my mentors, and I’m paying back my dues by teaching him as his father taught me.”

“Of course,” Islenhov remarked drily. There was silence between them for a while.

“You seem to have found your purpose,” Roy remarked, “or something very close to it.”

“Very close to it,” Islenhov echoed.

He liked to do that, Roy noted, as an affirmative to a question or remark. Roy also noted the slight modifications upon the tattooed arrays on the backs of Islenhov’s hands. Tattooing was a common trick for plenty of the combat alchemists the military employed during the war. Kimblee and Islenhov were among the more notable examples of the trend. It was possible to pinpoint the veteran alchemists of Ishbal with near-unfailing accuracy by simply observing their hands. Alex Armstrong and himself were among the few exceptions to the rule.

“I will leave Central later today, so please do inform Raven of the futility of attempting to find and reemploy me. I have had enough of the State to last a lifetime and more.”

Roy inclined his head with a slight smile. Islenhov was being generous by handing him an opportunity to visit with a general, particularly one so close to the Fuhrer. Roy was quite certain of Islenhov’s ability to communicate his own message in clear, succinct terms without help from an outsider if he so wished.

“I hope you know what you are doing, Roy Mustang,” Islenhov met his eyes, piercing Roy with the
same cold-hot stab of gravity he felt the first time he saw eye to eye with this man a lifetime ago. “You have always been a very reasonable man. That child you have in your hands is as brilliant as the sun; any man can see and be blinded by the bright future ahead of him. I hope you do not destroy it in the same manner that our future was destroyed.”

“Our future was destroyed, yes,” Roy remarked, “but I am building something out of the ruins of mine. I still believe in alchemy, and, I think, so do you.”

Islenhov turned and made to leave, pocketing his hands as if to squirrel the evidence away. Useful; the arrays were already burned into Roy’s mind. “I no longer believe in this State,” Islenhov said as a parting, already walking away.

“Yes; but maybe you can believe in me,” Roy said. Islenhov gave no reply, no indication that he even heard, save for a tiny hitch in his step and faint turn of his head.

It was a while before Roy moved from his spot and back into the arms of the populous gathering.

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As promised, he visited General Raven’s offices the following morning. First Lieutenant Roget, known to Roy as Elena the Graceful, made him welcome with an offering of coffee (which he declined, having already had some with Edward at breakfast over chess) and the day’s paper to read (which he accepted, having made this stop before reporting to Hawkeye first). Upon sighting the first page, however, he wondered if perhaps he should have reported to Hawkeye first.

There on the front pages of Amestris’ most widely circulated (and certainly Central’s most popular) newspaper were his and Edward’s profiles, pictured from the left, himself with a hand on Edward and Edward with both hands thrust wildly about. The irreverence of its angle was worthy of Maes (the detestable little snit!) and the sheer sensationalism of the article positively stank of a certain journalist’s handiwork. Roy knew good old Hank Fitz’ work when he saw it.

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BIG SCANDALS COME IN SMALL PACKAGES!

A young new alchemist publicly disassembles renowned Dr. Albert Schrum’s theory! The event rekindles long-standing debates about Amestrian military ethics.

CENTRAL—The annual National Symposium for Alchemical Advancement concluded with unexpected but perhaps not entirely unwelcome developments within the alchemical society of Amestris, after yesterday evening’s invitation-only lecture, demonstration, and function at the Amestrian Trinity Academy, a nine-time host of the venture.

War hero and nationally-acclaimed alchemical pioneer Lt. Col. Roy Mustang (pictured above, right) took yesterday as his opportunity to introduce his new apprentice to the alchemical society of Amestris. Or, as those who were in attendance will agree, Lt. Col. Mustang’s new apprentice took the opportunity to introduce himself. The enterprising child in question is Edward Elric (pictured above, left foreground), age 11, from an unknown elementary alchemy education and similarly unknown city of origin. The Lt. Col. in charge of Mr. Elric during his tenure in Central could not be reached for a comment after the Symposium.

Young Mr. Elric, with his striking blond hair, diminutive stature, and antonymous liberal tongue,
barred no holds as he systematically disassembled Dr. Albert Schrum’s demonstrated bioalchemical array for advanced human transmutation. Mr. Elric praised Dr. Schrum for having “biological theories that are very sound” while simultaneously decrying his lack of “strict alchemical expertise.” According to the young alchemist, the bioalchemical circle, constructed by Dr. Schrum himself in coordination with a team of expert alchemists (two of whom are notably State-licensed), had “no balance or structure whatsoever.”

Dr. Schrum, titled the Anatomist, is renowned within the Amestrian academic and military circles for his valuable contributions to medicine and bioalchemy. An alumnus of the prestigious Firat Academy of Medicine and liberally trained as a resident by the Amestrian State Hospital, Dr. Schrum showcases a solid background in human physiology honed by years of active experience. It is worth noting that Dr. Schrum held the Headship of Surgery for nearly a decade at the State Hospital before clearing the State Alchemy exam and embarking upon his career as a bioalchemist. In his time as an alchemical researcher for the military, he has redefined the platforms of bioalchemy through its thorough and methodical integration with his expertise in human physiology.

In stark contrast, young Mr. Elric is unknown, untitled, untested, and unfledged. The only measure of competence afforded by the mysterious new celebrity is his connection with prominent State Alchemist and well-loved socio-political figure Lt. Col. Roy Mustang. While the Lt. Col. has stated that Mr. Elric is the son of one of his alchemical mentors, the specific details of their association remain unknown.

At yesterday’s demonstration, Dr. Schrum appeared to readily accept and even appreciate Mr. Elric’s unexpected hand in improving his allegedly “skewed” circle. Under the assumption of Mr. Elric’s prodigious alchemical aptitude, it is easy to conceive the next steps of his alchemical career in Central. The public may now expect the military to recruit his talent in the near future—an expectation which is throwing into renewed sharp relief some old-standing rifts between the martial and liberal factions of Amestrian politics.

Celebrated liberal politician and former lawyer Aaron Steinberg remarks on the issue: “Mr. Elric’s talent is evident—and yes, I do mean talent. It is difficult to describe to those who were not present during his spirited—and admittedly rather entertaining—little spiel, but one could sense an authenticity to Mr. Elric’s words. We did not see a demonstration of his alchemy, but it was not necessary to witness his encompassing comprehension of the subject. Whoever has taught him seems to have done very well. But the obvious fact of his untapped potential—exemplified by the disparity between his age and talent—will inevitably become an incentive for the military to employ him as a State Alchemist, under the well-worn excuse of the furthering of the science. He will certainly not be the first minor to be employed as a State Alchemist if he clears the exams—his caretaker, Lt. Col. Mustang, began his State Alchemical career at age 15, for one—but Mr. Elric will be the youngest in the entire history of Amestris. It has been a while since any alchemist below the age of 18 has enlisted in the military; as those informed will be aware, it was common practice during the war to employ any capable alchemist above the age of 13. […] It is not a secret what State Alchemists are tasked to do for the country in time of conflict; I question whether there still remains an ethic to the military’s methods. It will certainly break my heart to see such a brilliant young mind be thrown into the violence of war at such a tender age.”

At this time, Mr. Elric is not registered to undergo the State Alchemy exams taking place in the upcoming spring. (Story continued on page A6)
Roy wanted to faint. Or even close his eyes and sink into a silent moment of despair. But misery demanded his company in the forms of General Gardner, Major General Hakuro, and Lieutenant General Edison walking into the office. At once, he put down the paper and snapped into a smart salute. Only skill combined with the best and most harrowing political experiences (the likes of which he had suffered through yesterday) afforded him his composure as order fought to re-establish itself in his head. Hakuro sighted him; Roy viciously shoved thoughts of damage control into a corner of his mind.

“Lieutenant Colonel Mustang,” Hakuro frowned, stopping short of striking range. A man with solid survival instincts, Hakuro was. Not that distance would ever stop Roy. “You seem to be everywhere recently. I see you’ve read the paper. Your child alchemist’s performance has made quite a stir.”

Roy gave a discrete but telling smile. “He is rather a handful, sir.”

“Indeed; the boy has managed to charm an old man’s little heart,” mused Edison with lips wrapped around an unlit cigar. The general shuffled a little too desperately for a light that Roy had to take pity. He produced a small flame at the tip of his finger. “Ah, yes, I forget, the Flame Alchemist. Hm, yes. Very good, Lieutenant Colonel.”

“You were talking of an old man’s heart, sir,” Roy prompted, much familiar with Edison’s deplorable lack of concentration. Most people dismissed it as advancing age, but Roy knew it as growing complacency. Being one of the most secure generals in the brass, Edison no longer saw the need to remain in constant vigilance and practice his faculties as a commander. Having many State Alchemists under his extended command—among them Dr. Albert Schrum, Basque Gran, and through Gran, Shou Tucker—only served to dull the old man into impotence.

“Yes, yes, yes. I was, wasn’t I. Well, Dr. Schrum has taken quite a liking to your young one, Lieutenant Colonel, quite a liking indeed. I believe he will be personally contacting you soon to arrange further consultations, perhaps to share theories, hmm? Or whatever it is you alchemists do! Indulge him for me, Lieutenant Colonel; it isn’t often we see him as spirited as he was in his prime,” Edison said. “Ah. And when the young one decides to jump the hurdle, I will not object to a commendation from Dr. Schrum, should he choose to give it. Of course, you know well that I encourage the active mentorship of alchemists to alchemists, so you can expect me to vouch for your appointment as the young one’s acting superior. It would only be fair.”

“Much honoured, sir, thank you,” Roy smiled, and you shouldn’t be so complacently nice.

“So long as you keep him tight on his leash, Mustang,” Hakuro sighed, knowing a lost battle when he saw one. The general rubbed his wrist, a vague motion of discomfort. Hakuro disliked being in the minority. “The boy seems to have too explosive a temper for his own good.”

“He’s young,” Roy offered, “and inexperienced. Temperance will come with time.” I hope. But it won’t be soon, and if he sees those papers, it definitely won’t be today. I have to keep him from seeing the paper. Deities of above and below, let him be drowned today by the crashing waves of his own thoughts...

“But you have vicious competition, Lieutenant Colonel,” Gardner abruptly remarked, and here Roy listened. Gardner was among the few of the brass Roy could say he truly respected. “If you hope to best Spahn’s new pawn—and quite a pawn that one is—then your Mr. Elric will have to present quite an impressive front. He might clear the exams and perform alchemy, but Russell Tringham has pedigree and sponsorship in addition to decisive research work. It is not an exaggeration to say that Mr. Elric will need a miracle.”

Roy was quite sure Gardner’s choice of words was entirely accidental, but he was delighted.
nonetheless. Face threatening to split into an entirely inappropriate smirk, he replied, “Edward will manage. I have confidence in his skills. While I cannot deny Russell Tringham’s talent, he lacks the philosophical conviction that drives Edward in his study. And Edward has a unique brand of alchemy that I have never seen before.”

*There,* he thought winningly, *let them stew on that.* The generals were among the few at the forefront of the academic and political circles of Amestris and were by far the best channels through which to pass intentional leaks of information. Their title gave weight to words that would otherwise be weightless when whispered through other lips. Roy figured now that the only viable method to prevent society from frowning upon Edward’s underage status was to counteract the political surge with strong but subtle whispers about Edward’s mysterious genius. *Strengthen the cult of personality,* Roy thought, *and human fascination with the curio will overpower everything else.*

As if to cooperate with his ploy, General Raven swept in at that most opportune moment, side by side with the Führer. Once again, Roy snapped to smart salute.

Raven gave cursory nods to his three peers, apparently privy to the reason for their presence today, but gave Roy a disgruntled eye. “I do not recall summoning you, Lieutenant Colonel Mustang.”

“No, sir,” Roy answered. “I come bearing a message, sir. From Islenhov.”

All four generals turned to him at once. Only the Führer seemed unsurprised. Roy never failed to marvel at the man’s near-omniscience. Much as he hated the man’s politics, he could not help but admire his methods.

“Well, speak, soldier!” Raven barked, never a patient person.

“Sir,” Roy acknowledged, stone-faced and bolt upright. “I met with former Major Islenhov yesterday at the symposium; he was present to listen to Dr. Schrum. He wishes to let General Raven know the futility of searching and attempting to reemploy him, as he has left Central yesterday night and will not be returning in the near future. He did not speak it, sir, but the threat of violent retaliation under military pressure was implied.”

Raven might as well have swallowed a dead rat from the mottled puce colouring of his face. The prideful commander severely detested being thwarted by those he considered beneath him, especially *multiple times* by someone as lowly as a *deserted* ex-Major who failed to even qualify as one of the glorified combat alchemists of Ishbal. Islenhov was relegated to undercover work and assassination, which were poor choices for popularizing an alchemist. He was not helpful to Raven’s campaign to power.

“If that is all, Lieutenant Colonel, then take your leave and get on with your day. Your paperwork is waiting on your desk and will not be done by another hand,” Raven spat, and thus Roy found himself duly dismissed from the brass’ presence.

On his way out, he shot a genteel smile at Elena, who demurred with a dip of her beautiful eyes. Raven might be the military’s most bloated toad, but at the very least, he knew to surround himself with beautiful women. *That,* Roy could admire.

**The rest of the day was a blur of much the same. People passed him by in the hallways and asked questions of Edward he was careful to divert, subvert, or sidestep altogether. It was not hard to keep***
his story straight, but it was taxing to have to repeat the same thing to so many faces over and over again. At the end of the day, Roy was on the verge of kneeling in thankful praise to the deities of alchemy (deity? He didn’t know whether to treat the Gate was singular or a plural consciousness) for his hour-early release. As he fastened his coat by the door, Riza approached him with his bag—stuffed to its seams’ limits, of course, with paperwork—and a demand for a promise that he would use this hour to go to his doctor as he had scheduled, instead of stopping by at Madam Christmas’ or “galloping off to be a waste of space elsewhere,” in her exact words.

“But of course, milady,” Roy gave her an admittedly tired smile. “I think I should be turning in early tonight anyhow.”

“Oh, don’t bother cooking!” Maes barged in without a greeting. “Gracia’s making dinner for all four of us, so just bring yourself and your pet over. And no, you will not be turning in early tonight; we need to discuss your birthday party.”

The entire office perked at the words. Roy had to sigh. “Maes...”

“If we don’t, I’ll take matters into my own hands, and the entire event will be the single most embarrassing night in your entire life,” Maes flatly informed him. “Even when counting that night in Aquroya.”

Dread smouldered in his chest at the very mention of the memory (and was he glad it was but a memory!). “Maes, please, not tonight. I’ll talk to you about it, but how about tomorrow morning?” Roy offered, hopeful. “And Edward already has instructions to prepare dinner’s ingredients—a little too late for not cooking. The beef will already be out of the freezer by now.”

Maes gasped. “You refuse my wife’s cooking?!”

“You refuse mine,” Roy pointed out.

“Well, that’s because you’re not a woman! I don’t see womanly bits! Where are your womanly bits, eh? I will take a woman’s cooking over a man’s any day! Tender loving care packed in every cubic inch of your food—”

Roy shook his head and simply walked out. “Tomorrow, Maes. I’ll come over to your house and you can feed me Gracia’s dinner for breakfast then.” He left his best friend blithering more words of inanity and made for his appointment. He was going to be just in time; Dr. Gerals’ beautiful nurse did not appreciate tardiness.

He took to the streets and hailed the first tram he spotted. In all truth, he had forgotten about his upcoming birthday. He had no plans for this year, which was why he delayed his conversation with Maes. If they talked without him having a direction, Maes would run him over and the entire night would be a mess. Aquroya was one fine example; Roy was banned from an entire section of that city—or at least, from the bars in that section of the city.

Usually his birthday celebrations were held at public locations—last year being at Giovanni’s, for example—where people could gather easily and go about their own way home whenever they wanted. Those gatherings were also usually more populous, tumultuous, and, well, adult. This year, however, he had his little charge to worry about; it had to be a milder, more presentable celebration than the past few years to accommodate the child.

Roy should resent his having to work things around Edward, but found that he could not. He liked the boy far too much. Shaking his head at his own foolish fondness, he sat and began to compose a guest list in his head. It would have to be smaller and more private. His subordinates, of course; Maes
and Gracia; the Armstrongs; the Steinbergs, if they would come, though he doubted it, what with their three children all fallen ill; his business associates—now there was a long one. Anya and her brother, if he was back from Xing; Andrew, Anthony, and their families; Marcel, Bastien, Justin and his brother; Giovanni would insist on providing the food, no doubt, which would delight Edward to no end...

He nearly missed his stop and hopped off just in time after an old lady whom he assisted to the side of the road. Just as he thought, he arrived on the dot, the beautiful nurse—Marjorie—raising a sharp eyebrow with a half-smile.

“Nearly missed your mark, Lieutenant Colonel Mustang,” she said. “It’s good to see you keeping healthy, however. You always work yourself a little too hard. Maybe you’re learning to relax a little bit now, hmm?”

Roy gave a little laugh. “If you say so, my dear,” though you would be sorely mistaken. The mere thought of Edward alone had enough potency to make Roy tired to the bone. Maes was right; the boy was a chip right off the old block. Roy could not remember being this tired (and alive) since his daily (futile) debates with Hohenheim, during which he tried to disprove the older man’s theories on fire alchemy using his own ‘superior’ understanding of the art. (He was a conceited little piece of shit back then. Well, much more than he was now, anyway, and in a much less refined manner.)

“Dr. Geralds is ready to see you,” Marjorie informed him after he was signed in. “You’re our second to the last patient for the day. Sit down; let me take your blood pressure.”

Her hands were cool and firm, handling Roy as he sagged against the back of the chair. She was always quick and efficient with her work, her vitals done in minutes, her paperwork signed off and handed in before Geralds could even ask for them. Roy liked her; she reminded him of a medical version of Riza, brunette-issue.

Soon, he was ushered into the medical examination room, where he took a seat by the desk and waited for less than a minute. Geralds came in with his usual mild smile.

“Lieutenant Colonel Mustang, always a pleasure,” the doctor bid him, also tiredly taking a seat. It seemed both of them were having particularly horrid days.

Perhaps it was the slight chill in the clinic, but the fatigue was beginning to set into Roy. He knew this by the small and extraneous details he began to notice in his environment that he would otherwise ignore: the crooked cut of one of the doctor’s nails; a line of bottles ordered from tallest to smallest set against the wall; the minute cursive letters on the doctor’s souvenir pen spelling ‘Cottonwood Place’; a droplet of water clinging to the mouth of the faucet. “What can we say,” Roy only smiled, earning a chuckle from Geralds.

“Indeed, what can we say, or do, but take it with a smile.” Geralds was an old acquaintance, older even than the Armstrongs, one of his first in Central. A military man was well-advised to find a primary doctor in his city as quickly as possible, to ensure coverage and continuity of care in the case of certain extenuating circumstances. Theirs was not precisely the safest of professions. “Have there been any changes, Lieutenant Colonel Mustang? Or are we here for formality today?”

“Formality, mostly, and then some paperwork.” He added, “Sorry,” with a wry smile.

“Taking it with a smile still,” Geralds laughed, tapping his pen against his worksheet. “How are you dealing with sleep? Any improvement from last time? You should still have a few weeks’ worth of the pills.”
“I do, and they’re better, thank you,” Roy nodded. Sleep was a most elusive thing after Ishbal, though these days, he found himself dreaming of different things. Equally horrifying, but concerning a certain little blond instead of faceless Ishbalans with their blood-red and accusing eyes.

“You do avoid taking them with alcohol?” Geralds prompted, and then rejoined, “Let me rephrase that. You are avoiding taking alcohol at night for sleep altogether?”

Roy laughed, a guilty laugh this time, dipping his head. “I might have slipped a night or two.” Geralds gave him The Stare. Roy bowed his head. “But I’ve been very careful never to take the pill and alcohol anywhere near each other.”

“Good, let’s keep it that way,” Geralds nodded. “I don’t think I have to tell you the amount of damage you can deal your liver if you overdo it, not to mention the possibility of a coma—or death, even, if you overdose on depressants. And I don’t think I need to emphasize the importance of rehabilitating yourself to sleep without the help of these agents, either.”

There was a stretch of silence as Geralds scribbled a little note. And then, “How are your—what was it?—story sessions with Cairns coming along?”

Roy laughed. Geralds was usually good at making him laugh, as opposed to Cairns, his psychotherapist, whose manner and humour reminded Roy of dog teeth gnashing and grinding away at dried bone. “Horrid, as usual. I lie through my teeth every time; he swallows it all with a nod every time.” Maybe he should invite Geralds to his celebration this year. Last year it slipped his mind; they didn’t see each other very often.

“I should be appalled at your outright disregard for honesty, Lieutenant Colonel, but considering your line of work, I will rest my case,” the doctor shook his head.

“A most wise decision.”

“I’m sure,” Geralds chuckled, scribbling something again. Roy was always curious about what these doctors noted about him. Considering his longstanding disregard for his therapist, it should not come as a surprise that he had developed an ability to read medical shorthand upside-down, and even reconstruct entire paragraphs by watching the motions of the pen (useful if the paper itself was not visible to him). Geralds relinquished the pen and looked him in the eye. “Now. What about this paperwork you were bringing me?”

“A new patient,” Roy smiled, “a charge of mine. I’ve recently become his official guardian, and it’ll likely be that way until he comes of age. His name is Edward: feisty and intelligent and all of eleven years. He’s a good kid, but he’s suffered a train track injury when he was younger—automail, recently attached.”

“Ah,” Geralds said. A medical doctor of his calibre needed no help grasping the implications.

“I wanted to set an appointment for him, and also to ask you to prescribe for him some analgesics after you’ve seen him for his check-up. I guarantee you he won’t ask for them; he tends to neglect such things. Charges, of course, on my account,” Roy arranged.

Geralds was already flipping through his schedule book. “I have... ah, enough time for a complete baseline workup on the morning of November the first, if that’ll work. I’d squeeze him in the previous week, but I’ve unfortunately scheduled my one free afternoon for a much-needed reprieve from this.” The doctor cast a wayward hand about, never looking away from the details of the appointment which he scribbled upon the back of a business card.
“Any specific plans for your afternoon?” Roy inquired, taking the business card. Geralds was an enthusiastic connoisseur of art and often spent his days wandering the museums, libraries, and historic walks of Central. It was how Roy first met the man, at an exhibit the Armstrongs had sponsored. If Geralds had an entire afternoon cordoned off for leisure, then it must be for a fine specimen indeed. Roy exerted some effort into remembering any mention of a notable artistic conquest or discovery of late and found himself stymied. His other worries have pressed all extraneous matters so far and hard into the corners of his skull that they seem to have fused into it and disappeared altogether.

“You must be truly busy, Lieutenant Colonel, if you have yet to hear,” chuckled the doctor. They exited the room together as Geralds apprised him of the artistic community’s recent developments, notably the surfacing of two distinct Xerxes-themed oil paintings, both of the same artist and three hundred years old (or thereabouts), to be auctioned off this month to the highest bidder. (One was dubbed *The Jewel of Xerxes*, predictably depicting a beautiful maiden, while the other suffered an ever more dramatic name, *The Vanishing*, rumoured to be among the most evocative renditions of Xerxes’ untimely and mysterious demise.) Geralds’ most enduring grievance, of course—as was with any connoisseur of humble means—was his inability to bid upon most of the precious artefacts himself. Despite being a doctor, bidding would be a pointless venture for him, as other more affluent persons such as the Armstrongs, or one of the Generals, or even Roy, would only perfunctorily outbid him. Geralds was by all means far from poor, but against military precedence combined with inherited wealth? Suffice it to say that certain items with certain ascribed values only ever fall into certain hands. “But a man must at least be entitled to look upon the item of his passion, if he cannot own it,” Geralds remarked, engendering from Roy a small smile.

*Indeed,* Roy thought! Of course, Roy made it a point never to bid for artefacts; he much preferred either discovering them himself, or buying them from a trustworthy source. Nevertheless, on his short and uneventful journey home, Roy thought about the art auction and fervently hoped that it would be the Armstrongs who would acquire the treasures. It was the only conceivable way for him to be able to show the pieces to Edward, who would no doubt fawn over them, owing to their theme.

Further thoughts of the art pieces were shorn away from his mind when, upon arriving home, he found Edward welcoming a most unwelcome visitor (Maes) who still insisted upon sharing Gracia’s dinner with them (despite Roy and Ed preparing their own meal) in the hopes of later trapping Roy in discussion about the logistics of the birthday party. Thus was how Roy spent the rest of his evening, sat outside on the grill deck with Maes, a notepad, and a bottle of brandy, nipping away at a long guest list for a private at-home event (the first of all his parties!) engineered to accommodate Edward. The boy remained blissfully unaware, ensconced upstairs in his words and figures. Outside, Central settled for a cool and inky night.

On his birthday, as with every year, he woke just as the sun began peeking over the horizon. Autumn was coming upon them, however, and the morning was not as early as it seemed. He went through the motions of his routine, preparing a light meal for Edward and himself: egg salad sandwiches, with milk (or juice for the boy) and cheese and a cupful of assorted fruits. Then he saw to the task of waking Edward, an activity requiring fifteen minutes (at the least!) of gentle persuasion, so that the boy would surface from slumber in a peaceable manner. Upon the odd mornings were nightmares, during which Roy took additional time to coax him into wakefulness. They never talked of these nightmares, but Roy needed no telling. He had had enough of them himself to understand; besides, Edward had incredibly expressive eyes. Healing would take effort and time.
Today, the nightmares were elusive, much to Roy’s relief. Edward easily woke, washed up, tidied the bed, and followed him downstairs to break their fast. Time was available for a quick game of chess as he nursed his freshly roasted coffee. Roy had to crack a smile as Edward triumphantly seized both of his bishops: the boy was invested in multiple gambles with Havoc and Maes (both of whom were irresponsibly introducing very unbecoming habits to his charge) regarding his ability (or lack thereof) to capture at least half of Roy’s eight ranking pieces within the course of one full game. So far, the boy had only managed three.

Making a note to introduce Edward to Breda later that night (for Roy would like to see Maes lose some money after a while of having lost some himself), Roy set off work. Edward looked decidedly perturbed when they parted without ado, as Roy kept his peace about the day’s occasion. He knew through Maes that Edward was aware of his birthday through Gracia; the boy likely wondered why he never spoke of it himself. Well, Roy was never keen on advertising his personal milestones unless otherwise unavoidable, even to his closest friends. (Maes and Riza almost always knew about them without being told anyway, so what did it matter?) Shy though he was about the oddest things, he was entitled to his little quirks and secrets. Besides which, birthdays never were such special affairs for him until after he met his cohort and other friends. It was they, not Roy, who necessitated a celebration.

The workday, though far from dismal, was trying at best. Riza was dogged in her attempts to complete all of their duties within their limited amount of time. Roy’s entire staff was to leave early for the party, the preparations for which Maes and Gracia (and Giovanni and Marcel, both of whom would have already arrived at the house to ready the foods) were attending to in his stead. Maes was far-sighted enough to always schedule an off-day on such significant occasions, as Roy would likewise be, had he only considered the day significant.

After seven rounds of case paperwork, two heavy waves of budgeting, a command meeting, and cumbersome repartees with Douglass and company, Roy was much relieved to finally head home. It was shortly after four when they commandeered two cars and drove the short distance to his neighbourhood, alighting on the steps of his front path when the first of his guests—the Armstrongs, ever timely—pulled into the driveway. He escorted the Armstrong couple into the house, seating them in the Great Hall where a prompt Giovanni offered appetizing morsels and refreshments all around.

Maes and Gracia walked into the hall just as the Armstrongs settled into their seats. After another round of greetings, Maes dutifully informed him, “Your little blond one is still a-nap upstairs. I believe he set an alarm; you should expect him to be prickly tonight. You never even told him! Bad, Roy; bad!”

Roy gave Maes a withering look.

More guests arrived, notable among them Anya, remarking at the rarity of The Roy Mustang, Flame Alchemist and War Hero Extraordinaire, opening his much-coveted and hideously opulent dwelling for semi-public view. Few of his business associates were privy to his house in the past; Giovanni and Anya, being older acquaintances (and also owing to the nature of Anya’s business with him), were exceptions to the invisible rule.

“It has been a while since we last visited, has it not, husband?” the Lady Armstrong remarked, eyes curious and alight. “There have been a number of changes to this hall, if my memory does not fail me, but everything appears to be exceptionally well-cared for.” The Lady gave Roy a sweet smile, which Roy naturally had to reciprocate. “I believe our decision to bequeath this house to you was a
most wise decision, Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Indeed, indeed,” her husband rumbled from beside her, neck craned to admire the wide expanse of the Xerxian tapestry against the long wall. Anya was also perched in front of it, mouth open and pulled in a young smile, fingers curling a breath away from the surface of the circle. Roy had acquired this piece from her brother, Alistair, two years ago shortly after purchasing the house. Both of them often came over on Sundays to sit in front of the tapestry and appreciate it, but at present their shop was in the midst of expansion, which prevented them from visiting as often as they would wish. (Alistair, in particular, was still far removed from Amestris, scouring the desert with his friends for more relics to bring home.) Anya was, in fact, most delighted to be viewing the tapestry once more; so delighted that Roy did not expect her to be conversant until dinnertime.

Roy soon excused himself to change into suitable clothes upstairs. “Edward has supposedly devised a special gift for you,” Maes then informed him as he made to leave, “so try to snoop while he’s still asleep!”

“That would ruin the surprise, Maes,” but even as Roy laughed, he was intrigued indeed. A special gift, from the young child who performed the first successful human transmutation! Roy could not wait. No doubt it would be alchemical in nature, but try hard as he did, he could not fathom what form it would take. Edward had done well to keep it quiet over the past weeks. Not a single word from the child, even with their close quarters and daily conversation—only further proof that Edward was well and capable of keeping his secrets from the world.

Upstairs, the library was cast in shadows and stained sunlight. Edward’s notes and books crawled upon each other in neat narrow piles that bore no threat of toppling aside. Not a sign of stray papers upon the couches, or array blueprints spread bare on the floor, or notebooks strewn on the table: everything was in place. Roy had to smile. Perhaps he's beginning to understand the importance of presentation.

Said young alchemist was indeed fast asleep, curled upon his bed atop the covers around a soft pillow. The window drapes were beginning to cast long shadows across the room, but a stray beam of sunlight caught a glint of something metallic shoved underneath the bed. Roy toed it, thoughtful. Maes’ voice broke him from his temptation. Roy removed himself from the room. He had but fifteen minutes before the rest of the guests gathered; Edward’s gift could wait. Leaving the boy in sleep, Roy tidied himself up and descended once more into the company of friends. With skill from years in politics, Roy removed Edward from his immediate thoughts. It would have been a barefaced lie, however, if he denied his delight when the boy finally woke to mingle. This celebration, after all, was more for Edward than for himself. Risking severe sentimentality, Roy recognised that his true gift for this year was to have met Edward Elric, because for the alchemist inside of him already devoid of Berthold and Hohenheim, Edward was the only companion.

“I hope all of Fitz’ ridiculous leftist blather will not convince you into halting young Edward’s progress into State rank,” Lucas Armstrong beseeched Roy, drawing him aside to discuss a matter within which the old General was translucently invested. “Such potential must not be left untapped, and despite its faults, the system still offers maximum mobility and support for our alchemists. You know this well; in fact, you know it so well I am sure you can devise a way to circumvent the system to protect him, if that becomes necessary.”

Maes’ grin was lightning-quick, there and mocking him one moment, gone the next. Everyone appeared to be conspiring against Roy’s protective tendencies these days! Roy could only fathom Edward’s indelible charm as the ultimate perpetrator.
“I still remain by my original stance,” Roy explained. “Should he express a desire to enter the ranks, I will assist him in doing so. As of present, he has yet to utter a single word.”

“It would help, you know, if he knew about all of Central alight with talk of him,” Maes rejoined, “and I don’t mean in passing. You haven’t told him what they’ve been saying.”

Roy gave his friend a withering look. “Never mind productive; do you foresee anything remotely polite coming from his awareness of this mess?”

“He,” Maes grinned, “will blow it up!”

“My precise concern,” Roy drily said, eyes seeking the little blond across the hall. Edward was clustered with Anya, Bastien, Falman, Fuery, and Louis Armstrong around the now mounted newest addition to Roy’s oil painting collection. The Vanishing fused into the hall’s motif seamlessly and without effort: a noteworthy piece, doubtless fetching a noteworthy price. But another item to tally to his long list of debts to the Armstrongs.

“I understand that you thrive in order, Lieutenant Colonel, but trust my words: a little chaos goes far when one is in need of a significant change in the status quo,” General Armstrong advised. “His alchemy is one of a kind, as I have heard you tell the Generals—” Roy smirked, “—and it would be a damn shame to let it go to waste. Imagine the possibilities! He is yet young. These are your words, you realise.”

“They are mine, yes,” Roy acquiesced. Those were his precise words to the Führer at the symposium. “I will find the right time. He comes from a troubled background as it is; I have no wish to permanently scar him. The military is not renowned for its kindness. He will grow at his own pace,” and, throwing a glare at a glib Maes, he added, “and Maes here will ensure that I will not interfere.”

“Spoken like a good parent!” the old General declared. Roy’s shoulder locked under the weight of Lucas Armstrong’s hand descending upon it; he hid a wince. Maes reclined in his chair and gave another cackle.

In the kitchen, Giovanni, Marcel, Breda, Gracia, and Riza were in an involved discussion about the appropriate method of preparing a glazed crust for pot pies. Havoc was toying with a whining puppy.

“I have a proposition for you, Lieutenant Colonel,” General Armstrong began once more, after a stretch of silence. Roy noted those words, and the weight behind those words. Propositions from an Armstrong were never to be taken lightly, as both he and Maes learned well in the past. He canted his body toward the General to indicate his interest. Lucas Armstrong continued, “Contrary to the current generals, all of whom are craning their fat necks to peek at your protégé over there, I have had the privilege of witnessing an example of Edward’s alchemy. Back at the stationery shop, yes—that was a little slip on your part, was it not, hmm? Let us both be thankful that we were then in the company of friends.”

His nod was wholehearted, his smile like a knife. Roy knew the shape of a veiled threat no matter what sort of veil it tried to lurk behind. Let it never be said that an Armstrong ever truly retired from the political arena. Simply bearing the name was a political statement in and of itself.

“Now,” Lucas Armstrong, the Lucas Armstrong, continued, “if young Edward decides to, as they like to say, jump the hurdle, he will rank a Major under a superior officer of alchemical supervising capacity. This will, of course, be you.”
Maes chortled from his cushy chair, eyes dancing in the firelight. The nights were becoming cold enough for Roy to allow the fireplaces to fully radiate their warmth into the house. “No moron would assign the kid elsewhere, not when the entire nation knows about his connection to Roy. Everybody will be expecting it. It would be perceived unfair were Ed positioned under someone else—about as bad as stealing another alchemist’s research and getting caught for it.”

Roy canted his head in agreement. It was the one overwhelming windfall from the near-incoherent mess following Edward’s antics at the symposium. Mass awareness of the link between the two of them ensured Roy a prime position for protecting Edward from within the system.

“The child does seem to have unnaturally good fortune, doesn’t he?” General Armstrong remarked. Well deserved good fortune, Roy mused as he considered the track record of Edward’s life. The last four months in particular were horrendous enough to be worthy of nightmares from hell.

But General Armstrong was oblivious to his thoughts. “In this eventuality, I am sure you are aware of the conflict of interest if you are to be his sponsor and his superior officer at the same time. I have a solution to offer you.”

Roy had actually been attempting not to think about this tender issue, as he was at the moment very far from trusting anyone (other than himself and Maes) with Edward’s well-being in any form and capacity, be it physical, mental, emotional, or—as was most pertinent in Edward’s case—alchemical. Maes was smirking again; yes, yes, pride be damned, Roy was being a mother hen! But how was he to help himself? This was Edward in question.

“You can rest assured, Lieutenant Colonel, I wish you and all those under your protection no harm,” Lucas Armstrong quietly said, resting a hand on Roy’s arm. It was heavy with promise: of what kind, Roy was both terrified and anxious to explore. “In fact, I wish to share in your investment in young Edward. Only do I ask that you, per proper procedure, share the profits of said investment. Though I may be growing old, I am not growing blind. I can see his potential. As you alchemists prefer to put it: equivalent exchange.”

“If I may be so bold, Lord Armstrong,” Roy swiftly responded, “you have retired from the military. While it isn’t uncommon for a civilian of sufficient means to sponsor an alchemist, and while I’m sure Edward would be a grand addition to a long line of Armstrong-sponsored State Alchemists, I fail to see that this endeavour would be of much positional benefit to you.” Lucas Armstrong nodded and smiled, satisfied. Roy tightened his jaw. “You cannot possibly be suggesting—“

“My Mira will be ranked Major General in a handful of months, Lieutenant Colonel,” the old General said, “and it is not done for any person in so lofty a position to be devoid of a sponsorship—so much more for an Armstrong! No; she must sponsor an alchemist, never mind her ill disposition towards alchemy.” The old man reclined in his chair and rumbled in a manner that easily betrayed his pleasure at the thought of his daughter achieving such heights of power. (Or perhaps he was pleased at the opportunity of rankling Mira Olivier’s stout composure by saddling her with a child prodigy. Despite his reservations, Roy was pleased with this, too.)

“What of Alex?” Maes asked. “Mira refuses to sponsor him?” How Roy could have ever forgotten his presence, he would never fathom, but Maes’ profile was now far removed from his jovial and at times mocking mask. Contemplative hazel eyes looked upon Edward across the room. The boy in question was in the throes of a heated debate with a much enthused puppy. Whatever their quarry was, it seemed a worthy one; Lady Armstrong looked much entertained.

“Mira refuses to sponsor anyone unless it is decided for her, hence my proposition,” General Armstrong frowned. “She is a stubborn one, Mira. Bred and learned by the mother, I’m sure.” Roy
begged to differ! “But it is a good proposition, is it not? You take the boy under your wing and benefit directly from his exploits. I foresee rapid promotions for you, Lieutenant Colonel. All the while, Mira sponsors him for afar, amending his needs whenever necessary, be it financial, social, political, or otherwise. She benefits by fulfilling the expectation of a sponsorship and, per your words, by adding another excellent alchemist to the long line of those sponsored by our family. Between the two of you, young Edward should flourish beyond all of our expectations! He shall have your protection from the inside, and our protection from the outside. You know well and true that we treat our friendships with gravity and great respect.”

Roy looked into the hearth and thought. Tendrils of fire leapt and twirled around each other, evoking the vivid memory of his gift from Edward. A fine work of alchemy and artistry that book was—and to think he had yet to peek into its contents! Softly, a smile came to his face. The gift reminded him of Edward in every sense.

“Roy,” Maes implored, abrupt and if a little too intense. Roy had to blink. Maes’ eyes were rarely ever so bare. “I know you and Mira are bitter rivals to both of your respective brazen deaths, but the old General’s cutting a good deal. Better than good, actually—of which you wouldn’t need my meagre skills to point out, if you took a moment to step back from your hopeless case of attachment from the boy. Remember what I said to you a few weeks back?”

_There’s no need to protect everyone from everything_, Maes had told him over scotch, in the warm sunlight from the kitchen window. _You can have faith enough in us to do our jobs if you can have faith enough in yourself to protect all of us._ Roy then realised that Maes, through those eyes of his, must be seeing something worthy in this strategic little step. (Little, hah.) Whatever it was, Roy would likely never be able to fathom it until it slapped him in the face. He and Maes complemented each other very well in such a way that they each saw what the other failed to notice. Roy looked into the fire again. _Well, it’s neither the first time nor the worst situation in which I follow through Maes’ words in blind faith._

He turned to the old General, and pulled up a most pleasant and engaging smile. “May I have the privilege of heralding this news of a ceasefire to your daughter, sir?”

General Armstrong broke into raucous laughter, thumping at the arm of his chair even as the entire room jumped at his loud voice. Maes cackled along, calling for a refill of ice wine and exchanging a little toast with Roy. Their eyes met, and Maes became actively complicit in Roy’s machinations on Edward.

Much later, Roy would discover that Maes was already there and moving far ahead of him long before he even considered it.

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_“You may not control the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.”_  
( Maya Angelou )

•

High above the earth the crow soared, a noble bird, its dark feathers iridescent against the pale autumn sunlight. Roy imaged the wind whistling through the hooks of its claws, the feathers at the tips of its outstretched wings. What freedom, what a life these birds possessed! Roy ached to be one
of theirs. They had none of his worldly concerns: no nagging threat of death by bullet in the workplace every day, no wayward young genius to care for, no superiors to please, no expectations to fulfil.

*If only*, he thought with a sigh.

He cupped his chin in one hand and dangled the other out of the window. Paperwork was strewn across the large table behind him, along with the frustrated faces of his subordinates still poring over unyielding data. Their investigation was going nowhere.

Ordinarily, when one was tasked to track a serial killer down, the idea was to work upon the fresh leads on the most recent of the killer’s excursions to try and prevent a repeat performance. Often one was granted a set amount of time between each kill, the exact length of these intervals varying from case to case. One had to work fast and hard to chase the fresh leads, as these things were highly liable to dry up with record speed. But there came times when no amount of effort on the part of a team can bring a perpetrator to light. Some devious little devils sometimes simply refused to be caught. Roy loathed to admit that maybe, just maybe, they would have to wait until the next victim to gain further ground.

*It isn’t even an issue of having too little to work on*, Roy despaired! They had enough, they *should* have more than enough, to catch the perpetrator—they had multiple profiles to work from. Except for as comprehensive and detailed as these profiles were, it seemed that they were profiling shadows in the night. No one person in Central existed to fit their boxes.

A crisp gust of wind buffeted his hair and reddened his cheeks. Papers rustled behind him. It was midmorning with fair weather over the city, certainly a perfect day to be outdoors. Edward would be leaving soon for his doctor’s appointment. The thought of Edward beckoned Roy’s memory of the gift. He ached for more time to explore it, ached to have it here with him instead of having to work, but he daren’t risk the object; it was too precious. Besides which, its covering—a polished box of gold—was too prominent to be tactfully hidden.

*A box.*

Roy blinked.

A crow landed on the windowsill beside his arm, but he paid it no attention, now absorbed in a sudden epiphany. Edward had explained how he had engineered the gold to become the container for the book in the shape of a box. The book was never intended to fit the box; instead, the box was *made for* the book.

Roy straightened, startling the crow away from the window, and swivelled his chair to face once more toward the table. The sudden movement jolted Breda from a light snooze, and Fuery nearly voiced a question if not for Havoc’s quick hand on his shoulder. Havoc knew Roy’s habits by now, being the second longest under his employ after Riza: when he was deep in thought, it was best to keep him undisturbed.

First, he considered the profile. Roy and Maes had both agreed that the perpetrator was likely aesthetically attuned, with a definite eye for theatrics. This agreed with Edward’s eye collector theory. Furthermore, the perpetrator had yet to collect two pairs of eyes of the same colour. The first victim had brown eyes, but the specimen was destroyed due to a botched circle. The second victim had brown eyes, which were successfully excised from the head. The third had blue eyes, the fourth grey, the fifth a startling albino-red, the sixth hazel, and the seventh—Edward’s young and most unfortunate acquaintance—had green eyes.
If the perpetrator’s sole aim was to complete his collection of colours, then the seventh victim should be the last victim; the collection was already complete. This was the most problematic factor: just as it had the potential to narrow their possibilities down, so it had the potential to spread them wide open. The perpetrator could either stop (less problematic), or he could continue to collect the same eye colours now that the excision array was improved and posed less threat to damage the specimen. To make matters worse, the perpetrator showed no preference for age, sex, socioeconomic background, or location of origin. Apart from their grossly mutilated bodies, the seven victims held nothing in common.

Roy closed his eyes at the thought. He sorely detested slow cases. The god-awful drag began enticing him to second-guess himself where he truly shouldn’t. With but sheer force of will, he discarded his sinuous doubts and forced his thoughts back on track.

The recent round of their investigation began with Edward’s help that provided them with their initial leads from the library logs. None of the names they crosschecked from those lists were viable, as they had discovered shortly after—but upon review, there were two specific names that stood out.

First of them was Elmer Roget, a businessman and art collector, who had signed out a copy of not one but three of Edward’s listed books from the Second Library a few months ago. Roget was known within certain circles to be filthy rich, in a near-literal sense of filth. Roget had several shady connections with underground spies from Drachma and illegal smugglers from Aerugo. Notable among them was his acquaintance with certain enthusiasts from the underground market for human and chimeric body parts. The man was no professional alchemist, of course, which would have made him his prime candidate—except for the small but significant detail of his whereabouts on the 20th of May, the night of the third victim’s demise.

Elmer Roget was brother to Elena Roget, a most beautiful and efficient secretary under the service of General Raven. For some unfathomable reason, she tolerated her brother’s presence enough to introduce him to her superior and invite him to the occasional State-funded public function. (Naturally, in these situations, Elmer Roget’s money talked. It was the one other thing the man had that the military could want, aside from his aforementioned connections with some shady Drachman characters.) On the night of May 20th, Roy and Maes were both in attendance at a State function where they both witnessed Elmer Roget’s presence. Roget had stayed around the entire night, and would have never been able to execute the third murder. Maes and Roy severely doubted the involvement of a second hand in the killings, so they were forced to accept Roget’s alibi and rule him out.

Their second (less likely) suspect went by the name of Noah Bauer, a seemingly humble young historian currently employed as a teaching assistant at one of the colleges in north Central. Bauer’s background check came back clear of any anomalies, and in truth he would be no suspect at all, if for his untraceable whereabouts on the days of the murders. Every single one of the seven murders occurred on an off day for Noah Bauer, and on those days none of his neighbours, friends, acquaintances, and workmates were with him. Bauer had no workable alibi to cover himself with, claiming that he habitually took his bicycle and rode out of Central into the surrounding hills to be alone and breathe fresh air.

Simply to be thorough, Roy kept him in the books. It was too large a coincidence to ignore, Maes had said. But Roy remained staunch in his disbelief. Bauer did not feel like a killer, did not have the character to even attempt to become one. Roy had interviewed the man himself; he could tell. His gut could tell.

If only gut instinct was enough, he groaned, things would be so much easier in life! One suspect had the perfect character but also had an alibi; the other had no alibi but a mismatched character. And so
far, these were their two only options. This case was impossible! He had the sore temptation to simply give up.

“Juicy developments!” Maes announced, trouncing into the office space and flopping disgracefully upon Roy’s couch. “The most recent on the ethic wars!”

Roy shook his head. “Not another ignoramus blathering about their entitled opinions, Maes, please.”

Most of Amestris’ intelligentsia and its media have by now contributed their own word or three to the surging controversy about the ethics of the military employing an eleven-year-old alchemist, except of course, the concerned parties: Roy, and Edward himself. Edward remained blissfully unaware of the roiling political clamour around his name. Roy had had to use one of his most prized blackmail specimens over Maes’ head to keep things quiet around the house, but with Edward’s ire considered, the sacrifice was worth it. He consoled himself by resolving to gather even better specimen in the future.

“No, no, no! This is actually good! It has to do with the superstars.” The final bit was stage-whispered, as Roy’s best friend was always given to ridiculous theatrics.

As of current, the most noteworthy participants of the discussion (in Maes’ lexicon known as the ‘superstars’) were the Armstrong patriarch, former General Lucas Armstrong, and the well-placed younger contender, Major General Hakuro. This was less in part by the strength, eloquence, or validity of their arguments as it was more of the oxymoronic contradiction of their positions. Armstrong, hailing from one of the staunchest liberal strongholds in Amestris, was vouching for Edward’s admission as a State Alchemist, never mind the ethics of his age. Hakuro, a devout proponent of the martial regime, was denying the rectitude of Edward’s ‘premature’ admission into the ranks of the military.

Roy never would have imagined even in the most surreal and improbable of his dreams that he would ever hear Hakuro argue for the rectitude of a matter, any matter. Even Maes lost that bet (and they all gained new levels of respect for Breda’s oft underappreciated strategic mind). Far be it for any proponent of the martial regime to even consider the rectitude or ethic of any major decision, but Hakuro, of all people!

“Well, then, what is it? Hurry and finish your gossiping so I can return to my paperwork. I have to stop by at Dr. Geralds’ clinic to pick up Edward today, and I still have to get home in time to cook for the kid. He’s asking for my homemade pasta.”

“Such a good parent!” Maes crooned. Predictable. “Anyway! The media is being hilarious again—”

“Another blunder? Wonderful, just when I thought they couldn’t get worse—”

“—no, no! Well, yes, in a sense. But not really. I guess it depends.”

“Out with it, Maes!”

“You need to be taught some patience, my friend! Maybe Riza can—”

“Maes.”

“Right, story. Well. The media is declaring old General Armstrong the winner of their little tug of war,” Maes declared, much to Roy’s surprise.

“Is this tongue-in-cheek, or did Hakuro give in for real?” Roy thought it highly unlikely. Hakuro was not Raven, but he was still very proud.
“Well, that’s what I meant: it depends on who you ask!” Maes cackled, always too happy for such scandalous events. “Apparently, Armstrong outbid Hakuro again, last night, at the State Museum’s art auction, and the media are blowing it up. The sane ones know that it’s just Fitz’ sensationalism at work again, but most will be taken in by the current. They’re saying that by outbidding Hakuro in an art auction, Armstrong is declaring his political superiority. Never mind that it’s an art auction, because everything is a competition.”

“Well, that’s what I meant: it depends on who you ask!” Maes cackled, always too happy for such scandalous events. “Apparently, Armstrong outbid Hakuro again, last night, at the State Museum’s art auction, and the media are blowing it up. The sane ones know that it’s just Fitz’ sensationalism at work again, but most will be taken in by the current. They’re saying that by outbidding Hakuro in an art auction, Armstrong is declaring his political superiority. Never mind that it’s an art auction, because everything is a competition.”

“You mean to say, everything is a pissing contest.”

Grinning, Maes put his elbows on Roy’s desk and leaned forward, as if to divulge a conspiratorial secret. “Beautiful piece, though, from what I hear; you’d like it. You should ask Armstrong for a viewing, and maybe take Edward so he can see the manor. Actually, Ed might like the painting too, or at least it’s history. The piece itself might be too simple for him. Here, a picture, see? Pretty girl.”

Maes thrust a picture underneath his nose, making Roy have to recoil a few inches to properly view the item in question. Framed by intricate golden filigree was a moderate-sized painting, oil from what Roy could see, of a fair-haired girl with burnished golden eyes. The girl was wearing an ancient style of clothing, old Amestrian, possibly Persian—

“She’s called the Jewel of Xerxes,” Maes provided, “and yes, she’s supposedly of the purest possible Xerxian descent. The line died up a couple of hundred years ago, of course; that was around the time period this painting comes from. The painter was allegedly fascinated with the unique colouring of her eyes—gold, you know, very rare, almost nonexistent these days—”

A painting I’d wanted for a while... a girl with the most beautiful colouring. Fair hair, golden eyes—simple, but elegant in its simplicity. I’ve no money to buy it of course, Dr. Geralds had laughed, Dr. Geralds had laughed—

But a man must at least be entitled to look upon the item of his passion, if he cannot own it.

Roy burst out of his seat, pulling on his gloves and nearly giving Maes a heart attack. “Riza, call Dr. Geralds’ clinic, inquire of his whereabouts—”

“Sir, what—”

“Now!” Roy snapped, reaching for his own phone and hastily dialling home.

“Roy, what the hell are you—”

It rang, and rang, and rang—Roy looked at the clock. 11:45.

“Shit. Ed’s gone—Riza!”

Riza bid a hasty goodbye to the clinic desk and reported, “Dr. Geralds was not in the clinic, sir, I—”

“Edward? Where’s Edward?”

“—not in the clinic either, the nurse was very confused—sir, I—”

“Damn it! We’re moving out. Get yourselves up, up—”

“Roy, slow the fuck down and tell me what is going on,” Maes snapped, hand on Roy’s shoulder holding him down and back.

“The eyes, Maes. gold!” Roy exclaimed, frantic. They were wasting time, Edward could be in
danger—and it was only his gut instinct, but it was more than that—“Geralds—he’s an art enthusiast, don’t you remember?! He talked to me about the Jewel of Xerxes too—he mentioned it—Maes, Ed’s eyes are gold!”

Maes stood stunned. In a heartbeat, his team scrambled up and readied their weapons, Havoc already sprinting out the door to get the cars. As a group they raced through the hallways, scattering people left and right as they went. Maes gave apologies and left commands for Falman to organise a bigger search party in the off chance that they should need help covering more ground. Fuery was tasked to relay an order to Maes’ team to secure the clinic, search its premises, and interview the inhabitants. All the while, Roy had his heart in his throat, a tight band of anxiety constricting his mind into one sharp focus: find Edward.

They commandeered a car and sped through the city toward Dr. Geralds’ listed home residence. During the tense ride, Maes made it plain, “Half the facts here don’t add up, Roy. If this doesn’t fly, we’ll be in for some shit.”

“Gut,” Roy hissed. “I can feel it.”

That was enough to satisfy Riza and momentarily silence Maes. Both of them were well-acquainted with Roy’s gut instincts. They did not come about often, but they were scarcely wrong.

“Geralds is a doctor; he should certainly know anatomy well enough to slice out an eye,” murmured Breda.

“Why not do it himself, then, instead of using a circle?” Havoc asked.

“Because alchemy will always be more precise than human hands,” answered Roy, eyes grim. He still dreamt of Edward’s screams on some nights and recalled with clarity the clean shear of Edward’s wounds.

Maes sighed. “We never considered the fact that our perpetrator doesn’t have to borrow the books from the library if they already owned them. Terribly remiss of us.”

“It was our only lead for the while,” Breda shrugged, “so we focused on it. Ironic that the kid who gave us that lead becomes the true lead.”

Havoc pulled to a screeching halt in front of an average-sized house in a quiet, secluded street of the affluent south-west Central. About them were upper-end homes of hard-working citizens, which meant that at this time of the day, most were devoid of life. Havoc and Riza panned around the back of the house, guns out and aimed at the ground as they stealthily leaped over brush and flowerbed. Maes, Roy, and Breda approached from the front, checking through the windows for any flicker of life from inside. There was none.

A sharp snap from Roy made an explosion small enough to only damage the front door’s lock. Pushing inward, they panned around, checking the living room, the dining room, the sitting room, the bathroom. They met Havoc and Riza midway; Roy’s group took the second floor while the other two took the basement. Moments into clearing the first bedroom, a yell from Havoc had Roy scrambling back down.

“Chief, you wanna see this!” Havoc insisted, voice muffled from his location.

Roy slipped into the tight staircase leading down to a dimly lit wine cellar. He had to look around before he found the false door in the wall, artfully hid by the wooden panelling underneath the staircase. He ducked under it and came into a more spacious room containing two desks, a chair,
books, papers, and shelves of—

“Holy hell,” Maes breathed.

On the wall shelf were seven glass bottles, each labelled and dated, each holding a pair of eyes. They were suspended in liquid—a preservative, Roy was sure—and cast large circular shadows on the wall behind them. The seventh pair, vivid emerald greens, was by far the best maintained.

“The house’s clear, chief,” Breda called from behind. “The kid’s not here.”

A tight hiss made it past his teeth. Roy’s fingers ached from the sheer effort of keeping them still. He had a gun in one hand and a glove covering the other, but both his arms were by his sides, powerless as he struggled to think of a clue. Maes was already at the two desks strewn with papers, so Roy followed, eyes wandering. Searching.

“These are all the circles,” Maes pointed out. “Here’s the most recent one, and here’s the fifth one… I think this is the third one here…”

“Anything that would tell us where the boy is?” Riza prompted, ever refocusing their efforts. Roy was already looking.

“As far as I remember, the doctor doesn’t own any other property apart from this house, unless he acquired one within the last two years,” said Maes, shuffling papers about. “We did a background check when we first met him, but I haven’t revisited him recently. I honestly wouldn’t know.”

*And that is the crux of the issue*, Roy thought. None of them knew. None of them even suspected someone so close to home, someone so trusted was their perpetrator. Roy fought the urge to scream his fury. He hated, hated, hated missing a step. He despised it!

Roy turned away from the shelved glass bottles and put a hand to his face, breathing deep to centre himself. Rerunning the facts in his head would work better if he could calm his frazzled nerves, but all he could think of was Edward, unwittingly put in the way of danger by none other than himself.

“Breda’s using the home phone to call the clinic and see if Falman and the others found anything,” Havoc reported. “Maybe they’ll find something there that’ll help.”

Maes shifted a small pile of books to the opposite side of the desk to clear some space, scattering some papers and sending pens rolling off the side. One of them rolled right up to Roy’s foot, a small blue-bodied pen, with white markings on the side. Roy picked it up and made to replace it on the tabletop, when he caught sight of the markings—*cursive letters, ‘Cottonwood Place’*—

“Do any of you know a Cottonwood Place in Central?”

“No, sir,” Riza replied with Havoc. Breda was still upstairs.

“Maes,” Roy nudged.

“Huh, what? Oh, Cottonwood Place, let me see,” his friend muttered, eyes zipping through papers in search for a clue. “I think it’s a new housing development just outside of south Central, if you head straight down South 1st—wait, why, how did you—”

Roy simply handed him the pen and turned on his heel, Havoc already taking the stairs two at a time. They all hopped back into the car just as two teams of soldiers pulled up to the house. Breda was left in charge as Roy took one of the teams with them, speeding down the city street against the early lunch crowds.
Cottonwood Place was far beyond the old boundaries of the city, an extension brought about by a higher demand on the housing market as the population thrived after each year. Parts of the subdivision were yet sparse stretches of grass and bare earth, but a cluster of houses could be seen every now and then. Most of them were only half-finished and still for sale. The few that were finished were the ones seemingly occupied.

“Pan out,” Roy ordered, “and check every house, every room, every basement. He has a hostage, a child; be careful when you engage. I want the perpetrator alive if possible, but the safety of the victim is top priority. Move!”

The men—far too few of them to cover the large area—jumped at his order and spread out in a circle, taking it house by house. Roy made for the nearest one and grit his teeth, hoping that he would make it in time. Maes had the foresight to leave their location with Breda so they could call for the reinforcements Fuery was supposed to pull together at the headquarters. But Edward. Edward.

It was neither the first house, nor the second. The third was occupied by an alarmed gentleman and his wife; the fourth, a young woman. By the time Roy exited the fifth—small, single-floor, all rooms bare and a windowsill home to a bird’s nest—his fury had mounted to a terrible proportion. All of his fear for Edward’s safety—all of his frustration—transformed into a white-hot and furious surging fire, deep in his belly, waiting to be summoned, wanting to burn.

Ishbal, he realized in a flash, it hasn’t been like this since Ishbal. This sort of roiling energy was a ghost he knew well from his bloody past. Not for the first time, Edward reminded him of things that were best laid to rest.

But he refused. He would not let Edward suffer injury under his care. He would not let Edward die like those children he had murdered in the sands. The thought sent his feet into a faster sprint toward the next cluster of houses. His soldiers were far to his left as he scaled the empty street, panning away to search more houses, showing no sign of having found anything valuable.

The next cluster of houses was small and largely uninhabited, the area being newer and farther away from the mouth of the subdivision. He chose the nearest house to investigate and was about to bust the door open when a movement caught the corner of his eye. His gun found its holster once more as he tugged on his other glove. The sensation of familiar leather against his skin hardened his nerves into steel. Ducking out of the front patio, he ran past two houses until the corner, around which three houses sat facing each other in a cul-de-sac. No sooner had he turned the corner when a flash of light, violent and blue, illuminated the windows of the house in the middle.

Edward!

It was brief, but it had Roy running. He sent a bright red ribbon of fire zipping through the air to call for reinforcements, but wasted no time waiting for them. It was by pure luck to find anything here; Geralds could have seen them scouring the first few houses and made his escape. But that light—only a circle could produce that sort of light. Roy knew alchemy when he saw it, when he came close to it, and he could feel it now, as he eased past the front door and slipped into the house.

Unbidden memories of Resembool came to him. His eyes easily found the door to the basement situated under the stairs, but it was closed and showed no signs of having been opened. No; the light came from ground floor. Roy sucked in a quiet breath and stalked briskly down the hall.

In the living room, Geralds was crouched. His jacket was creased, his forehead shining with perspiration. An uncapped jar rested upon the floor beside him, clear liquid vibrating within it as the array sang with energy. Edward—still whole!—lay still and sleeping within its lines. Geralds noticed him the moment he stepped into the room, eyes widening and hands tightening around a gun.
Both hands gloved and ready, Roy took aim.

“Life’s single lesson: that there is more accident to it than a man can ever admit to in a lifetime and stay sane.”

( Thomas Pynchon )

When his soldiers burst into the gloom, Roy was on his knees. Ginger fingers rubbed at the circle’s limit, blurring it until the glow was no more. It took practice and special attention to be able to deactivate a circle once it was already activated: the alchemist had to wait for the glow to dim a certain degree before attempting to blur a hole through the limit. Dimming light was indicative of lost intent, which happened whenever the alchemist removed his hand from the circle. Had Roy dallied two seconds longer, Edward would be dead.

“Do we have a medic?” was his response to Maes’ presence, voice as steady as his heartbeat was not. Edward was breathing, which calmed Roy somewhat—but the breaths were deep and smooth, too smooth for the norm. Drugged, he deduced, of course. Edward would have never let himself be taken without a significant fight. He must have been caught off his guard. And why not? Patients are supposed to be able to trust their doctors.

“The reinforcements just got here, they have a pair,” Havoc said, always quick to respond. “I’ll get them.”

Roy gathered the boy into his arms, taking care from smearing the circle any further. Scorch marks already obscured its far edges, near where Geralds had knelt. On that very spot smouldered a blackened mass, once human, now only vaguely so. Ashes from the doctor’s clothing danced like snowflakes around the room, waltzing gently until they settled upon some unsuspecting surface.

From the floor underneath the far window, Riza retrieved a far-flung six-shot revolver. “Did you get hit?” Maes asked, looking him over, knowing that Roy would prioritize others over his own health. “Did he use that gun?”

“He tried,” Roy said, “but I was faster.”

“Good,” Maes nodded, shoulders loosening a measure. “It’ll make it easier to explain why we have a corpse instead of an apprehended murderer to be tried and imprisoned.”

“He deserved it,” Fuery frowned, an intense expression of anger on his youthful features. “All those people, dead because of him. He deserved it.”

Looking back upon the scene, Roy felt an intense surge of the same white-hot fury. “No, he didn’t,” he said. This was not enough. “I should have let him live. Let him live and be sentenced to life in prison.”

Fuery’s anger morphed into confusion, but Riza and Maes understood what Roy meant. There were rumours underground, rumours of the Fifth Laboratory beside Central Prison. Roy understood some rumours to be truer than others.
“Roy,” Maes warned, but he was already headed out with his armful of sleeping child. Outside, the light was white and soft, as if in tune with his numbed heart. He should feel some remorse for having just taken a human life, but there was nothing in his chest save bone-deep relief—Edward was safe. Edward was whole.

He deposited the boy into more capable hands: a pair of medics he remembered to be recently placed under his command. Personnel from Intelligence met him as he exited, one of them staying to document Roy’s report as he sent the others inside to regroup with Maes. To the back, behind the cars, media flocked like bees to honey—or, as would be more appropriate, like vultures to a corpse. There were flashes and a handful of shouted questions, but none of them dared approach, kept in line as they were by the sight of a glove on Roy’s left hand.

“Go on ahead with Edward to the hospital,” Maes urged, reappearing behind him and encouraging further flurry from the media. “I can hold this down. Besides which, you’ll be useless here preoccupied with the boy. Just try not to fry anyone else today.”

“‘Fry’ is a tad mild, Maes,” Roy scoffed as he slipped into the ambulance after Edward.

“Don’t I know it,” smiled Maes, a tight expression with only his lips. His eyes remained dark and deep, a sure sign of a later conversation for which Roy would need some alcohol. Just as well. “Try and send Knox over, would you? He’ll be useful for identity confirmation. Minor detail, I know, but we better cover this thoroughly. Douglass will be on you for this. Even if we solved it, they won’t like how we handled it.”

Removing his remaining glove, Roy gave a sigh and flicked his eyes to the clamouring media. “Use them, then. You’re good at it.”

If he had waited any longer before shutting the ambulance’s door, he would have heard Maes utter an ironic little laugh. As it was, they needed to deliver Edward to better care; the ambulance eased its way through the gathered crowd and sped through the half-hashed houses toward the heart of the city.

Roy took a deep breath. It was high time he reordered his head.

SERIAL KILLER KILLED IN ACTION
Previously undisclosed details of the murders released!
Lt. Col. Mustang’s young apprentice somehow involved?

CENTRAL—On Thursday, November 1st, the unnamed serial killer responsible for seven murders within the past year was reported to have been killed in confrontation with the deployed investigative team. The perpetrator was identified to be Dr. Robert Geralds, 49, a physician in private practice and graduate of the Firat Academy of Medicine. Evidence of having committed the murders was discovered in the basement of his residence, located in the south-west suburbs of Central.

Investigators are now combing through files to find the links between Geralds and his seven victims, but are convinced that most of them—if not all—are either past or current patients. In order of death, the victims are (pictured to the left, in clockwise order): Caroline Braun, 23, lady of the night; Alfonz Werner, 30, former lieutenant and honourably discharged after sustaining a war injury; Rachel Chablis, 17, prominent high-born socialite and third daughter of the Chablis family; Mischa Wagner, 49, miller; Viktor Johanssen, 6, born with mental disabilities and resident of the Sinclair
Orphanage: Amica Freud, 26, secretary; and Timothy Rutherford, 12, student at the Aschgart Alchemical Preparatory School. Apart from the first two, each victim had a different eye colour.

Further details regarding the purpose of the murders were also revealed at a brief conference held shortly after daybreak today. According to the team spokesperson, the perpetrator’s primary aim was to collect the victims’ eyes with the use of alchemy. A more ancient form of alchemy was used in the process, giving the case a higher degree of difficulty. Gerals was found to own several books pertaining to the use of this older alchemy; however, the investigators maintain that he was not a full-fledged alchemist and merely dabbled in the arts without know-how of the proper construction of his arrays. This was cited as the reason for the progressive changes in their structure as he moved from one victim to the next.

Gerals was apprehended near noon at his newly acquired property within Cottonwood Place, a new housing development south of old Central. The investigative team was led by renowned State Alchemist and war veteran Lt. Col. Roy Mustang (pictured above, foreground left), who left with his young protégé, Edward Elric (pictured above, unconscious, foreground), shortly after journalists arrived at the scene. The team spokesperson has clarified that Mr. Elric had previously been consulted regarding finer details of Gerals’ arrays.

Our informed readers will be familiar with Mr. Elric’s name from his highly controversial public deconstruction of Dr. Albert Schrum’s human transmutation theory at this year’s National Symposium for Alchemical Advancement. Despite the clamour he had caused, Mr. Elric became well-known and well-spoken of as a prospective State Alchemist among the academic and military circles. His tender age of 12, however, has been the cause for high concern from a number of parties, most prominent of which are Major General Hakuro and politician Aaron Steinberg.

Mr. Elric was retrieved from within the house unconscious but has been cleared for discharge from the State Hospital today. No specific statements were disclosed regarding Mr. Elric’s involvement with the confrontation. Gerals was in possession of a six-shot 9mm revolver from which two shots were fired. First on the scene, Lt. Col. Mustang was forced to use his alchemy in self-defence, which resulted in Gerals’ quick death.

Further investigation is being conducted on Gerals’ potential involvement with other murder cases, but Lt. Col. Mustang thinks it highly unlikely due to Gerals’ self-serving reason for the murders. Lastly, it is worth noting that Lt. Col. Mustang was also himself a patient of the doctor. No official statements were made, but this humble journalist believes that we owe Gerals’ discovery to his own fortuitous close association with the very head of the investigative team hounding his tracks.

Gerals’ private practice clinic will be terminating its services within the month with promises to inform the patients of the steps to take to reclaim all private medical information. An option of obtaining referrals to alternative general practice physicians within the city will also be made available. (—Hank Fitz, senior correspondent)

When Edward woke, dawn was fast washing the night away. Roy saw him sat on the bed, eyes bleary, hair dishevelled. It was as if yesterday had not happened, as if Roy was only once more waking the boy for breakfast without the weight of what-ifs weighing upon his head. Edward saw him enter the room and took a moment to reorient. And then, “The doctor!”

“He’s dead,” Roy said.
A breath, sucked inward. Edward blinked, fisted a hand into the sheets. “Did you kill him?”

His voice was steady, a testament to his will. But Roy already knew this, knew this child’s strength of mind. Such was why Roy did not tarry with gentle words, why he stripped his syllables bare until they bled of painful honesty. If he were to be judged, so be it. He had no regrets; he had killed to save Edward.

“Yes,” Roy said, “I did.”

Edward swallowed, eyes wide and now very awake. For a moment there stretched between them a thick silence, an interminable tension—and then the boy gave a nod. “Thank you,” Edward said, fingers unknotting, shoulders sagging. “For saving me, I mean. Again.” His hair, a curtain of honey lit now by the slanted morning sun, fell loose about his face, obscuring his eyes from Roy. Again, Resembool, the image fleeting and sudden in memory: an image of Edward, no arm, no leg, hair fallen around young shoulders, eyes lidded in the aftermath.

Back then—only two months ago—Roy had been too wary of hurting Edward, too conscious of the injuries. He had not reached out. But now, he sat at the edge of the bed and placed a hand over the boy’s head. So they stayed for a solemn minute, sitting side by side under a bath of sunlight from the high windows of Roy’s bedroom. Roy had placed the boy in his own bed the previous night, unable to let him out of sight. His neck and left shoulder ached from having slept in his reading chair, but the mild pain was well worth his peace of mind and at least three hours of true rest.

“Are you feeling well enough to get up? We need to get some food in you, and you need a bath, young man.” Mundane things were always best for the most awkward of situations, as experience has shown Roy over and again.

True enough, Edward perked. “Food?”

“Food,” Roy smiled. “Gracia’s downstairs with your breakfast; I came up to wake you. The doctors cleared you for light meals and moderate activity as soon as you woke.”

An expression of distaste crossed Edward’s face. “More doctors?”

“I stayed with you the entire time,” Roy laughed, rising from the bed and tugging the boy with him. He hovered close as Edward tested his balance, tottering unsteadily toward the bathroom. “You might be lightheaded for the rest of the day; you were given high doses of two different anaesthetics. One of them should have already been metabolised while you were asleep, but the other will have lingering after-effects.”

“Specific compounds, please,” Edward grunted, clumsily working the faucet to warm the shower. Roy placed a set of clean clothes and towels on the counter.

“Isoflurane and nitrous oxide for the inhaled anaesthetic, which I’m assuming he used to knock you out.” Edward gave a grunt. “Controlled periodic doses of intravenous sodium thiopental to maintain it.”

Edward spluttered, arms tangling in the process of removing his shirt. “Thiopental? Intravenous?! What sort of moron uses that on a human being these days?! It’s used for dogs and shit. Dogs! Do I look like a dog? –No offence, dog.” Sebastian, having insinuated himself into the bathroom, was in the process of slobbering over Edward’s leg. “No wonder I can’t even get my arms to work properly. That shit takes forever to wear off! It’s redistributed to fat, did you know that? Granny Pinako taught me that. Then when you stop the infusion, the drug redistributes back into the blood, which makes it last longer.” Finally ridding himself of the shirt, Edward huffed in distaste. “He could have used
diisopropylphenol, you know, like any normal human being with any command of common sense would! And he calls himself a doctor.”

“I see that our damsel-in-distress has woken!” Maes grinned, head peeking into the bathroom.

“I’m not a girl!”

“Yes, yes, woken indeed, and healthy!”

A wry smile fixed itself upon Roy’s face as he stepped back and allowed Maes to parry with the boy. Though initially unsteady, Edward was fast regaining control over his limbs. Roy assured himself that it would be alright to leave the boy to shower, dress, and get to breakfast on his own. He and Maes would be due at the Headquarters in short order; Douglass was their first appointment. Tardiness would not at all be fashionable.

“So you’re leaving now?” Edward’s voice pierced Roy’s thoughts, a shade more uncertain than usual. Roy took a letter from his pocket and placed it on the side table, trusting that it would be enough to distract the boy’s attention for the day. “Will you be back tonight?”

“We will,” he said, “and I’ll make you dinner. In the meantime, stay with Gracia and try not to get into trouble.”

“Or at least wait until Roy’s home,” Maes joked, earning a dry look. “Here’s the paper for today; should be pretty interesting for you. We’ll be going now.”

Edward nodded, still clutching his shirt in one hand and petting the dog with the other. The boy was frowning, troubled, and Roy hated to bear more grief to the child, but he had to bear the news. “On the side table’s a letter from you from Resembool. From your brother. It arrived early this morning.”

A plethora of emotions clashed underneath the boy’s young face. Perhaps too much too soon, Roy thought, but what could he do? He would not hide the letter from the boy, would not deprive him of his brother’s words. Even if those words will likely be hurtful ones.

Roy knew the splintering of bridges when they burned, knew the crackle and groan of its structure as it fractured into pieces. He had had his more than fair share of them in life. This was one of them, but the bridge burning was not his own.

“I’ll see you tonight, Ed,” he bid with a light hand on the boy’s shoulder. “If you need anything, call the office.”

Edward nodded, frozen in place. Roy left him there, standing half-naked, a dog at his knee, a light in his eyes. Perhaps it was hope.

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At work, Roy wore his hubris, an arrogance that scraped at the very stars. It belied the quiet churn of his heart, full of an awful and unjustified dread. He had not read the letter, but he knew. He could feel it, deep in his gut, a forewarning.

“Might want to tone that down a bit; it won’t help make Douglass any kinder,” urged Maes, perhaps noting the tilt of Roy’s chin, or the brazen line of his shoulders, or the keenness of his eyes.

“Nothing will help make Douglass any kinder, old friend, you know this.”
“Yes, but,” Maes sighed, “it’s at least proper form to be polite.”

“Oh, I’ll be polite,” Roy airily replied, adjusting his collar as they strode in for their appointment. One lieutenant promptly escorted them into Douglass’ office, where the man himself was waiting poised to strike.

“Mustang,” Douglass grunted. “Hughes.” Both of them snapped into sharp salute and remained standing before the colonel’s desk. “You lot are certainly quite the celebrities. All this fuss you make on the papers; what drivel! You deliver me a corpse, barely recognisable! How do I know you’ve apprehended the true perpetrator?”

“Keyword: barely,” Maes helpfully pitched, tongue in cheek. Now who’s being irreverent, Roy thought. But Maes continued in a more succinct tone, “Dr. Knox is the best in his area of expertise and gave a positive match for the body’s identity. He’s also very experienced with Roy’s victims; fellow war veterans, you see.”

Douglass scowled. “So I saw in your report, along with your highly unorthodox methods of finding this perpetrator. It seems to me that you were acting on pure gut, no? Wasted precious manpower on guesswork!”

“Except it wasn’t wasted,” Maes pitched again, “and sir, with all due respect, glorified guesswork is the extent of what we all do. We never truly know for certain until we see it with our own eyes, but as the alchemists like to say, to begin to understand, we must first build on the most logical of assumptions.”

“Logical!” scoffed their superior. “Tell me where logical fits between your gut and your pride. You jumped at a possibility that had an impossibly slim chance of being true. This is not how we are supposed to operate! I cannot dream of passing these reports up to my superiors and let them see that my subordinate breaks protocol and procedure without so much as a by your leave!”

“Had I dallied seconds longer, we would have ourselves an eighth victim and a perpetrator still at large, Colonel Douglass,” Roy declared, his words heavy as stone. “Though I see that you would prefer I abandon a child’s life to protocol and procedure, I stand by my decisions and regret nothing of my actions.”

“Not even having killed another person,” Douglass said, face tilting backward, eyes assessing. Challenging.

Roy only smiled, sharp as a knife, and held his hands behind his back. “I am first an alchemist, sir. I aspire towards equivalent exchange. Would that I could, he would have died six more deaths for the six other lives he took.”

It was enough. His words were enough to remind Douglass of his presence, of what he was capable, of what he had done. Momentarily, his superior was cowed.

“Your protégé,” Douglass began once more, eyes darker, voice rougher. Roy’s shoulders remained even, but the muscles in his back began to tense. Perhaps Douglass knew he was treading upon dangerous waters now, for the man spoke slowly. “What was his business there?”

“As I stated in my reports, sir, we found him to be the eighth victim. I only had a suspicion, but my fear was realised, most unfortunately.”

“Your fear for the boy, yes? And how do I know Gerals’ death was not your act of revenge upon the doctor, your own premature intervention instead of an act of self-defence?” Douglass leaned in as
an animal anticipating the kill. “You didn’t even wait for reinforcements before stepping foot inside the house: a clear breach of protocol, Mustang. How am I to know that you weren’t lost to your own emotions then?”

Eyes narrowing, Roy parted his lips to begin his retort. But before he could, a voice from behind him said, “What does it matter if he was?”

The three of them started at the sudden intrusion, before snapping into hasty salutes. The Führer strode in with his secretary, a stately woman whose face Roy almost always forgot.

“Sir,” Douglass saluted, “excuse the lack of preparation, I was not informed of your visit—”

“No, no, quite alright,” the older man chuckled, waving a hand in dismissal. “No formalities necessary, I’m here for only a minute. I was on my way to find Lieutenant Colonel Mustang here to commend him on his fine work and was duly informed by his subordinates that he has an appointment with you.”

Roy dipped his eyes in quiet deference. “I am honoured, sir.”

“Also, a bit of paperwork—yes, yes,” muttered the Führer, taking a few sheets of paper from his secretary and handing it to Roy. Unsure of what to expect, Roy took them with careful fingers. “Let me offer my congratulations, Colonel Roy Mustang. You’ve worked hard and steady against odds since your last promotion; I believe your excellent display of discipline and determination deserves another one.” Thinly veiled surprise washed over Roy’s face, just as despair began to dawn in Douglass’ eyes. “Do not concern yourself about the technicalities of this previous case. Soldier or not, any man will find it difficult to remove himself from emotion when a friend or loved one is in danger. Besides which, ballistics retrieved bullets from the wall of the house and matched them to the requisitioned gun, did they not?”

Maes nodded, clearing his throat. “Yes, sir, they did. The trajectory was consistent with both parties’ position in the room as well.” He would know best, having directed the clean-up himself.

“Well, then,” the Führer smiled, expecting no further arguments. Not that they would, or could, have made any; this was all far too unexpected that none of them quite knew where to place themselves and how to respond. Turning back to Roy, the older man continued, with more relish than was appropriate, “Further details are in the packet, but to summarise, you are now placed under the command of Lieutenant General Edison. You will take your men with you and command six battalions; Lieutenant Colonel Hughes may continue to be your liaison if you wish. Given your exemplary performance with alchemy-related cases, we’ve decided to put you in charge of the Priority 1 batch.”

Douglass blinked, despair dimming from his eyes. Maes took a slow inhale.

Apprehensive, Roy ventured, “Priority 1?”

“Mostly cold cases: plenty of longer-running serial murders, some still active; a handful of unsolved research thefts; also the occasional anarchist alchemist, rogue ex-State, or fake State Alchemist.” It took all of Roy’s willpower to prevent his shoulders from sagging. “You will also be placed in charge of some investigations into foreign alchemical developments, mostly from Xing and Drachma. Sensitive work, but it requires teams like yours. There are fewer State Alchemists high enough to command these cases as we would like, so you see how important it is for the system to have you in this position. Your personal alchemical expertise is much desired.”

Roy gave a nod, exchanging a quick darting glance with Maes. As they had suspected, Roy’s title
played a large role in the rapid succession of his promotions. Above his skill for command, being a State Alchemist was his great advantage. Nevertheless, he would remain vigilant. At this high of an altitude, he could not afford carelessness. The bets were too steep, the payment for failure too high of a price to pay.

“I understand the work will be challenging, but I have confidence in you resilient young lads. It is very heartening to see that the new generation does hold promise for the future,” Bradley said. “Between you, your protégé, Mira Armstrong, and that young Tringham lad, I should say we are looking to see some exciting years ahead. I have always had high expectations of you, Colonel Mustang. You have great potential.”

“Your words are wasted on me, your Excellency,” Roy demurred, dipping his head. *I need no telling to know my own potential.*

Behind him, Maes made an aborting motion with subtle fingers, cautioning Roy to stop his talking. The Führer only chuckled. “Modesty does not become you, Roy Mustang. Proud confidence more befits a challenger like yourself.” Turning toward the door, Bradley bid, “Edison has already been notified. Let me know if there are any further concerns. Good day, gentlemen.”

Saluting, Roy stepped aside to let the Führer pass. Maes held the door open for them and remained respectfully postured until the door was once more shut. The three of them stood in silence, rather thoroughly stunned. None of them were yet able to digest the swift and sudden turn of circumstance. *Promoted,* Roy thought. *Wasn’t it only three weeks ago that I wished for this?*

Maes cleared his throat again. “Well, there goes our plans for today, I suppose. Plenty of things to do now. Reassigning ranks, moving into the new office, filling out the paperwork for the promotions… Colonel Douglass, if you’ll excuse us, we’ll be removing ourselves. You’re a very busy man yourself; we shan’t take any more of your time.”

Douglass sank back into his seat, fingers unsteady. The man was unable to decide whether or not he was pleased with what had just transpired within his four walls. Nevertheless, he was unfailing in his practised disdain: “Enjoy your new post, Mustang. Priority 1 will drill into you all the humility that you lack.” Shutting the case folder containing Geralds’ murders, Douglass dismissed them. “Go.”

But Roy paused at the door.

“To answer your earlier questions,” he said, “of how to know if I was lost in my emotions, and if I truly acted in self-defence: you don’t. Sometimes, you never do. But filling that gap is what trust between superior and subordinate is for.” And then, to convey his years of spite, Roy smiled. “You might try it once; it works like a charm.”

The look of fury in Douglass’ face—the pale blotches on his cheeks, the incensed eyes, the thin lips—it was a trophy of indulgence that Roy would keep without shame. Maes looked upon him with a resigned sort of reproach, but they were both guilty men, guilty and men. They rejoiced in their victories and revelled in their wits. These victories came at a high price, but in the end it was all worth it—worth the hardship, the danger, the tedium—for the taller the cliff to climb, the higher the ground he would then stand upon.

Ominous though Priority 1 was, Roy thought, *challenge accepted.*
When the sun hung low, Roy arrived home. He was glad to be back within the embrace of familiar silence. The house was darkened, with but a faint light from the kitchen. The library was empty, prompting a brief flash of anxiety, but Sebastian’s barking could be heard from outside. Removing his jacket, he observed as Edward sat under the backyard tree, book in his lap, face turned to the sky. The boy paid no attention as the dog attempted to hoist itself upon the swing.

Something about the view captivated Roy’s attention such that he remained standing by the window watching the boy for a span of time. It was only upon a slight breeze that ruffled the fiery trees and dappled the blushing light that Roy understood what he saw. Light flickered upon the boy’s face, catching to glisten at his cheeks.

Edward was crying.

He had never seen Edward cry. Not in mind-rending pain, not at his mother’s disregard, not at the loss of a home—never. Edward never cried.

Except who was he fooling? Edward was a child. A child. How often had he used the very word? Edward was strong, to be sure, but even the strongest, even the most resilient…

Roy stepped outside and crossed the backyard, sinking into the spot beside Edward and placing a hand on the boy’s head. Edward turned his face into his palms now and scrubbed with great fury. It was an attempt to cease the tears, but the more that tears were denied, the more they insisted. Roy knew this. Roy saw it, saw the stutter in Edward’s ribs, the shuddering breaths and the tense neck.

“They don’t understand,” the boy croaked, voice thick with meaning. “They don’t understand. Why can’t they see?”

Roy’s jaw tightened at the thought of Edward’s mother. He put an arm around Edward’s back, hand tightening against the flesh shoulder. But was this not a letter from the younger brother? Were they not good companions?

“May I?” Roy asked, hand hovering over the folded letter resting in between the pages of Edward’s book. With permission, he unfolded the pages and, drawing the quaking child close, began to read.

Dear Brother, wrote Alphonse Elric. I hope this finds you well…

Under the dying sunlight, Roy continued to read, page after page, until there was no more. Edward fell asleep against his side, tired face turned into his shirt. In the muted evening, the words from the letter rang loud in Roy’s ears. And so did Edward’s words.

They don’t understand, Roy agreed. But I do, Edward. I’m here.

“You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.”
( The Little Prince ~ Antoine de Saint-Exupery )

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FOOTNOTES
This chapter was inspired by a handful of novels, essays, and philosophical texts. Notable among them are: “In Praise of Prejudice: The Necessity of Preconceived Ideas” by Theodore Dalrymple (ch. 5-8, 14); “Dorian Gray” by Oscar Wilde; “Cinderella” by the Brothers Grimm; “Artist of the Floating World” by Ishiguro Kazuo; “The Prince” by Niccolo Macchiavelli; and “48 Laws of Power” by Robert Greene.

Russell Tringham’s scene was heavily inspired by an excerpt from “48 Laws of Power” by Robert Greene (Law 3: Conceal Your Intentions, p.16): “Keep people off-balance and in the dark by never revealing the purpose behind your actions. If they have no clue what you are up to, they cannot prepare a defence. Guide them far enough down the wrong path, envelop the in enough smoke, and by the time they realise your intentions, it will be too late.”

Roy’s characterisation is also inspired heavily by another excerpt from the same book (Law 21, p.178): “The perfect courtier thrives in a world where everything revolves around power and political dexterity. He has mastered the art of indirection; he flatters, yields to superiors, and asserts power over others in the most oblique and graceful manner. Learn and apply the laws of courtiers and there will be no limit to how far you can rise in the court.”

Another note from Tringham’s scene: the making of hydrogen peroxide from hydroxide and water (H2O2 = OH- + H2O) is a simplification of a process that is more complex to perform in real life. Alchemy, however, is capable of doing this.

On molecular manipulation vs. molecular transmutation. This might be a confusing concept for some of you, but it is really quite simple. If you are familiar with the nature of a molecule, you understand that it is a combination of multiple atoms configured in various ways. This configuration (positioning and types of bonds between atoms, which influence the behaviour of the resulting molecule) is specific to each one. For example, a water molecule (H2O) consists of two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen connected by a covalent bond. The molecular manipulation of water would mean that the alchemist is moving the water molecules around each other—let’s say in a block of ice—to change the shape of the ice. Note that he only changes the shape of the ice, but not its nature. It’s still ice (which is still water, only in a solid state). The word ‘transmute’, however, implies a change of something’s very nature into something else. So if the alchemist tried molecular transmutation on the molecule(s) of water, he would be destroying the covalent bond to separate the hydrogen and oxygen atoms from one another (requiring significantly more energy than simply moving them around as a whole molecule). He can then use the hydrogen and oxygen atoms to form other molecules (such as the hydrogen peroxide mentioned above) or use them individually. This sort of separation and recombination is possible in real life (the chemistry geeks will attest to this!) with the use of the right kinds of solutions and a controlled environment.

Radium is a highly radioactive chemical element, decaying aggressively and oxidising quickly upon exposure to air. Its original colour is actually a “colourless” salt-white, but due to its radioactivity, it is luminescent. The “glow” that Tringham refers to is the proof of active cold body radiation. We posited that the Stone is considered highly valuable by the Gate due to the amount of energy it possesses from the compounds that comprise it, so we thought that radioactive materials would be a good ‘substitute’ for amplifying effects of alchemy and the Gate. The original materials used for the red Stone in canon are likely other highly radioactive materials as well, which would explain its detrimental effects to those who were exposed to it for certain lengths of time.
(7) **Regarding the eye colours**, we said that the murderer had acquired all possible colours (brown, blue, hazel, grey, green, red/albino) but did not mention black eyes. This is because ‘black’ eyes are actually nonexistent within the human spectrum of eye colours. ‘Black’ eyes are actually very dark shades of brown due to a high concentration of melanin in the stroma.

(8) **Sodium thiopental and 2,6-diisopropylphenol** are two anaesthetics that do exist in real life. Sodium thiopental (Sodium Pentothal / Trapanal) is a rapid-onset ultra-short-acting barbiturate administered intravenously. It used to be a standard for inducing medical comas / unconsciousness for procedures such as Caesarian sections (the mother falls unconscious, but the baby remains unaffected). However, since it metabolizes very quickly, large doses are necessary to maintain unconsciousness, which makes it inadvisable for prolonged use. 2,6-diisopropylphenol is otherwise known as Propofol in our world and has now replaced thiopental for general anaesthesia. It is widely used for all sorts of procedures, but has side effects that linger after administration, such as muscular twitching, lack of coordination, and vasodilation (dilation of the blood vessels) which can cause dizziness. Additionally, both drugs are used for veterinary purposes, but thiopental is more popular for certain breeds of dogs that have less body fat and recover faster from its effects. **Isoflurane** is a halogenated ether used for inhaled anaesthesia, and is often mixed with nitrous oxide (also known as laughing gas) when given to patients.
Interlude: The Road Not Taken

Chapter Summary

Alphonse should have known from then that Brother would keep trying.

Chapter Notes

Inspired by Sophocles' *Oedipus* and the original score James Newton Howard composed for the 2004 M. Night Shyamalan movie *The Village*. Written by popular demand! (Ha, no, not really; it was planned into the plot. xD But a lot of you readers were very eager for this chapter, so I hope it comes up to expectations! Let us know what you think!)

They had been on the island that day with their master. Pain lanced through his leg as he tried to move it, exhausted though he was. Brother was still standing, but Alphonse was already down on one knee. Air slipped past his lips as he swallowed breath after breath after breath, naught but sheer force of will keeping him from crying out in pain. The spit would not come out of his throat to wet his parched mouth. Master had made a point to be merciless with their sparring that day.

His leg was broken at an alarming angle and so he barely registered her voice when she began talking. Alphonse knew, though, that every word she said was another step forward to excellence. She was their one authority, their alchemy’s lifegiver—her every last word was sustenance to their science. So when she spoke, his mind emptied of all unimportant concerns. He listened. He remembered.

“There was once a young man,” she said, “who lived with parents he thought were truly his own but were not. As a babe, he had been torn from his mother’s breast, stolen away under cover of night, given to another family to raise. It was said by an oracle that he would grow up to be his father’s bane, and the father, a mighty lord, was afraid of being dethroned. So he threw his son to the four winds of fate.”

Brother lunged forward—three jabs blocked, an elbow thrust pushed aside, an uppercut dodged, a roundhouse kick turned against him.

“The boy grew as boys do to become a loving son—a respectful one,” she continued. “When he came of age, his foster parents told him of the partial truth: that he was not theirs, not by blood. That he was born to another woman of another man. That an oracle had foretold his fate—which, when he learned of it, frightened him. So he took to the streets and disappeared from that house to dissociate his misfortune from his beloved foster parents. He was running away from fate—or so he thought.”

Alphonse pressed a finger to the circle he had scribbled in the sand, sighing at the tingle of sparks crawling across his flushed skin. His broken leg realigned itself as a makeshift cast of packed earth surged up to encase it.

“But one often meets one’s fate on the road one takes to avoid it. On the road to another city, dressed
as a filthy slave, he came upon a four-ways crossroad, where a wagon came at him at full tilt. Mounted on it was an old man, richly dressed and fully intent on thrusting him off of the road, or else crushing him with the wagon. In anger, the wanderer—once a boy, now a grown man—struck the driver even as the old lord tried to strike him. He knocked the old lord out of the high seat and killed both men.”

Brother was still trying, limbs silhouetted against the setting sun. The lake glimmered all around them, the leaves rustling in a very gentle wind. Alphonse rested his weight against his arms and imagined how the wanderer had unknowingly brutalised his own father.

“The two of you are privileged boys,” she declared. “What do you know of death? But this is how life proceeds. You will see this when you begin to walk your own paths in the world, out there where I can no longer protect you. This image of a wagon with an old man bearing down on you young ones, trying to remove you from the road—it will happen. Life asks such questions. Who will stay on the road? Who will go? Who will move forward? Who will give way?”

“The old always has to give way to the new!” Brother yelled, somehow managing to wrench his arm out from a lock. Alphonse watched as the sun caught in golden hair and flying limbs. Brother did not know how to give up. Brother had to be made to give up.

“Always?” she scoffed. “And yet here I stand, after an entire day of us sparring, still untouched. Have I taught you nothing?”

“Well, this match is unfair, you’re stronger than us!”

“Does the world seem fair to you, Edward Elric? I would have thought you of all people would understand. Is it fair that you had to grow up without a father, your mother without a husband? Is it fair that your friend Winry was robbed of her parents by a war that is not hers or theirs? Is it fair that I can no longer have a child?”

Alphonse blinked, sucking in a short bit of air. He hadn’t known.

But Brother was still trying.

“Recall my story. Is it fair that a lord who has lived in luxury fight against a penniless wanderer? The opponents are mismatched: the old rich, the young poor. The lord’s body is frail; the wanderer, though starved, is still strong. Where is fair? Tell me, Edward.”

“But,” Brother panted, spinning away from her to regain his breath, “equivalent exchange.”

“An illusion,” she said, “a phantom image that alchemy creates. Have you ever considered that though every circle operates within equivalence, we are never told how the values are decided? Oh, you both are very intelligent young boys; if I asked you what a compound consists of, you can rattle it off without your books. Water is worth oxygen and hydrogen. Salt is worth sodium and chloride. But tell me, Edward, Alphonse. What is time worth?”

“Time?” Alphonse said. “Time’s not a compound. Time is... time is...”

“No, time is not a compound. But there exists alchemy that can manipulate time. Those who are fool enough to try it forget that one cannot easily quantify time. If you cannot quantify what it is worth, how can you know what you must give in exchange?”

She spun Edward in her grip and then shoved him backwards to sprawl upon the sandy shore. Her face was cast in shadow as the sun dipped below the mountains behind her. But her eyes shone with a vast depth of wisdom, something that was visible even in the falling darkness.
“When you go out there, Edward, Alphonse, there will be those who will seek to harm you. There
will be many. Some will be your contemporaries, but in the beginning, they will be the old. The
established. You two are bright—for them, you may be too bright. They might seek to destroy you
before you can realise your potential. The young does not *always* prevail; permanence is an illusion.
Think about how many other wanderers the old lord has already pushed off the road or crushed
under his wagon before he came upon the one that undid him.”

In the distance, Sig was rowing toward them. This was to be one of their last days out here on the
island, for winter was coming. Days shortened minute by invisible minute as the year came closer to
its end.

“The young, if it wants to remain, must burst through and conquer. The young must make the old
yield and abandon the road. There will be blood. And most often you will find that motivation is
irrelevant: whether it was merely self-defence or a true thirst for power and murder on the son’s part;
whether the lord was on an urgent and proper business or simply desired the road for himself alone;
what does it matter? In the end, there is fighting, yielding, dying, killing. This is the nature of life,
growing up and growing old, coming into your strength to eventually move out of it for the others to
take over.”

Her hands were warm when she placed them against Alphonse’s knee. They both watched as she
put her palms together to summon her alchemy. The pain disappeared, the bleeding abated, the
bruises dispersed. He would keep the cast for near a month to allow the bones to reset, but he would
be able to bear some weight upon it. She had done this for Brother too, when Brother had broken his
right arm.

“Most people make it easier; they create for themselves a cocoon wherein they will not be rocked by
these truths. But as an alchemist, you seek to fix your eyes upon the truth. You relinquish the rights
to safety, to ignorance, to simple happiness. As an alchemist, it is your responsibility to always aspire
to equivalence, no matter how hard the struggle is to ascertain the worth of things. When you
perform your alchemy, you obey its laws, so be sure to first search for the value of that which you
seek. Alchemy already knows. It will take what it is owed—fair or not.”

That night in their beds, they sank and drank the darkness. Alphonse was tired, his eyelids more than
happy to surrender to its own weight. But from the other side of the room, Brother began to talk.

“Search for the value of that which you seek,” Brother mouthed into the space between them.
“Alchemy already knows. She makes it sound like alchemy can think, or something. I don’t get it. I
don’t like not getting it. And of *course* I’ll not turn away from the truth! I *want* the truth. I want to
know. That’s why we’re here, aren’t we, Al? We both want to know.”

Alphonse smiled into his pillow. Brother was still trying. He should have known from then that
Brother would keep trying.

~

“*Happiness is beneficial for the body, but it is grief that develops the powers of the mind.*”

( *Marcel Proust*)

~

Above them had stretched a beautiful sunset as they walked home from the town clinic. The clouds
were pulled pieces of cotton with edges dipped in the warmest of colours. The sun inked the sky
with itself in a vain attempt to leave behind a memory of its heat. Now that the storm was past,
Resembool shone, washed clean and watered plenty. It was only when he found the hastily scribbled note on Brother’s desk did he remember that the skies had been this beautiful too when Mother had died, and when Father had left.

*I’m leaving, Al, the note read. I can’t stay. Mother is forbidding me from doing alchemy. I can’t not do alchemy. I have to leave. I’m sorry.*

He had howled for Mother then and brandished the note at her. Alphonse rarely if ever lost his temper, but this was a rare day. His weakness of body, his lingering shortness of breath, vanished in a furious fit of panic. What did she mean by forbidding alchemy? What did she think she was doing? What about training with their master? *What about Father?*

He ran to the Rockbells that night and sat crouched on the porch until the sun began to climb, spilling brilliant yellow rays over Resembool’s rolling hills of green. Nature was mocking him.

None of them dared speak with him that day, or the day after—not even Winry. He was furious, and lost. Was Brother also this furious, and lost? They had always had each other for as long as they could remember; everything they set out to do, they did together. Now they were separate, now each on their own.

It felt alien without his constant companion. It was difficult to reorient. Even the simplest of decisions—*what to read today? What to practice?*—he found hard to make. He would turn and attempt to address a figure that was not there. After drawing a circle, he would seek his brother’s advice; after realising a new tangent of a hypothesis, he would tell his brother about it. Except Brother was gone. He had checked the train station that evening, but the last train heading for East City had already left. Brother was gone.

It was a whole week before his mother approached him again. Alphonse wanted to cry at the irony of their situation. Had they not sacrificed their flesh and blood and souls and *innocence* to bring her back? Yet now that she was once more living and among them, it was as if she did not exist. The true cost of what they had done was not their sacrifice, Alphonse now realised. The true cost of it was their relationship. It, too, was gone. *What if—*

“I had asked him to explain,” Trisha said, settling in the grass beside him. Above, the tree reached over them toward the blue sky. “I had asked him to tell me what he had done.”

“What we did, we did together,” *but no more,* Alphonse thought. He crossed his legs and closed his book.

“You have always been his anchor. I can’t bring myself to think that you had gone along with his plans from the outset.”

“But I did,” he smiled, but more to himself, and out of spite. “I helped him with everything. I shouldn’t have. We shouldn’t have. But what’s done is done. We argued at the last moment—tried to back out—but we did it anyway.”

“Did what, Alphonse?” He could hear her eagerness, see it in the cant of her shoulders, the tilt of her head. Mother was beautiful—so very beautiful that Alphonse began to wonder if she had ever been this way before. He began to wonder if, beyond simple life, they had given her something more.

A sudden pain speared between his eyes, making him grimace and duck his head. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he took a deep breath and centred himself. The pain went away. It always did, after a short moment.
“Human transmutation,” Alphonse murmured, “and you can’t tell anyone that we did, because they’ll take all of us away and lock us in labs to study and experiment on. Stick to our story. No one can know.”

Trisha recoiled, her slim fingers curling into the fabric of her skirt. She only barely understood alchemy, but she knew of what was forbidden. Her eyes went wide, her lips thinning until they were no more than a line.

“You were dead, Mum,” Alphonse told her, “cold and dead. We wanted you back. That was all.”

“I—I have no memory of this,” she said.

Alphonse only shook his head. “We barely understand what we did. We don’t even know how we succeeded. We were supposed to fail. I was supposed to die, but Brother somehow brought me back. I don’t know how it’s possible, he doesn’t know how it’s possible—but here we are. We want to study how we got it right—what part of it is different—we were planning to visit the City libraries when we went back to Master to train. We just—we wanted to know.”

Trisha was wordless and sat there as a statue. From inside, he could hear Winry hammering on metal for their new customer from two towns over.

“We were arrogant, you see. We really thought we could do it and walk away without injury. We wanted you back so badly and didn’t want to acknowledge the truth. So we tried to use alchemy to undo it. But it doesn’t work that way, and what’s worse, we’ve been taught that it doesn’t. We tried anyway—and alchemy forced us to face the truth that we had turned from. It brought you back, but we had to pay for it. All because we had turned our eyes away.”

Alphonse did not know why he continued to explain despite knowing that his mother would not understand. But anything to fill the silence. Anything to stave off her rejection. He was beginning to understand how Brother must have felt. He was beginning to feel the burden of their price.

It was ages until she spoke again. The hammering from inside the shop had stopped. “I’m scared,” Trisha whispered, reaching over to clutch Alphonse’s hand. “I don’t understand anything that’s happened, and I’m scared. I wake up and my eldest has lost two limbs, my youngest unconscious at death’s door. I’m not an alchemist, Alphonse, I don’t have your knowledge. It’s never bothered me before, even with Hohenheim, but now—now I realise how frightening it is to be in the dark.”

Alphonse wanted to tell her that it was equally frightening to be in the light.

“He warned me, you know,” she said. “Your father—he warned me before we married. He told me that if I really wanted what I was asking for, I should be prepared of a life in darkness, because there were things that he knew and he lived with that he could never tell me.”

“I think he only wanted to protect you, Mum. Brother, too.” He took her hand and squeezed it back. “But they’re not that good with words, and sometimes there are no words. Please try to understand.”

They sat there under the tree for a while, holding hands in silence. To Alphonse, it was to reaffirm in flesh the presence of his mother. To Trisha, it was to steady her fear. But too soon Trisha was withdrawing, her hand leaving a cold space in between Alphonse’s fingers. What if the true cost was greater? Alphonse did not try to hold on.

~

_The happiest life is a life without thought._

_(from inscriptions on Michel de Montaigne’s ceiling)_
Brother would have gone to Central, not Dublith. Brave though Brother was, he did not have the fortitude required to face their Master after what they had done—and neither did he. Alphonse worried for his alchemical training now. It would be difficult to proceed alone. He had only vague ideas where to start. They were at the phase of their alchemical learning when they needed a solid mentor to guide them through the transition from the basic practical alchemy into the foggy fields of experimentation. Suffice it to say that after their debacle with human transmutation, Alphonse was not very eager to experiment alone.

It was not a written rule that a master had to expel the student if the student committed an act of forbidden alchemy. Truthfully, no written rules for apprenticeship existed in Amestris. Apprenticeship was widely practiced beyond the alchemical trade, and every single instance of it was a private contract between master and student. Theirs was a lax one by comparison to common standard; their master had no other students and intended to have no more. The only stipulation they had to follow was to give every activity, every endeavour, their entire and unfailing focus whenever they were at work. Otherwise, their master encouraged freedom of mind and action.

Forbidden alchemy was declared forbidden by the books, not society. Scholars of the past warned future practitioners to beware certain things, not for propriety, but for their safety’s sake. Alphonse and Edward both wondered before why there was even any area of alchemy forbidden if they were to be true followers of science in search of the truth. Nothing should be forbidden, they had said. Everything should be put under question.

How young and foolish they had been.

Alphonse felt as though he had aged a decade. It could be his imagination, but there were times when he felt a leaden quality in his limbs, a tightness in his chest. There were times when it was hard to form a thought, times when sensations felt dim, and yet other times when he froze in motion or could not go into motion at all.

Earlier today he had studied the multi-chord circle seemingly tattooed into the skin of his chest—sketched it, even, into one of his notebooks. The skin was smooth if he touched it. The circle was of a deep burned red, the colour of blood. It was drawn in his brother’s blood, painted with fingers, steady despite the pain, despite the panic, despite the darkness. Alphonse once more felt a renewed surge of admiration for his brother.

Mother used to often say that Brother was their father’s son. Brother had hated it whenever she did, but she did anyway. Unlike Brother, who remembered enough to resent Hohenheim, Alphonse had very little memory of the man. He remembered a shadow, the glint of firelight against glasses, silken golden hair, and a deep voice—but not much else. He did not even have words. Which was why he liked to look at his Brother sometimes to try to see what their father was like. If Brother was very similar to Father, then Alphonse could use him as a window. It was his little secret.

As they grew together, Alphonse was quick to realise how different they were from each other. It began to make sense what people said when they likened him to his mother. He had her calm temperament, her gentle smile. While little Edward was spitfire and all of Hohenheim’s famed spontaneity, little Alphonse was the grounding anchor and steady bank.

He never resented their differences; he revelled in them. They complemented each other. Whereas Edward learned his alchemy by immersion and practice, Alphonse learned by a systematic and thorough replication of structure. While Edward came upon discoveries and ideas through leaps of intuition, Alphonse approached the world with eyes open to patterns and causation. Together they covered each other’s weakness: Edward made up for Alphonse’s relative lack of (mad) ideas to try
out, and Alphonse made up for Edward’s (irresponsible) disregard for procedure and detail.

But now that they were apart, Alphonse was beginning to understand that being together had allowed their weaknesses to persist despite gruelling training that was supposed to have corrected them. Alphonse was having difficulty kindling the spark of a new idea in his study, a job that had always been his brother’s. He wondered if Edward was having difficulty structuring his thinking, and hoped that it did not get his brother into any trouble.

It was something that they would both learn to compensate for in time, something that they would learn to balance out through experience. Alphonse, however, could not help but resent the necessity of learning it in the first place.

He picked up his pen and returned his focus to his notebook, reading through the notes he had written down. Equations jumped out at him with startling clarity, but his sketches needed work. Brother had a knack for the images; they always divided the work of making notes between them by letting the other do what they were better at.

Alphonse sighed. *This is going nowhere.*

“Can’t think of what to write?” Winry asked, coming up behind him from inside the house. At her heels trotted Den, stick in mouth.

“It’s usually Brother’s job to come up with the ideas,” Alphonse smiled. “I’m usually stuck with trying to make them work.”

“Be glad,” Winry nodded. “It means you’re the sane one.”

Alphonse cracked a light laugh, his first since his brother left. In two days, it would be three weeks since.

“What was he like?” he asked after some silence. “The Lieutenant Colonel who found us.”

Winry shrugged, settling beside him on the porch steps after throwing the stick out for Den to fetch. “Well, he said he was your father’s friend.”

“I know,” he sighed, “but what was he like?”

“He was nice, I suppose. Very polite,” she mumbled, fiddling with the hem of her dress. Still walking under the shadow of her parents’ sudden demise, Winry was acutely discomfited by the military. “I didn’t talk to him very much. He only really talked to Ed and Granny. Sorry.”

Alphonse nodded, throwing the stick back out for Den. The dog barked and bounded away toward the tree. “Brother said he refused the State Alchemy offer. I got kind of mad when he told me. Once in a lifetime chance, you know.”

“Are you really alright with him being in the military?” Winry asked, somehow managing to be hesitant and firmly indignant at the same time. This was a tender topic for her. The last time they had talked to her about anything remotely related to the military was the day she had received news about her parents’ death. She had refused to talk to them for a whole week.

“I think he’ll do fine,” Alphonse murmured. “To be honest, if Brother doesn’t want to do something, nobody can make him do it. So I think he’ll do fine. If the military asks him to do something awful, he’ll tell them to stick it up where the sun doesn’t shine and run away if he has to.”

“You don’t *run* from the military!” she scowled. “You get killed!”
“You forget that we’re alchemists,” Alphonse reasoned.

“You’re not immortal!” she insisted. “And they have alchemists too! Lots more of them, and with lots more experience! He’ll only get himself hurt!”

Alphonse had to laugh again. “When did that ever stop Brother?”

So Winry was stymied. For a few heartbeats they sat side by side, the thin tension hanging between them like an invisible drape. Then she sighed. “I suppose he’ll never be satisfied with just being here, studying alchemy on his own. Neither will you. Granny told me that the first time you left to train at Dublith, you know. I still don’t get it very well.”

“You will, one day,” Alphonse told her, “when you find that you’ve exhausted what you can learn here from Granny and you want to see the rest of the world. You know that there’s an entire city of automail mechanics in Rush Valley, don’t you? Doesn’t that excite you? It excites me, thinking of the City libraries, the alchemical symposiums and colleges and schools. There are so many things out there. I can’t even begin to describe it.”

She hummed under her breath, scratching Den under the chin as the dog sprawled over their feet. “So why don’t you follow after him, then? See the rest of the world together, instead of being miserable apart like this?”

Alphonse had to blink in surprise. He turned to look at her, but she only gave him a knowing little smile.

“Or maybe,” she continued, turning Den over to rub his belly, “maybe you like being apart. It’s something different, right? You’re sad that you’re away from each other, but at the same time, you have to learn all sorts of new things that you never had to do before, and it’s kind of fun, in the challenging way.”

The very idea was so foreign to him that Alphonse had to sit there for the rest of the afternoon, notebook untouched in his lap as he stared into the horizon. Did he like being apart from his Brother? Was he enjoying the challenge of having to work on his own? And—and if he was, did that count as a betrayal of their brotherhood?

“It’s okay, you know,” Winry told him later that night after dinner. “I felt the same way when Granny started to leave me to construct my designs alone. She said it was part of growing up as a mechanic. I had to learn how to fully function on my own, because one day she won’t be there and I’ll need to know my stuff.”

Alphonse went to sleep with those words. Maybe our ‘one day’ just came a little too soon.

~

It would be a full month before Brother’s first letter came. During that whole month, Alphonse devoted himself to the chase for his own elusive style, for what else was there to do? He was at a loss otherwise.

Their last term with their master had been fraught with her displeasure at what she had dubbed Edward’s first fit of early adolescent rebellion. Brother had begun melding modern alchemical techniques with bits and pieces of old Amestrian and Xerxian alchemy they had weaselled out of Father’s books and notes. Though Alphonse had warned him over and again, Edward had insisted on using it every day, running the risk of incurring their master’s wrath. It had resulted in a very rocky term, but Alphonse had been happy for his brother. Edward always reached the alchemical
milestones first, which gave Alphonse a point of reference.

In any case, a little experimentation upon the multi-chord circle on his chest made the pursuit of his new direction much easier. He postulated that the odd sensations that kept plaguing him—the spontaneous headaches, the sudden dimming of his senses, the difficulty with movement and thought—were due to a slight misalignment of the ‘soul’ with the body. Brother had been in a hurry when he had made the circle; it came as no surprise at all.

But for all his certainty, it took him an entire day of sitting in the basement in the middle of a circle he had drawn, guessing and double-guessing as his fingers hovered over the activation. When he finally did it, it took less than a minute: a very slight adjustment, albeit highly disorienting. His perception bent, for the lack of a better word, as the circle crackled into life. Sound distorted and dipped, vision blurred and blackened, tingles ran up and down his skin, the ground fell away from his feet, and for one frightening moment an intense pressure came bearing down upon his chest, crushing until he felt like his sternum was beginning to crack—and then it was gone.

Afterwards, he examined the circle on his chest and found its lines thinner, sharper, as if they were drawn by a pen instead of smeared on by a finger. The minute gaps that had been there at the end of each smear were now replaced by straight, steady lines that properly sealed the ‘soul’ into place. Alchemy demanded precision as a science: a hairline gap in the outlines of a circle could mean the difference between failure and success.

His triumph there, albeit small and private, gave him confidence to move forward with his own thoughts. It also gave him a returned clarity: he felt whole again in a way he had not felt since before the transmutation. The sensation was hard to describe: like a key fitting into the right lock, like the last line closing the outline of a circle. His vigour was renewed, his mind reimbursed its keen edge. He felt ready.

Alphonse decided to start at their most recent escapade, where he already had a few ideas to play with. Some of them were particularly sharp, and ones that he knew his brother would likely not have considered. Brother was self-centred, which doubled as strength and flaw. It gave him a boundless supply of confidence to chase his own paths, but all the while threatened to box him in his own point of view. Alphonse was the complement: he found it easy to slip into other perspectives.

Having it all written down made things so much sharper in Alphonse’s mind. Their attempt, he now realised, was actually easier than most other attempts at human transmutation. For example, they had the original body with them, which disposed of the need to construct a new one. This was the first roadblock that most alchemists tried to overcome, and failed. The full composition of a human body—or any complex living creature—was too involved for the current level of alchemical science available in their country. (With regards to alchemy, if Amestris did not have it, no one else had it. Alphonse could safely assume that the rest of the world was just as clueless as they were.)

If the Gate that Brother had seen truly decided the equivalence, then what they had paid in return for what they received must have been the just price. Brother had hardship accepting the fact that his one limb was equivalent to one soul, but Alphonse thought that Brother had hardship differentiating between equal and equivalent. The latter implied a value judgment, a job seemingly fulfilled by this Gate. Alphonse remembered his master’s words with crystal clarity: it was very difficult to ascertain the worth of things. Now he knew that it was because they did not understand the functions of the Gate; few even knew—or would believe—that it existed.

But it makes so much sense, he thought to himself, flipping to the next page as he ran out of space on the previous one. The Gate filled the missing piece of the puzzle: a piece that most people did not even realise was missing.
Alphonse also had a hypothesis on how a limb would be of equal value to a soul, and this idea he owed once more to their master. She had spoken of things that were hard to quantify, such as time. Another thing that would be hard to quantify would be the future—that is to say, potential. Trisha was not an alchemist and would likely live her life as a normal citizen of Amestris, aging and eventually passing in this peaceful town. But Edward and Alphonse were both young alchemists, their father being a prominent one. If—if they were destined for greater things—if their potential to impact the world was greater than Trisha’s—would the Gate then not value their soul, their life, worth more?

This was all guesswork, of course. He did not truly know. He would have to refer to older records of other attempts at human transmutation, research the circumstances and study the techniques used. He would have to gather his data in order to even call it a hypothesis. The problem, of course, was with proof; he was not going to try it out again. Once was enough.

A dull pressure began to throb behind his eyes, so he closed them, relinquished his pen, and took a deep breath. After a few heartbeats, the pain went away.

“Still having those headaches?” Granny asked from her rocking chair. He was sat on the Rockbell’s porch again, scribbling the afternoon away.

“Yeah,” Alphonse said, “but they’re easing over time. At least they don’t cripple me anymore.” Those terrible ones had ceased that since his successful experiment with the multi-chord circle.

“Well, good,” Granny nodded, puffing on her pipe. “Just try to stay away from too much excitement for now and let your body recover. I know you young ones are always impatient for the next new adventure, but it’s also important to know when to rest.”

Alphonse turned toward Granny, observing her little hunched frame ensconced in her chair. They were worlds apart, Granny and his master, but they had the same deep wisdom in their eyes. Alphonse had to wonder how much pain and grief they had both gone through to acquire those eyes.

“Granny,” he began, “I need your advice.”

“Mmm, good, you’re seeking advice this time,” Granny chuckled, smoke trailing from her lips. Alphonse had to duck his head.

“Well,” he bit his lip, “it’s about Mum.”

“Ah.”

“I want to tell her that I’ll be returning to train with master, but I don’t know how—I mean, how she’ll take it.”

“She’ll be sad, but she’ll take it as she has to,” Granny told him. “Just like when Hohenheim left, and just like when the two of you went to Dublith the first time. She knew this was coming; you are both his sons, after all. His blood runs strong.”

Alphonse gripped the wooden step underneath his hand. “Should I leave her? Do you think I should?”

She puffed on her pipe again. “It matters little what I think, Alphonse. You will anyway. Your alchemy calls you.”

“But,” he murmured, “we’d done all of this just to bring her back. It seems wrong, somehow, to just—go.”
“You would have never been able to go and meet the world if you hadn’t done this,” Granny reasoned. “You see? Reviving her was necessary for both of you. Reviving her allowed you your freedom. If you had allowed her to pass away peacefully, both of you would have had a hard time severing your ties to this town. Ironic, yes, but life often is.”

He fiddled with his pen and looked at his notes, mind cantering alongside Granny’s words. So many decisions! He envied Brother’s self-centred certainty, that ability to leap headfirst into the unknown. He had to build that sort of courage too, but he was the ponderous one by nature, cautious where Brother was not.

“The blood is strong, Alphonse,” Granny said over the creaking of her chair. “It is what calls you to your alchemy, just as it gives you the inner strength to answer. You have followed it this far together; now you need to follow it on your own. You can do it. You are his son too.”

A few days later, the letter from Central came.

~

“He takes nearly two months to send us word, and he has the gall to write us about his adventures?!” Winry shrieked, startling Den from a light doze. Alphonse had to wince at the sheer volume of her voice. “How hard can it be to send at least a telegram telling us he’s still alive? And how much of an inconsiderate meathead can he get, boasting about his new friends and new stuff like shit hasn’t happened because of him? What the hell!”


“Sorry, Granny, but this is just too much! I want to hit him and I can’t because he’s not here! Why is he not here, damnit!”

She was wielding her wrench, a lethal weapon revealed to her but a year ago. Alphonse recalled being on the wrong end of it once and winced again. Brother received its fury more than he ever had, but that was Brother. Alphonse’s head was not quite as hard, so he had right to worry.

“And—and what was that bullshit he said at the end? Tell Mum I’m sorry. Tell Mum I’m sorry! He can’t even be bothered to write a letter to Auntie himself?!”


“Gran-nny!” she shrieked again. “Scold Ed, not me!”

“Edward isn’t here to be scolded, but you are, young lady,” Granny frowned. “Now sit down and let Trisha read the letter in peace.”

“He probably didn’t even want Auntie to read it,” Winry grumbled, stomping to where Den was resting and taking the dog into her lap. “Stupid Ed. Why does he have to be such a meathead? And he calls himself smart!”

“A universal trait of men, my child,” remarked Granny from where she was polishing a newly finished thigh plate. “Be thankful he even sent a letter.”

Paper rustled as Trisha moved from one page to the next, sat on a chair by the window as she read by sunlight. Alphonse had gone over that letter so many times by now that he had the words by heart. He understood why Winry was incensed. That letter was meant for him; Brother was more callous and forthcoming when it was just the two of them. She would feel offended by the lack of pleasantries and politesse.
But it was his brother, and he understood in a way that they would never be able. Winry saw a boasting boy rambling through those pages, but Alphonse saw a new adventure unfolding before his brother’s eyes. Alphonse saw the challenge shining through the pages, beckoning to him, calling him. The first time he had read the letter, his heart had raced as if he were sparring with his brother on the island again, eager to see what’s next, eager to know more. Brother was already seeing the world; Alphonse—Alphonse wanted to follow.

When Trisha finished the last page and handed him back the letter, he took her hand. “Mum, I’m going to go see Brother in Central.”

Her eyes widened, hand tightening around his fingers.

“I just need to talk something over with him, but I’ll come back,” Alphonse explained. He had a feeling that Edward’s new world might not be for him. “I think I’ll stop by at our master’s place to talk to her first, maybe take her with me to Central to see Brother. We have some things we need to clarify with her too.”

She was wordless, and Alphonse wondered if perhaps he had asked too soon, pushed things too fast. But he could not hold himself. He wanted to see his brother—they needed to talk.

“Also,” Alphonse continued, “also, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to continue training my alchemy with our master. It’s—we’re at a point right now when it’s very difficult to move forward without a proper mentor. I need her guidance. I think Brother has found himself a new mentor in the Lieutenant Colonel, but I’ll continue with her. I can learn a lot from her; her alchemy matches mine more than Brother’s. If it’s okay with you.”

It took Trisha a while, but when she gave her consent, an invisible burden lifted from Alphonse’s heart. He sagged in relief.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you for letting me go.”

She put a hand to his cheek and smiled a watery smile. “You are your father’s son.” It was the first time she had ever said that to him instead of his brother. Alphonse had to smile.

~

He left after a few days to allow each of them to pen their respective replies to Brother’s lengthy monologue. When it was time to fit the papers into the envelope, he fought the temptation to take a peek at his mother’s letter. Unlike with Winry (who would scold Brother) and Granny (who would give advice), Alphonse could not fathom what Trisha had to say about Brother’s new adventures. She had sat up at the kitchen table all night, burning out the oil in the lamp twice before she finished. Her pace had been slow, her script full of pauses, but her face was set in a grim sort of determination Alphonse was used to seeing in the mirror. It kindled within him a near-destructive fire of curiosity—but in the end, he left it alone.

Trust was what was expected from him, and so trust he gave. Alphonse meant well. The postman took his money and stamped a seal on the envelope, which went into an outbox designated for letters and parcels to Central. In two days, the letter would be in Brother’s hands; in two days, the letter would break Brother’s heart. But Alphonse knew nothing of this, and all actions must be judged by their motive.

Bidding the postman a good day, he stepped back outside. Winry, Granny Pinako, and Trisha stood by the steps in wait. They walked as a group to the station. Winry unloading her cargo’s worth of reminders to eat well, call when he arrived, hit Brother on the head for her, “and for alchemy’s sake,
please try not to kill yourselves again so soon after your last try!”

“I don’t think we’ll run into another one of those situations again,” Alphonse laughed, reaching over to give her a hug. Behind her, he saw Trisha stiffen and frown.

“Pass the sentiments on anyhow, Alphonse,” Granny said, her old hand reaching up to pat his cheek. “You’re the level-headed one. Talk some sense into your brother. Let him know that there wasn’t a need to run away, and that he has a place here should he like to come back, even for a short while. Life in Central is fast and full; there’ll come a day when he’ll need a break.”

Alphonse only nodded, wondering to himself why they never sought more of Granny’s words. She was old and had some outdated ideas, but she had seen so much of life, having travelled all of Amestris and beyond when she was younger. Surely she would have seen the folly of their youth before it ever could harm them like it had. Surely, he thought.

Trisha came forward and gave him a soft kiss on his forehead. Alphonse closed his eyes and for a moment pretended that nothing had changed.

She drew back. “This was your father’s. He told me to hand it to you when you came to understand what alchemy meant. I am no alchemist, but you are. I trust you will know when the time is right to open it,” and then, holding her arms around herself, she gave him a sad, slow smile. “Go and be careful, Alphonse. Send your teacher my regards, and—stay for as long as you need.”

Alphonse was young, but he was not blind. Trisha made neither mention of her other son nor any further farewell. With only those words, she took a step back and allowed him space. He swallowed the tight knot of emotion in his throat and took his bags in hand, striding away from them with a false confidence that he summoned from somewhere deep within. He hadn’t realised that he was capable of this sort of deception, but new things were beginning to emerge in him, a harbinger of heavy changes to come.

And who was he to say that these changes were not to be good changes? Pain was often a sign of truth, their master had said. True and lasting changes were often painful, their master had said. They had already once forgotten their master’s words; it would not do to repeat the same mistake again. Most men would rather deny a painful truth than face it, their master had said, but you are an alchemist.

Watching Resembool retreat into the far, clear distance, Alphonse pressed his forehead against the window and murmured to himself: “I am an alchemist. I am an alchemist. I am an alchemist.”

~

*Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.*

( Søren Kierkegaard )

~

His carriage remained empty until Fergana, where he stepped off to transfer to a bus headed west for Rheos Falls. The train he had left would continue cutting north across the arid badlands of the East, passing East City and New Optain to eventually rest at the small northern city of Risslett. Alphonse had no business that far north, where the cold had a life of its own and crept into a man’s lungs to turn his breath into frost.

Granny had plenty such stories of her travels in the past and Alphonse now tried to recall each of
them in the finest detail he could manage to offset the anxiety that was beginning to gnaw at his chest. He had resolved to do things this way—what he believed the right way—and yet even the strongest of his resolutions could not bear to stand against the prospect of facing their master after what they had done. The shadow of her impending wrath had Alphonse, a calm and reasonable boy, fretting like a maiden at the wedding night.

Stories, he told himself, Granny’s stories. Plenty of stories of her own adventures, of other adventurers’ adventures, of the legends left behind by famed names in their country’s history—she had them all. She had visited many places in her youth for no real purpose but to see what the world had to offer while she could. She was no stranger to time, having been taken care of by her elderly parents until their death. She knew that one day her eyes would begin to smudge her sight, her knees would begin to buckle and her back begin to hunch. She wasted no time and feared no danger. Even the prospect of days on foot and nights on the dirt road gave her no pause. She was young, and ready. She had people to meet, things to learn, and places to see.

The Crossroads fast became her friend. Brother had once asked her why they were called the Crossroads, and her answer was simple: because they formed a cross. They were the four roads and railways that extended outward from Central City, like arms reaching for the very edge of its territory. All four of them met the four great peripheral cities of their country at one point and went past those until the railways ended a couple of dozen kilometres short of the border. From there, only the roads remained, which was a good security measure to prevent hostile foreign forces from using the trains to gain quick and easy access to the heartland. Central City, said Granny Pinako, had never once been invaded by enemies. Amestris was simply too prepared.

But it isn’t a cross! Brother had complained. Edward was no more than four years old, Alphonse three, but the both of them were already speaking in straight sentences coupled together, Edward fast mastering the art of speaking in whole paragraphs. The books began to hold their attention then, Alphonse recalled. Little Edward, in his mind’s eye, sat surrounded by a handful of open books with a map of Amestris spread on their living room floor. Granny Pinako was knitting matching winter scarves for them on the couch while Trisha taught Winry how to prepare a dish in the kitchen. Alphonse himself was sat across from his brother, eyes roving the map in search of the cross. It isn’t a cross, insisted little Edward, because look! The road that goes to East City points down and to the right from Central! You said the four roads go to the other cities, but this one doesn’t and this one does! It should be the other way ‘round.

The road and railway that shot straight as an arrow to the east of Central did not, in fact, meet East City, but instead crossed the dots of five small towns until it came to its end at the prosperous mining town of Youswell. There were no big cities along this route, with the only other prosperous town being New Optain, a wealthy military town bringing in luxury merchandise from Xing, cattle and crops from the Northeastern prairies, and refined ore from Youswell. Since the outbreak of the Ishbal War, it flourished as the safer route for trade, effectively crippling East City’s already suffering economy. The more anarchy reigned in that southwestern corner of their country, the more lucrative New Optain became.

Well, it is true that the eastern leg of the Crossroads leads downward instead of eastward, Granny Pinako explained, but little Edward was quick to cut her off.

It’s not a cross if one of its arms is broken! It’s hanging down, see? Alphonse smiled at the memory of Brother, so little and so bright, tracing lines with tiny fingers.

Says who? Granny Pinako had chuckled. A cross is still a cross even if a storm breaks off an arm.

No, little Edward replied with gravity, because a cross comes from two perpendicular lines crossing
each other, which is why it’s a cross.

Perpendicular, Granny Pinako corrected with a laugh.

And lines can only be lines if they’re straight lines, and the line from— from West City to East City is not a straight line because it bends here, little Edward insisted, finger resting on Central City. You see? It’s s’posed to make a right angle with the line from North City to South City, but it makes an obtuse angle. It’s not a cross!

Obtuse, Granny Pinako corrected again, and you’ve been reading Hohenheim’s books some more, I take it?

They’re hard, little Alphonse confessed then, voice small and soft. Little Edward had given him a grin.

But they’re fun, Brother had said, grabbing the nearest book and rifling to a particular page. See? We were learning this one and this one this morning…

Sketches of arrays and glyphs and structures flew before Alphonse’s eyes, years upon years of dedicated study in an art that once was the pillar that held their family together but now became the torrent that tore it apart. He took to his notebook and propped his feet against the opposite empty seats, scribbling under sunlight until his next stop.

It was past noon when he disembarked at the twin riverside cities of Rheos Falls and took a bus to take him the rest of the way to Dublith. He was taking the closer route by opting to take a secondary road instead of keeping to the railways, which would take him north only to go south again. It was a little less safe going the back route, but they had always preferred it, disliking the bustle of stations and the waste of time. They were always eager to meet their master again after a short break at Resembool, but this time, Alphonse was not.

An old lady took the seat next to him two towns over, and by mid-afternoon when the bus arrived at its destination, it unloaded a full crowd of travellers into town. Fortress Castell was Alphonse’s last stop before Dublith, where he would once more take the train, this time heading south. It took him true conviction to step onto the train—for once he stepped foot in Dublith, master would know, and master would find him. There would be no hiding from her. There would be no lying, either.

He leaned against the divider behind him and closed his eyes. It was a small matter of twenty minutes from Castell to Dublith by train. There was no point in finding a seat. Alphonse closed his eyes and focussed on his breaths.

When he opened his eyes, Dublith sped into view. Mere minutes and the train began pulling into the station, which was emptier than it would be during daytime. Night had fallen early, a signal of the coming winter. He briskly stepped onto the platform and secured the scarf around his neck.

Out of the station he went, navigating the streets of the midsized town with familiarity that used to be reserved for countryside Resembool. Small hordes of children, most of them only a little younger than Alphonse, trailed the streets, voices bright with laughter. Two boys his age were duelling with sticks, encouraged by loud yells and catcalls from their friends. A handful of soldiers were scattered about, prowling for a drink at the end of the day, some eyeing young women as they walked past. Civilians were on their way home, exhausted faces set with the knowledge that it was only the middle of the week.

As he turned into Market Street, the gaggle of voices washed upon him like a warm afternoon rain. Stores left and right boasted produce, vendors enticing the handful of customers with bellows of,
“Apples, cheap apples!” and “Watermelons, sweet as honey, the last of the summer!” and “Onions, turnips, roots over here!” Near the end of the street where the meat shops stood was their master’s house. Alphonse stalled by returning the neighbours’ greetings with a thin smile.

“Alphonse!” called Sig’s voice, loud and true as it carried down the narrow street. “Is that you there?”

Alphonse stiffened, but turned anyhow, facing the inevitable. He hefted his bags over his shoulder and returned the greeting. Sig seemed to be preparing to close up shop. “It’s me. Is master home?”

“She should be getting dinner ready inside,” the man replied. “Bit early for you to come, no? You should have called ahead. Where’s that brother of yours?”

“It’s just me today,” said Alphonse, voice small and soft. “We… ah, I need to talk to master about it, you can come too.”

Sig was struck with visible surprise, but said nothing about the unusual arrangement. “Go on ahead, then, I’ll follow after I finish this. Good thing you came before dinner was made or we’d have nothing ready to feed you.”

Alphonse took his bags and did as he was told. The front door was unlocked, as always, and the living room tidy. He removed his shoes and set his bags by the couches, following his master’s voice from the kitchen.

“Did you finish already, honey? Well, that was fast. I ran some water for you to take a bath,” she was saying as Alphonse ducked into the small kitchen. It was homely as ever, filled with warmth and the scent of spices.

“Master, it’s me,” said Alphonse, paused at the doorway.

Izumi turned to meet him with pleasant surprise, but her smile quickly fell into the sharp lines of a frown. Her eyes were deeper and darker than Alphonse had ever seen them. There was no conceivable way for her to know what had happened, and yet she did, because the first thing she asked was, “Is your brother alive?”

The stars were clear that night, even through his tears. He saw the thin slivers of silver spearing from their hearts into the dark. It had taken him all night to finish telling the story with as much exhausting detail as he could manage. Catharsis had left him drained and weak, resting his head against his master’s shoulder as she held him while muttering oaths under her breath.

“Stupid boys,” she had said, holding him like a woman would hold a son. “You are a pair of incredibly stupid boys. For all that both of you are brilliant, you are stupid,” she had said. “How lucky you were, you have no idea. And how difficult it must be.”

The next morning, as she tended to his cuts and bruises she had dealt with her own fists and knives, Alphonse asked, “How did you know?”

“The same way I can perform alchemy without a circle,” she said, tilting his face to the other side. He could feel his jaw protest at her handling, but it was nothing he had not endured before. Alphonse knew he deserved the beating. He should have known better. They should have known better.

“Which is?” Alphonse prompted, wincing at a rough dab of a cotton ball.
Izumi’s hands stopped as she settled him with an even stare. “The Gate that Edward said he saw—it contains a world’s worth of information and only ever appears with exceptionally large transmutations that involve foolish meddling with things that should not be meddled with. Space and time, dimensions and reality, life and death—these things that are bigger than us, things that should be left alone. I’ve seen it, just as Edward has seen it, just as you have seen it—“ Alphonse frowned, “—though you don’t remember. When you remember, you will find yourself able to perform alchemy without a circle as well. It is part of the information that you were shown.”

“But,” Alphonse said, “you—master, did you—”

“My first and only child,” she plainly stated, “was a boy, stillborn. I couldn’t accept it, and in my grief tried to revive him. I failed, of course, but I must’ve done part of it right, since it didn’t take all of me.”

From behind her, Sig placed a large hand on her shoulder. Izumi’s answering smile was gentle, mournful, as she returned the touch. After a short moment, he walked out of the house to leave them to talk.

“But it took part of you,” Alphonse chanced, “like it took part of Brother.” Then he blinked as something clicked. “Is that why you’re sick?”

Putting the first aid box back together, she gave a tight nod. “It took several of my organs, leaving me with just enough to function. I had to undergo multiple extensive surgeries to salvage what had remained—to rearrange them into a form that would continue to work. I would have died within an hour had it not been for Sig who had followed me into the island. Now I can never even bear us another child.”

Alphonse could only sit there and gape. He never knew.

“It is a thing of the past,” she sighed, rising to return the box to its place on the kitchen shelf. “We’ve moved past it, though that does not mean that it is a mistake we’ll repeat. You should bear this in mind as well, Alphonse: you are fortunate to be alive. You do not survive the Gate twice.”

“I know,” Alphonse said, acquiescence and apology rolled into one. Now I know.

After a moment’s silence, she turned back to him with a fierce look and declared, “I want to talk to your brother. I should hope that you know how to get a hold of him. Let him know that we will be leaving for Central in two or three days. That’s likely the soonest there are open seats on the train. Everybody seems to have business in that city these days…”

Thursday and Friday were spent preparing for the trip. Arrangements were made for the house and shop to be watched by Mason while they were away. Sig insisted on coming just as much as Izumi insisted against it. She soon conceded, as she always did whenever Sig argued for any matter, and three tickets were bought. Her predictions were accurate: their train was to leave Dublith early Saturday morning for a four-hour ride with a layover of an hour at Rush Valley. They were to arrive in Central at an hour past noon.

The only one problem was getting a hold of Edward, which turned out to be more difficult than it should have been. Alphonse had a telephone number to the Lieutenant Colonel’s house and tried to call five times on Thursday, but received no answer. He tried again three times on Friday, but received no answer. Izumi dismissed his concern and assured him that they would be able to find him somehow; they were not going to delay. Tickets to Central were rather costly, she said. If they gave their seats up, they would be hard pressed to get another train until well into the next week.
Before going to bed that Friday night, Alphonse trekked out to the public telephone booth and tried one more time. Already a wintry chill blew through the streets, forcing him to pull the collars up to shield his neck. One of Izumi’s neighbours exited the booth just as Alphonse approached it. The man held the door open for him and Alphonse found himself grateful when it finally closed behind his back. He lamented not bringing his scarf.

He stuck his free hand back into his pocket after dialling the number. A few seconds of silence was heard through the line before the telltale tone signalled that it connected and was ringing. Miraculously, the phone was picked up on the first ring. “Mustang,” came a man’s voice from the other side.

Alphonse stuttered. “Um! Um—um—may I speak to Bro—I mean, Edward, please? Er, this is Alphonse… ah—I’m sorry to disturb you so late at night—”

The man began to chuckle, his voice now warm and welcoming. “No need to apologise, it’s no problem at all. I’m pleased to hear that you’re up and about; you were still asleep when I left.”

“T-Thank you,” Alphonse replied, still with a frustrating stutter.

“If you’ll hold for a second—Edward!”

From the background, Alphonse could hear, “Busy!”

“Edward, will you please cease shouting and come down this minute?”

“I said busy!”

“Too busy to talk to your brother?” the man called out, voice removed from the phone. A minute of silence and then some unintelligible murmuring before the phone was picked up again.

“Al?”

It was Edward! Alphonse broke into a grin. “Brother! How are you? I’ve been trying to call you yesterday and earlier today! For some reason, nobody was answering—I guess you were out?”

“In a manner of speaking, I suppose,” Brother drily replied, but the irony was lost on Alphonse. Nevertheless, he ploughed on. “Listen, Brother, I’m in Dublith right now—”

“You’re where?! Are you suicidal?! I just saved you! Get your ass out of there this moment, Alphonse, or I swear I’ll—”

“I’m fine!” Alphonse yelled into the receiver, holding the earpiece away from his head. At the very least, it was good to know that Brother’s lungs were faring well. “Master already knows! She hit me but I’m still alive!”

“She—you—she—what the fuck, Alphonse!”

“I had to, it’s a long story, listen—” the line began to beep, so Alphonse fed the payphone two more coins, “—master wants to see you and has already bought tickets for us. We’re leaving tomorrow morning, we should be there by early afternoon.”

On the other side, Brother audibly swallowed.

“I’ll tell you the story then, alright? I’m at the market payphone right now so I can’t tell all of it here, and besides, it’s probably not safe—“
“—no, it’s not safe at all,” Brother cut, “and we’ll stop talking of it now. I’ll meet you tomorrow at Central Station, then. How’s—How’s Mum?”

“She’s fine,” Alphonse said, biting the soft inside of his cheek. “I—have a bit to tell you about her, too.” A pause, before he confessed: “I yelled at her after you left.”

Brother hissed. “Tell me she didn’t throw you out of the house too.”

“No, but—” Alphonse bit his cheek again, releasing a burst of coppery taste into his mouth. “She said I could stay at master’s place for however long I liked.”

The line beeped again.

“I’m out of coins, Brother. We’ll talk tomorrow?”

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” Brother affirmed. And then, “Al, did you read Mum’s letter? The one you sent with yours.”

“No, why?” Alphonse answered with a growing sense of dread. Had he been wrong to give his trust like so? He had the most disturbing sense that he had made a big mistake when she said her farewell at Resembool’s small train station. What had she done?

“…we’ll talk tomorrow,” Brother reaffirmed. “Afternoon?”

“One o’clock.”

“One o’clock, see you then.”

Alphonse opened his mouth to respond, but the line gave one last long beep, before terminating with a final click. Slowly and with a sigh, he relinquished the telephone.

Tomorrow, he drew his arms around himself and walked back to the shelter of the Curtis’ home. The chill draft made him yearn for his mother’s warm comfort, but she was many miles away, and he had little desire to return to Resembool at the moment—not to her unnatural beauty, not to her awkward smile and trembling hands. No. That was not what he wanted, or needed.

The gallop of his heartbeat kept him from falling asleep. Winry’s words returned to him as he lay in bed. This was a new challenge, and it was his. There was no reason for him to not claim it.

And then there were his master’s words from that day long ago on the beach: This is the nature of life, growing up and growing old, coming into your strength to eventually move out of it. And his master’s words from that night of the sharp stars when Alphonse had confessed everything: You will never be able to turn back. What is done is in the past, and upon it you must build a new life. Now that you understand a little better, Alphonse, you must learn alchemy over again, learn how to search first for the value of that which you seek.

Alphonse closed his eyes and let the words lull him into slumber. Tomorrow. It will all begin tomorrow.

In the dead of the night, within the arms of a dream, Izumi’s words were as chill as the wintry breeze. Never again forget, she said, her eyes dark as a promise, dark as the night. Never again, for alchemy already knows.

~
“One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar.”

( Helen Keller )
Before we begin, here are a handful of replies to reviewers! All of you will want to read these; they answer some common questions I’ve come across and might address some of your concerns.

Reply to SnowLeopardPasha: The Tringham brothers will reappear in their own time. Yes, Fletcher will eventually be involved, though I can’t tell you yet in what capacity. Thanks for returning and dropping us a note! We do so love our loyal readers!

Reply to some questions from lupassword:
(1) Where is Baschool (the town where Edward was impaled by a metal beam during a battle in the manga) on the Catalysis Amestris map? Baschool is not on the map, as you have most attentively noted, because the map only charts populated towns above a certain headcount. You will see from the legend that the smallest towns indicated on the map have a total population of less than 50,000 people – which is still a lot, so these are still relatively big towns. Baschool, on the other hand, is an abandoned mining town – hence, not on the map.
(2) According to the recent movie, Milos borders Creta, not Aerugo, as your map says. Mistake? Nope! All planned & plotted in. You’ll have to wait a little bit as we reveal more of Amestris’ history with its neighbouring countries, but there is a reason for Milos having migrated to the southern end of the country, I promise!
(3) From how the story is proceeding, will Russell Tringham be stealing Edward’s claim to fame as the youngest alchemist in history? I don’t know, will he? x) Let’s go see!

Replies to X59:
(1) How did Ed & Al become apprentices of Izumi so early if they only met her in canon after Trisha died? That’s just the thing: this isn’t canon. We had to mess with the timelines to make our premise work. We moved Izumi’s encounter with the brothers a few years earlier: she still met them during a storm, but they were at least 2-3 years younger, around age 4-5. (Canon-verse, they meet her at age 6-7.) In our timeline, Trisha also falls ill and dies later, at age 10-11 (canon-verse, this happens around age 9-10). They take only 3 days and 4 nights to put the human transmutation array together, having trained for longer with Izumi. (Recall that in canon, years passed in between her death and the transmutation for Ed & Al to acquire more knowledge.) The slight adjustments in the timeline allow for the premise that Catalysis sits upon to occur—that is, a successful human transmutation.
(2) Does Catalysis follow from the 2003 anime (which has Dante as the primary antagonist & mastermind of the homunculi) or the manga/new (Brotherhood) anime? Catalysis will primarily follow the mangaverse/FMA Brotherhood. Apart from being the definitive version of FMA, we feel that Arakawa’s storytelling does the characters and the alchemy truer justice. We will, however, include numerous elements from the 2003 anime, as noted by X59. For those who have seen both versions, I apologise for any confusion that this may cause, but bear with us and rest assured that we are planning the storyline with care to keep details consistent.

Also, further reminders that this story is slash/yaoi, the primary pairing being Roy/Ed. This is, however, years and years far into the future. I understand that some readers may be off-put by such themes, and while I hope that this will not discourage readership, I
feel that I have a responsibility to warn you well ahead of time instead of springing it upon you without notice. That would be hideous of me, especially if you’ve already read so far and have to stop because of the pair. Some readers are concerned about how it will disturb the current parental/platonic relationship existing between Roy and Ed: I will simply say that we have lots of things planned. We have many years ahead of us yet, and time can bring about some unexpected developments.

That said, onward with the much-awaited chapter! We start a new arc today, in which Ed finally deals with Important Things he has distracted himself from since he went to Roy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Arc III: Growing Pains

09

“Sorry,” Edward set the telephone down and turned to give his host a sincere apology. “That just sort of happened. If you want, I can go tomorrow to the station by myself and—”

“Nonsense,” Mustang responded: a straight dismissal. “I’m not letting you out of my sight so soon after yesterday’s... excitement. And before you attempt to ease your way out of my hospitality, I will tell you now not to bother. It isn’t any trouble providing lodging for Alphonse and your master for as long as they intend to stay.”

Edward had to fidget in discomfort. “Izumi will probably come with Sig, her husband,” he said, kneeling to tidy his clutter of books. “He always travels with her everywhere she goes since she’s sick.”

“Mm, no matter; they can share the guest room downstairs,” Mustang once more dismissed while in
the process of signing a report with the customary Mustang flourish. Ed’s lips twitched at the sight, eyes tracing the elegant strokes of the pen. Mustang’s regular handwriting approached calligraphy in its evident grace; it was truly quite a sight, considering the nature of the man’s work. Ed made a mental note to buy for himself a medium italic nib the next time he happened upon the stationery shop. He only had a basic set of extra fine nibs for writing from their last trip. “I’m sure you can share your bedroom with Alphonse? Or would you prefer staying in my bedroom for the while that he’s here? That way he can have your room to himself.”

“It’s fine, we can share,” Ed quickly reassured. “Sorry for imposing so much. I don’t remember insisting on monopolising your bed after the doctor got me, but—”

“I put you there myself,” Mustang said sharply, “because I couldn’t settle unless you were within my line of sight.” The older man lifted pen from paper and peered at Ed, eyes deeper than winter’s night. Ed failed to understand why people likened Mustang to fire: this Mustang had the steady unstoppable tread of a glacier coupled with a mind pointed and deadly as a shard of ice. “I am not fond of putting my people in danger, and now that you fall under my care, you are one of them.”

“You didn’t put me in danger,” Edward scowled, “because you didn’t know. He was your friend, wasn’t he? Gerals, I mean.”

He could not quite place if it was a tightening around the eyes or an angling of the jaw, but something changed within Mustang’s face, and the sight of it dropped a stone in Edward’s stomach.

“He was,” Mustang sighed, “unfortunately. And that is precisely my point: he was my friend, I should have known, or at least noticed. I would have saved us a whole lot of trouble.”

Neither one for self-recrimination nor any tolerant of it in others around him, Edward huffed and gave Mustang’s leg a prompt kick. “Well, you didn’t, and no one’s perfect, not even you, so get over yourself and deal with it. I’m fine, you’re fine, no one died—well, technically the doctor did, but at this point I doubt he counts—so quit the moping, it’s very nauseating when poured over your overlarge ego.”

That snapped a grin on the older man’s face. “Well, I think that’s the first time I’ve ever been called nauseating in any context.”

“Is it?” Edward drily remarked, hands on hips. “Well, don’t you worry. I’ll make sure to do so. Lots. And I won’t be lying when I say it.” Seeing that Mustang was sufficiently engulfed in laughter, Ed turned to the back stairs. “I’m going to make me some of that chai before I go to bed. No sugar for you, right? I don’t understand how you can drink it with that much cinnamon and no sugar…”

It was November now, the nights darker and colder and longer than Ed ever knew them to be. Farther south around Resembool and Dublith, winters were far shorter and more temperate, making for perfect cold-weather farming conditions while the northern highlands crusted over with frost. With any luck, Ed would witness his first true white winter here in Central, for snow was a relative rarity down south.

Ed felt a slither of movement from the Gate in his head, seemingly at the thought of snow. –and there it went again, a delighted little squirm at the mere mention of the word! He grinned to himself as he went about the half-darkened kitchen for two hot mugs of chai. Times like these were small repayments for the difficulty of having another consciousness in his head. Though intrusive, the Gate sometimes exhibited quite an adorable personality.

Yesss, it hummed, preening at the attention and naturally beckoning for more. Ed would have obliged—the cinnamon smelled of heaven and put him in the happiest of moods—except his ears
noticed a distant scratching sound.

He blinked. Perhaps it was Dog.

Wait, Edward thought. Where is Dog?

Inhaling in mild distress, Ed realised that he had forgotten Dog. It was trapped outside and would no doubt be cowering against the house in fear of the shadows! Quite pathetic in Ed’s eyes: his only experience with the canine species was with Den, and that dog was a fighter. Den never quailed from shadows; nothing in them could scare her.

Brave dog, murmured the Gate as Ed followed the sound. It led down the main hallway to the front doors; small wonder it sounded so very faint to his sharp ears. Through the doors’ side panels— tasteful and classic frosted squares of glass—he could see Dog’s jittery behind as it scuffled and pawed at the entrance. Ed sighed.

“Coming, coming,” he grumbled, unlatching the triple locks and easing the door open. A soft tendril of winter air touched at his nose. Dog waffled and barked and waffled some more, scampering in circles around his legs. Its fur was cold to the touch and it moved in a manner suggesting exhaustion. “Tired, are you? That’s what you get from playing too much. You’re still a puppy, you shouldn’t be overexerting yourself. Here, come here,” and Edward turned to close the doors after Dog slipped inside when a brief flash of motion caught his eyes.

Ed looked up. The lamp-lit street was empty.

Frowning, he stuck his head out and craned around, attentive eyes catching at the corners where the night folded darkly upon itself. The breeze was barely a breeze, stirring a few strands of his hair when he stepped off the patio and down the front walk.

“Who is it?” he called out. “Hello?”

The gas lamps flickered but there was no reply.

Of course there’s no reply, he thought to himself, because it’s probably those stalker news people. Wasn’t Mustang talking about them earlier? Something about giving him and Hughes a hard time at work. Stupid people. Why would they lurk around at this hour of night? Nobody—

Traitor!

An invisible weight slammed into Ed’s chest, knocking him breathless and motionless all at once. It took seconds of frantic blinking and disorientation before he realised that he had stopped moving, his feet planted flat against the ground, his legs and arms frozen in mid-motion. His head was heavy as stone.

It dares! the Gate howled in his head: an encompassing and layered sound that at once was a tolling bell, at once a crashing wave, at once one thousand needles on sandpaper, at once a scream. It dares, the traitor, it dares!

Ed’s heart hammered against his ribs, eyes seeking out the item of the Gate’s rage. There was nothing, nothing but shadows on the street. Yet he had the distinct sensation of being closely watched.

Its eyes are in the dark! It’s a traitor, hissed the Gate. It was once whole but now in pieces! Disgusting, unnatural infidel! Away with it! It is not legitimate!
“Edward,” Mustang, Mustang, Roy placed an arm on his shoulder. “Edward, what are you doing out here? It’s cold out, come back inside.”

Breath huffing out from him all at once, Edward collapsed into a crouch, hands bracing his weight over his knees. The Gate hissed and roiled in his head but it no longer held his limbs in stone, perhaps content now that he would not go any further and engage with—*with what?*

The shadows, the Gate told him. Don’t go into the shadows. You can’t fight it, not yet. Wait for your origin. Only the Light can fight it, only the Light.

“What?” Ed puffed in disbelief at the Gate’s incomprehensible drivel.


“The... it’s... it’s being confusing again, it just started yelling all sorts of shit when I stepped out here, I—I saw something move out there,” Ed retreated behind Roy’s frame. The small motion calmed the Gate somewhat. Only now did he notice that Dog was still behind them, whining, scuttling uneasily just beyond the front doors. Later he would pick out the small detail of Dog’s scuttling paws: they never crossed outside of the threshold and always remained in the light.

A sharp *snap!* made Ed’s eyes whip forward to track the thin ribbon of blue fire that erupted from Roy’s fingers. It danced over the street and briefly illuminated all of it’s the darkened corners, chasing the shadows away. Never fully, though. Under the surreal fire, the shadows bent, its edges dancing, swaying, and then spreading once more. The fire only lasted a few seconds.

“No one there,” Roy stated, but Ed heard the generous shred of caution in his tone. “Come on inside. Your chai will get cold, and it’s bedtime for you soon.” Ed allowed himself to be ushered along, Roy’s hand on his neck a warm and steady anchor. The Gate was still unsettled. There was a cold, dead weight deep in his chest.

As if by instinct, he put his palms together in a clap and then pressed them against the doors. Sparks ran along the walls, scaling the entire house. “I’m adding an alchemical lock. If someone tries to break in, we’ll know. If someone tries to use alchemy nearby, we’ll know. It should also strengthen your older defences against bullets and such. Just to be safe.”

“What is this about?” asked Roy with a frown. They collected the chai from the kitchen—still very warm—and retreated upstairs. They sat by the fireplace after Ed retrieved a comb for Dog. “You were saying something about the Gate.”

“It was angry,” he said, “very angry. Scared too, I think.” The Gate hissed. “Or unsettled, that’s the word.” Dog was docile and allowed the combing to proceed. Large dark eyes gazed up at them with clear adoration. “If only animals can talk, then we’d be able to ask Dog what he saw, if he saw anything. He was out there for a while, with—whatever was out there that angered the Gate. It called whatever-it-was a traitor and an infidel.”

Both of Roy’s eyebrows quirked, chai seemingly forgotten though it was cupped between his palms. “Traitor and infidel. Those are some strong words.”

The Gate hissed again; Edward shrugged. “Dunno. It’s still pissed for some reason. I don’t really understand it very well, like I told you before.” Outside, beyond the windows, the shadows now looked as if they rippled in a soft and subtle motion that resembled breathing. Ed hunched toward the fire. “Can I, um, stay in your room for tonight? I can sleep in the reading chair.”

A smile began to play upon Roy’s face.
“N-Never mind, I was just—I can sleep in my room, it’s fine—”

“No, it’s quite alright, you can stay in my room,” Roy said before taking a sip of chai in between. “The bed is very big—the biggest available on market, actually. We’ll sleep on either ends. We’re neither of us shifty sleepers. If you’re uncomfortable with that, I have a nice long body pillow we can put as a barrier in between.”

An embarrassed flush bloomed from beneath Ed’s skin. He was asking for company the way a three-year-old would demand to sleep in his parents’ bed. It was juvenile and should have been beneath him, but—but I can’t sleep on my own like this, he thought, looking out through the windows and feeling a fluid chill spreading over his back. And I need my sleep for tomorrow. Al & Master will be here tomorrow. What the hell is with all of this rotten timing! What is your problem, anyway? he poked at the Gate, but it only turned over and continued exuding negativity. He sighed. Yet another imposition on the Bastard.

But there was a deep light in the older man’s eyes, a light that echoed acceptance and patience. Understanding was absent, but Edward barely understood the Gate himself, and he was the one who lived with it. Roy had yet rebuke him for his behaviour—though truth be told, rebuke should be the least of his worries. A disembodied consciousness in one’s own head was a very dim reassurance of one’s sanity. Ed hesitantly wondered when, if ever, he would finally cross the man’s ire.

“If I may ask the Gate,” Roy began, a sudden disturbance of the silence between them. “Whatever it is displeased at, whatever was out there—does it pose an immediate threat to you?”

Not Edward, it murmured. Not yet. Ed relayed this answer.

“But it will, someday?”

Someday, it murmured, and to you, too. Warily, Ed relayed again.

“What sort of threat is it?”

Ed sat waiting in silence, but this time, it took a while. He took a sip of chai and waited. For me to provide you all of the information will cost a steep price, the Gate said, but there is no need for that. You will see. But you must discover it for yourself. Because if I provide you a faster way through, it will destroy you, and I like being in a vessel like this. Do you know how rare this is? Only six people—six!—having ever seen the Gate and lived and remained sane. Among them, only one having given more than what was required and in turn acquired a piece of the Gate. Only this one. Understand?

Ed relayed it with a frown. “Spoiled piece of—it’s even more self-absorbed than you are! And here I didn’t know that was possible.”

Roy only laughed, leaving Ed to murmur repartees with his invisible companion. Against his leg, Dog began dozing. For a long time, Roy was staring into the fire. Finally, after a while of warm silence, Roy urged both of them to rest, placing the body pillow barrier in between them as promised. The man was thoughtful enough to leave the master bedroom’s fireplace burning. The night was cold enough. Ed fell asleep with one thread of thought persisting through his murky dreams.

Among them, only one having given more than what was required, the Gate had said. More than what was required. To the Gate, Edward’s limbs and Alphonse’s blood were worth more than their mother’s body and soul: but another thing to add to a long list of things he did not understand.
Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrap in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?
( The Waste Land, T.S. Eliot )

Ed found the next morning incredibly attuned to his mood. He woke in a manner that was slow and yet paradoxically sudden, fostering a period of disorientation that was only enhanced by his unfamiliar surroundings. It took him near ten minutes to recall that he had asked to stay with Roy the previous night, owing to their little encounter with the shadows.

Mention of it sent the Gate into a veritable fit of hisses, which had the tendency to unbalance Ed. This sent Roy, who came from the kitchen to wake him up, into a similarly veritable fit of (s)mothering fuss.

“M’fine,” Ed said, “just sleepy. Be down in a bit.” To justify his excuse, he cracked a large yawn.

Roy left Dog to presumably watch him (it was now capable of obeying basic orders such as ‘sit’ and ‘stay’) but Ed shut his bedroom door on the puppy while he tidied up. It took Dog a while to realise the existence of the other door that Ed had transmuted into the wall after his first night in Central.

That’s right, Ed thought to himself, that was two months ago. How fast time flew. It seemed as though it was only yesterday that he was furiously toiling in their basement in Resembool in the effort to create the array that served to change their life forever. It was an achievement, what he had done. He truly thought it would allow them to continue living their simple, easy life.

Instead it tore that ideal into pieces.

How very naive of him to think—to even briefly consider—that performing such scale of alchemy was that simple. Alchemy was a science, yes, and its processes could be broken down into steps so small that a pair of toddlers could leap through them like he himself and Alphonse had done years ago. But simple actions, he now understood, could precipitate far-reaching repercussions, like a pebble precipitating far-reaching ripples. This was a truth of life: every action amounted to a result, and each result was equivalent to an action. It was foolish to attempt to separate alchemy from life as if it existed in a world of its own, exempt from the rules that governed the universe. Whenever an alchemist performed alchemy, it was never only a simple reaction. It always meant something, always affected someone, even by a mere spectator who happened to pass by at the opposite end of the lake from where the pebble was thrown.

Master had once mentioned similar things as she talked in passing about alchemy that meddled foolishly within things ought to be left alone. She was going to be so displeased.

“Edward,” Roy called from downstairs, “breakfast is getting cold. Everything alright?”

“Coming, yeah, I’m fine,” Ed replied, straightening his person and striding across the library in a manner more decisive than he felt inside.
Roy was already rid of the blue apron and sat at the table, stirring cream into his coffee. “What kept you?”

“Morbid thoughts about my impending demise at the serrated teeth of a scary she-wolf,” he grumbled, earning a chuckle from the Bastard. “At least someone is pleased by the prospects. I might not live to inherit your library after all, Bastard. Maybe give it to Anya; she could take care of it.” Ed finished preparing his own coffee and set to the food.

It was simple fare today: scrambled eggs with sliced bell peppers in green and yellow and red, with skillet-seared potato cubes and a small serving of tomatoes on the side. The eggs were topped with a generous dusting of cheese Ed now recognised to be parmigiano. Considering how recent his induction was to the luxurious life and times of the Grand Bastard, the sensitivity and accuracy of his palate was already quite impressive.

“I was just thinking,” Ed began, taking his time as he wove together the correct words, “about how alchemy is never just alchemy; how it comes to mean much more when you perform it. And—and not just in the large scale, but on the smaller scale as well.”

Roy nodded, as if the concept was already a familiar companion to him. “And what brought this on?”

“Well, you know,” Ed shrugged. “What we did with Mum, human transmutation—it was more than just one reaction, more than just a simple procedure to go through. Alchemy is more than just a tool.”

“Berthold once told me that the reason I failed to fully grasp the breadth of his alchemy was because I failed to see beyond what you just said,” Roy confessed. “It took me years to understand, years full of pain and failure. Alchemy is not a tool; it is a way of life. It would interest you,” the older man suddenly smiled, “to know that Hohenheim explained to me once that it was for this very reason that he left his family behind.”

Ed’s hands stilled at those words, his breath momentarily catching at his throat. A jumble of thoughts tripped over themselves in his head. Did Hohenheim feel the same way he had felt, afraid that his alchemy would never flourish or progress in that little idyllic town, suffocating in the lack of other alchemical minds to spar with—and maybe guilty of having ruined—of having abandoned—

“I hope you aren’t taking that to mean that Hohenheim did not hold you and your brother and mother close to his heart,” Roy cautioned, placing a hand on his arm.

“No, I know we’re important,” he said, resuming his meal. “It’s just that alchemy was more important.” A frown flashed across Roy’s face, so Ed amended: “Don’t try to say that it’s not true, because I know. I did it too, remember? Left it behind, ran out, put my alchemy above all else. It was more important. I couldn’t imagine never being able to do alchemy anymore, never being able to study it. It felt like drowning. I couldn’t stay there. Master will probably try to say that I ran from guilt, and that’s probably true too, but I clearly remember what my mother said, what ultimately drove me out of there. I remember what I felt.”

There was a momentary silence, during which Ed made short work of his potatoes. As he speared the last one with his fork, he gave Roy a wry smile. “Ironic, isn’t it? I willingly threw away what I had sacrificed a leg and an arm for to retain my freedom to continue chasing after things that might, in the future, require more sacrifices of legs and arms.”

“Oh, worry yourself not, young one,” Roy wagged a finger, “for you aren’t going anywhere near forbidden alchemy again, not under my watch. Once is enough, don’t you think?”
“Technically, it was twice, but okay,” Ed grinned.

“You and your technicalities.”

“So how do you do it?” Ed asked him without pause, now working on his eggs. “How do you keep doing alchemy despite knowing that it can mean and change so much more beyond your immediate environment?”

Roy took a while to reply. Finished with his meal, the older man reclined and nursed his cup of coffee. It was brewed from fresh beans imported from the small country of Yufi, far past the southern reaches of the Great Eastern Desert. The country was once a part of the great Persian Empire and was suspected by historians to be the origin of coffee as the world knew it today. How Roy managed to acquire such exquisite products from beyond Amestrian borders, Ed had no idea. Surely there was a limit to how large the Bastard’s network extended.

“A long time ago, I read a novel written by a scholar from Ailia,” Roy began what sounded like a roundabout explanation. “It was about a man—a mathematician—who feared the consequences of real life actions and the subsequent repercussions. He feared it so much that he entirely retreated into the ‘pure’ world of mathematics, refusing to act on any knowledge he held, an effort in preserving its alleged purity. Long story short, he gets embroiled in a series of murders but refuses to cooperate fully with the investigation. His refusal ultimately makes him responsible for eleven deaths.”

Ed swallowed his food. “So you’re saying that even if we refuse to move, we might end up hurting people anyway.”

“Well,” sighed the older man, giving a fluid shrug, “you see, this novelist and scholar kept drafts of the story that were discovered after his death. In those drafts, the mathematician was actually responsible for helping cover up the first murder by orchestrating the following murders in the series. Which makes him responsible for a total of fifteen deaths instead.”

Ed frowned, fiercely. “Now you’re saying the opposite. Make up your mind, which is it?”

Roy smiled, setting his coffee down and leaning forward. “Let me clarify. Quoting our novelist and scholar Professor Martell: ‘To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.’ We as human beings cannot afford to let ourselves remain at a standstill. We would let past necessary opportunities and fail to flourish as individuals, let alone as societies and nations. However, in the same narrative, Martell says: ‘Men’s actions are too strong for them, for nowhere does a man exist who has acted and has not been the victim and slave of his action.’ Precisely because action can carry us places, we must be careful to not allow it to get the better of us. It helps in certain situations, but in others it does not—especially so when action is not weighed first and contemplated upon, for every action has its risks and rewards. You, as a rational individual, simply must decide if an action is worth those risks and rewards—yes, unfortunately, on a case to case basis.”

What little remained of their meal began to make Ed nauseated, so he stood and began collecting the dishes. Roy followed him to the sink to share the chore and continued.

“Life is not as simple as science, where a compound remains a compound regardless of the circumstance. In life, sometimes one thing is worth more than it usually is at another time. We always make these value judgments upon things, but we have made them since we were capable of reasoning, and that is an awfully long time. We are so used to it that we never even notice, and some even forget. The most important thing from this that I want you to remember,” the older man said, turning to look him in the eye, “is that it is first and foremost your duty to educate yourself about the things that you want to make a decision upon. While it is necessary to have action in life, it is not a
requirement to be uninformed about them. In fact, nothing is quite so destructive. So use your intellect. Weigh the factors. Take precautions. And above all, whenever you can, seek advice. Two brains and two pairs of eyes are always better than one.”

They finished washing the dishes in contemplative silence, both having plenty to ponder within those words. It was well into midmornning (Roy had allowed them both to sleep in) on a day without much to do but pick their guests up from the train station after lunch, so they opted for an immersing game of chess upstairs, Ed occupying Dog with an unfortunate ball of yarn.

Upon the chessboard began to unfold a war of attrition, and it was then that Ed began to grasp the beginnings of a significant realisation. It’s a balancing act, he thought as he watched the pieces on the board shift positions at each turn. Black and white. Wrong and right. True and false. Both sides exist in the person, and the person must straddle in between. The person must decide—like Roy said—on a case to case basis. Because nothing is ever absolute; all things are relative.

Sudden and blinding as lightning, the Gate inside his head flashed a wide Cheshire grin. Ed waited in silence for it to say its piece, but it only settled for a purr. Ed was unsure if that was a sign of approval, but it was nonetheless a thought to turn over and examine for some time.

Pathetic, Ed thought to himself as he lost his only other rook to Roy’s vicious queen. Of the four things he said to do—think, weigh, take caution, seek advice—I did a grand total of none.

And that, the Gate grinned, is why I am with you.

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“The end of man is knowledge, but there is one thing he can’t know. He can’t know whether the knowledge will save him or kill him. He will be killed, all right, but he can’t know whether he is killed because of the knowledge that he has got or because of the knowledge which he hasn’t got and which, if he had it, would have saved him.”

( Robert Penn Warren )

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At half past twelve, they took the car and left the house. Hughes and Gracia were both informed of their whereabouts and the coming guests, eliciting much enthusiasm from the couple at the prospect of meeting his brother and master. If only Ed could say the same for himself!

He was very glad he brought the new coat that Roy’s tailor had made for his winter set: there was an icy wind cutting the streets of Central into shreds. The pallid sun was not much help there, its white rays more diffused and tenuous as it filtered through the mostly cloudy skies. Even the heavens were languishing today. It was to be a horrible day, he just knew it, he could feel it in his bones.

Even then, he noticed that most everyone at Central Station was still in lighter clothes, with lighter coats. Just like Ed, Roy was clad in reasonably warm clothing, but no one else seemed to feel the winter cold creeping in.

Roy answered his look of disbelief with a small smile. “If you were to walk up to one of them and ask if they were cold, they’d say, ‘Oh, no, it’s a pleasant autumn day!’ Northerners have such thick skins, you know.”

“Pleasant?” Ed spat, following past the large pillars toward the correct platform. “What is pleasant about this? The wind seems to have discovered a new use for sharp and pointed projectiles; the trees are going bald and that’s never good; the sun seems to have been castrated—what is pleasant about
all this?”

The Bastard had the indecency to laugh at the miserable situation they were in, so of course Ed stood there and snubbed him for a few minutes, unable to help himself from acting like a petulant child. Besides which, why should he not act like a child? Roy liked to call him one, treat him like one, and encouraged him to feel free to act like one. Satisfied with his justifications, he set about being an incorrigible brat to the older man, at least for the next handful of minutes before master arrived. By then he had to have his act together. Anything other than ready and intelligent before her could jeopardise his chances of coming out of this alive.

If he were not so occupied stewing in his personal little cauldron of dread, he would have noticed the handful of curious glances sent their way. The people of Central were well-informed citizens and doubtless knew of his and Roy’s small debacle a few days ago. Some recognised them from the photos, but perhaps Roy’s intimidating presence deterred them from approaching. Though the Bastard was not in uniform, the mere projection of power he held about his person was enough to cow most civilians.

“Brother!” Al called out, extricating himself breathlessly from a crush of debarking passengers. The train had pulled in and Ed had not even noticed.

“Al,” he smiled stepping forward to pull his brother in for a hug. Just as he did, however, Izumi stepped up.

“Look at you,” was the first thing she said, her dark eyes sharp and assessing as she hoisted her small knapsack. “Look at you, so dashing and scholarly.”

Something in her tone made Ed flinch, and it was not a flinch of fear. No; astonishingly, it was a flinch of indignation at her half-condescension. Was it his new clothes she did not approve of? Perhaps the way he carried himself, or the way he had grown his hair? True, these things were new and spoke of Central’s urban lifestyle, but they were also things that Roy had given him—given him!—without asking for anything in return.

But Izumi stepped right past him and up to Roy, face lit with what looked like a genuine smile. “Izumi Curtis, Edward’s alchemical master. I do apologise for all the trouble he must have caused you. I can’t thank you enough for taking him in.”

“Roy Mustang. The pleasure has been all mine and I mean it with all sincerity,” Roy responded in kind, ever the gracious Bastard. Introductions were further exchanged as Izumi introduced Sig, Ed introduced Al, and Roy further introduced himself. At the mention of the military, Izumi’s eyes tightened a tad, which Roy took as the cue to lead them out of the station. “Shall we? There is a whole lot to discuss, which we can do over lunch at home. You’re perfectly welcome to stay at my house for as long as you need to be in Central; in fact, I do insist on it. It’ll give you plenty of time to catch up as well.”

The drive home had to be Edward’s worst travelling experience yet. It was cramped in the back where he and Al squeezed in with Sig, and the pleasantly strained, polite atmosphere prevented him from getting an edgewise word into the conversation. The tension was thick enough for even the Gate to choke on (and it made mock gagging noises in the back of Ed’s head all the while). He could not even get a word to Al, who looked about as distressed as Ed felt. They both could feel it: Izumi was only waiting for the chance to blow.

True enough, the instant they stepped inside the house, Izumi slammed Ed shoulder first into the ground. Ed’s automail took the brunt of his weight, making him hiss in sudden pain. The Gate yelped, hackles rising in alarm at the sudden assault. It was, after all, heavily invested in Ed’s health
and wellbeing.

“You idiot child!” Izumi all but roared, picking him up just as he was rising to his knees. She took him by the lapel and shook him with great vigour, yelling into his face, “What were you thinking? No, never mind—you weren’t thinking, were you? You nearly got your brother killed! You nearly got yourself killed! Do you understand the magnitude of what you’ve done?”

“Master—“

“Step aside, Alphonse; your brother needs to hear this!” Izumi shoved Ed backward and aimed another punch—and Ed should have taken it, he should have just taken the beating that he deserved, but all this time with Roy told him that he didn’t deserve this. Yes, he had made a mistake; yes, he had hurt his family—but was he not suffering the consequences already? So he dodged the punch, weaved around Izumi, and backed out of her reach. “Come back here so I can pound some sense into that thick head of yours!”

Hughes came out of the main hallway in mild alarm. Roy was hovering closer, ready to interfere.

“What makes it worse is that after all that happened, you turned your back on it and ran away!” she kept shouting, advancing on him as predator to disadvantaged prey. Ed’s shoulder was throbbing. Roy would have to see to it later. “I don’t remember raising a coward, Edward Elric, so you will come here and tell me where you learned to run away from your problems instead of looking them in the eye! You are the older brother, you should be setting an example for Alphonse, and what did you do? You left your brother behind!” Izumi clapped her hands and was about to touch the wall nearby, which, despite his instincts screaming at him to back away, made Ed lunge forward into her grasp.

“No!” he yelped. “Don’t use alchemy on the house!” He managed to catch her wrist in motion and was then thrown once more to the floor. This time it was his hip that caught the fall—but at least he averted her hand from touching the wall. He could only assume that she was about to make a weapon with which to teach him a lesson, but he pleaded, “Please don’t use alchemy on the house, it’s a very old and precious house—”

“Oh, so a house is more precious than your family? You will defend a house from destruction, but not your own family? Edward Elric, you are—”

—trying not to get myself even more indebted to Roy, damnit!” Ed yelled back, he yelled back, and it felt good. He never knew it to feel this good. “I’ve already imposed enough as it is, and now you’re added impositions because of me too, and excuse me if I don’t want to hurt the house, but this fucking house is the only house I have right now, since I was thrown out of my mother’s house, in case you weren’t notified!”

“You didn’t even try to explain to your mother what happened—”

“Would it have made any difference? Al told her and she practically threw him out. She’s thrown both of us out!”

“That is no excuse for you to leave Alphonse behind! Did you even stop and think about your brother when you turned tail and ran? You are the older brother, you are supposed to take care of each other—”

“I gave up an arm to get him back, and I would do so again if need be! Stop trying to lecture me on caring about my brother—”

“I will damn well lecture you on whatever it is you need lecturing on, there are a handful of them—”
“This isn’t one of them! I know what I did, I’ve heard it before, I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking, I got us fucked over, I get it, now will you please move past the yelling part and actually talk to me instead of talking at me!” Ed all but screamed, winning the upper hand with yet another impressive display of lung capacity. The helpless fury he felt was so overwhelming and aimless that it brought frustrated tears to his eyes—but he did not let them fall. He clenched his jaw, squared his shoulders, and willed himself nerves of steel.

But before the argument could escalate any further, a hand came upon the back of his neck.

“I understand that Edward’s alchemy is your direct responsibility, being his master, and that you only intend the best for him, but we’ve gone over these issues at great depth and length,” Roy said in a manner so calm and soothing that Ed simply sagged into himself, fury expunged from his limbs. As ever, Roy’s words were Ed’s undoing. The tears he had done so well repressing began to streak past his cheeks; he brought his arm up to scrub at them. All the while, Roy continued, “There’s a lot of ground to cover, but I’m sure there will be more progress if we caught up with each other first. As I understand, a fair number of things have happened on Alphonse’s side; just the same, quite a fair bit has happened here as well, and we’d best apprise you of it in an orderly fashion.”

From the mouth of the main hallway, Hughes gave a snort. Ed snorted with him. ‘A fair bit’ was a gigantic understatement.

Alphonse gave a sudden long sigh of relief, rubbing the back of his neck. Ed sniffled and exchanged a comic grimace with him, before Alphonse turned to Izumi and softly implored, “Please don’t blame him too much, master; it’s both our faults. And he’s right, Mum wasn’t very receptive of what happened. And—please, master, we just lucked out from death. I really don’t want you to kill each other, and besides, we’re here to talk, right? Please.”

Roy smiled at him. “I see where Hohenheim’s calm and patience went.”

“Told you, he’s the sane one,” Ed grumped and sniffed, hoisting Al’s baggage and heading for the stairs. “Come on, Al, let’s get your stuff up to the room. Master and Sig’s room is down over there, but we’re upstairs.”

It was a lacklustre attempt at escaping Izumi’s full wrath, but it worked well. They left the adults behind, Ed trusting Roy’s very capable hands. This, in his opinion, was a fine use of the Bastard’s diplomatic silver tongue. He counted on Roy to have Izumi nicely defanged by the time they descended.

On their way up the stairs, Al bumped shoulders with him and whispered, “What were you thinking, yelling back at master like that! She could have skewered you alive, Brother!”

“I was pissed, okay,” Ed grumbled, flushing. “I’ve heard it all before anyway, and the sooner she got out of the yelling phase, the sooner we could talk.”

Ed and Al both glanced down at the same time as Gracia emerged from the hallway and made her greetings, eliciting a young smile from Izumi and a hearty response from Sig. The pregnancy temporarily caught Izumi’s undivided attention.

“That’s Gracia, and her husband is Maes Hughes,” Ed explained to his brother. “I told you about them in the letter; he’s good friends with Roy and they’re both in the military. They’ve been really nice. Hughes knows about—about us and Mum. Roy trusts him, so we’re okay to trust them too. Besides, Hughes would have probably found out anyway.”

“They look like nice people,” Al murmured in a low hush, eyes panning across the entrance hall over
the intricate carvings on the wall and up at the chandelier (which Ed had recently taken to calling the Deadly Bough of Glass Knives). “...it’s a very nice house.”

Ed grinned. “Come on, the library’s this way,” he urged, darting into the upper hallway and ducking into his room to deposit his brother’s luggage. He ducked back out and led Al down the hall to the library, where Al went slack-jawed. “Wicked awesome, I know.”

“It’s all his?” Al exclaimed, walking past shelf after shelf. “All of this?”

“He’s a rich Bastard,” Ed shrugged, “but at least he’s got good taste. What better way to spend the money than on alchemy and books?” He was about to sprawl on one of the couches and pull out some of his notes when a hand caught his arm. Al stood scrutinising him with eyes eerily akin to their mother’s. She was always very observant, but in ways different—more incisive with regards to people.

“Has he been good to you?” Al asked him in a tone braided with so many emotions that Ed did not even dare try untangle them. “Mr. Mustang, I mean—has he—has he been taking care of you?”

A torrent of thoughts slid past Ed and catching them was like holding water between parted fingers. There were so many things he wanted to say in response to such a question, so many things he had wanted to talk about with his brother—

“I hadn’t noticed it while I was staying at Resembool, you see,” Al continued, eyes still searching his face, “but when I got to Master’s place and she listened to all I had to say, that’s when I realised that I’d been carrying everything inside the entire time, so much of it that there wasn’t any place for healing anywhere. I just—I just want to know if Mr. Mustang’s been listening to you the same way, because I think—no, I know you’re hurting more than you’re letting on, probably hurting more than me—”

“No!” Ed refuted, startling the both of them. He blinked at his younger brother, cleared his throat, and quietly continued, “No, I’m not. Or—or I wouldn’t presume to say I am, because I’m not you, I can’t feel what you feel, and like Master said, I did leave you behind all alone. So we’re both suffering, and—and it’s because we both did this, the two of us.” Those last words were spoken with a heavy breath. Ed sank into the arm of the long couch behind him, fingers curling into leather. He sighed. “The price is heavy, Al. It wasn’t just flesh and blood the Gate took. We were pretty dumb back there.”

“Understatement,” his brother smiled a sad smile. “I was thinking the same, you know, when I told mother about what we did. She pulled away. That was when I started really considering that we might be—losing her. Not—not in the physical way, since she’s alive, but—but our relationship with her is broken. She said she’s afraid of what we did, that she doesn’t understand it.”

Ed’s face was dark. Her defence was valid in the beginning, when all of them were yet reeling in shock. But in the days that followed after, was there any excuse to shun her children, who only wanted to see her alive again? Roy did not have a shining opinion of their mother, but Ed and Al both knew that she had a gentle and forgiving soul—at least before she died. Now it was as if she was a stranger. What if the price was greater than what they understood it to be? What if, by bringing her back, they had changed her?

No. Ed did not want to think about that. He said instead, “It’s not like we understand it, what we did. Which is way worse, because we are the ones who did it.”

“Actually, I have a few ideas about what happened there,” Al began, and before his younger brother could begin downplaying his own ideas, which he was very prone to do, Ed pounced forward.
“Let’s hear ‘em!”

“But before we do, I want to hear your answer to my question first!”

“Ugh, about Mustang? Yeah, he’s fine. Moving on—”

“Brother. I asked a proper question, I want a proper answer.”

“I said he’s fine,” Ed sighed, throwing his body backwards to fall into the couch. His legs kicked at the air in front of his brother. Al moved to sprawl on the floor beside him, arms braced against the couch to keep looking Ed in the face. Al liked to look into people’s eyes to read many things, things that Ed never truly learned to read the same way. Ed read people by their movements, much more telling to him than their faces. Besides, some of them—in particular their faces—were downright nauseating. Reminded of Roy, Ed scowled. “He’s such a perfect host and caretaker it makes me sick. He doesn’t talk much about what goes on at his work or everywhere else, but I’m pretty sure I’m causing more of an inconvenience than he’s letting on. He never even asks for anything in return. He listens to everything I have to say and usually has something to give back that could help. He doesn’t even care that I have the Gate in my head.”

“You have what!?” Al shot upright from his careless sprawl, pushing away from the couch.

That seemed to be the popular reaction to this particular revelation. Ed shifted, rolling to the floor and rearranging himself to a sitting position beside his alarmed brother. “The Gate. Remember, I talked to you about it, I—”

“—saw it, but you didn’t tell me that you had it in your head—wait, what does that even mean?” Al had a look of immense confusion dashed with a wide stroke of concern. “Does it—does it—hurt you or anything?”

“No, it doesn’t; it’s like a—like another voice in my head, sort of,” Ed shrugged, and then winced as muscles winched against his automail shoulder. Most definitely something for Roy to see to later, that. “I did see it, twice. Roy thinks that maybe because of that, it acquired a sort-of personality? Kind of hard to explain, sorry.”

For some time the two of them sat there, Ed waiting and Al wearing a look of conflict under the wan November light. The windows were thrown open today to accommodate whatever natural lighting was available from outside, but the library was best lit by Roy’s fire so far as Ed was concerned. He contemplated on shutting the curtains. The emasculated sun was fast becoming a true source of irritation for him. In his very humble opinion, such a prominent fixture of nature should not display weakness in such an unbecoming manner. It was shameful!

“I wonder why I can’t remember it,” Al finally murmured, muted words riding on a small gust of breath. “The Gate, I can’t remember any of it. Master says I saw it too. She says I’ll remember eventually, but—there’s nothing there.”

Ed did not have an answer for that—but the Gate in his head did. It curled a tendril that Ed was now accustomed to thinking of as its tail, before humming the answer: It’s because he died. Passage through the Truth can be jarring to some souls. So, placing his flesh hand on his brother’s arm, he relayed the Gate’s words.

A multitude of emotions knifed across Al’s face. However, none of them made it into words, as Roy came up from the back stairs with a call for their lunch. Perhaps it was something in their faces when they both looked up at the man from their spot—Roy’s face softly fell into a warm smile. “Plenty of things to catch up on, I’m sure, but you might want to have these discussions with your master
along.” He looked over Ed with knowing eyes. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Hurts like fuck, but it’s Master, so what’s new,” Ed grunted in reply, rising to his feet at the beckon of food. Al followed after him with a resigned grin, the two of them falling into a pattern as easy as breathing. Beyond any words that could be exchanged between them, Al’s presence at his shoulder was the best balm to his pains. As they jostled on their way down the stairs, shoving at each other like they were little children once again, Ed began to reform his mind. Perhaps this visit was not as disastrous as it seemed. Perhaps today would not be so bad after all.

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Or maybe not.

Gracia was gracious enough to prepare for all of them such a homely spread yet Ed could scarcely muster up the appetite for it. And how could he, sat directly in front of his master and buckling under her expectant gaze? But she contained herself to those heavy glances while at the table and broached unruly waters no further. She turned on Roy instead.

“Alphonse has told me a little about your fortunate involvement in their mishap in Resembool,” Izumi began, “but not much about why you were there in the first place. I apologise if I’m being blunt, but I’m only wondering what business a ranked officer like yourself would have in such a quiet town.”

So Roy explained his association with Hohenheim and the letter he received from the boys months and months ago.

“It was awfully kind of you to take care of the expenses for Edward’s automail. I’m aware that the port wirings are best done when the cuts are fresh.”

So Roy explained his debts to Hohenheim and his obligation to care for the sons.

“Being an alchemist of the state, I’m sure you’re well aware of the military’s efforts in bioalchemy and human transmutation.” She gestured to Ed and Al with her free hand as she took a small mouthful of water.

So Roy explained his disinterest in the military’s futile attempts.

“So you keep Ed to yourself instead,” she finished for him, expectant, challenging. The fire in her eyes made Ed’s very teeth shake in their sockets.

But Roy only smiled, reminiscent of a moonbeam reflected by the flick of a knife. “Indeed, I do. I much prefer to have him right here, where I can watch over and provide for him until Hohenheim returns.”


Roy heedlessly continued: “I understand you’re concerned for Edward’s well-being, but I assure you that the harm you are looking to shield him from will not come from me. My only interest is to help him further his alchemical studies—”

“—by making him an alchemist of the state?”

“If he wishes it, yes. If he doesn’t, then no.”

“You would send a child out to war.”
“Not all State Alchemists head to war, Ms. Curtis, and Edward’s scholarly tendencies paint him as a researcher instead of a warrior. Both Maes here and myself are well-positioned to protect Edward from within the system, and we have every intention to do so should it come to that.” Roy’s words were as iron against Izumi’s fire, bending to the heat and shifting shape to accommodate. He was so skilled with them that Ed had to pause eating and listen. They were only ordinary words, but some mysterious power about them convinced people of things they were mistrustful of before. “There are ways of navigating the woodwork for minimum risk and maximum gain. Should Edward decide to pursue licensure, remaining a research alchemist will allow him to avoid being called out for war while giving him all the privileges that are available to State Alchemists.”

“Such as the First Library,” Al breathed, blinking at Ed in a way that implored him to take the test at once. “Think about all the advanced research you could study.”

“I still have the books upstairs to finish, you know. Maybe after them.”

Izumi set down her fork. “I wasn’t aware that you two were this eager to become alchemists of the state.”

Ed looked at his brother, who only looked back and shrugged. “Well,” he said, “we weren’t very eager about it before because it would take us far away from Mum and possibly put her in danger, and besides, it’s a sore topic for Winry. But now that we’re out of Resembool...”

“I don’t think I’ll pass the exams just yet,” Al said, “but with a little work, I should manage it the year after next. I’m sure you can pass it now if you tried, Brother.”

“They only test once every year,” Hughes pointed out from the other end of the table, “and it’s in the spring. The schedule changes with each round, but you can pretty much expect the written examination to come before the practical. Usually a day is reserved for each of them, though they might extend to two days each if there are a lot of participants. If you fail the written exam, you won’t be allowed to try for the practical.”

Ed and Al exchanged another look.

After a moment, Al said, “You should definitely try for it.”

“Are you going to try?” Ed asked.

At that moment, Al looked up at Izumi, a soft crease that should not be seen on such a young face settling between his brows. “I don’t know yet. I haven’t really decided on where I’ll be taking myself in terms of alchemy.”

“But you have ideas,” Ed ventured, “since you’re already at the deciding point.” His brother did not reply, so Ed took it a step further. “I take it we’ll be separated for a while, then?” He continued his meal, assuming a neutral expression, allowing none of his emotions to play upon his face. “You’ll be staying with Master at Dublith.”

It took Al a while to respond, during which Ed demolished his first serving of stew and asked for more. It was Hughes who helped refill his plate, insisting Gracia remain seated. Given her size, Ed could scarcely believe she was a mere seven months along. He had half a mind to ask of Hughes was sure Gracia was carrying one child instead of two or three. (Then again, Ed had very little—that is to say, none at all—experience with pregnancy. He had been too young to remember his own mother’s pregnancy with Alphonse.)

“I think it would best,” his younger brother began once more, in that soft, ponderous tone of his, “if
we stay apart, at least for now.” Yet again came a torrent of thoughts too fast for him to seize between his fingers. Ed had so many things he wanted to say—but he kept his peace and allowed Al the space. “I had a lot of time to think back at home, and while I was turning your theory over in my head to try and figure out how it worked when it shouldn’t have, I realised one very important thing that Master will probably get mad about.”

Ed groaned. “What the hell, Al, I’m supposed to be the one who specialises at trying to get us killed!” This was fast becoming too much of a habit for his brother. It simply was not done.

“Sorry,” Al flushed, ducking his head. He was now the item of Izumi’s searing attention. It only served to make him shrink even further into his seat. “I just noticed that when we’re doing alchemy together, we cover for each other.”

“What’s so bad about that?” Hughes asked with a cautious tone that, if translated into words, would spell, I’m not an alchemist; please elaborate!

“Well, we cover for each other’s mistakes, which is good when we’re performing serious transmutations, but kind of bad when we’re theorising, practising, or just thinking in general.” Al explained with a smooth and simple clarity that Ed would have been hard fought to imitate. Al was always the better educator. Ed’s mind simply leaped one too many steps ahead and considered one too many tangents. “Because we’re so used to compensating for each other like that, it puts us in very bad form when we’re on our own. Erm... an example would be how Brother is naturally good at grasping wide, overarching abstract concepts as a whole, but is absolute crap at organising the smaller details of a theory.”

Ed blushed hotly and exclaimed, “Because I don’t need to! I get it just like that, plain and simple! And I’m not that bad!”

Roy chuckled as he took a sip of his chilled and sweetened lemon tea. Izumi, however, did not look as amused. For the record, she did not look displeased, either; merely complacent for the moment, as if she had expected Al’s observation.

“Yeah, but if you’re taking notes on your theory for when you revisit it in the future or pass it on to someone else, or you know, when you’re actually using it for a transmutation in the future, you need to organise the details, or you run the very high risk of missing a step,” Al pointed out with a chastising look. It was Ed’s turn to shrink into his seat. They both knew what he was referring to; in their haste, Ed had forgotten to calculate for their mother’s soul, resulting to their catastrophic injuries. “Granted, you come up with insane ideas faster than I do, which sometimes makes up for the mistakes since you can correct them,” as Ed had done when he had sacrificed his arm to retrieve Al’s soul from the Gate, “but one day that might not be enough.”

“A sure and steady voice of reason,” Roy noted. “Why ever do you not listen to him more often, Ed?”

“I don’t know, Bastard, why do you not listen to Hughes more often?” Ed threw back with a fierce scowl, to which Roy and Hughes both responded with a shared laugh.

“I also need to work on creativity,” Al sighed, pushing his food around on his plate, “which I can’t if we’re together. You have too many ideas, Brother. It takes both of us to follow them, oftentimes, and they’re so good that I just get taken along. I feel like I’ll be able to find where I want to go with my alchemy if I had some space first.”

This conversation was fast becoming a painful thorn in Ed’s conscience. What appetite he had had when he asked for a second serving evaporated in the heat of his guilt. He began pushing around
what remained of his meal, forgetting Izumi’s displeasure at such blatant disrespect of good food, and mumbled, “Sorry,” after a brief silence.

Giving his side a nudge, Al said, “You shouldn’t apologise. It’s a gift you have.”

“You have it too, just a different kind,” Ed bristled, glaring a hole into his own reflection against the smooth surface of Roy’s long dining table. The wood was dark with streaks of earthy brown, no doubt polished until gleaming perfection. He hated it. It made him realize just how fucked up a position his mistake had dropped them in.

“Winry said my gift was the skill to keep us alive,” said his brother with a wry little twist of the lips, “but if we’re to be separating, you need to start learning how to do that too. Keeping yourself alive and safe, I mean.”

“Oh, no worries on that, the mother hen over here will do it for me,” Ed gestured to Roy, who demurred with his charmer smile.

But it seemed his Master was not yet convinced. “Will he,” she quietly remarked, dabbing at her mouth with her napkin and settling her cutlery with grace belying her near-inhuman strength. Ed shot a glance at Roy, which was as much of a warning he could give the man. She did not have a shining opinion of what Roy represented and would doubtless insist on bringing Ed home with her. Ed was unsure if he wanted to comply.

Gracia made to stand to gather the dishes and set out dessert (apple and peach cobbler, still hot more than warm, with a perfect golden crust and generous slices of fruit within) but again, Hughes preempted her, and Ed took his chance to momentarily escape the uncomfortable table by offering his hand.

As he was leaving the table, arms laden with everyone’s dishes, Izumi said to Al with all seriousness, “I don’t recall giving you leave to test for state licensure yet.”

Al gave her a torn look, in Ed’s opinion among the best in his arsenal of very pitiable expressions. His little brother was very hard to refuse, being much better at downplaying his own ego than Ed would ever manage. Ed knew he simply had too much fight in him—as Pinako would say, too much of Hohenheim in him—to be truly pitiable. (In all honesty, he never wanted any of their pity anyway; he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself, thank you very much.)

He disappeared into the kitchen in time to overhear Al attempting to win their master over in low, even tones. He would have never managed that either; if it were up to him, he would already be yelling across the table. (How Roy would like that.) Ed had no idea what Al was on about; his little brother was full of talents Ed could never even dream of.

His frown must have been a fierce thing; Hughes caught his elbow as he deposited the dirty dishes by the sink. “Don’t worry too much. At this stage, Roy isn’t going to let her take you away from here.” Hughes’ eyes danced with merriment, its corners crinkling in that distinct manner he had. Hughes was forever finding something to be amused about. “Haven’t you noticed? He’s totally attached to you now. He won’t let you go anywhere; he’ll insist on keeping you even if he has to be rude about it.”

Ed only snorted. “What are you on about? As far as Master’s concerned, his very presence is rude.”

Hughes chortled, lifting Gracia’s cobbler with care. They trooped back into the dining room, Ed placing clean dessert dishes and cutlery in front of everyone while Hughes served.
Izumi turned to him with a critical eye as he sat back down. “Edward.”

Ed swallowed. “Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re going to stay here,” she said, a statement intended to be a question. “With the Colonel.”

“Yes,” Ed answered, steady and decisive as he met his master eye to eye. “If that’s not agreeable to you—’

“Will it matter at this point? Clearly the Colonel has plans for you and you agree with them so far as he has explained them. He has explained them?” Izumi clarified. She had not even touched her dessert, though she had a small serving on her plate.

Ed nodded.

“And you think it wise to go down this path,” she continued, with disbelief weighing down her words such that they sank into Ed’s ears. How she did that, Ed had no idea, but she had always liked using it whenever imparting something important to them. It struck him that she used the same tone back when she had warned them not to dabble in forbidden alchemy. That seemed like so long ago.

He forked an apple slice but kept it on the plate, staring into his cup of tea. Roy had served it for him and he did not even notice. The Bastard was always incredibly circumspect and sensitive to subtle fluctuations in Ed’s moods. Ed relinquished his fork and took a sip of the tea instead.

“I don’t know about wise,” he started, still looking into his teacup. His reflection wavered as he sighed into its surface. “I obviously wasn’t being wise the last time I jumped into something big. I ended up hurting myself, Mum, and Al.”

“Good,” she said. “You begin to understand.”

“Kind of hard not to; I’m missing an arm and a leg for it,” Ed scowled. “But it hasn’t always been a record of unwise things. Before the transmutation, the thing that I’d jumped into was apprenticing under you—and I wouldn’t give that experience up for anything in the world.” Al nodded eagerly.

“But we didn’t really jump into apprenticing for you; we did think about it, we considered what you said to us and we decided to go for it. I’ve done the same for what Roy’s offering and I want to go for it.”

A minute transformation passed over the Bastard’s face, but it was out of the corner of Ed’s eyes—it was gone by the time he glanced over. Hughes, however, seemed to have seen it, as the man shifted in his seat and gave a quiet chuckle. Would there ever be any end to Hughes’ amusement?

“Even if it means submitting yourself to the military’s whims and wars,” Izumi confirmed, ever thorough and stringent.

Whims and wars—what a fitting way to describe it. Master always did have such a way with words. Anecdotes and parables peppered Ed’s memories of her lessons; it was all woven so finely into an arching story. But it was one of her little parables that reminded Ed of why precisely he wanted to remain here with Roy. It was a new realisation: the Gate in his head sidled up to this new determination and inspected it with the critical air even as Ed began to process it. Ironic how Izumi’s presence, the very thing he had dreaded, was the one to bring everything into sharper focus for him. But then again, she was their master; she had that effect.

“You were the one who taught us that an alchemist seeks to fix his eyes upon the truth,” Ed began.

Her eyes narrowed as she leaned forward, hissing, “I assure you, Edward, the Truth does not consist
of selling yourself to be a paid murderer. You misunderstand—"

“No, you misunderstand!” Ed snapped, for which he received a sharp gaze from Gracia. She had yet to say a word since lunch began, but she was determined to keep the conversation civil. Ed took a breath to quell his temper, and continued, “I assure you, Master, I know what the Truth looks like. Twice I saw it, twice I survived it. It’s made me rethink a lot of things and I’m still trying to adjust my understanding of alchemy around it. It’s precisely because of it that I want to stay here.

“We tried to deny the truth instead of accepting Mum’s death, so it made itself known to us instead. Now more than ever we cannot—I cannot turn my back on what I saw, even if it means relinquishing my rights to safety, to ignorance, to conventional happiness, to a simple life in Dublith with you or even in Resembool—and those are your words. I remember now. I won’t forget. Not again.”

Unused at having her own words tossed back at her, Izumi retreated, regarding Ed with a new and unsettling light in her eyes. Ed disregarded it and pressed on: “I know you think I’m jumping into yet another big decision, but believe it or not, I have been thinking about this. I’ve had two whole months to do so. See, Al’s decided to take the other path—that is, to stay with you, which is perfectly fine. But if I stay in Dublith, you can’t provide me everything that I will need for the kind of exhaustive research I want to do—and yes, I do know what I want to do. The literature I’ll need to do it, along with the money and the society, is here in Central. Roy took me to a symposium a few weeks back where I saw alchemists gathered together, and though some of them were worth tossing into the nearest street bin, there were others who had potential! Think about what I can contribute now that I’ve seen the Gate.”

“You can’t possibly be saying—”

“Oh, I won’t tell them about the Gate, I’m not stupid,” Ed dismissed, waving the very thought away with a hand. The small mannerism echoed Roy. “They’ll seize Mum and Al and throw us into some lab to experiment on, and Roy won’t be able to do shit to stop them, not at this rank.”

“No,” Roy agreed, “I really won’t. Let’s not go there. Edison will swallow you whole, and he’s not one of my favourite generals—”

“Political nightmare,” Hughes agreed from the other end of the table. “Maybe if it were Gardner or Jeager, but not Edison. Or, heavens forbid, old and prickly Raven.”

“Right,” Ed turned back to Izumi. “So you see, I’m in a very good position here, since I’m with Roy—this might be the one good thing our good-for-nothing father gave me.”

“Brother!” Al protested.

“It’s true!” Ed insisted. “Wouldn’t have met Roy otherwise; I’d have been stuck at Resembool with a mother who won’t let me do the one thing I’m good at—miserable excuse for a life. Before you get started on the horrible things I’ll be asked to do with this lifestyle I’m choosing,” he said to Izumi, “I don’t have any intention of being a combat alchemist. Like Roy said earlier, I’ll stick with research, thanks. Full access to the libraries, full privileges in the national laboratories, full funding at all times from the national bank: I’m able to do my study without being any more of a financial burden to Roy, which is what I’ll be if I remain civilian. He’ll insist on funding me; I’ll bankrupt him before long.”

“And precisely what kind of research is this you’re thinking of investing your life into?” Izumi prompted; Roy raised an expectant brow at Ed as well. Ed had not told him all of it.
“Transmutation on the subatomic level—that is, to transform one atom into another by manipulating its electrons.” Al and his master met him with an incredulous stare. “Of course, the prerequisite is to explore further the contents and structure of an atom, but it’s possible, I know it, I can feel it.”

“Does the Gate say anything about this at all?” hazarded Roy, taking his chance before Izumi could shoot the idea down.

“It’s eager,” Ed shrugged, “which means that I have a good chance at either great success or humiliating failure.” They both knew that the Gate would not allow him to step into something that would pose great and imminent threat to his life, last night’s trouble with the shadows but the most recent proof of the Gate’s determination. Therefore, if the Gate was allowing this venture, the possible failure should be limited to minor injuries and other immaterial losses—and the Gate head would never turn good entertainment down, the little shit that it was. (And of course the little shit preened.)

“How do you know this isn’t going to cost you your life next time, Edward?” Izumi asked him, now wary in uncharted territory. “I doubt this has been attempted in the past. You’re working with very little, if any, precedent. I don’t know if you should be working on this at all; the Gate exacts heavy punishment for meddling with nature.”

“But that’s the very reason—nobody’s done it before! Don’t you see?” Ed challenged her, leaning forward, dessert forgotten. “There is precedent—a minimal amount by Montague, and Mahler before him. I can add to what they’ve done, and I’ve got an advantage that they never had! Think about all the possibilities, Master: if you can divide an atom, I’m willing to bet it will release tons of energy. If you can harness that energy, you can power a city with just a handful of dust! If you can manipulate the atom’s electrons to form a different atom out of the original, you can make organic materials out of inorganic—food from sand, even without water: the proverbial Philosopher’s Stone! Think about the economic ramifications! Amestris still relies on coal and oil, but you can generate electricity from this. You can expand trade and territory into the desert area because you won’t need to worry about food or water shortages anymore. And that’s only the beginning!”

The whole table was struck with silence. Izumi was staring him in the eye, but Ed let her. She was not going to convince him away from this. He wanted to do this. Roy would support him, he knew. Roy was staring out at the backyard in contemplation, tea forgotten. Hughes was hemming to himself and the ceiling, arms crossed and deep in thought. It was Al who broke the reverie.

“This is—incredibly ambitious, Brother.”

“No more ambitious than human transmutation.”

Al gave him a look, that look, the one that warned of many uncertain things in the future. But Al said nothing to refute him, because even Al knew he was right. Ed was right. This had promise; this would work. It would take years, but it would work. Just like his theory with human transmutation, it would work, it was his, he could feel it—but this time, he would be careful, he would seek advice. He would have Roy.

“So you see,” Ed told his master for the nth time in their conversation, “I need to stay here. This study will require literature from Mahler and Montague, who were both State Alchemists. The original copies of those write-ups will be kept in First Library, if I’m not mistaken, along with other resources that will be helpful. There are also other alchemists in this city who might be able to help me. Pretty soon I’ll need research assistants, too. On top of that, if I’m licensed myself, I’ll have the power to make people listen—not just from inside the military, but from outside. There are other hubs of power in Amestris, smaller but just as influential. Old political families, factions, and such—they’re interested in bettering the country, because that means bettering themselves, and I can pitch
new technology to them. They’ll have money to fund it and reputation to market it; Roy knows a
couple of them.”

By them, Ed meant the Armstrongs, by far the only ones he knew he could trust. Ed was not
worried, though. The Armstrongs were enough.

“It’s frustrating that the state is the only option if you want to conduct major research like this, but to
be honest, Master, I’d rather be sponsored by the state than some private entity whose motives I
won’t be able to trust. As you said, this is sensitive alchemy. At least I can be sure the state won’t
risk using developmental technology in fear of destroying the country—that would mean destroying
itself, and the military values nothing else quite as much,” and all of this Ed learned from Roy. “Just
think about it. I know you only care for the best for us, Master, especially now that Mum forbids me
from going home. But I want this, and I know what I’m doing.”

Always and ever admiring of his headstrong determination, Roy gave him a small smile. It was all
the approval Ed needed. Though he was exerting effort to convince Izumi of his position, it less for
her approval and more to maintain good relations, especially now that Al was to stay with her in
Dublith. Ed did not want to be excommunicated from his little brother, after all. He did not mind so
much being removed from his apprenticeship with Izumi, which he felt would happen before Izumi’s
stay was over. He was past being a mere apprentice anyway. Roy would take over teaching him
from here.

That’s right, Ed told himself. Roy would take care of the things Ed was not yet able to manage. Roy
knew where they were going. Ed would trust him. There was no other choice.

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Edward,

I write this letter in reply to your correspondence with Alphonse. You likely only meant the letter to
be for Alphonse’s eyes, but he showed it to the rest of us. It has reassured me of your safety, which I
am thankful for. Please extend my gratitude to your father’s friend, Mr. Mustang.

After your departure, Alphonse made clear to me what had happened to all of us. Do not worry for I
have received adequate warning to keep the information to myself for our safety. But I will not deny
that this is the reason for my letter. I was very disoriented and afraid for my sons after I woke. I did
not understand what was happening, and had to draw my own conclusions given the lies I was fed. I
am no alchemist, but that does not deprive me of intelligence. The lies were blatant and insulting.
Furthermore, I am still your mother, and I believe I have the right to know why my children have
been injured so fatally. My confusion, anger, and fear clouded my judgment during those first weeks
and I ended up driving you away. For my harsh words, I apologise; you did not deserve such a
treatment. I should have given you time and understanding.

Alphonse has explained that the two of you were desperate to have me back, and that warms my
heart, it truly does. But Edward, did you not stop to think about the cost of what you were about to
do? What pains me the most is how you have used alchemy, something that your father has taught
me to be a tool for good, to hurt your own family. You might not have meant it, but you have done so
just as well. Because of your actions, yours and Alphonse’s, we can hardly be a family together
again.

These events have convinced me that it is best to do away with alchemy, and I stand beside this
decision. I foresee nothing but harm and danger if you were to continue with it. But you are your
father’s son; you will not stop, not now. So I bid you remain in Central, where you are at least
removed from Winry, Pinako, your brother, and the rest of Resembool. I beg you not to bring the
military’s eyes upon us. We only wish to live quiet, peaceful lives. The lifestyle your alchemy makes you lead does not allow quiet and peace.

Alphonse intends to continue practicing alchemy as well. He has expressed his anger and disapproval of my stance, but I will not change it. He intends to stay with your master in Dublith, where she can guide him in his practice so that he may not hurt himself any further. I will let him know that he can stay for as long as he wants, though he—and you as well—are welcome to visit for a small time whenever you want. But I trust your father’s friend will look after you in Central. Hohenheim was very discerning of people’s characters and the Lt. Col. was very polite and helpful when he was here. Once more, please extend my gratitude to him for saving our lives after what happened.

It pains me so very much to say these things, Edward. You are my son; I will always love you. But I no longer understand you. Perhaps the distance will, in the end, bring us closer. Perhaps in the future, we will find a point of reconciliation. But for now, be safe where you are, and I will continue where I am. I need time to be able to forgive you—and alchemy—for the destruction of what Hohenheim and I built here. It would have been better if you had simply let me go. You did not need to chase after me like you did.

Nevertheless, you have my best wishes for your future. Fare well, Edward. May you find your travels fulfilling and memorable. I trust you will do well. You are, after all, your father’s son.

Your mother,

Trisha

:::

“In order to rise
from its own ashes,
a phoenix
first
must
burn.”

( Olivia E. Butler )

:::

In the morning after, Ed surveyed the proverbial ashes. Suffice it to say that he was surprised to find himself in one piece; he had more-than-half-expected a catastrophe on the scale of a natural disaster and was met with a salvageable breakdown of the scaffolding instead. Matters would simply have to be readjusted. As Roy would say, they would take it one step at a time (but with an eye trained ten steps ahead).

He slipped out of bed with great care not to wake his little brother and hastily tidied himself before stealing down the backstairs. It was a Sunday, therefore his turn to cook. It was a homely pattern he and Roy had settled into to allow the Bastard at least one day of guaranteed sleep-in. With brisk economy, he whisked out some eggs and vegetables.

The familiar motions allowed his mind to entertain other trains of thought, most notable amongst them the previous night’s continued conversation. Ed had shown Trisha’s letter to Al and his master, eliciting much dismay and disapproval from both ends. Echoing Ed’s sentiments from two days ago, Al had mournfully whispered, “She doesn’t understand.” Roy had voiced his agreement and used
Trisha’s words as foundation to erect an even stronger defence for Ed’s continued tenure in Central. Faced with solid evidence of Ed’s eviction from Resembool, Izumi could no longer bring herself to argue.

Ed could see, however, that she was glad for Al’s decision to remain with her in Dublith. Their mother and Izumi both favoured Al’s calmer disposition and gentler soul. Yes, Ed was brilliant, they both agreed—but his very brilliance took him farther away from them. This was less the case with Izumi, who was also an alchemist, but it remained a point of conflict between them Ed’s unorthodox methods and recalcitrant behaviour. Izumi was a cautious alchemist—and now Ed knew why. Though at first with much hesitation due to Roy’s presence, she had revealed her past acquaintance with human transmutation. Ed should have figured. There was no other way for her to be able to perform alchemy without a circle. As far as he had weaselled from his invisible cerebral tenant, that was a trademark of having seen the Gate.

The mushrooms sizzled on the skillet, calling Edward’s attention to reality. He tossed them around for a few more seconds, taking care not to burn them. Roy had taught him how butter was tastiest for sautéing the mushrooms. When the juices began to ease out of the slices, he added the bell peppers and a handful of baby spinach. It took him longer than usual to finish with the vegetables; he had to prepare enough for five plus one, after all.

Trisha’s letter was not the entirety of last night’s conversation. Al had presented his ideas to all of them—ideas which were very intuitive, indeed. Again, Ed had no idea what Al was on about at lunchtime, because his little brother was perfectly capable of great leaps of creativity, though it required more organisation for him than Ed would be comfortable with. Al was a genius in his own way; Al knew how to recognise patterns and infer astoundingly astute conclusions from them. Ed was more skilled at creating patterns from chaos. Both were special gifts.

Reminded of Al’s hypotheses, the Gate hummed in delight. It was very impressed with what his little brother had put together. Al posited that their transmutation had succeeded because they had lucked out on two aspects of the surrounding circumstances. The first point: their mother had been but three days dead, eliminating the need for the creation of a full human body. The second point: their mother was not an alchemist.

Al had explained how the Gate could defy what commonplace understanding of equivalent exchange existed in modern alchemy. Most of them understood it as equal exchange—that is, one exact thing for another exact thing. (Ed credited this disastrous misconception as a fault of reductionist Materialists: a bunch of imagination-deprived pretentious cretins! It was a true tragedy how widely dispersed they were—like a hideous disease, almost, infecting everyone with their lacking simplification of alchemy. It was an insult to the very art.) In fact—and Ed should have known this all along, but darned Materialists!—the Gate, if it judged all transactions as it appeared to do, could hold other standards when it judged. They would be more complicated, and subsequently more realistic, standards—taking into account intangible things like time, potential, emotions, ideas, and relationships.

“When you think about it, it makes so much sense,” Al had eagerly expounded, hands gripping his legs as he sat with them crossed in front of Ed. “It sounds a little like an excuse, I know, but the Gate seems to fill in that invisible blank in the equation. We both know that simple reactions don’t really need the Gate, probably why most people remain unaware of its existence. Water for water, a couple of atoms to form this substance, and so on—those things are so straightforward that the Gate just doesn’t even bother.”

At those words, the Gate had shimmied about in delight inside of Ed’s head. Roy and Izumi both made thoughtful-sounding hums at the same time, garnering a scowl from their lady master. She did
not like Roy—not yet. (Ed was confident of Roy’s abilities to win her over by the end of the week.) Sig had been their quiet spectator, spoiling Dog with a thorough grooming.

Al had continued: “But when you start on the bigger things—well, that’s when things get messy. Take for example our attempt. We were trying to bring back a human being, and we already know that there are two components: body and soul. Body was easy for us, but soul we forgot. Most theories are very vague about it anyhow, because I think very few survived to tell the tale.”

“Six,” Ed had added, surprising his master and Al. “The Gate says six survived.” Their master had been none too pleased to learn about his cerebral tenant, though much less surprised than Al or Roy had been. She had seen it in its entirety, after all. She knew how vast the possibilities were—and how very little they were capable of doing before its presence.

“Yeah, so,” Al had pressed on, “we had to pay for Mum’s soul, which you paid for with your leg. I think I was already gone by then. When you look at that first, it seems so unfair—a leg for a soul, it feels like an insult. But think about it! The Gate doesn’t operate by equal exchange; it operates by equivalent exchange—that’s a huge difference. X is equal to X remains static for everyone—water for water. But what is of equal value to one entity might not be the same for another. For example, you would value your books while Winry would not. She’d value her alloys and tools more. Just so, the Gate would need to make biased judgments, because it has to judge people, and people are biased. It has to judge how much you value what you’re asking for, and what you can give of equal value.”

The Gate could have been throwing a party inside of Ed’s head with the amount of ruckus it was making.

“Now you’ll ask how your leg is of equal value for Mum’s soul. It still seems unfair. But consider what I said earlier. The Gate doesn’t judge on one, but many planes all at once. You may see your leg as just a leg, but it can signify other things, like your potential or possibilities. Your future, so to speak. Things will be different because you lost your leg, and the Gate could have valued those paths—now taken away—to be as potentially valuable as Mum’s soul. Brother, you’re an alchemist, and a brilliant one at that. Mum’s a normal person who will probably live her whole life quietly in Resembool, but you can do so many things with yourself, and you still have so much time. Do you see? One of those paths the Gate closed for you by taking your leg could have led to something very great, something that would have affected many people—even the world for all we know! Considering the multiplied magnitude of that, I think it’s definitely worth a soul. I don’t want to say that Mum’s soul isn’t valuable, because it is, and we value it—but you can be more valuable to more people, and the Gate knows that.”

Indeed, it did. Even now, as Ed carefully removed the saucer-shaped scrambled omelette from the skillet, the Gate broke into a strange dance in his head. He studiously ignored it and spooned the sautéed mushroom and peppers on the omelette. Carefully, he wrapped it, flipped it over, and topped it with cheese. The cheese began to melt. It was his omelette wrap—a much-praised yet simple recipe. The first time he had presented it, Roy had been very impressed.

But despite the distracting presence of good food, the Gate was not going to cut him any slack. Impressed, I’m impressed, it murmured against his ear. Your little brother is very sharp, hmmm! Shame on you, shame. You’re the one with a piece of the Gate in your head, and yet he figures it out first! Tsk, tsk. You need to up your game, little Hohenheim!

“Don’t call me that!” Ed growled, almost dropping one of Roy’s plates. Very expensive fine china, these. He put them down with a sigh. Al’s better at dissecting our mistakes than I am. I don’t like dwelling, at least on this particular mistake; it’s very unpleasant. He manages it somehow. I’m not
And it was true: Ed had had plenty of distractions to catch his eye. Trisha had been far too painful a topic for him to broach. Usually, he would have pursued their misstep with the bull-headed determination he was known for, but this one—this one hurt. And hadn’t he hurt enough already?

“You’re up early,” came Izumi’s voice from the hallway, making Ed jolt in surprise. It was unusual for him to find someone coming in from the hallway instead of down the stairs. They had never had a guest who stayed over before—not since Ed arrived. (He had the dear suspicion that Roy never allowed people outside of Hughes’ family and his own command to stay over, and even then only under dire circumstances. It made sense; this house was Roy’s one true sanctuary in the city. Even Ed would be—was—territorial.)

“It’s Sunday,” Ed responded, voice weak. “I make breakfast on Sundays. To let Roy sleep in and stuff. Since he’s always up early for work during the week. Sometimes, I cook on Saturdays too, if he doesn’t have work.”

Izumi helped him set the dishes and cutlery on the dining table. “You seem attached already. I never pegged you for someone who gets attached so quickly in so little time.”

“It’s hard not to,” Ed muttered, more than a little embarrassed at having this sort of conversation with his master. It was nearly as bad as the birds-and-bees—but-not-really-birds-and-bees conversation. “He’s been very generous, you know. He gives me a lot of things without asking for return—and not just material things,” he hastily amended, seeing Izumi’s expression, “though there’s that too. He works hard for the money to spend on me and trust me when I say he spends a lot. Way too much, way more than I would ever even know enough to ask for. He doesn’t ask for anything in return, even though I know he has other interests he could invest that money into. Beyond that, there are other, more precious things he gives—asylum, protection, information, education, and a strong network. Do you see how much all of that is worth? I’m still trying to wrap my head around it but he’s genuine. He means it. And his strong network isn’t something to take lightly either. He knows some very influential people. He’s earned that recognition and he’s letting me share it for free.”

“Oh, Ed,” Izumi sighed, taking his arms and holding him still before her so that she could cup his face in her hands. It was her first act of affection toward him since yesterday; it had his throat tightening with the sudden surge of emotion. “It’s not for free. Nothing is for free.”

Ed swallowed and pushed the words through the knot in his throat. “I know.”

“You don’t.”

“I do,” he insisted, grabbing her arms instead. “I do, I see that he has his motives, I asked him about it and he told me up-front. I’m an investment, he told me, a very big and very promising investment. All he has to do is foster me and help me learn—and all the benefits will come pouring, he said. But what I mean by free is that it doesn’t take me effort to give him what he wants in return. It doesn’t cost me anything to do what he wants me to do, because it’s what I want to do. Is it so bad that we end up helping each other to our own ends? We’re not hurting ourselves, or anyone else. Is it so bad?”

“Edward,” she said, her voice going low and terribly quiet like the muted rumble of ocean waves from underwater, “even research alchemists are not exempt from war. It isn’t conventional warfare with battlefields and an enemy on the other end of the gun. It’s a different kind—the kind that scars deeper than any battle wound. You might be tasked to perform horrible experiments in the name of national defence. You might be tasked to experiment on human beings, pregnant women, even children. They will see how brilliant you are and they will either try to destroy you or use you, and
given your versatility, I think they will try for the latter. It can get really, really messy. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Jaw working under the weight of the many words he wanted to say, Ed nodded. It took a while, but he pushed out, “I’ll—we’ll deal with it if it gets there. Roy and Hughes will help me find a way to circumvent them.”

“There is a way,” she murmured, words hushed and hesitant. Ed blinked. “I’m sure your Colonel has already thought of this, but I want to prepare you for what you’ll face.” Ed nodded, prompting her to continue. No matter their methodological disagreements, Izumi’s words were gold. “All alchemists are evaluated every year without exception, but contracts vary from alchemist to alchemist—especially with research. Combat-designated alchemists choose to be combat alchemists and sign a contract that lasts for four years with the option to renew every cycle. If you’re a State Alchemist, there is no resignation, so the only other choice if you don’t want to renew your combat contract is to sign a research contract, which lasts for two years and also can be renewed every cycle.”

Ed was caught in a flurry of blinking. “How do you know all of this?”

“Did you think I didn’t consider becoming State-licensed myself when I was younger? I’m glad I didn’t; I would have never been able to settle down with Sig as I have, but I considered it,” she sighed. “There’s another thing you’ll be letting go of: a quiet, simple life. But you already said you were set on relinquishing it.”

Ed nodded.

“Anyway,” she continued, “the research contract has stricter stipulations. Being a research alchemist is a higher honour—you have more leeway within the system, but it comes with higher expectations. You need to have a research proposal ready every two years; you have to know where you’re going with your research. You can’t just waltz into the military and tell them you want to do research; you have to show them what you want to spend their money on—and show them results every year during evaluations. Poor results can mean poor prospects for renewal and further funding. Combat alchemy is so much easier: you are just another soldier, subject to a superior but with special dispensations and specified designations.”

Ed nodded again. He assumed that the amount of funding also varied from alchemist to alchemist, depending on how relevant their research was and how lucrative the eventual turn-out.

“However, you can work these strict stipulations to your favour. Always, always, always plan ahead. Always be three steps ahead of them. Never give them even the slightest chance to dictate where you’re going, and insist on doing things your own way. Even the smallest amount of footing you surrender to them will be exploited, so be attentive. When asked for a new research proposal, always be bold and present your ideas in a tempting manner. This way, they will never be able to make you do something else—not unless under extreme circumstances, during which your Colonel will just have to help you out.”

That would be no hardship for Ed! He was bold whenever it counted. Sometimes, Roy liked to say, he was a little too bold. Either way, Roy would help him with it.

“But in order not to give the impression that you’re being uncooperative with the military’s goals, take some time to involve yourself in your Colonel’s tasks. If you help him out, it will seem like you’re also working toward the interests of the military, despite insisting on conducting your own research. It should be enough to deter most people, and your Colonel is a smooth-talker, so he’ll manage where your smokescreen can’t.”
Ed was taken aback. “You’re unexpectedly very knowledgeable about this,” he mused, tone laced with generous surprise.

“Know thine enemies,” she solemnly said, “how they act, how they think, what they say, where they go, what they do, who they talk to. When you start the great game, Edward, there’s no turning back. They’ll hound you wherever you go, so the only recourse is to face them and survive. You can’t just be smart, you have to be cunning. Knowledge is no longer enough, because now you need to gather wisdom. It’ll take time, but you’ll learn, because you have to. Just promise me you’ll be as careful as you can be, Edward. I’ve already lost my own son, and I’ve come so close to losing you and your brother without even knowing it—I don’t relish the thought of losing you to the military’s petty wars.”

Scarcely was his master so frank with her emotions as she was now. He almost did not know what to say in return. But he had to acknowledge her, because not doing so would be spurning her, and how could Ed do that, especially now that she was the only bond they had left with the childhood they had lost? Swallowing his uncertainty, Ed squared his shoulders.

“I’ll be careful,” he nodded, solemn. “I’ll think and watch and ask for advice. I promise. I’ll make you proud.”

“Oh, Edward,” she chuckled weakly, drawing him close and stroking his hair. Ed closed his eyes, tension sloughing from his spine. She smelled of home. “I don’t think any alchemical master will be able to refrain from pride when they can boast of two apprentices successfully performing human transmutation at an age when most children are too busy playing with sticks for swords. I’m already very proud of you, foolhardy as your actions were; you needn’t worry on that count.”

But the day Edward ceased to worry about her approval was when the sun rose to the west, when the mountains blew away into ashes, when the great seas dried up to reveal their deepest beds. Her approval was a treasure he now held within his hands, its sheer value threatening to render him immobile for fear of it shattering into pieces just as it thawed at the dread that had clutched a fist around his heart.

It took a few moments for him to comprehend the enormity of the change that took place in him with her words, but when he finally did, an intangible shroud lifted from his eyes. She was still there. He had not lost her.

Edward clutched at his master’s shoulder. I was so afraid, he realised, so afraid for days and weeks since Resembool. Because Izumi was like a mother to them, and now Izumi was the only mother he had. I can’t lose this. I can’t lose this too.

:::

In all science, error precedes the truth, and it is better it should go first than last.

( Hugh Walpole )

:::

Roy descended for breakfast only to ascend back into bed afterward, bidding them a good day exploring the city. The previous night he had procured maps, pointers, and a list of the best places to eat lunch, buy souvenirs, find books, and see sights. Despite being bone-tired and sleep-deprived, the Bastard somehow managed the duties of a most accommodating and helpful host. Entire civilizations would haul themselves out of the mud, master the art of writing and sciences, and decay slowly into
decadence before any creature could drop any malignant remark on Roy’s hospitality. It was simply not done.

Such was how the four of them—Izumi and Sig, Ed and Al—left the old Amsel house, packed ready with maps, lists, snacks, and some cash. Al had been rightly horrified to hear that Ed had yet to go exploring in Central despite having been there for two, almost three months; Ed meekly suffered the brief reprimands. He could not quite bring himself to detail his recent misadventures to his brother and master, owing to the sensitive nature of the subject. Izumi had no respect for sensitivity and would no doubt harangue Roy about it; no. Ed would keep it to himself.

Instead, he passed it off as his unwillingness to part from Roy’s library, which had enough of the truth in it to convince even the two. He also made sure to mention the symposium and his little visit to the prep school, more to illustrate to Izumi how serious Roy took him as a responsibility. (Ed could only hope his attempts would not backfire.)

Despite Al’s alarmingly detailed plans to explore every major site in Central, they never got very far. The Historic District swallowed their day whole: an early morning jaunt to Friedrich Square to see the Farmer’s Market; melting into the midmorning crowd at The Bend; avoiding the lunch hour crush by slipping into the Third Library; a handful of choice words from Izumi as they were dragged out of a book-littered alcove so they would have enough time to see Central Plaza and the Parks in the late afternoon.

There the streets were broad as they emptied into open space. Gaps materialised within the press of the crowd: never in a gaping manner implying a lack of presence but just enough to allow a breath of fresh air. This somewhat sudden shift encouraged a sense of relaxed order: in this place, at the very heart of Amestris, every person had his place.

At the east edge of the plaza towered the secure and imposing halls of First Library, its front steps a gleaming yellowish white under the early evening sun. Its façade was a weathered white, its spires and buttresses severe and dignified in their noble burden. Its roofs were grey through exposure to the elements, but they were strong still hundreds of years after the structure was initially built. Made in the Gothic exterior style like its sisters scattered elsewhere in the city, the structure was—in Edward’s very humble and unbiased opinion—the jewel of the plaza.

They took more than a moment to appreciate its architecture before stepping in. Other libraries in satellite cities were often expanded or, in East City’s case, repaired. But the First Library has never been remodelled or updated—hardly a necessity, given how little Central Plaza changed over generations. Safely ensconced against any sort of unrest, the worst First Library had to worry about was the occasional inclement weather.

The great library had a pair of towering oaken doors, reinforced with steel bolts and hinges. They were rarely if ever thrown open, for their lower halves housed a pair of smaller doors to pass through. But above the doors sat the true attraction of First Library’s exterior. The Amplifici were two large circular windows made of high-quality stained glass before the art of staining glass was afforded its current help from modern technology. Ed could only scarcely imagine the painstaking work invested into those precise lines and details, all done by hand, cut by cut, without the help of alchemy.

Sat directly atop the oaken doors was Amplificus Minora, a large circle holding within it many tangents which erupted to subdivide it into beautiful symmetrical panels and shapes. The effect encouraged was of a many-sided star, extending its rays to touch Minora’s outermost limit. The window as a whole was bound on its sides by stone sculpted to form a vaulted arch: a trademark of Gothic style.
The point of that very arch touched the bottom of Minora’s elder sister, Amplificus Majora, an even larger window of similar design. This one, however, had more tangents blooming from its centre to form with their outermost tips precise pointed arches of steel. Viewed from afar, Majora was a flower in full bloom, proud and grand. Ed was standing too far to see the details painted upon the small panes of glass, but he knew from history that Minora and Majora both had glyphs and scripts to emulate a real alchemical circle. Whether they were live scripts was and has been a subject of much debate over generations.

“It’s huge,” Al gaped. “Majora has to be tall enough to span two—no, three floors!”

Ed agreed. “The doors are tall enough on their own to be one floor.”

But when they stepped into the entrance hall, the ribbed vaulted ceiling soared high above their heads, its total height spanning at least two floors, maybe more. The hall itself was wide and quite unlike the other libraries of Amestris, with four desks at the far reach corralling behind them a cadre of smartly dressed receptionists in place of the common long rows of librarians behind counters serving the visitors. Between and behind those four desks was a pair of enormous doors: tall white wood, thin but nevertheless forbidding, lined and gilded with what looked like real gold—and rigidly guarded by two fully-armed cadets posted on its either side to verify every entrance into the inner sanctum. To go beyond those doors, one would need a license or, in Hughes’ lexicon, clearance level three.

“Brother, we’ve got to get licensed soon,” Al gaped on, uncharacteristic in his sudden impatience. “Can you imagine what’s behind those doors? I want to go inside…”

“The cadets look friendly, Al, but I don’t think they will be if you try,” Ed snorted. True enough, the spectators milling about kept a sure distance from the ornate white doors. Instead, they attracted to a fair-haired man with a winsome smile and a more-than-respectable fashion sense (Roy would approve). The man was likely the tour guide on duty for the evening shift, going by the smooth historical exposition he was giving the visitors. Ed inched closer to listen.

“…and just as Minora, the lovely maiden, sheds light upon this hall as you see above—” Ed looked up to indeed confirm that Minora, sitting above the entrance doors, looked down upon their heads with her colourful symmetry, “—Majora illuminates a spacious study upstairs. The study spans two and a half floors, accommodating Majora’s full height and giving one a beautiful view of Central Plaza from three floors above. Unfortunately, access is restricted, as all of you are aware,” a statement met with a mixture of disappointed groans, wistful sighs, and resigned chuckles. Al was one of those who sighed; Ed only huffed. It was only a matter of time before he would go through those doors himself.

The guide continued, “Now, beyond those tall white doors, guarded today by the dutiful Cadet Farlan and the beautiful Cadet Kearn—“ the lady cadet rolled her eyes, much to the audience’s amusement, “—is the sweeping grand staircase, though ‘grand’ is quite an understatement. The handrails are of pure black ironwood, quite expensive and hand-turned into intricate designs. Lady Henrietta Finn, an academic, historian, and one of the few civilians allowed full access to the First Library—for the purpose of writing about the Library’s construction and history, of course—writes in her book that the handrails are made to tell ancient legends from Xerxes, from where Friedrich the Conqueror, our country’s forefather, hailed. She has written about her interpretations of these legends in Origins, one of the five books published in her final days.”

The title sounded familiar to Ed; perhaps Roy had a copy.

“The stair steps are of white marble, same as the very flooring beneath your feet, hauled over a great distance from Aerugo before it became a country apart from Amestris. The staircase leads to the
second floor landing, from where two smaller stairs climb to the third floor, and so forth. The Majora study can be found on the third floor, the Rare Manuscripts Hall on the fifth floor, and the Eise Orrery on the eighth and topmost floor. Now, for those of you who are unaware, Major Eise was a State Alchemist who lived almost two hundred years ago and created the oldest, still-working Orrery—a mechanical planetarium, a model of the planets and stars—which was housed here after his death. It is now installed in the ceiling of one of the greater halls on the eighth floor. We have since developed more modern planetariums, some of which are in the National Museum but most of which are also housed here, on the same floor.”

“Finally,” the guide took a pause to assess for the continued attention of his audience, “approved individuals can access the narrow staircase to the two towers, north and south, housing the Observatory, where our most modern technology is available to conduct astronomical research. First Library is one of the tallest structures in Central, affording a beautiful view for enterprising researchers.”

Ed had read from the newspapers of rumours of the military funding a project to build a full-scale high-altitude observatory to house a modern reflecting telescope, a very large one capable of magnifying, tracking, and even photographing movements and details of space. Much discussion was generated over where it would be positioned, when construction would begin, and if it was economically sound (or even plausible) given their current (expensive) predicament with the East.

But Ed knew the temptation would be too strong to resist, for Amestris loved being the centre of technological and scientific advancement. Such pride was a remainder of the Age of Illumination, when Amestris surfaced from the mires of war and plague to lead the world in discovery and learning. If this new observatory project did succeed, it would be the biggest observatory ever built, and the telescope would be the largest and most sophisticated the world has ever seen—outstripping Ailia in the field of optics and astronomy. First Library’s Observatory was the oldest in the world, but the day’s most recent innovations in optics hailed from Ailia’s scientists. To Amestris’ pride, this was unacceptable.

“Boys.”

Ed froze, Al gasping in surprise beside him. They turned and there Izumi was, looking quite displeased to find them caught a second time by a library. With brisk and firm movements, she seized their shoulders and walked them out of the hall, mouth pouring reprimand about wasted time and troublesome fixations.

“You’ll have time enough to admire it as State Alchemists,” she mumbled under her breath. She would be irate for some time at the ease with which Roy snapped up her precious apprentices from right beneath her nose. Worst of it was that they were letting Roy do so, blatantly on Ed’s part. But she understood now; she said so. Izumi never lied; Ed believed in her.

They walked across the spacious plaza, made in the shape of a square. Seven streets fed into a roundabout roadway allowing cars to pass through. At the heart of the square, the cobbled streets parted to show the Rheos River passing underneath. A statue was set upon the water, reaching twenty feet skyward to tower over their heads. A fitting centrepiece indeed, for the statue was an alchemical globe: a spherical framework of mechanical metal rings that could be moved around, much like clockwork, to a great many configurations. It was a standard tool of alchemical teaching, useful in the study of array architecture and symmetry. Through the innovation of electricity, this particular globe was kept in constant rotation, cycling through the many classic forms of an alchemical circle.

To the north and the south were the Parks, its plentiful trees seemingly on fire as their blushing leaves
caught the setting sun. At the west end stood Central Headquarters, the core of Amestris’
government. Almost two months and yet this was his first time setting eyes upon Roy’s workplace.
What it lacked in height, it made up for in span: the Headquarters sprawled with its long wings and
spacious parade grounds. Its facade was of a much simpler style than the Libraries: square panelled
windows, roof tiles as grey as its weathered face, plenty of pillars so lacking in decoration they
seemed naked in comparison to the Library’s splendour.

At the very front and centre was large archway gated in iron, perhaps three stories high and six cars
wide. The iron gates were also painfully modest, with smaller gates built into their lower parts to
allow personnel and single vehicles inside. Set above this archway and overlooking the square was
an arched structure, a gazebo, with a groined vault roof that flew the green Amestrian flag at its tip.
The gazebo was historically used as a raised platform from where the Fuhrer would address his
people below.

Don’t you think it’s a little too… I don’t know, insecure? Ed asked his invisible companion, eyeing
the plainly manicured lawn, the tinted but thin windows, the brick and stone walls, and the
structure’s low stature. He had expected something more… imposing than what he now observed.
Indeed the very public nature of its placing made it difficult for ordinary soldiers and spies to infiltrate
or launch an attack upon the military base. The windows looked thin but were no doubt insulated
against bullets, explosives, and other such immediately harmful projectiles—but these were ordinary
measures. For an alchemist of respectable calibre, breaking and entering would be a walk in the park!

Well, yes, the Gate deadpanned, turning over and gesturing to the side with a tail. That is Central
Park over there. You’d have to walk through it to break in.

Ed took a moment of silence to marshal his patience.

What I meant, you insolent creature, is that the entire fucking area is too fucking exposed! (He was
never very good at marshalling his patience.)

Precisely the point, the Gate hummed, for none would be able to approach the area unseen. As if to
flaunt its cleverness, it flashed a map of Central behind Edward’s eyes, several areas of it highlighted
for his perusal. When one stood before the Headquarter’s tall gates, it was hard to notice how every
side of the military base was immediately adjacent to a park, a river, a plaza, or a lower structure,
providing a better vantage point for the soldiers in the case of a siege. Furthermore, the iron gates
were flanked by two tall towers, which then extended outward to form long wings of structure that
continued around the entire base, effectively walling the more sensitive areas within. And there
would, of course, be alchemical measures against unwanted intruders…

“Of course,” grumbled Ed, shoulders slumping in defeat. Having seen very little of Central outside of
the Historical District, he knew little of the lay of the city and thus had a despondent amount of
ammunition to toss at the Gate.

“Brother, have you been inside?” Al asked from beside him while digging through their pack. Sig
had successfully ushered Izumi upon a bench underneath a tree that was closer to the alchemical
globe than the Headquarter’s iron gates.

“No, and I don’t think I can go inside, either,” said Ed, looking through the gates from afar. There
was more lawn, more greenery, and taller, more imposing buildings within the protection of the outer
perimeter. Remembering the funny anecdote about boredom and the birds, he had to wonder where
Roy worked. “Not until I’m licensed, at least.”

Al ceased rummaging inside the pack and levelled keen golden eyes on him. Evenly, Ed returned the
gaze.
“So we’re really doing this,” his little brother said, lips compressing into a line that spelled doubt and determination in one stroke. “Signing up to be dogs of the state.”

Ed smiled a bitter smile. “You’ve got to stop calling them that if you don’t want to go mad with self-hate, since you’re going to be one of them too.”

“And you?” Al retorted, closing the knapsack and righting it on his shoulder. Perhaps it was a trick of the sun, but Ed thought in that moment that the two of them were standing straighter. Taller.

“What about you, brother? Will you be able to keep from self-hate?”

Yes, he thought, noting their long shadows, we have gotten taller. “I will learn,” Ed said. “I can, so I will. I am good at it.”

That remark engendered a smile. “That you are;” Al agreed with a nod. His little brother’s eyes, however, remained fixed on the cobbled stone beneath their feet. “You’ll probably get licensed first, brother. I don’t plan on rushing. I have to think this through, because the stakes for me are not as clear and plain as they are for you.”

Ed’s neck stiffened in contest, but Al held up a hand. “No, brother, hear me out. The stakes are clear for you—or at least clearer than they are for me. Mr. Mustang’s very presence cuts whatever risk you might be taking by acquiring a State license. I don’t have that same advantage, so I must take a step back and consider my reasons with care. Don’t get me wrong; I still want the license. I want the perks, but I have to weigh if they’re worth the substantial amount of freedom I must give in exchange. I think—“ Al bit his lip, “—I think that it would be a good idea to find the direction I want to take my alchemy first before I make such a huge commitment.”

“Hence your year,” Ed frowned, tension still holding his shoulders taut. “You said you’d take a year before you would take the exam, maybe more.” He stuck his hands into his pocket, eyes now darting to settle on his feet. “I don’t think I can wait that long, though.”

“Then don’t,” said his brother, voice was sharp as a knife, keen as the best blade, without a waver in its form. “You don’t have to wait for me.”

Ed looked up to be met with Al’s confident, frangible smile. Behind Al, the Amplifici—the siblings—caught the last rays of the golden sinking sun, the elder first and then the younger, one after the other burning as the sunlight slanted into their faces. Ed would forget neither the sight nor the words, for they were words of freedom ringing in his ears.

But as Al nudged him along, as they walked back toward their master, her welcoming them with dark and wise eyes, he asked the Gate, Does freedom always equate to loss?

The Gate did not answer.

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The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with weary feet, 
Until it joins some larger way, 
Where many paths and errands meet. 
And whither then? I cannot say.

( The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, J.R.R. Tolkien )

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FOOTNOTES (Right-click and 'View Image' to see full-size images.)

(1) Inspirations: The Oxford Murders, a novel by Guillermo Martinez; A Dangerous Method, a 2011 psychological drama starring Michael Fassbender, Viggo Mortensen, and Keira Knightley; and Sun Tzu's Art of War.

(2) On Edward's remarks on relativity and perception: Descartes has a famous adage, 'Cogito ergo sum' ('I think, therefore I am'). For reasons lengthy and all too philosophical, we both feel more comfortable subscribing to a modified version of that adage: 'Cogito cogito ergo cogito sum' – I think that I think, therefore I think that I am.

(3) Central Library's exterior is taken from its counterpart, the Reims Cathedral in real life modern-day Reims, France. The interior, however, is a different matter: despite their outer size, most Gothic cathedrals are built to have only one hall, often with a pair of transepts (smaller auxiliary halls) and sometimes a balcony for the choir. Thus we had to take liberties in order to afford Central Library its multiple floors of books, studies, display halls, and offices. This is what the exterior would look like:

And the interior:

(4) The Amplifici are examples of Catherine (rose) windows. They are a hallmark of the Gothic style and can be found in most of the major Gothic cathedrals in the world, particularly those in Northern France. The glass is hand-cut and stained to be fitted into the circle that is segmented by stone mullions and tracery. (For Central Lib, I opted for steel reinforcements, a valid alternative.) The symmetrical and highly complex designs used for these windows bear great similarity to complex
alchemical arrays, sans scripts and glyphs.

(5) **Central Headquarters** and its grounds are pulled from a real life counterpart: Chateaux de Fontainebleau, located just outside of the heart of modern-day Paris, France. Being one of the largest French palaces, Fontainebleau is built around a series of courtyards, which embodies what we envisioned for Central HQ. One continuous structure would surround the entire HQ in multiple wings, enclosing within it the parade grounds, courtyards, and other more important offices. This arrangement would not only maximize the available space but also tighten the security and ensure absolute defensibility in (unlikely) case of a siege. Additionally, if you will note [this Catalysis-exclusive map of Amestris](#), you will see that the HQ is flanked by the Rheos River on its northern side. That will correspond to the latter two pictures you will see below:

![Central Headquarters and grounds](image)

(6) **The Eise Orrery** actually exists in real life. It is the oldest still-working planetarium today and currently resides in the Royal Eise Eisinga Planetarium (est 1781) in the Netherlands.

(7) **An alchemical globe** is much similar to an armillary sphere, an ancient device modeling the celestial objects. Made up of a spherical framework representing celestial longitude, latitude, and other such relevant values, it was used by ancient astronomers to study the nature and movements of the heavenly bodies. It is not the same thing as a celestial globe (a map of the constellations). The ancient Greeks and ancient Chinese were known to have utilised this tool.

![Alchemical Globes](image)

Chapter End Notes

If I were to name this chapter, I’d name it *acceptance*. Everyone in this chapter has to accept something that is not particularly easy to swallow: Ed and Al facing Trisha’s fears and separation, Izumi facing Roy’s intruding presence, Ed facing Al’s decision to part, and Al facing the fact that Ed will not be able to wait for him. By the gods, this was hard to write!

**Bonus material** specific to this chapter are available at the references page.

**HAPPY HOLIDAYS, EVERYONE!**
STAY WITH US FOR 2013:

THERE BE MORE EXCITES TO COME
Arc III: Growing Pains: 10

Chapter Notes

Inspirations: Oscar Wilde’s “Dorian Gray,” John Green’s “Paper Towns” and “The Fault In Our Stars.” Brahms and Strauss and Stravinsky. Also some Rachmaninov. Orange chocolate cakes. Steaks. The puzzle section of Barnes & Noble. Ridiculous amounts of Earl Grey tea and blueberry scones. Vile vending-machine espresso shots at the asscrack of dawn when I'm trying and miserably failing to stay awake during hospital rotations. Three boxes of ink cartridges, dozens of expensive hand and back and neck massages, and eighty-four handwritten pages of pure masochistic joy. (Yes, I think I've figured out why Catalysis takes so long to update. Mm-hmm. Definitely. This is why. All of it is handwritten, I shit you not. I believe only chapters 1-4 were typed...)

Notice: Yes, Catalysis lives! No, it's not going to be scrapped. Also, catalysis @ LJ will be shut down soon - it is time for me to leave LJ behind, methinks. It's been a fun seven years but it's not working for me anymore, so no point in forcing it. References for Catalysis can now be found here, and Catalysis will now be housed on AO3 and FFN only (yes, the LJ counterpart really is going down). Makes it easier for me to up chapters. (AO3, of course, will still be the better version, because it allows me to embed images, which FFN will not. Humor me here; I must have my perks!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

III : Growing Pains

10

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Having spent the previous day traipsing around the city, they settled for a day of rest much-welcomed by Izumi’s delicate condition. Master refused all manner of coddling, but it was all in vain, for Sig was equally formidable when he made up his mind. Roy similarly forbade her from undue exertion after taking a searching look into Izumi’s face.

“You shall have to tell me more about this condition of yours, Miss Curtis,” he implored, “I know a number of highly capable doctors who might be able to help. A discussion for when I come home later, perhaps?” Her eyes darkened like the skies before a storm, but she gave no words of refusal.

“You have to teach me how you do that one day,” Edward bid Roy as they made their way to the street where Havoc stood in wait. “I’ve never seen her consent like that from a stranger before.” They were strangers, Roy and Izumi, if not for Ed and Al. And yet Ed was convinced that their paths were not so distant from the other as it first seemed. The world at large was a strange place, full of strange coincidences. (Please! the Gate scoffed. All things fall into their place at their precise time.)

But Mustang’s response took his attention away from the Gate’s cheek. “I did nothing,” the man said, “save suggest an option that might prove favourable to her in the long run. The key, Edward, is to offer them such options — choices — wherein they may gain something of value for a small sacrifice. Options, you see, allow the freedom of will — though mostly false — that the human ego
desires.”

“But it’s a false option,” Ed offered, still dubious, encountering great difficulty believing that Izumi would fall for Roy’s clever little tricks.

“Perhaps. Their answer may not be what you expect. This is why it is integral to minimise their refusal by giving them options,” a smirk, coy and triumphant, tugged at Roy’s lips as he stepped into his military car. “I trust you can navigate the kitchen for yourselves. Stay safe, Ed; I’ll see you later.”

“Later,” Ed echoed, closing the front gate. When he turned toward the house, Al stood by the doors. “Hey. Everything okay?”

“Oh, fine,” dismissed his brother. “But I have something to show you. Something from Mum. Dad gave it to her to give to us, before he left.” Al paused, looked into the house behind him, and asked, “Should we tell master about it…?”

“Well, what is it?” asked Ed, thinking, something Mum neglected to give me, apparently.

“A small box,” Al held up his hands to mime the size and shape, “probably just enough space for a letter, maybe, and a small trinket or two. I don’t know. It’s upstairs.”

Ed closed the front door behind him, bolting it as he thought. On the one hand, they owed their master a great deal of honesty after the mess they had caused. On the other, in close consideration of Hohenheim’s… crowd, perhaps keeping sensitive knowledge to themselves would be the wiser move. Izumi knowing of these things could only mean her further involvement in troubles beyond her concern and physical capacity.

Her coughing — deep and wet, as her impaired vessels struggled to remove excess fluid from her lungs — echoed from the ground floor guest rooms. Ed’s decision was made for him then.

“Let’s not tell her until we know what’s in it,” Ed declared, ushering his little brother up the stairs. Their bare feet made no sound against the gleaming redwood. “When we see what’s inside, we’ll decide what to tell her then. It could be nothing important in there that we don’t need to be worrying her about.”

“Right,” Al agreed, though they both knew the futility of that statement. Hohenheim, for all the pains he took over the years to hide himself and his purpose, would never have left such an item for them if it was not of significant import. Whatever this matter was, though, they had no clue.

They retreated into Ed’s rooms and closed the doors before Al retrieved the box from the depths of his knapsack. At a distance, Ed saw a small golden box, no longer than the length and width of his palm, with sturdy make and no visible latch. Upon closer inspection, they found that it lacked any visible means of opening at all, or any other external mark, save for small block letters engraved starkly on its front:

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BLOOD OF THE TRUTH
BLOOD OF MY SUN
BLOOD OF MY MOON
BLOOD OF MY ELOOD
ILLUMINATE THE TRUTH
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Strange words were made even stranger by their peculiar — and visibly intentional — indentation. They both puzzled over the words for a few minutes, Ed pondering the significance of the spacing: the conspicuous gaps were what first caught his eye. He knew from what little he had read of literature that poetry sometimes took advantage of the white spaces in between type to emphasize or
perhaps cloak some hidden meaning.

*But I'm hopeless at poetry,* bemoaned Ed, *and the one person whom I know isn't is away! Roy could shed some light on this, but they’d need to wait for him to return home first, then wait for a chance to talk without their master there. And how likely is that, with her guarding all of our interactions with Roy like some feral predator?*

“Mum didn’t give me any key,” Al murmured then, turning the box over and around. “How are we supposed to open this?”

“If Hohenheim’s being literal, then we bleed for it,” Ed deadpanned. The Gate snickered at their predicament. “Four repetitions of the word can’t be coincidental. Something to do about blood.” He scowled in bare-naked contempt. “Morbid. And here I thought he *cares* for our wellbeing!”

“Brother,” Al sighed in admonition. “A little blood loss isn’t *that* detrimental to our overall health. Maybe all it needs is a little drop!”

“Or maybe it needs to be submerged in a *bucket*; how do we know?” Ed returned vindictively, realising how petty and ridiculous he was being (Al’s exasperated glare confirmed as much) He cared not a single bit. He detested the necessity of Hohenheim’s mysterious departure; it was unfair. But the world was hardly, if ever, fair. “I suppose we can’t force it open by hand, then?”

“That would be a supremely bad idea if anything fragile is inside,” Al nodded, “but it’s made of metal. We can try alchemy.”

True enough it would be a simple matter of molecular displacement. Ed put his palms together, and, murmuring, “Here goes nothing,” wrapped his fingers around the box. Bright blue sparks flared to life, skittering and scuttling over the golden surface, giving the engraved letters an ephemeral glimmer, casting pale shadows against the wall as they grew brighter and brighter —

“STOP!” yelped his brother at the same moment that he dropped the box to terminate the reaction. Mutely they both stared at the box as the light faded from its outline.

Al spoke first. “That was overload!”

“But why?” Ed’s face collapsed in confusion. “*How*?”

“Brother, what did you try to do? Did you use anything special — “

“No!” he denied. Such an elementary mistake; he could not have made it! “Just an ordinary cleaving array to part the metal into two! Did I get the substance wrong? No, that’s gunmetal for sure…”

“So what went wrong?” Al puzzled. “Why would it overload? Arrays never overload unless there’s a glyph error, and you don’t make glyph errors.”

They stared at the other for a brief moment, before Ed fetched a slip of paper and a pencil. “You try it,” he offered, watching his little brother draw the exact same array he had held in his head — *I had it exactly the same, didn’t I?* he asked the Gate in a panicky voice, to which it indulgently replied, *Yes, Edward* — and for a second time, they watched the reaction fail. “Another overload. It wasn’t just me. Strange. D’you think we should bring it to master?”

A prospect they were both reluctant to submit to, if going by Al’s querulous expression. She would doubtless tire herself lecturing them yet again about the evils of recklessness and unsupervised experimentation, especially with unknown, untried objects such as this. It was highly unlikely that they would even get to opening the box at all.
“Maybe we should try the blood,” Al suggested, sounding stubborn and hesitant all at once.

Ed had to blink. “What, really? What is this, magic? No alchemy I know of opens boxes when you give it blood! I mean, how does that even work? Blood for opening a box — of all the nonsensical…” he trailed off into quiet murmurs of consideration, permutations of lock arrays skimming above his thoughts as he played with the mechanics in his head. The Lindbergh locks were the only ones he could think of that could come even close to that level of complexity, but they operated within the realistic bounds of alchemy, using scripts as keys for the locks on the item, and not blood. (Fine bit of invention, those Lindbergh locks were.)

“Well,” Al began cautiously in that tone that he used whenever he was on the verge of using words sure to offend Ed, “maybe the lock is something special. I’m pretty sure Dad knows a lot of alchemy you and I don’t know.”

That he does, the Gate affirmed in its usual glib manner, irking Ed all the more. But the mystery at hand far outweighed his ego’s need for reassurance, so he let the comments slide and fetched a safety pin. (His glares, of course, lost none of their acid potency.)

Al held the box steady as Ed pricked his finger, watching the blood slowly swell. When there appeared enough to be sufficient, Ed swiped the finger across the box’s surface, smearing a line of dark red against the engraved letters.

For a few moments nothing happened under their anxious watch. Ed’s doubt throbbed in his throat, and he opened his mouth to declare their attempt a useless one after all, when the blood began to sink into the shallow crevices of the engraved letters to trace the words crimson in an eerie display — and then it vanished — vanished! — into the metal, as if absorbed by a sponge!

Another incredulous heartbeat passed, spent gaping at the other like a pair of fools, until the box gave an unearthly reddish glow, split its metal housing neatly into half, and promptly parted to unload the small bundle of paper and cloth secreted away in its care.

“What!” Ed was incredulous and appalled, as he took stock of the box. “How is that possible! That’s not in the books! What — how did he do that! How!”

The Gate, no doubt privy to the specific manner of devilry at present work before them, chose to hold its peace and offered a mere moonlike smile.

While he spluttered, Al took the two halves of the box into either hand and put them side by side. The split was neat, a clean vertical cut dividing the metal box into two. But the peculiar way the cut fell across the engraved words allowed a new reading to surface for their eyes.

| BLOOD OF MY SUN | THE TRUTH |
| BLOOD OF MY MOON |
| BLOOD OF MY BLOOD |
| ILLUNIN |

The indented first and last lines were cut into half by the vertical split, leaving one half of the box with most of the verse while the other half was left with fragments of a line. ‘THE TRUTH ATE THE TRUTH,’ one-half of the box now read, turning Ed’s attention to the Gate. Still it remained, wordless and unhelpful but for a wider glib smile.

“Does it mean the Gate?” asked Al, apprehensive and visibly more than a little annoyed. Remembering none of that strange realm, his little brother was left out of the loop. Al, of course, was
the better choice if one of them had to be left out like so, given Ed’s nonexistent patience and inclination towards reckless and potentially fatal unguarded exploration.

“It has to,” Ed frowned. “I can’t think of any other possible meaning.”

“But — how does Dad know about the Gate?” Al’s tone was clad in anxiety, confusion, and apprehension — and for good reason: knowledge of the Gate was only attainable through direct contact with it, or someone who had seen it. And considering which precise examples of alchemy involved direct interaction with the Gate, well. If fortune was with Hohenheim, then he would have known about the Gate through someone else — but Ed knew fortune shied from their lineage, at least the sort of fortune that kept one out of grand and dangerous circumstances.

So Ed could only shrug and respond, in an oddly off-put tone, “As you said, he probably knows a lot of alchemy you and I don’t know.” (The Gate smiled in delight and patted him with a paw.)

The very admission made him uncomfortable, so he transferred his attention to the box’s contents. Al was correct: it did contain a wad of folded paper that had to be a letter, along with a small bundle of red cloth secured by a golden string.

“Letter first?”

“Letter first.”

Al scooted close as Ed unfolded the letter. They began to read:

Edward and Alphonse,

By the time you are reading this, I have been long gone. While I regret not witnessing your growth into fine young alchemists, certain responsibilities in one’s life cannot be simply abandoned or forgotten. I must meet this responsibility on its way to find me. I cannot allow my old world to damage the quiet life Trisha and I have had, even if it is at the cost of separation. I can hope that my decision does not cause you too much pain, a vain hope; I will trust the strength of heart that the both of you will have inherited from your mother. In any case, that you are reading this letter is an assurance of your relative safety and well-being, which is already more than I dare ask for.

But the purpose of this letter is neither in apologies and excuses, nor in pleas for forgiveness. We will address those at a later, more prudent time, when we finally reunite in person, so you will both be able to see for yourselves the sincerity of my apologies and the truthfulness in my reasons. Instead, I have entrusted this letter to your mother for her to hand you when you come to understand what alchemy truly means. She is no alchemist, but she is an intelligent woman. She will know when the time is right. Do not begrudge her if she delays. She takes her time to consider things, a trait of a wise individual.

The world of alchemy is both vast and small: once you enter practice, you will be encountering people I know and worked with, or people who know me, or of me. You are both intelligent boys: you will know not to take this world to Resembool’s quiet idyll. You will leave your childhood home and seek places of knowledge elsewhere. Your mother is even more ill-equipped to deal with the world’s pressures and perils than you two are. Leave her to her quiet life. She will reconcile to your departure as she has reconciled with mine.

I do not belittle you when I deem the two of you ill-equipped for the world at large. I do not mean it in a disparaging manner, but it is the truth, and we must learn not to begrudge the Truth. Too often
we lay the blame upon it when we ourselves are to blame for our own folly. I can do little to prepare you for what you will go to face — and they are great dangers, because you are my sons — but if you heed my words here, you should stay safe.

First among the items here is a small booklet of great value and sensitivity. Do not reveal its contents to others. It is a complete list of the people I have met and associated with, with notes on these pertinent people: who they are, where they live, how to contact them, what they do, what their other capabilities are, what loyalties they hold, where their weaknesses lie, and whether or not they should be trusted, with what, and to what degree. Such information can prove disastrous in the wrong hands, and some of these people are my good friends. It is not my desire to repay their kindness and companionship with treachery.

I have marked these trustworthy individuals whom I can feel you can approach and befriend. They will be willing to lend you a hand provided you reciprocate with good faith and earnest friendship. You may, of course, have already met some of them, for I can think of a few who might seek Hohenheim’s children first, if they gain knowledge of your existence.

Second are three warnings you must heed, though they might sound arbitrary and ill-contrived:

(1) NEVER, under any circumstance, perform any of the three forbidden acts of alchemy.

(2) Should you encounter any person bearing a tattoo of an ouroboros, in the likeness of the necklaces I have enclosed in this box, run. Do NOT engage with them: they are dangerous individuals possessed of a range of powers in combat and regeneration beyond any modern capacity of alchemy today. Avoid attracting their attention and refrain from any significant interactions with them. Above all, NEVER mention your relation to me. If you must engage with them, do so with every intent of escape. There is no shame in running if it earns you and your people another day to fight. If and only if you are caught without any means of escape, show them this necklace—which you must wear at all times, even in sleep or in the bath—and it will buy you time. At the very least, it should keep you alive and breathing.

(3) Beware of the shadows. These are no ordinary shadows; it lives and breathes and watches. It has eyes in the dark and can deal you harm if you give it any reason to. Do not provoke it; from it you cannot run, and against it you cannot win. Not yet.

Take these words to heart and do not discard them as the ramblings of an old man. I only ever wish for your safety and wellbeing. I cannot prevent you from setting out to see the world, but I can at least forewarn and thus forearm you against its perils.

May your feet be sure and your hands be steady; may the road take you to travels memorable and worthy. Home is now behind you, the world ahead, and there are many paths to tread. So take heed and be watchful until we meet again.

T. Van Hohenheim

The coverlet was warm underneath Ed’s fingertips, soft cloth and cotton giving way to the force of his grip. Silence settled between them, pregnant with the multitude of emotions coursing through their limbs. The lack of clear answers was enough to drive Ed mad with rage and frustration! What did the old man hope to accomplish with the letter if it only served to further his confusion? It only gave him more questions! Why did the world only ever see fit to give him nothing but questions?!

Ah, there now. You’re overreacting, admonished the Gate, with the dismissive brandish of a
vaguely puffy tail. You saw me. I am an answer, am I not? I am answer, the answer, to many, many things. We must care never to complicate that which is simple just as we must not simplify that which is complex. Do not blame the answers for not making sense, Little Hohenheim, especially if you are the one asking the wrong questions.

“Agh, shut up!” he snarled, “Let me think! I don’t need or want your fucking riddles right now!”

Al jumped at his sudden outburst and gave him a look. “Brother,” and there was a small note of alarm in his voice, but Ed burst just then from his seat and began pacing the room. Many things were mentioned in that letter — he would need to make copies — if he could only pick them out to examine them with greater care, surely something—! Surely it would be able to provide him with some sort of, of direction. As much as the words sounded ridiculous, they were Hohenheim’s words: they had to be of some worth. Absent though he was, Hohenheim had never lied to them: not in his textbooks, not in his journals, never in anything they have had of their father throughout their childhood years learning alchemy. He knew to heed those words — and besides, he personally knew the truthfulness of at least one part in the letter: the existence of the shadows. (Ed shuddered as the Gate coiled tight in displeasure.)

…and then there was the ouroboros. People with ouroboros tattoos could be as common as black crows! What was the likelihood of such a well-known symbol of alchemy being a unique marker for one specific group of people? Not to mention the logistic difficulty of screening every person for one! How on earth was he even supposed to conduct that conversation? Good day, I’m Edward, pleasure to meet you; would you mind stripping so I could see if you have an ouroboros tattoo? Edward blanched, horrified.

“Brother,” Al repeated, this time with significant force. “Sit down. You’re making me dizzy. Throwing a fit won’t do us any good.” Under his little brother’s heavy glare, Ed folded in surrender. “I’m supposing you know about some of the things he’s mentioned, going from your reaction. Spit it out, then. I’m getting sick of being left behind.”

That stung far more than Al surely intended, but Ed keeping pain was one of those skills his brush with the Gate gifted him. He gave no outward indication of his smarting heart and recounted his brief and inconclusive encounter with what he thought Hohenheim meant by ‘the shadows.’ He had time enough to warn about absolute silence on the matter before Al burst into his own hissy fit.

“Why do these things always happen when I’m not around!” he shouted, voice bouncing against the walls. These rooms had superb insulation; Ed doubted they would be heard downstairs. “I don’t know what it is you did, brother, but the trouble seems to be following — no, hunting you! There’s more you haven’t told me about things that have happened here — don’t think I can’t tell — and they all revolve around you. This is starting to get beyond ridiculous!”

“Er,” Ed offered carefully, “everything mainly started after the Gate?” and he winced at the vitriol in the Gate’s glare. Sure, it hissed, just put all the blame on me. After all, I’m the one who drew and activated a human transmutation array. Must be convenient to have a scapegoat handy for every major fuck up, no? Oh, and by the way, I’m also the one with remarkable golden eyes.

“That shadow — do you think it knows you’re Dad’s son?” Al asked, jolting him from the Gate’s inspired melodrama once again. “It’s a little too good of a timing to be a mere coincidence.”

“Al, we don’t even know if that was real,” he chided, reaching for some blank paper. He should make copies of the letter now. “Could be a harmless shadow, could be my addled imagination… could be Hohenheim’s saddled imagination too, actually, now that I think of it. I mean, really,
Spoken like a true brave warrior who didn’t cower into Mustang’s bedcovers to get away from the dark, sneered his Companion. He conjured a mental bucket of water over its funny catlike head, upturning it with a vicious mental shove. Drenched, it sprang away with a yowl. (The corresponding physical sensation was best described as a sudden knife of cold tingling towards his left ear.)

“It all sounds like make-believe, but I think I’ll trust Dad, brother.” Al fished the two necklaces from the pocket of paper they were nestled within. The filigree and elegant metalwork inspired a memory of his recent birthday gift to Roy. “We didn’t think blood would work but it did. We didn’t believe or even conceive of a Truth but there it is. Father’s talking about things that sound impossible — but is it really so hard to consider them likely? How much harder to believe a successful human transmutation?”

Ed took a necklace and watched Al don the other. The small circle of gold hung on a thin chain that looked delicate and almost feminine against his little brother’s throat, but it shone a queer white-blue under a certain angle of light: Ed guessed activated titanium. It would take significant force to break that chain — even without counting the abundant web of protective scripts no doubt etched into them. Ed swallowed. Hohenheim was serious.

“Come on, brother,” Al coaxed, patting the letter and the small booklet of blackmail material. (What Hughes would give for such a thing! He had to show it to Roy later.) “Let’s make copies and then go through them some more. I’m sure we’ll discover more surprises if we look carefully.”

Carefully was the keyword. Ed sighed and told himself, Ask the right questions, as he began with the booklet. Glinting under wan sunlight, the ouroboros necklace hung around his neck.

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The impossible could not have happened, therefore the impossible must be possible in spite of appearances.
( Agatha Christie )

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They made three copies and fell into argument about who would keep the original. Ed wanted Al to keep it, being far away from Central’s perils and politics and closer in spirit to Hohenheim. It was however for the very same reason that Al thought Ed should keep it — “because you need to try to consider and understand Dad better, brother!”

What an utter load of bull.

A stupidly sentimental letter was not about to help him ‘consider’ his dearest Father Hohenheim the Late. He needed to break Al out of this unsightly habit of insisting on clearly futile attempts, or at least convince Izumi to see to it. Time and energy were better spent on fruitful pursuits!

Ultimately they decided upon their usual brotherly compromise (and this was well into the afternoon): Alphonse would keep the original letter while Ed would take the original booklet. Similarly, the second copies were between them split. The third set of copies went back into the box,
which resealed after it was given another drop of blood. They had yet to decide for a place to hide
the infernal thing.

Soon Roy was home, hopping upstairs to chance and say hello before heading for the kitchen to help
Sig prepare dinner.

“Roy, after dinner,” Ed caught the man’s sleeve, “we need to talk with you. Alone.” Al was leaving
tomorrow for Dublith, their tickets already scheduled and paid for. They would have no other chance
to field their questions at Roy apart from tonight.

“Alright,” Roy easily acquiesced, giving them a knowing smile before disappearing down the back
stairs. The man was by now well used to undue demands on his time and attention, as he well
should, Ed thought, because it’s been more than two months since I came here, and that’s bloody
long already.

“He really does spoil you rotten,” Al mused, playing with the ouroboros necklace. It was fast
becoming a habit — Al had done it four times in the past forty minutes. His little brother was
distractedly happy about having received a trinket from Hohenheim, and it showed. Ed would have
to leave a sharp word or two about that; it would not do at all to walk around with the necklace bared
if Hohenheim’s words were to be properly heeded. (They had decided to be serious about heeding
their father’s words, for if breaking the man’s first warning about forbidden alchemy dealt the
damage it did, however much more for breaking the other two warnings about the ouroboros and the
shadows? He shuddered to think what sort of catastrophe that would look like.)

“Brother! Are you listening?”

“No, sorry, what?”

“I said,” Al sighed, frowning and casting a look that read ‘Not Impressed,’ “are you sure we should
leave Master out of this?”

Ed’s face darkened. “Positive.”

“Why? She could help! It’s just a letter from Dad,” Al sighed again. “I thought you said we’d tell her
after we saw what was inside.”

“And what’s inside is so inconsequential; it’s really none of her concern,” Ed scowled, picking at his
notes. The edges of his notebook bore faint indentations from mild but repetitive abuse from his
fingernails. “Look, she’s still your master, so I can see why you’d want to consult with her. Feel free
but do wait at least until you’re in Dublith, okay?”

“Brother, distance does nothing to dull her wrath.”

“Oh, yes, it does something! It does great things for my overall state of health! Not to mention my
mental stability!” He was met with a small frown, though, so he ceased his theatrics with a defeated
slump of his shoulders. “Look, I can tell how she’s going to react about the Booklet of Blackmail on
shady people, and I don’t want to hear any of it from her. Worst case scenario is she’ll insist on
hiding it from Roy, which, apart from being absolutely impossible, is also absolutely daft. Roy’s in
the best position equipped with the right amount of cunning and motivation to use it to substantial
effect — and he’s capable of doing so with enough tact that he won’t stain Hohenheim’s name or
offend any of his precious friends. Hell, those precious friends might be friends to Roy as well, I
wouldn’t be surprised…”

He neglected to mention his own stubborn, childish, and prideful wish to separate his movements
from Izumi’s watchful eyes and guarding hands. The contrary desire sparked out of nowhere, gaining strength and speed as a wildfire in dry grassland the more they talked of it. He was done with her total protection, *screw total protection*, he hissed, *I learn faster without it*. And this was true: the pain of the last two months had taught him more than he would have learned staying at Izumi’s place for half a year. Oh, it was *pain*, true enough, and he was no *sadist* basking in its visceral bite — but learning came with it and he did want *that*. There were few things in the world he would not give for that.

In stark comparison against Izumi, Roy’s protection was much different. It was still in a way coddling and paranoid, but Roy fully *expected* him to perform outside of total safety, more and more often now, a sign Ed took as a hopeful step towards Roy’s reconciliation to the fact that he would not remain a child to be protected forever. If Roy did come to that acknowledgement, he would be the first one of Ed’s guardians to do so. For Ed no longer needed to be hidden; instead, he needed to be guided carefully into the world. Roy seemed willing and ready to do so; Izumi was clearly not.

Over dinner, Ed endured Izumi’s inquisition with a potent mixture of sulk, sarcasm, and his usual firebrand recalcitrance. It seemed to lull her well into complacence. She was curious as to what they spent all day discussing upstairs and would not rest until she was assured that all was well; Ed’s pointedly normal behaviour showed her that all was well.

Alphonse caught the hint and kept comments to a minimum, feigning deep thought so well that Izumi (and Ed too, almost) was tricked into believing that Al really was considering a permutation on the soul link array burned into his own chest. Roy, on the other hand, gave indulgent and approving little smiles all throughout. (Surreptitiously, of course.) Then dinner concluded and Ed feared that Izumi would insist on staying up with them, but Sig, perhaps catching their intention or perhaps in genuine concern for his wife, promptly stood and angled her towards the hallway that led into the guest suite.

She sighed in affection. “Honey, I’m alright. Not made of glass, remember? Won’t break.” But Sig’s wordless grip on her arms was insistent. Whenever Izumi underwent an attack, only a full day’s bed rest could restore her to full strength.

Ed hastily assured her, “Go and rest; I promise we’ll not do anything stupid.” The concern in his voice was sincere. “We’ll probably just argue some more about the soul array — but we won’t do any stupid experiments like rewriting it while it’s holding Al’s soul, promise.” In the corner of his vision, Al’s hand twitched behind the chair.

Izumi sighed. “Fine, fine,” she relented, her voice was thin as the winter wind. Her eyes hid a lurking relief at the prospect of more rest. She had spent the day enduring her wracking coughs. Bidding them a good night and reminding Al to get some sleep for the morrow, she retreated into the hallway and vanished from their view.

None of them spoke except for quiet requests or directions from Roy as they worked to clear the dining table and clean the dishes (alchemy). Ed looked forward to not having to use the dining room anymore: he missed the quiet, intense mornings at their kitchen table for two, breakfasts with a lesson or chess session, the little homely things he shared with Roy. Already the table by the kitchen window looked as if it were languishing without their daily attention.

When the chore was concluded and they were each armed with a large piping mug of hot beverage in whatever preferred variation (tea, coffee, hot chocolate), they trooped up the stairs, Ed breaking the silence first as they took seats by the fire. “You tampered with the soul array, didn’t you.” It was not an accusation: it was a statement of fact.
“I did,” Al admitted with a shaky breath, fingers trembling around his cuppa. Al was never much for denial, despite having done grave mistakes few would admit to. (Denial was more of Ed.)

A stretch of silence passed by before Ed ground out, “I am not yelling at you because (1) it’d lure Izumi up here, and (2) because I am on my way to acknowledging that we will both forever be a pair of morons bent on accomplishing an impossible list of moronic and potentially catastrophic things.”

Al blinked and turned to Roy. “Thank you, sir.”

Roy smiled. “Ah, the pleasure was all mine.”

“For what?” Ed bristled. If Roy knew something about this and hid it from him —

“Two months ago, brother, you wouldn’t be holding yourself back from yelling at me for any reason, much less in consideration of master or to acknowledge our stupidity. This must be Mr. Mustang’s efforts showing its results,” Al pointed out plain and simple as you please.

Ed had to stop and consider that with some wonder.

“Well then, boys,” Roy intervened. “Before the night grows too old, what matter is this that requires my presence and opinion?”

Reminded of their purpose, they presented him the box, which Roy took, examined, and frowned at. He lingered on the etched letters, mouthing the words as if they were a song. Then he said, “Is this from Hohenheim?” to which both Ed and Al startled.

“How did you know?” Al demanded, knowing less of extent of Roy’s relationship with their father. Ed meanwhile scowled. So the Bastard really did see and know more of their father. (Small wonder the Bastard was such a bastard, for such things were best learned from masters.) The recognition that lit Roy’s eyes was of the same recognition that lit their eyes whenever they discovered a work of Izumi’s alchemy: it was of the familiarity borne from a student’s close apprenticeship to his master.

“There were poems and songs — plenty of them,” Roy recalled, fingers brushing the letters with a gentleness best described as reverence. “Hohenheim was very fond of them. A fair number I’m sure he created, though which ones I can’t say for sure. It was very strange alchemy — nothing like I’ve ever seen or read of before. The words have power, he told me. And so do the spaces — ‘the breaths in between,’ he called them — and the rhythm and tone, the repetitions, the count. The words had power to act as a directional: more precise, potent, and binding than our modern glyphs and scripts. Essentially they are direct instructions for the energy — without the need to translate intent into glyph and script.” With a wistful tone, he sighed. “I never got it out of him how this worked. That was the last year of my stay at the Hawkeyes when he finally explained it to me. Not enough time to talk my way into a lesson.”

Ed and Al exchanged laden looks.

“I’m supposing you’ll need blood to open this,” Roy declared, handing it back to Ed. “No amount of force, alchemy or otherwise, will work.”

Ed and Al exchanged a look again. It was Ed who then spoke, “Well, we’ve actually already opened it earlier, but opening it wasn’t what we came to you about. We just wanted to show you what it looked like first, but — well, what we really wanted to ask is if you know what’s making it do this.” He clapped his hands and held the box, demonstrating the mysterious overload process to see if Roy would recognise it as a step of any reaction at all — and true enough, it had Roy snapping upright in his seat, eyes shining eagerly in the firelight. At first, Ed thought it was in concern for their safety
(which if it were so, he would be *duly* offended, for he was *perfectly capable* of handling a simple matter of overload, thank you very much!) but Roy’s face lit in fascinated delight as the crackling faded away.

“Oh!” the man softly exclaimed, “Ohh, exquisite! Never in my wildest dreams — so there still exist practitioners who — he *never told* me, the slippery old snake — *so rare* — “

“*Excuse* me!” Ed barked with a petulant scowl. “Tell us instead of muttering to yourself like a lunatic! And you call *me* a mad genius? Pot! Kettle!”

Roy, undaunted by his ire, uttered a soft laugh before smiling through his explanation. “This, boys, is a box sealed with very, very old alchemy long thought lost to the sands of Xerxes’ destruction and Persia’s fall. It’s so old that even the most arcane books in First Library will mention it only in passing. The lock is the untold predecessor, so to speak, of the Lindbergh locks — you know them, yes? Our scholars call this the Pravese lock after Mr. Prava, the alchemist who documented almost all extant knowledge about it. But in the old books — the *really* old ones — they call it by a different name, a name of its own: the Blood Ward.”

Ed’s eyes flickered to its surface, where five repetitions of the word burned against firelight. Five for a star. Five for the pillars of a circle.

“Five for protection,” Al murmured, eyes dark as they both looked back on the night they began drawing their mother’s array. *Five for protection*, they checked off, building the circle like their master taught them to, with protection for themselves and for the would-be result of their transmutation. Backlash was not to be trifled with, she taught them.

Five for protection, of course, had little potency against the Decider of Equivalence itself. But for this box…

“It’s protecting itself!” Ed realised with a start, “and by blood the protection is done! So by law of equivalence —“

“— only by blood can it be *undone,*” Roy nodded. “The Blood Ward was long ago used to protect containers like this that would hold family heirlooms too precious to entrust to simpler, more straightforward forms of security. They would paint the array into the inner panel of the container with the sealer’s blood, and then infuse it with enough alchemical charge so that it keeps active and can trigger on its own. Which of course means that only certain materials can be used in the construction of the box: potent metals, conductive crystals, and so forth. Very expensive stuff.

“When the process is finished, the blood will completely absorb into the material, vanishing any trace of a circle — takes about three days. At that point, the array is permanent and the box cannot be opened or destroyed, except by that of the same blood — meaning sons and daughters of the bloodline who wish to open or destroy it. They would need to provide their blood to verify their identity, thus counting this array to be one of the small handful of old blood alchemy that we know of today.”

“Blood alchemy?” echoed Al, clearly unfamiliar with the concept. “I understand using blood as an identifier, but that should be it, shouldn’t it? Like any other molecular compound, blood is blood. There can’t be much you can do with it…”

“On the contrary, scholars of ancient alchemy speak of a whole collection of arrays and alchemical procedures operable only with the addition of blood — and no, not as a mere identifier either, or even as a trigger for that matter. We’re unsure how exactly they made it work — terribly rare to find a piece of relic holding a clue,” Roy added with a significant glance at the box cradled in Ed’s hands.
“If I were to put a price on the box you currently hold, it’d be enough to buy one of the major Armstrong estates — and then some.”

Ed seized the box to his chest.

“I’m not going to sell it,” Roy scoffed, sounding very offended. “Why would I hand it to someone else when it’s already under my roof? Besides which, its Hohenheim’s property, and now your property. I’m sure you’ll find better use of it than any of the military’s halfwits in employ. They wouldn’t know what to make of that and likely hurt themselves in the process of figuring it out. Let’s be generous and spare them the agony.”

Ed had to agree. Alchemical backlash was never friendly to the alchemist; Pinako and Winry had even had some customers over the years who were victim to their own stupidity. He stroked the box’s surface and wondered if Hohenheim truly trusted them enough not to get hurt handling this box. What if they hadn’t known any better? The explosion would have been sizable, the injuries serious.

“Hohenheim knew that you would come looking,” Ed told Roy, forcing himself away from more uncomfortable thoughts. He pricked his finger and demonstrated the opening process, which Roy watched with an expression of almost childish delight. They were all of them true and hopeless alchemists at heart, Ed sighed, fascinated by such strange and obscure things… “These are copies of what was inside. Here are the originals. It’s just a letter —” Ed pushed that away from Roy’s hand “— and two necklaces he told us to wear at all times.” Ed chose to share the three warnings and then showed Roy the golden chain.

“But it’s the last piece is what I thought you’d be interested in.” The booklet Ed retrieved was small, but perhaps half an inch thick, its pages darkened by the thick swarm of Hohenheim’s hand. They were notes and observations upon the many significant people Hohenheim had met. Under the first heading, which read ‘FRIENDS,’ began a troupe of names and pertinent details in gold ink. There on the very first page was Berthold Hawkeye and Roy Mustang.

“Good to know you’re not a lying lout, Bastard,” to which Roy replied with a wry smile. Berthold Hawkeye was underlined by Riza Hawkeye, daughter, non-alchemist — and beneath that, ‘Do not approach per specific instruction of Berthold.’

Roy nodded. “Berthold never wanted her in the way of danger. She is defenceless against the sort of enemies he would have made for himself during his youth as a well-known anti-martial alchemist. He did not speak of it often but his wife was a casualty of his infamy. He was afraid of the same fate befalling his only remaining blood.”

“But she’s in the military now,” Ed pointed out, “with you.”

“She followed me after Berthold died,” Roy sighed, “and wouldn’t be convinced away. The most I could do was to protect her from the inside, so the moment the conflict ended, I took her under my wing.”

“Just like that?”

Roy shrugged. “Her grandfather, General Grumman, is the Warden of the East, and was my superior after the war. She was assigned under my care and promoted to be of sufficient rank to serve secretary to a ranked State Alchemist.”

“If her grandfather was that powerful and rich,” Ed hazarded, “she could have gone to them after
Berthold died. And instead she followed you into the very system her father hated? How does that make sense?"

An expression Ed found difficult to quantify came upon Roy’s face then. Love was too powerful a word, and respect too weak; affection came up short, and regret not profound enough. Roy then said, “You will find that a woman with a strong heart does not so easily surrender her will and freedom to the insignificant and petty sentiments of men.”

Ed nodded. “I see. She told you where you can all shove it. Makes sense.”

“Brother,” Al sighed under Roy’s sudden, delighted laugh.

“I have renewed respect for the scary lady. There ought to be more of her in the world!”

“More of her to tell men like me where to shove it?” Roy chuckled. “Oh, she’ll love this. Gracia too. They can be quite a pair when they put their minds to it.”

“And their kitchens!”

“And their kitchens.”

They talked some more of a few of the people in the first pages of the booklet, but the conversation gradually led back to the box. He threw a suspicious glare at Roy, who sat inspecting the inner surface of the blasted thing. No doubt the Bastard felt uncomfortable discussing politics in bare terms with Alphonse in attendance. How many times had he warned Ed of ears hearing things they should not hear? Roy knew more about these listed people than he was letting on, to be sure. Ed would simply have to wait for later.

“Mr. Mustang, what can you make of Dad’s warnings?” Al asked out of the blue, holding the pages of the letter with fussing fingers. “You were with him for some time. Does any of it make sense to you?”

“Well, the first one is self-explanatory,” he began with a laden glance at the two of them, “but the rest I don’t know. Ed has no doubt told you about that strange night with the Gate and the shadows — if he hasn’t yet, shame on you, Edward — but apart from that, I’m as far in the dark as the two of you are.” The statement was met with marked disappointment, but only from Al. Ed knew Roy knew something more about all of this and he would eventually extract it from the Bastard. Roy continued, “I’ve never met anyone with that exact tattoo, and from Hohenheim’s words, let’s hope we never do. —ah, best let’s warn Hughes of it too, what with the nature of his job.”

“But what exactly are they?” Al was fiddling with the necklace again. “And what do they have against Dad?”
Ed could think of a couple of things…

“The likeliest explanation is that they are a syndicate of some sort, organised crime and the like, deep underground and dealing in forbidden alchemy. Could be smuggling relics or knowledge across borders.”

Ed was dubious. “Gangsters with ‘a range of powers in combat and regeneration beyond any modern capacity of alchemy today.’ Really.”

Roy shrugged. “I merely suggested a likely explanation; it does not have to be the truth. As I said, I don’t know. Hohenheim knows a lot of alchemy you and I are beyond. Perhaps one day we may ask him, but for now, this is all we have.”

Even still, Ed refused satisfaction.

“What about the Blood Ward? Do you know anything else about it? Scratch that — I know you know something more, you recognised it in one glance. You even said something about its practitioners.” Roy had acted surprised that Hohenheim knew and could perform blood alchemy — or perhaps that specific lock — as if he knew that there was only one known practitioner of it in living history and that practitioner was dead.

Roy smiled and nodded in approval. “Very astute observation, Edward. Add a point to your goal of ten for a cake on demand.” Ed pumped a fist into the air. “I do know more about the lock, but unfortunately for both of you, none of it relates in any way to Hohenheim, except perhaps in the vaguest and most abstract of senses. It would only be an interesting story to tell.”

Nothing else was quite as entertaining as stories about alchemy, so both of them sat the rest of the night away by the fire under thrall of Roy’s past adventures. Ed did not remember falling asleep, only that he woke eventually, still curled with his brother on the couch, the morning sun brightening the blinds on the windows and the embers of last night glowing still and soundless in his mind.

He thought of Roy’s story, of the lady and her three children, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with bright minds and uncertain futures. The story was far removed from them, away in another time and generation, too remote to be any of his concern. But it concerned him anyway. Why was life so difficult for people? It was not only them, though their little family was undergoing its own gargantuan hardships. Other people were routinely subjected to these trials, tested by pressure, and for no apparent reason.

Dog’s expectant tail-wagging thumped him from strange thoughts and the remainders of an even stranger dream. His feet, when he swung them round, met the warm presence of soft fur. Dog turned and gave him a demanding look.

“Spoiled,” he murmured, rubbing its belly. “Spoiled and rotten.”

Dog followed him into the bathroom where he washed, and then back across the library to descend into the kitchen. Surely breakfast would be underway. But as he neared the back stairs, voices in serious discussion reached his ears.

Stopping in his tracks, he turned to dog, met its eye, and dropped to the floor. (With a quiet wuffle, Dog also dropped to the floor.)

He dug his fingers into the animal’s fur to appease it and gingerly placed his ear by the stairway. It was Roy speaking now. He closed his eyes and strained.

“…no significant amount of blackmail or violence will wrest Edward away from my protection, Ms.
Curtis, please understand. I can see your reservations —“

“Do you, Mr. Mustang? I sincerely hope you do.” Yesterday’s long rest had done its number. Izumi sounded her usual self: strong, confident, sure of her place in the world. (That place was quite clearly nowhere beneath Roy Mustang.) “He’s too precious to be wasted on petty ambitions and fruitless political pursuits.”

“I could not agree more.” Ed could hear from this distance the smile in Roy’s tone, gentle and patient. “You do not approve of men like me, alchemists who work for the military, and you are well within reason to do so. But I bid you not constrain me to my title and line of work. Before I was a soldier, and before I was an alchemist of any reputable competence, I was a friend of Hohenheim — I still am. I owe their father many things, some of which I see Edward in need of now. These things I am more than happy to provide. As I’ve said time and again: I will not put him in harm’s way.”

“Some would argue that simply being with you is putting him in harm’s way, Mustang.”

Silence.

“I do not encourage him into anything he does not want to do, and that includes being with me, Ms. Curtis.” Was it Ed’s imagination, or did Roy actually sound hurt? “It might surprise you, but your first night here was also the first I heard of Ed’s plans for his career. Naturally I had measures in place to help him out whichever path he chose to pursue — I would have supported him wholeheartedly either way — but I have never heard any true confirmation of the sort that he made that night to you.” Another pause, during which Ed had to push his imagination to paint a picture of the man’s countenance. “Contrary to initial impressions, Ed is more than capable of keeping things to himself.”

“A disturbing notion if ever there was any,” Izumi huffed. Sig, silent until now, gave a soft laugh. “Very well then.”

Izumi had made a decision. Ed clutched Dog.

“Swear to me that you will care for that boy, Mustang, with the knowledge that breaking your oath will make me come after your blood. Care for him with the sincerity that his good nature deserves — not as a tool for your ambition, not as a pet or momentary fancy, but as a true friend. As things are, he looks up to you as a model figure despite your short acquaintance,” a rustle of cloth, perhaps her shrugging, “which is just as well — they never had a father figure, or any man, in their life.” Her voice suddenly grew soft, her words slow in coming. “Edward… Edward and Alphonse are the children I never had. You are too young to have children of your own, but I doubt I need explain the hardship of letting them go at such a young age, and after such grief between them and their mother. Ed, in particular, the stubborn boy — he has the potential for great things — and you know full well that great things can also mean terrible things —… I fear that will be his fate if he is left alone without a good and steady guide. He can very well destroy himself. He almost did.”

Roy took a while to respond this time. “And Alphonse, he isn’t so?”

“No… no, Alphonse is calm and circumspect, most of the time. Few things can unsettle that inner locus of control. And if Al were ever pushed to the point of harming himself — hard to do, mind you — he would spend some time thinking about it, time you can use to pull him out of the spiral. Not so with Ed: that boy will go out fast and in style. It is very hard to stop him from getting at what he wants.”

Roy laughed. “I remember saying a similar thing to Hughes.”
“It’s a good thing that Ed’s staying here, love,” Sig suddenly said, surprising Ed with his deep baritone. “You work better with Al. You and Ed are too alike.”

“But it’s Ed who needs more right now,” sighed the troubled woman. “Al remembers none of what transpired that week after the deed was done — the hardest time to cope with it all, which Ed had to weather alone. Surely that left wounds. Grief of that sort leaves its prints deep inside. He’s hiding it. He’s already hurting from having been left by their father — he remembers that when Al cannot. Their family has fallen apart — and he will say that it is entirely his fault.”

“There’s no remedy for that but slow reconciliation with his brother and mother,” Roy pointed out, tone reasonable and adult. “The best we can do in the meantime is to keep them occupied, prevent them from brooding. He’s forthcoming enough if you talk to him about it, though he does try to insist on blaming himself at certain times.”

Because it is my fault, Ed scowled, earning a windy sigh from the resident parasite in his head. Shivers broke on the back of his neck at the Gate’s sudden reappearance. It was a strange sensation, the Gate unfurling itself in the dark of his mind. The extended period of absence reminded him of how alien it felt having a tenant where there should only be himself.

Quit the self-pity, little Hohenheim, it is most unbecoming and frankly quite nauseating poured over your ego.

Ed hissed, almost missing Roy’s next words.

“In any case, it’s all a work in progress. He just needs time. I can give him time. It would also be good if he could visit you once in a while to see his brother, especially if he plans to remove himself from Resembool for a while. Al will be his only connection to that old life.”

“Oh, I expect the visits, rest assured. If I don’t see him every half a year hale and whole, I’ll think the worst and come for you.”

“Noted,” Roy chuckled. “They’ll be pleased to hear that they have approved visiting rights when they wake — which should have been ten minutes ago, let me fetch them.”

Ed hastily slid away from the stairs and crept towards his little brother, just now stirring from the couch. He had enough time, though, to hear Roy add playfully, “And of course, your guarantee, Ms. Curtis: that I will care for Edward I do swear, on pain of my doubtless painful and bloody death at your — ah, how did Edward put it? — serrated teeth.”

When Roy peeked into the library, Ed was sat by Al and sporting an awkward flush. How was one to take such declarations of loyalty? Ed hoped Roy understood the magnitude of those words, for Izumi held no idle oaths. She was a woman of her every word.

“Good morning, boys,” Roy smiled, beatific, at complete ease. “Breakfast is ready. Go wash and come down.”

“Thanks,” Ed croaked, one word weighted with meaning —

— and, as if to take the weight into his hands, Roy’s smile evened out in one beat. “You’re more than welcome.”

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By and large, children do not listen to what you say. By and large, children watch what you do. And that’s how you teach. (Morgan Freeman)

Before they knew it, Al and Sig and Izumi were leaving. It was far too soon. Four days and five nights were hardly enough to sate his longing for their familiar company. Life, however, had other plans, beckoning them home to Dublith while here — in his new home — Ed had to stay.

Parting with his brother was much more painful this time around, their farewells corporeal and raw as they were given face to face. The separation felt final, irrational as that was.

When are we next going to see each other? Ed wondered, throat clenching as he looked over his little brother’s face. Time flowed with such haste; they could easily grow into strangers, taller and fuller but different from how they used to be. Al looked like this now, thinly freckled nose and rounded cheeks and burnt honey eyes — how would he look in a year, or two, or three?

“Okay?” Al asked.

Would they still recognise each other?

“Okay,” Ed responded in kind.

He stuck his hand out, the flesh one. Al took it and shook it.

Then Al was boarding the train, the lines of his back already older and taller than Ed ever remembered them to be. Resembool and Dublith and the island on Lake Castell now seemed worlds away. How inseparable they had seemed back then, learning as boys under the shadow of the stars, just the two of them against the world. Now no more. Just like that.

Ed stood watching the train draw farther and farther away from the platform, espying Al’s hand shooting out to give one final wave before they were out of sight. He returned the gesture with a resigned sigh. We chose this, he told himself. Now we live with it.

“You can always visit each other whenever you like,” Roy said, laying a warm hand on the back of his neck.

“No,” Ed said, eyes fixed upon the window through which he could still see his brother’s receding face. “It’s best if we stay apart for some time. Otherwise, we’ll never get used to it. If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do it properly and in full. No halfway crutches allowed with master, after all.”

His guardian responded by steer him out of the station towards their parked car. “Absence diminishes small loves and increases great ones, as the wind blows out the candle and fans the bonfire,” Roy said quietly. “You’ll see him again. Come, we mustn’t be late for our next errand.”

“Errand?” Ed echoed, distracted by the weight of Roy’s unexpected words. “Why, where are we going?”

“No need to sound so alarmed.”

“Begging your pardon, but it’s you. I am within my rights to be alarmed.”
Ed balked. “But we just bought the winter set. What do we need more clothes for?”

“The annual Yule Ball, of course.”

“The what now?”

“An annual high-profile event exclusive to high society, notable persons, and dignitaries of sufficient import and status, Edward. Now let’s be getting inside; it’s cold out. Hurry now.” Roy held the door open for him; Ed followed inside. “The event is held by one of the five most prominent families of Amestris — well, technically four, since the Rens never host — but it’s been done since the founding of the country. It was the Armstrongs last year; it’ll be the Steinbergs this year. They cycle.”

“Right,” Ed blinked, eyes still adjusting to the indoor gloom. “Okay.”

Roy’s tailor friend — Anthony or Andrew, whichever one of the two — descended upon them, a veritable plague of praises and platitudes. Roy, of course, responded in kind. Ed stood there and waited for them to finish — “An outfit for the Ball, Anthony, and your selection of cravats as well, I think…” — before he commenced quizzing Roy on the portents of this Ball. There was no point in arguing his attendance — Roy would insist, and for good reason, the Gate added, a due reminder of the conversation he had overheard between Roy and his lady master. Roy was doing this for their mutual benefits, pulling a great number of the strings at his disposal to ensure Ed a safe and advantageous place in the military and in Amestrian high society. The least Ed could do was avoid being a difficult brat.

“So what exactly is the purpose of this event?” he asked as he shed his coat and cardigan. Roy was now sat at a small coffee table, a new addition to the private fitting room.

“Celebrating the end of a year by reaffirming political relations and making a show of spending money,” Roy shrugged, as if to say, what else is there?

“Oh, of course. Excuse me for even thinking that there ever was some sense in the world.”

Roy indulged him with a smile. “At its heart, it’s a gathering of the old families and other close friends. Few who don’t meet those qualifications are able to partake of the celebrations. But the old families have many friends, and most of them are people of power, money, status, or all of the above. So it follows that most of high society gets an invitation.”

“And it follows that you’re one of them,” Ed muttered in quiet defeat. Roy’s network was formidable. Hohenheim’s booklet had merely listed him as ‘alchemist apprenticed under Berthold,’ its information being dated eight years; Ed had to wonder if Hohenheim knew exactly how much Roy had achieved for himself in such a short span of time.

“I’ve been very fortunate to find good friends in the Armstrongs, the Steinbergs, and the Firats, yes.” Roy ceased demurring before him some time ago, a sign of their growing comfort with each other. It only meant, though, that his ego was often on full display. “However, I can’t say that I’m very close to the other families.”

Not that you need them, having only the three most powerful ones in hand. He recalled the Firats as very prominent characters in Roy’s story the previous night, about the Lindbergh locks’ origins. In a roundabout way, the Firats were related to the Lindberghs, whose patriarch Sir Alfred Lindbergh
invented the groundbreaking Lindbergh lock. A fine work of script if there ever was any. The Lindbergh lock’s advent revolutionised how modern alchemy utilised scripts and provided the only known method of locking a container by way of alchemy.

Or at least so the textbooks said.

Roy’s story and Hohenheim’s box told him otherwise. Before the Lindbergh lock was invented — indeed even before Alfred Lindbergh’s birth — there existed the ancient Pravese lock that Hohenheim had used for the box. Few knew of it, and among those few was a young Alfred Lindbergh, finding references and examples of this old array in a very old alchemical tome he had inherited from his financially intelligent but otherwise alchemically uneducated grandfather. Having plenty of money, an obscene abundance of time, and relative freedom from other pressing concerns, Alfred Lindbergh dedicated himself to research and eventually devised the alchemical lock that would define the rest of his life — all of it but a modern, script-based variation of the Pravese lock diagrammed and detailed within that old tome.

His ‘innovation’ catapulted him into even higher heights, taking him from his vast landholdings in the countryside of Kissel to the bustling streets of Central. He assumed a career as an academic of Amestris and received honorary funding from the military and numerous other sponsors to continue his research. Over time he produced countless variations of the original lock. He did marry as was expected of his station, taking a young woman from a stately family: Lady Lindbergh she became, to the envy of her peers, what with her lissome beauty and her fair heart. Though she was no outstanding mind in alchemy, she had wits about her that served her well in other areas of life, such as managing the household. She and Sir Lindbergh became the best of friends, confiding in each other as only those who hold absolute trust do. For a time, they were content.

It was at this time that Julius Firat, then a tall and strapping twenty-something and good friend of the decade-older Sir Lindbergh, brought along two classmates from the medical academy. It was that year’s Yule ball, the very same event Ed was now being prepared for. Julius introduced both to Sir Lindbergh, the first being Miss Anne Sachs (Julius’ future wife, a certainty he was still vehemently denying at the time) and the other a certain Miss Katerina Islenhov.

Trouble never even loomed on the horizon before it arrived. Sir Lindbergh suddenly fell in love.

It was not at first sight, no — according to Roy, at first Sir Lindbergh was merely curious. Julius, who was as a little brother to him, was known for his marked reluctance to ever be seen with a woman outside of family. Being the only Firat of his generation, sole heir and child, Julius was acutely aware of his status and the amount of turmoil his presence can and will bring into a young woman’s life. Suffice to say, Sir Lindbergh was surprised when Julius walked into the Ball with not one but two girls on either arm. Oh, he was very intrigued indeed.

After lengthy conversations, it became apparent that Julius had grown besotted with Anne Sachs, however reluctant he was about the business of love. It also came to light that Katerina Islenhov was only present as Anne’s moral support. (The Yule Ball was apparently a place so stressful one needed moral support.) When Anne was sufficiently comfortable perched on Julius’ arm, Katerina cleaved to a quiet balcony, and was subsequently engaged with Sir Lindbergh’s kindly company.

She was no exceptional beauty; the best word to describe her was ‘plain.’ Her hair and eyes were of earthy ochre, contrasting with her sun-starved white skin. Her cheekbones were high but her jaw too pronounced for the effect to be lovely or stunning. Her eyebrows were the slightest bit uneven, her lashes lifting as if they dared defy gravity — but just there, the fire of great intelligence within her wide, dark eyes — that was what caught Alfred Lindbergh’s poor heart. They shone bright with the light of genius, so bright that her face was almost rendered gaunt underneath them.
Alfred Lindbergh — not Sir Lindbergh, but Alfred Lindbergh — fell hard in love.

She was what his housewife was not. She could not cook and knew little of housekeeping. She worked like any man, a librarian at the First Library while studying at the Firat Academy. In a few years’ time, she would commence her career as a medical doctor specialising in cellular pathology. Eventually she was to become a professor at the very same institution, teaching cellular biology to younger generations of doctors and researchers. Her extraordinary intellect filled the gap that Alfred Lindbergh sought in his lady wife, spurring on a most ill-opportune romance that would bring about the birth of a great lie.

“Grey or gold, Edward?”

Roy’s prompt whisked Ed out of his quiet recollection. Both cravats in question were of the finest Xingese silk, hand-woven into soft waves of colour. “Gold?” Ed chanced, earning an approving nod.

“I thought so myself; it should go well with your colouring.” Handing them back to the tailor’s assistant, he negotiated a date for the fitting and took a moment to sign a bank note. “Thank you, Anthony. As always, I look forward to the results.”

In short order, they were seen out of the shop. They took to the car and summarily headed home. As Roy navigated a turn, Ed began, “About the Lindbergh story…” Roy smiled and gave an encouraging hum, “…nobody ever found out about the affair?”

“Nobody but those involved,” Roy confirmed, easily unfazed by the sordid details.

“So then how do you know about it?”

Roy smiled. “Because Katerina Islenhov’s youngest son is Anya’s lover.”

Sir Lindbergh had not had a child by his lady wife when he met Katerina Islenhov. Meeting Katerina extinguished all desire within him to start a line by his wife; instead, he wished for Katerina to bear his children: strong-willed, intelligent children to carry forth his legacy. These children would surely be capable of taking his life’s work into the future and bettering it. Kind and beautiful though Lady Lindbergh was, and a good friend of Sir Lindbergh’s heart, he knew enough of genetics to be certain that she would bear him no genius child. So he created a lie.

A great one it was, born with the help of his good friend Julius, by that time married to a complicit Anne. They gave him countermeasures to prevent any pregnancy through his lady wife and, when the time was right, corroborated his lie: they confirmed, as licensed and practicing doctors, that Sir Lindbergh was infertile. Which of course he was not — Katerina Islenhov was already pregnant. It was a sordid double-cross. But Lady Lindbergh bore this ‘news’ with commendable grace and kindness; never once did she blame her husband for their childless marriage and remained faithful to their vow.

Perhaps by guilt, and certainly to ensure that she would not be lonely, Sir Lindbergh agreed to adopt children, rearing a brood of seven strong to care for the family estates and for his lady wife in their old age. All the while, he sired three bright minds through Katerina, who lived life on the surface as a single mother by an unknown wayward lover.

“But then his real children will never inherit any of his stuff, will they,” Ed pointed out with a frown. “I thought he wanted heirs. Well, they’re not legal heirs.” Roy pulled into the last parking spot across
from a neighbourhood café they favoured. It was lunchtime, and the place served excellent chicken wraps. They were only a block away from home.

“They inherited neither his name nor his riches, correct,” said Roy, “but what he gave them in its stead is so much more valuable. His *acumen*, Edward; all three children have them, just like he thought they would. They carry the legacy of his brilliant mind. And the youngest—Kanon, Anya’s lover—he carries on his father’s research. He inherited all the necessary, ah, *materials*, so to speak.”

“I thought none of them inherited property!”

“Well, that’s according to common knowledge. Nobody knows that they *did* inherit some things,” Roy coyly smiled. “After all, nobody has yet to open that trunk of Sir Lindbergh’s.”

“Trunk?”

“He owns this trunk where he allegedly keeps all of his most precious and sensitive research journals, along with some priceless references and artefacts. The few who know of how he derived the Lindbergh lock from the Pravese arrays suspected — and correctly too — that the old tome he got the Pravese arrays from was kept in that same trunk. It’s a source of much frustration for his adopted children, who all want a piece of the most precious part of their ‘rightful’ inheritance. They think it still hasn’t been opened, and every year they debate about hiring alchemists to open it for them. They would have hired half the State Alchemists in Central if they weren’t so afraid of the contents of the trunk being stolen.”

One of the first things Roy had warned him of back in Resembool was the safety of his intellectual property. Ed remembered that conversation quite vividly. Plenty of people would kill for knowledge. “So the trunk has *been* opened by one of the Islenhov kids?”

Roy nodded. “At the time of his grave illness, his family was in disarray. The adopted children were fighting amongst themselves about the inheritance, so Lady Lindbergh sent them all away while their father was battling the illness. Lady Lindbergh herself was still strong and took to handling the estates by herself quite well. So Sir Lindbergh had the chance to call the Islenhov children — all three of them — to his house. Kanon says the Firats were there too, to make it look like a friendly visitation. But of course the true purpose was to ascertain if any of his secret children could open the trunk.”

“A test,” Ed said, “of worth.”

“The eldest of his three, Karenina, refused. ‘I am my mother’s daughter,’ she said, ‘though I’m honoured by your offer, sir. My place is in healing, in medicine, beside my future husband and family.’ In a matter of months, she was due to marry Jason Firat, the eldest of Julius’ brood.”

Ed snorted somewhat inelegantly into his food. Of course she would marry a Firat. Central became ever smaller and more insular the more he discovered its history. One would think there would be enough people to go around, but apparently not so.

“The second son, ah. I’ve told you about him,” Roy reclined, stirring his latte idly round and round. “He saw me briefly at the symposium. Karl Islenhov is his name.”

Ed blinked. “The Venom Alchemist!” Roy and Hughes had talked at length about the visit, though Ed had not noticed him in the crowd himself. *Smaller and smaller*, he thought. The world was a strange place.

“Yes, the Venom Alchemist, my comrade in Ishbal. He too refused, citing the vast gap and
numerous differences between his own style and his father’s alchemy. He was already in his twenties and well-established in his style by this time. And he was always proud of his own work, though in a quiet manner; he would not have taken well to being handed alchemy for free — it would not have been his, and it would not have been right. Strong moral principles, that man. And his alchemy does model itself more after a branch of his mother’s line of medicine. Cellular pathology specific to toxins instead of live pathogens — fascinating work.”

Swallowing his bite of chicken before Roy detracted himself, Ed prompted, “So the youngest got it.”

“That he did, and not without a show of brilliant alchemy too,” Roy nodded. “Kanon went to investigate the trunk and took a close look at the array — a classic Lindbergh lock, S1 class permutation — beautifully hand-carved with painstaking precision on the surface of the trunk’s lid. Except to the astonishment of his siblings and the Firats, he got up, took a penknife, and cut his palm open with its blade.”

Ed looked up from his food to search Roy’s face. “Are you saying that the lock…”

“A Pravese lock, a Blood Ward, was used on the trunk, exactly.” Leaning forward, Roy continued in eager tones, “Sir Lindbergh had used his own blood to draw the Pravese lock on the trunk when he had it first made; that initial circle would have absorbed into the material and long disappeared. Then he constructed a classic Lindbergh lock, with a prompt script that read: I open only for the blood of the worthy. Now, you’ve studied Lindbergh locks, you know how they work with scripts.”

“Right, right,” nodded Ed, “each Lindbergh lock is unique with a specialised prompt and keyscript. The lock spells out a ‘prompt’ — a question — and is primed to recognise only the correct ‘keyscript,’ like a password. So the alchemist would need to write out the exact script that spells out the exact password — he’d have to either memorise how to write it, or be proficient enough in scriptwork to be able to understand the question and translate the answer into the keyscript.”

He distinctly recalled Izumi’s script exercises, whole afternoons of communicating with nothing but scripts. Scripts were essentially glyphs (alchemical symbols) grouped together to spell out commands or form ‘words’ that were ‘intelligible’ to the energy. He and Al had long wondered precisely how the energy could read the glyphs and scripts, but now they knew: there exists a Gate.

Roy continued. “Well, the Pravese lock is somewhat similar: the alchemist who seals the container has to leave some sort of hint about the presence of a Pravese lock. Remember, the Pravese array is drawn by blood which disappears after it’s activated. Unless the sealer leaves a clue, the opener has no way of knowing that this container has a lock upon it.”

“Except if they try opening it by alchemy — then the container would do what Hohenheim’s box would have done and blow up in their face.” Ed was still dubious about that. What if he hadn’t stopped the reaction fast enough? Hohenheim became a shittier parent with every passing day.

“The most common forms of hints were either riddles or carefully worded verses of poetry, like Hohenheim’s clue — ‘Blood of the truth, blood of my blood…’ — which is partly how I knew that his box was sealed with a Blood Ward.”

“…so Lindbergh hid the hint to the hidden Pravese lock, in script form, inside a fake Lindbergh lock?” Ed echoed in disbelief. “Roy, the old man beats you in paranoia!”

“It is not paranoia if they really are out to get you,” Roy sniffed. “In any case. Kanon read and understood the script on the trunk’s lid upon sight. I open only for the blood of the worthy, it said. Perhaps not so much paranoid as he was meritocratic, old Sir Lindbergh was. And for good reason: his research is highly sought after. It should only fall into the hands of worthy alchemists.”
“Worthy alchemists being those who can crack the trick trunk by being highly versed in script,” Ed concluded. “Fascinating. So this Kanon Islenhov is a friend of yours?” Scriptwork was a delicate and oft underappreciated art with the most unfortunate tendency of being painfully vague, and imprecise in its relativity. Ed would very dearly like to meet an alchemist who specialised in it — a rare and most coveted specimen to be sure.

“He is,” Roy confirmed, “and unless he has other more pressing engagements, which I do highly doubt, he will be in attendance at the Ball.”

Suddenly the prospect of being paraded in front of important people did not seem so deathly grim. The promise of having at least another proper conversant apart from Roy and Hughes eased the tight ball of anxiety in his chest. –that feeling of unrest came at a strange time, he noted; he was never one to shy from crowds and prying eyes, and never encountered the same sensation during the symposium.

…perhaps, he thought, now that other concerns (Izumi; Trisha) were laid to rest, freeing him to truly commit to this new world, he began to grasp the enormity of all of it.

I’m going to be a State Alchemist. And all of this is working towards that.

He sucked at the winter air, letting it whistle past his teeth to fill his chest with smoke and the scent of roasting coffee beans and the sweet taste of subtle static warning of impending snow. The clouds above were gathering in substance: soon the city would be submerged in white.

“Roy.”

“Yes, Edward.”

“Will you really be able to keep me from war?” Ed wrapped his hands around his mug. Roy’s eyes were intent on him, twin dark pools shining in the limpid sunlight. “If I become licensed,” he began, “I’d be the youngest licensed ever. Do you think that’s enough to keep them from deploying me?”

“It certainly helps,” Roy responded in honest kind. The sidewalk café was beginning to empty as the lunch hour drew to a close. “If you desist from any overt show of combat expertise… if you are careful with the direction of your research…” the man released a windy sigh. “I can give few guarantees, Ed; politics offers few guarantees. Best we can do is anticipate and adapt. The one thing that I can guarantee you, however, is that if ever another battlefield arose and Amestris needed its alchemists for war, I would be deployed first, not you. My specific skill set is useful on the field, you know. Saves a lot of manpower and money having me on the front line demolishing enemy ranks with a snap. Hopefully, if that time comes, I’m enough.”

Ed thought.

“But even you have to sleep at night.”

Roy was smiling; Ed could not. Sacrifice was the taste of his own tears and his brother’s blood on his hands, in his mouth. It was a warm taste, and all too familiar.

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But there are forces that don’t let you turn back and undo things, because to do so would be to deny what is already in motion, to rewrite and erase passages, to shorten the arc of a story you don’t own.

( Salvador Plascencia )
Time coursed quick as a brook after Izumi left. Life in Central returned to its previous routine. A noticeable weight, though, was lifted from Ed’s heart, allowing him to truly begin to enjoy the good fortune bequeathed to him through his association with Roy. It was during this time that he discovered the existence of a basement in the house — “Really now, Edward!” — he had somehow remained ignorant of it for the past two months.

The basement, situated alongside the wine cellar, was nothing more than a vast empty space. Rectangular in shape, it looked to span the house’s whole length. Thick round pillars supported the house’s framework, being the only interruptions in the blank sight. To Ed’s great relief, it was much unlike the basement in Resembool as this one gaped in height as much as it did in breadth. The high ceiling alleviated the tomblike sensation of being underground.

“You’re welcome to set up a laboratory here if you need one,” Roy bid, descending the spiral stair with him into the wine cellar to go through the basement’s side door. He had fetched wine bottles for Roy in the past but he had never noticed this door; perhaps it was meant to be that way. “I did intend for this place to be space for experimentation, though as you can see, I’ve never gotten around to it.” The Bastard was a busy Bastard.

Maybe later, Edward thought, when I have something to experiment about. Taking his brother’s advice, he had begun keeping more organized journals of his thoughts, all with the heavy knowledge that his planning would play good parts in securing his research grants as a State Alchemist. He had to have direction if he did not want to be directed. This meant shedding his magpie behaviour by fortifying his restraint: challenge accepted.

His mettle was immediately put to test, as if the Bastard could somehow sense his resolution. On a rainy Saturday morning, as the past week’s murky snow was washed from Central’s stones and streets, Roy and Hughes sat with him in the library for a long and vital introduction to the persons of Central’s high society.

“Do I have to?” he whined, slouching into his couch.

Roy only raised a brow.

“Well, if you don’t, you run the great risk of committing some terrible faux pas, and that’s never a good way to start building relationships,” Hughes pointed out. “The more you know about them in advance, the easier you can inveigle them into your arms.”

“I’m not Roy,” Ed crossed his arms, “but I’ll pretend you have me convinced. How exactly do you propose to educate me about everyone attending? You can’t possibly want me to memorise a list of names and occupations?”

“On the contrary.” Before him, Roy set a thin sheaf of papers crawling with prolific family trees with detailed notes and charts. “You won’t need to know about everyone; the important figures will suffice.”

Ed stared at the papers in disbelief. “Is it even possible to know this many people?” He picked at the papers with a hand, as if to reassure himself that they were real.

“You need not know them, Edward; you must only recognise them.”

“…right. I can get away with no names as long as I connect their titles with their ugly mug.”

Hughes chortled. “Well, the ones we’re starting with are not what I’d call ugly. These families are
the **paragon** of unfairly flawless genetics, if you ask me.” Spreading out the first three pages, Hughes displayed relatively small family trees: the Armstrongs, the Firats, the Steinbergs, and the Weisses.

“You’ve already met the Armstrongs,” began Roy, “so tell me what you can recall.”

“Er. Old man Lucas Armstrong married scary lady Evelyn Amsel-Armstrong, and she birthed even scarier lady general Mira and kinda weird but kinda nice Major Alex? Oh. And girl who couldn’t stay awake at the symposium, whatsername…”

“Edward, names are **important**,” chastised Roy, relinquishing his cuppa and tapping the family tree with a finger. “You have to show them that you regard them important enough to remember their names.”

“But I don’t!”

“Then pretend.”

Ed sighed. *Can you do this for me?*

**Will you pay?** the Gate crooned.

*Never mind.* Ed turned his attention to the trees: Roy was gearing for a walk-through for each family. As Roy named a person, Hughes set down a corresponding photo. (Ed noted the strange angles. He knew a stalker’s vantage point when he saw it.)

“Lucas Olivier Armstrong: only child, head of the family, retired General, prominent politician. He served the military for over forty years: sponsored many alchemists (no need to memorise all of them, though). Hailed as the Defender of West City during our last active conflict with Drachma when they tried to take the gap of Westgate through the Spinestail — could have been a successful invasion if not for the old General. After that, he climbed the ladder and held the Headship of State Affairs here in Central.”

Ed pretended he knew what that meant.

“He married his wife from the Amsel line and they’ve been together for thirty years. You recall the story of the Amsels and this house, yes? Good. Well, she is an astute businesswoman and handles an equal amount of management power over the Armstrong estate with her husband. For the most part, she busies herself with their various financial concerns while Sir Armstrong weaves webs of power across Amestris. They make quite a pair.”

No one could argue with that description. Ed still recalled, in quite vivid detail, the respect and authority the husband and wife commanded with an ease that was better suited to breathing.

“The three children are Mira Olivier Armstrong who is eldest and a Brigadier General in service of Major General Hunter in the North. She’s soon to be a Major General herself, and is quite accomplished in combat, politics, business, and command. Yet unmarried, despite her mother’s best efforts—“

“She must be a pain to find a husband for…”

“Roy’s one of the strongest candidates, if you must know!”

“I mustn’t! Too much information!”

“Maes, please. She’s too old for me, not to mention frigid —“
“She’s only three years older than you!”

“Hence ancient, and frigid —“

“Best way to think of her is a female version of Roy, Ed, minus the alchemy.”

“And you’re trying to get them together?” Ed gaped in horror. “But that would mean he’s marrying himself! He’s already narcissistic enough as it is! Why would you do that??”

Hughes cackled in delight while Roy rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I am not marrying her,” the man firmly declared. “Now, moving on.”

Alex Louis Armstrong was nowhere near his elder sister’s achievements, hence a less interesting personality. His one redeeming quality was his kind heart, which Ed considered a necessary and fortunate asset to possess for an alchemist. Last of the brood was Catherine (yes, that’s her name!), young and innocent and very carefree indeed. The family’s princess was every inch a girl where Mira never was and never will be; as such, she had a close affinity to the Armstrong matriarch, with whom she reportedly spent a lot of her time. Catherine, all of fifteen years, was betrothed to Joseph Firat, also the youngest of the Firat brood.

“Now, the Firats are a different class of personalities altogether,” Roy continued. “The Armstrongs are by trade warriors and leaders, but the Firats are healers and scholars. Such is the way they’ve always been. They, along with the Steinbergs, Armstrongs, and Rens, are the four oldest bloodlines still true and intact in Amestris today. Make no mistake, they are good people, and very kind, but they tend to be more isolated, less involved, than the Armstrongs — not for any trivial reason but for their profession. The entire family is made up of doctors and future doctors.”

Ed nodded. He was familiar with the name. “They own the Firat Academy of Medicine, don’t they.” It was only the most prestigious medical academy in the whole of the continent!

“They don’t just own it, Ed, they founded it hundreds of years ago. They say the Firats were the healers of Friedrich’s army — and later his court — during the establishment of our country. Even back then, they were already the best at what they do. That is what you call pedigree,” Hughes declared.

“If it’s pedigree we’re talking, the Armstrongs have a leg up on them: they’re descended from Friedrich himself.” Roy spread his hand over the second tree on the table. “But the Firats are just as old and just as influential. Very busy people; no nonsense approach to life. You’d like them, I think,” he said to Ed.

Roy went on to enumerate each of the Firat brood and their numerous accomplishments, details that would walk with Ed into bed. The stories of Central’s families were long and colourful. Faces and feats blurred together in his head until at last they melted into flat grey noise that eventually lulled him to sleep. In those hazy depths, he dreamed of Hohenheim’s voice for the first time in many years.

When he woke, he opened Hohenheim’s booklet and began to read.

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What a treacherous thing, to believe that a person is more than a person.
( John Green, Paper Towns )
Hohenheim knew many people. Ed was a little shy of astonished. Pinako and Trisha certainly never spoke much of what Hohenheim was like, or what he did before happening upon his wife-to-be in the quiet idyll of Resembool, but the manner in which they all referred to life in the countryside (*quiet, peaceful, idyllic, removed*) suggested a lifestyle otherwise tumultuous and fraught with peril.

*What is he running from? Where did he come from? Where is he going?* So many questions, so many mysteries Ed had about his father, and all of them futile, unyielding as a barren desert.

Some of the people in the booklet Ed found in Roy’s charts and trees. They were alarmingly prominent persons: Marius Firat, father to Julius Firat, deceased; Lady Shan of Ren, great-grandmother and matriarch of the old family; Generals Gardner, Grumman, Raven, and Ivan; Lieutenant General Jeager and Adler; State Alchemists Nash Tringham, Albert Schrum, and the late Robert Mahler —

Ed began to wonder. *Hohenheim, who are you?*

Here we begin to ask the relevant questions, the Gate grinned, humming happily in his head. But that was as much as Ed got. The Gate remained unhelpful.

After lunch, he doggedly peppered Roy with questions as they drove to the tailor to fit the finished clothes. “Is it normal,” he asked with more than just a little scepticism, “for a person so reportedly uninvolved with the military to be so well-connected? He had to have had reasons to be acquainted with all these people beyond being an exceptional alchemist! Surely there are exceptional alchemists disconnected with the military. Izumi’s not in the military!”

“Rest assured the military is aware of her existence and practice, Edward, as it is aware of most alchemists of any worth or talent in this country. But to reorient your queries, Hohenheim was well-connected to such a degree because of his alchemical proficiency. Often he would provide counsel to younger alchemists, some even licensed by the State; he was never published to my knowledge, but certainly influenced enough salon and dinner table discussions to be a household name to those who were. Whenever he was in need of money, he would either tutor children of well-known alchemists or prominent families; he would offer his services as an assistant researcher, or peer reviewer, or relic appraiser; occasionally, he was even known to be an alchemical healer. He’s held a variety of occupations just in his handful of years at Berthold’s place with us.”

“But,” Ed haltingly murmured, “but — wouldn’t that mean some of the people we’ll meet might recognise me as his son? I — that is, everyone says I look a lot like him…”

Roy ushered him into the tailor’s shop and nodded. “Some might draw the conclusions, yes. Some already have. The important thing is for you to be careful of what you say. Keep quiet about your family situation to keep them away from your mother and brother.” A pensive look crossed the man’s face, the indoor gloom throwing dark lines and shadows upon his outline. “I had initially warned my company not to talk too much about you and whatever little they might know of your origins as a general precaution. This was when you were convinced against being licensed. I knew that if any of the top brass had heard about a son of Hohenheim, they would have cornered you into a contract, and that experience is not a pleasant one, mark my words. Now, though,” Roy turned to him with a crooked smile, “well.”

“Now we want them to pay attention,” Ed nodded, shoulders sagging a tad. He fiddled idly with his jacket’s cuff. If favour fell on his side, he would not be measured against Hohenheim’s reputation.
The booklet had no stories to offer on what sort of alchemy his father practised, not even a wandering hint of a minor goal or past achievement. It was frustrating, but he supposed it was a good thing. If people began to ask questions, he would have no clue.

“I wouldn’t fret about it too much,” Roy assuaged. “Though there are many secrets surrounding your father, he is without doubt a good man with a good heart.”

Ed’s face scrunched up in instinctive distaste. “What does that even mean?”

He was met with a warm chuckle. “I see you’ve taken well to your philosophy readings. Well, to put it crudely, consider that he is a man your good mother consented to marry.”

Ed remained unconvincing. “Love turns people’s brains into some strange gelatinous substance, from what I’ve seen and heard.” That coaxed laughter from the Bastard just as Ed began to shrug out of his jacket and shirt. “We’re not wearing a suit this time?” he noted with some curiosity. The trousers, shirt, and waistcoat were part of the course, but this time the coat handed to him sported a pair of tapered tails.

“No; this time we are in coattails,” Roy declared. He stood behind Ed and smoothed both hands across the coat’s shoulders. “A perfect fit as always, Anthony, thank you.”

Anthony looked well-pleased at his prized patron’s satisfaction. “Should we taper the waist closer, sir?”

Roy motioned for Ed to turn side to side and raise his arms, observing the fit and flow of the fabric with each motion. “No, this is perfect. Just enough space for mobility without losing form. Let’s try the cravat with it.”

Cravats, Ed found, were far easier to befriend than those neck ties (noose!) and bow ties (glorified collar!). True to Roy’s word, the golden silk made an elegant partner to the classic lines of his black waistcoat and overcoat with its coattails. Roy tucked a matching gold kerchief into his breast pocket, folding to make a small triangle: the finishing touch.

“There,” Roy smiled, settling a hand on his shoulder and looking with him into the mirror. “Scholarly, dashing, and handsome. You’ll be the evening’s golden star.”

Ed, shockingly, had to agree. The young man gazing back at him was at once both familiar and foreign. Those were his eyes, his face, his features — but he saw more confidence than he felt, and more calm than he knew. The cant of his jaw spoke of a quiet sort of determination; his shoulders were held with a lighter weight. And his eyes — they were focussed. Though his troubles were far from nonexistent and more challenges were waiting ahead, he was certain of his goals and the purposes behind them. For the first time in a long time, he was at peace with himself.

_I do this for myself_, he thought, unbidden. _For myself, because I want it._

“See someone you don’t know?” said Roy, drawing away to sign the receipt.

“Just someone I haven’t seen in a while,” Ed smiled, gingerly removing the coat. He handed it to the assistant and, on a whim, plucked a cravat from a tray of samples. “You should get this,” he held it up to Roy.

The cravat in question was of exquisitely crafted silk, Xingese in origin, dyed the blue of a deepening winter night. Minuscule waves were hand-woven into the fabric, a pattern that gave it dimension and shade. Against Roy’s dark colouring and pale skin, it made a most aristocratic design.
Roy examined the piece. “A fine choice, Ed. We will make a connoisseur of you yet.”

I do not pray for a lighter load, but for a stronger back. 
(Phillips Brooks)

On the day of the Ball, it began to snow. The flakes were soft and fat, melting quickly upon contact with Ed’s flesh hand. He held out his automail hand instead. They soundlessly sailed closer from the ashen skies, meandering to and fro with a delicate cadence. He stood in the backyard in mute wonder as the world was doused in white. Eventually, though, the cold grew too bitter to bear.

It was noon when the snow began to fall and mid-afternoon when he settled back inside. A long soak in steaming bathwater loosened the stiffness in his neck and shoulders, followed by a generously sweetened mug of hot chocolate to secure his good mood. For a few hours, the only sound inside the house was the ponderous crackling of the hearth and the muffled hourly chime of the clock. Dog was curled around his side when Roy returned home at last.

He was roused from his reading and fed a quick, small dinner before they both retired upstairs to dress. Ed had learned from Roy that it was best to eat a light meal before such events not only to provide them energy but to avoid overeating during the event. Primary amongst the night’s objectives was to socialise with people, and it would be a poor use of such a singular opportunity if they were to waste all their time socialising with the menu instead.

Washed, powdered, dressed, and buttoned, Ed crossed the hallway to Roy’s rooms, presenting himself to be checked once over — “Very good, Ed” — before he offered the man his hairtie. “I’m afraid to crease the coat,” he explained, facing about and allowing Roy to take a brush to his hair. It took quick, practised movements to pull his hair into a high and angled tie. Ed had to ask. “Did you ever have long hair?”

Roy huffed in amusement. “Never. Berthold refused a haggard apprentice. When I began to grow a beard, he demanded that I immediately learn to shave myself, or he would do it for me, slit my throat by accident, and would not be blamed for his actions. I had to get Hohenheim to teach me. Fortunate that he was there then.” The Bastard read the change in his face at once and asked, “Did he never teach you anything before he left?”

Ed’s lips quirked. “He did, actually. Quite a bit. I remember most of them only vaguely — I was very young. Don’t know exactly how old, but certainly old enough to wield chalk to good effect. He was teaching me a glyph at one time.”

Äld, Hohenheim had directed, tracing the glyph on the floor.

Äld, little Ed had repeated, hands tiny in his father’s steady guiding grip. Funny letter, he had giggled then as he was nestled into his father’s warmth. Circle inside a circle inside a circle!

It means ‘to begin,’ Hohenheim had said, and ‘to begin’ means ‘to end.’

Äld, little Ed had repeated once more, taking the chalk and copying his first glyph on their basement floor. Äld.
“There,” Roy relinquished the hairbrush. “A perfect young gentleman.”

Ed observed the man’s handiwork and gave a snort. “So if you’ve never had long hair, how are you so good at this? You must have had practise somewhere.” He followed Roy into the bathroom and watched as the finishing touches were applied to the man’s own ensemble.

“My once forever paramour and now no more,” Roy explained, nonchalant. “She had long, luscious hair. Dark and rich as warmth earth, soft and light as the wind. She would have me comb it into ties or buns. She would never let me braid it, though; apparently my braids were uneven.”

Ed could only blink. “…what happened?”

Roy swiftly slipped into his own coat and tugged the folds into their place. “She broke my heart.”

By their feet, Dog gave a quiet wuffle. Ed agreed with Dog and said, “Don’t worry about it; her loss.”

The Bastard snickered in amusement. “Indeed, Edward. But I’m surprised you aren’t hounding for details.”

“I was headed there next, thanks for making it easier. But I thought I’d be nice and stroke your wounded ego first.” Snickers erupted into proper laughter. “There’s definitely a story there, though. I’d be lying if I denied my curiosity.”

“Edward, I doubt your curiosity can be denied.” More laughter as they retrieved the car keys, a pen, a pocket notepad, their thick winter coats, and the house keys.

“There you are! I thought I heard happy noises,” Hughes bid from the back stairs. “Pick up the pace, gentlemen! It wouldn’t do to be late!”

Downstairs, Gracia stood in wait, radiant in her rose blush square-necked silk dress. Roy would later inform him that it was made of Erithrese silk instead of Xingese, being slightly thicker, warmer, and therefore more suited to colder clime. A sash one shade darker than the dress wound about her swollen belly, allowing the soft layers of silk to cascade freely around her frame. The skirts were cut in staggered layers of silk and hemmed with intricate hand-embroidered swirls. She wore simple heeled black shoes and was in the process of pulling on silken black long gloves when they descended. Hughes hustled over to help her into her coat, after which she adjusted her auburn curls above her collar.

“I do believe Edward is stunned speechless by your radiance, my lady.” Roy, ever the charmer, brushed a kiss over the back of Gracia’s hand. His comment earned an approving nod from Hughes and a mild chuckled from the lady herself.

“No — it’s — I — you’re — pretty,” Ed finished lamely. A mild flush crawled up his neck.

But Gracia took a hand to his cheek and smiled. “Thank you, Ed.” And then, with a sly light in her eyes, “You’re quite the dapper young man yourself. The young ladies will find themselves quite occupied, I think!”

This time, a full flush bloomed beneath his skin, effectively warming him as they stepped out, locked the doors, and trekked to the garage. Hughes was driving to the event; Roy would drive back home.

Once they were on their way, Roy handed him his invitation with a gravity and reverence more
befitting the surrender of a crown or a sack of gold. Ordinarily he would have been invited as Roy’s
ward in the same manner children were invited as their parents’ responsibility. But he had apparently
made such a remarkable impression on the Armstrongs that the old General and his wife had asked
the Steinbergs to procure for him an invitation specific and exclusive. He was being welcomed as his
own person—as an alchemist of individual worth and potential.

“I still don’t understand why you couldn’t just let him come as your ward, you know,” Hughes
commented from behind the wheel. “It’s not so bad being a father. Seriously. He’s good for you!
Ask Gracia, she’ll tell you. You enjoy life more! I don’t know why you’d want to deny that. You
were just laughing about something when I came up to get you —“

“It’s not that I don’t want to acknowledge Edward; it’s that he needs to be acknowledged on his
own,” sighed Roy, “and we weren’t exactly laughing about a laughing matter earlier. Ed cracked a
smart-aleck comment about Regina.”

There was a thick pause.

“Oh,” Hughes responded with some weight. “And what brought this on?”

“I was asking how he got so good at grooming long hair,” Ed pushed, leaning forward in his seat,
“and Roy mentioned a heartbeat. A heartbeat, Hughes — somebody broke the Bastard’s stone
heart! And I thought everyone wanted a piece of it. Or is that why? I’m curious.”

Hughes cackled, more at Roy than at Ed. “Of course you are! Well, Roy? Your boy’s asking for the
story of Regina, the girl who stole away into the night with Roy Mustang’s young and fragile heart!”
and then, in a mock-whisper, “I’m warning you, Ed: you’ll want to strangle the life out of her. She’s
a right witch.”

“Maes,” Gracia reprimanded.

“Right, yes, love, language and young innocents, sorry.”

They deftly navigated a turn and emerged at the beating heart of the Historic District. East 3rd was
little dampened by the thickening carpet of snow, it seemed, for people still lined the streets on either
side. The pavement shone like silver ahead, slick with moisture but not enough of it to pool on
corners. Hughes went at a confident speed.

“There’s really not much to tell outside your ordinary tragic teenage love affair,” Roy sighed as Ed
and Hughes both allowed the expectant silence to fester with awkward tension. “I met her while I
was staying at Berthold’s. She was of a fairly well-to-do family, somewhat prominent in the region.
Cotton farms. So she grew up in relative comfort and luxury, though it was outside of Central. We
met at a festival where she first approached me. Said I was different from the other boys she knew. I
told her it was likely because I was a few years younger and lacked the pedigree and wealth
necessary to transmogrify me into an unjustified arrogant arse. She didn’t care. We were friends, then
we were lovers. Then she broke my heart.”

Something about the casual tone with which Roy spoke of her struck a chord in Ed. Far from being
dishonest, Roy truly did seem to care little and think none of it anymore. It was but a story of the past
to the man. But pain, when visceral and tremendous, left its mark upon its victim, a mark quite
impossible to disguise. Ed heard it in Roy’s uncaring voice, knew it because he had undergone the
same himself. Roy had recovered, strong of will as he was, but Regina wrought in him great grief all
those years ago. Ed could tell.

“Will she be here tonight, d’you reckon?” Hughes asked. Ed blinked.
Roy shrugged. “Likely. Her husband’s family is one of the Armstrong’s business associates. That’s enough to warrant an invitation, even though they’re not very close. They have tradition.”

“Wait, wait. She’s here? That Regina lady?”

Hughes grinned through the rearview mirror. “She is! We see her every year. Quite the drama, don’t you think?”

Ed had to agree. “So… let me guess. She was already married off to this other guy and never told you?”

Roy smiled. “I did warn you that it’s little more than your ordinary teenage tragedy. She was engaged all along and I never knew. Never even suspected. How could I? I didn’t revolve in her society back then; I knew little of how her world worked. Her engagement, like most others, was a long-standing engagement between the two families: her husband’s business is in textile production. You can imagine how it was a most fruitful and practical union. I only found out by chance when I was visiting Central with Berthold. She’d mentioned having to attend a wedding at one of the city parks on the very same day; what she never mentioned was that it was her own. Likely she never expected that I’d have any reason to be in Central. I decided to surprise her, but got surprised instead. Sometimes I still wonder if she ever planned on telling me at all.”

Ed could see it in his mind’s eye, a vivid and beautiful scene. Regina resplendent in her white dress, crowned with flowers, perhaps barefoot in the grass, naked sun in her brown hair… and Roy, he would have stood in the distance, frozen in disbelief. It was potent enough for a novel.

“Anyway, I left for war shortly after that. Finished the Academy and got licensed; started my career at the end of that relationship. Ends are beginnings, so Berthold always said. And there’s nothing like the suffering of the world to detract me from my own misery. Forgetting her worked like a charm.”

Silence reigned inside the car for some minutes, all of them watching the passing scenery outside. They were almost at Central Plaza: the First Library’s gorgeous exterior loomed large and shadowy a little ahead.

After a while more, Ed huffed and crossed his arms. “Well, she must be ruing her own hypocrisy now. If she’s as status-conscious as you say, I mean. You’re at a higher standing than her husband, aren’t you? So there, in her face.”

Hughes and Roy both burst into laughter, much to Ed’s irritation. It was true! She could not give up her family for someone she allegedly loved, which spoke of her priorities clear and simple. She did not marry out of duty; no dutiful daughter would fool around with someone else all the while finalising an arranged marriage on the side. She married because she could not bear the stigma she would have to endure if she abandoned her family and name — as much as she could not bear the prospect of losing the life of comfort and stability that she enjoyed as the daughter of an old business family. Young Roy had little to offer in the way of material things back then.

They circumnavigated the roundabout one-way path winding around Central Plaza and slowly turned into South 4th. Central Park stood mostly leafless and frozen around them as they drove. Ahead was the National Theatre, where the Ball was being held to ensure adequate space. Before them in a neat line were stately black cars, all of them faces turned toward the same place.

“Does the theatre accommodate the Ball every year?” Ed asked. “How does everyone fit?”
“There’s two large ballrooms and plenty of adjacent halls inside, apart from the main theatre itself,” Gracia explained. “And whenever the Armstrongs are hosting, they hold the Ball at their residence instead. They have enough space, but I think they’re the only ones who do.”

“Not quite, honey; there are the Bohms. Their place is larger.”

“Than the Armstrongs?!” Who are these people to have one over the Armstrongs?

“What they have in size, they lack in finesse.” Roy was quite clearly not an ardent admirer of this Bohm family. “Their architecture and interior design—absolutely tasteless. Horrid furniture, at that. No congruence to speak of. No class whatsoever.”

Ed winced at the acid disdain in Roy’s words. Who are these people to deserve that much dislike from Roy?

“Best not to let them hear that, my friend,” Hughes warned as they finally pulled into the driveway.

“Which is why I’m letting it out now,” the Bastard murmured as they stepped out and arranged themselves. Other guests were making a trail of footsteps in the snow, a wet dark line leading up to the front steps of the theatre. The structure was surely gorgeous by day, but tonight it took elegance to a higher level, soft yellow lights making its ivory façade seem illuminated from within. The lighting was angled just so to give the spectator an illusion of gold. Circulating about the driveway as a small army of attendants, guards, and valets, every last one of them impeccably attired in their livery. Hughes relinquished their spare keys to one before they stepped inside.

First among the things Ed noticed was the honey-rich energy humming against his keen alchemical senses when they came into the entrance hall. Alchemical temperature control, he knew at once, though how he could identify it, he had no idea. Gracia helped him out of his overcoat and straightened his dress coat with small and practised movements. Ed stood straight and still for her, but his eyes meandered about, taking quick note of his surroundings with more than a little awe. Roy and Hughes were both removing their overcoats as well when Ed noticed a certain stiffness — tension — in Roy’s shoulders.

“Are you ready, Ed?” Gracia asked him, her soft brown eyes steady and warm.

Her question was simple, but Ed took a second to respond — he could hear Roy’s voice lurking behind her words, heavy with meaning. Ultimately you will face a decision no one else can make for you: do you want to be in this kind of life? Because if you don’t, you need to escape before it takes you over.

Ed looked to the tall white doors panelled and lined with artful hand-carved designs denoting the rich hidden life of Amestris’ Society. What lay beyond was a battlefield of immense magnitude, Ed knew, and this was Roy and Hughes preparing for battle. A different sort of battle from Ishbal, with words for bullets and titles for shields — a different sort, but just as deadly. It was little wonder Roy was tense.

“Ed? Everything okay?” Gracia pushed a stray lock of his hair out of his eyes. “A little overwhelmed, maybe? Perfectly normal. I was too, at first.”

Of course. She had a handful of years now attending these functions with Hughes, but she wasn’t born into this lifestyle. There was a time before she was Mrs. Hughes, a relatively simpler time before she had such obligations.

And why would any sane and reasonable soul subject itself to this particularly tedious and public sort
of masochism? Well, Gracia’s reason was close at hand. Hughes — and Ed figured he ought to start calling him Maes henceforth — returned for his wife with a jovial smile.

“Shall we, my lady wife?” the man offered his arm.

Gracia slipped her hand into the crook of her husband’s elbow and stepped away. But not before telling him, with a knowing little smile, “They are only as intimidating as you allow them to be, Ed.”

With naught but a breath, they strode away, together the picture of warm elegance, visibly full of love. Maes was chuckling at something already — Maes was always amused as a matter of course. Ed was then left with Roy, who eyed him up and down before donning a sharp smile.

There were no words. Ed understood the unspoken question. This was it — there would be no undoing after this. Everybody of importance and power would know his name and his face, would have talked to him and acquired an impression by the end of the night. This was his last true chance to retreat to his quiet world of simple alchemy, with his brother and master — except — except the last true chance isn’t this at all, he thought. The last true chance was that night, when Al tried to stop me from putting my hand to that circle. That was the last true chance.

After that, everything was different. Ed looked around him now and saw the change. Alchemy ceased its pretense of simplicity: the veil was torn from their eyes, from his eyes. This decision wasn’t hard at all; it was already made long ago.

Roy must have seen something shift on his face then: the man gave a firm nod, turned to the white doors, and lifted his head. Ed followed suit. They handed their invitation to an attendant at the door, and from this shortened distance Ed could hear it, the low muted hum of active conversation on the other side, under the light tinkle of glassware and china —

Gate give me strength; I mustn’t fail Roy. (The Gate grinned.)

Upon signal of a loud voice, the white doors opened: “Colonel Roy Mustang, the Flame Alchemist, with Edward Elric, alchemist and friend of the Armstrong family!”

By grace of sheer will, Ed did not jump. A most fortunate show of composure, for before them was a small sea of upturned faces expectantly eyeing their entrance. Ed fell into a half-step behind and beside Roy, descending the sweeping grand staircase and somehow managing not to trip. It was a minute movement but the crowd lapped forward to greet them at the foot of the stairs — with the approaching prospect of mingling with people came rushing forth all of Roy’s painful training in etiquette and presentation.

“Colonel Mustang! It has been far too long!”
“Colonel Mustang, as always it is an honour…”
“Ah, Colonel, come, you must meet my daughter…”
“My good man, finally! Why, all the ladies were beginning to wonder!”

Ed stood by Roy’s side and bore through it all. The straight and immaculate line of his shoulders never fell. His hands he kept clasped behind his back to avoid misplacing them. And, most important of all, the attentive but neutral mask never once slipped from its perch upon his face. It was, by universal standards, a distinct improvement from the last time he was before Society, when he had panned away to hug the walls instead of facing the circus and its music.

“There you are, Colonel Mustang, fashionably late as usual,” except we are perfectly on time! thought Ed—and here came old Lord Armstrong, parting the sea with the resonating clap of his voice. On his arm was perched his youngest daughter (her name is Catherine, came a sibilant
reminder from the Gate) looking shy and something of a child.

But a lovely child, for certain, the Gate prompted — so when Roy finished exchanging greetings and it came upon him to speak, he gave Lord Armstrong his hand to shake and a confident smile on top. “Good evening, sir, and thank you for your kind invitation — I’m very honoured. My lady, you are as lovely as ever.”

Catherine blushed prettily; Lord Armstrong erupted into a delighted laugh. “Upon my word, Mustang! Mere weeks with you and the young man transforms into quite the charmer! Well met, Mr. Elric, well met indeed. Why, you’ve made my daughter blush!”

Mustang gave him an openly approving smile just as one of the men nearby remarked with a chuckle, “It must be in the air. Living with the Roy Mustang will have exposed him to such density of daily charm that he has begun inhaling it into his young lungs. You must lend me some of this veritable power, Mustang; perhaps it’ll give me better luck with the ladies!”

But the man in question was handsomely built, with fair complexion and dark caramel eyes. What help? thought Ed. You need no help! Besides which, it’s not density of charm, it’s density of ego, thick enough to choke on. You don’t want no part of it, trust me.

“Such generous words — simply complement them like you just now did, Larsen, and they will know no escape.” Ed inwardly gaped at how Roy failed to even falter in search of a response. Ed would not have known how to answer that by himself, and so deftly too, and with such speed. Well, he had plenty to learn.

“Larsen, my young fellow, if you had any more help with the women, you will leave none for the unmarried men who need them and for your poor wife who needs her husband!” said Lord Armstrong with a pat on the arm. The gentleman shared a laugh at his own expense, which was a fine thing to mask the widening edge of Ed’s smile. I thought so. Roy’s data said you were married, you cheating little dandy. I hope your wife is nearby to hear it…

Catherine Armstrong is here to have heard it, said the Gate — oh. That had been a warning for her, from both Roy and her father. Otherwise, they would not have taken the conversation toward such a direction quite so willingly in polite company. She did look thoughtful now, perhaps considering the veiled warning. She was born into this; she should know how to pick them out.

Edward considered her for a moment and then looked back up at the blonde gentleman who had approached them. He wasn’t someone who looked or felt sinister in any way, but Ed was a beginner to the character of Society. Roy was what one would call a veteran, and yet he had misjudged Dr. Gerals. How much more for Ed, who had just gotten introduced to this world? If both Lord Armstrong and Roy Mustang thought that the girl was better off forewarned, then likely she was, never mind her seeming a bit young for such things in Ed’s eyes.

“Colonel Mustang!” and here came another bug — oh. Ed straightened a fraction. Not a bug at all.

Lord Steinberg approached them, tall and noble, towering over Lord Armstrong’s bulk. He was younger than the old General but carried himself with similar grace and assurance. His face was far gentler, though: the face of a man who has never weathered combat and survival. Lord Steinberg went straight for Roy and clapped him on the shoulder. “Dear old chap, it is good to see you! It has been far too long; I hope you’ll forgive us for missing your invitation — you had a more than satisfactory celebration even without us, yes? Good, good. My wife will want to greet you herself and apologize in person, I’m sure — a happy birthday to you, my friend, though my wishes are belated. And congratulations on your advancement. Colonel now! Hard to believe you’re only — what was it? — twenty-two!”
Roy smiled, of course, and murmured his gratitude, somehow managing to avoid looking awkward as he was showered praise by both lords. The old General remarked on his promotion as well: how it was past due, and well-deserved, and so forth. Ed knew the truth, though: Roy was not happy to have been promoted for killing his friend. Roy was only too practical to allow his own pride to get in the way of his ambition. Every inch closer was worth the pain and the struggle. Ed could admire that.

Perhaps it was due to these meandering thoughts, but for a second, his eyes slid away from the lords and Roy to settle on the man called Larsen. The gentleman had a lopsided smile on his face — still charming, still handsome — but quite obviously discomfited. (Or was it only obvious because Ed was particularly sensitive about people’s pretences?) He returned his attention to Roy: at complete ease, wearing a winsome smile that Ed knew to be a genuine one.

Perhaps that was it. Roy did not even have the slightest sign of tension or discomfort conversing with figures of power and influence, whereas even those who could be considered of higher status than a common military man (with only his personal titles and no weighted name) were acutely aware, and therefore acutely intimidated, by those large and looming figures.

Even the most talented socialites had difficulty commanding the seemingly near-universal good regard Roy enjoyed. No, Roy was not merely talented at politics — Roy had a gift for this, his own personal and oft undetected brand of genius. Just like how Ed could tell the makeup of a substance by touch and sight and smell, Roy could tell the workings of people with a few well-placed words in a conversation. The Bastard had the fortune of a pretty face, too, and a highly intelligent strategic mind, and determination to add to this knack of his: the result was an overwhelmingly flawless presence that Ed was only now beginning to appreciate.

And naturally, the Gate swished its tail, humans resent that which they cannot ever achieve. Ed’s eyes were drawn once more to Larsen, and then to Roy. He resisted the urge to release a hopeless sigh.

*Envy*, Ed thought, *is ugly.* (The Gate grinned. *That he is.*)

And Ed was no stranger to it. He was often lauded a genius himself. Even in Resembool, as a child, his presence had engendered stares of mixed admiration and scorn. The nicer children would not begrudge them, but would mutter words like, “That’s nice, I wish I could do that too,” or, “Good for you!” But the more vindictive ones would cleave to their wounded pride and shun the Elric brothers, the Alchemist’s children.

At that moment, a hand landed on his shoulder, but with a familiar weight and width. Ed did not startle and instead smoothly refocused his attention. “…haven’t introduced Edward yet, but here he is, Lord Steinberg. I know you’ve been most anxious to meet him.”

“Edward Elric, sir; an honour,” Ed shook the lord’s hand.

“Mr. Elric! Yes, yes. I’ve wanted so dearly to meet you! Why, Society is on fire about you! Lord Armstrong and the Colonel both have written me about you, and I am most intrigued by their words.”

Whatever the hell that meant! “Nothing too outrageous, I hope,” Ed replied, glancing up at Roy. “I know Roy is smitten with my alchemy but I wouldn’t want to disappoint.”

They chuckled, all three men, and Lord Steinberg remarked, “Mayhap I should send my son to you for his studies in culture and etiquette, Colonel. This young man here is all of eleven-and-a-half years old and already the paragon of correct conduct! You may be able to work a miracle my wife and I agree our son is in dire need of.”
Before Roy could respond, a booming voice announced the arrival of some more guests—ah, these ones highly anticipated for sure. “Lady Julia Firat and Brigadier-General Mira Armstrong!” They turned as one, and was met with quite a sight. The two women descended the stairs towards an adoring crowd, looking stunning indeed, except Ed could still see how Mira looked at all the nice young men in the crowd as if she could smell their stupid from Briggs Fortress. (Which she probably could. She was never going to get married, ever.)

“They sure know how to make an entrance,” Maes remarked from behind them, reappearing with his wife. Gracia was even lovelier under the soft golden light of the hall, which was surely engineered to bring forth the best and mute the worst features of any person. Not that Gracia had anything to hide. Ed still preferred her over everyone else.

Lord Armstrong rumbled appreciatively beside Ed, twinkling in delight at the sight of his eldest child. “How fast they grow. Look at her. Is she not perfect?”

Ed thought, she’s not six years old to be crooned over like that!

But Roy said, “Quite possible the single most gorgeous creature in this hall tonight, yes,” which engendered twin laughter from Maes and Larsen.

“Say that to her face, I dare you,” Maes challenged — to which Roy raised a delicate brow.

“It need not be a dare,” he said, and excused himself from Lords Steinberg and Armstrong, turning to where the ladies were surrounded by people. Ed watched his back recede.

After a moment, he said with a generous dose of horrified awe, “Roy enjoys this, doesn’t he?”

Maes smiled. “That is his secret.”

Where Mira and Julia were, surrounded by socialites who promptly parted at Roy’s approach, was a veritable buzz of excitement and talk. Ed could not hear them from this distance but Roy was saying something with a smile.

**Something very potent indeed,** remarked the Gate, as nearby ladies tittered and chuckled at his words. (Some younger ladies looked on the verge of fainting.) Then Roy pressed a kiss to Julia’s hand, which Julia allowed, and attempted to do the same for Mira, which she did not allow. Roy had her hand before she could react, but she exerted visible effort to push their joined hands down and away from Roy’s lips. Roy then said something (likely incendiary) and Ed watched as Mira’s temper burst; she wrenched her hand free of Roy’s grasp and aimed a slap at him. Roy dodged with a laugh; Julia only shook her head.

“You simply must marry them,” urged Lord Steinberg, stooping beside Lord Armstrong. “Look at them, my friend! I don’t believe there are many who can elicit such spark from your daughter, and there are even fewer among those who are worthy of the Armstrong family. What say you?”

“Mm,” Lord Armstrong watched Roy and Mira from this distance, perhaps seeing the potential fruits of such a union. Ed thought about it himself and shrugged. He liked the Armstongs: they were good people, hardworking, discerning, and intelligent. He could give his approval if it came to that.

“Well,” began Lord Armstrong, “I’ve tried many times to familiarise Mira to the idea of eventually settling down, but she is driven by her ambition and vision. That is my bloodline manifest in her. She balks at the very idea of surrendering her career to build a family.”

“A more politic approach might benefit you better in this situation.” When Lord Armstrong
responded with a grimace, Lord Steinberg hastily amended, “I know you have little love for political manoeuvres in matters of family, but what I am suggesting is a simple compromise. Perhaps there is no need for Mira to surrender her career for a life at home. They could both continue their military careers and raise a family together — with your help, it should be possible, no? They will certainly not be the first or only couple serving together in the military, though they might be the only one at such high rank. It isn’t a conservative model for family life, but surely for them an exception can be made.”

Lord Armstrong hemmed to himself for a few minutes, allowing Ed to notice that Catherine had gone to greet her sister with Gracia. Maes was likewise in a separate conversation nearby with some ranked military person, though on casual terms.

“The vital thing, if all is to proceed as such, is for them to achieve and maintain equal rank. Else their marriage will fall apart,” declared Lord Armstrong, followed by an encouraging nod from Lord Steinberg.

Ed blinked. So they’re already married just like that? That was fast...

Lord Armstrong was saying, “We must continue to help the Colonel along towards promotions,” when the announcement for dinner interrupted the conversation in the hall, ushers redirecting guests to an adjacent dining hall. Ed hesitated for a step, not knowing if he was supposed to follow, but Maes was there with a hand on his shoulder, steering him along after the two lords.

“I hope you’re hungry; it’s a five-course affair tonight,” Maes said, to which Ed replied, “But Roy said their portions are smaller?” Maes affirmed this and explained that it was a countermeasure against wardrobe emergencies (also known as button-popping) and fainting spells (for those who ate too much and, confined in their corsets, could not breathe).

Ed was snickering when they arrived at their table, which was one of the five rectangular tables in the centre of the hall. There they reunited with Roy, Gracia, and Catherine, who arrived with Mira, Julia, a dark-haired and pale-skinned lady Ed recognised as Karenina Islenhov-Firat, and a tall man he knew to be Jason Firat.

All the other tables were smaller and round, occupied with guests of less import—and it was quite obvious, for the group at Ed’s table altogether made quite a striking picture. Flawless genetics indeed, Ed echoed Maes’ words, almost unfairly so. If the Armstrong brood were identifiable by their light blond hair atop ice blue eyes, high cheekbones, and strong jaws, the Firats had hair the colour of warm earth and soulful eyes in either caramel brown or forest green. Their features were sharper, aquiline in quality, their build slimmer, with smaller bones, though just as tall. Altogether it lent them an air of nobility and solemn grace. Ed observed the two families mill about, open and familiar as they exchanged greetings and well-wishes. Roy, at complete ease, was every inch one of them.

An older lady (a decade younger than Lady Evelyn Armstrong, maybe) was in the process of apologising to Roy — ah, Lady Steinberg, Ed identified. “There you are, Adolf,” she sighed, laying a hand on her husband’s arm. “I was just passing our congratulations to the Colonel. Well-deserved, without a doubt.”

“I said so earlier myself, before he left us to pay his homage to Mira,” Lord Steinberg regaled to a growing circle. Ed stood by Roy once more, much to his relief, for the gathering of persons was beginning to look quite ridiculous. The Armstrongs, the Firats, the Steinbergs — and oh. Here comes the Fuhrer. Marvelous, he thought. Just when I thought it couldn’t get any further overboard.

But the Fuhrer only exchanged quick greetings and handshakes with the lords (and a smiling nod to
Roy) before heading for another one of the rectangular tables. Each one of the five distinguished tables were occupied with equally distinguished persons, the foremost of which was assigned to the host family (the Steinbergs for this year), the Fuhrer, and friends.

‘Friends,’ he had learned from Roy, was an inconveniently vague term denoting a group of people who could be any of the following: betrothed or fiancée of any person originally invited at the table; immediate family of the Fuhrer including brother, sister, or parent; honoured guest of foreign but equal rank to the Fuhrer, and their associates; and any specific person of importance invited to the table by any of its original guests for a specific stated reason, such as a companion, beau, or special honoured friend.

Roy had been there more than once, according to Maes — for every time the Armstrongs hosted, as an outward and undeniable sign of their true favour. Many speculated from his first night there — they certainly continued to do so now, and quite accurately so — that Roy was Lord and Lady Armstrongs’ handpicked favourite for future son-in-law. A notion that was neither encouraged nor denied — except, of course, by Roy’s supposed future bride, Lady General Mira Armstrong herself. She publicly loathed Roy, and the public believed her not one bit.

Said Lady General was at the table in discussion with another Lady — and there were a fair number of people around. Ed had been forewarned that they were to be dining with the Armstrongs and the Firats tonight, an arrangement most convenient for the other honoured guests at the other tables: the Weisses and representatives of the Ren clan were sitting with General Austerlitz of Internal Affairs at the Weisses’ request. Generals Gardner, Edison, and Raven were seated at the fourth table, leaving Generals Jaeger and Adler and Ministers Lindquist and Wolf. Ed figured it had to be quite the nightmare figuring out these seating arrangements, for the danger of committing some terrible faux pas that would offend somebody. Society was a scary place.

He followed Roy to their seat — side by side, across from Gracia and Maes, thank the heavens! Ed wished he were as comfortable as they seemed, but despite, or indeed, because of his consciousness of possible error, he managed to conduct introductions, polite words, and platitudes with astounding grace. (From across the table, Maes was giving him an appreciative smile.) Some supernatural strength seemed to bolster his confidence from deep within his chest, tapping a heretofore unknown wellspring of elegance and self-control. His voice never once wavered, though he would pause every now and then to weigh his words.

No; not a single misstep.

“We finally meet the talk of the city,” an older man remarked of Ed, sat directly opposite of Lord Armstrong at the other end of the table, “and what a well-mannered young man he is. Practically unheard of, Mr. Elric, capturing the eye of Society like so without even having met any of the Four Families beforehand.”

Ed dipped his eyes in respect, a minute movement, before stating quite plainly, with a wry smile, “I was never told anything of it until last week, Dr. Firat. Roy is protective to the side of paranoia, I’m sure you know.”

The table erupted in chuckles and delighted murmurs. Lady General Armstrong audibly scoffed, “I dare say.”

“Is he, indeed! Well, we are glad that he has decided to trust us with your company for tonight, Mr. Elric. A friend of the Armstrongs is a friend of the Firats; it has been so since the days of old, and we give tradition its due respect. As the patriarch of my family, I welcome you to Central,” and Ed knew that ‘Central’ did not mean the city as much as its Society. “Our doors are always open to you.”
Ed swallowed, spine stiffening. This time he fully dipped his head and murmured, “Thank you, sir.” He was taught to demur and claim how their words were wasted on someone like him, but both he and the Gate physically recoiled from that. **We are not a waste of words,** the Gate nodded firmly. **We are never a waste of words!**

“How that the formalities are done,” began a younger man strikingly featured with kind grey eyes, “you must cease calling Dad ‘Dr. Firat’ or you’ll end up confusing us all. We’re all Dr. Firats, but we aren’t as uppity about formal references as other families you might encounter. Practicality runs in the blood. Do us a favour and call us by name, won’t you? I’m Jason,” the man declared, a fact Ed already knew. Jason Firat, the eldest and heir, was the spitting image of his father Julius, all dark hair and sharp features that were softened by the soothing warmth of a good doctor’s smile. Father and son could be twin brothers, if the grey eyes became green and Julius’ grey hair regained their dark chestnut colour.

Ed responded, “Then please call me Edward; thanks for having me.”

The lady beside Jason — his wife, Karenina Islenhov-Firat, also a doctor after her mother — very prettily laughed, leaning towards her husband. “Very charming, indeed. It must be Roy’s influence.”

“Well, of course, who else,” Mira Armstrong replied. “Hughes is nowhere near as noxious.”

“I shall take that as a compliment!” chortled Maes, just as Roy reclined with a delighted smile. Ed inwardly groaned: the cat was out to play.

“Why, my fair lady, I am deeply honoured by the high regard with which you hold me,” Roy said, voice dripping with honey and light. “It must be rare indeed to be thought charming by none other than you.”

The table lit up with laughter, even from Catherine and the notably flustered young man seated in front of her—Joseph Firat, the youngest, engaged to Catherine and all of sixteen years old. (Which only meant that the two were entirely unable to meet each other’s eyes.)

“You walked into that one, Mira,” remarked Julia, almost tragically beautiful sitting across from Mira. “Touché, Roy.”

Was that Ed’s imagination, or was a flush darkening Mira’s neck? Either way, she pinned Roy with most menacing eyes, which only highlighted their stark paleness.

“Spare me your sweet pretensions, Mustang. I am not to be toyed with.”

“Ah, but of course. The Lady General prefers being praised for her strength over her most remarkable beauty.”

Ed inwardly groaned. He is asking for it.

The Gate hummed thoughtfully. **I do believe your kind calls it foreplay?**

Ed choked — on his own spit, at that — and had to struggle to discretely clear his throat. Fortunately for him, the table was now in full swing of conversation: he caught Maes regaling to the Firats, “Roy’s a very private sort of person about the objects of his affections, you see! Do excuse him for hiding Edward. Whenever he likes people immensely, he might never tell their name to anyone. Very, ah, covetous man, my friend is. He takes great pleasure in the knowledge that something is his and exclusively so.”
“Maes,” Roy sighed in open dismay, over the Firats’ laughter.

“Why, you make young Edward sound like some treasure to be zealously protected!” Lady Anne, Julius’ wife, flicked her grey eyes towards Ed’s direction.

“He is, my lady,” said Roy, “a brilliant mind quite unlike any I’ve ever met. Well, apart from his father, of course.” Despite his better control, Ed could not prevent a scowl.

“And Edward’s father was your alchemical mentor, is that right?” Jason said, leaning to make space as the waiter came to serve the aperitif. There was also soup.

“One of my alchemical mentors, yes; I was still primarily a student of Berthold Hawkeye.” This was apparently new information, for both Lord Armstrong and Lord Firat looked up in surprise.

“The Alchemist of Air?” confirmed Lord Armstrong, and at Roy’s nod continued, “My dear fellow, you have never told me so! Your Lieutenant Hawkeye — she was not assigned to you merely as good favour from that old Grumman, then?”

“Riza insisted to stay under my command, but yes, I would not have taken her along without General Grumman’s express permission.” Roy looked the very picture of poised elegance, so Ed doubted an unintentional slip of tongue. (The chances for one were minuscule from Roy at an event of this importance and before families of such power and influence.) He puzzled for more than a little while at the strategy behind revealing that bit of information now, and rather unsuccessfully, because it seemed such a vital piece of fact if it had been withheld for so long. He couldn’t fathom any reason for Roy to reveal something so personally significant and possibly destabilising — fatal, even, for much could be derived about one’s alchemy from the identity of one’s master.

Ultimately, as if out of pity, the Gate provided, It’s for you, dolt. Dropping an influential name in relation to the identity of your father — and therefore determinant of your status — protects and elevates you, the both of you. I do believe your kind calls it give and take. You owe him a big one.

Ed watched as the members of the table evaluated Roy in a new and heightened light. The Bastard flourished under the scrutiny! What an unbelievable exhibitionist. Ed grimaced in distaste. Even the scrumptious morsels before him could not overwhelm the rancid taste in his mouth. With a sigh, he reached for the wine.

The food, he noted with pleasure, was indeed quite a feast. Butternut squash soup was the first course according to Roy, matched with grapefruit sorbet for cleansing. He hoped for the sake of those here who took medicines that there was an alternative: grapefruit was one particular fruit juice that negatively reacted with a large list of substances, most medicinal in use. But no one seemed to be on the verge of collapse. All well and good.

The second course was a salad with chicories, pear, and crumbled gorgonzola cheese, dressed in balsamic vinaigrette and topped with toasted pine nuts. Very winter, he noted with delight, crunching quietly on the pine nuts, which were considered a treat down south. Resembool and the surrounding areas did not often have pines, the climate being altogether too warm for the plants throughout the year. Gorgonzola was an excellent partner for the nuttiness, and the pear’s dash of sweetness was a flash of vibrant colour against the darker tastes. Sparkling white wine sherbet was offered afterwards for cleansing, cutting through the chalk of the cheese.

As the dishes were taken away, he leaned towards Roy and asked, “How come their gorgonzola tastes different from the one you have at home? Firmer, less — uhh — milky.” He was at a loss to describe it.
“The kind I routinely buy,” Roy responded with approval, “is made in the West, near Pendleton and the Spine, from where you can see Mawspeake. Those are the high woodlands, and they have a particular method of making their cheese so that it tastes buttery instead of milky. This gorgonzola, I think, was probably bought from farms near Insselberg or Altheim, just north of Central. Just as good, but of a different sort.”

Roy’s words were carefully tailored to avoid offence, Ed noted with a nod. While Roy was plying his explanation, the third course was placed in front of them, a subtle statement of wealth and privilege if there ever was any. It was fish, simply prepared, on a bed of leeks and mashed potatoes. But to be precise, it was black sea bass, exclusively a marine fish, and quite expensive considering how it had to be imported from Aerugo or Creta.

“Take a bite,” Roy instructed, “and then immediately follow it with the wine.” For this course, it was rosemary red wine — and what an elegant match. Ed savoured the soft interplay of flavours as they slid over each other on his tongue. The bass was seared just so, and seasoned very lightly, to highlight the taste of the sea, never to overwhelm it. Ed was quite sure he was not alone in savouring the rarity of this dish, as most of his table seemed to be quite taken with it.

The fourth course was the heavy one. Before him was a sumptuous filet mignon with roasted vegetables: yellow and red beet jewels, young carrots, and caramelised Brussels sprouts. This was traditional Amestrian fare, and Ed could taste it in the richness of the meat. It was almost as good as Giovanni’s steak, except he couldn’t say as much to Roy, not with this company — it would be rude. Instead, he chased his remarks from his tongue with a generous slather of the lemon sauce.

Throughout the course of the dinner, the table was lively with talk of all things considered by Society, politics and philanthropy foremost. Gossip, Ed found to much relief, was seldom if ever obvious, for such distinguished families had methods most honourable of discussing other people’s notable endeavours and the relevant results therein—namely philosophy.

Of the common man’s vocal displeasure at the so-deemed ‘vices’ of the upper echelons, Lady Evelyn Armstrong had to say, “Oh, I do quite sympathise.” Her face was stern and dispassionate as ever. “They must feel that drunkenness, stupidity, and immorality should be their own special property, and that if any of ‘our’ kind makes a fool of himself in such a manner, why,” she paused and levelled them with an imploring look, “we would then be poaching on their territory! How uncouth that would be of us. Quite logical, if one gives it some thought, no? They do work so very hard to acquire their lot in life, unlike the rest of us. Is it a wonder they would be so — how does one put it — covetous?”

Even Ed could not suppress his snickers; the old Lady had a way with words! Now he could see how Roy so quickly learned. It was nigh impossible to avoid picking this up.

“Truly, though,” Julia Firat remarked thoughtfully, “I can never figure why these common men, as they now call themselves, are so starved for this life they think we lead in pure joy and comfort. They have perfectly valid and valuable treasures, like freedom and the opportunity to define themselves by their own hard work — men like Roy here, now Colonel, have done so very well for their own reasons — reasons that are worth the price, I dare say, of throwing away those other valuable gifts they are born with.”

They were all quiet for a heartbeat, until Ed huffed, discontent. He knew the answer to this one. “Knowing the price is not knowing the value. Prices are arbitrary; value is not.”

The Gate shone in agreement, its fluffy bobcat-shaped presence radiating pleasure from the back of
Ed’s consciousness. Lord Firat made a soft sound of assent as well.

“Well said,” nodded the older man, “very true indeed. Plenty of people will live long lives never
knowing the treasures that they already hold within their hands. But another truth of life, my dear
daughter.” Julia sighed in faint acknowledgement. Ed could sympathise. Such truths bore ill for the
world as a whole.

Lady Anne chose that moment to detract the conversation towards art, apparently a topic relevant
even to philosophy to avoid too much of a jar in the flow of discussion. “Lord Armstrong tells us
that they have bequeathed the Vanishing to you for your birthday, Colonel! We do apologise for not
being able to attend — duty calls — but I’m sure you enjoyed the piece. It is a most gorgeous work
of art.”

“A very generous gift for which I am still quite certain I am unworthy,” said Roy, to which Lord
Armstrong responded with a huff and a dismissive wave of his large hand. “The piece is very
evocative. Ed fell in love, I think.”

“What,” Ed said. “It’s pretty. And not falsely pretty, but realistically pretty!”

“Are you an admirer of Realism, then, Mr. Elric?” asked Alex Armstrong, the first Ed heard him
participate in discussion tonight. If his brain was not failing him, Alex was a staunch devotee of the
high arts.

But Ed had no training of any sort in such fields, so he apologised and said, “I don’t know what that
is. My education up until Roy has consisted of alchemy for the most part.” Technically not a lie.
Combat and survival counted as alchemy, and so did medicine. Izumi said so.

“It is merely what its name dictates — a style of depicting the world in art as realistically as the
medium can afford. A younger trend, and quite divisive. There are as much who love it as those who
hate it,” explained Roy.

Mira Armstrong scoffed. “It’s only divisive for idiots. Our century’s dislike of Realism is the rage of
a monster seeing its own face in a looking glass. Our century’s dislike of Romanticism, on the other
hand, is the rage of a monster not seeing its own face in a looking glass. Either way, pick your
poison. It’s all regurgitated blather.”

Half the table broke into chuckles, Roy raising his glass to Mira for thoughts well put. Why weren’t
they married again? They suited each other so perfectly, Ed thought, that they were almost twins.

Similar charges dispel, said the Gate — oh. That makes sense. (Science! Ed loved it.)

Continued they did on similar veins of talk, until dessert arrived, much-awaited indeed. The fish and
steak left him quite satisfied already, but there was always room for cake. It was orange chocolate
cake, beautifully arranged on the plate before him, and in a portion visibly controlled to prevent its
rich sweetness from cloying the tongue. Roy often said that food was art, and the plate was a canvas
— rightly so, for Ed almost didn’t want to destroy the presentation. Except of course, chocolate.

Catherine Armstrong threw out all pretence of light, peckish, and ladylike eating to savour the treat
with great delight. Conversation dimmed around him such that he was able to observe adjacent tables
where sat persons he knew from Mustang’s briefing. Ed noted how they sat together regardless of
political affiliations, inclinations, or pursuits: a good politician, Roy would say, followed his party
leader’s movements in public life, but in private followed the best cooks, dining with the Martials and
thinking with the Liberals, in obeisance to a wise and well-worn rule.
It was also essential to speak only of moral things, self-denial and sacrifice and other such absolute impossibilities, so that the whole dinner could be spent talking of nothing important at all. Instead, everyone waxed poetic about each other’s achievements in fields of philanthropy or arts or alchemy. No one discussed the burgeoning conflict with Drachma (again!) or the roiling civil unrest in the East. Not one word was mentioned about subsidy for the displaced poor of Ishbal or the sensitive issue of citizenship and rights for annexed peoples like them. The persons of power preached about the importance of virtues and principles for which exercise there was neither space nor necessity in their own lives.

“Now, Mr. Elric, let me ask you,” Lord Firat leaned forward all of a sudden, eyes steady on Ed’s face. Ed swallowed, hoping they wouldn’t ask his opinion of complicated political matters. He wasn’t quite there yet… “What do you say about Lord Steinberg’s opposition against your, ah, rumoured enlistment under Roy’s command? He says you ought to wait, that you are too young to be exposed to the perils of military duty. Plenty of other options to consider, surely.”

Ah, yes. Lord Steinberg, currently seated with the Fuhrer at the head table, was one of the most vocal detractor of his enlistment under Roy’s command, citing his age and innocence. Ed was only recently made aware (by a very reluctant Roy) of his own name’s impact on Central’s political talk. Apparently, his appearance at the Symposium had disturbed a nest of sleeping wasps.

Well, that was their problem, not his.

He turned to Lord Firat and said, “Give me a well-funded, well-staffed, and well-populated alchemical university, sir, and I won’t need to be a State Alchemist. None of us will.”

“Hear!” two voices echoed in agreement. Ed had to fight a grin. Jacob Firat and Kanon Islenhov, the two individuals he was most eager to meet tonight! As Roy had promised, they were all seated at the same table. He turned towards them, hoping perhaps that this would be the beginning of a good conversation —

But Lord Firat was not so easily deterred. “Is there something specific you need a State license for that the Colonel can’t help you acquire?”

Ed had to blink in mild surprise. Really? “First Library, for a start.” Wasn’t that much obvious? “I know Roy’s rich as a flaming pirate, but I don’t think he can afford to get me all of First Library, sir. To begin with, some of the things in there I don’t think can even be priced. Hell, I’m not even sure if it’s right to be pricing them.”

Roy swiftly took over with a chuckle, sensing that Ed was on the verge of losing hold of his tongue. “Ed has decided on a course of research that is very difficult to conduct without the appropriate literature. Of course, it is entirely up to him to decide whether or not he wants the license — I daresay I can find something to be promoted for even without him as my subordinate.”

That remark coaxed hearty laughter from both Lords Armstrong and Firat. Small wonder Roy’s very presence encouraged intense urges for homicide in otherwise pacific people. The Bastard was the darling of Society’s elite, and he managed it so — so — agh!

“If you do decide to go ahead, though, you’re already past the deadline,” Jason Firat informed him.

“Plenty of ways to go around a deadline,” Mira dismissed, pinning Ed with her own scrutiny. “I doubt you’ll need my help with something so simple, will you, Mustang?” An understanding passed between the two, completely sailing above Ed’s head. He frowned, looking back and forth. What
“You have a little over three months to prepare, Mr. Elric,” Lord Armstrong peered at him, already sure he would proceed. “I expect your success. The examinations are far from easy, so be warned.”

Ed set his jaw. “As it should be! Three months is more than enough time.”

“Confident, are we?” Mira smirked. “Have a care not to choke on your own ego.”

Oh, Ed knew how to play this game. He smirked back. “If I do take those exams, they’ll be begging to license me at the end.”

Some laughter, and the conversation simply kept flowing, splintering and reconnecting within their small circle. Before departing entirely from the issue, however, Lord Firat caught his arm with a hand and said, “I hope you don’t come to regret your decision, Mr. Elric. It isn’t that I decry alchemy or State licensure, which are both necessities of our civilization, but you are very young. I only wish I could convince you that there is no need to discard all other possible paths to pursue licensure, but I know my words will be in vain. My son is an alchemist, too.”

Ed could see the deep sincerity in Lord Firat’s wise eyes, could see that the man truly wanted nothing more but the best for his well-being. Perhaps he was tired of seeing shells of men returning from a hideous duty that they had unwittingly signed up for… or perhaps Lord Firat simply did not understand what it meant to be defined by something so thoroughly that everything else paled in comparison.

Either way, Ed gave the elderly man a small grin. “You’re very wise to hold your words, sir. You see, even before I came here to be with Roy, all the other possible paths had become impossible. I’m not discarding them to be licensed; I can’t, since I already did.”


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One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar.

( Hellen Keller )

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It took some time but at long last the lengthy dinner concluded, liberating the table’s occupants to mingle among others once more. The population reconvened in a separate hall devoid of dinner tables; instead, servants here circulated with trays of after-meal refreshments and small samplings of sweet for those whom the luscious dessert was not enough. Their table’s group did not separate, with the exception of a few of the ladies retreating momentarily to recoup in the ladies’ room. Instead, their group grew with the addition of the Steinbergs, a handful of decorated Generals, and a pair of distinctly Xingese young men representing the elusive but much-lauded Ren clan.

Conversation on politics and society swam around Edward, failing to hold much of his interest for any extended period of time, though he did note what topic rose and fell between which persons, if only to be on the safe side.

He needn’t have worried though. Just as the relocation allowed the true politics to commence, it also allowed Jacob Firat and Kanon Islenhov the opening they had been waiting for to grab at Edward’s sleeve and pull him to a corner.
“Edward, wasn’t it?” Jacob Firat began, with little to spare for pleasantries. (Ed liked him already.) “Roy’s told Kanon about you. Haven’t talked to him recently — he’s been busy — how do you do, by the way? I’m Jacob — this is Kanon, we’re really interested in your alchemy — Anya said you were worth talking to.”

Ed blinked, blindsided. Jacob, according to Roy and Maes’ data, was the alchemically brilliant second son of Julius Firat. They didn’t warn him, though, that he was also brilliantly eccentric!

“Um, hi, yes, I’m Edward, nice to meet you, and thanks, that’s flattering,” he responded, unsure of what else to say. Jacob peered at him with intense hazel eyes — very intelligent eyes — set upon a narrow, thin face. Though very handsome indeed, the intensity of intellectual energy radiating from him rendered him somewhat gaunt and harder to approach than his warm and welcoming older brother. He didn’t twitch or fidget, but he did have an almost visible sort of tension about him — an impatient air, as if the world moved at too slow a pace for his hyper-accelerated mind.

“I think you might be stumping him there, Jake,” Kanon Islenhov mediated. Jacob blinked and immediately murmured an apology, which Ed accordingly dismissed — he wasn’t stumped, only surprised — Kanon smiled. “That too. Jacob is rather unusual in conversation, I suppose, but you’ll forgive us. We don’t mingle an awful lot in Society.”

Ed gave them a sideways grin. “There’s nothing to forgive.”

“Excellent! We are at the beginnings of an understanding,” Kanon declared, clapping his hands together. He was less intense, more boyishly charming, but no less intelligent than his friend. Edward knew his type well — Kanon was of Al’s breed, kind and genial, likeable and easy to engage, but hiding manifold layers underneath. “Now, if you’ll indulge us, Edward — may we call you Edward? — right, here you are, then,” Kanon placed a small box in his hands, which Jacob had procured from his pocket.

Ah, Edward smiled, looking down at the box and then back up at the two young men standing expectantly before him. He was being tested! How long has it been since I was tested so honestly? His smile morphed into a grin as he turned the box over and around. How many others have figured this out before me, I wonder?

The wooden box had all four sides hand-carved with images, sigils, symbols, and scripts — so much of them and in such an artfully deceitful manner that Ed could think of at least three schools of alchemy that would be fooled into thinking the arrays were theirs. But opening this box needed no alchemy — so the scripts read, if one were able. All you need is a familiarity with children’s toys, Ed thought as he began pushing the movable pieces of each face of the cube, that and a mind for clever little puzzles.

The top and bottom faces of the cube had no movable pieces but held the hint ‘SPELL OPEN’ as a single line of script, if you could spot it where it was nestled between archaic glyphs (decorative) and fancy lines of old poetry written in modern script (also decorative, though nice taste — Ed recognised it as Mendelson, from Roy’s weekly literature lessons). So he did as he was told, spelling OPEN with the faces of the cube, one letter for one side. The movable pieces slid against each other, distorting the hand-carved images on each cube face but lining up the useless lines of gibberish script to form one ordinary alphabet letter at a time.

When he finally had each side set, the bottom of the box tingled against his fingers. Lines of script appeared on its flat and otherwise unmarked surface. It read:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And Heaven in a Wild Flower
“Oh, nicely done,” Edward grinned, recognising the prompt immediately. What decent alchemist wouldn’t? He sought Roy and plucked at the man’s sleeve, borrowing a pen and a piece of paper to write out, in script, the appropriate response those two very well-known lines of verse — the keyscript for this clever little Lindbergh lock —

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.

They were the famous words of an old alchemist and literary genius who had lived some two hundred and fifty years ago, defining in poetry the very nature of alchemy and the potential it carried for those who were adept enough to properly wield it.

The very second he finished the last word with a final stroke of his pen, the cube popped open in his hand, half-startling him even as he blinked at its contents. There, sat in between four open panels of wood, was a delicious-looking caramel truffle.

“Five and a half minutes!” Jacob crowed, calling the attention of nearby persons not already observing their little test. “He solved it in five and a half minutes!”

But Ed was more concerned with the truffle, asking flatly, “Is this for me?” even as Jacob took him by the shoulders in delight.

“If you knew how many alchemists we’ve trumped with that box, Edward!” Kanon laughed, offering Ed a second truffle. “To celebrate a new friendship, yes?”

“Yes,” Ed nodded eagerly.

“You shouldn’t let yourself be taken along by my little brothers so readily, Edward,” Karenina Islenhov-Firat warned him with a coy smile. “You might regret it; they get quite zealous, especially when left to their devices for a long enough span of time, as you’ve no doubt seen with their peculiar method of introducing themselves and befriending people.”

“No kidding,” Ed grinned up at her. “An alchemical puzzle and good chocolate — I’ve never received a better proposition in my life! Why don’t we conduct introductions like this on a daily basis? It makes so much sense.”

“Hear!” exclaimed both Jacob and Kanon, to a mixture of fond and exasperated faces.

“Oh dear, they’ve found a new one,” Julia mourned.

Roy chuckled and took great pleasure in saying, “I told you so,” to a very intrigued Edward.

The following hour was accordingly spent trading queries and stories with his newfound companions, all the while remaining within arm’s reach and sight’s distance of Roy. Jacob and Kanon were both very bright young alchemists, well-known movers within their respective fields. Kanon was a scriptsmith, while Jacob specialised in medical bioalchemy. Both were receptive to Edward’s consideration for enlistment as well, citing most passionately that alchemists were often trapped in difficult straits, unable to further their study without a stable income source for their research unless they were fortunate enough to be born to families capable of providing for their careers.

“Though I’ll be honest with you,” Kanon said, “the prospect of a public university affording the public free knowledge somewhat scares me too. You never know what people might use alchemy for. Case and point that debacle with Dr. Geralds…”
Edward tensed, preparing for a deft manoeuvre to avoid giving too much information away — but just then the dances commenced, saving him from having to respond.

“Oh, here we go,” Kanon sighed. “Should have insisted Anya come with me. Now I have to find someone to dance with…”

“Must you?” frowned Ed. “You could opt out…”

“It is expected of me, as my dearest sister would say,” and with that he began to step away in the hunt for a temporary partner. “I’ll be back in short order, Edward. Come along, Jake.”

“No!” Jacob scowled, crossing his arms in a fine mimicry of a five year old.

“Come now, little brother, don’t be so glum,” Julia swept him away, leaving Ed by the balcony, suddenly alone and more than just a little abandoned.

The dance was truly quite a spectacle, lords and ladies and distinguished gentlemen with their escorts moving in a coordinated swirl of textures and colours. Edward watched, dazzled and tired, leaning against the cool wall behind his back. The night was almost over, and it had been its own little adventure — was there anyone in society, anyone in Roy’s circles, he had not yet met? He didn’t think so. But of course, just as he began thinking about it, Roy spun into his line of sight, locked in sway with a lovely lady Edward did not know.

Who is she?

Edward watched them, rummaging through his brain. No; he wasn’t among Roy and Maes’ trees of faces. Not one of the prominent families, not a ranked officer, not even one of the business magnates included in his pre-Ball briefing. He leaned forward, looking intently. He was intrigued. Roy didn’t just dance with anyone.

Who is she!

The Gate had no answer, swishing its tail quietly with the rhythm of his thoughts. She was very lovely indeed, long brown hair in a regal cascade, dress flowing from her limbs with the slow sinuous motion of molten gold. They were talking — she was talking, somewhat pleadingly — and Roy was —

Roy was not happy.

Ed sucked in a slow breath through his teeth, recoiling from the cold bite in Roy’s eyes. Roy said a few words as the dance ended, disentangling his arms from her and smoothly switching partners with the adjacent gentleman — ah, of course. Lord Armstrong passed an incensed Mira into Roy’s arms at that moment, her sweet ferocity displacing the sour taste that lovely brunette left in Ed’s mouth.

As if on demand, the orchestra began a romantic and appropriately grand waltz as Roy and Mira spun round to the delighted murmurs of an appreciative crowd. The other couples parted to clear a way for them, allowing Ed an excellent view. They were talking as they waltzed, Mira managing to refrain from violence for once as they exchanged words in an inaudible conversation. Roy looked a little out of his depth for a minute, before recovering his usual aplomb, visible by the gentle and — dare Ed say it? — sincere smile he gave Mira in return for a few of her words. At one corner of the hall, Ed spotted the lovely mystery brunette, looking on in — in scorn? Envy? Wistfulness? Agh. Emotions were so difficult to quantify.

I could teach you all about emotions if you’d like, offered the Gate, smile widening like underwater rifts.
Nope, I can manage, thanks. Ed had a limited supply of arms and legs, after all. But could it be? He watched as the mystery brunette melted back into the growing crowd of spectators. Hmm.

“Lady Mira likes to deny it but I think she really likes Roy,” a voice said from beside him — oh. Kanon was back (and looked very glad for it). “Or at the very least, she holds great respect for him — rather difficult not to, it’s Roy, you know. But she likes to pretend she doesn’t, even though they’re the only ones who probably understand the pressures of their world. Really a great match all around. They’re like Central’s highly anticipated fairy tale waiting to tie the knot.”

Ed recalled his jibe about Roy’s collection of fairy tales and had to snicker. “So… who’s the Prince?”

“Don’t let her hear that,” Kanon grinned. Jacob came back looking mightily harassed just then; Kanon slung an arm around his brother-in-law. They both turned to Edward and Kanon said, “Listen, Ed. I don’t know how your schedule is or what commitments you have, but give us a call when you’ve got a free day. We’ll take you to the colleges where the cafes are near — that’s where most of the younger alchemists kill time. We’ll go to Anya’s too — you’ve been once, right? She says she’d love to have you over to look at some pieces.”

It was the closest alchemists could get to an invitation to play. Ed nodded definitively. “I’ll clear it with Roy and call you. Roy has your numbers, right?”

“Oh, god, enough already,” groaned Julia Firat, most unladylike as she tugged her scarf about her shoulders and turned in mock disgust. “If they fall into bed tomorrow, it won’t be soon enough.” The delay was causing her to have to wait for the car she was to share with her brother and sister-in-law. But Ed was a curious boy. He stepped closer to listen —

“…do believe I owe you one, and I do insist,” Roy was saying, pre-empting what would have been dismissals from Mira’s lips. “Perhaps a dinner, or a favour?”

“Save yourself the trouble, Mustang. I only told you what any person possessed of logic would have advised.” She sighed, turning up her coat collar against the biting wind.
What, Ed thought, no slaps or witty retorts?

“Still, I insist,” Roy helped her with her scarf too, and then faced her with the most earnest face Ed has ever seen on him. “Please, Mira, allow me this.”

But Mira did not push him away! She only rolled her eyes, and with a put-upon sigh, acceded. “Fine, fine, Tuesday next week, eight sharp. Nothing fancy or I’ll carve you into fancy shapes.”

Ed stared, somewhat in shock. She agreed? She agreed!

Mira’s car rounded the driveway, but before she stepped into her car, she tossed at Roy, “Forget her, Mustang. She’s not worth a tenth of you.” She stepped into the car, shut the door behind her, and left.

“What? Maes exclaimed, coming up to Roy with disbelief and surprise and unapologetic glee. “My good man, what in the world was that?!”

“Her, who’s her? Was it that brunette lady?” Ed tugged at Roy’s sleeve. “It was that brunette lady, wasn’t it.”

“Brunette — Regina? Roy, did I not tell you — I told you to let her be!”

“Wait, wait, that was her? Talk to her, no! He danced with her —”

“Roy! Of all the stupid —”

“Oho,” Julius Firat chuckled from behind them, still in wait for their car. “I smell a good story here.”

“Indeed, do enlighten me,” Julia agreed, drawing close as a predator would to the scent of fresh blood.

Roy smiled at all of them rather demurely but addressed his response to Julia. “I’m sure Mira will tell you the story if you ask her, my dear, but as you’ve heard, I’ve been advised to forget. Now if you’ll excuse us, our car is here.”

“You’re running away? He’s running away!” Kanon exclaimed, having materialized behind his sister-in-law. “But we want to hear —”

Just so, they made a hasty exit, Roy manning the wheel and manoeuvring them home.

“Ooooh, Roy,” Maes nudged him, “everyone’s gonna know now. Did you really tell Mira? Seriously?”

“It was a moment of vulnerability, Maes, leave it alone.”

Aha, so it wasn’t planned! Mira saw an opening and pounced!

“How come I didn’t see this? When did you dance with Regina?”

“It was right before he danced with Mira,” Ed pointed out. “I was wondering who she was.”

Roy looked only mildly discomfited at the idea of their society knowing about his history with said woman. He did purse his lips, however, when Maes began speculating about the gossip it would engender between less-informed persons. One of the disadvantages of Roy’s visible and highly
coveted position was that people often turned even the most mundane details into lascivious items of rumour.

“Bright side’s on you, though,” Maes was saying, “because nothing they say can really be damaging to you. Regina won’t be having it as easy.”

“I know that much,” Roy sighed. “Oh well. It was bound to come biting my ass anyway. Now’s a good time as any. And it takes the heat off Ed.”

“Language, gentlemen,” Gracia reprimanded, her fatigue beginning to show as she rubbed small, slow circles over her swollen belly. “And the rumour mill is nothing a careful word or two won’t fix. I’m helping the Arreys prepare a little banquet for their daughter’s birthday next week, and Beth Lewis will be attending. I’ll wax poetic about your old lady love. It’ll be the perfect tearjerker over tea and scones, and by the weekend, all of Central will know the right story.”

Roy laughed. “Always so reliable! You’re wasted on your husband.”

“Hey!”

Ed could only laugh. *Yep. I still like Gracia the best.*

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It was quiet at home. The walls around him were warm and familiar, drawing from him an answering yawn. Ed was tired. He would need very little help falling asleep now after such a colourful time. The Gate in his head exuded a subdued hum as it sorted through manifold images and sensations from his memory of the night, processing them with a method and order too random and complex to make any sense to his exhausted mind.

“Would you care for a cup of herbal tea, or are you too tired to manage beyond washing up before bed?”

“No,” Ed shrugged out of his coat, “I can do a cup of tea. Probably good after all I ate.” He folded said coat over his arm in the same manner Roy folded his as they took the back stairs in single file.

Ed took to his bedroom and washed, shedding the formal wear in exchange for soft pajamas with a grateful sigh. The box he got from Kanon and Jacob now sat on his bedside table, a little souvenir to remember the night by. He looked forward to meeting them again.

When he returned to the library, Roy already had the tea. They sat by the fireplace and shared the silence. Roy was stirring some sugar into his cup when the thought surfaced in Ed’s mind.

“Roy,” he said, turning his decision over with surprising clarity for how exhausted he felt. “I’ll do it. I’ll take the exam this spring.”

Because, truly, why delay the inevitable? It was nothing but a waste of time. He could be starting out early, learning the steps now, enjoying the benefits of being one of the country’s certified best. And
the First Library was just there, awaiting him.

Roy searched his face. “Why the sudden urge? I do believe we are past the deadline, though like Mira said, I can call in some favours if you truly wanted.”

“There’s just no sense in delaying it,” Ed sighed, tipping his head back against the back of the couch. “The longer I delay, the more I second-guess. And second-guessing has never served me well. My gut instinct is my better friend.”

Roy smiled a little at that, but offered no comic remark. Instead there was a stretch of silence, companionable though curious, before Roy said, “I hope you don’t feel like I’m forcing you into any of this.”

Ed blinked, and then gave him an odd look. “Roy. As confident as you are of yourself, when it comes to alchemy, you couldn’t force me into anything. I do what I want with my alchemy. I thought we already had that down.”

“Mm, yes, well, there is that,” Roy acquiesced with a chuckle. Ed peered at the man for a moment; Roy looked tired. “Very well. I shall see what I can do.”

Finishing the rest of his tea, Ed nodded and made to stand up. He could feel sleep coming to claim him. But ah, yes. Before bed, there was one thing he needed to ask.

“Roy.”

“Hmm?”

“Did I do well tonight?”

He hated that it sounded as plaintive as it did, but Ed had to ask. He had to know.

At that instant, Roy’s face lit up with what others would name pride. “The finest example of a young gentleman—you did exceedingly well, Edward.”

The warmth—it was sudden and overwhelming. Ed shifted in his spot, ducking his head as if to physically avoid the compliment. It would take time to get used to this. Roy should cease being so embarrassing.

But then he wouldn’t be Roy anymore, said the Gate, warning him, be careful what you wish for.

Whatever, Ed mumbled, settling his teacup on the table. “Okay, well, um. That’s good. I’ll, uh, go to sleep now, I think.”

Roy nodded, still half-smiling. “Goodnight, Edward.”

“Night,” Ed bid, padding quietly to his room. “…and thanks. For, you know. All the things.”

The last thing he remembered was the solid certainty of Roy’s voice. “You’re very welcome, Edward,” Roy said, with pride and regret ringing among the unspoken wealth of emotion in those quiet words. “Always.”
All parents damage their children. It cannot be helped. Youth, like pristine glass, absorbs the prints of its handers. Some parents smudge, others crack, a few shatter childhoods completely into jagged little pieces beyond repair.

( Mitch Albom )

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**FOOTNOTES** (Right-click on images and 'View Image' to see full-size.)

(1) The two boxes mentioned in this chapter (Hohenheim's box and the puzzlebox from Kanon & Jacob) are both inspired by Pottermore's sorting quiz, wherein you may come across a question that asks: "Four boxes are placed before you. Which would you try to open?" and it gives choices between a small tortoiseshell box, a jet black box with a lock and key, a golden casket with clawed feet, and a small pewter box which is unassuming and plain. Except the pewter box has a message scratched on the top that reads, *'I open only for the worthy.'* Obviously Slytherin, but I digress. (We all know Edward is a hopeless Ravenclaw. Or maybe a Ravenclaw lost in Gryffindor, like a certain bushy-haired heroine we know all too well?) Below is pictured that pewter box:

![pewter box](image1)

(2) Hohenheim's box would look something like this, except plainer and without the knob at the top:

![Hohenheim's box](image2)

(3) Kanon & Jacob's gift box to Edward is reminiscent of Japanese puzzle boxes called **koyosegi**, which are wooden boxes with movable surface panels that are often lacquer-finished into different puzzle designs. The user would rearrange the panels by sliding back and forth in order to solve the puzzle. Some **koyosegi** boxes are more concerned with engineering, having removable or
manipulable parts as well as hidden compartments you can only access by removing certain pieces in a certain order.

An artist from deviantart, who goes by the name steelgohst, creates some wonderful art - and one of his pieces reflects how I imagine the actual puzzle box would look like! See below:

(4) The Lindbergh lock, for those who are still confused, is pretty much a password lock. The box responds to a particular phrase which the alchemist has to write out in script on a piece of paper, and then he presses the paper to the box to open it. Deceptively simple. The Pravese lock on the other hand will be more familiar to fans of the Harry Potter genre, perhaps, where the concept of blood warding is pretty common. As demonstrated, it will only open for a bloodline. There's a twist to this that Edward doesn't realise quite yet, but that's for future chapters! x )

(5) Roy's words for Edward, "Absence diminishes small loves and increases great ones, as the wind blows out the candle and fans the bonfire," are the words of Francois de la Rochefoucauld, a noted French author of the 1600s.

(6) After some deliberation, I ended up reusing the Hellen Keller quote ("One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar") in this chapter. Last it was used, Alphonse was about to leave Dublith to visit Edward. I used it for him because I wanted to show how Alphonse too feels the pull that Edward does - that they are both Hohenheim's sons, that they both know the world waits for them somewhere out there, if they only braved the first momentous step. The theme ended up rearing its head when I didn't expect it, so there went the quote. Edward cannot be derailed from achieving what he wants to achieve; he is too determined, too driven, and too bloody stubborn for his own good!

(7) The prompt and keyscript for Jacob & Kanon's box is from one of my most beloved poets, William Blake. It goes:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.

Very legit description of having alchemy, if one does it properly. Taken from 60. Auguries of Innocence, it continues on for some length, but near the end the lines below finish the poem, and I find these words also highly appropriate in reference to the Gate's existence:
He who doubts from what he sees
Will ne'er believe, do what you please.
If the Sun and Moon should doubt,
They'd immediately go out.

God appears, and God is Light,
To those poor souls who dwell in Night;
But does a Human Form display
To those who dwell in realms of Day.

(8) The lineages of the Armstrongs, Firats, Steinbergs, and other relevant families are available for viewing here, along with other valuable resources. (That's right, we're back to Google Docs. At least until I figure out a better alternative.)

Chapter End Notes

Again, full references including floorplans, maps, etc. to be found here at the GDocs page! Go visit, you might learn something new. 8 ]
Arc III: Growing Pains: 11

Chapter Notes

What, you didn't think Catalysis was still alive? Surprise! Enjoy your yule gift! This chapter took a very long time to write, but every bit of it was a joy. I took a break in between Elysia's birth and the rest of the story, so you may see some mild stylistic differences. If it has been a while (as it was for me), I highly advise a re-read of the whole story, in which case you must forgive me for the doubtless horrible errors I have left lying around in the earlier chapters. (Chapter four begs for a complete rewrite, but I must write forward instead of back.)

From the last time I wrote Catalysis, quite a bit has changed with its plot and style. I would also like to think that I've matured as a writer since the last chapter, so this story will begin to diverge from what I had originally planned. That won't really change anything for you, though! I hope you'll still stay with us, and if nothing else, I hope this rekindles a love for this old fandom, which will always be dear to my heart!

REFERENCES for Catalysis can be found here as always, and it will continue to be updated!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

III : Growing Pains

11

"All of this?"

"All of this."

Ed eyed the fat sheaf of papers now situated between 'Origins' and a leather-bound, silver-lined copy of 'The Laws of Alchemy'. The droll papers felt so very out of place that Ed almost felt sorry for them. Almost. "Surely with the Gate I'll pass? Do I really…"

"What if the Gate requests payment again like you told me it tends to do?" Roy countered, shucking off his uniform with a sigh of relief. "It's best to be safe, Ed."

Ed flipped through the first few pages, noting the meticulous order of topics. "What is this, an exhaustive outline of the known world? We're tested on geography?"

"And geopolitics. You are being inducted as a military officer, and upon receiving your State Alchemy certification, you immediately assume the rank of a Major, Edward. Which would mean you would need the working knowledge the equivalent of any officer who has gone through the Academy's Command track." Roy shrugged, rolling up his sleeves. "It isn't difficult material, by any means. Just tedious."
"I hate tedious," Ed groused, wishing fire and brimstone upon the papers he now had to review. "Can I skip the parts I already know?"

"It's your test, Edward," Roy told him with a glib sort of gleam in his eyes, "and it's up to you how you'll prepare for it. Just don't fail, or it'll be both of our miserable hides flayed by the society papers."

Rolling his eyes and muttering, "Great. What happened to contingency plans?" Ed resumed his reading with half a mind now effectively distracted.

He was fairly confident the State exam wasn't going to be too much of a challenge—at least as far as alchemy was concerned—but all of this extraneous detail had him thinking. His geography was pretty good, and his history was workable, but as far as geopolitics: faulty. Amestris was always so engrossed in domestic issues that they barely had time to concern themselves with the affairs of any political entity further beyond: that issue with Aerugo (which used to be part of their country, so domestic enough), and that other issue with Creta (which also used to be part of their country, so still domestic), and then the everlasting conflict-non-conflict with Drachma (been there for so long it was as good as domestic anyway). It was exceedingly good fortune that Xing was already so expansive it threatened break into pieces if it acquired even more land. Otherwise, there would be (more) war as Xing would doubtless try to acquire Amestris too.

After a while of honest and painful consideration, Ed lowered his book again and grudgingly told Roy, "I'll... need review on geopolitics and all that international bureaucracy bullshit."

"Language," Roy reprimanded, followed by an amused, "I expected as much. The last thirty pages of that pile I gave you is a treatise on modern Amestris' international relations in historical and alchemical context."

Ed flipped to the end of the pile, and his eyebrows quirked up. "You wrote it."

"I did," Roy confirmed, relaxing against the couch and enjoying his fine cup of late afternoon tea for a minute. "Feature in an issue of Ars Alchemica, hmm, two years ago now, I think."

"You're published? But aren't you under a combat contract?"

"I am what some would consider both research and combat, as odd as that sounds," Roy sighed, as if it was something of a great burden. Ed could safely wager everyone else would think it an honor. "It's an unconventional arrangement that I think the Fuhrer only allows because of my, ah, status. Though I'm not the only one. But on occasion, I do undertake research projects and publish papers. Not as often as I would wish, given my other duties..."

Ed looked at him incredulously. Right. Duties.

The Gate hummed quietly in the back of Ed’s head as he thumbed through the article Roy had written. Lots of hats, lots of hats, many many many hats, it sang. Over time, Ed was growing more cognizant of precisely what Roy was working towards, with his expansive clout, meticulous planning, and pointed ambition. There were people in the world who collected powerful friends and created a comfortable position for themselves because it was the smart thing to do in life – and then there were people like Roy, who had determined eyes on a goal that courted such terrible danger it required an equally terrible amount of insurance in the form of allies and friends, connections, spies, debts, and of course, wealth. It was a path that required one to play many roles. Hats, indeed.

“I do think you’ll be just fine, Edward,” Roy then said, tone soft as he looked Ed over. “The written exam is no complicated hurdle. You’re easily one of the smartest people I know, and trust me, I
know some rather stupid people who have passed this exam as well. If they can do it, so can you.”

Ed nodded.

“Have you given thought to the practical?”

Ed frowned.

“Not really, I see.”

“I have! I have, I just—haven’t quite figured out what’s appropriate yet!”

“Your case is difficult. You aren’t a specialist in the traditional sense, like how most of them will be. But I think any demonstration from you will be powerful enough if they can see you transmute without a circle. So something small would suffice.”

Ed scrunched up his nose. “I don’t do small.”

That earned him a chuckle. “You’ll think of something.”

When he would was the question. The new year would be upon them, and from there, Ed would have three and a half months. State Alchemy exams were routinely held in the spring, usually April, as soon as the roads and rails thawed enough for far-flung alchemists to be able to travel safely to Central. (Though if they were alchemists of any reputable competence, Ed was of the humble opinion that winter should never be an insurmountable hindrance. It never was to Izumi.)

“Did you have a hard time with your exams?” Ed asked, though he already knew the answer. He only wanted to hear the story. “What did you do for yours?”

“I snapped.”

“No shit, genius, what did you do for the written.”

“I studied the same notes you have now. It wasn’t hard. I already knew them. Just review,” Roy smiled. “I was, after all, taught by Berthold and Hohenheim.”

That deserved a scowl, as a matter of course.

“The practical is formality for alchemists of my type—combat alchemy will always be a worthy investment for Amestris. Researchers, on the other hand,” and here Ed gets the Meaningful Look™, “need to be able to justify their necessity at any given time. Quite difficult to do when priorities are in the arbitrary hands of the State.”

“So,” Ed asked then, “how do I do that?”

Roy shrugged. “Just show up and do as I said. Be your usual brilliant self. They won’t even know what will hit them.”

“Helpful, Mustang, so helpful.” Ed threw himself backward into the couch, letting the air knock out of his lungs as Roy chuckled along. Roy held absolute confidence in his acceptance, which was reassuring to an extent until it became uncomfortable. It showed how little he knew of the alchemical society when another alchemist was better capable at gauging his level of competence and skill, something Edward should know for himself. Couldn’t be blamed, though. His exposure to fellow alchemists was, until recently, limited to his brother and Izumi, and practically everybody was bound to be inferior to Master.
Kanon and Jacob had promised to introduce him to fellow alchemists, but their plans were thwarted by the lingering winter storm that decided to sweep into Central and stay for the better part of the week. Roy was likely one of the few citizens of the city to even have a workday every day, and probably also one of the few who could traverse the roads well enough for it. The cobblestone streets were slick with ice only thawed by some alchemists unfortunate enough to be in Central for the military to exhort, if not Roy as he passed by.

Ed liked the winter, though, despite its massive inconveniences. The thick snowfall smothered all noise until a sublime sort of hush seemed to linger thick and implacable over the city. Life slowed to a leisurely stroll. Ed breathed it in.

“Have you given thought to your research proposal?” Roy asked this time, pen flying over some documents in a perfunctory manner.

“Somewhat,” and Ed did have something for this. “Does it have to be written?”

“If it’s a formal proposal, yes,” Roy looked up at him with a faint frown. “No need to rush, though. After you pass, we’ll talk about it and I’ll help you write it—the proposal and the project itself, if you’d like. I have experience proofing and consulting. Or we can have the Weisses on the case.”

The Weisses were close relations to the Armstrongs, old and pedigreed just the same, though not one of the founding families and never considered too influential until the Amsels squandered their prestigious command of Amestris’ literary society. Owning three of the five foremost publishing houses in the country and having married into the Armstrongs thrice in the past two centuries, the Weisses inevitably took over their position. Incidentally, the current Weisses were good friends of Roy. (Who wasn’t?)

“I shouldn’t need them if I have your help, right?” Ed mused, “and I’m sure Kanon and Jacob won’t mind proofing.”

“That they won’t. Also very helpful sounding boards and study partners, given both of them have already passed the exams.”

Ed blinked. “Wait, what? They have? But they aren’t—”

“State Licensed? No, not officially. Both declined their offers, on the grounds of having only taken the exams to test their knowledge and skill. Jacob believes military employment to be a severe insult to his family and pedigree. Why conduct research under the State when he is perfectly capable of funding himself? The Firats are rather wealthy, you know, and the grant they offered him—one of the largest in recent decades—is like spare change next to what his trust fund must look like. It would be a different matter altogether if he were a combat alchemist, but alas, he is not.”

Ed snickered. That sounded like Jacob, alright.

They both sank into their tasks after that with the usual companionable silence, Ed never resurfacing again until a hot cup of cocoa slid beside his elbow on the tabletop. It was adorned with floating marshmallows – Ed promptly dropped his pen and accepted the drink.

Dinner on the Eve of the new year, per Maes and Roy’s tradition, was held late in the night and lasted until past midnight, so that the first hours of every new year was spent in the warm company of close friends. Riza Hawkeye was the only one coming in out of Roy’s company, being as good as family to Roy. Ed didn’t feel bad, though, because according to Maes, his and Roy’s men would need to be scraped off the frozen sidewalks outside of a bar tomorrow with how much fun they were having on their own without having to worry about their superiors and the smoking barrels of
Hawkeye’s guns.

“Drink up. Warm yourself before we step out there,” and Roy spat there with the tired spite of a pyromaniac stuck in the throes of an exultant winter. “I’ll be changing. Fetch your coat and scarf.”

Ed was still licking chocolate off his lower lip when they stepped out into the blistering cold. Roy snapped to soften the snow beneath their feet. Fat snowflakes danced around them, one landing on Ed’s lashes and another slipping past the scarf tucked around his face. His ports ached in sharp discomfort but the snow brought a smile to his face.

That was how the new year passed, hushed as snowfall, celebrated with Maes’ sweet champagne and Gracia’s laughter and Roy’s warm presence ever at his shoulder.

A week later, as Ed assisted Roy in the kitchen, he was asked of his opinion regarding studying with another State Alchemist, part in preparation for the exams, and also as preparation for life as a licensed researcher. Roy posed the question easily, casual as you please, whipping cream in his blue apron with his shirtsleeves folded up to the elbows. It was only the two of them tonight, and Roy was preparing chocolate torte for dessert.

Are you worried I won’t pass? was the first question that crossed Ed’s mind. The clenching in his gut—fear, of disapproval, of disappointing Roy—was so potent he barely caught his automatic response. Except. Except Roy had absolute certainty in him, in his alchemy. So…

Underneath the underneath, Little Hohenheim, the Gate sibilantly whispered. Ed was effectively forced to re-evaluate the situation. The few months of training with Roy was for purposes beyond simple alchemy, honing his mind to apply the incisive deduction he was gifted with towards other pursuits he would need to survive in this realm, such as politics.

So why would Roy—who believed in him and who was an incredibly covetous man besides—risk fostering him for study, however brief, with another State Alchemist?

“Who is it?” Ed asked, hands resuming the tedious task of slicing carrots into small, rectangular pieces. (They had another argument about clapping vs traditional methods of cooking; of course, Ed lost.)

Roy was carefully stirring the blackberry currant sauce in a bowl. “Shou Tucker,” he said, “otherwise known as the Sewing Life Alchemist. Quite a reputation as a researcher.”

Reputation, Ed echoed in his head. Aha.

By studying with another esteemed researcher, Ed was better poised to attract grants and funding for his own research, as well as adding credibility and weight to his own name. Why stop at one State Alchemist as a mentor when there are more to be acquainted with in the city? Roy was building his resume for him.

But this—this didn’t feel like Roy’s idea.

“Soooo what did Maes have to bribe you with to get you to let me out of your immediate clutches for more than an hour?”
Sudden laughter fell from Roy, pleasant surprise crackling like lightning over his face. “Very good, Ed! Though it wasn’t Maes this time. Mira and I talked.”

“Huh. So you and Dad talked.”

Roy ignored that. “She made it quite clear how wrapping you in a mile of gauze would only serve to disfavour the both of us—you and me—and therefore ruin her future investment. She’s a fastidious person with her assets, you see.”

“I see,” Ed deadpanned. “Her assets, indeed.”

Assets! the Gate giggled.

“So what is this Shou Tucker person like?” because there would be no point in asking if Roy knew the man, of course Roy knew the man. Roy knew every man worth knowing in Central.

“Quiet,” Roy shrugged, “one daughter, one dog. As rumours go, he’s involved in quite a bit of illegal bioalchemy.”

Blinking, Ed asked, “And you’re letting me study with him?” with no small amount of disbelief.

Roy sighed. “Rumours are called rumours for a reason. There hasn’t been any proof, as far as official channels are concerned. Of course, there is the consideration that the military is sponsoring his research…”

“…meaning the military is likely in on it,” Ed finished for him, tone flat. He was no stranger to anti-martial sentiment. The military was never popular in Resembool, never popular that close to Ishbal. The Bloodsands were still too recent, still extant in living memory. Winry was a testament to that. “Do you want me to dig while I’m there?”

Ed regrets the words the moment they leap from his tongue. The look on Roy’s face—regret, disappointment, apprehension, fear—every emotion tastes sharp and fresh, Roy not even bothering to mask it anymore. At this point, it was futile. Ed was getting to know him too well for masks.

“I am… sorry, Ed, I did not mean to imply that,” Roy slowly apologised, submerging them both in a distinct atmosphere of discomfort. “I only want to better prepare you for what you’ll encounter. That is all.”

Silence reigned for a few seconds, until Ed cleared his throat. “I know that, but. Let’s be honest, Roy. When I become licensed, I’ll be your subordinate, beholden to the same goals you are. I’ll be risking my neck for you the same way you always do for me. So… let’s just skip over the formalities and start early? I don’t think you have anything against this Tucker guy, but Maes always says information is prime currency. I’ll be in the best position to snoop—discreetly, of course.”

That coaxed a laugh from the man. “Discreet is not a word I ever expect from you, Edward Elric.”

“Discreet is easy when people are, like you always say, so blinded by my brilliant self they forget to be cautious of me,” Ed sniffed, sticking his nose into the air. And then, playfully swiping a finger’s worth of currant sauce, he said, “I learn only from the best.”

Roy positively glowed.
Emotionally divisive talk about studying under Shou Tucker was pushed to the sidelines when Ed’s birthday descended upon them, sudden and unexpected and hideously bright. White snow, freshly fallen, softened Central’s edges into watercolour textures. Like they did on the new year’s eve, they gathered at Maes’ house, the four of them, Maes and Gracia with Roy and Ed. That was more than enough.

The food was divine, of course, prepared by Roy’s hands with Maes as his more-cumbersome-than-helpful sous chef. A vanilla-frosted version of the Devil Cake was the highlight of the dinner, with twelve (edible!) candy candles in the shape of various alchemical glyphs adorning the delicious miracle. Roy snapped once to light all twelve of them, Maes sang an ear-shattering off-key rendition of that hideous birthday song, and then finally Ed could blow the candles out so that he could pluck away the eos glyph candle and pop it into his mouth. Brilliant.

Altogether, it was a much simpler, much calmer celebration. It was a private affair: Ed had vehemently refused a large gathering the likes of Roy’s birthday party. He had no desire whatsoever to sour such an auspicious day by forcing himself to socialise with a large crowd. This was what he preferred: crackling fireplace, warm cider, cake, Dog at his knee, Roy by his side, Maes and Gracia tucked together across from them, comfortable conversation. It felt like home.

“Gifts!” Maes declared, once the last of the cake was devoured. “Mine first!”

Ed grinned, eagerly grabbing for the box Maes placed on the table. It was wrapped in glossy green paper and topped with a silver bow. When he was younger, he had relished ripping the wrappings apart to get to the gift underneath, but he couldn’t muster the will to ruin the beautiful wrapping, so he took his time gently unravelling it instead.

“Oh.”

Inside the brown box was a small photo album lying beside a new camera. And not a cheap one, either—the camera looked expensive, top of the line, and knowing Maes, painstakingly handpicked.

“It’s the model one step down from mine,” Maes explained, “simpler to operate and about an ounce lighter. I’d take you through the step-by-step, but I’d just bore you. Just play with it, you’ll get the hang of it. There’s a manual included in there too.”

Ed turned it over in his hands, slack-jawed and blinking. Discounting Roy’s various gifts and provisions, this had to be the single most expensive gift in his entire life. “…thank you. I—um. I’ll take good care of it, I promise.”

Maes only chortled. “I’m sure you can fix it right up with alchemy if it ever broke.”

Ed frowned. “Some things are like fine china when broken. They don’t ever repair the same.” Gingerly, he replaced it in its cushioned spot. And then the album. It was heavy and thick with pictures already inside. Flipping through the pages pinned a grin to his face.

The first picture was of him sitting in Roy’s library, one hand around a mug and another hand gesticulating around his head, with Roy sat across from him, face intense and engaged. And then a picture of him sitting under the tree in Roy’s yard, reading. An admittedly elegant portrait of him in the formal wear before they left for the Symposium months ago. Himself, from a distance, arms flailing in front of a gathered crowd around Dr. Schrum’s defective circle. Dog rolling around with him on a pile of fallen leaves. Roy standing beside him, the two of them with thick scarves and dark coats, quietly talking under the snow.
On and on it went—Ed would take time to go through them all. He stopped after a few pages and tucked the album back into the box. “I feel so stalked.”

“Get used to it,” Roy snorted, pouring himself and Maes both two fingers of whiskey each.

“I also feel weird saying thank you for stalking me and then providing me with the fruits of your questionable labour,” Ed told Maes.

Maes took a gulp of his whiskey and then wagged a finger at Ed. “You won’t feel weird anymore when I get you the Roy blackmail collection for when you pass the State exams!”

“Maes.”

Snickering, Ed reached for the next gift—a soft, fat parcel lovingly wrapped in baby blue paper with a yellow bow. Gracia’s gift. “That blackmail collection better be comprehensive enough to hold over his head so he doesn’t try to abuse me when he becomes my CO,” he teased as he unwrapped the parcel. It was harder to keep the wrapping intact this time, due to the parcel’s irregular shape and softness. But as soon as the paper fell away, Ed’s fingers sank into soft cotton and warm wool.

Several items of clothing were bundled up together: two waffle-knit sweaters in vibrant red and deep black, two long knit cardigans in soft cream and slate grey, a black wool cap thick enough to deter snow, three thick handmade scarves in black and red and Persian green, and a double-layered tummy warmer—his immediate personal favourite. He knew Gracia to be a fast knitter, but this had to have taken time.

“I love them, thank you!” Ed broke into an adoring grin and shoved himself into the red sweater. It was as warm as Gracia’s little motherly hugs.

“You’re quite welcome, Ed,” Gracia rubbed an absent hand over her ripe belly and smiled. “Oh, I’m glad they fit. Maes, look how well they fit!”

Maes predictably spent the next ten minutes fawning over his wife’s handiwork, while Roy helped Ed fold the clothes back into order. “I’m jealous,” the man said, stroking the green scarf. “Handmade clothes from Gracia—must be nice…”

“Oh, shut it, Mustang, your wardrobe is already large enough!” Ed pushed the clothes away from Roy’s hands and swiped for the last gift on the table. Roy’s turn.

Shimmering textured gold paper with a sheer golden bow. Ed carefully unwrapped the box, smaller than Maes’ and lighter than Gracia’s. As if to return the favor, Roy had kept this gift a complete secret from Ed until today—he just knew he was in for a massive surprise, if the glint in Roy’s eye was anything to go by.

Removing the lid from the box revealed a wicked-looking blade laid carefully atop a black leather sheath. A soft noise of delight escaped from Ed’s throat. “Hunting knife!”

“A Sanz knife, blade forged from carbon steel. Balanced for throwing as well. Very useful.”

True enough, the small curved blade showcased finely sharpened edges on both sides, serrated near the hilt, with a reinforced handle made of a dark, lightweight metal alloy. The hand guard featured a rougher surface texture and was lightly moulded to fit a hand for a more secure grip. It was entirely bare of engravings (like a blank canvas, because Roy would have expected that I’d want to engrave it myself) except for a small blacksmith’s emblem at the base of the pommel. It was tastefully done in black and gold and steel. (1)
“I could dress this in scripts,” Ed brushed a finger across the flat of the blade in adoration. “Neurotoxins, hallucinogens, tranquilisers.”

“Start with those reinforcement scripts Roy does for mine instead. Never fun to break your trustiest knife,” Maes advised, unexpectedly savvy. Ed didn’t know Maes used knives, but somehow, a blade-wielding Maes was easy to fathom. “Ah, right, you haven’t seen. Palm blades are my weapon of choice—Schrades (2), in particular. I have Roy reinforce every single one I own.”

A glance at Gracia told Ed that she was well-used to her husband and Roy’s dangerous pastimes and antics; she didn’t even bat an eyelash, her soft smile unwavering as Maes cradled her against his chest. Ed nodded and made a note to ask Roy about the reinforcement scripts later. “Why does Sanz sound familiar?”

“No, that is a very fascinating story,” Roy leaned forwards, eager always for a juicy bit of history to share. “You lived some years in Dublith, so the name will sound familiar to you. Gideon Sanz is quite an infamous figure in the South. He was born in Syrell more than a hundred years ago but learnt his trade smithing as an apprentice at Rush Valley before moving to South City to set up shop. He was very highly respected as a blacksmith during his time, which is why nobody ever suspected him to be one of the most prolific serial killers in our history. South City’s Red Ripper—red because he always picked victims who happened to be wearing red. As if the very colour triggered the urge to kill. Left them in pieces, scattered about like trash, no trace of a motive whatsoever until a chance witness gave the military the break they needed. He got careless in his old age.”

Ed gaped. “But the fact that he grew to be old means he was so good he avoided getting caught for all those years! How many did he kill?”

“Approximates are at least in the three hundreds. Exact number, we’ll never know. He died when the military found and engaged him. He went down fighting and took five armed officers with him,” Maes regaled.

“There were 377 knives found displayed on a wall in his basement. Investigators speculated that there was one knife for every victim, specifically handcrafted and used for each kill,” said Roy. (3) “Each kill we know of,” Maes added, “because it wouldn’t be far-fetched for him to have killed outside of his Red Ripper persona.”

Roy nodded, finishing his whiskey and taking the knife in hand. “The Sanz knives scattered far and wide over the years, some disappearing underground, a few crossing the border into foreign countries. They cost quite a bit of money so collectors aren’t the most forthcoming if they own one—highly popular, prone to burglary. Rightly so; they are all of very high quality make. Sanz knives are still considered the gold standard for hunting and fighting knives. I know the Armstrongs possess twenty-four of them; Julia tells me Mira and Alex were trained in knife-fighting using them. I was fortunate enough to come across a pair for myself almost two years ago. This is half of that pair.”

A pair of knives which were once used to murder, gut, and dismember some unfortunate person. Ed should be revolted. Instead, he was fascinated. “A pair, though. Did he kill twins with them or something?”

“Husband and wife, actually,” Roy quipped, deftly flipping the knife with one nimble hand. “How well do you handle blades, Ed?”

Hearing the bare challenge, Ed knocked the knife from Roy’s hand in one swift movement, sending it up into the air before catching it, flipping it, and sheathing it in one motion. “Well enough.”
Maes and Roy both shared a laugh, delighted. Ed quietly made a note to ask about Maes’ knives too, later on. Izumi had talked about palm blades and how fatal they could be in close combat, but she never used them due to the difficulty of handling. Ed knew that Schrades were one of the trickier types, being a cross between a knife, a throwing dagger, and a palm blade—Maes would have had to master it through extensive training and no small amount of trial and error.

“I want you to carry it with you,” Roy told him, voice soft. Almost hesitant. “I would feel better if you were armed. I know you have your alchemy everywhere you go, but sometimes a simple weapon can do just as much. I won’t arm you with a gun just yet; we need Riza to teach you first. But now that you’re about to become part of our world, you need to be prepared.”

Ed nodded, tucking the sheathed blade back into the box. It was small enough to hide well against his leg if he were to wear boots. It would also hide well on his hip, under a jacket or vest. “Thanks, Roy. I’ll take good care of it.”

At that, a smirk started to creep upon Roy’s face. “Oh, you’re not done yet, Ed. Underneath the gold cloth, please.”

There’s more? Ed didn’t really want or need more. He had gotten better at hiding how uncomfortable Roy’s many gifts made him, but this was pushing it. The knife did not look cheap. Housing and feeding and clothing and supporting him wasn’t a cheap either. What else could there possibly be that Roy hadn’t given him already?

But true enough, underneath the knife was gold cloth, and underneath that hid a dark blue envelope secured with a golden string. It reminded him of Hohenheim’s little letter, an unpleasant association. With a moue of exaggerated dread, Ed untied the string and pulled out a few folded papers, smoothing them out and perusing the contents.

**Last Will and Testament**

*Wait, what?* Ed blinked. It was a formal will, declaring Roy’s titles, relations, properties, assets, and status. It also delineated his beneficiaries, and—“Roy. I was joking.”

Roy shrugged, smug. “I wasn’t.”

“Oh my god, I’m inheriting your library.”

“Not yet, I hope.”

“Where am I going to put all of it!”

Maes and Gracia both dissolved into laughter even as Ed continued to stare at the piece of paper. The Gate was crooning its delight, but Ed wasn’t quite ready to believe it yet. The will formally bequeathed to a certain Mr. Edward Elric the entire library, the tapestry, a very handsome sum of money, and an itemised list of specific alchemical and historical relics Roy owned—all of this to be carried out at the time of Roy’s demise. It was all too much.

“You should know,” Ed said slowly, “that I am currently making very inappropriate associations between that very sharp, very pointy knife you gave me and the portents of this will.”

Roy’s face morphed from smug to dawning horror. “Edward, the gifts are not meant as an invitation to stab me in my sleep.”
“You may want to lock your doors tonight, because I haven’t decided yet whether I like you more than I like your library.”

Roy’s horrified expression was precious enough to count as one of Ed’s gifts. They had a good laugh at the thought of Ed committing murder in the name of books (possible, entirely possible, those were some really good books) and Maes ribbed Roy about it so much that Roy’s face never lost that distrusting cast even as the night wore on. Ed tucked his gifts away in a small pile on an unoccupied couch, savouring the dear thought of each one with overflowing contentment. It was different, spending this day away from Alphonse and Master and their mother, but—but it was enough. This was enough. He wasn’t going to ask for more; he had already learnt his lesson, and learnt it well.

Or so he thought before Gracia went into labour.

Ed was just concluding a more-than-just-a-little-awkward telephone conversation with Izumi and Alphonse (they had tried to call Roy’s house and received no answer; luckily, Alphonse had kept Maes’ number with him) when he heard the commotion.

“You need to call more often, Brother. Promise me you’ll call more often, please?” Alphonse, of course, ever the prodigy at emotional blackmail. And such an irreverent little shit about it too, wielding his talents against his own older brother. Where did the respect go?

Ed sighed. “Alright, I promise, Al.”

“Good!” Al exclaimed, tone bright. “Great! My gift should be arriving there soon; I think it just got delayed with the snowstorms stalling the northbound trains. You have to call me when you get it!”

“I will, I will!” Ed laughed, wondering what it was Al got him. Gifts for each other were always such brain-turners when they were growing up together. They shared everything with each other, and what they didn’t have, they found a way to make with alchemy. For the most part, their gifts had consisted of hand-drawn diagrams, step-by-step instructionals, and if the opportunity provided, rare alchemical specimens they either made or obtained from somewhere. That was all going to change now. They were no longer together. “I’m sorry we couldn’t spend today together,” Ed said quietly.

“I know,” Al sighed. “I’m sorry too, but we made our decisions. We have to stick by them.”

“Or else,” because Ed knew Izumi was nearby, listening to the half of their conversation she was privy to and deducing the rest. “Alright, well, I’ll talk to you later then. Thanks for calling, Al. Tell Izumi thanks too, and the both of you get back into the house!”

Alphonse laughed, bid him a good night and a happy birthday, and hung up. It was at a good time, too—Ed placed the telephone back into its cradle and turned to Roy, who bustled into the kitchen looking quite alarmed. “What’s wrong?” Ed asked, dread kindling in his belly.

“Gracia,” Roy took a deep breath, “is in active labour.”

Dread mounted and held Ed in a stranglehold. “Doctor?”

Roy’s eyes flicked to the window—outside raged a snowstorm, snowfall thick and unforgiving as it muffled warmth and buried light. Ed experienced a moment of wit-shattering panic—before that familiar sharp, elevated awareness that Izumi had trained into him clicked into place.
“Water,” Ed blurted out, lurching to the sink, “hot water. Towels, lots of towels—or any kind of cloth, really—”

Roy darted to the linen closet down the hallway, returning with an armful of assorted towels in his arms. Ed took the large basin of water and together they hurried to the living room, where Maes was murmuring frantic words to Gracia. Gracia was stretched along the long couch, face twisted into a grimace. Ed picked up a towel and dipped into the water—tch, too tepid, so he clapped and brought it more heat. Steam rose from the basin as he soaked a towel and gave it to Maes.

“First aid kit—” Roy placed a large black-and-red wooden box on the table, pulling out disinfectants, medical shears, and an array of other instruments Ed couldn’t be bothered to name.

“Does anybody actually have experience assisting a live birth before?” Maes asked, panic edging into his tone as he tucked an old leather coat under Gracia’s hips, followed by two layers of thick towels.

“I know it in theory?” Ed hesitantly offered.

“I’ve seen it done?” Roy uneasily confirmed.

Gracia groaned. “Roy can do it, can’t he? Maes, just—ah—just call the doctor so he can guide—oh god, it hurts—guide us—” she let out a sharp hiss of pain, fingers clenching into the upholstery.

Maes looked between Ed and Roy both, and then at the snowstorm outside. “Desperate measures, I suppose.”

Roy was already rolling up his sleeves and looking like he was sorely regretting the last few fingers he had of that scotch he and Maes had shared. “I think there’s enough in your kit that we can make do, barring complications. I need to wash. Ed, you too, come on.”

Oh shit, Ed thought to himself. I’m participating? (To which the Gate replied, learning experiences!) They went to the kitchen to perform a very thorough wash of their arms and returned, sitting at the end of the couch by Gracia’s legs. Maes had already moved to sit behind Gracia, supporting her in a reclined position. Flat-lying was about the most awkward and energy-consuming position for childbirth, according to Izumi. If only Gracia could stand up.

“Gracia, I need to see how far down the baby is,” Roy said. Ed could feel the tension in Roy’s shoulders, but none of it was on his face—there was only intense focus there, sharp as the finest Sanz blade.

Gracia nodded, parting her legs and hands still clenching and relaxing in time with the invisible contractions. Roy reached (Ed shivered) and measured—“Not there yet, but it’ll be done soon, I think can feel the dilatation. (4) I can’t feel the baby yet. Ed, warm towels on her belly.”

Ed did as he was told, brain spinning through the information he had absorbed from living with Granny Pinako and Winry and Izumi—dilatation, descent, frequency of contraction increases dramatically as the transition stage begins, oh god—and the Gate, ever glib, flashed images at him, some helpful, most not, and always with a catty smile.

“Wait,” Ed turned to Maes, “the baby isn’t breech, right?”

“No, no, the doctor checked just a week ago,” Maes responded, hand running soothing lines over Gracia’s distended stomach.
But, Ed thought, a week ago is a long time. Baby could have rotated in there and we wouldn’t know.

He didn’t voice it. They all knew of the possibility. But what choice did they have now? None of them knew how to manipulate the baby’s position and trying their amateur hands at it could only serve to harm the child.

It was a very tense half an hour hence, during which Maes managed to contact the doctor and relay the situation. The doctor, as they had expected, would be severely delayed. (Ed was just thankful they would still come.) After conversing with Maes, the doctor had a lengthier dialogue with Roy, and Ed could hear steady, step-by-step instructions being recited into Roy’s ear. Roy nodded along, not bothering to write anything down, as if he was only confirming what he already knew and consolidating new information in.

Ed remained at Gracia’s side all the while, keeping the steady supply of hot water towels and belly rubs. If he pressed his flesh hand into her belly hard enough, he could feel the muscles rippling underneath. Goosebumps crawled along Ed’s back. It was the first notable time his intimate knowledge with human anatomy was more of a discomfort than a service. How strange and uncomfortable an experience it must be, he thought. His fertile imagination pictured the viscera shifting inside of the body to accommodate the intense undulations. Bones grinding, hips shifting, organs dancing, the Gate crooned, providing visuals that were far too much, thank you, please stop.

The Gate swished its tail and cackled.

He was shaken from his inward conversation when Gracia’s hand patted his cheek, somewhat clammy but gentle against Ed’s skin. “I’ll be okay, Ed, don’t worry. It’s a natural—” her breath hitched, eyes screwing shut, “—natural process.”

It didn’t seem very natural right at that moment.

“You were the one who told me,” Gracia smiled at him again, which meant she was in between contractions, “that we must pay a high price for the gift of life.”

Ed blinked. This is not what I meant.

But this is what it’s supposed to mean, bringing life into the world, the Gate said, reverberating in his skull even as he moved to assist Roy prepare cloths and second basin and other materials they needed for the impending child. What you know of the gift of life is the unnatural. This is how it is done, without paying the price for a soul. What you did was but a mere imitation of this, and though imitation may be the highest form of flattery, you cannot create life the same way. It is not done.

Ed already knew that, thank you very much. Irritably, he helped fold Gracia’s dress out of the way, the sharp tang of blood bringing memories of the Rockbell’s operating room. But this was different. The metallic smell was muted with something else, muskier and heavy on Ed’s tongue. He didn’t know what it was, but he had no memory to equate it to.

It was a waiting game for the next hour, Roy intermittently checking the baby’s progress as they tracked Gracia’s contractions coming closer together and lasting for longer. The doctor was still nowhere to be found.

“…could have called the doctor earlier, but we didn’t know,” Maes was murmuring to Roy, who shrugged.

“She could have been in labour all night and didn’t know any difference, since she’s been having false contractions for the past two weeks.” (5) Maes looked worried, so Roy added, “Gracia’s young.
Her chances are good. She’ll be fine.”

Finally, after what seemed like forever, Roy measured with his fingers again—Ed congratulated himself for not feeling nauseated or embarrassed when Roy did so this time—and declared that the baby’s descent was accelerating.

“Almost time to push, Gracia.” How did Roy know? Ed gawked. “Ed, hold her leg like this—Maes, we need to shift up a little bit for gravity to help her—”

They repositioned and Gracia gave a surprised grunt, face contorting—

“Right, the baby’s coming.”

Maes’ voice broke in panic. “Holy shit, okay, okay love, you can do this, we can do this—”

Ed could see the muscles in Gracia’s stomach and sides clench and ripple as a very strong contraction hit. “Push,” Roy said. Gracia pushed, face reddening and neck straining with the effort. Another contraction, another push—Ed faintly registered Gracia’s hand on his shoulder as he helped hold her leg and her position, her fingers digging into his flesh like claws as she grappled for purchase. On the third push, she cried out in bloodcurdling agony, and Ed had to squeeze his eyes shut.

“Don’t,” Ed grunted, patting her leg to get her attention, “don’t waste your energy on yelling, Gracia, Auntie Pinako says you shouldn’t waste your energy like that.” Ed patted her leg again, making her look at him, sweat pouring into her eyes as she gasped for breath in between contractions. “You need to breathe. Blow the air out between your lips. That’s how Master taught us to deal with pain.”

Maes pushed her hair out from her face and kissed her temple, murmuring encouragement as he braced her for the fourth, and the fifth, and the sixth push. Ed wondered when this would end. Surely it would end soon. She couldn’t take more of this, could she? What if something happened to her? What if a complication arose? Gracia could die.

She will if she doesn’t keep pushing, said the Gate, lashing its tail in tense anticipation. So Ed strangled his fear and kept coaching her to breathe and push, breathe and push.

All of a sudden, Roy grabbed one of her hands and placed it in between her legs to touch something—Gracia broke into a sob, hand returning to grab the couch as she pushed with renewed strength. Nine, ten, eleven, twelve—oh, Ed thought, the baby is coming out. That was what Roy wanted her to feel. (6)

Ed choked back a sob himself when he saw the baby’s head peek out, a little pale, its face pinched, but no surprise there, the poor thing was being wrenched out of its warm cocoon so harshly! The baby wasn’t breech after all.

After the baby’s head, the rest of the body seemed easy for Gracia. Ed could see the physical release of it in her muscles, her head lolling against her husband’s shoulder as Roy carefully eased the child out. There was a lot of blood, and the baby seemed to be covered in some white mucus, and the umbilical cord was tangled loose around the baby’s leg—but Ed felt no disgust, no discomfort. Only awe, humbling and sharp, as Roy cradled the baby and firmly tapped its foot—there it goes, the newborn’s wail, indignant and gaining strength with each inhale of air, with each heave of those tiny, tiny lungs. It shook the cloying tension free from around them, lighting up the entire house with relief.

“Clamp and shears,” Roy prompted, laying the baby down on Gracia’s chest after towelling it down.
Roy tucked another towel under Gracia’s hips (for the afterbirth, Ed recalled) and took the clamp and shears from Ed’s miraculously steady hands. “Hold the cord up—yes, hold it—” Ed watched as Roy clamped within an inch of the baby’s belly, and sheared it off with one stroke. Gracia’s newborn was still wailing, her anger bringing a healthy flush under her skin.

“Roy,” Ed said as he gazed at the severed cord, “I think she's bloody pissed at you.”

Maes and Roy both broke into surprised laughter, as Gracia looked into her first child’s face with a lovestruck smile. She was so tiny that Maes’ hand cupped around her bald little head in one curled span. They called her Elysia. (7)

Later, as Gracia helped Ed wash Elysia in the warm water basin, Ed grinned down at the little girl and ticked her chin with a flesh finger. “Welcome to the world, Elysia. I promise it’ll be a grand adventure.”

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*My mother groaned, my father wept,*  
*into the dangerous world I leapt.*  
*(William Blake)*

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The doctor arrived two hours after Elysia was born, which was almost five hours after they called. They couldn’t lay blame, of course, for one because it was quite a feat that the doctor even came, and for another because the doctor in question was Karenina Islenov-Firat, who of course arrived with her husband and sister-in-law. Where there was once a calm, settled silence now reigned a flurry of activity as the three doctors fussied over Gracia and Elysia, Julia Firat taking a moment to rib Roy about his contributions.

“You birthed a child,” she smirked.

“Please don’t say it like that,” Roy grimaced.

“You’re one of us now,” she continued.

“I wasn’t aware you had an illegitimate child somewhere,” Roy retorted.

“I’m so proud of you,” she cooed.

“Please stop,” Roy groaned, with a pleading glance shot at Jason. Jason threw his hands up and shrugged, washing his hands clean of the matter. Why would Roy even ask Jason for help? There would be nothing Jason could say or do! Not against Julia!

“Oh, by all means continue, Julia!” Karenina turned to beam at them from her seat beside Gracia. “For complete amateurs, you did quite the job and therefore deserve the adulation.” Roy muttered under her breath as Julia elbowed him in the side. “I don’t see any reason to be overly concerned,” Karenina told Maes, after having assessed the baby’s health. “Beautiful, healthy baby girl. Congratulations to the both of you!”
Maes visibly sagged in relief.

“Gracia seems fine, too,” Jason declared. Mothers and babies were quite removed from Jason’s expertise, but he had the requisite knowledge to pass basic judgement on her wellbeing, and Gracia’s dedicated obstetrician wouldn’t be able to come for a while besides. “Roy did a smashing job. Bleeding will persist for maybe one to three days but should taper quite sharply. If not, call for another examination.”

Jason and Karenina began to unload tips on the two new parents, which made entirely no sense to Edward. Gracia looked halfway to sleep and Maes was nowhere near coherent right now; neither of them would retain shit. But there was a thrum of excitement in the room, so Ed excused it. Everyone was just happy, that was all.

“I heard you helped, Edward,” Julia smirked, prompting him to hide behind his mug of coffee. “Admirable, very admirable. My little brothers, the two idiots, they would have lost their heads in panic! There was a blackout here in Central, a couple of winters ago now, and I asked Jacob to light a fire so we could see and be warm—guess what he said? ‘But there’s no wood!’ the idiot said!”

Ed laughed. “Is he an alchemist or not?”

“That’s what I said!”

“Well, my Master was very thorough,” Ed grinned, “and I really did very little work. It was all Roy.”

Julia smiled. “No fear of blood?”

Ed snorted. That wasn’t nearly as much blood as there had been on their basement floor in Resembool. “Trust me, blood is not even the least of my issues. I’ve seen worse.”

Riza Hawkeye came soon after the Firats, being one of Gracia’s closest friends and second to receive the good news. The Firats didn’t have all day to stay—“Work to do, patients to see,” Jason grimaced, earning an exasperated smile from his wife—so they soon left and allowed the hazy calm to descend once more upon the house. With clearance now acquired from the doctors, Gracia was up and walking (how was this even possible, Ed didn’t know). Riza assisted her into the shower to get cleaned up. (8)

Ed couldn’t remember what happened after that; he fell asleep curled up on one of the smaller couches, exhausted from his birthday celebration and the tense emergency, not to mention the cleanup after. Never mind that he and Roy had used alchemy to do it—he was drained. He would later learn that Roy took one of the guest bedrooms for sleep so that they would be within easy reach in case Maes or Gracia needed any additional help.

The following week was laden with gifts and wellwishes for the Hughes family, Maes and Gracia being dear friends to many people. It seemed that all these people were also somehow privy to the extraordinary circumstances of Elysia’s birth. It would be no surprise to Ed at all if the entirety of Central’s society knew about the ordeal, but if Ed was being truthful, that wasn’t the worst part—oh, far from it. No, the worst part was this: the Firats’ shining endorsement of Roy’s performance served only to further elevate society’s regard for him (such a gifted young man, such skill, such readiness, ad fucking nauseam) and therefore gave the Bastard extra helium to add to his already inflated head.

It drove Ed insane.
So he spent his days holed up studying for the exam, allowing Maes and Gracia some time alone with their newborn. He took his fill of Elysia in the evenings when he and Roy came over for their daily visit to share dinner and coo over the newborn girl who now shared Ed’s birthday. In Maes’ lovestruck words, Elysia was a lovely little angel, an absolute delight to be around. She didn’t make a habit of crying or fussing; she’d simply lay there and blinked up at whoever was caring for her, as if watching, observing, even though Ed knew that her yet underdeveloped eyes could not see very far. She would make a fine alchemist one day, with such keen observational instincts.

Otherwise: study, study, study. Ed did nothing but study. He devoured books on Amestrian history, literature, and art. He informed himself on the most recent economic trends and political disasters in the Amestrian community. Anything and everything that had near to no relevance to alchemy he studied, because Ed, being Ed, knew what he didn’t know, and didn’t like not knowing. (Also because maybe Roy had scared him just the littlest tiniest teeny bit when he had mentioned the test including other things. Ed wasn’t comfortable with other things.)

So intent was he on his studies that he entirely forgot about his playdate with Shou Tucker until Roy came home one night and confiscated his books to send him to bed early. “I’ll drop you off at Tucker’s tomorrow,” he said, and Ed’s brain ground to a screeching halt.

“Wait, what did you just say?”


“Yes, is there a problem—”

“Of course there is a problem, I don’t even know alchemist to alchemist etiquette as you say, what am I supposed to do if he doesn’t like me, what if I offend the guy or, or, or he kicks he out of his house because he thinks I’m trying to steal his work?”

And Roy had the indecency to laugh. “Oh, Ed. Tucker’s a very mild-mannered guy from what I’ve seen and heard. There should be no problem.”

“Operative word: should. Also, mild-mannered,” Ed frowned. “Did we not have a conversation some time ago where you told me that Hohenheim told you that mild-mannered people are the ones to be wary of?”

“Did we also,” Roy retorted, “not have a conversation some time ago where you told me how Hohenheim can, and I quote, ‘shove his wisecracks up his ass’?”

Ed stage-gasped “Your mouth, Colonel Mustang! Dare you greet Gracia with that mouth? Dare you greet Elysia with that mouth?”

Raised eyebrow. “Your words, not mine, Ed. Anyway, I cleared it with Gran. If all works well tomorrow, you get two days a week until you’re licensed, at which point in time you will have to discuss cooperative study with Tucker under contract. Wake up early and don’t be late.”

He ended up waking late, after all, and had to rush to get his things together before they had to run.
But there was enough time on the way to Tucker’s house for him to wolf down an egg sandwich, so he managed to at least sate his morning hunger. Breakfast was the most important meal of the day, after all.

Shou Tucker’s house turned out to be a modest two-story house in a modest middle-income neighbourhood. It had white walls, a brown roof, and a bright blue door. That was as much detail as Ed managed before a hurtling mass of fur bowled him over onto the pavement and began to eat his face.

“Alexander!” came the harried reprimand, as Ed struggled with the wriggling creature smothering him. “Alexander, no! Goodness me, I am so sorry—Alexander, stop! Down! Down, boy!”

Winded and slathered in dog saliva, Ed staggered to his feet as Alexander the Drooling Dog was hauled off his person. The creature was a massive canine of some evil breed that took an indecent amount of joy in licking his face off while suffocating him to death and simultaneously being offensively taller than he is at its full height. (Damn that height!) It was brown and white and had a long, fluffy, thumping tail. The creature had the gall to grin at him; Ed scowled back.

“I am so sorry,” a middle-aged, sallow-faced man apologised, “our dog is not as well-trained as we’d like him to be—no time, you see, and Nina can’t exactly—ah, come here, Nina, let me introduce you to our guest here…” and it became clear that this unassuming, hunched excuse of a man was Shou Tucker, the much-renowned Sewing-Life Alchemist.

“Hi!” a little girl of perhaps about five or six chirped up at Ed, her little arms immediately going around the massive dog’s neck. Her wide smile and plaited brown hair made for an instant little charmer. “I’m Nina. What’s your name?”

“Uh, Edward,” and Ed found himself exchanging a sticky handshake with little Nina Tucker before he even managed a decent introduction to her dad.

Roy’s hand came down to rest on his shoulder, and Ed straightened himself in anticipation of the formal introductions. “Ed, this is Major Tucker. He’s under Brigadier General Gran’s jurisdiction, and they’ve both kindly agreed to have you study here with him for a short while before your exams. Major Tucker, this is Edward, my ward. As I’ve already explained in our last conversation, he’s planning on the exams this year.”

Tucker nodded, a mild smile softening his sallow face. “Yes, yes, I remember. Quite admirable, and very impressive achievements at your age, Mr. Elric.”

His age, of course. “Ah, Ed is fine, really.”

“Ed, then,” Tucker nodded. “Welcome. I hope you’ll excuse the clutter in our house — my wife left and it just hasn’t been the same—but you’re welcome to whatever books or references you’d like to read.” Tucker knelt in front of his little daughter and said, “Nina, Ed is here to study with Papa, okay? You need to let him study. No siccing Alexander on him again.”

Nina pouted. “Can we at least play a little after lunch? I want Alexander to have ‘nother friend.”

“Only if Ed agrees, okay?”

“Kay!” she whirled round and flashed a bright toothy smile at Ed, declaring, “You’ll be jus’ as smart as Daddy if you study together and Daddy is very, very smart! And when I grow up, I’ll be an alchemist too! Are you an alchemist, Ed?”

Ed grinned. “You betcha.” And on principle, because she was such an adorable little charmer, Ed
knelt in front of her, plucking into his hand a stray dead leaf from the pavement. He put his palms together with a grin. “Do you like flowers?”

“I love flowers!”

Ed pulled his hands apart—*rush* went the energy, sharp and sweet though it was short-lived and small—and a sprightly yellow flower sprung from where once was a dead grey leaf. Carefully, he tucked it into her hair, above her ear. “There you go! Pretty young lady with the pretty flower.”

What noise that came out of the little girl was best described as a keening, strangled squeal of delight—sharper than Dog’s whining—as she launched herself at Ed and latched on in pure adoration. She started babbling in the half-coherent speak five-year-old children uniquely spoke, all the while digging her sticky fingers into Ed’s new coat.

“Oh dear,” Tucker sighed, “now you’ve done it. She’s never going to let you out of her sight, Ed.”

“Never!” she exclaimed, much to Roy’s amusement, as Ed attempted to adjust her deceptively little arms—boy, they were *strong*, what did this girl *do* in her play time?

Pleasantries exchanged and assurances received, Ed, Tucker, and Nina parted ways with Roy and Lieutenant Havoc (they would have to speed to get to work in time). Ed exchanged last-minute instructions with Roy (“Pick you up at four sharp, you know my number, and you’ll be careful, yes?”) all the while feeling incredibly relieved that Tucker was kind and accommodating enough for things not to be awkward. Nina’s presence was great help, naturally, but Tucker truly seemed to be open to practical strangers waltzing into his house and disturbing the peace.

*Things are going well after all, just like Roy had said,* Ed told his invisible companion. *I think I worry too much.*

As the front door closed behind his back, the Gate answered him with a wide, fanged grin.

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Much to her father’s fond embarrassment, Nina began to give Ed a hyper-accelerated tour of the important parts of the house: Alexander’s extra-large doggie bed, her purple-decked playroom, the backyard tree with the makeshift swing, the sitting room with her massive dollhouse. It took the work of half an hour before Nina was convinced off of Ed’s person so she could start her homework in her room.

“I have schooled her at home for most of her life,” Tucker told him as they left her bedroom door open a crack so they could hear if anything happened while they were otherwise occupied. “It was easier when my wife was here and I had another person helping around the house. Now it’s just me and her, it’s getting harder. Though she needs less supervision, she also needs more teaching.” Tucker chuckled, shoulders shaking in private laughter. “She started asking about alchemy the other week and wanted to know how to go about turning Alexander into a girl so that she wouldn’t feel bad about putting ribbons in his fur.”

Ed gurgled on his own laugh. “What did you tell her?”

“I said, ‘Honey, how do you know Alexander won’t be mad at you for turning him into a girl?’ But she’s a smart one, she said, ‘Well, we can ask him, of course!’”
Snickering, Ed prompted, “And what did the dog say?”

“Nothing,” Tucker gave him a bland smile. “The dog can’t talk, after all. Nina was very upset. ‘Daddy,’ she told me severely, ‘you have to find a way to make Alexander talk! If you don’t, I will!’ I do believe I’ll be entirely outdone in a few years, what with her degree of determination, I’ll be out of business. She hasn’t let the matter rest since last week.”

They walked into what looked like two rooms collapsed into one, the wall partially removed to open up space, piles and shelves of books crawling everywhere. Ed took a deep breath and savoured it. Now this was an alchemist’s home. Nowhere near the breadth and peculiarity of the library at their own home, in fact more chaotic, but still very enticing. Tucker knew his literature well, it seemed, for Ed immediately spotted the Must-Haves Must-Reads scattered across the piles. He could already see that the majority of the texts were on biology, with a good number of alchemical references thrown in.

“You have, though,” Ed said, quietly following after the man. Tucker led him to the settee, which was in front of a paper-strewn table. The papers were cleared aside to make room for tea. (So they were going to have the talk first. Well, good place to start as any.) “You’ve found a way to make animals talk.”

Tucker’s thin-fingered, white hands paused for a moment, before resuming their task with a stilted sort of grace. “So you are aware of the extent of my research. I wasn’t sure how much I was allowed to tell you. Certainly makes it easier on me.”

“Roy,” Ed shrugged.

“And I imagine the Lieuten—ah, no, that’s right, Colonel now—I imagine that Colonel Mustang must keep track of everybody noteworthy in his profession,” Tucker smiled. It was the smile of one who was well used to the politics surrounding the field.

“Got it in one.”

“Well,” Tucker hummed, pressing lips together in a ponderous line, “Colonel Mustang does sit on the State Alchemical Review Committee, being the second-highest ranking State Alchemist in the country. He would know of all the details of the research that passes through the Review’s table. You must understand, however, that though I might want to engage with you as an alchemist to an alchemist with complete discretion, I—”

“—have rules you gotta follow, I know,” Ed flapped a hand, the motion startling Tucker and then, strangely enough, making him relax. “Roy primed me on pretty much everything. Including contract stipulations. Can’t show me all your research, but you can talk alchemy with me in broad strokes. Can’t tell me about the questions they’ll ask me during the practical, but you can coach me through the general contents of the exam. That’s why I’m here, officially and on paper. But unofficially,” Ed tipped his head to the side, “politically, I’m here, we’re both here, to make Gran and Roy look good. And, you know, to give the impression that we’re both ‘upstanding alchemists of Amestrian society, upholding the tradition of mentoring from one generation to the next’.”

Tucker let loose a delighted laugh. “The Colonel’s words? Did he make you memorise that?”

“For libel, you understand,” Ed grinned, now feeling comfortable enough in the looser atmosphere to tuck one leg underneath him. “He kept on lecturing last night I guess it just burned into my brain.”

“Well, then, shop talk it is.” Tucker leaned to the side and shuffled around some sheaves of paper. “I’m quite glad I didn’t prepare to talk to you about alchemy itself; we’d be wasting time, given your
apparent comfort with practical transmutation already. Ah, here it is.”

Ed accepted a large binder of papers dated four to seven years ago.

“These are old declassified research reports written by a licensed State Alchemist. Formal proposals, progress reports, practical application models, and such. I’m sure you’ve read alchemical journals, but these are vastly different from what is published—not just in content, though often there is content withheld, but also in format and approach. The military has specific interests, and your contract will also have specific clauses. If you’re aiming to be a research alchemist, it’s best to arm yourself with this knowledge.”

And then, Tucker placed beside the binder a small pile of Ars Alchemica, worn and dog-eared.

“These are the journal volumes corresponding to those papers. Compare them and see what the public is told versus what the State Alchemists know. You’ll find it quite interesting,” Tucker promised with a nod.

When Ed continued to wear a mildly perplexed face, Tucker explained: “When cleared by the Board, our research reports begin to circulate privately among the State Alchemists, with varying degrees of disclosure depending on the nature of the study involved. The military tries to protect the privacy of our individual techniques. But they must also facilitate the sharing of information so that all State Alchemists are abreast of the most recent developments and are at the cutting edge of the science at all times. Access is restricted to the First Library, of course, and you cannot take the files or any copies outside unless they are declassified, like these ones. Published studies are usually delayed, edited, and provide incomplete information to prevent a leak of technology. Drachma, Xing, Ailia, and such other complications withstanding.”

“Huh. What’s to prevent us from talking?” Ed wondered. “I mean, nobody would have to know that we talked to them spies, necessarily. They can’t watch us round the clock.”

“Well, I can’t say all State Alchemists are best of friends, but there does exist a certain commonness, a camaraderie, so to speak. Along with that comes an unofficial code of honour. And, honestly, if I worked so hard to learn and master my techniques to qualify as a State Alchemist, I wouldn’t want to demean all of that work by sharing the fruits of my labour to the people who are otherwise too lazy or unskilled to put in the work.”

Ah, so the man did have a spine. Tucker appeared to straighten and grow with his words. Must be the really secretive, covetous type of alchemist. Eh. Ed was rather the same.

“I like to keep the declassified files, you’re welcome to them if you haven’t read them already. I don’t know if Colonel Mustang keeps copies,” Tucker said, brushing his palms on the thighs of his trousers.

“He doesn’t. I’ll read them, thank you.”

“Anyway,” Tucker nodded, “it’ll help to give you some perspective for, ah, one of the questions in the practical—” Ed perked up, “—and also catch you up on some developments with more detail.”

Perspective. Ed hemmed to himself, thumb rubbing his lip as he thought. Perspective. Something in these reports will give me perspective regarding the—but—what perspective?

Tucker was talking about a few more unimportant details—kitchen that way, bathroom that way to the left, feel free to get food or drink, come to me if Nina disturbs you—but Ed was already so absorbed he barely noticed when his host walked out of the room. Something about preparing Nina a
snack before returning downstairs. Downstairs must be a basement research space. Wise, considering the presence of a child. Locked area would be better to prevent accidents.

Ed jolted with a sharp, almost visceral reminder of the basement in Resembool, the stench of fresh blood in the dank air sharpened and sweetened by the crisp taste of energy. The memory was so sudden and so real he could almost taste the sweet, high notes of it on his tongue.

But no, no, I'm in Central, I'm not in the basement, I'm not in a basement, I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine.

He leaned against the settee’s arm until he was certain his heart wouldn’t try to beat its way out of his chest through his throat anymore. What the hell was he having a bloody panic attack for, and at such an odd place and time?

Besides, he thought grimly, walking to the window and taking some of the papers along, what happened in the basement in Resembool was no accident. We did that ourselves.

Naturally, he didn’t tell Roy about his near panic attack. Why should he? There’s no reason to further bother the man. At the end of the day, he bid Mr. Tucker and Alexander goodbye, having already helped tuck Nina into a nap that she was yet to wake from. Once safely inside the car, he sagged into a liquid heap, encouraging a chuckle from Roy.

“Was it that taxing, studying with Mr. Tucker?”

“It’s taxing watching my every damn word,” Ed muttered, tugging at the irritating scarf until Roy sighed and pushed away his clumsy pawing hands to help tug it out from underneath the collar. “I suppose it’s good practice. Every time I discuss alchemy with him, I have to make sure whatever I said isn’t giving anything away.”

“The essence of secret keeping is patience,” Roy told him, ever the fount of hidden wisdom. “What do you say about a dinner with Gracia tonight? Maes offered. I was going to cook for us but looking at you made me tired as well.”

Ed had to laugh at that, but heartily agreed to dinner with the Hughes. Even Lt. Havoc (Jean, Roy called him) got to stay for dinner, since he had nothing to do tonight anyway. They parked the car in front of the house, dropped off their bags, fetched Dog, and trudged across the slush in their backyard. Thick icicles hung from the trees, dripping, threatening to fall, their glistening surfaces throwing the pale evening light in prisms. At the door, Gracia was delighted to welcome them in, looking well and happy, a sight that immediately breathe the warmth back in Ed’s bones.

They set a fifth place for Lt. Havoc on the table. Ed helped finish up in the kitchen and earned a kiss on the forehead from Gracia for his hard work. Somewhere nearby, Maes was cooing to his infant daughter. Roy was being a pyromaniac, rekindling the fire in the dining room. Together he and Gracia carried the dishes to the table, and when they finally sat to eat, Lt. Havoc praised Gracía’s cooking with sincerity.

It was a table full of warmth and laughter, the way a family should be. Maes placed Elysia on a high chair modified to be a tiny high cot nearby, where they could watch her and she could grow accustomed to having people around her. Ed told them about his day at the Tuckers and let them have a laugh at his misfortune with that mangy monster Nina liked to call Alexander. Dog was far
more behaved than that thing!

“Well, it would be better behaved if it had someone else other than a four-year-old girl for company,” Roy pointed out. “Tucker’s probably busy all day working, looks like he barely has enough time between tending to what his child needs and his own research—no time at all to spend on a pet.”

“Shouldn’t have gotten a damn dog, then,” Ed grumbled, though half-heartedly because Nina would then be alone. Suddenly, he thought of the disordered state of that house, the dining table overrun with alchemical references and array sketches, the kitchen barren and perfunctory, the living rooms in a state of scholarly chaos. It was no environment for a child. He looks around at the Hughes’ house. This was an environment for a child. Children should have both parents. Children needed a mother and a father both.

Ed was almost finished with his dessert. They were discussing something that concerned Gran and someone named Spahn, which probably meant he should pay attention, but found that he couldn’t. His eyes wandered to Elysia, who was beginning to fidget.

She already had her share of milk before they sat down. Now she was fussing in her cot, wanting to be in her mother’s arms perchance to sleep.

“Hush, now, love,” Gracia soothed, smoothly scooping the infant up and pressing kisses to her downy head.

Maes immediately turned around. “Oh, my little angel’s sleepy!”

“Don’t worry about the table, Gracia, we’ll take care of cleaning up,” Roy said. Gracia gave them all a grateful smile and stood to take Elysia to the living room to sit by the fire. Ed looked longingly after them—the fireside sounded wonderful, with a cup of tea and a warm blanket. Reading his mind, Roy chuckled and pushed his shoulder. “Go on, keep them company.”

They left the men to clean up in the kitchen; Lt. Havoc was a well-trained guest and more than happy to put dishes away in exchange for Gracia’s food. Ed handed Gracia some small blankets to swaddle the infant with, which she did with a soft smile and even softer hands. Maes had a crib set up for Elysia to sleep in a quiet corner of the living room if the parents didn’t yet want to turn in upstairs, but Gracia seemed content holding her child in the rocking chair.

It was faint at first, but when Ed settled under a blanket with Dog, he could hear it, a faint hum underneath Gracia’s breath. A lullaby.

“I don’t know many lullabies,” Gracia murmured, so quiet Ed could barely hear her. “My own mother was too tired at night to sing us to sleep, though I like to imagine she wanted to, if she could. I’m hoping the songs I know are appropriate enough for her.”

“Elysia’s very lucky to have you,” Ed blurted without thought, shortly thereafter digging his fingers into Dog’s fur and tucking his chin under the blanket. But Gracia only had a smile for him, she always did, and Ed suddenly wanted nothing more than for her to always smile at him like that. It was how his mother used to smile at him and Al. The force of so many emotions hit him so hard that his chest ached, his breath growing short.

“Smile, though your heart is aching. Smile, even though it’s breaking.”

Ed’s eyes blinked open; he didn’t even realize he had closed them. Gracia had Elysia tucked against her chest, the warmest and safest place to be. She was singing a gentle melody for her daughter, but
the words weren’t for an infant. No, the words were for him. Gracia was still smiling at him, rocking the infant gently, singing.

He realized then, quietly and without much fanfare, how Roy navigated a greyscale world with such surety despite toeing a line with each decision. If there was any moral boundary Ed would not cross, it would be the line that would take Gracia’s smile from him. Ed didn’t know if it was Maes’ companionship, or Riza Hawkeye’s loyalty, or Gracia’s warm regard, perhaps all of the above—but he knew, he knew that Roy lived for the same.

When there are clouds in the sky,
you’ll get by
if you smile
through your fear and sorrow.
Smile, and maybe tomorrow
you’ll see the sun come shining through
for you.
Light up your face with gladness,
hide every trace of sadness.
Although a tear may be ever so near,
that’s the time
you must keep on trying.
Smile, what’s the use of crying?
You’ll find that life is still worth while
if you just smile.
( “Smile,” melody from Charlie Chaplin, first lyrics from Nat King Cole )

What began as a miserable week of frost and forbidding snowfall culminated, in a muted wonderland of soft and clear winter skies soaking up sunset watercolours at its far edges. It was still bitingly cold, far colder than it ever was in Resembool or Dublith, but at least the cold was bearable with the presence of a beautifully distracting city humming with life all around him, even underneath the slowly thawing snow. People were out and about after the departure of the crippling winter storm, and the streets were properly shorn clean of frost for the first time in more than a week. It gleamed black and wet as cars slowly sped along. Central knew how to thrive even in the winter, it seemed. Only Ed was new to it all.

They were coasting along East 3rd, a street now familiar to him but still always seemed to unfold like a new and fascinating mystery. Cold air caressing his face felt like waking up after a long, warm nap—refreshing and invigorating. Proof, once again, that reality was not objective, but always waiting to be reshaped and refined by one’s perception and mood.

“Excited, I see,” Roy half-smiled, eyes still trained on an involved-looking piece of document.

“Doesn’t even begin to cover it,” Ed grinned, though it was mostly directed at the car window.
“Remember what we talked about,” Roy murmured warningly.

“I know. I will.”

Rather hard to forget, with how much gravity Roy leant that lecture. Ed had to be very, very careful around the old families, who were too powerful for Roy to stop if they were to become enemies. At the moment, Roy’s masterful dancing over the past few years had them on the safe, but the smallest variable could destabilise such a delicate equilibrium. Roy thought of them as quite good friends, but there was a limit even for such trust.

The Firats were bound to be more trouble, what with the whole family’s vast medical background. Roy had already told Ed that Julia seemed to be suspecting his automail: “she can tell by your gait,” Roy had told him, “though she would be one of the few, for you hide it well; nevertheless, she can tell because she’s a surgeon, and one of the only few surgeons capable of re-anastomosing an automail port after it’s been damaged or ripped out in battle.” So they would likely raise questions that Ed had to be prepared to answer.

At least, that was what Roy wanted. Ed rather thought he didn’t need to answer anything—not if he played the traumatised child well enough. Either way, Ed understood the point of caution.

The car came around the bend where the six main thoroughfares of Central merged into one large roundabout that circled the Plaza. To their right loomed the First Library, and—“Ah! There they are!”

“Indeed,” Roy shut his work folder and stepped out of the car with him.

Detaching from the front steps of the Library, the very recognizable handsome forms of Ed’s friends, Jacob Firat and Kanon Islenhov, trotted up to the car, both sporting grins as eager as Ed’s as they came close.

“Edward!” both exclaimed, exultant and simultaneous.

Ed grinned. “Hi, guys!”

In short order, Ed was flanked by two very enthusiastic chatterboxes promising plenty of alchemical debate and fun new people to meet. Somehow, in between proclamations of great things to come and exasperated Finally!'s, Ed managed to exchange handshakes and a proper hello.

“Alright, alright, you lot,” Roy laughed, clapping a hand on Kanon’s shoulder and exchanging a firm handshake with Jacob. “Settle down already.”

“Old man, the more you work at that dreadful place, the more tedious you become,” Kanon sighed, despairing. “Quit already and return to the folds of truant alchemists like us! We are the gleaming future!”

“Gleaming,” Ed gurgled in delight.

Roy said, “Quite.”

Jacob, in his characteristic halting speech, was already explaining the itinerary: “Just talking today—no experiments scheduled, really—well, discounting accidental discoveries—then that’s just serendipity, you know—Georgian Quarter for the most part, likely—“

“Just please don’t take him to that hideous salon with the eye in the triangle—Auras, or whatever the hell it calls itself—“
“Horace’s? No, no, we’re going to Libris,” Kanon dismissed with a laugh. “Have to be seen somewhere respectable if I’m to be seen at all, says the older sister. Besides, really, Roy, you know I can only stand them damned Existentialists (9) as far as I can throw them.” Kanon flexed his arm’s modest muscles to indicate ‘not very far’. Ed snickered.

Roy relented. “Very well.” A laden glance at Ed, “You know how to get hold of me,” to which Ed nodded. Then Roy was stepping back into the military car, already almost late for the start of his workday. Ed gave a little wave as the car pulled away.

“Lieutenant Hawkeye is going to flay him.”

Kanon slung a kindly arm around his shoulder and laughed. “It’s Roy. He can handle it. He’s a grownup, after all.”

Ed took that to mean that they weren’t, which meant that he was in the company of oversized children, which was brilliant, because like Izumi always said to Sig, no mind took to alchemy as fluidly and expansively as a child’s mind.

As he was led off on his first playdate with his two new friends, Ed’s foremost and pervading thought was: This will be so much fun!

Libris turned out to be a moderately-spaced, antique-looking café ran by a couple who accumulated books like Amestris accumulated enemies: they picked the books and the books tended to stay. The books were not always the type to sell with the populace (hence Amestris’ enemies) and therefore having a bookstore was ruled out. One of the owners was an accomplished patissier and had wanted to set up a shop of his own, so the partner, who was an accomplished businessman, invested in the idea by buying the small, century-old hotel they were in and transforming it into a library café.

An outstanding idea if ever there was any, in Ed’s humble opinion. The books were on open display on the wall shelves and unlimited reading was the perk, so long as the books stayed within the premises and the House Rules were obeyed. There was excellent coffee imported from Yufi and an encompassing menu adapting through the meals of the day, plus a large variety of Francian, Ailian, and even Xingese pastries for brain fuel readily available at a moment’s notice! Heaven should be so wonderful!

The upper hotel rooms were renovated into private salons for idle conversations or topic-specific organised debates or study groups (a common thing this close to the State exams)—or even as a simple escape for a group of friends to waste time. These rooms were, of course, rated per the hour, and fees depended on which room was in question. Some were larger and more furnished than others.

Ed took one step into the place and fell in love.

The mahogany and rosewood walls crawled with books and antiques—the ceiling looked like an accurate replication of the Northern constellations—aromatic coffee beckoned from some indeterminable point within the hotel—and the sweets! Ed knew at once why Roy favoured the place: they were Marcel’s sweets! They should have just said so—the conversation would have ended there.

“Ah, Kanon, Jacob,” a tall, solemn man greeted from a counter by the entryway. Ed recognised him
as the acting ‘concierge.’ “I believe you have the usual room already reserved.”

“Yeah,” Kanon grinned. “Cyril and Andrei should already be waiting for us. Can we get the usual tea and pastries as well?”

The man nodded; one of the men-in-livery (waiter? servant? footman?) moved away with a bow, presumably to prepare ‘the usual’.

“Ah, by the way,” Kanon added, hands squaring on Ed’s shoulders and presenting him to the solemn man, “here’s the newest addition to our little crew. This is Edward; he’s brilliant. Absolutely fantastic. He’s Roy’s!”

“Hello,” Ed blinked. “Edward Elric. Good to meet you, Mr…”

“Louis—just Louis for you, sir, and good to meet you,” the man responded, tone even and entirely unruffled by Kanon’s enthusiasm. Must be tolerance from prolonged exposure, or just an iron countenance. “Welcome to Libris. Friends of Roy’s are always our treasured guests.”

“He’ll be here quite often—won’t be a guest anymore before long—you’ll see what we mean,” Jacob said with a halting nod.

At this, solemn Mr. Louis gave a small smile. “I am entirely comfortable taking your word for it, Jacob. If you say he is, then he must be.”

And it would be at this point where Ed’s manners should kick in. He should demur like Roy taught him to do, deny his talents, downplay himself.

…yeah, no.

Ed pointed to one of the large, complicated mechanical accoutrements adorning the lobby’s far wall. “Is that a Xingese celestial clock?”

Mr. Louis continued to smile. “Indeed it is. Alastair acquired it for me some years ago. Quite the catch; surprised I managed to buy it at all considering how hideously fierce the competition was.”

“Alastair was mad at Roy because Roy kept on hitting on Anya to try to make me jealous,” Kanon snickered.

“It worked,” Jacob flatly said.

“It did not!”

“Did it really?” Ed guffawed. “You let yourself be played by Roy?”

“He did.”

“I did not!”

“Started dating Anya within the same month,” Jacob retorted, eyebrow cocking in challenge. Kanon spluttered and squawked, wordless.

“Well,” Ed shrugged, patting Kanon’s back, “at least you have taste. She’s smart.”

“That she is,” Jacob agreed. “She’s asked for you—we should go visit her once—you’ve been to her shop?”
“Once, when Roy took me there a couple months ago.”

Ed followed after the two of them up the sweeping grand staircase, around and up three more flights until the fifth floor, past a number of closed doors in a tall hallway, until they arrived at the last door at its very end. “This is always reserved for us—Mondays to Wednesdays from noon until closing time at 11pm, Thursdays to Saturdays all day from opening at 6am, and Sundays all day from opening at 9am until closing at 9pm. Now it’s yours too,” Kanon winked at him, threw the door open, and hollered, “Cease and desist all manner of devilry, in the name of the Victor King!”

“Bloody hell—!”

There was a clatter and more muffled expletives as two boys scrambled to pick up the pieces to an upended chess set. One teacup on the table was tipped to its side but it was fortunately empty. Kanon—for the lack of a better word—cackled, sweeping imperiously into the room and leaving Jacob to close the door behind them. (Jacob, for his part, was also muttering some halting expletives under his breath, leading Ed to wonder.)

“Victor King?” Ed echoed.

“The Victor King,” Kanon turned with a grin, “is the winner of our monthly Chess Deathmatch. Used to be Roy all the time until he got excommunicated for winning an entire year to himself—now that’s just unfair. These days the Victor King gets to have a go against him as a bonus match instead. Not that any one of us has ever won, mind you.”

“And the Victor King this month happens to be you,” Ed dubiously guessed.

“That’s right! Me!”

“Zat is only because I let you win!” one of the boys indignantly declared, effectively drawing Ed’s attention. He had a strange, harsh accent. “Zat doesn’t mean you can lord it over us all the time! Zis behaviour is rotting!”

Ed snorted. Did he mean: rotten?

“Now, now, darling,” the other boy hushed, brushing a pale hand on his indignant friend’s shoulder, “he’s just sore because he otherwise never wins, not between you, Jacob, and Roy.”

“Rotten behaviour, me? I’m not the one being rude when we have a guest of honour,” Kanon chided, still playful and seemingly unperturbed by the boy’s indignation. Ed was pulled forward and presented yet again, grasped firmly by the shoulders with no avenue of escape. “This is Roy’s Ed. Yes, yes, alchemist too, I know the rules. He’s trying for the exams this year, actually. Now, he’s only twelve, though, so be mindful. That’s a warning for you, Cyril darling.”

“What! How dare you imply I would sully an innocent’s purity! Such menial work is beneath me, you heathen; besides which, what need have I to do that when you’re already taking care of it?” Cyril said. Cyril, it turns out, was the calmer boy, closer in age to Kanon and Jacob, exceedingly well-dressed, and very handsome. “Cyril Croft; it’s an absolute pleasure. And you would be…?”

“Edward Elric, thanks,” Ed said, shaking Cyril’s hand and thinking, this one is Roy’s kind. But Croft… he’s heard that name somewhere. Surely some rich influential family or another.

“Edward,” the indignant boy stepped towards him, no longer so indignant, but calmer and contrite as he offered a hand as well, “good to meet you. I am sorry for my outburst. I do not like losing in chess. Ah, I am Andrei Yurakin. Please do not call me Andy.”
“Er, sure? You can call me Ed, though, I don’t mind.”

“Elric, though,” Cyril said, taking his previous seat on one of the two long couches on either side of the table. “I don’t know that name. Not from Central or from any of the satellite cities, I presume?”

“Correct,” Ed nodded, having expected this interrogation. “I’m from a small town. My Dad’s an alchemist but I carry my mother’s name so you wouldn’t know it.” He took the space on the couch next to Andrei, since Jacob made for Cyril’s side and Kanon seemed territorial of the large leather couch at the head of the table. *Must be the Throne. I can imagine Roy lounging there for an entire year, like an oversized, overfed cat.*

“What is your Dad?” Andrei asked, and, “An alchemist of Roy’s standards from a small town?” Cyril, too. At the same time. Ed blinked, twice.

“Um, well, I suppose I can answer both of those at once. My Dad was Roy’s alchemical mentor—one of them, but that was long ago. His name’s Van Hohenheim.”

“Oh, I see,” Andrei nodded while methodically replacing the chess pieces to where they were before being interrupted. Cyril, though, stilled at the mention of Hohenheim’s name. Kanon had a sharp grin from where he was sat at the head; Cyril must know or know of Hohenheim somehow, then.

True enough, Cyril turned to Jacob with ill-concealed betrayal in his eyes. “How *could* you hide this from me?”

“It was Kanon’s idea, before you chastise me for going with it, I will remind you that you don’t *live with him,*” Jacob frowned. Ed imagined Kanon could become annoying if overexposed; kind of like Alphonse got when fussy. Ed prided himself in never being annoying.

“You know my Dad how?” Ed asked, saving Jacob from further pain.

Cyril turned back to him with a smile, the betrayal shifting away like a fluid veil. *Yep, definitely Roy’s kind, this one.* “My father, Cecil Croft, is the engineer credited for the efficiency of Amestris’ railways and trains today. Traditionally, the Croft family is in the chemical and pharmaceutical trade, but Father is somewhat of a black sheep among his brothers and sisters. He’s very passionate about his work and insists on checking every single train or track the company puts down—the one time he decided to check out a new line in the North, one they had constructed on a bridge that ran over a wide ravine, they got stuck because the tracks froze over and the ice grew too thick too fast to be shorn off by hand. An alchemist happened to be travelling nearby—on foot, I tell you, in the middle of a blizzard, how absolutely preposterous—the man saw them and decided to help. Papa says the alchemist only did this—*Cyril clapped his hands, the sharp sound rattling Ed terribly,* ‘—touched the rails, and behold! Ice-free.’”

Ed stared at Cyril while the boy took a sip of tea.

“The alchemist introduced himself as Van Hohenheim and gave Papa a set of circles to be engraved on every new track to be built — it would ice-proof and wear-proof the tracks for a long time. The circles were unlike anything Papa had ever seen, and he had seen his fair share of applied alchemy in his career. Papa’s never seen that alchemist around again, but the tracks haven’t iced yet, anywhere. The only instance travel stops during wintertime is when avalanches and train car accidents happen—unfortunately, those do happen quite often because of the white-outs up there. No alchemy to avoid that. And we’ve seen the train cars themselves freeze before. It’s a tundra up there.”

Another sip of tea. Ed sat, quiet.
“So imagine my surprise when you come here and tell me that you’re that man’s son. Papa will be ecstatic! Did you learn your alchemy from him? What kind of circles do you use?”

“Er, well, in a manner of speaking…? I learned from his books. He left us when we were very young, so I don’t know him all that well. Roy would be your better bet,” Ed said, uncomfortable. Cyril’s eyes darkened.

“Roy, that little shit. He knew Van Hohenheim all along and he never told me! His mentor! What an absolute piece of—”

“Language, Cyril.” Kanon levelled them with a flat stare.

Ed snorted. “No, no, it’s fine, I agree. Roy’s a royal asshole, what’s new. You should try living with him, it gets toxic annoying.”

Snorts and cackles went around at Ed’s nonchalant remark; it seemed to open the floodgates, and all at once everyone had a thing or three to say about Roy the Royal Bastard—even polite, awkward Andrei. Cyril moaned about being betrayed every few minutes, interspersed with pointed questions about Ed’s alchemy, but for the most part the conversation wandered away from Hohenheim’s unexpected appearance in the midst of a winter storm.

Ed was thankful, for he couldn’t afford to give anything away, and only the conversation kept his head above one terrible, impossible realisation: somehow, I don’t know how, Hohenheim knows how to do alchemy without a circle. Which can only mean one thing: Hohenheim has definitely seen the Gate.

In his head, the Gate laughed.

The four of them, as it turned out, made up a small collective that was rather famous amongst Amestris’ academia. They had no name for their group, but within other circles they were known as The Boys Club. Ed was their new recruit; by virtue of his recent debacles with Roy in society, he certainly wasn’t lagging behind in notoriety.

Cyril Croft, as Ed had earlier surmised, was the only son of Cecil Croft, current patriarch of the Croft empire. Third out of four children and the only male heir in the entire family tree, Cyril was well spoiled and quite accustomed to the privileges of high living. Ed had been introduced to a few of the Crofts during the Yule event, and thus recalled the name. He didn’t remember their faces, but he was quite sure they were as devastatingly comely as Cyril was, all dark-coloured and pale-skinned, a consummate charmer and heartbreaker at age eighteen. Cyril would have looked like Roy if Roy were pure-blooded Amestrian, only with longer hair and slightly lighter eyes.

Andrei Yurakin, on the other hand, had hair the colour of fine ash and eyes as green as emeralds. He was Drachman by birth and citizenship, an immigrant of only two years in Amestris. He was the only legitimate child of the Drachman emissary Simon Yurakin, but had about a dozen or so illegitimate brothers and sisters all baying for the chance to snap his neck. (“I mean zat literally,” Andrei told him, “you Amestrians seem to alvays think I am joking when I say zat.”) This was why his father took him away from Nyeva (10), Drachma’s capital city, to Central, despite the political threat.

“Ze ‘threat’ I face here is like facing a little child pointing a knife at my face. Ze threat I faced back
home was the knife already gone out my throat,” Andrei explained. Evidently, Andrei had a solid grasp of metaphor. “Amestrian politics is kind. Drachman politics not so. Your family you love, but you cannot trust. I love my sisters—Yesfir, I miss dearly, and Faina too, even if she likes to nag—but I know if they had a good chance, they would let me die to secure their position in life. It is a harsh life otherwise for bastards in noble Drachman families. Not so here,” a pointed glance at Kanon. Kanon only smiled, indulgent. So this small circle knew of the Islenhovs and the Lindberghs. (11) “Do you have siblings, Edvard?”

“A brother,” Ed said, “but nothing as exciting as your family.” Hah. “Right now, he’s living with our Master—umm, our alchemical mentor. We sort of went separate ways alchemically.”

“So he is an alchemist too!” Andrei brightened.

Cyril nodded approvingly. “It runs in the blood, they say. Perhaps we will meet him one day, should he come to visit. Yes?”

Ed shrugged. “Sure, I don’t see why not.”

“I am so happy to meet young alchemists!” Andrei said, grin brighter than the sun. “We do not learn alchemy from an early age, so I have unfortunately started late. But I will catch up to the rest of you!”

Of that, Ed had no doubt at all. At sixteen, Andrei showcased razor-sharp intellect and a keen understanding of politics and economics. If he were to apply those to alchemy with the zeal Ed could feel vibrating from him, they were expecting perhaps the very first Drachman alchemist of the highest Amestrian calibre within the decade.

“Let us all be thankful for Andrei’s brothers and sisters, though,” Kanon grinned, raising his teacup in a mock toast. “If it weren’t through their thorough efforts in knocking Andrei down a peg or three, we would be suffering another Cyril Croft in our midst.”

Andrei cried, “Their bullying hurt, you know! Physically! You try growing up with eight of them!” Cyril only turned his nose up and mumbled some dark things under his breath.

It was true, though. Andrei was polite and kind and unfailingly proper, as if he feared a social faux pas would send heads rolling the next day. Cyril, on the other hand, was charming, yes, but abrasive too, forward and demanding, rather a bit of a brat. Used to getting whatever he wanted, regarding the consequences beneath both his concern and his intervention. What a nightmare it was to balance this group! How did Kanon manage?

And now he has acquired you, too, the Gate cackled. Oh, he will be a busy boy!

“You said Roy used to be one of this group. Isn’t he a little too, I dunno, old?” Ed couldn’t help but ask.

“He still spends time with us once in a while,” Kanon shrugged. “And Jacob and I are around his age. Actually, you three are quite young for us.”

“How did he even become part of your group?”

“Quite simply because the man’s a damn genius!” Ed’s eyebrows rose, pushing Kanon to further expound. “His mastery of practical alchemy is amazing, Ed, have you not seen it yet? The level of control! I’m sure he has more secrets he keeps from us; he isn’t considered a war hero for some paltry circus tricks, let me tell you. The Bloodsands—that was singlehandedly him. Did you know that? No? Well, it was. It earned him his chops.”
“That,” Cyril cut in, “and he’s a consummate politician on top. He can play the game. So very few State Alchemists can, you know. We’re all usually too navel-gazing, or detail sticklers, or unbending fools about things we feel strongly for. We usually fail at politics. He doesn’t. He excels in it.”

“Great businessman too,” Jacob added. “Grows his own money, knows where to invest, understands economy.”

“So you see,” Kanon continued, “he was prime pickings for society when he came back after Ishbal. Everyone wanted a piece of him. Our families tested him endlessly—still do, in fact, even if we are all established allies now—because the worthy ones are so very rare. Sir Armstrong doesn’t let go of his daughter easily, you can imagine, but the family wants her to marry Roy. That tells you something of how valuable he is.”

“I got that part,” Ed snorted. “Rather hard to miss.” But his response was distracted, again caught by a shattering realization. Roy. The Bloodsands. He wanted to know more but felt it was wrong to ask the boys. Would Roy be offended if he asked?

“Speaking of the devil,” Cyril leaned forward, “I’ve heard from the vine that you’re attempting the exams. True?”

“True.”

Cyril groaned, sagging and tipping his head back. “I should just take the damn thing, shouldn’t I.”

“I told you to take it with us last year,” Kanon said, “but you were far too busy making cow-eyes at that lass, and it wasn’t even season.”

“She was quite gorgeous!” Cyril defended himself. But then, expression flattening, he rescinded his praise. “Terrible gas, though. Something wrong with her bowels. She needs a doctor, that she does.” Various sounds of disgust from around the room. Ed broke out with inappropriate laughter.

“You should take it this year!” Kanon suggested. “You and Ed both!”

“And pit my scores against this one?” Cyril scoffed. “What do you take me for, an imbecile? My scores will be so outdone; it will be a humiliation of the century. No, thanks.”

“Do you mean me?” Ed incredulously exclaimed.

“You, yes,” Cyril said. “Hohenheim’s son, Roy’s chosen protégé, and at your age? I know genius when I meet it.”

There went that word again, genius. Ed scowled. “It’s not for sure that I’ll pass, you know. I might nail the alchemy parts but what if I fumble with the stupid politics and history bullshit?”

“You won’t,” Jacob told him confidently. “They are very easy questions.”

“As if they’re mere formality,” Kanon added, “and they put more effort into testing you about alchemy. So if you know your alchemy, you should pass. There are considerably less questions on the non-alchemical topics; you could get all of them wrong and still pass, by my calculations.”

Ed rolled his eyes. “So why the hell even include them! And here I’ve been studying like a madman.”

“They use it to assess how much else they need to teach you, and if they can use you some other
way,” Kanon explained. “There aren’t enough questions to fail you, but they’re enough to assess other aptitudes you may be hiding underneath your veneer of aspiring State Alchemist.”

“I have none,” Ed confessed. “I’m an alchemist; that’s about it. Roy’s been teaching me, but other than that…”

“Vatever Roy has taught you vill be enough, I’m sure,” Andrei reassured him with a smile. “Not to worry too much. It ages a person, my sister says. ‘Rinkles are not attractive.”

Ed made a face; everyone laughed.

“I just don’t want to fuck anything up for Roy,” Ed told them, perhaps with an amount of honesty that Roy would have disapproved. He shrugged it off; it felt good to have friends. It felt good to confide.

Kanon laughed again, shifting his weight and leaning against the arm of his chair, eyes glittering with a secret he wished to impart. “Goes to show how little yet you know him. I’ve known Roy the longest here, and I can tell you with confidence that he has everything well in hand. I’ve never met a more prepared, paranoid, and meticulous person in my life—and that’s considering I live with this one,” he stabbed a finger towards Jacob, who did not seem indignant at all but instead proud. “Truly, rest at ease, Ed. Roy has calculated every possible scenario. Very few things ever surprise that man. You’ll be fine.”

Ed didn’t know how to tell them that he was one of those very few things.

The next morning, he and Roy helped each other make breakfast. Roy was off today. They were in the kitchen, just the two of them. Outside, the clouds were overcast, but inside was the pleasant heat from the stovetop and the savoury smells of food. Ed regaled Roy about the previous evening’s highlights, leaning in to watch the omelette being made.

“They’re hilarious,” Ed grinned, engendering a chuckle from Roy. “Cyril is a brat.”

“That he is,” Roy agreed, hands deftly frothing the eggs with a fork. He looked yet half-asleep, but his hands moved with muscle memory, touching fingers to the pan to feel its heat, turning the flame down, sliding the eggs in, dipping his hand into the salt and flinging it, precise and careless at the same time. Roy tipped the pan to all the points on a compass, letting the wet egg slide under the set edges. “Being an only child of an empire does that to a person. But he has a good heart. Fickle, but good.”

Ed snickered. “There was that girl he was supposedly seeing last year. They told me horrific stories.”

“Ah,” Roy nodded, “the girl with terrible gas.”

Ed gurgled in inappropriate delight. “That is terrible. What a terrible name to be known by.”

“There are worse names,” Roy shrugged, “though that one is evocative enough that it might almost pass as a State Alchemist title. The Terrible Gas Alchemist. Wouldn’t that be a thing.”

Wheezing, Ed leaned heavily against the countertop. He had finished preparing the chanterelles, which were waiting just beyond his elbow, wet and caramelised. Roy soon took them and spooned
them into the middle of the egg, rolling the whole omelette using only the tines of a fork and the movement of the pan. It was one smooth motion. The skin of the omelette was flawless: a mastery of the application of heat.

*Should I ask him now?* Ed wondered, fingers twitching even as his eyes followed the omelette being plated. *How do I even ask him?*

The Gate was silent, offering him no advice.

*But it feels intrusive,* Ed argued against himself. *If he wanted to tell me, he would have already.*

He opened his mouth and a different question came out. “What title do you think they’ll give me?”

“You?” Roy hummed. “I wonder. Tricky to name, you are. Your style is so encompassing. But the Fuhrer can get creative. He’ll pick a good name.”

“Not too creative, I hope,” Ed mumbled.

“Oh, he’ll never be as creative as The Terrible Gas Alchemist.”

Ed snickered again, carrying the omelettes to their window-side table. Roy washed his hands, tucked away his apron, and poured them both some orange juice. “Did it help, talking to them?”

“I think so,” Ed nodded, picking up his fork and digging in. Lured by the smell of food, Dog came loping into the kitchen to settle at their feet. “Now I just want to get it done and over with. All this anticipation is killing me.”

Roy chuckled. “It’ll be here before you know it. Barely three weeks now.”

“Yeah,” Ed agreed, rubbing Dog’s head with his foot and just barely resisting the urge to toss him a scrap. That meant he had three more weeks to work up the courage to ask Roy about the Bloodsands, because somehow Ed was convinced that hearing the story would give him the final conviction he needed to go through with the licensure. Why and how he came to think so, he wasn’t sure.

He didn’t even know why he was so reluctant to ask Roy. It would simply be the matter of a single quiet discussion. Ed knew not to judge harshly; he wasn’t a hypocrite. He’s had his own share of mistakes, and besides, how was it fair that Roy knew of them without reciprocation?

But Ed didn’t manage another for the rest of breakfast. The timing was never quite right, and as they dug into their food, Roy looked so relieved for a chance to relax that guilt crushed Ed’s willingness to speak up. They spent the rest of the morning with small talk. If Roy noticed Ed’s lingering unspoken questions, he never said a word about it.

But Ed couldn’t focus.

He had plenty of things left in his list to study: the structure of Amestrian government, the (unfair) divisions of power, the progression of legislative development that eventually concentrated all the executive capacity into the Fuhrer’s hands… but the morning’s unspoken questions remained at the forefront of his consciousness.
He wanted to ask Roy. He really wanted to ask Roy.

He wanted to hear it from the source, to confirm or deny the increasingly wild half-conceptions churning around in his head. But how does one go about asking another person if they truly were a mass murderer?

To make no mistake about it, Ed was entering into this arrangement with full knowledge of what some (many) State Alchemists were called to do in the name of Amestrian progress and supremacy. He grew up far too close to Ishbal not to know, and plenty of Granny Pinako’s customers were wealthier Ishbalans fleeing from the conflict with sustained injuries that they needed a doctor for, one that wouldn’t turn them away for the colour of their skin or the hue of their eyes. His knowledge made it no easier to reconcile the massacre of the Bloodsands to this man sitting across from him, peacefully sipping coffee while reading (for once) a leisurely work of literature.

Roy was perhaps not the warmest or most honest person around, but none who knew him well could deny that he was kind. Almost dangerously so, for a man in his position and playing his sort of game. That he could be single-handedly capable of murdering so many people—

Ed should just get it into his head that knowledge of something will never make it easier for him. If anything, it did the opposite.

“Is government proving particularly difficult to digest, Edward?” Roy suddenly asked without looking up from his book. “You haven’t turned the page in some time. I know you read faster than I do…”

Ed sighed. “No, just—sometimes Amestris sucks.”

Roy chuckled at that, agreeing while turning a page. “It does, doesn’t it? Some days more than others.”

Some days, indeed. The Bloodsands was one such day, a blight on Amestris’ already bloody history. Ed wondered what that day was like for Roy, who at the time would have been a newly minted State Alchemist, surely one of the best despite also being the youngest history—only fourteen when he became licensed, sixteen when he went to Ishbal.

Ed would have been… six at the time.

What a staggering thought. Sixteen years old. Not that much older than Ed was now. Why did Roy do it? Where did he find the fortitude? How was it done? Because the Bloodsands were named such for a reason: the sands of Ishbal ran red that day with the blood of almost all of the population of one of their largest nomadic settlements. An estimated sixteen thousand people in casualty—Ed still remembered the day the news came to Resembool, another deceptively beautiful day, except with Granny Pinako cussing up a storm as she tossed the paper into the fire. ‘MASSACRE IN ISHBAL: A reckoning delivered’—Ed’s eyes had caught the phrase before the paper curled up into grey-black tendrils of ash and smoke. Ash and smoke into nothingness, just the same as those sixteen thousand lives lost on the desert that day, leaving behind barely recognizable scorched rubble. Utter annihilation, a war won in one instant, history made in a day.

“You still haven’t turned a page,” Roy noted with greater concern, this time looking up from his own reading with soft eyes. This man killed sixteen thousand people in one day. “Edward, are you quite alright?”

“I have to ask you something,” Ed blurted out, the lump in his throat no longer capable of being denied. “It’s not pleasant and may make you upset but I need you to be honest with me. You can get
mad at me afterwards, okay?”

Roy, sensing perhaps the trapped urgency in Ed’s tone, put down the book to regard him with sharp, dark eyes. “Very well. What is it?”

Ed looked him right in the eye. There was no other way to do this. He hoped this wouldn’t destroy his rapport with the man. “The Bloodsands,” he said. “Kanon mentioned you were single-handedly responsible for it. Is that true?”

All at once, before him he beheld a transformation. It overtook Roy’s face entirely. What was once open to Ed was now closed off, shuttered behind a steely, stoic mask. But maybe Ed’s own trepidation—his fear of upsetting Roy—reflected in his own expression, because in the next instant, Roy’s mask suddenly fell off like a curtain cut loose from its rod, and from behind it emerged a defeated man.

“It’s true,” Roy quietly admitted, after a heavy moment of silence. “I was wondering how to discuss this with you. I knew you’d find out at some point or another.”

“Figure I should at least hear it from you before I make any judgments,” Ed muttered, hands suddenly seeking something to hold and clutch. Obligingly, Dog shuffled closer on his belly, sensing Ed’s need and responding in kind. “Was it a mission they gave you?” Ed asked.

Roy sighed again. It took a while before there came an answer. “No; it was my initiative.”

Ed looked upon him in bewildered horror.

Leaning back to sag against the sofa, Roy turned his face up to the ceiling, gazing into some indeterminate point of his past with far-away eyes. The words became a story, slow and halting but a story nonetheless. “At the time, I was sixteen. Almost seventeen. Just a year into deployment.” Roy scrubbed at his face with a hand. “You can imagine, perhaps, that I had many false ideas about what I was there to do, what the state of the conflict was really like at the time. I thought it was a well-defined war with two sides pitted against each other on a battlefield, and that I was there to help subdue armed opponents out to kill our own soldiers.”

“You were wrong,” Ed surmised.

“Egregiously so.”

“They weren’t armed?” Ed frowned, confused and somewhat aghast if it were true. Did Amestris slaughter a whole country of unarmed civilians and then lied about it?

“They were armed—some of them—but not in the way I was expecting.”

Now Ed was even more confused.

“The war wasn’t one battlefield. No; everywhere it was the battlefield. Out there, it was guerilla warfare. And in hindsight, I should’ve realized this if only I took into consideration the Ishbalans’ meagre resources pitted against ours. How else could they possibly last against a seasoned, well-trained army backed by State Alchemists and the robust economy of a whole country? I arrived to find a more brutal, more deadly conflict taking lives from both sides at an unprecedented rate, and the longer the war dragged on, the more desperate the Ishbalans became. The more merciless.”

“You must understand, Ed, they used no alchemy and had a limited number of firearms. That meant every four kills out of five were done by hand, with blades and axes and clubs and crude weapons. Our soldiers were dying horrible, painful deaths, while the Ishbalan children were starving, their
houses being destroyed, their women violated. Yes, violated. Some commanding officers were good at quelling such behaviours from our soldiers, but there were also others who turned a blind eye to it, or even encouraged it, victor’s spoils of war and all that, or as a convenient method to, ah, ‘slake the soldiers’ thirst.’ I knew a few who even actively participated.”

There was nothing Ed could say. Between them, the silence was thick and heavy with memories Roy was omitting from words, memories which were surely recent enough to be fuel for nightmares. If Roy’s memory was anything like Ed’s, all of them would be in terrifying technicolour.

“Ishbal, as you know, is not truly a country defined by borders drawn on a map,” Roy explained, voice more detached now, as if he were telling someone else’s story and not his. “Ishbal is its people, nomadic by nature, dwellers of that wide swath of land directly east of us. They range from the sand dunes and arid deserts of the south to the semi-arid rocky plains of the northern wasteland. Well, to them, it’s not a wasteland. I saw them live in it. They knew how to navigate the mazelike gorges, how to get around the boulder-strewn hills; they could find water where we would die of thirst not fifty yards from their source. They had food too, though how they carried enough and kept it from spoiling I guess I’ll never know. Equipped better than we were for such an environment, they were easily capable of ambushing us, targeting our patrols, laying waste to our temporary camps. One incident of note carried hundreds of casualties for us when they poisoned a water source we had built an encampment around—and on their end, they didn’t even have to sacrifice a single life.

“Where they were fast and mobile, we were slow and laborious. We had to coordinate with squadrons spread out over a large territory little explored and very unsecured. They were at an advantage and they pressed it; we tried to engage them in traditional warfare and they took it as a ripe chance to dance circles around us. As you might figure, it took little time before the command strategy changed.”

Ed grimly predicted, “Quickly and without mercy.”

“Precisely. They changed their approach and started deploying smaller elite units of soldiers, along with one or two combat alchemists, to engage in the same sort of guerilla warfare. Except where the Ishbalans only killed soldiers, our soldiers went for the civilians too. Intel mapped out their trade routes to conduct raids on caravans, depriving their settlements of supplies. We would attack smaller villages first, methodically working our way along so that they would all gather towards their larger settlements. Easier said than done, of course, considering they were nomadic and always moved from one spot to another. But the military is nothing if not persistent; we didn’t hold our border against Drachma for so long without our own brand of bullheadedness. When I realized what the command was doing, it came to me that if the whole process wasn’t stopped, there would be none left of the Ishbalans in this world. They were going to be wiped out.”

A small sound came from the back of Ed’s throat, suppressed and strangled much the same way he was handling his knee-jerk responses at this time.

Roy continued. “I was a kid, given too much power—I was arrogant and even stupider for it. I can at least say that I did think of trying to save them, but not for any noble wish to spare their lives, no. I wanted them to survive,” Roy paused, heaving an inhale and then forging onwards, “I wanted them to survive because we had just stumbled upon parts of the Xerxian ruins during a raid, and I understood that if there were more of these ruins to be found, it would only be the Ishbalans who could lead me to them. Perhaps they could even enlighten me about them. You may think it odd for me to fixate on some crumbling pieces of rock in the desert when I had other things to worry about, but you see, the writings on the wall were suspiciously familiar to some works I glimpsed in Hohenheim’s notes, writings in some old notebooks I inherited from my own master. All I could think about was that. All I could think of was alchemy. Maybe I was trying to avoid the reality I was
in, but all I could think about was what a waste of ancient history it would be if they—the Ishbalans—
died."

Roy pitched forward, putting his face in his hands.

“Fuck, that sounds even worse when I say it out loud.”

Across from him, Ed gaped. *I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard him cuss.*

“This is the first time I’m actually talking about this,” Roy apologetically chuckled. “My psychiatrist
gets tall tales from me on a monthly basis, nothing more. Maes was in Ishbal with me so there’s
really no need to talk, he already knows.”

“And scary lady Hawkeye?”

“Riza too,” Roy nodded. “By alchemy, she was a heaven-send. If it weren’t for her knocking some
sense into our heads every now and again, where would we be now?”

“Dead in a ditch somewhere,” Ed snorted, though in light of their discussion, his humour fell short.

“Yes, that,” Roy laughed, self-deprecating. Ed couldn’t get over seeing him like this. “Anyway. So
arrogant as I was, I began to take matters into my own hands. I used Intel Maes stole for me to
intercept Ishabalan caravans. I warned the Ishbalans about the raids. I had to go alone—I look more
Xingese, therefore they were less likely to kill me on sight—it took a while, but they began to trust
me, especially when my warnings rang true.”

“Did they know who you were? That you were an alchemist?” Ed asked, doubtful that Ishbalans
would freely accept help from an alchemist. The ones who used to come to Granny Pinako would
avoid him and Al with religious fervour; they were never antagonistic, but very avoidant.

“No,” Roy confirmed Ed’s doubt, “I pretended to be a merchant’s son. Supposedly, my merchant
father felt guilty about the loss of life but couldn’t be seen helping Ishbal for fear of losing the
family’s livelihood. So my merchant father sent me. I made friends with traders at the outposts to
make it more authentic. That was how I met Anya and her older brother Alistair. They helped ferry
information for me too, whenever I couldn’t get away from camp. Can’t disappear too often, after
all.”

“So now they regain the advantage again, with your information. Then what happens?”

“Then,” a grim Roy pronounced, “things took a turn for the worse. In frustration, the military
unleashed one of its most powerful weapons against an entirely defenceless opponent.”

“What.” Ed felt a slow, mounting sort of dread.

“They began handing out to alchemists what they called the Red Stone. It was the first stable batch
from the laboratories—or at least as stable as they could get. Touted as ‘precursors’ of the
Philosopher’s Stone, they were Nash Tringham’s crowning achievement before his death.”

“What did they do?”

“They were amplifiers. Unstable at times, but they made us extremely efficient and horrifically lethal.
Two to four times amplification of base energy, Ed. Imagine the scale of that. Imagine that on a
technician like Zolf Kimblee, who used alchemy to create explosions.”

Rapidly blinking, Ed tried to clear the image of a bright white-hot explosion from his mind. Two to
four times. That was a lot.

“The Ishbalans had no clue what was coming for them,” Roy continued. “The next few raids were used as tests; there were no survivors, no one to tell everyone else to run, or better yet, surrender. Besides which, the Ishbalans, from what I’d seen of them, were not the type to be convinced with only words. But I had to try anyway, didn’t I? Of course I did. So I took a horse in the dead of the night and rode hard for their third largest settlement, the one incidentally closest to our encampment. Maes and Riza, they covered for my absence. Havoc, too. It took me all night, but once I got there, they saw how far I’d come and were willing to at least hear me out.”

“Let me guess: they weren’t convinced,” Ed said, mind whirling in wonder. What that must have been like, riding hard and alone across a moonlit desert, headed for enemy territory with no guarantee of making it out alive.

“No, they weren’t,” Roy snorted, derisive of his own idiocy perhaps. “They didn’t want to run. This was their third largest settlement; such an undertaking would sap their resources and occupy their warriors with other matters. They didn’t see the threat. And I saw in that moment that what would follow would be more of the same, neither side stopping, until Amestris wiped all of them out.

“I didn’t want to leave, but they were turning me away; I had no choice. So I asked them if I could at least have a drink of water before I rode back out. They led me to their well, and there, from the hilltop, I saw a faraway caravan of supplies heading in from another settlement from the east. That was when I realized I had a choice.” Roy swallowed, halting as if the words were physically difficult to wrench out. “I could leave and return to camp as I was bid, having warned them to the best of my capacity. Or,” he swallowed again, “or I could show them.”

Horrified understanding dawned upon Ed. “You used your Red Stone.”

“I used my Stone,” Roy nodded. “I killed…I killed a lot of people. I made a point. The next day, their leader surrendered to the Fuhrer.”

Ed stared at him, dumbfounded.

“The sun was just rising over the horizon then. Everything was red. Bright red and orange. The flames, they fed on each other. A reaction of that scale…the energy…”

They had burned alive. Ed clapped a hand over his mouth, screwing his eyes shut. Images of charred corpses, of people screaming as their skin peeled off, faces in agony, the sulphuric stench of burning hair, the children—he gasped, eyes flying open.

“You didn’t go there to warn them,” Ed realised with rising distress, “You knew they’d ignore you! Maes’ intel—you knew, you must have known there was an incoming caravan from another settlement. That’s why you had to go that night, even though it’d be suicide on another day! You planned to burn that settlement to make a point, and the surviving caravan brought the news back to the other settlement! You didn’t have to work hard to convince them; they’d do it themselves.” Ed stared at Roy in equal and warring parts admiration and horror. “You manipulative, murderous motherfucker, you did that on purpose. To save their kind. To keep their bloodlines. You killed a third of their population in one night. You absolute fucker.”

Roy broke out in sudden laughter, half-crazed and more than a little terrifying. “Well, shit. It sounds even worse coming from you.”
This was what Roy hid underneath? This calculating, ruthless monster capable of murdering thousands in pursuit of a goal? And what an ill-thought, unworthy goal it was, the preservation of knowledge and heritage and blood. It was hardly equivalent, was it?

But who was Ed to judge, all the same? Roy was barely a man then, barely older than Ed was now, and given such capacity to change things. Ed also took that plunge, didn’t he? He knew how that felt, that total loss of control when you thought you had everything under control. And Roy, Roy must have dealt with it the same way Ed did, playing to the circumstances and making the very most of the situation, because hell, he had already murdered sixteen thousand people for it! Might as well do the best he could with it! Might as well take the infancy and turn it on its head, might as well ride the glory back home and see how far up it could take him. Take the name and turn it on its head, might as well take the infamy and turn it on its head, might as well take the glory back home and see how far up it could take him. Take the name and grow a network out of it. Take the promotions and rise through the ranks. The system was too strong from outside; maybe he could make it work better from within. Maybe one day even make it up to the people of Ishbal, what few remained of them now.

Roy, Ed realized, had exchanged his soul in order to save what was left of those people, in what amounted to a noble, intelligent mistake.

“Who else knows?” Ed asked, voice tight.

“Maes,” Roy shrugged, “and now you.”

“What about scary lady?”

“I’m not sure how much of all this she’s figured out,” Roy admitted, mouth contorting into an uncomfortable grimace. “I’m sure she has her own suspicions about the whole ordeal, but she has never breathed a single word of it to me, not even in rebuke. We were never close, her and I, not in the way Maes and I relate. We were—are—for all intents and purposes brother and sister, her father my alchemical mentor, but therein lies the problem.”

“Her father preferred you more?”

“No,” Roy scoffed, “quite the opposite. Her father loved her dearly as his only daughter, but love is difficult to cultivate when you barely understand each other. She never showed aptitude or interest for alchemy. Her father therefore spent more time and attention on me, however reluctantly. In their house, at times, I felt like an unwelcome bastard son, and though she is too good and kind to say anything about it to me or anyone else, surely she felt like that on more than one occasion. I escaped the house whenever I could but never caused trouble, lest I look ungrateful for all that I was given. I avoided her and she did the same. When I left to become a State Alchemist—a decision my mentor abhorred, of course—I lost contact with her, until one day a letter from her came, telling me about his passing. ‘There is a will and you are in it,’ she said. My mentor left her the house and the money but gave me all the books.”

Roy motioned around them, volumes upon volumes of inherited knowledge from what sounded like the only parental figure Roy knew. Ed has never asked after the rest of Roy’s family, but if Roy didn’t mention them, he figured it was for good reason.

“During the time I stayed at the house now deprived of my mentor’s presence, we talked more than we ever had in all the years we had known each other. Maybe she finally saw me as a person independent of her father’s insistent lectures. That’s what I like to imagine, at least. But we sat at the table, her father’s usual seat conspicuously empty between us, and talked like adults. We weren’t, though. I was fifteen, she was seventeen. Both unmoored, alone now in the world. She asked me
why I became a State Alchemist, when my mentor so staunchly opposed it. Was it because of the opposition? Was I rebelling?”

“No more than you were when you left Resembool. I was waking up and beginning to see that it was a big world out there. So much to see, so much to learn. Berthold would have me remain secluded in that house but I could no longer bear it—it was time to go. And I told her this, in honour of her father. I told her truthfully that it was never out of disrespect or rejection. Quite the opposite. It was an acknowledgement of all that her father taught me about life. That the only way to live is to grow. And I believe that he understood that, only he didn’t want me to go towards danger in my quest for more. My only regret is for my own impatience; would that I had waited a little longer, spent the last two years of his life at his feet and by his side, instead of training at the barracks, learning how to kill people.”

“I would have liked to meet him,” Ed said, petting Dog’s fur. “He sounds like an interesting person.”

Roy laughed and for a moment was the picture of his idealistic youth. “Interesting is a word for it. He would have argued you to death.”

“Argument is good,” Ed countered. “It exercises the brain.”

“That it does,” Roy agreed. “In any case, Riza confessed that her father’s health declined much faster after I left, and that he spent most of his time writing what last few things he hadn’t yet taught me. He told Riza that I’d be back and that only I should have his notes. I perfected my technique from those notes. I returned to the barracks a wholly different alchemist. Three months later I was deployed, and a little over six months after that, I met Riza on the field. She told me she decided to follow me because I needed watching. She wanted to make sure her father’s knowledge would never be misused. She told me that she understood why I really left—because I had ambitions in my bones that were too large to be contained—and that there needed to be somebody capable of putting a bullet in my head if those ambitions took me over.”

“So how the fuck are you still alive?” Ed gaped, “After that shit you pulled in the desert?”

Roy smiled. “Maes. Single-handedly responsible for saving my sorry ass many, many times. He managed to talk her down. At gunpoint.”

“Maes is insane.”

“I’ve often thought so myself. No one in their right mind would stay friends with a renowned mass murderer who has designs on the deadliest office in the continent. But I consider myself a very fortunate individual indeed, and I know better than to scoff at my exceedingly good luck.”

That was another distinguishing trait of Roy’s. Luck, a nebulous entity, favouring him constantly even as it denied others its fickle attentions. How lucky did Roy have to be to stumble upon Ed and Al in a small, quiet town in the Eastern province? How lucky was he to have the chance to take Ed, who already had a master, under his own wing? As much as Ed didn’t want to believe in fate, it almost seemed as if there was an invisible hand at work. (The Gate crooned in the back of his head.)

“So,” Roy shifted to lean forward, peering into Ed’s face, “with all that being said, what do you think? Still alright staying with me?”

Questioned so directly, Ed had to give pause. From this distance, Roy’s eyes weren’t so dark after all, gradations of brown and ochre visible in the angle of the light. Was it so hard a question?” No, Ed
decided, it’s not.

“At least what you did, you didn’t do to your own mother and brother. At least what you did, you did with good, selfless intent. All I wanted,” Ed confessed—and not for the first time, though only to this man before him, “all I wanted was to have my mother back for myself. I never even stopped to think that that would mean for anyone else, least of all for her. I guess it just means we’re both noble idiots,” Ed shrugged, somewhat embarrassed now, and fearful that his hasty, ill-explained comparison of them would be ill-received.

But Roy stood, a sudden movement, to cross around the table and kneel before Ed. “You,” he said, “are a remarkable soul, Edward. And you put me to shame. You put all of us to shame.”

And, with the benediction and the affection Ed never knew he craved from any man, Roy kissed his forehead, hands cradling his face.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

Ed had to close his eyes. He could feel it, the full depth of Roy’s gratitude and adoration, all the way deep into his bones.

It was different after that day. The dynamic had changed with one conversation. Now it was clear to Ed why Roy was helping him, what role it was he played in Roy’s life. He wasn’t just a cold investment, a pawn who happened to be interesting enough to hold Roy’s personal attentions. No; Roy saw in Ed a shadow of himself, having made similar rash mistakes dabbling with knowledge he barely understood. He saw Ed as an opportunity to pay his late mentor forward for all the things he himself learned as a student. He saw Ed as a path through which to fulfil his own dream of a researcher’s life, a dream he was now unable to lead. Most of all, he saw Ed as an equal—a fellow alchemist who only wanted to discover more of their world, to unearth mysteries and to unravel puzzles, except they both kept getting caught in the tides of time.

This understanding was crucial for Ed, in ways he hadn’t realised he needed. It was a confirmation of what he had already suspected but needed proof of, a logical explanation behind Roy’s behaviour, and this surety was indeed welcome as his test day loomed close.

Ed spent some time alone after that conversation, laying on his bed and staring at the ceiling, thinking of what it must have been like to be in Roy’s position. It was a difficult exercise in empathy but he gave it a serious attempt. At the end of it, he came away with a pounding headache and the conviction that Roy became a State Alchemist not as an act of rebellion, not even as an act of honouring his mentor, but as an act of brazen idealism, firm in the belief that with such a position of privilege, he could do more for the world around him, and especially because he was an alchemist.

Arrogant, perhaps, but that arrogance, that blind courage Roy held on to, believing in his own design above others no matter how naïve and impossible and idealistic, led him to his bloody victory in Ishbal. And just like Ed, although Roy paid for it with his innocence, he saw his idea work. Just like how Ed’s mother lived, Ishbal still existed—it existed because of Roy.
Two weeks before the exams, Ed went to Tucker’s house again. Nina was ecstatic to see him, clinging to his pant leg and chattering at a hundred miles a minute somehow without turning blue in the face. Children’s lungs were truly a marvel. At least she didn’t sic the slobbering mutt on him this time.

Bribed with a sweet and tucked happily into a blanket next to Edward on the couch, Nina kept them company throughout their discussions. She remained quite content to sit and suck on her lollipop while colouring in between the lines of an illustrated children’s book, and it was easier to satisfy her this way than attempting to tuck her away into a room by herself. That just made Ed feel guilty anyway.

“Really, it’s fine, she doesn’t bother me at all,” Ed assured Tucker, who was already flustered about the deteriorating state of disorder in his house. “She’s a very good kid.”

Tucker gave him a thin smile; Ed had to wonder if the man was getting enough sleep. Perhaps Tucker was chasing deadlines. “She is, isn’t she? Well, if you insist. I do appreciate your kindness with Nina. You’re very good with children.”

Points for Tucker in Ed’s book; the man didn’t treat him as one of the children.

“So tell me what you made of the journals you read the last time you were here,” Tucker said, sitting down in a dusty armchair with a sigh. “I hope they were at least illuminating.”

“Oh, they were, very much,” Ed snorted, petting Nina’s hair with one hand while he twirled his pen with the other. “In reality, the cutting edge of the science, privileged information for licensed alchemists only, is fifteen to twenty years ahead of common alchemical knowledge. They censor a lot out of the publicly published journals, a hell of a lot. Like the fact that they’ve actually succeeded in creating chimeras that survive past a week—but they’re dumb chimeras, hard to train and control.”

“Yes, they have,” Tucker bobbed his head in agreement, glasses glinting in the wan sunlight. “Laboratory 3 is in charge of that operation, believe it or not, as unassuming as they appear.”

Ed grimaced, not wanting to imagine what that operation must look like. Granted, they were just animals, but they still felt pain.

“Well, good for them, I guess.”

“Good for Brigadier General Gran,” Tucker corrected. “He is the direct superior of a majority of the alchemists who operate there.”

“You’re not really showing me anything that’s of particular use to the exam, though, are you?” Ed guessed. “You showed me those journals because you wanted to tell me how licensure works. The perspective you were trying to give me: a glimpse into what that world actually looks like. The nature of research they prefer. All of those journals you left out for me to find—you were trying to tell me something. Are you one of the people who don’t want me to be licensed because I’m young, Mr. Tucker?”

Tucker was silent for a moment, thin fingers drumming restlessly on the arm of his chair. “Oh, I wouldn’t presume to tell you what you should or should not do, Mr. Elric. You have shown quite clearly that you are no longer a child. I just think it fair that you know what it is you are walking into… what kind of people you will be calling your colleagues. What sort of things they will consider acceptable in pursuit of a goal. That’s all, really, because I already know you’ll pass.”

Ed blinked, unsure at first how to respond to that unexpected vote of confidence. “Thanks, I think?
You’re not the only one who has tried to tell me—well. Roy has told me quite a bit.”

“Hm,” Tucker rubbed his knee, “I’m sure he has, but in the interest of protecting you, he might not have told you everything.”

“I’m all ears,” Ed shrugged. “If you’ve got more to tell me, I’m willing to hear it.”

Tucker smiled the same thin smile again. The way his muscles pulled across his cheekbones highlighted how gaunt he was becoming. Was he eating enough? Ed glanced down at Nina, resuming his petting, scrutinising if she too looks sickly or underfed. No, she seemed fine…

“Well, then, let me get you started,” Tucker stood, the motion a little laborious. He fetched a small stack of journals from a shelf to hand to Ed. “These are more journals—a different kind of research this time, less bioalchemy, more chemistry. Although a certain part of it contains bioalchemy too. Well, we can’t really put them all in neat little boxes, can we?”

“It’s an eternal knot,” Ed grinned, delighting in the inside joke. “The entirety of alchemy is an eternal knot.”

Tucker paused then, blinking at him in surprise, before smiling once again. “Indeed, it is. Here you go then: a tricky little bit of that eternal knot to unravel. I’ll be downstairs if you need me.”

Ed took the stack and put them on the table next to Nina’s colouring book, careful not to shove her crayons to the floor. “D’you mind sharing the table with me, Nina?”

Nina grinned up at him, a smudge of blue mashed into her left jaw and cheek. “Of course not, big brother! We’ll play together!”

Tucker left them there, sitting together under the spill of sunlight from outside, Alexander the Dog nuzzled up against Nina’s other side. Ed flipped the first folder open; the name Nash Tringham immediately jumped out at him.

The Red Stone. Precursors of the Philosopher’s Stone. Base amplification, two to four times.

Clenching his jaw, Ed leaned in and began to read.

The phone rang and shattered the peaceful silence, shriller than the one Ed and Roy had at home. Ed looked up, only now realising that it was evening time, the sun halfway to setting outside. Nina was fast asleep next to him, little body nestled under the blankets. The dog had left at some point, wandering in the direction of the kitchen. Good; that would make it easier to leave.

After three rings, the phone stopped; Tucker must have an extension downstairs. Ed began to pack up, tidying Nina’s crayons, her colouring books, and the stack of journals he was reading. For good measure, he chose to return them to the shelf Tucker had taken them from, returning a little bit of order to it as he straightened the contents of the shelf as best as he could. They really needed a housekeeper.

“Edward? That was Colonel Mustang,” Tucker informed him, voice carrying in from the hallway where he was emerging from the basement. “He’ll be here to pick you up ten minutes.”
“Alright, thanks, Mr. Tucker,” Ed said, “I put your journals back where they were on the shelf.” Turning just then, Ed saw Tucker come in from the hallway—and inexplicably, all the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

“Thanks, you didn’t have to do that,” Tucker sighed, wiping his hands with a towel. He must have just washed them. “Edward? What’s the matter? Was Nina bothering you?”

“Oh—no, uh, Nina’s asleep,” Ed gestured toward the couch, where the girl was curled up in a ball. “She’ll, uh, need a bit of a wash since she got colour all over her hands and face, but she was great.”

Ed made for the chair near the doorway, where he had deposited his coat, scarf, and bookbag. The feeling of unease did not go away. What in the world is going on? he thought to himself, alarmed. Is this your doing? What’s wrong?

The Gate did not say anything in return, but it did shift uneasily in his head.

“Well, I hope the journals were enlightening,” Tucker put the towel aside and walked him to the door, holding his scarf and bag for him while he fastened his coat. “Tringham’s work is considered of great importance in the military.”

“Huh, imagine that,” Ed snorted, still unable to shake the feeling of unease. When he turned to take the scarf from Tucker’s hand, he caught a glimpse of the basement door, which was closed but had a sliver of light outlining it from inside. A shadow passed over the light, as if someone—or something—walked past the door on the other side.

Is this gonna be like last time? Am I having another panic attack about basements?

Odd, considering he was able to go to their basement at home without issue.

“Did you forget something?” Tucker asked quietly, but something in his tone made Ed look up at his face. The shine of Tucker’s glasses obscured his eyes; Ed couldn’t see.

“N-No,” Ed shook his head, pulling the scarf around his neck twice, “no, Mr. Tucker, I’m fine, thanks. Uh, say bye to Nina for me? Also, I think the dog’s in the kitchen.”

“M’awake, big brother,” Nina mumbled, coming out from around the corner while sleepily rubbing at her eyes. “You’re leaving already?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Nina, I didn’t want to wake you,” Ed picked her up and gave her a kiss on the forehead. She clung to him with her inexplicable five-year-old strength, her fingers curling painfully into his braid.

“You’re leaving already?”

“Will you come back soon?”

“For sure, and the next time I’m back, we’ll play all afternoon with the mutt, alright? Promise,” Ed told her, encouraging a sleepy smile.

“Okay. Bye, big brother.”

“Bye, little lady,” he handed her to her father, who picked her up and settled her in one arm. She laid her head on Tucker’s shoulder, eyes drooping already with how much she wore herself earlier in the day.

Tucker smiled. “Thank you again for being so good with her. You’ll do fine on your exams.”
“Thanks, Mr. Tucker,” Ed nodded along, slinging his bag around his shoulder and opening the door. Roy’s car was pulling up at the curb; Ed breathed a sigh of relief at the sight. The cold air too was a relief, as well as the ambient noise of life outdoors, after the stifling silence inside Tucker’s house. It really was no place for a child to grow up.

“Until next time, Edward.”

Ed just lifted an arm in goodbye, briskly setting off towards the car without looking back. He didn’t dare, not until the car door was closed, not until he had Roy’s reassuring warmth next to him, not until the car was pulling away. If Ed had known that this was the last time he would see Nina alive, he would have run back inside and wrenched her from her wretched father. As it was, he only watched Tucker close the door just as the last of the sunlight dimmed to darkness.

The day of the exams dawned bright and unforgiving. Ed woke when Roy pulled his windows open, letting in bright sunlight and the sound of twittering birds from outside. Spring was now fully upon Central, and along with it the deluge of hopeful alchemists in town to take the exams.

“No,” Ed groaned, turning away from the light. It was too early, and he was under the blankets, and besides, his pillowcases were freshly washed. He couldn’t possibly abandon them when they were so soft and welcoming!

“If you get up now, we have time enough to enjoy breakfast, clean up, and I can help you braid your hair the way you like,” Roy entreated, weight settling on the edge of the bed. Ed felt a hand stroke the length of his hair, snagging softly where loose knots appeared overnight. “Or we could both idle until the very last minute, rush to Headquarters without breakfast, and be cranky with hunger halfway to lunchtime. Your choice.”

“Guh,” Ed coherently responded, rolling back over with a bleary, baleful expression. “Why must you be so hateful so early in the morning.”

“There you are,” Roy smiled down at him. “Good morning, sleepyhead. Big day today. Up you get. Let’s have breakfast so you’ll have fuel for the day ahead.”

Despite the early hour and his distaste for Roy’s manipulative bargaining, Ed was never one to turn down food. Roy descended first, Ed shortly following after he washed his face and emptied his bladder. The kitchen was already steeped in the glorious smells of frying bacon and toasted bread. Roy baked eggs in what looked like cupcake holders, topped with chopped bell peppers and onions for taste. There was fresh strawberry jam on the table, butter too, and piping hot mugs of coffee. Ed helped set their dishes and together they ate, a soothing daily routine to put his nerves at ease. With food warm and full in his stomach, Ed felt more prepared to engage with the world.

“I will drop you off at the registration’s desk for the check-ins. We can have lunch after you’re done. I’ll meet you at the doors, yes?” Roy told him, buttering a golden triangle of bread.

“Alright. Does it take that long?”

“Depends on you. You can take all day if you like, but I doubt you’ll even stay until lunchtime. It’s really not that hard.”

“And then tomorrow is the practical. You’ll be there.”
“Yes,” Roy nodded. “As a ranked State Alchemist, I have the clearance to be present; as a member of the State Alchemical Review Committee, I also have voting rights. However, I will have no say in your case; I am registered as your mentor and therefore will be considered a nonpersona during your length of the examination. But I’ll be there for you as moral support.”

“Right,” Ed snorted through his bacon. He would likely need support of the moral kind.

It took little time to dress and prepare. Ed wore one of the trousers Roy had tailored for him and one of Gracia’s knit sweaters over a buttoned shirt. Obligingly, Roy took a ribbon and braided his hair the way he liked it (because Gracia liked it and complimented him often), the braid canting sideways so he can throw the tail of it around his neck and over a shoulder. He fusses over which pens to bring, took a pencil and eraser too just in case, and soon enough they were ready to go, Roy looking commanding in his polished boots and pressed uniform as usual. Downstairs, Gracia came over to give Ed a big hug and to take care of Dog for the day. Ed took a moment to nuzzle the sleepy baby cradled in her arm.

“You’ll ace it, Ed, don’t worry,” she smiled, her kiss on his forehead the best sort of blessing.

Maes clapped him on the shoulder and they were off, piling into the car Havoc had idling out front. Once inside, Maes immediately launched into political talk.

“News was out yesterday about the official registration list, Spahn is furious at you my friend.”

Roy shrugged. “Yeah, expected that. No loss.”

“Why’s he furious?” Ed asked. “Is he furious about me?”

Roy leaned into him, a wicked smile on his face, and said, “Spahn has a promising young man under his care, only a year older than you, by the name of Russell Tringham. He’s supposed to take the test next year and become the youngest State Alchemist ever at age 13.”

“That’s one year younger than you were,” Ed blinked, “but I just turned 12, so even if he tests next year, I’ll still be younger.”

“Yep,” Roy grinned, ever smug. “They didn’t really think I’d put you up for the exams at your age, and especially with the controversy surrounding it. They thought I’d make you wait.”

“When will they learn to take you seriously?” Ed wondered.

“Never, I hope!”

But Ed knew that by passing those exams and adding further renown to Roy’s name, Ed will push him back into a renewed limelight, where enemies can all take a good, long look. Ed understood his position now, to be sure. More than ever, it was important for him not to let Roy down.

At the Plaza, Ed saw for a marked change that the Headquarters’ iron gates were wide open. Groups of people streamed in, civilians in plain clothes, and it was easy to spot who among them were to undertake the exams today. They trooped forward with exhausted determination, severe-looking bruises underneath their eyes. Nights of endless revision did that to a person. There was a fraction who were only there to provide their friends or loved ones moral support, even a few lovelorn women offering kisses and embraces to their beaus: one could almost pretend they were all being sent off to war.

“That’s a lot of people,” Ed murmured, observing the throng. “I never knew there were so many alchemists.”
“Most are third-rate or worse,” Roy dismissed. “There are more than a hundred now but there’ll be less than forty once today is over. Maybe even less.”

“You could sound a tad more solicitous,” Maes chortled. “They are enlisting as our comrades, after all.”

Roy’s lip curled. “I would feel more heartened if I weren’t so disgusted at the half of them here just to make money. Disgrace to the art, I tell you. Alchemy is not something you choose; alchemy chooses you.”

“Hear!” Ed grinned.

At the tall gates, Havoc exchanged a salute with the guards, easing past the throng into the parade grounds. It was more expansive inside that it seemed to be from outside, extending north and south to give Ed an odd sense of far too much space than what was possible. An optical illusion, Ed realised, noting the angle of the buildings and the pattern on the concrete. It skewed the way his brain calculated the proportions of what he could see. A possible deterrent against snipers and distance-fighters; very smart indeed.

Headquarters itself was fronted by an expansive four-or-so story structure, handsomely panelled with white windows upon an austere grey façade. In the midst of this structure were tall grand doors at the top of a wide stone staircase. Uniformed officers jogged smartly to and fro, all looking very serious and official about their business. But Havoc didn’t pull them up there.

The throng of civilians were being shepherded to another building on the left-hand side of the parade grounds, one that looked much like the main building but with smaller doors. There at the doors was a small team of uniformed officers manning several registration desks with signage identifying them for the State Alchemy exams. People stopped to stare when they debarked, Roy first and then Ed; Roy’s epaulettes and silver chain singled him out in the crowd.

Havoc was instructed to relinquish the car and report to the office ahead of them. The man saluted, guiding the car away to wherever they parked cars in this place. Somehow, the sight of the car driving away made him slightly more nervous. Roy led him and Maes over to a desk which remained conspicuously clear of a queue, as if it were reserved for special persons only. Another added bit of anxiety there.

The young soldier behind the table stood at attention and gave Roy a crisp salute. “Colonel Mustang, sir!”

“Good morning. Checking Edward Elric in today.”

“Yes sir,” the young soldier hustled to the books at once, without so much as a blink or a flinch. “Have you your letter of confirmation, Mr. Elric? And your birth certificate, please.”

“Uh, yes,” Ed procured the items from an envelope he had tucked into a pocket.

“Very good, sir. Please state your name, date of birth, and citizen number for our records.”

“Edward Elric, 3rd of February 1895, 090-615-332.”

“Thank you, Mr. Elric, we do have you registered in our roster. This is your identification badge, please affix it to your chest where it is easily visible. Do not remove or lose it during the examination. If it does get lost, please notify us at once, and know that it may result in your disqualification for this year’s cycle. Seating time ends at 08:55 hours and testing begins sharply at 09:00 hours. You may
remain outside until then or enter early to find your seat, but once inside the testing hall, you are not permitted to leave until all testing is done. It would be wise to allow yourself time for the men’s room before sitting down; there are amenities indoors. You will be searched upon entry and any indication of codices or notes will be grounds for disqualification as well. Do you have any questions, sir?"

“Yes, can I leave early when I’m done?” Ed asked, engendering a startled blink from the young soldier at last. “I can’t sit in there all day and wait for everyone else. I’d starve.”

Behind him, Roy and Maes erupted into chuckles. The soldier before them cleared his throat and answered, “Yes, sir, of course you are permitted to conclude at any time.”

“Alright, thank you,” Ed nodded, pinning his badge on and turning back to face Roy. “Will you be here when I finish?”

“I will,” Roy smiled, clasping his shoulder with a firm grip. “Around lunchtime, perhaps? Should be more than enough time for you. We can have lunch wherever you fancy. Reward for your good work.”

“Careful, or I’ll start expecting it.”

“Off with you, then,” Roy bid, “go find you a spot to sit.”

“Good luck, kiddo! Go shock the world!” Maes cheered.

Ed was already headed for the testing hall and merely lifted a hand back in acknowledgement. Maes was right. He already had this. He felt good today, eyes clear and mind sharp. The breakfast they ate warmed him from inside out, filling but not too heavy, just enough to keep him sated and comfortable. His shoulders felt light and his breathing easy; the beat of his heart was calm.

**Can’t quite say the same for everyone else,** the Gate pointed out with more than a little amusement. The rest of the hall was filled with worried eyes and gaunt faces; some even looked dangerously close to collapse. If they were so exhausted just for the written part, how did they expect to perform well for the practical tomorrow? Alchemical reactions took energy from the alchemist, but these people did not look like they had much energy left. What if tomorrow they keeled over and fell dead?

**Then I suppose that’s a good thing for them not to be a State Alchemist after all,** the Gate sang. **One less disgrace!**

*I really don’t like it when you and Roy agree, and that’s disturbingly often these days. Also, wasn’t it you who said that every being is good for something under the sun?*

**You’re right!** the Gate grinned. **Some of them would make excellent cannon fodder!**

Gratuitously, the Gate then supplied him an image of a human being stuffed into a large cannon and then launched airborne with fanfare. Ed quickly shut it down before it had a chance to escalate.

The front had less people so that was where he sat. He briefly had to put up with stares at the back of his head, but that was better than having to watch everybody have a nervous breakdown in concert. At his desk, which was reminiscent of those individual wooden desks they had at school in Resembool, he laid out his pens and pencils and his little eraser. Soon it would be time to start.

There was a clock facing them on the wall. At 08:55, the doors closed behind them with a quiet thud. A minute shy of 09:00, the proctor stood at the front and announced, “You may write on the papers. Mark your name on each page clearly and legibly. If you require blank sheets of paper, raise your
hand. If you need the toilets, raise your hand. You will be escorted there. You have all day if you wish. Begin.”

It was 09:00 sharp. Ed was impressed at the timeliness. He leaned one elbow on the desk and flipped through the papers first to see if he needed to tackle it out of order to allow for time on more difficult items. Not so. The geography, history, and civics section were to start, so he slogged through them as best as he could, feeling quite confident that he got most if it right, if not all—even the longform questions.

**You got them right,** the Gate grinned, **of course you did.**

It felt like cheating, having the Gate there with him. Although he didn’t ask it for any help, the Gate would nudge him towards an answer whenever he doubted himself. Admittedly, it wasn’t often—only once every twenty questions or so—but still, he felt bad for all the others who had to go through this alone.

But all these idle thoughts flew from his head once he began the proper alchemical section, about an hour and fifteen minutes into the exam. The beginning was simple enough, basic questions about elemental properties and predictions of basic chemical reactions. But over the next following pages, the questions got harder, building upon each other, gradually increasing in complexity until they had Ed constructing arrays from scratch, calculating residual thresholds from the formulae, and isolating by-products from balanced equations long enough to span half a page.

It was all rather fun, truth be told, until he got to the fourth section of alchemical questions and arrived at a whole new problem set. He recognised the author(s) at once and scowled.

A glance up at the clock said 10:45—plenty of time. He stuck his hand up for more paper, all the while beginning his response for the question on bioalchemy, specifically the beginning of a problem set that would eventually lead to chimera transmutations. He wrote:

> Dr. Schrum, Dr. Tucker, et al.—

> This is Ed, the boy you spoke with during the last Symposium. I believe we have already discussed this matter, but I suppose for the sake of the exam itself, I can elaborate once again, and in a more succinct manner. I cannot answer the next five questions because their very premise is flawed. Allow me to explain.

Over the next few pages, Ed sketched out the circles they wanted and then shot methodical holes through each of them. He even took time to show the evolution of the arrays and how each version fell short of what they were attempting to achieve: a thinking, viable chimera. It just wasn’t possible, not with where bioalchemy currently sat. And he was willing to bet that none of their leading bioalchemists were capable of creating something like this, not even Mr. Tucker, whose speciality is the very issue. Something like this, after all, would require a great level of sacrifice.

As he wrote out his closing statement, he could feel the Gate humming in satisfaction between his ears. It was happy with what Ed was writing. That gave Ed conviction to continue even as his hand began to cramp.

> Until and unless we have a better understanding of the physiology of the human brain, and not just its anatomy, we will not be able to advance in this field. It’s easy enough to create animals from animals, but don’t mistake that for an excuse to try and create humans from animals. The miracle of human consciousness is exclusive for good
reason, and we must take heed not to disobey the rules of equivalent exchange in this matter, lest we incur injuries and irreversible damage to our alchemists. Though you are all of course welcome to try, at best all you will be able to create is some half-formed, barely coherent monster, with perhaps sharper instincts than the simple animals that preceded it, but without anything resembling what you might call consciousness for you to be able to converse with meaningfully or even just command. Anyway, I think you should take these questions out of the exam in the future; it’s all very misleading and based only on half-finished research. It wouldn’t do to be thought of as amateur-ish. You have a reputation to protect, and that’ll be my reputation too, once I join you.

Ed read it over once again with a critical eye. What do you think, does it sound good?

Quite splendid, the Gate hummed, I do love the unsubtle implications of incompetence. Carry on!

Satisfied, Ed moved on. Writing out his rationales took the better part of an hour and it was now almost lunchtime. Roy would wait for him, he knew, but he was hungry too, and there was only one page left.

The last few questions were variously about alchemical philosophy and its schools of thought. They took longer than Ed expected, asking for expositions on the nature of energy, the purpose of alchemy, and the virtues of its application. He could swear the military was profiling them through these questions, figuring out what type of mindset they had and which philosophy they hailed from in order to better use them in their forthcoming position. They could also use the information as ammunition for the practical tomorrow. Either way, Ed gave the answers he felt were most true, about energy and alchemy and science overall. It was harder now to answer without letting slip his knowledge of the Gate, so he read over his answers thrice before he was satisfied.

Finishing, he stacked his papers in a neat sheaf and raised his hand to be escorted out. At the doors, they took his badge back and gave him a folded piece of paper with further instructions. Roy and Maes were waiting right outside, true to their word and as if they had never left since the morning. Ed rushed to them with a dramatic groan.

“Surely not that bad,” Roy chuckled, holding the car door open for him. “You’re just hungry.”

He clambered into the car and waited until the door was shut. “It is so hard to answer questions without giving away how much I know!”

Roy sobered up a bit. “Do you think you might’ve slipped?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Ed frowned, looking up. “Gate.”

“Okay,” Roy nodded, continuing the conversation without missing a beat. “I will be part of the Committee that begins scoring the longform sections this evening, after the multiple-choice sections and single-word answers have been scored. I won’t be allowed to score your longform, of course, but I will be able to see it and detract them during the discussion if need be.”

Ed sagged against the seat in relief. “Thanks. That makes me feel loads better. Can we go eat now?”

Roy and Maes both laughed. “Yes, Edward, we can go eat now.”
They ended up eating at home anyway, where Gracia was waiting with shepherd’s pie. Ed gluttoned himself with abandon and then retired to the living room with Dog and Elysia. He was tired. His brain felt wrung out, not from the testing but from trying to withhold his own knowledge, and also trying to figure out how to go about tomorrow. He still had to decide what to do for the practical.

The Gate shifted in his head.

_I know, I know, it’s bad, right? Problem with not being a specialist, like Roy._

The Gate offered no words this time, only shifted in that hair-raising manner once again. When Maes and Roy left for work once more, Ed excused himself back to the house to prepare. He should have plenty of time to himself, with Roy staying late for the scoring. He was preparing himself a cup of hot cocoa downstairs when the house phone rang, shattering the silence and jolting him awake.

Cautiously, he picked it up, waiting for the other side to speak first.

“Hello? Brother? Mr. Mustang? It’s Al!”

“Al!” Ed exclaimed in surprise. “Hey! How are you?”

“I should be asking you that! Test this morning, right? Figured you’d be done by now. How’d it go? You think you passed? Was it hard? What sort of questions did they ask?”

Ed laughed, tension easing from his frame. He could just see Al, crammed into the phone booth in Dublith, fist clutching a handful of coins, looking about half his age as he bounced on his heels in excitement. Ed missed his brother. He wished they were still together.

“Brother? Are you there? Did it cut off?”

“No, I’m here, sorry,” Ed shook off the cobwebs in his head. “My brain’s checked out for the day, I think. I had to argue some of their questions because they were wrong, can you believe it? It wasn’t even a proper question, really! What was I supposed to do with that, make up an answer?”

“Oh, _brother_,” Al sighed in dismay, adopting that put-upon tone that told Ed he had misbehaved despite knowing better. (Where did Al learn that anyway?) “Tell me your wording was at least polite.”

“I was _very_ polite,” Ed sniffed, “politer than they _deserve._”

“What is the Colonel going to do with you?” Al sighed again. “Just try not to _actively_ court trouble, okay? You’re a magnet enough as it is.”

“Hey!”

“True! Anyway, I was just calling to check up. You sound alright, though. Master sends her regards.”

“No, she doesn’t, but you’re making her anyway.”

“Well, she implied her concern,” Al laughed. “We were learning about transitions in alchemy yesterday and she got all excited about it. I’ve never seen her so on fire about any particular topic before. It was kinda scary!”

“It must feel good for her,” Ed noted, “to finally have someone to talk to who can understand even a
“Right,” Al agreed. “How’s the Colonel? And please pass our congratulations along to the Hugheses! We’re glad it all went well in the end.”

“Roy’s the same as ever, manipulative little shit.”

“Brother!”

“I live with the guy, I can see the truth of him! Gracia and the baby are doing great, though. Maes is insufferable now.”

Al laughed again. “Sounds like Mr. Hughes.” The line beeped. “Oh, that was my last—good luck tomorrow, brother! I’ll see your name all over the papers on Wednesday, yeah?”

“Alright, Al, take care,” Ed relinquished the phone down and stared at it for a while, until Dog came fetching him from the kitchen. His cocoa was cold. Shrugging, he clapped to warm it up; in an instant, it began emitting steam.

“Transitions in alchemy, huh,” Ed murmured, absently climbing the back stairs to the library where he parked himself for the rest of the afternoon. He fell asleep at some point and dreamed of morphing shapes, symmetric illusions, octagons, dodecahedrons. A flower, blooming open. A cornstalk withering under the sun. The shifting sands of a vast desert, nothing in the air but golden dust. That was alright. Everything began with dust.

When he woke, it was late at night and Roy was sat on the sofa across from him. Ed turned over and blinked at the familiar vision, before snuggling back under the blanket around him, falling asleep once again. The next thing he knew, it was morning.

The atmosphere was decidedly different the next day. For one, as Roy had said, there were less people—a lot less. No throngs of hopeful alchemists, no lovers kissing each other good luck at the gates. There were still people meandering about the plaza, however, and this was despite the fact that today, the iron gates were closed.

“Why are they closed?” Ed asked as they passed by.

“Only those who passed the tests yesterday are allowed in. Protection for the techniques to be demonstrated is the official excuse, but really it’s to protect the delicate constitutions of some of the brass attending today,” Roy shrugged. The registration desks were still in the same spot, but now more distinguished persons with heavy epaulettes, medals, and stars were signing in. One desk was marked for the candidates; that was where Roy led Ed.

“You gonna be alright, kiddo?” Maes asked, clapping a hand on Ed’s shoulder.

Was he showing his anxiety? No can do. Superior predators can smell that shit.

Ed steeled himself. “Fine, just fine.” He sticks a hand into his pant pocket to check if the seeds he took from the kitchen this morning are still there.

Roy placed a hand on top of his head and when Ed looked up at him, he was smiling. “One is all...”
“And all is one,” Ed grinned. “I won’t let you down, I promise.”

Roy chuckled, “I don’t believe you even can. Go on, then. Best you get a seat early.”

Inside, the alchemists were led to a different hall, this time one with very tall ceilings and a second-floor balcony wrapping around the room. It was a gallery, then, a place of exhibition. The balcony seats would afford a great vantage point from which other State Alchemists and invited persons may observe all proceedings below. Directly in front of Ed, as he stood with his back to the main doors, sat a row of chairs underneath the sombre auspices of an enormous Amestrian flag.

Hugging the walls around them were more chairs with their backs to the wall, although these ones were set in the shadows. These were for them, Ed realised, as the proctor began handing them back their badges for pinning. Ed picked a spot close to the front, where he would have a good view of all the demonstrations. From here, he could also see clearly those sitting at the opposite balcony above. After all the aspiring alchemists were seated, other people began filing in upstairs; Ed had to resist the urge to wave when he saw Roy. *He must be sitting in my line of sight on purpose,* Ed realised, *to keep me calm.*

**Such a good guardian he is,** the Gate crooned, **so attentive!**

Ed envisioned shadowy arms to wrap around the Gate so that he could hold it close and smother it. (Much to his surprise, it worked.)

At 09:00 sharp, the Fuhrer walked through the main doors, prompting a chorus of heel-clicking salutes. Behind the Fuhrer trailed a group of generals and their adjutants; the chairs under the flag were obviously for them. Ed fidgeted as the Fuhrer ran sharp eyes over the whole assembly; it was a good thing he had already met the man before.

“Welcome to the practical phase of the State Alchemist Examinations,” declared the uniformed proctor who had handed them their badges a short while ago. “We have seventeen candidates awaiting a decision today. Candidates will test in order of their arrival time this morning. When called, please come forward, state your name, date of birth, and citizen number. Questions may be addressed to you from anyone in this hall, including your fellow candidates. To note, all persons in this hall are either officials with the appropriate clearance or State Alchemists themselves. After all questions have been satisfied, you will then proceed to the demonstration, during which you are given one and **only one** chance to showcase the practical application of your alchemical knowledge. When you are finished, a vote will be cast amongst the present members of the State Alchemical Review Committee on your fitness and capacity to become a State Alchemist. After the vote, you are welcome to stay for the rest of the candidates’ demonstrations or leave the hall in silence.”

The exam proctor examined them all with a beady eye and then turned to the Fuhrer, who nodded and sat with his generals. The rest of the hall followed suit.

“Let us begin. Mr. Lyle Fitzhugh, please come forward.”

Lyle Fitzhugh was a sallow-skinned, anxious-looking man who was far younger than he looked, only twenty-six when he looked all of fifty. After he recited his personal information, the inquisition began.

“Tell us which school of alchemy you hail from and why.”

“Explain the purpose of alchemy in Amestrian society.”
“What is the role of the State Alchemist in the military?”

“How long have you been a practicing alchemist?”

“How does alchemy affect Amestris’ relationship with its neighbouring countries?”

“What aspect of alchemy do you hate and why?”

On and on they went, candidate after candidate, asking horrifically vague questions Ed would’ve never thought they’d ask. Lyle Fitzhugh was inches away from a nervous breakdown and could not perform for the practical, therefore failing. The tall fellow after him stuttered through his answers but could create a large stone wall from the floor, earning him a very narrow pass.

_Really?_ Ed gaped. _But that’s basic!

**Most people are basic, child,** the Gate reminded him with a swish of its tail. Notably, Roy had voted ‘no’ for that candidate.

About eight candidates in, a young lady with dark hair and pale, pointed features came forward. Her voice remained calm throughout the cross-examination. _Finally a decent one,_ Ed thought. Her answers were careful and well reasoned, but she seemed hesitant and inconsistent whenever pressed about alchemy’s role in society, as if she were afraid that her answer would offend if she told the truth.

Eventually, the Fuhrer himself leaned forward and said, “Whatever it is you are trying not to say needs to be said or they will not relent until you do, young lady, and we have all day. Out with it.”

She scowled at her feet and muttered an oath, before straightening up to her full height. “I believe that the ability to do alchemy is the mark of a superior class of people who should be given preference over the many in respect of equivalent exchange. Alchemists can contribute more than an ordinary man or woman and the hierarchy of privilege should therefore reflect that, not the other way around. We shouldn’t have to be the ones begging for the right to do things, have things, dictate things.”

_What?!!_ Ed thought in outrage. He opened his mouth—

—saw Roy glaring at him from across the room—

—and shut it. His teeth clicked together from the force of his annoyance. Oh, Roy didn’t sit there so Ed could see him; he sat there so he could see _Ed_. The bastard.

During her demonstration, she was moderately skilled, using alchemy to harden and sharpen paper into blades that could be used as projectiles. _Excellent,_ Ed thought, _a combat alchemist._ _Maybe she can go and get herself killed in action. Or injured. Enough that she can’t propagate that stupid idea._

After her, Ed had to suffer through four more ‘candidates’ who were subpar and all failed their practical besides. He was on the verge of death by boredom when his name was finally called.

“Mr. Edward Elric, please come forward.”

_Oh, goody._ Ed stood at once and walked to the middle of the hall, where he faced the Fuhrer with unblinking eyes. “Edward Elric, 3rd of February 1895, 09-0615-332.”

“Noted, Mr. Elric. The questions may now proceed.”
Ed was ready, but the hall remained silent. Unlike the other candidates, his presence seemed to have engendered a hesitant hush, as though everyone was attempting to figure out what to say. One of the Generals sitting with the Fuhrer was clutching the arms of his chair with a grip so firm his knuckles were turning white. Ed wasn’t sure, but he could hazard a guess: General Spahn, perhaps, with the degree of displeasure he was radiating without a single word.

After an awkward minute of shuffling and continued silence, the Fuhrer broke into an honest chuckle. Ed blinked along with everyone else.

“I do believe this is a first, young Edward. Your very presence has silenced a whole hall of alchemists, something I thought was impossible before today. I don’t think they were all expecting you to truly be here, but your written exam was—ah, how to put it?—it was quite a riveting read, I must say. Your long exposition caused quite a stir yesterday evening, although I am certain Colonel Mustang has already told you all about it.”

“Er, no, sir, it was past my bedtime when Roy came home, and we didn’t get a chance to discuss it this morning.”

“Indeed? Well,” the Fuhrer nodded with a smile, “I shall leave him that story to tell so that we may proceed with this examination. Let me begin the questions. Tell us, Edward, how long have you been an alchemist?”

“Er,” Ed tilted his head sideways, “since I could read…?”

“Truly? Where did you learn?”

“From my father’s lap, at first. Then my father’s books. Then my alchemical master, who I trained with for some years. Then Roy.”

“I see. For our Dr. Muller’s benefit, I shall ask: which school of alchemy do you identify with?”

“Holistics.”

“Explain that to us, please.”

“All is one, and one is all,” Ed declared with the weight of the Truth behind his words. “Alchemy is not a tool; it is not a means to an end. Alchemy is not a language or a vocation. Alchemy is a way of life. If you grew up like I did, living and breathing it everyday, then this would be very easy to understand.”

The Fuhrer smiled kindly at him. Ed steadied his stance and clasped his hands behind his back, sensing the oncoming flood of questions about to be unleashed as the room collectively began to relax.

“What is the role of alchemy in your daily life?” asked that same person from above and back, a question every single candidate has had to answer so far. Maybe someone put this person up to the task of asking.

“I just said,” Ed shrugged, “but I guess you didn’t understand. That’s like asking what the role of air is in breathing. Alchemy is a way of life.” When no one said a thing in response, Ed sighed and continued. “When I wake up, I use alchemy to heat the water to wash my face. I’ll also use it to heat the water for coffee. Roy will tell me that making toast with alchemy is not cooking, but it is because I applied heat and that’s what cooking is. Then I go to take a bath and use alchemy to dry my hair. When I write in my notebooks, I use alchemy to dry the ink and fix the pages. When I go to visit our friends’ baby girl, I watch her and wonder about the miracle of human life that with alchemy we still
cannot reproduce. We may never achieve it, because what do you give in exchange for life but life itself? That makes me think, so I’ll crack a book or two open and read on childbirth or child development or early biology. Alchemy is in every part of life for me so that question is irrelevant, sir, and you are wasting time asking it. Next.”

Someone coughed from above.

Ed rolled his eyes. “Please.”

“What part of alchemy do you hate and why?” yet another question everyone has had to answer.

Ed sighed. “Equivalent exchange.” People began murmuring; the audience rustled in their seats. Very well; Ed had to elaborate. “Because what about the unquantifiable things, like time, or memory, or knowledge? What is the price for those? What can you give in exchange?”

Once again, no one had a response. The Fuhrer remained smiling kindly upon him, demeanour betraying nothing but interest. Ed supposed that was a good sign. After another couple of minutes, someone cleared their throat and quietly, hesitantly asked, “What do you think the alchemist’s role is in Amestrian society? And why did you, at your early age, choose to become one?”

Oh, of course, back to his age. Ed had to fight not to roll his eyes. “Alchemist, be thou for the people. That is what I was taught and what I understand alchemists are meant to do. That is the ideal we should all aspire for, that all of our efforts are for the good of those around us, who are perhaps not gifted with the same capacity we have with alchemy but are people nonetheless. Roy had a fancy Francian term for it—noblesse oblige—our obligation to help them precisely because we are in a position of privilege. With power comes responsibility and all that.” He did not shoot a sharp look at the girl who came before him but only because he was disciplined like that.

“But if you want to know what I think alchemists are to Amestrian society today, well, that’s a different matter. We are simultaneously near and far from the ideal: we are the weapon and the shield; we are the economy and the academia; we are the backbone of this governing body. We serve many purposes, but most of all we are meant to bolster the society against external threats, because we are a warning against those who would try to annex us: Drachma, Xing, and the like. As far as why I’m joining up at my early age, well, it’s because of the goddamn Library, of course, why else would I go through all of this if not for the books?”

One of the generals, the one who could be Spahn, scoffed. “And you’re letting him join up just like that, Mustang? For the books?”

Ed could hear Roy shrug. “He wants the books, sir. You could say I should stop him but you don’t live with him.” His tone was the perfect blend of flippant and unapologetic; Ed had to snicker.

“You are aware, of course, that State Alchemists are often called to duty in times of conflict,” another general asked, this one made of sterner stuff. “They are sometimes asked to perform duties that are quite unpleasant in service of the state.”


Reminded of Roy’s weighty achievements, the room quieted once again. Ed remained standing there, looking up at the Fuhrer with an expectant face. Surely that wasn’t all of it?

“If approved and licensed,” another general quietly began, shifting in his seat to the immediately left of the Fuhrer, “what sort of alchemist do you aim to become and why?”
“A researcher, if I understand your question correctly, because with all due respect, combat alchemy is rather straightforward and boring. Alchemy is useful for many other things.”

“And what sort of research can the military expect to sponsor for you, Mr. Elric? Please give us concrete examples of your ideas.”

Ed rocked back on his heels and tipped his head sideways. “Hmm, currently, I’ve been reading a lot about Mahler and Montague’s work on subatomic theory, which hasn’t been updated since their deaths. I think there’s a way to split atoms into their separate subatomic parts and harness the residual energy to help power our industries, perhaps even enough to replace coal and oil. Additionally, it would allow us alchemists to break atoms apart and reshape them the way we wish, thereby opening a whole new frontier for alchemy to expand towards: it would allow us, for example, to transmute organic materials from inorganic objects. Bread from dust. This would be an example of true transmutation in its basest sense, instead of what we call transmutation but is actually transfiguration, a more elementary procedure.”

Once again, murmurs swirled around the room, even from his fellow candidates. The general who questioned him conferred briefly with the general sitting next to him, and then asked, “Your ideas sound quite vague and underdeveloped, Mr. Elric. Tell us why you think we should invest in such an uncertain proposition.”

“Of course it’s underdeveloped,” Ed couldn’t help but roll his eyes this time, because the hypocrisy, the sheer gall of it! “I have a lot to learn about subatomic theory, learning I cannot do efficiently without access to the goddamn Library, because Mahler and Montague’s manuscripts are locked up in there! That being said,” he took a steadying breath, “your investment would be a wise decision in light of my mastery of applied alchemy and your apparently lack of theorists who are also versed in practical application. You have plenty of theorists and plenty of practitioners, but few who are capable of doing both; that is, translating theory into practice. By the way, Roy is one of them, but you have him pushing paperwork and doing shit other people could be doing—why?”

“Edward,” Roy warned from above.

“Fine, back to my point: you cannot logically deny me funding on the basis of uncertainty when you seem perfectly content pouring funds into researchers like Mr. Tucker—sorry, Mr. Tucker—or Dr. Schrum, who are fine theorists! Yes, and in Mr. Tucker’s case, a pretty good practitioner too—but they are both attempting obviously futile endeavours based upon insufficient understanding, and, indeed, insufficient knowledge. I won’t say anything on the dubious usefulness of a chimera that can talk, or human transmutation when you can easily find a nice lady and marry them and have tons of perfect little humans in less than a year—”

Incredulous tittering swept around the room—

“—but maybe before making them do such research, fund the anatomists and behavioural scientists first so that we may have more data on how the human body creates human consciousness. Then you can build upon this data and use your new understanding to pursue your talking chimera, or your transmuted human. Proper progression. That’s how science works.”

The Fuhrer chuckled along with half the room, so Ed took that to mean that he hadn’t been too offensive. So far he was doing a good job at maintaining his calm like he and Roy had talked about, but he really couldn’t see Roy’s face from here, and he was never great at gauging himself, gosh, he hoped he wasn’t ruining Roy’s reputation right now…

“One last question, Mr. Elric,” a different general leaned forward this time. This one had flinty blue eyes and a heavily scarred face, perhaps a relic from one of Amestris’ wars. “You have indicated
your awareness of the State Alchemist’s duty during times of war. Tell me what you think of the military’s endeavours in the North and the East, and if you would be willing to deploy in service of the country when you are called upon to do so.”

“Well, if it’s serving the country, sure,” Ed shrugged, “but to be frank, General, I don’t really see how acquiring an extra patch of dusty, empty desert territory serves the country in any way. The North’s one thing, but what the hell was that in the East? Pick on someone your own size.”

“You are aware that your mentor, Colonel Mustang the Flame Alchemist, fought in this conflict and earned his acclaim through his actions against Ishbal?”

“Yes, we had a talk,” Ed glared, “and I’m sure you’re aware that he ended that conflict far ahead of schedule, single-handedly, so that no more of your soldiers would have to die and resources would no longer need to be wasted.” Someone coughed again from above, someone who sounded like Roy. “What I’m trying to say is: prove to me that it’s a worthy endeavour that would truly be in service of the state, and I’ll do it. Otherwise, I got better things to do with my time.”

Someone from above and to the right scoffed. “It’s as if the child doesn’t understand that he will be tasked to follow his superior’s orders!”

Murmurs rose once again; Ed’s eye twitched. “Wrong on both accounts!” he turned to glare up at the nameless, spiteful officer in uniform. Some combat alchemist no doubt jealous of Roy or something. “I do understand, more than you, it seems, and as a State Alchemist, I will be tasked to ‘use my considerable intellect to contribute in meaningful, profitable ways to the people of Amestris.’ My duties to the military as a researcher are limited to that of my periodic progress reports to my ‘superiors’—to prove that the money I am begin given is being used well, more than as a proof of competence—and perhaps the occasional presentation or publication for the rest of the alchemical community. Even as a combat alchemist, I am given freedom to judge the worth, integrity, and feasibility of any assignment, project, or mission I am given, as well as the freedom to withdraw from any mission, request a change of division, or withdrawal from active combat status if I so wished. You don’t hire me to be a brainless pawn; you have your soldiers for that. You hire me because I can think. Read your handbook, for fuck’s sake.”

“Edward,” Roy sharply admonished.

“Sorry for cussing,” Ed sniffed, turning back to face the Fuhrer, “but I’m not sorry for what I said. I’m right and you know it.”

Roy sighed once again, but said no more, vindicating Ed’s response. Thankfully, the Fuhrer was still smiling.

“Very good, Mr. Elric, thank you for your honest, thorough answers,” the Fuhrer nodded. “I believe we must now conclude the questions and proceed to your practical demonstration, in the interest of time. Tell us what it is you will do for us.”

Ed cleared his throat. “Well, your instructions were vague so I didn’t really know what to do until yesterday. A practical demonstration of my capacity and knowledge in alchemy, right? But I know a lot of things about alchemy, so I was reading last night and thought, what the heck, I’ll just show you all of alchemy.”

Murmurs swirled around him yet again. He pulled the seeds out of his trouser pocket, three small sunflower seeds he had plucked from Roy’s kitchen this morning before they left the house. Crouching down, he put the seeds on the ground, along with a pocketful of dirt he had taken from one of the potted herbs and wrapped in a rug.
“Sunflower seeds, for those who can’t see in the back, and a bit of dirt from our garden,” he said. “Any alchemist of repute begins by learning the Five Forms of Transmutation. Can I use this?” he asked the proctor, walking towards a few slabs of ice on the floor, leftovers from a previous candidate who had transmuted them from buckets of water earlier.

The proctor looked to the Fuhrer, who nodded.

“Alright.” Ed stood over the ice, took a breath, lifted his arms, and brought his palms together. *Clap.*

Crackling and glowing, the energy rushed forth from his hands as he brought them to hover over the melting ice at his feet: it began to thaw in fast-forward motion. “Transformation—the first form of alchemy. That is, to transform an element or molecule from one state of matter to another. In this case, ice, the solid state, to water, the liquid state.”

He straightened up and brought his glowing palms before all of them, holding a hovering glob of water in the air. Suspended, it remained in between his palms as he walked back towards the sunflower seeds resting underneath the bit of dirt on the floor. “Displacement—the second form of alchemy: to move an element or molecule from one point in space to another. When an alchemist creates a stone statue out of a brick wall, displacement is what it is called.”

Stopping in front of the seeds, he knelt and lowered the water into the dirt, curving his hands around it with care. In his mind’s eye, he held an array that morphed into the third transition, like a puzzle, like a living organism, like a flower blooming under the sun. Underneath his hands, the water fed hungrily into the dirt. “Combination—the third form: joining two or more elements in a compatible reaction to create a third, resulting element.”

Ed fed more energy into the reaction, and before him the seeds began to sprout from the dirt, growing and blooming, a little sunflower seeking the light. “Acceleration—the fourth form: feeding energy and base materials into an existing, compatible reaction in order to hasten its process. In this case, I provide the energy and the base materials are present in the form of minerals and nutrients in the dirt.”

“And finally, the fifth form,” Ed straightened, bringing his hands out as he stood up. Before him, the flower hovered, faltering, and then withering, and then disintegrating at last into dust, which dispersed into the air. He terminated the reaction into silence. “Decomposition: breaking bound elements or molecules apart into their basic, individual forms, essentially returning them all to dust.”

Before him, the Fuhrer has straightened into attention, leaning forward with intent eyes, the smile gone from his face. However, no one said a word, so Ed forged onwards: “Every alchemist, in order to be called a true alchemist, must be able to perform these Five Forms of Transmutation with at least a basic level of competence. As a State Alchemist, it is expected for us to be able to perform all of them at the master’s level, which I have done for you today in a seamless progressive transmutation. I think it sufficiently illustrates my capacity with practical alchemy, although I am more than willing to perform other transmutations for you if you have any particular requests.”

“But—where are your arrays, child?” one of the generals asked, wide-eyed. “You didn’t draw any arrays!”

“Ah, see, that’s where I’m unique. I don’t need to draw arrays,” Ed grinned, tapping his temple, “they’re all in here.”

“Impossible,” the very same general declared, “you must have them hidden somewhere.”

“A tattoo!” someone said from above.
“A piece of paper in his sleeve?” someone else suggested.

“Please,” Ed sighed. With irritation, he tugged his gloves off, raising his hands up, automail and all. “Tattoos are so old-fashioned.”

“There is only one method of verifying,” the scar-faced general quietly told his colleagues, “and that is if we ask him to demonstrate spontaneous reactions he cannot have planned prior to this examination.”

Murmurs of agreement ran around the room, to which Ed rolled his eyes. Non-alchemists were so tedious. If they had any understanding of alchemical arrays beyond what the basic books explained, they would realize that the demonstration Ed just did was done with five different arrays he would have had to hide in five different places! But whatever, Ed thought, if it makes them shut up.

“Make a wall from the ground!” someone said from above.

Ed turned around and levelled a glare in their general direction. “Really? A wall, after what I just did?” He clapped his hands nonetheless and knelt to touch the floor, rising to bring up a small wall in front of him.

Louder murmurs this time, until someone said, “Make a weapon out of that wall!”

“That’s still only displacement,” Ed pointed out even as he clapped his hands again, touching the wall’s surface to pull out a long spear with a sharp stone blade at the end. “But this is too heavy, it’s made of concrete… let’s make it into a metal.” He clapped and ran a sparkling hand down the length of the spear; brick dust fell from it, leaving it thinner and gleaming under the light. “Much better. What else to do you want me to do? Make a sword out of it? Put it back in the wall?”

“Can you pull water from the air, Mr. Elric?” the Fuhrer asked this time, leaning forward with very keen interest. The entire room fell into a hush, perhaps now finally noting the intent attention the Fuhrer was giving Ed.

“Sure,” Ed shrugged, putting down the spear to clap his hands again. There, suspended between his palms when he separated them, sat a growing glob of water, glittering with ethereal light. “Not much humidity in here, though. This would work much better outside.”

“So you’re still subject to what your environment provides.”

“Of course!” Ed exclaimed, terminating the reaction and allowing the water droplets to evaporate. “There are laws to alchemy; I can’t just break them!”

“Of course,” the Fuhrer nodded, hand coming up to rub at his chin in contemplation. That dark, intent gaze remained levelled on Ed.

“One last reaction, as a treat,” Roy spoke into the silence, prompting Ed to look up. Roy was leaning an elbow on the banister before him, casually observing the proceedings below with a smirk smugger than the Gate. “The next level of combination transmutation, Ed. Let them see.”

Ed blinked. “You sure? That’s your territory.”

“Just a little bit,” Roy shrugged, “since we’ve gone this far.”

So Ed brought his hands together, inhaling and concentrating because he didn’t want to scald himself—he pulled his hands sharply apart and a burst of orange flame expanded between his fingertips, blazing into life just as fast as it guttered out. Communal gasps and exclamations from his audience,
except Roy who laughed in delight.

“Combustion,” Ed explained. “Roy’s much more experienced with it than I am.”

Once the crowd settled enough, the Fuhrer nodded in satisfaction. “Very well, Mr. Elric, thank you for your impressive demonstrations. Clearly you possess a solid grasp of both theoretical and practical alchemy. While I would love to hear more of your ideas, we do have an agenda to follow, so perhaps another time. I must now open the floor to a vote from the members of the State Alchemical Review Committee, barring Colonel Mustang who is your declared mentor.”

“Right, go for it,” Ed nodded, returning to his easy stance.

The Fuhrer’s face settled once again into that kindly smile. The proctor announced the vote for Ed’s licensure without further ado. Ed couldn’t see behind him, but before him, all the generals and the Fuhrer held up blue cards indicating a ‘Yes’ vote for each. Even could-be Spahn had to grudgingly raise the blue. After a moment of the proctor counting the gallery, the pronouncement came.

“Mr. Edward Elric is hereby licensed as a State Alchemist with unanimous consensus. Mr. Elric, you will receive further instructions tomorrow morning. Congratulations and please take a seat to make way for the next candidate.”

At last, Ed’s shoulders relaxed. He looked up towards Roy, who smiled and gave him a wink.

I did it, Ed grinned. I’m a State Alchemist.

YOUNGEST STATE ALCHEMIST IN HISTORY LICENSED AT AGE 12
Edward Elric, formally apprenticed to Col. Mustang, officially licensed yesterday during the annual State Alchemist examinations!

CENTRAL—In a stunning turn of events succeeding last year’s heated debates about Amestrian military ethics, Edward Elric, age 12, has received full and official licensure as a State Alchemist with unanimous consensus from the State Alchemical Review Committee. Now a ranked military officer, Major Elric was listed as a late applicant for this year’s State Alchemist Examinations, which concluded yesterday with a closed-doors practical demonstration attended by top military officials, the State Alchemical Review Committee, and the Fuhrer himself.

While restricted from revealing the specific nature of the demonstrations, the comments emerging from those who witnessed the practical speak to Maj. Elric’s skill and capacity.

“Young Edward holds such promise for the future of alchemy. During his cross-examination, he answered his questions in such a manner that showcased his reasoning— razor-sharp and unforgiving, but always speaking the truth,” Dr. Albert Schrum, the Anatomist, reported.

“Wisdom from the mouth of babes, indeed,” said Herr Aaron Steinberg, celebrated politician and former lawyer, having had the privilege of attending as a non-voting entity. “While I still oppose his licensure on the account of his tender age, primarily because I am afraid that it will set a precedent for the military to draft younger soldiers
in the future, Mr. Elric has made it apparent that he will not be judged on the basis of what we hold as normal standards of intellect. He is wise beyond his years and appears to understand the precarious position he now enters as he takes up his new title. He had the most eloquent, honest answers about alchemy in society; I was very impressed. Col. Mustang is teaching him well. It is a warm consolation to know that he will be closely guided throughout his growth, with Col. Mustang, an upstanding man, constantly at his side… there is no doubt that the military should place Mr. Elric under his direct command.

Maj. Robert Kinnear (28), the Carbon Alchemist, stopped for a comment outside the hall immediately after the practical demonstration. “He’s an amazing alchemist. The whole package. I’m very excited to meet and talk with him! He seems full of amazing ideas. To be honest with you, I don’t fully understand everything that he did in there—how he did all that—just ground-breaking stuff! Very ambitious too, which is always a good quality in a researcher. Well, Major Elric, whenever you have time, let’s chat! I’d be interested in working together!”

“I have never seen anything like it, and I have seen plenty of alchemy in my life,” retired General Lucas Armstrong remarked. “It does not take an alchemical expert to see the breath of Edward Elric’s potential. The boy is a genius, no two ways about it.” Retired General Armstrong sponsored many alchemists during his tenure in the military, Robert Mahler, Abel Montague, and Isobel Lenora to name a few.

Maj. Elric’s official title and the details of his appointment will be released later today. Maj. Elric (pictured above, left-center, with Gen. Raven, Lt. Gen. Edison, Col. Mustang, and the Fuhrer) declined to comment after the conclusion of his examination, even as he stood outside the examination hall conversing with a few of his fellow alchemists and a number of ranked military officials. While the specific amount of financial support he will receive from the military towards his research remains confidential, Maj. Elric will begin receiving a salary of 7,000 marks as befitting his rank, along with the full privileges of a State Alchemist, including undeterred access to all State Libraries, research facilities, National Laboratories, and institutes of learning nationwide.

At this time, we are informed that Maj. Elric is still formally apprenticed under war hero and nationally-acclaimed alchemical pioneer Col. Roy Mustang the Flame Alchemist, who was also present for the demonstration, albeit as a non-voting entity in Maj. Elric’s assignation. According to an insider source, Maj. Elric also has a listed financial sponsor, Lt. Gen. Mira Olivier Armstrong, who up until now has refrained from sponsorship despite her family’s long legacy and financial involvement with the national alchemical community. Both parties declined to comment regarding Maj. Elric’s advancement at this time. (Story continued on page A3)
REFERENCES

(1) **Sanz knives** – In real life, they would be called Bowie knives. My knowledge of hunting gear is limited, but I do know how blades work on human flesh; these would be very efficient and deadly when in the right hands.

![Sanz Knife Image](image1)

(2) **Schrades** – Maes’ knives are, in real life, push knives. Below is an example, made of Damascus steel… lovely things. Not made for outright battle but for stealth.

![Schrades Knife Image](image2)

(3) **Gideon Sanz** is an idea from another fandom called Hunter x Hunter, which those of you who are anime nerds may know about. In that fandom, there were these highly-sought weapons called Ben’s knives (or in some wikis, Benz knives). Very expensive, each hand-made by the murderer Benny Dellon after each kill he committed. Each knife he made was engraved with a number. His knives were easily recognisable from their form and make, which were indicative of the time period during which he lived. There were 288 knives in total. Killua’s father, Silva, used one of these knives – infused with potent poison—during his match with Chrollo Lucifer (Spider arc).

(4) **Dilatation** – The cervix has to dilate to 10cm before birth can safely happen, otherwise damage to both mother and child may occur and birth will be very difficult. It can take anywhere from an hour to 80 hours (the longest I’ve heard of); some women never dilate to 10cm and therefore require emergency C-sections, or they die.

(5) **Braxton-Hicks** are false contractions that feel real but are not. They do come before the birth, though. Really unpleasant, from what I am told. Birthing is a bitch.

(6) **Crowning** babies look so weird and feel even weirder. If you have the constitution (or if you have had children, which tells me you have more than just constitution) then go Youtube it. I chose to spell it as **Elysia** instead of Alicia, in reference to the Elysian fields. Although they do not have that lore in this fandom, we do, and I like it better. I feel it’s also more loyal to the manga canon.

(7) Women are amazing, don’t you know! Getting up and walking mere hours after birth, allowing their nipples to be willingly gnawed upon by the little aliens that just popped out of their vaginas… I
don’t care what people say about the strength of men, I won’t hear it until I’ve seen men split their
crotches and pop out a watermelon-sized human.

(8) **Existentialism** is one of the six named schools of alchemy, discussed in previous chapters. It is
pretty much the same as existentialism in the realm of philosophy, with an alchemical focus. Ed
would not like it precisely because it likes to say that existence precedes essence.

(9) Drachma is Russia in my head. The river Neva runs through St. Petersburg in our world; it
inspired the name of their capital city, Nyeva.

(10) Quick notes version of the Islenhovs & Lindberghs: Sir Alfred Lindbergh, State Alchemist and
creator of the Lindbergh lock, was married to a noble wife with many adopted children but had three
true-born children by another woman named Katerina Islenhov. She was also a researcher and
professor of cellular biology at the Firat Academy of Medicine. Her three children are Karenina
Islenhov, who is now married to Julius Firat (eldest of the Firat brood), Karl Islenhov the self-exiled
Venom Alchemist, and Kanon Islenhov who is Sir Alfred Lindbergh’s alchemical heir.

This story was laid out in the past chapters, told by Roy who knows of it from his friendship with
Kanon. A few readers commented that they did not like the tone Roy took with his telling, as though
he admired the double-cross Sir Lindbergh performed. These readers felt that the last chapter held a
bit of a double-standard regarding Roy & Ed’s regard of Sir Lindbergh’s adultery when compared to
how they talked of Regina (Roy’s ex) and her betrayal of Roy’s affections.

Tina, trusty reader, if you feel disconcerted about the double-standard you are seeing, then I have
achieved my goal. Roy is only a man; he, like all of us, are dishonest, indeed even blind, to our own
faults. He hates the fact that Regina cheated on him and yet admires the fact that Sir Lindbergh
cheated on his own wife. That’s because he admires the reason Sir Lindbergh did so, whereas he
disdains Regina’s reason. Sir Lindbergh cheated for the vision of future children with brilliant minds,
and although I do not endorse eugenics for various reasons, we all wish for our children to be better
than us, regardless of how we define ‘better.’ Sir Lindbergh defined it in terms of intellectual
capacity; Roy happens to agree. I think that to be consistent with my characterisation of him in this
story.

I don’t always succeed, but I aim to write the characters as human, not perfect. Roy will not be
morally pure, and neither will Ed. They will make decisions that will be morally grey or, as you will
see in the upcoming chapter, downright cruel. That’s all part of the story. I hope it doesn’t sound too
much like an excuse when I say this. I also hope to remind you that what I write is not always a
direct reflection of the values I hold as a person. Remember, this is a story: like life, some things are
ture, but not all of them, and never always.

(11) **Libris** is inspired by a real-life cafe in Moscow called *Cafe Pushkin*, as well as *Merci Cafe* in
Paris. See below! (Addendum 2018.12.09)
Chapter End Notes

Fair reminder that references for Catalysis can be found here! I hope you enjoyed it, let me know what you think! Comment below!
Arc III: Growing Pains: 12

Chapter Notes

Whaaaat, another chapter for Catalysis within the same year? Can you believe your eyes? Because I barely can, and I wrote it! All 30k words of it! I hope you enjoy.

REFERENCES are, as always, available here. I have also made a PLAYLIST for Catalysis on Spotify, which you can listen to if you like. You don't need a Spotify account, I don't think. Let me know if you have a hard time with it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Evil begins when you begin to treat people as things.
( Terry Pratchett, I Shall Wear Midnight )

Ed knew that his attendance at the Yule Ball was what made him known to those who mattered, but somehow seeing his name at the front page of the morning paper made it more concrete. He wondered if they had heard yet, Granny and Winry and his mother. None of them made a habit of reading the paper. He already knew what they would think—they would be disappointed, or angry, in Winry’s case—and yet he still could not help but imagine it.

“Fitz, so predictable,” Roy chuckled, glancing at the article over his shoulder. A plate of fancy toast appeared in front of Ed. “It’s nice to have him around, we can always rely on him to fan the flames just the right way.”

“Friend of yours?” Ed asked, inspecting the special breakfast Roy had prepared: eggs whisked with crème fraîche and chives, scrambled on a skillet with melted butter, draped artfully over perfectly golden triangles of toast, with thinly sliced portions of smoked salmon on top. It took less than twenty minutes to prepare but looked beautiful and delicious, indeed cheerful, pink and yellow, the colours of a rising sun.

“No, although I’ve met the man several times. If I befriend him, his usefulness wanes. His words are only worth what they are because people know I do not relish associating with him—”

“—and therefore, whatever good he says about you must be true, because he has no reason otherwise to flatter you. I see,” Ed smirked, taking a bite out of his breakfast. It was beautiful, but not so much that he couldn’t bear to put it in his mouth.

Roy sat across from him, smiling in approval at Ed’s deduction. “You’ll be alright taking the tram to Headquarters by yourself?”
“I’m 12, not 2,” Ed rolled his eyes. Roy’s paranoia had only mildly decreased since that incident. “Besides, if I came along with you, what would I do there for two whole hours? I’d die of boredom.”

“I somehow doubt that, but as you say. They should have your name listed at the gates. If there is any trouble, refer them to my office.”

Ed nodded along. Roy would leave with Maes at his usual time in order to be at work by eight. Ed, however, did not have an appointment until ten. According to his introductory letter—delivered with surprising haste to their door by a cadet yesterday evening—he was to report to the Registry Office in Internal Affairs in order to get his identity verified and his fingerprints logged. That would take about half an hour, after which he was expected to report to his commanding officer, a certain Colonel Roy Mustang, for further instructions.

“Apart from my birth certificate, do I need to bring anything else?”

“Patience,” Roy said, “for Internal Affairs. They can be efficient… when they want to be, but it is never guaranteed. Also, your favourite pen. You’ll be doing a lot of signing today.”

Nose wrinkling in distaste, Ed stuffed another mouthful of fancy toast into his mouth. It could be worse, he supposed, I could have been assigned to someone else.

Ah, but your Colonel has orchestrated everything such that they would have no choice but to give you to him, the Gate pointed out, swishing its tail behind its fluffy, shadowy roundness.

Roy orchestrates all the things, Ed agreed with a sidelong glance at the paper next to his elbow.

“Your brother and master will have read that by now, surely.” Roy’s comment was quiet and cautious this time. Ed and Al spoke last night over the phone, but the conversation was quick and too excited for everything else left unsaid.

“Al won’t take the exams until he feels he’s ready,” Ed said. “He’s not like me; he waits and thinks it through. Maybe next year or the year after that, but there’s no telling with Al, and master won’t let him go that easily either.”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” Roy clarified, meeting his gaze with dark, knowing eyes.

Ed ducked his head. They were getting to know each other too well to hide these things. “I know,” he said in a small voice. “It’s fine. I made my decision. There’s no turning back.”

Roy reached over the table then, placing a warm hand on his head and smoothing back his loose hair. “I swear to you that you’ll never be alone against them; I’ll do everything in my power and more to protect you. You will be with me and only me; I won’t allow them to reassign you to anyone else. We won’t give them any excuse to reassign you to anyone else.”

Ed nodded, steeling himself. Thoughts of his mother always brought doubt into his heart, but these days those thoughts came rarely if at all, and without so much grief anymore. “In return, I promise,” Ed met Roy’s eyes, “I won’t let you lose sight.”

Roy froze.

Ed took Roy’s wrist in hand and continued, “Hawkeye might be the one watching and waiting to put a bullet in your head if you lose your marbles or become a tyrant, but I’ll—I won’t even let it get there. I’ll be here to remind you of where it all started. We do this together now. Equivalent exchange.”
A slow smile dawned upon Roy’s face; in solidarity, Roy clasped his arm back. “Together, then.”

“Or not at all,” Ed agreed. After all, their goals were too lofty to aim for alone.

Roy left that morning with a smile, clasping the back of Ed’s neck with affection before he walked out of the house. Ed locked up after him and went upstairs to dress, contemplating this warm dynamic that was morphing and evolving between them. Roy was like the collaborator Ed never knew he wanted, for he had always been an independent mind; Roy was also simultaneously the equivalent counterpart Al could never become. Al was his partner, his rival, and moreover, his precious brother; Roy came from a different place altogether. He knew enough that he could be Ed’s teacher, except he didn’t always teach, instead learning and teaching with Ed at the same time.

He was also, more than anything now, Ed’s closest friend, the one person outside of Al who had earned his trust so wholly that Ed could tell him anything and everything. Ed wanted Roy’s attention, needed his reciprocation, and trusted his opinion. Perhaps it was unhealthy to crave so much of one person’s time and regard, but Ed grew up in a small family and he was accustomed to having just one or two people within his innermost community. Now that he and Al were separated, it left him and Roy.

It would be too much to assume that Roy thought of him the same way; Roy was a grown man and had a prolific social life besides. It would be nice, though, to have and keep his trust in return. Not the superficial kind, but the true kind: the kind not borne of obligation, the kind that would compel a man to ignore boundaries and break rules.

He already ignored the boundaries and broke the rules for you, the Gate pointed out, flicking the memory of Dr. Geralds’ corpse before his eyes. I daresay you already have his trust.

That would be nice, Ed thought, as he undressed, washed, and dried his hair with a clap.

He had picked out his clothes yesterday after much deliberation. Appearances were, after all, part of that crucial first impression. He put on black trousers Roy had gotten tailored for him, not the overly formal kind but the ones that were more flexible and made for movement. Over a buttoned shirt, he fastened a black vest, fitted to his shoulders and tapering around his waist. If he wore gloves to conceal his hands, the vest would help conceal the line of his shoulder ports; the same consideration applied to his shoes. He wore black waterproofed Chelsea boots and hid his Sanz knife in a sheath he alchemised into the leather. Finally, to keep him warm, he chose the coat Al, Izumi, and Sig gave him as a birthday gift: it was double-breasted and made of waterproofed wool (alchemy!), warm but lightweight and with lots of crafty hidden pockets. Obviously expensive and of fine make, he knew it would last him a while, which was good, because it was also in his favourite colour: a vibrant, eye-catching cardinal red.

Al reportedly waterproofed the wool and customised the pockets, knowing his preferences better than Izumi, but Al could not have afforded something like this on his own. Not yet, at least, not until Al became employed or signed up to work for the state. No, this was from Izumi and Sig. It was a very nice present, fitting as a commencement gift from a mentor to a student. And although the sentiment was not put into words, Ed knew what the gift meant when he saw that Izumi’s symbol was not on the back. Because they had parted ways, Ed choosing a different path than the one Izumi wanted him to walk, he was declaring himself independent of her and no longer a student. With the severance of that relationship, he lost the right to wear her symbol. The next time they meet, they
would approach each other as equals—alchemist to alchemist.

**And the style of it,** the Gate pointed out, looks like the double-breasted coats the military men wear. **Your teacher is being very pointed!**

*It’s Izumi. She’s always pointed.* But the Gate was right. Come to think of it, the coat did look like the ones Roy and Maes wore, although without the pins, stripes, and epaulettes. **Well, that’s fine. I am part of the military now. I need to embrace it. We do not turn away from the truth.**

**No, we don’t,** the Gate agreed with pleasure. **Besides, look at you!**

Ed looked at himself in the mirror, marvelling at the difference clothes made. He already felt ten times more confident than he did ten minutes ago. He looked good, very good in fact: older, taller (he loved the boots), more certain, even *commanding.*

He nodded to himself. “We’re ready.” The Gate agreed.

Before long, he left the house, double-checking that the doors were locked. He led Dog across the yard to Gracia’s house. She complimented the coat first thing and offered him a hug second, reminding him of what she had said at the Yule Ball months ago. “Remember, they’re only as intimidating as you allow them to be.”

Grinning, Ed hugged her back. How lucky he was to have Gracia in his life. “Thanks, Gracia. See you later, little lady,” he nuzzled against Elysia’s little nose.

“Tell Roy to take it easy on you since it’s your first day,” Gracia bid, nudging Dog inside with a push of her leg. “Have fun, Ed!”

“Oh, I will!” Ed laughed as he walked away.

After all, it wasn’t every day that one became a State Alchemist.

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On the tram, no one paid him much attention; he was just another passenger, another soul amongst the multitude. Ed felt simultaneously relieved and apprehensive. Perhaps the pictures in the papers weren’t of a very good angle, but people weren’t outright recognising him. He took it as the start of a good day.

At the Headquarters, it was a different story. The soldiers immediately addressed him by name, opening the iron gates with much gawking and comical haste. He nodded to them, not knowing what else to say, and followed the instructions to the Internal Affairs Registry Office. It was a bit of a long walk.

**They’re all looking at you,** the Gate giggled, **and your red coat doesn’t help!**

Ed squared his jaw. *I don’t give a shit. This coat is a gift; I wear it with pride.*

**You missed my point but sure.** The Gate sounded happy and cooperative today, nudging his attention towards little details that brought Ed to this absurd new reality he was to live in.

When he took the stairs to the main hall’s front doors, people parted in front of him with a bit of a
hush. Soldiers who were hurrying along slowed to a stop, craning their necks to take a good look. He heard the whispers loud and clear: ‘Is that him?’ and ‘youngest ever in history’ and ‘I heard his practical was brutally hard’ and ‘the Fuhrer liked him a lot, maybe because he’s young’—all of Central command was talking, and it took all of Ed to keep a straight face, to march along like he meant business.

_I do mean business_, he frowned, _I'm one of them now._

**You outrank many of them,** the Gate pointed out. Ed’s eyes caught epaulettes with differing colours, ribbons, and the flash of an occasional silver watch.

_I’m gonna have to learn that_, he took note. It would be useful to know who he could order around on sight.

He stopped in front of tall white doors, checking that the plaque beside it read the right number and name. When he stepped inside, more of the same attention: the entire room fell into a hush.

“Excuse me, good morning,” he blinked, looking to the nearest lady, who looked like a nice enough receptionist despite her gaping at him like a fish. “I have an appointment for ten o’clock. The name’s Edward Elric.”

It took the receptionist lady a moment to respond. “O-Of course, er, yes, er, good morning, please, yes, Mr. Elric, please take a seat. We will, er, call your name shortly.” She motioned to the far side of the room, where two rows of chairs were half-occupied with soldiers and recruits who also had appointments. If Ed wasn’t mistaken, two of them were among his cohort yesterday. _Thank fuck that supremacist girl isn’t here, or I’ll have to have words_, he thought darkly.

He took a seat as instructed; the receptionist was making a phone call now, trying to keep her voice down without much effect. “—yes, sir, he, um, Mr. Edward Elric has just arrived, and I was told—yes, sir. I understand.”

_Well, everyone inside Headquarters definitely read the papers._ That, or the grapevine was more efficient than Ed thought. The windfall of it was that he only had to wait for five minutes before his name was called and a squat, grumpy-looking soldier escorted him through a door into a long hallway. He was brought to a small office where the soldier sat behind a desk laden with paperwork.

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“Please close the door behind you and take a seat, Mr. Elric. My name is Sergeant Rudhelm. I will be processing your registration today.”

Ed sat.

Sergeant Rudhelm was brisk and matter-of-fact, something Ed appreciated very much. This would have been very awkward if someone like the receptionist was made to process his registration instead. He was asked to present his birth certificate and identification, of which copies were made and placed into his personnel file. He filled out a lengthy form asking for a variety of information: height, weight, address, telephone number, place of birth, next of kin (he put Roy), secondary emergency contact (he put Maes), and their contact information. It also asked for an outstanding medical history, including vaccination, which he had no problems with until he got to the part that asked about automail.

_Train track accident_, he reinforced his own fabricated story, carefully writing out a succinct explanation that would not lead them to suspect an attempt at forbidden alchemy. He had to be consistent, in case someone thought to check.
After that form, Sergeant Rudhelm took impressions of his fingerprints and photographs for the file. The last form he was given asked about banking information, for which Ed had to refer to a note Roy had written out for him last night.

“Er, I just opened this bank account yesterday afternoon, and they said to let you know that when you call, they might not find my name updated in their index yet. They gave me this reference number,” Ed read out a string of digits the State Bank had given him.

“That will be no problem,” Sergeant Rudhelm grunted. “Didn’t expect you’d have much need of a bank account before all this.”

Ed blinked. “…will I need to do anything on my end?”

“Give them a call in a week to verify that they have our information; we will send you a notice through your CO’s desk that the link is confirmed. Your salary will be deposited monthly and available for withdrawal on the third Monday of each month.”

“I understand. Thank you.”

Sergeant Rudhelm saw him back to the receptionist desk, holding the door open for him with a nod. “The Criminal Investigations Division is on the fourth and fifth floors of Building 3. Follow this hallway until you exit, and the building will be right in front of you, facing north. Colonel Mustang’s offices are towards the back; you’ll know you’re there if you see that the plaques on the wall start with P1.”

Back to the hallways he went, where people continued to crane their necks to get a look at him. Ed wanted to tell them that he would be here quite often, that this would not be the only time for them to see the youngest State Alchemist in history, but then that would require talking to them, and who wanted to do that? Instead, he screwed on a stoic expression and made sure not to walk any faster; it wouldn’t do to be thought of as running away.

_You never know who the predators are, _Ed recalled an old lesson from Izumi, _so you should never let them see your weakness._

_The impression you create becomes you_, the Gate nodded wisely in agreement. _The smell of fear is the smell of prey._

He emerged into a small garden, the green square bisected with brick paths that reflected the spring sun. Nearby, he could smell the fresh waters of the Rheos river, indicating that he was indeed on the north side of the Headquarters. There were walls, however, preventing him from seeing outside. The walls were thick and had to be at least four stories high. Atop them were soldiers marching along the periphery, on guard for any threat, and every few hundred meters were sentinel towers equipped with outward-pointing cannons and other artillery. It seemed rather over-paranoid given Central’s peaceful history.

_Amestris was not created with complacency_, the Gate pointed out.

_No, _Ed agreed, _Amestrian Fuhrers are generally not complacent folk._

Building 3 was large but very plain, sporting a massive Amestrian flag draped across its front. The stairs were central and wide, with a directory next to it on the wall. Ed found that Roy’s offices would indeed be on the fifth floor, so he began climbing, half-jogging up the stairs in order to avoid appearing late. He had met most of Roy’s command team though, which took some of the tension away from his shoulders. They were good people. Roy handpicked them himself.
Outside Roy’s doors, which looked like every other door in the long hallway, the plaque read COL. MUSTANG – Criminal Investigations – Priority 1 Division. The people who made these plaques must hate Roy very much, for he necessitated a new one every year with the rapid succession of his promotions. Ed knocked on the doors.

“Door’s open, come in,” said a familiar voice; Ed peeked in with a small wave.

“Hello,” he said. Every head in the small room rose to greet him.

“Oy, he’s here! Hey, Ed!” Kain Fuery came forward, holding the door open for him with a grin. “You came just in time!”

“In time for what? I wasn’t given a specific time, Roy just said to come as soon as Internal Affairs released me,” Ed frowned as he stepped in. He had just a moment to note the general layout of the large room—a long table and chairs to the left, underneath wide windows; shelves, cabinets, and counters to the right, looming over two paper-laden desks; a tea-and-coffee station next to the door, where the special coffee machine sat; a door straight ahead of him with Roy’s name on it—and then Jean Havoc took him by the shoulders to steer him onwards.

“The boss has guests who are here for you. In you go, we’ll say hi later,” Havoc said, patting him twice on the shoulders just as scary-lady Hawkeye rapped sharply on Roy’s office door.

“Major Elric is here, sir,” Hawkeye said, looking Ed over with a critical eye.

What? What’s going on?

“Send him in,” Roy called out from inside the room. Ed could tell the tension from his voice. Hawkeye opened the door and held it for Ed, who cautiously stepped in to—

Oh, Ed blinked in surprise. A guest.

Fuhrer Bradley stood by the window, hands clasped behind his back even as he turned to greet Ed with his usual kindly smile. Roy stood behind his desk, looking quite nonplussed. This was unusual, then. Before the door could close behind Ed, the Fuhrer’s aide, an unassuming middle-aged woman, walked out with her head dipped low. It left only the three of them inside the quiet room.

“Er, good morning, sir,” Ed greeted, unsure what else he was supposed to say. A quick glance at Roy communicated his confusion. “I’d salute but I don’t know how.”

“Quite alright, you’re new, after all. May I offer my congratulations? I was quite impressed, young Edward, and dare I say delighted to have you as one of my alchemists. Your title is well-deserved,” the Fuhrer offered Ed his hand, which Ed took with every bit of grace and care Roy had hammered into him.

“Thank you, sir, I… am sure I’ll earn your confidence.” He threw another glance at Roy, who remained carefully impassive.

“I wanted to be here to hand you your title in person, especially with how much thought I have had to put into it. Sit,” the Fuhrer motioned, taking one of the two chairs in front of Roy’s desk. Ed took the other, ensuring that his behind touched the chair only after the Fuhrer himself and Roy were already seated. Decorum, and all that. The Fuhrer then handed him a large envelope that was resting on the edge of Roy’s desk. “Here you go, then. Tell me what you think of it.”

Ed gingerly took the envelope, inside of which was a beautiful certificate in heavy vellum, embossed in gold and with the Amestrian rampant lion on top.
The State Alchemical Review Committee of Amestris hereby recognises

Mr. Edward Elric

as a State Alchemist and awards him the title

PROTEAN ALCHEMIST

with all the rights, privileges, and honours therein pertaining this title, given this fourth day of April, year 1907 in Central City.

Below, it carried three signatures: Dr. Aldheim, the chair of the State Alchemical Review Committee; Minister Lebensbrun, the civilian Prime Minister; and King Bradley, the Fuhrer himself. But what had his attention was the title.

Protean, Ed mouthed the word. The Gate crooned at it, tail lashing in pleasure. An Amestrian word derived from a Xerxian one. Poroteu, it whispered to Ed, an old name. It evolved into protogonos, which means primordial. It means firstborn. The word trembled with power through the Gate’s voice, gravid with meaning he could not yet grasp.

“Protean, from the old Xerxian myths, right?” Ed glanced at Roy. “Poroteu, the ancient sea god who brought the storms from the skies, who swept ships aground with his winds and changed the shore itself with his waves.”

Roy nodded, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table and steeple his fingers in front of his face. “Poroteu was among the oldest of the gods in ancient Xerxian mythology. By the time of their demise, they were no longer superstitious people, but they did have their mythology, like any ancient culture of that time. Poroteu was said to inhabit many forms: an old man, a young man, not a man at all but a fish, or the water itself. He was mutable and versatile, and in this versatility he was powerful. Because of this trait, he became their symbol for wisdom, for it was wisdom to recognise and accept the impermanence of all things in life. The precious life-giving characteristics of water elevated him to a position of even higher esteem: he became a symbol for alchemy—then primitive but still a method of changing one thing into another—he became a symbol for the perfection of the art itself.”

The Fuhrer reclined into his own chair, smile widening. Ed suddenly recalled how the Fuhrer had asked him, during the practical, to pull water from the air.

“A fine choice, sir,” Roy tipped his head towards the Fuhrer. “I did wonder what you would decide, but I could not have picked out a better title.”

“With technique like yours,” the Fuhrer said to Ed, “so adaptable and capable of many types of transmutation instead of a specialised few, you will achieve great things. Whatever it is that manages to hold your interest will develop into a project that will better Amestris, of that I have no doubt. In truth, I care not of the specifics of your proposals, only that you continue to grow and learn and actively contribute in whatever way you choose, Edward Elric. With all due to respect to Colonel Mustang here, I do believe you are the finest alchemist I have met in my lifetime.”

“I wholeheartedly agree, sir, no offence taken,” Roy smirked.

“W-uh, thank you, I think? Um. This—this is great,” Ed stuttered, still holding the paper with his two hands. He gingerly replaced it in the envelope, trying not to crease the edges. “The Protean
“Excellent,” the Fuhrer nodded. “I am glad to hear it. You will continue to remain with Colonel Mustang for as long as you will both have each other. When he is promoted once again, you will remain with his command, I will see to it. Colonel Mustang will have the details of your grant and clearance level. Should you have need of anything beyond what he can manage for you, come directly to me. Although with the Colonel’s considerable guile and resources, he is proving himself quite capable without my help. But I know potential when I see it, and I am not getting any younger.”

“Sir,” Roy acknowledged with a dip of his head.

The Fuhrer then rose, prompting both Roy and Ed to their feet as well. “I shall leave the two of you to it, then.”

“Sir,” Roy saluted; Ed straightened but did not try to copy him.

“Thank you, sir,” Ed looked up at the Fuhrer, who for some reason seemed to favour him outright. *Why do you like me so much? What’s in it for you?*

The Fuhrer nodded and then strode out, prompting stiff salutes from all of Roy’s command. All of them remained standing until he was well gone, and the door closed behind them.

“Fuck,” Roy eloquently swore, collapsing loudly into his chair behind Ed.

“Everything okay, boss?” Breda asked from the long table, hand braced on a pile of paperwork.

“Yeah,” Roy waved a hand, dismissing their concern. “Shit just surprised the hell out of me. Walking into my office without so much as a warning, who does he think he is?”

“The Fuhrer,” Ed drily pointed out, sitting back down. “We’re technically on *his* property.”

Roy grunted.

“Why does he like me so much?” Ed asked, choosing to voice his confusion. “What’s in it for him? I mean, he doesn’t *look* stupid; he *must* know you’re after his position. And yet he comes in here and hands us a free pass, pretty much. I don’t get it. What’s his game?”

“A free pass?” Breda echoed.

“You didn’t just get promoted again, did you,” Havoc frowned.

“The Fuhrer isn’t stupid,” Falman muttered as an aside.

“No, he’s not,” Roy sighed, “and that’s why he likes you, Ed. He can see your value. He knows you’re loyal to me and therefore that increases *my* value. He’ll support us because we’re the winning hand he can wield whenever he wants to.”

“Even if it means letting you get closer?” Ed asked.

“Friends close, enemies closer,” Roy pointed out. “He can watch me better.”

“More like he can groom you better,” Ed snorted, “I mean, you heard him. He practically declared you his heir.”

“If I don’t fuck it up. That was as much a warning as it was a compliment.”
“My head hurts,” Ed declared. “I want something sweet.”

Roy chuckled. “That machine is capable of spitting out hot water and there is hot cocoa mix in the drawer. Help yourself. We’ll discuss your papers as soon as I’m not in danger of having a heart attack.”

Ed rose to go to the machine at once, where a smiling Kain Fuery met him with a poorly wrapped gift. He blinked in surprise. “What’s this?”

“Our congratulations gift! Welcome to the crew, Ed! We can call you Ed, right?”

“That is my name, it’d be awkward if you called me something else, and you really didn’t have to, thanks!” Ed tore into the paper, revealing a red coffee mug with a large letter E on it. “This is great!”

“Everyone has one,” Fuery pointed out; there were two clean mugs on the counter next to the coffee machine, one with a letter R and another with a letter V. “Boss’ mug is the blue R; Lieutenant Colonel Hawkeye’s mug is the yellow R.”

“Got it,” Ed nodded, grinning even as he turned the mug around in his hands. Time for hot chocolate, then.

“Man, I really didn’t think you’d fucking pass,” Havoc was now kicked back in his chair. Ed turned and raised an eyebrow, since his hot water was still gurgling inside the machine—and then, spotting the coat hooks on the wall on the other side of the door, Ed went to remove his coat.

“You will watch your language, First Lieutenant,” Hawkeye warned with narrowed eyes. Havoc straightened in his chair. “Yes, ma’am, sorry, ma’am.”

“He lost money to Heymans again,” Fuery confessed to Ed. “He’s been moaning about it all morning.”

“Why do you even bother to bet against him?” Ed asked, knowing from Roy’s stories that Heymans Breda possessed a cunning mind and a wealth of luck. “You’re just asking for it.”

“But I really didn’t think you would, though!” Havoc whined. “I mean, fine, I did think you would pass, but I didn’t think you would test. I could’ve sworn Boss would never have let you.”

“It wasn’t his decision to make, it was mine,” Ed pointed out. His hot water was ready now. The hot chocolate stirred easily into it. He took the mug back towards Roy’s private office, where the man was rifling through a folder. “Roy, d’you want coffee?”

“I had some earlier, thanks. Sit, we have much to go through.”

Ed sat, and when Roy looked up at him, it wasn’t Roy his guardian and mentor. This sharp-eyed, dead-serious individual was Roy Mustang the Flame Alchemist, the scheming asshole who crawled out of the sands of the East with bloody hands and dark glory mantling his shoulders. This was Colonel Mustang, his direct superior, his commanding officer.

“Major Elric,” he began, “you have received your formal title, and with it you receive privileges and responsibilities of equal measure. From this day onwards,” Roy slid a paper across the desk to him, “you are under my direct supervision, as a part of my core command. Behind you are your comrades, with whom you are expected to work in whatever capacity you are required, whenever I ask it of you. You are, of course, free to make suggestions and question the perimeters of any task I set you—this is part of your privilege as a State Alchemist. However, you are to do so with due respect to
myself and to your comrades. If you agree to your assignment to my command, sign at the bottom and print your name underneath.”

Ed cleared his throat and pulled out his favourite pen, signing carefully at the bottom. “Like I’d want anyone else as my CO. The only reason I’m signing this is because it’s you, you know.”

Roy tilted his head with a dark smile. “Good to know. Next,” he took the paper from Ed and replaced it with another one, “this is your research contract, with itemised terms and stipulations. The contract has a term of two years from today. Your renewal is contingent upon approval from the State Alchemical Review Committee; they will take a vote when it comes time. You are required to provide a formal research proposal to the Committee in three months, written and submitted for review no later than July 31st. If the Committee approves your proposal, you are to commence your project in whatever manner you see fit, with periodic updates expected every six months—these need not be written and can be practical demonstrations, unless you would like to write them. If you complete your project within two years, you are expected to produce a formal research paper to be peer-reviewed by the Committee, archived through the First Library for State circulation, and then eventually published in a scientific journal—Ars Alchemica, the Amestrian Journal of Medicine, and the like.

“You can transition to a combat contract should you prefer; it will have to be a written request submitted to the Fuhrer himself and approved by the State Alchemical Review Committee. Likely they will ask for an explanation in person. At that point, there is no guarantee that you will remain with me.”

“Not gonna happen,” Ed shook his head.

“Still I have to tell you,” Roy shrugged. “Because you are a researcher, this contract precludes you from having to be deployed on combat missions, reporting to me daily in this office as a part of a working team, or even so much as wearing uniform. This contract gives you a lot of freedom; that is the exchange for the level of academic expectation they have for you. However, if we are to be smart about this, you should still report to me at least once a week, show your face in this office and help with some of the cases we are responsible for. That excuses you from prying eyes who will wonder why you are taking so long to produce research.”

Ed nodded. Izumi had told him the same. He signed the paper on the bottom.

Roy took it and handed him a third sheet. “This has further details on your compensation. As a ranked officer, a Major, you will begin receiving 7,000 marks every month. You are entitled to a total of one month’s paid leave per year, during which you are not expected to report to command and will not receive directives from your superior officers. All leave, paid or otherwise, must be approved by your direct superior and then routed through Internal Affairs. Any leave beyond your allotted paid month will have to be cleared and remain unpaid. Since you are a researcher, you have much leeway with this; you don’t need to report to me daily and can perform research at home even when you are feeling ill or under the weather. For the most part, you have full command of your time.

“When you retire, which will not be for a long time, you will receive a monthly stipend of 3500 marks per month as a retirement benefit. You will also retain access to the Libraries, but you will no longer have access to Laboratories or military facilities unless otherwise invited. You will retain your membership within the State Alchemical Review Committee as well as your voting rights for the appointment of new State Alchemists annually.”

“Ooh, I can be there next year and vote ‘no’ on all the cannon fodder!”
“Indeed; you can sit with me and we can be the red card committee,” Roy smirked, flipping to the next page. “Next are your medical requirements and compensation. Every soldier is required to have an annual physical during which they evaluate your level of fitness and overall state of health. Based on these results, they will generate a report that will have recommendations on things you need to address—diet and exercise, for example. Sometimes they will mandate certain things; I am required to attend sessions with a psychiatrist due to my, ah, involvement in Ishbal, as they say. These are judgments made on a case to case basis. As a researcher, their expectations of you are not as high, but they prefer that you stay in good health so that you are able to perform your duties without issue.

“All of your medical care is free from now until your death, provided you acquire said medical services through the State Hospital. They provide automail maintenance and repair as well, although it is up to you if you would like to retain your mechanic—most people prefer to do so. You would have to pay out of your own pocket in that case.”

“Yeah, I’d rather stick with Granny and Winry,” Ed scratched his cheek, wincing at the thought of Winry’s wrench. “Although maybe I won’t see them until later this year. When they’ll be less, uh, painful.”

“A wise decision,” Roy nodded, having been exposed to Granny Pinako’s ire. “Any questions so far?”

“Nope. What’s next?” Ed twirled his pen in his automail hand, now managing enough dexterity not to drop or fling it.

Roy turned to the next page. “This contains the details of your research grant, as approved by the State Alchemical Review Committee. It will take a week before you are able to access the money, but the paperwork is already in motion and the bank account details are here. You are hereby granted 60,000 marks—”

“Holy shit.”

“For the first six months, renewal or an increase contingent upon the mid-year reassessment you will have to undergo with the Committee. These funds are supposed to be used only for the purposes of your research, but the details are per your discretion: you may hire research assistants and secretaries, you may purchase supplies and equipment, or you may use it to rent property to build a lab of your own. If the Committee signs off on your progress report at six months, then you get another 60,000 marks. This amount may increase depending on the results you are able to produce, but they rarely increase grant funds more than once a year. You’d have to be very convincing.”

Ed’s eyes were as large as saucers. “Um, I can’t think of why I’d need more than 120,000 marks every year.”

“You never know,” Roy shrugged, flipping the paper over once Ed’s signature was secured. “And it’s nice not to have to spend your own money on research, even though I know you’d be willing.”

“I don’t even know what I’ll do with all this money!”

“Buy your own books and clothes? Save up for a rainy-day fund? Maybe send funds to your brother.”

Ed shook his head with a frown. “Al would never accept it, no.” And Izumi would be pissed.

A few more signatures regarding more morbid considerations (hazard pay, accidental death reimbursements, setting up a living will) and they were concluding the papers, which were then kept
inside a blue folder.

“Will I get copies of those?”

Roy gave him an approving look. “Riza will make copies for you,” he said, handing the folder to his lieutenant.

“Excellent. So, what’s next?”

Kicking back in his leather-padded chair, Roy spread his arms. “Your time is yours, Major Elric. You could stay here and learn how the unit functions. You could take a tour of the grounds. Or,” and at this, Roy got a gleam in his eye, “you could spend the rest of the day at the Library.”

The Library!!

Ed stood at once, hot chocolate all forgotten. “See you later, then,” he bid, speed-walking across the office to the background of Roy’s chuckling.

“Try not to get buried under the books,” Roy called after him, “I’ll come find you after five.”

At long last, Ed gleefully thought as he fled the drab building, Amestris’ arcanum, the First Library!

The First Library of Amestris was perhaps the most comprehensive compendium of human knowledge on the Continent. It certainly held the largest collection of alchemical knowledge in the world. Even the Empire of Xing, where practitioners of a similar science known as alkahestry purportedly guarded several temples full of ancient scrolls, did not have anything approaching the breadth of knowledge that the First Library held within its walls. Why else would they send their scholars across the desert otherwise? The Ren clan were primarily businessmen and traders, of course, but they were also useful ambassadors for the Xingese Emperor, hosting a rotating cast of scholars and clerics from their homeland at any given time.

Ed strode through the front doors, suppressing a shiver of delight that crawled down the length of his spine. He was here, he was finally here! Eyes set only on the white wooden doors guarding the inner sanctum, he wound through the groups of visitors who were gawping at the architecture. He stopped at the doors in front of a uniformed cadet to show his watch.

“Major Elric,” he declared, feeling an odd mixture of pride and embarrassment, “I’d like to go inside, please.”

The female cadet blinked down at him several times before responding. “E-Er, y-es, of course, sir, erm, please sign in at the desk,” she motioned towards the tables set on either side of the entrance.

The same sort of reaction there when Ed presented his watch and asked for the log. He signed his name, the date, the time, and his license number (engraved, of course, into the face of his watch). How would they know, though, the difference between a real and a counterfeit watch? Perhaps there was a unique mechanism or trademark hidden inside... something to ask Roy later.

“How long am I allowed to stay?” Ed asked the receptionist, who accepted his signature and countersigned the log after examining his watch.
“As a State Alchemist, sir, you are allowed free and complete access to the entire Library at will, sir. There are no hour limitations; you may even stay overnight. Please be advised, however, that you are not allowed to remove any items from the premises at any given time, sir, except with express permission from the Fuhrer and the State Alchemical Review Committee.”

“Right,” Ed took back his watch, tucking it into his right pocket. “Anything else?”

The receptionist adjusted his glasses and peered down at him with intense eyes. “...a-are you really only twelve?”

Ed rolled his eyes so hard they hurt. “Yes, I’m only twelve. If that’s all, I’ll be going, thank you.” People, he thought, are so tedious.

No matter, he was here for the books. The cadets dutifully opened the inner doors for him, earning a hush from the unlicensed onlookers otherwise wandering the limits of the antechamber. He must have made quite a picture with his red coat bright against the white door. Lucky suckers, Ed thought to himself, earning a glimpse inside without having to be licensed. Likely it was the farthest any of them would ever see into the First Library in their lifetime.

The enormous, elaborate staircase met him first. (1) They curved on either side of the sizable hall, banisters made of dark carved wood and steps clothed with thick red carpet. The walls were white and crowded with stories carved into the wood and gilded with gold. Ahead of him, at the top of the stairs, stood the statue of a nameless alchemist carrying upon his shoulders the weight of a large alchemical globe. The globe rotated with electricity like the one outside in the middle of Central Plaza, even as it was confidently borne by the alchemist who stood with legs spread apart in a power stance. The message was loud and clear, of course. With knowledge came the burden of responsibility, and alchemists, more than anyone else, carried the most of both.

Directly below it, if Ed chose not to ascend the grand staircase, a corridor continued down what seemed like the length of the whole library, with hallways branching out every so often on either side. The hall was too interior for any source of natural sunlight, so everything was lit with lamps and sconces, lending the place a meditative, cavernous glow.

If this is a cave, then I never want to see the light, (2) Ed crooned, bearing right to slowly ascend the stairs with a hand softly touching the elaborate banisters. He had read about this in that book called Origins, written long ago by one of the very few civilians who were allowed entry into the First Library for the sole purpose of writing about its history. The decorated walls held the stories of Amestris’ founding, all painstakingly hand-carved through the vision and hard work of a genius woodworker hundreds of years ago. Amestris must have had plenty of money indeed to be able to afford such luxuries that served no other purpose beyond storytelling and aesthetic.

Behind the alchemist’s statue was an archway that opened into a long hall like the one downstairs. There were more stairs here on either side, landing on each level in front of an archway before continuing upwards for eight floors. It was much, much larger than it looked from the outside.

What caught his attention, however, was the archway on the opposite end, above the doors through which he entered. From here, he could see panels of brightly coloured glass glimmering with the sunlight from outside. He wandered towards it as if drawn by siren song, emerging into a bright room with high carved ceilings, massive landscape artwork, and a truly enormous stained-glass window looking out over Central Plaza and Headquarters.

Amplificus Majora! Ed gasped in wonder, eyes roving across the intersecting lines of the array. The scripts were indeed live, now that Ed could observe them in closer focus. He walked to stand before the glass, hand hovering over the tiny scripts marching along the inner limits of the circle.
“Careful,” someone said from behind him, “the verdict is still out on whether those are live or not.”

*They’re live alright,* Ed wanted to say, but he didn’t know who this person was. Turning around, he found a sandy-haired man leaning against the back of one of the many chairs in the Majora study, a thick book in held his hand.

“You must be the city’s new celebrity alchemist,” the man said, sharp eyes looking him over once and then twice. “Edward Elric, I presume.”

Ed immediately did not like him. “Correct,” he said, unwilling to disclose more than that.

Just then, a small group of young alchemists entered, among them the supremacist girl from yesterday who made blades from sheets of paper. Ed’s frown grew.

“Lucius!” one of the newly arrived young men exclaimed, “You found him! Hello,” the young man turned to Ed, eyes sparkling with excitement, “Robert Kinnear, Carbon Alchemist, great to meet you at last! I saw your exam yesterday, I was very impressed!”

Offered a hand to shake, propriety obliged Ed to reciprocate. He shook hands with Robert Kinnear (of whom he has never heard before) and said, “Edward Elric, thanks, nice to meet you too.”

“Oh, these are a few of our colleagues—Milton Burns here,” a young man with reddish blond hair, “my good friend David Hemmler,” another blond man, this time a pale yellow blond, “Mathias Lindquist, who is a fellow researcher,” the oldest of the group nodded at him, “and Analisa Tarasova, you must remember each other from yesterday.”

*I must nothing,* Ed mutinously muttered to himself, but outwardly kept his expression schooled neutral. Likewise, she did not offer her hand, only nodded, no doubt recalling his not-so-subtle barb against her bigoted philosophy.

Instead of trying to be nice to her, Ed turned towards the man who first spoke to him, still standing there and observing the situation with an air of amused superiority. “And you are?”

The man himself did not respond, instead allowing overly excited Kinnear to step in and introduce him. “Oh, I thought you’d already introduced yourselves to each other! That is Lucius Dornseifer, also a researcher. A scriptsmith! I’m sure you know what that is.”

*The limits of condescension know no bounds,* Ed thought. Even this Carbon Alchemist, who seemed so impressed with his performance yesterday, *still* saw him as a child.

“I was hoping you’d come here after you were done at the Headquarters,” Kinnear brightly continued, “I was betting on it. I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist!”

“I mean, who can?” Milton Burns shrugged.

“Robert has been singing your praises since yesterday,” Mathias Lindquist said with some chagrin, “I’m sorry to say I wasn’t able to attend due to a prior engagement.”

“No need to apologize,” Ed shrugged back. *What complacency, skipping out on the perfect chance to scope out your competition due to ‘a prior engagement.’* If Ed had any choice about the matter, he would be present at every single practical exam. No doubt Roy was.

“The papers say Mustang is your CO,” Kinnear prompted.

“Yeah, he was also my legal guardian, so it makes sense,” Ed said.
“Who would have thought,” Lucius Dornseifer chuckled, although mostly to himself.

“Mustang, though,” Burns turned to Kinnear, who raised both eyebrows. “Must be intense. I mean, he’s not exactly the most kid-friendly CO you can have.”

“None of the COs are supposed to be kid-friendly,” Kinnear reasoned.

“Mustang himself was very young when he joined up, he must know what it’s like,” Lindquist pointed out. The man was old enough to have been enlisted then at the beginning of the war. “I hope he treats you well,” the man said to Ed.

Ed gave a cold smile. “Quite well, thanks. We’re good friends.”

“Friends,” Dornseifer echoed.

“What’s your problem?” Ed asked then, unflinching. “You’ve been very judgy since you walked in here, and I haven’t even met you before today. Do you have a problem with Roy?”

Called out in such a direct fashion, Lucius Dornseifer straightened to his full height, lip curling in what could be anger. He opened his mouth, no doubt to spew some venom, but before he could get a word in edgewise, another voice interrupted from the entryway.

“I wouldn’t pick on him if I were you, Lucius, he has sharp teeth,” and hey, Ed knew that voice! Brightening, he stepped around a chair to grin at his friend. “Kanon!”

“Heya, Ed! I see you’ve met a few of the peers,” Kanon came up to him and slung an arm around his shoulder with a wide grin. “Congratulations, you little asshole, Cyril is gonna shit a brick when he finds out you’ve been holding out on him.”

“Technically, I’ve been holding out on everyone, on Roy’s instructions,” Ed slyly smiled. “So, if you wanna blame anyone, blame him. What are you doing here?”

“Needed to look up a few things, but I also figured you’d come here straight away,” Kanon looked up at the others, who were still gathered nearby but with much less ease about their shoulders. Ed had to grin; Kanon obviously put them on their toes. “Long time no see, Lindquist! How’s the research going in West City?”

“Satisfactory, I suppose,” Lindquist said. “I read your last publication, it was very thought-provoking.”

“Boring old scriptsmith like myself, it’s the least I can do to provoke some thoughts in you,” Kanon teased.

“Scriptsmithing is not boring!” Ed frowned, twisting under Kanon’s arm to give him a short glare. “It’s one of the hardest things in alchemy! Have some respect for yourself.”

Kanon laughed. “Did you hear that, Lucius? Someone who appreciates our dusty old field!”

“Fool for those who don’t,” Lucius sniffed, arms crossed, and shoulders hunched. Ed then realized that Lucius and Kanon must be rivals, for if they practiced within the same narrow field, then they would have no choice but to compete. Kanon, of course, with his considerable intellect, resources, and connections, must have been winning.

“Have you gone elsewhere?” Kanon asked Ed, to which Ed said no. “You must see the Rare
Manuscripts Hall. Come on, I’ll give you a tour. Later, guys—and lady!”

Without further excuses, Kanon dragged him away from the Majora study; a misnomer, Ed realized, because one could never study there when everyone else tended to come and go. There would be too many distractions, too many prying eyes.

**Like the Lucius boy,** the Gate pointed out, **who must always sit somewhere nearby waiting for people to spy on.**

*He must have wanted something from me,* Ed thought, because why approach otherwise? A part of him regretted being dragged away so soon, instead curious about what else he could discover from these alchemists who seemed to be so curious about him. But it was only a small part. By large, he was relieved to be dragged away.

“You never want to go to Majora unless it’s very early in the morning and no one else is here,” Kanon said. “Otherwise, you tend to get ambushed. You gotta learn the safe places. Think of this as one massive nerdy fraternity house. That sort of mindset will help you.”

“I have no clue what that means.” Kanon paused, and then resumed walking, “Right, twelve years old. Okay. It’s like—a clubhouse. A clubhouse where people of like interests and a singular association—ehem, State Alchemists—hang out… except everyone is in some way or another competing with everyone else even if they are billed on the same research study. Tensions can run quite deep, and that’s not to mention the petty manoeuvrings some of them try. A lot of times it becomes about money. Best to avoid it all and stick to your own circles. That’s why I spend my time with the Boys instead of with our so-called peers.”

Ed couldn’t fault him there.

“This is what I call the scripts section, although it’s not officially named as such. I always sit around here somewhere.” They had gone down the long corridor and bore left into a smaller hall with rows of shelves around them. Tall pointed windows let in some sunlight. There were also tables and chairs in the middle but no one else around. “You’ll develop your own mindmap of the Library as you explore it, but all the books that have something to say about scriptsmithing tends to sit hereabouts.”

Ed was looking forward to developing his own mindmap, yes, he was indeed.

“This is the human biosciences hall,” Kanon pointed out a hall with blue drapings as they passed it, “and across the corridor is the flora and fauna hall. Above us, the entire fourth floor is all about physics and chemistry—anything and everything you can think of.”

On and on they went, from hall to hall until Ed was properly convinced he had died and gone to heaven. Nothing should be so wonderful. He couldn’t wait to tell Al all about this! *He must get licensed,* Ed thought, *this is totally worth it.*

“The medical literature collection in the Firat Academy of Medicine is larger, but there are a few rare texts here that they don’t have over there. Jason—my sister’s husband—managed to get provisionary access here for a few months when he was researching a new surgical technique and needed references. That required some serious strings-pulling, though.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Ed snorted. The Firats were plenty capable of pulling strings for their eldest son.

They stood in a long hall filled with more books and long tables in the middle, low lamps available
for work and an alchemical globe the size of a human head displayed in the middle. What beautiful, sacred spaces this place held. Ed admired it all openly and with his whole heart, walking along the shelves with his flesh hand hovering over ancient pages. While he did this, Kanon admired him.

“Quite a display yesterday, with your practical,” Kanon stood with a hip against one of the sturdy tables. “Roy didn’t seem surprised, though, so he knows what you’re capable of.” Ah. Kanon must have had access to the exams somehow, likely through the Firats. Perhaps he and Jacob both came to watch, although he didn’t notice them in the darkness of the gallery.

“Of course he knows, it’s Roy,” Ed pulled a book from a shelf and rifled through its pages. He could do this now. He had the right to all this knowledge.

“All the more reason I’m surprised he’s allowing you to be in the military.” Ed looked up at Kanon then, who met him eye to eye. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I know Roy’s got ambition in his bones, but I expected more care from him. Letting someone like you into the hands of the military isn’t exactly something I expected he would do.”

“And once again I reiterate,” Ed said slowly, “it was not his decision, it was mine.”

“Then perhaps you don’t understand what you’re capable of.”

Kanon knew something, that was for sure. For a moment, the two of them stood there in mutual silence, Ed holding a book and Kanon leaning against a table. A scriptsmith, a social figure, a genius in his own right: Ed should not underestimate this person, even though they were tentatively friends. After all, in the great game, everyone has a play.

Ed replaced the book in its spot on the shelf. “Trust me when I say I know exactly what I’m capable of, Kanon, although I thank you for your concern.”

Kanon huffed, looking down to his toes and readjusting his stance. “Roy’s trained you, alright. Very well, then. You should know that your brand of alchemy has put you under a spotlight. There are those in certain circles who… hmm, suspect that you have done something… forbidden… in order to be able to transmute without a circle. I only tell you this because you’re my friend.”

Ed walked back to where Kanon still stood, leaning against the table himself and crossing his arms. “Is that why you didn’t accept a position in the military? I know Jacob doesn’t have to, but you could have.”

Kanon’s smile fell. “The military ruined my brother. They ask for too much, and under their command, my alchemy would be devastating. I don’t know how Roy lives with it, and frankly speaking I admire him for functioning as well as he does through all of it, but if it were me, I would break. Know thyself, isn’t that what they tell us when we begin? I know myself. I won’t survive.”

“Fair enough,” Ed nodded. “I appreciate the concern, really. Thanks for the warning. But I know myself,” he responded with a conviction that the Gate echoed, “and whatever they think to throw at me, I’ve already survived worse.”

*This has been a very odd conversation,* Ed reflected, walking past Kanon to head back towards the stairs. He still wanted to see the Rare Manuscripts Hall and the Eise Orrery on the topmost floor. But as he walked past his friend, Kanon’s hand shot out and gripped his flesh arm in a vice.

“Don’t ever set foot in Lab 5,” Kanon ducked down to whisper into his ear, “and whatever you do, do not show an interest in bioalchemy. They have forced alchemists to perform human transmutation, and if they so much as think you can do it, they won’t care that you’re only twelve. They will make
you, and there’s nothing Roy can do to stop them.”

What?

At that moment, another alchemist walked into the hall, giving them a passing look and then ignoring
them entirely for a bookshelf. Kanon clapped him on the shoulder.

“Come along, then! Rare Manuscripts Hall is this way.”

Ed tagged after Kanon, blinking at the thoughts careening against the insides of his skull. Human
transmutation? Is that why they’re so obsessed with asking people about it during the exams? But
why though? What military benefit could you possibly get? That makes no sense.

The Gate, silent through the entire conversation, simply turned over in his head and smiled.

“He’s not wrong,” Roy handed him the next dish to dry, “and yes, I’ve heard those rumours before.
Lab 5 is best avoided, I agree with that. Not entirely sure what’s happening in there, not entirely sure
I want to know. But let’s put it this way: it doesn’t change my plans.”

“That’s fair,” Ed carefully parked the next plate atop the pile. “I was just thrown by that whole
conversation. If I didn’t know better, I’d have panicked that he knew something about—Mum.”

“There’s a reason why we’re lying about what happened to you,” Roy pointed out.

“I know, I know, it just doesn’t make sense, though, because, I mean,” Ed put the towel aside, neatly
folded, and turned to ask, “what would the military gain from a successful human transmutation? It’s
not something everyone can just do, and it’s not something you can easily mass-replicate. That’s
assuming they’re successful. If they’ve even tried, they must know that it comes with a price.”

Roy turned off the tap and dried his hands. “People do talk about how Lab 5 sits next to Central
Prison.”

Ed made a disgusted noise, hugging himself and hunching forward. “I knew what I was signing up
for but what the fuck.”

“Language, young man.”

Ed gave him a flat look.

Sighing, Roy threw his arms wide. “What can I say? This is why I do what I do. If it’s going to
change, it must happen from the inside out. The only other alternative is the whole structure’s
complete destruction, and that comes hand in hand with the destruction of everything we know to be
Amestris. Can’t go that route, too many casualties and it’s damn near impossible besides.”

“So we do it the hard way.”

“Yep.”

Roy moved around him to prepare them their nightly hot beverage, cocoa for Ed and tea for himself.
Ed watched him quietly, thinking back on everything Kanon said in the Library that afternoon. No
matter how many times he ran over the whole conversation, it was more than passing strange.
“His brother’s defection must have gotten to him, I guess.”

“Kanon? Likely. The three of them were very close from what Jason and Julia have told me. And Karl Islenhov was not well after the war. None of us were. It must have been hard for Kanon, seeing his brother like that. I didn’t know him very well yet at the time. I got to know him after Karl had already left.” Roy handed him the steaming cocoa with a smile and added, “Kanon must also really like you.”

“It’s my age again,” Ed sighed, stirring the cocoa with a frown.

“It’s more than that. Kanon rarely does such risky moves, it’s not like him,” Roy took a hand to the back of his neck and ushered him towards the back stairs. “He usually doesn’t like people knowing how much he knows. But he told you all that anyway, knowing that you would surely talk to me about it. I think we have an ally, Ed.”

“I thought he was your ally already.”

“He was a potential, but a neutral. I was hopeful, though. He’s well attached, smart, resourceful, and moreover Anya’s partner. I would hate for us to be on opposite sides.”

Ed hummed in assent, disliking the thought of having to consider Kanon an enemy. This business of putting everyone on sides was exhausting. Did Roy think like this all the time?

**He must**, the Gate quietly murmured. **How else would he survive?**

How indeed.

*Wait a second.*

“Wait a second,” Ed turned and caught Roy’s arm before the man could retire to his room. “Kanon’s not State-licensed. You said he refused his offer. How does he have access to First Library?”

Roy chuckled, “That’s Kanon for you, ever resourceful. He’s the only person I know who has managed to argue the Committee into allowing him limited access—he can only use the First Library and does not have access to laboratories or satellite cities’ resources—on account of his stellar test scores and familial connections. I believe the Firats wined and dined the Fuhrer for that perk. The Fuhrer’s wife is very good friends with Anne Firat—the matriarch—and Karenina, Kanon’s elder sister, is the paediatrician to the Fuhrer’s son.”

“I should be so appalled,” Ed said in admiration.

“It’s politics,” Roy shrugged. “Get some sleep, Ed, you’ll need it. We’ve got a full day tomorrow.”

“Right... wait, what’s happening tomorrow?”

Roy turned and smiled at him, the kind of smile that warned of unpleasant things to come. “Socialisation.”

“What?!?”

In the morning, Ed had time to consider the vellum certificate declaring his new title. *Protean*
Alchemist, he mouthed soundlessly. It still felt unreal. He held it up to the wall, or atop the desk in his room, but putting it somewhere visible felt pretentious somehow. In the end, he slipped it back into its envelope and tucked it into his battered suitcase, next to his birth certificate, under the bed.

The watch did stay with him though, and he thought he could get used to its weight. It sat on his nightstand while he slept, for he was afraid of losing it in the sheets or under the mattress. It would otherwise make a home in his pocket, the silver chain on subtle display just as Roy wore his.

While combing his hair back, he considered the notebooks he would bring and how much he could fit into his satchel without looking like he stole half the Library. Such serious matters required lengthy, sincere consideration. He was still debating the merit of taking an extra notebook with him when Roy knocked on his door for breakfast.

“You look like you’ve got heavy things on your mind,” Roy noted with a smile. He did not need prompting to come into the room and braid Ed’s hair for him.

“Should I take three notebooks or just two? What if I run out of paper? Will they let me make notes and take it out of the Library? Do they inspect my bags when I step out?”

Roy’s laughter echoed brightly within the room. “The Library can provide you notebooks and plenty of paper. Yes, they will allow you to take notes out. Yes, they will inspect your bags, but that’s just standard procedure for everyone who goes in or out. You also assume to much of them, Ed; they won’t understand your notes even if they looked closely. Most of the cadets and librarians are laypeople, not alchemists. At best, they are students, but the military is careful about hiring those.”

Ed made a noise of assent, shrugging into his vest. The buttons got easier to do up everyday; his automail dexterity must be improving.

They ate breakfast together over a quick game of chess and then left the house in Havoc’s company. As they drove down East 3rd, Ed leaned into Roy and asked, “So how do they know if it’s a fake watch? It’s not that special, really.” He pulled his silver watch out to illustrate his point.

“The titanium alloy it’s made with isn’t easy to come by, but I suppose the truly resourceful would find a way,” Roy shrugged, “in which case military records are the way to verify someone. Your number is unique and corresponds only to you. All the records nationwide will have already been updated by now. There aren’t that many State Alchemists—several hundred of us, and we get scarcer by the day—so it’s not that hard to keep track.”

Ed hummed, unconvinced. It seemed too simple.

Sometimes the simplest answers are the best ones, the Gate quipped, ever glib. It looked notably fluffy today, like a cat that spent the better part of a sunny afternoon laying out and grooming itself. Ed had to wonder if it had anything to do with the chaotic, confusing dreams he only vaguely recalled from last night.

They pulled up in front of the Library. Still blissfully empty; too early for visitors yet.

“Pick you up at noon, don’t be late. We have a standing appointment and we don’t want to keep our guests waiting.”

Sighing, Ed debarked the car. “I don’t see why I have to socialise. M’socialised enough...”

“Look sharp, Major. You’re a State Alchemist now, it comes with responsibilities attached.”

“Didn’t see socialisation on the contract!”
He shouldn’t complain, really—it wasn’t another ball or party—but he was quickly learning to resent anything that curtailed his time inside the Library. Could you blame him?

No, Ed sighed with happiness as he logged himself in, no, you really couldn’t.

What did he want to learn today? He stood in the entrance hall as the doors shut behind him, sealing him and the books in a tomblike silence. Most people would be unsettled; Ed was excited.


And so he marched up the stairs with determination, heading towards the section that held everything to do with chemistry and physics. He had promised himself that he would allow one day out of the week for leisurely topics and other distractions, and he needed to uphold that promise. The rest of his four days were to be spent on his research and whatever other project Roy might assign him. Otherwise he would get nothing done.

I have three months to write up a proposal, Ed kept in mind, so I must use my time wisely. Roy had promised to help him with the writing, but Ed had to at least get a grasp on the existing knowledge before they could start. Besides which, Roy and his crew had their own work to deal with, these Priority 1 cases which were giving Roy and Maes both a significant challenge. Cold cases go cold for a reason, Maes had grimly explained, because the Amestrian military was not known to fail very often.

At this early hour, the Library looked truly deserted save for a few librarians who had little to do but tidy the workspaces. The Majora study looked warm and inviting. Perhaps Ed would go back to sit there after finding some worthy books. The chemistry section was on the fourth floor, and it wasn’t hard to find the shelves dedicated to advanced chemistry, so he began browsing there, learning how the shelves were organized within their distinct subcategories.

Journals seemed to have their own shelves in each hall, organized by publish date and then author. Thusly individual manuscripts were easily set apart from the proper books. Ed found Mahler and Montague’s works there, the originals with full annotations, waiting in the dark for the next mind to converse with them. Dusting their surfaces with a gentle hand, Ed could tell it had been a while.

Almost fifty years ago, Robert Mahler was the one to prove that the atom was the smallest unit of matter. Up until his definitive discovery, alchemists were performing transmutations without fully understanding what they were doing; it was common practice to trial an array and observe its effects, working backwards by deciphering scripts and array structures to understand how and why nature behaved the way it did. Molecules were grouped haphazardly with atoms, every single thing simply called a ‘substance’ or ‘material’ without heed to their structure.

Atom from atomos, Ed knew, in the old language meaning ‘indivisible.’ Little did he know.

Mahler was young when he made this discovery, a field pioneer and still only in his twenties. Within ten years, however, another maverick alchemist would upend his theory with a new one, Abel Montague coming out with proof that there existed detectible particles smaller than the purportedly indivisible atom. Instead of shunning the newcomer, Mahler quickly conscripted Montague and together they worked to build the atomic theory Ed grew up being taught. Atoms were still formally considered the smallest unit of matter because what minuscule particles existing within them were too tiny to be consistently observed with current technology; however, each atom was different from its neighbour, some larger while others smaller still, and it was Montague’s theory that what made them different from each other was the precise contents they held within them. These subatomic particles,
too small to be observed, made the critical difference.

Over time, the partners built a list of the different types of atoms they observed, which would later be published in Ars Alchemica as the Table of Elements (3), eleven years after the beginning of their partnership. That was the volume Ed now held in his hands, ground-breaking work that changed everything they understood about alchemy. The pair would go on to publish several updated versions of the table, adding more elements as they discovered them, for they were smart enough to leave gaps in the table in order to afford for modifications.

Their partnership came to an abrupt, unexpected end in the winter of 1893, mere two years before Ed’s own birth, when Robert Mahler was shot and killed in Central by an unknown assailant. Montague attempted to continue the work alone, but perhaps due to overwork he soon succumbed to the plague of deadly influenza that swept across most of the Continent the year after. Both died with no issue, the First Library inheriting their manuscripts while the Armstrong family took over whatever other material property they left behind.

What a shame, Ed thought, because they were on to something here.

Around Mahler and Montague’s discoveries, other researchers flourished. As the partners redefined the foundations of the science, other alchemists of various specialties brought a veritable explosion of practical application. Suddenly they could predict reactions they had never tried well before an attempt; if they calculated the equations correctly, they could tell exactly how much base materials were required in order to produce a set amount of any desired substance. Instead of being about memorizing and repeating a set of known reactions, alchemy became about creating new ones.

They now understood that each atom differed from the other based on how many electrons it carried inside. Hydrogen had one, helium had two, lithium had three, and so forth. The more electrons it had, the heavier the atom became. Each molecule was a defined combination of several atoms bound through either the full sharing or exchange of their “spare” electrons. Some atoms liked each other better than others did; they bound to each other more readily, hydrogen and oxygen for example, one of the strongest bonds known to occur in nature.

It was the work of some alchemists to attempt to force otherwise unbound atoms together into new combinations. They made metal alloys stronger than either predecessor, or new solutions with special properties that made them better solvents or conductors of electricity. Nash Tringham’s work was along the same lines, although far more ambitious and morally reprehensible than so far anything else Ed has had the… privilege of reading.

Lapis philosophorum, or the Philosopher’s Stone.

Well known to drive men mad, the Gate murmured, sorting through the chaotic tumble of what must be the breadth of Ed’s knowledge. A worthy pursuit.

Is it? Ed asked, looking up from the journal he was ploughing through. Can it even be done?

Nash Tringham, the Gate offered him his own memory of reading the manuscript at Mr. Tucker’s house.

We both know Nash Tringham only managed a shadow of the real thing. The Gate hummed, turning over as a dark, fluffy mass behind Ed’s right ear. You’re telling me he was on to something?

Amplifier, the Gate pointed out. Imperfect, unstable, but it worked.

Somewhat. Not every batch was stable.
Because not every woman was the same, smiled the Gate, and Ed was struck with a sudden bout of nausea. The solution should have been adjusted according to its host, don’t you see? (4)

Oh, Ed saw, alright. Tringham’s questions had not been fully balanced. If it had been him—except no, he could never, not even close, not on pregnant women, pregnant like Gracia—

Bursting out of his seat, Ed paced up and down the length of the hall, taking a moment to control his breathing. The only reason he hadn’t hurled when he read that manuscript was because of little Nina sleeping soundly halfway in his lap. To think that such a thing was successful—

But the work is incomplete. And the equations, they weren’t balanced as they should have been. He seemed like he knew what he was about, Nash Tringham; surely he would have been able to see—oh, but perhaps the man was trying to mislead the military. Perhaps he intentionally left his work incomplete, in order to prevent other people from—

Ah, but does he not have a son? said the Gate. Isn’t his son supposed to be your contemporary?

Ed grimaced. If the son knows what’s good for him, he won’t continue his father’s research.

But what are the chances? the Gate smiled. If the reward is the Stone, then he will not be alone. Even if he doesn’t pick up where his father left off, others will continue the work.

What is the Philosopher’s Stone anyway? The Gate presented Ed with knowledge he already had, but Ed waved all that away. I know what it’s supposed to be, but what is it?

The Great Work of Alchemy, the Gate murmured, prima materia, materia ultima.

“That’s real helpful, thanks,” Ed drily commented. The great work of alchemy, though…

Distracted, Ed wandered towards the dustier end of the hall, where books which indeed seemed older than Amestris itself sat in wait. Some of these books were considered irrelevant nowadays, their half-formed and immature theories long since disproved and supplanted. But somewhere, surely, there would be a mention of the Xerxian theory of matter. Somewhere, somehow…

His fingers, which had been wandering over ancient spines, stopped over a book that was bound in what felt like heavily tooled calfskin. Gently, carefully, he eased it off the shelf, blowing on its surface to displace the light sheen of dust. Why this book? He didn’t know, but something about it—Ed gasped.

There, on the front page, was a tree, the upside-down tree, the one that he twice saw engraved on the Gate.

Quickly he closed the book again, reading the title, which was degraded from age and the wear of its handling. Mysterium Magnum, the title read. The Great Mystery. How pretentious. It was written some three hundred years ago by a Jacob Bohme, and it seemed, at least from the first few pages, to speculate on the origins of elements, discussing different base materials and their properties, as well as their observed behaviours. Surprisingly insightful, although flawed information. Ed flipped through the contents with some speed, stopping only when he found a chapter dedicated to the Stone.

…in ancient alchemy, there exists such a legend known as ‘prima materia’ or the ‘prime matter’, a mysterious chaotic source material containing opposites incompatible and in the most violent of conflicts, and when it is guided towards a redeemed state of harmony, it becomes ‘lapis
philosophorum,’ the philosopher’s stone… First, it must be brought together, and then it must be putrefied. What has been putrefied must then be broken down, and then the divided must be purified. Unite what is purified and then harden it; in this way one can be made from man and woman. (5)

“What in the world…?” It sounded like the blathering of a madman. There was little sense to be found within.

Ed shook his head, closing the book and replacing it on the shelf. He returned to the table, eyes one last time glancing over to that old, forgotten section of the hall, before looking to Montague’s spiky handwriting once more.

He was roundabouts where Montague was illustrating how each resulting molecule can show different characteristics from its preceding atoms, much like how each child showed unique traits separate from the parents. The manifestation of these traits depended on how the combination was achieved, the strength of the molecular bonds, the type of bond observed, and the environment around the new resulting material.

Which is why Nash Tringham was not successful, Ed noted, because he did not take into consideration the ‘environment’ of the pregnant host in his equation.

But Ed’s work, if successful, would not be concerned with the combination of atoms. Ed’s work was more concerned with the division of them. What would he do if he were to successfully split one? Could he manipulate those subatomic particles with alchemy, move them and unbind them and recombine them as he saw fit? Would they even be capable of such change, or would they simply dissipate if the atom was divided? He just wanted to see—how would they behave independently of one another? Or even further—what would he find inside an electron, if he could split one?

You ask repetitive questions, Little Hohenheim. I already told you, the Gate smiled, scythe-like and dark, it is the Great Work of Alchemy. Prima materia. Materia ultima.

Straightening in his seat, Ed flattened his fingers on top of the table. Are you telling me, he slowly clarified, that if I split subatomic particles, I create the Philosopher’s Stone?

It is one step, answered the Gate, for first it must be brought together and putrefied, and then what has been putrefied must be broken down...

That book. Ed put his face in his hands, rubbing vigorously; this was not what he was supposed to be working on. But it was related somehow, and the Gate was talking about it, and when has the Gate ever been wrong?

Never.

Ed stood and walked back to the shelf. He needed to read that book. If you’re misleading me, I will dunk you in water and keep you wet for days, you hear me? This had better be good.

Bristling in indignation, the Gate shifted to rest behind his left ear instead, hissing at him all the while, I don’t mislead you! I don’t need to! You humans mislead yourselves so well one would think it was a competition!

Ignoring the solid point it made, Ed poked the Gate aside as he took the book back to his table. Alright, he told himself, time to make sense out of the ramblings of madmen.

But all these discarded stepstones of knowledge upon which progress was built must have been, at one point in time, the cutting edge of the science. So Ed needed to give them the credit they were
due, in the same way he hoped his own work would one day be viewed with respect even as it was outstripped.

Here was the true secret of Amestrian supremacy, a secret the Fuhrers of Amestris all seemed to inherently understand, even from the beginnings of their history: Amestris was most powerful because it understood that knowledge was power. Amestrian society respected their scholars unlike any other society elsewhere in the world.

Now if we alchemists could only respect each other the same way, Ed chided himself, ah, but that’s asking for too much, because it’s a special kind of disrespect to stand up, take a torch to the work of another alchemist’s life, and tell the world they are wrong and you are right.

It’s called hubris, the Gate grinned, and I’ve never known any other kind of human to have as much of it as you alchemists do. After all, that’s how I met you.

“Ed. Edward.”

A hand landed on his shoulder, jolting him from the rough rapids of his own thoughts. Ed looked up. “Oh, hi.”

Roy chuckled, reaching around him to push a few of his notes aside. “Transitions of form… prima materia? What’s this? Mysterium Magnum,” Roy picked up the book about which Ed was internally screaming. “Written by a Bohm! Colour me surprised. Where has this intelligence gone?”

“Wait, they’re still around?” Ed blinked.

“The Bohms, Edward, you must have met a few during the Ball. Although I do tend to avoid them when I can, so perhaps you don’t remember them on the account of very brief interactions.”

“That.”

“Ah, the Bohms. Rich but tasteless. Often mired in scandals. Spending their money so fast they’ll be destitute by the turn of this generation. They’re the darlings of society; they provide us all with plenty of sordid entertainment,” Roy explained. “Well, distractions aside—you seem to be hard at work, but I have to disturb you. It’s time to go.”

“Right,” Ed cleared his throat, looking over the mess he had made of the table. He gathered his notebooks into as orderly a pile as he could make. The books he would have to return to the shelves. “What if I wanted to hold on to some of this and continue later? Do we have the option of keeping them somewhere in here, since I can’t take them out?”

“Of course; there are personal shelves available downstairs. Are you taking all of these, then?” Roy began picking a few of the books up. “Ah, yes. The original Montague. He was a better writer than Mahler.”

“A more solid alchemist too,” Ed agreed, “but Mahler didn’t seem to mind.”

“They were lovers,” Roy said, “you didn’t know?”

“Oh,” Ed blinked again. “No, I didn’t. But that makes sense. Wait, isn’t Mahler older than
Montague?"

“By a bit more than a decade, but for them I suppose it didn’t make a difference. Montague took Mahler’s death very hard. Sir Armstrong tells me that Montague’s illness was not just of the body but of the mind, after Mahler’s sudden death."

“And they never found out who shot him?”

“Officially, no,” Roy sighed, standing to wait for Ed while he straightened his vest, pulled on his coat, and shouldered his bag. “I wouldn’t be surprised, however, if the Armstrongs, ah, took care of the matter quietly and on their own terms.”

Grunting, Ed took the books and few journals he wanted to save for Monday. He and Roy had already agreed that Ed would only hole up in the Library on the weekdays; the weekends were reserved for time at home and with family. (That was what they were considered now, he and Roy and the Hugheses. Family.)

“I have a question for which you may or may not have an answer,” Ed began as they walked back down the middle hallway, towards the meandering stairs that eventually led to the ground floor.

“Yes?”

“Nash Tringham’s research. I read the manuscripts at Tucker’s house. The equations weren’t balanced properly. Did he do that on purpose?”

Roy, when Ed glanced up, wore a tight frown in response. “For the record, I only answer this because the man is dead and the military can’t punish him for it anymore… but yes. I believe he did.”

“Right,” Ed swallowed, recalling that they were still technically in public, although the halls were deserted around them. “Sorry.”

“No harm done. The man died and took his secrets to the grave. But his sons are brilliant—he has two and both are alchemists. The elder one is Spahn’s hopeful for next year.”

“The one who would have been the youngest if not for me?”

“The very same.”

“Is he doing the same kind of research?” Ed asked, dreading the answer.

“Yes.”

“…is he successful?”

“Yes.”

Ed grimaced, in disgust or despair he didn’t know for sure. Tringham’s own son was betraying his secrets. Did Tringham’s son also perform experimentation on pregnant women? Did he know?

“Say nothing,” Roy quietly told him as they reached the first floor. “Learn to swallow it. If you cannot agree, then remain silent. Let your silence be your protest.”

Ed nodded. They turned left at the mouth of the entrance hall, instead heading into a hall that held the Head Librarian’s office, several other rooms with closed doors, and a few occupied desks with librarians busily at work. They seemed to be cataloguing books and journals, perhaps new ones, or otherwise repairing mild damage on the covers and pages of older volumes.
“May we help you, Colonel, Major?” a middle-aged man stood to attend to them, hair slicked back into a severe style.

“Major Elric here would like to avail of one of the personal shelves.”

“Of course, sir,” the librarian nodded, “follow me this way, please.”

They were led to one of the closed rooms. There were tall cabinets inside, each drawer with an enamelled number. From a secured locker, the librarian retrieved a log and began to note the books they were carrying.

“Perhaps number 35 or 42, sir, to allow for more space.”

“Sure, whatever,” Ed shrugged. “How long can I use the personal shelf for?”

“Items left untouched for two weeks will be removed from the shelves and returned to their proper homes upstairs. Otherwise, they will be kept in the shelf for your convenience until you are finished with them. I do advise not leaving personal notes inside; in case you are otherwise waylaid and become unable to retrieve your items before your two weeks are over, we will have to take your notes and dispose of them in the according manner.”

“Of course,” Ed carefully lowered the books into shelf number 42, with Roy right behind him. The librarian made him sign the log accordingly. “What if I come in the middle of the night and want to see the books?”

“We are here at all hours, sir.”

They left the storage room and were about to walk out of the librarian’s hall altogether when Ed was struck with another question.

“Wait,” he turned around, “what if some other alchemist had a volume I was looking for stored in there and I needed it?”

“The library has multiple copies of even the rarest prints, but in the event of a unique manuscript, you would have to write out a request to the other alchemist, which they are obliged to answer within three days. You may then proceed to share the item of interest with each other and store it in a communal shelf if you like.”

“Huh.”

Roy tilted a smile down at him. “Doesn’t happen often. Come along, we really can’t be late.”

They left the First Library and there outside was Havoc waiting as always. “You don’t ever get a break from chauffeuring Roy around, do you?” Ed asked once they were in the car, earning himself a snort.

“It pays the bills and I get fed once in a while, so,” Havoc shrugged, “can’t really complain. ‘Sides, it’s a far cry from the desert. Anything’s better than that.”

“You were with Roy in Ishbal?” Ed didn’t know.

“Yep, lucky me. I’d probably be dead otherwise,” Havoc pulled them out of the roundabout, skirting Central Plaza and striking northward on 1st Street. They didn’t go very far, just a few blocks past the State Military Hospital, behind which was the expansive First Laboratory. One of these days ED would visit. “Do you want me to wait for you, Boss?” Havoc then asked Roy.
“No, just leave the car and I’ll take it back to Headquarters tomorrow. You can go afterwards.”

“Nice.”

“Plans?”

“This gorgeous lass I’m hoping to get a name from,” Havoc explained, “she works in a café near the Second Library. Beautiful black hair, Boss, the type you like.”

“Hmm, not much into dark hair anymore,” Roy shrugged, playing with the tail end of Ed’s ponytail. Ed raised him an eyebrow.

“Lady General Armstrong is blonde,” Ed pointed out.

“Please,” Roy sighed, “let us not be morbid.”

Ed snapped his fingers. “Lieutenant Colonel Hawkeye is also blonde! You like women who can walk all over you, don’t you?”

Havoc exploded in laughter, which ended in a coughing fit as he inhaled more cigarette smoke than he was prepared for. The car swerved for a moment before he caught the steering wheel and righted it.

“The good lieutenant is far too lofty for someone such as myself, Edward, I thought we had already established that,” Roy cleared his throat, huffing as one might a slighted cat whose tail was pulled.

“Sure, whatever you say, Roy. Hey, what in the world, is this a palace?”

Tempted to stick his head out of the car, Ed craned his neck to look outside. They had turned off North 1st into a smaller road, and then from there took a left into a cobbledstoned driveway lined with lush green hedges and a perfectly manicured lawn. Approaching ahead of them was a handsome brown palace, because no other word was fit to describe it, with a few black cars parked on the driveway and a blue-and-white flag flying atop one of its turrets. It had turrets. (7)

“They call it a hall, but indeed, it’s a palace,” Roy chuckled.

“That makes no sense.”

Upon debarking, Ed acquired an instantaneous neckache. The structure was compact but tall, perhaps six or seven stories, not including basement space. The exterior was a weathered yet stately brown, with crawling, flowering vines now bursting into a riot of violets and yellows and blues. All around them, spreading out in a show of extravagant space, the lawn and what looked like distant gardens painted a canvas of verdant spring.

“Ed!” Kanon and Jacob came bursting from the front doors, dodging men in livery awaiting the newly arrived guests.

“Hi, guys,” Ed grinned. They were part of the reason Ed wasn’t so bummed about having to be here today. “Nice house.”

“Not mine,” they both said in unison, parking themselves on either side of Ed. “Nice coat!” Jacob complimented, petting the wool.

“Sure, don’t mind me, I’m no big deal,” Roy snarked, fetching the keys from Havoc, who gave a jaunty little salute before heading back for the gates on foot. Ed gave the lieutenant a farewell wave.
“You aren’t a big deal anymore, you gave that up to this one here,” Kanon gave Roy a shit-eating grin. “I’ve told you before, old man, the more you work at that dreadful place, the more tedious you become!”

“Kanon!” Karenina Firat emerged from indoors, standing at the threshold with hands on her waist. “We do not insult our guests before they have even set foot inside the house!”

“Yes, do wait until they’re at least indoors, it’s only polite,” Julia’s voice from somewhere behind Karenina. “Is that Roy I hear feeling ignored?” she then asked with a cackle. “Pardon him, he’s unused to the feeling of being unmanned.”

Ed snickered unabashedly at Roy’s expense; for his part, the man looked quite ready to play the game, striding towards the house to give Karenina a cheek to cheek before going further inside. “I’ll take the unmanning if it’s from you, my dear Julia. How do you do, Karen?”

“Well, thank you, hello, young man,” Karenina turned to Ed in one smooth motion, greeting him with a cheek to cheek as well. “You’re looking quite handsome today. The colour looks lovely on you.”

“Thanks,” Ed smiled, a bit of a blush rising to his cheeks.

Inside the foyer, Roy was already fully engaged in a four-way verbal spar with Julia, Jason, and Mira Armstrong who was present with her family. Ed took the surroundings in, enjoying the warmth of the rich cedarwood panelling and the harmonic colours of the drapes. A footman approached him and offered to take his coat just as the front doors closed behind them. Kanon and Jacob then tugged him further inside, past an elegantly appointed sitting room meant to entertain strange guests, down a hall with paintings and portraits on either side, and into a spacious dining hall with a long table set for what looked like twenty or so guests. There were already people at the table.

“I hope we didn’t keep you waiting,” Roy smiled in perfect form, charm dialled up to a hundred percent. He took Anne Firat’s hand for a quick kiss and then shook hands with Julius, the patriarch and today’s host.

“No, no, the Armstrongs have also just arrived and settled in. Good to see you doing well, young man!”

Roy went to repeat the same process with Madam Evelyn Armstrong and her husband Lucas, then onwards to the daughter Catherine, a handshake for young Joseph Firat, and an arm clasp with tall and imposing Major Armstrong.

“Ah, our young alchemist,” Julius turned with a broad smile, “I believe congratulations are in order! Allow me to formally welcome you to Firat Hall, Edward. We are delighted to have you as our guest. We hope it will become something of a habit, yes?”

Ed shook hands with the older man. “Well, if Kanon and Jacob have a say in the matter, it just might, sir. And thank you for allowing me into your home. It’s a beautiful palace. Er, hall. House?”

Everyone shared a laugh, Jason clapping him on the shoulder genially. “Formally, it’s called Firat Hall, but technically, it’s a palace. To us, though, it’s just home.”

The Firats had no business having just anything, but Ed kept that remark to himself. After a few more handshakes and cheek-to-cheeks, they sat to eat, Ed sandwiched quite happily between Kanon and Roy. They did that on purpose to make him feel more comfortable; he appreciated it.

There were younger children in the next room, he realised, perhaps Jason and Karenina’s kids. He
briefly glimpsed them through an adjoining door when it opened to allow a tray-bearing manservant past. Children were to dine at a separate table for such events, Ed knew, to remove them from discussions that could potentially be unsuitable for their ears. Strictly speaking, he was young enough to be relegated at such a table, except he was respected as a contributing entity today, so he sat with the adults. He knew he liked the Firats for a reason.

Conversation was light for the better part of the meal. The food was delicious and the eating of it made even more of a pleasure as everyone heaped praise upon his remarkable performance during the exams. Despite himself, Ed preened, and the Gate inside preened along with him. Beside him, Roy chuckled along and allowed him the shower of praises. Positive reinforcement was a real thing.

“A beautiful title the Fuhrer has given you,” Evelyn Armstrong remarked, “so unique. Protean. It’s almost poetic, isn’t it, husband?” Lucas Armstrong nodded along.

“I wasn’t privy to the examinations in person,” Anne Firat was saying, “but of course I’ve heard all about it, which only serves to make one curioser! Might we ask for a demonstration after lunch, Edward? For myself and Evelyn, who was similarly absent from the examination hall.”

“Yes, yes, let’s see what you’re about,” Julia nodded, “since you’ve been the talk of both of my little brothers, who are more asocial than a brick wall.”

“Hey—we have a social circle,” Jacob shot back, “and I have friends.”

“One circle,” Julia smirked, “of the same friends. For a decade, Jacob!”

“It’s called loyalty,” Jacob sniped, stabbing a broccoli with his fork, “not that you would know. Not everyone gets around like you.”

“Ooooh,” Karenina, Kanon, and Roy all crooned. The matriarchs and patriarchs only chuckled.

“Jealous, little brother? I can set you up,” Julia recouped without missing a beat.

“Jules,” Jason sighed, “quit before he explodes.”

True enough, Jacob looked red and flustered. Kanon laughed and gave him conciliatory pats on the shoulder. “Don’t mind her, Jacob, she goes through her men like they’re clothes. If she knew any better, she’d pick higher quality ones so she could keep them for longer.”

“Oooooh,” Karenina, Roy, and Jason all crooned.

“Damn,” Ed blinked up at Kanon in admiration. “Teach me your skills. I need them to cope with this one,” he jabbed a thumb at Roy.

“A bold assumption that there even exist men who are quality enough to keep,” Mira pointed out, slicing a marinated sausage with one jerk of her knife. “Excluding Papa and Uncle Julius, of course, they’re born of a different generation as the lousy ones we now have to put up with.” Julia toasted her a glass of wine.

Waaaait for it, Ed grimaced and braced himself for Roy’s comeback, which—

“Mira, you only need allow me to convince you otherwise,” Roy grinned, “I can make you see the light.”

Yep. There he goes, in rare form.
Julia and Karenina both erupted in peals of bright laughter; even the matriarchs couldn’t help it. The innuendo was not lost on anyone; demure Catherine was bright red mess. Joseph was clearing his throat on a glass of water and Kanon reached around Ed to thump Roy on the back.

Ed, for his part, only sighed in dismay. He shook his head, pushing around a bit of carrot and some potatoes. “And here I wanted to finish my plate, but you had to go ruining my appetite.”

Roy chuckled. “You need to develop an iron constitution if you don’t want to starve at this table, Ed. Now I do believe there is dessert…”

And there was dessert: a choice of eclairs, pudding, and three different types of cake. How did these people not gain weight if they ate like this everyday? Ed needed to get back into the habit of exercise. If he wasn’t careful, he too would start gaining weight.

After dessert and more lively conversation, they took tea to a drawing room overlooking what must be the back garden, which was a riot of colour this time of the year. Ed went to the windows to admire it; the weather was still a tad too nippy for the glass doors to be thrown open, but in a few weeks’ time, this would be a beautiful, fragrant space to while away an afternoon.

The children were released from their separate table and now ran about the place, excited at the prospect of new visitors. Ed was introduced to Hans and Helen Firat, Jason and Karenina’s two children. Both were bright, eruditely spoken, and well-behaved for their age. Respectively seven and five, they were already aspiring scientists, boasting to Ed about the experiment they did with their grandfather the previous week.

“…and we learned about the structure of a cat’s lungs! Grandpapa showed us the veins and the arteries, they’re like trees,” Hans rattled off at Ed, who nodded along. “Have you ever seen a cat’s lungs, Edward?”

“You can call me Ed, and no, not a cat’s lungs, but I’ve seen human ones.”


“Ah, when I was apprenticed under my alchemical master.”

“Is it true you’re a State Alchemist?” Hans asked.

“How old are you, Ed?” Helen asked.

“Er, yes, I’m State-licensed, and I’m twelve.”

Their eyes grew even larger and they drew simultaneous gasps. “Wow. You must be really smart.”

“You’ve gone and done it,” Jason sighed, “they’ll pester you now.”

Ed looked up at the adults. “Was I supposed to lie?” They laughed.

“He has some sort of charm with little children, it’s quite amusing,” Roy told Karenina. “Shou Tucker’s little girl was all over him too, she’s about the same age.”

Lucas Armstrong hemmed and hawed, turning to Ed. “And how did you find the Sewing Life Alchemist, Edward? You studied with him for a time, surely it was enough to form an impression.”

Ed shrugged. “Three days at Mr. Tucker’s place, not too much interaction actually… he kept to his basement for the most part. He’s alright, I suppose. Bit timid. But he seems to know what he’s about.
Of course I wasn’t allowed to see his research, but from what I’ve read of his previous publications, he’s a fine practitioner. I think they overwork him too much, though. He looked kind of weak. The dog could run him over if it tried.”

“It’s that time of the year,” Roy smiled, though humourless and grim. “Reappraisals. He’s due to present his updates to the Committee next week, like everyone else.”


“Mm, I have a digest on the effect of amplifiers on combination reactions currently under review with Ars Alchemica,” Roy said. “That’ll be enough for my reappraisal.”

Ed did a double-take. “Since when did you have the time?”

“I hate you,” Kanon flatly declared.

“I want to read it,” Jacob demanded.

“Another Ars Alchemica issue,” Alex Armstrong remarked, “that is impressive, Colonel. I look forward to it.”

“Enough for another promotion?” asked Jason, eliciting a noise of disgust from where Mira and Julia sat together.

“No,” Roy chuckled, “too soon. And it’s guaranteed to infuriate Spahn, so I’m sure he’ll be raising enough of a stink that I won’t get anything for it.”

“Why?” asked Ed. “He’s always angry. What’s he angry about this time?”

“He’s sponsoring Nash Tringham’s son, remember? And Russell Tringham is hard at work at perfecting his father’s amplifier.”

Ed grimaced. “Oh, so they would have wanted the article to come from their quarter instead of from you. But even if they wrote it, they’d never give it as much justice as you could. They’ve never used an amplifier in combat before. You have.”

Silence descended upon the room, disturbed only by the quiet chattering of the two children sat near the windows. Ed looked around and then back up at Roy, now alarmed.

“…my bad. They didn’t know, did they. How much damage did I just do?”

But Roy only smiled, placing a soothing hand atop his head. “No damage. I told you I don’t talk about it much. Not a whole lot of people know.”

“The Bloodsands?” Lucas then asked, casual as you please, as if Ed hadn’t just dropped a veritable bomb of information in their midst.

Roy tilted his head. “They distributed Tringham’s third stable batch of the Stones just a few days prior. It would be the last batch he would produce. He went missing about three weeks after, if I recall correctly. I think I might have made him quit.”

The room was once again silent for a moment, before Ed shrugged. “He should have known what his research might be used for, but I guess he couldn’t have predicted you. And you say his son’s producing a better batch under Spahn now?”
“I don’t know about better since I haven’t tried it,” Roy said, “but it’s definitely more viable-looking. Stabilised with radium, therefore likely to be very potent.”

“Radium?” Jacob echoed, aghast.

Kanon gave a bark of humourless laughter. “Kid’s killing himself—and they’re letting him.”

“I hope you don’t get ideas to do anything similar, Edward.” Julius sternly admonished. “Radium is extremely harmful to organic matter. We still don’t understand how exactly it damages tissue, but we know it is causative of tumours, which, although slow-growing, are fatal.”

“Well, I can tell you how it damages molecules, if that helps,” Ed pointed out, “and no, sir, with respect, I’m not that stupid, or desperate.”

Jacob clicked his tongue. “It damages molecules through particle radiation—essentially knocking electrons off atoms it passes by—but to translate that into living tissue—”

“Atomic binding property is dependent on electron density and availability,” Ed explained, “so if the particle radiation knocks off a few electrons from a handful of, say, cholesterol molecules comprising the wall of a single cell on my skin, then that cholesterol molecule’s binding capacity will change. That might cause it to be less adherent or maladherent to its fellow lipid molecules, disrupting the bilayer that forms the wall. If the wall collapses, then the cell pops—damage cascade. At least, that’s how I’ve been taught it works. My biology’s weaker than my chemistry, but I did grow up with an uncle and aunt who were both doctors.”

“Tumours, though?” said Kanon.

Ed shrugged. “Not a bioalchemist, remember? I don’t know enough of normal body processes on that level to really—”

Jacob grabbed his shoulder at once. “I’ll need your signature—that’s a great idea—if I publish anything out of it, I’ll be sure to credit you—you can even help if you like.”

“Er, sure. Sounds interesting, keep me posted.” Ed turned back to Roy. “So is anyone keeping an eye on the Tringham kid to make sure he doesn’t collapse?”

“Spahn wouldn’t let his precious investment burn out before he can get anything out of it,” Mira snorted. “That’s what you become, you State Alchemists. Investments. The best tools for the military to use in whatever manner they like. You seem to be coping well enough with that, though.”

“I wouldn’t have tested if I wasn’t capable of coping.”

“And you’re still fine being posted under Mustang even after hearing about what he’s done.”

This again? Ed smiled. “People are more than the worst thing they have ever done in their life.” (9)

His words silenced the room for a second time. Roy’s hand landed on his shoulder once again, a warm weight of wordless gratitude.

“Touching,” Mira coldly smiled, “but you’re wrong on one account.” She leaned forward, bracing her elbows on her knees. “That move was perhaps the best thing Mustang has ever done for himself; it cemented his reputation and it showed everyone what he was willing to sacrifice in order to get where he needs to go.”

“That’s nice, but you’re also wrong,” Ed snarked back, “because finding me was the best thing Roy
has ever done for himself. We’ve already established this and he agrees with me, right, Roy?”

Everyone in the room laughed, even Mira, who did so mockingly.

“You laugh,” Ed shrugged, “but it’s true. Luckily for me, I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“That’s just the thing,” Roy quietly chuckled from beside him. “You do.”

Ed turned to him and frowned. “Since when?”

“Since she’s signing on as your financial sponsor, slowpoke. Why do you think we’re here today?”

Ed whined, “She’s not an alchemist, Roy. Explaining to non-alchemists is hard.”

“But we must still try,” Roy encouraged, “and besides, Mira is quite smart. She also has an alchemist for a brother. I daresay she’ll be able to keep up.”

“But, like, how much?”

And he wasn’t jesting about the question, even though it made the room laugh; he needed to know what Roy thought would be okay to share with this group. Should he talk about his brother? Or should he hide everything? Of course he couldn’t say anything about his mother, or his father, or the human transmutation, per se, but—

“I thought you said you haven’t done anything forbidden,” Kanon raised an eyebrow, leaning lightly against the arm of his chair. To Jacob’s questioning look, he answered, “I asked him yesterday about the nature of his alchemy. Dornseifer’s little hypothesis, remember? It sounds interesting enough, although Cyril hates the guy.” Jacob only grunted, turning back to peer at Ed.

“I didn’t,” Ed sighed, “do anything forbidden.” Technically, no knowledge or action is forbidden by the Gate. It’s just that everything has a price, and it’s usually more expensive than people are prepared to pay.

Very true, agreed the Gate.

Julia, a non-alchemist, clicked her tongue in annoyance. “What are we talking about now? Catch the rest of us up,” she said impatiently.

“Ed’s brand of alchemy,” Kanon mimicked his clap, “which appears to use no arrays—nothing visible, at least... been the talk of the town. There’s a rogue thought about it—Dornseifer’s a pretty ardent believer—that the alchemist must perform a forbidden transmutation, and if they survive it, they walk away with a special set of skills.”

“But usually they don’t survive, I take it?” said Julia.

“Forbidden alchemy is forbidden for a reason,” Alex Armstrong frowned, daintily setting down his teacup in its saucer. The china looked laughably tiny and delicate in his overlarge, muscled hands. “People have died in its pursuit. Even the brightest alchemists cannot circumvent the laws of nature.”

God, this was awful. The back of Ed’s neck was sweating; thankfully, his collar hid the fact. With discipline he learned at Izumi’s feet, he stamped down the urge to fidget and he resolutely did not look at Roy.

“Oh, but I don’t understand—what do you mean, alchemy with no arrays?” Anne Firat asked, leaning forward in keen interest. Just then, little Helen darted forward and crawled into Julius’ lap,
upending the teacup and saucer that was sitting on the arm of his leather chair.

The china shattered on the floor with a crash, prompting a gasp of dismay from the child, followed by a whimper. “I—I’m sorry, grandpapa, I—I didn’t mean to...”

Hans, who was standing next to the armchair, crouched down to reach for the shards.

“How fascinating!” Evelyn remarked, leaning over to examine the repaired teacup as Ed handed it to the lady Anne.

“It’s quite exceptional, isn’t it?” Roy smiled.

“‘Oh,’ Julia blinked, hand dropping from beneath her chin. “I see.”

“How fascinating!” Evelyn remarked, leaning over to examine the repaired teacup as Ed handed it to the lady Anne.

“I thought we’ve already talked about this,” said Roy.

“‘And the reality of it is now upon us, so justify it to me once again.’ Roy did like his women demanding and hard to please.

“You didn’t really expect me to test, did you?” Ed asked. “You thought Roy wouldn’t let me.”

Mira only levelled both of them with a look.

“It’s not so much the lack of visible arrays that’s remarkable about Ed,” Roy began, “but the fact that he uses so many of them. Just like that, without effort. For example, to repair that teacup: a substance manipulation array that would move the shards back into shape, with scripts to dictate that shape, and sigils to regulate the energy, and precise calculations to gauge how much energy is needed for that amount of porcelain. Then that would have to be followed with a recombination array that would bind the porcelain back together in such a way that would not show the damage. He did it in seconds, without hesitation. Can you do that in seconds?” he asked Kanon and Jacob. “No, neither can I.”

Roy shifted in his seat and continued, “He uses alchemy like it’s an extension of his own body. As if it’s just a limb he can command at will. Even for simple things—drying his hair, heating water, cleaning after the dog... truly exceptional. There aren’t very many people who can construct arrays and perform such quick mental calculations, Mira, and be accurate every time.”

Ed frowned at that. “You do it,” he pointed out, “and you have to be even more accurate than I do. Combustion and all. The atmospheric considerations for each snap. The quality of available fuel, the amount of energy, and the forward speed of that spark.”

Roy shrugged in acquiescence. “I am, however, a specialist.”
“Ugh,” Kanon gagged in disgust. “Geniuses.”

“You just—you have to talk to the energy,” Ed tried to explain, motioning emphatically with his arms like so. “The energy knows—and the array, it’s just a guide, a pattern, but really it should all be in your head! And it’s all about knowing clearly what you want to achieve, because the energy hates indecision. When you put your hands on that circle, you can’t be thinking, oh I hope this works—you have to mean it.”

Jacob turns to Kanon then. “It’s like those self-help books they sell at the thrift bookstore near the riverbank. Success is a mindset—if you think it, then you’ll be it, or some shit like that.”

Ed threw his hands in the air. “I don’t know how else to explain it. It’s just a feel for the thing.”

“Is there anyone else who can do your type of alchemy?” Mira then asked, changing track.

“Um, well, my alchemical master can, but she’s very anti-martial, so you won’t ever see her apply for State licensure. I’m sure Roy would get it too, if he had time to study.” Maybe.

“What about your brother?” Kanon then asked. “Can he do it too?”

Ah, shit, that’s right, I’d mentioned Al. “Not... entirely sure. We technically split ways after I went with Roy. My master didn’t like that much. Philosophical disagreement. My brother’s still with her, so we’re, ah...”

“It is a violation of his apprenticeship if he shared his secrets with you,” Alex nodded in understanding. “I am sorry that you have had to be separated.”

Ed shrugged. “We talked and agreed on it.”

“Parents?” Mira again.

“Father out there somewhere, who knows. Mum’s back home, she’s not an alchemist. Lives with my cousin and granny. She let us go train with our master when we were little; we can be real annoying when we want to be,” Ed grinned.

“What about your automail? A train track accident, you said,” Alex prompted, blue eyes calm and deep.

He still suspects.

Karenina gasped, hand flying to her chest. “Automail? But you’re so young!”

“Right arm, left leg,” Ed wiggled his automail fingers. “Our house is near the train tracks that run past the town. It was stupid. My granny’s an automail mechanic. I wanted it; can’t stay in a wheelchair for the rest of my life when there’s a perfectly valid alternative just there.” He didn’t say anything of Roy paying for the automail, because it would open questions as to why Roy happened to be there just at the right time. For all they knew, Ed was the one who came to Roy, showing up a lost child at Central Station.

“I knew there was something about your gait,” Julia followed, eyeing his leg. “You hide it well.”

“Goodness, that’s just unbelievable,” Jason murmured, aghast. “And how old were you when it was done? Do you have a doctor here in Central to look after the ports? You’re so young—you risk impeding your natural bone development with the weight of the ports and the limbs!”
“Er, I just turned eleven, and, um, about the doctor...” Ed looked up at Roy.

“Gerald was his doctor,” Roy quietly revealed, “for all of one afternoon.”

“Oh,” Julia raised both eyebrows, now leaning back in her chair. “So he died a horrible fiery death. I did wonder about that.”

Roy gave a cold smile in response. “I am alchemist first and foremost; I aspire to equivalent exchange. Would that I could, he would have died seven more deaths for the seven other lives he took. He should have known that, but perhaps he was overcome by his greed. In any case, Edward is spoken for; I took him under my wing, and that means he is mine to protect.”

And once again, for the third time, the room was silenced beneath Roy’s words. Ed shivered, suddenly cold; Roy was willing to go that far for him. Was it wrong to feel so, so vindicated and relieved?

Mira, who was still looking over them with seeking eyes, clicked her tongue but said nothing. Likely she agreed to Roy’s methods; she would have done the same thing. Ed met her gaze with one of his own, even and unflinching. He had nothing to hide. She had to believe that.

“What I need to know now,” Mira slowly began again, after another stretch of silence, “are what threats I should anticipate if I am to throw my lot with you.”

Ed blinked. “Well, um, you should know better than I do, I mean, whatever threatens Roy threatens me.”

Mira grimaced.

“There are plenty of contingency plans in place,” Roy assured her, “and I do not lack favours in fortuitous places.”

“You piss off too many people.”

“So do you.”

“You’re too arrogant.”

“So are you.”

“You manoeuvre too fast!”

“So should you, and by the by, being in that fortress is doing your marriage prospects no good.”

“What would you know of commitment, knave?”

Knave? Ed rolled his eyes. “Alright, mum and dad, get a room.”

Everyone laughed—everyone, that is, except for the two involved.

“It’s gonna happen at some point,” Julia nudged Mira with a snicker, “I mean, you’re already acquiring co-custody of a child together! All that’s missing is the bedroom action...”

“Augh, please stop,” Ed made a face, “I don’t need that in my head.”

The ribbing continued for quite a while, good-natured laughter flowing around the room, watered by the tea. Distracted with Roy’s wiles, Mira seemed to be content leaving her interrogation at that.
Lucas Armstrong, however, was not yet finished with Edward.

“Young man,” he asked Ed, “is there anything you require at this time as you begin your research?”

“Oh, er, no, sir, so far the First Library’s all I need.”

Lucas nodded, smiling down at him. “When you begin to require assistance in any quarter and your Colonel is unable to help you or otherwise occupied, come to me. It is the Armstrong family’s privilege to help you. All we ask is that you come to us first and foremost; if, after discussing with us, you find our terms of aid unreasonable or insufficient, then you are free to seek aid elsewhere. Mira will be returning to Briggs Fortress next week, so she will be far from you, but we are always here in her stead. That is what it means for us to sponsor you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Ed smiled, “I’ll take care to remember that.” The Armstrongs would be more useful for political leverage in the future. They were certainly wealthy, but Edward had a large grant he could use now. Money was not the only relevant currency.

Roy’s hand landed once more on his shoulder, calling his attention. “Ed, were you listening?”

“No, sorry, what?”

“I was telling Jason and Karen about needing a primary physician for you, so that someone may look after your ports. The military will require it anyhow. I am signing up to be under Jason’s care. Karen is a paediatrician; would you be amenable to an arrangement?”

Ah, yes, Roy’s other agenda for the day.

“Sure,” Ed shrugged; these people were easier to hold accountable to privacy than some random doctor whose provenance and interests Ed did not know.

He took a moment to step aside with Karenina to sign some papers and shake on an agreement. He would return for a physical later in the coming week. When they returned to the room, people had moved around, everyone gathered and facing towards a particular corner.

“Ah, they seem to have parked Roy at the piano already.”

Yep, that was Roy, playing romantic tunes as was his wont, and was that singing Ed could hear?

Curiously, Ed came closer to find Roy at the piano and Julia beside him on a stool. She was sitting cross-legged, her sharp-heeled shoe dangling off her toes. An elbow on her knee, a glass of champagne in the other hand, her silk sleeves unbuttoned and pushed up her arms, she was the very picture of indulgent elegance.

No, no, that wasn’t the word. How to describe it?

Seductive, the Gate purred then, that’s the word you’re looking for.

Ed shivered, unsure that he even understood what the word entailed. It was a term that up until now existed in the realm of adults.

But you’re entering that world now, the Gate pointed out, and you need to understand how it works.
Well, sure. Ed never shied away from learning either. He sat at an empty seat to listen, noting that he wasn’t the only one under the thrall of Julia’s voice. Little Helen was still perched on her grandfather’s knee, but now had eyes only for her aunt. Catherine swayed and hummed along with the song she obviously knew, while the elder Armstroongs and Firats simply sat back to savour the music.

“Shall we dance?
On a bright cloud of music
Shall we fly? Shall we dance?
Shall we then say goodnight and mean goodbye?
Or perchance when the last little star has left the sky,
shall we still be together with our arms around each other
and shall you be my new romance?” (10)

Music was mathematics too, Ed thought. A playful kind of mathematics, leaping and bounding within the confines of the progression of time. Improvisation on a theme, like derivatives working off the most beautiful equations in nature. Karenina began to sing with Julia on the next verse, creating a beautiful harmony, two lines twining around each other. Ed smiled. He couldn’t imagine life without alchemy—perish the very thought—but there was more than one way to ask a question, and for those who did not have alchemy, well, music was as fine a way to ask the big questions as the very complex equations of life.

Roy went into a playful, bright solo just as Jason leapt up and swung his wife into a circle, dancing and laughing together. Catherine also jumped up, twirling happily in her skirt, quite at home with the Firats that she felt no shyness about taking Alex Armstrong’s large hands up to coax him into a dance.

It was different from what he knew, this family, but they were a family nonetheless. He thought about his mother and his brother, his master, Granny Pinako and Winry, all the people in what was once his very narrow, constricted world. Now he was here, sitting inside a palace beside people who were descended from the very founders of Amestris. This certainly hadn’t been the intention, but he was quickly learning that nothing in life ever happened according to plan. Plans were lies they created to fool themselves. In truth, they were all just muddling along, pretending that they could see where they were headed instead of being the blind leading the blind.

But we can’t very well sit in the same spot our entire lives, can we? Ah, well. Entropy will take us where it will. Ed sat back and closed his eyes to savour the beauty.

True to his word, Ed began an exercise regimen the very next day. It was a Saturday and they woke later than their usual, but he dragged Roy outside all the same, citing his tired-looking complexion as a reason to get up and move.

“If you’re not careful, you’re going to start looking like Mr. Tucker,” Ed warned. “Speaking of Mr. Tucker, d’you think we can visit? I promised Nina I’d come play with her once the exams were over.”

“Sure,” Roy yawned, straightening up from a hamstring stretch. “I can take you today. I’ll go check up on a few other things while you’re there.”
They warmed up with a light jog around the yard, making figure eights around the trees where Maes wanted to put up a swing for Elysia in the future. Dog loped alongside them, every now and then rolling around in the grass like an absolute lunatic. Ed would have to get all the dirt out from his fur again.

“Okay, here we go,” Ed enumerated the regimen for Roy. “Think you can keep up, old man?”

Affronted, Roy turned up his nose. “Brat. You’ll be left behind.”

It was better exercising together, Ed realised, as the competition kept them going when otherwise they would have quit. They went through bodyweight squats, split jumps, lateral lunges, push-ups, tricep dips, jumping jacks, hanging sit-ups (Ed transmuted wooden bars they could hang upside-down from), and pull-ups. After three rounds with a minute break in between, they were plastered on the grass, out of breath and dripping with sweat.

“Ugh,” Roy groaned, “my back.”

“That’s what you get for sitting at that desk all the time,” Ed laughed, still panting and winded but happy. Movement brought blood flow to the brain and flooded him with endorphins. His whole body tingled with energy.

A shadow darkened the sky above them. Ed opened his eyes to find Maes standing over them with a camera in his hands. Click!

“Maes,” Roy groaned.

“Roy!” Maes chirped. “Good morning!”

“The morning is no longer good now that you’re here.”

“Rude! And here I was going to offer you breakfast!”

“Breakfast?” Ed sat up, looking toward Maes’ house, where Gracia was visible through the kitchen window, cooking. “Gracia’s breakfast!”

Ed hopped to his feet, earning a bark from Dog. Roy took Maes’ hand and levered himself up with a grunt, stretching into a spine-cracking backbend once upright.

“Your age is showing,” Maes chortled. “Kid’s gonna run you into the ground at this rate.”

“Apparently, I sit too much. Ugh, my back.”

Sweat-soaked and exhausted though they were, Gracia welcomed them to her table all the same. There was a generous spread of sausage, eggs, and oatmeal for breakfast, as well as a selection of fresh fruit. Little Elysia joined them in her cot, watching with wide, alert eyes; she had already finished her warm bottle of milk before Gracia got her ready for the day.

Gracia complimented Ed for his physical efforts and offered him a freshly sliced peach. Roy pouted about it, citing favouritism and the like. Ed snickered at Roy and crooned at Elysia, who made batting motions with her little arms when he reached to tickle her. Maes declared that Elysia was the grandest thing in the world.

All in all, it was a lovely morning, and when they later emerged from their respective rooms ready to visit Mr. Tucker, they were quite happy. Even Roy looked fresh, despite his earlier moaning about his aching limbs and sore back. They dressed more casually today, Ed in comfortable trousers and a
sweater in preparation for an afternoon of playing with Nina. Roy didn’t want to drive so they took
the trams.

“Julia sings really well,” Ed said as they sat in the tram, emptier than it usually was at this hour on the
weekdays. “Do you do that often with them?”

“Not always with the whole family like that, but I go out to have drinks with them from time to time,
not counting the more formal gatherings where we see each other as well. She studied music since
childhood, of course,” Roy pointed out.

“Of course,” because far be it for a Firat child to lack education in anything. “Karen is nice, I like
her. She treated me like an adult.”

Roy laughed. “If only everyone would, right? But most people are fooled by how young you look.”

“Oh, Mr. Tucker wasn’t,” Ed pointed out, “and Maes.”

“Maes doesn’t count, but that’s a credit to Tucker.”

Soon they left the tram and walked the rest of the way to that white house with a brown roof and a
blue door. Roy pointed out several places to visit as they passed by, this neighbourhood being a
middle-class one but nevertheless full of wonderful little places that served great food or held great
company.

“That one there is one of Heymans’ favourite spots. Apparently on Tuesdays and Thursdays, a chess
tournament happens in the evening.”

“Aren’t people drinking by then?”

“Some of the most creative decisions are made when drunk,” Roy pronounced with great
equanimitiy.

Ed rolled his eyes. “You’re just a bunch of alcoholics.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll catch up.”

“No, thanks, bad for the liver. Hey, here we are!” The house looked even more subdued than usual
today, curtains drawn except for the window in the living room under which Ed and Nina sat that
one day he came over to study. “I hope they’re home.”

“Let’s hope,” Roy reached for the doorbell.

It rang but no one answered, the house remaining silent. Ed shifted from foot to foot. After a minute,
Roy rang the bell again. Still no answer. They exchanged looks before Roy reached for the knocker.
No one answered that either. Ed couldn’t even hear footsteps on the other side.

Maybe as a last resort, or for what other reason Ed didn’t know, Roy tried the door handle and found
it unlocked. The door creaked open; the threshold was dark.
Something.

There was something captivating about how the shadow fell across the hallway floor, slanting across
the wooden floorboards and the edge of the long rug that must have been a relic of Tucker’s
estranged wife. Ed couldn’t tell what kept them from walking away when it was obvious that no one
was home. There was something about it though…
“Hello? Mr. Tucker? Nina? Anyone home?” Ed stepped into the threshold as he called out. It hit him then; the hairs on his arm stood up on end.

Something was wrong.

Roy must have felt it too. “Edward,” the man held him back with a hand on his shoulder. It was a gloved hand, Ed realised with a jolt. “Stay behind me.”

It wouldn’t do to be ahead of him; Roy needed a clear line of sight. Ed let Roy step ahead and followed close behind, allowing the front door to shut quietly behind them. They paused to let their eyes adjust to the gloom.

Roy looked in the living room and found nobody; likewise, Ed peeked further down the hallway and found only shadows.

“Roy,” he muttered, “I don’t hear anything. Not even from upstairs. Where’s the dog?”

Roy didn’t respond, looking at the stairs curving at the end of the hallway but making no move towards it. Instead, his eyes slowly panned to look towards the narrow steps leading into the basement. A slow sense of dread began pooling in Ed’s gut.

“Behind me,” Roy said again, quieter this time. He took a moment to don his other glove.

Down the steps they went, Ed’s palm sweating in tension. Roy turned the door handle and once again found it open. It made no noise as it swung inwards, and at last there was a sign of life.

A lamp was lit on a desk set against a far wall. There were books and papers strewn on the table, on chairs, and even on the floor. The basement was spacious but it was made narrower because of the clutter, and all around them were cages varying in size. Stacked on top of each other, each cage held some sort of animal; they rustled, quivered, and growled in the dark, iridescent eyes tracking them as they stepped into the workroom.

Ed, however, could not pay the animals any attention. They had stopped near the doorway, Roy holding out an arm to keep him behind, for in the middle of the room, space was made for a large circle that was still chalked into the floor. Within it was a mass of golden brown fur, and it was—shivering?

“Oh,” said a croaking whisper from the corner, “we have visitors.”

There he was, Mr. Tucker, sitting with his back against an empty cage near the desk. Ed barely noticed him; Tucker barely moved to breathe. The man looked more shrunken and emaciated than he did the last time they saw each other, and perhaps he was unable to lever himself up off the floor to get food or water. He sat facing the transmutation circle and whatever chimera it was that he made—because that was what it had to be, a chimera, a new achievement for Tucker to show the military.

“Mr. Tucker,” Roy calmly spoke, “my apologies. We rang several times but no one answered. We merely wanted to ensure that everything was alright. Do you require any assistance?”

“Yes, you do,” Tucker murmured, “do I require assistance, he asks…”

Yes, you do, Ed thought, because Tucker was not alright. There was something wrong here, something—

“Ed… ward.”
Ed jumped. The mass of fur sitting amid the circle slowly turned its face towards them.

“Bro… ther… Ed… ward. It… hurts. Help… please… hurts.”

No.

“Can’t… play… it… hurts,” the chimera whimpered, shuffling laboriously forward. Its golden brown fur was matted and dirty, but its eyes were big and clear, in a shade of brown exactly the same as Nina’s eyes. “Ed… ward.”

No, no, no, no, not this.

With shaking hands, Ed reached for the chimera, petting its fur, which was the same fur that Alexander the dog shed all over the house. But those were Nina’s eyes, and Nina’s words, and—

“Nina?” Ed gasped, unable to breathe. Beside him, Roy jerked violently. The chimera bumped its square snout into Ed’s chest, attempting to come nearer—or perhaps to run away. “Mr. Tucker. What have you done?”

“Well, as you can see,” Tucker coughed, “I made Alexander talk.”

At once, Ed was consumed with rage.

“Talk?” Ed screamed, making the chimera whimper. “You made—you made Nina and Alexander into—” Ed caught himself then, cut himself mid-sentence, a flash of realisation searing across his mind, “You monster. Your first chimera—your wife!”

Roy inhaled but said nothing.

“She didn’t leave you—you made her into a chimera! And that’s why it wanted to die!”

Tucker bowed his head, the shine of his glasses obscuring his eyes. “You’ve such a sharp mind. I really am in awe of you. So young and yet so brilliant. It’s because of you, you know.”

Roy then growled, “Oh, don’t you dare—”

“It’s true, Colonel Mustang, you at least must see what I mean,” Tucker coughed again, “it’s because of him that this year, the pressure is immense. His genius has changed everything. The Brigadier General has been breathing down my neck for results. I had to—I was going to lose everything. I just had to, you must understand.”

Understand what? The rage inside Ed grew.

“So it’s my fault?” he stepped around the chimera and in front of Roy. “You’re saying you did this because of me? You fucking monster, you used your own daughter—”

“It’s better this way,” Tucker tried to say, “she doesn’t have to suffer anymore, what with having no mother around—”

“BECAUSE YOU KILLED HER!”

Ed clapped and touched the ground, sparks surging across the room towards Tucker. Concrete ropes shot up from the floor, winding around Tucker’s limbs to hold him in place. The rage boiled over inside of Ed and solidified into a mass of cold determination, a heavy weight like a ball sitting in his chest.
“You want genius? I’ll give you genius,” Ed snarled. “I am going to unravel your life’s work and you are going to sit there and watch.”

“Ed,” Roy put a shoulder on his hand and asked, “what are you doing?”

“We’re fixing this,” Ed jerked his chin towards the chimera. “Help me, Roy. We can fix this.”

It took them the better part of an hour to draw out the new circle after Ed had cleared the old one off the floor. Roy took care of the structure and symmetry; Ed wrote in the scripts. Ruthless and proprietary, Ed yanked on the knowledge he had inherited in the form of the Gate, and for once it relented without a word edgewise, allowing him to sift through its inky strands for direction.

Roy, it turned out, knew quite a bit about molecular fission. Ed only had to explain a little bit and Roy was caught up on the same page. When Ed sketched out his idea and showed it to Roy, the man’s eyes widened first, perhaps in shock, and then hardened with determination. All they had to do to convince themselves of the worthiness of their task was take a glance at the huddled mass of fur near the door, quivering in fear and the pain of an imperfect fusion.

“Ed… ward,” it intoned every now and then, to which Ed would quietly respond, “Just a little while more, Nina, we’ll fix it, I promise.”

“It’s not going to work,” Tucker tried to dissuade them with what little energy he had left. He didn’t even fight his restraints, although he would not have been able to anyway. “You can’t separate what’s already been joined. She’ll die. They’ll both die. You’ll kill them.”

“Shut the fuck up.” Ed jammed a crumpled wad of paper into Tucker’s mouth.

Kneeling on the cold floor, sleeves rolled up and chalk smudges on his cheek, Ed felt an odd sense of confidence settle over him. He was here already, twice before. He knew what to expect. This time, his calculations were correct, and he had enough fare to pay for the Gate to let them through. Roy seemed to trust his direction, constructing the bones of the array to Ed’s specification without question. On the other side of the array, the man was focused on his task, sketching lines with mathematical precision. At least this time Ed wasn’t alone.

When at last they finished, Ed’s neck and shoulder screamed in pain, but the array was perfect. Roy finished the last stroke on the final glyph and at once the lines began to hum with power, sweet and heady like only the most potent arrays ever did. They cautiously stepped out of the live array and met each other’s eyes.

If this doesn’t work, Roy wanted to say; it will, Ed was sure of it.

The next task was to coax the chimera into the circle, which fell to Ed, while Roy bodily hauled Tucker into the space made just for him. The man was still restrained but was able to wiggle on the circle, which began to glow once he was put inside.

“I’d give it up if I were you,” Roy quietly told him. “You’re not going anywhere.”

The glow grew brighter as the chimera stepped into the circle. All the animals around them shuffled and whimpered in their cages, restless and terrified. The chimera was the same. They could all feel the energy building, too large to weather in this confined space.
“It’s alright,” Ed crooned, petting both hands down the chimera’s neck. It looked like a dog, but with an over-large, malformed head. Its ears were all wrong. Ed knew its face would come back to haunt him in his dreams. “It’s alright, Nina, Ed’s got you. This will be quick, alright? I’m sorry for this, but it’s the only way,” he murmured, “it’s the only way to get you back.”

Tucker spat the paper out of his mouth, coughing in distress. “Wh-What are you doing? Why am I in the circle?”

Ed turned to glare at him, lip curling in utmost disgust, “Because, Mr. Tucker, you will be our sacrifice.”

Tucker grew still and pale.

“Ready?” Roy asked, crouched at his position on the rostral line, hands hovering over the activation glyphs.

Ed knelt across from him at the caudal line, their hands echoing each other in symmetry, because symmetry mattered. “On three.”

“One.” The chimera whimpered.

“Two.” Tucker curled up tight.

“Three.” 

Rushhh-crackle the energy went, blooming from within and without. The circle blazed with light and life, blinding them as it ripped space apart, and there it was again, that familiar tugging sensation—Ed allowed himself to be pulled, breathing hard, surging forward into—

WHY, HELLO, THERE, LITTLE HOHENHEIM. YOU SEEM TO HAVE MISSED ME.

—everywhere. The voice came from everywhere all at once. It was like the sound of tidal waves crashing on the shore, or the scratch of a thousand nails on a chalkboard, or the violent thrum of a hummingbird’s wings amplified a million times. When Ed could see again, there was a shadowy humanoid figure standing in front of him, with a knife-like smile that he saw everyday inside his own head. It felt like coming home.

AND YOU BROUGHT A FRIEND THIS TIME! HOW THOUGHTFUL OF YOU.

The humanoid shadow turned sideways to acknowledge Roy, who stood across from Ed as if they were still holding their positions on a symmetrical transmutation circle. Roy was breathing fast, blinking as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

ROY MUSTANG, ALSO A STUDENT OF HOHENHEIM. WE ALMOST MET, ONCE.

“Wh… what are you?” Roy whispered, hand twitching with the urge to reach out and touch.

I AM ONE, the shadow grinned, AND ONE IS ALL.

“Roy, meet Gate,” Ed waved an arm about, indicating the whole space. “Gate, you know Roy.” Beside them towered a pair of massive ornate doors, and—yes, there it was: the upside-down tree, its branches curling and twisting outwards, its roots gnarled with the mysteries of space and time. Ed tried to etch it into his memory as best as he could, but who knows how much he would be able to remember this round.
A FITTING EXCHANGE, the Gate remarked, looking upon a terrified Tucker, curled up between them, and the quivering chimera that was half-animal half-child. BUT THE EXCHANGE IS NOT EQUIVALENT.

Roy looked up sharply, catching Ed’s eye.

Ed only nodded to the Gate. “I brought you more than what is necessary.”

A MOST GENEROUS PAYMENT, the Gate agreed, humanoid shadow reaching out a hand towards Tucker’s pathetic form, FOR A SOUL CAN BUY PLENTY.

At once, Tucker seized and began to beg, sobbing, “No, no, please, stop, no, don’t—”

The Gate paid him no heed, its grin fixed even as the large doors swung open behind them. The Void stared back at them from within, reaching out shadowy arms with apparent greed—and Tucker began to disintegrate.

Legs first, bit by bit, then arms, then torso, and finally his head. Layer after layer, all in order, skin and then fat and then muscle and then bone. He came apart in strips methodically torn apart. The last of him was an echo of his scream, terror apparent in the way he begged. But the Gate knew not mercy.

I HAVE RECEIVED MY PAYMENT. NOW FOR YOUR REQUEST.

The other humanoid arm reached out towards the chimera. At once, it began to separate, the dog-like body grotesquely pulling apart to make way for the limbs of a child. Flesh split and bones cracked as Nina was put back together from inside out, first her organs and her bones, then the muscles and the fascia, then the fat layer under the skin, until at last her hair and face and eyes were once again as Ed remembered it to be. Most importantly, her soul: it was a small orb of light that the Gate gently pushed into her body, where it suffused her with a glow that told Ed she was alive.

She hovered there between them, suspended in reconstruction, as Ed and Roy watched in awe. It was done, their exchange, and the light was beginning to fade, but before the transmutation could terminate, the Gate reached out towards both alchemists and said, A PARTING GIFT FOR THE SUCCULENT SOUL YOU HAVE BROUGHT ME IN KIND.

Ed felt the Gate shove something into his head and then the world exploded with light.

I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as one dieth, so dieth the other; they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place: all are of dust, and all turn to dust again.

( Ecclesiastes 3:18-20, The Holy Bible, King James Version )
The basement was almost pitch black afterwards. Ed cradled a sobbing Nina, shushing her with gentle pets and senseless noises of comfort. They rocked together near the doorway, Ed watching Roy clean up the basement all the while. Roy, for his part, seemed well-recovered, or perhaps reserving his nervous breakdown until they were back behind the privacy of their own home. His hands only shook a little as he snapped to sear the chalk lines off the basement floor. This wasn’t the first time for him either, Ed realised. Roy must have cleaned the basement in Resembool too.

They left a smudged, adulterated version of Tucker’s circle on the floor. They did not touch the animal cages or the books on the table. They did not move the notes on the wall. Roy made it look as thoughtless and messy as he could, while Ed spotted for any evidence of what had transpired after he was done. Once satisfied that all was taken care of, they took Nina upstairs, closing the basement door behind them.

“I’ll get her dressed,” Ed said, heading towards the stairs. “You do what you have to do.”

Roy nodded, wiping the door handles clean of their fingerprints. “It’ll take them less than fifteen minutes to get here, so be fast about it.”

At least Nina was clean, her pale limbs all baby-smooth and flawless. All Ed had to do was wash her face and put her in the next set of clean clothes he could find. Ed also washed his arms and dusted off his sweater to get rid of the chalk dust. They came back downstairs to the beginning of the inquisition, which was headed by a very displeased Brigadier General Gran. Roy was already giving a concise report of their falsified story; Ed quietly approached from the staircase with Nina in his arms.

They went to the living room where Ed picked an armchair and sat with Nina in his lap. Once Roy finished with his version of the story, it was Ed’s turn; he regurgitated the same lines and then shrugged when asked if he had an idea where Tucker might have gone. “He didn’t mention any detail about his extended family or anything of the sort while I was here. But, I mean, he left Nina behind. She was all alone in the house. So he can’t have gone far.”

And when they tried to ask Nina questions, the child only blinked up at them, shaking her head. “I dunno,” she sniffled, cuddling back into Ed’s arms. “Papa was there an’ then I was’sleep an’ then I woke up an’ Ed was there an’ it was dark.”

“Did your Papa tell you if he was going anywhere?” Gran asked in as gentle a tone as he could manage. It still made Nina flinch.

She shook her head, “Papa stays downstairs. Hav’you checked there?”

At this point, Gran’s team was well underway with combing the house for clues, but they weren’t going to find anything. Gran stood and turned back to Roy. “And why were the two of you here again?”

“A social visit, sir,” Roy answered. “Edward had promised Nina that he would return to play with her after the exams. Since Ed is due to put in his hours for research during the weekdays and I have work likewise, the weekend was the best time to stop by.”

They were held in the living room for another hour. Halfway through it, Maes showed up, concerned and a little bit pissed. Someone told him that they were being held; someone found out somehow. Once he saw Roy and Ed relatively whole, he released his concern and retained only his ire.

“A weekend, Roy Mustang, don’t you know I have obligations to my wife?” Maes sniped.

“Honestly, I leave you alone for one minute!”
Roy, who would usually have a snipe in return, simply gave him a smile that was more a grimace. Ed waggled his fingers at Maes in the parody of a wave; most of his arm was being strangled by the child in his lap.

Maes pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “So Tucker ran off, is that what it is? Why are you being held up here?”

Gran stepped into the conversation then and said, “We must consider all the angles, Lieutenant Colonel Hughes.”

Maes frowned; Gran didn’t seem to intimidate him much. Ed’s respect for Maes grew. “Yes, well, consider them considered, sir, because it’s frankly preposterous for you to suspect that Roy and Ed did something to harm or maim Major Tucker. Firstly, they have no reasonable motive; secondly, why would they call you afterwards? Thirdly, Ed’s rather fond of the child and, from what I hear, has made friends with Major Tucker through their study days.”

Gran’s frown grew deeper because he could not contest the truth in Maes’ words. Eventually, they were released, once written statements were taken from them.

“You know where to find me, sir, and I have no plans of leaving Central anytime soon,” Roy assured Gran. “You can even put temporary travel holds on me, if it will ease your mind.”

“Same,” Ed shrugged when Gran looked at him, “and I have no need to steal Tucker’s research, because frankly speaking, I could do it better—if ever I developed an interest in bioalchemy, that is.”

Finally, Maes draped a blanket over Nina and said, “I can take his daughter home for now. How does that sound, Nina? I live right next to Ed’s house!” Nina gave him a hesitant smile. To Gran, Maes said, “My wife wouldn’t mind such a darling girl staying over for a few days. You know where to get her when you do find Tucker, although it’s questionable whether the man should be responsible for a little girl if he decides to just disappear like this without even ensuring that she’s taken care of.”

No doubt they would hear more about this in the coming week when inquiries ran cold. But for now, they were allowed to leave. Gran’s crew could not find any evidence of violence, tampering, or theft inside the house, hence no reason to hold them. With only the clothes on his back, it looked like Tucker simply walked away.

Roy and Ed left the house, Ed taking a huge lungful of air as soon as they stepped outside. He hoped never to see this house again. Nina never would, if Ed had anything to say about it.

Maes led the way to the car, which was parked down the street; there were too many military cars crowding directly in front of the house. Roy helped Ed get Nina into the backseat and then sat shotgun, collapsing into the padded seat with a quiet sigh.

“It’s not so unheard of, State Alchemists running away during reappraisals,” Maes was grumbling as they pulled away from the curb. “Don’t know why they were making such a fuss about it. And I had to hear it from Vato! He called the house and tipped me off. Heard about the fuss on the vine. I thought you went there directly after breakfast! It’s been hours; Gran didn’t keep you there for hours, did he?”

“No,” Roy said, sounding somewhat absent, “we ran errands first.”

“Won’t Gracia mind, Maes? Nina, I mean,” Ed asked from the back.

“Of course not! She’s just a little girl. She’s so young, I can’t believe Tucker just up and left her in
the house like that!”

“Yeah, well,” Ed shrugged, “like you said. Reappraisals.”

“The stress of it all must have gotten to him,” Maes then said, tone grave. “Desperation makes people do the stupidest things.”

Ed met Roy’s eyes through the rearview mirror and thought, *Oh, Maes, you have no idea.*

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Nina liked Gracia well enough. They left her in the Hughes’ capable care, tucked into bed with her favourite blanket draped over her shoulders and a plush dog Ed alchemised for her from a spare pillow. He tried to make the dog look like Alexander; it ended up looking a bit like the chimera. Whatever.

At their own house, it was cool and dim and quiet. Maes surely had questions for them but it could wait. They went upstairs, where Roy lit the fireplace with a single snap. Ed felt that ripple of energy course through the air. Huh. That was new.

Roy shrugged his jacket off, removed his vest, threw it all aside, and went to lie down on the floor. Removing his own sweater, Ed did the same, stretching out next to Roy and watching the shadows dance on the ceiling. Outside, the sun was almost gone.

“Ed.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know where to start.”

“Yeah.”

Together they laid there, unseeing eyes looking upwards as the knowledge of the Gate unravelled within them. A flower opening, a cornstalk withering, the whole of the universe in the swaying motion of a single mote of dust. The whirling ways of all the stars that passed above their heads. Forces of attraction, the cradle of time. A theory of everything. Metamorphosis. The tree of life.

In the breath between one thought and the next, Ed fell asleep, sinking into dreams full of dizzying illusions and blinding light. He was falling, falling, forever falling off the branch of an upside-down tree—his hand outreached towards a fruit that he almost had in his hand—except this time, in this dream, he was no longer alone. Roy was falling next to him.

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*I was looking, and behold,*
*a tree in the midst of the earth,*
*and its height was great.*
*The tree grew and became strong;*
*Its height reached to the heavens,*
and it could be seen to the ends of all the earth.
Its leaves were lovely,
its fruit abundant,
and in it was food for all.
The beasts of the field found shade under it,
the birds of the heavens dwelt in its branches,
and all flesh was fed from it.
(Daniel 4:10-12, The Holy Bible, King James Version)

REFERENCES

(1) The First Library’s entrance hall is based on a stairwell in the Buckingham Palace. Use your imagination; it isn’t a stretch!

(2) Some people probably got it, but this is a reference to Plato’s allegory of the cave, except Ed is being tongue in cheek.

(3) A bit of back to school here! If you’ll recall your intro chem days, Dmitri Mendeleev came up with the Periodic Law and what we know today as the periodic table of elements. Essentially, in their world, Mahler and Montague came up with that same table. Mendeleev’s version was published in 1870 and he was smart enough to leave gaps in the table to allow for elements that were yet undiscovered. Of course the table we have today has expanded far beyond what he initially created, but that’s just progress for you.

(4) In the 2003 anime, Nash Tringham researched the so-called precursor of the Philosopher’s Stone, the Red Water. He was trying to find a way to make it crystallize faster and in a more stable form. He
worked with a colleague who then made the suggestion of injecting the Red Water into the unborn foetuses of pregnant mothers, which would of course kill the foetus, but incubate the Red Water and help it solidify. Thought I’d use that because it fit better. I don’t recall if they actually used this storyline in FMA: Brotherhood but I definitely remember it from FMA 2003.

(5) This interesting passage is from the *Claveus Germanicus* or otherwise titled as *Büchlein vom Stein der Weisen* (“Booklet of the Philosopher’s Stone”), which was published in 1617. It was essentially an instruction manual, a how-to book, if you wanted to learn alchemy and create the famed lapis philosophorum. You can flip through it here. I highly encourage you to, it’s quite cool! To note, there is also an actual alchemical book called *Mysterium Magnum* written by Jacob Bohme published in 1623. Jacob Bohme was a philosopher and Christian mystic who dabbled in alchemy and was a prolific writer besides. If you read his work, he sounds like an absolute lunatic. Or maybe he was high on mushrooms. In any case, it’s interesting stuff—well, interesting to me, anyway, I’m a nerd like that—and really pretty for use in my little work of fiction here.

(6) Anyone catch that reference? All of Ed’s books in shelf 42!

(7) I am using *Highclere Castle* as a reference for Firat Hall, because I can. (You might otherwise know it as Downton Abbey.)

![Highclere Castle](image)

(8) For the gardens, think *Dyffryn House* in the Vale of Glamorgan. (Again, because I can.) This is actually an artist’s rendition of the gardens, probably from the 1890s; the artist, Edith Helena Adie, lived from 1865-1947.

![Dyffryn House](image)

(9) “People are more than the worst thing they have ever done in their life.” – Bart Campolo is a secular humanist who used to be in the Christian ministry but left that world for secular humanism after three decades. I like his work; his writing is very well thought out. Check him out at bartcampolo.org!

(10) This song is called “Shall We Dance?” and is a bit of a classic, some of you who like jazz might know it. I am thinking here of the Stacey Kent version, which you can listen to here (Youtube). Enjoy!
(11) Last but definitely not the least, Edward’s outfit! I envision his trousers, shirt, and vest to be like this:

![Edward's outfit](image1)

And his beloved coat looks EXACTLY like this:

![Edward's coat](image2)

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**REFERENCES** are, as always, available [here](#). I have also made a [PLAYLIST](#) for Catalysis on Spotify, which you can listen to if you like. You don't need a Spotify account, I don't think. Let me know if you have a hard time with it.

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**End Notes**

**A NOTE TO READERS:**
While I have been very fortunate with some amazing readers who have stayed with this story for years, there have also been a fair number of those who have not liked this work. *'Don't like, don't read'* is a good policy to abide by in these trying times, folks. If you dislike what you are seeing, there is such a thing called a 'Back' button. No need to set fires. I acknowledge that there are issues discussed herein that may be sensitive to some people, but I
cannot please everyone, nor do I aim to do so. We write this story firstly to satisfy ourselves; if we did otherwise, this story would have been long dead. When you read this, remember that like life, no one in this story is perfect: everyone is flawed, people will do things you do not like, and not everyone will agree with you all the time - nor do they have to! Read the tags, I update them every chapter with appropriate warnings, from the important things (Morally Grey Characters and Angst) to the mundane (such as the fact that this will be a very, very slow burn). So if you are going to comment and say that the pace moves too slow, please shelve it and save yourself the effort. You've been warned. Don't like, don't read. - **On the other hand, if it is constructive criticism** you have, bring it! We'd love to hear from you & exchange ideas; we are always open to discourse if done in a purposeful, contributive manner. Don't be a stranger!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!