Follow brothers Edward and Alphonse Elric after they leave their home world for our world - a world poised on the edge of a global war, one they are trying to prevent by tracking down a dangerous weapon that was brought over from their world into ours: the uranium bomb. How will they find it? Who will they meet along the way? What adventures await? FIND OUT IN FULLMETAL AFTER
Edward quickly covers the shining of his metal arm before anyone should see.
"Come on, Brother!" Al says as he tugs on Ed’s coat sleeve.

"All right, quit pulling!" Ed says back to his little brother as they both get up out of the grassy ditch they’re sitting in, each of them grabbing their suitcases and jogging up the small hill to the nearby roadside.

There stands Noa, their gypsy friend. Her skin is dark, her hair is dark, her eyes are dark. But her clothes are bright – white and pink and red. Such a beautiful contrast. She is beautiful.

"Come on, Edward," Noa says to him. "These nice people are going to give us a ride."

Ed looks at the people in the truck – and is immediately struck by the looks of the driver and his companion. Al is confused as to why his brother looks so surprised – and then he looks, both boys then smiling nervously.

The driver is the spitting image of Scar, their old enemy, and strangely friend – by his side, the spitting image of Lust, the monster and strangely friend. But both Ed and Al know that the people in this truck are not them – they only look like them, a concept Ed has had to grapple with for two long years and one Al is just now getting used to.

Noa hops into the back of the truck with a bunch of other people who are traveling along, a mixture of men and women, some more German-looking, others more Romani. She hasn’t taken notice of Ed and Al’s funny looks as they still smile awkwardly at the driver, she asking “Well, what are you waiting for?”

"Right," Edward responds, quickly coming to the back of the truck. "Watch out, ladies!" he says as he tosses in his big suitcase, the young women giggling as the two young rogues climb in with them.

The truck takes off down the long country road, leaving Munich behind forever.

The year is 1923.

Al sits nervously on the truck bed bench, blushing for the handful of pretty girls around him.

Ed, sitting across from him, reaches over and nudges his brother, smugly smiling, “What’s a-matter, Al? You act like you’ve never seen girls before.”

Al spurts, “What? No! I mean, yes…”

The girls all giggle at the young boy’s shyness, the men in the truck also chuckling, remembering what it’s like to be young.

Ed smiles as he lets his face take in the warmth of the sun. “Ah, such a kid, Al… by the way, why are you so short?” Within a split second, Ed thinks to himself, Wow, that sounds weird coming out of me…

Al is quiet for a moment, making sure no one else is paying attention to the two of them. And then quietly he leans forward towards Ed, saying, “While my body was inside the Gate, it didn’t grow any. When I came out, I was still the same age as when I had gone in.”

"Add a few years and that makes you 13," Ed smiles that toothy grin of his, "And I’m already 18." He chuckles as he rubs Al’s hair. "That REALLY makes you my little brother now."

"Knock it off, Ed," Al brushes his brother’s hand aside, not enjoying being petted like a dog.
They are both quiet for a moment, enjoying the fresh air as it blows past them, the smell of the grass and the open road filling their senses.

Al looks over at Edward. “So… where are we headed now, Brother?”

"First we have to track down that uranium bomb that was brought over from the other side," Edward tells him. Both boys know that dangerous things come from the other side of the Gate, and this was certainly no exception. "A weapon like that shouldn’t exist… no matter which world it’s in."

Al nods, and looks out onto the road behind them. Something catches his eye – a small propaganda poster, crushed under the tires of the truck and spit back out onto the road. He gives a bit of a frown. “People say another great war is inevitable here. And from everything that’s going on… maybe they’re right…”

The wind blows the piece of trash away.

Al looks over to Ed, “Do you think we should get involved in their battles?”

"Like I said, Al – we can’t keep thinking we’re all that matters – that the world has nothing to do with us. That goes for both sides of the Gate. This is where we live. It’s home now. And we have to do our part.” He turns to Al with a confident smile, one that Al has seen many times before.

Al nods and gives a firm smile back, both boys ready to face the world.

Noa scoots a little closer to Ed, wanting to get in on their conversation. “You two are used to traveling a lot, right?”

Ed and Al look over to her as she speaks.

"I saw it in your memories - that you and he used to go from place to place all the time."

"Memories?" Al asks, a little perplexed.

"Yeah," Ed explains, a playful spookiness about his voice, "That’s her magic gypsy power. She can touch a person and learn a lot about them."

"Really?!" Al asks excitedly. He sticks his hand out to Noa. "Do me!"

She chuckles, taking his hand. “All right.” She closes her eyes for a minute, her breath slowing as she concentrates. “…You’re kind, very thoughtful… and your brother hates milk.”

Ed bursts, standing as he shouts, “Of course I hate milk! Who would want to drink something that came out of an animal’s filthy tit?!”

The girls all start giggling.

"Brother! Sit down! You’re embarrassing me!"

Ed sits down, grumbling as he crosses his arms, “Yeah, sorry Al.”

Noa lets go of Al’s hand, and brushes her hair aside for all the wind blowing past. “But I’m right, right? You two are practically gypsies like we are. You should have no problem adjusting to living with us.”

Ed looks at her for a moment, and then closes his eyes, “I suppose. Only I’m not used to this many
people.”

Al smiles and pokes his brother in the cheek as he talks to Noa, “Yeah. Ed’s kind of anti-social.”

Ed snaps his jaw as if to bite Al, Al moving his finger back and laughing.

“You two really are very close,” Noa says, they looking over at her as she speaks.”It’s so sweet. I wish I had a sibling. Or at least someone I was close to.”

Al smiles brightly, “You’ve got us! Right, Brother?”

Ed looks to Al, then looks over to Noa. She smiles softly at him, the sunshine glowing off her hair. And Ed’s not sure why, but he can’t help but smile back.

"Yeah. You’ve got us."

Noa nods. “I’m glad.”

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The city long gone behind them, miles away, the truck has come to a rest near the river, all the riders piling out to stretch their legs and take a rest amongst the wooded countryside.

Ed stretches his arms, “Oh, man! It feels good to stand on solid ground. Nice to stretch the muscles.”

"Hey Ed," Al asks, "Why is it you have automail still? I got all of MY body back. How come you don’t have all of yours?”

Ed looks down at his right arm, his coat and gloves covering him. “I don’t know. It’s just one of those things, I guess.” He looks over at Al. “And in this world, they don’t have automail. I’d really stand out if people saw it.”

"I must say," Noa interjects as she comes walking up with a small wicker basket, given to her by one of their fellow travelers so she can help forage for food, "This new arm of yours is even more amazing than the last one."

"Last one?” Al asks.

"Yeah," Ed tells him, "Dad was here in this world. He was able to make me fake limbs, though they were nowhere near as good as Winry’s.”

"Winry…” Noa says slowly. “…She was your childhood friend, wasn’t she?”

Ed looks to her, watching Noa as she thinks aloud.

"I’ve seen her in your memories, too. You liked her…”

Ed nervously rubs his head as he blushes, “Yeah, she was a friend, that’s all…”

Noa smiles quietly.

Al knocks on Ed’s suitcase, “So is that what’s in here? The limbs Dad made for you?”

Ed nods, “Yeah. These are just backups in case my automail ever breaks.” Ed gives a proud smile, “But the best mechanic in Risembool knows what she’s doing. And I doubt I’ll be fighting any
homunculi around here. The chances of it getting broken are slim.” Ed moves his arm around a bit, rotating his shoulder. “But I’ve got to say, the skin covers are tight. Their meant for the ones he made, not the one she made.”

They hear a woman call to them, “Hey you all! We have food if you want it!”

"Oh boy!" Al says jogging over to them. "I'm starving!"

Ed smiles, shaking his head. “Jeez, such a kid.”

#

The band of gypsies all sit around, eating the small bits of food they’ve piled together for everyone. As he eats, Al can’t help but stare at the driver, the big, tall man with a very commanding air about him. His resemblance to Scar is just too chilling for Al. Sure, he’s missing the signature X mark across his face, but nonetheless his face is just the same.

The man looks over at the young boy. “…Why do you keep staring at me like that?”

Al sits up straight, nervous and sweating as he waves his hands back and forth. “N-no reason! It’s just that, y-you remind me of someone I used to know!”

"Oh?" his companion queries as she sits by his side.

Ed decides to jump in on the conversation. “Yeah, but you’re not them. What are your names?”

The man speaks, “I’m Serkan. And this is Lucine.”

"Well I’m Ed."

"And I’m Al."

"Pleased to meet you," Lucine says, very soft-spoken.

"So, where you all from?" Edward asks.

"We’re from Istanbul."

Ed gives a smarmy, half-amused grin. “Istanbul… you don’t say…” the name sounding eerily akin to Ishbal.

Al can’t contain his curiosity, “How long have you two known each other?”

Lucine and Serkan smile at each other, she petting his hand as she speaks, “Since we were children.”

"But it feels much longer, doesn’t it?" he says.

"Yes."

"As if we’ve known each other even before we were born."

Ed feels like laughing at the prospect, while Al’s eyes are filled with stars. “How romantic!” Al spouts.

"Where are you boys headed?" Lucine asks them.
"Nowhere," Ed responds, a little aloof.

"Well you must be going somewhere," she says as she picks up her cup. "Your people aren’t wanderers like us."

Ed crinkles his nose just ever so slightly, “What would you know about our people?”

Serkan, with his deep voice and a bit of a grim frown, says, “What would you know about ours?”

Ed sighs in his throat, calming himself. “…More than you’d know. Trust me. My brother and I haven’t had a home since we were young children.”

Lucine takes a drink from her cup and then says, “I’m so sorry to hear that. And you’ve been traveling by yourselves all this time?”

"Yeah."

Serkan breaks his bread in half as he speaks, “The same goes for us. For the most part, it’s just been me and Lucine ever since we left Istanbul.”

Lucine smiles, “Until you got that truck, and then we made a lot of friends.”

He sighs, grumbling, “Freeloaders is more like it.”

She nudges him in the arm playfully, “Come on! We’re gypsies! We’re supposed to have a band!”

"Just because we’re travelers doesn’t mean we’re gypsies. And besides, we weren’t born wanderers, you know.”

Al asks, “Then why are you wanderers now?”

Serkan looks to the sky, watching a bird fly by as he remembers back, “I was fifteen when it started… The old empire was weak and falling apart. We owed a lot of money to other nations for the railroad that was built through our country. It brought with it money and progress… But progress means change… A lot of people didn’t like our old imperial ways… There were revolutionaries who were determined to dethrone the sultan, which they did. The new rulers wanted everything to be Western, to be modern.”

Lucine interjects, “They even gave women a lot more rights. It was about time.”

Serkan shakes his head, annoyed, “They only reason we didn’t give women more rights in the first place was because we knew they would flaunt them once they had them.”

She smiles and gives him a nudge on the cheek.

He continues, his eyes dimming with seriousness, “But then the war broke out. I was twenty-one then. Our country allied itself with yours, but we were overtaken by your enemies. Their soldiers occupied our homeland… and it’s not ours anymore.”

Lucine stares sadly into her cup, watching as her own reflection shakes amongst the ripples in the water, “That’s when we decided to leave. There was no point in staying there anymore. Even if we had stayed in The City, it was not the same City anymore.”

Ed gives his sympathies, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Serkan continues, gently squeezing Lucine’s hand, “We’ll always have Istanbul with us, even if
we’re not in Istanbul.”

A bit of a sad smile begins to make its way onto Ed’s face, he thinking back to the countryside of Risembool… it’s the same for him… even though he isn’t there… it is there with him… All the memories… all the places… all the people… her… it’s all in his heart now… Nothing more than a memory…

But as quickly as it had come, the smile begins to fade… If Serkan and Lucine ever wanted to go back home to Istanbul, all they’d have to do is turn the truck around and take off. But if he and Al wanted to go back to Risembool? …It’ll never happen…

The sun has moved from its high point in the sky and is starting to descend, it not being quite as bright at this time in the afternoon, but certainly still as hot.

Noa stands by herself, alone in the woods at river’s edge, staring silently out into the distance, not but the hum of crickets coming to wake filling the air.

Ed quietly comes up behind her. “What are you doing out here, Noa?”

She is quiet, not facing him. “… …Oh Ed… Why do there have to be wars? …And I almost started another one… all because of my selfishness…”

She falls silent again as her face falls towards the ground, Ed patiently waiting while the crickets continue their muted singing, slowly growing louder and louder as a natural chorus amongst the trees.

Noa looks down into the water, watching it lazily float by, it taking snatches of fallen leaves and loose grass with its current. “…I’m sorry… I’m sorry for what I did back there in Munich… I just-”

"We all are," Ed very plainly and calmly tells her. "We’re all sorry for what we did. We all had our own reasons, and we thought we were doing what was right."

Noa sighs, dissatisfied.

"Besides," Ed continues, "Things turned out for the better, didn’t they?"

A bit of surprise rushes through Noa as she looks up from the river. Things turned out for the better? She turns to face him, he smiling a beautiful smile, his golden eyes staring back into hers. She can feel her cheeks warming with blush, and she shyly looks down at the ground, nodding. “Yes…”

"Come on," he says to her. "Everyone’s waiting for us."

The sun is just barely visible on the horizon now, the sky being painted a beautiful orange and red, faint dots of light becoming visible as the stars come awake. The band has built a campfire, big and tall, good enough for roasting food and warming their bones as they all gather around, settling down for the evening.

Al comes running up to Ed, “Brother! Look what I caught!” he says, holding a dead rabbit in his hands.
Ed laughs, “Just like old times, hey Al?”

"Wow!” Al awes, looking past Ed. Ed turns around to see Serkan has a big swan in his hands. “It’s huge!”

"Found this down by the river," Serkan says. “Both of them should make a good meal.”

Ed gives a grin, “Then let’s eat up!”

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The fires crackle and the people cackle, laughing and telling stories as they enjoy the open woods, Serkan in the meanwhile sitting on a log as he plays a guitar, strumming a melody to the passing night sky.

One of the girls gets up, brushing off some breadcrumbs from her lap, “Oh! Hand me my tambourine!”

Her friend pulls it out of a bag and tosses it to her, and she begins to beat it as she dances about to the rhythm of Serkan’s tune.

Many of the girls get up and start to dance as well, humming a melody and singing aloud, grabbing their guy friends from where they sit on the grass.

Al laughs and smiles at the spectacle, loving the swirling colors and dresses before him, the jingling of their jewelry, the twinkling of their bracelets and anklets and bells. One of the girls stops and winks at him, and Al hops to his feet with glee. She holds out her hand to him, and he takes it and they begin to dance, Al with no particular talent about him.

Ed, sitting on the ground, starts laughing, watching his little brother act so silly. And then Noa stands there in front of Ed, she gently holding out her hand to him. Ed looks at it for a moment, and then looks to her soft and smiling face, he now realizing what’s going on as he nervously waves his own hands back and forth. “Oh, no! No! I can’t dance!”

“It doesn’t matter!” she tells him as she grabs his hand and lifts him up, Ed red with embarrassment. She giggles, “Move your feet!”

Ed looks down, watching his steps, making sure his big old boots aren’t going to crush her toes or anything. But then he feels her fingers under his chin, she lifting his face to look at her. With a smile, she twirls away from him, her dress a swirling cloud, moving and swaying with the rhythm of her body. Ed tries to loosen up, moving his shoulders a bit and starting to smile, Al in the meanwhile twirling in circles like a silly person.

And Noa shakes her way back up to Edward, taking him by the hand as they dance into the night.

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The moon is high, the sky is black, the stars are twinkling bright. The fire has died down but is still alive, warming the travelers in the night.

Serkan and Lucine sleep in a tent, while many others sleep in the bed of the truck or on the ground. Al is also asleep, but Ed and Noa are not to be found.

They sit alone, together, by the riverside, watching the waters flow slowly by, the liquid disturbed only for but a moment as an insect briefly touches the surface, stirring the ripples of moonlight,
taking them away into the darkness.

Ed stares out onto this serene scene. “It’s so nice out here… And nice to finally relax.”

Noa nods, she also looking out to the river, listening to the crickets who have now come out in full force to serenade the night. “…I want to thank you, Edward.”

"For what?” he asks, looking over to her.

Her eyes are downcast, looking down at the ground beneath her as she says, "For being my friend… I’ve always been so lost and alone… but… Even through all my faults…” Her eyes rise to meet his, “You’re the only one who’s been kind enough to forgive me…”

Ed gives a bit of a somber smile, “…Probably because I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life… I know what it’s like to need forgiveness…”

"Oh Ed," she lays her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes. “It’s so nice being here with you.”

Ed, in the meanwhile, has stopped breathing momentarily. His eyes widen, his pupils constrict, and he looks both ways, afraid someone might see.

"Uh, Noa," he says, a little nervously, "You seem really tired. Maybe you should go to bed."

"Hmm?" she hums, and then softly she says, "No. I like it here…”

"Oh…” And Ed looks out to the river…

Later that night, while everyone is dead asleep, Edward nudges his brother. “Al,” he whispers. “Al, wake up.”

"Huh?” Alphonse stirs awake, rubbing his eyes. "What is it?"

"Come on, Al. It’s time to go."

"Go? But why?" Al asks, confused and distraught.

"Because. It just is. Now let’s go." Ed turns around, carrying his suitcase with him.

Quickly and quietly, Al grabs his things and starts to follow Edward. But then he stops for a moment, looking back at Noa, she sleeping peacefully in the grass… and then he turns and follows Ed off into the night…

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Next episode:
Reviews:

Chapter End Notes

To all Ed/Noa shippers: Sorry, this is not that kind of story. To all who don’t ship Ed/Noa: I bet you’re glad to hear that aren’t you? I’ve got nothing against the Ed/Noa ship, but I just thought you all should know.

Also (Psst! Keep reading til the end of Chapter 4. That's where shit gets real. Chs 1 - 3 suffer from what I call 'Novel Syndrome': that is, they're all just setup. I'd still read them, just so you know what's what, but Ch 4 is where things take off).
The morning air is cool and the sky so richly blue as Ed and Al walk along the side of the country road, the hills and trees stretching out around them – when from behind, they hear a truck. Ed is nervous at first, but as he peeks back over his shoulder, he realizes that it is no one he knows. So he sticks out a thumb, and, much to their luck, the truck slows down.

"Hey there!" Ed says to the driver with a grin, "Wouldn’t mind taking a couple of hitchhikers to the
next town, would ya?"

"No problem!" The driver responds. "If you don’t mind riding in hay! Just hop on in the back!"

Al gives a nod, “Thank you, sir.”

"Yeah, thanks, mister!" Ed says and he and Al make their way to the back and climb aboard.

The little truck chugs along, puffing out little spurts of black smoke every now and again in a noisy ambling fashion, its dark smogginess lifting up towards the white clouds in the sky.

Al sighs and rubs his tummy. “Oh… I’m hungry, Brother. We should have taken some food with us.”

"It wasn’t ours to take…” Ed says as he looks to the side, elbow on knee as he thinks.

Al is quiet for a moment as he silently watches his brother. “…Why did we leave, Ed?”

…Ed does not answer. And then he closes his eyes. “…I didn’t want Noa getting dragged into this whole uranium bomb business. She has enough troubles as it is.”

The truck bumps along, the sound of gravel crunching under the tires as they move along the otherwise empty road.

"But you know, Ed," Al says to him, "…Noa seemed really happy to have you around."

Edward ignores his brother.

* *

The little truck putters along its way, and finally a town comes into sight - brick and cobblestone as far as the eye can see, burnt-orange roofing on seemingly every building, and a lovely large clock tower greeting the morning sky. The truck finally comes to rest in front of a general store, the engine dying down, but with the slightest hum still audible, some clinking and clanking arising from the hood as the old girl winds down.

Ed hops out of the back of the truck, pulling his suitcase with him, the driver in the meanwhile getting out of the cabin, whipping his door closed behind him with a hearty grin as he puts a cigar in his mouth. “Welcome to Ingolstadt, boys! Ever been here before?”

"No sir," Al responds.

The man, playing with his trouser suspenders, looks as though he’s proud to give them the shorthand tour - obviously an old man who loves telling stories. “Yep, Ingolstadt - birthplace of mad scientists.”

"Huh?" Ed raises an eyebrow.

"Yep. This is where the Illuminati got started, and where they say Dr. Frankenstein brought his monster to life!"

"Frankenstein?" Al asks, tilting his head in curiosity.

The man continues, “Don’t tell me you’ve never read Frankenstein! That there’s a good book right there. A mad genius of a scientist brings a dead man back to life, but it goes mad and starts killing people.” The man shivers, “Chilling! But good!”
Edward hums lowly to himself, grimly, “Bringing the dead back to life… I know that story…”

Alphonse asks of the man, “What’s the Illuminati?”

"Also a bunch of mad scientists," he says. "I don’t know a too whole lot about them, but they had a bad reputation for being evil-doers or something or other like that. I really don’t care, but it’s fun to tell stories.” He leans over, winking as he brashly nudges Ed in the arm. "Works great for keeping the kids in line! Ha! Just threaten them that some Illuminati ghost will whisk them away in the night and do evil experiments on them! Haw-haw-haw!"

"Yeah…” Ed steps aside just a tad to get away from the cigar smoke billowing his way. "Well thanks for the ride," he says to him, and he and Al begin to walk away.

The driver waves to them, “You all be safe now! Don’t go wandering down strange alleys!”

Al scurries up to his brother, suitcase in hand. “You don’t think anything he said is true, do you Ed?”

Ed says, “If we were in Central, yeah, I might believe him. But so far, I haven’t seen anything obscenely bizarre out of this world. Sometimes I think to myself that this place makes more sense. But then I look around me and I see the exact same mistakes being made – only by different means…”

Al sighs to himself. Why must his brother always be so cynical? He changes the subject – “So, what do we do now?”

"Well for now we need to find a place to stay for the night. There’s no way we can go sniffing around for a bomb if we’re not prepared."

"But where will we stay? And where will we even begin to LOOK for a bomb?"

"If we’re going to find that uranium bomb, we’ve got to start investigating – talk to anybody who might know about something like that."

"Like who?"

"Well, the military for one; but I doubt they would tell civilians like us anything. And I’m not too crazy about joining the military all over again."

"What about a university?" Al suggests.

"Hey, you’re right," Ed brightens up, "Universities here do a lot of research for the government. If we can snoop around their chemistry departments, we might be able to dig something up. But where to find a university at this hour…"

Al rubs his stomach with a little sigh, “Oh, I’m still hungry. We haven’t eat since last night and we don’t have any food.”

"Well then let’s just get something to eat then," Ed says.

Al looks over at his brother, “With what money?"

With a sly smile, Ed pulls a small change purse out of his pocket. “Gracia gave this to me before we left Munich – sort of a parting gift.”

"Really!?” Al’s eyes light up. "That’s great! Thank you, Gracia!"
"Come on, knucklehead, let’s go get something." And the two boys trot off through the streets of town.

After a little bit of searching (and asking for directions after Ed got them both lost) they find a nice tavern, rather big actually. A well-preserved deer head rests over the large fireplace at the end of the hall, its grand old antlers collecting dust while burly working men sit at the bar drinking their 'still. A waiter bustles about, bringing out food and grog for the lot of them, meat and potatoes all around, the smell of fresh beer lingering in the air, complemented by the smell of tangy sauerkraut and plump juicy sausage.

Al sits down, so happy. “Oh, it all smells so good!”

Ed pulls out his chair and takes a seat. “Yeah. I like those little white sausages the best. Oh, but don’t touch the shredded cabbage. Boy does it taste rotten!”

"Is that the vinegar smell?"

"Yeah, that’s it all right. It's not even vinegar - it's fermented. ROTTEN is more like it." Ed looks around at his surroundings, noticing a set of stairs. "Huh. I wonder if there’s an inn up top. We might consider staying here…"

"Yeah!" A random shouting comes from the corner of the tavern. Ed looks over to see a small group of men are gathered there, probably playing a drinking game of some kind he assumes.

Al picks up a menu off the table. “I wonder what they have here…” And then suddenly his face turns blue with horror. “Oh my gosh! Brother! Look at these prices! We can’t afford this!”

"Calm down, Al. Don’t let the prices fool you,” Ed, sitting somewhat sideways in his chair, tells him as he picks up his own menu. “They may look like a lot of numbers, but they’re pretty empty.” He gently tosses his menu onto the table. "Dad was surprised by them too."

Al is quiet as he sort of twiddles his thumb on the menu, thinking. Then he asks, “…What happened to Dad? Why isn’t he here now?”

Ed, quietly, stoically, is looking down at the table. He, with his elbow on the table, fiddles with the menu in front of him with his thumb, opening and closing it rhythmically like a clock with a tick-tock. He is quiet for a moment before he finally begins to speak. “…I know that you said that you transmuted Wrath and Gluttony... that those who came through the Gate could be used as material to open it… Well… In order to open the Gate on this side… the Thule Society… …Envy wasn’t the only one who came through the Gate, now was he?"

Al wasn’t sure if he wanted to hear the rest – not because he was afraid of what was going to be said, but because he was going to have to make his brother say it.

"...He said he wanted to atone for his sins... And he let Envy bite him in half…"

Al’s eyes fall heavily to his lap, both boys sitting there quietly, a long silence stretching between them. “… Why? …Why couldn’t he ever just stay with us? Why does he always have to be someplace else?"

Ed sighs through his nose. “I dunno…”

A waiter comes by and the boys order their meals, the silence between them a little awkward. The
"You told me that Envy came out as a dragon on this side. Why is that? So far as I’ve seen, people on this side of the Gate look the same. Just like Gracia and Mr. Hughes."

"Yeah I know," Ed says, looking to the ceiling for a moment. "Maybe that was Envy’s truest form? Or maybe that’s the only one he could take that would get him through to this side safely. You saw what happened to those guys from the Thule Society."

Al nods a little grimly. “They were dead before they even reached our world. At least that’s what’s Officer Falman and Major Armstrong said.”

Ed smiles, asking a little enthusiastically, “How have they been? How’s everybody been?”

Al timidly shrugs, “They’re okay, I guess. I’ve spent most of these past few years training under Teacher – or training again with her I should say.”

Ed snickers, “You had to put up with Izumi for a second time, huh? So how are her and Sig doing?”

Once more, Al’s eyes have fallen to his lap. “…She passed on, I’m afraid…”

Ed looks over towards the fireplace, his face somewhere between sad and angry. “…I guess that was going to happen eventually…” He gives a grumbling sigh, “Though I’m surprised she didn’t live forever. Seems like she would have punched Death right in the face and told him to get lost.”

Though sad, a bit of a smile crawls its way up Al’s face, he knowing Ed’s words to be true. The teacher was certainly not one to mess with.

Al once more picks up his fork, though he’s yet to actually pick up any food as he keeps talking, “Well, who knows? Maybe she’s come over to this side now.”

Ed shrugs, “Not necessarily. There may already be an Izumi Curtis in existence here – like how there’s already a Hughes and a Gracia. This Hughes is the same age as the other one as far as I know; he didn’t have to wait for the other one to die to be born. And even if there is someone like Teacher, that doesn’t mean it’s actually her.”

Al nods. “I know. I didn’t get to speak with Officer Hughes for very long after we closed the Gate, but I didn’t get a very good feeling from him. He seemed really… grumpy, I guess. I’m not sure how else to put it. He’s nothing at all like the Brigadier General.”

Ed smirks, scooting his potatoes around his plate, “That’s right, he was promoted wasn’t he? Same thing with Mustang – he’s a General now too, but he’ll always be the Colonel in my head.”

Al chuckles, “Don’t say that to him. I’m sure he’d give you an earful.”

Ed also laughs, “Yeah I can hear it now,” he says, putting on a pompous air, “Fullmetal! You need to learn some respect for your elders! Blah blah blah, I shoot fire, blah.”

Al laughs at his brother’s tomfoolery, “Come on, you know General Mustang’s not that bad.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ed admits. “Still, General…” His eyes narrow slightly, the slightest bit of bitterness in his voice, “They only gave that rank to Hughes as a lame apology for killing him. They really think some title will replace what they took away from his wife? From his daughter?”
Al tries to console him, “Brother, that’s in the past. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

Ed hums, annoyed at the situation, shoving a potato in his mouth, he chewing noisily for a moment. “…Yeah, well if anything, maybe my pestering this world’s Hughes will succeed in him and Gracia getting married. In some small way, maybe that will put the universe back in order.”

Al shrugs, “I dunno, this Hughes is different from the other one. Gracia seemed about the same, and I don’t know if she’d go for someone so cold.” He then asks, "But why so different? Why wouldn’t they be the same no matter what side of the Gate?"

"Different world, different experiences," Ed says to him. "Maybe this Hughes didn’t have a very happy childhood or something. Or maybe he had wanted to be in the military and all he could make it as was a local cop. I’ve noticed the people here have a mean-streak for revenge when they feel they’ve been gypped somehow."

"Like how?"

"Well like this inflation and all the money being worthless. It’s only because they lost some war and now have to pick up everybody else’s slack." Ed shrugs his shoulders, "They feel gypped and since they can’t take it out on the countries who wronged them, they’re taking it out on the people they don’t like within the country."

Al nods, solemnly. “Like Noa, you mean.”

"That’s right. Because she’s different and they can." Ed tosses a bit of sausage in his mouth grumpily. "Yeah, big bunch of men they are, picking on a helpless girl like that…"

Al asks, “If you care about her, then why didn’t you stay to protect her? She might need you.”

Ed waves him off, “Nah, that’s all right. She’s got plenty of people now, including Scar, mind you.”

"He’s not Scar, Ed – his name is Serkan." Again, Ed waves him off, kicking back and nonchalantly putting his feet on the chair nearest him. “Yeah, but you know who I mean. And trust me, if anybody tries to mess with him, I’m sure he’ll just smash his guitar over their heads.”

Al leans forward, a little agitated. “But you said so yourself, Ed – different world, different experiences. This Scar never fought in any wars. He seems much more peace-loving; I doubt he’ll be one to fight anybody.”

Ed changes the subject – “The point is you and I are pretty different in our own way. We could easily become a target of that stupid Worker’s Party.”

"Worker’s Party?" Al asks, sitting back again as he calms himself. "What’s that?"

"The result of the war: a bunch of angry men who feel as though they’ve been gypped and want to get even with someone somehow. They feel it’s the government’s fault they lost the war, and so they want to rule the country. Sure, it’s fine for people to fight for their rights, but it’s unnerving to me how they do it in such big groups. It feels more like a mob and less like a political party."

Al playfully retorts, "I thought political parties were mobs.”

Ed just gives a half a grin and flicks a little chunk of potato at his kid brother.
Al finally starts eating off his plate, and then notices a little mound of limp white something-rather. He picks it up with his fork. “What is this?”

Ed points at it with his fork, “THAT is the nasty shredded cabbage I was telling you about.”

Al gives it a sniff. “Whoa! Very tart!”

"I know!"

Al looks it over for a moment, twirling it around his fork. Then slightly, just ever so slightly, he brings it nears his mouth.

"Oh, Al, no!" Ed says.

And then Al shoves the sauerkraut in his mouth and chomps into it. Immediately his face scrunches together, the ‘sour’ part of sauerkraut living up to its name, Ed laughing at the funny face his brother makes as Al swallows, then opening his eyes. “Mmm! Yummy!”

"Really? Ew!" Ed says, still laughing a bit.

"You should try some, Ed."

"No way!"

"Come on!" Al urges with a smile, Ed fighting the whole time as Al leans over the table with sauerkraut on his fork, trying to force-feed Edward, both laughing like silly people. Al finally manages to sneak a bit of it into his brother’s mouth, and reluctantly Ed swallows.

"Hmm," he says surprised. "You know, that’s actually not bad. I guess Alfons just wasn’t good at making sauerkraut."

"Me?" Al asks pointing to himself, and Ed realizes what he’s said.

"Oh. Not you – Heiderich…” he says a bit sadly, thinking back to his not-so-long-ago friend.

Al tilts his head just a bit as he looks to his brother. “…What was he like?”

"You would have liked him, Al. He would have been like a second brother to you." Ed gives a bit of a grin. "Even though we were about the same age, he was like a big brother to me. Now I see why you like having a big brother so much."

Al nods with a smile. But both of their attentions are drawn away from their conversation by noise coming from the back corner of the tavern.

A group of men stand around as another man stands on top of an old crate, shouting to them:

"Are we gonna stand for it anymore?!!"

"No!" They say in unison.

"Are we just going to let all these immigrants, these filthy animals, take our country away from us?!!"

"No!"

"And what are we gonna do about it?!!"

"And why aren’t we doing that right now?!!"

The small crowd cheers.

"Don’t celebrate!” their leader scorns them. "Because you AREN’T doing anything about it, ARE ya?! You CAN’T do anything about it, CAN you?! It’s because the GOVERNMENT won’t LET you!"

"Boooooo!"

Al looks back to Ed. “What’s going on over there?”

Ed just sighs angrily, mixing his potatoes with his fork. “THAT would be the Worker’s Party I was telling you about – a bunch of drunk guys listening to an idiot on a soapbox.”

The idiot leader continues: “We’re the better nation!”

"Yeah!"

"We’re the better people!"

"Yeah!"

"And our lack of action is just destroying our own country!"

"YEAH!"

"So why don’t we rattle the steel cages of the government and make them do their damn jobs?!" "YEAH!"

"HEY!” Ed shouts. The crowd parts so that the leader can see him, all heads turning towards Ed. "Can you keep it down? I’m trying to eat my dinner and you’re disturbing me."

The leader on his crate shakes a threatening fist. “Why don’t you just mind your own business and stay out of it, shorty?!”

There is a passing moment. And then Ed stands, very silently, his fist trembling at his side.

A drop a sweat rolls down Al’s face. “Um… Brother?”

Suddenly Ed bursts aloud, teeth sharp and veins popping from his forehead. He goes running straight for the man, screaming at the top of his lungs, “WHO YOU CALLING SHORTY?! I’LL BITE OFF YOUR FACE AND THROW IT BACK UP AND STICK IT ON YOUR BUTT!”

The men in the crowd intercept, stepping in front of Ed, grabbing his arms and legs – but with very little effort, Edward throws them off, running straight for their leader and punching him square in the jaw, with his metal fist no less!

The man falls off his makeshift podium and ingloriously lands on the bar, shattering glasses and scaring people.

One of the followers throws a beer bottle at Ed’s head, but he ducks, tackling his attacker. The stray bottle hits an innocent bystander in the face, his friend getting riled. “Hey!” He jumps into the
fight, going after the man that Ed has down on the floor.

But one of the Party members goes after that guy! And then another guy jumps in! And another! Until finally the whole tavern has gone insane!

Al covers his head as a chair flies over his head. “Ed!”

Ed looks over, getting ready to run to his brother, but an angry tavern patron comes running at him with a bar stool. Ed trips him, pushing him in the back and sending him straight to the floor. One guy however does manage to hit Ed in the metal shoulder, with a beer stein no less, sending a shivering down Ed’s nerves. He turns around, fist held high in the air, prepared to punch-

SNAP!

Ed looks at his wrist in surprise to see a handcuff on him! And a couple of officers standing right behind him!

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Ed and Al sit quietly by themselves in a jail cell, Ed grumpy and Al sort of anxious. Ed grumbles, then looking over to his brother, saying, “You don’t have to be in here with me, you know.”

Al just gives a big smile, trying to play off his embarrassment, “Sure I do! I punched one of the cops who was trying to arrest you!”

Ed gives an angry sigh, “Great.”

"Well, look on the bright side,” Al says to his brother. "At least we have a place to stay for the night.”

Ed almost laughs, but instead turns to him, “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you planned this.”

"At least as far as punching the cop goes…”

Ed just chuckles in his chest and turns away to lie down. “Good night, Al.”

Al smiles, watching his brother rest. He looks away, out through the small grate window, out to the dark skies… Quietly, he says to the bright stars above, “Good night, Mom. Good night, Dad…” And he lies down.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:
FULLMETAL AFTER

CHAPTER THREE
TO THE UNIVERSITY
The heat and hum from the idling bus mixes with the smell of exhaust as men load luggage into the vehicle. Ed and Al hand the driver their tickets as they board and they each take a seat, patiently waiting as the line of people filtering in all do the same. Ed looks out the window as the bus revs
up, and the town of Ingolstadt shrinks from their sight, left behind them forever.

Al stretches his arms and attempts to rest as he leans back against the mildly comfortable bus seat. "Sleeping on a jail bench isn't much fun."

"Yeah," Ed agrees. "At least they only kept us overnight. I was sure they were gonna keep us in there for life after you punched that cop."

Al laughs, "Yeah, that was sort of spur-of-the-moment. But that's only because you caused such a ruckus."

Ed shrugs, "Oh well."

Al sits up a bit. "So where are we going now, Brother?"

"I hear there's a university at the end of this line," Edward tells him. "If anyone would know anything about uranium, it'd be a chemistry department. It's the universities that do the majority of research – the government just sort of bums off of them."

"Didn't, um," Al thinks for a moment, "The man you said looked liked Führer Bradley - didn't you say he showed you a picture of the bomb? Didn't he say where he got it?"

"Oh, you mean Fritz Lang," Ed says, confirming this world's version of their once-great leader. "I don't know. Maybe he did say where he got it. But I was so shocked when I saw it, I don't think I was listening..."

"When we get to a phone, don't you think we should call him?"

Ed shrugs again, putting his arms behind his head and closing his eyes to rest. "Worth a try, I suppose - if he hasn't fled the country already. He's not too akin to these crazy Worker's Party people. That and he says there are more jobs for filmmakers in America."

"America?" Al asks, leaning forward a little. "What's that?"

Ed opens one eye, and then sits up. "Oh yeah. I forget that you're not familiar with the geography of this place. It's a country way across the sea from here. It's real popular for whatever reason. A lot of people move there because they say it's a land of opportunity and freedom or something like that." Ed leans back again. "All I can say is the grass is always greener..."

Al rubs his tummy and sighs. "I'm so hungry. At least the police could have given us some breakfast this morning."

Ed scoffs. "The policemen can't even feed themselves. Why would they feed us?"

Al sits back in his chair, a little grumpy from fatigue, sighing, then looking to his brother. "Did Dad say why it is that everyone's so poor?"

"Like I said last night, it's 'cause they lost the war. That was actually pretty good for me and him, though. We were living in a country called England before this, though I hear they're in just as bad of shape as Germany is. But then he and I came here, following scientific minds. Should've just stayed in England if I'd known it'd be this much trouble."

But Al smiles. "Things happen for a reason, Brother. If you'd never come here, I'd still be on the other side of the Gate."
Ed looks over at his brother and gives half a smile, "Yeah..." then he looks out the window, a bit of sadness on his face as he wonders...

Al, though, is looking out the front of the bus, not noticing his brother's expression. "I'm glad we took a bus," he says. "I'm tired of walking. I just wish we'd have had enough for a train."

Ed reaches in his pocket, pulling his small change purse out. "Yeah, but this money that Gracia gave us isn't going to last forever."

"It would have," Al says a bit sourly, "If we'd have stayed with Noa."

Ed just looks out the window, ignoring his brother.

* *

The bus rolls into the lively little city, driving along with all the other cars and trucks that criss-cross the busy intersections, people walking up and down the sidewalks, a lovely steeple visible over the treetops. A clock tower stands in town square, ringing out with boisterous sound, announcing to all those near and far that it is the top of the hour.

Ed looks out the window, pointing. "There it is, Al. That's the university there, I bet."

When the bus stops at the station, Ed and Al get off, kindly taking their luggage from the workers as they unload the baggage, loading them up into a pile. Finding a nice quiet corner somewhere, Ed pulls out his coin purse and proceeds to count the money they have, after which he promptly sighs.

"This is barely enough for one hotel room. We'd better get jobs quick, or we'll be living on the street."

"We can always camp out like we did back on the island," Al says to him.

"Yeah, but try finding a rabbit around here. Our bad luck, it'd be somebody's pet," Ed says as he pockets the money, starting to walk along.

Al follows in behind, quietly. "We could have been camping with Noa. And Serkan and Lucine. Then we wouldn't have had to worry about a hotel room..."

Ed continues to walk, ignoring his brother.

There is a strangely serious look on Al's face. "...Why did we leave Ed?"

...Edward does not answer.

Al asks, "Why did YOU leave?"

Still, Edward walks.

"...You were afraid that somebody might actually get close to you... is that it?" Alphonse pries, but still his brother will not answer. Ed doesn't even turn to look at him. There is a long silence as the two boys continue to walk along. Finally Al says, "...You're waiting for Winry, aren't you?"

And then Ed stops.

They're both very quiet, and when Al finally does speak, his voice is strangely grown-up for a child. "You're not going to find her, Ed... And even if you did, it's not the same Winry. And you
know that."

Ed clenches his fist tightly... and then he walks on.

Al sighs in his chest and continues to follow.

* 

After much (silent) walking, Ed looks up and finally sees what he's been looking for. "There it is!"
he points excitedly. "A university! I knew it! Ha ha!" He jogs up to its entrance, Al running behind.

"Wait for me, Brother!"

"Ah, this is great!" Ed rejoices with a big smile. "Like I said before - chemistry is this world's
alchemy. And with yours truly being the best alchemist around, along with all that work I did
under Dr. Oberth, I'm sure to get a job here! We'll be sitting high in no time!" Ed dashes off into
the grounds, Al still trying to keep up while carrying his suitcase.

"Brother! Slow down!"

* 

"What do you mean you won't hire me?!" Ed demands to know as the man on the other side of the
desk clears his throat.

"I'm sorry, but you're simply not qualified. You have no formal schooling. The references you gave
us don't check out. I'm sorry, but the university just can't take chances on a dark horse. I'm very
sorry."

Ed leaves the office, closing the door behind him with a grunt, he then sliding his hand down his
face. A janitor lady is standing there, leaning on a mop. "So, how'd it go?" she asks him.

"Not good," he tells her, his hand still resting on his face, he exhausted. "They won't even give me
a chance to prove myself."

"Yeah, I know," she consoles, "It's tough to get a job these days, what with the economy and all."
She gives a bit of a sad smile. "Listen - if it's any consolation to you, I'm looking to hire on a few
more janitors."

"Huh?" Ed looks over at her.

"It's not much, but it pays. At least it might put a roof over your head and some food in your belly."
Ed gives a half-hearted smile, glad to finally see some kindness, no matter how humble. "Thanks."

* 

With mops and buckets in their hands, Ed and Al look at the campus that lay before them.

"Well buddy," Ed says to his brother, "We've got a lot of work to do."

"Better get started then," Al says, and they go their separate ways.

~

Ed starts in a restroom with a brush and a sponge - though the grout in the tiles won't come clean.
He scrubs harder, with the same result, finally sending Ed into a crazed scrubbing fury with a string of screaming to follow - "AAAAAAHHHH!"

~

Al's a little less cranky about the whole prospect. Cheerfully he walks down the hall, pushing a broom and moving all the dust and dirt into one corner to scoop it up - however, only being thirteen years old, he can't help but attract the attention of all the adults. He's such a tiny janitor...

~

Ed enters a lecture hall, picking up a small trash can and dumping the trash into a larger trashcan that he’s been rolling along, but then he stops. The professor at the front of the class doesn't even notice him, but instead continues his lesson:

"The unstable nucleus of the atom continues to lose energy, the energy radiating outward - hence why we call it 'radiation'..."

Interested, Ed looks around the room to make sure no one is looking. And then quietly, he pulls out a chair and sits down.

~

Al is in the dining hall, mopping the floors as people move to and fro to find a place to sit and eat. Over at one table, some students stand around, watching the little boy, they chuckling amongst themselves.

"Hey! Watch this!" one says to the other.

He knocks over a cup of juice onto the floor, and immediately as the wooden sound hits, Alphonse hears the noise, and quickly he jogs over and mops it up. With a nod and a smile, he triumphantly returns to where he was before, unaware of the fact that the boys are laughing at him.

Another one knocks over yet another cup. But this time Al catches on. With a grimace, he marches over and mops the mess - and with a turn on his heel, smacks the man in the face with his mop.

"Hey! You little runt!"

And Al marches away.

~

Ed in the meanwhile has resumed his duties - though he now wishes he hadn't: in this particular hall, the restroom isn't very modern. Suffice to say it is only a drain on the ground and nothing more. Ed’s face is blue as his eye twitches, thankful he's wearing gloves. But still...

~

In the courtyard, Al is picking up trash and shoving it into a bag as students walk along the grounds. He comes up to the water fountain and picks up a leftover bit of a sandwich, ready to throw it away when he spies some birds hopping about near him. He smiles.

~

Not too much while later that afternoon, as the land is painted with a tinge of gold from the sun, Ed tiredly walks up to his brother who sits on the edge of the water fountain, picking off pieces of
bread and feeding it to the birds as they twitter and dance about at his feet. Ed sits down next to him.

"Uck! I never knew people could be so filthy. How do women do it all the time, cleaning up after men?"

"I don't know," Al says, enjoying watching the birds. "I guess they just have stronger stomachs than us." He tosses a niblet of bread to one bird, another bird jumping for it. So he tosses another bit for the other bird, but it's still trying to get the first piece. And even though he knows they can't understand him, Al still tries to reason with the birds: "There's plenty of bread. You don't have to fight over it."

"Heh," Ed scoffs. "Seems like birds are no different than humans. Always greedy for what everybody else has."

Al gives him a bit of a cross look. "Do you always have to be so cynical about everything, Ed?"

Ed rests his hands on the water fountain, angrily looking to the sky. "We shouldn't be doing this. We're better than this! 'References don't check out!' HEH! Do you know what that guy said about Oberth’s dissertation?” Ed says, looking to Al. “He said it was ‘too utopian’! Is that stupid or what?! If I knew where my rocketry group was they could vouch for me, PROVE that rocketry’s not stupid, and I'd have a real job right now! But without references, the university won't even let me near any equipment - say for a mop."

"Where do you think they are, your rocketry group?"

"Heh! I know exactly where they are! That damn Thule Society has them under wraps so they don't say anything about the Gate..."

Al continues to feed the birds quietly, and for some reason, he seems a bit nervous to look at his brother. "...Do you think it'd be possible to re-open a Gate?"

"The only way Thule would ever achieve that is if they got their hands on us," Ed tells him. "And I don't know about you, but I plan to stay as far away from them as I can. We don't want to risk an interdimensional war."

Al nods. "Yeah. You're right about that..."

* *

After school one day, Ed is cleaning down the tables in the science hall. "Man, I'm so tired," he says to himself. "I wish this day was over already..."

"No, no, no!" he hears someone say. He looks up to see three students at a table near the chalkboard. One sits with papers and a calculator and two stand, one of the two saying, "For the last time, that's not going to work!"

"It would if you would just give it a chance!" the other protests.

"Chance has nothing to do with it! This is science!"

"It's called experimentation! How do you expect to ever see results if all you ever do is theorize?"

"You can't change the nuclear structure of an element! Nuclear transmutation requires decay over a long period of time!"
Ed grumbles to himself, scrubbing the table harder as he growls under his breath, "They wouldn't know transmutation if it hit 'em in the face..."

The student sitting down scribbles and erases furiously, trying to keep up the pace, "Will you two be quiet? How am I supposed to run these numbers if I can't concentrate?"

Ed looks at the board, a very long equation running across it. He stares at it for a moment, very quietly as the students bicker. Unnoticed, Ed walks over to the board, and with the side of his hand, uses his glove to erase something. He picks up the chalk, writes something down, and then walks back over to his table and continues wiping.

The student at the table sighs. "No, he's right. It won't work. It's hopeless."

The one student standing smiles as the other sighs, defeated.

"I was certain it was possible. Check the numbers again."

"Again?! I'm tired of that!"

"Well maybe there's something we missed." He looks over his shoulder to the chalkboard, pondering... and then he pauses. "Hey. That number there is different. Is that what you have written down?"

They all look to the board and then look down at the paper. "No."

"Run that one instead."

The student punches in the numbers, erases some things here, scribbles a few things there... "Huh. You know what... this might actually be possible..."

Pleasantly surprised, the skeptical student stands proud. "Good thinking!"

...But the second student is confused. "I didn't change it."

"...Well I didn't change it. Did you change it?"

"No, I didn't change it."

"Well who changed it?"

They're quiet for half a second, before they actually realize that there IS another person in the room. But it's just the janitor...

The skeptic points to the board... "Did... you change that?"

Ed looks up as if he hasn't been listening, "Hmm? Oh, yeah." He tosses his rag onto his shoulder for the moment as he stands up straight, hand on hip as he points to the board, "You forgot to take into account the composition of the material. The particle flux is completely dependent upon it. Without solving for that, you're not going to have a correct prediction for burn-up in a reactor." And then Ed just smiles and nods and goes back to wiping down the table.

The students are speechless. The leader of the group looks at the board, and then looks back to Edward. "...Would you... care to join us?"

Ed smiles that big toothy grin of his as he comes over, "Sure! I'd love to!"
That night, Ed comes walking into the small room they call an apartment that he and Al share, he closing the door behind him, then hanging up his coat. Al is in the kitchen, boiling a pot of soup (though it's more water than anything - they hardly have money for food), and he pokes his head out of the kitchen.

"Ed. Where have you been all night?"

Ed sits down in the only chair they have, hard and wooden, and he stretches his arms. "I had a great day, Al! You wouldn't believe it!" He chuckles. "I totally blew away these advanced chemistry students. Advanced! Can you believe it?"

"Wow," Al says, coming around the corner, he currently wiping down a bowl with a rag. "What'd you do?"

Ed, being smarmy, waves his hand as he smiles. "Aw, it was nothing. You'd think I was learning advanced science since I was a kid or something."

Al laughs and throws his rag at Ed.

Ed continues, "I mean, for the most part, their research is pretty solid - but their equation was totally wrong. You won't believe how long I spent convincing them to scrap it and start from scratch."

"And?" Al asks, "Then what?"

"I provided them with a new equation, one that actually works. They say they're going to show my work to the professor tomorrow."

"Really?!" Al asks excitedly.

"Yep!" Ed says as he gives an accomplished stretch and relaxes. "They'll be offering me a job in the science department in no time!"

Or maybe not... For just a few days later, there is a gathering around the science department bulletin board, Ed and Al noticing this little throng of people.

"I wonder what's going on over there, Brother," Al ponders.

"Don't know." Together they walk over, Ed stretching his neck a little bit to try to see, he and Al then gently pushing their way through the crowd. On the bulletin board is posted a small article.

"What is this?!" Ed spurts angrily.

The bulletin headline reads: **Amazing Breakthrough Discovered - Three students theorize that artificial transmutation may be possible**

Ed has a contained rage about him, his fist clenched though he says nothing.

Al however is outright infuriated. "They can't do this! That's YOUR equation, Ed! You should tell them!"

Ed closes his eyes and turns around, leaving, "Forget about it."
Al follows after him, stopping in front of him, "No! I will not forget about it! It's not fair!"

Ed sidesteps him, "Nothing is fair here, Al..." and he continues to walk on.

Al watches him walk away, the young boy with an angry sadness about his eyes.

* *

Though the Elrics aren't the only ones having their share of trouble.

"Dammit Fredericks! I told you this was a bad idea!" shouts one of the students.

Fredericks, the skeptic of the group, tosses a pack of paper at his classmate. "Keep it down, you idiot!"

The third student moans, "What are we going to do? The professor wants us to explain our findings to the board, and in FULL! I can't remember HALF the stuff that janitor taught us!"

"Shut it!" Fredericks covers up his classmate's mouth, growling in a hushed tone. "You want somebody to hear that?! Do you know what it'll do to the reputation of this university if anyone finds out that the JANITORS are smarter than the STUDENTS?! Funding will fall through! Not like it's hard enough already!"

The student sitting at the table sighs, "But still - we're in a real dilemma here. Sure we know the answer, but we can't explain WHY the answer is the answer it is."

The other student moves Fredericks's hand from his mouth. "Let's get that janitor back in here. Maybe he can help us again."

"Absolutely not!" Fredericks says sternly. "Do you think I'm gonna let some two-bit toilet cleaner take the credit for our findings?"

"But Fredericks, HE'S the one who figured it out-"

"Sure! After WE wrote down the whole equation! All he did was change a number!"

"On our equation! But what about this new one? That's all him!"

"All right, listen!" Fredericks finally concedes, "At the very least, I'll bring him back to give us a quick run-down before the meeting - but I DON'T want him in that board room, do you hear me?"

* *

Edward is walking the hallways of the university, they mostly empty at this hour as all have retreated home for dinner – but dinner (as mealy as it may be) will have to wait for Edward, for now he must push his broom along and get all the hallways cleaned up so they can be filthied again tomorrow.

But then he stops when something momentarily catches his eye – standing at the corner is Fredericks.

Ed narrows his eyes, giving him an angry glare, and then Ed starts to walk past, continuing his sweeping.

"Hey," Fredericks strikes up a conversation, "About the other day - thanks."
Ed just continues to push his broom, a sarcastic and angry tone to his voice, "You're welcome."

Fredericks follows after him, stopping him by grabbing his arm, "Now hang on a minute. I know what the school paper made it look like, but you've got it all wrong! We were glad to have you help us."

Ed turns around, knocking Fredericks's hand from him. "Sure! Is that why you failed to give me credit?!"

Fredericks shrugs smugly, "All right, so maybe in all the excitement we forgot to mention you - but it's not about who gets credit; it's about scientific discovery!"

"Yeah, sure." And Ed starts to walk off, abandoning the dust pile in this hall. But Fredericks jumps in front of him.

"Just hear me out - The professor wants us to present our findings to the board, but we're in a bit of snag. You see, we think they might ask us some complicated questions, and we'd appreciate it if you gave us a little bit of tutoring beforehand."

"Forget it. You're the genius here. You're on your own!"

"Ah-ah-ah!" Fredericks says in a sing-song tone, wagging a finger. "I wouldn't be too hasty." He produces from his breast pocket a lump of bills. "This might interest you. After all, science does pay. And these aren't Marks; these are Francs. REAL money."

Ed stops for a minute, looking at the money in the student's hand... he thinks about the thin pot of soup on the stove and the paper-thin walls letting the cold in... But then he thinks about the infuriated look on Alphonse's face this morning, something he rarely saw from his brother. Ed frowns, pushing the student's hand aside as he brushes past him, "Keep your money."

Fredericks is shocked as the janitor strides away. "Wait! Wait! Don't you leave me!"

Ed continues to walk away, but Fredericks stomps into the middle of the hall, pointing a finger at his back as he gets further away.

"If you don't help us, I'll see to it that you're fired!"

Ed stops in his tracks.

Fredericks gives a snakely smile. "See? Now you're listening to reason."

Ed's shoulders slump, though he doesn't turn to face the student.

Fredericks continues, a faux-concern to his voice, "It's a shame, you know." He shakes his head. "I'd hate to think of that kid brother of yours starving to death on the street. And honestly -" he shrugs, "If you get fired from a janitorial position, who would really hire a loser like you?"

Ed is quiet, his slumping shoulders betraying his low self-esteem at this moment. "...What do you want me to do?"

Fredericks smiles.

That evening, the members of the board all pile into the meeting room, each one shaking hands with the other, exchanging pleasantries and the like.
The president of the university walks into the room, nodding and saying hello to colleagues. And then he pauses, noticing the layout of the table - "Well, that's a nice touch." At every seat there is a glass of water, and at either end of the table a large pitcher of water. "I should say, we certainly won't be parched."

"Yeah," a colleague gives him a nudge with an elbow, "But we won't be the ones giving any speeches! It'll be the speaker's who are parched!"

Everybody gives a bit of a chuckle.

~

Meanwhile outside the room, the trio of students are panicking: "Where is he?! You said he'd show up, Fredericks!"

"Oh! We're doomed for sure!"

Fredericks grits his teeth. "He'll pay for this! Rrr!" He swings around, "Come on! We better not keep them waiting!"

They enter the board room, and their professor stands. "Ah! Fredericks! There you are! Mr. President, I'd like you to meet my top student Mr. Fredericks. I'm sure you'll find his presentation fascinating."

Fredericks nervously smiles and gives a bit of a wave. The board members all take their seats as the president speaks, "Yes, well let us not take up anymore of your time, gentlemen. Please, you may proceed."

Fredericks nervously clears his throat. "Ahem, yes, of course." His fellow classmates lift up a board with some diagrams on it as Fredericks, holding a long stick, points to it. "Members of the Board - if I may direct your attention to... our board. These are our findings. You see, here we have some diagrams of what we have found, and I'm sure that you'll find that what we have found is a very interesting find indeed, heh-heh..."

The president raises an eyebrow at Fredericks's nervous chuckling.

Again, Fredericks clears his throat. "Yes, well..." He angrily thinks himself, Damn you, Elric! When I get my hands on you!

~

After about ten minutes of listening to the students prattle on, the president of the board excuses himself to use the restroom. When finished, he washes his hands at the sink, sighing.

"May I offer you a towel, sir?"

The president looks to the side where stands a janitor. "Oh, yes, thank you," he responds, kindly taking the towel and wiping his hands.

"I see the water I left you made it's way through," the janitor smiles.

The president smiles back, "Oh, so you left that water for us. Thank you. That was very kind."

"Aw, no problem," the janitor humbly accepts. "I just wanted to make sure you gentlemen were taken care of. So, how's the board meeting going?"
The president sighs. "Not very well."

"Oh yeah? Why not?"

"Well, I must say, that I'm not all that impressed with these students. I was promised something big and all they've done is show me a bunch of drawings without explaining them. I feel more like they're dictating from a textbook than actually presenting something new." He sighs, "It doesn't help that they're not explaining anything to me," he pauses, saying to the janitor, "I was a general science major, more interested in electricity than anything. Though I studied chemistry it was never my strong point."

The janitor nods understandingly.

The president continues, "Anyway, they say they've created a new chemistry equation. But they didn't hand out any sheets with this new equation on it. They didn't even put it on any of those diagrams that they've showed us a hundred times over! Saving the best for last, I suppose. Stupid way to approach it, honestly."

"Really?" The janitor says. "Huh! That's funny! I had heard these three were geniuses! What all are they telling you then?"

The president throws up his hands as if to wave the whole business off. "Oh I don't know! They keep talking about isotopes and half-lifes and beta this and neutron that. I can't follow it. And that Fredericks character just keeps repeating the phrase, 'Nuclear Transmutation' like it's supposed to mean something."

"Oh," the janitor says with all casualness, "It sounds like they're trying to explain the constant neutron flux involved with transuranic subjects. You see, the transmutation rates can be solved, but only with the proper equation, making sure that your decay is a constant."

The president gives him a blank stare, so the janitor says,

"Basically that means if you speed up the nuclear reaction of an atom, you can pull a lot of energy out of it and actually turn it into another element." He winks at the president. "But I wouldn't try doing it though. You'd get some nasty radiation burns."

The president smiles, and slowly turning, raises an inviting hand to the door. "Would you... like to join us?"

The janitor gives a big toothy grin. "Why sure! I thought you'd never ask!"

~

In the board room, everyone waits for the president's return so that the meeting can resume. The door opens and in walks the president with another man - and the students look horrified!

"Gentlemen," the president says, "I'd like you to meet Mr. Edward Elric. I thought I'd let him sit in on our meeting."

The other two students look surprised and nervous, but Fredericks looks angry. He clears his throat and adjusts his tie, pridefully pressing forward. "Pleased to have you here, Mr. Elric."

"No," Edward chimes with a huge smile across his face. "The pleasure's all mine."

Fredericks looks as though he's stabbing knives through Ed with his eyes, but Ed just smiles that
smarmy, rather cat-like smile of his, looking very pleased with himself.

Fredericks continues, "As I was saying before we took a break: the actinoids show much more valency, and are more concentrated to the higher elements, atomic numbers 90 and above, or thereabouts."

"I see," Edward says, looking oh-so amused. "Please continue."

Fredericks growls and then turns to his diagrams. "Here we see a demonstration of how over a long period of time, a higher number element can slowly decay and become a lower number element."

Edward butts in again, "Essentially meaning that you can turn gold into lead. That's no big deal. I thought it was supposed to be the other way around."

"Mister Elric!" Fredericks hisses as he tries dearly to keep his composure. "If you'd KINDLY allow me to finish! Ahem! These transitional metals, as we'll call them, may, in a sense, not truly be elements at all, but instead just a step between two actual elements."

"Well that's just silly!" Ed says as if correcting a child. "Elements like uranium and thorium do have a set number of protons meaning that they can be classified as elements. Now, if we were talking about HALF a proton, that might be different - but when we're dealing with radiation, we're simply dealing with the isotopes. Just because the number of neutrons on each atom may differ, that wouldn't change the atomic number."

"Grr!" Fredericks's blood pressure is rising. "Yes! But when you lose neutrons, the MASS will change!"

"So what?!" Ed asks of the frustrated student. "That's like saying someone could stand to lose a few pounds, but that's not going change him from a man to a woman!"

The members of the board all begin laughing at the thought. Fredericks turns red with embarrassment as he shouts,

"It's not the same thing! Will you please allow me to finish my presentation?!"

"Sure, when you stop being wrong. Tell me, actinium is composed of one radioactive isotope, but what about actinoids?"

"Uhm, well-

"And you say they start at thorium - oh wait, no you didn't, because you can't remember your Periodic Table - "

"Now you stop right there!" Fredericks finally snaps. "How dare you come into this room and insult my intelligence!"

Ed continues on, very calmly, "You're the one insulting these gentlemen by wasting their precious time. I could take over the presentation for you, if you'd like. After all, you came begging to me this afternoon."

A few hums of “Huh?” and “What?” arise from some of the members, others whispering to one another. The professor looks to his student, "Fredericks - is this true?"

"No! He's lying!"
"Oh yeah?" Edward says, calming pointing a finger over to the other two students who stand in quiet fear. "Why don't you ask those two? Go on - tell everyone how I tutored you."

One of them opens their mouth, but Fredericks turns on him, "Not a word!"

"Why?" Ed asks. "If I really didn't help you, then there's no danger in them speaking."

Fredericks shouts, "Because you're making a mockery of my presentation!"

Ed looks at the professor. "You know what he does in your class all day, right? He sits there looking at pictures of girly magazines hidden in his textbook." Fredericks's face freezes over with horror."Got to tell you, those girls do look pretty good in those bathing suits, but I don't think that really has much to do with chemistry, do you? I mean, unless we start talking about the balance of hormones and all that-"

"That is it!" Fredericks yells. "Get out!"

"Why?" Ed pries, "You seemed so desperate for my help earlier today."

"I'll have you fired, do you hear me?! FIRED!"

"I thought you only threatened that if I didn't help you?"

Some gasps and murmurs arise from the board members. The professor finally stands.

"That is enough! Mr. Fredericks, Mr. Elric - I'm not exactly sure what the problem is between you two, but I demand that it cease." He calms down, "Now I brought these boys here to tell their findings, and that's just what they're going to do."

"Certainly," Edward says. "But I have a question. These are you smartest students?"

"Yes."

"Meaning that equation they wrote wouldn't be known by a humble janitor like me?"

"Janitor?!" The professor shouts with surprise. This time, the murmurs of the board are not so hushed!

The president nods, "Yes, I met him in the restroom while he was emptying trashcans."

Edward stands from the table and moves the students aside, walking to the chalkboard at the front of the room. He picks up the chalk and begins to write down a formula. When he's finished, he turns around with a smirk. "Well?"

The professor snatches the sheet out of Fredericks's hands, a sheet that only HE has! No one else in the room has it, nor is the equation on any of the visible diagrams...

"Well?" one of the board members asks.

The professor sets the paper down on the table, with a cross look of disappointment, "...Verbatim..."

The crowd is amazed.

Finally, one of the students snaps, "Oh it's true! It's all true! He taught us everything!"
Fredericks grabs him by the collar, "You traitor! Be quiet!"

The president stands. "That is quite enough! I am very disappointed in you boys, stealing this man's work, and trying to pass it off as your own!"

Edward cuts in, humbly, "Well to tell you the truth, sir, they did do most of the research. I just helped them hammer out the kinks and explained to them why this equation rather than theirs would work."

"And that's exactly what we're looking for in this university," the president says, "Initiative! No fear of starting from scratch! Bravery to chuck it all away and start at the beginning again! I'm tired of students who all they can do is recite from a textbook. If this country is to be great, we need some critical thinkers, men who can drive us into the future! Like my old friend Hermann Oberth always says, 'You gotta shoot for the skies!'

"Oberth?" Ed questions, brightening up, "I know him! I worked with him on his rocketry project!"

"Really?" the president queries enthusiastically. "Why didn't you say so, son? A friend of Hermann's is a friend of mine! Mr. Elric, how does a grant to do research for us sound?"

Fredericks looks sick with shock. "B-but Mr. President! He's a janitor!"

"And an intelligent fellow!" the president says. All the board members nod in agreement. "You owe Mr. Elric here an apology, and the three of you need to study harder! And as for you, Mr. Fredericks - if your teacher ever catches you looking at girly magazines during class, I'll see to it that he has you cleaning beakers for the rest of your university career!"

Fredericks gulps with shame and embarrassment. Defeated, the three boys pack their project and go along their way, and the meeting is adjourned.

As the members of the board leave the room, Edward approaches the president outside the door.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Elric?"

"Thank you for offering me a job."

"Certainly. I find it a shame that a boy as bright as you were left with nothing more than a broom."

"Yes sir. Well, at least you can brag to other universities that even the janitors here are smart!"

They both laugh and the president gives Ed a hearty pat on the back. "And a good sense of humor! I like you, son."

"Sir, I was wondering," Ed asks, "I'll be glad to do research for you, but only if you allow me to have my brother help me."

"Why certainly," the president obliges. "Of course," he explains, "He'll have to prove himself, but if he's anything like you, I'm sure he'll do fine."

"Thank you, sir. We won't let you down!"

Ed and Al walk up to the gates of the university, both of them well-dressed (although a suit on Al
looks a little funny for one his age).

Al fiddles with his tie. "I can't believe it, Ed. We're actually researchers at a university!"

"Yep. And now not only do we have enough money for food, we're one step closer to finding that uranium bomb."

Proudly, Ed and Al walk through the gates and down the path to the halls of knowledge.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Reviews:

Note ^ The spacing issue has since been fixed

Sidenote: To the Science Side of the Internet: If I got any of the above mumbo-jumbo wrong, by all means, tell me. I’ll try to fix it.

That aside, every time Ed starts rambling off sciencey words: NEEERRRD!!!!! He’s a great big nerd. Him and Al both. But I love them, my v smol sons.

Chapters 1-3 have all been set-up up to this point. Now that we got that out of the way, it’s time to get down to brass tacks. Now’s when the plot shows itself.
And it’s not that chapters 1 thru 3 are bad - it’s just that in novel-writing you’ve got to use those first few chapters to set everything up. Once we hit Chapter 4, it's full-steam-ahead.
The birds twitter in the sky as the early morning sun stirs the city to life. Chimneys burst to life with clouds of smoke as breakfasts are made, and window shutters open to let in the life of a new day.

Alphonse is laying in bed, snug in his covers, his blanket bundled up close to his face to keep himself warm. As a cloud moves through the sky, the sun peaks out from behind the little white...
tuft, and a golden ray falls through the window onto Al's face. Gently he stirs, his eyes dark with sleepiness. He stares out into the darkness of the room, silently... and he thinks to himself...

...Sometimes... when I wake up... I forget where I am... and I wonder... 'Why am I here?'...

He sits up in bed, rubbing his head to unmat his matted hair and get the sore feeling off of his scalp. Laying in the bed that sits beside his own is Edward, fast asleep and unaware of the world as he noisily snores, his blanket half kicked off the bed. Groggily, Al looks out the window, still thinking...

...And then I remember... This is where we live now... But still I wonder... is it home?

The year is 1925.

* 

The university hums with life as students move about its grounds, people moving in and out of buildings, some just getting ready to start the day, others having been there for hours already, even though it was just now morning.

Ed and Al are walking the grounds, heading for the Science building, carrying briefcases with them like proper university staff, when a fellow worker trots up to them.

"Hey Elrics! How are you this morning?"

"Hey, Zimmerman," Ed acknowledges as their coworker comes up alongside them. "We're all right," he replies with a bit of a smile, feeling pretty good today.

"Did you hear?" Zimmerman asks. "A researcher in Göttingen is going to be receiving the Nobel Prize!"

Ed gives a short chuckle, "Sounds like I should be working in Göttingen instead of here."

Zimmerman gives Ed a pat on the back, "Yeah but we like you here. And with you gone, who'll protect Al?" He gives Al a big rub on the head with a big smile. "Why he'll be at the mercy of all those pranksters we call researchers! They'll be rigging his locker full of vinegar and baking soda in no time!"

"I can take care of myself!" Al protests, moving the man's hand away.

Zimmerman laughs, "But you're still so short! Aren't you ever going to be tall like your brother?"

Al laughs, "Ed? Tall? You're taller than he is."

"Well, you know what I mean."

"And besides, you should have seen Ed only a few years ago. He-"

"ZIP IT!" Ed threatens, Al trying to stifle a giggle.

"Oof!" Zimmerman bumps into someone, a short man who’s only still on his feet due to his large frame (and rotund girth) stabilizing his footing.

"A-harumph!" the old man protests, his mouth barely visible for all his bushy white whiskers. “I say there!” He readjusts his glasses. “Watch where you're going!”
Zimmerman wrings his hands apologetically, “Sorry Professor Heidelmann, sir.”

Professor Heidelmann and the little group of professors who follow beside him continue along their way, and Ed can hear Heidelmann talking, his voice slowly fading as the group moves further away: “As I was saying, the philosophies that metaphysics present are often hard for many to comprehend. Yet they fail to see that there are many metaphysical properties already taught to them in their own religions...”

Ed shakes his head with a smile. “I'm glad I'm not in Philosophy department. I don't think I could stand all the talking they do.”

Al watches the professors go as he says to Ed, “I don't know. I kind of like what they have to say. It's interesting sometimes.”

“It's all a bunch of bologna in my opinion.”

Their friend gives a grin, “I think you just don't like people arguing against you. Kind of frustrating when somebody has a point, isn't it.”

Ed sternly looks at his co-worker, “Shouldn't you be at a test tube someplace?”

Zimmerman grins more, “Y’see? Someone argues with him and he changes the subject.”

Al smiles as well, “That's my brother!”

Ed gently pushes either of them by the head, moving them to the side, “That's it, both of you. Get to your labs and don't come out until I say so.”

In unison, both Al and Zimmerman say with a mock-child tone, “Yes Mr. Elric,” and all three of them go their separate ways.

* *

Al works in the Pharmaceutical division of the university, and though he enjoys working here, it is only a part-time job as he’s currently attending public school in addition to being an employee of the university (a special arrangement worked out by the university president and a principal who’s a friend of his). It’s a balancing act between showing up to work on time and finding the time to do his homework. With a mortar and pestle, he takes a few chunks of minerals and puts them into the bowl, giving them a good grind to mix them together into a fine powder, seeing what miracle cures (if any) he can concoct in the lab.

Ed works combining chemistry with machinery in the Chemical Technology department. The alchemist in Ed hasn't died - far from it. He still loves pulling things apart (though his colleagues certainly don't appreciate it when he tears down their hard work. But he always promises to put it back together, usually with better results). The distinct smell of a science lab mixes with that of an auto garage, and the sounds of clinking beaker glasses mix with the metal 'ting' of wrenches as the scientists keep busy with their work.

Always, though, Ed keeps his ears open for that key word – uranium. He’s looked into it: in this world, that element was discovered (or at least recognized) over a hundred years ago and had since then led to the discovery of radioactivity. But so far, nowhere, either in the university or elsewhere, had there been talk of using radioactive elements, uranium or otherwise, for weaponry. For better or worse, the trail had run cold.

*Maybe we’re lucky,* Ed thinks to himself as he absent-mindedly screws some machinery together.
Maybe the bomb was on a ship and the ship sank someplace, and now it’s at the bottom of the sea…

But wishful thinking doesn’t lead to results he knows.

Huskisson is still out there someplace. He furrows his brow with determination. If we can find him – we can find that bomb.

But much like news on the bomb, so far, the name ‘Huskisson’ had never been uttered by anyone on university grounds. Neither could Ed nor Al ever find any records of the man. It was if he were nothing more than a ghost.

Ed gives a cruel laugh, Maybe he was on the ship that sank… One can only hope.

Midday comes, and in rolling waves, hunger seems to strike everyone on campus as lunchtime rolls around. Some decide to eat off-campus, hitting one of several cafés or restaurants in the area. Others still make their way to the dining hall on campus, Ed and Al themselves meeting up their for lunch, Al’s workday having come to an end and his half-day of school getting ready to start.

They walk through the spacious room, each carrying a lunch pail with them (finding it cheaper to bring food from home than buy anything here), and Ed is scanning back and forth, trying to find an open table.

Al has a bit of skip as he walks (unable to escape the fact that he's still a bit of a child) as he excitedly talks: “And they say that with this machine, you can trace electrical signals in people's bodies!”

“Well?” Ed asks, intrigued. “Is that so?”

“Yeah! I mean, I guess it makes sense – the body runs off of electro-chemical energy – but being able to track it! That's so neat!”

“Yeah, that is pretty neat,” Ed responds, half-distracted, eyes still roaming the room. “Boy, it’s crowded in here today. If we don’t find someplace to sit quick, you might just have to take your lunch to school and eat there.”

“Aw,” Al bemoans. “I don’t like eating lunch there. There’s no one to talk to.”

“Come on, Al – I’m sure there are plenty of kids to talk to. You’ve just got to make friends with them is all.”

Al sighs to himself, looking down at the floor.

Groups of students cluster at different tables, all chit-chatting about something or other, professors doing the same. As Ed and Al pass one table, they can hear some professors in a heated discussion:

“I hear in America they're trying to make it illegal to teach Darwin’s theory of evolution.”

“Well they simply can't do that! Why withhold scientific findings?”

“It's not so bad. It's just a theory.”

“GRAVITY is just a theory - and we base practically everything on that!”
Ed shakes his head as he and Al pass the table. “Somebody's always got to be complaining about something,” he says.

Alphonse looks to his brother, “I think that's a shame - governments stopping people from learning.”

“They do it all the time,” Ed tells him, pointing out, “Like the military not telling us about what really happened in Ishbal. If you keep people in the dark, you can lead them to believe whatever you want.”

“Yeah, but you can’t fool them forever,”Al says, giving humanity the benefit of the doubt. “Eventually they’ll figure things out. People are smart”

“A single person is smart,” Ed tells him, “A group of people are stupid. Once you start to lump people together, nobody thinks anymore. All those brains between them and not a one of them in use.”

“You there!” Suddenly a pack of paper is shoved into Edward's face, preventing him from walking as he is startled. “I see you're a smart man! And I see that you hate being lied to! Well my good sir! Than you HAVE to read this! It's so very important!”

Ed brushes the man's hand aside, “I can't even see it! You've got it too close!”

Al looks on curiously, “What is it?”

“The truth, my friends! The truth! We are being lied to! And it must stop! The Jews who control our government are masters in the art of lying, and they're conspiring to destroy the Fatherland!”

Ed moves the man aside and angrily walks on, “Get out of here, you loon!”

The man forces the papers into Al's hands, Al nervous as the man continues, “Here! Take it! Arm yourself with knowledge!” And the man continues on his way, looking for his next convert.

Al looks down at the paper, the title reading Mein Kampf. “My Struggle?” Al asks, perplexed by the papers.

“It's just propaganda, Al,” Ed says to him, still walking on. “That's exactly what I'm talking about. You write down a few fancy words, you pass them out to people, and hope like hell they'll believe it.”

Standing in the shadows, unknown to the boys, is a man... He's at a distance, but not so far that he cannot hear them converse. He keeps an eye on them as they move through the dining hall.

“Who's Adolf Hitler?” Al asks, reading the title page again. “Is he important?”

“Nah,” Ed waves it off. “Probably just some idiot with a type writer. Crazy people like that never turn out to be important.”

When they start to get too far away, the man starts following them, though keeping enough distance between himself and them so as not to be noticed.

Finally finding a table, Ed and Al sit down and begin to pull their food out, Ed grumbling, “That guy shouldn't even be allowed to be passing out those papers on campus.”

“But isn't that the same as keeping knowledge from people?” Al asks.
“Yeah, but this is just a pack of lies here.”

“Well maybe that’s how some people feel about that evolution theory.”

“That’s different! That’s science!”

“Ah-ha!” Al poses with all smugness, “But how do you know it’s science? How do you not know that it’s all just a conspiracy theory constructed in a secret lab?”

“That’s just stupid!” Ed retorts.

Al gives a bit of a laugh. “But it’s the same principle,” he says. “Regardless of the material under scrutiny, there’s always the chance that the facts can be wrong.”

“Then why call them facts?” Ed protests, mildly miffed.

The mysterious man quietly takes a seat at the table behind them, facing the other way so that they cannot look him in the eyes.

Ed continues, “The point of facts is that they’re indisputable. If you can dispute their validity, then they’re not facts.”

Al argues, “Something can seem totally valid at the time until you get new evidence proving otherwise. Until that new evidence shows itself, then the fact as it stands is the truth.”

Ed raises his voice just the slightest bit, “It’s not the truth if it’s subject to change!”

Al asks, “So then what do you consider the truth, Ed?”

Ed is quiet for a moment, looking down at the table surface. “The truth is… Well it’s…” He hums quietly in his throat, saying, “…I guess I’m still looking for it…”

And the man smiles.

* 

The whole of the cityscape is painted with a lovely red hue, the sun lazily sliding down through sky, down towards the horizon to take a well-deserved rest for the night.

Many people have already returned home for the evening, others still remaining at the university, either doing homework or studying, or in the case of professors grading papers and the like. In Ed’s case, he just couldn’t pull himself away from his latest tinkering project, and now as he walks towards the front gates, he stretches with a yawn, then lays his hand in his pocket as he continues walking along, briefcase in hand.

I wonder what Al’s cooking for dinner, he ponders. ‘Course, then again, he should be doing his homework. Darn it! I wish I’d quit getting so distracted with work. I’m the adult here! I’m the one who should be cooking dinner…

But then Ed stops.

Standing down towards the end of the path is a man. He seems familiar – and yet, his presence is strangely… foreboding… ominous almost.

Why’s he just standing there? Ed ponders. Certainly he’s just waiting on someone, a friend perhaps. But if that were the case, then why is this man staring so intently at him?
And now he’s moving! And towards Ed! Ed tries to calm himself, sure that he’s just over-reacting. This is probably just a normal guy doing normal things, not a pick-pocket or anybody dangerous like that...

But as the man grows closer, Edward’s eyes widen as he is transfixed on his face...

Colonel Mustang?

The same dark hair, the same thin eyes, even that same smug smile on his lips – there he is, Roy Mustang, staring him in the face.

No, Edward reminds himself, That’s impossible. The colonel, uh – “general” – couldn’t have crossed over. Clearly this is a doppelganger, this world’s version of Mustang. ...Should Ed talk to him??

But before Ed can even make a decision, the man has already stopped in front of him, staring down at him. And Ed’s not sure what it is, but something in his gut is telling him this is a bad idea. Something about this man is... unsettling.

“Edward Elric, I presume?” the man asks.

Ed narrows his eyes a little, his distrust clearly showing. “Who's asking?”

“Allow me to introduce myself,” the man says, removing his hat with a slight bow. “I'm Roy Mustang.”

“Yeah, I thought so...”

“Hmm?” the man raises an eyebrow. “You've heard of me?”

“I've heard the name, That's all,” Edward quickly recovers.

“I see,” Mustang says, putting his hat back on his head and his hands in his pockets as he continues. “I've seen you here on campus quite often Mr. Elric, and I must say that I'm intrigued by your work.”

“Oh?” Ed asks rather emptily, his expression rock-solid, never budging, even though something deep down tells him to stop talking while he’s ahead, and yet his mouth keeps running, “Are you a professor here?”

“No,” Mustang responds, “Retired captain of the military, actually.”

Edward smirks with an inward scoff, Of course – dog of the military, go figure... Wait, the military? Damn it! Is that what this is about? What does this military want with me?

Mustang continues, “My associates and I are very interested in getting to know you. I thought if you'd please, you and I could have a little chat.”

Ed moves to the side, “No thanks. I've got to be getting home.” And he walks past Mustang, heading for the front gates.

Mustang turns around, watching Edward as he walks away. “Too bad. I thought perhaps you'd be interested to hear what we have.”

Edward stops. Have? Ed slightly turns to face him, “What do you have?”
“A source of great power, Mr. Elric,” Mustang tells him, a sly smile on his face.

Ed resists gritting his teeth. Did the military get their hands on the uranium bomb before we did? Damn! …But then why tell us? And for that matter, how would they even know that me and Al knew about it? Unless—

Ed’s eyes go wide, his pupils constricting.

 Unless he’s part of the Thule Society!

Ed can feel the blood leaving his arm and leg, running straight into his chest as his heart beats with trepidation. No! It couldn’t be! Mustang would never … But this world’s Hughes was a member of the Worker’s Party... who’s not to say that this world’s Mustang has gone down a similar path?

Mustang speaks again, “If you’re interested, I’d be more than willing to talk to you about it.”

Ed is ready to punch him right then and there to get the information out of this guy. But something stops him, he not sure what... Is it... fear?

“I heard you talking today, about how you’re seeking the truth,” Mustang says to him as he starts to walk closer. Edward clasps tightly to his briefcase, ready to strike him with it at a moment’s notice, but he remains steady as Mustang stops but inches away from him, saying, “‘Mighty is the Truth, and it shall prevail.’ If you want to know the truth, I suggest we get to know each other.”

Mustang tips his hat politely, that same unnerving smile on his face.

“Perhaps some other time then, Mr. Elric?”

And with that, he walks past, leaving Edward standing there, just the slightest tremble visible on the edges of the briefcase as Edward tries to still his breath…

*

“Really?!” Alphonse exclaims in surprise, he standing in the doorway of the kitchen as they talk. “I never thought we'd actually see him on this side!”

“Yeah, but I wouldn't get your hopes up, Al,” Edward tells him as he strolls across their apartment, laying his coat over a chair. “I plan to avoid him at all costs.”

“What?” Al asks in confusion, coming into the living room to take a seat, having to move their cat, Checkers, aside to do so. The cat mews at Al, Al stroking it while the little furry mass of black and white nuzzles his hand. “I don't understand. Why don't you want to talk to the general?”

“First off, he's not the general,” Ed says to him, his arms crossed. “You know that better than I do. These are two very different Mustangs we're dealing with. And quite frankly, I don't trust this one.”

“But why not?”

Ed looks away, thinking to himself for a moment. Then he says aloud, “Something in my gut tells me he's hiding something from me. He's not being sincere.”

“Wasn't General Mustang always like that?” Al gives a bit of an awkward smile, trying to lighten the mood, but it passes over Ed without fazing him.

“Yeah, but this is different somehow. I can't place it, but... I don't know...”
“But Ed,” Al asks, “How do you even know if this Mustang's trustworthy if you don't even get to
know him?”

Ed looks back at his brother, “Don't forget, Al, he's not the same Mustang. Different world,
different experiences, remember? Bradley on this side’s not hell-bent on ruling the world as far as I
know. And while the Hughes we knew was nice, this world’s Hughes was a real jerk. Hell! I even
saw Dante and she was just an actress or something!”

Al scratches his chin for a moment as he looks to the ceiling, pondering, “Wait, old lady Dante or
Lyra-Dante?”

Ed is too wrapped in his own thoughts to hear his brother. “All I'm saying is there's a high
probability that people on this side of the Gate come out as opposites from our world. Scar blew
people to little bits back there, but here all he did was drive a truck and play a guitar.” Ed glances
out the window, his gaze concentrated. “No matter how much he annoyed me, I’ve got to admit –
Mustang was our best ally. And If I’m right about this world being opposite… then that spells
trouble for us.”

Al looks down at Checkers, quietly petting him, the cat none the wiser to his owners’ concerns,
and after a quiet moment, Al looks up and smiles, pointing out, “Yes, but in our world, Mustang
was neither good nor bad. So maybe this Mustang is neither bad nor good?” He smiles awkwardly
with a bit of a half-hearted laugh, hoping his brother will lighten up a little – but Edward only gives
him an unamused, partly angry glance, and Al just sighs, returning his attention to the cat.

“Still...” Edward says as he looks at the floor, unable to uncross his arms for his nervousness. “He
said he has something... something powerful...”

“Powerful?” Al glances back up. “…What could he have?”

Ed narrows his eyes. “The uranium bomb.”

Al gasps. He jolts forward, scaring Checkers off his lap. “Brother! You don't mean he has it?!?”

“He never actually said it. But he's been following us around campus, and who knows for how
long. He may have found us simply because we were looking for it.”

Al stands, somewhere between nervous and excited. “Then you have to talk to him! Brother! This
is our first lead in a long time! We might actually be able to recover that thing!”

Ed moves his arms in a little tighter, still looking at the floor. “Yeah I know, Al.”

“Then what's stopping you?”

Ed is quiet, lost in a world of thoughts. What was stopping him? Even if this Mustang is a member
of the Thule Society, does that really make him that formidable? They’ve already beaten the Thule
Society once before… But what if they’re prepared this time? Or maybe this Mustang has a special
skill of some kind to take them down?

Ed suddenly flashes back to Colonel Mustang, flames bursting forth from his hands, the fiery light
rushing towards him. But he calms himself. Of course not. There's no alchemy like that in this
world. He sighs under his breath and thinks, *Yeah, the easier way...* would be for this Mustang to
just pull out a gun and shoot him. Ed sighs aloud with a growl.

“Brother?” Al is quiet, concerned by his brother's silence.
Ed finally moves, heading for his bed. “I'll sleep on it...”

*  

Beneath a strong spotlight, Mustang walks out of the darkness and into the glow of the luminous beam. The clothes he wears are not the same as he had when he met Edward earlier this evening. These clothes are more refined - a black suit, a large golden collar hanging about his chest, and soft white gloves upon his hands.

His pupils constrict beneath the harsh lighting, but he closes his eyes as he bows his head, kneeling down.

A voice arises from the darkness. “What news do you bring us, Brother?”

Mustang says to the man in the darkness, “The young man I have found is in fact Edward Elric.”

“The son of Hohenheim of Light?” another voice asks.

“Correct, sir,” Mustang responds.

Yet another voice speaks, “Then it's true then?”

Mustang kneels his head further, “I do not know, Brothers. He hasn't said much yet, but I will pry it out of him.”

The second voice arises, “We must secure the Elric brothers.”

Mustang looks up with a confident smile, “Don't worry. I'm sure that I will be able to persuade Mr. Elric to join us.”

*  

The next day, Edward is walking along by himself, still lost in a world of anxious thoughts. He just can't get over what had happened yesterday.

Was that really real? he thinks to himself. The whole experience had been so surreal, seeing Mustang's face after all these years, a face Edward was sure he'd never see again.

And here he was... again.

Standing before Edward not but a few yards away is Mustang, this different Mustang, this unfamiliar Mustang.

Though he looks as though he is relaxed, Ed is ready to strike at any moment, a little more willing this time than last now that he’s feeling prepared. “...What do you want?” Ed very bluntly asks.

Mustang gives a cheery smile, “I thought perhaps you were in better spirits today, now that you've had a full night's rest.”

“I'll have you know I was tossing and turning all night,” Ed instinctively back-sasses. He can't help himself – just seeing that face automatically makes him indignant.

Mustang still smiles though, remaining polite, “I'm sorry to hear that. How would you like a cup of coffee, then? I'm sure that will wake you up. My treat.”

Ed glares at him for a brief moment. Then he closes his eyes, his brows furrowed but his voice
Sitting in a coffee shop, Ed grumpily, noisily stirs his coffee, the metal spoon ringing out off the sides of the china like an incessant bell. Mustang raises an eyebrow at Ed's quirky (or simply unrefined) behavior, and decides striking up a conversation may be the politest way to ignore it.

“So, I hear you're quite the scientific prodigy, Mr. Elric.”

Ed doesn't seem interested, “Yeah, something like that.”

Mustang nods, pleased, all the meanwhile adding some sugar cubes to his cup. “I’m glad to hear that. Scientific advancement is important in this world. The more we understand, the better our lives will be.”

Ed stops stirring, blurtling, “So you're saying that you understand everything, is that it?” Again, Ed can't help but to snip at this Mustang, and he’s beginning to feel a rather bit like an idiot at his inability to hold in his retorts.

“Hmm?” Mustang sits back just slightly. “I never implied anything like that.”

Ed gives an aggravated sigh, “Sorry. When you work at a university, you deal with a lot of know-it-alls…” A bit of angry (albeit comic) darkness hangs about Ed’s eyes, he stirring his spoon faster, “And people who think they can control everything you do and everywhere you go…”

“I see,” Mustang says as he picks up the small pitcher of cream and pours some of it into his coffee. “I didn't know university life was so hard. I'm afraid I came across the exact same thing in the military.”

With a smarmy smile, Ed looks back up at Mustang. “So a captain, huh? What's a-matter? You didn't have what it takes to make colonel?”

Mustang gives a short wry laugh in his throat as he brings his cup near his lips. “No. I'm afraid I'm too kind a gentle soul for the harsh life of the military.”

Yeah, I'll bet… Ed thinks.

“But as I was saying, Mr. Elric, your scientific work is really opening new doors. I'm curious,” Mustang leans in, just ever so slightly, “Where do you get your inspiration? It seems to me that you have an innate sense, as though you’re in tune with the universe and how it works - am I correct?”

Ed turns sideways in his seat, closing his eyes and acting disinterested. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Very few people can do what you do. You have a real gift.”

Ed shrugs, “Eh, what can I say? It comes naturally to me.”

“A man like you puts his heart and soul into his work. I suppose that comes naturally, too.” Mustang's already narrow eyes seem to get thinner with intrigue.

Ed looks at him through the corner of his eye, a simmer in the pit of his stomach.

Mustang continues, “Many a man puts his heart and soul into the things he does. It's what gives him purpose in life; helps him understand his place in the grand scheme of things. After all, we are but part of the construction of the Great Architect of the Universe.”
“Huh!” Ed gives a chuckling scoff. “Yeah, like cogs in a machine.”

“What's your philosophy on life?” Mustang asks of him.

Ed sets his spoon on the table as he looks back at Mustang, “I'm not much of a philosophy kind of guy.”

“You've never sat in on any of the philosophy professors at your university?”

“What, you mean a bunch of old men sitting around arguing? I think it's a waste of time. It's all conjecture. There's no proof to anything they're saying.”

Mustang has his glass halfway lifted, eyes closed with a smile, “What's your take on religion then? The Bible is full of proof of God's existence.”

“Wouldn't know,” Ed says, “Never read it.”

“So you're not a religious man then?”

“No sir, I'm a scientist.”

Mustang laughs at Ed's remark. “Witty,” he says with a relieved sigh. “Ah, but to only take one perspective - that's disappointing; especially for someone as broadminded as you. I think since the dawn of time, science and religion have been at odds with each other. On the one hand, science offers cold, hard evidence - but it can all be rather boring. On the other, religion offers hope to its followers, but it can be very disappointing. That's why I like philosophy.” He takes a sip from his cup and sets it back down. “It's a marriage of the two - science and religion working in perfect harmony.”

“Sure doesn't sound like harmony,” Ed chimes distastefully. “All I ever hear out of the Philosophy Department all day is 'yack-yack-yack.' And a lot of them raise their voices, too.”

Mustang hums a chuckle.

Ed faces forwards, arms on table, eyes burning, his voice low and solid, “What's this really about, Mustang?”

Mustang is slightly taken aback by Ed's sudden brashness.

Ed glares at him, a deep seriousness emanating out from those golden eyes, and from them Mustang can sense a fervent determination.

He confidently hums, “Quite the impudent young man, aren't we? All right, I'll get down to business,” Mustang sets his cup down. “I'd like for you to join my brotherhood.”

“Huh?” Now Ed sits back just slightly, though he also now sits up a bit more, having not expected this. “A fraternity?”

“Precisely,” Mustang says to him, laying his hand out onto the table, and Ed looks down to see a ring. He had seen it earlier though hadn't really noticed it, not consciously anyway. But now Ed looks over its design – a gold band with a blue circle, in its center a gold diamond with a G in the center. Mustang continues, “I am a Freemason.”

“What's that?” Ed asks, looking up from the ring to Mustang.

Mustang laughs, “Really? You've never heard of us?” He gently pulls his hand back, putting it to
his chin as he says, “No, I suppose you wouldn't have.”

Ed presses his lips together a bit, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We are men like you who seek the Truth. To each his own. Every man is responsible for shaping his own destiny - but we have the tools to help one do it. You need only learn how to use these tools.”

“I don't get it,” Ed replies, irked, “You bring me in here to join a club? I thought you had something more important to tell me.”

“Normally, we don't recruit people-”

“Then why start now?”

“Let's just say, you're a special case.”

Again the urge to punch this man is rising in Edward, showing itself in his clenched fist sitting on the tabletop. “Special how?”

Mustang continues, “Your talents have drawn our attention, and we think that you would gain a great deal from membership.”

Ed narrows his eyes, “What are you offering? And if you say eternal salvation I'm gonna kick your ass,” he says outright.

Mustang chuckles. “No, Freemasonry makes no such promises. All we offer is the chance to carve out your own path in life, if you are willing to learn, to work hard, and to seek the truth.”

“The truth, huh?” Ed asks. “And what truth are you selling?”

“As I said before, it's up to each individual to decide on his own truth.” Mustang stands, taking his coat off the back of his chair and laying it in the crook of his arm. “And I can see it in your eyes, Edward - that longing to know the Ultimate Truth, the secrets of the Universe. But then again, you already know a little bit about that, don't you?”

Ed now stands too, pounding a fist on the table, the china ringing as it shakes. “Quit jerking me around! Why do you keep saying stuff like that? You don't even know me!”

“Do you know yourself, is the question.”

“Of course I know myself! I know myself a lot better than most people!”

“Then you know it - the energy that surges through your body, the connection between spirit and matter.”

Ed stops for a moment, and listens.

“You know that spiritual energy that lies within all things, and that this energy is the tool that can reshape these things, change them, like magic. But it's not magic, is it? It's science.”

Ed's blood runs cold. He knows this. He knows what Mustang is talking about. But how does Mustang even know what he's talking about?

A moment passes between the two men.
And then Mustang speaks again –

“You know as well as I the visible and the invisible. You asked what Freemasonry has to offer you. My answer to you is, it is a science of the soul. You say you know yourself, Mr. Elric. You know what you are made of. Good. But that's only one part of the journey. Are you willing to break yourself down and rebuild yourself into something new?”

Ed's heart stops. He knows these words. He knows this sequence.

“Come with me, Edward, and I'll show you.”

*

The sun has set and darkness is now falling all around. Edward walks silently behind Mustang, the only sound that of their shoes on the stone sidewalk.

Mustang stops in front of a building, a rather plain-looking building, average, but above its door frame is engraved the same symbol as that on Mustang's ring. He walks up the steps, Edward following, and Mustang knocks on the door.

A small peering hole in the door slides open, a pair of eyes looking out into the darkness. A gruff voice questions, “Who comes here?”

Mustang answers, “One who comes seeking the light.”

Briefly after, the sound of a lock loosening is heard, and the heavy hinges creak as the large door swings inwardly open. Mustang enters, Edward following after, his eyes slowly looking all around, up to the high ceiling to try and take it all in.

Almost mysteriously, the door shuts behind them with a resounding thud, catching Ed by surprise. In the darkness there, he can barely see a man. But Edward's attention is pulled away by a spotlight that comes on above him, a bit blinding so as Ed puts up a hand to shield his eyes.

Standing before him are three men, a bit on the elder side. The one in the middle speaks, “Who are you?”

Edward straightens up, and very calmly answers, “I'm Edward Elric.”

The one on the left asks, “Why have you come here?”

Ed is quiet for a moment as he looks over at Mustang who simply gives him a nod, and then Edward looks back to the men. “I come here seeking the truth.”

And finally, the one on the right asks, “Why do you seek the truth?”

Edward is quiet again... and a moment passes over him, determination in his eyes and voice, “Because I have to. I have to know. I've always sought the truth. And I need it. I need to know.”

The man in the middle gives half a nod, but his bushy old eyebrows are a bit furrowed. “Are there two members of our order who can speak on your behalf and vouch for your loyalty and strength of heart?”

“Two?” Edward asks, suddenly becoming concerned.

Mustang steps forward with a slight bow, “I can vouch, sir. I have full confidence in Mr. Elric.”
The one in the middle speaks again, “And anyone else who supports you, Mr. Elric?”

Ed doesn't know what to say, “Well...”

“I do,” a voice says. Stepping out of the shadows near the entrance is a stocky, rotund man, his bushy white whiskers and eyebrows nearly hiding his glasses.

Ed gives a little gasp of surprise, “Professor Heidelmann?” It was the philosophy professor!

The professor speaks with a nod, “I've seen this young man do great things. Little ever stands in his way. I am sure that he will benefit from membership.”

The man in the middle speaks, convinced, “Very well then, Mr. Elric, if you please. Follow us.”

And all three men begin to walk off into the shadows, heading towards and then through some unknown door.

Ed begins to follow after them, Mustang and Professor Heidelmann as well.

The room they enter is lined with cool tile, a few candles on the wall to softly light the space. In the center of this room stands a small altar, on it an open bible, and on top of it, builder's tools - a square and a compass, only they are golden, and laid out ceremoniously to make the diamond emblem as seen above the doorway.

As Edward enters, his eyes drift from the altar beneath the spotlight to something beyond it - yet another door. But then shock grips his system - engraved on the door is a giant eye, staring back at him, mysterious carvings lining the giant doorframe. It looks like the Gate! Yet it is not the same... True, it’s similar – in appearance only, for there is not that same terrible energy emanating out from it. Still, its appearance causes a chill to run right through Ed’s core.

One of the men stops by the altar, motioning a hand gently towards the book. “Before you enter, you may pray to the god of your choice for guidance.”

Insultingly, Edward gives a scoff, hands on his hips. “God? I’ve seen a lot of things in my time, but a god is not one of them.”

The men look a little affronted, the eldest of the three giving an angry glance to Mustang, yet Mustang is as cool and calm as ever, a gentleness about his face. He questions, “If not in a deity, where do you place your faith, Mr. Elric?”

Edward thinks for a moment, staring down at the book and the square and compass... And then he thinks about the Gate and how life energy passes through it...

He thinks about the Philosopher's Stone and all the lives that were sacrificed to make it for power...

And then... he thinks about his mother... and her kind smile...

Edward whispers, “I know you're still there... Please, watch over me...”

And Mustang smiles.

Edward rises, and the man escorts him to the large doors. Edward stands before it, staring in awe at its massiveness and design. Then suddenly, from behind one of the men puts a blindfold on Ed, spooking him! He feels Mustang close behind him, and Mustang whispers in his ear, “Don't be
afraid.”

This only causes Ed to tense up, BEING afraid – but little time does he have to think, for without warning, he is pushed forward.

Ed stumbles a bit, finding his footing, certain he would have run into the door, but there is nothing is there. He stretches his arms out, knowing that the door must be right in front of him, and slowly he begins to walk forward. Yet the further he walks, the quieter and colder things become. Clearly he is in a hallway of some sort…

He wanders around, blindly in the darkness for a moment, unable to find his way. He has to stop for a moment, feeling oddly dizzy, perhaps just because there’s nothing for his eyes to focus on. Nothing but darkness. He aimlessly reaches out towards his left, hoping to find a wall, and lo, he does. He feels its smoothness, its coolness, and he follows it down the long hallway, seemingly forever.

He can sense them. He knows the other men are there. But the unnerving part is he can't hear them. Are they even there at all? Or is he imagining things?

Suddenly the wall ends and Ed almost falls over on himself again. He regains his balance, and he tries to find a new wall, reaching out towards his right, certain there must be one there - but suddenly, someone from the front roughly grabs him by the shoulders, scaring him!

An unknown voice shouts at him, “Master Hiram Abif! Please teach me the secret of Masonry!”

“What?” Ed asks.

He hears Mustang's voice from behind answer, “No. I will not tell you.”

The voice in front says, “Then feel my wrath!” And suddenly Ed gets hit in the head with a stick!

“Ow! Damn it!” Ed yelps, wanting to rub his head, but already he is being ushered along - by who, he doesn't know.

He doesn't get very far until yet another person grabs him by the shoulders, shouting at him, “Master Hiram Abif! Please teach me the secret of Masonry!”

Again, Mustang answers, “No. I will not tell you.”

“You fool!” the man answers, and again, Edward is hit smart across the head with a stick, only bigger and harder this time.

“Ahh...” Edward winces in pain, sucking in air through his teeth trying not to shout. He can feel his skull throbbing and his head bruising, the sensation of rushing blood flowing to the blows.

Again, one more man comes. His hands are huge, crushing Edward's shoulder. Though he can’t feel the man’s hand on his right shoulder, Ed can certainly feel the weight bearing down on his automail. He can't move as a deep menacing voice shouts at his face, “Master Hiram Abif! Tell me the secret of Masonry or I will kill you!”

Edward frantically thinks, fearing for his sore head, Just tell him the secret! Justtellhimthesecret!

But firmly, Mustang's voice responds one final time, “No. I will never divulge the secret of Masonry.”
Oh shit...

Ed feels a great rush of wind blow upwards past him as the large man before him raises a club! The man shouts, “Then die!”

Ed gasps aloud!

And then... darkness...

...

...Slowly... the world comes back into blurry view... carvings of stars linger on the ceiling above his head, mingling with the stars that still dance in his vision, they beginning to fade away as a silhouette comes into view.

Edward realizes he's laying down... and now someone is standing over him... it's Mustang. But he's different from before. Now he is dressed in fine black clothes, a gold collar about his neck.

Mustang leans forward as everything comes into focus. “Welcome back.”

“Back?” Edward asks, gently sitting up, slightly confused as he sees, oddly, beneath him a soft white linen, flowers and candles about him, as if he were on some sort of funeral altar.

Standing at the foot of the altar are more men, the three elders and Professor Heidelmann amongst them, all of them dressed in the fine black and gold uniforms.

One of them laughs as he says loudly, “Looks like you hit him too hard there, Schmidt!”

They all laugh, the tallest and biggest amongst them giving a hardy laugh.

Edward rubs his head, “What happened?...?!” He is suddenly surprised, looking down at his hand, “Hey! My head doesn't hurt anymore! What did you do?”

Mustang tells, “What you have gone through is the journey of the Master Mason, builder of the House of God. Masons are builders. But we create so much more than just buildings for people to gather in. We build places of hope and of worship, places that are filled with the spirit of Heaven. This is the duty and gift of a Mason. In him lies not only the ability to build matter but to build spirit.”

Ed gives a short smile, amused. He had never thought of a church that way before. But as per usual, Ed can't take anything gracefully or seriously in front of that face, playfully remarking, “I'm serious, Mustang, if you say anything about eternal salvation – ”

Mustang gives a short chuckle. “As I said before, that is not our calling. We are but a humble band of philosophers who practice the crafting of stones.”

Ed stops for a moment, “Philosopher Stone?” He gasps and jolts forward, “You're alchemists!”

“That's right,” Mustang nods, “Though these days we are more speculative than we are actual operative.”

“Wait a minute,” Ed sits back a little, becoming immediately distrusting, “You guys aren't like the Thule Society, are you?”

Mustang gives a bemused “Humph,” in his throat as he looks away, closing his eyes smugly, “We've been keeping a close eye on them. Though they too are interested in the secrets that
alchemy holds, they intend to use it to destroy rather than to build. We became especially interested when we’d heard rumors that they had on their side a man going by the name Hohenheim of Light.”

“Oh, so you've heard of him, too, huh?” Ed says as he finally slides off the altar, putting his feet on the floor.

“In this world, Hohenheim was a scientist who lived and died in the 15th century.”

A knot grows in Edward’s throat. “What do you mean this world?”

“We know that you, your father, and your brother all come from the other side of the Gate – the world that the Thule Society likes to call 'Shamballa.' Don't look so worried, Edward – we have no intentions of reopening the Gate. It's our duty to make sure that the secrets of alchemy remain secret – that's the Gate included.”

“So you wanted me to be a Mason…?”

“Because we know if the Thule Society or the Worker's Party ever get their hands on you, they'd force you to use your alchemic knowledge to build weapons for them. Here, you're safe with us.”

Ed gives an unkind smirk, “Safe, huh? How do I not know that you're just like they are?”

“Those fools are nothing more than a political vehicle. They could care less about the welfare of mankind.”

“Is that what you care about?” Edward pries.

“The three most important things to any Freemason are Brotherly Love, Honor, and Wisdom. These are the things a Freemason strives to maintain, not only amongst his fellow Brothers of the Lodge, but amongst any man he comes across. In his hands he holds the power to help others.”

Mustang holds out a hand to the other men of the lodge, showing them to Edward,

“We won't force you to stay, Edward. But know that if you're ever in trouble, we are your Brothers, and we're here to help you.”

Edward surveys the kindly faces before him, taking it all in.

And then Mustang spreads both his arms with an air of gloriousness about him, “And I am the head of this lodge, the Worshipful Master Mustang.”

Ed can't believe his ears. He pauses, only for a moment, before he has to bite his lip to stifle a snicker that finally breaks out into full-blown laughter.

Mustang is confused and semi-appalled at the indignity he's currently suffering. “Wh-what's so funny?”

Ed wipes his eyes of tears of laughter as he calms down, catching his breath. “I'm sorry. It's just that, oh! That title fits your personality so well!”

Mustang is a bit confused, “How would you know my personality? We hardly know one another.”

Edward gives him a grin. “I don't know. I guess we just must have known each other in a past life.”

The meaning of Ed’s words dawn on him, and Mustang returns his grin with a nod.
Reviews:

Next episode:
The lines are long and the food is small, but still the people are fed. Whether or not their stomachs are full, at least there is some amount of food in them. Money is everywhere, all of it useless, and not all of the money in the country can buy a decent meal.

The year is 1927.
Ed and Al walk past, trying not to look too well off. They look as is expected of university men. Even though Al is not but 17, he looks as grown-up as his brother, already 22. Their clothing is nothing fancy, but they are clean and well-pressed – no patches, no tears – and in this failing republic, even this modest bit of cleanliness can be taken to mean that they are rich men. Such is not the case.

“It's a shame, isn't it Brother?” Al comments somberly. “So many people going hungry.”

“Yeah, and we're pretty close to being there ourselves, Al,” Ed tells him. “We barely made last month's rent, and that's only because I had to get an advance on my salary. I can't keep doing that forever you know.”

Al rubs his head, “I know, Brother. I'm sorry.”

Ed sighs, “Ah, it's not your fault. If we just didn't have another mouth to feed,” Ed says, referring to Alphonse's pet cat.

“I can't help it! I love Checkers! I don't want to see him out on the street!”

“Yeah but he's a cat. He can hunt for mice or something. Hell, if he was worth his weight, he'd bring us home some mice to eat. Not to mention that you keep buying him toys. We hardly have enough room for ourselves. We don't need junk cluttering the place up.”

“Sorry, Brother...”

Ed looks over to the line of downtrodden people, their sad faces tugging at something deep inside of him. He looks forward and grumbles to himself, “I could easily transmute a whole truckload of bread right now.”

Al's face grows long. “Brother. We both know that's not going to happen.”

“And why not?” Ed snaps a little, missing his abilities. “We have science, don't we? Why can't we fabricate bread in a laboratory?”

Al manages a chuckle, “I bet the university would give us all kinds of funding for that.”

“Oh, ha ha.”

“No, really. If we could engineer food, it could all be made on an assembly line. We wouldn't have to wait for it to grow and we could solve all this hunger.”

“But remember, young Apprentice,” a man's voice says to Al from the side, “Even the industrious bee must work hard to keep the beehive fed.”

“Oh, hello Mr. Mustang,” Al greets him as he joins them on their walk. “How are you today?”

“Fine, thank you Alphonse,” Mustang says to the young man. “Are you two headed for work?”

Ed slumps his shoulders, exhausted eyes to the sky. “Yeah. Time to work for money that doesn't exist.”

“I know the feeling,” Mustang agrees. “If I don't find a cheaper place to live, I very well may end up in that line with everyone else.”

“Where do you live now?” Al asks him.
“It's just a small house a few blocks away from here. But even that's too expensive. Not to mention too spacious. There are a couple of rooms that have done nothing but collect dust and boxes since I moved in.”

“Say!” Al brightens up. “I've got it! Why don't we all move in together?”

“Heh?” Both Ed and Mustang raise an eyebrow of curiosity.

Al continues, “We can hardly pay our rent; you can hardly pay yours. You have too much space and we don't have enough. If we just had one rent, between the three of us, we could pay it no problem!”

“Huh,” Mustang chimes. “You know, the kid might be onto something.”

“Al,” Ed chides, “You just can't go inviting yourself into other people's homes like that.”

“Actually Edward,” Mustang remarks, “I'd have to agree with Alphonse. It seems the reasonable thing to do.”

“You think so?” Edward asks.

“I certainly don't mind,” Mustang assures. “After all, it does get lonely in that old house. I could use the company.”

“Whoo-hoo!” Al cheers, still yet to outgrow his youthful personality. “We can stay up all night, swapping stories, and playing games! We'll be just like brothers!”

Mustang smiles, pointing between him and Edward, “We are Brothers.”

Al laughs with a smile, “You know what I mean Mr. Mustang.”

Mustang nods, “If you're as studious as Ed is, I see no problem with you becoming a Brother someday as well.”

“You mean it?”

“Certainly.”

Ed, still thinking about the housing situation, gives a bit of a grumbled sigh as he crosses his arms, “That means we'll have to pack everything. Why do you always plan my weekends for me, Al? I never get to rest.”

Al just laughs as the three men walk down the street together.

—

Over the course of the next few weeks, Ed and Al keep themselves busy stuffing everything they possibly can into boxes. Checkers, being the curious cat as ever, has quite a time creeping through the city of stacked boxes lain on the floor. He sticks his nose to the edge of one and sniffs it to get an idea of what was inside. Then he hops up on his back legs with front paws on the edge of the box as he peers in. And with a spring, he promptly disappears into the papers and hay that serves to protect valuables.

Ed comes to a box, a pile of clothes in hand. He sets them down next to the box, and lifts a shirt to fold it so he can store it. But as he holds the shirt over the opening of the box and begins to fold, a black paw suddenly shoots out and catches the shirt edge in its claws.
“What the?!”

Checkers pops his head out and takes the shirt in his mouth and lays his weight upon his fabric victim.

Ed yanks back, “Hey! Let go of my shirt you stupid cat!”

Al comes in carrying some books with him, “Oh Ed, he's just playing with you.”

Checkers now holds Ed around the wrist, biting at his hand and kicking at his arm with outstretched claws. Ed lifts his arm, cat and all, “You call THIS playing?!” He looks at the cat, disgruntled, “You'd better be glad this is my metal arm...”

The cat ignores him, merely jumping off and running away to hide amongst his kingdom of boxes.

“Crazy cat,” Ed mutters.

As they move boxes in, Mustang moves boxes out, finally decluttering the extra rooms of their collection. He is perplexed, though, as to where to put the old boxes now. So he starts unpacking them.

He rummages through one and pulls an object out, “There's where that teapot went. I thought I'd lost this.”

Ed comes in, carrying a box much too big for him, and sits it down with a huff. “Whew. All right, here's another one.”

“Careful, Edward,” Mustang warns. “I don't want to get your boxes mixed up with my boxes.”

“How does one come to own so much junk?” Ed asks, looking around at the mounds of dust collecting on shelves.

“I don't know,” Mustang says to himself. “I just sort of pick things up here and there, hoping I'll find a use for it later.”

“You ought to donate some of it to the poor,” Ed says, laying his hand on a nearby globe and giving it a twirl.

“What do the poor need with a globe?”

Ed shrugs, “Dunno. But I'm sure they could find a use for a teapot.”

“But I like this teapot.”

Ed chuckles, “And that's why you have so much junk. You never let it go.”

Slowly but surely the conversion is complete, and Ed and Al now find themselves at a new residence.

“Just one more person,” Al chimes, hauling a pet carrier at his side.

“Who?” Mustang asks.
“The other member of our family,” Al says. He opens the carrier, and out hops a little black and white cat. Al smiles, “His name is Checkers. Isn't he just the cutest?”

Mustang sheepishly points at the cat, a look of near-dread on his face. “You... you have a cat?”

Ed asks him, “That's not a problem is it?”

Mustang gently takes a step back, “It's, just...” The cat begins to rub up against his leg and instinctively, Mustang sneezes. He looks back up, covering his mouth and nose, his muffled voice coming through. “I'm allergic to cats...”

“Oh, Al!” Ed says, annoyed.

“I'm sorry!” Al apologizes, “I'm sorry! I didn't know! I should have asked first! But you can't make me get rid of Checkers! You just can't!”

“No, that's all right,” Mustang says with a wave of the hand, trying to ignore the furball that is lovingly torturing him. “It would be unfair of me to make you do that. Just please, keep him outside.”

“Outside?!?” Al says, swooping up the cat. “But it's cold outside!”

“Relax, Al,” Ed tells him. “We can always build him a house.”

“But what if he gets attacked by a dog?”

“Then we'll build it on the roof.”

Mustang asks, “What is he, a bird?”

Life progresses as normal, with the exception of Checkers sleeping outside. Ed in his spare time is hammering together a little house (though getting it on the roof is another matter entirely). (Ed would prefer keeping it on the ground, but Al is holding him to word).

Al in the meanwhile is trying to look for cures to cat allergies, and, being an assistant in the pharmaceutical department of the university, has more than enough access to resources.

One day, Mustang comes walking into the kitchen where Al is at the stove boiling some water.

“What are you up to, Alphonse?” Mustang asks him.

“Making tea,” Al responds cheerfully.

“Ah, that sounds nice,” Mustang replies as he takes a seat. “You wouldn't mind making me a cup, would you?”

“I'm making the tea especially for you.”

“Oh? Why?”

Al pours a cup, “It's a special tea.” He brings it over to the table. “It's supposed to relieve allergy symptoms due to cats.”

“Oh,” Mustang says shortly, looking down at the cup a little reluctantly. “That wouldn't do
anything about fur being left all over the house. And why is it green?” he asks, looking at the hot water before him.

“Not all tea is black,” Al tells him.

Mustang picks up the cup, “Oh well. Bottoms up.” And he takes a sip, after which he shortly coughs, gagging a wee bit. “Ew! What is this?”

Al’s shoulders fall a bit, “It’s catnip.”

“Catnip?! Are you crazy?!”

“But it’s supposed to work.”

“Not if it tastes disgusting!”

Ed comes walking in, setting down a tool belt he had been wearing, “Al, are you poisoning people?”

“No!” Al retorts.

“You’re brother just fed me catnip!” Mustang shouts, a rather bit childishly.

Ed then asks, “Making people test subjects for your medicines, then?”

“Maybe...” Al says, rubbing his arm, a little embarrassed, Mustang in the meanwhile wiping his tongue on a napkin.

Ed starts to leave and looks to Mustang, “Just add some sugar and lemon and I’m sure it'll taste fine.”

Mustang looks at him sourly, “We don't have any lemons...”

~

After Al has left the kitchen, Mustang picks up the teapot and takes it over to the window. He opens the shutters and begins to pour the rest of the tea into the flower box. After not but a moment, Checkers hops up into the flowers, spooking Mustang.

“Ahh! Oh! It's just you.”

Checkers starts to lick the muddy puddles of tea. He shakes his head a couple of times, and then immediately begins to nuzzle Mustang’s hand.

“No - no, no!” Mustang stammers, but as he tries to pull his hand away, Checkers locks his wrist in a hug and starts nuzzling harder.

Mustang tries to back away, dragging the cat inside. “No, no! Stop! Bad kitty! Bad kitty! ACHOO!”

And thus begins a sneezing fit.

~

Not too much later, Mustang sits in his plush chair, a blanket around him, his eyes and nose both red and watery.
Al brings him a cup, “This one is regular tea, I promise.”

“Thank you, Alphonse,” Mustang says with a sniffle.

Many nights later, as they all sit at dinner, Checkers sits outside on the window sill, staring in at them. The rain pours down all around him, and Checkers is little protected by the small awning around the house. And though his mouth opens very wide, one cannot hear the meows Checkers makes as he occasionally paws at the glass.

Al sits with a long face as he watches his cat silently meowing at him.

“Al, are you crying about that cat again?” Ed asks.

“No!” Al retorts, turning back to his plate and eating angrily and silently, not very good at hiding the truth.

Mustang looks to Ed, “Don't forget, we have a Lodge meeting next week.”

“Right,” Ed acknowledges.

“If you don't mind me asking, Mr. Mustang,” Al starts-

But Mustang interludes, “Please, call me Roy.”

“Oh, okay. Roy - how is it you came to join the Freemasons?”

Mustang sets his fork aside, his eyes drifting to the ceiling nostalgically, “Ah, where to start? ...I suppose it would go much further back than before my joining. Masonry was sort of a way of life for me.”

“How so?” Ed asks as he puts his fork in his mouth, both he and Al listening intently.

Mustang's mind drifts away as he speaks, drifting back to a different time so seemingly far ago, when things were better, grander. “My father was a Mason. As was his father before him. To me in those days of childhood, Masonry meant nothing to me. I didn't understand it to be anything special or important. To me, it was just the way of the world, the way life was. All it meant was every month, we took a trip north to visit my grandparents...”

In dreamy imagination, it's as if the walls fade away, and Mustang is a child again.

A young Roy leans slightly out of a horse carriage, watching the road go by.

Mustang continues telling his story to the Elrics. “In those days we still used a horse and carriage, though there was always a new automobile on the road everyday.”

A little motorcar puts along past them, and young Roy leans out in awe. His mother tugs on his shirt, “Roy! Sit down! You'll fall out of the carriage!”
“Mother,” he asks her, “May we have a car?”

His father chuckles, “Perhaps someday, but not today.”

“It always took a full day to reach my grandparent's house. And once we did it was always kisses and hugs from relatives, and listening to the adults talk while my cousins and I played in the fields all day.”

The children run through the tall grass, sticks in hand as they gallop along. The adults in the meanwhile are on the porch, sitting around smoking tobacco and drinking lemonade.

The children begin tossing the sticks at one another, seeing if the other could catch it. One of Roy's cousins tosses one towards him, and Roy runs after it, narrowly missing. He hops after the fallen stick that lays near the porch, and he slows as he picks up the stick. As he stands there, he looks up to where his father and grandfather stand, the two men, near mirror images of one another say for age, conversing with one another.

Young Roy stares at his father for a while, the man's strong chin accenting his otherwise kind face.

“Even though Masonry meant nothing to me, I always saw how good and noble a man my father was. I always had a great sense of respect for him.”

His father looks over and notices him standing there. “Did you need something, Roy?”

Roy shakes his head, “No sir. I just dropped my stick.”

“All right,” his father says with half a chuckle. “Go on and play with your cousins. But don't do anything to hurt one another.”

“Yes Father,” Roy says, and he turns around and dashes off.

“And then came the 'Eating-Meetings',” Mustang says.

Edward asks, “Eating-Meeting?”

Mustang chuckles, “That's what I once heard one of the old Lodge wives call it. We always had a potluck meal before the men went off to a Lodge meeting.”

“I see.”

Young Roy sits in a chair next to his mother as he watches everyone else stand around and talk. He slumps over in his chair, “Mother, this is boring.”

“But all they're doing is talking. They talked all day on the porch. How much more could they have to talk about?”

“I said hush. And sit up straight.”

Roy pulls himself up, but his eyes still slump with a lingering sleepiness.

“I often fell asleep half the time. I really had no business being there. My mother was in the same boat. She wasn't very social, nor did she come from a Masonic family, so it was all Greek to her.”

“Greek?” Al asks, a little confused.

“Hmm?” Mustang asks as he lowers his fork from his mouth, “You've never heard that expression before? It means something is foreign or strange.”

“Oh...”

“The only good part of the Eating-Meetings was the eating part.”

Little Roy lifts a fork in either hand with a great smile, “Whoo-hoo!” He immediately starts digging into the mountainous buffet plate he's constructed for himself, barely one dish discernible from the next.

“The Lodge wives always made such good food - it was almost worth the boring part.”

Later, Roy is eating a piece of chocolate pie, swinging his legs back and forth as his feet don't reach the floor in that chair. He's smiling and happy, when he notices the portly old man beside him also has chocolate pie.

The old man smiles at him, his wispy mustache curling at the corners of his mouth. And the old man picks up his fork and cuts off quite a large piece of his pie and eats it in one bite.

Amazed, Roy looks down at his own pie. He tries to take a piece just as big, but it falls off his fork and lands back on the plate with a plop before ever reaching Roy's mouth.

The old man chuckles, and takes another big bite.

Defiantly and stubbornly, Roy tries again, this time shoving a large piece of chocolate pie into his mouth, his cheeks puffed up like a chipmunk and whipped cream seeping from his lips like a rabid dog.
The old man laughs again, and now says with a wink, “Do you think you could beat me in a pie eatin' contest?”

Roy swallows his piece of pie, and his only answer is to start devouring what pie he has left. In an instant it is gone, and proudly he looks over, only to realize the old man has already cleaned his plate.

“Hey!” Roy says, both surprised and annoyed. “I still had a lot more pie left than you did!”

“Well then! An even playing field - let's each get one more slice, same size.”

So they try again. Roy begins gobbling as quickly as he can, but in all of three bites, the old man has already finished.

By the end of that slice, Roy flops his head on the table, holding his stomach with a groan.

His grandmother looks to the old man and says, “Elmer! You leave that boy alone! You're gonna give him indigestion!”

Roy's grandfather chimes in, “Or make him as fat as you!”

Both the men laugh amongst themselves, Roy still rubbing his overly-full tummy.

Later, all the men begin to adjourn to an upstairs room, Roy watching all of them as they start to make their way up the staircase and through a door, he curious as to what they are up to.

But his thoughts are interrupted as one of the old ladies comes over with her friends, surrounding him on all sides. “Oh look at little Roy! He's gotten so big since the last time we've seen him!”

“Oh he has his father's eyes, don't you know?”

“And such cute little cheeks!” one says as she begins pinching them, Roy utterly unthrilled at his predicament.

Minutes later, once the ladies have worn out all conversation they can upon him, Roy slips away, trying to escape the noisy clucking old hens.

He makes his way to the bottom of the staircase, and quietly he stares up its flight to the door that lay in the shadows. What was it that the men were doing there? Certainly it had to be better than what was going on downstairs. And why were only the men up there? Was it a secret?

Roy begins to ascend the stairs, when his grandmother grabs him by the wrist. “Young man, you stay down here!”

“But Grandma! I wanna see what's going on!”

“No,” she pulls him down from the stairs, “You're not old enough.”

“But Grandma!”

“No more, now hush.”

Roy crosses his arms in a huff. “I never get to do anything…”

“I always thought I was so big and tough. That's why I wanted to join the military, to prove just how tough I was.”
It's a new day, back in the city where he and his family live. A military parade is making its way down the street, and Little Roy pushes his way through the crowd, trying to get to the front to see everything. As he makes it to the curb, his eyes go wide with wonder.

Large white horses decorated in gold cords, men carrying large flags, soldiers marching in time, the clicking of their heels resounding off the pavement. Confetti and streamers rain down from tall windows above the scene, and the spectacle of it all is a sight to behold.

Roy is taking it all in, about ready to bounce out of his shoes with excitement. And then he spots the reason for the parade – a war hero. He sits in a car waving to the crowd, a large medal hanging from his lapel, flowers and flags decorating the vehicle.

Roy is awed by this. “That was going to be me someday. I'd be a big war hero, and everyone would adore me.”

“When war broke out in Austria, I jumped at the chance. I enlisted right away, just barely passing the age requirement.”

The scene changes from the bright white glittering parade to the dark dingy grey of the trenches. The sky is dark, the sun never seeming to be able to shine through the smog of fires burning and gases floating in the air. There is hardly any grass left, all of it burned or trampled or blasted away. Even the smallest bit of water results in a quagmire of mud and muck.

Roy's boots stamp hurriedly across this landscape. With rifle in hand and helmet on head, he runs as fast as he can, heaving heavy breaths, avoiding the large rolls of barbed wire barricading his path.

A whistling suddenly fills the air, growing louder and louder, closer and closer until BOOM! A great light and fire bursts forth from behind him, sending Roy flying forward, he landing roughly in the mud, his rifle pressing deep into his chest, bruising him – even his bones feel bruised.

The trench – where's the trench?! The whole world is shaky, everything looking as though it were a ship on the ocean. Another whistle begins screaming through the air, getting louder and louder.

Roy tries to stand up, but the mud beneath him is slippery and his hands and feet slide out from underneath him. With no other means of moving, he brings his rifle close to his chest and starts rolling across the ground.

BOOM! The mortar fire lands yards from him, its blast shaking the ground and causing a hot wind to push Roy further along. The explosion even causes him to pop up off the ground momentarily, and the drop back down is much further than he expects – it lands him right in the trench!

A fellow soldier grabs him by the back of his coat, lifting him up, “You idiot! You trying to get killed?! Stay down!”

Roy puts his back against the trench wall, sliding down to sit on the ground.

“INCOMING!” another soldier shouts as more unholy whistles fill the air.

The explosions and the screams of men dying fill Roy's ear, his eyes shaking with fear.

“I couldn't take it. The parades, the posters – they all made war seem glorious. But this was not glory. This was Hell.”
Machinegun fire accompanies the mortar shells, Roy's unit defending their position. A sudden burst of red and the soldier next to Roy is dead in a millisecond, a large gaping hole right above his eye. He falls down at Roy's feet. And Roy is frozen in horror, left staring at his friend who only seconds ago was breathing.

“So much death. So much destruction. And for what?”

Blood oozes from the soldier's wound, mixing with the mud to make a putrid pile.

~

Months later, Roy, war-torn and exhausted, is walking up the small country road leading to his grandparents' house. There, on the porch, are his mother and father, his mother's eyes filled with tears, hands to her mouth.

Roy stops a short distance from them. He looks in her eyes, and smiles.

A joyful sob escapes her lips, and she runs down the short steps and runs straight up to him, hugging him tightly. Roy wraps his arms around his mother, hugging her tightly back. He looks up at his father. There is a silence. And his father gives him a nod.

That night, Roy and his father are sitting in the den. His father pours a drink for each of them.

“…Dad? Can I ask you something?”

His father, sitting in the chair across from him, looks up from the glasses on the coffee table, “What is it Roy?”

Roy is silent. …He isn't even sure what he wants to ask, or if he even wanted to ask anything at all. He just needs to talk. “Did you ever think, when you had kids, that it would turn out this way? That we'd be forced to fight in wars, and kill other human beings?”

Roy's father is quiet for a moment, taking a sip from his drink, contemplating the question. “…Sadly, death is a part of life. But war doesn't have to be.”

“But what can we do? Can one person, or even a handful of people, prevent wars from happening?”

His father sets his drink down, “While one man cannot stop the whole world from fighting, he has the choice to not participate in the fight. Where other men destroy, he has the choice to build. Rather than hurt, he has the choice to heal.”

Roy hasn't even touched his drink. All he does is look down at the floor.

His father continues, “There will be those who try to destroy what you have created. There will even be those who try to destroy YOU for creating. But you must always remember to hold onto to that which is true to your heart, and never change even if others try to force you.”

Roy looks his father in the eyes.

“That night, he told me the story of Hiram Abif, the Master Builder – of how he created great temples of worship. He was a man who built places of refuge and hope. The temples were far
Ed and Al sit listening, watching Roy reminisce, his eyes distant.

“That's when I knew,” he tells them. “That's when I knew I wanted to become a Freemason – concentrate on philanthropic work. Try, in some small way, to make up for the horrors I had participated in.”

Ed feels a lump grow in his throat. It would seem this world's Roy was not all that different from his own. Both had suffered. And both were seeking redemption.

Roy slides a bit of food around his plate with his fork. “All one can hope is that another war doesn't break out; although I fear that is inevitable. But when and if it does, I'll be here at home trying to do my part to keep life moving normally for people in this city.”

Al nods solemnly. “We understand. Ed and I have been trying for a long time to keep another war from happening.”

Roy looks up at them, “What do you mean?”

Ed's eyes are stern, focused, “We've been searching for four years now. You'll forgive me if I never told you when we first met. I still didn't quite trust you then.”

Mustang gives half a smile, “Understandably. Admittedly I was acting a bit shady. One has to tread lightly when dealing with matters about the Gate.”

Ed nods, “Exactly. Before Al and I ever landed in this world, there was something that came from the other side of the Gate – a weapon.”

Roy sits up a bit, concerned, “A weapon like what?”

“There was a man by the name of Huskisson. In our world, he created what he called a uranium bomb, using an element whose atoms could be split, releasing a large amount of energy, all very quickly, like an explosion. We thought he had died.”

Roy narrows his eyes, “But instead he traversed the Gate. And he survived?”

Ed nods. “I met a man, Fritz Lang-”

Roy is surprised, “Wait, like the Fritz Lang? Like the one who released that movie this year – what was it called?”

Al chimes, “I think it's called 'Metropolis.' I really want to see it!”

“The point,” Ed continues, “Is that he had a picture that he got from someone in the Thule Society. Huskisson was in it, as was the uranium bomb. Al and I got jobs at the university in hopes that we would hear about it and where it is.”
Roy quietly sighs through his nose. “I really wish you had said something about this sooner. The Brothers and I could have sent word through the grapevine; had eyes and ears on the lookout for this thing.”

“Like I said,” Ed reminds him, “I wasn’t sure how well I could trust you a couple years ago. Considering we’ve moved in with you, I guess you can say we trust you enough.”

Roy nods once more, “First thing tomorrow, you tell Professor Heidelmann about all this. The sooner we get a jump on this, the better. The last thing we all need is another war.”

They pass the night away talking, the light from the dining room window giving a warm soft glow to the alleyway, Checkers still sitting on his windowsill, his chubby little body casting a long dark shadow down onto the brick back-street below. The sounds of crickets fill the night air, and shimmering stars fill the sky, heralding a new hope.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Reviews:

[Image: QueenCari1129, chapter 5, July 6, 2014]

Checkers reminds me of my cat. She usually clings on my arm and starts to bite it.

Next episode:
The nighttime crowd disperses from out of the little cinema, each party going off in their own direction. Ed, Al, and Roy are amongst this scene, Al gibbering excitedly.

“That was intense! Who would have guessed that he was really the spy?”

“The ending was a little gruesome though,” Roy chimes, “I liked Metropolis better.”
“Even Metropolis was a little dark when you think about it,” Al says. “But they're both really good!”

“Well that's Fritz Lang for you,” Ed says, “Putting out one hit after another.”

Roy asks, “You said he's a friend of yours, didn't you?”

Ed shrugs it off, “Eh. We really only met the once or twice, so I wouldn't say we're friends. If you're looking for an autograph, you'll have to ask someone else.”

“But you know, Brother,” Al says to him, “If he hadn't taken you along for that dragon hunt, you may never have found me.”

Ed gives a small smile. “Yeah, that's true. Things happen for a reason I suppose.” Ed looks up to the sky as he thinks, the stars in the sky twinkling just beyond the forming clouds. “Come to think of it, if it weren't for him, we wouldn't have even known that the uranium bomb made it over to this side.”

Roy adds, “We've had word out on the grapevine about Huskisson for years now, and none of the other Lodges have returned any word back. If Lang is where you heard about this matter first, don't you think it's about time you asked him what else he knows?”

“Huh?” Ed stops walking, turning to face Roy, and then again his eyes drift skywards. “I guess you're right. I was hoping we would have found something on our own by now.” He looks back at Roy, “Plus, we're trying to stay as far away from the Thule Society as possible. I don't know if I ever told you this, but Lang told me that his wife is one of them.”

“She is?” Al asks, surprised.

“Well,” Ed continues, rubbing the back of his head, “He never straight up said it, but he did say she was a fanatic and a sympathizer, so she might as well be.”

“Still,” Roy suggests, “It'd be worth seeing him again and finding out what he knows.”

“So what,” Ed asks, “We just show up on his doorstep?”

Roy chuckles, “You really have no idea how to handle social affairs, do you? You call, or write a letter, and let him invite you.”

“What, just say, 'Hey! Remember me? I'm that guy that helped you fight a dragon. You wanna have tea?'”

Al laughs, “It's worth a shot.”

The year is 1928.

The train slows to a halt, and with a resounding whoosh it lets off steam, the mighty giant dying down for a rest. The conductors open the doors and passengers begin to pile out with their luggage in tow.

Ed steps out of the train and onto the platform, looking around to get his bearings as Al and Roy also exit. Roy lifts the brim of his hat a little so he can get a better view, “So this is Berlin, huh?” he comments. “Doesn't look like much.”
“This is just the station,” Ed acknowledges Roy's playful sarcasm. “Wait until you see the rest of the city.”

Indeed, as they head out into the afternoon streets, quite a sight greets their eyes. The buildings are a mixture of old classical strongholds and modern sleek designs. The women are decadently dressed, some with dress skirts far shorter than most, Al's face turning bright red as he tries not to stare. A painter stands on a bridge painting the scene of the riverboats before him while a street band plays on the corner entertaining all who pass.

“I gotta say,” Roy agrees, “The streets are a lot better than the station.”

The trio passes a small group of folks handing out fliers, one of the men in the group shouting, “If the Nationalists have their way, they get to decide who is worthy and who is not! All are worthy in the eyes of Communism, for we are all on equal ground! Vote Communist today!”

“Huh, that's refreshing,” Ed chimes, looking back over his shoulder at the group. “It's nice to hear someone other than the Worker's Party yapping their mouths for a change.”

* *

“Is this the place?” Al asks as he and Roy look up at the building before them.

Ed looks down at the paper in his hand, “Yeah, the addresses match. This is it.” He tucks the paper in his pocket, “Well, now or never.”

They ascend the short steps and Ed rings the doorbell. A moment later, a maid answers the door, “Yes?” she inquires.

“Hi,” Ed says, “We're here to see the Langs.”

The maid politely smiles though the slightest tone of pretension comes through in her voice, “Frau Lang prefers to be referred to by her maiden name – von Harbou. But yes, we've been expecting you. Please, come in.” She steps back, allowing the three men to enter the foyer. “I'll take your coats and hats.”

“Ah!” they hear from the top of the stairs – it's Lang, he with his monocle where Führer Bradley instead had an eyepatch, the uncanny resemblance between the two men making Al's stomach knot, but he tries to behave politely nonetheless. As Lang descends the stairs, he speaks, “Edward Elric. Good to see you again,” he shakes Ed's hand firmly. “And this must be your brother that you told me about. Alphonse, is it?”

Al nervously, but politely extends his hand, “Yes, pleased to meet you.”

And then Roy, “Roy Mustang, pleased to meet you.”

Lang shakes hands with all of them and then says, “Please, come on up. Thea and I have a pot of tea on.”

As they enter the upstairs flat, Ed, Al, and Roy are amazed by its decorations. It's like being in a small museum of oddities – curios from around the world line shelves, exotic plants in pots take up quite a bit of floor space, and the farmost corner of the flat is completely decorated in oriental rugs, woodblock prints, and large comfy throw cushions.

“Nice place you got here,” Edward says to Lang.
Lang chuckles, “It's absolutely Gaudí, I know. But don't let my wife hear that. Next thing you know, she'll want to buy a house in Spain.”

Ed isn't sure he follows what Lang is talking about, but his line of thought is cut short when a woman enters the room – she's about Lang's age, 40 or so, and roughly the same build. She playfully flicks aside some curls of her perfectly permed hair as she curls her bright red lips.

“And why would a home in sunny Spain be a bad thing, dear?” she says to Lang as she comes over and gives him a peck on the cheek. “And besides – imagine the scenery. We could film something really grand there.”

“Yes dear,” he replies.

The woman looks the young men up and down and then politely extends her hand, “Thea von Harbou, pleased to meet you.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma'am,” they each greet, one after the other.

“My goodness, what handsome young things you all are,” she says of them. “I'm sure your girlfriends must be very proud of catches like you.”

Al says, “We don't have girlfriends, ma'am.”

A devious glint rises from her eyes as she smiles, “I see now. That's good to know.”

Roy coughs politely, trying not to laugh.

Al inquires, “Do you work on films too, Mrs. L-, uh, Mrs. von Harbou?”

“Please,” she charmingly giggles, “Call me Thea.”

“Oh, okay.”

“And yes,” she continues, “Half of Fritzy's movies wouldn't be near as good if I didn't do the writing on them.”

Lang chuckles, “What can I say? No one knows how to instill true terror into the hearts of men quite like a woman.”

“Oh, dear!” she laughs and gives him a playful pat on the shoulder, Ed, Al, and Roy on the other hand feeling awkward, unsure if they should laugh along or not. Thea motions to the divans with the large throw cushions in the corner. “Please, have a seat, won't you? Maria!” she calls out the door. “The Darjeeling, please!”

“Yes ma'am,” the maid responds from downstairs.

As they all make their way to the corner, Ed stops and gazes at the large Oriental rug hanging on the wall – two dragons dancing. “That's a nice tapestry you got there.”

Lang nods, “Though my wife is the one obsessed with all things Oriental, I couldn't help but buy it when I saw it. Though both you and I know that these pictures hardly compare to the real thing.”

Ed nods.

“This dark corner doesn't do it justice, though. You should see the stitching in the morning sunlight. Oh! I know! Wait here, I'll be right back.” And he walks towards the door.
“Uh, sure thing…” Ed says. As Lang exits, the maid Maria enters with a tray of cups and the teapot.

“Yes, right there,” Thea motions to the coffee table in the center. Everyone takes a seat as Maria begins to pour the tea. “So,” Thea asks, “Edward, was it? What brings you to our home on this fine day?”

Edward politely sips from his cup, using the brief moment to think of an answer. *I don't think I should tell her the whole truth,* he thinks to himself. *After all, if she IS part of the Thule Society, she's the last person I want to let in on-

But before Ed can answer, suddenly a great bright light is blinding him! “Ow! Hey!” Ed closes his eyes, bright colorful spots dancing behind his eyelids. Though he can't see him, he can hear Lang chuckle.

“Sorry. I should have warned you I suppose.”

“Oh, dear,” Thea scolds, “Put that silly thing away. You'll blind someone.”

Ed scoots to the side, out of the line of fire, while he rubs his eyes, “I think he already has. What is that thing?” While his eyes readjust, Ed tries to discern what it is that Lang has in his hands – it’s a rather large, clunky metal box with a large bulb and an even larger mirrored half-sphere encompassing its back.

“It's something we're testing at the studio – a compact, portable spotlight. It'll make shooting on location a great deal easier if we can quickly and easily set up the lights.”

Al smiles and says, “Forgive my saying so, but that doesn't look very compact at all.”

Lang chuckles, “You should see the full-sized ones. They're monsters!”

His wife badgers, “Why did you bring that thing out anyway?”

“I wanted to show off the stitching in the tapestry. Look at it now.”

Ed looks over at the tapestry again. “Oh yeah, I see it now.” The edges of the dragons glitter like gold, their long whiskers especially gleaming (though much of the tapestry is still hidden from Ed's sight by the colorful spots still dancing in his eyes).

“That's nice, dear,” Thea tells her husband, “Now put your toys away.”

Lang flicks the switch of the light off. “Yes, dear,” he complies. “It's starting to get too hot to hold onto anyway,” and he makes for the door to put the spotlight back from whence it came.

“In answer to your question earlier Miss Thea,” Roy continues the conversation, “Edward here helped your husband with some technical work on a movie once. Isn't that right, Ed?”

“Oh?” Thea asks, lifting both her teacup and her eyebrow, “You mean on *The Nibelungs*? Funny, I don't recall ever seeing you on set.”

“It was a very brief stint at the studio.”

Lang reenters the room and takes the seat next to his wife, “So how's life been treating you? Been staying out of trouble, I hope?”
Ed grins, “Been trying to.”

“So where are you working these days? You know my offer still stands for you to come work for me at the studio.”

“Nah, we've got a pretty good setup now. Al and I are researchers at the university in Frankfurt.”

“You don't say! That's very impressive.”

“And what about you?” Ed asks, “What have you been up to lately?”

“Well, right now we're in production of a film I'm calling Woman in the Moon. After that, we've got a great murder thriller lined up.”

Thea suddenly throws up her hand, “Oh no! I almost forgot!” She sets down her teacup and stands, “I'm so sorry. I'd love to stay and chat, but I forgot I've got an interview to get to!”

Fritz looks over at her as she scurries around the room, grabbing her purse and shawl. “Was that today, dear?”

“Yes, and I'm sure they're expecting me,” she responds as she wraps her shawl around her shoulders. She sighs, sounding slightly aggravated, “I was hoping you'd come with me. But I don't want to detract you from your guests.”

“You could always reschedule,” Fritz suggests.

The devious glint once again rises in Thea's eye. “I know. What if one of you strapping young lads accompanied me? After all, it's not right for a lady to go somewhere unescorted.”

Ed nudges Al with his elbow, “Al'll go.”

“I will?!” Al blurts.

Ed quickly leans in and whispers, “We need to get her out of here so we can talk to Lang. Plus, she obviously likes you. You can butter her up and maybe pull some info out of her without her knowing.”

Al whispers back, “Don't you think that's a little risky?”

Ed gives him a hearty pat on the back, “Nah, just be smooth about it. Don't let her onto what we're up to.”

Thea shoulders her purse, “Are you coming then?”

Al sets his teacup down on the coffee table and rises. “Yes, wait for me.”

Thea calls again to the maid, “Maria – do you have my box?”

“Yes ma'am!”

Fritz calls after them, “Have fun. And Al! Be careful. Don't let her take you down any dark alleys!” and he laughs as they leave.

Ed's eyes drift from the doorway over to Lang. “No disrespect, Mr. Lang – but your wife… she's a little-”
“Flirty? I know,” he finishes Ed's sentence. “It's only fair. I flirt with all the actresses at the studio.” He takes a drink of his tea. “Thea doesn't mind. It's a game between the two of us. We both know the flirting is meaningless, as long as we love each other.”

“Uh-huh…” Ed decides not to press it further.

“So Edward,” Lang says to him, “From your letter it sounds as though you're interested to know more about that photo I showed you back in Munich.”

Ed solemnly nods, “Yes sir. The one with the uranium bomb.”

Lang returns the solemnly nod. He sets down his cup of tea, and then reaches into his vest pocket, producing the photo, then slides it across the table. Edward picks it up and looks it over again – a group of men in lab coats holding the small round object between them. The man on the right, Karl Haushofer of the Thule Society, whom Ed had met back in Munich. On the left, who Ed could only assume to be Huskisson. When he met Huskisson, he had been wearing a mask, so it was hard to definitively say. Nonetheless, the man in this photo shared many of the same features – the short hair, a squared chin… surely this had to be him…

Ed inquires, “You never said where you got this. Or for that matter why you showed it to me in the first place.”

Lang quietly says, “Like I said back then – I wanted to give you fair warning, before you got any more involved with the Thule Society.”

“And your wife, Thea – is she Thule?”

Lang shakes his head. “No. She has nothing to do with them, though she is an avid follower of Helena Blavatsky's writings.”

“Blavatsky?” Ed asks.

Roy adds, “I think I've heard of her. She's the one who brought the idea of Shamballa to Europe from the Orient, am I right?”

“That's right,” Lang affirms. “I myself have looked over the pages of her works a few times, and I can't decide whether I'm amused or annoyed that the Thule Society and the Nationalists even work together. One of the main tenets of theosophy, as Blavatsky calls it, is to make no distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or color.”

Ed scoffs indignantly, “Yeah, that's sort of the exact opposite of what the Nationalists have been doing.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Lang agrees.

“So then tell me,” Ed asks, “If your wife's not part of the Thule Society, then how is it that you knew what they were up to back in Munich?”

Lang sighs though his nose. “That's a little more complicated…”

“I'm listening,” Ed says, his eyes ever stern and resolute.

As the afternoon sun begins to wane, long shafts of golden sunlight begin to filter though the
windows of the cab that Thea and Al are riding in. Thea says to the driver, “Thank you again for waiting on us. I hope you weren't waiting too awfully long.”

“No ma'am,” the driver responds.

“So,” Al asks of Thea, “Where are we going?”

“To the police station. That's where all the naughty boys go.”

“Uhh, okay,” Al politely tries to ignore what he hopes he's misinterpreting. After all, this woman is easily 20 years his senior. Surely she didn't have any interest in him…

“As Fritz said,” Thea answers, “We're currently writing a murder thriller. What better place to find inspiration than from real murderers?”

Al sits up straight as a rush of anxiety fills him. “Wait, you don't mean that's who you're interviewing is a murderer, is it?!”

“Of course,” Thea says cheerily, “Don't look so upset. He'll be behind bars. It's not like we’re going into his cell to talk with him.”

“Yeah but still,” Al squirms in his seat, trying to act calm, “It's a little creepy, don't you think?”

She gives a hearty laugh, “Oh-ho-ho! It takes more than that to scare me off! Come on now, buck up. Be a brave little soldier, for me, will you?” she smiles.

Again, Al sits up straight, trying to play calm. He's faced worse situations, he thinks to himself. If he can fight off homunculi, than a murderer behind bars should be no trouble, right?

The cab arrives at the police station, and Thea and Al get out of the car. “Please, wait here for us, won't you?” she requests of the driver.

Inside, the sergeant at the desk looks up as the front door opens. “Ah! Miss von Harbou! There you are! I was starting to think you got lost.”

She giggles, “Oh now Sergeant Fromm, you know I'm more capable than that.”

Sergeant Fromm smells the air and then looks at the box in Thea's hands. “And what have you brought us today, Thea?”

Thea opens the box with a smile, “Apple strudel, fresh from the oven.”

Another officer calls from a desk further back in the station, “Did I hear 'apple strudel'?”

“Help yourselves!” Thea cheerily chimes.

“Ah Thea,” Sergeant Fromm happily says, “I do enjoy your visits.” As he takes a strudel from the box, the man finally notices Al. “And who's your helper here?”

“This is Alphonse,” Thea answers for him. “His brother is an acquaintance of Fritz's.”

“Oh, is that so?” Fromm asks. “You like motion pictures, kid?”

Al nods, “Yeah. We just saw The Spies.” He turns to Thea, “I thought it was really good.”

“I'm glad,” Thea says. “And now you'll get to tell people that you helped on this movie. We plan
Sergeant Fromm sets the uneaten half of his strudel on his desk, wiping his mouth clean with the back of his hand. “Right.” He picks up a nightstick from off his desk, and then nods his head in the general direction of a door, “He's back this way,” and he begins to lead them.

Al sets the box of strudels on the desk, but before he can follow Fromm, Thea takes a strudel, wrapping it in a napkin and tucking it away in her purse. She winks at Al, “For insurance.” Al cocks his head to the side, confused, but follows her and Sergeant Fromm anyway.

They enter through a heavy wooden door – on the other side of it, a long dank hallway made of stone and concrete. At the very end of it, the small window catches the last remaining rays of sun. The right side of the hall is all stone, the left side bars upon metal bars creating the jail cells. Some cells are empty, others have a few people in them – a drunk asleep on the bench; a burly man with scar on his cheek; another scrawny man who looks like the pickpocket type.

Sergeant Fromm leads them down to the very end of the hall, to the very last cell. “This is him.”

Al looks into the cage – and his blood runs cold.

“Well, well,” a familiar voice utters from the other side of the bars, “Did you bring me some new friends to play with?”

* 

Lang stares into his teacup, looking back at his own reflection. Ed and Roy wait for an answer.

“I got that photo from my wife, who got it from Haushofer.”


Lang nods, “That's right. We had met abroad in Japan and my wife was very fond of him. I hadn't seen him for years. And then one day… well, I had noticed that Thea had been coming home later than usual. Sometimes she stays behind at the studio to help clean up. She's motherly like that. Sometimes she even cooks for the crew. But that's aside the point…”

Ed patiently hopes that Lang won't ramble like an old man.

Lang continues, “As dishonest as it is, I had her followed, to find out where she was going in the evenings. Sure enough, she was seeing someone behind my back.”

“I thought you said you didn't mind?” Ed points out.

“Flirting, no. But full-on cheating? To be honest, I was never able to prove anything. All her and Haushofer were doing was talking. You can hardly call having tea 'adultery'. But after evenings spent with him, she'd come home with all these theosophical notions tucked into her head and she'd go on and on for hours about Haushofer's theories about racial distillation and such.”

“And the photo?” Ed asks. “Did she ever say anything about how she got it?”

Lang nods, “One of the theories that Haushofer was most passionate about was the theory of parallel worlds. He offered that photo as proof, but honestly it doesn't prove much of anything. Nonetheless, Haushofer was convinced that the device he's holding there came from another world, and he believed it scientifically possible to travel between these two planes of existence.”
Roy asks, “Did Haushofer ever say anything about why he was so sure that the device was authentic?”

Lang shakes his head, “No. I'm afraid I never saw Haushofer during that time. I didn't want to let my wife know that I was onto her.” He then chuckles, “Ironically enough, I don't think Haushofer was onto her either. I don't think he was even aware that my wife was trying to have an affair with him, as all they ever did was talk about metaphysics. Lucky for me, he's very loyal to his own wife.”

Ed speaks, “So he sees an object that *supposedly* came from another world. Did Thea ever say anything else?”

Lang nods once more, “That man you see next to Haushofer – he's the one who showed them this 'otherworldly' bomb. He claimed that by breaking down the element inside it, a massive amount of energy would be released.”

Roy asks, “And did this man have a name?”

Lang sighs, “I'm afraid I don't know that. I wish I could do more to help, but that's really about all I can tell you.”

Ed's face grows long.

* Of all the people he could possibly meet in this world, Al never thought that he'd see this face again. *Barry the Chopper*...

“How very nice of you to actually let me have some human contact in this hellhole,” the prisoner says to the officer.

“Shut it!” Sergeant Fromm orders the man. “You're gonna behave yourself or we're gonna have a problem, do you understand?”

“That's enough, sergeant,” Thea politely requests. She kindly looks to the man in the cell, “Bernhard Fleischer, is it?”

“Please, call me Bernd,” he smirks.

“Very well, Bernd,” She reaches into her purse and pulls out a small notepad and a rather fancy-looking pen, “I have some questions for you.”

“Ask away, doll.”

“Hey!” Fromm shouts at him, “Show her respect!”

“It's quite all right,” Thea puts a hand up to calm the policeman.

Bernd continues smirking, “You wanna know why it is I did what I did, is that it? You wanna know how it is a poor lost little lamb like me turned into such a vicious wolf? It was pretty easy, actually.” His smile grows wider as he tilts his head to the side, not unlike a cat plotting the demise of a mouse, “Or maybe you wanna know how to kill someone and get away with it?” He laughs raucously. “In that case, you're talking to the wrong person! In case you haven't noticed, I've been caught! Ha ha ha!”
Al shudders a little bit. He didn't like that laugh. True – he was bound to a suit of armor when he first met Barry the Chopper, so it's not like he had a physical body to be murdered. Nonetheless, his recollections of the man were not pleasant ones. Still, Al reminds himself, *This man isn't Barry the Chopper. Though it seems his life has taken a very similar path...*

“What I'd like to know,” Thea continues, “Is your story. I believe that everyone has a story to tell and has a right to be heard. I'd like to tell your story.”

“Oh, is that so? Put me up on the silver screen? Make a star outta me? That's awfully sweet of you. But what's in it for me? You think if enough people like the movie, they'll take me off death row?” Bernd presses sarcastically.

“I'm offering you the chance to have your side of the story heard.”

“Psh!” Bernd scoffs and lays back on his bench, resting his hands behind his head. “That sounds like work. Maybe I don't feel like talking.”

“Oh come now,” Thea says, her voice somewhere between silky and sharp. “You and I share a very similar trait.”

“Oh?”

“We're boastful. We want all of the world to know of our achievements. We want the world to know the great feats we have accomplished. And I can offer you immortality.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Though your body will no doubt pass, your deeds will live on in infamy, on film. Imagine it – decades, perhaps even centuries of people recalling that which you've done.”

Sergeant Fromm speaks up, “Uh, Miss von Harbou, I'm not sure that's such a good ide-”

She again raises her hand for silence.

Bernd stares at her for a while, contemplating her words. Then he speaks with a shrug of the shoulders, “That's nice and all, but maybe I'm not ready for the story to be over.” His eyes drift slowly over to Alphonse, who feels his heart leap into his throat. Bernd's lips part in a sly smile, his face partly-hidden in the shadows of the ever-darkening room, “Maybe I've still got a few plots to work out – a few more boys to kill.”

Sergeant Fromm strikes the bars with his nightstick. “That's enough out of you!” He turns to Thea, “Miss von Harbou, I really suggest that we end this interview.”

“Hmph.” In a huff, she passes off her notepad and pen to Al unexpectedly, hitting him a little roughly in the chest. He takes the items from her, putting them into his pocket for safekeeping. “Very well,” she says. She then reaches into her purse, pulling out the wrapped apple strudel. “I hope, Mr. Fleischer, that you'll accept this small token of appreciation. Perhaps someday soon we can meet again and you'll be in a better mood.”

She stretches her arm through the bars, the treat in her hand. The sergeant quickly cries, “Don't reach through the bars!”

And like a shot, Bernd has her by the wrist!

Al and the sergeant jump towards the bars to pull Thea back, but Bernd has already released her, he
now holding the strudel. “Thanks, doll,” he says, and saunters back to his bench, flopping down with his treat.

“Are you all right?” Al asks.

Thea rubs her wrist, “Yes, I'm fine. Sergeant, if you'd please.”

“Right,” and Sergeant Fromm ushers the visitors from the hall back to the exit.

But as they leave, Al can't help but feel as though he's being watched. He looks back over his shoulder, and sure enough, Bernd is at the bars of his cage, his eyes boring into Al's back.

The sergeant shuts the door behind them.

* *

“So now what?” Roy asks.

“I really am sorry,” Lang apologizes. “I wish I could be of more help. But may I ask why it is that you're so interested in this man and his weapon?”

Ed glares sternly at Lang. “It doesn't matter whether or not this bomb came from another world. If it really has the kind of power that Haushofer claims it has, then we have to get it out of the hands of the Thule Society and the Nationalists. No one should have that kind of power.”

Lang stirs his tea quietly, the air in the flat thick but calm. Then he says, “You know, from the first moment I met you, it seems like all you want to do is dig yourself into trouble. If this matter really concerns you, why not tell the government? Let them deal with it. You're a private citizen – you shouldn't be sticking your own neck out in business like this.”

“Trust me,” Ed tells him, “I've learned that I can't just sit back and act like the world has nothing to do with me. Sometimes inaction is the worst crime of all.”

All three men are quiet. Then the sound of the front door opening downstairs reaches their ears. “Dear!” Thea's voice calls from the foyer, “We're back!”

~

Later in the foyer, Fritz and Thea bid farewell to their guests. “It was so nice meeting you all,” Thea says, “It's a shame you couldn't stay any longer.”

Roy puts his hat on his head, “It is rather late. We should be going.”

She puts on a big smile, “Please, feel free to drop by anytime.”

Ed nods as he puts on his hat, “Thank you for your hospitality.”

Lang says to them, “I wish you well on your quest, gentlemen.”

And with that, the three of them leave.

They walk quietly down the nighttime street, the lamps lining the sidewalk providing a warm yellow glow. As they turn a corner, heading back to their hotel, Al asks, “So, what did you find out?”

Ed sighs, grumbling, “Not a lot. Though Lang was nice enough to give me the picture.” He hands
it off to Al, “See for yourself.”

Al takes the photo, looking it over. “So wait, which one is Huskisson?”

“You don't recognize him?” Ed asks. “He's the fella on the left.”

“Are you sure he's not this guy in the center?” Al asks. “I thought Huskisson had long hair?”

“Augh,” Ed grumbles, hand on head “We met the guy once, eight years ago. And he was wearing a mask!” He puts his hands in his pockets, “Heck if I remember exactly what he looks like.” He questions, “What about you? Did you find out anything?”

Al bursts, “You won't BELIEVE who I saw! Barry the Chopper!”

Ed nearly trips over himself, “What?!”

Roy is confused, “Who?”

Ed continues, “Don't tell me he's here, too!”

“Well, no, not really,” Al corrects himself, “I mean, it's not really Barry the Chopper – just this world's version.”

“Oh?” Roy asks, “Someone you knew from the other side?”

Ed rubs his head, “Right. I keep forgetting there are a few stories we've yet to tell you. Though maybe you shouldn't hear it before bed. It’ll give you nightmares!” Ed quips.

“Please, I'm not a child,” Roy retorts.

“How long before we reach the hotel?” Al asks.

“Not too far now,” Ed says, “It's just around this next corner, I think.”

Al, still clinging to the photo, puts it in his pocket, “Good. It's been a long day—Uh oh!” Al pulls something from out of his pocket. “Thea's notepad! And her pen! I forgot to give these back to her!” Al turns on his heel, “I'll be right back!”

“Don't worry about it, Al,” Ed tells him. “Just hang onto it until the morning.”

Al shoves the notepad back in his pocket, “We're not that far from the Langs' house. It'll just take me a minute.” And he sprints off.

“AL!” Ed calls after him.

“You want to wait here for him?” Roy asks.

Ed huffs, “Nah, he's a big kid. He can find his own way to the hotel. Come on, let's go. I'm exhausted.”

Al sprints down the street, turning the corner to make his way back to the Langs’ house, when BAM!

Everything goes dark.
A good twenty minutes have passed, and Al has yet to return. Ed sits on the edge of his bed, nervously staring at the door. *What's taking him so long?* he wonders. He looks over at the little rotary phone sitting on the desk. And after a long while of thinking, he finally rises and walks over to it, cranking it up.

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RING!

Fritz looks over to the phone on the wall. “Now who on earth could that be at this late hour?”

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Ed waits with bated breath.

“Hello?” Lang's voice calls from the other side.

“Hey, Fritz, it's me, Edward.”

Lang chuckles, “Miss me already?”

“Listen – is Al there?”

“Your brother? No.”

Ed's eyes grow wide.

Lang asks, “Is something wrong?”

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And then the world comes steadily into view, fuzzy at first, and then slowly, clearer and clearer. Al looks around him. *Where am I?* His head is throbbing. His hands are ice cold, hanging above his head. He looks up – they're chained to a wide, large pipe above him. Why?

He looks around – the room is small and dank, the only light a deep orange glow arising from a mass of coals inside a large boiler, its door wide open, warming and lighting the room. The wall next to it is lined with a variety of tools – hammers, saws, wrenches, screwdrivers, the like.

**SCHINK! SCHINK!**

Al draws in a sharp breath, hearing the sound of metal on metal – the sharpening of a blade.

“You know, I can't decide,” that same familiar voice utters from the shadows, “Do I wanna saw you in half? Or do I wanna bash your head in with a hammer?” In the darkness stands Bernd Fleischer. He slowly turns around, a crazed smile growing long from cheek to cheek, “Or do I want to get creative and shove a lead pipe down your throat?! There are so many choices, I just can't choose!”

Al takes a long, slow, deep breath, calming himself. “How did you get out?”
Bernd proudly holds up a small silver something, “It's pretty easy when you've got the key. Thanks to Miss Strudel Lady, I was able to get the guard to come close enough for me to swipe it!”

*When the sergeant and I jumped to save Thea, Al recalls.*

Bernd saunters closer to Al, the blade of his long knife glinting in the orange firelight, “I really should be thanking her. Not only did she provide my means of escape, but she renewed my vigor for life. She brought back the inspiration to take life!”

Bernd juts the tip of the blade under Al's chin, forcing him to lift his head lest he be cut.

“I've got to say,” Bernd murmurs, “You're a little bit older than my usual type. But you've got such a pretty face, I just couldn't resist! I'm gonna enjoy making you cry.”

But the next thing he knows, Bernd gets a swift knee to the gut, followed by a kick to the head! He falls over backwards, his knife flying far from him and landing somewhere in the shadows. Fast as a rabbit, Al jumps upwards and pulls himself up onto the large piping above his head. As quick as he can, he rushes towards the wall, pushing himself along the pipe to where it connects at a T-joint. He begins kicking furiously at the joint, trying to dislodge the pipe.

Bernd in the meanwhile is sitting back up, rubbing his jaw. “Ahh! Dammit! So! That's how you wanna play, is it?” Bernd gets back up to his feet and strides over to the tools on the wall, picking up a particularly large sledgehammer. He shoulders it and marches up towards Al who gasps. Bernd shouts, “You wanna see who hits the hardest?!” He swings the hammer!

Al slides backwards, the hammer landing with such great force that it bursts a hole in the wide pipe. A great column of steam forces its way out with a burning hiss. Bernd jerks back on the hammer, nearly toppling backwards from its weight.

Grabbing onto the chains around his wrists, Al jumps off the other side of the pipe and swings himself around, kicking Bernd in the jaw! Bernd falls backwards again, the hammer thudding heavily onto the ground at his feet.

The chains dig deeply into Al's skin, but he just grits his teeth, knowing he has no time to focus on the pain. He tries to run as best he can back towards the T-joint, a little hard to do as the chain keeps catching on every bump and connection in the piping.

Bernd starts laughing maniacally as he rises, “You know, normally I like a nice submissive prey. But I've got to say – you're feistiness is entertaining. It really gets the blood pumping, y'know?”

Al is back near the T-joint, this time pulling the chain down on the weakened part of the pipe where Bernd hit it.

Bernd goes over to the boiler, hands on the wheel near the pressure gauge. “What do you say we turn up the heat?” He spins the wheel rapidly, and the coals of the boiler brighten. A massive amount of steam screams out of the bust in the pipe, the heat forcing Al to back away. Steam fills the room, and Al has to shake his head to clear his eyes, trying to see past the screen of white.

Suddenly Bernd appears, knife in hand! Al backs away, leaping backwards in great strides, Bernd slashing back and forth! Al hits brick, his back to the wall! And Bernd stops. He stares Al down, each waiting for the other to make a move. Every time Al looks like he's going to move, left or right, Bernd also shifts his weight that way, tossing the knife from hand to hand, chuckling gleefully.

“Left? Or right? What's it gonna be? Doesn't really matter does it? You're stuck to that pipe. Still,
watching you think is fun. You're a lot more fun than all those little kids I've torn apart.”

“Shut up!” Al shouts, “I don't want to hear it!”

“Oh I see now,” Bernd says with a slinky voice, “You've got a soft spot for kids. Then you probably don't want to hear about the little girl whose brains I bashed in. I never knew so much red could come out of such a little thing.”

“I said shut up!” Al lashes out, kicking at his assailant, but Bernd retaliates and slashes Al across his calf. Al pulls his leg back, wincing.

Bernd cackles, “I'm gonna enjoy having your head on my wall as a trophy!” He barrels towards Al, knife held high!

But then suddenly, Bernd is being dragged backwards by his collar, and then thrown to the floor!

“Brother!”

“Roy!” Ed shouts, “Get Al down! I'll take care of this guy!”

Through the steam and smoke, Roy appears, rushing up to Al. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just get me down!”

Roy hurriedly looks over the chains while in the background Ed and Bernd fight, the steam filtering out through the open door of the boiler room.

Bernd swings his arms wildly back and forth, slicing upwards and downwards, Ed dodging. He winds back his metal arm and with great force, lays one right on Bernd's nose!

Roy shouts, “Is there a key?!”

“I don't know!” Al cries back, “See if there are bolt cutters over there!”

“Over where?!”

“There!”

Roy runs through the steam towards the tools, trying to avoid the brawl. He gasps and then quickly ducks as the knife comes flying over his head, barely missing him! It flies straight at Ed's face – but Ed puts up his automail arm and deflects it. His sight blocked for not but a moment, Bernd leaps on top of him and tackles him to the ground.

Roy makes it to the tools and fans his hands back and forth, trying to clear the smoke so he can see, coughing as the hot steam weighs down on his lungs.

Bernd, sitting on Ed who’s still on the ground, pummels Ed across the face, both men's noses bleeding. Bernd screeches with crazed laughter, enjoying himself immensely. But then Edward grabs him by the collar, and pulling himself upwards, Ed forcefully headbutts Bernd, stopping him momentarily. A moment is all Ed needs to throw him off and get back to his feet.

Roy returns to Al's side. “No bolt cutters, but I found a saw! We can saw through the pipes!”

“Do you know how long that might take?!” Al shouts.

Roy is already sawing back and forth on the piping, “Let's hope your brother can hold him off!”

Ed is on his feet – but having thrown Bernd halfway across the room, he's lost him in the fog again. “Show yourself!” Ed bellows.

Suddenly the door to the boiler closes and the orange lighting disappears. Bernd's cackling echoes across the walls. Ed stands at the ready, fists raised and ready to strike…

The hissing of steam still fills his ears, but just beyond that, he can hear footsteps, from which direction, he can't tell. Cautiously, Ed moves forwards, hoping to either avoid Bernd or get close enough to punch him again.

“Brother! Behind you!”

Bernd cries out with a bloodcurdling scream, descending on Ed – but right before he gets within arm's reach, a blinding light beams into the room, hitting both Bernd and Ed right in the eyes. “Augh! What the hell?!” Bernd shrieks.

“There he is!” Thea's voice calls.

Silhouettes of officers fill the room, tackling Bernd to the ground, he wriggling and screeching, “Let me go! Let me go!” They clasp him in handcuffs, and as they do, they light goes out.

At the door stands Fritz with his portable spotlight. “See? I told you this thing would come in handy,” he says to Thea.

Thea goes over to Al where a couple of officers assist Roy in getting him down. “Are you all right?”

Al smiles at her, “Yeah. Thanks.”

Fritz goes over to Edward, Ed asking, “How'd you find us?”

Fritz answers, “When you said that Al didn't make it back to the hotel, we had a feeling something was wrong, so we phoned the police.”

Thea adds, “That's when Sergeant Fromm told us to stay indoors – because he had escaped,” she points to Bernd as the officers drag him out, all the police exiting the room.

“Neither of us could resist the temptation of adventure though,” Fritz says. “Also, if Al was nearby, we were closer than the police were.”

Ed smiles, “Thanks. But you really put yourselves in danger coming out here.”

Fritz gives a hardy grin, “Don't think so little of me, boy. I was once a soldier, you know. I've been through worse than a madman with a pocketknife.”

Al, now released from his bonds, rubs his sore wrists. Thea puts a hand on his shoulder. “Oh you poor thing!” she says, “We'll take you back to the flat and get some iodine for that.”

“No, that's all right,” Al says.

“I insist! It's no trouble at all.”

“Oh, hey,” Al reaches into his pocket and pulls out the notepad and pen, “Before I forget.”

“Oh, my notepad.”
Ed interjects, “I told you you should have waited until morning to take it to her.”

“Don’t tell me that's why you were out by yourself,” Thea says as Al hands her the notepad. As he does, something falls off of its back – the photo. “What's this?” Thea looks down. “Where did you get that?”

“I gave it to them,” Fritz confesses.

She throws him an angry glare, “Who said you could give my mementos away to strangers? That's one of the only photos I have of our old friend Karl!”

“I believe these boys have more use for it than you do by tucking it away in a scrapbook.”

“What would they possibly need with a photo of him?”

Ed pipes up, “It's not Haushofer we're interested in.”

Thea looks over at him.

Ed continues, “We're looking for a man named Huskisson.”

Thea cocks her head to the side, “Huskisson?”

“He's also in this picture, or so we think. He's the one who made that bomb you see there.”

“You mean Henrikson?” Thea corrects.

All three of them gasp. Al quickly questions, “So you do know him!”

“I met him once before when Karl and I were having tea. He seemed like a brilliant fellow, but honestly, he was a little too, how should I say, eccentric for me. It was rather off-putting.”

“Please,” Ed presses, “Do you know where he is now?”

“I can't say that I do.”

Ed sighs.

Al on the other hand is excited, “But still! This is good! We haven't been able to find him because we've been using the wrong name! He changed it from Huskisson to Henrikson! This means we have a new lead!”

Thea finally picks the photo up off the ground.

Ed asks, “Thea, please, may we keep that?”

“Well,” she ponders, “I don't know.”

“Please,” Roy also implores, “It's very important that we do.”

She thinks for a little bit, and once more, that devious glint arises in her eyes. “Very well. On one condition…”

The boys leave the boiler room, photo in hand, Al wiping his lips across the back of his hand. “The things I do for you guys.”
Roy tries to hide his amusement, but he can't contain a smile.

A huge grin is plastered on Ed's face, “Way to take one for the team, Al!”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Reviews:

I love how Al just kicked Roy (Remi) in the jaw like that! He definitely handled it better than Ed - of course he is older than Ed was when in that situation. I also thought the ending was hilarious! I can't stop laughing! XD

Next episode:
The crowd lazily moves through the city streets of the marketplace, old ladies with their grandchildren picking through the fruit lain out on the carts, searching for that perfect apple, or piling potatoes into their handbaskets. Merchants shout out their specials, trying to get customers to
come and peruse their wares, even if everyone is saving the money they have for food.

Roy walks along, buying some food for the week ahead. He's lost in his own little world of thought, when a man approaches him.

"Roy Mustang?" the man questions.

Roy looks up from the pile of tomatoes that he's been looking at and turns his attention towards the man. "Yes?"

The man extends his hand, "Frederick Williams. Pleased to meet you."

Roy returns the handshake, mentally running the name through his head, wondering if he's met this gentleman somewhere before and has simply forgotten – but the handshake tells all – the Masonic handshake.

Roy nods solemnly. "What news do you bring?"

The year is 1930.

*

The four men sit around the table in the dining room, Ed and Al listening to the stranger that Roy has brought home.

Ed asks, "So you've been spying on the Thule Society this whole time?"

Al adds, "Isn't that risky? What if they find out you're a Mason?"

The man, Williams, responds, "I've been playing things fairly close to the vest. As far as they know, I'm just another member of their ranks. I feel they don't suspect."

"And Huskisson?" Ed queries.

Williams continues, "Yes. This Huskisson, or Henrikson as he's been calling himself – I haven't actually seen him. But I've heard whispers. It's all been very hush-hush, mind you. I do know for a fact, however, that the Thule Society has been pumping a great deal of money and resources into Wewelsburg castle up north. He chuckles, "There's a benefit to being the club treasurer as it were."

Roy silently takes it all in, rolling the info over in his head. "Wewelsburg. That's in Büren, yes?"

Williams nods, "We can house you at the local lodge if need be. But I warn you – if you decide to take the Thule Society head-on, you're playing with fire."

Ed says, "Trust me, I know."

Roy says, "It's not going to be easy. But we can't afford to sit around. The longer we wait, the closer the Thule Society gets to completing their plans." He looks to Ed and Al. "Pack your bags, fellas. We're going to Büren."

*

No time is wasted, and by the end of that evening, Edward, Al, and Roy have been escorted to the small hamlet of Büren, courtesy of Mr. Williams and his automobile. The sun kneels in the west, its golden sunlight bouncing off the orangey-brown rooftops. Not far beyond the town, sprawling
woods and hills stretch out in all directions. And not too far still rises a grand medieval castle, peering dauntingly over the treetops to the town below.

The car putters to a stop in front of a rather plain-looking building, its white façade and brown tiled roof blending in with the rest of the town. The only thing different about it is the tiniest of indicators – nestled under an awning overstretching the entrance, above the doorframe is a small engraving of the Square & Compass.

Williams turns off the engine, and the doors of the car open. Ed steps out, looking the building over.

"So this is the lodge?"

"Nice and quiet, isn't it?" Williams chimes as he unties the luggage from the roof of the vehicle. "The city lodges are too noisy for my opinion. What good's a secret club if you advertise?"

Al shuts the car door behind him. "Do you need any help with those, Mr. Williams?"

"Thanks," Williams hands him one of the bags.

Roy approaches the door of the lodge and knocks.

* *

The inside of the lodge is as modest as its outside, plain and unassuming. An elderly gentleman hobbles up to the trio, a cane helping him along. "You're from the Frankfurt lodge, yes?" he asks through bushy whiskers.

Roy nods and extends his hand, "Yes. Roy Mustang, pleased to meet you."

The old man returns the handshake, "Frederick Williams, head of the lodge."

Al points to fellow next to him, "Wait, I thought he was Frederick Williams?"

The younger man chuckles, "Junior. This is my father."

"Oh…"

The old man motions his head towards a nearby staircase. "Your rooms are up that way. Go ahead and make yourselves comfortable. Fred, ring up the Brothers and tell them I've called a meeting."

"Yes sir," his son complies, and walks towards the small rotary phone hanging on the wall.

* *

The sun disappears from the sky, and the tiniest silver sliver of a moon peaks out from behind a mass of grey clouds lazily drifting through the sky. The interior of the lodge, still old-fashioned in its ways, is lit with candle lamps. Other Brothers have arrived, pleasantries are exchanged, and slowly but surely the meeting room fills up.

All sit around a table, an ancient wrought-iron chandelier casting a glow from above. Williams Sr. quietly knocks a gavel onto the tabletop for silence and order.

"Now then," he begins, "As I'm sure you're all well aware, the Thule Society has been trying to harness the powers of the ancient ways for their own personal gain."
Nods and murmurs of understanding arise from the brothers.

The lodge master continues, "Brother Elric," he says, motioning to Edward, "Informed us a few years ago of their plans to use such power for military purposes. My son reports that the Thule Society has moved much of their time and money out of Munich and into Wewelsburg castle, placing much trust in a man named Henrikson. When he was last seen, Henrikson had in his possession a bomb of great magnitude. Now – it is unknown whether or not that bomb is currently in the halls of Wewelsburg. Nonetheless, it's clear that the Thulers are fortifying. What we must do now is decide what course of action to take."

Roy quietly raises his hand.

The lodge master points his gavel at him, "Brother Mustang."

"If the Thule Society is dedicating a great amount of money and resources to this castle, no doubt they'd want to protect their investment. It's highly likely that they have it well-guarded by a private militia."

Lodge Master Williams nods. "Indeed."

"Sir?" Edward pipes up.

Again, the lodge master motions his gavel, "Brother Elric."

"What we should do is scout the castle – find out just what kind of security they have posted around the place. That, and figure out both the lay of the land and the castle so we know best how to get in."

A few members shift uneasily in their seats.

Williams Jr. spurts, "You really want to infiltrate the castle?"

His father knocks the gavel on the table, "You speak out of turn."

"Sorry," the son twiddles his thumbs.

The master continues, "Though he does make a point. It'd be foolish for us to try to go in on our own."

Again Roy raises his hand.

The lodge master asks, "What do you recommend?"

Roy continues, "True, we're not a militant organization. But what we lack in weapons, we make up for in influence."

The master lowly hums as he ponders, twirling his gavel twixt his fingers, "Get the police involved, you mean?"

Mustang nods, "It's no secret that in the past both the Thule Society and the Worker's Party with whom they collude have tried to overthrow the government – and clearly that's what they're planning on doing now. What we need to do is let the military know. Get them to orchestrate a raid on the castle and take down Thule for us."

Ed, annoyed, pounds a fist on the table, "The military? Are you kidding me? Why, so they can take the bomb for themselves? That's just as bad if not worse!"
"Brother Elric," the master scolds, "You speak out of turn."

Al gently tugs on his brother's sleeve, whispering, "Ed, calm down."

Mustang asks, "Master Williams – who here in this lodge is either in the military or on the police force?"

The master motions his head towards one man at a time, "Obers there is a captain. Kicher is retired military. Acker is on the police force. And both Kohler and Metz are on the city council. I'm sure we'll require their help as well."

Roy asks, "Brother Obers – can I count on you to retrieve the bomb, and not let it fall into the hands of the military?"

"Of course," the man nods.

Roy looks resolutely at the headmaster - "How soon can we move out?"

* *

Later that evening, Ed is lying on the bottom level of a bunk bed, staring up at the mattress suspended above him.

Al, laying in the top bunk says, "I know that sound."

"What sound?"

"The sound of you silently brooding." He pokes his head over the edge and looks down at Ed. "You don't like Roy's plan, do you?"

"Of course I don't!" Ed squirms on his mattress like an antsy child. "You know I don't like sitting on my hands just waiting for things to happen. You heard the Brothers – an inquiry from the city council could take weeks or even months! By then, Huskisson will get away!"

"But that's only if we leave it to the city council. Brother Obers seemed pretty confident he could get the military to mobilize and raid the castle by the end of the week."

"Still," Ed grumbles, "That's too long. We've already wasted seven years on this hunt, and I'm not about to let him get away now!" Ed sits up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and stands.

"What are you planning?" Al asks with a bit of panic in his voice.

Ed pulls his overcoat off the back of a chair and pulls it onto himself. "What do you think? I'm going to go scout the castle."

Al waves his hands nervously, "But you heard the headmaster! We'd be crazy to go in on our own!"

Ed gives that big old grin of his, "That's never stopped us before."

"It's different this time, Ed!" Al snaps a bit angrily. "We don't have our alchemy anymore! How do you expect to fight all those soldiers?"

Ed makes his way to the window, opening it up, "We don't have to fight them. We just have to slip in, get the bomb, and slip back out."
"Who's 'we'?! I never said I was going!"

Ed looks over his shoulder, that same grin on his face, "Come on, Al. Like you really wanna miss out on this?" And with that, Ed hops out the window!

"Ed!" Al calls after him, he himself hopping down from his bunk. He quickly grabs his own coat from off a hook on the back of the door. "Wait for me!"

*

The landscape is virtually black, barely any moonlight visible through the cover of clouds. The castle looms at the top of the hill, its large round towers staring down to the valley below. Ed and Al make their way silently through the brush, trying to rustle as little as possible the grass and leaves around them.

They come to the edge of the tree line, in front of them a short stone wall. A large clearing with a small garden of some kind sits between them and the castle. The garden has raised vegetable beds, strangely quaint in comparison to the dark eerie stoneface behind it. To their left, the short stone wall rises up an incline towards a bridge that crosses over a dried up moat, the large arches of the bridge twice a man's height. To their right, a domineering, huge tower, small shadows moving along its top – sentries to be sure.

The brothers, crouched low, hug up against the short wall, just barely peeking over its top. Ed stares quietly at the castle, his eyes surveying every inch of stone.

"Brother," Al whispers, "We shouldn't be here. Let's go back to the lodge…"

"Shh!" Ed urges, "You want them to hear us?"

Ed continues scanning the castle walls, looking for something, anything, some weakness in the wall in order to get through…

He points, lowly whispering, "There. Do you see that?"

Al follows Ed's line of sight. At the very bottom of the tower, hidden in the shadows are a couple of wooden doors, side by side. Al squints his eyes, peering into the darkness. He can make out a form.

He whispers, "Yeah, but there's a guard there."

"Yeah," Ed says slyly, "A guard. One guy is easy enough to take out."

"And what happens when the others hear us knocking him out? Or someone comes along and sees him laying on the ground?"

"You worry too much."

"No I don't! I-"

"Hey!" a voice from the top of the tower calls. Suddenly a large light swings around, beaming down onto the short wall below.

Ed and Al quickly duck down.

The voice calls, "Who's there?"
Al can feel his heart throbbing in his chest. Ed clenches his fist, ready to fight. They can both hear men conversing.

"I thought I heard something. Go check it out."

The sound of heavy boots crunches through the leaves, making their way closer to them. Ed silently moves his hands about, gesturing for Al to move. On hands and knees, they both quickly scramble towards the bridge.

The soldier rounds the corner, his rifle at the ready. He can hear shuffling, but he can't see for the lack of moonlight – and the spotlight from the tower is casting an even darker and longer shadow as it hits up against the wall. Cautiously, he creeps along, following the sound, hoping perhaps it's just a deer or maybe a rabbit. He steps out of the spotlight's beam, making his way into the darkness unknown as he follows alongside the wall.

Suddenly, the end of his rifle is being forced upward and being yanked forward, he losing his grip on the trigger, unable to fire. And before he can even figure out what's going on, the guard gets a shattering punch to his jaw.

Ed holds the rifle, watching the guard fall at his feet. "Come on!" he hisses, trying to whisper but the urgency seeping through. "Around the other side!" he says while he removes the guard's helmet, handing it to his brother. "Under the bridge!" Now standing, the tall incline of the wall covering them, Ed and Al dash as quick as they can towards the base of the bridge. While running, Al puts the helmet on for protection, Ed still carrying the rifle.

They can hear more sentries on the bridge above them: "What was that?! Did you hear that?!" The light atop the tower is swinging back and forth, scanning the woods.

Ed and Al duck into the dark cover of the arches of the bridge, their backs to the wall, footsteps tramping quickly on the stones above. "Stay close," Ed says.

They tear across the clearing, keeping ever close to the castle's wall. But it's not long before the soldiers who were previously on the bridge have arrived at the dry moat bed. "Halt!"

POW! They begin firing!

"Go, Al!" Ed shouts. He whips around, ducking behind one of the raised vegetable beds for cover, and he fires at the soldiers.

Al, so close to the wall, cannot be seen by the sentries atop the tower. But Ed, in his current position, can. The spotlight swings across the bridge and fixes squarely on him. He gasps, hearing, "Fire!" He jumps to the left, dodging a hail of bullets.

Edward, rifle still in hand, continues running as a volley of rifles fires at his heels. He barrels towards the soldiers beneath the bridge. They stop running so they can get a steady shot at their incoming enemy, he now easily seen under the spotlight that follows his every move. But the next that they know, he jumps right at them, the spotlight now blinding them! POW! The volley of bullets hits them in their chests!

"Cease fire, you idiots!" a voice from the tower top cries, realizing what's been done.

Ed tucks and rolls back under the dark cover of the bridge, dust and dirt being kicked up, small
pebbles clinging to exposed skin and getting caught in his pockets. He grinds to a halt, getting himself upright, trying to reorient himself to his surroundings. He can see Al in the distance, just a silhouette, kicking at one of the doors.

*I have to get over there!* Ed frantically thinks. The large spotlight still beams down harshly, a stark yellowish-white cascading through the arches. Ed tiptoes on the edge of the darkness, trying to stay out of the light. But he needs to get back to Al. Ed once again puts his back to the wall, and cautiously slides his way along towards the doors at the base of the tower. He gets not but the toes of his left shoe out into the light before the firing starts up again, a sharp metallic sound ringing out.

He pulls himself quickly back into the darkness. *Dammit!* he thinks. *They better not have screwed up my automail.* He looks back across the clearing. *Wait a minute! Where's Al?!!*

~

The door has burst open and Al now finds himself tumbling down a staircase, unable to stop the momentum of his fall. The stone steps scrape his skin, knocking his elbows and shins before he ultimately hits bottom, his cheeks scraping against the hard sandstone flooring. He coughs, the wind knocked out of him, and he lifts himself up on sore, shaky, skinned palms. "Ow…" he groans as he sits up, "Glad I'm wearing a helmet…"

*Click-click!*

He gasps and looks up to see a handgun pointed at him. Standing over him is a tall man with long brown hair and a squared chin with a scraggily goatee growing on it. He wears a long white lab coat covered in various stains – oil, powders, who knows what else. His narrow eyes get even narrower as he glares, disgusted, at the young man before him.

"Who are you?! What are you doing in my lab?!!"

Al reaches for the sky, "Don't shoot! I'm unarmed!"

"HA!" The man laughs sarcastically, "That just means it's easier to kill you."

Al scrambles, "I-I'm your new lab assistant! Heh-heh!" he laughs nervously. "The Thule Society sent me!"

The man momentarily relaxes, aiming his gun at the ceiling instead. "What? I never ordered an assistant." He immediately points the gun back at Al's head – "And besides! What would you know about my work anyway? You're useless!"

"Trust me," Al says firmly, a suddenly stillness to his voice, "I know a lot more than you think."

The man tilts his head to the side a little, like a bird observing its prey. He slowly asks, "Your voice – it sounds familiar. Have we met before?"

Al is silent, wondering the best course of action to take – the truth, or a lie? "…My name is Alphonse Elric. We met a long time ago, at your castle in the ocean of the southwest of Amestris."

The man gasps loudly, every muscle in his body tensing up. "Wh-what?! You're lying! How do you know about such things?!"

Al slowly tries to stand, but the man waves his gun at him.
"Stay down, you! Answer me!"

Al, on his knees, tries to remain calm, knowing that riling him up will only make things worse. "You invited my brother and I to come see your uranium bomb. I was the tall one in the suit of armor…"

The man quiets down, and though his hand still trembles, his jaw is firmly clenched, a fire in his eyes and in his voice when he finally speaks. "So. I see I'm not the only one to traverse the Gate. So, tell me – who did you try to bring back from the dead that you were swallowed alive by the Darkness?"

Al calmly responds, "That's a long story. And that's not why I'm here. You're Huskisson, aren't you?"

The man's eyes flit to the ceiling momentarily, as if he's trying to grasp something with his vision. "Huski… Ahahaha!" He breaks out laughing. "It would seem I didn't recover all of my memory as thoroughly as I had thought!"

Al queries, "What do you mean?"

Huskisson slowly moves the hammer of the pistol into safe mode, using his thumb to keep it from releasing and firing. Still, he keeps the mouth of the barrel pointed at Alphonse. "When I first arrived in this world, I spent the first few days in a coma. They found me lying on a beach in a land they call Greece. Lucky for me, the man who found me was a wealthy philanthropist who was more than happy to pay my bills. When I woke up, I was amnesic at first, only able to recall a few things – a castle, strange black faces with violet eyes, and evil black hands clawing at me."

Al listens quietly, taking in everything Huskisson says.

The man chuckles some more, "Why, I couldn't even remember my own name! But there was one thing I could remember more clearly than anything else – The Gate. I knew that I wasn't from this world, and I knew that there was a Gate that was responsible for bringing me here. The doctors thought it was simply the shock of whatever had sent me into the coma – that I was having delusions. But my benefactor, Haushofer – he believed me."

Al narrows his eyes knowingly, "Haushofer. So you do know him?"

Huskisson continues, "That's right. He introduced me to his friends at the Thule Society, and they ate up everything I told them! They were so eager to hear about a land filled with magic, where alchemy rules and the physical world can be controlled with mere thought and a few chalk circles. Such petty fools – but with deep pockets."

Huskisson side-steps, revealing that which is behind him, that which Al had yet really to see: the room is large and round, a high ceiling above, windows lining the top of the room. On the walls are large, long tapestries of various archaic symbols. In the center of the room sits a large round pit, its circumference lined with a large metal working, a ring of some kind, cobbled together, with electrical wires of varying colors running along its course. Spreading out from this center pit are more large, heavy cables and wires, stretching out to the pillars of the room and running up the walls to the ceiling – and in the dead-center of the ceiling is a large metal plate, an antenna of some kind protruding down from it.

"What is all this?" Al asks.

Huskisson chortles, "You mean to tell me a great scientist like yourself can't recognize this? It's a
wormhole generator!"

"A what now?"

"A means of bending both space and time to my will, a way to open the Gate using physics and
chemistry, rather than alchemy!"

Al gasps, finally rising to his feet, "You want to reopen the Gate?! You can't do that!"

"Hmph! And why not?"

"Don't you understand?" Al pleads, "The Thule Society only wants you to open the Gate so that
they can get weapons for war! Making weapons is what got you into this mess in the first place!
Why would you want to continue that?"

Huskkison lets out another long cackle, "You're very short-sighted, aren't you? You think that after
being hurled through that hellhole that I wouldn't have learned my lesson? I'm not letting the Thule
Society use me – I'm using them!"

Al stops, confused, and curious…

* * *


He hears no response from the other side.

He hums, "Huh. They must be asleep already… Wait…” He can see light coming through the
crack at the bottom of the door. If they're asleep, then why are the lights still on?

He turns the door handle, "Ed? Al?” As he enters, he looks around – neither of the Elrics are there.
And the window is wide open.

Roy growls in his throat, "Damn it, Edward.” Quickly, he rushes for the stairs.

* * *

Ed clutches the rifle to his chest, thinking calmly, calculating. All right. I can't go left; they'll shoot
me. But I can't stay here for long because I'm sure they're going to send in people from the right to
get me. He gently peers out from the right side of the bridge, looking out to the woods. I could
always run downhill. They wouldn't be able to hit me for all the trees.

He looks back to his left. But still. I've got to get in there to Al. If I get anywhere near that tower,
they're gonna see me. He raises his eyes towards the top of the tower, unable to see it for the bridge
is blocking his view. Still, he thinks, As long as I can sneak away quietly, maybe they won't even
realize I'm gone. They'll keep the light on the bridge, and then under the cover of darkness, I can
get to the tower.

Ed cautiously begins to slide to his right, doing what he can to remain silent, the pebbles of the dry
moat gently sliding and grinding quietly beneath his boots.

Staying close to the bridge lest the tower sentries spot him on its other side, Ed carefully inches his
way closer and closer to the woods.
"What do you mean," Al asks Huskisson, "that you're using the Thule Society?"

Huskisson finally holsters his handgun. He turns slightly towards the inner circle of the room and motions his hand, "Come here. I'll show you," and then he begins walking towards the other end of the room.

Al is unsure if he should follow, but curiosity gets the better of him, and he goes along.

At the other end of the room is a large control panel, knobs and buttons and dials and levers and all manner of things here and there, many of the panels still exposed with wires and circuits visible, tools strewn about on a nearby workbench. On the other side of the control panel is a door leading to a long, winding staircase.

Huskisson puts a key into one panel, and with a heave, lifts it up. He looks over his shoulder at Al with a grin. "Do you recognize this?"

Al peers in, and then gasps! Sitting inside is a round metal object, a wheel valve on its top. "The uranium bomb!"

"Not anymore," Huskisson says proudly. "There's still uranium inside that little beauty – but I don't intend to use it as an explosion. I intend to use it as a power source."

Al looks over his shoulder at the large metal ring behind him. "A power source?"

"The dense amount of energy trapped inside that uranium, when harnessed, is enough to stabilize the portal. With it, I can create a traversable wormhole and get back to the other side!"

Al can feel something growing inside of him. Whether is it excitement or dread, he cannot tell. He looks apprehensively at Huskisson, "But you don't understand the implications of what you're doing. By opening the Gate, you're risking an interdimensional war!"

Huskisson looks sourly at the young man. "Really now, are you going to let fear stand in the way of progress?"

"Just listen-"

"Don't you want to go home?"

Al's voice catches in his throat and his heart stops. Just that word – home…

Huskisson slowly closes the panel. He turns to fully face Al. He slowly says, "I can see it in your eyes, Alphonse Elric. That's all you really want, isn't it? To return home? Go back to Amestris? See all your old friends again. I'm sure they miss you."

Al looks down at the floor, his eyes quivering. He wants to say no, but he can't find his voice. All he can see is the countryside of Risembool… the Rockbell's house… Winry…

Huskisson locks the panel and puts the key back into his pocket. "That's all I really want. That's why I was so hell-bent on making weapons in the first place. I just wanted to make sure Amestris won the war – so that my family would be safe. You know about family, don't you? They're the most important people in our lives." He crosses his arms, still looking at Al who's still looking at the ground. "What about your brother? Is he still on the other side?"

Al utters, "No… he's-" And his eyes go wide, realizing, "Brother!" He whips back around towards the entrance, "He's still out there! He could get shot!" Al starts to bolt for the door, but Huskisson
grabs him by the wrist.

"Well don't run out there yourself! You could get shot. Don't worry," he tells Al. "I'll run upstairs right now and tell them to cease fire. Perhaps I really can pass the two of you off as my lab assistants..." And then brightly he says, "Say! That's actually not a bad idea. With three people working on it, we can be done in no time!" Huskisson points to the workbench, "Do you see those papers over there?"

Al looks over to where Huskisson points, "Yeah?"

"Those are the blueprints for the portal. Look them over. Get to work as soon as you can. In the meantime, I'll go get your brother." Huskisson finally lets go of Al's wrist and he starts to make his way to the staircase. He calls down, "Don't worry! I'll be right back!"

Al is quiet for a moment, just trying to process everything that's happening... Home...

§

At the top of the tower, the head guard stands at the edge, peering down at the bridge below. Half the men have their rifles trained on the left, the other half on the right. The soldier manning the spotlight is ready to move it at any moment should the intruder appear from his hiding spot.

Suddenly, the nearby radio crackles to life. "Chief? Ground unit reporting!"

The head guard moves to the radio. He picks up the microphone, "Ground unit, this is the chief."

"The intruder's not under the bridge anymore. We're not sure where he's gone to."

"Keep searching," the guard calls back.

Another voice arises over the airwaves, "Guard tower, are you there?"

The chief responds, "Yes, Dr. Henrikson, what is it?"

"I understand we have an intruder?" Huskisson's voice crackles over the radio.

"Yes sir, that's correct."

~

Huskisson, inside a den in the tower, holding onto a microphone smiles widely. "Shoot to kill."

§

Ed reaches the bottom of the hill, panting for breath, clutching tightly to his rifle. He turns around and looks back up at the tall towers peering over the tops of the trees. But his thoughts are cut short when from behind, a pair of headlights begin to grow close. He ducks behind a tree, but right as he does, he hears,

"Ed!"

Ed looks out from his hiding spot. The car pulls up, making a turn to the left and then coming to a stop. With the headlights no longer in his eyes, he can see who's at the wheel.

"Roy!"
Roy, his head out the window, shouts, "What in the hell are you doing here?! Get in!"

"I can't!" Ed yells back. "Al's still in the castle! We have to get him out!"

"Damn it," Roy turns off the ignition and busts open the door, slamming it behind him. "You just couldn't wait, could you?"

Ed glares back up at him, "There's no time for that now. We can argue later."

"How many are we dealing with?" Roy asks, looking up to the castle.

Ed looks back over his shoulder into the woods, concerned. "I'm not sure. A dozen at least, probably more. And they have guns."

"So do we," Roy pulls from his pocket a large black pistol.

Ed is somewhere between scared and surprised, "How long have you been carrying that?!"

Roy has a cunning grin on his face. "I was an officer in the military. Do you think I go anywhere without a gun?" And like that, Roy is off and running uphill.

Ed follows after him, "Remind me never to piss you off…"

---

Al is sitting on the only stool in the room, next to the workbench. By this point, he's already removed his stolen helmet, and is scanning over the blueprints of the portal, the edges of the paper lined with equations, some scratched out, some erased and rewritten.

This could actually work, he thinks to himself. But still…

He hears footsteps coming down the stairs, Huskisson reappearing. "So," Huskisson chimes cheerily, "Everything all right down here? Don't worry, I've told them to bring your brother peacefully. Let's just hope he doesn't punch anybody with that automail arm of his."

Al laughs nervously, "Too late for that, I'm afraid."

Huskisson lets off a hearty laugh, taking Al somewhat aback, "Ahahaha! I suppose that's the Fullmetal Alchemist for you! Always so headstrong!" He approaches Al, craning his neck to see the papers, "So, how goes it? Do you understand all of this fairly well?"

"Uh, yeah," Al says, glancing back down at the blueprints, "As a matter of fact, you're actually making this more complicated than it needs to be."

"Oh?" Huskisson raises an eyebrow.

Al stands, laying the blueprints onto the workbench, flattening them out. "You're still thinking of space and time as two separate things. If there's one thing I learned from alchemy, it's that nothing is exclusively separate. Everything is connected in a large web. Space and time are probably the same. If you could combine the calculations, you could arrive at a single space-time answer."

"Hmm," Huskisson strokes his chin thoughtfully, "I never considered that. I'm genuinely impressed."

Al is quiet for a moment, and then says, "Mr. Huskisson-"
"Doctor, please."

"Oh, Dr. Huskisson," Al continues, "I will help you with the portal – but only on one condition."

Huskisson crosses his arms, still trying to keep a nice demeanor about him. "And what's that?"

"You're right. I do want to go home. And even though my brother acts like he's all right living here, I know he wants to go home, too. So once we open this portal and make it to the other side, you have to promise me-" Al says firmly, "That we'll destroy it."

"What?!" Huskisson shouts with cruel dismay, "Destroy it?! After all the work I've put into it?!"

"You said so yourself," Al reminds him, "You want your family to be safe. Keeping the portal open will only endanger them and everyone else. Destroying it is the only way to protect everyone."

Huskisson gives a cough, regaining his composure, "Ahem, well, yes. I did say that, didn't I?" He grumbles inwardly, and then still trying to play nice, he changes the subject, "Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Until then, let's worry about those calculations you were talking about."

* 

Ed and Roy continue to make their way up the hill through the brush, when, off to their left, they can hear the Ground Unit. They both duck down behind the bushes and wait for the soldiers pass, the troops not even seeing them off to the side.

Once the soldiers disappear from sight, Ed and Roy take off running again, growing ever closer to the castle.

Once more, Ed arrives at the short wall, though this time he aims for the much taller cover of the inclined side. He and Roy peer over the top.

"Darn," Ed whispers, "They're moving that searchlight around again. I was hoping they'd have left it on the bridge."

"Ouuhh," they hear someone groaning near their feet. It's the soldier from before, the one Ed knocked out. He slowly sits up, holding his head, "What's going-?" POW! Ed kicks him in the jaw and knocks him out again.

"Shh!" Roy hisses, "Keep it down!"


"Quick, help me get his clothes off," Roy says, undoing the soldier's belt.

"Say what?"

"You can disguise yourself as one of them, go in, get Al, and come back out. I'll stay here and keep you covered."

"Oh."

"And here," he passes Ed his pistol, "Take this. Give me your rifle. I'm going to need it more than you."

The head guard atop the watch tower is growing increasingly agitated. He goes to the radio again,
"Ground team, report!"

The radio crackles, "He's not down here either. Should we continue out to the road?"

"No. You know the commander doesn't want anyone in the town to know we're up here. They see soldiers, they might tell the government."

"Understood."

"Return back to base."

"Yes sir."

Suddenly, there is the snapping of a twig, and the spotlight swings around to the grounds below. The chief yells out, "Who goes there?!"

Below is a blonde soldier, his hands raised. "Whoa! Don't shoot!"

The chief calls down, "Who are you?"

"New guy! Just came up from Munich! Haushofer sent me!"

"Where's your helmet?"

The soldier rubs his head nervously, "It is my first day! Can't blame me if I forget something!"

On the other side of the short wall, Roy puts a hand to his face, grumbling, "Damn it, Edward…"

The chief calls down again, "What's the password?"

Edward is visibly beginning to sweat. "…Shamballa?"

"FIRE!"

Once more, Edward is tucking and rolling out of the line of fire – only this time he has Roy on his side. Roy pops up from behind the short wall, and he, still hidden in darkness, begins to fire his rifle at the top of the tower – and the first thing he aims for is that spotlight!

CRASH! With a great shattering of glass, a flash of light, and a pop of heat, sparks fly and the light is extinguished, the whole scene now bathed in darkness. Neither enemy can see one another, and shots go off randomly in the darkness.

Al and Huskisson are at the control panel, tinkering with some settings when they hear gunshots. Al looks over his shoulder, "What's going on? What's all that noise?"

Suddenly, Edward comes running down the stairs, bursting into the room.

"Brother!" Al cries, "Are you all right?!

"Come on, Al!" Edward shouts, "We gotta get out of here." And then Ed sees the man standing near Al, the tall man with long brown hair and the scraggily goatee. "Huskisson!" And immediately, Ed pulls out Roy's pistol and points it at the scientist.

Al jumps in front, "Brother, no!"
"Al! What the hell are you doing?!" Ed snaps.

Al holds his arms wide, shielding Huskisson, facing his brother, "You don't understand! He's on our side!"

"The hell is he! Move out of the way!"

"He just wants to get home, Ed! And we can help! We can open the Gate! And then we can go home!"

Ed thunders, "Damn it, Al! We've been through this! We can't risk another interdimensional war!"

"There won't be one!" Al asserts. "Once we're on the other side, we'll destroy it! And then the Thule Society won't be able to follow us!"

"And how the hell are we supposed to destroy it from the other side?!" Ed angrily yells. "We might not be able to reach back through to this side, and then what? The door's left wide open and Thule soldiers can just come flying into our world like they did last time!"

"Dr. Huskisson says we can set a time bomb!" Al turns to the doctor, "Tell him!"

Huskisson stutters a little bit, but somehow still sounds very authoritative, "Y-yes, that's quite correct! We'll be long gone before it ever explodes."

"And what sort of bomb do you intend to use? The uranium bomb?"

Huskisson waves his hands back and forth, a wide, albeit nervous, smile across his face, "Why no! Of course not! I would never dream of such a thing."

"But…" Al says quietly, "The portal is powered by the uranium bomb…"

Huskisson lowly growls.

Al mutters, "Even if we used regular black powder bombs… They might set off the uranium bomb." He looks over at Huskisson, "And then the whole town could be destroyed."

Huskisson, clenching his fist, speaks through grit teeth, "It's a risk we have to take. Do you want to go back home or don't you?"

Al furrows his brow, "Not if it means endangering everyone here."

Huskisson shouts, "So one town will be destroyed! It's a small town anyway! There won't be that many casualties!"

"No!" Al yells at him, "I don't want anyone getting hurt because of this! I want to go home as badly as you do, maybe even more! But I'm not going to kill people to do it!"

Without warning, Huskisson pulls down on a lever and suddenly all the lights go dim. A great whirring noise arises from all around, concentrated in the center of the room.

Huskisson grins, "I'm not asking what you want."

Electricity begins to crackle round and round the large metal ring in the center of the room. Ed backs away from it, a great heat arising from the pit as it begins to glow orange. He looks fiercely over at Huskisson. "What have you done?!"
"Oh don't worry," Huskisson hums, "I never intended for a time bomb to go off. How else will the soldiers be able to get through?"

"What?!" Al looks over at him in shock. He cries, "Then why did you-?"

Huskisson glances over at him, "I only said all that so you'd help me with my calculations. And now that you have," he reaches for his holster, "I have no need for you anymore."

"AL!" Ed cries.

Huskisson pulls out his gun, but Ed fires his own. Lucky for Huskisson, Ed is a terrible shot. Huskisson turns his gun at Ed instead, but Al swings his fist upwards, connecting with Huskisson's wrist, knocking the gun upward. It goes off, the bullet ricocheting off the walls.

The scientist tries once more to turn on Al, but Al punches him right across the face, sending him crashing into the control panel – and as he lands, Huskisson ends up hitting all kinds of buttons, breaking off a few knobs too. He stares at the control panel in horror, mouth gaping. "You fools! What have you done?!"

The ring of the center pit begins to hum louder, the low rumble growing into a high-pitched whine, the metal of the ring now glowing red hot. Sparks begin to fly from the heavy cables that run up the walls, the tapestries catching fire, and the antenna on the ceiling is bolting with lightning!

Ed grasps Al by his arm, "The bomb! Where is it?!"

Al points to one of the panels, "In there!"

Huskisson in the meanwhile is frantically trying to repair the damage, "My work! All my beautiful work!"

FROOM!

He looks over at the workbench – it is engulfed in flames! "NO! My blueprints! My calculations!"

Pulling off his lab coat, he runs over and begins beating at the flames.

Ed gets to the control panel, and with his automail arm, punches the lock. The panel pops open and there it is – after all these years, Ed is face-to-face with the item he's been searching for – the uranium bomb!

But there's so much electricity sparking everywhere, Ed's afraid if he touches it he'll be shocked. But if he leaves it in there any longer, it could go off!

Huskisson is gathering as many documents as he can carry, and all around him there is creaking and cracking and popping as the walls and ceiling of the castle are being damaged. He looks up just in time to see a flaming tapestry come crashing down on him! He screams, throwing his hands up to protect himself, dropping everything he's just collected – but it's not enough to protect him. Covered in cloth and fire, Huskisson clambers backwards, screaming such horrid screams. He trips over the red-hot circumference of the portal ring and falls into the center, the lighting from the antenna bolting down and electrocuting him!

"Brother, hurry!" Ed hears Al cry.

It's now or never! Ed rips off the soldier's jacket he's wearing and wraps it around his human hand. Quickly, he grabs a hold of the wheel valve on the top of the uranium bomb, inwardly praying – and in one swift jerk, he yanks the whole bomb from its resting place!
The power dies down, the electric sparks ceasing. But the fires still rage.

"Come on!" Ed yells, rushing towards his brother, grabbing him by the hand. "Let's get the hell out of here!"

On top of the tower, the soldiers are gagging, choking on thick billows of ash and smoke. Ed and Al come running out, the soldiers unable to see them for the veil of grey. Roy stands, and all three begin to run.

"Wait!" Roy shouts, "This way!" He runs off to the right, the Elrics following – for coming up the hill is the ground unit. The three men duck down behind a bush, hearing the soldiers clamoring.

"Quick! Find the doctor! Save the bomb!"

Once the soldiers have passed, Ed, Al, and Roy make a break for it, running downhill as fast as they can without falling forward.

They make it back to the car, Roy quickly putting the key in the ignition, Ed and Al jumping in the back. The car roars to life, and the tires screech as Roy hits the gas and drives off like a shot.

All three of them are breathless, nothing but the sound of their panting filling the car for several minutes. After a while, this gives way to heavy silence. All that can be heard is the sound of crickets and the nighttime air whooshing past the open windows.

"...I'm sorry," Al mumbles.

Ed looks over at him.

"...I almost did it again, didn't I?" Even though he was full grown, Al's voice now squeaked the way it did when he was young. "I was going to open the Gate... just so that we could see Risembool again..." Tears begin to stream his face. "I could have started a war, again... all because I was being stupid and selfish..."

"Hey," Ed puts a hand on Al's shoulder. "It's all right."

Al hangs his head in his hands, crying, "No it's not! I didn't learn anything! I just want to go home! I want to see Winry and Pinako and Sig and Mason and Rose – I miss them all so much!" His shaking shoulders curl inwards as he sobs.

Ed rubs Al's back, letting him weep. He hadn't seen his younger brother like this for many years. Clearly he had been keeping it all inside.

Roy silently drives along. He glances at the boys in the rearview mirror.

Ed looks down to his lap. There it sits. The uranium bomb. Ed lets out a long, exhausted, yet relieved, sigh. "...It's finally over..."

The sun barely peeks over the horizon, and what sky that is visible is turning blue. Most of it is still shrouded by clouds mixed with lingering ashes. A car drives up the wooded road, approaching the castle. In the back of the car rides a man – thin of build and of hair, he has a tiny, wispy moustache and a receding hairline. Large, round glasses magnify his otherwise beady eyes. He would seem
totally harmless were it not for the distinct air of sliminess that hangs about him.

The car comes to halt in front of the castle, and the man riding in the back gets out and surveys the damage before him – the bridge is half crumbled, the garden scorched – and the north tower, though it still stands, has black streaks running from its base to its tip.

The chief guard dashes up to man at the car and salutes him. "Herr Himmler! I'm sorry. The weapon is gone."

Himmler asks, "And Henrikson?"

"Dead, sir."

Himmler scans the castle from right to left and back again, not saying a word. Then, still gazing at the castle, says, "What a pity. Let's go inside, shall we? I must report all this back to the Party. I'm sure they'll want to know the full extent of the damage."

"Yes sir," the chief concedes. "We'll have to enter at ground level. The bridge is too dangerous to cross."

"Yes, yes," Himmler says, sounding rather bored with it all. "We'll have to rebuild it."

The chief opens the door for his commander and Himmler makes his way down the stairs. He looks around at the mess – the stonewalls blackened, the metal ring of the portal nothing more than twisted shards. A large pile of ash sits in the center of the pit.

Himmler nods towards it and questions, "Henrikson?"

"Yes sir."

"Hmm," he chimes. "Fitting that you should die in a crypt, my friend. Even more poetic that you should be turned into ash." He heads for the stairs.

The chief, yet to start walking again, looks at the ashes and back to his commander, "Sir?"

Himmler, still walking to the staircase says, "Like a phoenix from the ashes, we shall rise."

The chief is puzzled, but nonetheless follows in behind his commander.

Himmler reaches the top of the staircase, and entering the first floor of the north tower, he is stunned. He stares, wide-eyed, at the floor.

The chief reaches the top of the stairs and sees his commander acting strangely. "…Sir? Sir, are you all right?"

"Look at it," Himmler says breathlessly.

The floor is cracked, long, black, lightning-like streaks streaming out from the center of the floor, reaching out to all pillars of the room.

The chief looks down at the floor, lifting his helmet out of his eyes. "Huh. That must have been from the electricity downstairs. See there in the center? That's right where Dr. Henrikson had some weird lightning rod or whatever hanging from the ceiling."

Himmler proclaims, "It is a sign from the gods!"
The chief is yet again confused, but tired of asking.

His commander continues, "I have seen this symbol before – on artifacts recovered from ancient Teuton villages. They call it the Black Sun. Do you know what that is?"

The chief shakes his head slowly.

"It is the Anti-Sol, the opposite of our own yellow sun. It is the sun that hides at the center of the hollow earth, in the halls of the Vril-ya, at the very heart of Shamballa!"

The chief slowly slides away from his commander.

Himmler does not notice, nor does he care. He is enthralled with the symbol on the floor below him. "Yes. Here – here is where we shall center the new world. This shall be the axis point around which everything else revolves! Here, HERE, is where we shall build our new order!

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:

Reviews:

You and I did watch the same show right??
Al was a twerp. A MEGA twerp. He gave everybody the benefit of the doubt.
It is an odd day in my life when I write Heinrich Himmler as a character in one of my fanfictions. *re-evaluates life choices*
Huge red banners are strung across the square, billowing in the breeze as the people far below are gathering together, a great sense of pride and patriotism flowing through their veins. The marching band is warming up, the trumpets and tubas honking and tooting arhythmically as they run their
exercises. A man with a cart strolls through the square, selling flags to parents and their children to celebrate the spirit of the occasion. Meanwhile across the square, another man is handing out leaflets for free, proclaiming national pride and prowess. Everywhere there is a buzz of excitement and happiness, a great anticipation for the event about to come.

And then, in the center of the square, a man walks up the steps of a platform and stands behind the podium, and a great rolling cheer issues from the crowd at his feet.

The year is 1932

"Ed! Wait for me!"

Al is still trying to rearrange a few groceries he's carrying in one of his bags, but between the bag and the number of people in the square today, he's having a hard time keeping up with his brother.

Edward in the meanwhile is grumpily pushing his way through the crowd. "Darn it! Why do there have to be so many people all squeezed into one place? Where are the cops?! Why don't they rope it off so normal people can walk through! I'm not here for the dumb rally!"

"Brother!" Alphonse's head just barely pokes over the crowd as he cranes his neck to see.

Ed sighs and rolls his eyes, turning around. "Come on, Al! It's not like you don't know where the house is."

"You could at least help me with the bags!"

"Oh, all right!" Edward takes one of the bags from Al and together they walks through the crowd, attempting not to bump into people (although this is a near-impossible achievement).

The people continue to shout and cheer and chant.

"Hail! Hail! Hail!"

Ed holds a free hand to his ear. "Augh! Dammit! Can't you have they courtesy not to shout in my ear!"

Al grabs his brother by the arm and drags him away before a fight breaks out. No need to let Ed's temper get the better of him.

Ed continues to grumble to himself (something he's prone to do on an empty stomach), "Damn stupid Nationalists and their damn stupid rallies!"

Al trots alongside him, attempting not to step on people's feet and knock over children as he does so. "Still, I'm surprised so many people are here! From the talk you hear, you wouldn't think this many people actually support the party."

"Yeah, but think about who's printing those articles - The people with brains! This party plays to lowest denominator and takes advantage of their stupidity!"

"That's not fair, brother. I'm sure there are smart people who support this. Just because you don't like it doesn't mean it's wrong."

Ed whips around to Al, pointing a finger at him, "What, are you saying you like what they have to say?!"

"No, Brother! Nothing like that! I just meant in general!"
"My people!" a voice rings over the speakers from the center of the square.

The crowd begins to fall silent, and Ed and Al look over, naturally curious as to who is speaking. He is a short man with dark hair, a small moustache, and a serious face. He wears a military outfit to convey a sense of power, but other than that, there doesn't seem to be anything apparently spectacular about him. And yet the simple act of standing behind a podium and speaking into a microphone seems to be enough to command the attention of the audience.

"My people," he says again, "The time to act is at hand! Germany stands on the brink of a great new era, in which we, God's race, shall rule over all of the nations of the earth!"

Cheers arise and immediately quiet down as he continues.

"We cannot let fear stand in our way. We cannot allow the hard times we have fallen upon deter us from our true destiny. There are those who will speak against us - tell us that we are wrong and that they are right. But I say, with the God that created the German race as my witness, that we shall rise! Rise like a glorious phoenix from the ashes of our dismay and shine a blazing light across the entire world!"

The crowd roars raucously, swaying almost hypnotically as they continue chanting, "Hail! Hail! Hail!"

Al tugs on Ed's sleeve, "Brother, I'm scared!"

"Yeah, let's get out of here before they start a riot..." Ed turns from the podium and begins to walk away, his brother following in behind him.

Ed thinks to himself, I hope that eventually people will realize just how crazy they're acting...

But the months pass, and Ed's hopes are not fulfilled...

In fact, everywhere he turns, more red seems to cover the land, filling the windows of shops and being tacked to the notice boards at workplaces. Even at the university, the one place where Edward felt safe in the confidence of those who are "smart" - even here, he begins to see how people's opinions towards the Nationalists are beginning to change.

"Hey Elric!"

Ed is walking down the halls when he hears a coworker call him. He looks over his shoulder as fellow scientist, Zimmerman, walks up to him.

"What is it?" Ed asks him.

"The university board is thinking of opening up a Eugenics branch in the Science Department. They haven't appointed any positions yet, but I thought you and I should try out for it."

"Eugenics?" Ed asks, perplexed.

"Yeah!" Zimmerman says excitedly. "Wouldn't it be great if we could ensure that the next generation is born without any defects? Think of all the diseases we could cure if we prevent them from ever occurring!"

Ed ponders this, "Yeah, I guess it would make a lot of parents happy to give birth to healthy babies..."
"And not just healthy!" His coworker continues, "Beautiful too! Everyone could come out blonde-haired and blue-eyed!"

Ed frowns, "Now you just make it sound like we're breeding dogs."

Zimmerman rubs the back of his head, a little embarrassed, "Well, when you say it like that, it does kind of sound silly, doesn't it?"

"It sounds really silly. And the board is taking this seriously?"

"Very seriously!" Zimmerman suddenly sounds offended, and this surprises Ed. "And you should too! This isn't just about our university, Elric! This about the good of the whole country!"

"Okay, jeez! Sorry! I'll check it out later, okay?"

His coworker walks away in a huff, knowing that Edward is lying to him. Ed straightens his tie, feeling awkward at his coworker's sudden change in mood. "That was weird... Wait a sec!"

Ed's eyes are immediately drawn to a small silver something that is dangling off a small chain hanging from Zimmerman's pocket. It looks sort of like a coat of arms, but he has seen it before. He mutters to himself in disbelief, "That's the Thule Society crest!"

He seems rooted to the spot. *They're still around? Even after everything?* Ed isn't sure what to make of this...

*"The Thule Society?" Roy asks that night over dinner, after Edward has told him and Al what had happened earlier that day. "We haven't heard a peep out of them in years."

"I know," Edward says, "I was almost certain that they disbanded after the portal blew up... And yet how close they had been..."

"Perhaps this is enough to keep them valuable to the Nationalists," Roy notes.

"Do you think the uranium bomb is safe?" Al asks. "I mean, the Lodge isn't exactly what I'd call a military stronghold..."

"Don't worry," Roy reassures him. "As far as I know, the Thulars are unaware that we're the ones who stole their weapon. I doubt they'd go to the Lodge looking for it."

"So what are they up to?" Al asks.


Roy, who has been taking a sip from his drink, sets his cup to the side. "The last I heard they are still trying to recruit psychics to their side. They believe that they can harness the powers of the spirit world and turn its energy into some sort of weapon."

"How would they do that?" Al questions.

"It's already happening," Roy says darkly. The brothers grow quiet as they watch him think silently. Then he says, "You've seen the rallies. What are they doing? It's mind control. Hypnosis. They're tapping into people's subconscious, their collective instinct - twisting it to what the Thule Society wants to accomplish."
Ed narrows his eyes, "To bring a war."

"But why a war?" Al sounds a bit distraught. "If they really could use the powers of the spirit world, then why wouldn't they use it for good?"

Roy fiddles with the Masonic ring on his finger, anxious. "They think what they're doing is good. Good for them, anyway. They fail to see the bigger picture and how it will play out."

* *

And what is this bigger picture, Edward wonders to himself over the next several weeks. If there are Thule Society members lurking around every corner, what's the picture they're trying to create?

He sees Zimmerman from time to time as he walks through the halls at work. Ed conveniently looks away, seeming as though he is preoccupied with a notice on a board, a bird outside the window - anything to keep from starting a conversation with the man.

But at the same time... Ed can't help but want to march right up to him and beat the answers out of him.

"Professor Elric," an old man says.

Ed looks up and sees one of his fellow Lodge members. "Oh, Professor Heidelmann. What can I do for you?"

"You've seem distracted lately," the professor notes. "Is everything all right?"

Ed seems somewhere between distant and tired, "Yeah. Everything's fine. It's just... well, sir..." He lowers his voice, moving in closer to Heidelmann, "Zimmerman over there - He's a member of the Thule Society."

Heidelmann grumbles in his throat, also speaking lowly, "You're sure of this?"

"He was wearing their emblem. Either he doesn't know what it means, or worse - he does."

"Has he been acting strangely at all?"

"Not really. At least no more strangely than everyone seems to be acting lately."

"Strange is a matter of perspective, young man. If we're not careful, people will think that we're the ones who are strange."

"What do you mean?"

Professor Heidelmann crosses his arms and gives a serious nod. "If we do not keep good face value with the community, they will not trust us any longer."

"Face value?"

Professor Heidelmann continues, "The Freemasons have a long history of being distrusted, due to our very secretive nature. Many would suspect that we are up to no good behind closed doors."

"I guess that's understandable," Ed comments, "But we're not doing anything wrong. What business is it of theirs?"
"People are prone to an 'us versus them' mentality. If anyone is not a part of their group, or if they are excluded from someone else's group, than that other group is the enemy."

Ed grumbles and sighs to himself, a hand to his now aching head, "Go figure."

Heidelmann continues, "We need to blend in. We don't want to do anything that makes us appear different. For starters, I'd take off that ring."

"My ring?" Ed looks down at his hand to his Masonic ring. He grows slightly disgruntled, "I thought the whole point of this is to show our pride. Being a Lodge member doesn't make us bad people."

"It does in the eyes of the Nationalists and their followers. This is what I mean by 'keeping up face value.' As long as we nod and smile and play nice with them, as long as we don't do anything that they wouldn't like, then perhaps they will leave us be."

Ed crosses his arms, he himself cross, "So what! Am I supposed to join that Eugenics department and start transmuting perfect babies or something?"

"I never said anything like that, Elric. I just meant we should do what we can to keep their trust."

"And why shouldn't they trust us? We haven't done anything wrong."

"Unfortunately sometimes the price of freedom is lying."

"That's not freedom at all! Why should we have to pussyfoot around? That just makes us look more suspicious!"

"All I'm saying, Elric, is that if we do anything more to incur the wrath of either the Nationalists or the Thule Society, it could turn out very badly - not just for you or I personally, but the whole Lodge, maybe even the whole Order."

"I don't care who in the party I piss off! It's not like those lunatics will ever be in power anyway!"

* * *

It isn't long at all before Ed's headache grows into a full-blown migraine.

January 30, 1933: People swell in the streets, shouting and cheering and waving banners as they scramble to buy newspapers.

Ed, Al, and Roy are standing outside a coffee shop as its owner is busy exchanging money for newspapers. People crowd in to get a glimpse of the front page, even though they are going to buy the paper anyway.

"Can you believe this?" Roy says, almost disgusted. It's somewhat hard to hear him for all the noise around them. "Chancellor Hitler. Why don't they just say 'Chancellor Napoleon' - he's as short as he was."

Al attempts to brighten the situation, knowing full well it's a smart-alec remark, "Hey! He's about as short as-"

Ed's face darkens (albeit comically), "Say it, and I'll skin your cat."

Al retracts with a laugh.
"Oh come on!" Roy bursts indignantly.

"What is it?" Al asks.

"Look at this!" Roy reads aloud from the paper he holds in his hand, "The Grand Lodges of Germany have extended their congratulations to the new chancellor and wish him well during his term in office. How can they even say that?!"

"Looks like Heidelmann got his way then, huh?" Ed says, hands on his hips.

"It's cowardice, that's what it is!" Roy says heatedly. It had been a while since Edward had seen him like this. But now that Ed thought about it, he has never seen this Roy like this. It had always been the colonel...

Ed's thoughts are abruptly cut short as someone runs into him, spilling their hot coffee all down the front of his shirt. "Hey!" Ed shouts, pushing the man away. "Watch where you're going!"

Al says, "Come on, let's get out of here. It's too noisy and crowded."

They continues their way down the street, away from the newsstand. But Roy is still riled, "How could the Lodge congratulate them like that? Don't they know that the Nazis view us as enemies?"

Al responds, "I think they're just trying to extend an olive branch. You know, show the party that we're harmless."

Ed interjects, "Let's not worry about it right now. We're here to get some new glassware so let's concentrate on that."

Al rubs his head, a little embarrassed, "Yeah, sorry about that Roy."

Roy says, "I understand that you're enthusiastic about doing your Bio-Med homework at home, Al, but did you have to use the teapot to distill your experiments?"

"I used the jar for distillation. The teapot was for boiling."

Ed gives a half a laugh, "Either way, everything's either cracked or poisoned now."

At the china shop, the three men roam around. Al picks up a white ceramic teapot, he bursting with enthusiasm. "Brother, look at this one! The flower patterning on it is so pretty!"

"Al, we don't need pretty dishes. We're going to be messing them up anyway."

"You're always so boring, Ed. Why can't we have nice things?"

Roy says, "As long as it's not expensive, I don't care what we buy."

Al continues, "I'm just trying to make our home look nice, is all."

Roy looks away from the bickering boys, trying to do what he can to stay out of their silly arguments. But as he looks over, he realizes that the shopkeeper and his wife are giving them funny looks. Roy smiles, "Sorry, ma'am. We don't mean to cause such a ruckus."

The lady puts on an obviously fake smile, "So. You three gentlemen live together?"
Roy chuckles, "Sadly."

"Your wife must have quite a time trying to do all that cooking and cleaning for three men."

"Oh, I'm not married, ma'am."

The lady looks incredibly uncomfortable, "Oh... I see."

"Brother!" Al is excitedly musing. "This one has kittens on it! We have to buy it!"

"Al, stop picking girly dishes and help me look for something practical."

The shopkeeper leaves his wife's side and approaches Roy, "Perhaps it's best if the three of you left."

Roy is a little upset, "Look, I'll get them to settle down. We'll buy some dishes and we'll leave, I promise."

"We don't sell anything to YOUR kind. I don't want any trouble, so just get out, you hear me?"

Roy is confused, as are Al and Ed who have noticed what is going on.

They later stand outside the shop, the door being closed in their face.

"Well that is weird," Al says. He looks at Roy. "What did he mean 'our' kind?"

Roy says nothing.

*

Time passes, and it seems every time Ed turns around, things just go from bad to worse. What had started as whispers began to grow into full-blown conversations, out in the open.

"I'm telling ya!" he hears one man say to another as he sits in the university dining hall, "Those freeloading Freemasons are Jewish sympathizers!"

"Oh you don't know that," the other fellow says to him.

"Have you seen their emblem? It's the Star of David! All they did is remove a couple of lines to hide it!"

"Huh, now that you mention it, it does sort of look like the Star of David."

"And that's not all! I hear they practice some dark magic that was created by King Solomon! Their Zionists I tell ya! They're trying to turn the whole world into their New Jerusalem, and at the price of driving out every non-Hebrew! It's us or them!"

Ed pinches the bridge of his nose, feeling another headache coming on. *Just let it go*, he tells himself.

"Elric!" a voice cheerily says.

Ed looks up and feels his stomach lurch.

Zimmerman stands in front of him, pulling out a chair and starting to sit down across from him. "I hear you haven't applied for the Eugenics position yet. Come on! I've been doing what I can to get
Ed closes his eyes, grumbling, attempting to ignore the growing headache, "For the last time, I'm a chemist and an engineer – I'm not interested in your breeding program."

Zimmerman snickers, "I dunno – maybe a little breeding is what you need. You're always so pent up, you need to get a girl."

Ed blushes, angry. "That's so perverse!"

Zimmerman chuckles, waving it off, "Just trying to lighten the mood, pal. You're always so serious!"

"That seems to be the general mood everyone's in lately," Ed says. "Everyone's always talking about warfare and politics, and no one's ever in a good mood anymore."

"Okay, yeah, so everyone's a little on edge. It's only because people don't feel safe on the streets, what with gypsies and other undesirable walking around."

Ed clenches his fist, trying to keep his temper under control. "Right. Because people who are wanderers aren't to be trusted."

"See, now you're getting it. They only wander because they don't have a home. What we need to do is allot a plot of land specifically for them and give them a home. I hear that's what they did in the United States for the Indians there – reservations, they call them."

Ed laughs indignantly, "Prisons you mean. Even if the government did allot land for these 'undesirables' as you call them – do you really think they'd give them good land? No! They'd force them to fend for themselves while saving all the good land for 'real' Germans."

Zimmerman's mood turns dark, "This is Germany after all. Why shouldn't real Germans be allowed the best opportunities? Everyone else is a freeloader. We're being gracious by allowing these people to remain here."

Ed picks up his lunch tray and stands up, "For how long? How long will your graciousness last before you figure it's not worth the effort and just start killing people off?"

"I never said anything like that, Elric."

"I'm not joining your stupid Eugenics board, so stop asking. And do me a favor and stay away from me, you got that?"

Ed starts to walk away, Zimmerman still trying to talk to him, "Elric, just hear m-" and then Zimmerman's voice slows – for now, as he is sitting and Ed is standing, Zimmerman at his angle can see Edward's hand clearly as it holds the lunch tray. Zimmerman can see that on Ed's hand is a ring. A Masonic ring.

Edward walks away, glad that his coworker has finally shut up, unaware of why it is that he has fallen silent.

As is Checkers' dinnertime habit, the cat sits on the windowsill, staring into the house awaiting Alphonse to bring him some after-dinner scraps.
The trio sits at the table eating their dinner, drinking their beverages out of bowls as they have yet to get new cups.

When suddenly, there is a knock on the door. They all look up.

"Huh," Al asks, "I wonder who that could be?"

"I'll get it," Roy arises from his seat and leaves the table.

At the front door, he opens it up and is greeted by two police officers, two more standing beside the police car parked out front.

"Good evening, officers. Can I help you with something?" Roy inquires.

"Yes," the officer says to him, "We've had reports of a burglar sneaking around this neighborhood, and we were wondering if you've seen anyone suspicious lately."

Ed and Al at the table crane their necks to peer around the dining room entryway, trying to see who is at the door.

Roy says to the officer, "No, sir, I can't say that I have."

The officer continues, "For your own safety, we've been ordered to get people out of the neighborhood for the time being."

Roy raises an eyebrow, "That's a little extreme isn't it, for one burglar?"

"I really must insist," the officer says, his partner putting his hand on his pistol.

Roy notices this and grows quite, his heart pounding in his ears. Memories of the war quickly flooded his mind, and he knows – he knows...

Ed narrows his eyes, unable to see much of what is going on, for Roy is blocking his view of the officers. But he can still sense that something is wrong.

Roy has to say something, and he has to say something quick. "Do you have a permit for this?"

The officer says, "A permit? You mean warrant."

Roy says, "I am strictly forbidden to take any of the workmen from the Temple out of the country without King Solomon's permit."

Ed's eyes grow wide. It's code! he thinks to himself. From the Masonic tales!

"Brother?" Al asks, concerned, he too understanding what is happening.

Ed quickly grabs his brother's hand and pulls him under the table. Ed put his finger to his mouth, signaling Al to remain silent.

The officer at the door looks at Mustang indignantly, "What are you babbling on about?"

The other officer interjects, "We don't have time for this! Come on!" He roughly grabs Roy by the wrist, Roy struggling against him.

"Unhand me!"
Al tries to jump up to do something, but Ed pulls him back down. "Out the back! We'll sneak up on them!"

Ed and Al quickly duck out from behind the table, rushing for the back door, but not before they are spotted.

"There are the other two! Stop them!"

Roy shouts, "Ed! Al! RUN!"

The free officer rushes into the house, running after the boys as Ed flings open the back door and he and Al run out into the alleyway.

They dash down the dank street, Checkers being frightened by their sudden appearance and leaping from the windowsill to scurry into a nearby box. Ed and Al's path is blocked by the other two officers, but not for long as Ed winds back his heavy metal arm and lays one of the policemen flat.

The other wraps his arms around Al's midsection, lifting him off the ground. "Let me go!" Al shouts, kicking and screaming.

Ed punches the man in the back with loud CRACK, and the man screams, dropping Al to instead hold his aching back.

"Come on!" Ed shouts, he and Al running again. They turn the corner to try to get back to the front door.

Roy still struggles as his captor places him in handcuffs, ushering him towards the police car. "You can't do this to me! This is how you treat someone who fought in the war?!"

The officer smacks him clear across the mouth with his pistol, causing Roy's lip to bleed. "It's because of people like you that we LOST the war! You're a traitor!"

"Roy!" Ed comes running towards the policeman – but at that same time, the officer who had run into the house is just now turning the corner from the alleyway.

Roy shouts, "Ed! Behind you!"

Ed turns around in time to see the officer pulling out his pistol. Both he and Al duck, splitting up and running in different directions.

Roy shouts, "Forget about me! Get out of here!" And the policeman hits him again, this time across the back of his head, knocking him out.

"Shut up!" and he shoves Roy into the back of the car.

Ed ducks behind a building, trying to stay out of the line of fire, but knowing that he has to get to both Al and Roy. Damnit! He grits his teeth. He looks across the street to Al who hides behind the opposite building. Al looks back, and pointing to his right, indicates they should run ahead and meet up down the street.

Ed nods, and then runs further into the alley, farther away from the main street. He turns at the next right he comes to, running down its length, peering to his right, trying to keep Alphonse in view, unable to see him for the mass of houses.

At the next main street intersection, Ed turns the corner, quickly pressing himself against the wall.
Slowly, he peers back into the backstreet from which he has come, making sure he wasn't followed. He doesn't see anyone…

And then suddenly a hand grabs him by his collar! Ed winds back his arm.

"Ed! It's me!" It is Al. "We've got to get to Roy!"

"You heard him, Al! We need to get out of here!"

"I'm not leaving without him!"

But as he says that, the hum of an engine begins to pass – it is the police car, the officers rubbing their aching heads, Roy in the backseat, his head lolling to the side.

"Roy!" Again Al tries to move forward, and again Ed holds him back.

"We can't rush into this! We need a plan!"

Finally, Al stills. He knows his brother is right. He knows Roy is right. "That line about King Solomon's permit…"

Ed nods. "From the Masonic rites. The next line is, 'Then let us return back into the country.' Roy is telling us that we need to get out of town."

"And go where?"

"Maybe to one of the other Lodges somewhere. Maybe back to Büren." Ed crosses his arms, looking into the distance, "But then again… If they're arresting Masons here, you can bet they're doing it in other towns, too. It's probably best if we stay away from the Lodges."

"So then where then?"

"Wherever we go, we need to lie low. We need to get our heads together and plan how we're going to rescue Roy. If we go running headfirst into this, we'll get caught too. It's not exactly smart to burst into a police station with all those armed officers."

"We can't stay here," Al pleads. "We need to get out of the neighborhood before they send more police after us!"

"All right, calm down," Ed tells him. "We need a safe house. And we can't go to the Lodge…" And then suddenly an old familiar look crosses Ed's face, a look that makes him look like a conniving cat. "And I think I know just the place."

* *

Knock, knock, knock! It is after sunset. Who would be knocking on the door at this hour? Zimmerman goes to his front door and opens it. "Elric?!"

Ed has a great big grin plastered on his face, his brother sheepishly standing behind him. Ed greets him, "Hey there, Zimmerman! I've been thinking it over, and I shouldn't have yelled at you the other day. I was just in a bad mood is all!"

Zimmerman looks nervous, "So, uh, what brings you here?"

Ed barges his way into the house, Al following, Zimmerman trying to block them to no avail. Ed spouts cheerfully, "I'm thinking Eugenics is probably the way to go. I mean, while I don't agree
that everyone should have blonde hair and blue eyes, I still think it's great that babies can be born healthy!"

Zimmerman stutters, "Uh, th-that's nice, but it's awfully late. Don't you think you should be at home? MMF!" The next that he knows, Zimmerman's mouth is being muffled, Al tying a gag around the man's mouth.

"I'm really sorry about this," Al apologizes.

Ed ties up Zimmerman's hands. "They'll never think to look at the house of their informant, will they? Oh, don't worry Zimmy, old pal. We're not gonna hurt you. We just need a place to crash. To the closet!"

Zimmerman struggles every step of the way, but eventually the Elrics push him into the broom closet and shut the door on him, propping a chair up against the door to keep him in. The door shakes and rattles as Zimmerman beats up against it from the inside.

Ed lets out a sigh. Al says, "Are you sure the neighbors won't hear him?"

"Let's be thankful he's got a big yard then," Ed says. "The sound should dissipate before it ever reaches the neighbors."

"Now what?"

Ed goes over to the sofa and flops down, arms crossed as he lets out another sigh. "And now we plan. I know Roy wants us to leave, but you're right. We just can't abandon him. We need to figure out where they've taken him and how to get him back."

"Surely they've taken him to the police station."

"For now. Who knows how long they'll keep him there before they ship him off to the reservation."

"Reservation?" Al tilts his head to the side, curious.

"Zimmerman was saying that the government is rounding up 'undesirables' and shipping them off someplace. I bet by morning, they'll have Roy on a train to one of those places."

"But why would they do that?!" Al cries, "We haven't done anything to anybody!"

"They don't care," Ed tells him, "All they know is that we don't fit into their perfect ideal and they want us out."

"Then we need to get to police station tonight, before they ship him off! We may never be able to find him after that!"

Ed looks to his brother, "Just take a seat and take a breath."

Al lets his shoulders slump, quieting down, the sounds of Zimmerman's poundings filling the void. Al quietly walks from the closet door and sits down in the armchair across from the sofa. He draws in a long breath and slowly lets it out, letting his head fall into his hands, staring down at the floor. His breath is shaky. "...We just can't ever get away from it, can we? This is just like what the military did to the Ishbalans, shoving them off into camps..."

Ed is silent. He knows that Al is right.
The silence grows as Zimmerman tires out, ceasing his pounding.

It is just Ed and Al and their silence now…

Neither of them says a word. They sit there, letting the night wear on, the few seconds of silence stretching on like an eternity, feeling as though every second spent not planning is a vital moment wasted.

Finally, Ed speaks. "The train is our best bet."

Al looks up at him.

"The police station is heavily armed. And a prison camp would be heavily guarded, too. The weak point is the joint between the two – the train to transport the prisoners. It wouldn't be any different than we fought off Bald and his rebels when they tried to attack General Hakuro."

"Ed, that's worlds away from our current situation," Al protests. "For starters, we had Hughes and the others for back up; and now we don't have our alchemy to help us the same as we did then."

Ed sighs through his nose, "You're right about that. But still – you figure there might only be one or two guards per train car. We only need to find out which one Roy is on. Take out the guards quickly and quietly. And then jump the train."

"But how will we know which train car he's on? Or for that matter, which train they put him on?"

Ed thinks for a moment, concentrating hard while staring down at the floor. "We'd either have to stake out the police station, the train station, or both. But I don't like the idea of splitting up…"

"So what should we do?"

"The train station would be too hectic. There's so many people moving in and out that Roy would get lost in the crowd. However, we know that they have to move him out of the police station. If we just concentrate on that, then we can follow the police car to the train depot."

"To do that, we'd need a car of our own."

Again, the great big grin comes back to Ed's face, "Oh don't worry. I get the feeling Zimmerman won't mind if we take his car. Would you, Zimmerman?" he shouts to the closet, and the banging starts up again.

The darkness encroaches the whole of the land, and yet the twittering of songbirds begins to arise slowly out of the night, heralding the coming of the dawn. Ed and Al sit quietly in the car, tucked safely away in the darkness of the alley, keeping a vigilant eye on the police station across the street.

Al's head begins to fall, his eyes heavy, but quickly he sits up straight, trying to keep his wits about him. The first streaks of light are coming to life in the sky, and neither he nor Ed has slept.

He wants to ask, How much longer? But he knows that his brother doesn't know the answer either. He glances over at him. Ed stares at the door of the police station, watching it like a hawk. Al could have sworn that it had been a solid two minutes before Ed ever blinked.

And then Ed moves, "There!" he says in a harsh whisper. Al quickly looks out the windshield.
Two police officers are ushering a man down the front steps of the station, a black bag covering the man's head. A third officer is opening the back of a wagon, and the man is pushed inside.

"Are you sure that's him?" Al asks. "We can't see his face."

"That's got to be him!" Ed declares.

"But what if it's not? What if he's still inside?"

Ed grits his teeth, "But what if that is him? We can't just sit here!"

"I'll stay here."

"No! I'm not leaving you here! What if you get caught?!"

"I want to leave you alone on that train as much as you want to leave me here. But we can't both leave the police station. If Roy is still inside, they might transport him out while we're both on the train."

"Dammit," Ed knows his brother is right, and time is running out, for the police wagon revs to life. "Quick! Get out! I'll follow them!"

Al opens the door and hops out as quick as he can.

"And Al," Ed says to him. Al looks back into the car. Ed looks at him and says, "Be careful."

Al smiles back at him, "Speak for yourself. You be careful."

Edward smiles back. And then he turns back towards the windshield, turning the key in the ignition, the vehicle springing to life.

As the police wagon takes off, Edward follows after it.

*

Silently he cruises, trying to keep his distance from the police wagon, but not so far as to not keep an eye on it. Roy is in there. He knows he is. He has to be…

After a long drive, the train depot is finally in view. The wagon pulls up to the platform, slowing to a halt. Ed knows he can't park in the clearing lest he be seen. He looks around and spots a nearby supply shed and brings his car to a stop in behind it.

Ever so quietly, ever so gently, he opens the door and steps out onto the gravel beneath his feet.

"Hey!" someone shouts.

Ed freezes.

The voice is yards away, coming from the platform. "What'cha got there?"

"A prisoner for transport."

"Name?"

"Roy Mustang."

Edward's heart leaps! It really is Roy! He has to get over there quick!
Keeping low, Ed virtually crawls around the shed, praying that the sun would rise just a little bit slower, keeping him covered by darkness.

All he can see are silhouettes – the outline of the depot, shadows as men move back and forth along the platform, a billow of smoke arising from the steam engine. Ed can still hear the men conversing but can't hear them for the sound of his heart pounding in his ears. Closer and closer he gets – CLANG! He hits a trash bin!

The men look over and Ed quickly ducks behind the large can, holding his breath.

"Damn dogs," he hears the man say. "Anyway, what were you saying?"

Edward finally takes a breath. He waits a moment, then peers over the top of the trash can. The wagon is still there. Good! He squints his eyes, trying to see through the darkness – two of the policemen are still in the front seat. That means the third one must be guarding the back.

As quickly as he can, Ed rushes out from his cover, making a beeline straight for the wagon. He skids to a halt and ducks down, staying on the side of the vehicle, but ducking low so as not to be spotted by the cop in the front seat via the side mirror. Ed glances under the vehicle and can see the third officer's feet. He can hear the jangling of keys.

It's now or never.

Edward jumps up, running around to the back of the wagon, and punches the officer square in the jaw! The back of the wagon is already unlocked, and Ed whips open the doors.

"Roy! –"

But it is empty.

The train whistle sounds its shrill banshee screech, and with a mighty chug the metal beast moves forward. Ed looks over in horror. Roy must already be on the train!

He runs up the platform steps, passing the station manager who shouts after him, "Hey! Who are you?!"

Ed ignores him, desperately trying to keep up with the train, the cars already picking up speed. The last car is already passing him by!

The platform grows shorter and shorter before him, his heavy boots tramping down the wooden planks with heavy thuds, matching the chugs of the train.

"ROY!"

With a great leap, Ed jumps off of the platform, stretching his arm out towards the rail on the very back of the last car, his metal fingertips centimeters away from the metal railing.

But not close enough.

He lands roughly on the metal tracks, wooden splinters from the railroad ties scratching his face, the gravel scraping his skin.

The train's whistle begins to fade into the distance. Ed sits up, watching as the caboose grows smaller and smaller, vanishing into the darkness.

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Chapter End Notes

*slides tissue box across the table to you* Here. You probably need this.

MORAL OF THE STORY, children: You can't just sit back and /hope/ that everything will work out. You can't ignore politics and carry on with your daily lives. You need to be involved in your government before things get out of hand.
Monotonous. It's the only word Roy can think of to describe the sound he's hearing – monotonous – the constant thumping and grinding of the heavy iron wheels against the onward-stretching train tracks.
Once or twice, the sound had stopped when the train pulled into a station, more men being packed into the train car, they just as delirious as Roy had been when he had been shoved inside. So brief – so brief was the amount of time the door to the car was open. He'd have made a break for it, were he not chained to a pole on the inside of the train car. His hands were aching, the strange simultaneous sensation of both numbness and sharp tingling pricking at his fingers, his blood having a hard time circulating due to the constricting handcuffs. Roy stares forlornly at his blank finger. Not but a few hours ago, it proudly held his Masonic ring. Upon being taken to the station, the police seized it from him. 'Seized it,' they called it. Stole it is what they did.

And again, the monotonous sound follows as the train chugs to life again.

It's getting hotter now. It had been cool in the early morning when the police finally took him from his cell, shoved him into the back of a wagon, and then lugged him to the train station. Strangely, there in the darkness, as the train was pulling out of the station, leaving the city behind, Roy could have sworn that he heard Ed's voice…

Surely just the wee morning hours playing on his tired mind.

But now, now it's getting hotter as the sun rises higher and higher into the sky, the air of the train car stifling, the smell of sweat clinging to everything, a visible haze lingering above their heads.

The train once more comes to a halt. Roy wonders if it's at all possible for the police to shove any more men into a single train car, it already becoming impossible to breathe, the thick humidity weighing heavy on his lungs. But no – this time, when the doors are opened, and a cool rush of air sweeps in, men in brown uniforms begin grabbing the passengers by their arms, forcing them one by one out of the train car.

Finally, when Roy is the only one left, still shackled to the pole, a soldier enters and removes his cuffs, ushering him out of the car as well.

As Roy steps out of the car, glad to finally be able to breathe again, he feels that gladness slipping away as quickly as it had come. He looks around, taking it all in – tall fences on all sides, barbed wire wrapped around their tops. Guard towers stand at all corners, staring down menacingly at the people slowly trundling along below. Nowhere is there not a soldier with a rifle in his hands or a gun in his holster.

The guard ushering Roy along shouts to another guard, "Hey, Sergeant Hughes! This is the last of them!"

Standing not far from the train is a man with a clipboard. He is tall with black hair and a thin, wiry, yet well-groomed beard. He adjusts his glasses as he looks up from his clipboard. "It better be! I've got enough prisoners to catalogue!"

The guard pushes Roy forward towards Sergeant Hughes, and with a wave of the hand and a sing-song tone, the guard teases, "Have fun!" and takes off.

Sergeant Hughes is in a bit of a huff. "Am I the only one who actually bothers with all the red-tape bookkeeping around here?" He sighs, "Whatever," and then to the crowd of men before him he says, "All right! Listen up! Form a single-file line! Tell me your name, and then move along!"

Roy hears a little boy's voice rise up from the front of the crowd, "I don't understand! Why are we here?!"

Sergeant Hughes points his pen at the child, "Hey! Keep it quiet! Single-file, now!"
Monotony takes over again, only now instead of the sound of the train tracks, the muffled sounds of shuffling feet fills Roy's ears as the men of the crowd comply to the command of the sergeant before them. Slowly, the line moves forward, a little more, and a little more, with a shuffle followed by silence. And then another shuffle and another silence.

Inevitably, Roy reaches the front of the line. The sergeant, scribbling on his clipboard, ignores him for a moment, and then finally asks, "Name?"

Roy is silent, staring begrudgingly up at the tall man.

Sergeant Hughes finally looks up from his clipboard and looks the prisoner in the eyes. "Hey, you deaf or something? I asked you what your name is."

Firmly, Roy demands, "Tell me why we're here."

Sergeant Hughes grimaces at him. "Give me your name, and I'll check."

Roy knows it will make no difference in his situation, but still he says, "Roy Mustang."

Sergeant Hughes flips through the papers until he comes to the right one. "Mustang… Yup, here we are. Freemason, huh? Well that's pretty self-explanatory."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Roy can feel the hairs on the back of his neck rising up.

Sergeant Hughes scoffs, "Don't play innocent. Everyone knows that the financiers who drove our country into the ground were all Freemasons."

Roy tries to say something against this, but his mouth is barely open before Hughes is shouting to someone off to the side.

"Red triangle for this one! Next!"

And Roy is pushed off to the side, ushered along to a nearby table where men, prisoners themselves, hand out clothing – striped uniforms, nothing more than pajamas really, the thin material looking as though it can't keep out the tiniest bit of cold. Roy catches a glimpse of one of the prisoner's chests – on it is a small triangle patch, red, point-down, sewn to the front of his clothes. Roy looks around. Many of the prisoners here have the same red triangle. Others have blue, some have black, and here and there, Roy can spot prisoners with yellow patches that look like the Star of David.

A uniform is shoved into Roy's hands, and again, he is forcibly pushed along. Here he sees now that all of the new prisoners with whom he arrived are removing their clothing, being forced to strip down and put on the striped garb. The guards pick up the prisoners old clothes and toss them onto a bonfire at the center of the crowd, the last remaining bits of their identity being burnt into ashes.

The little boy from before, now in his striped prison uniform, clings desperately to his old clothing as a guard fights to wring them from his hands, the boy clutching the clothes tightly to his chest. "No! Let go!" the little boy cries.

A taller boy next to him shouts, "Let 'em go, Rick! They're just clothes!"

The guard rips the clothing out of the boy's hands and tosses them into the fire.

"Well, well!" another guard pipes up. "Looks like the little runt was hiding something underneath
"No!" the little boy, Rick, jumps after it, too short to reach.

The taller boy, now riled as well, jumps at the guard. "Hey! Give that back! That's from our mom!"

But the guards begin beating the children down with batons.

Roy moves to stop them, but he feels a hand grab his arm. He looks next to him to see another prisoner, one whose heavy eyes tell of how long he's been here. The prisoner solemnly shakes his head, and Roy can't help but feel helpless, his stomach dropping inside of him, he feeling as though all adrenaline and gumption have instantly been sucked out of him.

The beating doesn't last for long, and the guards leave, cackling over their small silver plunder.

The older boy is crouched over the younger boy, protecting him. The guards gone, he slowly moves to the side, shaky and achy. The little boy bursts, "Leo! Are you okay?!"

Leo sputters, "You should have tucked that stupid thing into your shirt…"

"But then they'd have thrown it into the fire!"

"The shirt you're wearing now, dummy!"

A short while later, as the thick black smoke continues billowing above their heads, the prisoners have been made to stand in formation, creating a small rectangle, like soldiers on a parade ground. After much waiting, finally, someone approaches.

He too, like all the soldiers here, wears a brown uniform. A black hat is seated upon his dirty blond hair, light brown streaks running through his locks here and there. His boots and pants are black, same as the hat, and same as the tie that is tacked down with a shiny red button with the swastika on it, a red armband with the same emblem on his arm.

He smiles a sly smile, like a garden snake looking at caged mice. "Ah," he chimes, "I see the new arrivals have been processed."

Sergeant Hughes salutes, "Yes sir."

"Very good." The officer, never having taken his eyes off the prisoners, now speaks loudly enough for them all to hear, his voice as snakely as his smile, but with a strange gloss to it, like a red candy coating on a rotten apple. "Welcome! You'll forgive our perhaps alarming means of bringing you here. I admit, it's all rather sudden. But we are doing what needs to be done here. All of you must understand that the greater good of our nation is at hand. If you love this country, then you will do as you are told. I assure you, as long as you follow the rules, no harm will come to you."

Roy narrows his eyes knowingly.

The officer continues, "I am Lieutenant Zolf Kimblee. You will address me as either Lieutenant or Sir. You will not speak unless spoken to. You will wake every morning at the sound of the bugle, and go to bed every night after a long day of work. Stay in line, and we'll all get along just fine."

Though no one amongst the crowd of prisoners says anything, a simple glance at their faces reveals that they have no faith in the words put forth by this man. Even he can read their distrust,
their eyes to the ground, the corners of their mouths downward, and Kimblee takes a strange
delight in it all.

He continues, even more loudly to make sure his is the only voice they hear, "You will now be
divided into your barracks. I hope you find them comfortable. If there's anything you need, please,
don't hesitate to tell me," Kimblee says with the utmost sweetness that cannot cover his seething
sarcasm. He then looks over at Hughes and gives a nod, "Sergeant."

"Sir!"

And with that, Kimblee walks away, Sergeant Hughes taking over. Hughes once again looks over
the crowd, calling out, "Listen for your name! I'll be calling out your barrack numbers, so pay
attention! I will **not** repeat myself!"

~

The barracks are even more depressing than the parade grounds. The bunks are stacked four beds
high, barely enough room to slide in. The mattresses (if one could call them that) are taut pieces of
canvas, like stiff hammocks. And there are easily twenty of these bunks crowded into this single
hut.

Roy's head is still spinning from how fast everything is happening. Perhaps this is all just a bad
dream, something caused by one of Al's experimental teas. Any second now, Roy'll wake up in bed
to find that Checkers has once again snuck his way into the house, his fur sending Roy into a
sneezing fit. Al will be downstairs in the kitchen making breakfast, Ed will be at the table, reading
the morning paper…

But the longer Roy stands here, looking into this dark, bleak room, the more he realizes… this is
no dream…

Finally moving, Roy enters further into the barracks, looking around, deciding which of these small
coffin-like cots he will choose to sleep in. He spies a top bed about halfway through the aisle of
bunks – it's right next to a tiny slot of a window, no wider than a man's forearm, and no taller than
a hand. It has no glass, clearly so that the soldiers can listen in on them at any time. But still – a
small bit of breeze, Roy thinks, is just what he needs if this barrack is anything at all like the train
car. He doesn't think his lungs can stand another suffocating experience like that.

Roy climbs the small, teetering ladder to the top of the bunk and looks the cot over. It seems all
right, he supposes. But no sooner does he start to crawl into the bed before a soldier arrives at the
front door shouting, "All right, you lot! You've had enough of break! Time to get to work!"

*~

With a clink and a shink and a shuffle, the men of the camp chip away at the earth beneath their
feet with pickaxes and shovels, guards ever nearby with rifles in their hands, scrutinizing the
prisoners every movement. Roy, lifting a heavy shovelful of dirt to toss aside, sees no point in their
digging of a ditch, say for keeping them busy and tiring them out.

Regardless, he says nothing. He's already seen what happens should someone speak out against the
guards.

And as if on cue, suddenly one of the guards shouts out, "Hey! Watch what the hell you're doing!"
Roy looks over to see another prisoner cowering before the guard, "I-I'm sorry! It was an accident!"
The guard, the front of his shirt stained with dusty earth, hits the prisoner across his face with the butt of his rifle. "No excuses! Get back to work!"

His lip bleeding, the man doesn't even stop to wipe the blood away, but quickly scrambles to pick up his shovel and continue digging.

Roy sighs through his nose, looking back down into the ditch as he pushes the shovel further into the earth with his heel. Clearly, the best thing to do is to remain silent and try to be as invisible as possible. Do nothing, say nothing, to incur the wrath of the guards. Maybe they'll forget that he even exists. And then one day, should he escape, they'll never even notice his disappearance…

Survival.

That's all Roy can think about. Just like in the trenches, surviving is what is important. He can't help anyone if he's dead.

And Roy knows that there are those beyond these fences who need his help. Ed, Al, and everyone back at the Lodge. If the police are arresting Freemasons, then surely they've raided the Lodge. And if they've done that, then that means the bomb, the uranium bomb that Ed and Al spent so long searching for, has once again fallen back into the hands of the Worker's Party…

Roy grits his teeth and keeps digging.

The days become a blur, a monotonous, hellish blur. A bugle sounding before the sun even rises, a small bowl of gruel, and then back into the ditch. His hands are becoming blistered, filled with splinters that make every push of the shovel an agonizing experience. How deep and how long must this ditch be? And for what reason?

Roy looks around every chance he gets. He tries to take in the layout of the camp, memorizing the position of every building, of every guard tower, of the routes the guards take with their large shepherd guard dogs.

Roy can see there are other prisoners working on other projects, building more barracks it looks like. And what for? Do the Nationalists really have that many enemies? Would the whole of the German nation end up behind barbed wire?

One barrack-building prisoner, lifting a large piece of lumber, falls to his hands and knees. "Get up, you!" a guard shouts at him.

The man shuffles a little, seeming as though he is trying to stand, but to no avail.

Another soldier, with a guard dog on a leash, trots up, and with a whistle, allows the dog to run to the end of its leash, barking furiously at the fallen prisoner.

A sudden jolt of adrenaline causes the man to jump backwards, and fearing the foaming, snapping jaws before him, the prisoner is on his feet, his shaking knees barely keeping him upright.

"That's more like it!"

Roy looks away…
In the short semblances of breaks they do receive – their bowl of gruel in the morning and bowl of gruel in the evening – Roy notices that even amongst the prisoners there seems to be an air of animosity, each man clumping together with prisoners of the same triangle color. The blues stay with the blues, and the reds stay with the reds. Far from the front door where the guards stand watch, the yellows hide in the corner, murmuring Hebrew prayers before eating. The blacks, though, seem scattered amongst themselves, the color being a sort of catch-all for anyone who doesn't fit into any one particular category, Roy himself even unsure of what those categories are.

In the mess hall, Roy spies a man with a black triangle pushing the tall boy, Leo, he too wearing a black triangle. The man shouts, "You belong over there with the blues! I heard that's the color they use for immigrants!"

Leo shouts back at him, "We're not immigrants! We were BORN here! We're German!"

"Bullshit!" the prisoner shouts back, "If you're German, then how come you've got brown skin? You gypsies, then?"

"We're not gypsies either!"

"Hey!" a guard comes in between them, "The two of you sit down and shut up, or you'll both be put in Solitary!"

Leo turns on his heel with a huff and returns to his table where sits the younger boy Rick, he silent and hunched over his bowl.

The nights are as bad as the days. So short is the amount of sleep they are granted, and how hard it is to fall asleep to the sounds of hacking coughs and groaning and even vomiting. Roy is thankful for the small window above his head, the sweet, crisp night air, though it smells of moor and mud, better and filled with far more hope than the smell of filth and disease clinging to the cots and bedposts and walls. Roy lifts his eyes to the window, looking out to the stars above. With half a chuckle, unsure if he is amused or sad, Roy now wishes to himself that he had paid more attention to his father when, while on their camping trips, he had told him how to navigate by stars. At least then, he might have some idea of where he is and how to get home.

Home.

Was it even still there? Or had the police burnt it to the ground? Were Ed and Al still there, waiting for him? Or had they done as he had told them and ran far away? Did they even understand the code he gave to them? They are not here in this camp, so surely they must have gotten away… unless… they were captured and taken somewhere else… or… even worse…

Roy holds his breath, trying to hold back the terrible thought and the tears attached to them. He closes his eyes tightly and takes a deep breath. Ed and Al are still out there. He knows they are.

Once more, the bugle sounds, and once more the prisoners arise, out of bed before even the sun has awoken.

Kimblee, in his warm soft bed, sits up and stretches. He throws off the covers and proceeds to start his daily routine. He puts on his well-pressed brown and black uniform, making sure his armband is straight. He runs a comb through his blond hair, proudly looking it over. But then he stops momentarily, looking down at the brush – the more brittle strands of hair have broken off, littering
both the brush and the shoulders of his uniform.

He glowers at them, and then brushes them off his shoulders. He puts his black hat on top of his head, and now, fully dressed, feels confident again.

He tugs the bottom of his shirt, making absolutely sure that it is straight. And, looking at himself in the mirror, he stands at attention and gives a salute. With a nod, he makes his way for the door, leaving his room and entering the hall.

Coming out of a nearby room is an older officer, heavyset in both his gut and cheeks, this man wearing a fully black uniform. His thinning blond hair compliments his bright blue eyes, the edges etched with age. He closes his door behind him as Kimblee greets him.

"Good morning, Commander Amsel."

"Ah, Lieutenant Kimblee," the commander responds, "Good morning. I'm ready for a cup of coffee, how about you?"

"Of course, sir," Kimblee agrees. "It would seem that not everything that comes out of Africa is savage, eh?"

Commander Amsel laughs, "Yes, I don't think modern civilization could even function without those little African berries! So, what's on the agenda today? Any idea?"

"Of course, sir," Kimblee gives a polite nod, "I put today's itinerary on your desk last night. It's already ready to go."

"Always on top of everything, Lieutenant. I'm quite proud of you." The commander gives him a hearty pat on the shoulder. "If it weren't for those brown eyes of yours, you'd make a hell of an SS officer."

Kimblee humbly nods, "Yes, it is a regrettable fate. I'm a silver medal trying to be gold."

Once again, the commander laughs, "Ah, don't take it so hard! You're still the best damn SA officer I've ever met. You're going places, son. Come on, let's get to the mess hall before the enlistees eat up all the cheese. I swear they're worse than mice!"

Kimblee gives a laugh (an obviously fake laugh, but a laugh nonetheless).

* *

Soldiers all sit around tables, chitting and chatting, digging into hard-boiled eggs and seeded breads. One soldier nearly chokes from surprise when out of nowhere, a picture pops up in front of him, seemingly out of thin air.

"Have I shown you this one yet?" Sergeant Hughes beams, clinging to the picture, "This is Gracia showing Elise how to arrange flowers! Isn't it just the most precious thing you've ever seen?"

The soldier coughs, hacking up the bread lodged in his throat. With a gruff grumble he says, "Sergeant, can't this wait until after I've had my coffee? I'm too tired for this."

Sergeant Hughes shoves the picture closer to the poor man, "Then just look into Elise's sweet eyes! Those baby blues will fill your heart with happiness and perk you right up!"

The soldier nervously chuckles, "They look kinda green to me…"
"Sergeant Hughes," Kimblee's voice arises. Hughes looks over to see Lieutenant Kimblee is standing there, the commander at his side. Kimblee continues, "For the last time – the mess hall is not your personal gallery to show off your family photos."

A little childishly, Hughes shoves the picture into his pocket. "Hmph! I'm just trying to keep up the men's morale a little," he says, and then quickly tacks on, "Sir," nearly having forgotten to address the lieutenant as such.

"That's very nice," Kimblee says condescendingly, "But adorable pictures of cute little girls does not make for tough, strong men." He smirks, his eyes catlike, "We don't want them to all end up soft like you."

"Hey!" Hughes defends himself, "Just because I care about my family doesn't make me soft!"

"All right," Commander Amsel says as he pulls out a chair to sit down, "Settle down, you two." He then addresses Kimblee, "What were we talking about, Lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Kimblee takes a seat as well, "Building Five, sir."

"Ah yes," the commander says while he pulls food from the communal plate onto his own. "When can we expect full operation?"

"With any luck, by the end of the week, sir – granted that no more prisoners die."

Amsel pops a small chunk of cheese into his mouth, and through a full mouth complains, "They just don't make workers like they used to. Hell, the Jews built the pyramids – you'd think they could handle building a few buildings." He then looks over at Hughes, "We're expecting more new arrivals today?"

Hughes nods, "Yes, commander."

"Good. Be sure to take things easy on them. I have special plans for this batch, and they're no good to me worn out."

Hughes is unsure of what his commander is planning. Nonetheless, something about it all makes his stomach turn.

As the day wears on, Roy is glad that the building being built next to him is finally tall enough to provide some shade from the beating sun. He hears noise and shuffling coming from the front gates, and sees that more prisoners are arriving, these ones, all of them, being handed the uniforms with yellow stars on them. Like most things around here, he begins to ignore them.

But then a sharp CRACK and a cry hit his ears. Roy looks over at the building project beside him, and sees a soldier with a long riding crop standing over someone – the little boy, Rick, who Roy has seen around. Rick cowers on the ground, covering his face with his arms as the soldier towers over him, riding crop held aloft.

"You wanna break?!” The soldier shouts, "How 'bout I break your arm! Is that enough of a break for you?!"

The soldier whips the riding crop across the boy's arms and head, Rick crying out, "Please! I'm sorry! I just wanted to get a drink of water! Please stop! I'm sorry!"
"Oh, I'll make you sorry!"

Roy clenches tightly to the handle of his shovel, ignoring the searing pain of his blisters. He looks back down at the ground, digging back into it, trying to ignore the CRACK, CRACK of the crop and the shrill cries that follow. Where was that other boy – Leo, was it? He always shows up to take care of the younger one. But with each crack and cry, Roy can feel a growing fire inside of him.

Suddenly, he throws down his shovel and clambers out of the pit. A guard there shouts, "Hey! What are y-!" and before he can finish, Roy shoves him aside and the guard topples into the pit, landing roughly on top of the prisoners therein.

The soldier in front of Rick raises his long riding crop once more, ready to strike, when Roy jumps in between the two of them, outstretching his arms as he faces the guard. "Hey, you!" The guard bellows, "Get outta my way!"

"Can't you see he's had enough?!" Roy roars at the soldier.

"Oh, a hero, huh?" The soldier deviously says. "Let me guess – Why don't I pick on someone my own size?" Without another word, the guard smacks Roy across the face with his thin weapon, Roy feeling the stinging of the leather across his cheek.

Quickly seizing his opportunity, Rick scrambles to his feet and runs away, going in behind the building.

Roy continues to stand there, the soldier relentlessly smacking him back and forth. Everyone in the general vicinity has stopped what they're doing and has taken to watching the scene. Even some of the guards seem impressed, one leaning over to the other, whispering, "Five Marks says the corporal tires out before the prisoner does."

"You're on."

"All right!" Sergeant Hughes' voice rises as he comes onto the scene, "Enough! What's going on over here?"

The corporal looks to the sergeant, "This man was interfering with my punishing of another prisoner!"

Another guard, covered in dirt and rubbing his head, adds, "And he pushed me into the ditch!"

Hughes grumbles, "Jeez, you sound like a bunch of kids." He roughly grabs Roy by the arm and begins clasping handcuffs around his wrists, "Come on, you. Looks like you're taking a trip to Solitary."

* *

Roy is taken to a small building not far from the soldier's quarters. The whole of it is brick and steel, with no windows – no means of letting in the sunshine or fresh air, say for the single door leading into the place – and naught but a single light bulb lighting the long hallway, giving the whole space a dark and dreary feel.

The sergeant leads Roy down the dark hallway, wooden doors lining both sides of the corridor. Were there other prisoners locked away in here as well? Why else go so far?

About halfway down the hall, Sergeant Hughes opens one of the doors and ushers Roy inside.
Herein is a small room, again, only a single light bulb lighting it. The room is divided in two, the back half of it enclosed with large steel bars.

Roy sourly looks at it. "Even inmates in prison have benches in their cells," he says, referring to the lack of a sitting/sleeping space, for there is nothing on the other side of the bars but concrete flooring.

"Keep quiet," Hughes demands whilst unlocking the cell. He pulls back on the large gate and shoves Roy, cuffs still on, inside, and then he slams the bars shut behind him.

Roy glares at the soldier. "How can you do this?"

"Hey, you broke the rules – this is what happens."

Roy clasps the bars, looking through them, "I mean how can you sit idly by while people are suffering? How can you keep a clean conscious while people are starving to death?"

Hughes, scowling at the prisoner, mutters, "I'm just doing my job. I've got nothing to do with the decision-making." He turns to leave the room, Roy calling after him,

"Decisions like abusing children? That's your job? How can you let that happen? Don't you have any children?"

The sergeant does not face the prisoner as he silently stands in front of the wooden door. And after a moment, and without a word, he finally opens the door and then exits, leaving Roy by himself, alone in the cell.

* 

Roy is unsure of how long he has been sitting here, unable to tell the time due to the lack of sunshine. His stomach is angry with him. You idiot! You couldn't wait until AFTER dinner to piss off the guards?

He curls his legs in towards his chest, ignoring the rumbles issuing from his gut. He can't take it anymore – the hunger, the filth, the sickness, the despair. It was like the trenches – only it was different this time. He, and all those soldier who had fought alongside him – they had chosen to be there, to fight that fight, to suffer those things for a greater cause. But here – here were civilians, innocents, who had no say, people who did not choose this, even if the officers in charge claimed that this was for the greater good of the nation.

Whereas in the trenches the hopelessness and desolation had broken Roy's spirit, now instead, he can feel an ember of rage growing into a fire, consuming him. He isn't going to just sit idly by. He isn't going to be silent and invisible. He knows that there are people beyond these fences that need his help, that need him to survive and get free – but there are people inside the fence, here, NOW, and they need his help, too.

Roy once more looks down to his blank finger, envisioning the Masonic ring he had beheld many times over. Wisdom. Honor. And Brotherly Love. While perhaps it will be unwise to incur the wrath of the guards, Roy knows in his heart that it is the honorable thing to do to stand up for his fellow prisoners. He mutters to himself,

"We're all brothers in this fight…"
Commander Amsel sits at his desk, going over reports, signing off on things here and there, dividing papers into several piles, looking rather flustered by it all. He sighs.

"I should hire a secretary…"

There is a gentle knock on the door.


Kimblee lifts a stack of papers he carries in his hands, "Today's reports, sir."

Amsel slumps his shoulders, "Oh great, more paperwork."

Kimblee gives a polite chuckle, "If it pleases the commander, I can sign off on most of these."

"Would you? I'm really behind."

Kimblee gives a slight bow, "Of course, sir. There is this report, though, that came in today. I feel you should look at it immediately."

Amsel holds out his hand as Kimblee passes the small folder to him. He opens it up and looks it over, reading pieces and parts aloud, "…Mustang, huh? 'Freemason.' 'Retired captain.' 'Not known to be a rabble rouser.' Mmmmm…" he hums as he continues reading silently. "Well, he's been put in Solitary for the night. Sounds like he's been taken care of."

"But is Solitary really effective?" Kimblee asks, sounding as though he already knows the answer to his own question. "That just gives him more time to think of how to cause more trouble. If one prisoner stands up and gets off with a punishment as easy as solitary confinement, what's to stop other prisoners from following in his footsteps?"

Amsel strokes his chin, his large, flabby jowls jiggling as he does. "You have a point. He should be made example of. Very well – in the morning, we'll parade him out to the stockade and have him publicly whipped. That ought to keep the rest of the prisoners from getting any bright ideas."

Again, a polite, albeit pompous, chuckle arises from Kimblee. "Forgive my saying so, sir, but there's no need for a violent spectacle. After all, we are the more refined race. Why should we stoop to the level of brutish savagery? That would make us no better than they."

"What then do you recommend?"

Kimblee grins, "I think it better if we deal with this quickly and quietly – a hanging at dawn."

Amsel is slightly taken aback, "A hanging? For a first offense?"

"Like I said, commander – we need to send a clear message to these people that we are in charge, and that insubordination will not be tolerated. A hanging is quick, clean, and bloodless. Done properly, a hanging will snap a man's neck and kill him instantly, rather than letting him choke and die slowly. It really is the humane route."

The commander twirls his pen between his fingers, looking down at his desk, "Well… I suppose you have a point. Very well. Have a gallow ready by dawn. But I still want all the prisoners there. Violent or not, this man should be made a spectacle of."

Kimblee salutes, "Very well, sir." And he turns and leaves, that same snakely smile crawling its way up his face.
The cold floor is somehow strangely refreshing from the canvas cot. Though it is by no means comfortable, Roy is glad for the silence. No coughing, no groaning, no sobbing. He can finally hear his own dreams this night.

Too short.

Too short though was this night, for already, a guard is turning the key in the lock of the cell. Roy groggily comes to life. Did the bugle sound already? Perhaps it did and he simply hadn't heard it through the thick brick walls.

The guard lifts him to his feet, "Come on, you."

Once more, Roy is lead down the dark hallway. He exits through the front door, and is surprised to see so many people out on the grounds. Why are they here? Has breakfast already passed? But why are they all looking at him?

And then he sees it: Standing before him is a simple wooden structure, tall, with a rope hanging from it and a wooden barrel underneath it. A guard is fashioning the rope into a noose.

"What is this?!" Roy shouts.

"Silence!" Lieutenant Kimblee orders, he standing at the head of the crowd, Commander Amsel next to him. "Bring the prisoner forward!"

Roy is pushed along, he dragging his heels into the mud. Another guard comes from the other side to help his comrade pull the prisoner to the gallows.

So this is how it ends… After he had just promised himself that he would survive, that he would help the people trapped here in this place…

The rope comes closer, silhouetted against the dark grey sky. Roy is turned, forced to face the crowd of both prisoners and soldiers. Standing amongst the soldiers, Roy spots the sergeant, Hughes – and Roy glares angrily at him, wondering if this is his doing. The sergeant looks away, unable to look Roy in the eyes.

The noose is thrown around his neck, and Roy is forced to stand atop the wooden barrel. Looking out into the crowd of faces, Roy sees one more face – the little boy Rick, his eyes filled with tears as he clings to his brother Leo, the older boy, staring at the ground, unable to watch.

Commander Amsel steps in front of Roy, looking him dead in the eye. The commander proclaims, "Roy Mustang! For insubordination, and for interfering with the operations of discipline of this camp, you are sentenced to death by hangi-"

"Wait!"

The commander looks over his shoulder to see a private running up to him. The private quickly juts out a piece of paper, his speech smattered with pants as he takes in breaths, "Sir! This telegram just came in!"

Commander Amsel looks it over. Kimblee peeks over his commander's shoulder, reading the telegram, and then the lieutenant spurs aloud, surprised, "Not to be killed?!"

A mixture of sighs and excitement rise from the crowd, the guards amongst them ordering, "Be
Rick's eyes light up with hope and gladness.

Commander Amsel reads the telegram aloud, but lowly only so that those immediately next to him can hear: "Mustang, Roy, is an ally of the known conspirator against the Party, Elric, Edward. Both are suspects in the murder of a top-level scientist, as well as the disappearance of a top secret weapon. The prisoner is not to be killed, for he may contain valuable information."

Information? Roy's heart begins beating fast, fluttering with hope. That means that they don't have the bomb! That means they didn't catch Ed and Al!

Kimblee grits his teeth, unhappy with this turn of events. He growls lowly, "Commander – we can't just let him off the hook like this! What sort of message will that send to the rest of the prisoners? That they can just get away with whatever they want?"

The commander folds up the telegram and puts it in his pocket. "That is true. But we have to operate within the orders we've been given. Corporal!" he shouts to a nearby soldier.

"Yes, sir?"

"Bring me a whip!" As the corporal trots away to fetch the item, Amsel looks at the guards who just hoisted Roy onto the barrel and orders, "Take him down, and instead tie him to that barrel. Remove his shirt."

The rope loosened, the guards yank Roy down from where he stands, he feeling as though at least one of his ankles has twisted upon impact. The soldiers rip his shirt off his back and force him down onto his knees, forcing his handcuffed arms over the top of the barrel and then secure him down with the rope previously wrapped around his neck.

The commander holds out his hand as the corporal arrives with the whip. He says to Mustang, "You will still be made an example out of. After this, you'll have wished that we hanged you instead."

Kimblee clears his throat, "Sir, if I may?"

The commander rolls his eyes, "Yes, lieutenant?"

Once more, that sickly, snakely smile crosses Kimblee's lips. "As I've said before, it's not becoming for people such as ourselves, the sophisticated, blond Aryans, to stoop to such savagery. This sort of work belongs to the lesser soldiers amongst us." He turns and stares straight at Hughes. "Have one of the Black-Hairs do it. Let's not dirty our own hands."

Hughes narrows his eyes, not wanting to be drawn into this mess.

Kimblee continues, "Come now, Sergeant. You're not soft, are you?"

Commander Amsel holds out the whip to Hughes, "Sergeant."

Sergeant Hughes steps forward and takes the whip from his commander. He approaches the prisoner, his bare back exposed.

Roy tenses his muscles, waiting for what is to come, the silence and being unable to see his assailant making the tension all the worse.
Hughes clenches tightly the handle of the whip. Feeling the eyes of both his commander and lieutenant boring through the back of his head, Hughes waits no longer, and he swings the whip back and lashes out at the prisoner.

Like a shot of lightning, pain streaks across Roy's back, coming out his mouth in the form of a scream. He can feel blood trickling down his back, tickling almost – but the sensation is overpowered by another searing slice of leather across his skin. It digs into his bones – his spine, his ribs, his shoulder blades. Once or twice the whip even curls over the tops of his shoulders and rakes him across his collarbone, or around his waist and laps at his stomach.

He tries. He tries so hard not to scream, but the screams still come, escaping from his mouth against his will.

With every crack, the prisoners wince, Rick looking away, burying his face into his brother's shirt, Leo holding him close.

Kimblee takes it all in, enjoying himself immensely.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

That night – after a long, hard day of work, still being forced to labor with his injuries – Roy lays belly-down on his cot, his head towards the window to take in the cool night air. His back still pulsates, and he can feel his wounds oozing.

He closes his eyes, knowing that sleep cannot come fast enough. But then he reopens them as a slight shuffling catches his ears. He looks to the ladder and spies tiny hands on the edge of his bed. Up pops the little boy, Rick.

There is a moment of awkward silence between the two, Roy unsure of why the boy is here, and the little boy looking almost too nervous to talk.

Finally he sputters, "Uh… Mr. Mustang?"

"Yes?" Roy asks.

"I… I wanted to thank you… for saving me yesterday," Rick tells him. "And I'm really sorry about what happened!"

Roy shakes his head kindly, "It's not your fault."

"Still…” Rick casts his eyes downward. "Thank you. Really."

Roy smiles softly at him, "You're welcome."

Even after everything, the stars seemed to shine a little brighter that night.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:
On behalf of you readers, I proceeded to slap myself in the face every time I suspected that this chapter punched you guys in the feels. There are quite a few many feels in this thing, and writing it was very painful... but not as painful as what’s to come. WHAT?!

Who said that? Wasn’t me...

Me to Kimblee during that whipping scene: “This is like some sort of sick sexual thrill for you, isn’t it??”
The Librarian and the Watchmaker

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sun is barely rising, the sky turning to a light grey-blue hue, but the land is still covered in dark shadows.

Fullmetal After opening [WITH LYRICS] 鋼の錬金術師 見えない世界 ポルノグラフィティ from Castiel Winchester on Vimeo.
The train whistle sounds its shrill banshee screech, and with a mighty chug the metal beast moves forward. Ed looks over in horror. Roy must already be on the train!

He runs up the platform steps, passing the station manager who shouts after him, "Hey! Who are you?!"

Ed ignores him, desperately trying to keep up with the train, the cars already picking up speed. The last car is already passing him by!

The platform grows shorter and shorter before him, his heavy boots tramping down the wooden planks with heavy thuds, matching the chugs of the train.

"ROY!"

With a great leap, Ed jumps off of the platform, stretching his arm out towards the rail on the very back of the last car, his metal fingertips centimeters away from the metal railing.

But not close enough.

He lands roughly on the metal tracks, wooden splinters from the railroad ties scratching his face, the gravel scraping his skin.

The train's whistle begins to fade into the distance. Ed sits up, watching as the caboose grows smaller and smaller, vanishing into the darkness.

A numbness covers Ed's whole body, blanketing his mind. The train is getting away. And there's nothing he can do about it.

"Hey, you!"

He hears a man shout, and Ed looks over to see the two police officers, who had previously been sitting inside the police wagon, now running down the platform towards him.

His mind springs back to life, scrambling as to what to do. Seeing them draw their guns, Ed instinctively tucks and rolls out of the way, going underneath the large wooden platform for cover. Rolling back into an upright position on his knees, Ed, ready to fight, claps his hands together.

And then he stops, saying aloud to himself, "What the hell am I doing?"

His thoughts are cut short as he hears the officers overhead, they jumping down from the platform and onto the gravel below. On hands and knees, Ed quickly begins scurrying to the opposite end of the platform.

"We know you're there!" an officer shouts at him. "Come out with your hands up!"

They can't see me! Ed thinks to himself, still rushing to the other end of the platform, thankful for the dark cover it provides. Come on, sun! Just rise a little bit slower! Don't light up things just yet!

He makes it to the other end, and, getting to his feet, takes off running.

"There he goes!" the other officer shouts. They open fire.

Ed barrels straight towards the police wagon, its doors left wide open when the officers had jumped out to come after him. He dives inside, not even closing the door behind him, and turns the key, thankfully left in the ignition. The wagon roars to life.
"Hey!" he hears the officers shout, and like a shot, Ed stomps down on the gas pedal and the wagon takes off, the doors slamming shut as he speeds away.

Again, the officers open fire, having to aim at their own vehicle, but as the suspect speeds further and further away, the wagon becomes an indiscernible shadow amongst the backdrop of silhouetted trees.

Ed swerves to the right and he begins to drive alongside the train tracks. *I can still get to Roy!* He pushes the pedal as far down as it will go, picking up speed. Unlike a car, the train can't go anywhere that the tracks don't. It HAS to stay on the tracks. Follow the tracks, find Roy!

But Ed suddenly gasps and hits the brakes.

Skidding to a halt, the tires just barely stop short of a steep drop-off. Ed gazes out across the deep chasm, the train tracks stretching out over a long bridge. As if something like this is going to stop him—

Ed shifts the wagon into reverse, and backing up slightly, he then drives forward, slowly perching the tires atop the tracks. He has to move fast enough to keep ahead of the cops, who, no doubt by now, have discovered the car that Ed used to get to the station and are surely following behind him. But he can't drive too fast. The slightest veer to the right or to the left could mean toppling over the side of the bridge and into the ravine.

Slowly, with a bump, and a bump, and a bump, the wagon precariously teeters over the tracks, inching along towards the other side, a rushing river gushing along below. Ed keeps his breath steady, his eyes ever concentrated on the metal path before him.

Slowly but surely, he reaches the other side in one piece, and once back on solid ground, Ed again revs the engine and punches the gas, speeding off alongside the tracks.

How much time? How much time did that waste? How fast was the train traveling? How long would it take him to catch up to it?

Running a million calculations in his head at once, Ed lays his weight further on the pedal, as if more pressure will make the already to-the-floor mechanism make the wagon go faster.

It's not long before he lets up on the gas though, for he comes to something even worse than a bridge – a junction.

"Dammit!" Ed exclaims. He looks at the tracks – one set goes to the left, one set goes to the right. "Which way did they go?" Ed quickly opens the door of the wagon and stands up, poking his head out and lifts his eyes to the sky. "There." He spies in the sky over the treetops, the billowing smoke of the train. "Left it is then!" Quickly sitting back down, Ed slams the door shut and gets ready to take off again-

But then stops, his eyes going wide.

*Al. Al is still back at the police station. I can't just leave him there! But Roy... Edward grits his teeth. "Dammit!" he exclaims again, pounding his fist against the steering wheel.

Once more, Ed shifts the vehicle into reverse, backing away from the tracks. This time he turns the wheels far to the left, and when he drives forward again, he is instead heading for the main road.
Al crouches quietly in the alleyway, trash cans as his only cover. Even though his eyelids are heavy, there is a strange alertness about him. He stares intensely at the police station, still unsure as to whether or not Roy is actually still in there…

Suddenly, a police wagon pulls up right in front of him, screeching to a halt! Al yelps and jumps back, clambering to his feet and starting to run off down the long alleyway.

"Al!" he hears his brother's voice call.

Al turns back around, "Ed!"

Ed has the door of the wagon wide open. "Get in!" he calls.

Al runs back towards the vehicle and climbs in, slamming the door behind him, and Ed drives off.

Al quickly looks around the cabin, and then he looks behind him, through the small grate that separates the front of the car from the back of the wagon where the prisoners are kept. It is empty. He turns to his brother, "Where's Roy?"

Ed stares sternly ahead at the road.

His brother repeats, more heatedly, "Ed, where's Roy?"

"They put him on a train," Ed tells him, "And the train took off."

"To where?!" Al frantically asks.

"I don't know."

"What do we do now?!"

"Calm down, Al," Ed says, "We'll think of something." Even though he seems cool on the outside, on the inside, Ed is as frantic as his brother, his heart beating strongly in his chest. "Our best bet is to follow the train tracks. It'll lead us to wherever they took him."

"But the train could stop at any number of stations! How do we know which one is the right one?"

"We don't. That's why we just keep driving until we find that train. It'll have to pull into a rail yard eventually. We find the man in charge of that train, and we force him to tell us where he took the prisoners. There's bound to be more people than just Roy on that train."

"But that could take forever! And who knows what the government is planning on doing to the people they've arrested!"

"Al!" Ed sternly says, "Take a deep breath, okay?"

Al heaves a heavy, breathy sigh, and then sucks in a long drink of air. Slowly, he breathes back out through his nose, trying to calm his nerves, yet still he feels on edge. He clenches his hands, looking out the window. "Okay… Train tracks… Get to the rail yard…" His eyes then drift back over to his brother. "And we're sure the bomb is safe?"

"What?" Ed asks, feeling slightly annoyed at the change in subject.

Al presses, "I know Roy said that the uranium bomb is probably safe in the Lodge, but like you said – if the government is arresting Masons all over, then what if they've raided the Lodge? Even if they didn't know to look for the bomb there, what if they wander upon it? Then what?"
Ed slows the car, bringing it to a halt, and roughly shifts the gear into park. He flops his head onto the wheel, grumbling, "Dammit…"

"Ed?"

"This is too big of a job for just the two of us. We can't search for the bomb and save Roy. It's got to be one or the other."

Al quietly looks out the window again, trying to get his head together. He turns back to Ed, "Let's at least drive by the Lodge, check up on it. Maybe we're over-reacting."

Ed sits up, looking at Al, "And if we're not? What if the place really is crawling with soldiers, then what? We won't be able to get in to check on the bomb, if it's even still there."

"Like you said, Ed – this is too big for us. What we need to do is get Roy, get out of the country, and seek help from other Lodges, maybe even other governments!"

Ed crosses his arms with a scoff and sits back in his seat, hunkering down like a pouting child, "Keh! Yeah! That's all we need to do is let other governments know about the bomb's existence. Why? So they can try to get their hands on it and use it themselves? Or worse – so they can start producing their own?"

"Okay, okay!" Al concedes, "For now we'll just keep it to the Brothers. But please! We have to at least check on it."

Without a word, Ed sharply shifts the vehicle into gear, and they take off.

* *

As feared, as they slowly approach the Lodge, Ed and Al can see a mass of police cars parked outside of it, soldiers and police officers shuffling in and out. Without stopping, the brothers drive past, Ed clenching tightly to the steering wheel.

*If I had my alchemy…*, he angrily thinks. It's been over a decade since he'd last used his alchemic powers, and yet still, still Ed wishes for what in this world could be considered magic, super powers. *They wouldn't be able to stop me. I could march right into the Lodge right now and get that bomb back!*

But he knows. He knows that it was sheer dumb luck that he and his brother survived recovering the bomb the first time. There was no way they could repeat that, especially not now – last time it had only been a handful of zealots. Now it was then entire German government after them…

Ed growls in his throat and pushes down on the gas, and the brothers take off, leaving the Lodge behind, perhaps forever…

* *

The tracks seem to stretch on endlessly, the passing tall pine trees watching as, below, a black police wagon rumbles by.

Al gazes out the window at the scenery passing them by, both he and Ed silent practically the entire drive. Neither knows what to say to the other, for in this moment, words are useless. Action is their only course. And Al can remember, from years before, the words his brother once spoke – *Keep moving forward.*
Al glances over at his older brother, Edward still sternly glaring out the windshield. That was always his brother's answer to everything. If Ed couldn't think of anything else to do, his only answer was to keep moving. It didn't even matter if there was a destination in mind. As long as they kept moving.

Al chuckles to himself as he looks back out the window. 'I am a traveling man,' after all, he thinks to himself, recalling the stories he's learned at Lodge meetings. Back when masons literally built things, it meant traveling from one town to another for jobs. These days, it was a metaphor for the constant pursuit of knowledge. But to him and Ed… they'd been traveling their whole lives… quite literally searching for knowledge, helping anybody they found along the way…

Al sighs, the happiness dropping from his eyes. Frankfurt was the first real home they'd had in years. And now it seemed that too was gone…

The sun climbs higher and higher in the sky, the inside of the wagon becoming hot and uncomfortable. Still, they press onward.

As they come near another train station, Ed slows the wagon. Here too, soldiers and officers seem to be everywhere. Ed changes direction slightly, driving off to the right, just a little further into the woods – far enough from the tracks so as not to be seen by anyone at the station, but not so far that he himself can't see the tracks. But this means an even slower going, as now he must navigate through the mass of trees and rocks and bushes, the wagon not exactly built to handle this sort of uneven terrain.

Still, onward…

The drive passes painstakingly slowly. The sun is traveling faster than they are, it already on the decline, and as it sinks below the horizon, Ed feels his head sinking low, he trying to keep upright.

Al, his voice as tired as his eyes, says, "Brother, let me drive for a little while. You're falling asleep at the wheel."

Ed chuckles, exhausted, "Are you kidding me? You're as sleepy as I am right now. We've both been up since yesterday morning…"

"Maybe we should rest for the night?"

Ed sighs, "Yeah. You're right. We're in no shape to be rescuing anyone right now…"

Ed sluggishly presses on the brake, and the wagon sputters to a stop amongst the cover of trees. Ed takes the keys out of the ignition and looks over at Al, "I don't know about you, but I think I'm gonna sleep in the back. There's more room to stretch out there."

Al sleepily nods, his eyes half-closed as he yawns, "Yeah. That sounds nice."

Tiredly, both boys slide out of the front seat and trudge to the back of the wagon, Ed pocketing the car keys. They climb into the back of the wagon, closing the doors behind them, and within a matter of seconds, Al is already snoring.

Ed, on the other hand, sits with his back to the wall, wide awake. Even though his eyelids are heavy, and his brain is fuzzy, he finds himself unable to sleep. All he can think about is how fast everything has changed. In the blink of an eye, their best friend has been taken, and he and Al are out of a home.

It's not like this was anything new. He and Al went years wandering the world, far and wide,
Ed sighs, trying vainly to set his worries aside. He glances over at his brother sleeping, Al laying belly-down and snoring away. Ed chuckles to himself. Al looks just they way he did when they were kids.

But they aren't kids anymore. Even though Al is still his younger brother, Al isn't little anymore. Ed tries to ignore the fact that these days Al is taller than he – but now Ed stops and thinks with a smile, When did that happen? It's like it happened overnight. Ed wasn't even aware of how Al outgrew him or when, but it happened. Ed chuckles to himself, lowly whispering, "Just like old times, hey Al? You always were taller in those days…"

* 

Ed wasn't sure of exactly when he fell asleep. All he knows now is that he is waking up, meaning that he must have fallen asleep at some point. What's that noise? he thinks, hearing shuffling in the front seat.

He hears a strange mechanical sputtering and the next thing he knows, the engine is roaring to life! Suddenly, the wagon jerks forward, bouncing up and down, tossing the brothers around in the back of the wagon.

Al, now awake, tries to hold onto something to stable himself. "Brother! What's happening?!"

From the front seat, they can hear a woman's voice cackling gleefully. From outside the vehicle, they can hear a man shouting – "Come back here, you hooligan!"

"Eat my dust, sucker!" the lady shouts, and the wagon takes a sharp turn, sending Al spilling into Ed, crushing him against the wall.

"Ow! Get off!"

"Sorry!"

The wagon levels out, clearly on the main road now. Ed pulls himself up and goes to the grate separating the front seat from the back. He peers through, trying to see who it is driving the wagon. And then in shock, he shouts, "Sciezka?!"

"AHH!" The lady, shocked as well, screams, clinging to the wheel, and the vehicle careens off the road and into the ditch!

The brothers pile out of the back of the wagon, coughing as exhaust and dust fill the air. The driver as well climbs out, waving her arm back and forth as she tries to clear the air to breathe.

Ed points at her, "Sciezka?! Is that really you?!"

"Who are you, anyway?!" the woman shouts angrily, "What the heck were you doing in the back of a police car?!"

Ed rants back, "What are you doing STEALING police cars?!"

"Hey!" they hear the man from before, and they look up the hill to see a farmer with a pitchfork
headed their way.

Sciezka hollers, arms in the air, "RUN FOR IT!"

Ed and Al heed her warning and together, all three of them beginning running down the dark road, a fat old farmer desperately trying to keep up with them.

* 

Exhausted and heaving, Ed and Al find themselves on the outskirts of a city. Trying to catch her breath, the bespectacled young lady laughs, and gives a righteous, "Yeah! WHOO! That was amazing! He'll never catch up to us now!"

Ed, hand on chest as he tries to calm both his heart and lungs, looks at the young lady and asks, "Just why were you running from him anyway?"

Gleefully, she responds, "I let loose all the rabbits on his farm! He won't be turning any of them into fur coats anytime soon!" Hands on hips, she laughs a victorious laugh.

Neither Ed nor Al is sure how they're supposed to respond to this. Al says, "That's good… I guess…"

Strangely, her demeanor changes almost immediately as she comes close to Ed, pointing a finger in his face, "Now hang on a minute! Do I know you? How do you know my name?"

Ed nervously waves his hands, smiling, "Uh, no, I think maybe I have you mixed up with another lady called Sciezka, heh-heh!"

She points at him more, getting even closer now, "That proves we don't know each other! My name's not Sciezka, it's Jesska! Not Jess-ih-cuhhh, but Jess-KA, and with a K not a C!"

Al nervously laughs, trying to seem polite. Still, he lowly whispers to Ed, "This Sciezka is kinda scary."

Ed, with his signature smarmy smile, responds, "Uh, no, I think maybe I have you mixed up with another lady called Sciezka, heh-heh!"

"Nice to meet you, I guess, even if you did ruin my masterful escape," she says with crossed arms. But then she says, "Then again, I wouldn't have gotten as far ahead of him as I did if you guys weren't parked there." Then she nervously laughs, "Oh, and uh! Sorry about crashing your car! Heheheh…." She brightens up, "Tell you what! You guys can crash at my place tonight! It's only fair! A crash for a crash! Ahahahaha!"

Again, the boys nervously smile. Ed says, "Uh, thank you?"

* 

The keys turn in the lock and Jesska opens the front door. "Home sweet home!" she beams.

The Elrics follow her into the house and they look around. There doesn't seem to be a wall that doesn't have a bookshelf against it, masses upon masses of books lining every inch of the shelving.
Ed smirks, "So, a book-lover I see."

Jesska nods, "Of course! What self-respecting librarian wouldn't love books? Knowledge is my life!"

Al gently tugs on Ed's sleeve. Smiling coyly, he whispers, "Looks like this Sciezka isn't all that different after all." Ed merely responds with a nod, trying hard not to laugh.

Jesska points to a couch and an armchair, "I'm afraid that's all I really have to offer in the way of places to sleep. But I do have some extra pillows and blankets. Hang on, I'll go get them." And she trots off.

Ed flops down in the armchair, resting his head in his hand. He sighs, "Boy this has been a long day."

Al seats himself on the couch, "How long should we stay here?"

"Long enough to get some sleep," Ed tells him. "If we're lucky, she'll feed us too, and then we're on our way."

Al looks down at the floor, "...Do you think Roy is okay."

Ed looks away. "...Yeah."

Jesska re-enters, a couple of blankets and pillows piled in her hands. "So can I ask," she questions, "What were you guys doing in the back of an abandoned police car? Did you two get arrested and then left to die in the wilderness or something?"

Ed waves his hand, unsure how to really answer, "No, nothing like that."

"Because you know," Jesska says as she hands them each a pillow and blanket, "It's not safe on the streets right now, especially around the police."

"Oh?" Ed responds.

A fire arises in the young woman's eyes, and she takes to speaking at a hundred miles per hour, "There have been abductions all over the city! People, just POOF! Gone! Disappearing! Like that! The cops have been saying that it's the Communist groups and their sympathizers that are responsible, but none of that is true! Lies! All lies! Do you know what I think?"

Ed amusingly retorts, "Space aliens?"

"What? Don't be silly!" Jesska steams, "I'm saying that it's the government who's been kidnapping people! It's all part of a major political conspiracy! Anyone who speaks out against the Nationalists magically disappears! It's not a coincidence!"

Al nods, his eyes firm, "You're right. It is the government."

Jesska turns to him in surprise, her hair virtually standing on end, "Whaa?!"

Al affirms, "That's why we're traveling. Our friend was taken by the police, and put on a train headed to a camp somewhere, with other 'undesirables' as the government's been calling them."

Jesska's reaction is bizarrely a happy one, she bouncing up and down, "Oh my gosh! I was right! I was right all along! Ha ha!" And immediately, her tone changes, she balling her hands into fists as a sickly look arises on her face, "Oh my god! I was right all along! This is awful! All those people!
We have to do something!"

"Jesska," Edward queries, "Has there been any talk about where these kidnapping victims might have been taken?"

Jesska turns her attention to Edward, "Well…Yes and no. You see, mostly everyone in town believes what the cops are telling them. That's their game you see! They keep the populace highly uneducated so that they'll believe everything the government feeds to them! But not me! They can't pull the wall over my eyes!"

"Sssoo?" Ed is getting annoyed that she's getting off-topic.

Jesska catches herself, "Oh! Right! You see, me and a lot of the other intellectuals in town," she smiles widely, not unlike a smug cat, "We have our ways of getting around the government and the censorship they've set up to try and keep us down. We've been listening to radio broadcasts all the way from England! And boy! Do they have some stuff to tell!"

Al inquires, "What have they been saying?"

"There's been a lot of movement along the border between Germany and the Netherlands. The Netherlands are worried that Germany might be planning to invade – but if the government really is behind these kidnappings, then maybe that's where they've been building those camps you're talking about!"

Ed says earnestly, "The border. Great. How long would it take to get there?"

"By foot?" Jesska ponders. "Gosh, I don't know." She nervously laughs as she rubs the back of her head, "After all, you guys don't have a car anymore…"

Ed gives a rattled sigh, a small vein popping out on his forehead. "So a long time then?"

Jesska says to them, "Well, I'm not entirely sure. I don't know if the Nationalists have been mobilizing on the northern or the southern border of the Netherlands. If you're lucky, maybe it's the south. If not, the north is pretty far away."

Al asks, "Is there anyway you can find out?"

Jesska perks up, "You bet! I know a guy! Tell you what – tomorrow, we'll go see him! He's been keeping records of the transmissions. I'm sure he can tell us." She turns, heading out the room, "Until then, get some sleep."

Ed grumbles, "While this Sciezka is more spunky, she sure is scatter-brained…"

* 

The next morning, after they've had breakfast (which Edward was very grateful for), Jesska takes the boys into town.

Edward tries to walk normally, but he feels very rigid. He scans both sides of the streets.

"You okay, Ed?" Al asks him.

"Just keeping a weather-eye out for any patrolling officers," Ed tells him. "I'm sure there's a warrant out for our arrest. That's the last thing we need right now."

Al jokes, "Oh I don't know. If we get arrested, we might end up in the same camp as Roy. That'd
Ed cynically laughs, seeing the humor but still being serious, "Yeah right. They'd split us up into three different camps. They know we're a menace when we're all together."

"Here we are!" Jesska says cheerfully. The brothers look up and see they've arrived at a watchmaker's shop. Jesska pulls open the door, and they all enter.

The inside of the shop is a curious little wonderland. More than just pocket watches are here: There are lovely little windup music boxes, dainty porcelain ballerinas dancing inside them; large and sturdy great-grandfather clocks, deep brown with inlaid gold on their edges; even a clockwork model of the solar system, the planets twirling around the sun as the exposed gears of the machine click and tink away.

"Mister Tucker~!" Jesska calls. "Are you here?"

Al looks at Ed, "Tucker? You don't think…?"

They hear a soft sound coming from the back room of the shop. Jesska cocks her head to the side curiously and heads back there, Ed and Al following, curious as well.

In the back room, sitting on a stool is a man – the spitting image of Shou Tucker. Ed feels his stomach roll over, but like many times before, he quells his fears, reminding himself that this is not the person he knew from way back when.

Tucker's eyes are bloodshot, streaks glistening down his cheeks. He cries softly.

"Mister Tucker," Jesska asks, concerned, "What's wrong?"

Tucker puts a hand to his mouth, trying to stop the sobs that arise from his throat, "They came for her this morning," he tells her through soft tears. "They took my wife, because they said she was Jewish."

"What?!" Jesska gasps, "Why would they do that?!"

"Her grandmother was Jewish, but she converted to Catholicism! So why?!"

Suddenly, Jesska starts frantically waving her hands about, "Oh my gosh! Where's Nina?!"

Tucker manages a half a laugh and a soft smile, "Don't worry. She's fine."

"Miss Jesska!" a little girl's voice cheerily says.

Ed turns and sees standing in the doorway a little girl with long, brown pigtails. Nina... He feels a lump form in his throat as she enters the room, toddling toward Jesska with open arms.

Jesska scoops her up, crying with happiness as she cuddles her, "Oh thank goodness! I was so worried about you!"

"Why?" Nina asks, tilting her head to the side.

"I thought you went missing like your mom."

"Mommy's not missing," Nina says to Jesska, "She went to go visit Granma. Isn't that right, Daddy?" the little girl asks, turning to her father.
His eyes still downcast, Tucker says, "Yes. That's right, Nina. And she'll be back in no time. Now why don't you go play upstairs for now. I seem to have a couple of new customers to talk to."

Jesska sets Nina down and Nina responds, "Okay, Daddy," and she trots off, out of the room.

Jesska is silent for a moment, and then looks over at Mr. Tucker, "She doesn't know?"

He shakes his head, "No. I don't want to frighten her. I want to try to keep life as normal as possible for her." He curls his shoulders inward, holding onto his elbows. "But I fear staying here. What if they take her too, for being half-Jewish or something? And I've heard talk that they're even planning on arresting what they call 'Race-Defilers,' which apparently they'd consider me one…"

Jesska returns to her spunky self, holding a presenting hand out towards the Elrics, "Don't worry, Mr. Tucker! These guys are here to help!"

"We are?" Al asks. And then he looks at Tucker and says, "Oh, uh, we are."

Ed steps forward. "Mr. Tucker – I'm Edward Elric, and this is my brother, Alphonse. Our friend, like your wife, was arrested and taken away by the government. We believe that the Nationalists have built camps of some kind to house these people. And Jesska tells us that you might know something about this."

Tucker puts his hand to his chin, "Hmm. So they're not training camps, but internment camps…"

Al pipes up, slightly excited, "So you do know something!"

Tucker nods, finally standing from his stool, "Yes. They're just reports I've heard on the radio, but they may be worth something. Follow me, I'll show you."

Tucker leads them out of the room and starts to ascend the stairs, they following.

Tucker asks, "So, how is it that you know Jesska?"

Al, directly behind Tucker, says with a smile, "We met her when she stole our car."

Tucker stops walking and turns around, "You what?"

Jesska, behind Al, waves her hands defensively, "It's not what it sounds like! It was a life-or-death situation!"

Edward with a smarmy smile pokes Jesska in the back and adds, "Yeah, she was being chased by a hoard of rabbits that she set loose."

"It was nothing like that!" she fumes as she turns to face him.

Tucker's shoulders drop as he glares at her sternly, "Jesska, I understand Animal Rights are important to you, but please, you have to stop. You could compromise the whole group if you get arrested on a stupid charge like that."

"Hey!" Jesska cries with furrowed brows, "Rabbits deserve to be shoved into cages as much as people do!"

Tucker groans and ignores her, continuing his way up the stairs.

When they reach the second floor, they take a right, heading for a room at the end of the hall. Before they get there though, Edward spies through an open door Nina, sitting in her room,
surrounded by toys. She sits at a small table with a toy teapot and several stuffed animals – a bunny, a doll, and a large teddy bear that's almost as big as Nina herself.

Ed glances at the trio ahead of him as they continue down the hall, and then he looks back at Nina. He quietly goes to her door and knocks on the frame.

She looks up from her toys.

Edward smiles softly, "Is it okay if I come in?"

Nina nods brightly, "Uh-huh!"

Ed enters the room and kneels down at the table, "Sure is a nice tea party you got going here."

"Uh-huh!" Nina chimes. "You want some?"


Nina picks up a toy cup from in front of the teddy bear and sets it down in front of Ed. Then she lifts her toy teapot and pretends to pour. "There you go!"

He asks her, "Are you sure your bear won't mind?"

"Miss Fluffenstuffs says she's not thirsty."

Ed lifts the little teacup and nods to the bear, "Thank you Miss Fluffenstuffs," and he proceeds to 'drink' his pretend drink. He lets out a happy sigh, "Ah! It's delicious!"

Nina grins from ear to ear, "Thanks! It's my own very special recipe!"

"Ed?" Al pokes his head into the room. "Where'd you go? We're waiting on you."

Ed stands up, "Yeah, sorry." He waves to Nina, "Thanks for the tea."

Nina waves back, "You're welcome!" She grabs her teddy bear and makes it wave as well. "Say bye-bye!"

Al smiles and waves back at the bear, and then he and his brother leave. "Cute kid," Al says.

"Yeah," Ed responds.

They're both quiet for a moment. And then Al asks, "You gonna be okay?"

"...Yeah. I'm fine."

They enter the back room where Tucker and Jesska are. A large one-way radio stands in the corner; in front of the window is positioned a desk, and on top of it, a small two-way radio complete with headphones and a microphone. Tucker places a hand on top of it and says, "This is our very humble base of operations. I receive overseas broadcasts from that large radio over there – and then I transmit messages to our fellow group members from this small one here. Mind you, everything's in code. We don't want the government listening in when we plan our sabotages."

Al asks, "Sabotages like what?"

Tucker shrugs, "Oh, little things. A government memorandum that suddenly goes missing. A factory worker forgetting to put a few screws into the making of a vehicle. Things that can go easily
unnoticed but still throw a wrench into the government's operations."

Jesska adds fervorishly, "We've also been keeping an ear out for what the Nationalists have been banning – books, songs, films – and I've been ordering as many as possible for the library! Mind you, I've been storing them away in the back room, away from the general public, but our dedicated followers know that these items exist!" She gives a victorious laugh, "Hahahaha! The law will not keep us down!"

"That's enough, Jesska," Tucker says as he pulls open a desk drawer and takes out a small notepad. He flips through a few pages, and then says, "Here," pointing to the sheet.

Ed leans in to look at the pad as Tucker speaks.

"These are notes that I took on a broadcast last week. The Nationalists have been building camps in the Emsland district. We thought they were training camps, but from all that's been going on, it would seem they are in fact prison camps."

Ed grits his teeth, "Emsland. That's north of here. I was hoping they'd be closer."

Tucker nods, "You have a lot of catching up to do if you want to make it to your friend," he sets the notepad aside and as he does, he then reaches for a picture frame. He holds it up, showing it to Edward, "Here."

"What's this?" Ed asks as he takes the picture.

"It's our family portrait," Tucker says. "I doubt that my wife will end up at the same camp as your friend, but please," Tucker pleads, "Please, memorize her face. If you see her at all, try to get her out."

Ed and Al both look over the photograph.

Tucker sighs, "I still can't believe she's gone…"

Jesska rubs him on the back, "It's okay, Mr. Tucker. I'm sure she's fine."

"But for soldiers just to kidnap her like that! And me – powerless to do anything to stop it!"

Edward says, "Don't worry. We'll do our best to save her…"

What no one realizes is that at that moment, Nina is standing in the doorway. Quietly she backs away and then sprints off to her room.

Al says, "Not to be rude, Mr. Tucker, but what's wrong with your wife's hand?" he asks, pointing to the photo.

Tucker responds, "When my wife was a little girl, she was feeding carrots to the horses on her family's farm. One of the horses was just a bit too hungry and took off two of her fingers along with the carrot." Tucker points to the photo, showing off his wife's right hand and the pinkie and ring fingers on it – "What you see there are clockwork replacements that I made for her. A tad bit strange looking, but they make it easier for her to handle things."

Ed inwardly chuckles. *Looks like this world could have some real automail any day now.* He hands the photo back to him, "Mr. Tucker, do you have any maps that show us the way to Emsland?"

Tucker shakes his head, "I'm afraid not-"
Suddenly Jesska pipes up, "Ooh! I do! I've got all kinds of maps at the library! Road maps, railway maps, geography maps, whole ATLASES if you need them!"

"Uh, sure," Ed says, still not quite used to how excitable this Sciezka is.

Jesska wraps her arm around his and starts to tote him out of the room, Ed trying not to trip on himself as she lugs him forward. "Come on!" she cheerily says, "The library's just up the street! And I've got more than just atlases! I can give you some books on communism and the worker's plight, and I've also got some really neat pamphlets that were published overseas about~" and she goes on and on, faster than Winry talking about automail.

Al shakes Tucker's hand, "Thank you, Mr. Tucker. Like Ed said, we'll do our best to find your wife."

Tucker smiles sadly, "Thank you. You boys are braver than I."

Al kindly smiles back, "Don't sell yourself short. There are all kinds of bravery. It takes a lot of bravery to raise a child, and even more strength to try and keep some normalcy in her life."

Still Tucker sadly smiles, "You're too kind." He tries to buck up, "You'd better catch up to Jesska before she disappears with your brother entirely. Before you know it, he'll be buried in a mountain of books."

Al laughs, "All right," and he leaves the room, waving as he does, "Goodbye. And thanks."

Before reaching the stairs, Al pops his head into Nina's room to say goodbye, but he doesn't see her. He looks around, left to right, but the room is empty. "Huh, that's funny..."

He goes downstairs where Jesska continues to talk Ed's ear off, he politely trying to cover his ear while making it look like he's just pushing his hair to the side. Al comes down to the first floor and asks, "Is Nina down here? I wanted to say goodbye."

"Hmm?" both Ed and Jesska hum. Ed says, "I thought she was still upstairs?"

Al shakes his head, "No, I thought she came down here with you guys."

"Wait!" they hear Tucker shout from upstairs. Suddenly, here he comes, jogging down the stairs with a paper in his hand. "You have to help!"

Jesska, concerned, asks, "What's happened?"

Tucker shoves the paper out in front of him. "It's Nina! She's run away!"

"What?!" Jesska swipes up the paper, she and Ed and Al all looking it over.

On the paper is scribbled in red crayon: "Daddy – Went to find Mommy. Will be back. – Nina. P.S. – Took Miss Fluffenstuffs with me."

Jesska stutters, "B-but I thought she thought her mom is at her mom's house! You don't think she's planning on walking all the way there, do you?"

Tucker has his hands on his head, running his fingers through his hair, "I don't know! She must have overheard us talking! Why else would she write 'went to find'?"

Ed clenches his fist and lets out a breath, "Looks like we'll have to put our trip to Emsland on hold." He looks up at Tucker, "We'll help you find your daughter. Any ideas where she might go?"
Tucker shakes his head, "No, not the slightest! She might just be wandering aimlessly on the streets!"

Jesska is suddenly clenching tighter to Ed's arm, her eyes glinting with resilience, "Well she's got little legs! She can't have gone very far! And we've got long legs! We'll catch up to her in no time! Come on!" And she yanks Ed forwards toward the door.

"Hey! Easy!"

Out on the front stoop, Jesska points to her right, "Al! Mr. Tucker! You two go that way! We'll go this way! Shout if you find her!"

And they split up, each pair running in opposite directions.

* *

Nina climbs up the front stairs of the library, clinging to her overly large teddy bear. She gets to the front door and pushes it inward, going inside. She looks up to the high ceilings with glee.

"Isn't it pretty, Miss Fluffenstuffs?" she asks her bear. "Miss Jesska brings me here all the time and reads me stories!" She lifts her bear up, looking it in its glass eyes, "Maybe I'll read you a story someday. But right now we got to find that map book. I think Miss Jesska called it a add-less or something..."

She carries her toy the way a mother would carry a child, and Nina begins wandering around the library lobby, looking at the masses upon masses of books surrounding her.

"Gosh," she says, a little disheartened, "We'll never find Mommy if we can't find a map..." Then her face lights up, "There it is!" She ambles towards a stack of books sitting on a round table – encyclopedias, almanacs, and yes, even atlases, sit piled here. She clammers up onto a chair and looks at the atlas, smiling. "This is it! This book has every map in the world!"

Suddenly there are the sounds of heavy boots running up the steps, and the doors are thrown open. Nina hears shouting and turns around to see men in brown uniforms carrying rifles.

She gasps, "Soldiers!"

Quickly, she snags the book from the table and runs in behind a book shelf, and she peeks over the tops of the books of the lowest shelf. She can hear the soldiers shouting, "Everyone out, now!"

Nina scurries away, running further down the lane of books, getting as far from the soldiers as possible. She spies an open crate sitting on the floor, some brand new books lain out on the table beside it. She throws in Miss Fluffenstuffs, and then Nina herself climbs into the crate, toting the book along with her. She reaches out of the crate and grabs its top, pulling with her little arms to bring the heavy wooden top to rest on top of the box.

She whispers to the bear, "Those soldiers aren't gonna take us like they took Mommy! We'll hide here all night if we have to!"

* *

"Nina?" Ed calls as he walks into an alleyway. He pokes his head behind a trashcan. "Nina? Come on, your dad is worried about you."

"Ahh!" He suddenly hears Jesska cry, "What are they doing?!!"
Ed runs out of the alley and back onto the main street. "What's wrong?"

Jesska points, "Look!"

Up the street, soldiers in brown uniforms are carrying books out of the library and are tossing them into a large pile on the street. A crowd is gathering around them, some shouting, others chanting.

Jesska takes off running, Ed calling after her, "Jesska, wait!" and he runs after her as well.

Jesska approaches one of the soldiers, "What are you doing?! Why are you throwing out our books like that?!"

"Stand aside!" the soldier orders her, "These books have all been blacklisted. We have orders to burn them."

"Burn them?!" Jesska cries with dismay. She gets close to the soldier, grabbing him by his arm, shaking him back and forth. "You can't DO this! What sort of heathens burn books?! Books are knowledge! Knowledge is power! Are you trying to send us back to the Dark Ages?!"

The soldier swings his arm, throwing her off, "Get lost!" He then shouts to a fellow soldier, "Get the torches!"

"No!" Jesska tries to run at the man carrying a torch, but Ed holds her back.

"Jesska, stop!" He turns her towards him, saying lowly, "They're just books! Like Mr. Tucker said – Don't do anything to get yourself arrested! What you're doing is too important for you to be put behind bars."

Tears are forming in Jesska's eyes, "This isn't fair! They have no right to do this!"

"I know," Ed tells her, his eyes still, "But we've got to choose our battles…"

The soldier tosses his torch onto the pile, and the books catch ablaze, the crowd surrounding them cheering.

Jesska holds her hands to her mouth, trying to hold back the tears.

The cheers turn to chants, someone shouting, "Burn – the – lies!" and soon the whole crowd is chanting, "Burn – the – lies!"

A young man picks up a stone and throws it at a library window. At the shrieking shattering of glass, the crowd cheers again and soon it becomes a game of who can pick up a rock the fastest.

Jesska waves her hands about, yelling, "Stop it! Stop it! You're already burning the books! You don't have to deface the library as well!"

"Boo!" They begin throwing rocks at her as well!

Ed jumps in front, holding up his right arm to protect them both. "HEY!" he barks at them, "Knock it off! You've had your fun!"

"Throw the commies out!" someone shouts. Before Ed even knows what's happening, a flaming book goes flying over his head, right through one of the broken windows! It gets caught in the curtains, and within a matter of seconds the window is engulfed in flames!

"No!" Jesska cries.
"Brother!" Al and Tucker run up to the Ed and Jesska. "What's happening?!

Tucker looks at the building, the flames spreading from window to window, "Oh no. This is terrible…"

The lead soldier comes over, pushing them away from the front steps, "All right! Back it up! Back it up!"

Suddenly Tucker is screaming, "Nina!"

They all look to where he's pointing – the farthest window of the building, right in the corner, Nina stands against the window, banging against the pane, her mouth wide open in a scream! Her bear dangles from her hand, it whacking up heavily against the glass with a thunk every time her small fists beat up against the window.

Tucker tries to run forward, but the soldier holds him back. "Please!" Tucker cries, "Let me through! My daughter's in there!"

"You'll be killed too, idiot!" the soldier tells him – but because he's so busy holding Tucker back, the soldier is too late in stopping Edward! "Hey! Come back here!"

Edward dashes up the steps as fast as his legs will carry him, and with the brunt of his shoulder, he bursts the doors open. Immediately, he is hit in the face with ash and searing heat, smoke filling his lungs. He coughs a couple of times, lifting his arm to shield his face from the roaring fires.

"Nina!" he shouts.

"Help!"

He can hear her scream, but he can't see her. He knows she's in the corner, so he runs towards it, trying to avoid the flames that are climbing up the walls and windows. The fire crawls its way across the ceiling, licking down and catching upon the books below it. Ed keeps running.

"Help me!" Nina cries.

"Nina, where are you?!

"Here! Here!"

He squints through the flames and can make out a small silhouette. "Just stay there!"

"Hurry!"

Ed wants to run straight towards her, but the flames are already getting too high! He darts to his left, running alongside a bookshelf, its right half on fire, but this side still yet to catch. He runs as fast as he can, not taking any chances with going slow, and he pops out on the other side. There, huddled in the corner is Nina, clinging tightly to her bear.

"Help me!"

Ed runs up to Nina, he taking off his coat and wrapping her up in it. He scoops her up into his arms, and he looks around desperately, "There's got to be a way out!"

Outside, the soldiers do their best to keep the near-to-rioting crowd under control, some shouting, "Don't just stand there! Save that child!" others shouting, "Let the traitors burn!"
Al and Jesska both struggle to keep Mr. Tucker back, they clinging to his coat as he claws forward, his fingers outstretched towards the building. "Let me go! I've got to save Nina!"

"Ed can do this!" Al reassures him, "Just give him time!"

There is a great creaking and loud cracking. Everyone looks up at the library, all four of its walls now brimmed with fire, and with a mighty snapping and cracking, the ceiling caves in!

"Ed!" Al cries.

"Nina!" both Tucker and Jesska shout, Tucker falling to his knees.

The massive amount of debris smothers the fire of the building, dust and ash rising into the air, smoke smoldering about as it rises to the sky. Only the gentle crackling of the bonfire of books in the background is to be heard.

Tears stream down Tucker's face, "No! NO! I've already lost my wife, and now my daughter too?!"

Jesska gasps, "Look!"

Walking over the rubble, out of the smoke and the ash is Edward, carrying in his arms Nina, and in her arms her teddy bear.

"Nina!" Tucker cries, rising to his feet and rushing towards them both, taking his daughter and hugging her tightly. "Oh Nina! Thank god!"

"Daddy!" she cries, her face covered in soot that she rubs off onto his shirt as she buries her face in his chest. "Daddy, I was so scared!"

He holds her tight, rubbing her head, "It's okay, sweetie! Daddy's here." He looks up at Ed, "Oh Edward, thank you. Thank you so much."

Ed shrugs, trying to play cool, "Eh, what can I say? Recklessly endangering myself is what I do."

Al runs up to them, Jesska following in behind, Al asking, "Brother! Are you okay?!"

"No worries," Ed tries to calm him, "Back doors come in handy in situations like this. We were out of the building long before the roof came down."

Jesska puts a hand to her chest, breathing a huge sigh of relief, "Oh, thank goodness! I was so worried about you two!"

The moment is cut short as the soldier approaches them, violently waving at them, shooing them off, "All right! Move it! Get outta here!"

* *

Back at Tucker's shop, Jesska wipes a warm wet cloth across Nina's face, Nina sitting atop the stool. "There!" Jesska says to the little girl, "All the soot's gone. Nice and clean!"

"Thank you Miss Jesska," Nina says.

"Nina," her father questions, "What on earth were you doing by yourself in the library?"

Nina looks down at the floor dejectedly, "I wanted to get the map book so I could go find Mommy. I heard you say that the soldiers kidnapped her, and I just wanted to help."
Edward kneels down to her, putting his hand on her shoulder, "That was very brave of you, Nina. But don't worry," he points a thumb to his chest, winking at her with a big grin, "Big brother Ed is gonna go out and find your mom, okay?"

She smiles a big smile, "Really?"

"I promise."

Nina scoots her way off the stool, climbing down to the floor and she trots over to her bear sitting in the corner, it oddly misshapen. Nina pulls the bear by its head, pulling it forward and exposing its back, its stitches all popped!

"Nina," her father says with a slightly scolding tone, "What did you do to your bear? Why is it ripped like that?"

From the inside of her bear, Nina lugs out the atlas! "I told you, Daddy! I went to the library to get the maps!"

Jesska says with an air of realization, "Oh~! And you hid it in the bear to keep it away from the soldiers! I'm very impressed Nina! You're a rebel in the making!"

Nina giggles gleefully, doing a bit of a squirmy dance of pride. She then walks up to Ed, lifting the book to him, "It's for you, big brother! You'll need this to find your way back!"

Ed smiles at her and takes the atlas, it very light in his hands compared to hers. "Thank you, Nina."

Jesska sighs, looking out the window, "We've already wasted half a day – and after a daring rescue like that, I can't send you boys off without having eaten. Not to mention, you probably need some rations or something before heading out." She rubs her head, thinking aloud, "And in the time it takes us to go shopping to buy you guys food, it'll already be sundown! And I can't let you guys wander around at night! Who knows what's out there! Wolves! Robbers! Bears!"

Nina lifts her teddy bear, "They can take Miss Fluffenstuffs! She'll protect them!"

Everyone chuckles, unable to resist Nina's adorableness.

And so, another day passes, the Elrics stocking up and taking a short time to rest. And as the sun arises the next day, they head out, thanking Jesska for her kindness, carrying with them bags filled with their supplies for the journey ahead.

They walk down the street, past the ashes of the library and the bonfire. Al looks to Ed. "How long before we get to Emsland?"

"On foot?" Ed ponders, "A full day if we walk nonstop without eating or sleeping, but we both know that's not gonna happen. And we shouldn't stick to the main roads either. So cutting through the woods, and eating, and sleeping..." Ed heaves a sigh, " Heck, this is gonna take forever...

*Bark, bark!*

The boys stop and look across the street from where they hear a small dog barking. They see on the other side of the street is Mr. Tucker, carrying with him a small white puppy. He pets its head, saying to it, "Nina's going to love you. I think I'll call you Alex."
"Bark!"

Ed feels his blood run cold, and suddenly he's frozen to his spot, unable to move.

"Ed?" Al mutters, concerned.

It's not until Tucker turns a corner that Ed finally snaps to and bolts forward, Al dropping his bag as he holds him back.

"Ed! What's wrong?!"

Ed shouts, struggling against Al's grasp "We have to stop him! That bastard is going to transmute Nina! He's gonna turn her into a chimera!"

Al pulls back on his brother's arms, "Ed! Stop! We both know that's not going to happen! It's impossible!"

Ed's heart stops… and slowly he feels it start pumping blood again, a shakiness about it, that shakiness making its way into his hand. Impossible… He looks down at the ground, and then turns around, not looking his brother in the eye. Slowly, he says, "...Come on. Let's get out of here..."

Ed walks past Al, Al sighing through his nose as he watches his brother silently. He leans down and picks up his dropped bag, shouldering it, following without a word.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter End Notes

Augh! Edward interacting with small children! It’s disgusting, isn’t it?! And by disgusting, I mean so unbearably adorable that I want to cry! And FYI: NINA LIVES! NINA FUCKING LIVES! Just to put everyone’s fears to rest, she survives this dingdaddily war. Her father is mentally stable, nothing bad happens to the dog, and Nina fucking lives, okay??! I feel like I’ve done enough to you guys and I’m going to do so much more to you that you all deserve this. NINA. LIVES.
Heart of Fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fullmetal After opening [WITH LYRICS] 鋼の鍊金術師 見えない世界 ポルノグラフィティ from Castiel Winchester on Vimeo.

The bugle sounds its ever-annoying excuse of a melody and the prisoners begin stirring in their bunks. Roy rolls over, desperately wanting just of few more moments of sleep, when, through cracked lids, something catches his eye.
"Huh?"

Sitting on the edge of his bed is a small seeded bread.

Roy sits up, staring at the mysterious bit of food. He looks around – none of the other prisoners have one, nor do they seem to notice that he has one. He looks back down at the bun, and pokes at it cautiously.

_This better not be some joke by the guards_, he thinks to himself. _It's either poisoned or filled with something disgusting…_

Slowly he picks it up, and then breaks the bread in half. It looks all right, he supposes. He brings it up to his nose and smells it. It smells even better, and his stomach begins rumbling intensely, begging for something other than the gruel its been given day in and day out.

_Well, you don't look a gift horse in the mouth, I suppose_, Roy thinks to himself, and throwing caution to the wind, he proceeds to eat the bread – quickly now, before a guard should come in and see.

*

In the kitchens, a chubby old man - the head cook - opens the pantry, ready to pull out some ingredients to make breakfast for the soldiers. He reaches to one shelf and his hand lands flat on nothing _but_ shelf. He stands on his tippy-toes to look.

"Hey!" he complains, "Where the hell did all the seed buns go?" He turns accusingly at his assistant cook, "Did you throw out the bread? I told you! We're on tight rations! We can't afford to be making new bread every day!"

"No, sir," the assistant defends himself. "Maybe it was mice?"

"You expect me to believe that mice ate _all_ of the bread without leaving a crumb?"

Suddenly there is the scurrying of tiny feet, and the door of the kitchen flies open, closing as quickly as it had opened.

Both the cook and his assistant look over at the door, the assistant shaking, "What the heck was that?!"

The cook says, "That was one big mouse…"

*

The day proceeds as normal. The guards stand at their posts, rifles in hand, eyes cast upon their prisoners.

Roy is in the trench with his shovel, digging with other prisoners. He wonders if they should be buried alive in here as now the trench is deep enough to stack two men high. Getting in and out requires a rope ladder.

He hears one of the other prisoners yelp, and Roy looks over his shoulder. A man is clasping tightly to his hand, red blood beginning to seep out from his palm.

A guard atop the hole shouts down, "Get back to work!"

The prisoner looks up, about to say something, but thinks better of it, and turns his attention back to
the earth beneath his feet. He tries to push down on the shovel, but winces again, stopping his digging, sucking air through grit teeth.

The prisoner then notices that someone has approached him. It's Roy. Without a word, Roy takes hold of the bottom of his own uniform shirt, and tears it off. He hands the long strand of rag out to the other man. "Here," Roy says, "Wrap your hand with that."

The man, slightly confused looking (as this is probably the first bit of kindness he's received at this camp) takes the rag from Roy. "Uh… thanks."

"Hey!" the soldier shouts again, "I said work!"

Roy looks up, eyes steely, "If you want him to work, you'll let him wrap his hand first. He can't even hold the shovel the way his hand is now."

The soldier grumbles, "Whatever! Just hurry up!"

Roy nods to his fellow prisoner, and the man smiles, and then begins wrapping the cloth around his hand.

* * *

During the only break they receive midday, the prisoners line up, tiny tin cups in hand, to receive some water.

A guard stands nearby to make sure the prisoners remain orderly as Sergeant Hughes ladles some water out of a barrel and into a cup, saying, "Next!" The prisoner before him moves away, allowing the next prisoner to come up to the barrel.

Hughes mutters to himself, "Can't believe they've got me doing grunt work. This is so boring…"

He looks up from the barrel of water to see that the next prisoner in line is a familiar face – that Mustang guy. The prisoner glares at him with ice in his eyes. Hughes' face is as still as stone, and yet a twitch manages to tick at the corner of his eye. Without a word, he lifts the ladle and fills Mustang's cup. "Next!"

Roy moves away, trying to find a quiet place to sit and relax for the few brief minutes he has. He hears a small commotion and looks back over towards the barrel.

An old man is pleading with the guard, "Please! Just one more cup! I'm so thirsty!"

The guard hollers, "You've already had your share! Now get lost!" Using the brunt of his rifle, the guard pushes the old man away, and the elderly prisoner roughly falls over and into the dirt, crying upon impact.

Roy gasps, unable to believe what he's seeing. He thinks he should be used to this sort of thing by now, and yet still he finds himself filled with both shock and anger. He walks up to the old man on the ground, and setting his cup down, Roy helps lift the man to a sitting position.

Roy then lifts his cup, handing it to the old man, "Here. Drink."

The old man is still crying, but his lips are trembling in a smile, "Bless you! Bless you!"

Sergeant Hughes scowls at the pair, saying to Roy, "You're gonna pass out from dehydration if you give your water away like that."
Roy glares sternly at the sergeant, "It's my water, I'll do what I want with it."

The guard beside Hughes commands, "Hey! You better show some respect."

Hughes waves it off, "Whatever. If he wants to kill himself, let him."

Commander Amsel sits at his desk, nervously tapping a pen on the tabletop as he stares rather blankly at the telegram before him.

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*Mustang, Roy, is an ally of the known conspirator against the Party, Elric, Edward. Both are suspects in the murder of a top-level scientist, as well as the disappearance of a top secret weapon. The prisoner is not to be killed, for he may contain valuable information.*

---

He sighs, now twirling the pen between his fingers, "Of course I'd end up with an important prisoner. I was hoping I'd get an easy job…"

---

Kimblee straightens his tie one more time, just to make sure that's it's perfectly straight. He gets ready to leave his room when suddenly he gasps, putting his hand on top of his head. His hat? Where was his hat?

Feeling a panic quickly arise within him, Kimblee looks around his room, and quickly he breathes a sigh of relief as he spies his hat sitting on top of his pillow. He walks over to his bed, lifting the hat and putting it on top of his head. After all, what self-respecting officer didn't look his best at all times?

Chin up and chest out, Kimblee leaves his room, making his way to the commander's office.

When he arrives at the door, Kimblee does one last check, brushing some stray hairs from shoulder, making sure he looks presentable. He then knocks on the commander's door. "Commander Amsel? I-

The door swings open but it is not Commander Amsel who stands there. It is instead a very tall, menacing-looking man: broad of shoulders, blond of hair, and dark blue eyes. His uniform is pitch-black, a helmet on his head. Another man, very similar to this one, stands inside the room near Commander Amsel who sits at his desk.

Kimblee feels his stomach drop at the appearance of this stranger, but immediately he snaps to attention and salutes the man. "Welcome to our camp, sir!"

Amsel laughs, "You don't have to salute them, Lieutenant. They're not officers."

Kimblee enters the room, "But they are SS, are they not? And I am but a humble SA man. They deserve my respect." Kimblee reaches the commander's desk, and he turns ceremoniously on heel to face the men before them. "I am Lieutenant Zolf. J. Kimblee. It's an honor to meet you."

Amsel says as he points his pen from one man to the other, "This is Trumbauer and Flagge. High
Command sent ‘em to help interrogate that Mustang character."

The corner of Kimblee's mouth twitches momentarily, but then he smiles, closing his eyes with a gentle bow of his head. "Actually, that's what I came to talk to you about, Commander. I would be honored if you allowed me to interrogate the prisoner." He then looks to the soldiers before him, "No disrespect, sirs. I just don't think you should be sullying your hands by having to interact with the filth."

One of them steps forward, Kimblee unsure if this one is Trumbauer or if this one is Flagge, and the man says, "It's disrespectful if you think that any sort of filth could actually sully us."

Kimblee coughs, trying to clear the lump in his throat. "No, of course not. You are the strongest of our race, clearly. Forgive me."

The other SS soldier laughs, "Ah, don't take it so hard! You're just a brownshirt. We don't expect you to understand the complexities of the higher-ups."

Kimblee narrows his eyes, resisting a frown.

Amsel gently waves at the soldiers, "Take it easy on him. This one's not that bad. Why he's almost an SS himself. Obedient, loyal – I think you'd find him a useful assistant in the interrogation."

The soldier (Flagge?) responds, "If that's how you want it, Commander."

Kimblee salutes them once again, "Don't worry, sirs! I won't let you down!"

The two large SS soldiers begin to exit, Trumbauer saying, "Just don't get under-foot, all right?"

Flagge exits after him, giving one last smirk to Kimblee, and Kimblee remains in the office with Amsel. The lieutenant holds in a great grumbling sigh, merely saluting his commander and then leaving quietly.

* *

As Roy leaves the water barrel and starts to make his way back to the trench, he passes the building that was recently erected next to it. Suddenly he is hit by a huge stench. He covers his mouth, trying not to gag.

What is that smell?

It's indescribable, somewhere between rotten meat and rotten eggs, both and yet not really either.

Holding his breath, Roy gets ready to descend the rope ladder into the pit, hoping that perhaps down there, the smell will pass over his head.

He stops momentarily, though, as he notices that more new arrivals are being ushered in through the front gates. More? he thinks to himself. How many people do they think will fit in this camp? He thinks perhaps his eyes are playing tricks on him, for it looks as though there are even women and children in amongst this new crowd. Roy shakes his head, The Nationalists are getting that vindictive are they?

He gets not but a foot on the ladder before he hears Kimblee's voice: "Mustang."

Roy looks up and sees that Kimblee is accompanied by two large men in black uniforms. Without a word, the two burly men grab Roy by his arms and start to drag him away.
Nearby, at another building project, the little boy Rick sees this and begins wringing his hands worriedly. His older brother Leo gives him a gentle knock on the head with his knuckle. "Hey. You better keep working before they get mad," he says softly.

Rick nods, "Oh, right…" and turns his attention back to the project.

Everyone else is already in bed by the time the guards take Roy back to his hut. They open the door, shoving him inside, and then slam the door behind him. Roy can hear the padlock click into place.

His knees shaky and skin stinging all over, Roy wearily makes his way towards his bunk. He climbs the ladder and, thankfully, looks at his cot before crawling into it, for laying there are a handful of pickled eggs.

"What the-?"

Roy moves them aside, wiping the vinegary wetness dry from the canvas, and then he slides onto his cot, piling the eggs into his lap, looking them over.

Where do these things keep coming from? he wonders. He coughs a bit, as the eggs smell as though they've been out in the hot air for longer than they should have been. He chuckles, Maybe that new building is where they've been storing all the eggs...

Thankful nonetheless for the mysterious gift, Roy eats away.

"What do you mean you don't have any eggs?" Hughes gripes.

The assistant cook passing out the food says to the sergeant, "I'm sorry, sir, but we're all out. We're expecting another shipment soon, though."

Hughes walks away a little pouty, a rather amusing sight. He mumbles to himself, "No bread yesterday and now no eggs today…"

He looks over at the officers' table, their plates completely full.

Oh, of course! He begrudgingly thinks, Of course the officers get eggs… But as he keeps walking, he takes notice of two large men sitting with Amsel and Kimblee. Who's that? I've never seen those guys before...

Kimblee chats away, Commander Amsel looking like a proud father, but the two SS soldiers looking very bored: "I know the requirement is pure German blood since at least 1750, but honestly, it should be pure blood no matter the amount of time. For instance, I can trace my pure blood all the way back to Joseph I of Habsburg – but that's just the tip of the iceberg. As we speak, my father has been devotedly researching our family line to track down all the records and reconcile them into a single book. It's likely my bloodline stretches beyond that…"

Hughes rolls his eyes, letting out a slight, "Yyugg," sort of sound, annoyed, and he keeps walking past, ignoring the lieutenant's ramblings.
Having sucked down a bowl of gruel, Roy heads out with the other prisoners, ready to make his way back into the trench. But when they get there, it's been filled in!

Roy grimaces at the dark dirt pile. *They better not expect us to re-dig this thing!*

But the soldier in charge leads them over to a patch of dirt directly adjacent to the previous one. "All right, maggots! We're building a new trench right here! Get digging!"

Roy's shoulders fall, eyes to the sky. *I wish they'd put me on hut-building duty or something. At least then I'd feel like I'm doing something useful...*

Roy gets ready to stick his shovel into the earth, when his tool is yanked from his hands.

"Ah-ah-ah!" Kimblee wags a finger at him, like a teacher to a child, "Not you." Kimblee tosses the shovel onto the ground, and then roughly grabs Roy by the arm. "You're coming with us."

Trumbauer and Flagge stand behind Kimblee, they looking down at Roy as one of them cracks their knuckles, "Let's see if we have a better session than yesterday. Maybe you'll actually feel like talking this time."

Roy narrows his eyes, not saying a word. And once again, the men carry him off.

* Kimblee stands outside the room, guarding the door, and from inside the room, he can hear Roy's cries of pain.

"Hmph!" Kimblee leans his back against the wall, his arms crossed and his brow furrowed. "What pigs. Don't they know there are more subtle ways to pull information out of someone?"

He stares at the ground, unconsciously clenching his jaw. *Damn it! I'll never find out anything from Mustang if these two idiots keep interrogating him! If I could just get in there. Squeeze the info out of him – No! Even better! If I could find and recover that top secret weapon! – then, maybe then, High Command will let me join the SS...*

He pinches the bridge of his nose.

*It's not fair! Morons like Trumbauer and Flagge are BLESSED with blue eyes... And yet me, who's a TRUE Aryan! Cultured! Intelligent! Majestic!*

He looks down at his uniform.

*...I get eyes browner than my shirt...*

He puts his hand on his head and shifts his hat forward, covering his eyes. He then hears footsteps approaching, and, pushing his hat back into place, Kimblee looks up to see Sergeant Hughes walking towards him.

"Lieutenant Kimblee?" the sergeant begins-

"Not now!" Kimblee barks at him. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Hughes retorts with a smile, "Yeah, that wall's not gonna stand up by itself."

Kimblee stops leaning against the wall and demands, "What do you want?"
Hughes continues, "Commander Amsel requests your presence, sir."

The door next to Kimblee opens up, and Trumbauer and Flagge exit, wiping their hands. Flagge closes the door behind him, "I don't know about you, but I could use some grub."

Trumbauer responds, "Me too. Beating up prisoners is hard work. But maybe this Mustang guy will feel like talking after hanging upside-down for a few hours!"

They both give bellyful laughs.

Hughes suggests, "You better not leave him upside-down too long. He'll pass out and then you'll never get a word out of him."

Kimblee snaps, "Shut it! Do not interfere with these men's methods!"

Hughes raises a hand defensively, "Hey, I'm just saying-"

"You have no right to speak to these men!" Kimblee sneers at him. "And even less of a right to tell them what to do!"

Hughes now waves both his hands, "I wasn't doing anything like that."

Kimblee turns away from Hughes and faces Trumbauer and Flagge, his voice returning to its normal, unnervingly calm timbre, "Please, ignore him. He's nothing but an enlisted man."

Hughes glowers at the lieutenant.

Kimblee continues with a smarmy tone, "You shouldn't expect him to understand the delicacies of interrogation. After all, most SA men are nothing but beer hall brawlers and street fighters. They're not refined like us-"

Before he knows it, Kimblee's hat is plucked off of his head! He gasps, his breath leaving him, eyes bulging and jaw slack.

Hughes, standing behind Kimblee, holds the officer's hat in his hand. Hughes says, in a very casual tone, "You know, my wife Gracia sometimes lightens her hair. And I've always noticed that when her hair starts to grow back out, that it's really dark at the roots. But you-"

Kimblee grits his teeth, clenching his fist, his shoulders beginning to tremble.

Hughes points out, "Your roots are a lot darker than hers. Let me guess – black hair?"

Kimblee whips around and rips his hat out of Hughes's hand. His face as red as his swastika armband, Kimblee shoves his hat back onto his head, Trumbauer and Flagge laughing all the meanwhile.

"Hawhawhaw! Yeah! Nice pure blood you got there!"

"I bet you don't even know who Joseph I was, you fibber!"

The soldiers continue guffawing raucously.

Kimblee moves in close to Hughes, pointing a threatening finger at the sergeant, growling, "You've just made a costly mistake! This isn't over!"

Kimblee forcefully pushes Hughes to the side, the sergeant jamming his shoulder up against the
Kimblee approaches Commander Amsel's door, and it's not until he's right up on it that Kimblee realizes how fast he's walking and with what force he's been swinging his arms. He stops in front of the door and takes a moment to calm down, breathing in a breath and slowly breathing it back out.

Immediately, he puts on a smile, as if absolutely nothing is wrong.

He enters, "Commander Amsel?" he asks cheerfully.

"Ah! There you are!" Amsel chimes. "What kept you?"

Kimblee, his movements stiff, gently closes the door, "Forgive me. I was delayed."

"Ah, no worries," the commander says. "I've got a job for you, Lieutenant."

Kimblee bows his head slightly, "Of course, sir."

"The cooks tell me that there have been rations going missing from the stores. I need you to look into it and find out who's been taking more than their fair share."

Kimblee's smile drops, "What? You want me to investigate missing food?"

Amsel says, "Well I don't expect you to find anything. Whoever stole it has probably eaten it already. Just find out who it is and be sure they receive proper reprimand."

Kimblee raises his voice, somewhat startling Amsel, "Sir! I really think I should remain on the Mustang case! Finding that weapon is more important than some missing food!"

"Lieutenant! What's gotten into you?"

Kimblee catches himself, realizing how he's acting, and yet he can't quell the energy pumping throughout his body, can't stop his hands from shaking. He straightens himself up, "I'm sorry, sir… I'm just… passionate, is all. I just want to follow through on the orders from High Command."

The commander lets out a heavy sigh through his nose, and then he rises from his desk and approaches Kimblee, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Listen, son. I know you've got your heart set on this. But if you really believe in the ways of the SS, then you'll trust Trumbauer and Flagg to do their jobs and do them well. Let them worry about that secret weapon. We've got a job to do here, now. We've all got our lot in life, and this is it."

Kimblee, eyes downcast, mutters, "Yes sir."

Amsel pats him on his arm and says, "Now get a move on. I know you won't let me down."

Kimblee inwardly sighs.

Rick pokes his head into the kitchens, making sure the coast is clear. He sprints across the open space, past the large table, its tablecloth billowing as he breezes past, and Rick gets to the end of
the kitchen, quickly throwing open the pantry doors. As quick as a flash, he opens up a burlap sack that once held potatoes, and with the full-length of his arm, he scoops a shelf's worth of food into the bag.

It doesn't even matter what the food is – as long as it fits in the sack. He promptly clasps the opening of the bag together, shoulders the bag and starts to make a beeline back to the door – but the door is opening!

Rick gasps and the only thing he can think to do is to jump behind the door and let it cover him from the on-comers.

The chef and his assistant enter the kitchen, tying their aprons on. Rick cowers in the small corner, the door his only cover for the moment. Sitting there, he prays that they won't look in his direction as they close it.

Lucky for him, they do not, for the chef is distracted – "Not again!" The chef bumbles towards the open pantry. "When I find out who keeps doing this, there's going to be hell to pay!"

The assistant closes the kitchen door behind him, and Rick stays stock still, trying not to do anything whatsoever to catch their eyes. The assistant says, "I wonder if it's those two new soldiers who transferred here. I mean, that's about when this started, right?"

The chef sarcastically laughs, "HUH! Don't let them hear you say that! They'd boil your bones for soup, boy!"

Quietly, and still sitting on the ground, Rick begins sliding his way across the floor, trying to get close to the door handle. But how to open the door? If he stands up, they might see him!

"Oh well..." The chef turns away from the pantry. Rick darts forward, diving under the table, the cloth hiding him on all sides. "Let's get started, huh?"

The assistant says, "I'm not looking forward to more belly-aching from the enlistees."

The chef, pulling some bowls out of the cabinets, remarks, "You know how it goes: Officers get fed first, then the enlisted men. That's just the way things are."

Rick can see the men's silhouettes as they move back and forth throughout the kitchen. Just a few seconds – just a few seconds is all he needs to get out the door!

Cautiously, he peeks out from underneath the tablecloth. Yes! Both of the chefs are facing the countertops - their backs are to him!

Quietly, he slips out from underneath the table and tiptoes to the door. Slowly, he turns the door handle, any sound it making hidden beneath the constant noise of the chopping of vegetables and the pounding of meat.

And like a whisper, Rick slips out of the kitchen, unnoticed.

Later in the evening, after the workers have finished their shift, they all pile into the prisoner's mess hall to get their dinnertime gruel. Leo waits in line when Rick scurries up to him, a little breathless.

Leo looks down at his brother, "Rick! Where have you been! You had me worried sick!"
"I'm sorry, Leo," Rick says, looking up to his brother.

Leo pulls his brother closer, saying lowly, "Do not go running off! Otherwise you might end up disappearing like the others!"

Rick cocks his head to the side, "What others?"

"You know those new prisoners they brought in a few days ago? Well I've talked with some of the guys around here – and none of them say that those new prisoners have been assigned to their barracks. Apparently, they all went into Building Five, and they never came back out."

Rick shakes in his thin shoes, "W-well then that means they're not missing. They're just in Building Five is all! Maybe they're on lock-down and they're not allowed to leave."

"Regardless," Leo says, "Don't leave my sight, okay?"

Rick nods. He then hears the door of the mess hall open, and he looks over. He gasps, "Mr. Mustang!"

Entering is Roy, his face bruised and a large bulge forming on his forehead. He slowly makes his way to the food line as Rick comes rushing up to him, tugging at his sleeve.

"Mr. Mustang! What happened?! Are you all right?!"

Roy manages to crack a smile, even though it hurts to move his face, "Don't worry. I've had worse." He's lying, of course, but Roy doesn't want to make Rick anymore upset than he already is.

"What did they do to you?" Rick questions, still concerned.

Roy gently shakes his head, "Nothing that I can't handle." He then gently pushes on the little boy's back, moving him back towards his brother, "You should go, before you lose your place in line."

With a gloomy frown, Rick says, "Okay…" unconvinced that Roy is actually okay, and he leaves to rejoin Leo towards the front of the line.

Later, after he's received his bowl of gruel, Roy makes his way to one of the tables, deciding to join Rick and Leo. Leo politely tries to ignore the older man's black eye and somewhat gross-looking face, but Rick seems very happy to have him around, the little boy swinging his legs back and forth underneath the table.

"Is it true that in the big city, they have wagons that run on electrical wires?" Rick asks excitedly.

Roy responds, "Trolleys, you mean. Yes, we have those."

"Neat-o! We don't have anything like that in the countryside! Our lights are still gas-powered, but I hear in the city, you've got electricity!"

Roy chuckles, "Well, not everyone in the city has electricity. Some houses do still use gas, but there's been a big shift towards electric lighting."

Leo scoffs, looking away from them both, "You might as well stop talking about it, Rick. It's not like we're ever going to see a big city."

Rick says determinedly, "We could too! We can go after we get out of here!"

Leo turns back to his brother, "Yeah right! Even if we do get out of here, do you think they want
people like us in the cities? No! We'd be better off trying to get out east!"

Roy drags his spoon through his gruel and asks, "Where out east would you like to go?"

Leo looks at Mustang, but then looks down at the table, unable to look the man in the face, "Our grandfather told us stories that his grandfather told him – out east there's a city called Baghdad. He says it's a really beautiful place, with tropical fruit and beautiful buildings."

"Is that so?" Roy asks, letting the boy talk, glad to actually hear some excitement in Leo's voice for once.

"And it's sunny there all the time! And he said that the girls are beautiful, too!"

Roy chuckles, "German girls not your type, huh?"

Leo looks away, pouting, "No, it's more like I'm not their type. They always look at us like we're dirty or something."

Roy sighs, "I'm afraid that's not a uniquely German trait. Unfortunately all over the world, there are people who fear others that don't look like they do." Roy says, more resolutely, "But you must understand, that there are more good people in this world than there are bad."

Leo purses his lips, "That's kinda hard to believe behind barbed wire…"

Roy wishes there is something more he can say, but he knows Leo has a point.

Their conversation is interrupted, however, when from the corner arises an argument. "Please! Just leave us alone!"

Most of the prisoners look over to the corner to see what's going on. In the corner sit the Jewish prisoners, marked as such by the yellow Star of David sewn to their uniforms. Another prisoner, one with a red triangle on his uniform, stands shouting at them, his finger pointing at them accusingly, "If you people hadn't come to our country in the first place, then maybe the Nationalists never would have organized and the rest of us wouldn't be stuck here!"

Murmurs of agreement begin to arise from other prisoners. Guards who stand near the door smirk, clearly hoping that the prisoners will riot and attack the Jews huddled in the corner.

One of the Jewish men, perhaps a rabbi as he's been standing this whole time trying to lead the people in prayer, demands, "Please! Just let us say our prayers and eat in peace!"

The red-triangled man shouts, "Maybe I don't wanna hear your Hebrew prayers! Maybe you should be saying some Christian prayers instead!"

"Yeah!" Many more of the prisoners agree loudly.

Leo stands up, Rick tugging on the back of his uniform, "Leo, don't!"

Leo shouts, "Maybe not all of us are Christian! Did you ever think about that?!"

"Shut up, mudface!" The red-triangled prisoner yells at Leo, and Leo runs forward, Rick losing his grip on him.

"Leo, no!"

But he doesn't get far before Roy grabs him by the wrist, stopping him.
Leo struggles, "Let me go!"

Roy stands up, glaring sternly at the young boy before him. Leo is very uncomfortable with this man's gaze upon him, for once noticing how tall he is in comparison to himself.

Roy releases Leo, and then silently, he strides towards the group of men gathered in the corner. All eyes are upon him, watching this prisoner who strangely carries himself as tall as an officer.

Roy stops in front of the table of yellow-starred prisoners. He looks directly at the man standing and asks him, "You believe in the God of Abraham?"

The man nods, "We do."

With a nearly threatening air, Roy turns his gaze to the man with the red triangle. "And you believe that Jesus descended from the line of Abraham?"

The man responds, "Well… Yeah, but-"

Roy then turns back around towards Leo, and he says loudly enough for the whole room to hear, "And Leo – Your people also descend from Abraham and pray to his God?"

Leo is quiet for a moment, and humbly answers, "Yes."

Roy, looking from one side of the room to the other, says aloud, "And the rest of you here, even if you do not pray to the God of Abraham, believe that there is indeed a higher power? A being who created the universe?"

A sea of nodding heads greets him.

"Then I say to you that we must not fight. Though we may refer to the Great Architect of the Universe by different names – Yahweh, God, Allah, and many others – we are all His children. That makes us all Brothers. And in order to survive trials and tribulations, Brothers must not fight amongst themselves – but instead we must remain strong, and continue to have faith in our Father, no matter what we call Him or how we pray to Him."

The room falls into silent reverence. The rabbi looks as though he is about to cry as a trembling smile arises on his face. The man with the red triangle slumps his shoulders, looking down at the ground. Even Leo manages to smile a little.

Roy approaches the rabbi and asks, "Sir. I would be honored if you would allow me to lead everyone here in prayer."

The rabbi nods.

Roy walks to the middle of the room and says, "How many meals have we received in this place, and not once have thanked our Father for feeding us, no matter how humble the meal may be?"

Again, more shoulders begin to slump.

Roy says, "Please, bow your heads."

And the prisoners all do so.

The guards, standing at the door, glance at one another with concern.
The guards are later in Amsel's office. He inquires, "Is that so?"

One of the guards nods, "Yes sir."

Amsel looks down at his desk, "Well we can't have that, can we? We've worked too hard to break these prisoners' spirits. That's all we need is someone for them to rally around." He grumbles, "I liked it better when this Mustang wasn't a rabble-rouser. Maybe whipping him was the wrong move. All it's seem to have done is motivate him further..."

He leans back in his chair with a grumble.

"But we can't not punish him either! What sort of message will that send to the prisoners?"

"Not to mention," he suddenly hears Kimblee's voice say, the lieutenant entering through the open door, "That if we lock him up for leading them in prayer, that will only anger the prisoners and might possibly lead them to riot. People tend to be foolishly attached to religion."

"Oh, hello Kimblee," Amsel says rather absently. "How goes the hunt for the food thief?"

Kimblee smirks, "I think our thief problem may actually present us with our solution."

The commander raises an eyebrow, "How so?"

Still smirking, Kimblee responds, "We can easily pin the robberies on Mustang and throw him, permanently, into Solitary for it. Not only is it a less emotionally-charged offense, but also if the other prisoners discover that Mustang has been hoarding food for himself and not sharing with them, they'll think it just that he gets what he deserves. They'll be happy to see him locked away."

Amsel asks, "And what happens when the food thief strikes again?"

"Hopefully," Kimblee says, "What happens to Mustang will be enough to motivate them to quit their thieving. If it does happen again, we'll dispose of whoever it really is."

"Very well," Amsel says with a waving of his hand, "Do what needs to be done. I trust you, Lieutenant."

Kimblee bows, looking less like a soldier and more like a butler. "Thank you, sir."

Roy lays on his cot, allowing the cool night air to provide some relief to his still sore forehead. He hears a shuffling coming from the ladder, and once more, he is greeted by Rick.

He smiles at the boy, "Hey. It's late. Aren't you sleepy?"

Rick shakes his head, "No, I'm all right. Are you feeling any better, Mr. Mustang?"

Roy chuckles in his throat, knowing that the answer is no, but he says to the boy, "I'm all right."

"Here, I brought you something," Rick says, lifting up his tin drinking cup.

"Hmm?" Roy questions, sitting up to see what it is that Rick has. He takes the cup as it's handed to him, and Roy looks inside, "What's this?" Inside the cup is an egg and a chocolate bar.

Rick explains, "When I was little, I once fell over and got a bump on my head. My mom made me all better using an egg and some chocolate." He looks down and to the side, "Of course, she used
some ice too, but we don't have any ice." He cheers up and looks back at Roy. "Still! I'm hoping this will help!"

"Where did you get these?" Roy asks.

"Uh…"

"Rick?" Roy asks again, sounding rather fatherly.

Rick mutters, "I got them from the soldier's kitchen."

Roy slightly chides him, "That was very reckless of you, Rick. What if you got caught?"

"I'm sorry," the boy apologizes, "I just wanted to help."

Roy sighs, and then pats him on the head. "Thank you. But please, promise me that you'll never do it again."

Rick, once more, looks down sadly. "…Okay."

*

The next morning, the bugle sounds, as per usual. And the prisoners arise, as per usual. And they all trudge out the door, as per usual. What is not usual this morning, it that the door of the prisoner's mess hall is being boarded shut!

Atop the short steps leading into the hall, Sergeant Hughes stands in front of the door, hammer in hand, pounding away, as a couple of guards protect him while he works.

"What's going on?"

"Why are we shut out?!"

"Hey! I'm hungry!"

"Open up!"

The guards have to keep them back, the prisoners all clamoring, becoming panicked as they begin to crowd in towards the door.

"ATTEEEN-TION!" Lieutenant Kimblee shouts at them.

Immediately, the men are silent and they all snap to attention.

Kimblee shouts further, "Formation! Now!"

Just as the day they had arrived, the prisoners scurry into a rectangle formation, everyone silent and staring straight at the lieutenant.

Kimblee paces back and forth in front of the men, like a tiger prowling in a cage. After a long while, he finally says, "No doubt you've noticed our redecorating. I felt it necessary considering you're all so obviously well-fed."

Though tempted to murmur, the men remain quiet, though they do glance at once another.

Kimblee's eyes flit over to them, looking at them out of the side of his eye. "Hmm? You all seem
confused. Or maybe you haven't heard." He faces them. "Someone here has been stealing food from the soldiers. Such a thing will NOT be tolerated! As such, NO ONE will be eating!"

At that, the crowd does break out into a murmur, loud, panicked even. Though they know better than to speak out, their stomachs, not their brains, are in charge at this moment.

"SILENCE!" Kimblee thunders, and the murmuring dies into a whimper. Kimblee continues his pacing. That same old snake-charmer voice arises from his lips, "Now it's not entirely hopeless. I'll let everyone here eat again – but only after the culprit comes forward."

Rick gulps in his throat, feeling his arms and legs go cold but strangely his head and chest becoming very feverish.

Kimblee grins as he watches the faces of the men before him, able to see their minds scrambling for answers. "Come on now," he pries, "Don't be shy. Surely someone here knows something…"

He passes by Mustang, who is the only one here whose face is as still as stone. Kimblee looks him straight in the eye and says, "Maybe the culprit took a steak to take care of a black eye?"

Roy narrows his one good eye at the officer.

Kimblee leans in, though Roy does not move at all. Kimblee continues to grin, scrutinizing, "Or maybe he only cares about filling his own belly while everyone else starves. Tsk, tsk. You know, Mustang." Kimblee continues, "Everyone else here seems surprised by the news. But not you. You look like you know something."

Finally, Roy breaks eye contact.

Kimblee gives a pleased, "Hmph! I knew it. Men! Take him awa-.

"WAIT!" Rick jumps out of the crowd, facing Kimblee. "It was me! I took the food!"

Roy shouts, "Rick, no!"

Leo pulls his brother back, lowly growling, "Shut up, you idiot!"

Rick breaks free of his brother's grasp and runs right up to Kimblee. "It was me! I admit it! I'm the one who's been stealing the food!"

This time, Kimblee gives a displeased, "Hmph. Pathetic! Are you really going to let a child pay for your crimes, Mustang? I didn't take you as the spineless type."

Roy steps in front of Rick, shielding him from Kimblee, "It was me."

"Mister Mustang! No!"

"And I'm glad of it, too!" Roy continues.

The prisoners listen attentively as Roy talks, even some of the nearby soldiers interested. From his place atop the short steps, Hughes can see everything that's going on.

Roy shouts, "I'm glad! Because if it means taking food out of your greedy gullets and giving it to people who really need it, then I'd steal a hundred pounds worth of food!"

Kimblee grills him, "You're such a lying piece of filth!" He looks at the prisoners, "Has he been giving food to any of you? NO! He's been keeping it all to himself!"
"I was planning on passing it out today," Roy says, his gaze going to the corner of his eye as he discreetly looks over at Rick. "Because that's the right thing to do."

Tears form in Rick's eyes.

"It's not right to keep all that food," Roy says. "It belongs to everyone."

Rick nods, understanding.

Kimblee hisses, "Spare me! You're nothing but a belly-to-the-ground snake!"

Roy shouts as loud as his lungs will carry, "A snake has more honor than you!"

Mumbles of surprise arise from the crowd, even a few snickers from some guards. Kimblee is taken aback.

Roy continues shouting. "A snake only attacks to eat or when it feels threatened! But YOU! You hurt people on a daily basis, because you like it! You say you're just following orders! Just doing your job! But a snake does not act outside of his nature! Is it in your nature, then, to cause pain to your fellow man on a daily basis? To make him a slave? To starve him and degrade him? If it's not in your nature – THEN WHY DO YOU DO IT?"

Hughes, still standing silently atop the steps, feels something move within him…

Still staring Kimblee straight in the face, Roy, tears of passion rising in his eyes, yells at the man, "IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE A MONSTER!"

Roy takes a step towards the lieutenant, and like a shot, Kimblee pulls out his handgun and points it at Roy's head, everyone in the crowd backing away quickly with gasps and yelps.

Kimblee clutches the gun tightly, his focus fixed squarely upon Mustang, Roy's eyes like daggers, stabbing back at Kimblee.

"Do it," Roy says in a deep voice. "I dare you."

Kimblee's finger trembles on the trigger. With an exasperated grunt, he instead smacks Roy across the mouth with the gun, and then holstering it, orders the nearby soldiers, "Put him in Solitary!"

Two soldiers come up, clapping handcuffs onto Roy's wrist.

Kimblee leans in and says, loud enough for everyone to hear, "And this time, don't let him back out! You're going to stay in there for the rest of your life! Take him away!"

And for the second time since arriving here, Roy is dragged off to Solitary Confinement.

*A guard stands outside the door, quietly doing his duty, when Sergeant Hughes comes up to him."

"I'll take care of this one," the sergeant says.

"Are you sure?" the soldier asks. "He seems kinda wiley. You think you can handle him?"

Hughes says, "Please. He can't be that bad."

"All right," the soldier says a little skeptically, "But if he escapes, it's you're neck, not mine."
The guard leaves his post, Hughes taking over for him. After the guard has exited the building completely, Hughes briefly looks over his shoulder at the door. And then he turns towards it and, turning the handle, he enters.

Roy sits alone in his cell, the single light bulb dimly lighting the whole place. There is a single chair in this room, positioned on the other side of the bars where Roy can't get to it, as if to tease him with comfort he can never have.

The door opens and entering is the sergeant, Hughes. Roy crinkles his nose at him, and then turns to the side, leaning his back against the nearest wall, ignoring the soldier.

Hughes is silent as he pulls up the chair and takes a seat, its back against the same wall Roy has his back against, Hughes staring across the room at the same wall Roy stares at.

Both are absolutely silent, only the slight electrical hum of the light bulb creating any sort of sound.

Finally, Hughes speaks, saying, "You know, I've never liked snakes…"

Roy continues staring forward at the wall.

"…But if there's one thing I like even less than snakes," Hughes turns towards Roy with a great big grin on his face, "It's Kimblee."

Roy looks out of the corner of his eye, his face unchanging.

Slowly, the smile fades from Hughes' face. He sighs, looking back forward at the wall opposite of him. He clasps his hands together, interlocking his fingers as he sits there. "…What you said out there… You're right, you know…"

Roy finally turns his head towards Hughes to look at him, but Hughes does not meet his gaze.

"…It really isn't in my nature to be doing this… but you've got to understand… It's more complicated than that…"

"Hmph," Roy once more looks forward at the wall opposite. "I'm sure it is…"

"If it's any consolation," Hughes says, once more facing Roy, "I'll make sure that little kid doesn't get caught."

Roy looks over at Hughes, each finally looking the other in the eye. Roy says sternly, "Weren't you listening? I said I was the one who stole the food."

Hughes gives a knowing smile, "Please. I'm a dad – I can tell when kids are lying. And he wasn't."

When Roy looks away again, Hughes adds, "Hey, don't worry. I'll make sure he and his brother stay safe…"

Roy does not answer.

Both men return to being quiet, Hughes leaning back in his chair, twiddling his thumbs. He chuckles to himself, "You know, I had a friend back in Munich who was really stubborn. Once he had his mind set on something, there was no stopping him. You kinda remind me of him."

Roy says nothing.

Hughes says, "Who knows – maybe when this is all over, you two can meet someday. I think you'd
get along."

Mustang chuckles sarcastically, "Hopefully he's not as ugly as you." He turns and looks at Hughes with a smirk.

Hughes sees this and smirks back, "This coming from the guy with a black eye."

They both laugh a little, and then slowly, return to staring silently at the wall, the rest of the shift passing in silence…

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:

Reviews:

Chapter End Notes

You know, I never actually say it in the story, but I’d like to think that the cook and his assistant are Sig and Mason. Just ‘cuz. We’re never gonna see them anyplace else in the story, so why not throw them in here?

Also, is anyone else amused that Roy, who currently has a messed-up eye, is shouting about honor, like Zuko? And that he’s shouting it at Kimblee who’s a “people person” (can read people easily), who is calm and reserved, but really is seething with pure rage and is a psychopath, like Azula? Because I just realized this…
The slimy black creature crawls forward, towering above, each step it taking swaying the beast from side to side, every heavy footstep leaving a black, gunky trail in its wake. It crawls its way out of the open door, its large claws curling around the beaten and broken metal frame.
It growls with an inhuman rumble, crying, "I must destroy it!"

Hughes pulls out his pistol and shoots the monster right in the head. It stops it trudging, staring at him momentarily through its glassy, red, lifeless eyes.

Hughes can feel every muscle in his body tense, and even though he is afraid, he is ready to strike again.

The monster keeps moving forward! And then it falls over, dead, the black slime bursting into the air and subsiding, revealing within the monster is not a monster at all, but a woman, a blonde woman, blood now oozing from her writhed, lifeless body, the red puddle around her head becoming a pool, its tide growing ever closer to Hughes's feet.

Hughes gasps and sits up, finding himself in bed. He holds his hand to his head, sighing. *That same dream...* he says to himself. But he knows it is not really a dream so much as it is a memory, twisted and distorted from years of silence.

What had happened in Munich all those years ago... it can never be spoken...

*Hughes sits at his small desk in his small room. On the one hand, he is lucky that he has a room to himself and doesn't have to share with another soldier. On the other hand, the room is so small he might as well be living in the broom cupboard.*

He scribbles on a piece of paper whatever comes to mind:

---

"Dear Gracia,

Thank you so much for the care package! You know I love your cookies so much – almost as much as I love you! Also, the Swiss Officer's knife you sent is really handy. Thanks. How's Elise doing? Is she behaving? Does she miss me? I miss her. I miss you both. Tell her to be a good girl while Daddy's gone..."

---

He sighs for a moment, thinking he should write about how he's doing, *But what can I possibly tell them?* he asks himself. Nothing that goes on in this prison camp is the kind of thing to write home about...

He taps his pencil on the desktop, blunting the lead with each *tap, tap, tap!* He remembers the words of the prisoner Roy: "If it's not in your nature – THEN WHY DO YOU DO IT?"

Hughes sighs once more, sitting back in his chair...

* 

A train pulls into the station, heaving to a stop, steam violently bursting forth from the metal beast as it comes to a rest.
The soldiers slide open the doors and begin piling the people out of the cars like cattle. "Come on! Move it, all of you!"

Hughes trots up with a clipboard in hand, "Sorry I'm late."

"Don't worry about it," the officer tells him, "These ones don't need to be catalogued."

"What?" Hughes asked, confused, "Why not?"

"They're not gonna be here that long," the officer says, a strange sort of self-satisfaction sounding from his voice. Before Hughes can inquire further, the officer turns his attention back to the soldiers at the cars, "All right! You know the drill! To Building Five with these ones!"

Hughes clutches to his clipboard, feeling a heat arise in his stomach as he frowns at the officer. No one here has said it, but they all know – they know why it is that these prisoners aren't being catalogued. Once they go into Building Five… they're never coming back out again.

Hughes turns away before he should catch one of the prisoners' eyes. That's the last thing he needs is to put a human face to the situation…

*

Roy sits quietly in his cell, the heat of the day beginning to wear on, he feeling as though he is trapped inside a brick oven. He misses the small window that was above his bunk in the barracks, the soft bit of coolness it provided during the long nights…

The single light bulb in the room continues its incessant humming, like a little fly clinging to his ear, endlessly buzzing. Roy covers his ears, unable to believe how such a relatively quiet thing can sound so loud in this silent space.

He looks down at the ground. He misses Rick and Leo's voices. For a short while there, it was almost like being back home with Ed and Al…

*Are they okay?* Roy worries. The fact that Trumbauer and Flagge are still here interrogating him means that, at the least, the bomb has not been found… But what of Ed and Al? Now that he's locked away in Solitary, there's no way for Roy to know what's going on outside of these walls…

His stomach grumbles intensely, and he clutches it. He chuckles softly. He misses, too, Rick's small gifts of stolen food – but he hopes, sincerely, that the boy has stopped his thieving as promised. There's no way he can protect Rick from inside this cell…

The door to the room opens and Roy looks up to see who it is. Not Trumbauer or Flagge, thank goodness, for their arrival usually entails a beating. No, it is just a young soldier, a private, carrying a small tray with a bowl of gruel on it.

The soldier comes into the room, not even very far, and sets the bowl down – on his side of the bars, away from Roy. And without a word, the soldier turns and leaves, closing the door behind him, the bowl of gruel left sitting in front of the door, miles from Roy's reach.

Roy sighs with a grumble. *At least it's cold,* he thinks to himself. Were it hot food, surely the smell would waft its way over and make him even more hungry.

*

"Are you serious?" the one soldier asks the other, trying not to laugh.
The two soldiers stand outside Building Five, quietly snickering between themselves. The other soldier responds, "Swear to God!"

The first soldier covers his mouth trying to hold it in, "I can't believe Lieutenant Kimblee dyes his hair! That's the kind of stuff my mom does!"

The other soldier takes off his helmet, running his fingers through his hair as he mockingly muses, "Oh yes! My beautiful golden hair is 100% natural! And my eyes are only so brown because I'm full of-

His friend is frantically motioning for him to shut up, and the soldier turns around to see why, yelping, "LIEUTENANT KIMBLEE! SIR!" The soldier salutes, slapping his helmet back onto his head.

Kimblee's glare looks sharp enough to cut the man clear across his throat: "No, please," Kimblee says with that slithering sound to his voice, "Continue."

The soldier shakes in his boots, "S-sir, I was just saying that you have beautiful eyes, I mean, not in that way, of course not! I would never insinuate-!"

"SILENCE!" Kimblee snaps, and the soldier curls his lips inwards, biting down on them. "Your job is to guard this building, not flap your jaws! Do you understand me?"

Both soldiers salute with a shout, "Sir, yes sir!"

"Good," the lieutenant growls with a deep voice, and he strides away, a dark cloud lingering about his presence.

Once the lieutenant is out of sight, the one soldier smacks the other in the arm. "You idiot! Why didn't you tell me he was right behind me?!"

"I tried!"

Kimblee prowls across the open campgrounds, relatively oblivious to everything happening around him. *Damn that Hughes! He bitterly thinks. Making a fool out of me! I'll show him! I'll put him on outhouse shoveling duty for the rest of his career!*

He stops walking and looks around.

Where the hell is he, anyway?

*

The door opens once more, and once more Roy looks up. Entering the room is Sergeant Hughes, carrying with him a small brown paper sack. Before he knows what's happening, Hughes accidentally kicks the bowl of gruel that was left in front of the door, the sad excuse for oatmeal slopping everywhere.

"What the?" Hughes looks down, seeing the mess. He scoots the bowl to the side with his boot, and then closes the door behind him. He walks towards the single chair in the room. "Can you believe it?" He says to Roy who still sits silently on the other side of the bars. "They put me on guard duty during the lunch hour. How boring is that? Oh well," He pulls up the chair and sits down near the cell, setting the paper sack on his lap. "It just means I'll have to eat lunch in here, I guess."
Roy narrows his eyes at the sergeant, Hughes unaware as he pulls a sliced sandwich out of the bag. He unwraps it, and as he does, half of the sandwich falls on the floor.

"Oh darn it!" Hughes says, looking at the food on the ground. "Now it's dirty. Oh well, I guess it's no good to me now..." Hughes looks away from it, closing his eyes as he prepares to eat the other half of sandwich still in his hand – but after a moment, he opens one eye, looking at Roy. When Roy does not move at all, Hughes looks him straight in the eye with smirk.

Roy smiles softly, understanding, and he moves forward and reaches through the bars, picking up the fallen half of the sandwich for himself. He brushes off the bread, it surprisingly not all that dirty, and Roy bites into it, happy for it.

Quietly, he and Hughes sit there, eating. Hughes's eyes wander around the room, not sure what to do to break the awkward silence. And then like a flash, he reaches into his pocket, pulling out his wallet, gleefully asking, "Have I told you about my daughter Elise?" and out rolls a long string of photos. "She's already four years old. Isn't she is just the most precious thing you've ever seen?!"

Roy blinks once or twice, confused by the sudden appearance of photos dangling in front of him. He swallows the bit of food in his mouth and turns to look at Hughes, "Can I ask just why it is you're trying to be so nice to me?"

Hughes purses his lips a little, folding up the string of pictures and tucking them back into his pocket. He turns forward in his chair, facing the wall across from him. "..." He moves to say something, and then falls silent again. "...When I saw you defending those boys from Kimblee... It got me thinking... If something happened that my family got put into prison like this... I would do everything in my power to protect my daughter..."

Hughes looks back over at Roy.

"I don't know whether you have children or not, but you've got that same flare – that same fatherly instinct. I guess," Hughes says, "I guess, I see a little of myself in you. We're not all that different."

Roy gives a little, "Hmph," and says, "If you were like me, you'd leave the military. That's what I did."

"I've already told you," Hughes frowns slightly, "It's more complicated than that."

"'Just following orders,' right?" Roy snips.

Hughes crosses his arms, "Well if you're going to simplify it, yes."

"And that's the life you want to lead?" Roy questions, "Always following someone else's orders?"

Hughes says sarcastically, "The life of a soldier. What can I say?"

"If you're serious about staying in the military," Roy tells him, "You need to get yourself to a position where you'll never have to follow unreasonable orders ever again."

Hughes gives a short laugh, "Become Fuhrer you mean. Yeah, that'd be nice, giving the orders for a change."

"Being a leader is not just about giving orders," Roy says, "It's about taking care of the people in your charge." He continues, "If it really bothers you so much to have to follow orders that don't sit right with your conscience, you could put yourself in a position of power that will keep other soldiers from having to go through what you're going through now."
Hughes again faces the wall, arms still crossed, "Pfft! Yeah, sure. You'd have to be able to prevent war in general to keep people out of the military life. But that's never gonna happen."

"So you're just going to keep doing what you're doing without a second thought?"

"Hey, we've all got our lot in life."

"And you're content to leave it at that?"

"I'm not happy about it, if that's what you're thinking. This isn't what I asked for."

"And you think this is what I asked for?"

Hughes whips back around to him, "Hey! I'm just trying to-!

But the handle of the door turns, and both of them look over, Roy quickly tossing the remaining bit of his sandwich through the bars and under the chair.

Entering the room are the large SS soldiers, Trumbauer and Flagge. Trumbauer cracks his knuckles, "Guess what time it is?"

Flagge looks at Hughes and asks, "What are you doing in here?"

Hughes stands, calmly folding his hands behind his back (doing his best to keep the paper sack from making noise), "Just keeping an eye on him, sirs. Will you be requiring anything?"

"Yeah," Trumbauer says with a grin, "When you see Kimblee, tell him thanks for the laughs!"

He and Flagge chortle, and Hughes grimaces at them, "Rriiight… Well, I'll be on my way then…"

Hughes walks past the men, leaving Roy in the room with them – but he stops at the door, hesitating as he looks back over his shoulder. And then he leaves.

Later that evening in the mess hall, Trumbauer and Flagge sit by themselves, off at a table against the wall, the two of them chatting and generally ignoring most of the other soldiers here.

"Uh-oh," Flagge says, sounding half-amused as he looks over Trumbauer's shoulder, "Heads up."

Trumbauer turns in his seat, leaning his arm over the back of his chair to see who's coming – and storming up to them is Lieutenant Kimblee.

Kimblee stops in front of them, slamming his hands down on their table, "Am I to understand that you interrogated Mustang without me?"

Trumbauer says, "Yeah, so?"

"So?" The intonation in Kimblee's voice rises slightly, "So Commander Amsel ORDERED you to let me sit in on these sessions!"

Trumbauer scoffs as he crosses his arms, "I think we can handle interrogating one prisoner without your help."

"Can you?" Kimblee whips his head towards Trumbauer. "Can you really? Just how much information have you pulled out of Mustang so far? We're nowhere closer to finding that weapon
than when we started!"

Flagge, always the calm one of the group, waves a hand, "Hey, calm down there, little man. You'll burst a blood vessel-" he tries to stop himself from snickering, but fails, "- Then you'll end up with red hair!"

Both he and Trumbauer break out laughing, Trumbauer adding, "Even worse! Red and yellow make orange! He'd look like a damn pumpkin! Ahahaha!"

CRACK!

Kimblee slams his fist into the wall, right next to Trumbauer's head, and for once since arriving here, both Trumbauer and Flagge look surprised, nay, even scared. Kimblee stands looking down at Trumbauer, the lieutenant's face half-shadowed, for the light is behind him, his shoulders trembling and his teeth bared, growling as he stares, without blinking, straight at the soldier.

After a moment, Kimblee finally pulls his hand back from the dent he's left in the wall, and swiftly he turns on heel and storms away as fast as he had stormed in.

*

Kimblee is in his room, pulling out a bottle of aspirin from his medicine chest. As he closes it, he notices something in the mirror, right on his hairline, a dark purplish spot. What is that? Is that a bruise? He really did burst a blood vessel.

Angry, he slams the medicine chest close, he hearing everything inside it shifting and falling over, he too mad to care about it right now. He downs an aspirin, thinking, 

*I've had it with those idiots! There's got to be a way to get them OUT of the way so I can get close enough to Mustang to interrogate him myself!…

...And after a moment of quiet thought, a snakely grin crawls its way up Kimblee's face…

*

Roy bites into the apple in his hand while at the same time clasping the thin burlap blanket closer to his shoulders. He looks up at Hughes and says, "You know, it's not hard to hide an apple core, but how am I going to explain having a blanket the next time someone comes in?"

Hughes shrugs his shoulders as he polishes his own apple on his sleeve, "I'll tell them truth – we can't interrogate a guy who froze to death," and he takes a bite of his apple.

Roy looks around the corners of his cell, "It is weird, this place. So hot during the day and so cold during the night."

"I'm not building a campfire, if that's what you want."

Roy manages a laugh, and Hughes smiles for it. Roy adds, "If you really want to be nice, you could always bust me out of here."

Hughes, with that same fatherly tone he's used before, says, "Hey, we've been over this. There's only so much I can do for you. Besides, if you got loose on my watch, imagine what that'd mean for me. Let me tell you, it wouldn't be pretty."

Roy smirks, "Fine, I'll knock you out before leaving – they can't blame you for not stopping me if
you're unconscious."

"Pfft," Hughes crosses his arms and leans back in his chair, "Yeah right. They'd still blame me. I've already messed up enough as it is, I don't need this on my record, too."

Roy tilts his head to the side, "Messed up how?"

Hughes looks over at him with a frown, saying, "I'm not telling you."

"Hey, you brought it up."

Hughes sits silently twiddling his fingers, clenching his fist once or twice, and Roy can see the gears ticking in Hughes's mind. After a moment, Hughes looks away, "Nah, it's stupid."

"What, did you shoot a kid in the line of duty or something?"

"Well, not a kid, but…"

Roy is quiet, unsure of how much further he should press.

Hughes, leaning his chair back so far that it teeters on its two back legs, stares down at the ground with his brow furrowed and finally says, "I shot one of our own. I mistook them for one of the enemy and popped 'em right in the head…"

"Friendly fire, you mean."

Hughes scoffs, "I hate that term. It makes it sound so nice."

"But it was an honest mistake?"

"Well… yeah…"

"Well then you've nothing to worry about," Roy says, looking away, relaxed almost, "The Lord knows."

Hughes grimaces slightly, "You going to get all religious on me now?"

"Not if that's not where you're wanting to go…"

Hughes turns forward in his chair, staring at the wall opposite of him.

And Roy wants to leave the man to his silent thoughts, and yet, Roy still breaks through the silence, "…It's just… there's a symbol I know; maybe you've seen it – A sword pointing to a heart."

Hughes shakes his head slightly, "No, I can't say that I have."

"The Sword Pointing to the Naked Heart," Roy explains, "Even though we can hide our hearts from Men, our hearts are bare before the All-Seeing Eye of God. And sooner or later, Justice will come to us all."

Hughes tightens his lips, looking a little miffed.

"If what you did was truly an accident," Roy says, "God knows."

Hughes finally sets his chair back down, all four legs on the ground. Justice, huh? he thinks to himself. Then Lord knows what's in store for me… for all of Germany, when this is all said and
The cricket chirps cut through the otherwise silent darkness, lulling all the world to sleep. The communications officer, sitting in front of the wireless telegraph, can feel himself falling to the spell of the night, his head dipping gently as he starts to nod off.

When suddenly, the telegraph comes to life. He sits up straight, startled by the sound, and immediately grabs a pencil and paper to write down the incoming message.

Halfway through, he stops, confused, staring at the machine – but continues writing quickly lest he miss any of the message.

When done, he barrels out of the office, message in hand.

Outside the Comm Office, Kimblee, in a large overcoat, stands quietly in the shadows, holding onto a rather ingenious little device he's concocted – a makeshift telegraph sender, it wired into the receiver of the office. A grin crawls its way up Kimblee's face, he holding in a delighted chuckle…

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Commander Amsel stirs from his sleep, sitting up, rubbing his eyes. "Yes? What?"

The communications officer enters, saluting, "Commander! This telegram just came in!"

"Let me see," Amsel commands as he holds out his hand to receive the telegraph. He leans over to his table lamp, turning on the light and looks over the telegram for a moment…

He flips it over to see if there's anything on the back and then flips back to the front, re-reading the message. "What is this?" the commander asks, perplexed.

The officer nervously responds, "That's what the message said, sir."

"But that can't be right…"

The message reads:

"Will be sending two SS officers. Trumbauer and Flagge. Will arrive by the end of the week."

Kimblee quietly crawls back through his window, closing it behind him. He throws off his overcoat, his pajamas already on underneath them, and with a quick clearing of his throat, proceeds to put on a sleepy routine.

He opens his door and pokes his head out into the hall, the communications officer standing there at the door to Amsel's room just across the way.

"What's going on?" Kimblee asks drowsily.
Amsel is standing, putting on a robe while still holding onto the telegram. The comm officer stands to the side to let the commander pass as he exits the room, passing off the paper to Kimblee. "This message from High Command just came in," Amsel tells him. "I can't make heads or tails of it."

Kimblee looks it over, and he, too, looks confused. "Will arrive by the end of the week?"

"I know!" Amsel says, "They're already here!"

"But sir," Kimblee says, his voice growing dark, "What if they're not?"

"What are you getting at, Lieutenant?"

Kimblee leans in closer to the commander, but doesn't lower his voice at all, clearly wanting the nearby soldier to hear – "Haven't you noticed that the two SS soldiers we've been entertaining have been acting very strangely?"

"How so?" Amsel inquires.

"They don't carry themselves like SS, not like you, sir," Kimblee tacks on the old charm, but continues with an otherwise concerned air, "What if these two men claiming to be Trumbauer and Flagge are actually spies?"

"Spies?!" Amsel cries, his voice carrying down the hall, "In my camp?!"

"It's a very real possibility we have to deal with, sir," Kimblee continues, "And it makes sense. Why else do you think they won't let me sit in on their interrogation sessions? They don't want us to hear! They plan to take the information they learn to our enemies!"

Amsel clenches his fist, trying to keep his voice low, "Maybe we're jumping to conclusions here. We can't be entirely sure about this…"

"But we can't take any risks either, sir," Kimblee tells him, his eyes resolute.

"What should we do?" Amsel asks.

And Kimblee smiles.

~

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

"Get up!" a soldier screams from the other side of the door.

On the bottom bunk, Flagge sits up, "The hell is all that noise?"

Trumbauer, from the top bunk, shouts, "Hey! Keep it down out there!"

The door bursts open, soldiers entering the room with their guns pointed at the two men.

"Hey! What is this?!" Trumbauer shouts.

Amsel enters the room, and Flagge looks at the commander and demands, "What's going on?!"

"Gentlemen," Amsel says as he stares down at Flagge, "For the time being, I'm remanding you to Solitary Confinement."
"What?! What in the hell for?! You can't do this!"

"Yes, I can," Amsel says with a strong voice, "I outrank you. Now get up! Both of you!"

Several of the other soldiers in the barracks are poking their heads out of their rooms, curious at to what all the commotion is about.

Trumbauer and Flagge are begrudgingly being escorted out of their rooms, Amsel saying to their backs, "I'm sorry, but I'll explain everything later…"

Trumbauer shouts, "High Command is going to hear about this, do you hear me?!"

Outside the barracks, the soldiers escort the two SS down the front steps, shuffling them across the yard. Flagge looks out the corner of his eye and sees someone. He turns his attention fully to that direction, and sees Kimblee standing quietly off the side. Kimblee smiles a devious little smile and waves at him. Flagge grits his teeth, knowing that this is Kimblee's doing.

And both Trumbauer and Flagge are taken into the Solitary building, each man shoved into a separate cell, away from one another.

Amsel sighs, running his fingers through his thinning hair, "We'll worry about questioning them in the morning. I'm too tired for this right now."

"Sir," Kimblee says as he approaches the commander, "I hate to be a bother…"

"What now, Lieutenant?" the commander says, a little exasperated.

"Seeing as we can't trust any intel that these two have gathered from Mustang, perhaps you'd allow me to-"

"Will you drop the Mustang case already?" The commander snaps a little. "If these two claiming to be Trumbauer and Flagge really are spies, we've got bigger problems than that Mustang prisoner! I'm going to need your help tracking down records to find out if these guys are who they say they are!"

Kimblee furrows his brow, holding in a sigh while at the same time trying to lay on his usual charm, "Of course, sir. The good of the camp comes first…"

*&

"You're kidding me," Roy says, unable to believe what he's hearing. "Is that what all that noise was last night?"

Hughes, sitting in the chair backwards not unlike a schoolboy, says to Roy, "Yeah! It was actually pretty hilarious seeing those two carted out of their room. I've never really liked them, not since they first showed up."

Roy says, "You and me both."

"Well, understandably, you like them less than me," Hughes says, and then adds, "You know, my wife Gracia knows this great home remedy for taking care of bruises. She's had to use it once or twice when Elise has gotten herself a skinned knee. I can't remember what she uses, but I bet it'd help clear up your face a little."

Roy gingerly touches his still healing face, "Something about an egg and a chocolate bar, right?"
"A what?" Hughes tilts his head to the side, bemused, "How's that supposed to help?"

Roy shrugs, "I heard it from one of the other prisoners."

"Oh…"

"So your daughter," Roy asks, "She's the rough-and-tumble kind of kid?"

Hughes reaches into his pocket, once more producing his wallet full of photos, "Nah, not really, but she is at that age where she tries to climb up everything from stairs to trees." He hands the photos to Roy who takes them willingly and looks them over.

Roy smiles, "She's cute."

Hughes couldn't look more proud, "She's got her mother's face and my eyes! She's such a cutie!"

"And you said her name is Elise?"

Hughes nods and he stands up, turning the chair to sit in it normally, "Yeah – like that Beethoven song, Für Elise. When Gracia and I were dating, I gave her a little music box that plays that song. She loved it so much, she decided that's what we should call her."

Roy smiles, handing back the photos, "That's quite romantic."

Hughes folds up the photos, putting them back in his pocket. "What about you? Anyone back home to return to when this is all over?"

Roy looks down at the ground, "Not a wife, no. But a family, yes. My Brothers."

"Older? Younger?"

"Younger." Roy looks away, a little dejected, "With any luck, they haven't been arrested already."

Hughes chuckles, trying to keep the situation light, "Are they as big of troublemakers as you are?"

Roy does smile at this, "Oh, far worse! Especially the older one! He lives to get in trouble!"

Both he and Hughes laugh, Hughes adding, "I knew a kid like that. He was a nice guy, but he was never one to listen to reason. He's actually how Gracia and I ended up getting together. He convinced me to stop dragging my feet and just ask her out."

"It's nice having someone like that, isn't it?" Roy chimes, "Someone just a little bit braver than us to push us in the right direction."

Hughes nods, putting his hands behind his head as he leans back in his chair, looking at the ceiling, "Yeah. That Edward. He was a character."

Roy feels his heart stop. Quietly he asks, "What did you say?"

"Hmm?" Hughes glances over. "Oh. The guy I knew back in Munich – his name was Edward. Why?"

Roy narrows his eyes at the sergeant, "You've been talking with Trumbauer and Flagge, haven't you?"

Hughes sits up, turning fully towards Roy, "What are you on about?"
"You've just been buddying up to me to try to pull info out of me."

"Huh?" Hughes tilts his head to the side, thoroughly confused. "I'm not sure I follow…"

"Get out," Roy demands. "Don't you dare talk to me."

"Geez, what the hell," Hughes says, perplexed.

"GET OUT!"

"Fine!" Hughes rises from his chair, "I'm only leaving 'cause I'm afraid you'll start throwing things at me – which, by the way, I ought to take back that blanket from you."

Roy rumples up the burlap as he stands and throws it through the bars at the soldier. "Take it!"

Hughes scoffs, "Crazy. No wonder they locked you up…” He doesn't take the blanket, but instead leaves it on the floor, and leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

Roy goes to the wall and gives it a swift kick, his blood pumping. "That bastard!" he says aloud to himself. "Trying to make me think he's my friend! I should have known better!"

Hughes is walking down the hall, towards the exit, grumbling to himself, "What a nutjob… Wait…” He stops walking. "He got angry when he heard the name Edward…” Hughes looks over his shoulder. "…I wonder…”

~

Flagge sits on the floor with his back to the wall, starting to nod off. He yawns and stretches, "Damn, this place is boring! I wish the commander would just hurry up and tell us what we're doing in here…"

The door opens.

"Oh, finally! Hey Commander, can you-"

But it is not the commander who enters.

Flagge raises an eyebrow, "Oh. What do you want?"

Hughes closes the door behind him and quietly, calmly, he approaches the bars. "Tell me – you came to this camp to interrogate the prisoner Roy Mustang, correct?"

"Yeah, so?"

Hughes crouches down to get to Flagge's level: "So what exactly have you been asking him about?"

Flagge turns his head away, nonchalantly picking his ear with his pinkie finger, "Why do you need to know?"

Hughes is quiet for a moment, and then responds, "Lieutenant Kimblee – he's usually really calm, but for some reason, this Mustang has got him all bent out of shape. I thought, maybe, you could enlighten me."

Flagge lets out an indignant scoff as he turns to look at the side wall, "That Kimblee! He's the reason we're locked in here! Just 'cause we laughed at him!" The soldier points at the sergeant,
"And you better watch your ass! You're probably next on his shit-list after the way you showed him up like that!"

"Hey," Hughes defends himself, "You guys were the only ones there, and I certainly didn't tell the rest of the camp about him bleaching his hair."

Flagge crosses his arms, rather childishly, looking away from Hughes.

"Still," Hughes says, holding onto the prison bars as he looks through at Flagge, "Neither of us like Kimblee. And do you really want him to get the collar on this one?"

Flagge glances out of the corner of his eyes at Hughes.

Hughes says, "Tell me what it is you're trying to find out from Mustang. And why you're still in here, maybe I can find out the info you need – BEFORE Kimblee."

Flagge mulls this over in his mind for a moment, and then turns forward to fully face the sergeant, "Fine. Why not. If it means putting Kimblee in his place – We're trying to find a guy named Edward Elric."

Hughes gasps a little, but quickly calms himself down, continuing to listen.

"He and this Mustang guy have been living together for years. And a few years back, someone matching Elric's description showed up at one of our secret bases and stole a weapon from the Party."

"And you think Mustang knows where the weapon is?"

"If not the weapon, then definitely Elric," Flagge nods. "But this Mustang guy is tough. We haven't been able to get a peep out of him, say for screams of pain. What makes you think he'll talk for you?"

Hughes looks down at the ground.

~

The door to the room opens once more, and Roy, still on his feet, looks over to see the sergeant entering again.

"I thought I told you to stay out!" Roy shouts.

Hughes roughly closes the door behind him, locking it. Roy is starting to feel a little nervous, the sergeant striding up to the bars.

Hughes puts both his hands up, clinging to the bars as he stares through at Roy. He says lowly, "How much did Edward tell you?"

Roy, closer to the wall than the bars, silently glares back at the tall man. Roy tries not to betray his own confusion but can't help but furrow his brows.

Hughes asks again, "About Munich – how much did Edward tell you?"

"What are you talking about?" Roy questions.

Hughes leans in closer to the bars, saying heatedly though lowly, "I'm going to tell you something that I've never told anyone – and you have to SWEAR on your LIFE that you will not repeat this to
another soul!"

Roy calms down a little, his curiosity overtaking his cautiousness.

Hughes is quiet for a moment, and then starts: "Back in Munich… It was the night of the Beer Hall Putsch – when the uprising failed, I returned back to base to find Professor Haushofer, one of the men in charge…"

Roy tries to remain calm. He could have easily learned that name from someone in the Party…

"What I saw there… I'm not even sure what it was… on the ceiling there was this strange, glowing, golden… thing… It looked like a pool of light… And from out of it came an airplane, a whole airplane! It came crashing through, and there were these long dark somethings, I don't even know what they were, clinging onto the ship, and it just crashed, right there in front of us!"

Roy's heart is thumping in his chest. This sounds like…

"That person that I shot – the 'Friendly Fire' as it were – I didn't know it was a person. It came out of the airplane, a monster – I know it sounds crazy, but it was really a monster! It was big and black and slimy, and I didn't know what it was… but… It tried to attack a girl, so… I shot it… It turned out that the head of the Thule Society, Dr. Eckhart, was inside that thing. I don't know if it was some new sciencey suit or something but… Let's just say the Thule Society wasn't happy about me killing their leader…"

Roy finally speaks, "You worked for the Thule Society?"

"Well, not for them," Hughes responds, "But with them. I was one of the original brownshirts." He chuckles cynically, "Most of the originals – hell, they're officers already. Me – I'm lucky to be alive – mostly because I was able to convince Commander Hess that what happened with Eckhart was an accident. And while he was able to forgive that… Well… I let, what were in his opinion, two of our biggest assets get away. In my opinion, they were people, not assets…"

Roy quietly listens, waiting for Hughes to start speaking again as he has fallen silent, his hands sliding down the bars as his shoulders slump, he looking at the floor.

"…You ask why it is that I do this job if it's not in my nature… It's because I have to. I'm as much of a slave to the system as you are. I wanted to leave Germany years ago, but the Party won't let me. I know too much." Hughes looks back up at Roy, "Just like you. You know about Ed and Al. You know about the Gate, don't you?"

Roy feels his heart leap into his throat. Not once, not once, have Trumbauer and Flagge, or anyone else here, questioned him about the Gate! The focus has always been on the bomb, or on Ed.

"Where did you hear this story?!" Roy demands. "Very few people know that story, and you heard it from someone!"

"I didn't hear it from anyone!" Hughes cries, "I was there! I was there when Ed came out of the airplane! I was there when his brother Al popped out of a suit of armor and said that…" And then suddenly Hughes looks like he's been slapped across the face. "…No, that's impossible…"

"What's impossible?" Roy asks distrustfully.

"I've read your record – you were a captain, not a general…"

Roy feels ready to slap Hughes across the face, "Tell me what you're talking about!"
Hughes says quietly, more to himself in a state of disbelief than to Roy, "Al said… that a General Mustang was on the other side of the Gate… getting ready to destroy it…"

And from his throat and into his feet Roy feels his heart drop. There's no WAY he can know that! he thinks. They've never told anyone but me about life on the other side…

Hughes eyes rise to the ceiling as he thinks aloud, "And I sure didn't see you come out of that airplane. Two Mustangs? One on either side of the Gate. Boy, that doesn't sound fun…"

"How do you know this?" Roy asks, trying so hard to keep his voice from shaking. "How do you know all of this?"

Hughes looks back at Roy. And he can see Roy's hand trembling ever so slightly. "…I should ask you how you know this. It's because you really do know Ed and Al don't you?"

Roy says nothing, though sweat is collecting on his brow.

Hughes looks over his shoulder at the door momentarily. Certain no one is coming, he turns back to Roy and once more gently leans in towards the bars. He asks lowly, almost in a panicked whisper, "Are they safe? Are they okay?"

"I… I don't know."

"The Party, the Thule Society – are they trying to reopen that weird Gate?"

"I don't know that either," Roy says, "I know they tried it a few years back, but so far, I haven't heard a word about it."

"Then why are they so concerned about finding Ed and Al? What use could they possibly be to them?"

"Like you don't know-." 

"No, I don't know!" Hughes covers his mouth, realizing how loud his voice is getting. He checks the door again and then continues, lower, "You know what, it doesn't matter! We've got to get you out of here!"

"Now you're pulling my chain-" 

"I'm serious!"

"What about that whole, 'It'll end badly for me' routine you were putting on earlier?"

"With any luck, we can pin this on Kimblee somehow. All I know is, I've seen that Gate – I've seen the weird things that come out from the other side of it. And I don't want any monsters coming after my family. And if you can help Ed and Al prevent that, then by God, I'm gonna do what I can to help!"

Roy is silent for a moment, still trying to process all of this, still trying to weigh it. "…You're serious," he asks, still unsure if he can trust this man.

"Yes, I'm serious," Hughes says, now pacing the room, staring at the floor with a hand to his chin. "We can't do it now, it's the middle of the day. We'd have to wait until after nightfall, after everybody's already gone to bed…"

Roy has now approached the bars and watches the half-crazed sergeant pace back and forth. "…
Not that I don't appreciate your help," Roy says, "... It's just... I still don't have any real reason to trust you. How do I not know this is a trap?"

Hughes waves him off, still staring at the ground as he paces, "You're already in a cell – why would we need to trap you?"

"Because this has Kimblee written all over it. This is some weird underhanded trick of his to get me to tell you people where Ed and Al are!"

"Shut up, you idiot. You want the whole world hearing you?"

Roy grumbles angrily.

Hughes keeps pacing back and forth, muttering aloud to himself, "No... no... maybe... No, that's a terrible idea. Augh," he rubs his temples, mumbling, "Keep moving forward, keep moving forward..."

"What did you say?" Roy asks quietly in disbelief.

Hughes stops momentarily and looks over at Roy, "Oh. 'Keep moving forward' – it's a saying my wife uses." And then Hughes breaks out laughing, "That, now that I think about it, she got that from Edward! He used to be a tenant of hers in case he never told you."

Finally, miraculously, Roy feels his blood pressure coming down, his muscles relaxing a little, "As long as you've got two good legs-..."

Hughes adds, "Then you can stand up and carry yourself-..."

Roy finishes, "and you can keep on walking."

Together, both men say, "You can keep moving forward..."

Hughes smiles at Roy, "So how 'bout it? You ready to get the hell out of here?"

* *

As quietly as he can, Hughes makes his way across the open campgrounds, avoiding the searchlights of the towers, and yet still trying to carrying himself as if on official business, for, should someone stop him, he is a soldier after all – he need only say he's running an errand for the commander...

Under his arm he carries a small parcel, wrapped in cloth so that it makes no noise as he shuffles across the grounds.

He looks around to make sure no one is looking his way. And then Hughes takes the keyring from his belt and opens the door into the Solitary Confinement building, gently closing it behind him to make sure the door does not even make the tiniest sound.

Once inside, Hughes quickly makes his way to Roy's cell, once more doing what he can to silently open and close the door behind him. He dashes up to the bars, slipping the parcel through. "Here!" Hughes says, "Put these on, quick! I managed to snag some civilian clothes from the pile before they got burned. Here's to hoping they fit." Hughes keeps talking as Roy starts to take off his prison uniform, "Put those on first. I also put in one of my uniforms, so it's probably a little too big, but that's good, 'cause it'll leave room for the clothes underneath."
Roy starts buttoning up the civilian shirt, "How much time do we have?"

Hughes is unlocking the cell, "We've got four different searchlights, and it takes about five minutes for one searchlight to cross the whole of the camp – that's about a spotlight passing over us every minute, give or take."

He opens the cell and Roy steps out, bringing the soldier's uniform with him and setting half of it on the chair while starting to put the other half on.

Hughes continues, "We can move in short bursts from one building to the next. Then, when we get to the north guard tower, we both climb up. I'll knock out the guard and take control of the light. After that, you've got a clear shot to climb down over the other side of the fence. I'll keep the spotlight to the inside of the camp so you've got the cover of darkness to get away."

Roy finishes buttoning up the soldier's uniform over the civilian clothing. "How long can you keep the light on the campgrounds before they get suspicious?"

Hughes passes to Roy a loaded weapon belt: pistol, bullets, and knife included on it, "If I move slowly enough, maybe a whole four minutes. After that, the light would be back around and facing towards the woods – but again, I'll keep it moving slow. And if you see the light coming towards you, just duck and cover. I won't call you out of course, but we've got to hope that none of the other guards look in your direction."

"And after that, then what?" Roy asks as he fastens the belt to his waist.

"After that, just keep running north. You'll hit the river in about half a kilometer. If we've timed this right, you should make it there just in time to ditch the uniform and catch the ferry. There's a ticket in the inside pocket there, so don't lose it."

Roy briefly reaches to the inside pocket of his coat to check and make sure it's there.

"And Mustang," Hughes says to him. Roy looks up. Hughes says, "When you see Ed, tell him to stay out of trouble, huh?"

Roy smiles and nods.

* *

Hughes gently peers out through the crack in the door. And then like a shot, he darts out into the darkness, Roy following at his heels. They scurry across the open grounds, trying not to kick up a cloud of dust, and they quickly halt behind one of the barracks, pressing their backs up against the wall.

A searchlight passes over their heads, the barrack casting a long dark shadow over them. As the light fades, once more Hughes and Roy move, running towards the next building.

Roy again puts his back to the wall, but Hughes has turned the corner, and realizing Roy is not with him, Hughes reaches around the corner and quickly grabs Roy by the collar, bringing him around, right before a searchlight hits the spot where Roy had just been!

Both men stand silently, waiting for the light to pass, Roy having barely made it around the corner in time…

As the light once more fades, Hughes nods his head towards the north tower, and once more, silently they move.
Kimblee walks towards the Solitary building, happily grinning. *Finally!* He thinks to himself. *A little alone time with dear old Mustang. That weapon is as good as-*

And then Kimblee stops in his tracks, gasping aloud. The front door is open. Why?!

He runs into the building, all the way to Mustang's cell. He whips open the door and…

"No…." Kimblee can't believe his eyes. The cell is empty! "NO!"

Like a banshee shriek, klaxons go off, blazing through the silence of the night.

"Shit!" Hughes exclaims.

"Now what?" Roy asks.

"Come on! This way!"

Both of them take off running, tearing across the yard towards the north tower – but the searchlights now move much faster, randomly, no pattern about their movements any longer.

"Halt!" they hear a soldier shout, and Hughes and Roy each dart in different directions. Hughes stops behind a building, back to the wall, when he realizes that Roy is no longer with him!

*Damn it!* Hughes thinks, *Where did he go?!*

Roy slams the door behind him – there's no lock on the inside! He quickly looks around for something, *anything* to barricade the door with – when he feels his heart stop dead in its tracks.

*What is this place?* he asks himself as he looks around, trembling, unable to process what he's seeing. *This is...This is Building Five...* The stench. Suddenly the putrid stench he had smelled before made sense. The smell of rotting meat...

He feels weak at the knees, and he can feel something rising up from his stomach. He tries to hold it, but he can't, turning away to a corner.

In a cold sweat, Roy backs up towards the door, fumbling to find the handle in the darkness. There's no handle in here either!

He grasps vainly at the door frame, trying to find the littlest gap to get his fingernails into to try to pry open the door.

Like a miracle, the door does opens – but not because of his own efforts, but because Hughes is on the other side, pushing it open. Hughes reaches in, grabbing Roy by the wrist, "Come on!"

And they run out of the building.

Kimblee runs from building to building, shouting orders, "Search every inch, inside and out! Look *under* the barracks too! He's not going to get away!"

Something out of the corner of his eye catches Kimblee's attention: Two soldiers, running towards the north corner of the camp. Kimblee narrows his eyes, curious. *Where are they going?*
And he takes off running.

Roy and Hughes get to the final building closest the north fence, Roy looking up at the tall tower. "Now what?!"

Hughes looks around, "There's no time to climb it now. Your best bet is through!"

"You've got wire-cutters or something?!"

"That belt I gave you," Hughes says as he pulls out his pistol, "There's a Swiss Officer's knife in there! It might do the trick! I'll keep you covered!"

They both try to dart out from behind the building, but with not but a foot out, machinegun fire goes off, and they both duck back behind the building. Gritting his teeth, Hughes takes aim at the west guard tower, its light upon them, and he fires a few rounds at the searchlight, shattering it, the light going dark.

Taking his chance, Roy tears across the space from the building to the fence, and pulling the Swiss Officer's knife from his belt, he pulls out every little tool on the knife until he finds what he can only presume are the wire-cutters. They're so small, he's not sure if they'll even work! But with little time to think, he grabs hold of the wire fencing, and clasps the teeth of the little tool onto them.

He hears voices growing closer, more gunshots going off, and another searchlight going dark. Roy pulls back forcefully on the tough wire, and lo and behold it snaps! But that's just one wire! There are still so many more!

Working as quick as he can, Roy continues popping the wires, one after another, trying to make a hole just big enough to get through. He's almost there!

– when he feels a pistol right next to his head. Roy slowly turns his head to see who's there – Kimblee has snuck up on him. Even though the klaxons are still blazing, the siren sound drops from Roy's ears as he stares at the officer beside him.

With that same snakeely slither coming from his voice, that sound that Roy has heard since day one with this man, Kimblee says, "Don't worry. I won't kill you. After all, I still need to find out where that weapon is." Kimblee grins from ear to ear, a strange crazed glint to his eye, "But you don't need you legs to talk. How 'bout a bullet right to the knee? I'll let you bleed out for a while, then the doctors will have to amputate it. You won't be running then!"

Kimblee aims the gun down at Roy's legs, but before he can fire, Hughes has snuck up on Kimblee and grabs him from behind, slipping his arms underneath Kimblee's and then locking his hands behind Kimblee's neck, leaving Kimblee's arms flailing in the air.

"Let me go!"

"Run, you idiot!" Hughes shouts at Roy, and wasting no more time, Roy pops one last wire, and slips through the fence. His clothes get caught, not but for a second, for Roy breaks free and takes off, scrambling through the trees and underbrush.

Kimblee continues to struggle against Hughes's grasp, "You traitor!" he screams at the top of his lungs. Kimblee bends his knees, using Hughes's own weight against him, and topples the sergeant over his shoulder. Kimblee makes a break for the fence, but Hughes grabs him by his ankle, the lieutenant falling into the dirt, his chin smacking against the hard dirt ground.
Hughes flips the lieutenant over, and, sitting on top of Kimblee, Hughes starts punching him right in the face, the lieutenant trying to do what he can to deflect the attack, but being smaller than the sergeant is having quite a time of it.

Much to Kimblee's relief, more guards show up, grabbing Hughes and lifting him to his feet, they also having to put up quite a struggle against this raging bull. One of the guards butts his rifle into Hughes gut, winding him as he bends in half, and then the soldier hits Hughes across the face with the butt of his rifle, slowing him down just enough for the other soldiers to get him to his knees.

Kimblee sits up, wiping his bleeding lip, spitting a bit of blood out of his mouth. "You treacherous snake!" He growls. "I should have expected as much from you!"

Kimblee rises to his feet, coming over to Hughes who is still on his knees, and kicks him right in the face, breaking the sergeant's glasses, glass shards cutting into his face and eye. Kimblee barks, "You make me sick!"

Hughes, a bit of blood trickling down his face, just smirks right back up at the lieutenant, "The feeling's mutual."

"Shut up! On his feet!"

The guards lift Hughes up, and Kimblee commands,

"Take him behind the shed!" As they drag Hughes away, Kimblee then turns to a free soldier and orders, "Round up a search party on the double! The prisoner is getting away!"

"Yes sir!" And the soldier runs off.

In the woods, Roy runs as fast as his legs will carry him, he heaving heavy breaths, hoping his lungs will hold out. He pushes tree branches out of his way, the leaves and pine needles brushing and scraping up against him, leaving sap and pollen and little whatnots about him.

He dare not look back. He fears that there are soldiers right behind him, right on his heels – but he dare not turn around to see. How many seconds would that waste? Seconds may be all that stand between him and freedom.

*I can make it!* Roy tells himself! *I can make it!* He prays to God that the ferry does not have a wireless radio on board – otherwise the camp may signal them and tell them to hold the boat.

And then what? If that's the case, then what will he do?

*I'll keep running!* Roy tells himself. *I'll keep moving forward! I'LL KEEP MOVING FORWARD!*

Hughes stands with his back to the fence and his hands cuffed behind his back. He stares unwaveringly at the line of soldiers standing before him, they with the muzzles of their rifles trained upon him.

Kimblee stands off to the side, his normally calm, charming air replaced with a stone cold demeanor, his eyes burning with hatred as they sear through Hughes. Kimblee lifts his hand, "On my mark!"
Hughes lifts his eyes to the sky. So, *this is how I go out, huh?* He wryly laughs inwardly. *At least my conscience is clean.* He closes his eyes, calmly smiling. *Bring on your sword. My heart is bare…*

Kimblee drops his hand, "FIRE!"

~

POW!

The sound thunders through the clear night air, and Roy stops running momentarily, turning around towards it. It sounds so far away, and yet still so close…

He hesitates for a moment… and then he turns back towards the river, running into the night.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:

**Reviews:**

![Chapter Thirteen: The Strong One](image)

**QueenCarl1129** chapter 12, Aug 23, 2014

... Damn these onions. Why are they at my desk?

**Gwntan12** chapter 12, Jun 21

Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo... Hughes died... AGAIN! WHY?!

**lexicomonster** chapter 12, Aug 17

"desperately wishes the Doctor was real so I can go back in time to this au and stop Hughes from dying"
And now, if you don’t mind me, I’ll be over in the corner grossly sobbing…
"Do you see it, Brother?" Al asks.

He and Ed stand at the edge of the treeline, looking down the hill at the town below. "Yeah," Ed
responds, shading his eyes from the sun overhead, "It looks like there's a camp just on the other side of this town."

"Do you think that's where Roy is?" Al ponders as Ed retreats back into the shade of the trees.

Ed sets down the bag he carries, a simple potato sack, and pulls out a book, an atlas given to him by Nina, "Let's hope so..." He opens up the book and looks at a map. Al comes over and looks over Ed's shoulder, watching as Ed traces a trail with his finger along the paper, "The fastest way to get there would be to just cut straight through town."

Al glances from the book to his brother, "Don't you think that's a little dangerous, Ed?"

Ed grumbles a little, more at himself than anything, "I know it'd be safer to go around, but we've taken so long getting here. Roy's counting on us. The sooner we get there, the better."

Al mulls this over in his mind for a moment, and then smiles, "Going through town's not that bad, I guess. We can use the chance to resupply. We are starting to run low."

Ed closes the book, putting it back in his bag, "Yeah, and with a third person joining us, we'll definitely need more."

Al stands back at the edge of the trees, looking out into the distance, his smile fading. "...Do you think he's all right?"

Ed joins him, both brothers looking out to the far away camp, "...I know he is..."

*

The Berlin office buzzes, secretaries at their typewriters pounding away at the keys, men drawing up plans tacked to cork boards, choreographed chaos working its way through the halls as people rush up and down to get their work done.

One worker in particular is straightening his tie, doing his best not to sweat as he approaches the door. He takes in a deep breath, and then calmly knocks.

"Come in," a voice from the other side calls.

The worker enters, carrying with him a small paper. "Lead Commander Himmler," the worker says, "This telegraph just came in for you."

Himmler, sitting behind his desk, calmly lays out his palm face up, and the worker places the paper in it. The commander adjusts his glasses, reading over the message. "Hmm," he chimes, "Spies posing as SS? Tsk, tsk. We can't have that, now can we?"

The worker stands at full attention, ready for action at a moment's notice, "What should you like done, sir?"

Himmler calmly folds up the telegraph and slips it into the inside pocket of his shirt, "Prepare a convoy. A score of men should do," he says as he rises from his desk and strolls casually, yet regally over to the window. "I will be going to this camp to see these spies for myself."

"Sir?"

Himmler glares out through the window looking over the city skyline, "My Schutzstaffel is an elite brigade. I will not tolerate anyone inferior who claims to be a part of it and dare besmirch its name."
If there really are spies in my ranks, I want to see that they are taken care of – properly."

The worker gives a slight bow, "Of course, sir. I'll prepare an escort right away."

"You are dismissed."

And the worker quietly exits, leaving his commander staring imperiously out the window.

* *

The soldiers stand at the base of the north guard tower, tirelessly wrapping new lengths of wire from one pole to the next, repairing the damage that has been done.

Some prisoners, yards away, watch as the soldiers work. "What do you think happened?" One prisoner asks the other.

"I dunno," the other responds. "From the sound of all those sirens last night, I'm guessing somebody broke out."

The one prisoner smiles, "That'd be great. Whoever it is can tell the rest of the world what's happening here."

The other prisoner sighs cynically, "Yeah, if they don't find him and shoot him first."

The one prisoner slumps his shoulders, but both of their thoughts are cut short as a nearby guard shouts, "Hey! Get back to work!"

Nearby this scene, Kimblee walks past, unnoticed. Normally he carries himself with such pride, and yet today something is off. He wrings his hands together, staring down at the ground, aimlessly wandering from one end of the camp to the other.

_I let him get away… I let him get away!_ Kimblee thinks, his eyes trembling, _My one shot at finding that secret weapon – GONE, just like that!_

He grits his teeth.

_That damn Hughes! That traitor! This is his fault!_

Kimblee glances from side to side, eyeing his fellow soldiers who are all busy running the prisoners.

_How many?_ Kimblee questions. _How many of them are just like him? How many men here are traitors? How many are plotting behind my back?_

Without even thinking, Kimblee tugs down on the sides of his hat, as if trying to hide his head from sight. _They're all laughing at me! I know they are! Hughes told them all and now they all know!_

Kimblee passes by the Comm Office right as the communications officer steps out, "Oh, Lieutenant. Good morn-.

"Not now!" Kimblee screams at him, and keeps walking.

The comm officer is slightly shaken, "Jeez! What's his problem?"
"Lord, shoot me…" Commander Amsel says as he looks at the telegraph that the comm officer has brought him. "Lead Commander Himmler couldn't have picked a worse time to show up. A top prisoner having escaped? How am I supposed to explain that one?"

The comm officer asks, "When do you think he'll arrive, sir?"

"Depending on whether he's left already?" Amsel says as he steeples his fingers, facing the side wall but looking at his subordinate out of the corner of his eye, "By this afternoon at the latest. We need to get this place cleaned up and quick." He turns his chair and fully faces the comm officer, "See to it that we get some proper accommodations set up."

The officer salutes, "Yes sir."

*  

Ed and Al sit inside a small café, enjoying the bit of warm food they can afford. Ed shovels a spoonful of potatoes into his mouth, watching his brother work, Al sitting with his bag on his lap and a needle and thread in hand.

"Your food's going to get cold," Ed tells him.

Al holds up his finished work, "Ta-da! Check it out!"

"So you sewed on straps, so what?"

Al slips his arms through the straps, "So now we can carry these on our backs. It'll keep our hands free."

Ed smirks, waving a free hand, "Yeah – I guess it will come in handy."

Al laughs, "Oh Ed… Huh?" Al notices something outside the window. "What's all that?"

Passing by are several large trucks, all in a row.

Ed quickly reaches over, grabbing Al by the shoulder, "Get down!"

They both duck down out of sight. Ed cautiously pokes his head just ever so slightly above the window sill as he peers outside.

"What is it, Ed?" Al asks.

"Those are military trucks," Ed tells him. "It looks like a convoy of some kind."

"Do you think they're headed for the camp?"

"I'm sure of it." Then he gasps, "Crap! They're headed this way!"

"What now?" Al asks, a little panicked.

Ed rises to his feet, dragging his brother with him, "Quick! Out the back door!"

Al grabs up Ed's bag and together they sprint through the small café, passing their waitress. "Hey!" she scorns, "You can't go that way!"

Al quickly pulls some money out of his pocket and shoves it into her hand, "Here's our bill! Sorry, gotta go!" And the boys take off.
"Hey! Ugh! Whatever…." The waitress sighs, returning to her duties.

Ed and Al make it into the back alley, the kitchen door closing behind them. They each heave a sigh.

"Great!" Ed says exasperated, "Moving around town is going to be a lot harder now, what with all these soldiers crawling around."

"Why do you think they're here?" Al wonders.

"Who knows," Ed responds. "Reinforcements probably. If the government is arresting as many people as Mr. Tucker and Jesska say they are, then the camps are probably full to bursting."

Together, cautiously, the boys round the corner, heading back out towards the main street. "Do you think we'll find Nina's mother?" Al asks.

Ed pokes his head out from the alleyway, keeping a close eye on the soldiers parked outside the café. "That all depends," Ed responds to his brother's question, "On whether or not they've been separating the camps by sexes or not." He hums in his throat, irritated. "We can't exit this way. Too many soldiers." He looks over his shoulder at Alphonse, "You ready to do some climbing?"

Al is a little surprised, "What, are going to hop from roof to roof?"

Ed gives a smarmy grin, "Nah, we only need to get to another alley that has an outlet. If we're lucky, there's one just on the other side of this building."

Al can feel himself going a little blue in the face, "But still – what if we fall off the roof?"

Ed passes his brother as he re-enters the alleyway, patting Al on the shoulder, "Ah, don't be such a baby."

"I'm not being a baby!"

*

The guard atop the west tower scans the area below him, the vast expanse of trees stretching out and touching the edges of the nearby town.

Then something catches his ear – a shuffling sound – digging? But where is it coming from?

The guard gingerly leans over the side railing of his post and looks down to the ground. It's not on the outside of the fence. He makes his way to the other side and looks to the interior of the camp – Indeed, there is a soldier down there with a shovel in his hand, scooping dirt from a pile and refilling a hole.

"You there!" the guard shouts down, "What are you doing?"

The soldier looks up the tall tower, and the guard recognizes him.

"Lieutenant Kimblee, sir! I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was you," he apologizes. "But… May I ask, sir, what you're doing?"

Kimblee points off to his right, "This tower is weak, just like the north tower! All of the towers are weak points! We have to bulk up our defenses!"

"...By digging holes, sir?"
"Mind your own business!" The lieutenant bellows. "Get back to watching the perimeter!"

The guard salutes uneasily, "Uh, yes sir…." And he backs away, returning his attention to the forest beyond.

Kimblee shovels on the last bit of dirt from the pile back into the hole and pats it down for good measure. Then he reaches down and picks up a small crate that sits next to him, and taking both it and the shovel, he starts to walk towards the next tower.

---

Rick and Leo are at the bottom of the trench with several other prisoners, each man shoveling out dirt to deepen the hole. The shovel Rick has is far too big for him – it would be better suited to Leo's height. But oddly enough, Leo is digging with his hands.

"Hey!" The nearby guard questions, "Why are you digging with your hands? Where's your shovel?"

Rick holds up the tool in his hands, "Right here."

The guard looks at the little boy, "Then where's your shovel?"

"Lieutenant Kimblee took my shovel, sir."

"What?" The guard grumbles, perplexed. "That's stupid! Why would…" but before he can finish his sentence, he sees the lieutenant walking along the fenceline, a shovel and a crate in his hands. "Uh…er…" He shouts back down at the boys, "Keep digging! I'll go find another shovel…"

---

Commander Amsel exits the soldiers' quarters followed by a secretary with a pencil and notepad in his hand, he scribbling down the orders his commander gives.

"Tell the cook to hold off on making that ham until the evening. We can skip the meat for lunch if it means saving some for the commander and his entourage."

"Yessir."

"And send someone into town to bring in a few good kegs of beer. The stuff we've got here stinks."

"Yessir."

"And for the love of God, did we ever get that vent installed on top of Building Five? The smell is building up something awful!"

"No sir; I'll double-check on the progress of that right away sir."

Amsel sighs, "And where the hell is Kimblee?" Amsel looks around and then says, "Ah! Speak of the Devil!" Passing by a few yards away is Kimblee and the commander calls to him, "Lieutenant!"

Kimblee flinches sharply, looking over, startled, but, realizing who it is, straightens himself up and walks towards the commander.

"Geeze, son," Amsel says to him, "You look like you're about ready to jump out of your skin."

"Forgive me, commander," Kimblee says, brushing some dirt off of his uniform, "Long night…"
"Well get yourself cleaned up; we're expecting company."

"Sir?"

Amsel looks at Kimblee with the utmost seriousness, "Lead Commander Himmler himself is coming here."

Kimblee gasps, his eyes going wide.

Amsel continues, "He's heard about the Trumbauer and Flagge situation, and he's said he intends to personally oversee the investigation."

Kimblee's heart is pounding in his ears, "Himmler? Here?! But Mustang!"

Amsel sets a hand on Kimblee's shoulder, "Don't worry – I'll take full responsibility for it. It is my camp after all. You did everything in your power, Lieutenant."

Kimblee looks down at the ground, "Thank you, sir."

"And as for that sergeant," Commander Amsel gives a, "Humph! You made the right call there. I'd have done the same thing myself. We've no room for his kind."

"Of course, sir…"

"Now then, as my second-in-command, I'm relying on you to help me get this camp into shape on the double. Everything must be perfect for the commander's arrival."

"Yes sir!" Kimblee bursts, not unlike a child, "Of course sir! I'll have everything ready immediately!"

"Very good," Amsel says, "Hop to it!"

"Yes sir!" And Kimblee speeds off.

*  

People cluster around the town square, trying not to stare, but their curiosity still piqued by the gathering of soldiers.

A few of the trucks begin moving forward, leaving the others behind in the town square. And as they roll out, one more truck comes rolling in from the opposite direction, passing them by.

It comes to a stop in front of the beer hall, and a couple of soldiers hop out of the back of the vehicle, making their way up the steps of the hall.

Sitting on top of a flat roof, Ed and Al look down at the scene below. Ed leans back on his hand, one knee up and his other arm resting on top of that knee. Al lays flat on his stomach, his arms crossed and his chin laying on top of his forearms. He sighs.

"We should have stayed in the woods and gone around town…"

Ed says, "If I'd have known we'd have wasted this much time up here, we would have."

Al looks over at Ed, "Well we can't stay up here forever."

"Yeah, I know," Ed says as he crosses his legs, resting both arms on either knee. "But we can't
storm the camp in broad daylight, either. We need to wait until nightfall."

Al again sighs and then rolls over onto his back, he looking back over at Ed. "We should get close to the camp before nightfall, though. We'll need light to see by so we can scout the place."

"Yeah, good thinking," Ed says, finally rising to his feet. "We'll need to know where to get in and out of." He nudges Al with his foot, "You gonna lay there all day, or what?"

Al sits up, "How do we plan to get Roy out of there, Ed? It's not like we can just walk out the front door with him."

Ed crosses his arms, thinking. "...I guess it all really depends on the layout of the camp. I figure stealth is probably our best bet – quickly and quietly."

"And what if we get caught, or," Al's voice catches in his throat momentarily, he looking down at the ground, "Worse? Or what if we're already too late?"

"Hey," Ed says assuredly, "Don't think like that. This isn't our first time breaking-and-entering a place filled with soldiers. We'll do just fine."

Al still stares at the ground hesitantly, and Ed turns his attention out into the distance to the guard towers that rise above the tops of the pine trees.

*  

The soldiers all stand in line on the parade ground, every man as straight as an arrow as the lieutenant strolls up and down their ranks, inspecting every single one of them from head to toe.

He points at one, "Polish those boots, soldier!"

"Yes sir!"

Kimblee points at another, "Straighten your helmet!"

"Yes, sir!"

The lieutenant keeps walking, eyeing each soldier like hawk.

"Achoo!"

The lieutenant turns on the man, "Did you say something?!"

The soldier shies away, "Uh, I, just sneezed, sir….

"Well keep it to yourself!" And Kimblee skulks along down the line, leaving the soldier befuddled.

And it goes on and on like this for the next several hours – anyone in Kimblee's path is sure to get his head bitten off.

In the kitchens, Kimblee holds up a plate, shoving it in the assistant cook's face. "Do you see this?! What is this?!"

The assistant holds up his hands defensively, "Uh, a spot, sir?"

Kimblee hollers, "Do you think Lead Commander Himmler wants to eat on dirty dishes?!" He winds his arm back and throws the plate against the wall.
The head cook furrows his brow, shouting, "Hey! Calm down!"

Kimblee points at him threateningly, "Don't you talk back to me! I'll have you discharged!" And he turns and storms out of the kitchens, shouting, "Clean that up!"

The head cook fumes, "What the heck has gotten into him?"

The assistant cook is shaking a little, whimpering, "I thought Kitchen Patrol was supposed to be easy!"

Crossing the grounds, Kimblee stops in front of one of the building projects: "Why isn't this barrack finished yet?!" he cries angrily.

The prisoners, tools in hand, stop working momentarily to look at the lieutenant. One of the guards keeping watch over them turns to Lieutenant Kimblee and says, "Sir, we only started it a few days ago. We're actually ahead of schedule-"

The guard yelps as Kimblee grabs him by the collar, "That's no excuse! I want this done before Lead Commander Himmler shows up!"

The guard quakes before him, "S-sir! That's impossible!"

Kimblee's voice grows quiet, he saying darkly, "You're working slow on purpose, aren't you?"

"S-sir?"

"You're trying to sabotage me. You're trying to make me look bad in front of the commander!"

"N-no, sir!"

Kimblee roughly shoves the soldier aside, roaring at the prisoners, "Get back to work, you filth!"

They all quickly turn away from him, returning to their duties, doing what they can to not catch his eye. Lucky for them, he doesn't stay long, but instead storms away.

_Idiots, all of them!_ Kimblee thinks heatedly. _They don't know how to run a camp! That's how prisoners get away! Because they're all idiots!_

He stops, breathing heavily as he stares at the wire fence.

_These fences are weak. They're ALL weak! They need to be reinforced, ALL OF THEM!_

Kimblee breaks out into a run and heads for the tool shed. He rips open the doors and goes inside, grabbing a shovel, not even closing the door behind him as he leaves. He dashes over to the next building, the munitions depot, and hops up the stairs, pulling his keys from his belt and unlocking the door.

* *

The trucks rumble up the long country road, pine trees passing them on either side. Himmler sits quietly, looking out the window. He then says to the driver, "It's magnificent, isn't it?"

"What is, sir?" the driver asks.

"The view. Look at it: all of these beautiful trees – pristine, unadulterated, pure."
The driver nonchalantly nods, "Yes, it is quite beautiful, sir."

"Did you know I started off as an agronomist?"

The driver shakes his head, continuing polite conversation but not really paying attention, "No, sir, I did not."

"It's amazing what one can learn from plants," the commander continues on matter-of-factly. "Plants are very stationary, though their seeds travel far and wide. Cross-breeding still happens, but not to the extent that we see in humans."

"Is that so?" the driver asks drearily.

"It's much easier in plants than it is in people to try to reproduce a good-old strain of crop, to breed out all of the inferior qualities and find that original, perfect form. It's the very foundation of genetics, you know. A monk, Gregor Mendel was his name, was trying to grow peas that were only green and not yellow."

The driver inwardly sighs and then asks, "Really?"

"Indeed," Himmler says smugly, "Little did that monk know that he was paving the way for our ambitious work. I suspect that within a hundred years time, the entire population of Germany will be of pure Teuton stock. We'll have bred out all the yellow peas and will be left only with the green."

"...That's... a beautiful metaphor, sir..."

The truck, followed by the handful of others, approaches the gates of the camp. The vehicle slows to a halt, the guards at the gate checking who's inside, and then they open the gates, allowing the trucks to enter the grounds.

The secretary rushes into Amsel's office, "Commander Amsel! He's here!"

Amsel quickly gets up from his desk, donning his cap and straightening his tie as he exits.

Outside, Amsel, escorted by his secretary, comes down the steps of the soldiers' barracks to see the line of trucks that have parked on the parade grounds. Stepping out of one of the vehicles is a thin man with thinning hair and a thinning moustache, with large round glasses perched upon his nose.

Amsel walks up to the man and salutes him, "Lead Commander Himmler, it's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

Himmler gives him a courteous nod.

Amsel puts his hands at his side, "Commander Amsel, at your service."

With his nose slightly turned in the air, Himmler surveys the grounds, turning his gaze from one end of the camp to the other. "I must say, you have quite a lot of SA soldiers here in your camp. How odd."

"Sir?" Amsel asks.

Himmler says, "All of the other camps are solely run by SS. And you, an SS man yourself – why would you allow so many SA to be here? They're nothing more than a sports and training division these days."
Amsel says, rather a little uncertainly, "Well, I mean, it's just a prison camp. I figure it's easy training for them."

"I see," Himmler says with a bit of dissatisfaction in his voice, "So you trust your fate to inferior men?"

Amsel shakes his head, "No, sir, I just mean – well, the prisoners are even more inferior than them; it's not a difficult task for SA to handle. Better to give them an easy job than have them screw up on the front lines."

Himmler shrugs, "I suppose there is some logic in that."

Amsel motions his hand out towards the rest of the camp, "Well, Lead Commander, the suspects are right this way, in Solitary-"

"Just a moment," Himmler says as he puts up a hand for silence. "The suspects can wait. Since I'm already here in Emsland, I think it a good idea to give all of the camps a thorough inspection. After all, I'm the one who answers directly to the Fuhrer about these camps – I'd like to make sure that everything is running accordingly."

Amsel nods slightly, "Of course, sir. Please, after you."

Himmler walks past Amsel, and even though he is taller than the Lead Commander, Amsel still feels intimidated by his presence. He finally breathes after Himmler has passed by, and Amsel turns to his secretary, giving him a nod, and the secretary pulls out his notepad and pencil, following after both officers.

Himmler, flanked on either side by one of his own soldiers, strolls across the campgrounds, eyeing everything from the water barrel to the trenches to the barracks.

The guard in charge of the latest building project glances over just in time to see who's coming, and he suddenly jolts to life, shouting, almost fearfully, at the prisoners, "It's Commander Himmler! Quick! Faster!"

The prisoners pick up the pace, hammering nails and sawing boards. Himmler comes to a halt in front of this project, the guard doing his best to keep his hand from trembling as he salutes.

Himmler looks the building up and down and then says to Amsel without turning towards him, "Why are all these prisoners mixed?"

"Sir?" Amsel questions.

Himmler flicks a hand at them, like swatting away a bug, "You've got black triangles working with blue triangles. The whole Reich is based upon order. Everything has a place, and here you are getting the most basic of things scrambled."

Amsel wrings his hands, "I'm sorry, sir. We'll fix it right away." He turns to the prisoners and shouts, "All right! Blue triangles! Get out of here! You're being reassigned!"

"That's more like it," Himmler says, strolling away.

Amsel sighs.

The guard asks, "But, sir, where are we reassigning them to?"
"Oh I don't know," Amsel groans, lifting his cap to briefly run his fingers through his hair, "Just put them someplace where they're not going to get in trouble..." And he trots off to catch up to the lead commander.

As Amsel does catch up to him, Himmler asks very quietly, "And how is Project Atlantis coming along?"

Amsel gulps though he tries not to show it, "Swimmingly, sir."

Himmler laughs and this relaxes Amsel a bit, "A sense of humor! I do enjoy that. I'd love to see our progress."

"Of course, sir. It's right this way, in Building Five."

Amsel leads Himmler and his bodyguards over to a large brick building. He pulls his keyring from his belt and unlocks the door, but before opening it, he looks over his shoulder and says, "You might want to hold your breath, though..."

Himmler looks at his guards and says, "Wait here."

"Yes sir!" they respond.

Amsel pushes open the door and cautiously enters, he himself pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, covering his mouth and nose. Himmler enters the building next, Amsel saying to him, "Leave the door open – no handle on the inside. We don't want the prisoners getting out after all."

The secretary is curious, wanting to look in through the open door, but the guards glare down at him with stone eyes, and he nervously backs away.

Inside Building Five, Himmler gazes at all that is around him, a grotesque sense of glee filling him. "Glorious. It's beautiful!"

Amsel coughs, the stench still bleeding through the cloth in his hand, but for some reason, Himmler seems unfazed by it all.

He stands with his hands spread, taking it all in. "How many?"

"So far?" Amsel responds, "About 500."

"EXACT numbers, man!"

Amsel stutters, fumbling through his memory, "Uhbd, uh... I think 513 was the last count."

"Good, good!" Himmler beams. "Excellent! Only 264 more to go! Are we expecting any more new arrivals?"

"Not until tomorrow, sir. But we do have some people already here who are next on the list."

"Good," Himmler commands, "Clear these ones out and get the next ones in. I'd love to see the machine at work."

Amsel feels his stomach jump and he resists a visible shudder, "Uh... Yes, sir..."

Kimblee pats down another pile of dirt, cackling to himself, "They won't get away. Not like
Mustang!

He tilts the small crate at his feet, looking into it.

"Empty. Need another box…"

Absently, he turns away from the fence, dragging his shovel behind him. He looks up and sees a small group of soldiers standing outside Building Five. Who are they? I don't recognize those men… He feels a bolt of lightning run through him, and he clasps tightly to his shovel. Intruders! They're spies, aren't they! They're invading Building Five! And the commander's secretary! Even he's in on it!

Kimblee swings the shovel over his head and charges towards the building! However, he stops yards away, dropping his shovel – for stepping out of the building is the Lead Commander!

The ringing clang of metal catches everyone's attention, and all of them - Himmler, Amsel, his secretary, and the bodyguards - all look over to see Kimblee standing there, his legs tense but his arms limp.

As Amsel locks the door to the building, he notices Kimblee and questions, "Lieutenant? Are you all right?"

Kimblee, slowly, numbly, walks towards them, the guards rightly moving forward to deter him. Kimblee stares at Himmler and says, "It's you. It's really you!"

Himmler lifts his chin, leaning slightly towards Amsel, "Just who is this?"

Amsel answers, "Oh, this is my second-in-command, Lieutenant Zolf Kimblee, sir. You'll forgive him; he's just very excited to meet you."

"Sir!" Kimblee cries, "Please! Let me join the Schutzstaffel."

Himmler furrows his brow at him, "Beg pardon?"

"Please, sir!" Kimblee tries to push forward, but the bodyguards hold him back. "My blood is pure! I'm a true German! I believe in the cause! I'll die for the cause!"

Himmler sneers as he says, "Commander Amsel – you need to get your subordinates under control. This sort of boorish behavior is exactly why I don't approve of SA working in the camps."

"I don't approve either, sir!" Kimblee exclaims, "That's why I want to be SS! I'm better than all these brownshirts!"

"Lieutenant!" Amsel hisses, moving in and grabbing Kimblee by the shoulders. He says lowly with concern, "Calm yourself."

Kimblee doesn't even hear his commander's voice, for he can't stop staring at the head of the SS. "I swear! I'll serve you loyally! I'll serve to the death!"

Himmler begins to walk past, saying, "While I approve of loyal soldiers, there is no room in the elite for someone like you." Himmler stares Kimblee straight in the eyes, "One drop of imperfect blood is enough to ruin a stock for generations to come. Why would I want someone with brown eyes to mingle with my blue-eyed soldiers?"

And Himmler starts to walk away. Kimblee is speechless, not but for a moment though, as he tries
to run after the lead commander, Amsel holding him back by his wrist. "But sir!" Kimblee cries, "You don't have blue eyes!"

Himmler stops in his tracks. The soldiers silently gasp, and Amsel looks like he's about to have a heart attack.

Kimblee continues to cry, "You're the head of the SS! And you don't have blue eyes! I don't have blue eyes either! I'm just like you, sir!"

Himmler turns around, fiercely glaring at the lieutenant, Kimblee entirely unaware of the anger emanating from the lead commander.

"And-and you have dark hair! You're not blond! Neither am I!" He throws off his hat, pointing to the top of his head, showing off his dark roots, "See? See?! I'm just like you!"

Commander Amsel steps in front of Kimblee, pushing him backwards while looking over his shoulder: "Please, Commander Himmler, forgive him! He's had a tough week! He's malnourished; he doesn't know what he's saying!"

"I'm just like you, sir!" Kimblee continues to shout, "Let me join!"

"Enough!" Himmler orders, and finally, Kimblee falls silent, his eyes trembling. Himmler strides up to the lieutenant, the small bespectacled man's face growing red as he clenches his jaw. "How dare you compare me to a worthless piece of trash such as yourself. You are a brownshirt, and you will always be a brownshirt. And nothing you say will change that!"

Himmler turns on his heel and storms away.

"Commander Amsel!" he calls.

Amsel still holds Kimblee by his shoulders, and he looks him in the eyes, saying quietly, "Son, what in the hell has gotten into you?"

Kimblee's voice shakes slightly, "I… I just…"

"You need to get some rest. Go on – you are relieved of your duties for the day."

"But-!"

"That's an order, Lieutenant."

And Amsel walks away, following after Himmler, leaving Kimblee standing by himself, alone.

* *

"Hurry up!" the driver says as he leans out the window, "We've got to get back to camp!"

The truck still sits outside the beer hall in town, the rest of the convoy already firing up their engines. A skinny young soldier rolls a barrel of beer towards the back of the truck, and he says, "I could use a hand here!"

A fellow soldier in the back of the truck, a portly, slightly older fellow, chuckles with a smile, "Why? It looks like you've got it under control."

The younger soldier sets the barrel upright, "I'm not lifting this all by myself."
"All right, quit your whining," the portly soldier hops out of the truck and helps his friend lift the keg. With a heave, they set it inside, and then climb in after it. The portly soldier wipes his brow, "There, see? That wasn't hard."

The younger soldier chuckles, "Says the guy sweating."

In the front, another soldier climbs in the cabin, the driver asking him, "We got the beer, or what?"

"Yup," the soldier nods. "Ready to go."

The driver fires up his truck as the rest of the trucks pass, he waiting for a clear opening to pull the vehicle out, and then he taps on the gas and follows in behind the convoy.

A few minutes pass and the town starts to grow smaller in the distance, eventually becoming obscured behind the trees. The sun is falling now, starting to paint the woods in an orange hue.

The young soldier pokes one of the barrels in front of him, "Who bets we don't see any of this beer? All the officers are going to get to drink it and we won't see a drop."

The portly soldier knocks a barrel on its top, "They don't know how many kegs we picked up. Who says we can't slip a drink?"

"And get in trouble?!" The younger one sputters.

The fat one grins, "They won't know."

"They'll smell it on us!"

"Ah, don't be such a wimp."

"Well, maybe just a little drink-..."

A few more minutes pass, and both men have already downed a cup's worth of alcohol a piece.

The fat one sighs, content, "That's what I'm talking about! Better than that bilge water they been giving us at camp."

"Yeah," the younger one smiles, "Tell me about it-..."

The back of the truck bounces up and down momentarily. Both soldiers look out the back, wondering if maybe they'd rolled over a bump – but instead are greeted by two young blond men, civilians! One of the two smiles with a wide smarmy grin, "Don't mind us, fellas! Just hopping in for a drink!"

"Hey!" The fat one shouts, "What are you-WHOA!" The next thing he knows, he's being grabbed by the shirt collar. He gets punched in the face and knocked out, literally knocked right out of the truck!

"Hey!" The younger one cries, "Stop!" And he too gets punched, tumbling out the back and landing flat on the road.

Al pokes his head out of the back of the truck, looking at the unconscious soldiers. "Ed!" he says, "Why'd you throw them out? We could have stolen their uniforms."

"Too late for that now," Ed says, rotating his arm to loosen his shoulder. "And keep it down; we don't want the driver to hear us."
The sun has set on the camp, and finally, the second half of Himmler's convoy rolls up to the gates. As the trucks roll to a stop on the parade grounds, Ed and Al quickly slip out the back, running for the nearest building they can find.

The driver of the truck heads to the back to help the other soldiers cart out the kegs, but upon arriving, he pokes his head in, curious. He looks back out to the fellow soldier that was riding up front with him and asks, "Hey, where are Bader and Hass? I thought you said they were in here?"

The other soldier also pokes his head in the back, "Huh. I could have sworn they were." He grins and gently whacks his friend in the arm, "Who bets they're still back at the beer hall getting wasted?"

The driver groans, "Well I'm not taking the fall for their stupidity. If that's the case, that's on them for not getting in when I said so…"

Ed and Al crouch quietly in the shadow of the building, waiting for the soldiers to clear the grounds. As the soldiers roll the barrels away to the mess hall, Al whispers, "Where should we look first?"

Ed looks around from side to side, "I don't see any prisoners around here. They may already be locked up in their cells or wherever it is they're being kept…"

Al also looks around to make sure no one is coming, "So all we've got to do is figure out which buildings have prisoners and which buildings have soldiers."

"Yeah," Ed says, "And stay out of the latter of the two."

And one of the latter of those two is of course the Solitary Confinement building, whereupon Himmler has finally come to see the supposed spies. As he and Amsel walk towards the building, Himmler asks, "Remind me – this is the camp where Roy Mustang of the Freemasons is being held, correct?"

Amsel clears his throat, "Uh, about that, sir. Roy Mustang escaped, last night."

Himmler stops walking, pinching the bridge of his nose as he slowly takes in a breath. He lets out a long sigh. "I see. This only further increases my disdain for your staff." He removes his hand out from under his glasses. "I want a full overhaul of this place. No more SA men. Full SS staff, as soon as possible."

Amsel nods humbly, "Of course, sir. I'll make the proper arrangements."

"Still," Himmler says as he resumes walking towards the building, "I suppose I shouldn't put it past a prisoner for trying to escape. It is in the nature of German blood to resist, after all." He gives a wry chuckle, "It only proves how worthy of an adversary he is. Unlike the rest of these non-Germans filling the camp – the gypsies, the Jews, the other miscellaneous rabble – Mustang has proven his German blood in resisting."

Amsel is busy unlocking the door, not sure how to respond. He's afraid no matter what he says, it may be the wrong thing to say. Still, he manages, "Well, he was a strong-headed one, that one."

"Ah," Himmler chimes, "But he is not the Strong One," he says as he enters the building.
"The Strong One, sir?" Amsel asks as he enters after the lead commander.

Himmler goes off into a voice not unlike a poet narrating for a crowded theatre – " 'The Strong One from above ends the faction. He settles everything with fair decisions. Whatever he ordains shall live forever.' "

"Uh, that's very lovely, sir. Did you write that yourself?"

"It is an ancient Aryan prophecy," Himmler says, glancing briefly over his shoulder as he and Amsel walk down the long, dark hallway. "It tells of how arises a man, like a phoenix from the ashes of dismay, to lead the Master Race into the new age of prosperity!" He looks over at Amsel with a knowing glint in his eye, "One need only look at the Fuhrer to see the fiery passion within him. Truly, he is a gift from the Gods."

Amsel this time does not clear his throat, lest he sound rude, "Of course, sir." Amsel thinks to himself, *I wonder if Commander Himmler is always like this…*

Finally they reach the end of the hall. Amsel unlocks the door on the left.

"After you, sir."

"Thank you," and Himmler steps inside.

Asleep on the floor is Trumbauer, snoring away. Himmler looks down at him, a little disdainfully. He pulls a pen from his front pocket and proceeds to tap noisily on the bars, the sudden sound stirring Trumbauer awake.

"Whatwhowha?!" Trumbauer looks up and sees who it is, and immediately, he hops to his feet, saluting, "Lead Commander Himmler, sir! Whoo," And he stumbles backwards against the wall, slowly sliding down.

"Stood up too fast, did we?" Himmler asks.

Trumbauer props himself back up, slowly standing himself back upright, "No, sir, just… Stunned, in your presence."

"Charmed," Himmler replies dryly. "What is your name, soldier?"

He salutes, "Trumbauer, sir!"

Hand to chin, Himmler nods, "Yes, yes, you do look familiar. And your comrade is named?"

"Flagge, sir."

"And you were sent here to?"

"Interrogate the prisoner Roy Mustang, sir!"

"In order to?"

"Find out where the uranium bomb is, sir!"

Amsel asks, "The what now?"

Himmler waves a hand, "You will forget everything you've heard here."
Amsel once more nods humbly, "Of course, sir."

Himmler continues, "And what have you learned from him?"

Trumbauer is quiet for a minute, the edge of his mouth twitching momentarily. And then he says, "Forgive me, sir. That Mustang is a tough one to crack."

"So you haven't learned anything, then?"

"Oh I've learned something alright!" Trumbauer's demeanor changes from looking respectfully at Himmler to looking rather impertinently at Amsel, "There's a rat in your ranks!"

Amsel nods, "He's been dealt with."

"Good! I never liked that Kimblee anyway!"

"Wait, Kimblee?" Amsel queries. "What are you talking about?"

"He's the reason we got thrown in here!"

Amsel steams, "Do you have any proof to these allegations?"

"Well, no. But I know he was behind this!"

Himmler, rather calmly, insists, "That's quite enough."

Trumbauer calms down, though audibly he grumbles in his throat.

Himmler says with a shrewd look on his face, "Now then, I'm going to ask you a few more questions – things only a real SS soldier would know. We'll see whether you are who you say you are…"

* *

Ed and Al quietly sneak across the camp, the chirping of crickets covering the sounds of their footsteps as they walk lightly across the grounds.

They stop with their backs flat against a wall, a searchlight passing over their heads momentarily. And then the light begins to fade as it continues along its way.

Al sees something and taps his brother. Then he points – Across from them is another barrack, but more importantly there is a small window there, high up. Ed looks from side to side to make sure the coast is clear. And then he nods and he and Al dash over there, once more laying their backs flat against the wall to hide themselves in the shadows.

* *

Rick lays on the cot that once belonged to Roy. He heaves a sad sigh, missing his friend. The boy rolls over onto his stomach, looking out the window to the night sky. I wonder if he's all right…

When suddenly a face pops up in the window!

"Ahh!" Rick moves away, startled.

The man at the window puts a finger to his mouth, going, "Shh!" Then he asks, "Hey, are you a prisoner?"
"Uh," Rick stutters for a moment, "Yeah…"

Rick hears another voice below the window: "Ed! Hold still! You're hurting my shoulders!"

The man at the window tells Rick, "All right, don't worry, just stay there!" And he disappears from sight.

Rick scurries to the end of the bed, peeking out the window to see where the mysterious stranger has disappeared to.

Prisoners begin to stir in their cots, as from outside the front door they hear a scuffling, followed by a loud, **THUD!**

"Huh?"

"What was that?" they ask.

Outside, Ed and Al set the soldier they've knocked out onto the ground, and they push him underneath the barrack.

"All right, come on!" Ed whispers to his brother, Al pulling the keys from the soldier's belt.

Inside the barracks, everyone is looking at the door as they hear the rattle of keys and the turning of tumblers. The door swings open and in come two men, closing the door behind them.

"Who's that?" a prisoner asks.

"They're not guards," another adds.

Ricks runs up to them, Leo following. Ed and Al are both surprised at the sight of them, recognizing these faces from their home world – but like so many times before, the boys remind themselves that these people are not the same people.

Rick looks up at Ed and asks, "Who are you guys?"

Ed looks around at everyone in the room, and he says, "We're looking for a guy named Roy Mustang."

Murmuring arises from the room, Rick's face lighting up: "You're friends of Mister Mustang's?!"

Al smiles back, "So he is here!"

Leo looks back at Al grimly, "Let's hope so. The last time we saw him, they shoved him Solitary Confinement. For all we know, they may have taken him into Building Five since then."

Rick whips around to his brother, "Don't say a thing like that! I know Mister Mustang is all right!"

"Building Five-," Ed questions, "What's that?"

Leo looks down at the ground, "It's a bad place. People go in there, and they never come back out. And then the morning after people go in there, the trenches that we've spent the week digging are suddenly filled back in. And we all know why…"

Rick grabs Alphonse by the arm, looking up at him with pleading eyes, "Please! You have to get us out of here!"
Al feels the strings of his heart being tugged at as this little boy stares up at him with tears in his eyes. Al looks over at his brother, and Ed, realizing what Al is thinking, says scornfully, "Al…"

"We can't leave them in here, Ed!" Al says with that same determination in his eyes that Edward has seen before. "Look around you! These people need our help!"

"I understand that! But it's not exactly stealth if we break out a hundred people all at once!"

The murmuring arises from the crowd once more, Rick now pleading with Ed, "Please! Please don't leave us in here!"

Al says, "It might actually be better than stealth!"

Ed crosses his arms, "How so?"

"In all the confusion, we can slip out unnoticed! There's no way the guards can stop all of us!"

"Yeah!" some in the crowd add.

Ed waves his hands, whispering harshly, "All right! Keep it down! You want the guards to hear?"

He looks down at Leo. "Just how many people are in this camp anyway?"

"I don't know," Leo tells him, "A lot. There's easily 80 people in this barrack alone – and there are six barracks in total."

Ed nods, "So nearly 500 people then. That's an awful lot."

"Exactly!" Al says excitedly, "And I'm sure there aren't 500 guards!"

Rick shakes his head, also excited, "There's not! There's maybe forty, fifty at most!"

"All right, fine!" Ed says, coming in closer to the group, everyone listening intently, "Here's what we do: Al, you've got the keys. You go from barrack to barrack unlocking the doors. I'll head for Solitary and bust out Roy. We'll reconvene here and when we're ready, we all burst out at once."

Al asks, "How will people in the other barracks know?"

"Tell them to wait for a signal – make something up. A whistle, maybe." Ed turns his attention to the prisoners, "Everyone stay in here until you hear the signal. If you leave before the signal is given, you're putting everyone in danger, do you understand?"

A sea of nodding heads greets him.

Al looks at Leo and Rick and he says, "I'm going to need a couple of runners to help me spread the word." He smiles resolutely at them, "Think you boys can handle it?"

They both nod, a fire in their eyes.

"All right," Ed says, "Quietly now…"

They exit the building, quietly making their way down the steps. Ed turns to the boys and whispers, asking, "Which way is Solitary?"

Leo points to the southern end of the camp: "That way, past the flag pole, the first brick building on the left."
Ed gives a thumbs up, "Thanks." He looks at Al, "Be safe."

Al nods, "You too."

And Ed speeds off into the darkness, Al and the boys taking off in the opposite direction.

* *

Kimblee is in his room, pacing back and forth like a caged animal, his hands on the side of his head as he stares down at the floor.

*He doesn't think I can do it anymore,* Kimblee worries. *Commander Amsel doesn't think I can keep it together! This is all Trumbauer and Flagge's fault! They came into this camp and stole my power right out from under me! The commander trusts THEM more than he trust me!*

He kicks his nightstand, everything on top of it shaking and falling over.

"He can't do this to me! HE CAN'T DO THIS TO ME! I'll show him! I'LL SHOW ALL OF THEM! I'm the only one looking out for the good of this camp!"

Kimblee rips open his door and takes off down the hallway.

* *

Ed runs past the flag pole, and quickly he has to dart behind the brick building, for the door is opening. Quietly, he slides his way to the edge of the wall, peering around the corner.

Exiting the building are two men, a tall chubby one, and a short thin one. The tall one asks, "Well sir?"

The thin responds, with a bored air, "They do both appear to be SS; but it is better to err on the safe side. We'll release them when their records arrive from Berlin."

"Of course, sir," the tall one says as he locks the door.

*Damn it! Edward thinks to himself. Now I've got to get those keys off him…*

"Still, it is a shame," The thin one says as they both begin to walk away, "That Mustang got away…"

Ed gasps. *He got away?*

"You have no idea how long it took us to track him down in the first place."

"Again, I apologize, sir…"

Ed's heart is leaping. *Roy got out! He got free! But just as quickly as his spirits lift do they plummet again. I've got to get back to Al! We've got to get out of here before it's too late!*

Ed starts to dash off, but immediately runs into someone! He backs up, cursing inwardly, for he knows the jig is up! The soldier stares back at Ed, and for a moment, Ed thinks he recognizes the face before him – but he doesn't know this blond man.

One scream from the soldier's mouth and Ed recognizes his voice instantly: "Intruders!" the soldier cries.
"Kimblee?!” Ed blurts, surprised, but he doesn't have much time to think for the Kimblee doppelganger is swinging a shovel at him.

Kimblee continues to cry, "Intruders! Sound the alarm! We're under attack!"

The searchlights begin swiveling insanely, trying to find the source of the screaming. Ed grabs a hold of the shovel and pulls Kimblee close fast, head-butting him and knocking him out flat. A searchlight lands on top of him!

"Halt!” he hears, and the sounds of sirens begin to cut through the night air.

Ed dashes off into the darkness, the light following at his heels, the sounds of soldiers' footsteps coming up from behind.

Outside one of the barracks, Al, Rick and Leo all look up to the siren atop the center pole in the camp.

"Oh no!” Rick cries.

Al shouts, "Give the signal! I'll unlock the rest of the barracks!"

Leo sticks two fingers in his mouth, and with all his might, blows a shrill whistle. Three of the six barrack doors burst open wide, and a flood of prisoners pour out of them, the people scattering in all directions! Al runs to the next nearest barrack, unlocking its door, he flinging it open and yelling, "Everyone out! Now!"

The searchlights continue their swiveling, trying to take in the entire sight at once.

"What the hell is going on down there?!” One guard atop the tower cries to his partner. The partner doesn't answer, but instead aims his machinegun down at the ground below and opens fire!

Men begin falling down as red liquid bursts from their chests, others running over the fallen bodies to get to the fenceline.

Soldiers rush out of the mess hall, while others are arriving out of the quarters, still in their night clothes. "Halt!” some shout, opening fire. Others don't get a chance to fire as they are swarmed upon by the angry mob of prisoners, their handguns and rifles being ripped from their hands and used against them.

The gunfire rings out through the night air, just barely muffled by the wailing of the siren. Ed runs along the northern fenceline, just barely covered by the buildings and hidden by the shadows. But the line of buildings comes to an end and suddenly he's caught under the glare of a spotlight!

He jumps back as quick as he can, right as a line of bullets cuts through the ground all the way up to the fence. The guard manning the machinegun atop the tower continues to fire in the direction of the intruder, firing at the building itself, hoping to cut through the bricking and hurt the man on the other side.

Ed has his body pressed tight against the wall, waiting for the firing to stop, just for a chance to run towards the front gates. He hears a piercing ring of metal on metal, and hears someone shout, "Stop, you idiot! The commander will be pissed if you destroy that building!"

Ed quickly peeks out from behind the building, and sees that the lock has been shot off, the door now loosely hanging inwards. Ed dashes to the opening and ducks inside. Okay, I'll just lie low here for a little bit. I need to get a plan together and...
And all of his thought processes come to a screeching halt.

...What is this?

Lining the walls, stacked four deep and eight long, are bodies – shriveled, dried up bodies, like mummies, every ounce of liquid sucked from them. They hang, vertically, suspended in a strange contraption – strapped against steel plates, IV tubes pierced into their arms and legs and even their necks, the tubes leading down the length of the building, ultimately plugged into a giant glass tank that is filled near to the brim with a deep red liquid.

Edward stares at the tank before him. He's seen this before… Numbly, he approaches it, his curiosity, nay, his disbelief at what he's seeing overtaking him. He places a hand on the glass. "Red liquid… this is…"

"Blood," he hears a voice say, and Edward whips around, assuming a fighting stance.

Standing at the entryway is the short thin man he saw before. The officer strolls into the room, rather casually and continues:

"Human blood, to be precise."

"Who the hell are you?" Edward asks, then shouting, "And what the hell is going on here?!"

The man chuckles, "It would seem you've stumbled onto my little project. Do you know where the Jews came from?"

Edward keeps his fists up, ready to fight should the man come too close. "You didn't answer my question."

"Oh, how rude of me." The man politely bows his head though never takes his eyes off of the intruder. "Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer of the SS and reincarnation of King Wilhelm I."

Ed scoffs, "That's a fancy title you got there. You come up with that one all by yourself?"

"I answered your question; it would only be polite for you to answer mine. Do you know where the Jews came from, I said?"

"I don't see what that has to do with all of this."

Himmler smiles as he traces his hand up one the IV lines. "Why it has everything to do with this, my dear boy." With a strange glint in his eye, he glances over at Edward. "Very few people realize that the Jews were one of the subraces of Atlantis."

Ed's fists drop slightly, betraying his confusion.

Himmler continues, "You are familiar with Atlantis, aren't you? The great kingdom that sank into the sea, disappearing overnight? Of course I don't expect you to be completely familiar with all of the tales of our world."

Edward brings his fists back up, Himmler chuckling at his reaction.

"Because you are from a different world, aren't you – Edward Elric."

Ed himself gives a sardonic laugh, though his pupils tremble a little, "You're one of those Thule Society nuts, aren't you?"
"Oh on the contrary – Thule Society, yes; 'nuts', as you say, no. I would only be crazy if what I said weren't true. I hear tale that you popped out of a portal, right out of the center of the earth as it were."

Ed snaps back, "I'll have you know I fell out of the ceiling! And let me tell you – plane crashes aren't much fun!"

Himmler chuckles, "Details." He motions his hand from one side of the room to other, "What do you think of my little project here? Beautiful, isn't it?"

"It's disgusting!" Edward bellow at him. "Why are you harvesting these people's blood? What do you have to gain from it?!"

Himmler clicks his tongue. "So short-sighted. I thought you of all people would understand."

"Understand what?!

Himmler tilts his head down slightly, looking at Ed over the rim of his glasses as he says darkly, "Why, the raw ingredients for a Stone, of course."

Ed feels his heart freeze in his chest. "…You don't mean a-"

"A Philosopher's Stone, yes. It is thought that the Atlanteans had a 'Great Crystal' – a stone of some sort that gave them magic powers, powers that allowed them to rule over the entire earth. The Jews were one of the many races that lived upon the Atlantean continent, and after the Deluge, the writings of King Solomon kept the secret knowledge alive. But you know all of this, don't you, Freemason? You and your Illuminati brothers, worshiping your forbidden Diamond."

"You're crazy!" Edward shouts. "Alchemy doesn't work on this side of the Gate! All you're doing is slaughtering people for no reason!"

Himmler tilts his head to the side, sounding like an exasperated schoolteacher trying to teach a dense pupil, "It's not entirely unfounded. Think about it – Matter is nothing more than compressed Energy. The ancient word for Matter is Body, and the ancient word for Energy is Spirit. If you compress pure Spirit, you get Body. And what is the most potent form of Spirit in physical form?"

He points abruptly at the tank behind Ed.

"BLOOD! Blood is the very essence of the soul; it is the prime material of all life!" The officer continues rambling, "With enough heat and pressure, you can compress minerals into diamonds! And with enough heat and pressure, one can compress pure human blood into the most potent crystal of all! Imagine! Seven-hundred and seventy-seven souls at your command! Pure soul energy in crystallized form, conglomerated hearts, like the Kingdom of Heaven in the palm of your hand!"

Ed glowers at him grimly, "Trust me – I know a lot more about this than you know."

"Then you understand the genius of it!" Himmler beams, the pitch of his voice starting to kilter, swaying between high and low, "The Atlanteans held colonies all over the world! They ruled the four corners of the globe! And now their descendents are providing for the new Master Race!"

Ed glances over at a line of bodies. One in particular catches his eye, making him gasp: A woman, the pinkie and ring finger of her right hand gone, replaced instead with clockwork mechanics. Ed turns his attention back to Himmler, lowly asking, "Their descendents…?"
Himmler breaks out in a cackle, "Yes! Every man, woman, and child in here is a Jew! These pre-Aryans, they have no right to live. But neither shall their deaths be in vain! Their blood shall provide a great source of power for their successors. Empires are built on blood, after all."

Ed's eyes continue to drift across the room, taking in the death before him, "You're sick," he says, "You built all of this – these camps, these death machines – just to chase after a fantasy?"

Himmler hums, "The Final Solution is no fantasy. We will exterminate all of the Jews, and the Aryans will rule over the earth as the Master Race, just as the Atlanteans before them. It is our destiny!"

Edward takes a step backwards, slowly making his way closer to the tank. "So, you're in the Thule Society, you say? Tell me – did they ever tell you anything special about my right arm?"

Himmler cocks his head to the side, raising an eyebrow. "I don't believe so. Why?"

"Because THIS!" Like a shot, Ed winds back his right arm, and with a mighty crash, he punches through the tank, glass shattering out in all directions, coagulated blood plopping out and spilling everywhere!

"No!" Himmler cries! "My blood! My beautiful blood!"

Ed runs past him, the officer too distracted by the liquid pouring out onto all corners of the ground. Himmler drops to his knees, vainly trying to scoop it back into the tank, screaming, "You've ruined it! You've filthied it!"

Ed runs out the front door, being swept up in a tide of prisoners all running every which way. He cups his hands, shouting over the madness, "Al! Al, where are you?!"

A large crowd of prisoners is gathered at the front gate, pushing with all their might against the bars, trying to force them open. Gunshots ring through the night air, people, prisoner and soldier alike, falling at their bite.

"Al!" Ed continues to shout, pushing his way through the crowd. He spies the flag pole. It's crazy, he tells himself, But if I can get up there, maybe I can see through the crowd and find him!

Finally breaking free of the crowd, Ed makes it into the clearing near the flag pole. But as he reaches it, he hears a shaky, breathy cackling. He looks over, and he sees standing there the blond Kimblee, blood crusting the forehead of the soldier's face, and a large, manic grin stretching from cheek to cheek.

"You're him, aren't you?" Kimblee laughs. "You're the one they've been searching for – Elric, isn't it?"

Ed starts to back away slowly from the crazed man who begins to encroach upon him.

"After all this time," Kimblee's shoulders shudder as he intermittently laughs, "After all the time I spent plotting to squeeze the information out of Mustang – you show up right on my doorstep! Lucky me…"

"Listen Kimblee!" Ed shouts at him, throwing introductions and explanations to the wind, "I don't have time for this! Just stay out of my way!"

Kimblee's chest rises and falls rapidly, his eyes bulging as he giggles insanely. He holds something
up in his hand, "Oh. You're not going to get away, not like Mustang. I won't let you! I'll take down this whole camp if it means stopping you!"

"What is that?" Edward asks.

Kimblee laughs, "Ingenious little device, isn't it? I made it myself! It's powered by radio waves. Most bombs require detonator line and a plunger, but not this baby!"

Ed's eyes go wide, "A bomb?"

Kimblee shouts at the top of his lungs, "Not just A bomb! This WHOLE CAMP is rigged to blow! One push and BOOM! WE ALL GO SKY HIGH!"

Ed cries, "Wait! You don't have to do this!"

"Of course I do!" Kimblee says happily, "You're a threat to the Reich! All opposition must be stamped into the ground! And I'm ready to go out in a blaze of glory! Solidarity to the cause and a commitment unto death!"

"No!"

But too late! Kimblee pushes his thumb down on the button, a suddenly one of the far guard towers explodes into a fiery column! And a section of fence nearest to it! And then the section after that and the guard tower after that!

Kimblee has his arms spread to either side, laughing to the sky as the explosions come closer and closer!

Ed turns and runs, wasting no more time! He hears men crying as the explosions tear through the camp, unsure if they are soldiers or prisoners, but does it matter? They're all going to die if they don't get out of here and now! But he stops, turning around back to the interior of the camp.

But Al! Where's Al?!

Meanwhile, Himmler is exiting Building Five, frantically looking around. "What's going on?! What's all thatAHH!" The fence off to his right explodes and he is thrown violently through the air, he landing roughly on the ground.

Stunned, the world spins in fiery colors around the officer's head. He opens his eyes, seeing the stars above him swirling. All sound has been muffled say for a high-pitched ringing shrieking through his ears and the thumping heartbeat pounding in his skull. Himmler slowly, shakily, tries to lift himself up, only managing to get up onto his elbows. He tries to reorient himself, trying to get a bearing of his surroundings-

When he sees him.

Standing in the middle of the fires, starkly silhouetted against the raging inferno is Elric, his coat billowing in the upsweeping heat and smoke that rises to the sky. The fires burn across the buildings and barracks, and as a pole from one of the guard towers topples down, the flames shoot up higher, lapping the heavens. And Himmler swears that in that moment, the flames were wings, stretching out from Elric's back.
"A… phoenix…" Himmler mumbles, and suddenly he recalls what Edward had said, that he did not rise from the center of the earth, but instead fell from the ceiling. "…The Strong One… from above…"

Another explosion, and Elric disappears from sight.

Commander Amsel is scrambling across the grounds when he sees Himmler laying there. "Commander!" he shouts, running up to the fallen leader. "Commander! Are you all right?!"

Amsel lifts Himmler to his feet, Himmler absently responding, "Yes… Right…"

"Come on, sir! We've got to get out of here!" Amsel looks over his shoulder, "There! That fence is down! Come on! Into the woods!"

Amsel and Himmler begin running away as yet another explosion goes off behind them.

Ed holds up his arms to shelter his face from the fires.

"Ed!" He hears Al cry, and he looks up. Al is inside a truck, the door flung open. "Get in!"

Ed runs to the open vehicle, jumping inside, and Al revs the motor and the boys speed off. Al shouts, "Tell me you got Roy out!"

"Didn't have to!" Ed shouts, clinging onto the door handle for dear life as the truck bounces over the uneven dirt path. "He got himself out!"

The gates of the camp have been opened, and prisoners and soldiers alike are running off into the woods, running away from the chaos of the fires that rage against the blackened sky. Al swerves through the open gate, rounds the corner, heading northward along the country road.

He doesn't let up on the gas, even though as he looks in the side mirror, he sees that there is no one following them.

"Al! Look out!" Ed yells.
Al finally does let up on the gas, easing off to the right before the truck should land in the river they've come upon. Gently, he taps on the brake, slowing the vehicle to a crawl. He and Ed look out the windshield at the orange glow the pulses unevenly from behind the treetops.

"...Roy got out?" Al asks quietly.

Ed replies, wearily, "Yeah. Yesterday. He escaped before we ever got here."

Al gives a short laugh, his gaze distant. "Still – we did good coming here... We got all those prisoners out..."

"Yeah," Ed says downheartedly, "But how many of them got killed because we tried to get them out?"

Al gently lays a mild punch on his brother's arm, though hitting his metal arm doesn't faze him at all. "Oh, Ed. Can't you for once look on the bright side?"

Ed smiles a little, "...Yeah, you're right. We did put quite a dent in a bigger problem. Let's hope it helps..."

"So where do you think Roy's gone?" Al asks.

Finally, having carried it this whole time, Ed slips the bag off of his back and once more pulls out the atlas. "The border's not that far away. What do you say, Al? You want to take a trip to the Netherlands?"

Al smiles resolutely and nods, "Sounds good to me."

He fires up the truck, and together, the brothers drive away into the darkness of the night, knowing that soon the sun will be dawning on a brand new, brighter day.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:

Chapter End Notes

I can't tell you how much fun I had writing Kimblee go slowly insane. I'd like to think Hughes got his revenge from beyond the grave by planting the little seed in Kimblee's mind that there were traitors in the ranks. Kimblee got his and Hughes did not go un-avenged.
The ship lulls lazily up and down with the gentle tide, the waves of the ocean pushing the floating metal giant closer and closer to the shore.
Roy stands on the deck of the ship, leaning against the metal railing, he looking out across the horizon, the deep orange sun rising through the cold, salty mist.

The salt is somewhat stinging to his face. His wounds are almost healed now, but still he must squint his eye against the whipping winds.

He turns his attention towards the bow, watching as the landmass in the distance becomes ever closer now. Soon. Soon he'll be on dry ground.

He sighs and backs away from the railing, walking over to a bench on deck, and he seats himself, letting his legs rest. He tucks his hands into the pockets of his stolen clothing – and as he does, he feels something there, a small and papery something. Roy rummages the pocket and pulls out the mystery item – hidden away in his pocket is a photo – it's of Sergeant Hughes, the man who saved his life, who freed him from the hellhole of the concentration camp – and in the picture with Hughes are the soldier's wife and child.

Roy smiles sadly at the picture. You know, he thinks to himself, I didn't even know his first name. And his smile begins to fade, for he catches himself speaking in the past tense. Something in Roy fears the worst… he can still hear the shots ringing out through that dark night…

Quietly, Roy tucks the picture back into his pocket. Just a few more minutes now. Just a few more minutes and the ship will be docking in London. And then…then I'll tell the whole world what is happening in Germany…

The sun is creeping up through the trees, the warm night having given way to a strangely chilly dawn. The wind is blowing, gently yet with enough force to shake off some of the weaker pine needles from their branches, the tidbits of green landing in the river below and being swept away.

The truck rumbles alongside this river, heading westward, away from the ruins of the burnt camp and towards the border out of Germany and into the Netherlands. Al drives while his brother sleeps, Ed leaning his head against the window, his mouth hanging open as he snores loudly. Al, feeling mischievous, is half-tempted to quickly swerve the vehicle to startle his brother awake, but he decides against it, letting Ed get some rest.

Al, glancing over at Ed, returns his eyes to the dirt road before him. And then he slows the vehicle, bringing it to a halt. Al peers through the greenery, the road winding through the trees. Then he reaches over and gently shakes Ed's shoulder.

"Ed, wake up."

Ed stirs awake, bleary, "Who,what?"

Al points out the windshield, "Do you see that?"

Ed rubs his eyes and then looks out to what Al is pointing at. Ed narrows his eyes, "A blockade…"

At the end of the road is a group of soldiers, trucks on either side, and a large wooden gate hastily set up to block the path. They are partially hidden from view by the mass of trees that the road snakes through. And Ed hopes that the soldiers can't see them where they are now.

Al turns off the ignition to cease the rumbling of their truck so as to not draw attention.

Ed hums in his throat as he thinks aloud. "Of course they'd block the road. All those escaped
prisoners? You know the government's going to do what they can to keep everyone from bolting across the border."

"So how do we get across," Al asks, his eyes looking as though he himself is already planning a hundred possible options.

Ed crosses his arms as he hunkers down in his seat a bit, thinking some more. "Well, the way I see it, we've got two options. One – we go on foot and quietly sneak across and hope they don't see us. The problem with that is, if they do see us, they've got cars and we don't and they'll probably catch us. Option two – We keep driving, they definitely see us, but at least now we can drive away quickly and maybe they won't catch us."

Al mulls this over in his head for a little while and then says, "I'd rather keep a low profile. If we give away where we are, even if they don't catch us right away, they'll know where to come looking for us later."

Ed nods. "So on foot then?"

Al nods in return.

Without turning on the engine, Al puts the car in Drive. Both boys sling their backpacks over their shoulders, and quiet as they can, they open the doors of the truck and slide out, setting foot on the soft earth below them. Gently, they close the doors. Then, they go to the back of the truck and proceed to push on it, moving the truck forward until it eventually goes off of the curving dirt road and into the trees. They then sneak into the underbrush off to their right, putting as much distance between them and the guards as they can.

Softly, they step on the mass of browned musty pine needles covering the floor, carefully pushing aside branches, trying not to rustle any leaves as they do so. Lowly they crouch, keeping out of sight as they grow closer and closer to the invisible line separating imprisonment from freedom.

To their left, about 50 yards away, Ed and Al can see the blockade, the soldiers there standing around chatting, waiting should anyone appear. Al looks forward again, out to the west. Darn! He thinks, This forest is about to end, the trees inevitably giving way to a flat, open countryside. There'll be nowhere to hide after that. How are we going to-

SNAP!

Al gasps, looking down, realizing he's stepped on a dead, fallen branch, the brittle wood breaking under his weight.

"What was that?" one of the soldiers in the distance asks.

Ed grabs his brother by the shoulder, both of them kneeling down into the dirt, behind the cover of the bushes.

"Go check it out," another soldier says.

And now, footsteps are coming their way!

Tiny little footsteps, silent almost for they are on soft, padded paws. The squirrel flicks its bushy tail, curiously scrounging across the soft patch of upturned earth. Nose to the ground, it begins digging, using its tiny little claws to throw out dirt to either side to find its prize. Ah-ha! A big juicy
plant bulb! Just the thing!

"Shoo!"

Without even looking up, the squirrel darts off, running up the nearest tree and spiraling around the trunk until it reaches a branch.

A young blonde woman shakes a rake at the little fuzzball, "You stay out of my tulip bed!"

The squirrel chitters at her as it puffs up its fur, it starting to squawk somewhat like a bird.

The lady squawks back threateningly at the squirrel. A young man with black hair exits through the front door of the house, stepping out onto the porch as he carries a box under his arm. "Sophie, are you getting into fights with wildlife again?"

She turns at looks at the young man and says, "Well if the wildlife would stay out of my garden, I wouldn't have to yell at them." She throws her hand out towards the squirrel, "Look at him! He knows what he's doing!"

The squirrel has turned around on the branch and is now kicking at the bark, scraping it from the branch and showering it down in Sophie's general direction.

She with her hand on her hip says to the squirrel, "I go and I make special feeders for you guys and you still want to dig up my tulip bulbs. What a cruel world."

The young man descends the steps and as he approaches Sophie, he amusingly chimes, "Maybe the squirrels have been trained by rival tulip-growers to come ruin the competition." He smiles and gives her a kiss on the cheek, "It's all a conspiracy."

Sophie smiles back, "Everything's a conspiracy with you, Aleks."

"Only the interesting things are," he says as he sets the box he carries into the back of a flatbed truck.

Using her rake, Sophie refills in the hole left by the tiny invader. "I probably need to go pick up more mulch to cover this. That and a little bit of chicken wire."

"I'm going into town if you want to come with," Aleks suggests.

Leaning on her rake, Sophie asks, "What's on the agenda today?"

Aleks closes the back of the truck, "Trade embargoes. I don't think we should be trading with Germany the way they're carrying on."

Sophie says with a bit of a smile, "I keep telling you, people out here don't really care about political stuff like that."

"Exactly," Aleks responds as he opens the driver-side door. "They don't and they should, and I'm going to convince them as such."

Sophie props her rake up against the tree and walks up to the truck, "Before we know it, you'll have us all transformed into sophisticated urbanites," she says as she hops in the truck.

Aleks turns the key in the ignition, "One can only hope," and he gives her a peck on the lips.

The engine fires up and the little truck pulls away from the small country house.
The tall water fountain spurts and bubbles, its waters rippling as birds hop around its base. Cobblestone stretches out in all directions from this center point of the square, the townsfolk moving back and forth as they start up their day.

The buildings are not tall – one, maybe two stories at most, all stone and brick and mortar, with thatched roofing on some of the older buildings and tile on newer. The local tavern-inn, second in size only to the town hall, hosts food and drink downstairs and cozy little beds upstairs.

In one of these rooms is a short little man, standing in front of a dressing mirror as he checks his attire. Skinny and lanky, pallid and balding, the man twists a little bit of wax onto the ends of his pencil-thin mustache. He grins at his own reflection. Then he leans his head slightly back over his shoulder, asking, "What do you think, Volkerson?"

Two other men are in the room, they sitting at a small table as they shuffle some playing cards, "Think about what, Yoki?"

The man at the mirror frowns, realizing they're not even looking in his direction. He turns on heel, hands on his hips, "About my appearance, of course!"

One of the two of them looks up, looking him up and down, and then says, "You look like your going on a date, not on vacation."

"Hmph!" Yoki brushes off the length of his sleeve, saying, "Well forgive me if I want to look good."

The other man at the table points out, "We're supposed to be blending in. It's not exactly undercover if you draw attention to yourself."

Yoki whips back around to the mirror, now preening his eyebrows, "Shows what you know. Plenty of people dress up when they go on vacation."

"What people?"

"Fancy people," Yoki quips, "People with proper upbringing. Not that you'd know anything about that."

The man starts to rise, brandishing a fist, but his partner motions a hand for him to sit down, which he does, grumbling.

"Now then," Yoki says as he straightens the bottom of his jacket, "What do you say we take a stroll around this lovely little town? I'd like to get a feel for this place if I'm going to be mayor someday."

"Who says you get to be mayor?" one of them asks.

Yoki waves a hand nonchalantly, "You can be Chief of Police."

The other man chuckles, "Getting ahead of ourselves, aren't we? I don't think the government's going to reward us with a municipality just for doing some reconnaissance."

Yoki straightens his bowtie, "Don't use big words, Fulkerson. It's unbecoming of you."

"I'm Volkerson."

"Whatever," again, Yoki waves his hand, this time heading for the door. "Come along, gentlemen."
“We have work to do.”

The sound of heavy boots grows closer as the soldier stomps his way through the underbrush, twigs snapping, leaves shuffling. Ed and Al both tense their muscles, ready to spring out from their hiding place should the soldier get too close. But to go towards him or away from him? Knock him out and take his gun? Or make for the open countryside?

But a rapid scuffling makes all three of them jump. The soldier points his gun at the white streak that bolts across the forest floor, it slightly zigging and zagging as it darts its way through the leaves.

The soldier sighs with a chuckle and then looks over his shoulder back towards his comrades, "It's just a rabbit," and he begins to walk away.

One of the other soldiers calls back, "You should have shot it! Then we could have had some meat for lunch."

They continue their chit-chatting, unaware of the boys in the bush sighing a dizzy sigh of relief. Al takes a big breath, realizing now that he had been holding his breath this whole time. Ed pats him on the arm and then nods his head towards the border as if to say 'Come on."

Still keeping low, very nearly crawling on hands and knees to remain hidden, Ed and Al continue to move through the cover of the trees, the forest getting thinner and thinner the further and further they go.

Ed is now thinking what Al was thinking before. *There's not gonna be anything to keep us covered. We'll be out in the open...*

Now far from the soldiers' earshot, at the very edge of the tree line, they come to a stop. Al asks, "Now what?"

Ed says, "I wish we'd have gotten here before sunrise. At least then it'd still be dark. And I'm not too keen on waiting around here 'til sunset – they'd find us before then."

Al grins, "If we had alchemy, we could transmute a tunnel underground and they'd never see us."

"Not helping, Al," Ed says a little bitterly.

"All right, well, tunneling aside – we can either walk or we can run. If we run, we get out of here quicker, but I'm afraid it would draw their attention towards us. If we walk, we might not draw their attention at all. But I'm worried that if one of them glances over and sees us, we won't be far enough away to get away."

Ed crosses his arms, "This day just keeps getting better and better, doesn't it?"

"Like you said, we can't sit here forever."

Ed nods, "All right, half and half – we'll start off walking, slow, so we don't grab attention. But once we're far enough away, we make a break for it." Ed points out into the distance, "Do you see that hill there?"

Al looks where his brother is pointing, "Yeah, the only hill around here?"
Ed continues, "Once we're around that, we'll be shielded from sight."

Al laughs a little, "It's only 300 yards or so. You make it sound so easy."

"I'm saying we only have to walk halfway there and then run for the other half."

The humor slides away from Al's voice, "And if they see us before then?"

Ed is quiet for a moment, then a little grin comes about him, "We'll do like that rabbit – we'll duck and weave. It's hard to hit a target that's not moving in a straight line." He looks over at Al, and Al sees in Ed's eyes that same resolute look that he's seen many times before. That look always gave Al confidence, and even now, he can feel his fears waning.

Al nods.

Together, the boys rise, looking back towards the blockade to keep an eye on the soldiers. And then slowly, Ed and Al start to walk out from the protection of the trees, walking, slowly, so slowly, towards the hill in the distance.

* 

Thump!

The gangplank lands atop the dock while, from on-deck, crew members toss heavy ropes overboard to dock workers below. The long heavy ropes are tied down, keeping the ship in place, and in an organized mess, passengers crowd the gangplank to get their feet back onto to solid ground.

The people gossip amongst themselves, some having enjoyed the trip, others thankful that it's finally over. Roy descends the ramp and comes to a rest on the pier. Momentarily, he gazes back out to sea, looking far beyond the horizon to a land no longer visible.

*Ed and Al are still back there…* he thinks. *God, I hope they're okay…* He gives a gentle smile. *Who knows? Maybe they hopped a ship a long time ago and are here somewhere…* But Roy's smile fades. He doesn't want to get his hopes up. But neither does he want to let go of that hope.

A dock worker holding a clipboard approaches Roy, "bægədʒ, sər?"

"…What?" Roy asks, unsure of what this man is saying to him.

The dock worker motions over to a large pile of luggage that is being towed out of the ship. "du ju hæv əni bægədʒ, sər?"

Roy waves a hand to apologize as he smiles nervously, "Oh! No…"

The dock worker gives a slight frown (not too long now, don't want to insult the guests), and carries on his way to take care of other passengers.

Roy now realizes his most obvious obstacle – *How am I going to get along here if I don't know any English?*

Even more now, Roy misses Edward. Ed had told him tales of how he and his father had spent time in England together. Surely Ed must know some English… but he's not here…

Roy looks around, trying to get a bearing for where he is and where everything else is. *I guess I can't stand here all day…* Roy puts his hands in his pockets, and starts to walk up the pier, heading
The bell above the door jingles as the door to the shop is opened. The shopkeeper, standing behind the counter, looks over and smiles at the people entering, "Ah, Sophie, good morning!"

Sophie, Aleks behind her, smiles with a little wave, "Morning, everyone," everyone being the shopkeep, his son who is currently sweeping, and a little old lady in the back looking at some begonias.

The shopkeeper leans on the counter, "And what can I do for my best customer today?"

Sophie gives a shy laugh, "Oh, stop. You know I'm not your best customer."

"Well, you always bring me the prettiest tulips," he says heartily, "That's gotta count for something."

"That's what I'm here for, actually," Sophie says, "Unfortunately there won't be any tulips if I can't keep the squirrels out."

The old lady in the back pipes up, "I've got just the thing!"

The shopkeeper's son tries not to giggle as his father sighs, sliding a hand down his face, "Oh here we go…"

The old lady hobbles up to Sophie, "This is a trick that my mother always used on her vegetable patch—"

The shopkeeper wags a finger, "If you say cod liver oil—"

The old lady throws up a hand, "I'm telling ya, it works!" The son starts laughing to himself as the old lady continues, "Deer and squirrels eat vegetables, not fish! The smell will drive 'em away!"

Sophie gives a short, nervous laugh, but smiles so as not to be rude, "That's all right. I think I'll just lay down a little chicken wire."

The lady puts up a hand as she gives a long, regal frown, "All right, I'm just saying—"

The shopkeeper switches the subject before the lady has a chance to continue, "Whatcha got there, Aleks?"

Aleks reaches into the box he's been carrying and pulls out a small paper, "Fliers. I'm going to be passing them out in town square today."

The shopkeep takes the paper and looks it over, and then he scoffs through his nose, "Trade embargoes? Is this really something for city council? That seems like something for the national government to worry about."

Aleks says ardently, "We're all responsible for what the national government does. If we just sit back and concentrate on our own towns, everything will be disjointed, nothing will get done. We all need to take an interest in national affairs."

"Young man," the old lady badgers, "Ever since you came to this town, you've done nothing but try to stir up trouble! Leave it be, can't ya?"
Aleks looks at her sternly, "You're only bothered by it because you don't want to face the truth. You all think that you're safe and secure here in this little town – that the world has nothing to do with you. Well in case you haven't noticed, Germany is just over those hills to the east, and pretending like they don't exist isn't going to stop them from moving in whenever they please!"

And with that, Aleks exits with his box in hand.

The old lady puts a hand on her chest, a look of indignation on her face, "Well I never!"

Sophie rubs an arm, "Sorry about that. He's just really passionate."

The old lady shakes a finger at Sophie, "Is that the kind of attitude that they teach in the city? I wish your parents had never moved there! They should have kept you here where you could have found a nice young man with some manners!" She pushes the shopkeeper's son forward, he surprised, "Why not Daniël? He's a nice young man."

He blushes profusely, waving his hands, "What?! No-no! I mean, you're very lovely Sophie, it's just-!"

Sophie laughs and waves it off, "It's okay." A large bright smile grows on her face, a tint of blush arising in her cheeks as she looks down, "Besides, I'm expecting a ring any day now."

Happy little gasps escape all three as they move in closer to her, the shopkeeper asking, "Really? Has Aleks been hinting at it?"

Sophie shuffles her foot, "Well, I mean, not exactly. But we've been together for three years now. It would seem kind of odd if he didn't…"

A disapproving groan streams from the old lady's throat, "And were you two living together in the city before you moved back out here?"

Sophie waves her hands, blushing, "Oh! No, no! I was still with my grandmother then! Aleks and I just now moved in together!"

"Hmph!" the old lady says indignantly, "Unmarried people living under the same roof, with no one there to keep an eye on them. It's indecent if you ask me."

"Don't be rude," the shopkeeper says sternly, "Sophie's a nice girl."

Sophie winks, "And besides," she says slyly, moving in closer to the old lady, "My grandma has told me stories about you when you were younger." A jolt of shock runs through the old lady as Sophie says, "Quiet the flirt as I understand."

The shopkeeper laughs as the old lady looks speechless, she finally managing, "Why, if your mother had ever sassed me like that, you can bet her mother would have given her a red behind, by God!"

The shopkeeper, trying to talk through his laughing, says, "Let me go get that chicken wire you need…"

Quietly…. Quietly… Almost there…

Ed keeps walking forward while Al keeps glancing over his shoulder. Just a few more feet, and
they can make a break for it.

BANG!

They both whip around, fists raised, ready to fight!

"Yea-hah!" they hear from the trees. "Got him!"

"All right! Roast rabbit!"

Once more, a sigh of relief passes from Al's lips. Ed tugs his brother's sleeve, saying, "Quick! While they're distracted!"

And like a shot, the Elrics break out into a run, heading straight for the hill in front of them. Around it, though – not over it. To go over would put them straight in the line of sight of those soldiers.

Though the hill seemed so small from a distance, now it seems so huge, its base never-ending. The more they run, the more grass they're greeted with.

The minute or so it takes to round the hill seems to last an hour, but finally, Ed and Al are around the other side, the line of trees separating them from Germany now gone from sight.

Ed, excited, gives Al a playful punch on the arm, "Yes! We did it!"

Al breaks out laughing, still a little nervous but relieved. "I don't know about you, but I don't think I can take much more adventure. I could use a break."

"No time," Ed says, "We're not out of the woods yet."

Al quips, "Yes we are. They're back that way."

Ed again gives his brother a playful whack on the arm, "You know what I mean, ya knucklehead. Come on – let's keep going."

Al looks out on the new scenery that greets them – gently rolling and sloping hills covered in tall grass, with not a tree to be seen.

Ed is already walking up one of these hills. Al takes hold of the straps of his backpack and starts to follow along after his brother.

They both reach the top of the first short hill, and Ed, using his hand, shades his eyes from the ever ascending sun. "Check it out – there's a town not too far away. And I don't know about you, but grub is starting to sound pretty good right now."

Al smiles, "Well, onward, then."

And down the hill they start to walk, ready to climb over the next hill and the next hill towards their new destination.

* *

Roy wanders through the bustling city streets, this place not unlike Frankfurt, though certainly much more wet – all day long, there has been nothing but drizzle dropping from the grey sky. Roy looks around, wondering where he can buy an umbrella…and then remembering that he has no money on him.
He sighs. *I've got to figure out where the nearest Lodge is*, he thinks to himself. *The Brothers there can help me out.*

He looks around at the people who pass him by, listening as they chat with one another. Their tongue is strange – it sounds sort of like German, but very flat in tone, and random words that sound almost like French are thrown in; and the people speak so very fast, like noisy birds chattering in a tree. Roy cocks his head to the side. *I'd ask for directions, but I doubt anyone would understand me…*

He continues walking, glancing from one side of the street to the other. *I could spend days wandering this place and I'd never find anything…*

Once more, a sigh escapes him, this time he looking down at his hand. *If I still had my ring*, he thinks, remembering how the police back in Frankfurt had forcefully taken his Masonic ring from him, *At least then, maybe I could show it to someone and they'd understand what I'm trying to ask them.*

*!

Out on the patio, at the only café in town, Fulkerson, Volkerson, and Yoki sit at a table as the waitress/owner comes up to their table, a tray of food in her hand. The portly lady, neither young but not quite old, begins setting down plates.

"Here you are, gents," she says with a cheery smile.

"Thank you," one of them responds, Yoki in the meanwhile ignoring her as he reads the newspaper.

As she sets down the last plate, she tucks the tray under her arm and asks, "So what brings you fellas to our little town?"

The other answers, "Oh, just passing through on our way to Amsterdam."

"Ooh, Amsterdam," the lady responds gaily, "I hear it's lovely this time of year."

"So is Vienna," says Yoki, never lowering his paper, sounding rather bored.

"Oh," says the waitress, "Well, I wouldn't know anything about that..."

"Of course you wouldn't," Yoki turns a page, never looking at the waitress as he addresses her, "I doubt any of you people ever leave this little backwater town."

One of his colleagues roughly clears his throat, as if to tell Yoki 'Shut it!' and then he turns to the waitress, "I apologize, ma'am. He's yet to have his coffee. He's pretty cranky in the mornings..."

Yoki hums to himself a bit, and then says aloud, "Says here that there are people in Austria calling for German annexation. That's just what Vienna could use is a shot of good old German culture pumped back into its system." He folds up the paper, setting it on his lap as he finally looks the waitress in the eye. "What do you think about things like that?"

The lady seems a little confused, "About German culture?"

"Yes, precisely," Yoki says with a grin as he leans back in his seat, bringing his hands together as he steeplest his fingers. "Why, it's just what a small town like this needs – culture! I think if the Netherlands were to become part of Germany the cultural benefits would be tremendous! Not to mention the economic benefits..."
"Oh, well," the lady holds a hand to her mouth, looking as if she is resisting the urge to chew on her nails, "I mean, I don't think we'd have to become a part of Germany to appreciate German culture."

The other partner speaks up, "Well, we don't have to be Dutch to appreciate the cuisine! This looks delicious!"

The waitress nods with a large smile, "Oh thank you. I hope you enjoy it." And she turns and leaves.

Volkerson reaches over and whacks Yoki in the arm, whispering harshly, "What the hell are you trying to do? You want people to get suspicious?"

Yoki shrugs, smiling, "Not at all. We're here to get the local opinion on the German government and we can't do that unless we ask, now can we?"

Fulkerson is cutting into the sausage on his plate, "You could be a little less overt about it," he says and then stuffs a chunk of sausage in his mouth.

Yoki scoffs, "Honestly, neither of you have the constitution for investigative work. If you're so scared, go back to Berlin."

Through a mouthful of sausage, Fulkerson says, "I never said I was scared. I'm just saying we don't have to let on that we are investigating."

Yoki frowns, "Don't talk with your mouth full, Volkerson."

"I'm Fulkerson."

"Whatever…"

From across the way, they hear a man's voice rising. The three of them look over in the direction of the town's square. There in front of the water fountain is a young man standing on a box, speaking into a megaphone. Down below, in front of him, is a young lady handing out fliers.

The young man shouts, "Oppose German actions now! We can't remain neutral any longer! Are we just going to stand idly by while hundreds of people are being oppressed by the German regime? No! Write letters to the national government! Tell them to stop trade between us and Germany!"

Some passersby stop and listen, only for a moment, and then carry on their way. Sophie extends her hand, a flier in it, "Flier, ma'am? Sir, would you like a flier? Information is knowledge!"

Aleks continues his shouting into the megaphone, "People are being systematically killed, and the German government is denying their involvement! But we know the truth! Tell our government that we will not do business with murderers!"

Yoki, still at his table, gives a dry chuckle, "My, he certainly is an enthusiastic young man, isn't he?"

A child climbs up on the edge of the water fountain, and begins mocking Aleks's movements as he continues his speech, "The very soul of our nation is at stake here! If our economy is based on the bloodshed of innocents, how can we hold our heads up proud?"

"Get down from there!" the mother scolds her little boy, Aleks just now realizing the child is there behind him.
The little boy giggles and jumps down onto the cobblestone square.

Taking her child by the hand, the mother looks at Aleks and says, "Honestly! You shouldn't be saying such things in front of children. Are you trying to scare them?"

"Good." Aleks says, lowering his megaphone, "I want you all to be scared! You need to be scared!"

The lady looks offended, and her husband speaks up, "Hey! Watch your tone!"

But Aleks doesn't let up, "The more trade we do with Germany, the more money they make – money that's being used to support tyranny!"

A small crowd is beginning to gather around, trying to see what all the ruckus is about, the husband now shouting, "That's Germany's problem!"

"But we're feeding into the system!" Alex retorts. "Don't you see? We need to break it off, otherwise we share the blame!"

The man crosses his arms, "I've got nothing to do with German politics. Why should I care? Why should any of us care?"

Little quips of, "Yeah?" arise from the crowd.

Sophie looks like she wants to say something, but can't think of anything. She looks up at Aleks, waiting for an answer. He notices this, and calmly smiles at her, giving her a nod of confidence, she smiling back.

Aleks looks back at the man and asks, "Do you love this town?"

"Yeah," responds the man.

"And you grew up here?"

"Yeah."

"And you want your son to grow up here, too? And have a family and grandchildren?"

"Yes, yeah, all that! So?"

"So if the Germans were to come over those hills right now, and tell you that you had to do what they say – that you had to give up your lands, and your home, and all of your possessions, even separate your family members – what would you do?"

The crowd quietly murmurs between themselves.

Aleks asks, "Would you just let it happen?"

Mild answers of, "No," arise from the crowd.

"Would you stand up against them?"

"Yeah," the crowd answers.

"Would you fight?"
"Yeah!" they shout even louder.

"That's why we have to get involved now! Before it's too late! We can't let Germany get any more powerful than they already are! The more power they have, the more they'll think they're entitled to take whatever they want – not just from their own citizens, but from other countries as well!"

The crowd has grown larger now, people paying full attention to Aleks and his words.

"Money is power. And we have the ability to take that power away from them. We have to hit Germany where it hurts the most – in their wallets!"

"Yeah!"

A single set of hands slowly claps, and the crowd parts as it turns to see who it is. They don't recognize this lanky man with his pencil-thin mustache. He says, "That's a very rousing speech and all, but honestly, you're a fool if you think that something as petty as a trade embargo will stop Germany from doing as it pleases."

Aleks furrows his brow at him and then says, "What, so you approve of what the Germans are doing?"

The man, Yoki, strokes a finger across the length of his mustache, "Oh, whole-heartedly. The German way is the only way. And honestly, if you had any brains, you'd be happy to have the Germans move in."

Aleks points a finger at the mysterious man, "The government will never stand for that! We'll mobilize before Germany has the chance to invade!"

Yoki shrugs with a smirk, "It doesn't have to be an invasion. I don't see why the lowlands can't embrace the people of the highlands with open arms."

Aleks shouts, "It's because you're a bunch of thieving, lying snakes!"

Yoki is a slightly taken aback, his lips parted as if to respond -

But Aleks cuts in, "Oh yeah, I can tell you're German. Your accent is terrible. On vacation from Berlin, are we?"

Yoki closes his eyes as he looks away, chuckling wryly, "Fine, so I'm German. You'll forgive a man for loving his country. I thought merely that I'd share my good opinion with you people."

"Well here's MY opinion!" Aleks winds back and then spits at Yoki, the mucus hitting him right on his cheek! The crowd gasps, some laughing.

"Aleks!" Sophie scolds.

Yoki very quietly, calmly, pulls a handkerchief from his breast-pocket and proceeds to wipe the slime from his cheek. "My. Certainly a rude and uncultured lot, aren't you? We shall have to breed that out of you."

"You won't be doing anything," Aleks says. "Go back to your country and tell them to stay out of the Netherlands!

"Or what?" Yoki asks condescendingly, "You'll stop exporting fish to us? That's hilarious."

"It'll be more than just us!" Aleks threatens, "We'll tell our partners, all our ally nations, to cease
trading with you as well! No one will support German interests abroad, and you'll all be left to rot in your perfect little fatherland!"

"Really?" Yoki asks, turning his nose up at the young man, "Someone as small as you thinks he can stand up to the entire Reich?"

"I do!"

BANG!

The crowd screams as without warning Yoki has pulled a small pistol from his pocket. Aleks lurches backwards, red bursting from his back and splattering on the water fountain, Aleks clutching his chest as he staggers sideways off his box.

"Aleks!" Sophie screams. She reaches out to him, catching him as he falls from where he stands, she feeling the burning hot puddle growing across his back as she wraps her arms around him to keep him upright. "Aleks?! Aleks!"

Yoki smiles, scanning the crowd from left to right, pistol still in hand. "Anyone else feel like standing up to the Reich?" he asks, and as his eyes fall over them, people in the crowd back away. ".No?" He chuckles, "That's what I thought."

Yoki begins polishing the pistol with his handkerchief.

"A lesson for you all --," his voice drops in pitch, he saying darkly, "Stay out of German business."

Yoki tucks his handkerchief and pistol back into his pocket as he walks away, leaving the crowd of townspeople scared and shaking.

Sophie clings tightly to Aleks, the color in his eyes fading as the color of his blood grows darker and darker on the cobblestone. She sobs, crying loudly, "Aleks!"

The water of the fountain continues its bubbling, washing its center stone clean of its red stain, the crimson liquid growing fainter as it murks the waters of the pool below.

* 

"Did you hear that?" Al asks as he looks to the sky.

"Yeah, kinda hard to miss," Ed responds, he too looking around. "The problem is, which direction did it come from?"

Al says, "Maybe it's the blockade soldiers again."

Ed looks over in the general direction of the border, "How many rabbits are they gonna shoot?" He turns to his brother and adds, "Let's hope it's just animals they're shooting…"

And the boys resume their walking.

* 

Roy stops in front of a shop, noticing something scratched into the side of the doorframe – the Square and Compass.

He goes to the window, glancing inside: it's a glassblower's shop, little knickknacks and artistic pieces lining shelf after shelf. He can spy one or two people, unsure if they are worker or customer.
Still, Roy decides to go inside. The bell to the shop rings as he opens the door, the owner calling, "Welekem!"

Roy chuckles inwardly, *I'll assume that means, 'Welcome'…*

A young man approaches him, "kæn aj hælp ju wið eniðæm tæde, sær?"

Roy waves a hand while shaking his head to say, 'No,' and the young clerk moves along. Roy begins perusing the store, looking as though he is shopping, while really he is trying to get a view of the owner. *If he's wearing a Masonic ring, that'd help, he thinks. If not, I'll have to think of another way to figure out whether he's a Brother or not…*

The owner rings up the only other customer in the shop, the lady thanking him and carefully carrying her fragile purchase out the door. Roy walks up to the counter, the owner asking, "wæt kæn aj du fær ju?"

Roy thinks, *Okay – if I can say this as simply as possible – the less words, the better. Roy asks aloud, "Traveling Man?"*

The owner tilts his head a bit, "wændør mæn? wæts dæt min?"

Roy holds out his hand for a handshake, the owner looking at him curiously. Obliging, the owner shakes Roy's hand and as he does, he realizes this customer is not doing just any handshake – but the *Masonic* handshake!

"o, o! ò wændørın mæn, aj gæt ët. jør ò brødør!"

Roy says with a smile, "You'll forgive me – I don't understand a word you're saying."

The owner laughs, "særi, met, aj känt endørstænd ju." He motions his hand towards the back of the shop, "kærn òn, ðís we." He looks at the young clerk, "he, wæd ju wætf ðør ædʒørstør?"

The clerk nods and takes over the register while the owner parts a curtain leading to the back of the shop, Roy following behind him.

"It's odd, isn't it Brother?" Al asks as he looks around, "This town seems nearly deserted."

"Yeah," Ed responds as he scans the small town, "Where is everybody?"

The streets are empty, say for one or two people on the sidewalk. As the boys continue walking through the town, the sound of a clamoring begins to arise. They look in the direction it is coming from – in front of the police station is a small crowd, everyone shouting at an officer who waves his hands, trying to calm them down.

"Well, found the townsfolk," Ed says.

"I wonder what's going on over there," Al wonders.

Ed can feel his own curiosity rising inside him, his instincts wanting to drag him that way to find out. Instead he says, "And I wonder what's cooking in there," pointing to the tavern-inn across the street. "Come on," he says to Al, "Let's go get something to eat."

Al asks, referring to the crowd, "Aren't you curious?"
"'Course," Ed responds, already walking across the street, "But I'm sure it's nothing." He turns and looks at Al, "Besides – we've got more important things to worry about. We need to get a plan together if we're ever going to find Roy."

Al is now crossing the street too. He nods, "Yeah, you're right. We need someplace quiet where we can plan."

Ed adds with a grin, "And lucky us, we've found an inn. A nice quiet room, soft beds, and plenty of food."

Al says, "Don't you think an inn is the first place the military would come looking for us?"

As they approach the door to the tavern-inn, Ed says, "With any luck, the government isn't gutsy enough to send troops across the border for a handful of escaped prisoners."

~

"Now everyone calm down!" the police chief shouts. "I understand your concerns, but-"

"But what?!" a townsperson cries. "He murdered a man in cold blood! Arrest him!"

Shouts of "Arrest him!" fly from the crowd, the officer again waving his hands.

"Quiet! All of you! – What I'm saying is… Well, if this guy is from Germany, I don't want the German government coming down on us for arresting one of their citizens."

"He KILLED one of our citizens!"

More angry cries fly from the crowd.

The officer finally concedes, "Very well. There's no getting around that. But understand that even by arresting him here, his government is probably going to extradite him back over there. They may not even prosecute him for this."

"We'll fight 'em!" "Yeah!"

The officer grumbles through his nose, crossing his arms. Then he turns and says quietly to a fellow policeman, "Call the office in Groningen. Let 'em know what's going on. This is about to turn into an international situation, and I don't want to be alone on this."

The fellow policeman nods and enters the station.

~

Inside the tavern, a small group of people encircle Sophie, she sitting in a chair with a blanket on her lap to cover the massive bloodstains that cover her dress. Her head hangs down, her eyes distant and empty.

A lady rubs her on the back, "Oh Sophie, please, let me take you home to get a change of clothes. And you should probably stay there, too – you need to rest."

Sophie's voice gurgles in her throat as tears begin to build, "I can't go back there… Everything there will remind me of him!" She holds her head in her hands, palms covering her eyes as the tears stream down.

The lady hugs her tightly, trying to comfort her, "Shh. It's okay, sweetie…"
Ed looks over at this scene. He says to Al, "Looks like we came at a bad time."

He and Al sit at a table under the stairs, Al counting their money. Al sighs, "Brother, I don't think we have enough to stay here for the night. We spent most of the money Jesska gave us on supplies."

Ed, lifting his cup of water to his lips, gives half a grin, saying with a dissatisfied tone, "Well, I guess it's back to camping in the woods then."

Entering through the front doors of the tavern is the police chief, followed by the small mob. "Where is he?" the police chief asks.

Ed and Al look over, curious.

The barkeep says, "I think he's upstairs-"

"No," a snide voice remarks, "I'm right here."

Descending the stairs are three men, Ed and Al as yet unable to see their faces from their position under the stairs. As the trio comes to a stop on the ground floor, Ed narrowly chokes on his drink as he sees the man's face.

Al gasps in disbelief, saying lowly, "What? He's here?"

Ed is trying so very hard not to laugh and draw attention to themselves, "Oh my god! Really? Yoki?!" He snickers, "This ought to be fun..."

Yoki walks to the center area in front of the bar and stops, his men staying back at the end of the bar closest to the stairs.

The police chief approaches Yoki. "Sir...I'm afraid I'm going to have to place you under arrest."

Yoki asks sarcastically, "Why, my good man, whatever for?"

The chief starts to turn a little red in the face, "You know very well what for! You shot a man! I've got thirty witnesses who saw you do it!"

Yoki brushes a bit of lint off his shoulder, "It was self-defense."

"What?!" The chief spurts, "You expect me to believe that?"

Yoki now narrows his eyes, glowering at the chief, "He spat in my face – quite literally. A man must defend his honor."

The screech of wood on wood sounds as Sophie rapidly rises from her chair, the chair toppling over and her blanket falling from her lap. "How dare you!" she cries.

Everyone looks over in her direction, Ed and Al now able to see her bloodstained dress.

Sophie's eyes bore through Yoki, "How dare you stand there and act like you have any honor! After you killed him?!"

Yoki chuckles, "My dear, men go to war and kill each other all the time. The way I see it, your man died for his cause. Is there nothing more noble than that?"

"Don't you try to justify this! You're nothing more than a murderer! MURDERER!"
Yoki frowns, pursing his lips, "Honestly, control yourself. This is about more than just your boyfriend. I did it to send a message."

"What," Sophie angrily cries, the tears burning hot in her eyes, "That you can just move in and take whatever you like?! Even people's lives?!"

"Precisely," Yoki says with a self-satisfied smile. "You see, in order to make the perfect empire, all citizens must comply with the wishes of its leader. Any and all opposition must be stamped into the ground."

"We are not your citizens!"

Yoki chuckles darkly, "Oh, not yet you're not. But soon. And the sooner you all make peace with that, the easier things will go. A child can fight and bite and scratch at his father, but rest assured, the father will take a belt to the child and put him in his place. If that is what we must do to the Netherlands, than so be it."

The tears stream down Sophie's face, but the passion in her voice never falters, "We are not your children! We do not belong to Germany! And we will bite and fight and scratch all we want to prove it!"

Yoki's shoulders slightly drop, he looking mildly fatigued, "Very well. If you must, you must," he says wearily. "Just know –," he reaches into his pocket, his voice dropping in pitch, "That there is no place in our Reich for people like you."

Sophie's eyes widen as she sees the glint of the pistol arising from Yoki's pocket. Everyone gasps and screams, backing away, the police chief fumbling to pull his gun from his holster.

BAM!

Before he knows it, a heavy fist is knocking Yoki's pistol from his hand. Yoki yelps, grabbing onto his throbbing wrist.

Ed, standing in front of Yoki, shouts at the police chief, "Don't just stand there! Arrest him!"

Yoki shouts, "Fulkerson! Volkerson!"

The two men at the end of the bar come barreling towards Ed, but one of them, Volkerson, is stopped when Al jumps on him from behind, wrapping his arms around the man's neck in a headlock.

The people in the tavern shout and scatter, most heading for the door, but others backing away to the walls to stay and watch the fight. Sophie is amongst them, she standing up on a chair to get a better view at these strangers who've saved her.

Ed dodges the punches being thrown at him by the large man, Fulkerson, in front of him, Ed stepping backwards to avoid the flying fists. He hits a barstool, losing his balance momentarily and narrowly falling backwards. A fist flies over his head, and grabbing onto the barstool to keep himself upright, Ed picks the stool up and swings it at the man, cracking him across the face!

Yoki watches his comrade fall to the floor. He shouts at Ed, "Why you impudent little-AHH!" Yoki tumbles forward as Al throws the second partner at Yoki from behind, he being crushed under the man's weight. "Augh! Get off of me, you buffoon!"

A heavy boot falls before Yoki's face, and he looks up into the eyes of the young blond man before
him. Ed says, "You know, you look familiar. I think I've seen your face somewhere before – on a mule farm!"

"What?!" Yoki sputters, "How dare you! Let me up!"

His partner, coming to, finally rolls off, both men getting back on their feet. Ed immediately assumes a fighting stance.

Al shouts, "Brother! Behind you!"

Ed ducks, avoiding the large man, and instead YOKI receives a punch to the face. Volkerson catches him as Yoki holds his bleeding nose, "OWW! You idiot! Watch what you're doing!"

Ed gives a smarmy grin and says, "Oh yeah! I remember now! It wasn't a mule farm – it was coal mine! And I gotta say, he was quite an ASS!"

Yoki howls, pointing a finger at Ed, "YAUGH! GET HIM!"

Al grabs Volkerson by the back of his jacket, turning him around, and POW! Al punches him across the jaw.

Ed throws a punch at the other one, but Fulkerson grabs him by the wrist to stop him. So instead, Ed pulls him in close and fast and headbutts him hard. Fulkerson clasps his aching face, time just enough for Ed to give him a left hook to the gut.

Yoki is scrambling towards the open door, but the mob is now crowding the entrance, blocking him. "Move, you filthy beasts! Let me out!"

The people reach their hands out, pushing Yoki back into the tavern as the chief comes up behind him with a pair of handcuffs.

Yoki struggles and shouts, "No! Stop this! You can't arrest me! You have no authority over me!"

Fulkerson lands on the floor with a thud, Volkerson being piled on top of him, and Ed puts his foot on top of them both to keep them down.

Some of the rowdier patrons shout and cheer, while many others breathe happy sighs of relief, clapping cheerfully.

Ed bows theatrically, "Thank you! Thank you!" Al is blushing a bit at the attention from the townspeople, and he just smiles and waves at them.

Sophie's eyes waver as emotions overwhelm her, and she can't untangle one from the other – joy, righteousness, grief – all of these things, all at once.

Ed glances over and sees her standing above the crowd. At first, he's not sure what he should say if anything, so he just gives a grin and a wave.

Sophie smiles back.

The chief, accompanied by some fellow officers, drags Yoki and his men out of the tavern, literally having to drag them up the street towards the police station, Yoki kicking his legs as he shouts, "High Command will hear about this, do you hear me?!"

Ed and Al stand at the door of the tavern, watching. Ed laughs, "What was that about kicking and screaming like a child?"
Al also laughs, "Looks like he speaks from experience."

"Excuse me," a soft voice says. Ed and Al look behind them – it's the lady from before, the one who stood up to Yoki. She says, "I want to thank you… for saving me."

Ed is quiet for a moment, and then tries to play it off, "Ah, it was nothing. I can't stand jerks like that. It was fun beating him up."

Al tries not to stare at the bloodstains on her dress, but he can feel a sadness growing inside of him, as if he can feel her own sadness. He mutters, "I'm sorry for your loss…"

Sophie looks down, the sorrow welling within her again, but she tries to keep a steady voice. "Me too… It's true though… Aleks died standing up for what he believed in…” The steadiness in her voice starts to go, "He died a noble man…"

As much as Ed tries to fight it, empathy wrenches at his heart. Almost begrudgingly, he sighs, eyes to the sky. (Given the opportunity, he likes to put as much distance between him and his feelings as possible – and here he finds himself face to face with them).

Sophie is surprised when she feels Ed's arm slip around hers. She looks up at him.

"Come on," he says in that very big-brother tone, "We'll take you home."

"Oh, um… thanks?"

"No prob," he says, putting on his signature grin, "If there're any more fellas like Yoki hanging about, I don't want to miss the chance to kick their butt."

Sophie manages a laugh. "Well, I don't know about that – but there are always squirrels you can chase off."

Ed and Al begin to escort Sophie down the streets of town, Al adding, "I wouldn't chase them off – I like squirrels."

Ed jibes, "Of course you do, you nut."

Once more, Sophie finds laughter.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:
Ed: Is this Yoki guy bothering you?
Townsperson: Auck, yes. He made a terrible mess of the blood fountain.
Al: *looks at it* It looks fine to me.
Townsperson: IT USED TO BE WATER!
Al: OH......WOW.....
New Alliances

The sun peeks through the window panes, its stark white light of dawn arousing all who sleep to wake.

Roy rolls over in bed, the first soft bed he's felt in a while. Even the beds on the ship weren't that comfortable. He's glad that the Lodge is more than just a meeting place, but a literal lodge for traveling Brothers. Without their help, Roy would have nowhere to go.
He lulls somewhere between sleep and wake, his dreams less dreams and more memories floating through his mind. Yesterday, after having met the glassblower, the shopkeeper took Roy from the shop to the local Lodge. There, the Brothers muddled about, unable to understand a thing Roy was saying, but still they treated him with all the hospitality due a guest.

Roy was waiting in a study, a quiet little room lined with books and a large round table standing in the center of the floor. He sat, twiddling his thumbs, waiting for something to happen, unsure as to why the Brothers left him here alone in this room.

Eventually there came 'round another Brother, this one speaking Roy's language: "Good day. Welcome to our Lodge. Charles Bonham, at your service."

Roy rises from his seat and shakes the man's hand, "Roy Mustang. Pleased to meet you." Roy smiles, "You're the first person all day who I've understood."

Bonham says, "When you study the works of Freud and Jung, it's good to have German under your belt," he chuckles, "Teaching German at private school helps, too. The Brothers have recruited me to be your translator for the time being. We hope that in time you will come to have English as your second language."

"I'll try my best," Roy responds.

"I'd be more than happy to teach you," Bonham offers. "Though I teach German to English-speakers, going in the other direction shouldn't be all too difficult."

Roy nods, "I'd appreciate it."

Bonham holds a hand out towards the chair, "Please, be seated."

Roy obliges, and Bonham joins him at the table.

"Now then," Bonham asks as he scoots in his own chair, "What brings you to London, Brother Mustang?"

Roy's eyes become very grim, "Matters of life and death."

"Trouble with the law?" Bonham raises an eyebrow.

"More than that," Roy continues, "The situation in Germany right now – it's not good. And if we don't do something soon, it's only going to spread, like a wildfire, and consume everything in its path."

* 

The smell of coffee wafts through the air, rich and warm. Ed's eyes flit open as he stirs, coming to life. He sits in a large armchair, a blanket bundled about him, and he glances over to where Al lies on the couch, he sleeping like a baby.

Ed stretches his arms above his head, groaning as he tries to work the kink out of his back. As he settles back down into the chair, he gazes around at the cozy little house around him – a brick fireplace, the embers long since burnt out; some flowers in a vase on a little end-table by the door; a bookcase set up against the side of the stairwell; and an open entryway leading into the kitchen from where the smell of baking sweet bread is coming from.

Ed's stomach rumbles as a blissful little smile crosses his face. *Mm! It smells good...*
Finally deciding to stand, Ed pulls himself to his feet, folding up the blanket and setting it on the armchair. He walks past Alphonse, treading lightly so as not to disturb his brother's slumber.

Ed enters the kitchen and sees the table set for breakfast, plates and cutlery lain out atop a simple plaid tablecloth, glasses set next to the plates, and napkins neatly folded beside those. At the open oven door is Sophie, pulling out a small pan and then closing the door. She looks over and sees Edward.

"Oh, good morning," she greets him.


Sophie smiles, "Breakfast of course. I made poppy seed and walnut muffins. They're my specialty."

"Oh, is that so?" Ed politely chats.

Sophie nods with a little, "Mm-hmm. Coffee's already on the boil, and I'm getting ready to start some eggs. Do you want any?"

Ed replies, "You didn't have to make all this. You should be resting."

Sophie looks down a little bit, still smiling, but her eyes are clearly sad, "No. It's all right. If I sit still, I'll go mad." She turns back towards the countertop, setting the pan of muffins on top of a small wire rack to cool. She says, "I like to keep moving. It keeps me busy."

Ed's eyes soften, his lips somewhere between a smile and a frown. He doesn't want to press the issue and make her any sadder – and even though he thinks she should take it easy, he can't say that he blames her for wanting to take her mind off of it.

Ed finally says, "Thanks for putting us up for the night."

Sophie manages a smile again, "It was nothing. It's the least I could do after you saved me." She picks up the coffee pot, saying, "Please, have a seat."

Ed pulls out a chair, saying, "Thanks," as he sits down.

A shuffling sound alerts Ed to Al's presence at the doorway. Al still looks half-asleep as he says with a groggy smile, "I smell food."

Sophie laughs, "Well, it is the kitchen." She motions a hand, "Come on in!"

After coffee has been poured and eggs have been cooked and plates have been set, Sophie joins the boys at the table, the three of them sitting around chatting.

Ed bites into a warm muffin, enjoying the nutty, buttery flavor. "Mm. These are good."

Sophie beams, "Told you."

Al says, "I can't even remember the last time I had muffins."

Ed reminds him, "It was that time Roy tried baking."

Al starts laughing, "Oh, right! How could I forget? They were so gooey and undercooked!"

Ed snickers, "Pretty funny considering he's supposed to be good with a flame, am I right?"
Sophie asks, "Who's Roy? A friend of yours?"

Ed replies, "Hmm? Oh, yeah. We're actually trying to find him right now."

"Oh?" Sophie tilts her head a bit. "Are you meeting him in town somewhere?"

Ed sets down his muffin as he stares at his plate, "That's just it. We don't know where he is."

Al somberly adds, "What happened to Aleks, what Yoki did to him – that's happening every day in Germany."

"Oh my god," Sophie says, putting a hand to her mouth. "Aleks said it was bad, but I never imagined it was that bad."

Ed continues, "The government came and took Roy away. And he's just one of many who've been kidnapped. They've been putting them into work camps, and who knows where else. We tracked down where Roy was, but luckily, he had already gotten free."

"Is he all right?" Sophie asks.

"Honestly, we don't know," Ed tells her.

"Sophie," Al inquires, "Have any other strangers passed through town? Somebody about Ed's height? Dark hair, thin eyes?"

Sophie shakes her head, "I can't say they have. Aside from Yoki and his men, you guys are the only new faces in town."

Ed sighs, face long and shoulders slumped, "Figures…"

"So how are you going to find him?" Sophie wonders.

Ed picks at the muffin in front of him, "That's what we need to figure out. We've got to get a plan of attack together. There's no telling which way he went when he busted out. We could be looking all over Europe for him."

Sophie cuts into her eggs, looking very matter-of-factly, "Well, you two can stay here as long as you like while you get a plan together."

Al asks, "Are you sure?"

"Of course. If you two are out to stop the Nazis, then by all means – our home is your home…It's what Aleks would have done…" Quietly, she lifts her fork to her mouth, looking down at her plate "…And I can't do any less than that…" She eats the bit of eggs hanging from her fork.

Both boys are quiet for a while. Then Ed says gently but with a grin, "One can only hope he was half as brave as you."

Sophie responds with a soft, but sad smile, as if to say, 'Thanks.'

* *

"Wow," Roy says as he shields his eyes from the sun to get a better view of the large clock tower before him. "I guess they don't call it Big Ben for nothing."

Bonham sounds like an artist exhibiting his finest works as he says with pride, "Actually, the clock
"The tower isn't called Big Ben – it's the large bell *inside* the tower that holds that name!"

"Oh, really?" Roy responds, mildly impressed. "That's neat."

"Come, come!" Bonham says enthusiastically, "There's so much more to see."

Bonham starts to take off, Roy following after him. "I really appreciate you showing me the sights and all," Roy starts, "But I was hoping you'd show me something more practical – like where I can find an apartment, or maybe where the market is…"

"Oh, posh!" Bonham responds, "In good time. This is your first time in London, I want to see to it that you get to see all the wonderful things we have to offer."

Roy lowly hums in his throat, a little annoyed. *He's going to drag me around all day when all I want to do is relax…* He then asks aloud, "Well, since we're already out, do you think we can stop by a bookstore? I think I should buy a dictionary or something."

Bonham stops walking, putting a hand to his chin, "Well, yes, I guess that makes sense. I was going to give you one of my extra Beginner's books, but all the instructions are in English." He laughs a jolly laugh, "A lot of good that would do you! Ha-ha-ha!"

Bonham continues his laughter, Roy cutting in, asking, "…Ssso? Is there a bookstore around here?"

"Oh yes, of course!" Bonham realizes he's getting off-track, "Right this way – *lovely* little place!"

At the book shop, Bonham peruses the shelves, muttering as he reads the spines of the volumes: "Let's see here – English to Italian, English to Latin, English to Greek – French?! Rubbish! Get it out of here!" He tosses the book over his shoulder.

Roy in the meanwhile is casually strolling through the aisles of short, waist-high bookshelves, hoping no one realizes that he's with the odd fellow over by the dictionaries. He stops at a spinning rack lined with postcards and other tourist knick-knacks. Roy gives it a gentle twirl, scanning what all the rack has to offer, and he comes across a city map. *Huh,* he thinks to himself, *This ought to come in handy.*

He glances back towards Bonham's way, to see whether or not he's found what he's searching for – when in the aisle beside him, Roy sees a lovely lady! Her blonde hair is done up in a tight bun; little gold earrings dangle from her ears; petite glasses sit before her deep brown eyes; and her red lipstick is so bold that it smacks Roy right in the gut.

It's not until she glances his way that he realizes he's staring, and quickly, Roy whips around the other way, certain that his face is as red as her lipstick. *Oh god, she's looking right at me! …* Cautiously, Roy turns his head to peek over his shoulder – the lady has moved on, browsing her way towards the back of the shop.

Roy heaves a sigh, a hand on his chest. *Well that was embarrassing…* Still, out of the corner of his eye, he wants to gaze upon this lovely lady. *She's so beautiful… I wonder if…* And then his thoughts screech to a halt. Roy smacks a palm against his forehead. *Dammit! I couldn't ask her out even if I wanted to! I DON'T KNOW ENGLISH!*

Roy takes a breath, trying to calm himself, feeling a bit foolish. He picks up the map from the rack and goes to the register to pay for it, when there on the counter, he sees a bouquet of pink carnations all sitting in a pot, a price tag dangling off of it.

*Say now!* Roy thinks. *You don't have to speak the same language to know what a flower means.*
He plucks one of the carnations from the pot and sets it with his map, the clerk ringing up the purchase. Roy stuffs the map into his pocket, and gently he picks up the flower by its long stem. He clears his throat, taking a moment to collect his nerves –

And then Roy turns around – but the lady is gone! His eyes dart back and forth, from one side of the shop to the other. But alas, as quickly as she had appeared, the mystery woman has disappeared.

Bonham, a small dictionary in hand, joins Roy at the counter. "What have you got there?"

"Oh, um," Roy's not sure what to do with the carnation now. "I just… thought this would look good," he says, snapping off most of the stem and leaving not but an inch or two on it, then tucking it neatly into the breast-pocket of his jacket.


In the living room, Al sits next to Ed on the couch, both of them studying the atlas that lies open on Ed's lap.

"Okay, the camp was here," says Ed, pointing to a spot on the map. He traces along it as he speaks, "We followed the river out this way. But it's possible that Roy made his way south back into town."

"Maybe not," Al contradicts, "All the people at the camp were wearing prison uniforms. Someone in town would have noticed him."

"Not if he stole clothes off a clothes line in the middle of the night," Ed considers.

"And for that matter," Al asks, "Do we even know what time of day he got out? That would have determined a lot of his actions."

"Augh," Ed grumbles, crossing his arms as he leans back on the sofa, "We'll never find him this way. There're a hundred different directions he could have gone in, and no telling which way he actually went." He runs his fingers through his hair. "I wish we could have grabbed a guard and questioned him. Why did Kimblee have to go and blow up the camp?"

"Waitwaitwait!" Al throws up his hands in disbelief, "Kimblee? You mean to tell me Kimblee was there? That explains everything."

Ed gives a short laugh, "Yeah, just like Kimblee to make everything go boom, huh?"

Al shakes his head, lightly laughing as he still tries to wrap his head around this. "Wow… just… Wow. It's amazing how many people we keep running into on this side…"

"Hey guys," Sophie says as she enters from the kitchen. "I've made some tea if you'd like some."

Al smiles brightly, "Sure. Thanks!"

"No problem," Sophie replies as she retreats back into the kitchen to fetch the kettle.

Ed flips from one page to the other, studying the maps intensely. "It really seems like the smart thing for him to have done would be to cross the border."

Al points out, "Yeah, but Roy may not have even known that he was near the border. I'm sure they
didn't tell him exactly where he was going when they picked him up."

Ed continues his frustrated grumbling as Sophie returns with a tray, carrying three mugs and the kettle of tea. She sets the tray down on the coffee table in front of the couch as she says, "Sounds like you guys have hit a snag."

"Tell me about it," Ed vents.

Sophie pours some tea into the mugs, "Try this. My brother, Matthijs, says this tea helps him concentrate when he's working." She passes each of the boys a cup.

Al carefully handles the hot mug. "Mm, it smells nice. Kind of minty."

"It's exotic tea from Java," Sophie tells them. "My brother works as a trader in Amsterdam, when he's not busy traveling the globe. Right now he's in the East Indies trying to find the next big spice," she giggles, "If there is such a thing." She takes a seat in the armchair with her own cup. "Sometimes he gets extra money and sends out gifts to the family."

Al carefully sips at the hot liquid, and then remarks, "Well your brother has good taste. This is delicious."

Ed, who's been busy staring at the map this whole time, finally lifts his own mug to his nose, taking a good whiff of it. Indeed, it does have a strong minty scent to it, and when he takes a small taste of it, there seems to be almost a bayleaf sort of flavor to it.

"Mm, not bad," he concedes, the warmth of the drink calming his nerves a tad bit.

"So what have you got so far?" Sophie asks, looking at the atlas from where she sits.

Ed says, "A hundred different possibilities and no telling which one's the right one."

Sophie asks, "Well, how did you find him in the first place?"

Ed looks up from the atlas to her, "What do you mean?"

"I mean how did you know to look at that camp? Did you just aimlessly wander and hope for the best? Or did you raid a government office and look through their files?"

Ed chuckles, "Nah, nothing like that. We actually had some help from…" Ed slows for a minute, and then brightens up, "Say, that's it!"

"What's it?" Al asks.

Ed continues, a bit excitedly, "Radio! Just like Jesska and Mr. Tucker – we can listen in on the airwaves and see if there's any talk about the escaped prisoners. If the government is trying to track down Roy, we can find out what they know, and maybe we can get to him first."

Al tilts his head a little, thinking this over and then asking, "Why not just call out over the radio and see if Roy responds?"

Ed considers this, but says, "I doubt Roy's listening to military frequencies, if he's near a radio at all. And besides – if we start calling out, there might be a way for the government to trace it back to us."

"Oh…" Al says, hanging his head a little, "I guess I didn't think about that…"
"Sophie," Ed asks her, "Is there anywhere in town where we can buy a radio?"

Sophie puts a finger to her chin, her eyes drifting to the ceiling, "Well, we do have a hobby shop around here. And I think Mr. Johansson sells radio kits."

"Great!" Ed says, rising to his feet, "Come on, Al! Let's go pick one up!"

Al asks a little skeptically, "Ed, do you even know the first thing about building radios?"

Ed waves a hand enthusiastically, "Ah, I'm sure they come with instructions. It can't be all that difficult."

Sophie sets her teacup on the coffee table and rises as well. "If you wait for me to grab my coat, I'll show you guys the way."

"Thanks," Ed beams.

"No problem."

* *

"…Wait… I think I've got it…" Bonham rotates the map in his hands, trying to orient himself in relation to the many lines and squiggles passing over the paper.

Roy sighs, "I thought you said you knew your way around this city."

"I do!" Bonham defends, "It just, well, I've never been on this side of town, or at least not since I was a child anyway, and mind you, I'm no spring chicken."

Roy puts his hands in his pockets, looking begrudgingly up at the sky as it starts to sprinkle on him, "Should have bought an umbrella while we were at that shop."

Bonham chuckles, "First thing you'll learn about London – it's always raining." Bonham looks around and then says, "Ah! A bobby! Jolly good! He can give us directions!" Bonham trots off in the direction of the policeman, calling, "Excuse me! Officer! I require assistance!"

Roy stays where he is, only backing up a few steps to get under the cover of an awning stretching out from the café behind him. He leans his back against the wall, absently staring out at the grey city before him.

When suddenly a spot of red catches his eye – lipstick. It's her! The lady from the shop!

She's on the other side of the street, walking along with an umbrella to shield her head from the drizzle in the air.

Roy's heart pounds. Should I go over there? Should I give her the flower? Yeah but if I do, she'll want to know my name – and I don't know how to introduce myself…

The lady turns a corner, heading down an alleyway, and she begins to shrink away from sight.

Dejected, Roy once again sighs, annoyed at his own lack of nerves. Why am I so scared? She's just a woman – she can't be that scary…

And then he gasps as he notices that two large, unsavory looking men turn down the same alleyway, following in behind the lady.
Shit!

Without thinking, Roy runs out from under the awning.

In the alleyway, the lady hears footsteps behind her. She turns around to see the two large men following her.

"Hey there, little birdy," one of them says, "Whatcha doin' walkin' all by yourself?"

The other adds, "You shouldn't go down dark alleyways. Bad people hang out here."

The lady scoffs at them, "Well you're in the alleyway – I assume you're bad people."

The first chortles a little, gently waving his hands a little defensively, "Ey, nothin' like that. We're just tryin' to give you some friendly advice, that's all."

The other lends out his arm, hoping she'll slip her arm around his, "Come on then, love – why not let a couple of strappin' young lads escort you?"

She smirks, "When I find a couple of strapping young lads, maybe I will."

One begins laughing, "Hawhaw! This one's a sharp one!"

"haji!" A third voice calls.

They all turn towards the main street to see a man with short black hair standing there, a pink carnation in his pocket.

He calls, "ɪð̥sɪnʁuə!"

"What's he say?" One of them asks.

The other responds, "What's your problem, mate?"

The man, shorter than they, comes charging at them, his fist wound back ready to strike. But a simple sidestep from the two men, and the third man teeters forward as he swings his fist and connects with nothing but air.

The lady takes a couple of steps back to prevent being bowled over by this third stranger as he falls forward onto the ground. She looks down at him, asking, "Are you all right?"

He doesn't answer – instead he jumps back to his feet, and turns around to face the two large men, putting his fists up with a scowl on his face.

They laugh, "What's with this one?"

"Sorry, mate. Is she your girl? We didn't know-"

The only answer they receive is a warcry as the short man comes barreling towards them again, once more his fist wound back. Only this time, one of the two of them stretches out his own fist, and the short man plows right into it, face-first!

He reels backwards a little, holding his nose.

"Hey!" The lady shouts, "That wasn't nice!"
The large man defends himself, "He started it!"

The other makes his way over to the lady, putting his arm around her, "If this is your man, he's not much of a fighter, is he?"

Before he has a chance to say anything else, the large man finds himself being elbowed in the gut by the lady, followed by a backhanded fist to the face!

He holds his face, "Hey! What the-!"

WHACK! She smacks him right across the jaw with her folded umbrella, and he does a little half-pirouette before hitting the ground.

The other, who is currently holding back the short man as he vainly attempts to swing a punch, sees his friend fall down. "Oi! What gives?!"

BOOM! A high-heeled kick to the side of his ribs knocks the wind out of him, he clutching his aching side as he roughly coughs, bending over as he wheezes. The toe of her shoe connects with the center of his forehead, and all the world is lost behind a veil of stars and brightly colored spots.

Roy, his nose still throbbing, puts a finger under his nostrils to keep the blood from trickling out. He looks around at both men laid out on the pavement. "Wow… That was some good fighting you did…"

He realizes the lady is giving him an odd look.

Roy lets out a short nervous laugh, "Oh, right. Um… Oh!"

He suddenly remembers the flower in his pocket. He reaches for it and pulls it out, only to realize it has been crushed in the fight, its petals all gone save a for a twisted, crumpled few still desperately clinging to the bud. Roy feels his heart drop as he looks at the trampled carnation.

Crestfallen, he sighs, "…Damn. Nevermind." His shoulders fall, "It would never have worked out anyway. You can't understand a thing I'm saying. All the same, I think you're very beautiful."

The lady smiles at him, "Why, thank you."

Roy is alarmed and stunned. OH GOD! SHE UNDERSTANDS ME!

The lady continues, "I appreciate you trying to help me and all, but honestly," she looks at the fallen men on the ground, "I don't think they were all that dangerous."

"R-really?" Roy asks. "Then why knock them out?"

The lady chuckles in her nose as she shrugs and then says, "Quite frankly, because they were annoying."

"Oh…" Roy rubs the nape of his neck as he asks, "So… Where'd you learn German?"

The lady, reopening her umbrella to cover herself from the constant mist falling, says, "I have a fondness for languages. Studying them is my hobby."

"Oh, that's neat" Roy says, trying to sound casual, but honestly a little nervous, "So, do you travel a lot?"

"Not as much as I'd like to," she responds. She walks a little closer to him, extending her hand,
"Lisa Hawkeye, nice to meet you."

Roy responds, shaking her hand, "Roy Mustang, pleased to meet you, too."

Lisa is quiet for half a moment, and then says with a small grin, "Mustang like the horse."

Roy chuckles, "Yes, exactly. I get that a lot."

"Well Mr. Mustang," Lisa says, "You seem like an interesting fellow," she reaches into the pocket of her overcoat and pulls out a small handbag, "Unfortunately, I have somewhere to be right now – but I'd love to get together and continue chatting later, if you like."

Roy lights up, feeling a bit of heat rise to his cheeks, "Uh, yes, yeah, that'd be great."

Lisa opens her small handbag and pulls out a card and hands it to him, "Lovely. Meet me here at six o'clock. I think you'll find the restaurant scene in London quite wonderful."

Roy takes the card, looking it over. "Six o'clock, got it."

She snaps her handbag shut, slipping it back into her pocket. "It was nice meeting you."

"Yes," Roy responds with a smile as he tries hard not to let his voice squeak like a teenager, "It was nice meeting you, too!" As she starts to walk away, he adds, "I promise I'll bring a flower that's not crushed this time!"

She lightly laughs as she waves goodbye, Roy waving back to her. And a turn around another corner and she's gone.

Roy stands there for a while, in a happy daze. But then a groaning from his feet makes him realize that the two big men are waking up!

Quickly, Roy runs out of the alley, back across the street to the café.

Bonham comes walking out of the café – "THERE you are! Where on earth did you disappear to?"

And then Bonham is taken aback, "Good God, man! What happened to your nose?"

Roy responds, "Er, um… I… ran into a pole…"

*

The spacious work-shed is lined with tools – various things like a rake and a hoe and a watering can, gardening tools in addition to the standard building tools like hammers and screwdrivers all laying around.

Ed turns a screw to keep in place the metal sheeting he's working with, the base of a medium-sized radio set on the workbench, its insides exposed with several large vacuum tubes and wires and other little copper whatnots stuck here and there. A microphone lays abandoned off to the side – though it came with the kit, there'll be no need for it if all they're doing is listening.

Sophie pokes her head into the large work-shed, looking over at Ed. "So, how's it going?"

"It's going," he tells her, brushing little filaments of metal scraps from his work area. "But I worry that this radio's not going to be powerful enough to pick up all the frequencies we want. We might be able to hear some local broadcasts, including anything coming across the border. But if we want to hear anything coming out of Berlin, I think I'm going to have to rig up a long antenna and hope for the best."
"Gosh," Sophie adds, "I wish you had said something back at the shop. Mr. Johansson probably sells antennas as well."

"Probably not one as big as we need," Ed continues to screw the housing of the radio into place. "Besides," he says, "It doesn't have to be prefabricated. All I need is a lot of metal and I can make an antenna all my own."

"Really?" Sophie asks, "You could build something like that from scratch?"

"Sure," Ed grins, "It's easy!"

"Gosh, you're pretty handy," Sophie admits. "Do you build things all the time?"

"Yeah, it's what I do," Ed tells her. "I'm an engineer, with a specialty in chemistry."

"Wow, really?" she asks, a little amazed, "I wouldn't have guessed."

"Why's that?" Ed asks.

"Well," she mutters for a moment, "It's just – the way you and your brother beat up Yoki's men like that – I never would have taken you for the bookish type."

Ed grins again, "Looks can be deceiving."

Sophie giggles a little. But then a distant rumbling catches her attention. "Uh-oh. Did you hear that?"

Ed looks over his shoulder from the workbench to the door, "Hear what?"

Sophie has turned to face the outside, looking up at the sky, "Sounds like a storm's moving in."

Ed leaves the work table and joins Sophie, glancing out the open doorway. "Are you sure? There's not a cloud in the sky."

Sophie chuckles, "Looks can be deceiving. The weather can change in an instant around here, especially during flood season."

"Which is far away, I hope."

Sophie shakes her head, "Sorry, but it's due any day now. And once the storms start, they can last for several days."

"Great," Ed croaks. He turns back to the inside of the shed, heading back to the radio, "I better get an antenna up soon. We don't have days to fall behind. For all we know Roy's in trouble right now and we need to find him as soon as possible."

Roy looks at the sign above the restaurant, and then down to the card in his hand and back to the sign again. "Yeah, this is the place," he mutters to himself.

He tucks the card into his pocket, another pink carnation in his other hand, and he enters the restaurant. The lighting is mellow, the warm yellow flickering of the candle-lit chandeliers bouncing off the dark brown wooden paneling of the walls.

Roy approaches the host stand, and he looks at the man standing behind the small podium and
asks, "Roy Mustang?"

The host flips through the reservation booklet, "ɑ jɛs, məstæŋ. pliz – ðts we.." The host steps out from behind his stand and begins to lead Roy through the restaurant. Roy glances around, this place a very fine-looking establishment – clean and pressed white tablecloths, shimmering glasses and gleaming china. Various smells drift through the place, a mixture of savoury dishes and sweet desserts. The gossiping of diners mixes with the soft sounds of the string quartet that plays in the corner.

Roy and his host approach a set of double doors, a private dining hall. The host opens the door, politely motioning his hand for Roy to enter. Roy nods as a way of saying thanks, and then enters the private dining hall, the host quietly closing the door behind him.

The room is midsized – not extravagantly large, but nor is it small. Here too the room is lined with the dark wood paneling, though the carvings upon them are slightly more intricate. There is a door at the other end of the room, perhaps leading to the kitchens so that servers can bring food in and out without having to interact with customers outside of the private dining. In the center of the room there stands a long table, clearly meant for parties.

Roy ponders to himself, Why did she choose this table? It's just going to be the two of us, isn't it?

That's when the door at the back of the room opens and in filter several men – plainclothed, wearing everyday street clothes and business suits. The double doors behind Roy open and in come a few more men, closing and locking the doors behind them. All of the men line the room, they standing at attention but with their eyes squarely fixed on Roy.

What is this? Roy frantically thinks, a sense of panic arising within him. He can feel the blood pumping into his arms and legs, ready to fight if necessary. And then like a hammer, realization hits him, he internally screaming at himself, Damn it! I'm such an idiot! OF COURSE she was speaking German – she's a German spy!

From the door at the back of the room enters Lisa, she smiling a crafty smile as her sharp eyes glint through her thin glasses. "So you're the Mustang who has the Germans scrambling right now. I must admit it was a bit of luck running into you. You made my job all that much easier."

"What is this?" Roy shouts at her. "Tell me!"

"No need to raise your voice," She says as she pulls a cigarette out of a small silver case. "The first thing you must learn about England is that we value manners here." As she raises the cigarette towards her lips, one of her companions lights it for her. She draws a long drag from it and then slowly blows out a long billow of smoke. "So please, keep a civil tongue."

"Who are all these people?" Roy questions, he glaring at the woman, "And who are you really?"

Lisa cradles her elbow in her hand, letting the smoke of the cigarette lazily wisp through the air. "You can calm down," she tells him, "There's no need to fret. We're on your side."

"Of course you are," Roy snips sarcastically.

Lisa continues, "There's been a lot of chatter about you over the airwaves, Mr. Mustang – you and a couple of people called the Elrics, am I correct? Seems that you all have made some very important enemies in the German High Command."

Roy tilts his chin down a little, never taking his eyes off of her. "You still haven't answered me. Who are you?"
Lisa shrugs, passing her cigarette from one hand to the other, "Of course, where are my manners." She reaches over to the ashtray on the table and sets her cigarette down. She looks back up at Roy and says, "We are Adelphi."

"Adelphi? Roy asks.

"Precisely," Lisa affirms. "Part of the British Secret Service as it were. We're code breakers – interceptors of foreign intelligence, which we crack and translate in order to ensure the safety of the Crown." She picks her cigarette back up, taking a quick puff and then saying, "You realize, of course, that under ordinary circumstances I wouldn't divulge any of this information in the least. But in your case, I'm willing to make an exception."

"And why's that?" Roy asks, a sudden bit of impishness arising within him, "Because I'm so handsome?"

Lisa chuckles, "Charming." Again she cradles her elbow in her hand, her tobacco poised between her slender fingers, "It's because you've been on the inside," she tells him. "You have firsthand knowledge of German operations, information we'd like to know."

"Is that so?"

Lisa slowly strides towards Roy, a trail of smoke lingering behind her, "Here is our proposition: You tell us everything you know about what the German government's been up to. In return, we'll see to it that you are provided protection and amnesty under the Crown. We'll find you a place to live, give you a stipend until you can get on your feet, and make sure that the Germans don't get wind of where you are." She comes to a stop in front of him, he able to see her eyes clearly through her glasses now. "These are my terms. Do they sound reasonable, Mr. Mustang?"

Roy stares back at the lady before him, he wondering to himself, Can I really trust them? I mean, even if they're not German, they're still working for a government. His eyes lift to the men lining the room. Honestly, they seem just like the Nationalists. Still – His eyes come to rest back on Lisa. They're probably my best option…

"All right," Roy tells her, "I agree to your terms – on one condition."

"And what's that?" Lisa asks, lifting her cigarette to her lips.

"I want to join your group."

She stops halfway through a puff, blinking momentarily as if trying to process what she's heard. . "…Beg pardon?"

Roy's voice grows grim, "You haven't seen what I've seen. The things that are happening in Germany… I can't just sit back and let the Nationalists keeps doing what they're doing. If I can help you stop them, I want in."

Lisa gives a slightly incredulous chuckle, "That's easier said than done I'm afraid. You're not a British citizen, you don't speak English – and though you could be considered a refugee, the fact of the matter is you are still a German. I don't think my superiors would be all too interested in letting you in on our operations."

"What if the information I have proves highly significant?"

"Such as?"
Roy presses, "I'm not just talking about troop movements or the locations of some munitions depots," Roy stops, momentarily unsure if this is the right thing to do, but decides it is, "I know about a top secret weapon."

Lisa narrows her eyelids, just ever so slightly, questioning, "Is that so?"

"You said I have the Germans scrambling," Roy tells her, "Why do you think that is? Because they didn't want me to get out and tell the world what they're working on."

Lisa grows quiet, silently sucking in a long breath of tobacco, her sharp gaze never leaving Roy's, the hawk part of Hawkeye making itself very clear. She slowly exhales, the whitish-grey smoke clouding the air as it rises upwards, making her look not unlike a dragon.

Finally, she closes her eyes, looking away as she taps what little bit is left of her cigarette against a large silver bracelet on her wrist, "Very well then, Mr. Mustang," she lays the finished, burnt out butt on the table, "If my bosses find that the information you provide us with is indeed of a highly lucrative nature, I'll see to it that they seriously consider allowing you to join our ranks. Just know that nothing is guaranteed."

Though his lips are not, Roy's eyes are smiling. "I promise I'll work hard." Finally, he lifts the carnation in his hand, holding it out to her. "So… Are we going to have dinner or what?"

Again, Lisa chuckles, although this time there is a sincerity (if not a pity) about it. "I suppose I did bring you here under those pretenses. It would only be fair."

*

The gentle breeze is gaining strength, turning into a full-fledged wind, the sound of the air rushing past the open window.

Al has scooted the coffee table from the center of the room and has placed it up against the wall, near to the only electrical outlet in the room.

Sophie gives a short laugh as she apologizes, "Yeah, sorry about that. This old town hardly has any electricity. Mostly everyone still depends on gas."

"That's okay," Al says as he sets the radio on top of the coffee table. "We only need enough electricity to power this and we should be good." He strings the long cord coming from the back of the radio down the side of the table, and on hands and knees he plugs the radio in to the outlet. He sits back up and the flips a switch, and the radio crackles to life – though nothing but static comes through.

"Is it supposed to do that?" Sophie asks.

"Hang on," Al says as he turns the radio back off. He stands, walking to the open window nearby, and pokes his head out, looking up. "Okay, Ed! We're ready down here!"

"Hang on!" Ed's voice calls from above. "Catch!"

A long length of cord tumbles down from the roof, Al catching the end while the other end stays on the roof with Ed. Carefully, Al slides his length of cord over to the radio, and attaches it to something on the back. He turns the radio back on, and this time, the very faint sounds of voices come through, all warbled and jumbled together.

"Well," Sophie says, "It sort of works…"
"Come on," Al says, motioning his head towards the door. "Let's go see how Ed's doing."

Outside, the skies are growing grey as the winds are picking up, pushing masses of clouds into the area. The wind blows passed Ed, whipping his hair about, he trying to keep it out of his eyes to keep his vision clear as tries to stand the long metal pole he holds straight.

Al and Sophie come out of the house, Al looking up to the roof and cupping his hands around his mouth, "Ed!" he shouts up to his brother, "Do you need any help?"

"Yeah!" Ed calls back down, "Hold the bottom of this, will you? I can't get it stable!"

The bottom of the antenna reaches all the way to the ground, it set in a small hole yet to be filled. Al comes over and grabs onto the pole, holding it straight, while on the roof, Ed begins to tie down some lengths of wire to suspend the antenna in place.

"Guys!" Sophie shouts over the growing winds, "I really think we should wait! It's dangerous up there! You could get struck by lightning!"

"All the more reason to work faster!" Ed responds. "The sooner we get this up, the sooner I can get down!" Amusingly, a large leaf smacks Ed in the face, throwing his concentration for a moment. He brushes the leaf aside and resumes tying down the wires. "Sophie!" He calls, "I need you to go inside and see if we're picking anything up on the radio!"

"Are you sure you'll be okay out here?"

"Yes, now hurry!"

Sophie scurries back inside, the winds starting to howl across the open door and window. She goes over to the coffee table, the radio still on, and she begins turning the large knob on its face. Varying strengths and pitches of fuzz crackle through the speakers, faint ghostly voices disappearing as fast as they arrive.

She stops when she hears a strange little melody coming through, very clearly, a singer vocalizing:

"Ce n'est que Madelon mais pour nous c'est l'amour, Quand Madelon vient nous servir à boire..."

Sophie smiles, rising to her feet and jogging back out the front door. The blustery weather makes the bottom of her dress dance about, and she swears she can feel drops of water starting to land on her skin. Sophie calls back up to Ed, "Hey! We're getting something! I think it's coming from France!"

Al looks up to the roof, "How far away is that?"

"Far enough," Ed says, sliding his way over the roof tiles towards the ladder at the edge of the house.

"Be careful!" Sophie says, concerned.

Ed gently slides off the roof, putting his foot on the ladder, "I'm fine – Ahh!" The wind causes the ladder to shake, and quickly Ed grabs onto the edge of the roof.

"Ed!" Al, who was filling the hole back up with dirt, quickly darts over to the ladder and grabs the bottom of it.

Sophie has a hand on her chest, "Are you okay?"
"Yeah," Ed doesn't look at either of them, lest they see the embarrassment on his face. "I'm good."

Inside, they close the door behind them. Ed walks over to the open window and gently slides it shut, not too hard now otherwise it might damage the cord from the antenna. The wind whistles through the small opening left between the window and its sill.

The sprightly French music continues to carry through the house, the singer from before now replaced with a lively accordion.

Ed kneels down in front of the coffee table, and he starts fiddling with the knob, turning it all the way to the left. He's greeted with the fuzzy static, and as he slowly rotates the dial from left to right, a multitude of sounds and voices roll forth from the speaker.

"...les principales nouvelles ce aujourd'hui... and now, lediz and dʒɔntʃəlmɔn, for maj nekst trik... Oliepriserne fortsætter med at stige..."

Al leans over Ed's shoulder, staring at the funny little box, "How do we know when to stop?"

Ed keeps turning the dial, "Whenever we hear something we can understand..."

Another pop of static fuzz, and a station comes in: "The sooner everyone understands that Jazz is not real music, but merely noise meant to distract the German people from higher culture, the sooner the government will do the right thing and ban Jazz altogether!"

"Yes!" Ed cheers. "A radio host complaining? That's gotta be from Germany."

Sophie giggles, "I don't think complaining is solely a German trait."

Al asks, "Now what?"

"Now we sit and wait," Ed says as he settles himself on the floor, crossing his legs. "While we're at it," he adds, "We should be taking down notes. Better to write it down than just trying to remember it all."

Sophie says, "Hang on – I'll go find some pencils and paper," and she starts to make her way for the stairs.

Al watches as she climbs up them, and then he looks at his brother. "Do you think she's okay?"

"Sophie? I'm sure she's fine," Ed says. "This is probably the most exciting thing to happen in this town."

"Aside from...?" Al slows.

Ed quietly acknowledges, "Well... Yeah, aside from that... Everybody deals with grief differently. I guess keeping herself busy is how she deals with it."

Ed can feel Al's gaze upon him, and he wishes his brother would stop because he certainly doesn't want to talk about this...

Sophie comes back down the stairs, a notepad and pencil in one hand, and a small stack of paper with a couple more pencils in the other. "This should do," she smiles at them as she joins the boys on the floor. She passes out the pencils and paper, "I'll try to take as many notes as I can – though understand, German sounds really funny."

Al points at himself, "Even we sound funny?"
Sophie giggles, "Especially you guys. Your accents are so thick!"

Ed nudges her in the arm with his elbow as he grins, "Says you. Maybe we're speaking normally and you're the one with the accent."

They all laugh for a while, the laughter slowly dying down as they turn their attention to the radio, keeping their ears open for anything significant.

The room is organized chaos – the tall walls are lined with monstrous machines clicking and whirring, long tables stretch from one end of the room to the other, men wearing headsets man radios as they furiously scribble on paper. Shrill electronic beeps emanate from a telegraph machine, and here and there men dash back and forth to deliver folders of documents.

Roy follows in behind Lisa as she escorts him through the room, the click of her high-heels seemingly in time with the clicking of the machines. Someone greets her, and she greets back, "Good day."

Roy also politely greets the stranger, in English, "Goot day."

Lisa chuckles, "Good – with a D at the end. You're still saying it with a T."

"Oh," Roy glances down at the floor.

"That's all right; you're learning," she says as she continues to show him through the room. "This is the heart of our operations," she tells him. "Though we do some field work now and again, the radio room is our home."

Roy ponders, "How do they hear anything over all the noise?"

"You grow used to it," Lisa tells him as she finally stops in front of an empty chair. "After a while, you'll learn to phase out the background noise entirely. And all you'll hear is that which comes from your headsets." She pulls out the chair, "This will be your station. Though we listen to all foreign entities, since you are a native German speaker, you'll be listening in to the German broadcasts."

Roy takes his seat and looks at the set-up before him, dozens of knobs and dials and buttons and switches all greeting him. He looks back up at Lisa, "Does this thing come with an instruction manual?"

She gives a sly chuckle, "No need to be intimidated. You won't have to touch more than the On/Off switch and the volume dial," she points them out as she tells him. "We've already got this radio tuned into Nazi frequencies. All we need you to do is write down what they're saying. Short-hand is better – unless you're somehow magic, you'll never be able to keep up with everything."

Roy reaches across the desk and slides a pencil and notepad close to him. "Just… write down anything?"

Lisa flips the radio on for him, "Write down anything that sounds particularly suspicious, anything that sounds like it's code – sentences that seems out of context or don't make sense. Especially," she adds with a wink, "Anything that has to do with that little secret you told us about."

Roy tells her, "They're probably using code for that, too. I'm not sure what they're referring to that weapon as."
"Nonetheless," Lisa continues, "If you think it has something to do with the German plans for their secret weapon, by all means, write it down. And if it so happens that they're tracking the movements of your friends, the Elrics, let us know immediately."

Roy's heart thumps, "Would you really be able to get them out of Germany?"

Lisa says with a self-assured smile, "Of course. There's no way we'd let the Germans get their hands on a couple of Grade-A scientists like that. They'd be put to much better use working for us."

"What?" Roy asks, a little perplexed.

Lisa pushes her glasses into place, "If the Elrics are as prodigious as reports lead us to believe, it would certainly give us an advantage to have them building bombs for us rather than the Nazis, don't you agree?"

Roy doesn't answer, trying not to let his disapproval show, but still his brows furrow. Gingerly, he slips the headsets onto his head, the chattering and buzzing on the radio filling his ears.

"And Mustang," Lisa says to him.

He looks back up at her.

She says with a grin, "Good to have you on board."

He grins back and gives her a firm nod. But as she walks away, the furrow returns to his brow as he frowns.

*Darn it,* he sighs inwardly, *This is exactly what I didn't want to happen. It doesn't matter which government it is – the last thing I want is for them to be using Ed and Al's talents to build weapons… They're better than that…*

For the second day in a row, the sun has risen and Ed has been unaware of it, he still thinking it nighttime for a solid half hour before realizing it is already a new day. Though he and Al have been taking shifts in listening in on the radio frequencies, Ed has been unable to rest peacefully in his downtime, eager to get back to the radio as soon as possible.

Now the sun is already high in the sky, peeking through the cracks of the massive grey clouds that still cover the sky. Ed's head dips and nods now and again, his eyes heavy, the tip of his pencil perched on the paper, ready to write when the moment strikes.

Random sounds pass through the speaker, all of them relatively meaningless, clearly military, but none of them sounding like they have anything to do with Roy or the prison camps: "Spider Knight is on the move…"

Ed mumbles to himself as he begins to drift, "What ridiculous codenames they choose…"

The front door of the house opens and in walks Sophie, escorted by Al. She wears a black dress and hat, and she dabs a handkerchief to her puffy eyes. Al gently rubs her on the back, she saying quietly, "Thank you again for coming with me."

"I couldn't let you go by yourself," he says to her. Al looks over and sees Ed still sitting in front of the radio. "Ed? How're you doing?" he asks his brother. "Have you eaten at all today?"
Ed mumbles, "Huh, what? Yeah…"

Al frowns, looking rather motherly, "You haven't, have you?"

Sophie looks to Ed, and though she tries to sound enthusiastic, her voice is fatigued, "I can make something if you need."

Al stops her before she can scurry off into the kitchen, "Sophie, no."

"No, it's all right," she tells him as she tries to walk past, he blocking her path, "I don't mind."

Al gently places his hands on her shoulders, looking into her eyes, "You need to rest. Why don't you go upstairs and take a nap. I'll take care of this."

"Are you sure?" she asks him.

Al smiles at her, "I can handle making a sandwich. You go upstairs and rest, okay? You've had a long day."

Sophie looks down at the floor quietly, reluctantly saying, "Okay… I guess I am a little tired…"

She turns away from Al and slowly starts to make her way up the stairs, still clinging onto her handkerchief.

Al waits until Sophie is out of sight, and after he hears the click of her bedroom door close, he walks over to Ed and joins him on the floor. "Come on, Ed. I'll take over while you take a break."

"Huh?" Ed numbly mutters, "No, I got this. You just came back from the funeral, I'm sure you're tired."

"Ed, you need to rest," Al says sternly.

"I'm fine."

Al inwardly grumbles to himself, annoyed at his brother's stubbornness. "All right, well, what have you learned while I was gone?"

Ed mumbles sleepily, "Something about spiders."

"What?"

"What?" Ed pops to life for a moment, realizing he's been nodding off again. "Ugh," he pinches the bridge of his nose. "You're right, I'm tired. We haven't learned a damn thing doing this. Not once have they said anything about all those escaped prisoners."

Al supposes, "The government probably doesn't want to admit that they've made a mistake."

Ed gives a short, cynical laugh, "More likely, they've already taken care of the problem, if you get the drift."

Al grits his teeth, though he keeps his mouth closed. He exhales noisily, and after a while, finally says, "Maybe radio isn't the way to go. Maybe we just need to pick up our things and go – get out there, physically look for Roy."

"We've been through this, Al. Where do we even start?"
"I don't know!" Al says a little anxiously. "But this isn't getting us anywhere either!"

"All right, calm down," Ed says to him. "I'd rather be up and moving about, too. At least then I'd feel like we're doing something. But we've got to be patient. The government's bound to slip up and give us a clue."

"But for how long?" Al asks. "How long should we stay here?"

Ed is quiet for a moment. "...I don't know."

Al again grumbles inwardly, sighing as he brings his knees to his chest. What if Ed's right? What if the military already has 'taken care of' the escapees? ...Roy included?

Al shakes his head. No. Roy's all right. He's still out there.

Little by little, over the past couple of days, Roy has been picking up on the language of his co-workers. He manages the pleasantries – "Hello," "How are you?", "Good day," and the like. Still, some of the more complex things escape him – he hears the gents gathered around the water cooler, chatting about, laughing, and Roy is unsure of what it is they laugh about.

In his off time, at home in the new little flat that Adelphi has provided him with, Roy studies the books that Bonham has given to him. The Alphabet is not all that difficult. And Roy is able to pronounce most of the English words he sees, even if he has no idea what they mean.

His nights are filled with studying and his days are filled with listening and writing. Though he has no need to reset any of the dials on his radio, Roy still sometimes finds it tempting to play with equipment – he wonders what else he can hear if he tunes into other frequencies. Just how far away can he hear?

Maybe I'll learn more than English, Roy thinks to himself. That'd be fun – being able to understand multiple languages...

He gets a tap on the shoulder, and Roy looks next to him to the coworker that sits beside him. The man asks, "oy, met. wɑːʃmɪstʃən?"

"What?" Roy asks as he removes his headsets.

His coworker mutters about, eyes to the ceiling as he mentally runs through his vocabulary, "Oh, uh... Toilette," he says, gesturing his thumb over his shoulder towards the door. Then using his hand he makes a big circle over his section of the desk – "Watch, please."

"Oh!" Roy understands, and he obliges by scooting over to his neighbor's workstation as the coworker rises.

"Thanks," and the man walks away.

Roy sits there, twiddling his thumbs, unsure of what to do. Should he be taking down notes for his coworker? But what about his own station? While he's watching this man's station, his own work is going undone...

His thoughts are cut off as another worker approaches him, shoving some papers onto him, "ðiz nid tu bi sɛnt awt," and the worker keeps walking.
"Wait a minute!" Roy reaches a hand out after him, but the worker doesn't even notice, just keeps on walking.

Roy looks down at the papers in his hands. The top reads, 'OUTGOING.' Roy looks up at the radio on the desk. He's seen this word before: The headsets are plugged into one jack reading 'INCOMING;' and the microphone is plugged into another jack labeled, 'OUTGOING.'

Roy slowly reaches for one of the switches on the radio, but then he stops. *I shouldn't do this. I should just wait for him to get back and let him take care of this...* But still, Roy's curiosity overtakes him, and his eyes drift over to the small microphone stand. He picks it up and brings it closer, looking it over. There is a small button on its base, and when he pushes it, a little red light blinks to life. He releases the button, and then pushes it again, watching the light go on and off, on and off.

"Having fun?" Lisa asks, standing beside him.

Roy quickly tosses the papers on the desk, shoving the mic away. "Uh! Just, uh, watching his station while he's in the restroom."

"You can watch from your own seat, you know."

Roy rubs the back of his head, "Yeah, sorry. It's just – these machines are so interesting, I just want to see how they work."

"In due time. We're not sending out any communiqués in German, so until you get a better grasp at English, you're solely on listening duty." Lisa turns, ready to leave.

Before she has a chance to walk away though, Roy asks, "Ms. Hawkeye – I was thinking – well, if you want me to practice my English... I could send out these messages anyway. You could watch and make sure I pronounce them right."

Lisa sighs, muttering to herself, "It's like taking care of a puppy..." She turns back around, facing Roy, "Very well. I know you just want to play with the radio, but we might as well make good use of the time."

Roy tries to hide his smile (as yes, he really does just want to play with the radio).

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Ed yawns, unsure if it is still daytime as the clouds have completely blocked the sun. The rain beats against the windows and the clapboards of the house in arhythmical sheets, growing louder and softer. The branches of the tree out front bend and sway under the force of the wind and the water, leaves every now and again being blown away.

Ed adjusts the radio, twisting the dial just ever so slightly. "Augh!" He grumbles, "This rain is causing interference."

Al, laying on the couch, asks, "Do you think the antenna can stand up to this weather?"

Ed keeps gently fiddling with the dial, "Yeah, it'll be fine – as long as the wind doesn't knock it down."

Sophie comes down the stairs. Al looks over at her and asks, "Hey Sophie. Feeling better?"

Though her eyes are still a little red, she manages a small smile, "Yeah. A little better." She looks
over at Ed, "How 'bout you guys? Any luck?"

Ed is now adjusting the cords on the back of the box: "No. And there won't be if I can't get this stupid thing to-

And then a voice comes over the radio – a familiar voice. It's in English, and Ed stops, listening in.

Al sits up, "Ed? Everything okay?"

Ed holds up a finger for silence, listening intently to the voice coming from the speaker.

After a moment, Sophie quietly leans over to Al, "What language is that?"

Ed answers, "It's English. I know this – I spent time in London with our father."

"Really?" Sophie asks. "What are they saying?"

"It's not what they're saying," Ed tells her, "It's WHO'S saying it – I think it's Roy!"

"What?!" Al jumps to his feet, rushing to Ed's side. "Are you sure?!"

"I dunno," Ed thinks aloud, "I've never heard him speak English before so I can't be sure."

Al looks over at his brother, "Does Roy even know English?"

Ed quickly stands, "He could be learning. Wait here," and Ed runs for the front door.

"Ed," Sophie asks as he flings open the door, "Where are you going?"

"I left something in the shed!" he calls back as he races out into the rain.

At the shed, Ed opens the door, the wind whipping it back. He goes in, going to the workbench, and Ed picks up the microphone that came with the radio kit. Quickly he stuffs it under his shirt to protect it from the rain, and Ed darts out of the shed. He has to push hard against the door, fighting the wind to lock it back into place.

Through the downpour, Ed runs back to the house, bringing a sopping mess with him as he jogs back to the radio.

"Oh Ed!" Sophie scolds, "You're getting the carpet all dirty!"

Ed doesn't even hear her as his attention is solely fixed on the radio before him, he connecting the microphone to a small jack on the back of it.

"Ed, wait!" Al cautions, "What if it's not Roy? Should we be calling out like this?"

Ed is quiet for a moment, microphone already in hand. "We've got to risk it, Al." He grins, a fire in his eyes, "Beside, I've got a good way to check…"

Lisa stands next to Roy, he with the headsets dangling around his neck and the volume all the way up so both of them can hear the receiver. Roy uses his pencil to guide him down the paper as he reads off codes, "Alpha 2-2-0…"

Suddenly, a new voice bursts over the radio: "Fullmetal to Flame, Fullmetal to Flame! This is
Fullmetal. Do you copy, Flame? Over."

Lisa, baffled, says a little loudly, "Who in the bloody hell is that?"

*Fullmetal!* Roy thinks. *Ed said that was his nickname on the Other Side! And Flame! That was his world's version of me!*

Again the voice calls, "Are you there, Flame? Over."

Roy pushes down on the call button, saying in German, "Ed? Ed, is that you?"

"Depends," the voice responds, "What's our cat's name?"

"What?"

Lisa is growing irate, "What is all this? Who is that?"

The voice says, "If you are who I think you are, then you know the name of our cat. That's something I don't think anyone in the government would have bothered to find out."

Roy replies, "His name is Checkers, and he's not *our* cat, he's Al's cat."

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Al shouts, "It is him!" He moves in close to the mic, "Roy! Roy, are you okay?"

Roy's voice chuckles through the speaker, "It's good to hear you, Al."

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"Al?" Lisa asks, "As in Alphonse Elric?"

Roy covers the mic for a moment, "Yeah. It seems they found us instead of us finding them." Roy uncovers the mic and continues the conversation, "Are you guys okay?"

Ed responds, "Yeah, we're fine. We made it out of Germany in one piece." He asks, "What about you? How on earth did you get out of that camp?"

Roy tells them, "I had some help from an old friend of yours."

"Really?" Ed asks. "Who?"

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Roy is quiet for a moment, and then says, "His name was Hughes."
Ed and Al gasp.

Roy continues, "He said he knew you back in Munich."

Al looks over at Ed. "Hughes was there? I didn't see him."

Ed has his finger off the call button. "Go figure. Good old Hughes helping Mustang escape. That sounds about right." He turns back to the mic, calling, "Well I'm glad you got out safely."

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Al's voice calls worriedly, "Where *are* you, Roy?"

Roy quietly sighs through his nose. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"The Nationalists could be listening in right now – so don't say where you are, either. I don't want you getting picked up."

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Al frowns, a small whine escaping his throat.

Ed asks, "Then how are we supposed to get to you if we don't know where you are?"

"You're not going to," Roy tells them. "Don't come looking for me."

"What?"

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"What?!" Lisa fumes, "Mustang, what are you doing?"

Again, Roy covers the mic, "Think about it – how are we supposed to set up a rendezvous if the Germans are listening? Any spot we set up as a meeting place will be crawling with soldiers."

Lisa asserts, "We have our methods. Give me the microphone!"

Roy instead turns back to the mic, calling out, "I don't want you two getting involved in this. You've been through enough already."
Ed slams a hand on the ground, "You think we're just gonna sit back and take it easy? After what the government's done? After what they've stolen?"

Roy calls back, "About that: The thing that you're looking for – the thing that we found but then lost again – I've got good news," Roy smiles, "The Nationalists don't have it."

Both Ed and Al are both relieved, though a little perplexed. Al asks, "Then who does?"
"We don't know," Roy tells them, "But we're going to find out."
"Who's 'we'?" Ed asks.
"The people I'm working for now. Don't worry. We've got it all under control."
"Let us help you!" Ed demands. "We can work together to find it!"

Roy calls out, "Ed – do you remember why it is that Hiram Abif would not divulge the secrets of Masonry?"

Ed looks down a little, narrowing his eyes. He knows.
And Al knows too, his eyes beginning to shake, "…Brother…" his voice squeaks.

Ed calls back, "I do…"

Roy tells him, "That's why it's best that you and Al stay where you are, far away from all that."
"What are you telling them?" Lisa asks angrily, "I demand to know."

Ed insists, more quietly, "Roy. Please. This isn't your fight. It's mine and Al's. We dragged you into this."

Roy chuckles, "You didn't drag me into anything. I came willingly."
Roy's eyes and voice soften, "How many stories have you two told me, about the lives you led before we met? You've been through enough already. You don't have to keep fighting. It's all right to take a rest."

Sophie's eyes drift from the speaker over to the boys – and she can see in their eyes a deep sorrow…

Ed then grits his teeth, clasping the call button, "That's not good enough. So we've been through a lot – that's no reason to lay down and stop fighting!"

"I want you to go on and lead normal lives. Peaceful lives. You can do so much more than putting yourselves in danger all the time. You can go back to teaching, Ed. Tell Al to go ahead and pursue becoming a doctor like he wanted."

Al grabs the mic, tears growing in his eyes, "Roy, stop this! We're going to come find you! We're going to be together again!"

Roy says, "Maybe when this is all over. For now, stay safe. This old soldier will fight the war so you don't have to."

Ed yells, "Damn it, Roy! Listen to me!"

Suddenly, a loud crack of thunder pierces through the sky and the radio pops with bright sparks, startling all three of them.

"Ed?" Roy puts one of the ears of the headset closer to his ear. "Ed? Are you still there?"

There is no response.

"What happened?!" Al asks anxiously.

Ed sighs, setting the mic down. "I'm guessing our antenna just got fried by lightning."

Sophie asks, "Will you be able to fix it?"

Ed cautiously unplugs the radio, "Not right now, not with this storm."
Al cries, "But we have to! We've got to get back in contact with Roy!"

"Calm down, Al," Ed says to him, "There's nothing we can do 'til the storm passes."

"But, we have an idea of where he is now!" Al says hopefully. "He was speaking English, you said. That means he must be in England!"

"Not necessarily," Ed points out. "He may have just met up with people who speak English. For all we know, he's still here on the mainland someplace."

Al's shoulders fall a little, "...But... It's worth looking..."

"Face it, Al," his brother tells him, "Roy has a point."

Sophie asks, "What did he mean? About masonry? Like, setting stones and things?"

Ed looks to her and says, "It's a metaphor. It means that in the right hands, knowledge can be used to build things for the benefit of mankind. In the wrong hands, knowledge is used to destroy."

Sophie tilts her head still, "So what did he mean by that?"

Ed somberly looks over at the radio, "If I had to venture a guess? I told you – I'm an engineer. I build things for a living. Whoever Roy's working for, it sounds like they were planning on using me and Al to build things for them – bad things."

Al is looking down at the floor. He quietly asks, "Now what? What are we supposed to do now?"

Ed scoffs with a smirk, still looking at the busted radio, "Well Roy is wrong if he thinks we're just going to sit on our hands. I'll tell you what we're going to do," he looks over at Al, "We'll do just what we did last time – we'll find a university, keep our ears open. Maybe find a local Lodge and have the Brothers there help."

"But remember how long it took us last time?" Al reminds him, "And now Germany's basically been closed off to the Brotherhood – how will we find it?"

Ed grins, "It's not in Germany, is it? If it were, they'd have found it by now."

Sophie interrupts, "I'm sorry – what are the Germans looking for?"

"A weapon, of course," Ed tells her, not wanting to reveal too much, "What else do warmongers want?"

"And you think a university would know something about that?" she ponders.

"Like I said," Ed tells her, "Governments like to use knowledge for the wrong reasons. Universities are usually the first to develop new weapons for the government, willingly or not."

"That's terrible," Sophie says. "Well I don't know what it's like in Germany, but I don't think that's how it works here."

Ed decides not to press his cynicism upon her.

"But if it's a university you're looking for," Sophie continues, "You might want to try Amsterdam."

"Amsterdam?" Al asks.
Sophie nods, "Yeah! It's great! It's the biggest city in the country. You're bound to learn something useful there. They've got a university, and I'm sure they've got a lodge if that's what you're looking for."

Ed asks her, "How far away is that?"

"Not too far," Sophie tells them, "I'd say less than half a day if we take the truck."

"We?" Ed inquires.

Sophie giggles, "Of course. It'd be weird if I let you stay at my brother's place without me there to keep an eye on you."

Al asks, "Are you sure your brother won't mind?"

Sophie says, "He's in Java right now, remember? His apartment is totally empty. My grandma has a spare key – we can pick it up on the way."

Ed says to her, "I appreciate the offer and all, Sophie, but we'll be fine on our own."

She giggles, "Are you sure about that? A lot of people here speak German because we're on the border. But I'm pretty sure most if not everyone on the west coast only speaks Dutch. You two would be lost without me."

Al smiles, "She's got a point there, Ed."

Ed crosses his arms, conceding, "Well… all right. But I don't want to inconvenience you – we'll stay with you until Al and I can afford a place of our own."

"Sounds fair," Sophie agrees. "I'll bring you guys a great big bouquet of tulips as a housewarming present."

Al happily says, "That'd be wonderful. Thank you."

Sophie looks back over at Ed, "Now – don't you think it's about time you got some rest? You've been up for days on end."

Ed gives a tired half-smile, "Yeah… I guess it is all right to take a rest…"

*

Lisa crosses her arms, looking sternly down at Roy, "That was very noble of you and all, but I hope you realize how far you've set us back. Those two would have proved incredibly valuable to us."

Roy clicks the radio off. "If they're out of the Nazis' reach, that's good enough for me." He looks up at her, "If the Elrics came to work for Adelphi, they'd demand to be put in the field. And then what? They could easily get picked up by the Germans and we'd be right back at square one."

Lisa adjusts her glasses, trying to hide her scowl, "We simply would have denied their request for field work."

Roy laughs lightly, "You don't know Ed like I do. You give him an order, that's all the more reason for him to do the opposite of what you've said."

"He's rubbed off on you, apparently," Lisa says, recrossing her arms. "I told you to hand over the
microphone and you failed to comply. That's insubordination."

Roy looks down. His voice is calm, but strong, "Forgive me. I guess I was just caught up in the moment. You don't know what's it's like… worrying about whether or not someone's still alive."

"Yes I do…"

Roy looks up at her. She is quietly looking at him, though her gaze seems far away. After a moment she purses her lips and straightens herself up, clearing her throat. "Well then. Don't let it happen again. Return to your desk, soldier."

"Yes ma'am," Roy complies, sliding back over to his own work station – though he watches Lisa as she walks away through the crowd of organized chaos.

*

The skies eek out a light shade of blue as the grey clouds give way to white, and the warm yellow sun dries the earth, the animals re-emerging from their shelters to breathe in the new day.

Sophie gently pushes a tulip bulb into the soft, muddy mound of dirt, right in front of the large stone bearing Aleks's name, wreaths and flowers and cards surrounding it. She stands back up, trying not to let her eyes water. "There…" she says softly, "…That way you'll always have something to remember me by…"

Ed and Al wait silently on the dirt road yards away, standing beside the beat-up old truck, luggage piled in the back.

Sophie smiles softly down at the grave. "Don't worry – they're nice guys… You didn't get to meet them, but I'm sure you would have liked them. They're a lot like you…"

She stands quietly, as if listening to the earth itself.

"…I'll come back someday… But right now, I've got to do what's right… If I can help these two stop the Germans… then maybe…" A tear still manages to roll down her cheek, "…Then I'll know that you didn't die in vain…"

Sophie wipes the tears from her eyes and she takes a deep breath, steadying herself. She kisses her fingertips and then gently presses them to the top of the headstone.

"This is goodbye for now, Aleks… I love you…"

And slowly, Sophie turns away from his grave and walks over the still damp grass towards the truck.

Ed quietly asks, "You gonna be okay?"

Sophie nods. Then she puts on a smile, "Well, we're not going to get to Amsterdam by standing here all day, are we?"

Ed smiles back at her, and he opens the truck door for her, Al opening the door on the other side to climb in.

Moments later, the little truck is firing up and it begins to pull away, taking off down the long dirt road, the trio heading west, out onto new horizons.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*
Reviews:

QueenCari1129 chapter 15. Oct 11, 2014
Hawkeye my love! She has arrived :)

Cy: chapter 15. Aug 11
In my opinion, this fic should have more favs! I've been looking for a story after shambles movie for ages! And I couldn't find a decent one. Only a few is good but they're not a direct continuity, so I'm a happy girl right now. I like most of ideas you put in this story, actions, think plot around a bomb, old faces from other world, and world war II references. Basically everything! Keep going!

I'll let you know that I tried to input this comment for 6 hours because server of this site was up and down repeatedly. Hopefully this time it posts successfully.

This site kicks me out so I login again. Grr.
The dark chill of the morning air gives way to the warmth of the rising sun, the birds whizzing through the grey-blue sky, off to find their early morning breakfast. The city slowly comes to wake, the chimneys bursting to life with the smell of cooking food and boiling coffee. Slowly but surely, the streets begin to fill as people leave their homes, on their way to work and to school, others off to enjoy the parks or to stroll over the many bridges connecting various parts of the city together.
For two years now, Ed and Al have called Amsterdam home. For two years now, they have not seen Roy's face nor heard his voice. But still they know that he, just as they, have not given up on their goal. The uranium bomb - wherever it is, wherever it is hiding, whoever has it – it will be found, whether by they or by Roy, it will be found.

On a little street, newer in comparison to parts of the old city, a line of redbrick houses all stand together, wall to wall, most sharing walls, the whole block seemingly one large, long house with doors at regular intervals as the only indication of separation.

One of these doors, and the subsequent two floors attached, belongs to Matthijs, Sophie's older brother. And for two years, while her brother has been away in the East Indies, it is here that Sophie has been keeping watch over her tenants, the Elrics.

Sophie stands at the kitchen counter, putting the finishing touches on waffles as she gently pulls them out of the waffle iron. Ed and Al sit at the table, already eating that which has been made – eggs and bread and jam and coffee – Al with a book laying open to the side of his plate, he reading it intently while absentmindedly cutting into his eggs with his fork – less cutting them and more just mushing them by this point as his eyes have been focused on the words in his book.

Ed looks up from his own plate, and takes notice of just how mesmerized Al seems to be, noticing also the constant tapping of Al's fork against his plate.

"Hey, Al," Ed says, "If you wanted scrambled eggs, you should have just said so."

"Huh?" Al looks up from his book, unsure of what Ed's talking about. And then he looks down at his plate and sees the quite yolky mess he's made. "Oh. Sorry," Al apologizes, "I'm guess just distracted right now."

"No kidding," Ed says. "You got a test today or something?"

Al sets down his fork, picking up instead his book and bringing it front and center, "No, finals aren't for another month. But I want to be prepared."

Sophie walks from the counter to the table, carrying the small plate of waffles. "At least eat something before you study," she tells Al as she slides a waffle onto his plate, "You can't run on an empty tank."

Al sighs, closing his book and setting it aside, "Oh, all right."

As Sophie crosses from one end of the table to the other, Ed takes in the warm smell of the sweet, crispy bread. "Ah," he chimes happily, "Sophie, you always make the best waffles."

She smiles at him as she takes her seat, "Well, it's my grandmother's recipe, so she makes the best waffles."

Smarmy as usual, Ed says as he cuts into his breakfast, "Well your grandmother's never made me waffles, so you make the best waffles."

She giggles, "Thanks."

Suddenly there is a jingling and a little black shadow has appeared on Sophie's lap. "Meow?"

"Ahtut-tut!" Sophie scolds, "Urd, down! You know better than that."

Sophie gently pushes the cat out of her lap and onto the floor, Urd landing nimbly on her paws. She
sits down on her haunches and looks back up at Sophie. "Meow?"

Ed casually points a fork at the cat, "See, this is why we kept Checkers outside."

Al says, "We kept him outside because Roy was always sneezing." Al sighs, "I miss him still. He was such a nice cat."

"To you maybe..." Ed quietly retorts.

Al adds, "I'm sure he and Urd would have gotten along."

"Are you kidding me?" Ed says, "That cat was so spoiled, he'd have hated the competition."

Urd in the meanwhile is rubbing up against Sophie's legs. Sophie looks down at the cat, saying, "Yeah, this one sure is an attention hog, aren't you?"

"Meow."

Sophie then turns her attention to Al, "So, your final finals. You excited?"

Al stares down at his plate, "Terrified is more like it."

Ed tells him, "Don't worry, Al. You'll do fine."

"Well, yeah," Al mutters, "I mean, I know I know the material, it's just - - well… Everything else."

"Like what?" Sophie asks.

"Well," Al responds, starting slowly at first but his voice gradually picking up speed, "Like, not only do I need to study for exams, but I've also got end-of-term papers to write, and final projects to turn in. And I've still got to go out job hunting and find a hospital to do my residency after graduation – but I don't have time to go out looking because that's time I spend doing homework; but if I don't have a residency position ready to go as soon as I graduate-!"

Ed holds up a hand, "Al, breathe."

Al stops, and takes in a breath. He exhales. "Sorry. It's just, everything all at once. It's a little overwhelming."

Sophie says to him, "Don't try to do it all at once. You'll drive yourself crazy." She continues to say as she finally starts to cut into her own breakfast, "You need to take care of yourself. If you go and work yourself sick, then you'll never get anything done." She gives him a smile, "Baby steps, okay?"

Al smiles back at Sophie, but quickly his face falls, he quietly eating his breakfast, sulking almost, for words do not lighten the load of work he still has to do.

* *

For these two years, Ed and Al have done as they did all those years ago when they first came to this world – Ed has taken a job at the local university, in the chemistry department, always at attention for news concerning new weapons or uranium or radioactive elements in general. His vast and complex knowledge and understanding of chemistry bewilders not only his students but some of the professors as well. Still, Ed takes care to make sure he explains everything thoroughly in his lessons. It's his job, after all, to teach his pupils the material, not just show off how much he knows.
Al in the meanwhile now attends the medical school at the university. He had received his Bachelor's in Frankfurt, and was already two years into his med program before the government came and took Roy away. Here now in Amsterdam, Al is picking up where he left off. Though his studies are a broad, general learning of the medical field, Al is most interested in hematology. The power of blood holds a special interest for him, hearkening back to the days of adventures long since past, of monsters and of magic…

Al scribbles in the margins of his notes, half listening to what the professor at the head of the class is saying. The pages of Al's notebook are lined, covered, with circles and symbols, geometric shapes and other oddities.

…Fifteen years… It's been fifteen years, and yet Al still finds that the best way for him to understand scientific principles is to draw them out as transmutation circles… It couldn't have possibly have been that long ago, could it? He wants to say to himself that it seems like it was only yesterday, but even that’s not true. All those memories seem so far away… like something out of a dream… But it happened. It all really happened…

Al sighs to himself, pushing these thoughts aside, and returning his attention to the blackboard.

* 

Sophie ties a kerchief to her head to protect her hair, and then picks up the broom. "Well," she says, determined, "Time to get to work."

While cleaning is nothing new to Sophie, she never imagined that cleaning for three people would be so much harder than cleaning for two. Or maybe it had to do with the fact that in comparison to Aleks, the Elrics were so very strange. Actually, in comparison to most people, Ed and Al are quite strange. Not every household has a pair of scientist brothers who like to run their experiments from home.

The desk in the den is hard to find under the stacks of papers and books cluttering its top. Sophie's almost sure that the desk should break in half from the weight piled upon it. She moves the papers off the surface, keeping them in their same stacks so as not to get things mixed up. She looks at the spines of the books, not sure if she should put them back on the shelf in order of author or title. She's not sure if she should bother putting them away at all as Ed will just pull them off the shelf again anyway.

Still, Sophie clears the desktop so that at the very least she can dust it – though it's not even dust that plagues the desk so much as it is crumbs and tidbits of food, for Al has the bad habit of taking his dinner into the den so that he can continue studying while he eats. Sophie finds sitting off to the side, on the floor next to the desk, a stack of plates and forks, the pile lopsided like the Tower of Pisa, for every plate has a fork wedged between it.

Sophie grumbles to herself, "Augh… Al…"

Sophie takes the stack of dishes downstairs, carefully watching her feet as she descends from one stair to the next, her task all the more difficult as Urd wants to be right there at her feet. Sophie makes her way to the kitchen, slowly and carefully setting the dishes down into the sink. She heaves a sigh of relief.

"Well," she says to herself, "I'm already in the kitchen. What else needs cleaning in here?"

She looks around, scanning the countertop, most of it already quite tidy. But she spies the icebox, wondering if there's anything in there that needs to be thrown out.
Sophie opens the door of the little contraption and peers inside. The bottom two shelves actually have food on them – the eggs, a couple of cuts of meat she bought the other day – but the top shelf is completely cluttered with cups and mugs and glasses, each half filled with odd and mysterious liquids. She pulls out a mug and looks into it, unsure of what she's looking at. Is this one of Al's projects? Or is this just old and moldy coffee? Or does Al's project involve molding coffee?

Sophie, annoyed, hums in her throat. Her instinct is to toss it out, but the last time she did that, Al just about had a heart attack as it turned out that that was indeed homework for class. She grumbles and sighs and puts the mug back where it came from, closing the door to the icebox.

She turns her attention instead to the dining table, it already having been cleared of this morning's dishes, but still in need of a touch-up – its wooden surface covered in knicks and scratches and various odd oil stains and chemical burns – the result of Ed building things, little machines and whatnots, his tools scraping and scuffing the surface of the table. There's not a work shed here like there was back in the countryside, so Ed has opted instead to use the dining room table, much to Sophie's displeasure.

She huffs a sigh, hands on her hips, "Matthijs is gonna hate me for ruining his table. We'll probably have to buy a new one…" She runs her hand over the tabletop. "Still, a good waxing might help the old girl last longer."

Sophie retreats back to the kitchen to look through the cabinets beneath the sink to retrieve polish and a rag. As she does, she notices that the container of bleach is nearly empty.

"What the?" She picks it up and shakes it, the little puddle of liquid resounding off the sides of the container. "This was full the other day. Augh! Ed!" she cries, certain he swiped it for some random experiment. "How am I supposed to keep this place clean if he keeps stealing all my supplies?"

She closes the cabinet, polish and rag in hand, returning her attention to the table, only to find Urd sitting on top, cleaning herself.

"Shoo!" Sophie urges Urd away, and the cat just looks at her dumbly, innocently, as if it has not done anything wrong. Sophie sets her supplies on the table and picks the cat up, setting it on the floor. "You've already left your fur on everything else. How about keeping it off the table?"

"Meow."

Sophie brushes the tabletop with her hand, "I love you and all, but I wish you didn't shed so much…"

A postman jaunts up the short steps to the door, and he lays a package on the doorstep, it wrapped in brown paper, a length of twine keeping in place a letter that sits on top of the box. He knocks on the door, and then heads back down to the sidewalk to continue his delivery route.

Urd, who's been hiding in the bushes by the door, pops her head out, cautiously watching the stranger as he walks away. Once far enough away, she slinks out of the bush to inspect the box that has been left. She sniffs the edges of its brown paper wrapping, and, enjoying the smell, begins nuzzling its edges, taking extra care to make sure she leaves her scent on the corners of the box. After a moment, Urd takes to nibbling on the brown paper, ripping it back.

Sophie opens the front door and sees Urd up to no good. "That's not a mouse, don't eat it." She gently brushes the cat away, Urd taking the touch of her hand to mean 'Cuddle Time,' and proceeds
to forcefully nuzzle her head hard against Sophie's hand. Sophie laughs, "You silly thing…"

Leaning down, Sophie slides out the letter from underneath the twine. She stands back up, reading over the label on the front of the envelope.

"It's from Matthijs…"


"He's coming home?" Ed asks, the three of them sitting around the coffee table that evening as they have tea.

Sophie, sitting in the armchair, nods. "His letter says he'll be home in three months, but it's dated for two months ago."

"So he'll be home at the end of the month then," Al states.

Sophie again nods. "Meaning you guys better start looking for a place to live."

Ed playfully jibes, "Kicking us out already, are you?"

Sophie crosses her arms, "You said that you were going to stay here until you got enough money to find a place of your own. That was two years ago."

Ed frowns, "Gee, sorry. I didn't know you wanted us gone so badly."

"I never said that," Sophie tells him, "But this is my brother's house – he's going to want it back."

Al slides down the couch a little. "He couldn't have waited until after I graduate? I don't have time to go house hunting."

Sophie picks up her teacup off the coffee table. "That's why I wish you guys had been looking for a place of your own sooner. Then we wouldn't be in this mess."

"Hey," Ed says to her, "You're the one who offered to let us stay here."

"Yes," Sophie responds, "Because I wanted to help you guys stop the Nazis, not be your maid."

Ed, still frowning, asks, "Is that was this is about?"

Sophie, having not even drinken from her cup, sets it back down, a little forcefully, "I came out to Amsterdam to pick up where Aleks left off. I thought I'd be out at rallies or handing out fliers or something. But you two keep me so busy picking up after you, I never have time for that."

Al sits back up, his face a little sad and apologetic, "We're sorry, Sophie. We didn't mean to put so much work on you."

Ed meanwhile crosses his arms, leaning back against the couch, "Besides, it can't be that bad. We got along fine before we met you."

Al looks over at his brother, "But Ed, that's because I was the one doing chores back then. And Roy helped. He's not here, and I'm at school all the time now."

Ed stammers a little, "Ergh… Well, yeah but-"

Sophie crosses her arms as well, looking sharply at Ed, "And you're not a lot of help. I can barely
get you to take your shoes off when you come in the house; I'm supposed to expect you to clean up after yourself?"

Ed complains, almost childishly, "I wouldn't have to take off my shoes if it wasn't raining all the time! It's not my fault I get mud on my boots. Isn't there ever a dry day in this country?"

"See? This is what I'm talking about," Sophie responds. "Rather than take a little responsibility or initiative, you blame someone else."

Ed squints at her, a pout about his lips, "Good thing about having a house of my own – I won't have to listen to your nagging."

Sophie's hair practically stands on end, "I wouldn't nag you if you'd just clean up after yourself!"

Al sighs to himself. *Just like the old days when he and Winry would get into arguments...*

Ed, ignoring Sophie, turns to his brother, asking, "So when are we going to go looking? This weekend?"

Al shakes his head, "I'm busy this weekend. I'm meeting with my group to put together our project."

"What about next weekend then?"

"I'm meeting with another group to rehearse our final presentation."

"Augh!" Ed gripes, "So when are we supposed to go house hunting?"

Sophie speaks up, "I can fill in for you, Al." She says, "I mean, I don't know everything you're looking for in a house, but I could help."

Al tiredly smiles, looking relieved, "Would you? That'd be great."

Ed casts his dark pouting gaze back at Sophie, "Why, so you can nag me about every house I choose?"

"Ed, stop," Al pleads with him.

Sophie once more picks up her teacup, closing her eyes regally, "I won't criticize the house you choose. I'll just be there to make sure you get a house that's not old and falling apart."

"That's called being critical," Ed points out.

"Stop it, you two," Al says.

*The week wears on, and each day, Ed and Sophie go out and make sure to view at least one house, Al in the meanwhile focusing on his schoolwork – though admittedly, his brother's house-hunt is always on the back of his mind. Al worries, not even so much as to the kind of house Ed will choose, but whether or not he and Sophie are still bickering. Al would hate to leave Sophie on bad terms. She's a good friend after all...*

And Sophie, being the good friend that she is, is trying very hard not to let her patience wear thin.

"Come on, Ed," she says to him, "You can always hire someone to fix it."
They are currently in the living room of a little cottage, and though old, it is clean and upkept. The landlord stands off to the side watching the two young people as they inspect the premises, Ed at the moment currently preoccupied with the fireplace, he fiddling with the damper hiding inside the top of the open stonework.

"I shouldn't have to spend extra money to fix something that should have been fixed in the first place," Ed states, arm-deep up the flue as he tries to pry the damper shut, it not budging in the least. "If this thing won't close, it's gonna get cold in here."

Sophie can fill her blood pressure rising just a tad bit, "That's why you light a fire…"

"I'm talking about when we don't have a fire going," Ed tells her, he finally leaving the damper be and pulling his arm out of the fireplace, his hand and forearm now covered in soot. He wipes his hands, saying, "Wide-open like this? We're gonna get birds and mice and everything else that wants to come down that chimney in the house."

The landlord speaks up, "I assure you, it's an easy fix. It'll be no trouble."

Sophie politely smiles at the landlord, "We'll keep that in mind. Thank you for showing us the house."

The landlord smiles and nods in return, "No trouble at all, young lady."

The next house isn't much better, at least not in Ed's opinion anyway.

A leasing agent parades them through the house, the clicking of her high-heels echoing sharply off the bare floor and walls. With a wide smile, she proclaims, "We're located right in the heart of the housing development, so all of the buildings are brand new, never been lived in!"

"Wow," Sophie's eyes drift across the high ceiling, taking it all in.

"Is that why it smells funny in here?" Ed complains.

The leasing agent chuckles, "Fresh paint, I know. But don't worry – Once you move everything in and get that kitchen cooking, it'll be just like home!" She continues her rehearsed tour speech, "There's a park within walking distance, and it's quite lovely there. Wonderful little place to go and relax."

"Yeah," Ed throws in, "A bunch of families with their noisy kids making noise. That's relaxing."

Sophie roughly nudges him with her elbow, "Ed, behave."

"Let's take a look at the upstairs, shall we?" The agent suggests, already walking up the stairs without waiting for an answer, "You're going to adore the views!"

Ed grumbles and sighs, following along…

Day three comes along and with it another house to tour. This one is closer to the heart of the old city, and Sophie beams as she looks around at the sights, "Look at the detail in architecture! It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess," Ed concedes. "It's nice."

"Oh, hey!" Sophie points up the street, "There it is. Come on."

"All right, all right, I'm coming…"
They reach the little row of houses, this place not unlike where they're living now, all the houses conjoined together to form one long building. Sophie knocks on the door, and from inside they can hear a woman's voice feebly call, "Just a moment..."

A minute later, the door opens to reveal a little old lady, she walking with a cane.

She looks up at them, questioning, "Hello? Yes?"

"Hi," Sophie greets, "We saw your ad in the paper. This is the house for sale?"

The old lady nods, "Oh yes, yes, come in." She steps to the side, allowing Sophie and Ed to enter, then closing the door after them. "You'll forgive the clutter," she chuckles, "A lifetime of knick-knacks, you know."

Ed scans the house, looking around: There's a warm, roaring fireplace in the living room where large cozy armchairs sit around a dusty old rug; and shelves and cabinets and little display cases are filled near to the brim with porcelain figurines and other trinkets and things.

The old lady hobbles up to Ed, "Mind you," she says to him, "This'll all be moved out before you move in – except for the furniture really. I'll have nowhere to put it."

Sophie looks at the old lady, "If you don't mind my asking, why are you moving out? You seem like you've got everything nicely set up here."

The old lady nods with a bit of a sigh, "I'm afraid I just can't afford this place anymore. I'll be moving in with my daughter and her family. So kind of her to take in her old mother like this. Still," the woman slowly makes her way towards the fireplace, "It'll be nice to have someone around to talk to again."

She picks up off of the mantle a small picture frame.

"My husband," she says, holding the picture out. "He died a few years ago. And this place has been so quiet since then..."

She puts the picture back in its place.

Then the old woman cheers up, "But you're not here to hear an old lady lament. Come! Come! Let me show you the house!"

At the end of the living room is a doorway leading into a large and spacious kitchen, great big windows lighting the whole room. Sophie smiles as she looks around, "Wow, this is nice. Al's going to love this."

Ed opens a door at the end of the kitchen, it leading into a sizable yet narrow space. "What's this?"

"That's the utility closet," the lady answers. "You'll notice the circuit breaker off to your left there. And before he died, my husband was getting ready to refit the place for an electric washing machine." She sighs, "Oh how heavenly that would have been. I've no idea how he would have gotten it through that little door back there, though - " She points her cane to the end of the short room, pointing out that indeed there is a door hiding back there. "That leads out into the alleyway, so always make sure it's locked at night unless you want bogeymen getting in."

"Of course," Ed acknowledges.
The lady returns her attention to the kitchen, "You'll find there's plenty of pantry space – room enough for both your food and your dishes. There's not an icebox, but once I have that china cabinet over there moved out, if you have an icebox of your own, it should fit right there."

Sophie, still smiling, says, "I love it. What do you think, Ed?"

Ed shrugs, "It's all right, I guess." He crosses the kitchen, heading towards Sophie. "We still haven't seen the upstairs, though."

The old lady nods, "Of course. There's a nice master bedroom, plus a couple of extra bedrooms for the little ones."

"Little ones?" Ed and Sophie ask in confused unison.

The lady asks, "I thought I heard you say you had a son – Al, was it?"

Sophie tries to hold in her laughter as Ed explains, "No, no – Al is my brother."

"Oh?" The old lady queries, "Will he be helping to care for the children then?"

Sophie covers her mouth to keep her giggles from escaping as Ed's face lights up red with blush, he waving his hands back and forth, "N-no! We're not married! We're just friends!"

Sophie, getting control of herself, explains, "I'm not moving in with them. I'm just here to help look for a place, that's all."

"Oh!" The old lady squeals with embarrassment, "Forgive me!" She laughs to herself, "Old Granny making assumptions." Then she says to Ed and Sophie, "But you two look so cute together – you might consider giving it a try."

Ed clenches his fists, shoulders raised, as he attempts to remain civil, "Can we see the upstairs already?"

"Yes, yes," the old landlady chuckles as she turns, exiting the kitchen, motioning her hand as she says, "Come along, children, come along."

* 

The sun is on its way out, sliding further down the sky towards the horizon. Sophie unlocks the door, and she and Ed go inside. There in the armchair is Al, fast asleep with a book laying in his lap, his head lolling to the side as he quietly snores.

"Poor Al," Sophie says as she quietly closes the door. "He's going to study himself sick."

Ed tells her, "He used to be able to study for hours on end, no problem." Of course, Ed was referring to the days when Al was bound to a suit of armor, armor which needs no sleep. He decides to stop there, lest Sophie inquire further – and how would Ed even begin to explain?

Ed walks over to Al, laying a hand on his shoulder, and gently nudging his brother, "Hey, Al. We're home."

"Huh?" Al stirs awake. He looks around and then looks up at Ed. "When did I fall asleep?"

"Before we got back, apparently."

Al sits up and stretches his arms as he yawns. He lays his elbow on the armrest and then lays his
head on his hand. "Oh man. I've still got to get through this chapter. But I've been staring at the book for so long I feel like the words don't even make sense anymore."

Sophie smiles, pulling something out of her pocket – "Here. Maybe this will help."

"What is it?" Al asks as Sophie hands him a tiny metal circle, like a coin almost.

"It's a good luck charm of St. Nicholas. He's the patron saint of students."

Al smiles, "Thank you, Sophie."

Ed butts in. "Really, Al? You're going to give into superstitious nonsense like good luck charms?"

"Hey," Al defends, "It can't hurt, right?"

Sophie looks over at Ed, "Maybe I need to find the saint of homesteads for you. Otherwise, you're never going to find a place to live."

Ed gripes, "It's not my fault all the houses around here are terrible."

"If you just weren't so finicky. You find something wrong with every house we go to."

Al rubs his temples, "Guys, please, not now..."

"Sorry, Al," Sophie apologizes.

Ed lays in bed that night, staring at the ceiling. The hum of crickets outside fills the air, and every now and again the sound of an odd late-night car passes by.

Ed turns his head towards the small clock sitting on the nightstand next to the bed: 2 A.M. He grumbles to himself, rolling over to face the other way, pulling his blanket with him as he tucks it closer to his chin.

Damn it, body, he inwardly yells at himself, Go to sleep! I've got to get up in the morning!

But if only it were so easy. The saying goes 'Mind over Matter,' but at this moment, it would seem Ed's mind has no say over his body. Or perhaps things were the other way around, for Ed's mind has been buzzing ever since he got into bed that evening.

He sits up and fluffs his pillow, flopping back down on it in a huff, again huddling the blanket close around his shoulders and neck.

Why can't I fall asleep? he questions. This is Al's fault somehow, he thinks to himself, half-joking, half-serious. When Al's body was trapped in the Gate, Ed had taken to eating twice as much food. It was only afterwards that the both of them realized that the extra nutrition Ed had been taking on was sustaining Al's body. At this very moment, in his sleep-deprived state, Ed thinks, I bet Al's sleeping just fine. He's stealing all the sleep for himself...

But Ed pushes this thought from his mind, knowing it to be silly. He rolls back onto his back, again staring at the ceiling.

Stupid Sophie's brother, coming back home to take his house back. I'm with Al – why COULDN'T he have waited until after Al graduates? At least then it'd be me and Al looking for a house. I wouldn't have to go around with Sophie...
Ed turns his attention from the ceiling to the wall off to his left. I mean, not that I don't like Sophie. She's nice. It's just… Well, I guess I'm always at work, so I only ever see her when I'm at home. And not that I don't like seeing her when I come home. I do like it. I love her cooking…

Ed sighs. Darn. I'm gonna have to learn how to do some cooking, aren't I? Al always used to do the cooking; but if he's working at a hospital all the time – and the hours at a hospital are INSANE! I mean, it's not like I CAN'T cook… It's just, the only cooking I ever really do is camping-style, like roasting fish or a rabbit…

He looks up at the ceiling with a determined smile. And cooking can't be that hard. Alchemy was born in the kitchen, after all. It'd be just like alchemy – no sweat. See? Sophie makes it sound like it's hard to run a household…

And then Ed's smile begins to fade, a small sense of guilt beginning to arise within him. But yeah, I guess we have been giving her more work than she deserves. And we did say we were going to find a place of our own…

And once more, Ed angrily rolls over to face the wall, bundling the blanket up to his chin. But dammit, I don't wanna. I'm nice and cozy right here. I mean, why do we even have to move out at all? Can't Matthijs just take us on as tenants or something? This house is big enough to support three people – a fourth can't be that bad…

His shoulders fall a little as he relaxes, realizing - Oh. Except that there's only three bedrooms. Al and I would have to go back to sharing a room. Heck, I haven't had to share a room in years. And I don't know how excited Al would be about that. He claims I snore. I don't snore, HE snores…

Ed flops over to face the other wall. Well I'm not sharing a room with Sophie; that'd be awkward… Sharing a room with a girl…

Out of nowhere, Edward's heart skips a beat, it feeling as though a great amount of blood has pooled in his chest for split-second and then immediately drains, the sensation knocking the wind out of him. He sits up coughing.

What in the hell was that?

Ed rubs his chest.

…Eh, just… heartburn, probably…

He lays back down.

Sophie added too much spice to those kidneys she cooked for dinner… Of course, I like spicy food, so it wasn't so bad… Huh, now that I think about it, I've never actually told Sophie that I like spicy food… She just sort of… knows…

He tilts his head in thought. She actually knows a lot of little things about me. She knows that I like that mint tea that her brother sends. She knows that I LOVE those poppy seed and walnut muffins she makes… But… I actually don't know a lot about her…

Ed grimaces at himself. I'm such a jerk. Here Sophie goes and does all these nice things for me, and I go and act like an ass…

He sighs. I should do something nice to apologize. I dunno, get her flowers or something. She likes flowers.
And then Ed quickly sits up, blushing, *No! Not flowers! She might take that the wrong way!* he thinks to himself, *She might think that I want to date her or something!*

Quietly, he lays back down in bed, eyes ever to the ceiling …*Not that she's not pretty. Any guy should want to date her… I mean, she's funny, she's smart, she's nice…*

His mind continues to trail… *She's got these deep, brown eyes… and her eyelashes are so dark… And her hair looks so soft, silky almost…*

His stomach clenches and he bites down on his lip, hitting the brakes on his mind. *Damn it! What the hell am I thinking?! SHUT UP, BRAIN! GO TO SLEEP!*

He turns over and lays on his stomach, burying his face into his pillow.

*"

The sun peeks through the window, but it is not the early morning light that awakens Sophie. She sits up in bed a little, her hair, not tied back, falling down the sides of her face and shoulders. She sniffs the air drifting through the house. *Food? She ponders, Who's downstairs cooking?*

She rises from bed and dons a house robe, covering her nightgown, and she makes sure to tie the robe tight before leaving her room.

As she descends the stairs and rounds the corner into the kitchen, she is surprised to find Edward there at the counter, a mess of mixing bowls and spoons and such there with him. He turns from what he's doing and smiles at her, "Good morning."

"What's all this?" Sophie asks as she leans against the doorframe.

Ed spoons some batter onto the hot waffle iron, steam sizzling forth. "Breakfast."

"You're making breakfast?" the humor in Sophie's voice pronounced.

Ed still smiles but a little more humbly now, "Well… Yeah. It occurred to me that you've made breakfast for us every day since we've met; and not once have I or Al gotten up to make breakfast for you. So. Here." Ed reaches over and lifts up a small plate of spiced bread, passing it to Sophie.

Sophie accepts the plate, softly saying, "…Thank you, Ed. That's very kind of you."

She walks over to the dining table and sets the bread down. Then she looks back over her shoulder to Edward, he preoccupied with the waffle iron, looking around its sides and back as if something's gone missing.

"Do you need any help?" she asks.

Ed nervously laughs, "No, no, I got this. …Just, uh… How long am I supposed to cook these for?"

Sophie giggles, crossing back to the kitchen counter. She stops beside Edward and points to the iron, "They're done when steam stops coming out of the sides. That's usually in about three to five minutes. But you have to be careful," she looks back up at Ed, "Otherwise they might burn."

Ed turns his face away from her, hoping she hasn't seen the blush on his cheeks. "Yeah. I knew that."

Sophie giggles once more. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about. No one's perfect at everything on their first try."
A week passes. And though Ed finally settled and picked the third house they saw, and made an offer to the old woman who lives there, she has yet to get back in touch with Ed. He sits alone at the desk in the den, absently twirling a pen in his hand, lost in thought. Finally he slams the pen down with a grumbling sigh, then runs his fingers through his hair. "Augh! This is driving me nuts!"

"What is?" Al asks as he enters the den.

Ed realizes he spoke out loud. "Oh, Al. How's it going?"

Al makes his way to the bookshelf, "Just here to get a book. What's driving you nuts, Ed?"

Ed leans his head back, "This whole housing situation. I wish it would just blow over already."

"Don't worry, Ed," Al says, "I'm sure we'll find someplace to live. Have you heard back from that landlady yet?"

"No," Ed mumbles, eyes on the ceiling, "She's probably got a lot of offers for the house. Better offers, probably."

"Maybe you should give her a call," Al suggests, "Instead of waiting for her to get back to you."

Ed apathetically responds, "Nah, I'll just wait."

"But somebody else could get the house first," Al answers anxiously.

"I really don't see what the problem is," Ed argues, "If we can't find a house, I doubt Sophie would turn us out onto the street."

Al frowns, "We can't keep taking advantage of her like this!"

Ed quarrels, "We are not taking advantage of her."

"Yes, we are!" Al's shoulders rise a little, he glaring at his brother. "Sophie's shown us nothing but kindness since we met her, and you've been treating her like nothing more than a cleaning lady!"

"Says Mr. Leaves-His-Dishes-in-the-Den."

"Okay, fine. So I haven't been much better," Al admits. "But come on, Edward – why are you being so stubborn about this?"

Ed angrily sighs. By this point, even he is getting annoyed at his own reluctance to move. It's not like they hadn't done it before - packing things in boxes, piling them in a truck, and then offloading them and unpacking. And this time he and Al won't have to worry about moving any furniture - that all belongs to Matthijs. Moving was nothing new.

So why? Ed asks himself. Why can't I make myself get up and move?

This WAS something new. Very rarely did Ed like staying still. And yet now when the situation demands that he move, he's planted himself firmly where he stands.

"Well?" Al demands.

Ed sighs again, "I don't know..."
Downstairs, the telephone begins to ring. Sophie's voice drifts up the stairs, "I've got it!"

Al looks over his shoulder, towards the open den door. "That's probably the landlady now."

And again, Ed sighs.

A few days later, Ed is sitting cross-legged on the floor of his room, surrounded by boxes, he slowly but surely putting all of his things into the crates to be sealed up and shipped out – more slowly and less surely, really. He just can't seem to stop sadly sighing, and he has no desire to move from his spot on the floor.

With the bedroom door open, Urd casually strolls her way in, patrolling the small maze of boxes. She finds Edward sitting on the floor, and immediately begins to rub up against his knee.

Ed sadly smiles and begins to pet the cat, "Hey, kiddo. How's it going?"

"Meow."

Ed half-heartedly laughs. "Easy for you to say. All you've got to do is look cute and people give you whatever you want…"

Urd climbs over Ed's leg and into his lap as he continues to pet her.

"…You've got it easy, Urd. You don't have to worry about a job and money, or war and politics. You just curl up and go to sleep."

As if on cue, that's precisely what Urd begins to do, hunkering down on Ed's lap.

He laughs, "I didn't mean right now. I'm trying to pack."

But Urd closes her eyes and begins to purr, and Ed doesn't have the heart to move her.

"Ah, who am I kidding? I was barely packing to begin with…" He continues petting the cat, listening to the soft, rumbling purr that fills the otherwise quiet room. "It must be nice being a cat… having someone to take care of you, and feed you, and cuddle you and all that…"

A sad sigh finds its way across his lips.

"…Nice to have a home… Not having to worry about who or what is going to come along and take it away from you this time…"

He falls quiet, still gently stroking the cat down its soft back, the silence of the room filling his ears.

"That's the way the world is, Urd. Nothing is fixed. Everything's always changing. …I just wish… I wish it didn't change so fast… I wish it wouldn't change at all… The way things are now? It's peaceful…"

He stops petting, now leaning back on his hands as he stares out the window.

"…Every time I think I've found a place to call home… something comes along and takes that away from me… I just feel like… Every time I lose a home, it also means losing someone I care
about… Winry… Roy… and now Sophie…” Ed gives a short laugh, leaning his head down to the
cat, "But don't tell her I said that."

Urd merely flicks her ear at the touch of his breath.

Ed continues to watch the sleeping feline. And then his eyes drift back up towards the window,
unknowing that standing in the doorway is Sophie, quietly listening…

*

The day finally comes and it is time to move out. In Al's case, it's his first day of finals, and he has
since already left for school, St. Nick charm in pocket and quite a few cups of coffee in stomach.

Ed descends the short steps out front, carrying with him a box to be put into the back of their beat-
up old truck. Sophie follows after him, carrying a box as well.

"I don't see why we didn't just hire some movers to do this," she says.

Ed sets the box in the truck bed, keeping his gaze on it instead of ever turning to Sophie, "Because,
why hire people when you can do it yourself?"

Sophie comes to the back of the truck, "Yeah, but that means we're going to have to go back and
forth between the two places. With a big moving truck, it only would have been one trip."

Ed shrugs, "I don't mind traveling," he says as he walks past her, never looking at her.

Sophie watches Ed walk away. Finally she sets the box she carries into the truck, and then follows
Ed back into the house.

"Ed?" she asks once inside. "Are you all right?"

Ed has his back to her as he picks up another box, "I'm fine. Why?"

"I don't know," she says, "You seem a little… off."

He sets the box on the dining table. "...I'm just worried for Al is all. You know, finals and
everything…"

"Oh…"

Neither of them move, both standing quietly, Ed looking down at the box before him.

"...So, Sophie…" he starts, she looking to him though he doesn't look at her, "What are you going
to do after your brother gets back?"

"What do you mean?" she asks.

His eyes drift away from the box to the floor, "Are you going to live here with him? ...Or go back
out to Groningen and live with your grandmother?"

Sophie casually puts her hands behind her back as looks off to the side. "I haven't given much
thought to it. I'd like to stay here in Amsterdam – maybe finally get in touch with some of the
political groups around here."

"...Well…” Ed says to her, "If you ever need a place to stay…” He finally looks up, looking her in
the eye, "You can always come live with me and Al…"
"Huh?" Sophie looks back over at Ed, noticing he's blushing.

He stammers a little, "Not that I think that your brother wouldn't take care of you! Just, I mean, our door is always open. And you're always welcome."

She smiles, "That'd be nice. We should get together for tea sometime."

Ed has his fist clenched, trying to swallow the lump in his throat. He yells at himself, **Damn it! Just say it already!**

He strides from the table up to Sophie, taking her hand, taking her by surprise. His cheeks red-hot, Ed states, "Sophie, I want you to move in with me and Al."

"What?"

"I promise, I'll clean up after myself! And I'll cook dinner on the days that you have rally meets! And even though we don't have a very big yard, I'll build you a garden so you can grow your tulips!"

"Ed-"

"I know it doesn't make a lot of sense, but… I would just really, really like it if we were all still living together…" Ed sheepishly looks away again, shrugging, "And let's face it – " He looks back up at her, "Al would fall apart without you."

Sophie giggles, "Just Al?"

Ed blushes, half-choking on his words as he shyly looks down, "Well…"

She smiles softly at him, "It's okay, Ed. I understand."

Again, a lump jumps up into Edward's throat, he unable to speak. All he can do is gaze into her deep, brown, smiling eyes.

"I'd be happy to move in with you."

The corners of Ed's mouth rise, a wide smile crossing his face as his eyes light up.

Sophie then gives him a light, playful smack on the arm. "But I want those boots off before you ever come in the house. You drag in any mud, and you're cleaning it."

"I promise."

*

Everyone in the crowd politely applauds as one by one the students are called by name, and one by one they cross the stage to shake hands with the dean.

"Alphonse Elric."

Al walks up the short steps, up to the platform, and he crosses the stage to the sound of applause, he shaking hands and receiving his diploma.

In the audience sit Ed and Sophie, Matthijs beside her, he too clapping for his sister's friend.

Sophie looks over at Ed and notices his eyes are watering. She lays a hand on his shoulder, "You
okay, Ed?"

He gives a short laugh, wiping a tear from his eye. "They grow up so fast, don't they?"

She lightly laughs too, rubbing his shoulder.

Later, when all is said and done – diplomas received and caps tossed in the air – Alphonse cuts through the crowd, making his way to his brother and friends.

Sophie gives him a great big hug, "Congratulations, Al! You made it!"

As Sophie releases him, Al says to her with a smile, "Thanks, Sophie."

Matthijs shakes hands with him, "So – Doctor Elric, is it?"

Al chuckles, "No, not yet. I still have to do my residency first."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Matthijs reassures him.

"Ooh!" Sophie points out something not far away, "Looks like they've got refreshments!" She gently tugs on the sleeve of Al's robe, "Come on, let's go get some punch."

Al nods, "Sure."

Ed begins to follow, but before he gets far, Matthijs has put his arm around Ed's shoulder, stopping him.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Matthijs inquires.

"Uh, sure," Ed complies.

Matthijs's voice is casual, yet something in his tone is very strong, "Sophie tells me she's moving in with you guys, is that right?"

Ed answers, "Yeah, that's right."

Matthijs looks Ed dead in the eye as he says, "Maybe I'm old-fashioned. Maybe I'm just overly-protective. But I would prefer it if she was living with family – someone she knows."

Ed is feeling uneasy, not really sure how to respond.

But Matthijs continues, "She seems to trust you two, and I respect that. But I want your word as a man that you'll never do anything to hurt her."

A moment passes, Ed reading Matthijs's face and recognizing something in him that Ed himself is familiar with. Ed gives him a firm smile, "Don't worry. I'm a big brother, too. I know all about not wanting to see your sibling hurt."

Ed turns his attention towards the refreshment table, both he and Matthijs watching as Al and Sophie converse, laughing over punch.

Matthijs questions, "And do you see her as a sibling? Or something more?"

Ed's breath catches in his lungs momentarily. Slowly he confesses, "...I haven't really figured that part out yet..."
Matthijs turns his gaze back to Ed, "And when you do figure it out?"

Ed is quiet for a moment, and then finally says, "...I'll let you know."

Matthijs finally removes his arm from around Ed's shoulder and gives him a hearty pat on the back. "You better. And don't look so intimidated. Sophie's tough, but she's actually really sweet."

Ed blushes a little, already knowing this to be true, "Yeah..."

"You take care of her, Edward, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hey guys!" Sophie calls to them, "You better hurry up before the punch is all gone!"

Matthijs starts to walk towards the table, but Ed stays where he is for a moment, taking in the scene before him, letting it all sink in. And he smiles softly, walking forward towards friends and family.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:

Reviews:

• Dom19 Chapter 16 - Oct 14, 2014
  I'm really liking the story! I like how Ed and Sophie are developing but what about poor Winry... How could you possibly separate the inseparable Edwin! : ( but anyways just wanted to leave a review. I also love how the chapters are nice and long the dialogue is great.

• A response to your review at https://www.fanfiction.net /r/10427212/Home
  I won't give away any spoilers. All I can say is.... Wait for it.... ;)

• Awww ;) fare enough. But I really do admire a person like yourself being able to write creative stories keep up the good work
  Oct 20, 2014
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fullmetal After opening [WITH LYRICS] 鋼の錬金術師 見えない世界 ポルノグラフィティ from Castiel Winchester on Vimeo.

Banners billow in the breeze, and the scent of flowers hanging on long garlands carries through the air. The sun is warm and the air is cool, with only a few choice fluffy white clouds hanging in the sky. The distant sound of brass music mingles with the growing chatter of people as they begin to...
gather on the fairgrounds, ready to celebrate the new life of spring.

Ed and Al and Sophie stroll across these grounds, surrounded by all the lively colors of streamers and balloons. A small parade of children scurries past them, the children tooting and screeching noisily on little wooden whistles as they dash through the crowd.

Ed chuckles, “Sounds like they could use some practice.”

Sophie looks around, observing the many upon many stands and rides. “What should we do first?” she asks.

Al points off to the side, “Hey! That looks fun!”

Sophie points in the other direction, “Ooh! That looks fun, too!”

“All right, kids, calm down,” Ed playfully chides. “We’ll try to hit as many things as we can. Just don’t wear yourself out early.”

Sophie giggles as Al says, “Yes, Dad.”

Sophie slips her arm around Ed’s arm, “Come on, let’s go!” she says with a smile, and all three of them trot off into the fairgrounds.

* *

The first place they go is to the Ferris wheel, the mechanical beast towering high above the crowds. The large round gondolas, caged on all sides for safety, teeter and sway gently as the wheel rotates slowly around and around. Ed, Sophie by his side, sits on one side of the gondola, Al on the other, and as they reach the top of the wheel, all three of them gaze out at the stretching landscape before them, the city visible not far in the distance.

“It’s nice up here,” Al says.

Sophie, clinging to Ed’s arm, says, “This is the highest I’ve ever been.”

Though visibly impressed by the sights, Ed shrugs, saying, “I’ve been higher.”

“When?” Sophie asks.

Ed tells her, “I’ve flown in an airplane before. It’s actually really neat.”

Al, still looking to the outside, cranes his neck just a bit, trying to see how far he can see. Instinctually, without thinking, he starts to stand, just a little bit, but immediately the gondola starts to swing from the change in weight. “Ahh!” they all yelp, Al quickly sitting back down, grabbing onto the caging.

“Whoa!” he says. “Right – not on solid ground…”

Ed points out, “You could probably stand if we balanced out the weight in here.”

“Ed!” Sophie slightly scolds, “Don’t encourage him!”

“No, it’s no problem,” Ed assures her, “It’s a simple matter of ratios - ” He starts to scoot his way across the bench, away from Sophie. “If we all space out to every third of the gondola, we’ll be level.”
Sophie, too now, is clinging onto the caging of the gondola, “Ed, no! Come back over here!”

Al is laughing, whether because the situation is amusing or because he’s genuinely nervous, even he can’t tell. “Ed, it’s okay,” he says to his brother. “We shouldn’t be standing anyway. I’ll just stay seated.”

“Nah, I got this!” Ed stubbornly says, too enveloped in running calculations in his head. “Three-hundred and sixty degrees divided by three – that’s 120. If I move over here,” he slides more, the gondola rocking with his movement.

Sophie shrieks like a maid who’s seen a mouse. “Ahh! Ed! Please hold still!”

Ed gets a mild laugh out of this, “We’re fine. This ride is perfectly safe.”

Still clasping to the caging, Sophie says, “You don’t know that!!”

Later, with feet firmly planted on the ground, Sophie’s knees shake, she now with her arms around Al’s instead. Ed pats her on the back, he smiling a toothy grin.

“Aw, come on! It wasn’t that bad!”

“I’m never riding on that thing again,” she squeaks.

Al points to a big building, its walls thin-looking, it clearly a temporary set up for the carnival – “How about that?”

Sophie looks over, “What is it?”

“Hall of Mirrors, it says.”

Ed asks, “So what, is it like a maze or something?”

“I think so,” Al responds. “Come on, that looks fun.”

The inside of the maze is dark, barely lit, and the gang is greeted on all sides by multiples of their own reflections.

“Wait,” Sophie asks, looking from side to side, “Which way did we come in?”

“The entrance is to our left,” Al says.

“No it’s not!” Ed rebukes. “We’ve been traveling to the left – that means we entered on the right.”

“No it doesn’t,” Al responds, “We came in, we made a left, we made a right, another left, another right, and then went down that long hall. I’m pretty sure we’re close to the far-right wall right now – meaning the entrance is to our left.”

“Wait, what?” Sophie asks, perplexed. “I thought we took more turns than that.”

Ed says, “Are we even looking for the entrance? Is the entrance the exit, or is there a separate door?”
“I have no idea…” Al admits.

“Tell you what,” Ed suggests, “I’m going right. You can go left, and we’ll see who gets out first.” At that, Ed dashes off into the darkness of the maze.

Al cups his hands around his mouth, shouting at his brother’s back, “Why’s everything gotta be a race with you?” Ed doesn’t answer, he just turns a corner and disappears. Al looks to Sophie, “What about you? Do you want to take the middle hallway here?”

Sophie shakes her head, “No, I think I’ll just stick with you. I don’t want to get lost.”

Eventually, Al and Sophie do find their way out – and then they spend a solid ten minutes standing outside the Hall of Mirrors waiting for Ed to come out.

He finally appears at the exit, looking frazzled. “Damn it!” he shouts, “How in the hell did you get out before me? This maze is a nightmare!”

Sophie giggles as Al smiles with amusement, “I told you we should have gone left.”

“Aw, shut up, you know-it-all,” Ed grumbles.

Al chuckles, “Such a sore loser.”

The next ride they find is the flying scooters. Suspended by cables, round and round the cars fly, and though fast, they don’t fly too high, which is just fine with Sophie, she screaming with fun and joy as the wind whips past her.

Al, on the other hand, can feel his stomach being pushed into his spine by the force of gravity.

Afterwards, he leans up against a tree, his head laying against his hands as he stares at the ground, waiting for the world to stop spinning.

Ed rubs him on the back. “You gonna be all right there, buddy?”

“Yeah,” Al mumbles, “Just give me a minute…”

They move on from the rides and attractions and make their way to the vendors’ section, this area crowded with artisans selling their work, some of it truly artsy – paintings and small hand-carved figurines and such – other items practical – woven baskets and colorful knitted clothing – and other items simply for fun – puppets and marionettes, wooden noisemakers and whistles, various toys and dolls.

Ed spies one vendor – a woman with her daughters, it looks like – weaving together fresh spring flowers to make crowns, her daughters exchanging the wreaths for the money that their customers hand to them.

While Sophie is distracted, busy watching a woodcarver make his marionette dance, Ed sneaks off to the flowerlady.

A moment or so later, Al turns around. “Hey. Where’d Ed go?”
Sophie looks around and, too, notices Ed’s disappearance. “I don’t know. He was here a minute ago. Should we wait here for him?”

“He knows we’re here, right?” Al checks.

“I think so,” Sophie tells him, “Like I said, he was right here…”

Ed reappears, cutting through the crowd.

“Where’d you run off to?” Al questions.

Ed, his hands behind his back, grins, “Ah, no place special.” He looks at Sophie, “I just saw this and thought you might like it.” He pulls out from behind his back one of the flower crowns, it made of lovely white, pink, and yellow flowers.

Sophie clasps her hands together as she smiles gleefully at the crown, “Oh my gosh! It’s so pretty! Ed! Thank you!” she says to him as he places the wreath on top of her head.

“There,” Ed says to her, “Now you look like a princess.”

Sophie can feel her cheeks tingling as blood rushes to them, “Oh, stop.”

Al teases his brother, “What, nothing for me?”

Ed gently thumbs him in the ribs, “You want a flower crown, you gotta buy your own.”

* *

Traveling further along, Sophie sees a man taking photographs, his camera affixed to a tripod, in one hand the flash lamp, and in the other the shutter trigger.

Sophie excitedly tugs on Ed’s sleeve. “Let’s get our picture taken!”

Ed tilts his head a bit. “Do we need our picture taken?”

Sophie mopes, giving him the big-eyed treatment, “Of course! I don’t have any pictures of you guys.”

“That’s true,” Al says.

“All right,” Ed agrees, “Let’s go get a picture.”

“Yay!” Sophie rejoices.

At the photo stand, they gather in front of the background board that’s propped up. Sophie stands in the center with Ed and Al on either side of her.

The photographer holds up his flash lamp. “Say cheese!”

“CHEESE!”

FLASH!

A bright light, and then the photographer says, “All right. Come see me at the end of the day. Your photo should be developed by then.”

“I look forward to it,” Sophie says with a smile as she pays the man. “Thank you.”
He tips his hat to her, “My pleasure, ma’am.”

As they continue to wander the fairgrounds, Al sees hanging above the heads of the crowd a large conglomeration of colorful orbs – balloons! He smiles, and as they approach, he asks, “Hey, you guys want a balloon?”

Sophie nods, “Sure!”

Ed jokes, “Don’t buy her too many, though. She’s so small, she’ll fly away.”

“I’m not small!” Sophie protests. “I’m as tall as you.”

“Huh-uh!” Ed denies. “I’m a whole two centimeters taller than you are!”

“Only ‘cause of your boots.”

Al, trying not to laugh, cuts in, “Children, please -”

Ed responds, “Yes, Dad.”

They go up to the balloon man, each of them picking out their color of choice – Al goes with orange, Sophie green, and Ed red.

Ed holds his rumbling stomach. “Ugh. I don’t know about you guys, but I’m getting hungry.”

“Yeah,” Al agrees, “I could go for something to eat.”

Sophie says, “It looks like the food stands are just ahead. Let’s see what they have.”

Everywhere there is the smell of something being roasted, baked, or fried. Grandmothers make their specialties using old family recipes, serving up hearty fried meatballs filled with rich broth-drenched cabbage. Large grills are set up, each stand proclaiming their sausage better than the stand across the walkway. A candy floss stand draws droves of children to it, the man running it taking his time to carefully ensure that each paper cone he prepares comes out with the fluffiest of spun-sugar puffs. A whole section of the food lot is dedicated to a bread baking contest, seeing which contestant can bake the heaviest loaf of bread.

Sophie gets herself a stroopwafel – a large chewy cookie-like waffle, filled with warm goopy syrup. Ed, not wanting to fight the lines at the sausage stands, settles on a bag of black licorice candies. Al buys a small plate of poffertjes – tiny miniature pancakes cooked like a funnel cake, it topped with a smidgen of butter and a heaping helping of powdered sugar.

“That’s winter food,” Sophie says of Al’s poffertjes. “I don’t see why they’re selling it out of season. It’s too early.”

“Or super late,” Ed comments.

“It’s still pretty good, though,” Al says as he tries to balance his small plate while the balloon tied to his wrist dances around in the breeze. A gust of wind, and not only does the balloon shake about wildly, but also the powdered sugar from the top of his treat showers all over Al, and even a little bit on Sophie and Ed.
“Hey, watch it!” Ed gripes.

Sophie just laughs, “Goodness! It’s everywhere!”

“Aw man,” Al laments, looking as his sugar-coated trousers. “That stinks. The sugar’s the best
part.”

* 

After snacks (and after Al has thoroughly patted his clothing clean of sugar), the trio wanders upon
the fairway games.

“I wonder what we should play,” Al ponders.

“Ktsch!” Ed scoffs. “Everybody knows these things are rigged. You’ll never win anything.”

“I can try.”

Sophie, a hand over her mouth is quietly giggling. She says aloud, though not too loud, “You could
win a prize for one of those girls over there.”

Al looks at her questioningly, “Over where?”

She discreetly points, trying not to let on that she knows, “Over there by the dart-throwing game.
Don’t look!”

“If I don’t look, then how do I know who you’re talking about?”

“Okay, look slowly. Slow~ly~… There. Do you see them?”

Indeed, over by one of the gaming stands is a trio of young ladies chatting amongst themselves
whilst staring at Alphonse, they giggling every so often. When he turns to face them, two of the
three yelp as they turn around giggling loudly – the third, on the other hand, waves at him as she
bats her eyelashes.

Al blushes, his voice catching in his throat. “Uh… What should I do?”

Ed pushes him in the back, “Go say hi!”

“I can’t just go say hi!”

“Oh-oh,” Sophie chimes, “Here they come~!”

“What?”

Sure enough, the three young ladies have approached them.

“Hi~!” greets the one with raven hair (the one who winked at Al), “I’m Silke. What’s you’re
name?”

Alphonse stutters, “Uh, I’m Al.”

The redhead beams, “Hey! My name’s Al, too!”

“It is?”

“Alida. Pleased to meet you.”
“Uh, pleased to meet you.”

The brunette butts in, “And I’m Katrijn. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

Ed chats with them, “So, ladies, you enjoying the festival?”

“Oh, yes,” Silke replies, “It’s lovely.”

Ed grins, patting Al on the shoulder as he says to the ladies, “You know, my brother here’s got quite the arm. I bet he could win a prize for one of you at the baseball-toss game over there.”

Al’s shoulders rise as he says quietly, though panicked, “Ed! What are you doing?!”

Katrijn giggles, “Oh would you? I’d love it if you won me a teddy bear.”

Alida purses her lips, “You’re a grown woman. What do you need with a teddy bear?”

Katrijn haughtily looks away, “It’s not the object but the thought that counts.”

Silke slides her arm around Al’s, he feeling his face heat up quite quickly. “Come on then,” she says to him, “Let’s go play some games.”

Alida takes Al’s other arm, and together the three girls start to tote Al away, he looking over his shoulder with a frantic expression as if to say ‘Brother! Help!’

Sophie again covers her mouth to hide her laughter, Ed merely waving with a grin as he calls, “Have fun, kids!”

* *

At the baseball-toss game, Al holds the ball as he lines up a shot. He stares quietly at the milk bottles that are stacked in pyramid form while he concentrates. And then finally he winds back his arm and lets the ball go, it flying across the length of the stand. With a crash, the leather ball barrels through the milk bottles, knocking them all down.

The trio of girls cheers, Katrijn bouncing up and down, “Yay!”

The gamesman pulls down off the shelf a teddy bear and hands it to Al. Al, smiling, turns around with the toy in hand. “Here you g-,” only to realize his most obvious problem – three girls and one teddy bear. Each of the young ladies stands there, hands clasped and eyelashes fluttering.

Sweating, Al laughs nervously. “Uh… I guess I could play a couple more times…”

Ed and Sophie in the meanwhile continue to stroll along on their own through the forest of games, the operators trying to wrangle in customers with their shouts of, “Step right up!” “A winner every time!”

Sophie turns to Ed, “Are you sure you don’t want to play anything?”

“You can play something if you want,” Ed says to her.

“I will if I find anything that grabs my attention,” she says.

A few yards away, a gamesman shouts, “Test your strength! Test your strength! Show all the fellas
who’s boss!”

Ed and Sophie stop momentarily as they watch the crowd that is gathered around the game—a lever with its end under a metal cylinder, and said cylinder attached to a long vertical pole set against a plank marked with numbers. At the top of the board, a bell, waiting to be rung.

A tall man shoulders a sledgehammer. He holds it firmly with both hands, lowering it gently to his side. He swings it to and fro, like a pendulum, for a moment. And then in one great swoop, he swings it back, lifts it up over his head, and swings it down onto the end of the lever.

The cylinder shoots up high, just narrowly getting to the top, yet falling short of the bell. Still, the crowd gives him kind applause.

The gamesman says, “Close, but no cigar. All right!” He shouts to the crowd, “Who’s next? Step right up!”

Ed grins. “Strength game, huh? This oughta be fun.”

Sophie says with slight concern, “Don’t hurt yourself, Edward.”

“Don’t worry,” he says to her as he approaches the stand, “I got this.” Ed reaches the gamesman. “Hey!” he says, pulling out a bit of money. “I’ll have a go.”

The gamesman gladly takes the money, “All right, son, the game is easy—you just take that mallet over there and give the ol’ plank a good whack! Ring the bell and you win the prize.”

Ed rubs his hands together, “No prob.” Though he’s left-handed, Ed picks up the mallet with his right hand—inwardly he cackles with near evil glee.

Just as the man before him, Ed gently swings the hammer back and forth like a pendulum, building up momentum. With both hands on the handle, Ed winds the hammer back and gives it a mighty swing, the mallet crashing down onto the plank with great force.

The cylinder rockets up its tower and DING! It hits the bell.

Sophie yelps with happy surprise and claps giddily for Ed.

“Well!” The gamesman says, “I am genuinely impressed! Good work, son. What’ll you have?” he asks, holding a hand out to show off the prizes on the shelf.

Ed points, “I’ll take that one.”

Shortly after, Ed cuts back through the crowd up to Sophie. “What did you get?” she asks him.

He holds up a fluffy stuffed toy bunny. “For you.”

Sophie coos, like an aunt meeting her baby niece for the first time. “Oh, it’s so cute! Aw, Ed! You shouldn’t have! You should have gotten something for yourself.”

“Hey, if it makes you happy then it makes me happy.”

Again a cooing issues forth from her lips, “Aww! Thank you!” she says as she takes the stuffed bunny in her arms.

Al appears from amongst the crowd. He pouts, “I’m all outta money,” he looks sourly at Ed, “No thanks to you.”
“Alphonse~~!” Silke’s voice calls, Silke herself shortly following in behind it, flanked on either side by Katrijn and Alida. “Where’d you go?”

“There you are!” Katrijn cheerily chimes.

Alida pinches his cheek, “It’s hard to lose a cute face like this in the crowd. I could spot him a mile off!”

“Oh you could not!” Katrijn objects.

Silke looks at Sophie and pleasantly says, “Oh, I see you got a prize, too.”

Sophie nods with a slight blush on her face, “Yeah.”

“Hey, look over there!” Katrijn points through the crowd. “I think they have a circus here!”

Alida comments, “I didn’t know your family was visiting.”

“Hey!”


Al, being amiable, says, “Uh, sure. If that’s what you’d like to do.”

Katrijn swoops in, taking Al by the arm, “Great! Let’s go!” and she takes off at a jog with him in tow, Alida calling, “Hey! Wait up!” and running after them.

Silke sighs, saying to Ed and Sophie, “You’ll forgive my friends. They’re quite impetuant.”

Ed raises an eyebrow, “Do you mean ‘impetuous’?”

Sophie gently nudges him, “Ed, shush.”

They follow after Al and the girls, and reach the live entertainment section of the fair. The area is filled with all sorts of performers doing various acts – clowns running around being silly for the amusement of the children; a man with a small dog holds out a hoop, and the miniature canine leaps with all its might and makes it through the brass circle, the audience applauding; acrobats jump off of tall platforms to land gracefully on the top of a human pyramid; performers juggle large bowling pins while at the same time riding on unicycles.

Here, the lazy music that’s been drifting through the fair all day is at its loudest, for off to the right is the bandstand. Currently a folk singer sits on a chair onstage, strumming his guitar as he sings of olden days long since past.

The gang approaches the bandstand right as the folk singer wraps up his tune, the crowd politely applauding for him. A host comes onstage as he exits, “Thank you, thank you. Lovely song. All right, ladies and gentlemen, up next – let’s hear it for the Highland Oompah Band!”

The crowd cheers as the band takes the stage, and immediately the players begin dishing out a lively tune. People in the crowd start clapping in rhythm to the music, and some turn to one another and begin dancing.

Alida happily takes Al by the hand, “Come on, Al! Let’s dance!”
“Uh, okay,” he shyly agrees, she dragging him into the crowd of partiers.

Ed laughs as he watches his brother bashfully dance. Sophie taps on his shoulder, and Ed looks over at her.

She coyly asks, “Do you want to dance?”

And suddenly Ed is as stuttering and shy as his brother, “Uh, what? N-no! I-I don’t dance!”

Sophie smiles, “Come on. It’ll be fun.”

Ed gulps and then clears his throat, “…Ladies first.”

She giggles and takes him by the hand, they walking together out onto the sprawling lawn that is serving as a dance floor to the fair guests.

The tuba chants with a rhythmic ‘Oom-pah! Oom-pah! Oom-pah! Oom-pah!’, the carnival-goers bouncing and stepping in time, holding hands and swinging back and forth as the accordion presses ever onward with its melody.

Sophie and Ed hold hands, Ed being very delicate with his right hand, not wanting to squeeze hers too hard... He wishes he could feel both of her hands at the same time. He can feel the weight of her hand in his automail palm – but not her skin, not her warmth, not her touch.

“It’s okay,” Sophie says suddenly.

Ed looks up from their hands to her face, “What?” realizing he had been zoning out.

Sophie smiles at him, “Don’t look so worried. There’s no shame in dancing.”

Ed smiles back with a short nervous laugh, “Oh, right.”

Sophie starts swinging hers and his hands back and forth in time to the beat of the tuba, she saying, “Okay, ready? On the count of four – one, two, three, GO!”

And together they move, though Ed dragging his feet as he quips, “That wasn’t ‘four’. ”

Sophie laughs, “Come on, move, lazybones!”

Ed picks up the pace, together he and Sophie prancing across the lawn to the sprightly music.

*#

Late in the afternoon, when the sun has burnt up all of the clouds and all that is left is thick blue sky, the gang, the three ladies included, is making their way towards the exit.

Al yawns. “Goodness! I’m tired.”

Ed snickers, “Dancing with three girls will do that to you.”

Al looks over at him grumpily, wanting to say, ‘This is your fault,’ but not doing so in the presence of the ladies lest he offend them.

Sophie says to Ed, “Let’s not forget to stop by the photo booth to pick up our picture.”

Ed nods, “Right.”
“Ooh~!” Silke speaks up, “Would you look at that?” Everyone looks over in the direction she’s looking. ‘The Tunnel of Love!”

Of course, one of the other two swoops in, clinging to Al’s arm, “Oh, Al! Let’s go ride it!”

The other comes from the other side, “No, ride with me!”

“Hey! I asked him first!”

“Ladies!” Al cuts them off before they can get too far. “I’m going to be honest here – I don’t like playing favorites. There are three of you, and it wouldn’t be fair for me to take one and leave the others behind.”

While all Katrijn and Alida can say is, “Aww!”, Silke slyly suggests,

“Why don’t we all just ride at the same time?”

“What?” Al asks, not even sure where to begin with what’s wrong with that idea.

“Come on!” Silke urges. “I’m sure we can all fit!”

Ed, in the meanwhile, has heard none of this – for as soon as he heard the words ‘Tunnel of Love,’ a great mixture of panic and excitement flooded him.

Sophie stands quietly as she watches her friend once again be dragged off by these (insane) girls. Alone with Ed, she looks over at him. …At the bandstand, she’s the one who suggested they dance… It’s Ed’s turn to suggest something…

Instead, all that passes between them is silence, Ed looking at the ground. Sophie inwardly sighs and also looks at the ground.

Finally, in an almost angry voice (perhaps angry at how brightly he is blushing), Ed blurts, “Well, are we gonna ride this thing or what?”

Sophie asks, “Do you want to ride?”

Ed’s face softens as he looks over at her, “If you want to ride, I’ll ride with you.”

Sophie laughs a bit, “I’ll ride if you want to ride.”

“I’m riding so that you can ride.”

Sophie giggles at their odd game of ride-hot-potato, she claiming ‘defeat’ – “Okay. I want to ride. Will you please ride with me?”

Ed nods, trying to keep a calm, manly face, but the corners of his mouth twitching like a nervous teenager. “Okay. Let’s go.”

~

“Say what?” the ride operator asks in confusion.

Silke, hand on hip, says, “I said we want to ride!”

“In the same boat?”
“Yes! Don’t you listen?”

The ride operator lifts his hat and scratches his head, “I dunno. This ride is only meant for two people. You *might* be able to squeeze a third on, but I don’t know about a fourth.”

Silke wraps her arms around Al’s shoulders, “That’s okay – I’ll ride on his lap!”

“You’ll what now?” The operator asks, Al’s face as red as a cherry.

The boat gently teeters back and forth as the waves lap its aft, pushing the little vessel further and further along through the canal, the bow giving a quiet thump every time it bumps against the sides of the manmade river.

The sounds and music of the outside world are muffled, and continue to grow more mute as the boat floats further and further along through the dark, cool building. Spotlight illuminate dioramas of cupids and swans, the artwork on the papier-mâché figures subpar.

Ed looks around at all the heart designs that surround him, everything lit by spotlights, his only question being, “Is it really a good idea to have this much live electricity near running water?”

Sophie, sitting on his left, laughs quietly and gives him a pat on the hand, “Oh, Ed… I’m sure it’s fine.”

“I just want to make sure it’s safe you know,” he says, his voice growing quiet, “…I want to make sure you’re safe…”

Sophie looks over at him.

He clears his throat, looking away.

The little boat floats along, the dioramas now portraying scenes of famous lovers – Cleopatra & Marc Antony, Lancelot & Guinevere, Romeo & Juliet.

“There’s a romantic play,” Sophie comments.

“Which one?”

“Romeo and Juliet.” She points to the scene of a young man kneeling in a garden, calling up to his beloved on the balcony. “It’s sad, though.”

“What happens?” Ed asks.

Sophie gives a semi-surprised laugh, “You’ve never seen it?”

Ed shakes his head, “I’m not one for artsy stuff.”

Sophie explains: “Their families were rivals in a feud. But even though they were on opposite sides, Romeo and Juliet still fell in love.”

Ed says, “I’m guessing that didn’t sit too well with their parents.”

Sophie shakes her head, “No. Her father arranged for her to marry someone else. So to get out of the marriage, Juliet faked her death.”
“And then ran off with Romeo?”

“Romeo wasn’t in on it,” Sophie tells him, “When he heard Juliet had died, he killed himself.”

“Why?” Ed asks very flatly.

“What?” Sophie seems surprised, “What do you mean ‘why’?”

“Why would he kill himself?”

“Because he’d rather be dead than face a lifetime without her. Juliet did the same thing when she found out that Romeo was dead.”

Ed crosses his arms, turning his attention to the river ahead, “That’s not romantic. That’s just stupid.”

“It’s not stupid – it’s tragic.”

Ed turns to her, “Okay, let’s just say that Juliet really did die –initially, I mean. What does Romeo killing himself accomplish? Do you think that Juliet would be happy to hear that Romeo had died?”

“Clearly not-.”

“What I’m saying is, if somebody really cares for someone, they would never want to see them give up. Bad things are going to happen, but you’ve just got to carry on.”

“That’s why it’s tragic,” Sophie points out. “Romeo’s pain was so great that he couldn’t carry on, not without her.”

Ed once more turns his attention towards the front of the boat, he quietly, but firmly saying, “There’s always a reason to live. Even when things seem their bleakest, you’ve just got to keep moving. Life is so short as it is. It’s foolish to just throw away something as precious as that.”

Sophie looks down, fiddling with her fingers as her hands lay in her lap. She softly smiles, knowing Ed has a point, but just wishing he could appreciate the tragedy of the play.

Still… she wonders, her smile slowly fading, her eyes becoming distant. *I wonder what would have happened if Ed and Al hadn’t been there for me after Aleks’s death… Would I have ended up like Juliet?*

She thinks back to all those years ago, remembering Aleks’s kind face, his happy voice, his soft kisses…

No… she thinks with a sad smile. *He would have wanted me to live. He would want me to keep fighting.*

Slowly her eyes carry over to Edward. *You, too. You wouldn’t want me to give up, would you?*

She gives him a gentle poke in the arm and says, “All right, Mr. Playwright – if you were to rewrite the ending to Romeo and Juliet, how would it go?”

Ed scratches his chin as he thinks aloud, “Rewrite it, huh?” With that old grin, he points a thumb to his chest, “Well if it were me, I’d storm the castle gates, beat up all the guards, and whisk Juliet out of her tower in the moonlight. *That’s romantic.*”
She chuckles, “More the heroic knight than the poetic bard, huh?”

“Actions speak louder than words, they say.”

Sophie scoots a little closer, “And what do Romeo and Juliet do once they make it out of the castle, under the moonlight?”

Ed can feel his heart beating strongly in his chest, his head feeling hot and his feet feeling cold. “Uh. Well… I guess you’d wanna keep running so the guards don’t catch up with you.”

Sophie giggles, again scooting closer, “And after that?”

“I guess… run into the woods.”

Closer, “And after that?”

“Hope you don’t get eaten by bears.”

Sophie laughs, turning away from Ed as she covers her mouth, giggling. “Oh, Ed. You really aren’t poetic at all.”

Ed mumbles under his breath, a little pouty, “I could be if I wanted…”

Sophie smiles at him. And her smile makes Ed smile.

* *

The countryside is bathed in golden light, the crowds of the fairgrounds becoming thinner and thinner, some parents carrying their tuckered out children in their arms as they all make their way towards the exit.

The trio of girls walks away, waving, Silke calling, “Don’t be a stranger now.”

Al and Ed and Sophie wave goodbye to their new acquaintances. Ed turns to his brother, asking, “So, Al, did you enjoy yourself?”

Al finally breathes a sigh of relief, “Finally, they’re gone. I mean, they’re nice girls and all, but I don’t think I can handle more than one of them at a time. That, and they were spending more time trying to out-do one another that they really weren’t even paying attention to me at all.”

Sophie looks puzzled for a moment, and then says with a sly catty smile, “Alphonse~! Is that lipstick I see on your cheek?”

Al quickly slaps a hand over his cheek, “What?! No!”

Ed grins as he pats him on the arm, “All right, Alphonse! Little heartbreaker!” He pries, “Which one was it? Come on, tell us!”

For the umpteenth time today, Al’s cheeks and ears are red, “Just drop it, you guys!”

Ed and Sophie laugh as together the three of them finally make their way to the photo booth to pick up their picture.

The photographer hands it to them. “Here you are.”

Sophie smiles brightly, “Look at it! It looks so good!”
Ed snickers, “Al almost isn’t even in frame.”

“Oh it’s not that bad.” Al says.

“The top of your head is cut off,” Ed says as he points to the picture.

“Only my hair. You can still see my face.”

Sophie says, “I like it. I’m going to put this on the mantle so that we can look at it every day.”

Far in the distance, a clock tower begins to ring, its bells sounding off the time.

Ed looks out onto the sunset horizon, tired, but happy after a long day of fun. “Come on, you guys. Let’s go home.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Reviews:

QueenCari1129 chapter 17  . Oct 26, 2014

I like fluff. It is a good break, especially from the tension they experienced earlier

Sometimes it’s nice to write fluff. :)

Next episode:
Thick fog rolls across the landscape, the sky and the land mixing to become one, for clouds linger across both, the white sunlight illuminating everything in an almost unbearable shine. A little airplane buzzes noisily across this frozen scene, sounding like a fly whose wings echo endlessly...
off the walls of a cathedral.

The old pilot checks his compass. “Aharrumph!” he grumbles. “I’m turning us west. The Rhine’s got to be down there somewhere.”

His passenger in the seat behind him says, “I’m pretty sure we’ve already passed the Rhine. You said you knew where you were going!”

“I DO know where I’m going!” the pilot rebuffs. “Would you have preferred to be stuck on a slow train right now?”

“At least the train stays on course! Heck, I’d be there by now if I had taken the train!”

The pilot turns around in his seat to look at his passenger, to properly tell him off face-to-face – but in turning around, his knee knocks a lever, and suddenly the engine makes a ghastly sputtering noise!

“What was that?!” The passenger asks.

“Jehoshaphat!!!” The pilot cries as he immediately whips back around to his controls, the dashboard sounding the alarm as various lights begin blinking.

“What did you do?!”

“D-don’t worry, young man! We’ll be just fine!”

“We’re going down!”

“Just stay calm!”

The plane rockets downwards towards the earth, a field of trees coming into view. The pilot pulls up on the controls, lifting the nose of the craft, it scraping the ground just enough to rip the nose clean off the plane!

The craft barrels straight through the clump of forest, the wings of the plane being shorn off by the tall trees, and the pilot and his passenger scream as with a great grinding, the plane finally comes to a rest on the ground in an empty, open field.

…Both men are silent – unscathed, but unnerved. The passenger looks around, unable to see much for the thick fog.

“…Where are we?”

*

The newsstands are abuzz as people gather ‘round to read the headline: “GERMANY PLANS TO INVADE THE LOWLANDS!”

One man holds a paper in his hands as he reads off the article to his buddies, “Says here the plane that crashed in Belgium was carrying battle plans.”

“So wait, was that plane supposed to be the first wave or something?!”

“Nah, sounds like an accident. The paper says the Nazis plan on moving into Belgium and the Netherlands on the 17th!”
“Oh my god! That’s only a week away!”

“Ah, don’t worry,” the man says, “If the plan’s been exposed, they won’t go through with it.”

News reporters anxiously crowd in the square, pencils poised on their notepads, ready to scratch down every syllable as the prime minister stands behind his podium. He clears his throat saying, “There is no reason for the Dutch citizens to be worried. I have had many dealings with the German government, and I do not believe that they would EVER violate Dutch neutrality. We are a vital trading partner, and Germany would be foolish to ever turn us into their enemies.”

The reporters immediately begin clamoring, asking a whirlwind of concerned questions.

People sit in bars and cafés, their nerves no less twisted than when the news first broke.

“I’ll tell you what it is!” one patron grumbles over his beer, “I’m betting it wasn’t a German plane at all! I bet it’s a trick by the French just to get us to join their stupid Allied Forces!”

“Yeah!” a friend agrees. “Them and Britain have been pestering us forever about that!”

“Exactly! What you do is you create a dilemma so that people get scared, and then you swoop in offering a solution.”

“What part of ‘We want to be neutral’ do these people not understand?”

The chandelier glitters and sparkles like the white snow that thinly laces the ground outside, the moonlight dancing off of this winter backdrop. Inside, where it is warm, the waiters move from table to table, serving their guests as the diners quietly and casually chat amongst themselves, soaking up the fine atmosphere. A musician sits at his piano in the corner, delicately rolling out the Clair de Lune, the ivory melody mixing with the sound of chiming wine glasses.

“Congratulations!” Ed and Sophie say in unison as they toast. Together, the three of them sit in a cozy, cushy booth, dressed in their finest to celebrate the occasion.

Al smiles, “Thanks, you guys.”

“Hey, you deserve it, buddy,” Ed tells his brother. “Not everybody makes the number one resident slot.”

Sophie asks cheerfully, “This means they’re going to hire you on as a permanent at the hospital?”

Al shrugs bashfully, “Well, nothing’s guaranteed.”

Ed grins, “Don’t be so humble about it, Al! You worked hard to get here. They’d be stupid not to keep you on.”

“Thanks.”

A waiter comes up to the table, politely asking, “Are you ready to order?”

“Yeah.”
The night wears on, the air outside growing colder, the lights in the restaurant slowly coming down, bathing everything in a relaxing yellow warmth. The sleepiness that accompanies a fine meal begins to wear on.

Ed asks, “Are you sure you guys don’t want dessert?”

Both Al and Sophie shake their heads, Sophie saying, “Goodness, no! I don’t think I could eat another bite.”

Al yawns, “I think I’d fall asleep in my dessert if I ordered any.”

Ed chuckles.

Al scoots towards the edge of the booth, “I’m going to use the restroom real quick, and then after that we can go.”

“No rush,” Ed says to him as he leaves.

Sophie gently hunkers down against the soft cushioning of the booth. “Ah!” she sighs. “This has been a nice night.”

“It has,” Ed says softly.

Sophie quietly looks over at him, looking into his big golden eyes, unsure if what she sees in them is the reflection of the chandelier or if there really are stars sparkling in Ed’s eyes.

He smiles softly at her, “You look lovely tonight.”

Sophie blushes with a large smile as she responds, “You don’t look so bad yourself.” Though Ed usually wears professional clothes for work, more often than not he comes home with his clothes covered in filth from working on machines – that, and he always smells of a strange mix of both an auto garage and the sterility of a science lab. Not that that was a bad thing – it’s just that now, at this moment, all Sophie can smell is the heavenly scent of his cologne drifting through the air, the musk rich but light.

Ed gently scoots a little closer to her, feeling her heart beginning to flutter. He grins slyly at her, “I don’t think I’ll order any dessert. Nothing they have here could possibly be as sweet as you.”

Sophie shyly giggles, “Why, Mr. Elric,” she playfully pries, “Is this your attempt at being poetic?”

“It might be,” he says confidently yet quietly. But as he moves in closer to her, the two of them coming eye to eye, the bravado begins to melt away from his demeanor, and a sincerity shows through, something so very soft, timid almost.

The fluttering of her heart turns into a deep, rich, strong beating as her eyes flit back and forth between his.

Edward slowly slides his hand over hers, firmly squeezing it, stroking her wrist with his thumb. A warmth rushes all over his body as he stares into her deep brown eyes. Her lips tremble, and slowly he kneels his head down to hers, and they both close their eyes as their lips find one another.

All the world fades away, the only sound that of their heartbeats dancing in time to the Clair de
Al exits the hallway leading from the restrooms, and as he rounds the corner, he stops, backing up slightly, back into the hallway as if to hide behind the wall. He peers out from behind it, just a bit, back to the table.

There they are – Ed and Sophie – kissing.

Al can feel something move in the pit of his stomach. What it is, he is unsure. He sadly smiles at this scene.

He wants to go back over there, but at the same time, he doesn’t want to interrupt. Al looks around and spots a waiter. “Excuse me, waiter!” he calls as he exits the hallway, walking towards the maître d’.

At the sound of Al’s voice, both Ed and Sophie come back to reality. Ed nervously chuckles, realizing that, in fact, they are not alone, and Sophie, still blushing, happily smiles as she squeezes Ed’s hand in return.

* 

Ed unlocks the front door, the three of them entering the dark house. Ed flips on the light switch as Sophie makes her way towards the staircase.

“Good night, fellas.”

“Night, Sophie,” Al says to her.

Sophie lingers on the staircase for a moment, giving a little smile and a wave to Edward, he smiling and waving back before she leaves.

Alone now, Al silently watches his brother for a moment as Ed hangs up his coat. Al slyly asks, “So – did you two enjoy yourselves tonight?”

Ed looks over at his brother, and he can see that Al has a very knowing look on his face. Ed rubs the back of his head, “So. You saw that, huh?”

“I’m pretty sure the whole restaurant saw that,” Al says as he takes off his coat.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

“Why would I mind?” Al asks as he approaches the coat rack.

“I don’t know,” Ed admits. “I just thought it might be awkward…”

Al hangs his up coat, “No, it’s fine,” he says, brushing off a bit of snow that clings to the bottom of his coat. “I’m just glad to see you finally take a chance on someone. I mean, when was the last time you took an interest in a girl? Noa? That was nearly two decades ago.”

“Oh it has not been that long.”

“Yes, yes it has, Ed,” Al tells him. “I crossed over in ’23. That was seventeen years ago.”

“Stop it, you’re making me feel old,” Ed mumbles with crossed arms.

Al gives a laugh, “That’s the point I’m making. You’re not getting any younger. It’s okay to get
attached to people.”

Ed loosens his crossed arms, relaxing a bit. He is quiet as Al moves on with his business, heading for the kitchen.

Ed hesitates for a moment, but then follows after him.

Al is at the cabinet, pulling down a glass before heading for the sink.

Ed’s voice quietly rises, “…Hey, Al… Can I talk to you about something?”

Al looks over at his brother, “What is it?”

Ed rubs his arm, looking down at the floor. “I’ve been wondering… What do you think about Sophie?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“I mean… She’s spunky, and she’s driven. And she’s blonde.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So…” Ed looks up at Al. “Don’t you think… that sounds a lot like Winry?”

Al furrows his brows, gently setting down his glass. “Ed-”

“Hear me out!” Ed quickly cuts him off. He quiets backs down, again looking at the floor. “What if Sophie is this world’s Winry? I mean, you can’t expect everything to be exactly the same on both sides.” He moves his hands about nervously. “Like, this Scar had dark hair instead of light hair. And Bradley – his name isn’t even King Bradley, it’s Fritz Lang. There are so many variables… So if her name is different. And her eye color is different. Still. It’s possible…that Sophie is…”

Ed’s voice slows.

Al is quiet, and though his mouth is closed, one can see he is clenching his jaw, for the muscles at the corners of his face bulge momentarily and then relax. He quietly takes in a breath through his nose and then noisily exhales. And as he finally turns back around towards the sink, he says, “Just don’t get your hopes up.”

Ed glares back up at him, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Al draws some water, filling up his glass. “What I’m saying is, if you’re going to love Sophie, then love Sophie for Sophie.” Glass in hand, he turns back around to Ed. “It’s not fair to her if you keep holding her up to the image of someone else. Love her for who she is, not who you want her to be.”

Ed looks away with an angry pout, “I DO love her for who she is! I just wanted to throw that possibility out there…”

Al shrugs, and takes a drink from his water. “…Well, anything is possible. Just not everything is probable. Keep that in mind.”

Ed turns back towards the kitchen door. “I’m going to bed.” And he leaves.

Al stands alone in the kitchen, his back to the counter. He heaves a sigh, looking to the floor as he shakes his head.

“…Oh, Ed…”
The winter melts away uneventfully, giving way to a calm spring. The people are happy in knowing they were right. Indeed, the day of the ‘invasion’ came and went, and not a thing had happened. It became a thing of folly, for neither side, the Nazis nor the self-proclaimed Allied ‘Forces,’ had taken a shot at one another.

“Can you believe this phoney-baloney war?” A customer says to a shopkeeper.

“Huh!” The shopkeeper scoffs, “The Belgians got us all worked up for nothing. I mean, really – if the Germans wanted to invade us, they wouldn’t continue to supply our military with weapons, am I right?”

The customer nods, “Damn right.”

Suddenly the front door flies open, another customer rushing in, shouting, “Turn on the radio, quick!”

“What, what’s going on?” the shopkeep asks.

The customer runs to the counter, “Turn it on! Now!”

The shopkeeper turns around to the little radio he has behind the counter and turns the dial, the little electronic device whirring to life.

An announcer’s voice sounds over the airwaves, “—Reports confirm that German forces have entered Denmark, and aerial surveys indicate that there are troops moving towards Norway as we speak. In response, the government in The Hague has ordered that more troops be moved to the borders. Of greatest concern is the southern region of the country, where, it is speculated, that German troops may move through on their way into Belgium—”

“Wow,” the shopkeeper comments, “That does sound serious.”

The first customer scoffs, “Yeah, but that’s in Denmark. What’s that got to do with us?”

His friend smacks him upside the head, “You idiot! Isn’t it obvious? They’re invading everyone! We’re next!”

The shopkeeper waves a hand, “All right, calm down. I’m sure things aren’t that bad.”

Not but ten days later, the people of the country gather around their radios once more – “A state of emergency has been declared. All citizens are advised to remain indoors.”

“Mommy!” a little boy cries, tugging on his mother’s apron. “I’m scared.”

She picks him up, setting him on her knee as she hugs him, “Oh, baby, it’s okay. Nothing bad’s going to happen. You’ll see.”

“Why is Daddy leaving?!”

“Because, sweetie, he has to go join all the other men. They’re going to go to the border,” she tickles her son as she says with a gruff, playful voice, “And scare away the bad guys!”

Her son laughs as he is tickled. And then he asks, “Just like how Daddy scares away the monsters
under my bed?”

“Yes, dear. Don’t worry – Daddy will scare them all away.”

The horses stomp forward as they drag the heavy artillery towards the airfield.

“How long before those tankettes arrive?” A sergeant asks of a comrade.

“Not long!” the man responds, peering through binoculars. “They’re coming right now, and the armored cars are with them.”

Another soldier jogs up to the sergeant, quickly saluting. “Sir, a word?”

“Yes, corporal?”

The corporal stutters, lowly asking, “Sir, are we really prepared for an offensive like this? I mean, the last time this regiment saw any action, I wasn’t even born yet!”

“Get your nerves together, corporal!” The sergeant orders. “You’re a soldier! Act like one!”

The corporal nervously salutes, “Yes sir!”

The sergeant turns his attention elsewhere – “Get those AA guns in position! Now!”

Sophie sits under a tree in the park near their house, the sunset in the distance tinting everything in a golden hue. She gazes out at the river before her, watching a mother duck with her ducklings swim serenely across the water.

“Sophie!” She hears Ed call, and she looks over to see him trotting up to her. He slows as he reaches her. “What are you doing out here?” he asks her.

She looks back out to the river, “Watching the ducks.”

“You heard the radio,” he tells her, “We should be inside.”

She shakes her head calmly. “No. It’s nice out here.” She smiles. “With everyone else inside it’s actually pretty peaceful outside for once.”

Ed is quiet, trying not to show his nervousness.

Sophie pats the ground, “Sit with me, Ed.”

He kneels down, joining her on the grass, he crossing his legs as he sits. Together, they gaze out at the river, not but the sound of the twitter of birds and hush of water sounding out across the empty park.

Sophie puts her hand on Ed’s, and she leans her head on his shoulder. Ed leans his head onto hers.

The rhythmic lapping of the water against the muddy banks is as a metronome, sounding off the beats for the frogs to croak to as they begin to awaken to the coming night tide.

Ed can feel his fears waning, his heartbeat slowing to match the calmness all around him. The
warmth of Sophie’s body next to his eases him, makes him feel safe…

A handful of clouds linger lazily in the sky, their soft whiteness being painted with rainbows as the sun hides further and further behind the horizon.

Ed asks calmly as he points at the clouds, “You know why it is the sky changes colors as the sun sets?”

Sophie shakes her head, her hair softly rubbing against his cheek. “Huh-uh. Why?”

Ed explains, enthusiasm seeping through, “You see, the sky is like a giant prism – and as the source of light changes position, it changes how far the light has to travel. When the sun’s at its highest, the light doesn’t travel as far and you get really short wavelengths, like blue. But when the sun’s on the horizon, the light has a longer way to go – so you get really long wavelengths, like red.”

Sophie chuckles, “Oh, Ed. You can take something as poetic as a sunset and turn it into science.”

“Is that bad?”

“No,” she says, contented, “I love hearing you talk about it. You get so excited. …It makes me happy to see you happy.”

Ed smiles. He looks back out to the river as he puts his arm around her shoulders, holding her close.

Sophie sighs, comfortable. “…I wish this moment would never end…”

He gently squeezes her arm. “…Me, too…”

A duck takes off from the riverbank, flying off into the sky, and Ed watches it at is starts to grow smaller and smaller, looking not unlike an airplane.

He frowns to himself. …How long? How long before German airplanes fill the sky? Will it be just like it was back in London all those years ago? How could he possibly protect Sophie and Al from falling bombs? What if the house is hit? What if they’re inside the house and it gets hit? Or worse – what if Sophie’s out at the market, and Ed is at work, and they’re nowhere near one another and bombs start falling? And Al – the hospital will be flooded with injured. Or what if the Germans are so cruel as to bomb the hospital?

Ed hugs Sophie tighter, and she can hear his breath shaking. She looks up at him, “Ed? …You okay?”

He rubs her arm up and down, he quietly looking at the grass at his feet. After a moment, he says, “I know you don’t want to talk about this… but if the Germans invade-”

“You heard the prime minister,” she tries to assure him, “They probably won’t.”

“But if they do,” he continues, “I just want you to know that I’ll do everything I can to protect you.”

She wraps her arm around his waist, snuggling closer. “Same here.”

He looks at her. “What do you mean?”

“If the Nazis even so much as look at you, I’ll sock ’em in the face.”
Ed manages a laugh, and he pets Sophie’s head as they both continue to gaze out onto the river, the sun passing out of existence for the time being.

* 

Two weeks pass, the state of emergency now bordering on three, and still the citizens are on pins and needles, waiting for something that will never come. Denmark has long since fallen, and reports on the radio tell of how the Norwegian royal family has fled their homeland.

A nurse looks at her coworker and says, “If the Germans have gotten what they wanted, then they’ll be satisfied, won’t they?”

Her coworker nods, “I’m sure they are. Their troops are probably tired and want to go home now. They wouldn’t want to invade us even if they were ordered to.”

Al, busy going over patient charts, not far away from this, can hear the nurses chatting. He sighs to himself. He wants to believe it. He wants to believe what they’re saying. But deep inside, he knows. He can feel it. We need to get out of here, he says to himself. Not wait until it’s too late, like what happened with Roy. We need to get out of here while we still have the chance…

He stares at the patient charts.

…But what if nothing bad actually happens? I can’t just abandon my post here… Or what if the worst actually DOES happen? They’re going to need as many doctors on-hand as they can…

He sighs, laying his head on the table.

* 

The crickets chirp peacefully, more and more of them waking up as each night gets just a little bit warmer than the last.

Ed paces back and forth in his room, unable to calm himself. Just do it, he tells himself. Just go down there, and say it.

He stops in front of his door, putting his hand on the handle.

I can do this!

He stands stock-still, and then leans his head against the door.

I can’t do this…

He walks away from the door and returns to his pacing. And then he goes right back up to the door and abruptly opens it.

Sophie is startled by his sudden appearance, as he is by hers. Ed nervously rubs the back of his head, “Oh. I thought you were still downstairs.”

“I was,” she says, “But I’m going to bed now. Did you need something?”

Ed walks through his door, quietly closing it behind him.

“Are you all right?” Sophie asks. “You look a little pale.”

“Sophie,” he says to her, “We’ve known each other for four years now…”
“Yeah?”

“And we’ve basically been living together since we first met…”

She shrugs, “I didn’t mind housing you guys.” She smiles, “And I appreciate you housing me these days.”

Ed smiles, “Yeah. No, I like having you here. I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He clears his throat, “It’s just… do you ever feel awkward about it?”

“Why would I be?”

Ed looks down at the floor, shuffling his foot, “Unmarried woman, living with two men…”

Sophie waves it off with a bit of an uncomfortable smile, “Well I know back home they probably would have talked – but nobody cares about stuff like that in the big city.”

Ed quickly looks up at her, “What I mean to say is, what if we fixed that?”

Sophie can feel her feet growing cold, “Fixed it?”

Ed takes her by the hand, he blushing profusely, “Sophie, will you marry me?”

“What?” Sophie yelps, she too blushing.

“I love you,” Ed tells her, just letting it all out, “And I don’t know what I’d do without you. And I don’t want to lose you…” He looks down at the floor, “…I’m scared. I’m scared for our future.” He looks back up at her, looking into her eyes, “I want to know that we’ll always be there for one another. I want to prove that I’ll always be there for you.”

“…Ed…” Sophie says, her face dropping a little, “We can’t just rush into a thing like this.”

“We’re not rushing,” he frantically defends, “It’s been four years.”

“But we’ve only been dating for a few months,” she points out. “I know you’re worried, Ed. I am too.” She squeezes his hand. “…And… I love you, too… Really I do… But… I don’t want us to get married just because we’re scared of losing each other… If we do get married, I want it to be because we’re happy.”

He takes both of her hands, “I am happy. Sophie, you’ve given me a happiness I haven’t felt in years.”

She smiles, “I’m glad for that. But Ed… I can’t.”

Ed feels his heart drop into his stomach, his arms and legs going cold but his cheeks still hot with blush.

Sophie sadly looks down at the floor. “…I don’t want to get married during wartime… I don’t want to look back on my wedding day and remember bombs falling all around us… remember fear and dread, when I should be remembering happiness…”

He wants to say something, anything to put her mind at ease, ANYTHING to make her change her mind, but his throat has closed over. He can’t even make a squeak.

“…Oh Ed…” she says quietly, “…If things were different… If it were another time, another place…” She looks up at him, “If we lived in another world… Maybe then…”
And something within Edward breaks. Another world.

Another world.

The heat shoots from his cheeks and into his eyes, and he can’t stop the flood of tears that comes forth. Ed lets go of Sophie’s hand, running into his bedroom and slamming the door behind him.

He leans his back against the door, covering his mouth with both of his hands, trying so vainly to muffle the sound – but his sobs still break through, his shoulders shaking as he slides down to the floor, his cheeks burning with the hot tears that run over his hands and face. He curls his knees into his chest, hands still over his mouth as he lays his forehead on his knees, crying, crying.

Sophie, out in the hall, can hear Ed through the door. And she wants to help. She wants to tell him everything will be all right. She places a hand against the door, leaning her head on it… Oh, Ed...

The night air is still, oh so still. It seems even the stars are afraid to be out tonight, for they hide behind a veil of thin, grey clouds.

The corporal looks through his binoculars, scanning the horizon.

The sergeant walks up to him – “Anything, corporal?”

“No, sir, all cl--… Wait. Wait! Sir!” the corporal shouts, “We’ve got movement!”

“Where?” the sergeant demands.

“In the air – planes! Oh my god, so many planes!”

The sergeant looks over his shoulder, shouting to a nearby guard, “SOUND THE ALARM!”

At the blaring of the sirens, soldiers jump out of their beds, leaving their barracks while still strapping their helmets in place.

The sergeant shouts orders back and forth as the men dash about the grounds to get to their posts: “Man the AA guns! Somebody get those spotlights on! Contact The Hague and let them know!”

A soldier shouts, “INCOMING!”

A high-pitched whistle screams through the air, rapidly closing in.

BOOM!

One after another, in a shower of fire they come, the bombs, dropping from the sky.

The men on the ground fire up the anti-aircraft gun, lifting the barrel upwards, and letting the planes have it!

But the pilots do not back down – ever forward they fly, the bombs unceasing.

The sergeant holds his helmet down on his head to keep it from popping off as the earth shakes beneath his feet. “How many damn bombs can one plane carry?!” he cries angrily. “You think the damn thing would crash from that much weight!”

“Take cover!!!” a man shouts.
Ed stirs in his bed, rolling over as his eyes crack open. *What’s that sound?* he asks. He remains still, quietly listening to the sound drifting in from the outside – a deep, rolling boom of a sound. … *Is that thunder?* he wonders.

His door cracks open, Al poking his head in. “Ed,” he quietly asks, “Do you hear that?”

Ed sits up, rubbing his eyes clear of sleep, “Yeah, I do.”

“What is that?” Al asks.

The door to Sophie’s room quickly opens. “Guys!” she shouts, “You have to come look at this!”

Ed hops out of bed, joining his brother as they follow Sophie back into her room. She stands at the window, “Do you see that?”

Ed and Al look out the window: over the rooftops of Amsterdam, far into the distance, the dark night sky glows with a strange orange aura – fire. Bright pops of white light crackle across the horizon, like lightning flashes, a deep booming rumble rolling out in their wake.

Al mumbles, “Oh no…”

“It’s happening, isn’t it?” Sophie fearfully asks.

Ed takes her by the hand, “Come on, we’ve got to get someplace safe,” and he starts to leave the room, Al following both of them.

Sophie asks, “But where will we go?”

Ed is making for the stairwell, “It’s too dangerous to go outside. For now, our best bet is to get downstairs and board up the windows.”

“With what?”

“With anything we can find. We’ve got to insulate ourselves; try to stay away from the outside walls.”

They get downstairs, and Ed lets go of Sophie’s hand as he says, “Al, come help me with the table.”

“Right,” and both of them go into the kitchen to retrieve their long dining table.

Sophie rushes over to the radio in the corner and quickly switches it on, turning the volume dial down, so that it’s not too loud, but still audible. The announcer says: “Reports are coming in from Amsterdam-Schiphol. They now join the list along with De Kooy naval base and The Hague airfields. Even if you are nowhere near these areas, it is advised that you stay indoors. Metal fragments from bombs and planes can land several miles away from a battle, and anyone outside may get hit—”

Ed and Al come back into the living room, maneuvering the large table through the rather narrow door. “Sophie!” Ed says, “Run back upstairs and grab as many books as you can out of the study! Go!”
Sophie dashes up the stairs as Ed and Al position the table up against the only window in the living room.

Al gives a confident smile, though his nervousness clearly seeps through, “What, you think we’ll need reading material to pass the time?”

“Insulation,” Ed says plainly as they finish propping up the table. “Come on!” he’s already dashing towards the stairs, “Let’s get the mattresses, too.”

Up and down, up and down, as quick as they can, Ed and Al and Sophie bar the window with books and a mattress. The second mattress they bring down, Ed and Al take into the kitchen.

“What are we doing with this one?” Al questions.

“We’ll prop it against the door,” Ed tells him. He points to the large windows lining the kitchen. “If these get blown out, all that glass is gonna come shooting through here. Not to mention, the shockwave will probably blow down the kitchen door.” Ed begins lifting up the mattress so that it sits on its narrow end. “If we put it up against the door on this side, hopefully, One) all the glass will get stuck in the mattress and not shoot through the door, and Two) it’ll absorb the shockwave and the door won’t fly off into the living room and hit us.”

They prop the mattress against the door, leaving just enough room at the bottom for them to slide through and get back into the living room. Al goes to one of the armchairs and begins dragging the heavy item back, saying, “Mattress or no, a big enough blast of air will still swing that door open.” He sets the chair in front of the kitchen door, scooting the chair as far back as it will go without pushing the swinging door back into the other room.

Sophie, still stacking books against the window, asks, “But what if we need to get food?”

Al pats the chair, “Well, it’ll be a bit of a squeeze, but we can still slip in and out if need be. I vote Ed – he’s the smallest.”

“Ha, ha!” Ed replies, again heading for the stairs, “With any luck, the air raid won’t last that long. Come on, Al, let’s get that last mattress. We’ll seal off this entryway here between the living room and foyer.”

“Right.”

* *

Quietly they sit, the three of them – Ed, Al, and Sophie, all still in their night clothes – sitting in the corner furthest from the window, on the side of the living room that borders the wall of the stairwell, this being the centermost point of the house and therefore furthest away from all outside walls.

They have made a makeshift barricade between them and the rest of the living room, the miniature wall comprised of the sofa and the second armchair, stacked with every cushion and pillow they could find.

The only sound is that of the radio lowly droning, they having set it up next to them in the corner, the announcer continuing to read off reports as they come in: “Rotterdam confirms that German paratroopers are landing at the airfield there. We will keep you informed if any other cities report the same.”

Sophie hugs her knees close to her chest, Ed with his arm wrapped around her shoulders. Al fiddles
with the radio, scanning the stations to hear what the other channels are saying: “—can’t give up hope!” a voice rings out over the airwaves. “We may fall, but we will never stay down! If Germany succeeds in overrunning us, we will rise up! They can send as many troops as they want, but we will NEVER be a part of Germany! For we will always fight for Dutch liberty!”

Sophie sadly smiles, “I’ve heard that speech before. Sounds just like Aleks.”

Ed, too, smiles, “It’s good to see there are those fighting for the same cause.”

Al continues his scanning, moving to the next station, a gruff, authoritative voice on this channel: “If you have witnessed any suspicious activity within the past few days, you are urged to call the police immediately. Again – we have reason to believe that there are those within our borders who have been harboring Nazi spies. If you’ve seen anything suspicious, please, don’t hesitate to call your local police department.”

Ed grumbles in his throat. *Damn it, this stinks,* he wants to say aloud – but he remains calm, for Sophie’s sake. He also wants to tell Al to pick a station and stick with it, but he figures this is Al’s way of feeling like he’s doing something important, when at this moment there is nothing more that any of them can do but sit and wait.

Al turns the dial once more: “—ame to Fullmetal. Do you copy?”

Both Ed and Al gasp, Ed holding out a hand. “Al, stop!”

They all wait with bated breath to see if the voice will come again.

It does: “Flame to Fullmetal, do you copy? Over.”

Al looks like he’s about to burst out with tears of happiness, Ed meanwhile scrambling towards the radio. He reaches to the back of the device, having to pry loose the microphone that has spent years tucked away in its holder.

Ed pushes on the call button. “This is Fullmetal. Long time, no see, Flame! Over.”

“It’s good to hear your voice again,” Roy responds. “Are you boys both okay?”

Ed smugly replies, “‘Boys’? You make it sound like we’re kids or something.” Then he says, plainly, “Yeah, we’re all right. What about you? Over.”

Roy says, “I’m fine. Don’t worry – I’m nowhere near what’s going on right now.” Roy continues, “Listen, this is important. The British are currently sending an aid ship to your location – nothing major, just some food and bandages, things like that to help the civilians. But as soon as it offloads all of its supplies it’s turning right back around and going back to England. Do you understand what I’m saying? This is your opportunity to get out of the country while you still have a chance. Over.”

Ed instinctively raises an eyebrow, “So wait – you know where we are? How long have you known? …Over.”

“I’ve known for a while now,” Roy admits. “I haven’t contacted you because I was afraid a letter or anything I send could be tracked and you would be found. But we don’t have time to go into that now,” he tells them, “Listen: the ship will be arriving at the Vissershaven port in about an hour. And it won’t stay there for long. You have to get there as soon as possible. Over.”

“How do we know which ship it is?” Ed asks, “And how do we even get **on** the ship? Over.”
“Look for a ship flying the British flag,” Roy tells them, “I’ve given the captain a code that you’ll probably recognize. When he asks it to you, just say, ‘Yes’ and tell him who sent you. That’s how he’ll know it’s you. Over.”

“Is that it? Is that everything we need to know? Over.”

“That’s all for now. The captain will give you further instructions when you get on board. Stay safe. I’ll see you soon. Over and out.”

Al is already hopping to his feet excitedly, “Come on! We’ve got to get dressed and pack!”

Sophie worries, “But isn’t it dangerous for us to go upstairs right now?”

Ed also is starting to crawl over the couch, following Al, “If you want to show up in England in your nightgown, that’s up to you.”

Sophie blushes, miffed, “I’m not going out in public in my nightgown!”

“Then come on!” Ed calls back down the stairs.

That strange hour rolls around – it’s not quite dawn for the sun has yet to show itself, and yet it’s not quite night any longer for there is light chasing away the darkness. The dull white light gleams through the window above the stairwell, filling the whole foyer with an eerie, albeit magical, sort of air. The very presence of the light itself seems to bring with it hope, for the rolling sounds of the thunderous raids have stilled to a silence.

Fully clothed, Ed descends the stairs, suitcase in hand, Al and Sophie following him in the same manner. Ed pulls out his pocket watch and checks it.

“All right, the boat should be arriving in about half an hour,” he says aloud.

Sophie asks, “How long will it take us to get to the docks?”

Al says, “Well, you figure—”

POUND.

They stop in their tracks, staring at the front door.

POUND.

The sound comes again, the wood shaking, the metal handle violently jiggling.

POUND.

“Shit!” Ed turns around and grabs Sophie by the hand, and they make a bee-line for the living room.

“What’s going on?!” Sophie cries.

“It can’t be!” Al exclaims as he follows. “Don’t tell me they found us based on Roy’s message!”

POUND!
Ed is pushing the heavy armchair, trying to get it out of the way of the kitchen door, “Al! Help me with this!”

POUND! CRIK!

The front door splinters down its middle!

Sophie gasps, knowing they’re almost through. “Run!” she shouts as she turns to Ed and Al. “I’ll hold ‘em off!”

“You’ll what?!” Ed exclaims as Al continues pushing the heavy armchair out of the way.

Sophie shouts again, “If they ask, I’ve never met you! I won’t tell them anything!”

“Sophie, no!” Ed cries, but Al has grabbed him by the wrist.

“Come on!” and Al pushes through the kitchen door, knocking down the mattress on the other side, pulling his brother out of the living room.

“Sophie!” Ed screams as he reaches his free hand back out towards the living room, catching one last glimpse of her as the door swings back and forth. “SOPHIE!”

Al pushes open the door to the utility room, this narrow space leading out into the alleyway, and Ed nearly falls down the short steps out back, for he is still facing back towards the house, struggling against Al’s grasp. “LET ME GO!”

“Ed!” Al says in a harsh whisper as he continues to run through the back alley, “Be quiet! Do you want them to hear us?!”

Ed drags his feet, still trying to run back to the house. “SOPHIE!”

~

POUND! CRACK!

The front door bursts open, the frame splintering as the lock rips through it. Soldiers in black uniforms, rifles at the ready, enter the room, aiming their barrels at the only person there.

“Don’t move!” one of them shouts at the young woman as they surround her on all sides. “Hands in the air! Now!”

Sophie’s face is as still as stone as she glowers at the soldiers before her. Slowly, she raises her hands, and as she does, she feels a large hand on her shoulder, forcing her down onto her knees.

The soldier shouting orders looks at the men beside him, “You two check upstairs.” He turns his head, “And you two, check the next room.”

They all separate, say for the one giving orders and the soldier behind Sophie, his rifle pointed at her head. He looks at the leader, “Should we take this one back to the commander?”

The leader responds, “Well, she’s not the target. But I bet she knows where they are.” He grins down at her menacingly.

And Sophie glares back at him with such a fire in her eyes as if to burn him.

~
Al and Ed close in on the end of the alleyway, Al still dragging Ed along with him, Ed continuing to vainly struggle against his much bigger brother.

“Dammit, Al! Let me go!” But then Ed gasps, for he sees exiting the house two soldiers in black uniforms!

“There they go!” they shout.

Ed finally begins to run as the soldiers raise their weapons. The alleyway comes to an end, it leading out to a crossroads, and Al dashes off to the left, Ed barely rounding the corner with him as riflefire begins sounding off at their heels, the bullets ringing off the corner of the brick building.

Al continues running, looking for somewhere, anywhere to hide. This street is all houses, the people inside surely having locked their doors. And the park off to the right is too wide open!

The boys pump their legs, sprinting through the empty streets, Al’s heavy suitcase swinging back and forth while Ed’s still dangles from the wrist that Al is latched onto.

Al spots another alleyway. “This way!”

They duck behind the building just in time to hear, “Where’d they go?”

“You go that way, I’ll go this way!”

The short alley gives way to a small industrial park, the concrete field filled with a handful of small warehouses. The door to one of these is slid back, the windowless building open and emptied, surely the work of vandals taking advantage of the situation to do some looting.

Al and Ed run for the warehouse, and once both inside, Al pushes the door shut, lowering a large steel bar that swings down and locks the warehouse from the inside.

They stand there, heaving and huffing, trying to keep their breaths quiet but their lungs crying for air. They can hear the soldier’s running footsteps growing closer. Al leans in to the door, peeking through the tiny crack between it and its frame. The soldier’s not far off, he cautiously pointing his gun from side to side should anyone pop out at him. He’s coming closer to the door!

Al backs away from the door, he and Ed both putting their backs to the front wall. The light seeping through the crack turns to shadow, the soldier’s silhouette overtaking it. …And then it passes.

They remain quiet, waiting until they can no longer here heavy bootfalls.

Cautiously, once more, Al returns to the door, peeking through the crack. He waits silently, slowing his breath…

“…Okay,” Al whispers as quietly as he can, “He’s gone-”

Suddenly, Al feels Ed’s hand digging into his shoulder, and he’s whipped around and Ed punches him right in the face!

“You bastard! Why the hell did you leave Sophie?!”

“Ed, be quiet!” Al again harshly whispers. “They might still hear us!”

Ed grabs Al by the collar, not lowering his voice, “Answer me, damn it! Why did you leave her?!”
“She said she’d hold ‘em off!”

“She could have gotten out with us!”

“You saw how close you came to getting shot just now! If she hadn’t bought us time, you WOULD have been. Or SHE would have been since she would have been running right behind you!”

“We’re going back for her! NOW”

“Ed, we don’t have time!”

“We don’t have time? Time is more important to you than the people you love?! If there wasn’t time to save me, you wouldn’t bother?!”

“I’m trying to save you now, Edward! If you go back to the house, they’re going to kill you!”

“They’re gonna kill Sophie!”

“No they won’t! If they want to get to us, they’ll keep Sophie alive and use her as bait. If we go back there now, we’re falling right into their plans!”

“I don’t care!”

“Don’t you get it? She’s safe! If they kill her, there goes their biggest bargaining chip!”

“Bargaining chip?! Is that all she is to you? A pawn to be tossed around?!”

“I didn’t mean it like that! Sophie’s my friend!”

“Then save her!”

“We can’t, we have to go now! It’ll take us at least half an hour to get to docks and we’re already running late as it is! If we spend any more time here, the boat will leave without us!”

“I don’t care about the boat! I care about Sophie!”

“And you think that I don’t?!”

“You sure as hell aren’t acting like it!”

“I care about her more than you do! You don’t care about Sophie, you care about Winry!”

Ed’s breath leaves him, he frozen to his spot as Al glares back at him angrily.

“… At least I can see Sophie for who she is. I’m not in love with a fantasy!”

PUNCH!

Edward knocks Al so hard across the face that he falls to the ground, and Ed, still holding onto Al’s collar falls with him, he pinning his younger brother to the ground. Ed bares his teeth like an angry animal, his breath and muscles tensely shaking as he feels his blood pump rapidly.

Al quietly scowls back up at his brother, while Ed stares daggers at him.

“…A fantasy?” Edward growls. “Do you mean to tell me that you’ve forgotten who we really are? The things we’ve done? The things we’ve seen? The people we’ve lost?! Are they not real to you?!”
Al continues his quiet scowl. And then he utters, “…Not anymore… They might as well be a dream…”

Ed winds back his fist back and POW! punches Al across the face again, this time causing his lip to bleed. In retaliation, Al punches back, the two young men fighting until eventually Al manages to roll Ed onto his back and pin him down instead.

“Listen to me, dammit!” Al yells. “We WILL save Sophie, just not right now!”

Ed angrily heaves a few breaths, Al continuing-

“…It’s clear that Roy has connections. He may be able to use them to find someone who can get Sophie out. But we’ll never reach Roy if we don’t leave right now!”

…Ed falls quiet, trying, trying so hard, to calm himself and think this through logically.

“Please, Edward,” Al begs. “Trust me on this.”

Ed finally sits up, Al letting him do so. Ed wipes his nose with the back of his hand, clearing away any blood. He heaves a few more angry breaths, “…All right, fine…” Ed quietly concedes, his voice burning. “We’ll do it your way. But I swear that if anything bad happens to Sophie, this is on you!”

Al stands up and helps Edward to his feet, “Don’t worry. The Nazis may be cruel, but they’re not stupid. They’ll keep her alive, trust me.”

Bound and gagged, Sophie is dragged out of the car and through the front door of the safehouse – just a normal every day house, now made evident that it belongs to a traitor, a spy, someone on the inside who has been working with the Germans this whole time.

One of the soldiers quickly looks around, making sure no one is watching them, and then he too enters the house and closes the door behind them.

The place is quiet yet abuzz, a handful of soldiers moving about here and there, one or two being patched up of their wounds received on the battlefield not far away.

Sophie is dragged through an archway and into another room. “Commander!” one of the soldiers holding onto her arms says, “The target got away, but we were able to capture this one.”

Looking at a map that is tacked to the wall is a tall man. Clothed is all black, he wears a long cape, his regality almost out of place amongst these rough and dirty soldiers. He turns around, his cape swaying with his movement, and as he faces them, Sophie’s blood runs cold as he looks at her with icy blue eyes.

“Well,” he says as he approaches them, sounding pleasantly surprised, “I was told to capture the Elric brothers. Seems, instead, we’ve found a sister.”

As he stops in front of them, he makes a gesture with his hand as if to indicate Remove the gag, and the soldier complies, Sophie now able to breathe much easier without that bundle of cloth across her mouth.

The tall man tips his hat as he gives a slight bow, “Commander Johann Reistrom of the Schutzstaffel. And who would you be?”
Sophie’s only answer is to glare at him angrily.

He frowns slightly as he straightens back up, resting his hat back in place. “You know, it’s rude to ignore someone when they’ve asked you a question.”

Again, with not but the movement of his hand, he commands the soldiers sit her down, and roughly they force Sophie onto a stiff wooden chair, sliding her already tied hands over its back to keep her in place.

The commander casually strolls across the room as he speaks. “Ah, Amsterdam. ‘The Venice of the North,’ they call it. Disgusting, isn’t it? They should be calling Venice ‘The Amsterdam of the South,’ don’t you agree?”

Sophie’s eyes follow him as he slowly roves around the room.

“After all, we were here first, the Aryans. All other races are just a sad imitation.” He stops next to her, putting his hand on the back of the chair as he leans in to get eye to eye with Sophie. “You’re Aryan, too, you know. Golden hair, soft white skin.” He clicks his tongue, “Sad that you have brown eyes.”

As he resumes his walking, he traces his hand across Sophie’s back and off her shoulder, causing her to shiver.

The bottom of his cape gently catches the air as he walks back towards the map on the wall, scanning it over. “Clearly you should be cursing whichever of your ancestors decided to breed with a lesser being. One drop is all it takes – one drop of bad blood, and your lineage is ruined for all of eternity.”

He turns quickly to face her once more.

“But let’s get down to business, shall we?” He rests his hands behind his back as he lowers his chin, staring at Sophie. “Where are the Elrics?”

Sophie remains silent, her angry glare never faltering.


Suddenly Sophie lurches forward, snapping her teeth at him, nearly nipping his nose. He quickly stands up straight, startled. And then his surprise gives way to a bit of laughter. “Well! Feisty, aren’t we? I don’t know whether to attribute it to your lower animal blood, or to your higher German blood that naturally wants to resist.” He reaches over her shoulder, resting his hand on the back of the chair, again leaning towards her, though not near as close this time. “Don’t you see? You’re German, just like we are. We’re on the same side.”

“I am NOT on your side!” Sophie finally shouts, stomping her foot out to try and hit his, though she misses.

“Oh, she speaks!” Reistrom chimes. “And for a moment there I thought I’d been handed a mute.” He roughly grabs her face, his leather-gloved hand encompassing the whole of her chin as his fingers dig into her cheeks. He says again, this time gruffly, “Where. Are. The. Elrics?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about!”
“Don’t act stupid. Our intel puts them right where we picked you up.” He gives a sinister smile, “I’m curious – what are you to the Elrics? Are you a sister? Or a Mrs. Elric, perhaps?”

Sophie falls quiet again, resuming her angry glare.

“Or dear, I’ve touched a nerve, haven’t I? Maybe you wanted to be Mrs. Elric, but he rejected you, is that it? Which one was it, the older or the younger brother?”

“I’ve told you! I don’t know who you’re talking about!”

“And I’ve told you to not act stupid. There’s no sense in protecting someone who doesn’t care about you. If they did care, they wouldn’t have let you get captured, now would they? They go running off with their tails between their legs and leave a defenseless woman to fend for herself. Now really, does that sound like someone you should be protecting?”

Sophie wants to shout out, It was nothing like that!, but she knows it’s best to remain quiet. He’s already got her to talk once or twice. Anything more and she might let something slip.

He moves in closer to her, she able to feel his breath on her face, he clenching his hand on her cheeks even tighter, “Where. Are. The Elrics?”

Sophie can feel her face beginning to bruise under his crushing fingers. Even if she wanted to talk, it’s hard to move her jaw under his grasp.

Finally, Reistrom rolls his eyes with a disgusted sigh. “Useless…”

He releases her as he walks away, and Sophie hangs her head, rubbing her tongue against the inside of her cheek to try to get some feeling back into it.

Reistrom walks over to a table in the corner of the room, and with his back to her, Sophie can’t see what he’s up to.

“You know, in the olden days,” he says with his back still to her, “Something like this would have been called a potion. But these days,” he turns around, a syringe in his hand as he chuckles, “We simply call it a serum.”

Sophie gasps, she trying to scoot the chair back away from him, but the two soldiers that brought her in grab onto the chair and hold her still.

Reistrom slowly, menacingly, walks towards her, his shadow crawling its way up her body as he towers over her, the needle of the syringe gleaming. He jabs it into the side of arm, Sophie crying out as the hot searing pain flares across her arm, the serum tingling through her veins. Strangely, it even causes her sinuses to flare up, she squeezing her eyelids closed against the strange sensation.

Reistrom pulls the needle out, smiling, “You’ll tell us what we want to know, whether you want to or not.”

* *

Al opens the door of the car as his brother climbs in on the other side, throwing their suitcases in the back seat. With a screwdriver found in the warehouse, Al cracks open the steering column and begins looking for the ignition wires.

Ed is nervously looking out the window, making sure the coast is clear.
The wires spark, and the vehicle roars to life. Al quickly hops into the car and takes the wheel, and they drive off down the street. They both know it’s not right, stealing a car like this. But it’s too dangerous to try to get back to the house to get to their truck.

Ed has his arms crossed, silently staring out the window, not looking at his brother. Al keeps his eyes on the road ahead, though he can feel Ed’s anger vibrating through the air. And even though he’s just as worried as Ed is, Al keeps telling himself, They won’t kill her. She’s too valuable. If they kill her, there goes their chance of finding us…

Ed, his gaze out the window, watches as the houses and shops of Amsterdam pass them by. It’s all the same. The break in. The running away. Leaving their home behind forever. Leaving their friend behind. It’s the same now as it was in Frankfurt with Roy.

Ed, arms still crossed, tightens his grip on his elbow.

They hadn’t learned anything. They were making the same mistakes all over again. They had seen the warning signs and they didn’t leave when they had the chance. What if they do to Sophie what they did to Roy? What if they send her to one of those camps? Him and Al had seen the condition of that place, how thin the prisoners looked, how filthy and cramped the quarters were.

We’re making a mistake, Ed inwardly yells at himself. We can’t leave her like this! I don’t care if Roy DOES have connections! What if they don’t care? What if they say she’s not worth the risk? Or what if they do go in and they can’t get her out?

He hugs his arms in tighter to his body, cursing under his breath.

* 

The lights grow dim as Sophie’s eyelids fall and rise, she trying to keep her head up – but the overwhelming urge to sleep makes her brain feel heavier and heavier within her skull.

Reistrom pulls up a chair, sitting down directly in front of her. He rests his elbows on his knees, resting one hand in the other as he stares at her, he never blinking. “Now then,” he says quietly, “You never did tell me your name.”

“How are we feeling, Sophie?”

“What did you give me?”

“Just a little something to help you relax. You seemed very tense. Why were you so tense, Sophie?”

Her speech is incredibly slow, the words moving at a snail’s pace, “‘Cause… ‘Cause you’re gonna hurt Edward…”

Reistrom smiles widely. He motions a hand at one of the soldiers, and the soldier goes to the table in the corner, picking up a pencil and a notepad.

Reistrom continues, “I’m not going to hurt him. I just want to talk to him.”

Sophie numbly shakes her head, “No you don’t. You’re gonna kill him.”

“Why would you think that?”
“Because… he hates you… you stole his friend…”

“What friend?”

Sophie mumbles, like a toddler falling asleep, “Hmm, horsey…”

The soldier writing notes raises an eyebrow questioningly.

Reistrom pays it no mind. “Sophie,” he chimes, almost sing-song-like, like a father to a child, “Don’t fall asleep.”

“I’m not asleep,” she grumpily responds, lolling her head back, “I can still beat you up…”

“Did Edward tell you to beat us up?”

“Edward? …”

“Where is Edward?”

Sophie begins giggling, her eyes closed with her head still back, face towards the ceiling. “Heeheehee! He’s going fishing! Haha! Fish and chips…. They like that in England, don’t they? …”

Reistrom nods at the soldier, indicating to write that down. “Is Edward going to England?”

“No!” Sophie again says like a petulant child, her head rolling back towards him as she wearily tries to keep her eyes open to give him a grimace. “I told them that I wouldn’t tell you anything! I said that I would say that I’ve never met them and that I don’t know who they are!”

Reistrom chuckles, “Forgive me. You did say that, didn’t you?”

“That’s right,” she affirms.

“Well then,” he says, steepling his fingers together as he continues to lead her on, “If you were to go to England, where would you catch the boat?”

“At the harbor…” she mumbles, again nodding off.

“Which harbor?”

She yawns, “The fisherman’s harbor…”

Reistrom looks at the second soldier, and the commander points to the map on the wall. The soldier goes over to it and begins scanning all the shorelines.

Reistrom turns his attention back to Sophie, “Would you like to go see Edward, Sophie?”

“…Edward…”

“I’ll take you to him.”

“…I want to see Edward…”

“Sir,” the soldier at the map pipes up, “The Vissershaven, in IJmuiden to the west. It’s the closest point between here and England.”

“Excellent,” Reistrom says with a smile as he stands. He walks forward, placing his hand on
Sophie’s head. “Come on, Sophie. Let’s go see Edward.”

“Edward…”

The car pulls up on the docks, Ed and Al both looking out the window as they search the pier.

“There,” Al says, looking towards one of the ships in the harbor. “That’s the British flag, isn’t it?” he asks, referring to a flag billowing from the ship’s tallest pole.

“Yeah, that’s it all right,” Ed confirms. “This must be the one.”

They bring the car to a rest, parking in front of some large crates that are all stacked high. A crane aboard the ship is currently lowering down more of these large wooden boxes, surely the supplies that Roy had mentioned.

As Ed and Al exit the car, a crewmember on deck dashes up to an older gentlemen with a beard, whispering something to him. The man looks over and sees the strangers with suitcases approaching, and he makes his way to the gangplank, walking down to the pier.

Ed and Al stop as this man approaches them. He asks, “Do you have a permit?”

Ed instantly recognizes this – the same thing Roy had said to the police officers in Frankfurt. Ed nods, “Yes. Roy Mustang sent us.”

The man nods, extending his hand for a shake. “I’m glad to see you’ve arrived safely.”

Edward shakes the man’s hands and also recognizes the handshake as well as the ring on the man’s finger – he is a Brother.

“Captain Jones, at your service,” he smiles. “Let me show you to your cabins.”

The captain turns and begins to make his way back up the gangplank, Al following him, but Ed hesitating for a moment. He sighs, finally following. We’ll get to see Roy again… But what if we never see Sophie again? Something catches in his throat. Is this Equivalent Exchange? Giving up one friend in return for another?…Damn it…

The captain leads them below-decks, taking a left to the port side of the ship. He opens a narrow door, leading into a narrow little cabin with a bunkbed. “This will be your quarters. It’s not much, but it’s the best I can offer you. We should be arriving in England in about 19 hours. So please, make yourselves comfortable.”

Al nods as he sets his suitcase on the top bunk, “Thank you, sir.”

“My pleasure,” the captain nods in return. “Please, excuse me,” he says, and he leaves the room, leaving Ed and Al alone there.

Ed tosses his suitcase onto the bottom bunk, very little life in his eyes as he does so.

Al is quiet. He hates seeing his brother sad like this, and he wants to do something to break the tension. “Hey,” Al finally asks, “I’m hungry. How about you?”

Ed shrugs.

“I’ll go see where they’re hiding the galley around here,” Al says as he heads for the door. “Why
don’t you get unpacked?”

Ed shrugs again, “Yeah, sure, whatever…”

Al leaves, knowing that Ed could use a little alone-time right now.

Ed sighs, strolling over to the porthole window, to get one last glimpse of the Netherlands, even if all he gets to look at are the dreary, grey docks. He looks up to the grey clouds passing overhead, unsure of what is actually cloud and what is left over smoke drifting from the far away airfields. His eyes drift back down to the docks, and as they do, he gasps.

Walking down the pier is Sophie!

“Sophie!” he gasps, and Ed immediately turns and exits the room, making his way to the stairs to get back on deck.

Sophie stops a few yards in front of the gangplank, her stance a little wobbly.

Ed, now on deck, rushes to the edge of the ship. “Sophie!” he calls down to her. “Up here!”

She numbly looks up at him.

“Hurry up!” he calls again, “Get on board! -?!”

Strolling up behind Sophie is a tall man, wearing all black, with a swastika on his officer’s cap.

Ed grits his teeth as the man places his hand on Sophie’s shoulder.

“Mr. Elric,” the man calls up. “A word, please.”

Edward clenches the railing of the ship, standing there, silently, for a moment. And then he lets go, walking towards the gangplank.

One of the crewmembers sees this, and takes off for the Bridge.

Ed descends the gangplank, walking towards Sophie, she mumbling, “Edward?”

As Ed approaches, about a yard away, the officer holds up a hand, “That’s close enough.”

“Let her go,” Ed growls.

“I don’t believe you’re in a position to be giving orders…” The officer falls silent for a moment, staring strangely at Edward, almost as if he’s seen a ghost.

Ed raises an eyebrow, “…What’s your problem?”

The man chuckles, regaining his composure, “Forgive me... I suppose I didn’t expect you to be so short.”

Ed’s temper flares up, but all he does is clench a fist. “Get to the point! Why are you here?!”

“Oh you know why I’m here,” The officer smiles as he says authoritatively, “Edward Elric: By the order of Lead Commander Heinrich Himmler, in the name of our Fuhrer and all of Germany, I hereby place you under arrest for high treason and crimes against the Reich.”

On the Bridge, the crewmember gets to the captain. “Sir! The Germans are here! And one of our
passengers has gone down to meet them!”

The captain goes to the window, looking out to the docks. “Damn,” he says under his breath. “He should have stayed below decks.”

“What do we do, captain?” the crewmember asks.

“We have our orders,” the captain tells him. “We are not to engage the Germans under any circumstances.” The captain sighs to himself. “I’m sorry, Mr. Elric. But there’s only so much I can do for you…”

Ed, still on the docks, only scoffs with a haughty grin. “Really? You think I’m just going to come willingly?”

“No,” the officer admits, reaching for his holster. “I thought you might take a little convincing.”

He takes out his pistol and points it right at Sophie’s head. “Come with me, or the woman dies.”

Ed again grits his teeth. Damn it…

The officer chuckles, “Though we seem to be one short. Where is your brother?”

Ed quickly blurts, “We split up!”

“Is that so?”

“He’s staying behind to help the resistance! That’s right! You didn’t think you could just invade the Netherlands without the people rising up, did you?”

The officer shrugs, “It doesn’t matter. The Lead Commander’s vendetta seems to be solely directed at you. Bringing in your brother would have merely meant an extra feather in my cap.” He cocks his pistol, placing the mouth of the barrel right against Sophie’s temple. “Now as I was saying – Are you going to come with me? Or do I have to drag you kicking and screaming away from her bloody corpse?”

Ed’s heart is beating strongly, he quickly calculating every option in his mind. And then, oddly, he starts to chuckle. And then breaks out into a laugh.

Reistrom raises an eyebrow.

Ed crosses his arms, closing his eyes with a confident smile. “Go ahead. Kill her.”

“Ed…” Sophie numbly mumbles.

“Though I don’t know why you’d ever do anything so stupid,” Ed says to the man. “She’s your bargaining chip, am I right? You think holding her hostage will get me to do whatever you want, like dangling a carrot in front of a rabbit.” Ed points out, “But if you kill her, I won’t have reason to do anything you say! Throw away the carrot, and the rabbit will just run awa-“

BANG!

“SOPHIE!” Ed’s eyes snap open immediately.

Sophie is shaking, her eyes watering. Reistrom has his pistol pointed high into the air, the barrel smoking. He gives a wide, malicious grin, and Edward’s stomach turns, knowing that his bluff has been called.
On the Bridge, the captain looks at his watch. “Time’s up. Draw in the gangplank…”

Ed’s eyes tremble, his breath shaking.

The officer once more puts his gun back to Sophie’s head: “That’s what I thought.”

Ed hears a noise behind him, and he looks over his shoulder to see that the gangplank is being withdrawn back into the ship.

Reistrom chuckles. “Oh my. It would seem your ship is leaving without you. That’s all right. I have a ride.” He motions his head back towards dry land. “Do you see that car over there?”

Indeed, there is a second car on the dock, a soldier at the wheel.

“Get in it,” Reistrom orders, lowering his voice to dark, gravelly pitch, “And no funny business.”

Ed’s shoulders slump. Al was right. He’s fallen right into their trap.

The ship lurches forward, starting to move its way out of the harbor.

At least Al is safe, Ed thinks. And at least now I can keep an eye on Sophie – keep HER safe…

Ed looks down at his feet and begins to walk towards the car.

The ship rumbles, and a slight sway signals that the metal beast is moving.

Al re-enters the cabin, a couple of trays in his hand. “They don’t have much, but it should…. Ed?”

He looks around. Edward is not in the room.

Al sets the food on the small endtable in the corner, and he goes out into the hallway, looking around. “Hey Ed, where’d you go?”

Al goes to the stairs, wondering if maybe Ed went up to get some fresh air.

As he rises from the decks below, the wind whips past Al’s hair as the ship heads out to sea. He scans the boatdeck, and then grabs one of the sailor’s attentions.

“Excuse me!” Al asks. “Have you seen my brother?”

The sailor questions, “You mean the guy that came onboard with you? Yeah, he went back down onto the pier before we took off.”

“He what?!” Al asks frantically, “Tell me he came back on!”

The sailor shakes his head, “Not that I saw. Hey! Where’re you going?”

Al runs down the length of the ship to its aft, stopping at the railing as he looks back to the docks, the ship already a good hundred yards away from it. There he is! And Sophie too! both of them being put into a car by a tall man in black!

“Edward!” Al shouts as he starts to climb over the railing.

Nearby sailors grab him, “What the hell are you doing?!”
“Let me go!” Al cries. “I have to save my brother!”

“The propellers will cut you to ribbons!” they tell him, pulling him back over.

Al struggles against them, “Please! Turn the ship around! Turn it around now!”

The captain exits the bridge, “Quiet down! You want to draw the Germans’ attention to us?”

Al turns on the captain, begging for an answer, “Why?! Why did you leave him there?!”

The captain sadly sighs. He replies, “I’m sorry, son. We ran out of time.”

Al’s eyes fill with tears as he stands there, unable to move.

The captain lowers his eyes and then turns around, “I suggest you go back to your cabin. We have a long way to go and I’m sure you’ve had a long night…” And the captain goes back onto the Bridge.

~

Al re-enters the room, his movements slow, his hands and legs feeling heavy and frigid…

…Time… they ran out of time…

He flops down onto the bottom bunk, staring at the floor as he sits there numbly.

…All this time… they've been running… for years… But Ed still got caught…

…They're gonna kill him…

Al digs his fingers into the sheets, feeling everything inside of him well up as his body shivers with a sudden chill.

...They're gonna kill him… And with him dead, Sophie’s no use to them anymore… They’ll kill her too…

His breath shakes. Al looks to his side and sees sitting there Edward’s suitcase… Slowly he reaches over and takes it by the handle, sliding it towards himself. He lifts it onto his lap, setting the broad side of the suitcase against his chest. And he wraps his arms around it, hugging it – quite possibly the only thing he has left of his brother.

Al can’t stop his shoulders from shaking as sadness overwhelms him and the tears fall forth from his eyes, he crying aloud as he lays his head onto suitcase, burying his face between it and his chest.

Again. Again they’ve been separated. Maybe forever this time… Ed will be just like everyone else now… nothing more than a memory…

Unlike his brother, Al doesn’t try to hide or muffle the sounds, and his crying rings out across the hollow room.

The ship continues sailing westward, out onto the blue horizon, outrunning the rising sun and the smoldering cities at its aft, leaving the mainland behind forever.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*
Next episode:

CHAPTER NINETEEN
IMPRISONED

Johann Reistrom
Ages: 24
Gender: Male
Nationality: German
Appearance: Splinter-faced
Affiliation: Emperor's Guard
Profile: A cruel and ruthless man. He's the last person you want to cross. Cold and calculating. Very little is known about his outside of his military career.
Humbert Bahr
Age: 16
Gender: Male
Height: 170 cm
Nationality: Germany
Affiliation: German Army

Jozua Schwangau
Age: 21
Gender: Male
Height: 180 cm
Nationality: Germany
Affiliation: German Army

Humbert Bahr
- Younger brother of Otis and a member of the Black Sun society. He is known for his quick-wittedness and strategic thinking.
- His interests lie in politics and economics.

Jozua Schwangau
- Known as the "Swan Knight" due to his elegant and charming appearance.
- Hisplist: 2.3 cm
- Mellow: Germany
- Rank: Commander
- Affiliation: German Army

Bio: Born to a rich family, Jozua's father pushed him into a military career. His good looks and his high rank with little effort.

Humbert Bahr
- Known for his sharp mind and quick actions.
- His contribution to the Black Sun society is significant.

Jozua Schwangau
- Known for his charm and good looks.
- Hisplist: 2.3 cm
- Mellow: Germany
- Rank: Commander
- Affiliation: German Army

Bio: Known for his charm and good looks, Jozua is a member of the German Army. Hisplist: 2.3 cm

Humbert Bahr
- Known for his intelligence and quick thinking.
- His contribution to the Black Sun society is significant.

Jozua Schwangau
- Known for his charm and good looks.
- Hisplist: 2.3 cm
- Mellow: Germany
- Rank: Commander
- Affiliation: German Army
SKDJGFKJDG;SDFKLGH;SDFH;SDFLJH;A *incomprehensible sobbing*
SOMEONE HOLD ME!
The outside world is nonexistent. All there is now is the dark interior of the armored car as it rumbles along, heading to God knows where.
After being taken away from the docks, Ed and Sophie were taken back to the safehouse in town, where some soldiers had shown up with a stolen armored car from one of the airbases.

“Perfect,” their commander, Reistrom said of the vehicle, “Put the prisoners in the back and let’s be on our way.”

Now in this silent darkness, Ed sits with his arms wrapped around Sophie, she still groggy from the serum she’d been given. She knows, she knows they’re in danger. She knows it’s her fault that Edward has been captured, and she wants to cry – but the serum has made her so numb that she can barely move or talk.

Edward keeps his arms wrapped around her, his cheek laying on her head. He wants to protect her. He wants to protect her in any way that he can. But for how long can he? As soon as this car stops, who knows what the Nazis have planned for them next?

At least I know Al is safe, Ed thinks to himself. Soon he’ll be with Roy in England. And then everything will be fine… Roy has connections. He’ll send someone to come bust us out… We’ve just got to wait it out… Survive until then…

Ed manages a short, inward laugh along with half a smile.

Knowing Al, that idiot’ll be at the head of the charge.

His smile begins to fade.

We haven’t changed at all, have we Al? Still running headlong into danger… to save the ones we love…

He tightens his grip on Sophie.

* *

The car rumbles along endlessly up the road that cuts through the large, thick forest, the tall evergreens staring down at the little caravan that moves like a line of ants across the floor. The armored car, at the head of the line, is followed by several other smaller cars, all heading back to wherever it is they came from.

After a few hours of travel, the armored car finally draws to a rest.

A couple of soldiers go to the back of the car, opening the doors, “All right! Get out, you!” one of them shouts.

Ed still sits right where he is, glaring angrily at the soldiers.

One of them climbs into the back, taking Sophie by the arm, “We said ‘Come on’!”

“Let her go!” Ed shouts as he clings to her, but the other soldier has entered the car and is now grabbing onto Ed, prying the two of them apart.

A couple more soldiers pile in to assist, one helping with the woman, the other helping to contain the man who struggles against them, they having to handcuff his arms behind his back to keep him from lashing out at them.

“I said let her go!”

“That’s quite enough,” Commander Reistrom says, he standing at the open door at the back. “Lock
the girl in a cell,” he orders. “As for Elric,” he gives a dark smile, “Bring him with me.”

The soldiers force Edward out of the truck, they nearly dropping him out the back as he refuses to use his legs. “Stand up!” one orders him.

Now outside, Ed can finally see where he is (though admittedly, he does not know where ‘here’ is) – he stands before a large imposing building, its walls slanted inward, the whole place one giant concrete trapezoid. Around this building is a short yard of nothing but dirt, and beyond that, tall concrete walls, their smooth grey surface giving way to threatening lengths of rolled barbed wire poised atop them.

The soldiers push Edward ever forward, dragging him towards the door at the front of the building, the men from the rest of the caravan all heading for the indoors as well.

“Damn,” the soldier on Ed’s right comments to his buddy, “You feel the muscles on this guy? Like steel!”

The other scoffs, “He ain’t that strong…”

Reistrom, at the head of the procession, knocks on the door. A viewing slot opens momentarily, the guard inside checking who it is, and then the slot closes, followed shortly by the sounds of locks loosening. The door to the compound swings open, allowing Reistrom and his posse to bring the prisoners inside.

The long hallway looks to be like everything else in this place – concrete floor, concrete walls, concrete ceilings. Only the doors, made of heavy steel, are different. Door after steel door goes by, Reistrom finally stopping about halfway down the hall.

With merely a motion of his hand, Reistrom commands that Sophie be put in the cell on the right. He in the meanwhile is unlocking the door on the left, opening it and entering while the soldiers take Sophie into the other room.

Ed, still, struggles against his captors, “Where are you taking her?! Sophie!”

“Calm down, Mr. Elric,” Reistrom says, very calm himself. He turns to face Edward, “I’m being very gracious by putting her in the cell right across the hall. At least then you can talk to each other if you want. As you said – you never want the carrot far from the rabbit.”

Ed glowers at him. His eyes then drift from side to side as the room fills with soldiers, all of them looking at Ed with a strange anticipation.

One soldier walks into the room carrying a whip, which he then hands to the commander.

Reistrom smiles, “I’d say this is probably my favorite part – breaking in the ‘new recruits’.”

The soldiers all chuckle darkly.

“On his knees,” he commands.

The soldiers force Ed down, turning him so that his back is towards the commander as others swarm in on Ed, tearing back his coat and shirt to expose his back. In the melee, one soldier grabs what he thinks is clothing, this strange bit attached to belts that cross Elric’s chest – and as the soldier pulls back on this clothing, it rips its way back and down Ed’s arm, exposing a shining, gleaming silver arm!
Reistrom gasps, his pupils becoming pinpoint thin as his mouth hangs open.

The other men stare in awe, some mumbling, “The heck?” “Is that his arm?” “Wow, that’s something…”

Reistrom lowers his chin, staring angrily at Edward. Lowly but deeply, like a tiger growling, he commands, “Everyone. Get out.” And the soldiers comply, quietly leaving the room, one of them closing the door once they’ve all gone, the heavy steel door resounding against the bare walls of the empty room.

Ed waits quietly, sitting there on his knees, he looking over his shoulder to stare back up at the commander just as heatedly as the commander stares back down at him.

Reistrom slowly begins to pace the room, circling Ed like vulture waiting for its victim to die.

Ed still waits, unmoving, unsure as to why the commander has fallen silent…

And then suddenly Reistrom comes up behind Ed, putting the handle of the whip around his throat and talking in his ear – “I know who you are – Edward Elric, Fullmetal Alchemist.”

Edward’s heart stops as his eyes widen, he sucking in air through his grit teeth. After a moment of silence, Ed calms down. *He probably heard me and Roy talking over the radio*, he thinks to himself. *No big deal...* Ed coldly responds, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Does the town of Liore mean anything to you?”

And just as quickly as it had started beating again, Ed’s heart stops again.

Silence fills the room – nothing, not even the sound of breathing nor the scurry of an insect is heard.

“I was there,” Reistrom growls at him. “…I was among those soldiers, among all those men that YOU killed.”

*What the hell is he talking about?!* Ed thinks, his eyes shaking, his blood ice cold. Ed finally speaks: “I didn’t kill anyone!”

“Of course you did!” Reistrom says with conviction. “You killed all of us – just so that you could have your damn Philosopher’s Stone!”

*All right, calm down*, Ed tells himself. *Clearly he’s had dealings with the Thule Society, or maybe he’s one of them. He’s just trying to get into my head... But how would the Thule Society know any of this?*

Reistrom heaves a few angry breaths, and then slowly seems to calm. But his voice is so deep and growling that it almost doesn’t sound human anymore –

“Every night… every night of my life… I’ve had the same horrible nightmare: drowning in an ocean of blood, so thick and dark that I almost can’t see in front of me. The only thing I can see are the anguished faces of the men who drown with me; all I can feel are their hands grasping at me as they struggle to breathe. And though there is no air, I can hear their terrible screaming, as if their hearts are being ripped from their very bodies… surely something so terrible could only be done by the hands of Hell.”

He releases the whip from around Ed’s neck, Ed coughing for a moment as Reistrom begins to
slowly circle the room again.

“And then, they all begin to explode, like stars, into bright white lights, and the sea of blood begins to boil. I feel myself catch on fire, the pain so great as I scream, my mouth open and the blood rushing in to fill the void, my heart being crushed by some unknown force.”

He continues to stare down Ed, Ed staring back, confused as to where this is going.

“And then, I feel myself being pulled forward, as if I am falling from the sky. The blood begins to subside, turning into water, and all I see before me are dead children, little girls, who all look alike, their eyes absolutely soulless, as if they were just dolls.”

Ed lifts his head a bit, this sounding slightly familiar. Nina? he thinks to himself. When Al went to see Tucker… and he used the Stone to transmute a new Nina...

Reistrom continues, “And then I feel myself pass through one of these girls, as if she were nothing more than smoke… And then I’m being lifted upwards towards the Heavens, heading straight for the Golden Gates… And then… after that… I remember nothing...”

Both men are quiet, the commander continuing to circle the room. He stops behind Edward, standing away from him, his voice echoing off the cold concrete walls, sounding as though he’s right in front of Ed.

“…Seeing such visions of Hell… every night… since you were a baby…” He gives an off chuckle, the pitch in his voice rising, “It can have a strange effect on you, you know. As I got older, the dreams started to change a little. Sometimes the dreams were slightly different – sometimes they’d pick up halfway through. Other times, I’d think I was finally having a different dream: that I was a man, a soldier with a gun, running with my brigade, storming some little desert town, only to find the desert town deserted.”

Ed is making the connections in his mind, seeing everything coming together.

Reistrom still talks, “And then what do you think happened once we all got into town? That’s right – a bright light, screaming, and then suddenly I’m back in the ocean of blood. Other times, I’d see a man with an eye patch, my commander I assume.”

_He’s getting way too specific…_ Ed thinks. _He can’t possibly mean-_

“Other times there was a dark man, with red eyes and a scar across his face…”

Ed is quiet, waiting for what could possibly come next. Reistrom comes behind him again, talking into his ear.

“But there was always one face I remembered the most – the face of a little boy, with gold eyes like a demon, a blood-red jacket with the Serpent in place of our Lord on His cross, truly a devil from Hell, disguised as a human. But most of all, his arm-”

Reistrom puts his hand on Edward’s automail, grasping it as if trying to crush it.

“A silver arm…” he whispers. “An arm…just like yours – so perfectly human-looking, that it couldn’t have been made by the hands of Man, but perhaps by some devil’s blacksmith.”

Reistrom stands and begins to walk again, this time, his circle much tighter around Ed, as if trying to suffocate him with his very presence.
“I thought it was all a dream, some punishment sent by God to torment me for being born a bad soul. Or maybe it was a warning, a premonition of things to come – the trenches of the last war certainly proved just how hellish this Earth can be.” His voice drops to almost a whisper, “But what of the boy, that golden devil dressed in red? What did he and his silver arm herald? The opening of the Gates of Hell?”

Ed kneels his head a moment, thinking back to the Gate… and what his teacher, Izumi, had said years before… that in that Gate was not Truth… but only Hell…

Reistrom stops and kneels before Ed, using the butt of his whip to lift Ed’s chin, looking into his eyes, a bizarre, almost excited, insane look about Reistrom’s face as he smiles a strange smile. “The dreams started to get worse you know, almost unbearable – the screams getting louder, the pain tearing me in half so that I couldn’t sleep – and then one day, they stopped… and I haven’t had the dreams since…”

“What’s this all about?” Ed finally yells at him. “Why are you telling me these things?!”

Reistrom is quiet, that same look on his face as he looks back and forth between Ed’s eyes. “Because I wonder if the dreams aren’t needed anymore… Have the floodgates been opened? After all, you’re here, aren’t you? Isn’t that why you’re here? To destroy this world, just as you did the last?”

“I haven’t destroyed anything!”

“Haven’t you? Once the dreams stopped, the entire world fell into disarray – depression overtaking every country, people dying hungry in the streets, and a war that is engulfing the entire world in an ocean of blood… I looked up that symbol I always saw on your back – the Flamel Cross they call it, the symbol of alchemists, of sorcerers, who are damned for the eighth circle of Hell. I pored over books in libraries, finding little to nothing on alchemy, at least not where I lived. I had to go to the big cities, where the universities were, until finally I found it – the purpose of alchemy, the goal – a thing called a Philosopher’s Stone, a jewel that would give a man the powers of a god. All he has to do is use ‘materia prima’.”

Reistrom gets back up, circling Edward again, only a little further away this time.

“The raw, prime material born out of chaos - ” He stops behind Ed, again talking in his ear, “Spirit. Souls. To have the power of God you must control Heaven, and what is Heaven but a gathering of souls? How many people did you kill, Edward? How many souls did you have at your command?”

“I didn’t do anything…”

Again, the commander begins to pace, Ed starting to get dizzy from watching him go in circles. “Once the dreams stopped I started having visions instead – while I was awake. Hallucinations – I thought I was going mad. I started hearing voices, saying names like ‘Amestris’ and ‘Bradley,’ ‘Liore’ and ‘Ishbal.’ I didn’t know what they meant, or where they were coming from. But there was one phrase I kept hearing –” He stops once more behind Edward. “Full Metal.” He moves in closer to Ed, “And the word ‘metal’ just made me keep thinking of that demon boy. I thought you were just a dream…”

He hits Ed full on the metal arm with the whip handle, the vibrations shaking up into Ed’s shoulder and nerve endings, making him yelp with pain, for it feels as though a hundred little needles are stabbing him on the inside.

“But this…” Reistrom says, stroking Ed’s automail arm up and down, “This says it all. I’ve read
the report on you, Mr. Elric,” he says as he rises to walk again, “– You’ve had encounters with the Thule Society. You’re a Freemason. You’re a menace and a gypsy sympathizer.”

He stops in front of Edward again, looking down on him as Edward looks up at the man who stares at him with burning hatred in his eyes.

“You are an alchemist,” the commander growls, “An alchemist with gold eyes and a full metal arm. You murdered countless men, myself included, in the name of ultimate power. And yet that was a past life for me. I was reborn. But you – you are exactly the same. Did you achieve immortality with that stone of yours Mr. Elric? Are you really a god now?”

Reistrom suddenly flicks his cloak to the side, pulling out a dagger and hitting Ed across the face with it, Ed crying out as it digs into his cheekbone, blood splattering forth onto the ground and the blade.

There is silence as Reistrom with a cold, stern look watches the red trickle down … “No… you are no god… You’re just a man…” He puts the dagger back in his belt. “Which means you can suffer, just as you’ve made me suffer.”

He readjusts his cloak, straightening himself up.

“I’m going to make your life a living hell, Mr. Elric. I’ll see to it that I bring the eighth circle of Hell here, now, so that you can suffer in this lifetime and the next. I will keep you here in this prison, this little pocket of stone, until you die from your own diseased filth – such as is fitting for an alchemist.”

With that, Commander Reistrom finally walks towards the door, walking out and slamming it behind him. Edward can hear the heavy padlocks shifting into place, followed by the sound of Reistrom’s boots echoing down through the hallway until they are smaller and smaller and finally gone.

And then finally there is silence…

Ed is left alone in his cell, his hands still cuffed behind his back, his shirt and jacket left hanging around his elbows, as he sits there kneeling on his knees, trying to process everything that has just happened…

… * KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK! *

The guards inside hear the pounding, and one of them goes up to the door, opening the view-slot.

“Who goes there?”

“Open the door, you idiot!” shouts a large burley man, he towering well above the view-slot, the guard looking directly at the man’s broad chest bearing his rank and service bars, just barely able to see two soldiers who accompany him at his side.

“Oh! Commander Bähr!” the guard stutters for half a second. “Uh, sorry, sir, just give me one minute-.”

“Not a minute, now!” the commander bellows.
The guard answers, “Uh, let me just confer with Commander Reistrom…”

Reistrom sits behind his desk in his office. His breathing is slow and heavy, his jaw clenched and his brow furrowed, trying, vainly, to calm himself after the discovery he’s just made. He barely even notices that the pen he holds in his hand has broken in half, the nearby inkwell toppled over, the black ink slowly oozing out across his desk.

He slowly takes in a breath, and then heaves a sigh, finally unclenching his fist, dropping the broken pen, it splatting on top of the inky puddle. Reistrom looks down, finally noticing the mess. He grumbles to himself, knowing it must now be cleaned.

Just then, a little something catches his eye – a drop of ink is moving. He chuckles to himself, realizing that this little black drop is not a drop at all, but a spider scurrying its way across the table.

“Well hello there,” Reistrom says to it, he gently laying out his fingers before the creature.

The spider stops its scurrying, coming to a halt. Tentatively, it reaches out its front two legs, feeling Reistrom’s fingers, checking whether or not it’s safe to crawl across.

“Don’t be afraid,” he says to it.

The spider then begins to make its way across his fingers, as if they’re nothing more than branches upon a tree.

Reistrom casually lifts his hand, watching the little creature scamper across his knuckles.

A slight knock comes at his door.

“Enter,” he says.

A guard opens the door, giving a salute, “Commander Reistrom, sir! Commander Bähr is here to see you!”

Reistrom chuckles, still busy watching the spider, “Of course he is. Show him in.”

The guard salutes once more, and before he leaves, Reistrom requests, “And bring a towel back with you, won’t you?”

“Yes, sir.” And the guard leaves.

Reistrom finally sets his hand back down, letting the spider go along its way, it running in behind a small stack of books.

A few moments later, flanked on either side by his own soldiers, Commander Bähr comes striding into the room, his broad shoulders just very narrowly fitting in through the doorway, his thick, wiry beard unable to cover the scowl on his face. “There you are, you snake!”

“Commander Bähr,” Reistrom says with bland pleasantness, “So good to see you.”

“Shut it, Reistrom!”

“Couth as always…”
Bähr’s soldiers wait outside the door of the office, ignoring the guard who quietly dashes past, setting a towel on the spilled ink pile on the desk before dashing back out.

Bähr, in the meanwhile, is too busy shouting, “What the hell were you doing in Amsterdam?! That is MY operation! You’re supposed to be overseeing the Rotterdam raids!”

Reistrom sits back in his chair as he lifts a telegram up off his desk. “I am overseeing them – reports tell me things are moving as planned in Rotterdam. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Then what were you doing on my turf?” the large man barks.

“Taking care of a special request from the Lead Commander.” Reistrom says with an acute smugness about his voice, “It seems he didn’t think you were competent enough to handle it, so he gave the job to me.”

“What?!” Bähr is taken aback, nearly stumbling over his words for a moment before returning to his angry demeanor, “You’re making shit up! What were you really after?!”

Reistrom gives a grin, steepling his fingers, “Maybe you were unaware of this, but the Elric Brothers have been living in Amsterdam for years now.”

“Wait, you don’t mean – ”

“Oh I do mean – ,” Reistrom confirms, “The ones responsible for destroying the Lead Commander’s pet project; the ones who nearly burnt Wewelsburg to the ground all those years ago; the ones who thwarted the Thulers’ attempts back in Munich.” He gives a shrug with half a chuckle, “But I’m sure you knew where they were and had a team already ready to go to apprehend them.”

“Ghch! Well, yeah!” Bähr responds, acting as though he already knew all this, “Why do you think I’m here? I demand that you turn custody of them over to me.”

Reistrom casually swings his chair to face the wall, closing his eyes as he looks away from Bähr. “Forgive me, but I must decline.”

Bähr shakes a fist, “Why you little – !”

“It would be wrong of me to lie straight to the Lead Commander’s face.” Reistrom then opens his eyes, glaring sharply out of the corners of them, “And I’m not about to give you the credit for my work.”

Bähr points a finger threateningly, “It wasn’t your work in the first place! You overstepped your bounds by moving your units through my region!”

Reistrom turns back forward, resting his arms on his desk, “And I’m willing to take reprimand for that. But not from you. Besides – ,” he grins, “The Lead Commander will be so thrilled to finally have Elric in custody, I’m sure he’ll be willing to overlook my transgression.”

Bähr growls with grit teeth, and then finally says, “This isn’t over, Reistrom! You’ll see! I’ll have Elric transferred to my base whether you like it or not!”

Reistrom gives a wide smile, “I look forward to seeing you try.”

Bähr grumbles under his breath, still shaking a fist. He gets ready to leave when he notices something moving along the desk – a spider. He sneers, turning his nose up at it, and with his large
Reistrom’s icy eyes drift from the desk up to Bähr’s face, Bähr taking pleasure in the way his comrade glares daggers at him. And with that, the burly commander marches out of the room.

The single fluorescent lamp hanging from the ceiling gives the cold, empty cell a white, unnatural light.

Ed, his hands still cuffed behind his back, is trying to get his shirt and jacket back onto his shoulders. He leans against the wall, hoping the cloth will get caught on the rough surface and he can slide his arm down and force his jacket back over himself. Though that’s all easier said than done, for as his jacket gets halfway up his arm, it falls right back down to the crook of his elbow.

“Agh, come on!” he grumbles lowly to himself. “I’m not gonna spend three days shirtless in this cold-ass cell!”

Three days… he thinks to himself. That’s all it’ll take. That’s time enough for Al to get to England, find Roy, make a plan, and for Roy to send some troops in here to save us…

Ed changes tactics, turning his back to the wall to see if he can’t force his jacket on that way.

...I wonder who Roy works for anyway… Is it the government? Is it a mercenary group? I dunno…

He slides down the wall, sitting on his bottom, his jacket all the way up his back but not over his shoulders. If he moves, it’ll probably fall right back down to where it was before.

Ed sits there, quietly contemplating. ...But should we wait? What if waiting is the wrong move? What if no one comes to save us?

He looks up at the ceiling, a determined look on his face.

We need a back-up plan in case that happens. I know Al and Roy will try to save me – just like me and Al went to go save Roy... But... what if something happens before they make it here?

Ed grits his teeth, shaking his head as he looks down at the floor.

I can’t think like that...

“Ed!” a whisper arises from across the hall.

Ed looks up to the view-slot of his cell door, hearing Sophie’s voice call from the other side.

“Ed, are you there?”

Ed swings his legs up under himself, rolling onto his knees and lifting himself up. He walks to the door, peering through the bars of the slim little window. Across the hall but one cell over, off to the left, is Sophie, she too looking out the view-slot of her own cell, she able to have her hands clasped around the bars as her hands have not been cuffed.

“Sophie,” Ed whispers back to her, “Are you okay?”

She puts a hand to her head momentarily, “I think so. My head’s still swimming though. I feel like I’ve had one too many beers.”
“What did they do to you?” he asks her.

Sophie looks down, growing quiet. “I’m not sure. He stuck me with something, a needle with some kind of serum in it. Next thing I knew, everything got hazy. After that, I can’t really remember. Everything just sort of passed like I was dreaming… Ed…” She looks back up at him, her face long, “…They captured you… because of me… It’s my fault…”

Ed tries to put on a smile, though he can feel his heart sinking at seeing her sad, “Hey, don’t sweat it. You did what you thought was right by staying behind to buy us time.”

Sophie glances at the other cell doors in the hall, “Where’s Al?”

“Don’t worry about him,” Ed reassures her, “He’s safe. We have to worry about ourselves now.”

“So what’s the plan?” she asks him. “How are we getting out of here?”

Ed looks down, sighing through his nose. “…I don’t know. …I think probably the smart thing to do right now is to not try to escape at all.”

“What?” Sophie says, surprised. “That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Shh!” Ed says quietly, “Careful how loud you talk.”

Sophie gently covers her mouth, realizing how loud she had been talking. She then asks, more quietly, “But Ed, why? We can’t just stay here – that doesn’t make sense.”

“I know it doesn’t –,” he says, “And I can’t tell you why, because they might be listening to us. But Sophie,” Ed says to her, “Please trust me when I say that we just need to stay calm, and not do anything to set these guys off. Don’t give them reason to hurt you. If we can survive, for just three days or so, everything will be okay.”

“I don’t understand -.”

“Please, Sophie,” Ed tells her, “Just trust me.”

Sophie is quiet, looking back into Ed’s pleading eyes. “…Okay, Ed,” she agrees, “I trust you.”

* *

Bähr marches through the halls, still in a huff, his personal guards following along behind him.

“That Reistrom thinks he’s such hot stuff!” the commander gripes. “Little punk! We’ll see about that!”

One of his soldiers asks, “What do you plan to do, sir?”

“I’ll think of something!” he grumbles. Then he stops right where he is, the soldier immediately behind him running into him and bouncing off the large man, Bähr not even feeling it. “I know!” Bähr proclaims happily, smacking a fist to his open palm. “I’ll just call the Lead Commander first! Ha! I’ll tell him I’m the one who caught Elric!”

The soldier rubs his nose, feeling like he ran into a brick wall. “But sir,” he asks, “How will you explain the prisoner being kept at Commander Reistrom’s base?”

“Easy,” Bähr says as he turns around to face his cronies, “This place is closer to the border than my base.” He winks, looking proud of himself, “I’ll just say that I wanted Elric behind bars as soon as
possible – didn’t want to risk him getting loose between Amsterdam and Ottenstein. It’s genius! Quick!” He orders, “Find a phone!”

“Yes sir!” one of the two of them responds, dashing back down the hall.

The other soldier, however, just looks at his commander and says, “You know, there’s probably a phone in your room, sir.”

Bähr scratches the side of his face, “Oh, yeah. You’re probably right about that.”

“Should I go after him?”

Bähr waves it off, returning to walking, “Nah, let him look. It’ll give him something to do.”


Sophie sits in her cell, the short sleeves of her dress not really doing much to keep her warm. Her eyes still feel heavy, though her head does not feel so cloudy anymore. She rubs her arms up and down, trying to warm up a little.

We can’t just sit here! she thinks grumpily to herself. We have to do something! There’s got to be a way to get out of here…

She sighs, guilt tugging at her stomach.

Ed’s just being cautious because I’m here… If he wasn’t so worried about me getting hurt, I’m sure he’d be thinking of a way to bust out of here…

Arms crossed, she absently picks at the lace trimming of her sleeve.

And I know he said to trust him… but the longer we wait, the more dangerous this becomes.

Her eyes tremble.

What if they’re just planning to kill us off?

She frowns angrily.

I can’t just sit back and let that happen!

She gets to her feet, standing, and walks over to the doorway, looking out through the bars of the view-slot. She looks the hallway up and down, trying to get her bearings.

But how to even get out of here? And what to do once out?

She ponders for a moment.

I figure there are one of two options: I can get out, and then get Ed out, and then together we can flee… Or, if saving Ed isn’t an option, at the very least I can get away – and if I’m gone, that means the Nazis won’t have me to hold over Edward and make him dance like a puppet. He’d be free to make his own decisions instead of being coerced…

She puts her hands on the bars, gently trying to shake them, but they do not budge.

These are pretty solid… I wonder if digging is an option…
She turns around, looking her cell over.

_Augh! Every inch of this place is concrete! I’d need a pick-axe or something!_

She leans her back against the door, crossing her arms. She can feel her tired eyelids trying to close on her. She shakes her head, putting a hand to her forehead.

_Can’t fall asleep… how much time would that waste? Doesn’t help that I haven’t eaten since dinner last night. I’m starting to get lightheaded…_

Though her stomach is beginning to ache from emptiness, the lower half of her body is starting to ache from the fullness of nature calling.

Sophie scans the cell, and suddenly realizes her predicament. _Oh you have got to be kidding me! They didn’t have the decency to install a toilet in here?_

She turns back to the bars, looking out into the hall. There is no one there, but there is a door at the very end. Perhaps there’s a guard on the other side?

“Excuse me?” Sophie calls, mildly at first, and then louder, “Hello? Hey!”

Ed appears at the bars of his cell. “Sophie, what are you doing? Don’t draw their attention.”

“This is kind of an emergency,” she mutters, embarrassed. “Hey! Is anyone out there?”

Finally the door at the end of the hall opens, a guard poking his head in. “Hey, shut it!”

Sophie calls down to him, “I need to use the restroom!”

The guard calls back, “Designated restroom time isn’t until noon.”

“What?!” Sophie cries, appalled, “Isn’t it good enough that we’re locked away in here – you have to control when you use the restroom, too?!”

“You don’t like it, go in the corner.”

“Ugh! That’s sick!”

The guard chuckles, “Welcome to prison, sweetheart.” And he slams the door shut.

Sophie looks down at the ground, disgusted, “Ugh… I hate this place…”

Though there’s not much he can do, Ed tries to lighten the situation, “Uh, well, look on the bright side, I guess. At least they let us out to use the restroom at all, am I right?”

“Yeah, but what time is it even now?” She sighs, “The sooner we get out of here, the better.”

* *

Bähr has the phone to his ear, waiting for the operator to get back to him. In the meanwhile, he looks at his soldier and tells him, “Stand guard outside. See to it that I’m not disturbed.”

The soldier nods, exiting the room and closing the door behind him.

Bähr returns his attention to the phone, impatiently drumming his fingers on the tabletop, “C’mon, c’mon…”
“Commander Bähr, sir?”

“Yes?” he responds, apprehensive yet excited.

“I’m afraid Lead Commander Himmler is not here at the moment. Would you like me to take a message?”

“What?” Bähr asks, aggravated, “What do you mean he’s not there? Where is he then?”

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to disclose that, sir.”

“Gahh!” Bähr grumbles as he scrambles through his brain. Well, if not the Lead Commander, then at least I can get SOMEONE to corroborate my story… He asks, ... “What about Commander Schwangau? Is he there?”

“One moment please…”

Bähr smiles devilishly to himself.

The May air is warm and pleasant – not too warm, for there is a nice cool breeze drifting through, and it brings with it the smell of the flowers that have been soaking up the sunshine of the morning.

A fair young man sits with his back to his desk, ignoring his work to instead look out the open window, taking in the expansive view of the Berlin city skyline before him.

The twitter of birds is interrupted by the ringing of the phone on his desk behind him. He looks over his shoulder, and then turns his chair back around, picking up the phone.

“Hello? Yes?”

“Commander Schwangau,” the operator responds, “Commander Bähr on Line 1 for you, sir.”

“Oh. Patch him through, please.”

“One moment…”

Schwangau twirls his finger on the desktop while he waits, and then Bähr’s voice finally comes on.

“Schwangau! How’s it going?”

“Very good, Bähr,” the young man responds politely. “How are you?”

“Great!” Bähr calls, haughtily saying, “You won’t believe who I caught sneaking around Amsterdam!”

Instinctively, Schwangau tilts his head, “Who?”

“That Elric guy! The one the Lead Commander’s been looking for this whole time!”

In genuine surprise, Schwangau’s eyes widen, “Really? How did you find him?”

“Aw, it wasn’t too hard,” Bähr proudly responds, sounding like a hunter who’s just taken down a
choice deer. “Little pipsqueak thought he could take me on. I showed him! Haw-haw-haw!”

Bähr’s laughter continues to carry over the phone, Schwangau patiently waiting for him to finish before sheepishly adding, “…Well, I’m sure the Lead Commander will be pleased to hear that and all… But is Elric really of any use to us anymore? We already found the weapon he stole-.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Bähr says self-assured. “I’m sure Lead Commander Himmler will get enough of a kick outta just torturing the guy to death.”

Schwangau shivers, feeling his stomach turn a little. “Do you have to say such things?”

“Ah, quit it with the weak stomach, you,” Bähr scolds. “You’re SS – man up, can’t ya?”

Schwangau hangs his head with a sigh, “I’ll try…”

“Do me a favor,” Bähr says, “Call the rest of the Order. Let them know too. But don’t worry about Reistrom though.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve got him here with me.” He laughs an arrogant laugh, “Elric neared killed that idiot! He’s lucky I was around to save him!” And he resumes his proud guffawing.

Schwangau cocks his head to the side inquisitively, “That doesn’t sound like Commander Reistrom —”

“No, it doesn’t.” Reistrom’s voice says.

“Ghigh!!!” Bähr yelps as his muscles tense, like an ice cube has just been dropped down the back of his spine.

Reistrom is sitting in his office, his own telephone to his ear as he listens in. “That’s quite a story you’ve got there, Bähr. Tell me again exactly how it is you captured Elric?”

Bähr, in his room, is shouting back, “Hey! This is a private line!”

Reistrom calmly, yet darkly, responds, “Yes, at my base, where I’m keeping the prisoner that I captured. And shame on you for laying your lies upon Schwangau. You know he believes everything that anyone tells him.”

Lucky for Schwangau, neither of them can see him as he blushes, embarrassed, “I do not!”

“Enough of this,” Reistrom commands, “Schwangau – return to your duties. As for you, Bähr,” he says to his comrade, “I’ll be generous and give you a one-hour head-start to get off my base before I come after you.”

Click! And the phone cuts off.

Bähr gulps, still clasping the phone in his hand. “…Uh…” He hangs it up, mumbling to himself. “One hour, huh? That’s time enough to come up with a plan.”

He opens the door to his room. “Hey, you two!” he says to his personal guards. “Get in here!”

They follow in after him, he closing the door.
“All right, you – break time,” the guard says as he unlocks Sophie’s cell.

Sophie, unashamedly, has her hands clasped in front of herself, her legs and knees together. “Thank goodness! I hope the restroom’s not far.”

The guard lifts a pair of handcuffs, “Hands behind your back. You can’t leave without cuffs.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Sophie blurs, “If I move my hands we’re going to have a situation here! Just cuff ‘em in front!”

“Whatever,” the guard replies, giving in to her request. He takes her by the arm, “Come on,” and he leads her out of the cell.

He escorts her down the hall and through the open door leading out of the cellblock, where outside this door stand two guards, one on either side. The soldier leading Sophie takes a left, leading her down a short hall. Sophie, though she keeps her face forward, roves her eyes all about, trying to take in as much as possible, memorizing every door and crack in the wall – even though every door and wall in this place looks exactly alike.

They take a right and then another left before finally stopping in front of another door.

Sophie wriggles, begging, “Hurryhurryhurry!”

“All right, calm down,” the guard tells her as he momentarily releases her arm so that he grab the keys from his belt to open the restroom door.

A moment is all she needs – Sophie clasps her hands together, interlocking her fingers, raising her hands high above her head, and POW! Using the brunt of the metal cuffs on her wrists, she strikes the guard, right at the base of his head, where the skull meets the neck!

The guard cries out in pain as he stumbles forward into the door. He reaches behind him, trying to grab the prisoner, but she continues to beat down on his back before grabbing him by the shirt and ramming him headfirst into the door! While his helmet protects his skull, it does nothing for the impact on his neck and spine, and guard lands on the floor in blinding pain.

“What was that?!” The voices of the guards outside the cellblock carry around the corner, and Sophie knows that the clock is ticking!

She swipes the keys out of the fallen guard’s hands, and she takes off running, darting off to the left.

I’ve got to lure them away from the cellblock! she thinks to herself. If I can get them away, and if I can make it back there without them following me, I can get Ed out!

There is another hall not far away, and Sophie ducks down it, going left again, it leading to a long corridor.

The front door’s got to be around here somewhere! she thinks. Or the back door, or whatever! Whatever door is opposite of where they brought us in!

Her eyes widen.

Oh no! This way is a dead-end! No, wait! There’s another hall!

Indeed, she comes to an intersection, rapidly looking both ways.
She can hear their boots stomping across the concrete, one of them shouting, “Sound the alarm!”

Crap! She goes left again, running, running down the dark hall, every few feet illuminated by the stark fluorescent lighting. She stumbles to a halt as she hits another dead-end, quickly backing up and turning around.

“There she is!” A guard says as he turns the corner.

Sophie ducks into the hall on her right, and does the first thing she can think of – bursts through a door, slamming it behind her and locking it.

She heaves heavy breaths, trying to collect her thoughts, knowing the door won’t hold them for long.

“Hey!” A strong voice bellows, “Who the hell are you?!”

Sophie gasps, looking up, realizing there are soldiers in here – a big, burly man with a grizzled beard and two smaller grunts.

A pounding comes from the door, shaking Sophie who still leans up against it.

“Open this door!” the guards outside it order.

The large man rises from his seat, “What’s going on here?”

A strong strike from the other side of the door alerts Sophie that the guards are trying to kick it in.

Meanwhile, the large man is approaching her, “Answer me, you!”

Sophie whips back around to the door unlocking it – but as she swings it open, she stays behind the large steel plate, using it as a shield as the guards on the other side come tumbling in, they clearly having taken a running start before trying to ram the door.

The large man gets bowled over, he falling back into the other two soldiers behind him, and they all land ingloriously in a pile on the floor, Sophie dashing out the open door as they try to untangle themselves.

“Get off me, you idiots!” the large man yells.

Sophie runs back out into the hallway from whence she came, getting back to the intersection and now running down the length of that corridor.

Come on, comeoncomeon! She thinks frantically. Gotta get outta here!

Another intersection and Sophie hears, “What the hell??” She looks to her left and there are two MORE guards, they standing in front of a large double-door. “Stop her!”

Sophie keeps running down the hall she’s already in, now being forced to take a turn around the only corner available to her – and WHAM! She runs into someone!

She shrieks as he grabs her by the base of her ponytail, pulling her back away from him, she swinging her cuffed fists back and forth, the keys in her hands jangling. “Let go of me!!!”

“What are you doing out of your cell?” Reistrom, holding onto her, angrily demands, he ripping the
keys from her grasp.

Sophie tries to pry his fingers out of her hair, but she cannot reach his hand on top of her head. “Let me go!”

The guards from the double-doors round the corner, coming to a halt, “Sir!”

Reistrom ignores them, instead pulling Sophie’s face closer to his own, sneering at her, “You’ve got a lot of energy for someone who was given a truth serum not but a few hours ago. Let’s see how much energy you have left after this. You two!” He points at the guards, “Bring in the heaviest logs you can find.”

“Logs, sir?”

“You heard me!” he says to them as he drags Sophie, hair-first, past them. “Bring them to the cellblock.”

~

Ed stands at his cell door, peering out through the bars. What’s going on out there? he wonders. There’s been a variety of distant shouting, all of it garbled and lost through the halls. Some of it grows louder now, he clearly hearing Sophie yelling,

“I said let me go!”

“Sophie!” Ed fearfully shouts, pressing his face close to the bars, trying to see where she is.

Reistrom swings open the door of the cellblock, dragging Sophie in by her hair, she struggling against his grasp, they followed by a couple of guards.

“Hey!” Ed angrily shouts, “What’s going on?!”

Reistrom gets to Sophie’s open cell and he throws her in, she stumbling down onto her hands and knees. “On her back,” Reistrom commands to the guards. “Hold her down.”

The guards do as told, one holding her arms above her head, the other doing his best to hold down her feet as Sophie tries to kick her legs: “Hey! What are you doing?!”

“GET AWAY FROM HER!” Ed screams as he kicks at the door, driving the heel of his left boot as hard as he can into the large steel plate separating him from the hall. “Sophie!”

His cloak billowing behind him, Reistrom strides over to Ed’s door and forcefully slides the view-slot shut.

“Sophie!” Ed cries, “SOPHIE!”

Reistrom turns, about to return to the other cell, but he stops momentarily as a cruel grin begins to creep up his cheeks. He turns back to Ed’s door, reopening the slot. “No,” he hums at Edward, “I want you to hear her screams.”

Ed grits his teeth, “You bastard. Don’t you dare touch her!”

From down the hall arrive two more guards, each one lugging with him a large log, the weight of each evident in how the soldiers’ arm-muscles bulge in an effort to not drop their cargo.

“You,” Reistrom points at one of them, “That one under her knee.”
The soldier quickly but carefully sets his log down, sliding it across the floor as the guard at Sophie’s ankles lifts her right leg so the log can be forced underneath.

“Stop! What are you doing?!” Sophie vainly struggles.

Step by step, Reistrom slowly approaches Sophie, lording over her as she lies with her back against the cold, hard ground, he seeming even taller now from this angle. The stark fluorescent lamp hangs just a little ways behind him, casting a dark shadow over his face – but still his icy blue eyes peer out from his towering silhouette.

“So you thought you could run away? I’ll admit,” the commander tells his prisoner, “I am thoroughly impressed with your efforts. However – I cannot let something like this go unpunished.”

His cape slides down his arm as he raises a hand out towards the other guard, the soldier standing at attention even though it’s hard to stand up straight with so heavy a log.

Reistrom’s eyes, still on Sophie, narrow as a malicious smile overtakes him. “We’ll see just how far you can run after this.”

The commander swings his hand from the guard down to Sophie, and the guard quickly totters his way up to her, releasing the log right above her knee, letting it drop, the heavy item crashing just a little northwards of her kneecap!

Sophie cries out in anguish as she feels a sickening crunch, pain shooting both up and down her leg, jumping up all the way into her hip, nausea suddenly overtaking her. Lightning-like pain even shoots out from her chest and into her arms as tears swell and tumble down her cheeks.

Ed again is kicking at his door, screaming, “You bastards! What are you doing to her?! Get the hell away from her!”

Reistrom’s devilish smile has not faded. “Release her,” he commands, the guards complying.

Sophie wants to roll over and curl into a ball, but the slightest motion to either side sends the pain shooting again, and all she can do is heave heavy sobs.

“I wouldn’t have had to have done that if you hadn’t tried to run away,” Reistrom says to her, a strange patronizing tone about his voice, “It’s your fault for disobeying the rules.”

The commander turns to the open door and leaves, the soldiers all following him, shutting the cell and locking it, leaving Sophie lying there in her misery.

“You son of a bitch!” Edward screams through the view-slot of his cell. “You said if I came with you, you wouldn’t hurt her!”

“I said I wouldn’t kill her,” Reistrom corrects, standing outside the door. “She’s still alive, isn’t she?”

Ed kicks at the door again, the loud bang clattering off the bare walls. “Bastard! When I get out of here-”

“You’ve already seen what happens to those who try to escape. I suggest you get comfortable, Mr. Elric. You won’t be going anywhere.”

And with that, Reistrom walks away, his guards following in behind. The door of the cellblock
closes, a silence ringing out in its wake. The only sound is that of Sophie crying.

Ed presses his face closer to the bars, gently calling out, “Sophie. Sophie? It’s okay,” he says, trying to comfort her. “Hey, it’s okay… The worst is over now…”

Her only response is louder sobs.

He wants to reach out to her. He wants to phase right through these walls, like a ghost, and be there with her, hold her. He tries to keep his voice from trembling, “It’s okay, let it out… I’ll get them back for this, you’ll see. They won’t get away with this. I’ll make them pay.”

“I’m sorry!” she bawls, her voice cracking. “I’m sorry!”

“It’s not your fault, Sophie! Don’t listen to him.”

“I should have listened to you, Ed!” she cries, “I should have waited like you said! I should have been patient!” More sobs cut in between before she regains her voice, “I just wanted to get us out of here!”

“And we will get out of here,” he reassures her, “You’ll see!”

Sophie continues her sobbing, overwhelmed with pain, and all Ed can do is stand there, listening, separated, and trapped...

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:

Reviews:

QueenCari1129  chapter 19  Nov 15, 2014
Sophie no D:
Admiral Flumister

Age: 65

Strata: High

Height: 170 cm

Military Rank: Admiral

Rank: Fleet Commander

Alien: "Miel Knight"

Affiliation: Secret Order of the Knights of the Black Sun

Bio: Founder and Head of the "Small Arms" faction. Known for his intense and manipulative leadership style, handling politics with an unwavering loyalty to duty, order and discipline, always acting in the best interest of his followers.

FULLMETAL ATER

vhsd (hsvd) deviantart.com, 2011
Adalstein Ritter
Age: 25
Gender: Male
Height: 190 cm
Military: Germany
Rank: Commander, OP 0
Alias: "Brawn Knight"
Affiliation: Teutonic Order of the Knights of the Black Sun
Role: A man of few words. Highly trusted by Ramler. Calm and steady decisions. Rarely seen on the battlefield (due to health issues?)

Erik Armbruster
Age: 23
Gender: Male
Height: 185 cm
Military: Germany
Rank: Commander, OP 0
Alias: "Hat Knight"
Affiliation: Teutonic Order of the Knights of the Black Sun

FULLMETAL AFTER
whaddevah.deviantart.com 2014
I don’t know about you, but that part at the end with Reistrom breaking Sophie’s leg - ghawgugwedl - it turns my stomach. Really it does. I mean, Roy getting whipped made me wince, but THIS - I literally had to get up and walk away from my computer for a few minutes because I couldn’t handle it.
**Darkness**

**Chapter Summary**

WARNING: If you’re a person with a sensitive constitution, then this episode might be a little… much for you. Read at your own risk.

Or, if you so desire, SKIP ALL THE WAY TO THE BOTTOM, where I will give you the quick facts you need to know for next episode/the rest of the series. [WARNING: HELLA SPOILERS for anyone who wishes to read this chapter].

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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**Fullmetal After opening [WITH LYRICS] 鋼の錬金術師 見えない世界 ポルノグラフィティ** from Castiel Winchester on Vimeo.
The tall pine trees catch the mist that blows in over the mountaintops, the cool droplets of water clinging to the spiky green needles as the clouds of vapor roll down into the valley below.

The prison compound is quiet, settling back down after quite the hullabaloo – a prisoner attempting escape. She was dealt with quickly.

Reistrom, leaving the cellblock, is returning to his office, his soldiers still walking alongside him. Just then, his comrade, Bähr, comes jogging around the corner, followed by his two personal guards: "Where'd she go?! Did we get her?"

Reistrom frowns at the large man. "You knew she was out?" he questions, referring to their prisoner, Sophie.

"She ran right into my room!" Bähr proclaims. "Little idiot! Did she really think she could escape?"

Reistrom's frown grows even darker, "You mean to tell me she was within six feet of you, and you couldn't even take her down?"

"Buh," Bähr stumbles over his words for a moment, "It's more complicated than that!" he defends.

"And I thought I told you to get off of my base."

"You said I had an hour! I was just packing my things!"

"You didn't bring any things."

"That's beside the point!" Bähr contradicts (both Reistrom and himself), "If I hadn't seen she'd got out, I couldn't have raised the alarm! So, you're LUCKY that I stayed behind!"

Two of the guards behind Reistrom look at one another, not sure if they should tell the truth (that they raised the alarm).

"Still," Reistrom says, an odd casualness to his voice suddenly, "Someone so big, so tall, so 'manly' – defeated by a woman. Won't the Lead Commander love to hear about that as soon as he arrives?"

The color suddenly drops from Bähr's face. "H-he's coming here?!!"

"Of course," Reistrom replies nonchalantly, resuming his walk towards his office. "I phoned him not long after I arrived this morning. He should be here any minu-.."
Knock! Knock! Knock!

Reistrom smiles. "Well. What excellent timing."

He motions a hand towards the front doors, and one of his soldiers first salutes and then jogs to up the hall towards the knocking.

Bähr stands up straight in an effort to keep his knees from trembling, taking a gulp followed by a loud cough as he proclaims, "Good! I'm glad he's here! Now I can tell him all about how you hijacked my operation!"

Reistrom, strolling towards the front doors, waves him off, "Of course. Do as you please."

The guard up the hall opens the large double-doors, the huge steel plates swinging inwards. All present halt where they are, throwing up their hands in salute as they shout, "Sieg Heil!"

In walks a short, thin man with thinning hair and a thinning mustache, large round glasses poised atop his slightly upturned nose. He is followed by a taller fellow – just slightly taller than Reistrom but not quite so tall as Bähr. His skin is fair and pale, his hair so light a blond it is white, and his eyes so thin a blue that they are very nearly a lilac-color, the red of the blood at the back of his irises mixing with the blue.

Reistrom approaches them, he lifting his hand in salute, "Sieg Heil."

They return salute: "Sieg Heil."

"Lead Commander," Reistrom greets, "I'm so glad you could make it. And Commander Ritter," he looks up at the taller fellow, "I wasn't expecting you."

"He was already with me at headquarters," Himmler answers for him, "Overseeing the Belgium operation. Armbruster, so far, is doing an amazingly good job on his front."

"Glad to hear," Reistrom politely chats in return. He then slightly turns back towards the end of the hall, "Come, allow me to show you the prisoner-"

"Now hang on just a minute!" Bähr speaks up, refusing to be ignored.

Himmler finally takes notices of him, "Bähr, what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in the Netherlands right now?"

"I was!" the large man shouts in response, throwing an accusing finger Reistrom's way, "Until I found out that this little punk was sneaking around my territory! If you needed someone specific captured, why didn't you just give me the orders?"

Himmler gives a bemused hum with a shrug, "Quite frankly because I didn't think you could handle it."

"What?!!" Bähr sputters with disbelief.

Himmler calmly holds up a hand, closing his eyes as he gently shakes his head, "Don't misinterpret my meaning, Bähr. I simply meant that I knew you would have your hands full with the invasion – taking the Lowlands is more important than capturing a couple of criminals."

"Er, well, yeah – but you still could have told me! I could have sent some troops to assist."

Himmler calmly opens his eyes, a distinct sharpness about his gaze, "Clearly that wasn't necessary.
Now then, on your way. I'm sure your men need you at the front."

Bähr resists a grumble as he lifts his hand in salute, doing so out of duty less respect, "Yes, sir." He looks back at his guards, "Come on."

Reistrom smirks as he watches Bähr pass. And once the large man and his two cronies have exited, the double-doors closed behind them, Reistrom once more turns to the end of the hall. "Shall we proceed?"

The cell is empty and cold, the only light that of a single, long fluorescent lamp hanging above; the only sound that of Sophie across the hall, still softly crying on the floor of her own cell.

Ed heaves a sigh through his nose as he sits there on the concrete floor, he leaning up against the wall closest to her, just trying in some small way to be near her. His one human hand is starting to tingle, the metal cuffs clasped behind his back increasingly uncomfortable. And though he's managed to get his shirt and jacket back up over his shoulders, Ed still can't button up his clothes to deter the cold.

Just then, a shifting comes from the end of the hall, and Ed can hear the turning of locks. It's not long before the locks on his own door begin to clink and clank, and the door to his cell swings inward.

And in walks someone Ed's seen before - a short, thin man with large, round glasses, and a thin, wispy mustache above his curling, grinning lips. He is shortly followed thereafter by another officer, and finally by Reistrom who closes the door behind them.

"Well, well!" the short man chimes, "It's been quite a long time, hasn't it Mr. Elric? The last time we met was in a prison as well, was it not?"

Ed smirks, "Sorry, I don't recall you. You must not be important enough to remember."

"Clever," Himmler responds dryly. "But you didn't honestly think you could outrun us forever, did you? Not after all the trouble you've put us through. First you thwarted us in Munich; then you destroyed my portal at Wewelsburg – not to mention took off with the uranium bomb that our dear friend Dr. Henrikson gave to us. It took us quite a long time to recover that little beauty."

Ed feels like a vice is crushing his chest. They have the bomb? Damn it! How?!

Outwardly though, he tries to remain calm, not wanting to give them the enjoyment of seeing him nervous. He shrugs, saying with a sassy tone, "What can I say? I enjoy throwing wrenches into people's gears."

"Quite," Himmler responds, "Your wrench-throwing has cost us quite a bit of time and money – so much so that the Fuhrer does not care to fund my pet project any longer."

Ed narrows his eyes, his nose crinkling as he furrows his brow, "You mean that sick blood-harvesting project of yours? Maybe Hitler's just more sane than people give him credit for – and that's saying something."

"Silence!" the pale officer finally speaks up, "You will not talk of the Fuhrer in such ways!"

Himmler merely holds up a hand, and the officer calms down.

Himmler continues, "You have caused us nothing but trouble since you arrived, and I've had quite enough of it. Now that I've confirmed your identity with my own eyes, I can say with confidence
that this thorn shall once and for all be taken out of our side. Reistrom."

"Sir?" Reistrom responds.

Himmler says with a smile that makes Ed's skin crawl, "Arrange a firing squad immediately."

Ed's eyes widen, his pupils constricting.

The pale officer clears his throat, and then says lowly, "Sir, if I may?"

"Yes, Ritter?" Himmler questions as he slightly turns to look at the man.

Ritter has also turned, both of them with their backs to Edward as if to block the sounds of their voices as they converse. "While he is quite insolent, it would be a waste to throw away his talents."

"How so?" Himmler asks.

"I've read the reports on him, sir," Ritter says. "Word is, he's a scientific prodigy. Wouldn't he be put to better use with the other scientists, building weapons for us?"

"Hmph!" Himmler scoffs. "Hardly. If you've read the reports then you know just how much trouble this one is. Give him even an inch and he'll blow us all to smithereens. No doubt he'd sabotage our weapons and cause more damage than he's worth."

Reistrom jumps into the conversation, though he does not lower his voice at all, "That's easily taken care of."

Both Himmler and Ritter turn to Reistrom, Himmler asking, "What do you mean?"

Reistrom looks directly over at Edward. "We've also captured his lover – used her as bait and he came running. Should he in any way disobey us or try to sabotage us, she will be the one to suffer."

The gaze between them never breaks as Ed attempts to burn a hole through Reistrom by staring at him.

Reistrom merely smiles as he asks directly to Ed, "Now, do you really want to put dear Sophie through all of that?"

"Keh! Yeah right!" Ed rebukes. "I would agree to do what you say AS LONG AS Sophie remained unharmed! But you JUST harmed her!" he points out, referring to the fact that Reistrom had Sophie's leg broken not but 10 minutes ago. "That means the deal's off before it's even started! I'm not doing a DAMN thing that you say!"

"You seem to fail to understand how prison works," Reistrom says as he slowly strides towards Ed. He leans down, getting very near face-to-face with him. "We are in charge, not you. We make the rules. And as our prisoner, you will do everything we say, whether you want to or not."

Ed's glare never falters. "Try me."

Reistrom still smirks, "Oh, I don't doubt that you're a resilient one, Mr. Elric. But what about dear Sophie, hmm? How resilient is she?"

Ed's only response is angry silence.

Reistrom stands up straight, and though he still looks at Ed, he now addresses his superior – "Don't worry, Lead Commander, leave it to me. I guarantee that in three weeks time," his smile grows
even wider, "Mr. Elric will see things our way."

Ed growls, "We'll see about that."

Reistrom chuckles, "You won't be quite so brave on an empty stomach."

Himmler sighs, sounding rather annoyed by the affair, he pulling out a pocket watch to check the time. "Yes, quite quite..." He closes the watch, stuffing it back in his pocket. "Very well. Three weeks. That's all you get. If you can't crack him within that time, then it's to the firing squad with him."

Reistrom gives a short bow to his commander, "As you wish, sir."

Himmler has already walked up to the door, giving it a knock, and the guard on the outside is reopening the cell. The three officers exit, but not before Reistrom gives one last satisfied smile at Ed.

Ed glares angrily back at him.

And the door to the cell closes.

*

"I'd still prefer it if we killed him off now," Himmler says as they walk towards the front doors. "But I trust your judgment, Ritter."

"Thank you, sir," Ritter responds.

Himmler sighs, and though his lids are closed, his eyes are to the sky, "I suppose I'm just too close to the situation to view it logically. I can always count on you to be the level-headed one."

"Again, thank you sir," Ritter responds once more.

As they reach the doors, Reistrom says, "It was a pleasure having you here, Lead Commander. And Commander Ritter," he says, turning to his comrade with grin, "Perhaps you should take a few days off. You look a little pale."

Ritter furrows his brow at Reistrom, though Himmler merely chuckles, "You know he always looks like that. Come, Ritter," the Lead Commander says, "We must return to our duties."

"Of course, sir," Ritter calmly responds.

Looking to Reistrom, Himmler raises his hand. "A Hail to Victory."

Reistrom raises his hand in return. "To victory."

And with that, Himmler leaves, Ritter behind him, and the guards close the large double-doors.

*

The pain burns like a slow ember cutting its way through a log, crawling across and through the wood, eating it away a little bit at a time.

Sophie has managed to drag herself to the wall, now leaning her back up against it. Her right leg still throbs, the area above her kneecap now bloated and bruised as blood rushes to the area.
She knows she must care for it. Her first instinct is to elevate her leg, get all that extra blood out of it. But the injury is so tender, the slightest movement is akin to drawing the bone across a cheese grater. And besides, there's nothing here for her to prop her leg up on anyway – the guards took the logs with them when they left. At least if they had left them, not only could Sophie prop up her leg, but perhaps also use the wood to make a splint and set the bone.

...Not sure how I'd make a splint, though, she thinks to herself, sniffing a little as she winds down her crying. I'd need an axe to chop the wood...

She gently pulls back the hem of her dress, bundling the cloth so she can get a good look at her leg, now seeing just how red and bloated it is. She winces at the sight of it.

At the very least, she thinks, I should probably wrap it. That might prove useful...

Her dress bundled in her hands, Sophie begins rubbing the material with her thumbs.

If I can rip the bottom off of this, I can use that for wrapping... How much would I need to use though?

She lifts the hem of her dress, and, using her thumbnails, Sophie tries to poke a hole into the cloth – a task easier said than done as this material is proving to be quite hardy.

Her breath is quiet and concentrated as she pulls back on her dress, trying as hard as she can to rip through the material.

Augh! She inwardly grumbles, I'd need scissors to get through this! If I could just poke a hole and get a rip started...

Just then, there comes the sound of the locks shifting, and the door to her cell is opening!

Sophie quickly tosses her skirt back over her legs, smoothing out her dress.

It is the commander, Reistrom. He enters the cell carrying with him a small bale of hay, it held firmly together with twine.

Sophie sits there quietly, watching him distrustfully as he carries the bale to the corner nearest her, tossing it onto the ground.

"After your little stunt earlier," the commander finally says to her, "I'm afraid you've lost your restroom privileges. This will have to suffice."

Sophie remains silent, glaring at him angrily.

Reistrom takes notice of this, managing a laugh. "Oh come now, don't be like that," he says as he leans down, pulling out the dagger from his belt to cut the twine. "You should be glad that I'm even providing you with this at all."

Kneeling, he slips the blade underneath the twine and pops the bale of hay apart, he then running his hand across the pile to spread it out.

Reistrom turns back to her, about to speak, when something catches his eye – there is a small bit of thread hanging out from underneath the girl's thumbnail. His eyes drift to the bottom of her dress and he can see the wrinkles and a corresponding piece of loose thread coming from her hem.

He hums. "Clever. Trying to use your dress as material to wrap up your leg. Here – let me help."
And he moves closer to her, knife still in hand.

Sophie swings her arms at him, finally shouting, "Get away from me!"

Reistrom lifts his own hand to protect his face from her nails as she swings wildly at him. He grabs one of her wrists to stop her flailing, she continuing to swing her other arm about, as she continues to shout,

"I said get away!"

Without dropping his dagger, Reistrom manages to grab her with his other hand, transferring that wrist to his free hand, now holding both of her wrists in just his left hand. He swings her arms down, pinning her wrists to the floor as he kneels next to her, holding the dagger threateningly close to her throat.

Sheer shock causes Sophie to fall silent, her heart pounding loudly in her ears.

There is a moment of silence. And then without a word, Reistrom juts the knife into the corner of her skirt hem, dragging the tip of the dagger along the floor, it scraping shrilly across the concrete, the bottom of her dress ripping.

"There," he says to her as he releases her wrists, he rising and putting his dagger back in his belt.

Sophie continues to sit there quietly as Reistrom walks towards the door.

"You're welcome," he says in response to her silence. He knocks on the door and the guard outside opens it. And Reistrom exits, the door closing behind him and the locks shifting back into place.

Sophie looks down at her dress, a nice long rip started for her.

She frowns, grumbling to herself, *I could have done it myself. I didn't need his help...*

The sounds of both Reistrom's and the guard's footsteps recede down the hall, followed by the closing of the cellblock door. And then Sophie hears Ed call from across the hall,

"Sophie! Is everything all right?"

"Yeah," she calls back, hoping her voice carries from where she sits, "False alarm. Just Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Creepy delivering a pile of hay."

"Hay? What for?"

"The way he put it – 'bathroom privileges'."

She hears Ed sigh, followed by, "Don't worry, just a couple more days and we'll be out of here."

Even though he can't see her, Sophie softly smiles, "I know..."

In his own cell, across but one cell to the left of Sophie's, Ed looks down at the floor, he slowly turning away from the door as he makes his way back to the wall, leaning up against it and sliding back down to the floor.

That's all they can do for now is wait.

*We've got to stick to the plan*, he tells himself. *Just wait for Al to get to England. Let him find Roy and have Roy use his connections to get us out of here. Roy will send some people back this way to
rescue us, and then we'll make a run back for England.

He smiles to himself.

It's already been half a day. That means Al's already half-way there! If we can just make it through a couple more days, then we'll be home-free!

The opening of the cellblock door sounds from down the hall.

Back already? What, did they forget something?

And he hears the cell directly next door to his own being opened. Ed feels an icy beat skip across his heart.

Do they have another prisoner? What if it's Al?

Ed takes a breath, calming himself.

No, that's stupid. He was already on the boat... The easier thing to do...

An image of a sinking ship flashes across his mind: the flying of bombs, the roaring of fires, the ripping of steel...

Ed shakes his head, closing his eyes tightly.

Lucky for him, something else begins to distract him from these thoughts – strange sounds, coming from next door.

What is that? he wonders. It sounds like... drilling? But why?

He listens quietly, intently, trying to figure out what's going on, the sounds vibrating through the wall he leans against, rattling the back of his head and spine. After a while, the constant noise and vibrating becomes annoying, and Ed gets to his knees, making his way over to the other wall, flopping up against it instead.

Gah! He grumbles to himself. I can't think with all this noise.

CLANG! As if on cue, there is a loud clatter from next door, as if something large has fallen onto the floor. It is followed by a clanging and banging against the wall, and an ugly high-pitched scraping across the floor as though something is being dragged.

Ed hunkers himself in the corner, heaving a sigh. Man, I'm tired... How long have I been awake, anyway? ...It was, what, four maybe (?) when the bombing started... and I only went to sleep a little after midnight... and that was after...

Though the hall continues to clatter with sound, Ed's mind is silent.

*

The clinging and the clanging has been going on for a solid hour now. Sophie had hoped that the guards would have gone away by now. At least then she and Edward could talk to one another. It's too dangerous with soldiers nearby that can hear their every word.

Her leg wrapped, Sophie instead is biding her time, fiddling with straws of hay from the pile. She gently lays them out one at a time, building a maze.
I think I've got it right…

She scans the little straw map over as she thinks.

The guard took me left. Then right. Then left again…

She traces the maze with her finger as she runs through her mind.

So the restroom was here… and then I turned around and went this way… and then I went this way, right?

She plucks another straw of hay from the pile and places it on the map, creating a wall and a hall.

If I can recreate the compound… As soon as those soldiers leave, I can tell Ed the way out of here…

Suddenly the door is opening again! Sophie quickly sweeps the straws back into the pile, the map now gone say for a scattered corner.

With all the noise going on across the hall, Sophie didn't hear Reistrom as he approached down the cellblock. He enters the room, holding a tray of food in his hands, water gently sloshing in its short cup atop the tray as he turns, smiling pleasantly at her.

"You know in most situations," he says as he closes the door, "I'd just have the guards slip the food in through the slot at the bottom of the door." He begins to approach her, "But I know you're having trouble moving with that leg." He kneels beside her, "So I thought I'd bring the food right to you."

Sophie crosses her arms, turning her head away from him.

Reistrom sets the tray of food on the floor, still smiling as he says with a patronizing air, "Come now. You need to keep up your strength. We want to be strong for Edward, don't we?"

She looks at him out of the corner of her eye. "I heard what you were saying to Ed earlier, about an empty stomach." She looks away from him again, "If Ed doesn't eat, then I don't eat."

Reistrom chuckles, "Loyal, aren't we? Just like a dog. But even a dog knows its place. It knows never to disobey its master." He says very firmly, "I am your master now."

He didn't see when Sophie had slipped her hand around the cup, but he knows it now for she is splashing water in his face.

Like lightning, he slaps her, hard, across the face, and then grabs her by the chin, digging his fingers into her cheeks as he gets face-to-face with her. "Harlot! It's not enough that your leg is broken? You want to starve too!"

He roughly releases her, she nearly getting whiplash from the way he tosses her head to the side.

Reistrom rises, turning to leave. But as he does, he notices something – an odd little scattering of straws, out of place from the rest of the pile, this little bundle strangely forming a 90-degree angle, twists and turns here and there like a maze…

He scoots his boot across it, shoving the hay back into its pile. And then he turns, glowering down at Sophie. With not but a gentle swing, he kicks her in the knee – but even that is more than enough to send the fiery pain shooting through her leg again.
She yelps, clasping onto her knee, biting down on her lip as she sucks in air, holding in her screams.

"Making maps, are we?" Reistrom questions, still glaring at her. "I don't see why – you'll never escape from this place." He moves in closer to her, she not looking up. "I catch you doing something like that again and I will kill you. I will kill you like the she-wolf you are."

Oddly, Sophie begins quietly laughing, causing Reistrom to raise an eyebrow. She finally lifts her head towards him, and though there are tears in them, her eyes are resolute.

"Funny thing about wolves," she says to him, "We're not like dogs. We don't take orders."

He frowns at her. "We'll see about that."

With a sweep of his cloak, Reistrom turns back towards the door, carrying himself out, slamming the door behind him.

Sophie leans back against the wall, face to the ceiling as she breathes slow, deep breaths, waiting for the pain to subside…

* 

Ed's stomach rumbles. At least if he could put his hands over it, maybe that would make it settle down a little. For now, all he can do is bring his knees up to his chest, which, strangely, does seem to help.

Ah, he sighs, At least the noise next door has stopped, he thinks. He lays his head on top of his knees. Now maybe I can get some sleep…

CLANGCLANGCLANG!

"Ahh!" Ed sits up straight, startled by the sudden noise.

At the door of his cell, a guard is looking through the bars of the view-slot. He says to Ed, "Stay awake, you!"

"What for?" Ed gripes.

The guard responds, "Orders are you're not allowed to sleep."

"Oh this is bullshit!" Ed cries. "I don't care if this is war – people in a normal prison are allowed to sleep!"

"Well this ain't normal prison, so get over it!" the guard tells him. "Keep your eyes open!"

"Or what?"

"Or I'll come in there and beat you!"

Ed grins to himself. That's right, open that door. Give me a chance to run. He closes his eyes.

"Hey!" The guard shouts, annoyed, "Didn't you hear me? I said stay awake!"

Eyes still closed, Ed says in a singsong voice, "Sorry, can't hear you. Sleeping."

"Why you!" The guard lifts his baton, and begins banging against the view-slot bars.
Ed chimes, "You can't keep that up all night."

"Watch me!" The guard barks.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

The hall echoes with the sound of the baton banging against the door, slowly, like an old clock ticking, unable to properly keep time.

The guard, his back to the wall, lazily swings his arm back and forth, letting his baton knock against the steel door. Though his pace has slowed and his strength has waned, the soldier does not let up on his duty.

The door at the end of the cellblock opens, another guard approaching. "You're relieved for the night."

"Oh, good," the guard says to his fellow soldier, "Your turn."

The other guard pulls his own baton from his belt and, switching places with his comrade, the new guard resumes the banging, though audibly louder.

Ed, sitting in his cell, gives a loud groan as he lolls his head back. DAMMIT. I was hoping his arm would have given out and he'd have stopped! Either that, or he'd finally decide to open the door. He sighs. This is gonna be a long night…

The hours pass, the beating on the door like a leaky tap incessantly dripping water. The lights of the compound have been turned down – except for Ed's cell, of course. He can only assume it's nighttime, for his eyelids beg to be closed again. And even though he does close them, his head can't stand the pounding.

Somehow, strangely, the beating becomes as a metronome, its monotonous rhythm lulling Ed further down the path of sleep…

…

The door at the end of the cellblock opens, and the guard looks up the hall to see Commander Reistrom heading this way. Naturally, the guard salutes – but before he can say a word, Reistrom puts up his finger towards his own lips for silence.

The commander walks up to Ed's door, and quietly, he slides the view-slot shut.

The guard has stopped banging the door momentarily, looking inquisitively from the view-slot over to his commander. "Sir," he asks quietly, "What if he falls asleep? I won't see it-"

"Shh," Reistrom calmly responds, his voice low as he looks at the door, "That's all right. We can give him one night's sleep." He looks back at the guard, "As you were."

"Yes sir," the guard quietly responds, and he resumes swinging his arm, knocking the baton across the door.

Reistrom in the meanwhile is crossing to the other side of the hall. He lifts his hand, sliding closed the view-slot on Sophie's door.
Sophie gently stirs awake, hearing a shuffling coming from across the room. It takes her a couple of seconds to remember where she is – and immediately she remembers as a tall, dark shadow slides in through the doorway, closing the door behind him.

Reistrom's eerie, ice-blue eyes pierce through the darkness, a smile devilishly creeping its way up his cheeks.

Though her back is already to the wall, Sophie tries to back away from him further, a sense of impending doom overcoming her.

Reistrom unbolts his belt…

Edward…

"Huh?" Ed's eyes flit open, his lids barely cracking as he squints them against the bright light hovering over his head. "Wha… What's going on?" He looks down at his body. "WHAT?! Where am I?!"

He is strapped down tightly to an operating table, several belts going all the way from his chest down to his ankles, keeping him tightly in place under the spotlight, weird poking and prodding instruments strewn out on carts, all of them pointing straight at him!

"Eeedwaard!!" he hears a familiar voice call.

He turns his head to the side – AND SEES WINRY, TOWERING TEN FEET TALL, her eyes gleaming! She has a wrench for one hand and a screwdriver for the other!

"You broke your automail again, Edward?" The tall girl thunders at him.

"Don't worry!" Another voice says. Confused, Ed looks over and sees it's Winry's grandmother, Pinako – but she's tiny! So tiny, like a fairy! And she rides on top of the family dog, Den, he hovering in the air, his tail spinning around like a propeller. Pinako takes a long drag from her pipe and blows out, the smoke sparkling like pixie dust. "We can fix your automail in a jiffy. But it's gonna cost you!"

"What?" Ed mutters. "Cost me? Cost me what?"

"AN ARM AND A LEG!" the old lady cackles, pixie dust shooting out in all directions.

The ten-foot Winry closes in on Ed, her eyes shining wildly, and Ed can feel sweat rolling down all over his body. Winry lifts her handtools, "Let's get started!"

KATHUNK! CLANG!

"AHH!"

Ed startles awake, looking around as he instinctively tries to raise his fists, realizing they're still cuffed behind his back.

"Whatwhat?!" he mumbles, groggily trying to reorient himself. "Hey, wait…" He realizes, "I fell asleep." He smiles. "HA! Showed them…"

A grinding and a shift alerts him that the door is opening, and he looks up as a guard comes in. "Come on," the guard says as a second soldier enters, they both lifting Ed to his feet.
"Where are you taking me?" Ed questions, ready to dig his heels into the ground.

"You're being transferred to the cell next door," the guard tells him.

"What for? Maybe I like it here," Ed belligerently responds. (He knows he doesn't, but he can't help but be contrary).

Get your head together, he tells himself as they pull him towards the door. I know I want to wait for Roy, but this might be my only shot. As soon as they get me in the hall, I make a break for it!

But as soon as he steps through the door, Ed sees that on either side of him the hall is glutted with soldiers, not the slightest bit of running room between them.

Reistrom, off to Ed's left, gives a self-satisfied smile. "Why so shocked, Full Metal?" he coyly asks. "You don't think that after what happened yesterday that I wouldn't take more precaution?"

Ed lowers his eyebrows, jutting his chin. "If you wanted to be so cautious you wouldn't let me out at all."

Reistrom shrugs as he says, "I'm simply moving you to a cell more suited for you. But before that," he says with a fake cheeriness, "I thought I'd give you a little present – some one-on-one time with your girlfriend. After all, this may be the last time you ever get to see her."

" 'Last time' nothing! ! Eventually we'll get out of here and then you won't be able to keep us apart!"

"Whatever makes you feel better," Reistrom says. He turns his attention to a guard, "Go on – put him inside." His eyes drift over to Ed, "You can even remove his handcuffs."

The guards holding onto Ed escort him over to Sophie's door, another soldier already opening it for them. Once inside, they remove his cuffs, quickly getting out the door before the prisoner should bolt, and they close the cell.

Ed momentarily rubs his left wrist, trying to work the soreness out of it. He looks up and sees Sophie, she huddled in the corner, her one good leg up to her chest. Suddenly everything else melts away and all Ed can see is her.

He rushes over to her, quickly kneeling and hugging her. "Sophie! Sophie, oh my god, are you all right?"

She is quiet, though she hugs him tightly in return.

Ed buries his face in her shoulder, hugging her as tightly as he can. "It's okay. It's okay, I'm here now."

Sophie makes no sound – just clings tightly to Edward, her fingers gripping at his clothing.

Ed finally moves back a bit, pushing her hair away from her face as he gently puts his forehead to hers as he looks into her eyes, cupping his hands on either side of her head, his fingers in her hair. He says quietly, "I promise you we'll get out of here. I won't abandon you. We'll get out and then everything will be okay."

Tears fill Sophie's eyes, they red and sore as if she's been crying all night.

Ed wipes away a tear from her cheek, cradling the back of her head in his other hand. He kisses her.
"...I love you, Sophie. You know I love you. Just be strong. Just for a couple more days..."

She looks down, still saying nothing.

He moves one of his hands to her shoulder, gently massaging her arm. "...Sophie, what's wrong? Say something."

Silence still.

**Why is she being so quiet?** he ponders.

He watches her quietly, Sophie still staring at the ground, her eyes empty.

**Why isn't she speaking?**

Ed gasps as in a strange tunnel-vision he is transported back to his childhood, back to Liore, back to what it is that Scar had said to him all those years ago: "You have no idea what the soldiers have done to the people of Liore." He remembers, he remembers Rose, a baby in her arms, Scar's words still ringing throughout his mind, "A group of them carried her to their base. Whatever they did to her there was traumatic enough that she couldn't speak when she returned."

And in a flash, Ed snaps back to reality, his vision painted red as he barrels at the door, pounding his metal fist on it with enough force to leave dents in the large steel plating, he roaring at the top of his lungs, "YOU BASTARD! I'LL KILL YOU! YOU SICK BASTARD!"

Sophie curls her shoulders in towards her chest, hugging herself as she starts to cry once more.

Reistrom is outside the door, hearing the noise. And he devilishly smiles to himself.

Ed, inside, continues pounding on the door, angrily shouting and cursing. "You son of a bitch! I'll get you for this!"

He slows, hearing Sophie's voice finally breaking through, and he turns and sees her there, head down, shoulders shaking.

Ed runs back over to her, hugging her again, trying desperately to make her pain go away. "I'm sorry!" he cries as he holds her tightly, his voice cracking, "I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you! Forgive me! I'm sorry..."

Sophie sobs, putting a hand to Ed's head, caressing his hair as she feels him trembling in her arms, both of them crying there alone in that cold, stone corner.

Reistrom, outside the door, finally looks to a guard and says, "That's long enough. Retrieve him."

The guard unlocks the door and a couple of them enter as more cover the exit.

"Come on," one says to Ed.

But Ed clings tighter to Sophie.

The guard grabs him by the arm, Ed now shouting, "Leave us alone, you monsters!"

The other guard starts helping, grabbing Ed's other arm, together they prying the prisoners loose from one another.

Sophie desperately tries to hang onto Edward, his arm sliding through her hands, their fingers
grasping out for one another, catching each other in one last, vain touch before being ripped away.

Ed pulls against the guards, determined to topple them forward as he tries to pull his arms in to his chest – but a couple more soldiers have entered to assist, they too now grabbing onto Ed’s arms, pulling him back.

"Edward!" Sophie finally cries, reaching out both her hands towards him, wanting to run to him though she cannot stand.

Ed looks to her, the door slamming in between them, and he can just barely see her through the view-slot before the soldiers cart him away from the door.

"LET ME GO!" Ed screams, trying to break their hold on him. He lets his right arm go slack for half a second, causing the soldiers on that side to fall back under their own weight – and then Ed yanks his arm forward, his automail free!

Another couple of soldiers jump in to help, grabbing Ed's arm, but he elbows one in the face, and then punches the other one with his fist!

More soldiers grab him from all sides, trying to subdue him, Reistrom in the meanwhile standing there enjoying the show.

One soldier grabs Ed by the back of his coat collar; another grabs him by the belt; still another manages to actually force Ed's metal arm behind his back. Ed kicks out at them, trying to do as much damage as he can to them with his left leg.

And then he catches sight of Reistrom, the officer smirking at him. Sheer rage fills Edward, and he lunges forward, dragging the soldiers with him, they very nearly falling forward from the sudden burst of strength their prisoner has found.

"I'll kill you!" Ed screams as he presses forward, the soldiers holding him back, some of them now grabbing their batons to beat the prisoner down. Yet sheer testosterone and rage fuel Edward towards the officer. "I'LL KILL YOU!"

A couple more guards jump into the fray, they each grabbing one of Ed's legs and pulling them out from under him. Ed falls forward, and altogether, the guards lift Edward up, ushering him to the new cell.

The door already open, they toss Ed in, he landing roughly on the hard, cold, concrete flooring. He scrambles back to his feet, rushing at the door, trying to burst it open – but too late. It's been closed and they're locking it.

Ed pounds on the door, still screaming, "Just you wait 'til I get out of here! You're gonna pay for this!"

Reistrom slides open the view-slot, his blue eyes peering through. "Enjoy your new accommodations."

Ed wishes the window was bigger or the bars further apart – then he could slip his hand through and choke the bastard!

Reistrom gives one last smirk and leaves, his soldiers following, the parade of men marching past – all but one leaving, this guard already starting the incessant banging of the baton against the door.
Ed furiously breathes through his nose, his jaw clenched so tight his teeth could crack. He grips the bars, his face pressed hard against them as he watches Reistrom and all leave the cellblock. He then turns on the guard immediately outside the door, "And knock it off with the banging, would ya?!!"

Ed pushes away from the door, fire coursing through his veins. But after a moment, he finally looks around, taking notice of his new cell – above his head hangs a large, blindingly bright lamp, its white light penetrating every inch of the room.

"Gah!" Ed shields his eyes, foolishly having looked directly at the light, "It's like having the sun in the same room with you!" He keeps his arm on his forehead, the shadow it casts protecting his sight.

*Is that what all that noise was about? They were installing a light? What for? He looks around the room, no corner of the cell even remotely dark. To keep me awake, I guess. Hard to sleep with this much light.*

He does notice something in one corner though – a pile of hay, just like in Sophie's cell.

*Nothing but a pile of hay and the clothes on my back. Great…*

He turns back towards the door, now taking notice that this, too, is different – a stronger, heavier door from the looks of it. He touches it with his human hand, feeling its surface.

*Yeah, definitely stronger… I made a hell of a dent in Sophie's door, but I didn't even scratch this one…*

He sighs as he looks through the view-slot, he now able to look directly into Sophie's cell as this cell is directly across from hers. But though he can see in, he can't see her where she is on the floor.

Ed puts his palm up against the door, ignoring the vibrations that come from the clanging of the baton.

*Just be patient, Sophie…. We'll get out of here… You'll see…*

*#

Just as the sun, the bright lamp fills the room with a terrible heat. It wasn't so bad at first, but the longer Ed sits here, the hotter it gets, the only cool spot on the floor that where Ed is currently sitting, for his body has shaded that bit from the light's reach.

Ed removes his coat, tossing it aside. *Damn, it's hot in here…* he thinks, the air becoming thick and humid. He rolls up his sleeve. *I'm gonna end up with a sunburn from a lamp…*

He winces momentarily, accidentally having touched a bruise on his arm. He gingerly massages the area around it.

*Damn guards with those damn batons. I oughta transmute it into one big club and knock 'em all over the heads with it!*

His face slowly falls.

*…If I could still do alchemy… We'd have busted out of here a long time ago. Hell! They never would have even caught us in the first place! They wouldn't have caught Roy either! I'd have stopped them then and there!*
He looks down at the floor.

...I could have saved Roy... I could have saved Sophie... Maybe... Maybe I could have even saved Heiderich...

Ed remembers the kind face of his friend from years ago – so much like his brother's, and yet distinctly different... He remembers when he last saw him alive... how Heiderich's final act was to get Ed back to his own world...

And yet here Ed was...

Heiderich's last act had been for nothing.

Ed sighs, feeling a heaviness overtake his body. For nothing... he wanted me to go home... Dad wanted me to go home...

Just like Heiderich, Hoenheim's last act was to give his life.

Ed shuts his eyes tightly, trying to block out the memory – the red. So much blood. Seeing his father's body shattered and mangled amongst monstrous teeth.

Ed curls his knees to his chest.

If I had my alchemy... I could have saved him... That was the only thing I was ever good at. And I can't even do it anymore...

He gives a short, cynical laugh.

I was a golden child – youngest State Alchemist! Everyone knew me! ...And now... I'm nothing...

Slowly his hands slide down his shins...

Who am I kidding? Even with alchemy I was nothing... I couldn't save anyone... I couldn't save Rose... I couldn't save Nina... all alchemy ever did was get me into trouble... from day one...

He stops himself, not wanting to think on it any further. He turns his eyes to the sky, but has to look down again.

"Damn light!"

He grabs his jacket and throws it over his face. But not long after there comes a BANG! BANG! BANG! on the door.

"No sleeping!" the guard shouts at him.

"Augh!" Ed angrily crumples up his jacket, tossing it off. He sits there for a second, and then glances over at it. Then quickly grabs the jacket back up and starts to spread it out across the floor.

Maybe my jacket will absorb the heat and keep it from reaching the floor. Then maybe I'll have someplace cool to sit...

Time passes. How much, Ed is unsure. With no window to the outside world, there is no sunshine, no passing moon gliding by in the sky to tell him whether it is noon or night.
How long has it been? he wonders. Is it morning yet? For all he knows, it's still the middle of the night…

Surely it must be later than that. The guards have already been switched out… But how often do they switch?

If it is morning, Ed thinks, that means we've been here for three days. A jolt of excitement jumps up his stomach. It's Day 3. Roy's comrades will be here. There'll be British soldiers here to break us out any minute now…

Still the time ticks by, every other moment or so filled with the clang of a baton against the door.

How much time? How much time has passed? An hour? Two hours? Three?

Where are they? Ed asks, fear gripping his stomach, knees to chest. They should be here by now. He picks absently at the edge of his pant leg.

…Maybe they're just behind schedule. Yeah, that's it. They just got a late start leaving the dock…

…Is Al with them? …No, Roy would do the smart thing – he'd keep Al with him… Unless Roy is with the rescue party too? …They'd have to cross enemy lines… What if they get caught? Or what if they get killed?

Ed takes a breath, forcing himself to set his legs down away from his chest, even though he doesn't want to. Being bundled up like that is just making him more nervous.

They'll be here… …Won't they?

He runs his fingers across his thumb, again and again.

…What if the people that Roy works for really did decide not to send a rescue party? …I mean, really… Is it worth the risk? Just to save two people?

He clenches his fist.

What if that really is what happened? What if we've just been left here to die? …But Sophie... She's counting on me… I promised her that I'd get her out… I can't disappoint her…

…Just a few more hours… Just a few more hours…

*

The guard outside the door looks up the hall, seeing another guard heading this way, cups of water in his hand. "For the prisoners?" he questions.

The other guard nods, "Yeah, none for you," he jibes. He leans down, setting both cups on the floor. He lifts opens a small hinged door at the bottom of the much larger door, and he slides one of the cups inside.

He then takes the other cup to the other side of the hall, doing the same at that door, though he stops as he looks through the little opening.

"Huh. This one's not drinking her water. The cup I gave her yesterday is still here. What'sa matter?" he calls in to the girl inside. "You waitin' for me to bring you wine or something?"
Sophie responds, not loudly though firmly, "I'm not drinking anything until Ed gets something!"

"I just gave him water."

"Prove it!"
The guard looks over his shoulder to Ed's door, "Elric, tell your girlfriend I gave you water."

Ed calls through his door, "They gave me water, Sophie. It's all right."

She says, concerned, "And you're not just saying that? Just so I'll drink?"

Ed tells her, "They want to keep me alive, don't they? They have to give me water."

Sophie is quiet for a moment, and then says, "All right..." And delicately, she slides her way to the door, taking the cup.

Ed lifts his own cup to his lips, conveniently leaving out the fact that this is the first time in three days that they've given him any water – and they've still yet to give him any food. But he knows Sophie. She's so stubborn she'd starve herself until they gave me something. As long as she's being given food and water, I'll be fine...

At the very least, perhaps this small cup of water will help to calm his aching stomach...

And it does, but only momentarily, for not long after, the rumbling returns, Ed trying so hard to ignore it – especially once a guard arrives later with a tray of food, the smell wafting through the air, clambering through the view-slot, drifting its way across Ed's cell, the heat of the lamp somehow amplifying the scent.

Ed pinches his nose. Even though it smells delicious, it somehow makes him feel sick.

It would make him even more sick to know that it's no guard that takes the food to Sophie, but Reistrom. Again, he slides the view-slot shut, closing off the outside world as he enters her cell with the tray.

Sophie looks down away from him, ignoring Reistrom as he sits down in front of her with the tray.

"The guards tell me you haven't been eating your food," he says to her. "They find the tray from the day before still full, right where they left it."

Sophie's eyes rest on her lap, her hands cradling her elbows as she sits there silently.

"Is it too far for you to reach? I thought I'd try bringing it to you again – if you've learned your lesson, that is. We won't be having a repeat of the other day, now will we?"

Sophie brings her arms in closer.

Reistrom lifts off of the tray a small lump of bread, ripping off a piece of it. He stretches out his hand, offering the bread to her. "Here – eat."

Sophie's eyes finally drift up from her lap to his hand, and then to his eyes. But she says nothing, nor does she take what's in his hands.

Reistrom narrows his eyes, repeating, strongly, "I said, 'Eat'."

Timidly, Sophie outstretches her hand, taking the bread from him, and, reluctantly, lifts it to her
mouth. She nibbles on the small, crusty little bit of food – and she doesn't know what overtakes her as she starts to cry.

Reistrom smiles. "There, see? I knew you were hungry. So delicious it makes you cry."

Sophie still says nothing, just quietly lets the tears fall as she chews on the bread.

"You want to survive this, don't you?" he asks her. "You won't survive if you starve yourself to death." He rips off another piece of the bread, handing that to her as she finishes the first, "If you're smart, you'll do everything I tell you to. It's the only chance you have."

Sophie still does not speak, trying to ignore him, ignore his words, ignore his presence – just will him out of existence.

He rips off another piece, giving it to her. "I'm curious what you would have done had you actually managed to escape. Do you think I would have let you off so easily? It would have cost you dearly – and I mean more than dear Edward. The Lead Commander would have killed him regardless. No – I mean I would have tracked you down wherever you were hiding, be it with friends or family – killed them one by one and made you watch, knowing that it was all your fault."

Sophie tries to hide her trembling.

"Now do you really want to go through all that? It's certainly not fair to any of them to have to die because of your own selfishness."

The bread all gone, Reistrom slides the tray forward to Sophie.

She looks at it for a moment, and then looks at him, his face hard to read as it is neutral and still.

He says, "Your only chance of survival is obedience."

Sophie looks back down at the tray. And without a word, she picks up the small bowl of soup that sits on it, and she lifts it to her mouth and drinks.

*"

"Fullmetal!"

Ed looks over and sees Roy – but it's not Roy, but it is! "Colonel!"

Colonel Mustang stands not far away from him, his hands in his pockets, he grinning that same old grin.

Ed happily runs towards him, "Colonel! What are you doing here? ...Huh?" But then Ed slows, for he sees that the colonel is pulling his hand out of his pocket, lifting his gloved hand towards Ed.

Ed's eyes widen as he gasps, he turning around, starting to run the other way, hearing the colonel say,

"Too slow!"

SNAP! SNAP! SNAP!

"Hey are you listening?!" the guard bellows. "How many times do I gotta tell ya? NO SLEEPING!"
Ed has his hands to his face, checking to make sure that his body is all here, that none of it is on fire. It is not – relatively speaking, for that god-awful lamp has yet to be turned off.

_Damn stupid thing!_ he thinks, glaring angrily up at it. _You'd think the light bulb would have burnt out by now or something!_

…

How long?

How long has he been sitting here?

How long will he have to keep sitting here?

_They should have been here by now…_

Ed flops back against the wall, exhausted. His bones hurt. Whether from a lack of movement or from the beating he'd received the other day, he's unsure. His muscles hurt. He wants to rub them, but he's suddenly feeling too tired to move.

_I hope I have enough energy to move when they get here. That's all they need is me slowing them down…_

Even though he's tired, Ed somehow finds the energy to start nervously drumming his fingers.

_Are they going to give a signal? Maybe they already gave it and I missed it? But there are no windows here, I never would have heard it…_

His breathing speeds up, he laboring under the heavy, humid air.

…_They're not coming, are they? Al said he would come… He said he'd come back…_

Ed nervously crosses his arms, rocking a little.

_Dad said he'd come back, too, and he never did! …That's not fair, he did… Took him damn long enough though! Al better not take years getting here!_

He uncrosses his arms, shaking his hands to try to somehow physically shake off his nervousness.

_OKay, calm down. Let's look at this logically. Let's say that Roy wasn't able to persuade the people he works for. That means we're on our own. I've got to figure a way out of here… But how? And where would we go once we do get out? Yeah, to England, but which way is that?_

He closes his eyes, trying to re-envision the drive that brought him here, trying to figure out where Amsterdam is in relation to him now…

…_Amsterdam… He can still see the canals… the park… their house… Is the house safe? Or has it been bombed and burnt to the ground? Or what if its just been looted? …It doesn't matter… he's never going to see it ever again…_

Ed holds his breath, holding in the feeling that's welling up within him. He rubs his head, reopening his eyes as he looks at the ground, finally exhaling exhaustedly.

_What was I thinking about? …Oh, escape, right… Okay, so if Roy couldn't convince the British… There's always the Brothers, Ed thinks, referring to the Freemasons. Roy can always get them to help, just like he did with Captain Jones…_
Another sigh escapes his lips. Why didn't I just stay on the ship? If I just hadn't looked out the window and seen Sophie… But then the Nazis probably would have taken over the whole ship to find me and Al. And then all of the crew onboard would have been endangered…

Back on track here – If the British government doesn't want to save me, I know the Brothers will. They're my friends… So what in the hell is taking them so long?!

He slams a fist on the ground.

...Have I just been left behind? Have the Brothers just abandoned me? ...the same way Dad did? ...Left me behind, the same way Mom did? ...Left me behind the same way Al did to Sophie, so quick to run out on her…

...Sophie…

Ed looks up at his door, wanting to get up and go talk to her, check on her, make sure she's all right – show her that he's still here for her…

I told her, he thinks. I told her that I wanted to prove that we'd always be here for one another… And I am… so why…

...Why didn't she say yes?

Why didn't she say yes when I proposed? I know she said it's because she doesn't want to get married in war time… but… what if it's more than that? …

Does she only like me but not love me? ...Am I not good enough for her? Is there something wrong with me?

Ed looks back down at the floor, a strange half-smile finding its way to his face.

Okay, there's a lot wrong with me…

The smile fades, the corners of his mouth feeling as heavy as his bones.

...Sophie doesn't deserve that… She shouldn't have to deal with me laying all my problems on her… she deserves somebody strong, to care for her…

He slides down the wall a bit.

Somebody strong who can save her…

He then looks up with a sudden fire in his eyes.

That's me. I'm the one who's going to have to get us out of this mess! I can't keep sitting here, waiting, for someone to come along!

Finally, Ed lifts himself to his feet. He looks all around the room, plotting, planning. He looks up at the light.

And then he pulls his jacket off the floor. He throws it over his head and face, covering himself, and – still able to see the light through the cloth – Ed winds back his automail arm and POW! He crashes the bulb, the glass shattering everywhere.

"Hey! What're you doing?" the guard outside the door shouts. He looks through the slot, looking into the cell, seeing that it has gone dark. "What the?! Why you!"
"What's going on in here?"

Commander Reistrom is walking down the hall, followed by a soldier carrying something in tow.

The guard at the door salutes Reistrom as he walks up to him. "Sir! He just broke the lamp!"

Reistrom glares through the bars, watching as Ed pulls his coat off of himself, tidbits of crushed glass sparkling as they fall to the floor. Reistrom furrows his brow. "Clever, Elric, very clever."

"Thank you, I thought so," is Ed's smarmy response.

"You think if you break the light, we'll have to come in there and fix it, is that it?"

"Or at the very least I can go to sleep now."

"I'm afraid you're wrong on both accounts," Reistrom tells him. "We won't be fixing the light, meaning we won't be opening the door, meaning you won't be able to run out. As for sleeping," he says with a smirk, "That's why I'm here. I brought a little present – courtesy of the engineers you'll be working with eventually. You can thank them when we finally do let you out of here to go work with them."


Reistrom nods at the soldier that was following him. The soldier sets down the little contraption and winds a crank on its top. The little machine whirs to life – a simple axel with a stick protruding out of it at a horizontal angle. Gears at the bottom of the machine whirl around and around, tightening a coil, and BANG! Like a mousetrap, the spring releases, swinging the stick forward and banging the door. Slowly the stick rotates back into its first position, the coil rewinding itself, building up more power to do it again – BANG!

Reistrom smiles, "I hope you enjoy hearing that every thirty seconds."

"It's better than hearing your slimy voice," Ed retorts.

"Tsk, tsk. That mouth of yours. It'll get you into real trouble you know. For that, as well as for breaking your light, we'll have to punish you. Private."

The soldier behind him salutes. "Yes sir?"

Reistrom maintains eye contact with Ed. "Get the girl."

Ed rushes at the door, "What are you doing?! You leave her out of this!"

The soldier is already opening Sophie's door, and Ed can hear her: "Get away! Stop!"

Ed is kicking at his door again, "Damn it, I said leave her alone!"

"Don't worry, Mr. Elric," Reistrom says to him, the soldier in the background carrying Sophie through the open door. "I don't intend to hurt her. But as punishment,"

BANG! the little machine makes its noise.

Reistrom continues, "I'm moving her down the hall, where you won't be able to see or speak to her." Reistrom takes Sophie by the wrist, forcing her to wave. "Say 'ta-ta!'".

Sophie looks like she wants to pull away but does not.
"Put her down!" Ed shouts. "Sophie! Sophie!"

The guard carries her away, Reistrom sliding shut the view-slot on Ed's door, Ed unable to do anything other than bang his fist against the door.

"Sophie!" He then kicks the door. "Damn it! This isn't what I wanted at all!" He kicks it again. "I wouldn't have had to do this if Roy would just should up already! Damn it! **Damn it!**"

Reistrom smiles to himself as he hears Ed's continual banging and screaming of 'damn it.' "Such a mouth on that one." He looks over at Sophie. "And you honestly let him kiss you with that mouth?"

BANG! the little machine makes its noise, Sophie hearing it echo down the hall as she sits on the floor, looking up at Reistrom who towers in the doorway.

"No wonder you're filthy," he says down to her. "One of these days I shall breed you into a fine lady. But as long as you stay attached to filth like that, you yourself will never be anything more than filth."

He swings the door closed, and locks it.

Ed still kicks his own door, "Damn it! Why the hell do all these plans keep failing?! Roy's failed to show up!" KICK! "I failed to get to England!" KICK! "I failed to save Sophie!" KICK! "I couldn't even keep that damn bomb out of the Nazis' hands!" KICK! KICK! KICK!

Every other word becomes followed by a kick against the door.

"Spent! Forever! looking for it! Only! to have them! get it! back! And who! knows! what! the hell! they're doing! with it! now!"

KICK! BANG!

Ed slams his fist against the door, resting his forehead against the large metal plate, tiredly saying, "Damn it… I fail at everything… We'll never get out of this…" His hand slides down the door. "… It's hopeless…"

* 

Though the heat has subsided in the absence of the light, the air of the cell is thick as ever, stale and unmoving.

Ed sits in the quiet darkness, in the corner furthest from the hay pile, not wanting to get anywhere near it. He wishes now he had thought to set the hay near the door – at least then it might get aired out whenever the guards open the trap-door to slide water in.

**What day is it?** Ed thinks to himself. **Is it water day yet?** He's not sure how many days have past since he last saw Sophie. His only companion thus far has been that stupid banging of that stupid machine.

Ed grumbles. **Humans… Such intellect and we waste it on building stupid machines… machines of torture, machines of war, machines of death…** He grits his teeth. **Why? Why are humans like that?! Are the people on this side of the Gate even human? Hell! I thought the war back home was bad, but this! These people are **disgusting**! They're not even human at all!**

He punches the ground.
They may wear the same skin as us, but on the inside they're filthy! They're monsters!

And then Ed stops… He's heard this… He's heard this before… But where?

And then his heart drops as he realizes – the woman who was in charge of the Thule Society – Eckhart was her name – she said something just like that… about Ed's own people…

He slides down the wall, putting a hand to his face, "My god… I'm no better… I'm no better than any of the people I've been fighting against… I'm just like them…" He covers his mouth, trying to hide his voice,"…I'm a monster…"

His shoulders shake for a moment, Ed putting his head onto his knees, trying to ignore both his thoughts and the banging of the machine.

...I am a monster… How many people have been killed because of me? Nina. Heiderich. Hell! I was about two seconds away from killing all of those prisoners at Lab 5! I was going to do it!

His shoulders shake more.

...But I didn't… I didn't… I didn't kill anyone… Except… Except for Greed… B-but he was a Homunculus, it doesn't count…

...Mom was a homunculus… I killed her too… I… I…

He audibly sobs, the cry ringing off the bare walls.

"Oh god! Mom! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

He hugs his knees so very tightly, rocking back and forth as the sobs roll forth.

"I'm sorry!"

I killed her! It's my fault…

He wipes his eyes.

No! No, I killed SLOTH! That thing was NOT Mom! Mom was already dead before that.

He sobs again, his lips tightening.

Why did she leave us?! Why! We NEEDED her! Were we not important enough for her to stick around?!

He rubs his arms, laying his cheek on his knee.

...Didn't she love us? ...Didn't she love me? ...Does anyone love me? ... Am I not worthy of being loved? ...Am I worthy of anything? The Universe sure doesn't seem to think I deserve anything – not parents, not a home, not love, not peace… All I'm worthy of is pain…

Ed slowly lays down, feeling lightheaded, both a lack of food and an overwhelming sense of emotion preying upon him. He lays on his side, glad that the floor is cool – but it is also scattered with sharp bits of glass that dig into his cheek, he too tired to care to brush them away, letting them instead cut into his skin, he feeling his warm blood trickle forth from his face.

All I'm worthy of is pain…
...I don't deserve Sophie... I can't protect her at all... I can't even think of a plan to get us out of here... I'm at the mercy of all these guards...

A bit of anger flashes through him, coming out as a kick that he takes at the air as if someone were there.

Damn stupid Nazis! Screwing up everything for everyone! I'll kick in all their heads and teach them a little respect!

He curls up closer to himself, pouting angrily.

That's their problem! They don't have any respect for anyone! They think they're better than everyone else!

...Damn... who am I to judge? I'm no better, always showing off... I bet everyone at the university talks behind my back... they all hate me for being a show off...

Where the hell did that even come from? We're talking about Nazis, not school!

He grumbles a sigh, flopping over to the other side – but this time the glass does annoy him, and Ed sits up momentarily, brushing all the glass away from him. He lays back down, suddenly realizing how sore his other cheek is.

He winces as he carefully passes his fingers over his cheek, delicately picking the glass from his skin.

Damn it... Can't even take care of myself, how can I be expected to take care of others? He sighs. That's what Matthijs was worried about, wasn't? He was worried that I wouldn't be able to care for his sister... Well he was right about that... Ed slows, sighing. But then he finds fire again. That's no reason for him to treat me the way he did! Hell, he practically threatened me when we first met! Does he think I'm garbage or something? Or a bad person? How many people have hated me just because I'm a Mason? And how many people before that hated me just because I was a State Alchemist?

His muscles slack, Ed relaxing his body, the chilliness of the concrete seeping into his bare skin.

...I only ever became a State Alchemist so that... so that...

He sighs again, rolling over onto his stomach, his eyes staring at the blank, dark wall to the side of him.

So that I could break the rules...

...Matthijs was right not to trust me. I'm no good. I've never been good. ...I committed the greatest sin of alchemy... and I was only 11...

...I lied to Teacher about why I wanted to learn alchemy in the first place...

...I dragged Al into it... How many times did he try to stop me? How many times did he say he had a bad feeling about it and I ignored him?

Al...

A tear falls down his face.
Everything I put you through… because I was being selfish… And I was selfish again… I put my own wants first… And now look where it's gotten me…

He looks away from the wall, resting his forehead on the floor.

Still as selfish as a child… a rotten child… …Maybe I was born a bad soul… That's the way Reistrom put it, wasn't it? …Maybe he's right… I deserve this… I deserve to rot…

...After everything I've done... Everyone I've ever hurt or killed... I couldn't save those soldiers in Liore... And now Reistrom's getting revenge for all of them... He can't take it out on Scar, so he's taking it out on me...

Worry jumps through his stomach.

Scar... Where is he anyway, Serkan? And Lucine, and all the others? ...Noa...

Ed clenches his fists, gritting his teeth.

...I told her I was her friend... That I forgave her... And then I just up and LEFT! I didn't even give her an explanation, I just vanished! By now, she's probably-

He squeezes his eyes shut as he curls his arms in towards his body, more hot tears flowing across his face and onto the floor.

She's probably dead in a ditch somewhere! They've all been dead for years! Just for having dark skin!

Though his head is already to the floor, Ed tucks his chin closer to himself, as if trying to hide from all the world.

And what about Rick and Leo? Back at that camp – they were there! Did they make it out alive? What if Kimblee blew them up? Or what if they got shot by the soldiers? Even if they did make it out, what if they got picked up again, and just got killed then?

Another sob escapes his lips.

I can't help anyone! It doesn't matter! No matter how hard I try, everyone's just going to die anyway!

He covers his mouth, crying, "Al! Al, please don't die! I need you!"

"Stop sniveling, you shrimp!"

Ed's eyes snap open as he scrambles up onto hands and knees.

Standing before him is his teacher, Izumi!

He sits upright, "T-Teacher?! What are you doing here? Gah!"

She kicks him in the face. "Don't ask stupid questions!"

Ed rubs his face, "I'm sorry! Gah!"

She kicks him in the other cheek. "Stop apologizing! Apologizing is for weaklings!"

"I'm sorry! No, wait!"
She kicks him in the gut. "Is this how I trained you? To be a weakling?! Get up!"

Ed clambers to his feet, propping himself up against the wall. "Teacher, you've got to help me get out of here!"

He ducks as she punches right where his face was, a crater now in the wall. "You got yourself into this mess!" Izumi screams at him. "Get yourself out!"

"I don't know how!" he pleads.

"That's your problem, Edward!" she yells at him, "You always dig yourself into a hole with no plan how to climb back out!" She punches him again.

"Stop hitting me!" Ed cries, literally crying as he defensively holds up his fists.

"Fight!"

"I don't wanna fight!" he says, squeezing his eyelids shut, "I just want you to HELP me!"

"I am helping you!"

"BY HITTING ME?! WHAT IN THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?! WHO PUNCHES A 10-YEAR-OLD?!"

…There is no answer…

Ed slowly opens his eyes, realizing that he is the only one in the room. He looks at the wall behind him – it is as smooth as ever, no crater present…

Shaky, he falls to his knees…

BANG! the little machine makes its noise against the door.

* *

Sophie has her eyes closed, internally chanting to herself: *Left, right, pass one, turn right on two, left, double-doors.*

She's almost certain those double-doors are the way out of the compound. She runs through it again, this time moving her hands as if acting out the running through the halls.

She hears the cellblock door, now directly next to her in this new cell, opening, and she stops what's she's doing, calmly laying her hands in her lap. The trick is to be calm… if she's nervous, then he knows she's up to something…

Indeed, as expected, it is Reistrom, Sophie not even remotely surprised. Though that does change as this time he brings in a chair with him, setting it in the corner near her. He notices her curiosity, and so he says, "These visits are becoming a daily occurrence. So I thought at the very least I should have somewhere to sit. The floor is for prisoners."

Sophie frowns but quickly changes to a neutral expression, knowing that if he sees her grimacing at him, it could mean getting slapped again.

"You can use it if you like," he says as he sits down, "If you can get into it, what with that leg of yours. It is regrettable," he says as he strokes his hand across her head, petting her hair, "— A fine specimen such as yourself, being damaged like this."
Sophie still looks down at the ground.

"If it helps," he says, lifting the flap of his shirt pocket as he reaches into it, "I brought a little something that might help with the pain." He produces a small bottle, giving it a little shake, the pills inside it rattling. "Aspirin," he says with a smile. "Simple, but effective."

Sophie still does not look at him – she merely twiddles her fingers, nervously massaging them.

"You don't want them?" he asks. "They'll make you feel better."

Cautiously, she does look over at him, looking at the pill bottle in his hand. She wants to say, 'Sorry, but the last time you gave me drugs, it didn't end well,' but she utters not a sound, afraid of what it might result in.

Reistrom sits there quietly, and then gives a disdainful sigh as he shoves the bottle back into his pocket. "A simple yes or no would have sufficed-"

"Yes," Sophie mutters, her voice squeaking for a moment, for it has been a few days since she's used it. She clears her throat, though her answer is still quiet. "...Yes..."

Reistrom slowly reaches back up to his pocket, "Yes...?"

She coughs again, trying to make her voice louder, "Yes, please."

"Close~"

"Um... Yes, sir?"

"Good girl."

*BANG! the little machine makes its noise against the door.*

Ed sits tucked away in the dark corner of his cell, accustomed to the noise that the little machine makes. His stomach has forgotten how to rumble, for it has gone so long without food that Ed is almost sure it has died off inside of him. He dares not open his mouth lest whatever little moisture is still trapped inside it should get sucked out into the air.

His eyes drift heavily across the room, and sees that someone else is trapped here too, huddled away in the corner opposite of him. The mass is big and black and furry, like a bear.

*Is it a bear? How did a bear get in here?*

The furry mass shifts, a whispering arising from the corner. "Look, Nina..." The voice whispers. "It's your friend Edward..."

The creature turns around, and Ed is greeted by the upside-down face of Shou Tucker. Ed would be surprised, if he wasn't so tired. Tucker smiles, the corners of his mouth hanging towards the ground but towards his eyes. He lifts his large animalistic arms, showing off what he has.

Tucker whispers, "Say hello, Nina darling..."

Ed looks down at Tucker's arms, and sees that he carries a bareskinned little girl, Nina, her eyes dead and soulless, like a doll.

Tucker's laugh sounds as a wind forcing its way through the crack in a window. "She's happy to see
you. See? See here? She's smiling. She's alive, Edward. My baby is alive."

Ed's face is long, but not because he frowns. He is too tired to frown. He's too tired to feel. He's too tired to speak. His face is simply long because gravity pulls at him.

Tucker doesn't notice as he is too busy putting his ear close to Nina's mouth. "I can hear her. Can't you hear her, Edward? She's speaking."

"Ed…ward…"

Ed does sit up a little at this… He hears the voice… But it is not a little girl's voice…

"Ed…ward…"

Who is that? Ed thinks. It's a man's voice.

Suddenly from Nina's bare chest a face forms, pushing its way outwards. "Edward."

Ed gasps –

It's Reistrom's face, staring back out at him from where Nina's heart should be.

Edward yelps, backing away – but then he runs into something. Not the wall. He turns around, and now backs away from that which he sees – a corpse! It is as thin and as shrunken as a raisin, tubes plugged into the body at several major artery points, the blood having been sucked right out of this dead woman, her eyes sunken into the back of her head, her lips pulled as tight as dried leather, exposing her teeth and gums.

Ed stares up at it, his eyes trembling. And then the corpse springs to life, reaching out towards Edward, her fingers like gnarled, twisted tree branches, the last two fingers of her hand not fingers at all, but strange, clockwork mechanisms!

BANG!

Ed struggles for a moment, suffocating under his own jacket. He throws it off and sits there quietly in the dark for a moment. Then he sighs wiping his hand down his face.

I was only asleep for a minute… Er, thirty seconds, I guess… How could I possibly have dreamt all that that quickly?

He starts to lean back against the wall, but quickly whips around, scanning it up and down suspiciously. He gently reaches out a finger, poking the wall once or twice – it's solid. He sighs, leaning his back against it.

Maybe NOT sleeping is actually a good thing, he thinks. Every time I actually do fall asleep, I have a weird dream… He grumbles. But I'm only HAVING weird dreams because that asshole wouldn't let me sleep in the first place…

When was the last time I slept? …Uh… not the last time they brought me water, but the time before that… so… six days ago? And I think I was only asleep for 30 seconds then, too. I don't know if that actually counts as REAL sleep… How long have I been in here anyway?

Reistrom, sitting at his desk inside his office, draws a pen across his calendar, marking off another day.
A knock comes from his door.

"Enter," he says.

A soldier does so, giving a short salute. "Reporting in, sir: Everything all clear around the perimeter. And Commander A-"

**FWIP! THOING!**

Reistrom's hat has flown off of his head and is now pinned to the wall, an arrow sticking out of it, the fletching shaking up and down as the arrow still vibrates, slowly drawing to a rest.

Reistrom closes his eyes, taking in a long breath through his nose before finally saying, "Hello, Armbruster…"

Popping into the doorway is a young officer, about the same age as Reistrom, though certainly more chipper, he carrying a small crossbow: "Ha! Got you again! You didn't even see me coming!"

Reistrom instead is looking down at his paperwork, scribbling as he asks, "How many hats do you owe me now?"

"Uh," Armbruster's eyes look up through his dirty blonde hair, up at the ceiling, as if the answer is written up there somewhere. "I think we're up to three."

"I think we're up to four…"

"No biggie," he says as he enters the office, pushing the soldier aside. Armbruster leans his elbow on the desk while giving a big grin. "SO! Guess who's air team has the Belgians on the run?"

Reistrom continues his work, "Guess who doesn't care?"

"Aw, come on! Don't be like that!" Armbruster whines childishly as he stands upright. "I thought you'd be glad to hear how good I was doing!"

Reistrom dips his pen in its inkwell, "How many towns have you captured?"

Armbruster scratches his chin, "Uh…"

Reistrom lifts his pen from the inkwell, touching the pen back to paper, never looking up at his comrade. "While you've been playing with your airplanes, my squadrons have already captured The Hague, Rotterdam, Terneuzen, the entirety of the southern half of the Netherlands, AND Ghent – and I haven't even had to leave my base."

Armbruster purses his lips. "Pfft! 'Mr. Leads-from-Behind'! At least I'm out there on the front lines with my troops!"

"And they'd be all the better for it if it actually amounted to anything."

Armbruster slams his hands on the desk, "Hey, I just came here to-!" he looks down, feeling something wet collect under his fingers – and he realizes that upon slamming the desk, the inkwell fell over. "Oh, geeze!" He quickly picks it up, setting it upright. "I am SO sorry! I didn't see that there!"

Reistrom grumbles, "Blind as a bat, I swear…"

Armbruster warningly lifts a finger, "Hey, don't get started on the bat jokes."
Reistrom looks at the soldier that still stands by the door. "A towel, please." As the soldier leaves, Reistrom returns his attention to the young officer. "Look Armbruster – just get the supplies you need, and be on your way."

"What, you don't even have time to stop at the Mess Hall for a beer or anything?"

"No, I do not. I'm in the middle of something very important right now."

Armbruster is intrigued, this time setting both of his elbows on the desks as he rests his chin in his hands, "Important how?"

Reistrom smiles, "I'm only a few days away from cracking a prisoner I have here. It's been two weeks since he's had any food, and already the guards are telling me they hear him talking to himself."

"That's neat," Armbruster responds rather mechanically. He then proudly points a thumb to his chest, "Well in a few days, I bet my squads will have captured Belgium. You just watch – I bet it only takes us three days!"

"I bet four."

"Water…” Ed's voice dryly cracks as it crawls out of his throat. "Water…”

He hears heavy footsteps coming this way, and his chapped lips break into a smile.

"Water," he says hopefully. Slowly, shakily, he moves his hand from his lap to the floor, trying to push himself upright, but he can't find the energy.

The footsteps get closer. They're almost here.

Ed sets his other hand on the floor, both arms now pushing him forward. He hangs his head, his eyes staring at his lap, he desperately trying to muster the strength to get to the door.

"Wa…ter…”

He hears a noise at the door – but it's not the trap-door at the bottom… Ed lifts his head, and then he screams, seeing that looking back at him through the view-slot is the Masked Man! His ugly, red, dragon-like face glares through the bars, beady black pupils looking out of white-painted eyes, white-painted teeth bared and jutting out of a gold-painted jaw.

Ed points at him, yelling, "N-Now hang on! I know that's you, Mason!" he shouts, referring to his teacher's helper. "You can't scare me with that dumb mask!"

But like a ghost, the Masked Man is phasing through the door!

Okay, Mason can't do that! Ed thinks frantically. He tries to back up, but he has nowhere to go but against the wall!

The Masked Man, his huge muscles bulging, raises his club high over his head, and Edward screams as it comes toppling down on top of him!

BANG!

"Son of a bitch!” Edward screams. He scrambles on hands and knees to the door, and he tries to
force open the trap-door at the bottom. "I'm gonna break that damn machine!"

Miraculously, the hinged door does swing open, but not because of Ed's efforts, but because there is a guard there. "What the?" the guard says, now kicking at Ed's outstretched hand. "Get back in there! Or you ain't getting any water!"

Ed lights up, sucking his hand back into the hole, waiting excitedly for what's to come.

The guard shakes his head, leaning down, slipping the cup of water through the hole.

Ed swipes it up, nearly taking the guard's hand with it, and the guard pulls back, rubbing his hand.

"Ow! Jeez! Watch it! Crazy..." he mumbles as he walks away.

Ed fumbles with the cup, trying to get it to his lips – but he's so shaky, that most of it sloshes over the sides, the cup finally dropping from his hand and the water spilling everywhere.

Ed stares at the puddle forlornly, a desolate whine arising from his throat. But it's still good! This is concrete – it won't soak up the water!

Still on hands and knees, Ed dips his head to the puddle, hitting it a little hard, smooshing his nose against the ground. But he doesn't care. Water! Cool, wet water...

But then something catches his eye – a face, reflecting in the water. It is not his own – it is a woman, with long brown hair and green eyes.

Suddenly the face is jutting forward out of the water, Edward backing up with a yelp as the face forms. The lady stares directly at him. "Edward," she asks in a sorrowful voice, "Why didn't you bring me back to life? Why did you make me a monster, Edward?"

"Go away!" Ed screams at her. "You're not real!"

The water rises high, forming a liquidous body, her arms flopping about like the tentacles of an octopus. She walks towards him. "Come on, Edward. Give Mommy a hug!" She slings her watery arm at Ed, and he scrambles to his feet running away from her, running off into the never-ending darkness.

He keeps running, running, hearing her voice calling after him,

"What's wrong, Edward? Don't you love me?"

"Go away!" he screams, never turning around to face her.

He trips, and the next thing he knows, Edward is falling forward – but the floor is not there! He falls a good six feet before he finally comes to a hard landing, butting his chin against a long wooden plank, feeling his brain rattle around in his skull.

Her voice comes again, but not from behind him – it's from below him now, underneath the wood: "Edward! Why did you dig me up, Edward?"

"Wh-what?!" Ed looks down at the planks of wood beneath his palms as he sits up. He looks around him, "What is this?!" The hole he's fallen into – it's not circular, but rectangular.

As he stands, the wood beneath his feet begins to tremble, the voice desperately begging, "Let me out! Get me out of here!"
Ed runs to the edge of the hole, climbing his way towards the top. He gets his arms over the edge and pulls himself up, coming face to face with a headstone, it inscribed in deep, bold letters: TRISHA ELRIC.

He breathes rapidly, trying to wrap his head around this, but his attention is turned away as a silhouette overtakes him. Ed looks up to his side and sees a woman in a large, lovely pink ballgown standing next to him.

"Dante?"

The young lady smiles, one hand to chest, the other hand held aloft. "So tragic the role of the hero! Tragic, for his life would not be worth noting if he were normal!"

"What?" Ed spurs, "What the hell are you doing?"

She seems not to hear him, for she carries on, moving her arms in sweeping motions as her theatrical voice carries across the void. "The man who has everything and nothing at the same time! Cursed by fate to wander forever across the lonely desert, never finding his oasis!"

"Brilliant, darling!" A voice behind her says. Ed leans to the side, trying to see around Dante to see who's there.

"Fuhrer Bradley?"

Indeed, the leader of Amestris, eyepatch and all, stands behind a camera, rolling the film as he says to Dante, "The camera loves you, sweetheart! Keep going!"

Ed pulls himself out of the grave, Dante narrating, "The hero cheats death! His greatest feat by far! But for how long?" Her smile grows sly, her dark eyes piercing him as she lifts her hand, palm to the sky. "Death is not always fast, but it is most certainly patient."

Suddenly, her nails extend, becoming as long as her body, the points as sharp as sabers!

"What the?!" Ed exclaims in confusion.

Dante's dress rips down its middle, exposing underneath the playful pink a deathly black – and Dante's skin rips up her face and out pops Lust!

She swings her saber-like nails back and forth, Ed dodging up and down to avoid them, Bradley all the meanwhile calling, "Astounding! Amazing! You're a star, kiddo!"

Determination flashes across Ed's face, he tired of dodging, finally feeling the old fire in the pit of his stomach. He ducks down once more, avoiding Lust's swipe, she instead scraping Bradley across the face, his eyepatch ripping off.

Calmly he calls offside, "Make-up!"

Ed runs forward at Lust and punches her right in the face!

Ed cracks a large grin, "Ha! Gotcha! …Huh?"

But suddenly, Lust's pale face is reshaping itself over Edward's hand, engulfing his entire fist. Ed tries to pull away, but he finds himself stuck tight in Gluttony's jaws!

"Mmm! Yummy!" the fat beast mumbles.
"Let go of me!" Ed cries, and he winds back his free fist and punches Gluttony in the eye, the big oaf screaming,

"Ow! No fair! Come back here!"

Ed runs away, heading straight for Bradley, the Fuhrer still rolling as he stares into his viewpiece – the sight he sees, a Gluttony growing larger as he runs straight towards the lens! "Now wait a minute," Bradley says, dissatisfied, "We're not making a monster movie."

Gluttony opens his mouth wide, and he chomps down on the camera, cutting it in half.

Bradley cries with dismay, "No! My film! It's ruined!"

Ed stops running, and turns around to see what's going on.

Bradley is pulling his sword from out of his sheath, slowly turning towards Ed, the Fuhrer finally opening both of his normally squinted eyes, revealing the red Ouroboros symbol in his eye. "You. Ruined. My. Movie!"

He charges straight at Edward, Ed standing his ground as both Bradley and Gluttony come barreling towards him.

But before they ever reach him, suddenly there is a green streak flying across both of them, and the two Homunculi stop dead in their tracks.

"Huh?" Ed lowers his fists, just slightly, not letting his guard down entirely.

Bradley and Gluttony fall to the ground, and Ed hears a voice: "Don't touch him," it says as a pale, slender figure comes forward through the darkness. A face grins from behind long, scraggly, green locks. "This pipsqueak is mine."

"Envy!" Ed claps his hands, blue energy bursting forth, and his automail arm transforms into a large blade!

Envy walks towards him, "Still a runt after all these years, Fullmetal?"

Ed says nothing, merely charges forward, brandishing his blade back and forth. Envy ducks low as the blade passes over his head, and jumps high as the blade sweeps under his feet. He lands nimbly on top of Ed's arm, and jumps clear over Ed's head!

Ed quickly turns to keep his eyes on Envy, not letting him get out of sight-

SLICE!

Ed stops breathing… He can't feel his heartbeat… He looks down… Envy's arm is rammed through his chest! Ed watches helplessly as his own blood dribbles over Envy's forearm, the Homunculus smiling cruelly at him. Envy begins to laugh, slowly at first, then breaking out into full-blown manic cackles as he victoriously throws his head back.

Ed grits his teeth, glaring up angrily. He winds back his automail blade as far back as he can, and SLICE! He rams it through Envy's chest!

Envy's laughing ceases, a gutty sputtering issuing forth from his throat as he looks down at his own chest.

Envy's arms slowly fall, and Ed slides down and off of Envy's arm, Ed now somehow miraculously
healed. Ed smiles, knowing he's won… But something's wrong… that's not Envy… that's…

Ed can't believe his eyes that standing in front of him is Greed! Pure black, covered in red streaks here and there, the monster lowers his shields, his hard, black, armor-like skin retreating only down to his neck, Greed exposing his more human-like face.

Greed stumbles backwards off of Ed's blade, Ed backing up, confused. "I-I don't understand!"

Though there is a gaping hole in his chest, Greed looks up at Ed and smiles at him. "I knew you had it in ya, kid," Greed quietly mutters, flecks of his armor skin starting to fall off of him. Greed adds, "I knew you could be a killer like me."

"No!" Ed shouts. "No! I'm not a killer!"

But Greed doesn't hear him, he still standing there, looking as though he's passed out standing upright. Still, his armor falls off in flakes, they gently, wistfully falling to the ground as softly as petals, turning blue as they land on the ground… Blue petals… Blue rose petals…

Ed cautiously approaches, intrigued by what is happening. "Blue rose petals?" he questions. "I don't understand. Why blue roses?"

His eyes drift back up to Greed, and once more Ed is yelping and hopping backwards – for it is not Greed who stands there, but someone else now! Ed doesn't recognize him… And yet he does.

"Who is that?" Ed asks aloud. "Why do I know him?"

Slowly, vines begin to crawl up the man's body, overtaking him as tiny little thorns begins to grow out in all directions, piercing his soft flesh, causing little bits of blood to bead up in their wake, green buds plumping up and blossoming into large, stunning blue roses.

Suddenly memory strikes Ed like a lightning bolt. "Majhal?!"

But the man's body is already completely covered in the flowery overgrowth, the tall, human-shaped bush teetering over, falling onto its side.

Quietly, cautiously, Ed gets back on hands and knees. He stares, entranced, at the striking roses, their heavenly fragrance overtaking his sense. He reaches out his left hand, wanting to touch their petals, wanting to caress their beauty - but oddly, they begin to melt, turning red and watery.

"What now?!" Ed cries as the puddle grows in size, creeping its way closer and closer to him. As the puddle touches his hand, he is zapped by a small bolt of blue energy. "Ow!" he sits up on his knees, rubbing his hands. "What is this?" The puddle touches his knees, zapping him more. Ed jumps to his feet, backing away from the red water that pursues him.

He hears a moaning, a groaning, a throng of voices coming towards him. Ed looks up and sees a crowd of men, all of them in plain prison clothing, their hands clapped together in simple wooden cuffs. They reach out towards him, they stumbling dumbly, numbly forward.

Their clothes begins changing color, turning to a deep rich blue, their prison uniforms becoming Amestris military uniforms! Their wooden handcuffs transform into rifles! Their walking speeds up, turning into a run, all of them running straight at Ed! One of the soldiers shouts, "There he is! Stop him!"

Ed once again puts up his dukes, ready to fight – but before they ever reach him, a screaming arises from the back of the ranks, rolling its way forward as the soldiers start to explode, turning
into bright red lights, like stars.

"What's going on?!" Ed looks around, trying to figure out what's happening. Is there an enemy nearby who's shooting them? Is it the Homunculi again?

He turns his attention back towards the horde of soldiers in front of him, and sees the men being sucked into a single point, a red stone beginning to form in its center.

Ed gasps, "The Philosopher's Stone!"

He runs straight towards it, ignoring the fact that the howling winds are trying to suck him into the Stone as well. He gets closer, and closer, and closer!

But suddenly he runs into someone.

He pulls himself back, looking up – and he is greeted by a face looking down at him, a face just like his, only a beard and glasses and a few wrinkles difference between them.

"Dad?"

Hohenheim smiles at his son, the wind still whipping past them both. BOOM! Without warning, Hohenheim explodes in a flash of red, blood going everywhere, getting all over Edward, in his hair, on his clothes.

Edward's breath shudders as he slowly backs up, staring at his shaking palms drenched in red, his gloves dripping with blood. Ed breathes in and out in short bursts, faster and faster until finally he lets out a scream. He screams and he screams, his own screams mixing with that of the men vanishing into the Stone.

The Stone!

Ed looks up – but there is no Stone – there is only a brick wall, with the charred, splattered outline of an animal, like a dog with long hair.

Ed cries, "Nina!" He runs forward towards the wall, clapping his (somehow dry) hands together and then slamming his palms against the bricks. "Nina!" He claps again, again and again, vainly pressing his palms against the wall, no blue energy pulsing from his hands. "Nina!"

"Alchemist…" A deep voice rumbles from behind him. Ed turns around and sees Scar! The tall man's red eyes stare out accusingly through the darkness. Scar lifts his arm, his tattoos glowing an unholy red, and the Ishbalan charges right towards Ed!

Ed begins running away, the wall before him having disappeared – ALL the walls have disappeared! There are no corners to turn around, no alleys to run down, there's nowhere to hide!

Just one wall! Ed thinks as he looks back over his shoulder, seeing Scar at his heels. Just one wall!

WHACK!

He finds that wall. Ed rubs his chin as he stares angrily at the bricking before him.

SCHINK!

But his focus is immediately shifted as a large butcher knife digs itself into the wall next to his head. Ed's blood runs cold, his skin tingling with goosebumps as he turns around and sees Barry the Chopper!
Barry pulls the knife out of the wall, lifting it high over his head as he maniacally laughs.

Ed lets his legs fall out from under himself, landing on the ground to avoid Barry's swinging slice, and Ed scrambles past him on hands and knees.

He can't see him, but Barry's voice echoes all around him: "Piggy, piggy! Where'd you go? You're not going to get very far without these!"

Suddenly Ed falls to the ground, again smacking his chin. "Wh-what?!" Ed panics as he looks at his right arm – somehow his shirt has disappeared, and Ed now sees that his automail arm is gone! "What?!" He looks at his left leg, his pant leg empty and limp, both of his shoes missing. "No! My limbs! Where'd they go?!"

He hears a muffled shouting coming from ahead of him, and Edward looks up and sees Winry there, she standing on a stool, her mouth gagged, her hands bound in chains and stuck on a meat hook above her head.

"Winry!" Ed says, starting to crawl, hobbling his way towards her. "Don't worry, Winry! I'm coming!"

But the closer he crawls, the further away she seems to get!

"I'm coming!" he reassures her. "I'm coming!" He gasps aloud again – a shadow is growing behind Winry – Barry the Chopper! He's getting closer! He's lifting his knife above his head!

"Winry look out!" Ed shouts!

SLICE!

Barry cuts right through Winry's waist, she evaporating like a puff of smoke, Barry disappearing much the same.

"WINRY!" Ed cries, reaching out his hand to her even though she's no longer there. And he stops, noticing something wrong with his hand. It's covered in blood. It wasn't covered in blood earlier… Or was it?

Ed looks down, realizing the entire floor is nothing BUT blood! It's everywhere! He's swimming in it!

He rises to his knees, wobbly leaning to one side, looking all around. "Where is this coming from?"

He hears a splurt! splurt! splurt! rhythmically plopping from his right side, and he looks at his automail port – coming from out of his empty socket are large shots of blood, squirting bright and red, coming out at every heartbeat, as if from an artery!

Ed uses his hand to cover the socket, trying vainly to keep his blood in. "No! Stop! You shouldn't be bleeding! Why am I bleeding?!"

The spurts of bright red immediately turn slick and black, and Ed pulls his hand back, seeing his hand now covered in oil. As the oil jumps from his body and onto the blood-covered floor, all of the red is overtaken by pitch black.

And large violet eyes open all around Edward, surrounding him on all sides. Ed falls back onto his behind, scared stiff by all the eyes that stare through him.
And then a cackling arises, a cruel, high-pitched laughter, like that of a demented child.

"Wrath?!!" Ed questions, he angrily adding, "Is that you?! Stop this!"

Springing forth like a frog is Wrath, the sharp-toothed child pinning Edward down by landing on top of his chest. Ed feels his lungs being crushed under Wrath's weight, the tiny Homunculus getting nose-to-nose with Ed, the child smiling a wide smile as he says with furious glee, "I'm gonna rip your head off and use it as my own!"

Ed rocks backwards, slipping his foot between him and Wrath, and he kicks Wrath off of his chest, the child flying off into the darkness, screaming as he lands who-knows-where in the black Abyss.

Ed sits up, propping himself up on his one good knee, raising his only fist, ready to fight, knowing that Wrath is going to come running at him again.

But instead of Wrath, he hears the crying of a baby.

"What?"

Suddenly, there is the crying of a thousand babies, surrounding him on all sides, just as the eyes – and arising out of the darkness are slimy, blobby little creatures – they look like babies, but they are not.

They're those things that are inside the Gate!

Ed shakes his arm, trying to get the creatures off, they raking at his skin, ripping at his flesh and clothing, Ed screaming as he feels as though his very bones are being set alight.

"BROTHER!"

Ed looks up with a gasp.

There is Al – little Al! not more that 10 years old – being sucked into the Gate, its doors wide open, long, black, spindly arms and hands and fingers grasping at the boy's legs and arms and face, dragging him in!

"Al!" Ed shouts. "No!" With a sudden, newfound strength, Ed smacks his one good hand against the ground – and a blue energy bursts from his right shoulder, his human arm reforming! Ed stares straight at Al, they never breaking their gaze with one another, Ed shouting, "I will NOT lose you again!"

Ed claps his hands together and touches his knee, his human leg coming back! He leaps to his feet, running towards the Gate.

"Brother, hurry!" Little Alphonse cries, he growing dangerously closer to the open doors, towards the mass of violet eyes.

Ed dashes up and grabs Al by his hands, pulling back against the Darkness that pulls him in. "Let him go!" Ed yanks his brother out, swinging him around, and flinging Al far from the door, Al landing roughly on the ground with a tumble.

But now Ed is being swooped up the spindly black hands!

Al looks up and sees this, reaching his hand out as he calls, "Brother!"

Ed fights. He struggles against the Gate's grasp – but it pulls him backwards off his feet,
swallowing him whole.

"BROTHER!"

Al's voice echoes… And then it is lost as the heavy doors close with a resounding BANG!

Ed's eyes snap open. He is laying on the floor. His automail is where it always was. He sits up, rubbing his head. "…What the hell just happened? Huh?!!"

Standing before him is a large looking glass, the intricate patterning around its edges looking like something out of a fairy tale.

Ed gently rises to his feet, and slowly, he approaches the mirror, fearful of what he might see.

The edge of a reflection begins to show, and Ed backs away, afraid. But as he slowly works up the nerve to move further and further into the mirror's gaze, he realizes that while it is not his reflection, it is nothing to fear either.

"…Al?"

Ed walks closer to the glass. There is Al – nowadays Al – tall, healthy, smiling.

Ed's eyes fill with a loneliness, his face growing long as he stares forlornly up at his brother.

Though Ed is sad, Al puts on a strong face, smiling back at his brother as if to say, 'It's all right.'

Ed sadly smiles, and lifts his hand, Al doing the same. And together they lay their hands against the glass, reflections of one another. They touch, and yet they do not, separated from one another by this thin, invisible, yet very real barrier.

The tears rise in Ed's eyes. Still Al smiles, calmly. Ed feels a bittersweet emotion fill him, wishing, just wishing this glass would break.

Just then, he thinks he sees someone. Ed looks over his shoulder for a moment – no one there. So he looks back into the mirror. Al is there. But who's that behind him?

Ed peers around his brother, and he sees standing there a man. He looks familiar, but who is he?

"…Hess?"

Yes, Hess, from the Thule Society! What's he doing here?

The man reaches for his holster, and slowly pulls out a gun, lifting the barrel towards Al!

Ed gasps, shouting, "Al! Al, run!"

BANG!

Al jolts forward while at the same time the glass shatters in a thousand directions, cutting across Ed's cheeks.

"AL!" Ed holds out his arms, catching his baby brother in them, Al's body falling limp as Ed desperately tries to keep him up, both of them collapsing to the floor. "Al! AL!" Al is face-down, and Ed turns him over, looking into Al's eyes as he starts to fade away, a large red stain growing across Al's belly, that same stupid smile on his paling lips. Ed cradles his little brother. "Al? Al?! Speak to me! Al!" Ed sobs, hugging his brother, laying his head upon his…
But then Ed realizes his head is just touching his hand. His hands are empty!

"Where’d he go?!" Ed frantically asks, looking around. "Al? Come back! Come back, Alphonse! COME BACK!"

Angrily, Ed lets out a scream of rage.

He then claps his hands and hits the ground where Al once lay. "GIVE HIM BACK!" Ed screams at the top of his lungs, continuing his vain clapping. "HE’S MY LITTLE BROTHER! HE’S ALL THAT I HAVE LEFT! GIVE HIM BACK!"

And then – the most sinister gurgling arises from behind Ed, a sound, like a beast, choking on slime and bile that bubbles in its own throat, the creature sounding in pain as it shudders a raspy breath.

He knows this sound… Why does he know this sound?

Ed slowly turns around – and his eyes widen, his pupils going pinpoint thin as he sees the monstrosity behind him: pale, bloodless skin; arms and legs jutting unnaturally out at odd angles and in all directions; a ribcage, split open wide, guts and organs beating and pulsing with a sickly, unstable beat, the innards glistening with bile and slime; and bright, magenta eyes shining, cutting through the darkness, glowing brighter and stronger than any fluorescent lamp. That same, pained, gurgling sound issues out from behind deformed teeth, the gaunt face staring lifelessly back at Edward – the gaunt face that of Al!

Ed screams, louder than any scream he’s ever screamed in his entire life.
Sophie sits up in her cell, hearing this. “Ed?!” she asks, worried, scooting herself across her cell, regardless of the pain. She tries to force open the trap-door at the bottom of her cell. “Ed?! Ed, are you all right?!”

Reistrom strolls down the corridor, his cloak customarily catching in the air that gently passes by his long legs, all the meanwhile being followed by Armbruster at his heels.

“Come on!” Armbruster pleads. “We never actually official placed bets on this!”

Reistrom tells him, “I said it would take you four days to take Belgium; it took you four days to take Belgium. You owe every man here a beer.”

“Come, ooonnn!!”

“And you still owe me four new hats.”

“Come oonnn!!”

Reistrom finally stops when he reaches the guard posted outside the cell door. “Well?” the commander questions.

The soldier slides open the view-slot, saying, “See for yourself.”

Both Reistrom and Armbruster look inside, Armbruster commenting,

“Phew! It smells like hell in there!”

Sitting off in the far corner off to the right is Ed, he propped up against the wall, leaning limply against it, his left arm slack, his hand unmoving. Ed’s eyes are wide open, he staring blankly at the wall across from him, his eyes empty…

The guard says, “I came to give him water and found that the previous cup I gave him was still full, sitting right where I left it. I’m not sure how long he’s been sitting like that.”

“Is he dead?” Armbruster questions.

“That, gentlemen,” Reistrom says as he smiles, “Is the look of a broken man. And wouldn’t you know it – three weeks, like clockwork.” He chuckles, “Who knew Elric would be so easy to break?”

“What do we do now, sir?” the guard asks.

“Leave him for now,” Reistrom tells him. “I have a telephone call to make.”

Reistrom turns on his heel, his cloak sweeping with his movements as he makes his way back towards his office, Ed none the wiser to the world surrounding him in this dank, dark, quiet little cell…

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:
Reviews:

A response to your review at https://www.fanfiction.net/r/10427212/  May 26

Not sure if I should be ashamed or proud that I have scarred you. Needless to say, the chapter had its intended effect. And thank you for the compliment! :D It lets me know my efforts have been worthwhile, and inspires me to keep up the writing. (We writers are like puppies - we need lots of pats on the head :D)

Be proud. The only other person who's ever been able to pull that off is Isayama Hajime, creator of Attack on Titan (*shivers*)

(Yes, yes we are. Especially me. I'm a very needy writer XD)
Author’s Comment: …I have no idea what my Author’s Comment should be. How do I even begin to explain? Let’s just say that Ed basically did Reistrom’s work for him. The poor boy has a list of issues three pages long (literally, I went through the series and wrote them all out), and every page I typed just made me more and more depressed for Ed, wanting to hug him, give him a shock blanket, a mug of hot cocoa, and a cookie!

ED!!! OH ED!!!

And Sophie! Holy sheeeit! I will string Reistrom up in town square for all to see so that we may beat him like a jackass piñata! I know I created the bastard, but that doesn’t mean that I like him nor excuse anything that he’s done! (….Is this how God feels about the Devil?).
…So…. Yeah… Remember all those posts/comments I made a long time ago, saying about all the terrible things I was going to put you guys through? *waves* Hiiiiiii~!

*~*~*~*~*~*~*
QUICK FACTS ABOUT THIS EPISODE:

- The Nazis want Ed to build weapons for them. He refuses.
- Reistrom intends to break Ed until he complies. Reistrom orders that Ed be given no food, not allowed to sleep, and is only given water every three days. This strains Ed’s health, both physical and mental.
- Brace yourselves – Reistrom rapes Sophie, and for that, among other things he shall rot in Hell. When Ed finds out, he goes ballistic, vowing to kill Reistrom.
- As an attempt to keep Ed awake, the Nazis move him to a cell in which an incredibly bright light has been installed. Ed simply breaks the light. As punishment, Sophie is moved far down the hall from him so they can’t talk to one another.
- Sophie, though originally very defiant, has thoroughly had fear instilled in her by Reistrom. He intends to make her his pet. She simply wants to survive, for both her sake and Ed’s.
- Ed was banking on Roy and Al coming to the rescue. They have not shown up.
- Isolated from the outside world and his health declining, every fear and trauma Ed’s ever suffered surfaces, and he begins having hallucinations and war flashbacks
- After three weeks of no food and no sleep, Ed cracks, sitting catatonic in his cell. This pleases Reistrom.
Isolation

Chapter Summary

DISCLAIMER: The views expressed in this chapter are not the views of the author but of the character. (As such, please do not pelt me with tomatoes. I WILL however help you guys to throw tomatoes and/or rocks at Reistrom. Because fuck that guy).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fullmetal After opening [WITH LYRICS] 鋼の錬金術師 見えない世界 ポルノグラフィティ from Castiel Winchester on Vimeo.
It is nighttime. Or so Sophie thinks. She really can’t tell since there are no windows to tell her whether or not there is sunlight or moonlight in the sky. Her only indication as to the time is when the guards slide her evening meal under the door – and that has already happened, about an hour or two ago.

BANG!

Oh. But of course there always is the strange banging from down the hall. Sophie just barely heard Commander Reistrom describe it to Ed before they moved her to a different cell. It goes off every thirty seconds, hitting the door to make noise to keep Ed awake.

If I’d thought about it, Sophie thinks to herself, I’d have used THAT to figure out what time it is. Every other bang is a minute, right?… She sighs to herself, not sure what good it is knowing the time… But there is NOTHING else to do here.

Nothing to do but sit. Sit and wait. Wait for a rescue that may never come.

Ed told her to be patient. He said that they’d be here no more than three days. That was twelve days ago…

Twelve days. Twelve days now her leg has been aching with pain. Twelve days of sitting, wondering, waiting in this dank, cold, dirty little cell.

Suddenly from across the hall there comes a bloodcurdling scream! Sophie sits up straight, recognizing the voice.

“Ed?!” she asks, worried, scooting herself across her cell, regardless of the pain. She tries to force open the trap-door at the bottom of her cell. “Ed?! Ed, are you all right?!”

She pushes and pushes, the door not budging. She tries to pry her nails into the little crevice where door meets door, but to no avail.

“Ed, can you hear me?!” she shouts, putting her mouth close to the trap door, hoping her voice will carry through. “What’s wrong? What are they doing to you?!”

But still no answer from Edward.

She pushes again, trying so hard, hoping the little door will pop open so that she can look out and see what’s going on. But no matter how hard she strains her muscles, the door stays right where it
Sophie stops her pushing for a moment, and instead sits there listening. ...It’s quiet. There is nothing but silence outside. Ed has not made a peep since. Is he okay?

BANG! the little machine sounds its noise.

...But still, no reaction from Ed... And it doesn’t sound like there’s anyone else out there... What caused him to scream then?

She wants to know. Sophie wants to know. She wants to get out there and help.

But there is nothing she can do. Nothing more than sit here...

...Is it morning yet? It must be, since Sophie just woke up. But even then, she doesn’t really feel like she slept at all as all night long she was tossing and turning, worried for Edward. Why did he scream the way he did? ...Have they killed him? What if they used the bang of the machine to cover the bang of a gunshot?

Sophie rolls onto her side, ignoring the pain in her bad leg as she curls her good leg close to herself. They wouldn’t do that – they wouldn’t kill Ed. He’s important to them... Why is he so important to them? Yeah, she heard the officers say that they wanted Ed to build weapons for them – but there are plenty of scientists to do that.

What specifically about Edward is it that the Nazis want him so bad?

She wishes she could have heard the whole conversation between Ed and those men who showed up all those days ago. For the most part, everything was covered in their own echoes bouncing off the stone – and by the time the sound made its way across the hall, it was already distorted. Still, Sophie was able to hear a few things. She knows for one that they’re not feeding Edward.

At least they’re giving him water, she sighs. He’s right. The Nazis want to keep him alive, don’t they? You can survive without food, but you won’t last long without water...

Sophie brings her leg a little closer to herself, rubbing it up and down as she shivers. The floor is so cold. She almost forgot how cold it was. Sitting in the exact same spot for a long time, her body had warmed up the concrete, and it didn’t feel so bad. Having now moved, even just slightly, she’s on a new patch of concrete, it just as icy as when they first set her in here.

One good thing about the cold though – smell doesn’t travel as badly as it does in a hot environment. Still, that pile of hay in the corner... ugh. Sophie wishes the guards would get rid of it, change it out, give her some new hay or something... What did people do before toilets? she wonders. No wonder life expectancy used to be so short in the olden days – everyone was mucking around in their own filth...

BANG! the little machine sounds its noise, and Sophie jumps, startled. She’d think she’d be used to it by now, what with it going off all the time. But everything in this place has made her jumpy – the slightest little sound, be it something far off like the opening of a door or the turning of a lock, to the sounds of boots growing closer and closer, she worried as to who it might be and what they might do should they come to her cell.

There only ever seems to be two different people who come to her cell – in the evenings, it’s the guard bringing her her meal and water. At least all he does is slide the meal through the trap door
and then leave. The other person who comes to her cell always comes inside – Commander Reistrom. He always sits in the chair in the corner, just sits there staring at her, the way zoo patrons would stare at a monkey in a cage.

She wishes he wouldn’t. She wishes he’d just go away and leave her alone. *Doesn’t he have more important things to do than bother me?*

… If only she’d been able to get back to the cellblock after she had stolen the keys… If only she could have gotten to Ed’s door and unlocked it. Then they both could have fled, together – and neither of them would have had to worry about Reistrom. They’d be free. But now they’re stuck here…

…Ed told her to wait. To be patient. To wait for three days. Three days for what? What was going to come in three days? Sophie figured that Ed must have had a trick up his sleeve, some plan to get them out of here. But what was that plan? …Well, Al’s not here. He’s on the outside still. Maybe THAT was the plan – that in three days time, Al would show up and break them out.

But could Al really stand up to all of these soldiers by himself? …Maybe he was going to get help from their friend Mustang who they were talking to over the radio… *I wonder what this Mustang fellow is like, Sophie thinks. Is he nice? …Well clearly he cares about Ed and Al if he contacted them about that boat leaving…*

Sophie again sighs to herself. What on earth possessed her to stay behind? Did SHE really think she could fight off a bunch of soldiers? Why didn’t she just run with Ed and Al? Obviously they were able to outrun the Nazis – Ed was ON the boat when Reistrom took her to the docks. If Sophie had just run out of the house with Ed and Al… all three of them would have been on the boat… And the Nazis would have no idea where they were!

She sighs again… Too brave for her own good… Her bravery had nearly gotten her killed once before already, back home out in the country – after Aleks had been killed, Sophie was near ready to fistfight with the man who killed him. If Ed hadn’t been there to save her…

*Oh, Ed…* Sophie’s face grows long. …*If I hadn’t tried to save you, then you wouldn’t have had to save me, and neither of us would be here right now…*

*It must be noon now – again, Sophie is only guessing as to the time – but she has designated this time as noon, for consistently and without fail every day at this time, the door to her cell opens – and in walks Reistrom, here for his daily visit.*

*Why does he always come here? Is it that he gets bored? Is there really nothing else for him to do than to always come here and bother her on a daily basis? – Of course Sophie says none of this out loud. She’s learned that a smart mouth results in a smarting cheek…*

*Reistrom closes the door with his free hand, for his other hand carries something – a folded blanket with a small pillow on top. Sophie instinctively tilts her head with a furrowed brow, both a little confused and intrigued.*

*Reistrom lifts the objects with a smile – though not a genuine smile; not the kind of smile that one gives when truly happy, but the sort of smile one gives when simply trying to be polite, lips slightly lopsided.*

“I brought you a present,” he says to her. “Yesterday when I was in here, you looked like you were
shivering. Perhaps you wouldn’t be so cold if you bothered to wear stockings like a proper lady. It’s indecent the way you leave your legs uncovered.”

He gently tosses the pillow and blanket onto the ground next to her, the soft padding giving a little poof of air as it hits the concrete.

Sophie looks down at the bedding, “Uh… Thank you.”

Reistrom lowers his chin as he raises his eyebrows, giving her a look as a teacher trying to correct a pupil.

“Oh,” Sophie says a little nervously, “Um, thank you, sir.”

Reistrom smiles. And then he makes his way to his chair, taking a seat, moving his cloak to the side so as to not sit on it. “I hope you appreciate the things I’m doing for you,” he says to her. “Most prisoners don’t get the luxury of something as simple as pillows and blankets. Of course then again, most prisoners aren’t quite so lovely.”

Sophie is looking down at the floor, knowing not to make eye contact with him, for sometimes that will set him off, without warning. It’s a little hard to predict what mood he’s in on any given day. Just best not to chance it…

His mood, already, sounds as if it’s turned a bit sour, “I just gave you a compliment. The least you could do is acknowledge it.”

Sophie forces a smile.

“That’s better. Clearly they don’t teach manners in Amsterdam. Don’t worry – stay with me long enough and I’ll have you acting like a proper German in no time.”

“Um,” Sophie manages to utter some sound, and, against her better judgment, she asks, “Commander Reistrom, sir… I was wondering… is Edward all right?”

He frowns but he does not move from where he sits.

Sophie continues looking down at the ground, “It’s just… I heard him scream last night… I thought… maybe there was something wrong…”

Reistrom shrugs. “Well it wasn’t me,” he tells her. “And as far as I know, none of my soldiers were responsible for it. We haven’t really checked on him for quite a while now – and I don’t plan to for another five days or so. As of right now, I’m letting Elric stew in his own juices. By the end of the week, hopefully, he’ll come to see reason. He’ll fall in line and take his proper place in the Reich, just as the rest of the world should – and when he does that, then you’ll be set free.”

Reistrom smiles at her.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you Sophie? To be free again?”

Sophie does not really answer him – just continues staring down at the cold, hard, floor.

*BANG! the little machine sounds its noise. Sophie’s eyes slowly open, her cheek warm as it’s buried in the soft pillow. She’s surprised she actually slept so well, even with that ghastly machine making noise across the hall. Just the addition of this simple pillow and a long, warm blanket has
been enough to bring her some much needed comfort in this hellhole.

She rolls over onto her back as she takes in a deep breath, bringing herself awake, she staring at the grey ceiling above her head… Normally when she wakes up, Sophie would be greeted by the orange morning sunshine streaming in through her window, the ceiling above her bed painted a warm, lovely gold.

But here there is only grey…

*What about the house? Sophie wonders. Is it still there? I know the bombing was far away from the city center, but what if after we left the bombing moved closer? Is the house still there? Did it get hit?*

Sophie has to stop the emotions that try to crawl their way out of her. She doesn’t want to think about it – she doesn’t want to envision the entire neighborhood on fire, the buildings crumbled, the trees in the park ripped from the soil, their branches bare, the rivers and streams polluted… At least the ducks who live there have wings – they can fly away. Far, far away from all of this… Find someplace new to live… without a care in the world…

...Why didn’t Ed just come up with an escape plan? …That’s not like Edward at all. Usually he’s the FIRST to run headlong into danger…Why did he think it best to wait? She wants to sigh, but she’s too tired. She’s sighed so many times she thinks perhaps she’s run out of sighs to sigh.

*Of course, if I HAD just waited like he told me to… I wouldn’t have a broken leg right now…*

She looks down in the general direction of her right leg, the area just above her kneecap still aching with a dull numbness, it feeling slightly less pained as the warmth of the blanket really seems to be helping…

*But if ED was the one who broke out! she thinks, slightly angry, At least he knows how to fight! If the soldiers had grabbed him, he could have fought them off.*

...Well… I guess no one can fight bullets…

Attempting escape is useless, no matter what… What about when Al comes, IF he comes? Can he fight off bullets? Will he and whoever’s helping him have guns? Will they be able to take on the soldiers? …What if he gets shot?

Sophie frowns, covering her mouth, again trying to fight off all emotion…

*What if he’s been shot already? What if that’s why we’re still in here? Because…*

She closes her eyes tightly, trying to put the thought out of her head.

*The locks on the door shift, and the cell door swings inward, signaling Reistrom’s daily visit, he giving his unnerving, unnatural smile as he enters, leaving the door open behind him.*

“She’re taking a field trip today,” he says to her.

Sophie clenches her fists, she unknowingly curling her shoulders inward a little. Though trapped, she feels somehow safer in this cell than being taken anywhere else in this prison – especially being taken anywhere by HIM.
Reistrom walks towards her, and more and more, Sophie curls her shoulders in towards her chest, her line of sight moving further back and back from the floor to her lap to finally her chest. As long as it means not looking at him.

He comes to her side and he bends down, slipping one arm under her knees and cradling his other arm around her back, and he lifts her up off the floor.

Sophie instinctively yelps, the pull on her knee as she’s lifted causing her pain, but she closes her eyes tightly, biting her lip to keep herself from crying out any more.

Reistrom raises his eyebrows, asking, “Did that hurt? Forgive me, I’ll try to be gentle.”

Sophie’s eyes pop open. Did he just apologize??

Reistrom straightens himself up as he holds Sophie closer to him, carrying her out of her cell and through the open cellblock door, they passing the soldiers who stand guard on either side.

Reistrom makes a left, passing the soldiers up, carrying Sophie down the next hall to the right.

She’s surprised that he can carry her so easily. While he’s tall, Reistrom is rather skinny. He doesn’t look muscular at all. And yet he carries her effortlessly.

She can feel his arms underneath her legs and back, his leather-gloved hands gently but firmly clasping onto her thigh and arm. He holds her so close that her head has nowhere to go but onto his chest, her cheek up against his uniform, his heartbeat strong, his chest warm, his cologne mellow and intoxicating.

Sophie clears her throat, turning her head forward so that she can see where they’re going down the hall.

They’ve taken another left, passing what Sophie knows to be the restroom. Reistrom continues walking, carrying her past it, and taking another left down a long hall, he walking for a while before finally coming to a rest in front of a large open entryway.

Sophie looks into the room and sees that this large area is completely covered in tile – there are short little walls, about half a man’s height, making large squares, each of those large squares divided into four smaller cubicles – and from the center of each foursquare is a long pipe, spigots aimed at each of the four different corners.

Sophie cocks her head to the side. “The showers?” she asks, perplexed.

(Of course,” Reistrom says to her as they enter the room. “Just because you’re living like a pig doesn’t mean you have to smell like one.”

He gently sets her down, left-side first, Sophie tentatively outstretching her left leg until she finds the floor. She leans up against the little half-wall directly beside her, Reistrom slowly removing his arms until she can stand on her own.

Sophie looks over the wall into the shower, this area just like everywhere else in this room, covered in tile, a small drain in the center of the floor. She looks hesitantly up the pipe to the spigot. …Why did Reistrom bring her here? Why is he being so nice? Clearly this is a trick of some sort…

“Go on,” Reistrom coaxes her, “Don’t be shy.”
Sophie hums a little disdainfully, reluctant. *Best not to look a gift horse in the mouth, I suppose... This might be her only opportunity to get clean.*

But… He’s still here…

Sophie’s eyes drift over from the shower to the entryway, Reistrom still standing there. Is he going to leave at all?

Sophie frowns. So this is his game, is it? This is the only reason he brought her here. He’s not going to leave.

Even though she’s tried hard to keep her emotions in check lest she set him off, Sophie openly furrows her brow, giving an angry frown as she starts to unbutton the top of her dress. There’s no way she’s going to be able to make him leave, but that doesn’t mean she has to be happy about his presence.

Her hands move further down from her collarbone down to the middle of her chest, she undoing her buttons one by one. But once past mid-chest, Sophie starts to have a little trouble, for she is still balancing her elbow over the top of the short wall. To move her arm off of it could mean falling over.

She’s looking down at her dress, concentrating on her movements – when Reistrom’s feet come into view. She looks up, realizing he’s right in front of her now.

Again he gives that unnerving smile. “Here. Let me help you.”

Sophie heaves a short breath through her nose, letting her hand fall at her side as if to say, *Help yourself.*

Reistrom lifts his hands to her chest, carefully unbuttoning her dress, the cloth opening up a little bit more and a little bit more the further and further down he goes. As he gets lower, he has to bend down a little to reach the buttons, and as he gets lower on her body, Reistrom looks up at her with a devious smile. Sophie turns her head away from him, again she heaving an annoyed breath. Reistrom chuckles through his nose.

He finishes unbuttoning her dress, and he stands back upright, now walking around her to her back, Sophie conscious of his movements, her eyes following him though she does not turn her head and though she cannot see him. He stops behind her, gently reaching his arms over her shoulders, his hands resting on the open seams of her clothes, he sliding her dress back over her shoulders and down her arms. She frees her right arm first, her left arm still leaning on top of the wall. And then Reistrom carefully bunches up the dress and moves it over the wall and off of her left arm.

She feels his fingers just barely brush her back as he begins to unhook her brassiere. One by one, he unsnaps each little hook, he doing so slowly as his eyes rove across the curve of her neck and soft shoulders. Once undone, he slides the straps of the bra off her shoulders and down the front of her arms, he moving in closer to her as he does so.

He drops the bra off to the side, it landing on her fallen dress, and then Reistrom moves his hands to her head, undoing the ribbon that holds up her ponytail, her hair tumbling down over her bare back and shoulders.

“I’ve got it from here, thanks,” she finally says to him, and Reistrom actually chuckles.

“Of course,” he says as he finally backs away, turning to pick up her clothing. He lays them over the wall as Sophie hobbles her way around the wall and into the shower, she ignoring him as he
moves through the room to get something, coming back to her.

He lifts what it is – a metal chair, a towel on the seat. “So you can sit while you wash.” He sets the chair in the middle of the shower and he removes the towel, laying it over the wall and picking up Sophie’s clothes, carrying them away as he exits.

Finally alone, Sophie hobbles over to the chair, trying to carefully sit down, but she still lands on the seat rather fast. *I’m glad the floor’s still dry,* she thinks. *That could have ended badly if I’d slipped…*

She puts her hands to the waistband of her underwear, having to wriggle them off as she’s sitting, and she slides them off her legs, taking special care around her injured knee, slipping off her shoes as well. She’s not sure where to put them all – on the wall, over the wall? No matter where she puts her undergarment, it feels embarrassing, knowing that at any minute *he’s* probably going to come back in… Over the wall it is then. Doesn’t matter, she supposes…

Sophie leans forward as best she can, trying not to put too much pressure on her leg, and she outstretches her hand to the metal handle and turns it. Out from the spigot comes cold water, like a winter’s rain pouring over her, and Sophie yelps and shivers, wishing she wasn’t stuck in this chair. At least then she could move out of the way of the stream. Slowly, the water begins to warm up – not a lot, but a little, coming to about room temperature, so still considerably warmer than it was when first turned on.

Sophie sits there momentarily, letting the water fall over her body, the liquid trickling down over her skin, across her scalp and through her hair, the sound of the sprinkling echoing through the empty tiled room. She never really appreciated just how a nice a shower actually is – not until she had to go so long without one. Even if the water is not warm, it is clean, it is fresh…

She spots a shadow out of the corner of her eye, and she looks over – as expected, it is Reistrom, standing in the doorway. Even though she knows it unwise to talk back, she’s unable to stop her voice in time: “Aren’t you going to leave?” she asks.

He responds very plainly, “Someone has to stand guard to keep the other soldiers out, don’t they? We don’t want all those lecherous men coming in while you’re bathing, now do we?”

Sophie stares at him while thinking, *Well, yeah – but you’re no better.* She, of course, keeps this to herself.

She turns her attention forwards, back to the shower. In front of her, screwed into the wall, is a little tray, a bar of soap sitting in it. She leans forward and picks it up.

~

After her shower, Sophie has turned the water off, and now she sits in the metal chair with her towel, drying herself off, Reistrom still standing in the doorway.

He picks something up off the floor – she didn’t notice it there earlier, but now Sophie sees him bringing it towards her. “I have a present for you,” he says to her as he holds out a thin box.

Sophie looks at it curiously, she covering herself with her towel as he approaches. She takes the box as he hands it to her, and she sets it on her lap.

“Go on,” he says a bit cheerfully, “Open it.”

Sophie takes the top off of the box and is surprised by what she finds – a new dress, it bright red
with ornate white lace trimming. “Wow,” she says as she lifts it up out of the box, looking it over – it has no buttons, it’s simply a slip-on, with a shiny satin belt that ties in the back to show off the waistline. “It’s pretty.”

He smiles, though not his normal false smile, but a little bit of sincerity peeking through: “Do you like it?”

“It’s nice,” she responds. “Thank you… sir,” she quickly tacks on. She sets the dress back in her lap as she utters, “So… I wear this while I wait for my dress to be cleaned?”

“Cleaned?” Reistrom queries. “Goodness no. I threw that thing out.”

Sophie turns on him, “You what?! Why would you do that?!”

“Oh come now,” he says to her, ignoring her anger, “Why would you want to hang onto ratty clothing like that? This dress is much nicer.”

She shouts at him, “But that was MY dress! You had no right to throw it out!”

“I got you a new one!” he angrily defends, “You could at least be grateful for it!”

“Grateful?! What do I have to be grateful for?”

Reistrom sneers at her. “I can’t believe you’re acting psychotic over a soiled, ugly old dress.”

“You’re the psychotic one!” But Sophie quickly claps her hands over her mouth, realizing what she’s said, fearful for what may come next.

Reistrom narrows his eyes at her, he shouting, “Fine – you don’t want it?” He rips the dress out of her lap and tosses the dress onto the shower floor, the cloth starting to soak up the beaded puddles of water left behind. He then roughly grabs Sophie by the arm, forcing her to stand, she balancing on her good leg until suddenly he’s swooping her up, carrying her over his shoulder, her towel just barely covering her.

She beats on his back. “Hey! Let me go! Put me down!” She wriggles, using her free hand to keep her towel wrapped over her back. “I said put me down!”

Reistrom marches his way through the empty corridors, ignoring Sophie’s shouting and pounding and wriggling. He approaches the cellblock door, and the two guards standing outside of it stare in stunned silence as they’re greeted by bare lady legs and a towel-clad behind.

“Open the door, you fools!” Reistrom barks at them, and one of the soldiers scrambles to comply, quickly unlocking the door and opening it for his commander, Reistrom sweeping past. Once through, the guard closes the door. And then he looks over at his buddy.

He curls his lips inwards, trying to stifle a laugh – but both end up giggling like immature school boys.

Reistrom enters Sophie’s still opened cell and he bends down and flops Sophie off of his shoulder, she landing roughly on the ground, still clinging to her towel to keep herself covered.

“You don’t want the dress I gave you?” he shouts, throwing up his hands, “Then you don’t get any dress at all!” And he storms out, slamming and locking the door behind him.

Sophie breathes short, heavy breaths, shivering, a little too stunned and worked up to feel her leg
throbbing at the moment – but as the silence grows, she starts to notice it more and more. Her hands clasp tightly to her towel, clenched in front of her bosom. Slowly, Sophie looks over to where her blanket is. And she picks it up and wraps it around herself, bringing it in tight around her shoulders. At least he didn’t take the blanket, too… She sits there, bundled in her blanket, trying to warm up as she silently starts to cry…

The night wears on, the shift stretching on for seemingly ever, made no better by the constant BANG of the machine down the hall. Why the commander ever put it there is a mystery. But the soldiers aren’t ones to question his methods.

One of the guards outside the cellblock stretches with a yawn. “Man, I’m bored. How long before our shift’s over?”

“Still another hour,” his companion tells him.

The first guard groans.

The other guard has a smile crawling up his cheeks. “I know a good way to pass the time.”

“How so?”

His companion still smiles, “There ain’t anyone else in there, right? I say we have a little fun.”

~

Sophie lies asleep in her cell, her blanket bundled all around her. Though her hair has dried, her pillow is still moist, having soaked up the water that was in her hair when she had laid down on it. That, plus her towel still around her under the blanket, makes for a rather warm, moist, uncomfortable sleep.

Sophie bolts upright at the sound of the locks moving. The door is opening, and already Sophie is scrambling backwards away from it.

The door opens inward, and in walk the two guards from outside the cellblock, they leaving the door ajar, the dim light from the hallway outside stretching into the darkened cell.

“Well, little missy’s got a blanket, does she?” One of them asks as they both approach her.

“Good,” the other says, “We can lay it out on the floor, then it won’t be so cold.”

Sophie continues backing up, her back coming in contact with the wall, she now shouting, “Please! Go away! Leave me alone!”

One of them puts a finger to his mouth, “Shhshhhhh! We don’t want anyone to hear now do we?”

The other adds, “We’ll be gentle…”

BANG!

It’s not the banging of the machine, but the sound of a gun! The man jolts forward, falling to his knees and landing flat on his face at Sophie’s feet, she screaming with fright.

The other guard instinctively puts his hand on his holster, turning around to face the assailant – but he gasps in surprise.
Commander Reistrom stands in the open doorway, the barrel of his pistol smoking.

The guard sputters, “C- Commander Reistrom! Why-”

BANG! The commander lets off another round, and that guard too takes a bullet, falling backwards and landing with a thud.

Sophie remains huddled against the wall, hands to mouth as she cries in fright, looking at the dead men who lay before her.

Reistrom holsters his gun while staring down, disgusted, “Filth…”

Running footsteps come to a stop as a third soldier halts in front of the open door. “Commander, sir! I heard gunshots! Is everything-?!?” And then he sees the dead soldiers laying on the floor, blood quietly oozing from their lifeless bodies.

The commander turns to him. “Dispose of these two immediately.”

The guard hesitates, still staring at the dead soldiers. And then quickly he salutes, “Yes, sir,” and he enters the cell, bending down and grabbing one of the fallen guards by his ankles, dragging him out, the body leaving a long, bloody streak across the floor.

Sophie, still against the wall, still with her mouth covered, holds in her sobs, aghast at what’s happened and just how quickly it’s all happened… The last time she saw someone get shot… Aleks…

Her attention is pulled away from the blood on the floor as Reistrom walks up to her. She looks up at him and realizes now that folded over his arm is the red dress, her shoes in his hand.

He throws the dress and shoes at her, and orders her, “Put it on.”

At first, Sophie is silent. But slowly she lays her blanket aside, her towel still wrapped about her body. She lifts up the dress and slips it over her head, slipping her arms through the long sleeves, and her head through the collar. Then she grabs the bottom hem and pulls the skirt down over her legs, slipping off the towel underneath at the same time.

Reistrom snatches the towel from her, and without a word, he sweeps out of the room, past a fourth soldier who comes in, giving a short salute before grabbing the other fallen guard by the hands, dragging the body out. As soon as he exits, the third guard from before closes the door to Sophie’s cell and locks it.

Sophie is left alone, staring at the bloodstains on the floor, they as red as the dress she now wears.

* * *

BANG! the little machine sounds down the hall.

Sophie is huddled in the corner furthest from the door. Having backed up against the wall last night, she was hesitant to move anywhere closer to the door since. She keeps her blanket wrapped around her, the little pocket of air around her body providing her with a comforting warmth.

She wishes there was something to do. There is nothing to do. Nothing to do but sit here and stare at the walls. The ceiling. …She doesn’t want to look at the floor anymore, for now there are streaks of blood leading out the door, the red already having turned a dingy brown.
The door starts to open and Sophie jumps – but she relaxes when she realizes it’s just Reistrom… and then she’s confounded herself by realizing It’s just Reistrom? At what point did she become comfortable with this?

Reistrom closes the door behind him, he looking rather tired strangely. And he stops for half a moment, looking down at the bloodstains on the floor, looking as though he forgot they were there. He scrunches his nose at them, saying, “We’ll have to get that cleaned up.”

He crosses the room to his chair, and as he sits down he says,

“Or maybe we’ll leave them there – use it to scare the next person we put in this cell.” He crosses his legs as he looks at Sophie. “You’re not going to be in here forever, you know. One of these days, we will let you out.”

Sophie does not answer, just stays where she is in her corner with her blanket bundled about her.

“What are you doing all the way over there?” he asks her. He holds out a hand, “Come. Come sit next to me.”

Reluctantly, Sophie begins pushing her way across the floor towards Reistrom, coming to a rest by his side.

“And why do you still have that blanket around you?” he asks. “It’s the middle of the day, not bedtime. Take it off.”

“Um,” she mutters timidly. “It’s cold in here.”

“It’s not that cold,” he rebukes. “Besides, I want to see your new dress. Take the blanket off.”

She does so, letting the blanket fall around her.

He smiles at her. “There, see? You look lovely in that dress. Much better than that nasty old thing you were wearing before. Didn’t Edward ever buy you nice dresses?”

Sophie still looks down at her lap. “…Well… no…”

“He must not have cared much for you, then,” Reistrom says. “Every woman deserves fine clothes. Without them she’s not much of a woman at all.”

Sophie says nothing, just sits there silently wringing her fingers for a little while. She tries to speak, but her voice catches in her throat. She clears it, and then quietly speaks up. “…Thank you… for saving me last night…”

Reistrom shrugs and then sighs. “You’re welcome, I suppose,” he says to her. “It’s your own fault for having been so foolish. If you had gotten dressed after your shower like I told you to, those men wouldn’t have seen you half-naked and wouldn’t have had lustful thoughts about you. Now I’m out two good soldiers no thanks to you.”

“…I’m sorry…”

“You should be. That’s what happens when you break the rules. People get hurt.”

Sophie inwardly sighs as she hangs her head. That’s what this place revolves around, isn’t it? Rules and pain…

Reistrom says, “You should be glad that I decided to give you that dress back at all after you
rejected it.”

Sophie again quietly speaks, this time remembering ahead of time to add the proper ending. “Thank you, sir…”

* 

It’s become so that Sophie can really only tells when it’s a new day based on Reistrom’s daily visits. And even though Sophie would rather he leave her alone, at the same time it’s kind of nice do something other than sit here and stare at the wall. At least she can hear a human voice as opposed to the banging of that god-awful little machine.

And strangely, as the days wear on, Reistrom seems as if he’s becoming… nicer? Today he’s brought with him a little tin of sweet biscuits, Sophie quietly and politely nibbling on one of the cookies. On the outside, she doesn’t want to look happy about it lest Reistrom think that she’s actually happy to have him around. But inwardly, she is rather thankful for just how sweet this little treat is.

“You know we have nice things like this in Berlin all the time,” Reistrom says as he sets the lid underneath its tin on his lap. “True,” he adds as he picks out a biscuit for himself, “It was difficult to find nice things like this during the Depression. But now that the Fuhrer has kicked out all the Jews, they’re not here to hoard all of the country’s money.” He takes a bite of his biscuit, and after swallowing adds, “Now decent hardworking folks can actually make some money to buy some decent food.”

Sophie has resumed her usually quiet stance of staring at her hands in her lap.

He notices that she’s finished her cookie. “Would you like another?”

“Oh. Thank you, sir,” she responds quietly, accepting his gift as he hands it to her.

She nibbles on it quietly for a moment. But then she stops halfway through, gently laying her hands back in her lap.

“…Commander Reistrom, sir…” she quietly speaks up.

He looks over at her.

“…I can understand the German government doing what they want with Germany,” she says. “… I mean, it’s their country… But… Why did you have to invade the Netherlands? And Denmark, and everywhere else? What did we ever do to you?”

He purses his lips at her. “You don’t have to sound so sad about it. You should be happy. Germany is being reunified.”

She looks up at him questioningly, “Reunified?”

“Of course,” he tells her. “A long time ago, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark – all of these countries were part of Germany. And then through war and strife and foreign influence, the country slowly began to break apart – brothers and sisters being separated from one another, borders being put in place by greedy princes and politicians and clergymen. They didn’t care about the folk – they only cared about how much land they owned.”

Sophie resumes nibbling on her cookie, not wanting to respond.
Reistrom continues, “But now slowly, piece by piece, we’re putting Germany back to the way it used to be – restoring the glory of the Fatherland, so that all people of German heritage have a place to call home. Our nation is becoming whole again.”

Sophie finishes her cookie with a sigh.

“How much good blood has been spilt?” Reistrom quietly asks. Sophie looks up at him and sees that he’s not even looking at her, but towards the wall, his eyes distant as if he’s looking far beyond even that. “How many of our Aryan brothers and sisters have been killed because they cannot see the light? It’s because they’re still being influenced by all of the bad forces in this world – Communists, Slavs, Jews. They sow the seeds of discord, throw a veil over the eyes of the people and tell them, ‘Look! There is your enemy!’ Blinded, a man takes up arms and kills his brother, while the real perpetrator laughs to himself. It’s just as it is in the old Norse tales.”

“Legends from long, long ago, from the lost land of Thule,” he tells her, “Detailing the lives of the gods. There was a god, Baldur, the most beautiful and holy of all the gods. But the trickster god, Loki, god of discord, was jealous of Baldur’s beauty. So he tricked the blind archer god Hoder into shooting and killing Baldur. And all the gods wept, for the most perfect being in all creation was no more.”

“Oh…” Sophie says quietly, “That is kind of sad, I guess.”

“Of course, it is sad,” Reistrom replies. “But it is a metaphor. The Aryan race of Thule was once beautiful and perfect and holy. And then along came evil and tore us apart. Now we all blindly shoot at one another for we cannot see.”

Though she’s not sure whether or not to believe his story, Sophie does really wish that the blind, senseless shooting would stop.

“That is the mission of the Reich,” Reistrom states. “We are restoring the natural order of things – returning everything back to its perfect, unstained beauty. When everything is in its proper place, the world shall move together in harmony. ‘It is worthwhile because ours is a great mission. The mission was not given to us by a worldly superior. But by the God who created our nation’.”

“…So… tell me,” Sophie chances asking, “…When do you have all the countries you want… when Germany is ‘whole’ again… What happens then?”

“As I said, hopefully the world will fall back into place.”
“…But what if it doesn’t?”

“You have to have faith – faith in the Fuhrer, faith in the Reich, faith in the Order. It may take a very long time, but everything will work out for the best.”

Everything will work out for the best. Sophie smiles to herself, knowing that she is smiling for a reason other than what he’s talking about. Just have faith...

“If you like,” Reistrom changes the subject slightly, “I can pass the time by telling you more of the Nordic tales.”

“Oh, sure,” Sophie agrees, “That’d be nice, sir.”

“Please, call me Johann.”

“…Yes, Johann.”

*

BANG! the machine sounds its little noise.

The guard makes his way down the hall, carrying the cup of water, being careful so as not to spill it.

When he comes to the prisoner’s door, he leans down and opens up the little trap door at the bottom, getting ready to slide the cup of water inside.

But as he does, he stops. “Huh?”

He looks inside. There’s still a cup of water there from the last delivery he made – and that was three days ago. The prisoner hasn’t touched the water since.

The guard grimaces. “The prisoner didn’t drink his water?”

He stands upright and slides open the view-slot, looking in. He peers through the darkness, trying to make out what he can see. Slumped in the corner is the prisoner, he unmoving.

“…I hope he didn’t die,” the guard says to himself. “And if he did, I hope the commander doesn’t blame ME for it…”

*

Reistrom strolls down the corridor, his cloak customarily catching in the air that gently passes by his long legs, all the meanwhile being followed by Armbruster at his heels.

“Come on!” Armbruster pleads. “We never actually officially placed bets on this!”

Reistrom tells him, “I said it would take you four days to take Belgium; it took you four days to take Belgium. You owe every man here a beer.”

“Come, oonnn!!”

“And you still owe me four new hats.”

“Come oonnnn!!!”
Reistrom finally stops when he reaches the guard posted outside the cell door. “Well?” the commander questions.

The soldier slides open the view-slot, saying, “See for yourself.”

Both Reistrom and Armbruster look inside, Armbruster commenting, “Phew! It smells like hell in there!”

Sitting off in the far corner off to the right is Ed, he propped up against the wall, leaning limply against it, his left arm slack, his hand unmoving. Ed’s eyes are wide open, he staring blankly at the wall across from him, his eyes empty…

The guard says, “I came to give him water and found that the previous cup I gave him was still full, sitting right where I left it. I’m not sure how long he’s been sitting like that.”

“Is he dead?” Armbruster questions.

“That, gentlemen,” Reistrom says as he smiles, “Is the look of a broken man. And wouldn’t you know it – three weeks, like clockwork.” He chuckles, “Who knew Elric would be so easy to break?”

“What do we do now, sir?” the guard asks.

“Leave him for now,” Reistrom tells him. “I have a telephone call to make.”

Reistrom turns on his heel, his cloak sweeping with his movements as he makes his way back towards his office, Armbruster following after him, “Hey! Wait for me!”

* *

Reistrom sits in his office, his phone to his ear as he waits for the operator to connect him.

“Hey!” Armbruster harshly whispers. He points to the bookshelf. “You’ve got mice… You want me to take care of it?”

“No, thank you,” Reistrom says, mostly ignoring him. “I’ll have someone spray for them later.”

Armbruster is already brandishing his crossbow from his side, “Nah, no problem, I got this…”

Reistrom sighs, ignoring his comrade further.

The phone on the other end picks up, and a snide little voice calls over the speaker, “Yes?”

“Lead Commander Himmler,” Reistrom chimes, rather proudly, “It’s been three weeks. Guess who’s cracked?”

Himmler hums, “Hmm, quite impressive.”

Reistrom covers his free ear so that he can hear the lead commander’s response – a little hard to hear as Armbruster is in the background throwing books off the shelf to chase a mouse.

Himmler says, “I should have expected such good work from you, Reistrom.”

“Thank you, sir,” Reistrom responds.

CRASH!
“What on earth was that?” Himmler asks.

Reistrom sighs, “Armbruster.”

“Oh.”

Himmler can hear Armbruster’s voice over the phone: “Look out, look out! There it goes!” FWIP! THOING!

“Don’t shoot that stupid thing off indoors!”

Himmler clears his throat, “Commander?”

Reistrom leans back in his chair, “While he’s cracked, he’s yet to really agree to anything.”

“Then why call me?” Himmler asks, annoyed. “Don’t bother me if you haven’t completed your mission.” Click! And the Lead Commander hangs up.

Reistrom holds the phone away from his head, narrowing his eyes angrily at the man no longer on the other end.

“Oh shit!” Armbruster is jumping around, kicking his leg. “Get it off!”

Reistrom slams the phone down, standing up, and he marches over to where Armbruster is, leans down and yanks the mouse up by its tail, crossing over to the window where he flings the poor beast out.


Reistrom points at the door, “Get the hell out of my office!”

* 

Sophie folds up her blanket, setting it off to the side. She knows Johann doesn’t like her all wrapped up when it’s not bedtime.

And did she sleep late, she wonders – for the door is already opening. It’s not noon yet. Or is it?

Reistrom strolls in as per usual, taking his seat in the corner. He lifts one long leg over the other, resting it on his knee. He smiles at her. “And how are we today?”

Sophie sheepishly responds, “I’m fine, thank you, sir.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he says. “I’m a little tired myself, though,” he adds. “It’s hard being an officer, you know. There are so many responsibilities; so many duties to take care of.”

Sophie responds quietly, “Um. Well, I’ve never really known any military people, so I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“Yes, it is quite hard for civilians to understand the military life,” he says to her. “They take for granted the freedom they’re given – freedom only made possible by the soldiers who defend them
from foreign threats. In the military, you must do what you’re told when you’re told, whether you want to or not.”

Sophie inwardly sighs, ever looking at her hands in her lap.

“You understand that’s why I treat you the way I do, don’t you?” he questions. “This is a military base, after all. Whether you want to or not, orders must be followed. Why, I was only following orders when I captured you.”

She cautiously looks up at him. “…Whose orders?”

“The military’s, of course,” he tells her. “They ordered me to capture Elric. And in order to capture him, I had to capture you. If he hadn’t run away, like a coward, I wouldn’t have needed to bother you at all. Don’t you see, Sophie? If it weren’t for Edward, you’d be free right now. You’d be with your family.”

Sophie’s eyes fall back to the floor, she wondering where her family is now – her brother, her grandmother, her uncle… Are they safe?

Reistrom breaks the silence, “If it had been up to me, I’d have freed you from this place a long time ago.”

“…Really?” Sophie asks.

“Do you think I enjoy seeing you this way? – filthied, captive, surrounded by these gross, unruly soldiers? Sleeping on the cold hard ground? I’d rather a beautiful woman like you be lying on a bed of satin; wearing fine dresses; dining on rich foods; surrounded by the right kind of people.”

Again her eyes fall to her lap.

“But I’m stuck in the system just as much as you are,” Reistrom sighs, sounding a little defeated. “I have my orders, and orders are ‘The girl does not go free until Elric agrees to work for us’.”

“…When you say, ‘work for you,’ …” Sophie slowly questions, her eyes once more cautiously rising to meet his, “…What do you mean by that? Like, building weapons and things?”

Reistrom shrugs. “I’m not entirely sure what the Lead Commander’s plans for Edward are. But if that is the case, you should be glad. If Elric had no talent whatsoever, the Lead Commander would have disposed of him already.”

Sophie’s lips tighten in a mild panic, worried at even the thought of it.

Reistrom says boldly yet rather boredly, “You’re lucky I stepped in and said something on his behalf.”

Sophie’s demeanor softens, “…You did that?”

He gives a sly smile. “I may be bound by honor to follow orders – but I have my ways around the system. For example, I’m the one who is supposed to convince Edward to work for us. But let’s be honest here – Edward is so stubborn. Anything that comes out of my mouth, he is automatically going to assume it is a lie. I couldn’t convince him even if I wanted to. You, on the other hand…”

She holds a hand to her chest, “Me?”

“He listens to you,” Reistrom says. “He trusts you. I trust you, Sophie. Maybe, just maybe, he’ll
listen to you. Do you think you can convince him?”

Hand still to chest, Sophie slowly closes her hand, clasping her fingers tight. “Well... I don’t know...”

“Please,” Reistrom asks of her, “Try to get through to him. Make him see the light. Make him understand that your safety is more important than his stubbornness.”

The guard waits patiently in the hall, the cell door behind him just slightly opened, the other cell door down and across the hall wide open – inside the darkened cell, a fellow guard stands on a footstool, currently putting in a new long light bulb into the fluorescent lamp, this bulb much softer than its harsh predecessor.

The guard in the hall hears the door behind him open all the way, and he turns around to see Commander Reistrom helping the lady prisoner walk through the door. The guard reaches over and picks up what’s leaning against the wall – a set of crutches – and he holds them out, both he and the commander helping Sophie to get on them and gain her balance.

The other guard exits the newly-lit cell with his footstool in hand, and he stands off to the side, awaiting further orders.

As Sophie approaches the open doorway, she looks inside – there is Ed, slumped limply in the corner, unmoving. Quickly, she begins hobbling towards him, concerned.

Reistrom nods at the guard. “Go ahead and close the door. Let’s give them some privacy.”

The guard does as ordered, turning the lock as well for good measure.

Reistrom lifts his hand to the view-slot and just very gently cracks it open, just the tiniest bit, so that he can listen in.

“Ed?” Sophie asks as she carefully slides down her crutches and onto the floor, being careful to avoid the broken glass that litters the area.

She watches him for a little while – his eyes are empty, distant. It’s like she’s not even there at all.

She tries once more, “Ed? Speak to me.” She puts a hand on his shoulder, shaking him, and suddenly Ed pops awake with fright, grabbing her by the arm, Sophie yelping in surprise, each spooking the other.

Ed stares at her. Just stares at her and stares at her. “…Sophie?”

“It’s me, Ed,” she reassures. “It’s me.”

Ed’s hand drifts up her arm, he gently squeezing it, making sure she’s real. His breath trembles as his parched lips break into a smile. “Sophie!” he hugs her, “I missed you!”

She tightly hugs him back, both of them starting to cry a little. “I missed you, too!”

He hugs her and hugs her, clasping her shoulders. But as he holds her, he notices something. Gently he moves back, looking her up and down, her long hair undone, falling over her shoulders. And not just that – “Hey,” Ed says, “Your dress is different.”

“Oh.” Sophie looks down at her red dress. “Yes. Johann-- -!-!” she quickly covers her mouth.
Ed raises an eyebrow.

Sophie slowly puts her hand down, starting again. “…I mean… Commander Reistrom gave it to me…”

“ ‘Johann’?” Ed asks. “What, is he your friend now?”

“No,” Sophie shortly waves her hands. “It’s just that, it’s weird calling people by their last names, is all.”

“Why did he buy you a dress?” Ed questions.

Sophie looks down and away, “The old one was dirty.”

“It wouldn’t have been,” Ed says, “If he had just released you like I told him to.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Sophie tells him. “Commander Reistrom has agreed to let me go.”

Ed is surprised, his face saying ‘Really?’

Sophie continues, “But you have to agree to work for the Germans.”

Ed crosses his arms, looking away. “Of course. I should have expected this.”

“Expected what?”

“He’s not man enough to come in here and tell me that himself, so he sends you to do his dirty work.”

“It’s not dirty work, Ed. He’s serious. He says that I’ll be free to go as soon as you meet his conditions.”

He looks back at Sophie, “He’s lying. He’s only telling you that so that you’ll try to convince me. Well I ain’t buying it.”

“Ed, can’t you listen to reason?”

“Reason? You think the words that come out of his mouth are reason?”

“Not everything he says is a lie. He makes a good point sometimes.”

“Oh. Really? Sophie, why are you defending this guy? He’s the whole reason you’re in here in the first place,” Ed points out.

Sophie frowns, “I only ended up in here because I stayed behind to defend you.”

“Yeah – from HIM.”

“Well maybe when I moved in with you you could have told me how dangerous it was going to be living with you.”

“Hey, I warned you when you first met us.”

“You did no such thing.”

“We’d just burnt down a prison camp and were looking for a BOMB – what did you THINK you were getting into? HELL! We had JUST beaten up a bunch of Gestapo officers! Did you really
think we’d get off free and clear after something like that?"

Sophie now has crossed her arms and is looking away. Both of them sit there in angry silence for a moment.

“…Besides,” Ed continues, “…You had your chance to leave when Matthijs came home. You could have left then.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about when Al and I got a place of our own. I practically had to beg you to come live with us. If you really wanted to be there, you’d have come without me asking at all.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I’m saying that on a subconscious level you knew how dangerous it was to be near us and you wanted to bail. You wanted to go home to the countryside, back to an empty house and Aleks’s grave.”

“Hey! Don’t make this about him!”

“And why not? That’s all you ever seem to think about. ‘Aleks used to do this,’ ‘Aleks used to do that,’ ‘This is what Aleks would have wanted me to do.’ I never even met the guy and yet I can’t seem to get away from him.”

“Forgive me for holding onto the memory of someone who was important to me. Like you don’t do that? Like there’s never been anyone in your life who you’ve loved and lost?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then why bring it up?”

“You brought it up.”

“YOU brought it up.”

“It doesn’t matter who brought it up, just stop talking about it.”

They return to their angry silence, one looking at the floor, the other looking at the wall.

Ed’s eyes drift over to Sophie, he watching her quietly for a moment. She looks all right, he supposes – she looks healthy, she looks clean, she certainly smells cleaner than he… Ed can only guess that Reistrom has been keeping up his end of the bargain to not harm Sophie – to care for her…

“…So…” Ed starts slowly again, again looking back to the wall. “‘Johann’ says you’ll go free, huh?”

Sophie hums quietly, sadly. “Yes.”

“And all I have to do is build weapons for the Nazis. Well that’s just peachy…”

Sophie looks up at him and says, “He assures me it’s a clean facility. It’s a research lab, not a prison.”

“Pfft!”
“Ed.”

Ed finally looks her in the eye again. “All right, let’s say that this research lab really isn’t a prison, and that by my working there he ‘lets you go’. How free, really, are you going to be on the outside? For all we know, the Germans have already conquered the Netherlands.”

“They have.”

“There, see?” Ed says, throwing up a hand. “You’d be just as much of a slave out there as you are in here.”

“So, what,” Sophie fumes, “You’re telling me that I’m better off stuck in this hellhole?”

“It’s war out there!” Ed shouts, pointing at the wall as if the front lines were right there. “Sophie! – if you go home, you’ll be right in the line of fire!”

She irately asks, “So where am I supposed to go, exactly?”

“I don’t know.”

“You keep saying you want me to go free, but then you say stuff like this!”

“I don’t know what I want, all right! I want you to be safe, but I don’t know how to do that!” Ed cries, “I can’t protect you in here! I can’t protect you out there! I can’t protect you!” He wraps his arms around his legs, laying his forehead on his knees, hiding his face.

Sophie grows silent, watching Ed as his shoulders begin to tremble. She can’t stand to see him sad. Quietly, kindly, she reaches out her hand and touches him on the elbow. She says softly, trying to lift some of the weight off of his shoulders, “Ed… It’s not your job to protect me.”

“It was SUPPOSED to be my job!” he cries. “It would be my job if I were your husband!”

“But you’re not.”

“And why not?!” he fiercely looks up at her, but immediately his face falls sad again, his eyes quaking with tears. “Why didn’t you just say yes, Sophie?”

Her shoulders fall. “…I already told you, Ed. It’s complicated.”

“How complicated can it be? Either you love me or you don’t. If you loved me, you’d have said yes.”

“I do love you, Ed… And I don’t want to see you trapped in here anymore. Please. Please just do what they say.”

Ed wipes the tears from his eyes. “Oh yeah right,” he says sarcastically, “Just do what they say. Just give in and let them win.”

“It’s not about winning or losing, it’s about surviving. Ed – you’re the one who told me that even when things seem their bleakest, you’ve just got to keep moving. You’ve got to have faith that everything will work out for the best.”

Ed heaves a breath through his nose, silently staring at his feet for a while.

Sophie’s voice quietly arises again, “…I know things look hopeless right now, but… We’ve just got to do what we can for now… Make it through this war… And when it’s over… Then we’ll find
Ed’s eyes drift up to hers, he looking into her deep brown eyes as they look back into his.

She sadly smiles. “…I’ll wait for you, Ed.”

Ed is still silent. But finally, a tiny glimmer of something (hope?) starts to shine its way through.

She puts her hand over his and gives it a gentle squeeze. “…Promise you’ll come look for me, okay?”

Ed puts both of his hands around hers, squeezing back as he looks into her eyes. “I promise.”

* ~

Ed walks out through the open double doors, and he has to squint his eyes momentarily, unused to seeing sunshine anymore. Yards away, near the solid steel front gate, a military truck sits, soldiers posted there, waiting for him.

He looks off to the left, and he sees Sophie, being escorted to a car, she still on crutches. An officer, someone Ed does not recognize, opens the door for her, but shortly Reistrom is there taking over for him.

Sophie turns back for a moment, locking eyes with Edward. He solemnly nods at her. Sadly, Sophie turns back towards the open car door, and she slides her way inside, crutches and all. Reistrom closes the door, and then knocks the top of the vehicle as if to tell the driver, ‘Take off.’

The car rumbles to life, and it slowly pulls out, inching towards the gate as the guards slowly open it. Once through to the other side, the car begins to gently pick up speed, taking off, Ed no longer able to see it as the guards pull the large gate doors closed again.

His attention is pulled away from the doors as he realizes that Reistrom has walked up to him.

With a self-satisfied smile, Reistrom extends his hand, saying to Edward, “Welcome to the German Army, Mr. Elric.”

Ed inwardly grumbles as he looks down. Bitterly, reluctantly, Ed shakes the commander’s hand – but not without trying to crush it, as he’s shaking with his right.

Regardless, Reistrom’s smile grows even wider, knowing full well he’s under Ed’s skin.

As they release one another, Reistrom turns towards the soldiers standing by the truck. “Take him to Commander Geizsler’s base.”

The guards open the back of the truck, and quietly, Ed climbs in, taking a seat on the bench in the back. They close the doors, and Ed looks out through the little barred window, watching as the prison building starts to move away, the truck exiting through the gates – and slowly, the base starts to shrink farther and farther into the distance, finally being lost behind a veil of trees.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:
Reviews:

Ubermarine chapter 21  Dec 7, 2014

You have one brilliant antagonist, better than the original FMA one which had absolutely garbage motive and method of accomplishing her goals.

A response to your review at https://www.fanfiction.net /p/19427212/

Thank you for the review :). I have mixed feelings, though - on the one hand, I'm like, "Yes! The readers think my villain is brilliant and evil! I'm doing a good job!" On the other hand, I'm like, "Don't give him a compliment - you're only encouraging his bad behavior!" *Reinster chuckling sinisterly in the background*

You get back in your cage, young man!

But yes, thank you. An artist is always happy to hear their work is appreciated.

Heinrad Geissler

Age: 37
Gender: Male
Height: 130 cm
Nationality: Germany
Rank: Commander, CF-8
Alias: "Great Knight"
Affiliation: Teutonic Order of the Knights of the Black Sun
Bio: Happy, jolly, and a bit decrepit, but certainly not naive. A usually cheery disposition, but can easily give way when angered, becoming a fearsome force to behold. Easily distracted by women and food.
Chapter End Notes

My sister’s reaction to the character Reistrom: “STAB! YOU! IN! THE! DICK!”
MY reaction to the character Reistrom: “STAB! YOU! IN! THE! DICK!”

Just because I made the character doesn’t mean I like that asshole. Seriously – that whole last scene where he’s talking to Sophie about, “Oh! I’m just as much of a victim as you are!” YOU LIAR! DON’T LISTEN TO A WORD HE SAYS, SOPHIE! IT’S A TRAP! Ugh, and the feels! So many feels! My emotions! My emotions...

This story is going to be the death of me…
Ed gazes absently out the back window of the truck, the scenery slowly changing as the miles carry on. Tall piney woods give way to twisting creeks give way to sprawling farmland, give way to mossy glens give way to craggy, mountainous terrain.
Ed, sitting on the bench, rests his back against the wall of the truck, he feeling the rumbling of the road against his spine, the gravel crunching under the tires, dust being kicked up in their wake. He watches, still, the changing scenery – though mostly his eyes are on the blue sky, the white clouds drifting by. Somewhere, somewhere right now, Sophie is able to look upon this sky, too, for she is free, no longer caged up in a dank little cell. She’s free…

Up on a high road now, Ed is able to see down into the little valley below, a tiny village nestled within it, the roofs of the houses a burnt-orange. A large lake glistens at the village edge, tiny sailboats gliding silently across its sparkling surface.

The village disappears behind a grove of trees, and the truck begins to slow a little, finally coming to a stop. Ed can hear some men outside talking, and shortly thereafter, the truck begins to move forward again. As it does, Ed sees out the back window that there are gates being closed behind them. Apparently they’ve arrived.

Once more the truck slows to a halt, and he can hear the doors of the cab opening and then closing, the sounds of the soldiers’ boots carrying over the ground to the back of the truck. The back doors open, the soldiers looking in.

Without a word, without the soldiers having to force him as they have so many times before, Ed stoically rises from his place on the bench and walks to the edge, carefully hopping out.

He looks around, gaining his bearings – this place is similar yet different to Reistrom’s base. There are tall walls with barbed wire on their tops, square guard towers at every corner. There is a large building in the center, this one three stories high than just the one. Yet the whole place seems to be made of red brick as opposed to smooth, dull grey concrete. Even the ground is nicer looking, covered in grass as opposed to lifeless gravel.

Ed hears a muted, metallic clanging coming from somewhere not too far off, and he glances over and does a double-take. Roaming this open grass courtyard is a small herd of goats, about six or seven of them, all of them gathered by the shady base of a great, tall stone lookout tower that reaches a good story above the outer walls, the tower topped with an old medieval-fashioned spire. Ed tilts his head. *Goats? What for?*

“Elric!” a burly, and oddly jolly, voice calls, and Edward looks over. Approaching him is a large man with a scraggily beard, his uniform just like Reistrom’s – all black, with a long black cloak and broad, off-gold shoulder pads. This is the third person who Ed has seen in this outfit, the second being that pale officer who had accompanied Himmler. (Or was this the fourth? Ed didn’t get a good look at him, but that officer who had been near the car when Sophie was leaving – did he have a cape, too?)

The large officer walks up to Ed, proudly resting his fists on his hips as if to make himself appear even larger. “Commander Geizsler. I’m in charge of this base.”

Ed starts to hold out his hand to shake. But then he remembers. He’s one of theirs now. He’s part of the German military. Ed salutes the commander, trying as hard as he can not to show his displeasure. “Please to meet you… sir.”

Commander Geizsler raises an eyebrow. “What are you saluting with your left hand, for? Salute with your right.”

Ed inwardly sighs, doing as he’s told.

The commander now raises both eyebrows. “What’s that you’re wearing? A gauntlet?”
Ed is hesitant at first. *But I’m going to be here for a while*, he thinks to himself, *Might as well get it out of the way now.* “No, sir,” he responds aloud, “That’s my hand.”

“Your hand???” the commander asks, perplexed.

Ed unbuttons the cuff of his sleeve, both coat and shirt, pushing them back to expose his automail.

Commander Geizsler’s eyes bulge. “Amazing! And did you build that yourself?”

Ed pulls his sleeve back down, re-buttoning it around his wrist. “No, sir. A friend did.”

The commander gives a hearty laugh. “Well! I hope you’re as skilled as your friend when it comes to building things.”

Ed smiles a little. “I try to be,” he says, his mind drifting back off to Risembool, if only for a moment, for the commander is speaking once more.

“Glad to see you made it in one piece! Reistrom didn’t give you too much trouble, did he?”

Ed grimaces at the name, and he attempts to remain respectful, though his answer still comes out sarcastically, “Only a little…”

The commander gives yet another hearty laugh, plopping his heavy hand down onto Ed’s shoulder, Ed teetering momentarily under the sudden weight. “Hohoho! No need to be shy about it. That Reistrom – he’s a crazy one and we all know it.” He then leans in slightly, half cupping his mouth, hiding his words as if Reistrom were somewhere nearby. “But don’t tell him I said that.”

“Don’t worry,” Ed tells him in all seriousness, “I don’t plan to see that guy again for a million years.”

“Come!” Geizsler says, outstretching a hand towards the building, “Let me show you the facility!”

He starts to walk towards the front door, Ed having to walk quickly in order to keep up with this man’s long strides. A guard opens the door for them and they enter.

Ed looks around, the walls on the inside just as the walls on the outside – red brick. At least the lighting is fair – Ed can actually see where he’s going. It’s not dark here like it was at the other base. The ceilings are tall, giving this relatively narrow hallway a surprisingly spacious feel to it.

“You’ll find we have all the latest gadgets for you to work with,” Geizsler says to Ed. “Nothing but the best for our scientists!”

Yeah, Ed thinks crossly. *If you really want what’s best for them, you’d let us all go…* And then Ed ponders, “Excuse me, sir – but who are these scientists?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll meet them in a minute,” Geizsler says.

The commander opens up a door on the right side of the hall and he enters, and as Ed follows in after, he looks around – this room is visibly more impressive than the hall, taking up the whole three stories in its height, large wooden beams crossing the ceiling. There are windows way up high, allowing the sunlight to stream through, helping to light the already well-lit room. There is also a catwalk lining the high ceiling, a couple of guards patrolling the area, looking down below as vultures perched on high rocks.

There are men in white lab coats busy at work, some tinkering, others looking over blueprints. In
the center of this spacious room is a very large aircraft of some kind, it rather odd-looking, and clearly incomplete as there have yet to be wings attached to it.

Geizsler turns to Ed and says, “It’s a beauty, isn’t it? Not finished, but it’ll look great when it is.”

“It is impressive,” Ed admits.

“I hear you’re an engineer,” Geizsler says, “So this is the team you’ll be working with primarily.” He turns his attention towards the craft and he calls, “Gather ‘round, eggheads! Well, not all of you – only the head eggheads! Hoho!”

A few of the scientists working put down their tools and make their way towards the commander, a fellow with black hair and glasses remarking, “Sir, I really wish you wouldn’t call us that.”

As the scientists reach him, Geizsler gives the fellow a pat on the back, so much so that the skinny scientist nearly falls forward as the commander comments, “Ah don’t be so upset about it. Eggs are good for you! Lots-a protein! Builds muscle! Looks like you could use some.”

The man adjusts his glasses, quietly sighing with a grumble.

Commander Geizsler carries on, “All right, roll call! Gentlemen, meet your new lab partner. This here is Edward Elric. I expect you all to get along just fine.”

Ed gives a short wave (with his left hand to avoid having to talk about his automail right away). “Hey,” he greets casually.

They all give little hey’s and hi’s of their own, and then Geizsler begins introducing them to Ed one by one, starting first with the bespectacled scientist already nearest him – “This here is Van Leeuwen. He’s our engineer – builds all the machines.”

“Hello,” Van Leeuwen greets.

Geizsler moves to the next one, a rather short fellow with brown hair – “This is Vigne – he designs everything.”

Vigne says with a nod, “Bonjour.”

Geizsler gives a chuckle and says to Ed, “Don’t let that accent fool you – he ain’t French, he’s Belgian.”

Van Leeuwen says rather spitefully, “He’s French…”

Vigne turns on his fellow scientist, “I am a real Belgian – not a Dutch wannabe like you.”

Van Leeuwen looks about ready to deck the short man, “Why you!”

“Don’t start, you two!” Geizsler cuts them off before they can get any further, pushing the two men apart. He then moves on to the next scientist, a tall man (not as tall as the commander, though) with curly red hair. “This is Holgerson, our chemist. Doesn’t speak a word of German! But he seems to understand it pretty well – don’t you, Holgerson?”

The redhead man shyly responds, “Liksom…”

“Ha!” Geizsler laughs, pointing at him, “See what I mean?” he moves along to the last fellow, a guy about Ed’s height, and blonde as well. “And this one is Langelans.” And then Geizsler falls silent for a moment. “…You know, I’m not even sure what he does.”
Upset, Langelans says (through a very thick Danish accent), “Sir! I am very important to the team!”

Van Leeuwen tries to hide his laughs as Vigne says to the young man, “Oui. Those test tubes will not clean themselves after all.”

Langelans goes red in the face (whether from anger or from embarrassment, it’s hard to tell), “Don’t sound so belittling about it. It is very important to keep equipment sterile.”

Geizsler intercedes, “What did I just say? No fighting!” He then looks around, a little puzzled. “Now hang on, we’re missing one here-”

“No we’re not,” a voice calls from underneath the aircraft. “Just a moment.”

A man slides out from underneath the aircraft, he laying on a mechanic’s sliding board, and he sets aside a ratchet before sitting up. The portly man, aged, but not old, carefully stands up, wiping the oil from his hands and onto his coat. As he turns around to face the group, Ed can’t believe his eyes at who it is that is walking towards him.

The man says as he approaches, “Dr. Tim Marcoh. I’m the head physicist on the team. Pleased to meet you,” he greets, extending a hand.

Ed smiles, shaking his hand in return, “The pleasure’s all mine.”

“Great!” Geizsler, now standing next to Marcoh, says happily, “Now that you’re all acquainted, let’s get started. I’ve got a new plan for you all!”

A general groan of disdain sounds from the crowd.

“Heh, now don’t give me that tone!” the commander scolds. “You should be glad that I’m giving you new things to build! That’s what scientists like to do, isn’t it? Do science?”

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls something out, holding it out for them to see. Ed looks it over – it is a poorly drawn picture of a tank, scribbled on a crumpled napkin.

Commander Geizsler says proudly, “Thought of this little beauty while at the bar last night. You know what the biggest problem for a soldier is? You can’t get drunk – because the enemy could attack at any moment, you gotta be on your toes. So I thought, ‘What if you could get drunk, and still be able to go into battle?’” He thrusts the napkin further out at the crowd. “I present the automated tank! All by itself it runs across the field, blowing up enemies, while you sleep off the hangover inside, safe and secure.”

Ed tilts his head with a look of confusion, thinking, *Is this guy serious?*

Marcoh, calmly, yet a reserved air about him, says, “Commander Geizsler, sir – we’re already working on several projects as it is. We’ll never make any progress if you keep spreading us so thin.”

“Oh, please,” Geizsler rebuffs, “The workload’s not that bad. And besides – I just got you guys a new egghead to help you out.”

“There’s that word again…” Van Leeuwen mutters.

“The tank aside, Commander…” Ed asks, “What exactly are we working on, here?”

“The future, Elric!” Geizsler puts his arm around Ed’s shoulder, the commander looking off into
the distance as he holds out his free hand towards the craft. Ed is uncomfortable. “What you see here is the future of aerial combat – anti-gravity!”

“Anti-gravity?”

“Imagine it – being able to turn off gravity. Think of the possibilities!”

“Uh… What are the possibilities?”

“Why, you could fly a craft absolutely silently. There wouldn’t be the noise of propellers or jets. The enemy would never hear you coming!”

“That’s neat, I guess,” Ed responds.

“It’s better than neat – it’s magnificent! All we have to do now figure out how gravity properly works, and then we’ll be set.”

Ed is slightly perplexed. “We do know how gravity works. It’s one of the basic tenets of physics.”

“Ha!” Geizsler laughs sarcastically. “Newton! The man was an Illuminati Freemason! His work is garbage! And even worse is this Theory of Relativity that everybody’s talking about. Jewish nonsense!”

Ed is starting to feel vexed. “So,” he asks, attempting to hide the annoyance in his tone, “What, then, is the non-Jewish, non-Masonic way of looking at the world?”

“Ice Theory!” Geizsler proclaims.

“…Ice theory?” Ed asks flatly.

“Of course!” Geizsler responds pompously, not noticing Ed’s exasperated expression. “Nordic man has his origins in ice! And H₂O is the only compound that comes in all three forms of matter – it can be a solid; it can be a liquid; it’s scattered all throughout the air!”

Ed mutters, “Yeah, I’m pretty sure water’s not the only one…”

But Geizsler doesn’t even hear him as he’s yet to stop talking, “Ice and water penetrate the entire universe! Surely it plays a hand in the role of gravity!”

“That sounds absolutely--" Ed is about to say ‘ridiculous.’ But before he can finish his sentence, he notices Langelans frantically motioning his hands as if to say ‘Don’t say it!’ Ed instead finishes with, “…Interesting. I’ll take it into consideration.”

A soldier enters through the door, giving a salute to the commander. “Sir, you’re needed on the telephone.”

“Well, gentlemen,” Geizsler says, shoving the napkin into Marcoh’s hand. “I won’t keep you from your work. And Dr. Marcoh, I’m looking to you to fill Elric in on anything I’ve missed.”

Marcoh nods, “Of course, sir.”

Geizsler then looks at the scientists and loudly claps his hands twice, saying, “Back to work! Chop-chop!”

They all begin to move back to their stations, the commander finally following his soldier out of the workshop.
Ed’s not really sure what to make of this new commander.

Marcoh looks over at Ed and asks, “You said your name is Elric?”

Ed realizes the doctor is speaking to him, and he looks over to him. “Oh. Yes sir.”

Marcoh looks to the ceiling, a hand to his chin, “I feel like I’ve heard that name before, but I can’t remember where.”

Ed shrugs with a nervous smile. “Well, it’s not a very common name. There can’t be too many of us floating around. The only other person I know with the name is my brother.” A strange bit of hope suddenly flits through him. “Maybe you’ve seen him?”

“What’s his name?”

“Alphonse. About yea tall,” he holds his hand high above his head, “Kind of looks like me except with short hair?”

Marcoh shakes his head. “No, I can’t say that I’ve ever met him.”

Ed frowns a little. He is both happy and saddened by this fact – he wants to know where his brother is and if he is safe. But if Marcoh actually had met Al, that would have meant that Al had passed through this place, and that’s the last thing Ed wants.

Marcoh asks of Ed, “Well, where would you like to start?”

“Oh,” Ed looks up at the aircraft. “I guess you can explain this thing to me.”

Marcoh again nods, “I’ll give you the tour,” he says, starting to walk back to the craft, Ed following. “As Commander Geizsler said, we’re trying to develop new forms of aircraft.” He chuckles, “Anti-gravity being one of them, but I don’t think we’re getting anywhere with that. However, we have used the propeller-less idea as a jumping point.”

They arrive at a long table, blueprints spread out across them.

Marcoh continues, “What we’re mainly interested in is, is it possible to make an aircraft that can hover in one spot – much like a hot air balloon – but can rapidly take off in any direction when necessary?”

“Like jets on an air balloon?”

Again the older man chuckles, “Yes, something like that. It’s much more complicated than that, mind you.”

“Naturally.”

“If we can create a new propulsion system, one with variable outputs of energy, we could conceivably make something that can hover at different heights, be it low to the ground, or way, way up there.”

“It would have to be a pulsating of some kind,” Ed thinks aloud, “If it were a constant stream of air or energy, you’d just shoot straight up like a rocket.”

Marcoh nods. “Yes, we’ve thought about that. The problem is how to keep the ship at a constant height rather than bouncing up and down with every pulse.”
Ed turns from the blueprints and looks up at the hulking machine. “A change in wing design might help – if they were hinged to go down when the vessel goes up, but made to hold straight out and catch the wind as the vessel goes down – the added air pressure underneath could provide extra lift.”

“Oh, there are no wings on this aircraft,” Marcoh tells him.

“Say what?” Ed questions. “Then how will it glide forwards when you need it to?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out. The Lead Commander insists that all our designs be ‘futuristic,’ as it were – something completely out of this world.”

Ed stares at the ship with a bemused smile, *Like space aliens, you mean*, he thinks, his mind drifting to Sciezka. “Anyway…” Ed finally says, “If we’re talking strictly about hovering in one place without using a propeller – that sounds pretty hard to do. You’d have to have an airstream pointed at the ground – and that would blow everything away, meaning the enemy would know you’re there. Or if you’re using a burning fuel source of some kind, you’d probably burn everything, and then the enemy would really know that your there – I mean, unless that’s what you want to do is burn the town down, then by all means…”

“That’s why we’re trying to look into alternative fuel sources,” Marcoh tells him, “Something that will create a field of energy without burning – or better yet, make use of existing negative energy fields.”

“Negative energy?” Ed questions.

Marcoh explains: “It’s theorized that there is positive energy and negative energy – a push and pull to the universe. Positive energy pushes, and negative energy pulls. For every positive there is a negative. Generally speaking, it seems that mostly everything in the solar system radiates outwards – like the light and energy of the sun. By that logic, that means that gravity is an outside force pushing down on us, rather than pulling us towards the earth’s surface.”

“Oh,” Ed says, interested, “I’m following you so far.”

“So if there are objects that radiate outwards, perhaps there are objects that have a negative radiation, pulling things inward.”

“I see what you’re saying,” Ed confirms, “If you could find points where there are pulls, they could pull you up away from the earth.”

Marcoh nods happily, “That’s right.”

“Yeah, but how far out into the universe would you have to go to find one?” Ed asks. “If there was anything like that here on Earth, you think someone would have found it by now.”

“Points like that on Earth might already exist,” Marcoh suggests. “Just look at the Bermuda Triangle in the Caribbean. They say every ship or plane that goes in there goes missing. What if it’s because they get propelled off the surface of the earth, like from a great anti-gravity catapult?”

“Or they might get lost from bad navigation,” Ed quips.

“Electromagnetism is something else we’re looking into,” Marcoh tells him. “Bending the Earth’s magnetic field around an object perhaps, causing repulsion.”

“Like two magnets with their positive ends pushed together,” Ed says. “You’re talking about
changing the polarity of the Earth. Even if you could manage that on a small scale, do you have any idea what the effects of that could be?"

Marcoh looks down at the floor with a bit of a saddened hum. “Well, yes. But I’m afraid the Brass doesn’t really care about side effects so much as they do about positive results.”


Marcoh looks up at Ed. “…I know you probably don’t want to be here. Most of us don’t. But we’ve all been handed our cards. So now we must play them.”

Ed heaves a sigh. “…Yeah, I know.” Ed turns his attention back to the blueprints. And then after a moment, finally says, “…Where would you like me to get started?”

*

In seemingly no time at all, it has somehow become lunchtime, signaled as such by the ringing of a bell high up on the wall. Everyone in the lab is already hanging up their coats if clean, and tossing the dirty ones in a large nearby basket to be cleaned, throwing away gloves and washing hands before leaving for the mess hall.

Ed is reminded a little of the cafeteria at the university back in Frankfurt. This mess hall is much smaller, but it has a similar feel – maybe it’s just from all the, ahem, ‘eggheads’ sitting around.

There is a line of men, all of them carrying trays, standing in a single-file line, patiently awaiting their turn to receive some food, then moving down the line to exit and find a seat.

Ed picks up a tray and joins the line, a worker on the other side of the counter handing him a plate of food when he reaches that point. Ed looks down at the food – it is certainly less than stellar looking, but at least it’s edible (or so he hopes).

He exits the line, looking around the mess hall for an empty seat. He then spies Marcoh and the others. Even though he’s just spent the whole morning with them, Ed figures, Why not?

He walks up to them, and they all look at Ed as he asks, “Is it all right if I sit here?”

“I don’t see why not,” Marcoh responds with a smile. “Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” Ed replies as he takes a seat.

Marcoh comments with a half-hearted chuckle, “I know the food’s not much to look at – but you’ll get used to it.”

Ed’s face is tired, yet oddly happy, “Anything is pretty appetizing at this point. They’ve starved me for the past three weeks – and then when they finally fed me this morning, all they gave me was some bread and water.”

Everyone at the table looks slightly taken aback, Langelans commenting, “That is terrible.”

Holgersson speaks: “Hvorfor gjorde de det til deg?”

“…What?” Ed asks.

Langelans responds, “He asks why it is that the Nazis did that to you.”

Ed shovels a bit of food into his mouth, shrugging, trying to play it off casually, even though it’s a
serious matter. “What can I say? I’ve got enemies in high places. Apparently I pissed them off one too many times. What about you guys? How’ve they been treating you?”

The men all look at one another, a bit uncomfortable. Van Leeuwen speaks up, “Well – badly, but not that badly.”

Vigne interjects, “For starters, they came and they arrested every one of us – on no charges at all!”

Van Leeuwen says, “Well, not arrested exactly. More like, we were ‘asked’ – ‘politely’ – to work for the German government.”

“Feh!” Vigne responds with an upturned nose. “Asked at gunpoint.”

“Keep it down, all of you,” Marcoh says sternly. He then turns his attention to Edward. “Well, as far as I’ve heard, nobody here has received any ill treatment,” again he chuckles, “Except for the taste of the food.”

Vigne slides his food around with his fork, almost pouting, “Zero flavor. Germans have no sense of cuisine.”

Van Leeuwen raises his cup to his lips, his voice only being half shielded as he says, “About as much sense as the French.”

Vigne points his fork at him, “The Dutch are just cheap imitations of the Germans! That means your cuisine is LESS than zero!”

“Frog guzzler!”

“Fry eater!”

“Knock it off,” Marcoh again has to scold them. “It’s like working with children, I swear…”

Ed looks down at the glass that he’s been handed with his food, and he sighs with a grumble. “Milk. They don’t have juice? Or even water?”

Holgerson smiles, “Du liker ikke geitemelk?”

“Whhhat?” Ed again asks. “I don’t speak what you’re speaking.”

Langelans answers, “He is from Norway. He says, ‘You do not like the goat milk?’ ”

Ed lifts the glass, tilting it to look at the liquid against the light. “Is that what this is? Explains the goats outside.”

Marcoh nods. “Commander Geizsler believes that goat milk is healthier than cow’s milk – better calcium, higher in protein, things like that. I wouldn’t know, I’ve never run tests or anything on it. But it’s sweeter in taste in my opinion.”

Ed sets his glass down, pushing it away from him. “Yeah, that still doesn’t sound digestible. Somehow it sounds worse.”

“You should try it,” Marcoh insists. “I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

Ed frowns at his glass, wanting it about as badly as a shot at the doctor’s office. But then he says, “Aw what the heck. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, I suppose.” He lifts the glass of milk to his lips, hesitantly, and takes a slight sip of it, then makes a face like a baby being given castor oil.
“Well?” Marcoh asks.

Ed sets the glass back down. “Fatty, slick, and kinda tastes like grass.”

Marcoh chuckles, “It was worth a shot, I suppose.”

Ed then begins snickering, trying to stop himself from giggling like an idiot.

“What?” Marcoh asks. “What is it?”

Ed tries to remain quiet but ends up saying the end of the sentence rather loudly, “I’m just… trying to imagine these tough Nazis sitting outside milking goats! Like farm maids!”

Everyone at the table begins laughing.

* *

In the blink of an eye, just as fast as the first half of the day had passed, so too now the second half of the day has passed, the sunlight having disappeared from the high windows, leaving only a rich blackness outside.

The bell once more sounds on the wall, several people giving a yawn and a stretch, thankful for the end of shift.

“Huh,” Ed suddenly realizes aloud. “Commander Geizsler never showed me my room.” Ed looks over at some of the fellow scientists, most of whom whose names he’s yet to learn. “What’s the sleeping situation around here? Is it just like one big barrack or something?”

One of them shakes his head. “No, it’s actually pretty decent. Two beds to a room.”

“Yes,” one throws in, “So hope you don’t get someone who snores!”

They all laugh.

Ed scans the room, trying to see if he can find a guard, there only being the ones in the rafters. He goes to the door and looks out – and there’s one. “Hey,” Ed asks, “Uh, I’m new here. And the commander never told me where my bedroom was.”

The guard sounds exasperated, as if he’s had to give this speech a hundred times, “Bedrooms are not assigned. Just find a room with an empty bed and go to sleep.”

“Oh… Okay.” Ed sticks his head back into the lab, again looking around, feeling a little out of place and slightly apprehensive. He hasn’t had to share a room with anyone in years. And even then, the only person he’s ever usually shared a room with is Al…

But Al’s not here…

He catches sight of Marcoh, the doctor standing by the coat rack, pulling off his lab coat - and though he is a little hesitant at first, Ed finally approaches him. “Dr. Marcoh,” he says, sounding slightly ashamed, “I hate to be a bother again, but… I don’t have a room.”

Marcoh once more gives a chuckle. “Ah I knew this day would come. I’ve lucked out in having a room to myself since I got here, but I knew I’d have to share eventually.” He hangs up his coat and then motions a hand. “Come on, I’ll show you the way.”

Everyone is exiting the lab, the scientists all filling the halls, more handfuls of scientists all coming
out from different doors in the hall, adding to the crowd.

_Gosh,_ Ed thinks. _How many people have the Nazis forced to work for them? It didn’t seem like there were this many people in the lunch room this afternoon._ Maybe it’s because this hallway is much smaller, it only seems like there are more people…

After a while, people begin to peel off in different directions, most heading up a stairwell. Marcoh, instead, turns down a hall. “We’ll be taking the lift,” he tells Ed.

Marcoh opens up the little metal grating, pushing the gate to the side, and he and Ed enter. Marcoh closes the gate, and then pulls down on the lever next to him. Slowly the elevator rises, the floor disappearing, the ceiling above them becoming the next floor at their feet. And then Marcoh stops the elevator.

“It seems kind of silly, I know,” the doctor says as he reopens the gate. “Using the lift for only one floor. But my poor old my knees are shot. No good at climbing those awful stairs.”

Ed shrugs. “Well, age isn’t kind to most people.”

Marcoh gives that chuckle of his (Ed’s beginning to wonder if it’s a nervous habit), “You’re telling me. Come on, it’s this way.”

The hall here is less crowded as more and more people begin to retreat to their rooms. Marcoh opens the door to one, flipping a switch on the inside of the door, a simple little lamp on a desk at the end of the room coming to life. He moves aside, allowing Ed to come inside.

Ed observes the room – it’s small, only about enough walking space for one person at a time to walk between the beds – though once past the beds, it does open up a bit, as the only thing at the back of the room is the desk, a window situated above it.

Marcoh is moving a pile of miscellaneous rabble from the bed on the right-hand side. “You’ll forgive the mess. Like I said, this has solely been my room since I got here.”

“You need any help with all that?” Ed offers.

“No, no,” Marcoh politely declines, “I’m practically done now.” He sets the final object, a jacket, over the back of the desk chair. “There. That should do it.”

“Thank you,” Ed says to him.

“No problem,” Marcoh responds, slowly taking a seat on his own bed. “I know we talked a bit at lunch, but I don’t think you ever said where you’re from.”

Ed’s sitting on his own bed, pulling off his shoes. He shrugs. “Me? I’m from all over. I’ve been living in Amsterdam for about four years now.”

“Amsterdam,” Marcoh says, impressed, “I hear it’s a nice place. And before that?”

“Before that, I was in Frankfurt.”

“Really?” Marcoh asks, intrigued. “What part of town?”

“Not too far from the university. That’s where I worked.”

“You don’t say. You wouldn’t happen to know a Professor Heidelmann by any chance, would you?”
Ed perks up, “You know Professor Heidelmann?”

Marcoh nods, solemnly, sternly. “He’s an old friend of mine. We go way back.”

“Is he all right?”

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t heard from him in about four years – same time as you moved to Amsterdam it sounds like.”

Ed looks down, thinking out loud, “The day the government starting arresting Masons. Heidelmann must have fled.”

Marcoh nods, “He came to me straight away, all the way from Frankfurt to Berlin.”

“You’re from Berlin?”

“Me and Heidelmann both. Heidelmann left Berlin following his work, but we always kept in contact – Christmas cards and whatnot. But then one day out of the blue, he shows up on my doorstep in a panic. I asked him what was going on – and he said that his Brotherhood had been compromised, that he was in danger. He didn’t know who else to trust aside from me. Then he pulled out little device, about as big as a man’s head – told me that if the Nationalists ever got a hold of it, it could spell disaster.”

Ed sits on the edge of his bed. “Did he tell you what this thing was?”

Marcoh nods grimly, “He called it a uranium bomb.”

Ed’s eyes widen. “So THAT’S where it went! But he took it to Berlin? Of all places?”

“I know,” Marcoh agrees, “I thought it sounded like a terrible plan, too. But Heidelmann said that they’d never think to look right under their own noses for it. They would presume that the Masons had whisked it out of the country someplace, and they’d spend all their time searching in vain. It seemed to make sense. So I hid the bomb away, in the wall safe of my house. And for a while, things were going pretty well. No one ever approached me. The police didn’t even look at me. I was just a nice old man.”

“What happened?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I never talked about Heidelmann, tried to avoid using the word ‘uranium’ if at all possible. But somehow or other, the government tracked the bomb down. Next thing I knew, my door was being kicked in and I was being arrested for treason. The only reason I’m still alive is because they find me useful.”

“You and me both…” Ed says as he looks down at the floor.

A moment of silence passes between the two of them.

Ed speaks up again, “So the bomb… what do you think happened to it?”

“If I had to venture a guess?” Marcoh responds. “I’d say they probably took it off to some lab to pull it apart, reverse engineer it so they can mass produce it and make tons of them.”

Ed looks back down at the floor, dejected, “That’s what I’d thought you say.”

Marcoh says to Ed, “But that’s where I heard your name. I can’t believe it took me this long to remember. As you said before, age is not the kindest. Heidelmann told me that if someone named
Elric came looking for the bomb, I could trust him.”

Ed gives a half-hearted smile. “I’m glad the professor had such faith in me.”

“‘Has,’ son, ‘has.’ Don’t use the past tense – far too negative.”

“Sorry, forgive me.”

“You’re at no fault. It’s just that in a place like this you can’t let the little things get you down. You’ve got to beef up the positive wherever you can.”

Ed smiles. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Well,” Marcoh says rather tiredly as he rises, “We’d better get some sleep. Geizsler runs a ‘late-to-bed, early-to-rise’ sort of operation.” He turns off the lights and then, once more, the old man chuckles, “And you usually want to be the first one in the breakfast line. Otherwise the pancakes will be cold and chewy.”

Ed chuckles as he lays down, “I’ll keep that in mind, too.”

* * *

Ed?

...

Ed?!

ED!

Ed pops awake, gasping. He swears he heard Sophie’s voice, as if it was coming from just beyond the door, as if she were in her own bedroom just adjacent to his own…

Ed breathes slowly, trying to reorient himself… this is not his house… this is not his room…

And that terrible snoring sound is definitely not Sophie.

Ed turns his head, just barely able to discern Dr. Marcoh in the darkness, the old man’s mouth hanging open as he noisily snores.

Ed pushes his pillow up against his ears. Geeze! What a racket! Is that how I sound when I snore? Now I know what Al’s talking about…

Ed’s hands slowly slide down the pillow, resting on the bed top, though he still keeps the pillow close to his ears.

…Al… where is he now? …Is he all right? …And Sophie… Is she all right?

…Was she even all right before she was set free? She was acting kind of strange when he last got to see her.

“Johann”?? Really? Why did she call him that? And why did he give her a dress? Ed clenches the sides of his pillow. She would have had to take off her old dress to change. Did he watch her? Did he watch her change?! Ed can feel his blood boiling.
How could she defend a guy like that? WHY was she defending a guy like that? He brainwashed her, that’s what he did! Under different circumstances, she would never like him!

...She DOESN’T like him, does she? ...

...No, of course not… She was only saying what she had to… so we could be free...

Ed again clenches the sides of his pillow, though apprehensively this time. And then he rolls onto his side, taking his pillow with him, as he tries to fall back asleep.

* 

The next morning after breakfast (and after chewy pancakes, for Ed had not been quite fast enough), Ed spots Commander Geizsler in the hallway, and quickly jogs up to him.

“Commander, sir?”

“Oh, good morning, Elric,” Geizsler says to him, cheery – but then suddenly turns very stern, “Ah! You’re a soldier now! Salute!”

“Oh, sorry.” Ed gives a short salute, but then gets right into it, “Sir, I was wondering – The conditions of my imprisonment-”

“You’re not a prisoner here,” Geizsler says in that same cheery voice, “You’re a worker.”

“Uh… yes, sir. But, the reason I’m working here – I was told if I work here, that someone very important to me would be safe.”

Geizsler narrows his eyes with a sly smile, “Oh! I see how it is! Got a lady back home, eh? Eh?” He nudges Ed with his elbow, Ed already feeling a bruise form on his arm.

“Yes, sir. But I wanted to know – how am I going to know that she’s actually safe?”

Geizsler raises an eyebrow. “What do you mean ‘know’? You don’t have to know-know. If a man gives you his word, you hold him on his honor to it.”

Ed furrows his brow, “Sorry, but I don’t have a lot of faith in the honor of Nazis.”

Geizsler’s brow furrows farther than Ed’s, the commander’s face growing a little red with anger as he crosses his arms. “Oh? Is that so?”

Ed tries to recover, though his response still comes out sarcastically: “…Forgive me… I’m afraid Commander Reistrom has… shaken my faith the regime.”

Geizsler seems to calm down, though only slightly. “Hmm. That’s understandable. But you’ll find that a real Nationalist is a good, upstanding man. Don’t worry! Buck up! I’ll make some calls and see what I can find out.”

Ed as well calms down. “Thank you, sir.”

“Now quit standing around. You’ve got work to do.”

“Yes, sir.”

*
The days pass, Ed slowly working his way up – starting alongside Langelans fetching tools and cleaning up messes, to helping Vigne with design flaws, to helping Holgerson balance out the equations (between trying to figure out what Holgerson is saying).

For the most part, Ed’s been following Dr. Marcoh’s lead on this hovering ship project. Ed actually has been having some rather clever ideas pop in his head – yet he has opted to remain silent. To throw out good ideas means to help the Nazis further their progress – something of which Ed has been trying to avoid for seventeen years.

…Has he really been here in this world for this long? Perhaps it didn’t seem so long because Al had always been with him… There had always been a little piece of home with him. And Roy – though he was not the colonel, the decade they’d known him (spending eight of them living with him), it really did feel like home…

…And Sophie?

Though he has not known her as long, or lived with her as long as either Roy or Al, for some reason, to Ed, Sophie still means home.

All throughout his work time, thoughts of Sophie still come to him. He thinks of when he used to help her do things – built that flower box for her… cooking dinner together… pulling clothes off the clothes line… He smiles as he remembers the one time he wrapped a sheet around her waist so he could pull her in close… to look into her eyes… to kiss her…

And then his face falls.

“You with me, Elric?” Van Leeuwen asks.

“Huh?” Ed comes back to reality. “Oh, yeah, sorry.”

During lunch break one day, Ed decides not to head straight for the mess hall, but to instead first stop by Geizsler’s office to follow up on their conversation from earlier that week. Ed sees that the door is open, and he slows to a halt as he looks inside.

There are two other men there with the commander, both rather tall (and one rather fat), the both of them in the same style uniform as the commander.

Ed can’t hear what they’re saying, but naturally, he’s intrigued by what’s going on.

The shorter of the two men turns, looking over his shoulder, and he spots Ed in the hallway, the officer eyeing him like an eagle does to a mouse. Ed feels his heart clench in his chest. Luckily, the only thing the man does is sneer and then close the door.

Ed lets out a sigh of relief. ...I guess I’ll ask the commander later…

Dr. Marcoh taps a pen against the blueprints, finally letting out an aggravated sigh. “I think those hinged wings you were talking about when you first got here are probably our best option.”

Vigne cries, “Non, non, non! They will look moche! They will ruin the aerodynamics!”

“Moche?” Van Leeuwen asks. “What’s that mean?”
“Your face is what it means.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“It means you are ugly, you clog head!”

“Snail licker!”

“Tulip chewer!”

“Boys! Knock it off!” Marcoh cries. “You’re grown men – act like it!”

Geizsler, who was at the door, approaches the team as he laughs. “Hohoho! Having to play babysitter again, are we Doc?”

“Every day,” Marcoh responds with a flat smile. “What can I do for you, sir?”

“I’m here for Elric, actually.”

Ed turns his attention to the commander.

“Good news, Elric!” Geizsler tells him. “You were asking a couple weeks back about how you’d know your sweetheart was all right?” He reaches up to his shirt pocket and whips something out. “Ta-da!”

Ed gasps, taking it. “What is this?”

“A picture of course,” Geizsler tells him. “You’ll get one at the end of every month. Consider it your paycheck, hohoho!”

The others gather around, curious to see the picture, Ed himself staring at it intently: Sophie sits on a chair, her right leg oddly stuck out in front of her, the chair before a large bookcase.

“Wow. She is pretty,” Langelans comments.

“Hva har skjedd med beinet hennes?”

“Quoi?” Vigne questions.

Langelans translates, “Holger sees what is wrong with her leg?”

Ed sadly answers, “The Nazis had it broken.”

They all gasp.

“Sacré dieu! Horrible!”

Geizsler shakes his head. “Shameful. A man never assaults a lady. It’s against all sorts of chivalric code.” His mood suddenly changes back to cheery – “Well, enough about that. How’s the project coming? Are we ready for a field test tomorrow?”

Dr. Marcoh nervously rolls his pen between his fingers. “…Sir, I hate to say it, but I don’t think we’ll ever get this bird off the ground.”

Geizsler jibes, “I think it looks more like a bell than a bird! Hohoho!”

Marcoh holds in a sigh. “We may need a few more weeks. This thing is going to need wings.”
“Wings?” Geizsler questions, sounding displeased. “But that would ruin the design.”

“That is what I said!” Vigne pipes up.

Marcoh continues, “Without them, this thing will likely plummet straight to the ground.”

Geizsler strokes his beard for a while as he thinks. “Well… I suppose we don’t want that happening. But I’m only giving you two more weeks, so you better hop to it.”

Two weeks or four weeks – Ed thinks it really won’t make much of a difference.

The aircraft has been rolled out of the hangar and onto the open parade ground, the large bell-shaped vehicle propped a few yards off the ground on a custom rig. A few of the soldiers who aren’t on duty gather around to watch with a few of the scientists from the other divisions, everyone feeling a little excited.

Ed gives the launch platform a knock with his boot. “Flying Bell. More like Flying Brick.”

“Oh Edward, please do not jinx it,” Langelans pleads.

A pilot is climbing up the ladder into the craft, Marcoh calling from the ground below, giving him some last-minute instructions. “And for the love of God, if you feel unsafe, by all means either land or bail.”

“All right, doctor,” Commander Geizsler says. “Give the man some room to do his work.” He begins shooing away the team, “Back, back everyone. Stand over there with the crowd.”

They all retreat, moving across the parade ground to join the crowd as told.

Geizsler clears his throat, and then says, “Gentlemen! Today you will witness history! Behold! The new age of flight technology.”

The crowd gives a light, polite applause, the commander stepping away from the craft. He walks up to one of the soldiers who carries a small two-way radio, and Geizsler picks up the mic. “All right, captain. You are clear for takeoff.”

Through the windshield, everyone can see the pilot give a thumbs-up. He pushes down on a lever, a slowly, a great whirring sound begins – slowly at first, picking speed and picking up speed. The grass beneath the launch platform is being pushed out towards the edges, and dust begins to fly as the little contraption begins to hover off of its platform.

The crowd gasps with amazement.

“It’s working!” Van Leeuwen exclaims, excitedly grabbing Vigne by the shoulders and shaking him. “It’s working!”

Up and up the machine rises, going up as high as the tall stone lookout tower.

Marcoh motions his hand at Geizsler, indicating he wants the mic. Geizsler obliges, and Marcoh calls to the pilot. “All right, you’ve achieved lift. Let’s see if you can keep that height. Shift it into second gear.”

After a moment there is a clunk and a grinding, and suddenly the ship drops!
The crowd gasps in fright!

But with another strange *ka-thunk!* several wings expand from the side of the vehicle, like a metal flower blooming, and the wind of the engine gets caught under the wings, and pushes the tiny little vehicle upwards again.

Everyone breathes a sigh of relief, especially Dr. Marcoh who is already sweating by this point. He calls over the radio again. “All right, wings deployed. Third gear should stabilize you.”

The bell has again started to climb higher and higher, getting back to its original height of the tower top. There is a sputtering, and now the air is coming out in beats, the wind pulsating the grass back and forth, the air washing over the men in waves.

Geizsler coughs as a blade of grass goes down his throat.

Ed has to shield his eyes from the mess of dirt coming his way, looking through his fingers to try to see what’s going on. The bell is wildly bouncing up and down with every air blast. And what’s worse – it’s headed this way!

Holgerson covers his hair. “*Hva skjer?!*”

Ed shouts, “It’s because it’s not parallel to the ground! Every time the bell falls, it’s falling at a slightly different angle, propelling it forward in that direction!”

The men begin to scatter as the bell comes ever towards them, drifting off at odd angles here and there.

Geizsler waves his hands desperately, “Not the building! Don’t hit the building!”

The bell teeters off away from the buildings, Geizsler heaving a sigh.

Then he hears frantic bleating and a cacophony of bells! “Oh no! Not the goat pen! Where’m I gonna get my cheese?!”

He makes a beeline for the small corral, Dr. Marcoh calling after him, “Commander! It’s not worth it!”

Geizsler miraculously runs ahead of the aircraft, it now gaining more height, blowing wind in all directions as it starts to spiral upwards. Geizsler whips open the gate of the corral, waving his hands and chasing the goats out. “Go! Run! Get out of here!”

Up and up and up and up! Round and round the aircraft spirals, white smoke beginning to billow out of its bottom!

Dr. Marcoh calls over the radio, “For the love of God, BAIL!”

The windshield pops off of the machine, flying off and shattering as it smacks into the perimeter wall. The pilot is launched out of his seat, and with little time, he pulls his parachute cord – but his chute gets caught on the tall spire of the lookout tower, and the poor pilot – all he can do is dangle there!

The aircraft plummets like a meteor, landing on the other side of the base’s walls with a great loud CRASH! dirt and soil and rocks being flung into the sky to rain down on any unlucky man who is still outside.
…And then all grows quiet. The team, Ed included, pokes their heads out from behind the building.

“Is it over?” Vigne asks.

Holgerson states, “Jeg tror vi har gjort en feil.”

Ed says, “Yeah, you can say that again…”

Not too much later, the team has been gathered in Geizsler’s office, he yelling at them: “That was a complete disaster! Pilot injured! Machined totaled! And I’m still picking the grass out of my beard!”

Holgerson whispers, “Minst geitene er trygge,” and Langelans begins giggling.

“Quiet!” Geizsler orders. “Do you have any idea how I’m going to look to the Lead Commander if I can’t deliver a proper anti-gravity aircraft like I promised?”

“Geizsler, sir,” Ed steps forward. “I hate to be the one to tell you this, but anti-gravity is impossible.”

The others look as though they’re about to have heart attacks.

Geizsler glares at him. “What do you mean impossible? Of course it’s possible!”

“No, it’s not,” Ed rebukes. “Gravity is a force of nature – you can’t just turn it off.”

“Oh how narrow-minded of you! I thought you were a scientist! Don’t you believe in the pursuit of discovery?”

Ed slams a hand on the desk, “I believe in the pursuit of TRUTH! In the pursuit of reality!”

“Anti-gravity IS a reality!”

“You don’t know that!”

“And you do?”

“What I know is that we’re wasting our time here! And if you ever want to see any REAL weapons built, you’d put our talents to better use!”

“Talents?! HA! Clearly you do not have any of that! You’re not trying hard enough!”

“You’re trying too hard! You’re reaching for the moon! Hell! You’d be better off trying to get to the moon! Build a moon base or something!”

Marcoh jumps in before things get too out of hand, “Sir, we’re all a little upset right now. Everyone just needs to cool down for a moment.” He begins ushering Ed out, hinting for the others to leave as well, “Don’t worry! We’ll get right back to work on those equations and get working anti-gravity in no time”

“No we won’t!” Ed says, but Marcoh closes the door. “Don’t tell him stuff like that!” Ed says to Marcoh. “You’re adding to his delusions!”
“Edward, listen to me!” Marcoh says seriously, his hands on Ed’s shoulders. “The Nazis do NOT like to hear that they are wrong. Everything they say is right, and you have GOT to believe in their cause, or-”

Ed brushes Marcoh’s hand from his shoulder, “Or what? They’ll beat me? They’ll starve me? It’s nothing they haven’t already done!”

“They’ll KILL you, Edward!” Marcoh shouts at him. “Is that what you want?”

The hall falls silent.

Marcoh continues: “You want to be lying in an unmarked grave somewhere? Never see your friends again? Never see your brother again? Never see your girl again? You told me that you promised her that you were gonna go see her again when this is all over! Do you want me to be the one to explain to her that you got killed for being an idiot?”

Ed looks down at the floor. He quietly responds, “…No…”

Marcoh draws a breath. And then he starts again, more quietly this time. “…Listen… If you believe in their cause – even if you just act like you believe in it, but really fight for it – at least then you’re proving that you’re on their side. But if you think differently than they do, then that means that you’re the enemy, and therefore deserve no mercy. Please, Edward. Do not make yourself their enemy.”

Ed cynically laughs on the inside. It’s a little late for that, Doc…

He looks up into the old doctor’s somber eyes, and Ed finally heaves a sigh.

“…All right,” Ed concedes. “…Let’s get back to the lab and see if we can’t get some anti-gravity going.” Slowly, everyone starts to take off, Ed adding, “Who knows? Maybe we really should be running these calculations based on Ice Theory…”

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That night, Ed lays awake angry in bed, staring at the ceiling, completely ignoring Marcoh’s snoring.

Damn stupid Nazis! Damn them all! Damn this stupid lab and damn this stupid anti-gravity! And especially damn that DAMN Reistrom! This is all his god-damned fault!

…Damn him for bursting in and screwing everything up… Damn him for taking Sophie away from me… for ripping us apart…

…Just how much has he ripped us apart? Yeah, physically he separated us… But what about emotionally? … She was acting real strange when I saw her…

…She does care about Reistrom, doesn’t she? Ed thinks bitterly. She fell in LOVE with him, didn’t she? Why would she do that?!

His heart begins to sink. …Well clearly she never loved me in the first place… No, that’s not true. She told me she loves me… But did she mean it? …What if… What if Sophie only said that to me… in order to get me to work for the Nazis?

They knew I’m in love with her. They knew the only way to get me to do what they wanted was to use Sophie as leverage. But if Sophie didn’t love me back, then they wouldn’t have anything to hold
against me. They FORCED Sophie to tell me that she loved me. HE forced her to...

A wave of guilt washes over Ed.

I can’t think like this. How could I ever think such horrible things about Sophie? Is that what this place has done to me? Made me as heartless as the Nazis?

Ed sighs, and as he calms, he rolls over onto his stomach, pulling his pillow over his head and around his ears, blocking out the constant rumble of snore.

“#

A few more months pass, the warm summer season giving way to the cool autumn breezes, the grass outside beginning to turn a dry brown. At every month’s end, Ed is given a new picture of Sophie as promised, and he is glad to see that she is now able to stand on her own. She smiles in the photos – but they are sad smiles. Forced smiles.

Where is she, for real? Is she really safe? …

Everyone is steadily at work in the lab, a nice change of pace added to the atmosphere by the addition of a small one-way radio set up on the desk top, a little classical tune stringing out through the hollow workshop.

The bell design has been scrapped in favor of a more disk-shaped sort of aircraft, one with a concave bottom that acts as its own wing / metal-flower / parachute – one that a slight change in angle can be easily corrected.

Ed tucks his pictures back into his coat pocket, returning his attention back to the calculations he has scribbled on the notepad off to his side, eyes darting back and forth between them and the blueprints before him.

Then there comes a static fuzz, the music disappearing, and the radio coming back to life with jazz music.

Ed briefly looks over his shoulder to see that Van Leeuwen has changed the station, now snapping his fingers to the beat.

“Hé!” Vigne yells as he madly makes his way over to the radio. “Put that back!” He turns the dial on the radio, switching it back to the orchestral movement.

“But that music is so boring,” Van Leeuwen says, switching the dial forwards again. “I want to listen to this.”

“Oh, honhonhon!” Vigne teases. “It is not enough that you are a Dutch wannabe – now you want to be an Américain wannabe!”

Van Leeuwen turns up the music. “Sorry! Can’t hear you!”

Vigne grabs the volume dial and turns it down. “How can you listen to this noise?”

“It’s not noise! It’s fun! It gets the blood moving.”

“Out of your brain and into your legs. Classical music is good for the brain – switch it back.”

“Oh you’re just making that up. And besides, even if that were true, my brain is tired of working.”
“Your brain never works.”

“You take that back, you fat French pastry!”

“What’d you call me?!”

Finally, Ed turns on them, he yelling, “Will you shut up? I’m trying to think over here!”

Van Leeuwen and Vigne quiet down, Van Leeuwen turning the volume down as well. Then Vigne reaches up and switches it back to the classical orchestra, Van Leeuwen giving him a dirty look.

Ed turns back to the workbench, thinking to himself, *Hell, I’LL take control of the radio – pick a station that NEITHER of them wants, just to shut them up. Yeah, but then I’d have to be right next to the radio. Otherwise they’ll just switch it anyway, and I’d have to walk all the way over there to switch it back. I’d never get any work done if…*

Suddenly Ed looks up, a flash in his eyes. He looks over his shoulder, looking at the radio, the jaunty jazz now arising from it as Van Leeuwen has snuck back over and switched it again. Ed sets his pencil aside and walks over to the radio.

Langelans looks up from his own work, noticing that Ed seems out of sorts. “Edward? Are you okay?”

Ed looks the radio over peculiarly, picking it up and turning it to one side, then to the other, the music notes being partially distorted as the speaker changes directions, the sound waves bouncing off the different surfaces.

“What’s he doing?” Van Leeuwen asks.

Holgerson shrugs, “Jeg vet ikke.”

Ed is still staring at the radio, gears ticking in his head. He unplugs the radio.

Vigne, with a grumpy tone, demands, “Hey, what did you do that for?”

Then Ed puts both hands on top of the radio, and, using his automail fingers, digs in between the chassis seam and rips the back off of the radio! the wires and tubes being exposed!

Vigne and Van Leeuwen recoil in horror. “Elric! What are you doing?!”

Ed’s picked up a screwdriver and is now unscrewing something from out of the insides.

Marcoh walks up to him. “Edward? Is everything all right?”

Ed is still busily unscrewing screws, “I’ve got a great idea. But I need the parts from this.”

“Really?” Marcoh asks. “What is this idea?”

“Radio-control, you say?” Geizsler asks as he sits back in his office chair, listening to Ed’s proposal.

“Yes, sir,” Ed tells him, “It’s actually an idea I got from one of your own soldiers – a guy named Kimblee. He was able to use radio waves to remotely detonate bombs.”
Geizsler crosses his arms, “Well that’s all well and good, but you’d still have to plant the bombs beforehand, meaning we’d still be placing soldiers in enemy territory. It doesn’t sound all that different than what we’re doing now.”

Ed says, “Yes, but consider that now the enemy wouldn’t be able to cut the detonator line – nor could they follow it back to where the bomb is and dismantle it.”

Geizsler hums to himself, stroking his scraggily beard. “Well… That does sound interesting. But if we’re going to change the focus of our program, you’re going to have to convince me on more than just the one idea.”

Ed thinks for a moment, and then says, “What if you could control exactly where a bomb lands?”

“Oh?” Geizsler raises an eyebrow inquisitively.

Ed continues, “What if you could sit on top of a mountain, launch a rocket missile, and guide it to exactly the target you want to strike?”

“And we can do that with radio waves?”

“Possibly,” Ed says. “We’d still have to work out the details – but I think it’s viable.”

“Hmm, interesting,” Geizsler continues stroking his beard. “Very interesting indeed. All right, Elric,” The commander says, pepping up, “I’ll tell you what – I’ll give you a month to test this new project of yours. If you can prove to me that a functioning radio-control missile is possible, then I’ll whole-heartedly endorse it. But if at the end of the month, the project fails, then it’s right back to building aircraft, you got that?”

Ed nods, “Yes, sir.”

Geizsler then waves him off. “All right then, get to it. On your way.”

“…”

“We’re doing what?” Van Leeuwen asks, the team gathered around the drawing board, Ed at the head of the room as he explains.

“Think of it - missiles that can be PILOTED, like an airplane – but there wouldn’t have to be a man on or in the missile – he could control it from the ground.”

Vigne scans over the drawings on the board, “It does sound intriguing.”

Holgerson looks at Langelans and asks, “Vi gjør en musikalsk rakett?”

Langelans shakes a head and a hand, “Nej, nej. Radio-styret rakett.”

“Ah,” Holgerson nods understandingly.

“…”

In no time flat, three weeks have passed, and the team has assembled a basic rocket and outfitted it with an antenna and a few mechanisms to control the wing flaps on the rocket’s tail.

The missile is being held in place atop a large structure – akin to the launch pad of the bell ship – and Ed and Marcoh are able to stand up straight underneath it as they add some finishing touches to the wing flap mechanics.
Marcoh looks to Ed and says, “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you quiet this happy.”

Ed gives a short laugh. “Don’t take it the wrong way. I’m not happy to be building weapons if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Then what is it then?”

Ed slows as he finishes tightening a screw in place. Then he says, with a fondness in his voice, “It’s been a long time since I’ve built a rocket. I guess I’m just reminded of different times.”

“Better days?”

Ed shakes his head. “No, not really. I had been separated from my brother for a while – he got lost and I couldn’t find him. During that time, I took up rocketry research under Dr. Oberth, and made a really good friend there. He was like a second brother to me.”

Dr. Marcoh chuckles. “There you go again, using the past tense.”

Ed is not facing Marcoh. “…He died.”

Marcoh’s shoulders fall, the silence being filled by the sound of ratcheting. “…Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.”

Ed shakes his head. “You didn’t know. Besides,” he says, turning with a bit of a bittersweet smile on his face, “After he died, my brother and I were reunited. The Universe is funny like that. Every negative has a positive, right?”

Marcoh gets the same bittersweet smile on his own face. “Yes. I suppose you’re right.” He glances down at the floor for a while, Ed still ratcheting the mechanical flaps in place. Marcoh then pushes his sleeves back. “Well, we’re almost there. Just a little ways more.” And he returns to working on his own portion of the rocket.

Ed feels an odd happiness slowly growing inside of him, something he thought he’d never feel in this place – never thought he’d find camaraderie while trapped like a lab rat. But maybe it’s because they all felt this way – each of them is just looking for a friend (even if Vigne and Van Leeuwen act like sworn enemies).

* *

Down on the other side of the mountain, on the side away from the village, the little truck rumbles, carrying in its open-air back a large target.

The vehicle comes to a stop, the soldiers in the cab hopping out and dragging the target out of the back of the truck to set it up on the open, flat expanse of valley below.

Back up at the mountain complex, Ed and the team are putting the missile into place, Vigne working the crank to lift the platform to a 45-degree angle from which the rocket will take off.

“You fellas ready?” they hear Geizsler’s voice say, and Ed turns around to see not only Geizsler, but two other officers – the tall officers he had seen in Geizsler’s office months ago.

Ed is taken aback the sheer size of one of them. “Oh!” Ed spurts, then regains his composure, “Yeah. As long as they’ve got the target set up down there, we’re good to go on this end.”

Ed stares awkwardly at the officers for a moment, they silent.
He then slowly raises his hand in salute, “I’m sorry. I didn’t catch your names – Commanders…?”

The bigger of the two puffs up his chest (to match his belly), “Commander Bähr, and don’t you forget it!”

“No, sir,” Ed responds. He looks to the other officer, “And you, sir?”

The man grimaces at him, a permanent scowl seemingly plastered on his face. “You never told us your name first.”

“Oh,” Ed drops his salute, somehow feeling weird, as if he’d be saluting himself while saying it, “Edward Elric, chemical engineer.”

Bähr’s jaw drops for half a second. “You’re Edward Elric? You’re a lot shorter than I imagined.”

Ed tries not to blow his top. His fist clenched, he manages to pull off a semi-calm attitude as he says, “I’m not short, sir. You’re just very tall.”

“Hawhawhaw!” Bähr guffaws. “Well, you got that right!” he gives Ed a slap on the back, Ed just about bowled over from the hit.

“Really,” the other officer says, derision in his voice, “The way the Lead Commander was going on about wanting to catch him, you’d think Elric would have been far more intimidating.”

Ed’s gaze pierces through the commander. “Oh don’t worry, sir. I can be intimidating if need be.”

“All right,” Geizsler says, “Cool your jets, Elric.” He winks. “You’ve got a rocket to fire up instead! Ho! See what I did there?”

Ed responds, unthrilled, “Clever, sir.”

Geizsler looks at his fellow commanders. “Well let’s get on with this then. We’ll have a great view of the show from the lookout tower. And Elric,” he says before leaving, “We’ll have a radio up there so we can listen in to the test.”

“Roger that,” Ed responds.

Geizsler laughs, “Hoho! I see what you did there! Hohoh!” And he takes off, leading his fellow officers away towards the tower.

Ed turns his attention back to the team. “All right, everybody ready.”

“All right!”

“Ready!” they all call off, one by one.

“I really do hope this works,” Dr. Marcoh says. “While I’m not too keen to give the Nazis any sort of an advantage in battle, I’d much prefer it if they continued to use the same strength bombs they’ve been using – as opposed to something stronger, you know what I mean?”

Ed nods, “I completely agree.”

Langelans, carrying a two-way radio with him, hears the commander’s voice crackle over the speaker: “Papa Goat to Baby Goat – do you read me Baby Goat? Over.”

Langelans looks at the radio with a bit of disdain. “Are those really the codenames he wants to go

Geizsler calls, “The target is set up and the area has been cleared. You are set to launch. Over.”

“Understood, Commander.”

The radio crackles to life again, “Use the code names! You’re supposed to use code names on radio! Over.”

“Uh…Okay… Papa Goat. Over.”

“That’s better.”

Holgerson, standing nearby with the launch button in his hand, mutters as he shakes his head, “Den mannen er så rart…”

~

Inside the tallest room of the tower, the officers each look through a pair of binoculars that have been set out for them.

The serious officer says, “This had better be worth my time, Geizsler.”

“Oh don’t worry, Adler,” Geizsler responds, “You two are in for a treat!”

~

Van Leeuwen is atop the perimeter wall, an area usually reserved for the guards, but given the circumstances, the team has been granted access.

“Target sighted,” he says as Ed joins him on the wall, Ed carrying a small device in his hand, a large dial (not unlike the radio tuner dial) on its face.

“All right,” Ed says, “On my count – Three,”

Everyone pauses.

“Two,”

Everyone preps,

“One,”

Everyone holds their breath.

“FIRE!”

SHOOM! And the rocket shoots off into the air, clearing the top of the perimeter wall with ease.

The others climb the stairs leading to the top of the wall (Marcoh much slower no thanks to his knees), and they all join Ed at his side.

“All right, Van Leeuwen,” Ed tells him, “I’m counting on you to guide me here. Where are we?”

Van Leeuwen gazes through his binoculars: “So far so good. It looks like we’re on the flight path. Wait, hang on. Looks like the wind is pushing us to the right. Steer left a bit.”
Ed gently turns the dial on his controller, turning it just ever so slightly to the left.

But the rocket suddenly swings WAY to the left!

“Heyheyhey!” Van Leeuwen cries, “A bit! I said a bit!”

“That was a bit!” Ed defends, quickly turning the dial to the right – and now the rocket veers far to the right!

~

Geizsler lowers his binoculars for a moment, “What’s going on down there?” He picks up the mic.

“Baby Goat, what’s going on down there?”

The rocket is now jiggling, its nose swinging wildly from left to right.

~

Langelans fumbles with the radio for a moment. “I-I-I don’t know, sir! The missile must be over-reacting to the commands!”

~

Adler lowers his binoculars with a sigh. “I knew this was a waste of time.

Bähr, however, seems to be enjoying the show: “Wow! Look at it go! Ten Marks says it turns around and hits the village! HA!”

“Don’t be so crass,” Adler sneers at him.

~

“I don’t understand what’s wrong,” Marcoh says with upset. “I was SURE we had all the calculations right!”

Langelans calls back to the officers, “D-Don’t worry! We’ll get this sorted out!”

To the right goes the rocket. Ed notices this.

He turns to Langelans and says, “Hey, hit the button again.”

“And tell them what?” Langelans asks.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Ed says, “Just push it.”

Langelans pushes it. To the left goes the rocket.

Ed slaps a hand to his forehead. “We’re such idiots! THE RADIOS. Langelans! Call the commander and tell him to turn off his radio!”

Van Leeuwen pipes up: “ETA 10 seconds ’til impact!”

“NOW!” Ed shouts, ready to attempt to pilot the rocket against the onslaught of radio waves.

“Commander! Er, I mean, Papa Goat! Radio silence! Turn off your radio! Over!”
Geizsler looks perplexed. “What for?”

Adler growls, reaching over and shutting the radio off.

~

Ed turns the dial a bit and voila! The rocket is flying straight again!

KABLOOM! Just in time, too – the rocket lands right on top of its target.

The team cheers with joy, Vigne jumping up and down, “Merveilleux!”

Van Leeuwen proclaims, “C'est magnifique!”

Vigne grins at him, “Oh, mon ami!”

Van Leeuwen laughs, “Ah, let it go, you baguette muncher.”

Vigne laughs, “It's okay! Live it up, you sprout eater!”

~

Geizsler lets out a victorious laugh, “HA! Told you my scientists could pull it off! Them boys in Berlin worked on it for a year and then gave up. My team figured it out in one MONTH!”

Adler sets the binoculars from whence he got them, he rather calm – and visibly, since the first time since he’s arrived, a small smile has managed to crawl its way onto his face. “It’s impressive, I’ll admit. But then again, you don’t have very much competition coming out of Berlin, now do you?”

Bähr, in the meanwhile, is still gazing through his binoculars. “Wow. Look at it burn down there.”

Adler rips the binoculars from Bähr’s hands and slams them down on the stone window ledge, the lenses audibly cracking.

~

Ed and his fellow teammates have come down from the perimeter wall and are trotting up to the lookout tower, reaching its mouth at the same time the officers descend.

Geizsler says to the scientists, “Good job, men! Score one for Germany! You all are really onto something here!”

“Thank you, sir,” Ed says, sounding a little out of breath from all the excitement.

“I agree with what you were trying to tell me a while back,” Geizsler says. “I can admit when I’m beaten. That whole anti-gravity sttick – it might take us DECADES before we get that worked out. But this! This is the here and the now! This is technology we could be using on the battlefield right now! I’m proud of you, soldiers.”

And just as quickly as the excitement had filled Ed, he starts to come down from his high, the heaviness of guilt starting to drag him down. “…Yes, sir.”

The commander continues, unnoticing, “The focus of this lab will be on radio-control from now on. The more of these missiles we can produce, the better.” The commander looks over at a nearby guard. “You there! Dig out a bottle of wine for these eggheads! They deserve a reward! Oh, and
what the heck – get a little something for yourself.”

The soldier salutes with a smile and takes off in the direction of the larder.

Holgerson mutters to Langelans, “Men jeg liker ikke legen når han er full. Han vil tilbringe fem timer fortelle oss historier.”

“What did he say?” Ed asks.

Langelans keeps his voice low as he smiles, “He says that he does not like Doctor Marcoh when he is drunk, because he will spend five hours telling stories.”

Ed laughs, for as if one cue, Dr. Marcoh has come over to the trio, he saying, “You know, this reminds me of this one time, back when I was still a student at university…”

“Oh jøss…”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Reviews:

Chapter End Notes

Well, this episode was a nice change of pace from the recent trend of CARVE MY HEART OUT WITH A RUSTY SPOON AND SET IT ON FIRE AND FEED IT TO A DEMON SPAWN SO THAT I AM NO LONGER CAPABLE OF FEELING EMOTIONS chapters.

While it’s a totally serious episode considering Ed’s situation, it somehow came out…
fluffy.

BTW, new BroTP Vigne/Van Leeuwen 5evah ~<3. I don’t know why, but it cracks me up to hear them slinging insults back and forth at one another.

Also, Langelans and Holgerson are fluffy and adorable and must be protected at all costs.

And also – MYSTERY SOLVED, eh people? Y’all have been waiting since freaking Chapter 9 to find out whatever happened to that damn bomb. *:*✧:*:*✧=*:Now You Know= 
The mountainous base is all abuzz with the news – Initially, many of the men here were on high alert as out of nowhere there was suddenly the sound of a great explosion on the mountainside. But their fears were put at ease upon discovering that it was a team of their own scientists who had caused it – a rocket launch, successfully controlled via radio waves. What a breakthrough.

The commander of the base, Geizsler, himself is ecstatic at the results, making his way to the safe
hidden behind his desk as he says to his comrades, “This calls for a toast!”

“We’re on duty,” his fellow commander, Adler, sternly points out as he closes the door to the office.

The third officer, Bähr, is taking one of the two seats in front of the desk as he responds, “Ah, one drink won’t hurt. I don’t know about you, but it’d take a lot more than one drink to get me drunk.”

“What did I tell ya?” Geizsler happily carries on as he sets some glasses up on the desk, followed shortly by a bottle. “Top-notch scientists I got working for me!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bähr gripes as he crosses his arms, “And now you’re gonna get credit for this new weapon, we get it. I’d have a share in that credit too if I had picked up Elric instead of Reistrom.”

Adler, taking his seat, says, “No one’s getting credit for anything. We’re not telling anyone about this.”

Geizsler is a little perplexed. “And why not?”

“Don’t you see?” Adler tells him, “This is exactly what we need to move forward with our plans. We can be miles away from the launch site, and still we can make sure that the missile lands right on top of headquarters.”

Geizsler sets his elbows on the desk. “Yes, but what if ground forces see the missile coming at them? They might just use an AA gun to blow it up in the air. I still like the idea of covertly planting a bomb inside – then just remotely detonating.”

Adler sneers at him, “That would still mean that one of us would have to be present. If anyone sees us there, we become suspects. With this new long-range control, we don’t have to be anywhere near the launch point. We can make it look as though someone else sent that rocket.”

Adler, though he argued earlier, now finally picks up his glass off the desk as he smirks.

“We could be at Löwe’s base when the bomb hits Berlin. He’s trustworthy, that Löwe. Everyone will believe him when he says that we were with him when the attack took place. It couldn’t possibly have been us who did it – that is if anyone even suspects us in the first place. That’s why it is vital that NO ONE outside these walls know about this new radio-control.”

Geizsler puffs out an annoyed breath as he crosses his arms, looking down at his desk. “It’s the same old story, isn’t it? Doing something amazing and getting absolutely no recognition for it. We’re already serving a Führer who doesn’t know we exist. Now we won’t even get credit for this new tech.”

“Tell me about it,” Bähr concurs. “If we’re supposed to be the best of the best, then how come Himmler’s all hush-hush about it? People should KNOW about us. They should RESPECT us!”

“Fool,” Adler says as he looks over at the large man. “It’s not a secret order if everyone knows about it. Besides, it’s in our best interest that the Führer does not know of our existence. Not only has he condemned the occult, but should things take a turn for the worse, he won’t have us as his scapegoats.”

“Hardy-har-har,” Geizsler adds with a lick of sarcasm about his voice. “Let’s make a goat joke. Anyway,” he gets back on track, “We need to make sure that the Führer is not in Berlin at the time of the attack. I’d hate for him to be injured, or worse, killed.”
“I don’t see why we just don’t get rid of him, too,” Bähr suggests, much to the shock of Geizsler (though Adler doesn’t seem to be fazed). Bähr asks, “If we want to be in charge, why not BE in charge?”

“Hitler is Leader in name only,” Adler tells him. “The true power lies with the Schutzstaffel. Control the SS, and you control the Reich. With Himmler out of the way, I can take my rightful place as the head of the Order and the SS.”

“Besides, Bähr,” Geizsler adds with fervor in his voice, “We are Knights! We serve our King! For one of us to kill the Führer would be like Sir Lancelot killing King Arthur!”

“Pfft!” Bähr scoffs, “Those are English tales anyway. Who cares?”

“But the point still stands,” Adler states. “It is our duty to serve our King. But he is the only one whom I shall serve.” His gaze is sharp as he articulates, “Himmler is a pompous fool for thinking that an Owl outranks an Eagle. I am the very symbol of the Reich itself! As the Eagle Knight, it’s my God-given right to be the leader of the Order.”

Geizsler nods affirmingly, “Indeed. It only makes sense that the embodiment of Tyr be the one to lead us in war. Leave the God of Wisdom to his libraries, I say.”

Bähr has yet to uncross his arms (as he seems to be in a perpetually bad mood). “If I have to listen to that idiot read one more poem, I swear!”

Geizsler returns his attention to the matter at hand, “Where should we launch the missile from though? I’m not sure what the range on the control is. If we launch from Löwe’s territory while we’re in Löwe’s territory, isn’t that still a little suspicious?”

Bähr snickers, interjecting, “What if we launch it from Schwangau’s territory? Wouldn’t THAT be a twist? It’s always the quiet ones, am I right?”

Adler says in his ever-serious tone, “Schwangau’s not one to plan the invasion of enemy territory, much less a coup. No, he’s a terrible patsy. We’d be better to pin this attack on Sweden.”

Geizsler cocks his head to the side, “The Swedish? Why would they attack us? They’re neutral.”

“Exactly,” Adler says. “We have no reason to go to war with them. This will give us a reason to send troops. With control of Sweden, we will have access to all of their resources. True, they’ve been selling supplies to us, but so too have they been giving aid to our enemies. We shall put a stop to that.”

The officer takes a drink from his glass, setting it back on the desk as he says with a smile,

“We won’t be ‘invading’ a neutral country – we will be defending our honor against a belligerent enemy. The people of Germany will have a rallying point around which to lift us up. ‘Praise Adler, the hero who avenged the death of Himmler!’ I’ll be the Führer’s right-hand man in no time.”

Bähr finally speaks up again, “Hey! Now don’t forget about us! We get a share in the glory, too!”

“Of course,” Adler says to them both. “Where would I be without my right-hand men?”

#

The compound has grown quiet as the sun has slipped away beyond the horizon, and all have taken their leave of their workshops and tools, their blackboards and erasers, each returning to their
dormitories.

Marcoh lies on his bed, red in the face from one too many glasses of wine.

Ed pulls back the cover on his own bed, getting ready to sleep, he too a little red from alcohol. The team spent the evening celebrating the success of their rocket launch, and now as the stars overtake the sky, it’s early to bed so they can be early to rise.

“Did I ever tell you,” Marcoh slurs, Ed inwardly chuckling as Marcoh has said that phrase a hundred times since his first glass, “That I wanted to be a doctor originally?”

“Is that so?” Ed asks.

“Oh yeah!” Marcoh spurs. “Patchin’ people up and makin’ ‘em all better.” He hiccups. “But I found I’m too sensitive for that. Oh sure, you need sensitive doctors and all. But I’m the kind of person who gets so wrapped up in the emotion and pain of others that I hardly even know what my own feelings are anymore. I’d never make it as a doctor. I’d be too busy crying about my patients’ woes…”

Ed gives a half-hearted laugh of a scoff. “You wouldn’t want to hear about my life then. You’d fall to pieces.”

Marcoh rolls over onto his side so that he can look at Ed. “No, son. Go on! Tell me.”

“No, that’s all right,” Ed says as he climbs into bed.

“Don’t be shy,” Marcoh drunkenly encourages him. “I’ll tell you something about me first,” he says, even though he’s been telling stories all day. “When I was a kid, I always hated the game ‘Marco Polo,’ because I always got chosen to be Marco. Can you believe it?”

Ed laughs, “Yeah, I can believe it.”

Marcoh now lays on his stomach, resting his elbows on the mattress and his chin on his hands, a dumb drunken smile on his face. “Now it’s your turn. You tell me something about yourself.”

Ed looks at the ceiling for a moment, thinking. Then he says aloud, “When I was a kid… well, I guess I was a bit of a brat.”

Marcoh chuckles. “All kids are brats. I mean, don’t get me wrong – I love kids. But I hate kids. They’re adorable and all, but I wouldn’t want one for keeps. Y’know what I mean?”

“I guess.”

“What about you, Ed? You want any kids?”

Ed looks down, staring quietly at his lap. “…Someday. Yeah. …I thought I’d have kids after getting married… But I can kiss that plan goodbye…”

Marcoh outstretches his arm and lays his head on his arm, mumbling. “Now don’t be like that. You won’t be in here forever. Someday you’ll get out of here and see your Sophie again.”

Ed looks over at Marcoh. “But how can you know that? What if I spend the rest of my life in here? Spend the rest of my life building weapons for a cause I don’t believe in?”

Marcoh rolls over onto his back, a stern look on his face as he wags his finger at the ceiling as if Ed were up there for some reason. “Now, now!” he slurs, “Y-you need to stop being so negative.
“Buck up!” He puts his hand back down, resting it on his rotund belly. “You said that you’re gonna get out of here and go find your girl and get married and have kids, and that’s just what you’re gonna do…”

Ed sighs to himself, saying out loud, “Even if I do find Sophie again, she didn’t seem too keen to get married when I asked her.”

Marcoh’s eyes open as he excitedly (albeit slowly) sits up, “You already asked her?”

“Yeah,” Ed says, his eyes drifting over to his roommate. “But she declined.”

“Well that doesn’t mean that she doesn’t love you.”

Ed looks away sadly, “Sure seems like it to me.”

“Now let me tell you something,” a fatherly tone arises from Marcoh’s voice, “And you better listen. Just because someone has the capacity for love doesn’t mean they have the capacity for bravery. Why, when I was a young man I was in love with this woman, right? Most beautiful woman I ever met! And I mean that on a spiritual level – I mean, she wasn’t really much of a looker, but she was the sweetest human being I ever knew. But I was afraid.” He laughs, “Oh boy! Was I afraid. I’m probably the biggest coward of anybody I know. I wanted to be with her forever – but I never proposed.”

“Why not?”

“Too scared!” Marcoh tells him. “I couldn’t bring myself to do it. We had a great relationship, and I didn’t want that to change. Why take the risk and have things change?” He shakes his head, eyes distant, “I wish I had, though. It was a mistake I’ve always regretted. I was so afraid of what the future might hold that I didn’t want to let go of the present.”

Marcoh shifts himself in bed just a bit, so that he can better face Ed.

The old doctor continues, “I think, maybe, your Sophie is the same – she’s afraid of the future. That doesn’t mean that she doesn’t love you. I know,” he chuckles sadly, “That even after all this time, I still think about my girl – still wish that I could see her again.”

Ed has returned his gaze to his lap. “…I really do miss her. I never thought it possible to miss someone as much as I do her… And I know a little something about missing people.”

“Your brother?” Marcoh questions.

Ed nods. “And more than just him. Our father left us when we were young. And our mother died shortly thereafter.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“And everyone I ever knew growing up – they’re all on the Other Side.”

“Goodness,” Marcoh says, stunned (taking Ed’s words to mean ‘they’re all dead’). “Such tragedy. …And yet you’re still here, carrying on. You’re a lot stronger than I am, young man.”

Ed scoffs a little sadly, “What good is strength if it doesn’t protect you from pain?”

Marcoh starts to hunker back down into his bed. “Well, what can I say? Life is a struggle. If you stop struggling, then you’re not really living, are you? For now you just gotta struggle with being
here. Then struggle to get outta here. Then struggle to find your love. Then struggle with her to
convince her to marry you.” Marcoh gives a long yawn, while saying, “If you never even try,
there’s no possibility of winning, am I right?”

Ed manages a smile. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

Marcoh’s voice trails off as he sleepily says, “You can’t just lie down…”

Ed holds in a laugh. Says the guy lying down. “Good night, Dr. Marcoh.”

The only response Ed receives is a snore.

* 

The dry autumn air has been blown away by the wet winter winds, the ice cold rain drenching the
grounds, freezing what little grass is left into place where it stands on the muddy earth.
Commander Geizsler’s pet goats have been moved to a small barn where they can be kept warm on
their piles of soft hay, away from the gusts and chill of the outdoors.

And though the work hangar is dry, the large spacious room is not very warm with its bare brick
walling and concrete floors. Next to the catwalk that stretches through the rafters, where the guards
slowly patrol the area, the high windows rattle noisily as the winds whip past, drops of rain
splattering in an unending procession, creating a constant drumming hum off the top of the metal
sheet roofing of the building.

Langelans sneezes as he shivers, holding his arms close to himself for warmth. “I think I am
coming down with something…”

Vigne lazily swirls his pencil across his notepad, “I could really go for a nice hot chowder right
about now.”

Van Leeuwen smiles dreamily, “That sounds heavenly!” he says as he imagines his belly filled
with the warmth of comfort food. “A nice, thick corn chowder…”

“Corn?” Vigne says disdainfully. “Feh! Non, non, non. A Chaudier de Poisson – that is a good
meal.”

“Ew, fish?” Van Leeuwen says, sticking out his tongue. “No way! It’s got to be chicken and corn!
Or even potato and corn!”

“Corn is for feeding the chickens!”

“Yeah – and you eat it with chicken! Double the corn flavor!”

Holgerson holds his stomach with a whine. “Vennligst slutte å snakke om mat…”

“What’d he say?” Ed asks.

Dr. Marcoh says, “I don’t speak Norwegian, but I’m going to guess that he said he’s hungry.”

The door opens noisily as enters Commander Geizsler in a huff.

“Uh-oh,” says Holgerson.

“He does not look very happy,” mutters Langelans.
“Dr. Marcoh!” Geizsler says as he approaches the old man. “Where is your progress report? It was due on my desk this morning!”

Marcoh wrings his hands (less out of fear and more to try to warm up). “Commander Geizsler, sir, we’ve been working very hard—”

“Hardly working is more like it!” the commander retorts. “I thought you’d have corrected the guidance system by now! I thought it was a simple fix!”

Marcoh defends his team, “I am sorry, sir. I know it’s taking longer than expected. But it seems every time we fix one problem, we end up creating another.”

“How difficult can it possibly be?” the large man asks, crossing his arms as he stares sternly down at the doctor.

“It’s a very complex system,” the doctor tells him. “And it’s hard to know whether or not our calculations are correct when you never let us run any field tests anymore.”

“Hmph!” Geizsler tells him, “Everyone down in the village got nervous after they heard the explosion from the last test we ran. It’s not much of a secret base if people start snooping around wondering what’s causing all the noise.”

Ed pipes up, “We don’t need to run the test with live bombs, Commander. We can run trials with empty shells. All we really need to test is whether or not our new systems can control the flight path.”

Commander Geizsler holds a hand to his chin as he nods. “Hmm, hmm. Yes, that would be simple enough. Plus we’d save on ammunition. And while we’re on the subject of flight,” the commander says, “I’ve been thinking – why can’t we combine this radio-control with our anti-gravity aircraft?”

“What?” Ed asks as a general air of displeasure seems to overtake the team. “I thought we gave up on that?”

“But wouldn’t it be something?” The commander asks as his normal cheeriness starts to return to him. “We could send surveillance planes to take photos of enemy territory without worrying about our pilots getting blown to pieces. It’d be great!”

Ed sighs, “Uh, well, I guess that’d be all right.”

“And I think I’ve figured out how we can get it off the ground. Get it? Hohoho!”

“…Hilarious, sir…”

“Some boys at our other science base have been working on a thing called ‘nuclear fission’. Ever head of it?”

Ed resists the urge to gulp, “A little bit…”

Commander Geizsler begins describing it excitedly: “They’re saying it’s possible to pull an amazing amount of energy out of just a tiny bit of rock, simply by splitting its atoms apart. Think of it – one nuclear engine could be worth a hundred or more gas-run engines.”

“Sir!” Ed quickly blurts, doing what he can to turn the conversation away from anything nuclear, “It’s the end of the month. I’m supposed to receive a new picture.”
“What? Oh…” Commander Geiszler says rather flatly, looking a little annoyed as he digs into his shirt pocket. “I don’t really feel you deserve this since you haven’t delivered anything in a while. But a deal’s a deal.” He produces from his pocket a new picture of Sophie which he then hands to Ed.

Ed takes it from him, looking it over as he says, “Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me so quickly,” Geiszler says to him, Ed looking up from the photo as the commander continues. “As I said, a deal is a deal. And the deal was that you build us weapons and your girlfriend remains safe. You haven’t really been holding up your end of the bargain very well these past few months.”

Dr. Marcoh quickly steps in, nervously, “That’s my fault, sir! Admittedly I’ve been too controlling of the project-”

“Well then stop being so controlling,” Geiszler warns the old man. He looks at Ed and says, “If I don’t see some results real soon, I may be inclined to send word to have your little tart there hurt in some way.”

Ed furrows his brow, saying surprisingly loudly, “You wouldn’t!”

“Don’t test me!” Geiszler threatens. He points at the blackboard and shouts at them all, “Get back to work!”

And with that, the commander turns heel and leaves.

Marcoh lets out a breath. And then he turns to Ed. “Edward, what have I told you? Don’t do anything to make him angry.”

Ed shoves his picture in his pocket before he should accidentally crush it in his clenched fist. “Well it makes me angry! Using people as leverage against others – it’s sick! And what’s more-!” he says as he digs his hand back into his pocket, pulling out one of the several pictures he keeps with him, “Who’s taking these pictures of her anyway? Where is she that she looks so upset all the time?”

He passes the picture to Marcoh, Ed still ranting:

“That’s not a real smile, I can tell. She’s not happy wherever she is. She’s not really free at all – they’re still holding her hostage somewhere, I know it.”

Marcoh himself sadly frowns as he looks at the picture of the unhappy young lady. “Maybe she’s not happy because she knows that you’re still being held hostage.”

Ed looks down at the ground angrily, and quietly he takes the picture as Marcoh hands it back to him, the doctor saying,

“I understand you’re upset, Edward. And I also understand that you’re not too keen to give the Nazis any sort of advantage in battle-.”

“You got that right,” Ed grumbles.

Marcoh resists a smile at Ed’s childishness. “But it’s a balancing act. You’ve got to deliver just enough to keep them happy, but not too much lest they actually win this nonsensical war of theirs.”

Langelans, who is not too far away, reaches over and pokes the doctor with the eraser end of his pencil, the young man saying quietly, “Careful how loud you talk, Doctor.”
The doctor’s eyes rove the room, checking the positions of the guards on the catwalk and whether or not the soldiers are listening in. They appear not to be…

Marcoh continues, his voice lower now, “It’s basically tit for tat. If you want them to give you something, you’ve got to give them something.”

Ed gives a half-hearted laugh. “I wonder what kind of weapon I’d have to build for them to let me give her a phone call…”

“But you understand what I’m saying,” Marcoh says. “It’s about time we stop fiddling around and actually work on the missile. I’m surprised we’ve been able to put it off for this long without the commander getting suspicious.”

Ed, the picture still in his hand, finally puts it back into his pocket, he smiling as he says, “Let’s just be glad Geizsler has no idea how radio waves work. Otherwise he’d have already figured out it’s as simple as running the guidance system on a different frequency…”

Langelans now pokes Ed with his pencil, “Shh!”

* 

The days pass, each a dull blur of dark and rainy skies. When the sun actually does manage to peek through, the team takes their rockets, stripped of their warheads, out for some test drives – this time intentionally switching through the different frequencies on their handheld radios to test whether or not there is any interference with the rocket.

And though the commander is gladdened by the results, every day he pushes them more and more, wanting to see the rockets go further, and further, and further!

“There’s only so far we can send it,” Ed says practically as the team stands around the chalkboard, going over calculations. “If you can’t see the missile through your binoculars, then how will you know where to guide it?”

“Get stronger binoculars,” Van Leeuwen remarks.

“Let the commander worry about things like that,” Langelans says. “Let’s just get this next missile up and running before he yells at us again.”

Holgersen nods.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ed unenthusiastically responds as he wipes away a few numbers from the board.

It’s all the same. Every day it’s the same routine: waking up, eating chewy pancakes with nasty goat milk, standing in this refrigerator of a workshop, listening to the commander shout at them about whatever’s got his beard twisted this day…

…And for what?

What’s the point?

Is there even a point anymore?

Ed later stands by himself off in a corner, looking over his pictures, a total of six so far. …She does look happy in them… Maybe the sadness he’s seeing in them is just his own sadness… The sadness of not seeing her…
The sadness of not seeing Al…

Though Ed has not seen Sophie in person, at least he’s seen her face. Al, on the other hand…

Ed tucks his pictures back in his pocket, returning to his duties, the team now having shifted their focus from solely the flight of the missile to protecting it from AA barrage, Vigne and Van Leeuwen in one of their usual arguments:

“I am telling you!” Vigne rambles off, “That armure is too heavy! She will plummet like a rock!”

“Then we just come up with a stronger fuel,” Van Leeuwen defends, “Something to get it off the ground. Am I right, Holgerson?”

“Jeg antar…”

Langelans ponders aloud, “What was that one thing the commander was talking about? Something about a nuclear engine?”

Dr. Marcoh clears his throat. “Um, yes. I’ve looked into it a little myself, and honestly it’s much too explosive. It would never work…”

Van Leeuwen rests his hand on his hip. “Well if it’s an explosion the commander wants why not fit the nuclear part as the war head? That’d make a heck of a boom.”

Dr. Marcoh glares at him angrily. “Idiot!” he whispers. “Don’t let them hear you say that! Do you want to give them good ideas on how to kill people?”

Van Leeuwen holds up a hand defensively, genuinely apologizing, “Sorry, doctor. I was just thinking out loud…”

Ed has rejoined the group, not having really heard any of this. “So, bring me up to speed. Where are we?”

Vigne flattens out the blueprints that keep trying to roll up on themselves. “I was saying that the commandant is frustrating me to no end. He wants us to make missiles that will fly for miles and miles, but then he wants us to pile on so much armor that we will be lucky if we get the rocket off of the ground.”

Ed smirks, a bit of his old smugness shining through. “How ‘bout we skip the armor and just tie a great big bow on top? Maybe the enemy will mistake it for a Christmas present and not shoot it down.”

The group gives a laugh, Langelans joyfully adding, “No, no, we paint it up to look like Julemanden – how do you say, Santa Claus? – and his sleigh. And THEN we launch it at them! No one would shoot down Santa Claus!”

Everyone laughs, momentarily feeling their worries slip away as talk of yuletide and merriment overtake them. And for a while, even if only for a little while, Ed feels like he’s with family – two siblings who constantly bicker, two siblings who get along just fine, and that one old uncle who has a hundred stories and wisdoms tucked under his belt.

Marcoh once more clears his throat, bringing everyone back around to reality. ”We’d better get back to work before the commander shows up…”
The rest of the winter passes rather uneventfully, say for the commander being kind enough to give them Christmas and New Year’s day off. And though with every new rocket the team achieves greater and greater distance of long-range control, the more Ed begins to wonder-

“Where exactly are we trying to hit, Commander?”

Geizsler brushes him off as he passes Ed up in the hall, “That’s none of your concern, Elric. You merely build the weapons – I worry about where they will go.”

Ed follows him regardless, “I only ask because the longer that missile flies in the air, the sooner someone’s going to notice it and shoot it down.”

“That’s the point of the armor, is it not?”

“Well, yes, but still – you lose the element of surprise.”

Geizsler suddenly comes to a halt, turning around excitedly. “By Jove, you’ve just given me a great idea!”

“I have?”

He grabs Ed by the shoulders, “It’s even better then anti-gravity! Invisibility!”

Oh great, Ed thinks to himself. I should have just kept my big mouth shut…

“Think of it, Elric!” Geizsler says with his usual gusto. “Invisible missiles! Invisible planes! Invisible TANKS! Hoho! They’ll never see it coming! Literally!”

Ed tries to refocus the conversation: “Sir, I was just going to suggest that we launch the rockets into the stratosphere. They’d disappear from sight that way. Then we can use the guidance system to target their landing…”

“I like my idea better,” Geizsler says as he happily slaps his fist into his palm. “Tell you what – Make me an invisible missile and I just might consider bringing your girlfriend for a visit or something!”

A sentence that should have made him happy just makes Ed’s heart sink further. Invisibility is impossible. Why even tease me with a thing like that? “That’s all right, sir,” Ed says as he feigns a cheery air, “I appreciate the thought and all, but it’s probably not a good idea to have her around guys who haven’t seen a girl in who knows how long.”

Geizsler gives a big laugh. “You’re probably right about that! I suppose those pictures will just have to do you.” He then says, “Well, it’s almost the end of the month. You want a new one, don’t you? Back to work, chop-chop!”

“Yes, sir,” Edward salutes, and he turns and starts to make his way back to the workshop, Geizsler calling after him,

“And consider mixing the invisibility with my Automated Tank idea! It’d be marvelous!”

…Do I really care for a new picture? Ed starts to wonder to himself, spending yet another sleepless night staring at the ceiling.
What am I even doing anymore?

The pictures aren’t really that motivating anymore.

They’re nice and all… But they’re just pictures. I can’t hold her. I can’t touch her. I can’t kiss her… At this point she’s nothing more than a picture.

Ed rolls over onto his side, staring at the blank wall next to him.

I mean, yeah, she really exists… But I’m never going to see her ever again, he thinks somberly. So what’s the point? These pictures aren’t rewards anymore. They’re torture! He clenches his fist. Looking at them just makes things worse! It reminds me of how lonely and miserable I am! They remind me of the freedom I gave up.

Freedom I gave up in order to make sure that she stayed safe…

He loosens his fist, feeling his muscles unstiffen.

I sure hope she appreciates it… I hope I’m not wasting my time in here for nothing…

Is she really waiting for me? Is she waiting like she said she would? What if she’s moved on? What if she’s found someone new?

…No, she said she would wait…

Where is she? Did she go back to her house in the country? …Did she go out to Groningen to live with her grandmother? I only ever met the lady once, but she sure seemed like a firecracker. Ed smiles firmly. Even if the Nazis have taken over the Netherlands, I bet ol’ Grandma hasn’t let it get to her. That’s just what Sophie needs – somebody strong to keep life normal for her…

Matthijs would make sure of that, too. He’s never let anything bad happen to her. It must just be a big brother thing to be over-protective of little siblings…

His mind turns to Alphonse…

…I did the right thing by not telling him that Sophie was on the docks. He’d have gotten off the boat with me, and then we’d both be stuck in this mess… At least he’s safe…

…God, I hope he’s safe…

*

The end of the month comes and goes, and as promised Ed receives yet another picture of Sophie – this one of her standing outside a tall wall with an intricate bar gate in it. Through the gate Ed can see that inside the walls is a pleasant-looking garden, a nice tall water fountain with beautiful patterning on it situated in the center.

Ed sits on the edge of his bed as he looks at this picture and smiles. I wonder if Sophie’s going to plant flowers when spring hits in a couple of weeks, he thinks to himself. It looks like she’s got a nice big garden to work with now…

His face starts to fall. …This isn’t their house. Nor is it Matthijs’s house. Does that mean that both of those places got hit during the bombings? Are they not there anymore?

Dr. Marcoh enters the room, the portly fellow heaving a heavy breath. “I hope they fix the lift
soon. My old knees can’t take much more of those stairs.”

Ed looks up with a somber smile and says, “Who knows? Maybe you can get a couple days off if you can’t get downstairs.”

Dr. Marcoh chuckles as he takes a seat on his own bed. “There’s an idea. But knowing Commander Geizsler, he’d just carry me down the stairs to prove his own strength.”

Ed gives a smarmy smile. “Maybe we can invent an anti-gravity belt so you can hover off the ground.”

They both laugh, Marcoh commenting, “That’s actually pretty good motivation. I might have to get to work on that.”

Ed picks up the pile of pictures he has sitting beside him as he says, “Yeah. They sure know how to keep us motivated, don’t they?”

“May I see them?” Marcoh asks in reference to the pictures.

“Sure,” Ed agrees, passing them across the small expanse between the beds.

Marcoh takes the photos as they’re handed to him, and he looks them over one by one, a soft smile on his face. “That’s quite the girl you’ve got there.”

“Thanks,” Ed says, somewhere between happy and sad. “But don’t be fooled – I know she looks dainty and all that, but she’s pretty fiery.”

Marcoh continues flipping through the pictures – but as he reaches the latest one, suddenly his eyes go wide. “Hang on a minute.”

“What is it?” Ed asks.

“I know this place.”

Ed sits up straight. “What?”

“I recognize this street,” Marcoh tells him. “It’s not far from my own house. I pass by it all the time on my way to work. Or I did – you know what I mean.”

Ed hops up from his bed and joins Marcoh at his side, both of them looking at the picture together.

Marcoh points at the picture – “This water fountain here, inside the gate – I remember it. I remember thinking that one of these days I’d a get a fountain just like it for my own yard.”

Ed turns to him, asking, “And you know where this house is?”

“Yes,” Marcoh says. “And no. I can’t recall the street name, but I know it when I pass it. Get me a pencil – I’ll draw it out.”

Ed hops off the bed and quickly goes to the nearby desk, grabbing a pencil and passing it back to Marcoh, the old doctor turning the photograph over and starting to drag the pencil across its back.

“If my house is here,” he says, drawing a little star in the bottom right-hand corner, then drawing some lines out from it, “And this is my street, I go this way, then this way, and then, right here, on the right-hand side – it’s the house on this corner here.” He hands the little map to Ed.
Ed stares intently at the map, his eyes shaking. “But if she’s here… I know where she is now. She’s in Berlin. I can go find her like I promised her.”

“Well she might not be there forever,” Marcoh says as he pulls himself up off of the bed. “The sooner you get moving, the more likely she’ll still be there.”

Ed looks up from the photo. “Wait, you mean break out?”

“Of course,” the doctor says as he starts to pull the sheets off of his bed. “And the sooner the better.”

“Now wait a minute,” Ed says, trepid. “Aren’t we getting a little ahead of ourselves? We need to plan this out.”

“I have planned it out,” Marcoh says, as he finishes tying a couple of bedsheets together.

“You have?”

Marcoh’s shoulder’s fall as he quietly sets the knotted sheets back down onto the bed. He is silent for a moment before he finally says, “Do you remember what I was saying to you before, about me being a coward? …I’ve had an escape plan for months. But I’ve never had the guts to go through with it.”

The doctor leaves his bedside and walks over to the desk. He pulls it, just a little ways away from the window, and then he reaches behind it, pulling something out. He walks back over to Ed and hands the large folded paper to him.

“What is this?” Ed asks as he unfolds it.

“It’s a map,” Marcoh tells him. “I stole it out of Commander Geizsler’s office. The base’s coordinates are marked there. As soon as I got out, I was going to use that to help me get to the sea.”

Ed manages a chuckle as he looks over the map, “For being a coward, that sure was gutsy of you to steal this from the commander.”

Marcoh gives a shamed smile. “Yes, I suppose it was. Though I’ve never been able to work up the nerve to climb out the window and cross the grounds. I fear they’ll spot me while I’m still trying to get up the steps of the perimeter walls.”

Ed folds the map back up, “We can make it if we’re quiet enough.”

Marcoh shakes his head. “No. You don’t need an old man like me slowing you down.”

“I can’t just leave you here!”

“It’s all right. Besides,” Marcoh says with a glint in his eye. “Someone’s got to lead the radio-control project.” He slyly winks. “There are an awful lot of bugs in the system. It just might take years before those missiles are ever ready for a successful strike – you know what I’m saying?”

Ed smiles, understanding. “Just don’t make it too obvious, all right?”

Marcoh nods. “Of course not…”

Ed’s eyes drift back down to the map drawn on the back of the photo in his hand. Marcoh’s address scribbled in the opposite corner. “So all I’ve got to do is find your house. And then I can find this
house."

Marcoh nods, adding, “If my house isn’t occupied at all, you can stay there. Take what you need. There’s a secret compartment in one of the kitchen drawers. If nobody’s taken it, there should still be some money tucked away in there.”

“That’s all right,” Ed politely declines, “I can survive without money.”

Marcoh chuckles, “Take it. It’s not doing me any good in here. And while I’m thinking about it – here, change your coat.” Marcoh lifts his heavy, old unused jacket from its place on the back of the chair. “They’ll be looking for someone in a long brown coat.”

“Good thinking,” Ed says as he takes off his coat, passing it to the doctor as Marcoh hands him the jacket. Ed slips it over his arms. “Oh, wow. This is a lot warmer.” He laughs. “Wish I had known – I’d have been wearing this down in the workshop.”

Marcoh smiles, “It’s probably best you didn’t. Otherwise they might recognize you in it now.”

Ed picks up the folded map off the desk and places it in the interior jacket pocket. “…I can’t thank you enough, Dr. Marcoh. You don’t know what this means to me.”

Marcoh smiles. “I can guess. I’d hate for you to be like me and spend the rest of your life wondering ‘What if?’ You’ve got the opportunity – seize it. Go get the girl you love.”

Both of them stand there quietly for a moment, Dr. Marcoh finally saying,

“Well what are we standing around, for? Let’s get these bedsheets tied together!”

*

The air is dry and frigid though the ground glistens with dew. The window slowly slides open, the wooden frame shifting and creaking against itself as, quietly, Edward tries to open it without being noticed.

He pokes his head out and looks around: The grounds are clear, though there are soldiers patrolling the perimeter walls, their stark silhouettes just barely visible in the pale light of the near-to-full moon.

Ed looks up to the sky, waiting for the heavy grey clouds to roll across the moon and hide the land in darkness. And as they do, Ed quickly tosses the makeshift rope of bedsheets out the window, the cloth tumbling down, dangling just a few feet from the ground.

He crawls out the window, holding tightly to the sheets as Marcoh says quietly to him, “Godspeed, young man.”

Ed gives a determined smile and nods. And then he starts to move down. But before he does, Marcoh adds,

“And Edward-”

Ed looks up into the old man’s sad and pleading face.

Marcoh says, “Don’t forget about us…”

Suddenly, Ed feels a little twinge in his chest, for now he realizes that as so many times before, he is about to leave family behind.
Marcoh continues quietly, “When you do get out of the country, let people know what’s going on here. Send some help back this way.”

Ed nods. “I will.”

And with that, Ed slides down the bedsheet rope.

Marcoh watches as Ed hops off as he reaches the ground. The old doctor then unties the sheet from his bedpost and sends the rope down to Ed before softly closing the window.

Ed wraps the rope around his chest as he looks around the grounds, making sure no soldiers have since appeared. He has to move quickly before the clouds roll away from the moon and the whole base lights up again.

Ed dashes across the open grounds, trying not to let his footsteps be too heavy, careful as to not step on an icy patch of grass lest he slip and fall.

Quickly he looks over his shoulder. So far so good. No soldiers-

He looks back forward, and he immediately halts, having to swing his arms back and forth to keep his balance. Three more steps and he’d have toppled right over a goat!

The animal looks up at him, chewed up cud hanging from the side of its mouth.

Ed angrily glares at it. What are you doing out of the barn? You’re going to draw attention to us! he thinks, looking straight at the bell that dangles from the beast’s neck.

As gently as he can, so as not to startle the goat, Ed pets it on the head, the goat allowing this as it returns to eating grass, its bell mutedly clanking. Ed grabs the bell to muffle its sound, and as quietly as he can, he undoes the leather collar and slips it off the goat’s neck, the goat trotting off, now annoyed by Ed’s presence.

Ed holds fast to the clapper as he lays the bell down on the ground. As he stands back up, he quickly looks around again. …It’s quiet… And dark. But the light is now moving towards him, the moon beginning to peek out from behind the clouds.

Ed dashes towards the wall, reaching the bottom of the steps. Though the grass seemed mostly dry, the stony steps however have a thin coating of ice on them, half melted and gritty with salt and sand that has been thrown on top.

Ed hugs close to the wall, hunching over lowly as he crawls his way up the staircase towards the top of the perimeter. He can feel his clothes and the bedsheets starting to absorb the moisture from the stairs, the bottom of his jacket starting to get soaked through, the side of his waist growing cold. The light is growing ever closer to him.

He gets close to the top of the stairs and he has to stop, for walking right past him is a guard, walking away from him, thank heavens. As the guard walks away, his back to Ed, the soldier looks to his left and then to his right, never back. Ed cautiously stands up, making his way onto the wall. And gingerly, he backs away from the guard, Ed then turning to go the opposite direction, towards the corner guard tower.

The large brick box of a guard tower has two open-air doors to access the walls, and two open-air windows that look out onto the forest below. Ed crouches down low again as he approaches the door, and carefully he peers inside. There is a guard, of course – but he is gazing out at the still woods before him…
Quietly. Quietly now…

Ed sneaks into the guard tower. He gets right behind the guard. And quickly he covers the man’s mouth to keep him from crying out as Ed decks him in the head, knocking the soldier out.

Ed quickly catches the guard before he should fall and make noise, and he quietly lays him in the corner. Ed then looks over his shoulders, both left and right. No one’s coming, but still he must move quickly. Every second spent is another risk taken.

He unwraps the bedsheet rope from around his chest, looking to the open window.

*Damn,* he thinks. *There’s nothing to tie the bedsheet to here. How am I supposed to get down?*

He looks over at the knocked out guard and ponders…

*He’d make a decent weight… Yeah, but what if he wakes up? He could drag me back in…*

Ed then spies the guard’s rifle. He goes over and picks it up, taking it back over and propping the rifle upright against the window, both ends of the rifle touching wall.

*It’s risky,* Ed thinks, *But it might work.*

He hurriedly ties one end of the rope around the rifle, tying the knot tight. He then ties the other end around his waist. He crawls through the small window, sitting on the window ledge as he holds the rifle in hand.

Then, using both hands, Ed puts the rifle on the inside of the window, right at its corner so that the rifle crosses the small 90-degree angle and touches the surrounding walls. He pulls back on the rifle to make sure that it’s solid.

*Here goes nothing…*

Ed slowly swings himself off the window ledge, propping his feet up against the outside wall. He moves one of his hands down the rifle barrel towards the rope, and he takes a firm hold of the sheet. Then he does the same with the other hand. The line holds taut.

With still breath, Ed begins to repel down the perimeter wall.

Closer. Closer now. Closer and closer the ground gets. Until – oof! Ed comes to a stop, the ground still a good six feet away from him. The line’s run out!

*Darn it! I guess I’m jumping the rest of the way…*

Ed reaches for the knot around him, the bedsheet digging into his waist and ribs. He slips his fingers in between the knot, pulling the sheet apart, and as he does, the bedsheet immediately falls slack, and Ed rolls out of the sheet and hard onto the ground.

He winces as he hits, hearing too that the rifle above his head has fallen onto the floor of the guard tower.

“What was that?” he’s sure he’s heard another guard say.

Ed scrambles to his feet, running off into the woods.

*Which way is town?* he quickly thinks. *I think I’m heading uphill right now. I’ve got to go the other way!*
Staying in the cover of the trees, Ed turns and starts to run downhill, heading for the little village.

On the perimeter wall, a guard, flashlight in hand, is heading towards where he heard the sound come from. He sees something moving below him.

“Don’t move!” he shouts as he swings his light down. And then he is perplexed.

“What is it?” his buddy in the opposite guard tower asks.

The man with the flashlight laughs. “It’s one of the goats! He’s up on the steps licking up all the salt!”

“Well stop him or else those steps’ll freeze over!”

The guard makes his way down the steps, taking the goat by his horn, leading him along. “Come on. Back to the barn with you.”

*

The cobblestone streets of the little village are deserted, naught but the moonlight as their only companion. Ed peers out from behind a house to make sure the coast is clear. And then he dashes across the street, ducking into the shadows of another little nearby cottage.

A short corral fence denotes the front of the house from the garden, Ed hopping over the small wooden structure to get into the back yard. The vegetable boxes are bare. There’s no food to be had here. More importantly though – there are clothes that have been left out on the clothesline. Just what Ed needs.

While still in the shadows near the cottage, he sizes up each of the clothes available – which looks his size, his build… And then quickly Ed runs straight for the clothesline, snatching a shirt and some trousers, pulling them from their wooden pins as he runs without stop, straight to the next patch of darkness behind a small shed.

He waits, catching his breath, as he listens in on the silence, listening for any sort of movement, whether or not anyone has heard him… There is nothing.

He pokes his head out from behind the shed, looking around, and he spots its door – there is no lock on it – just a light wooden beam across the front of the door.

Small town folk are far too trusting…

Ed leaves his place in the shadows, stolen clothes slung over his should as he gently lifts the wooden beam, quietly laying it down on the ground and shoving it through the grass back into the shadows. He then slowly opens the door, tiptoeing into the shed.

It’s much darker in here than it is outside, and it takes Ed’s eyes a while to adjust to the darkness, he in the meanwhile unbuttoning his vest and shirt, removing them and replacing them with the shirt from the clothesline. He then changes his pants.

I’ve got to change my appearance, he reaffirms to himself. It’ll be harder for them to find me if I look different…

He picks up his heavy jacket, pulling it over his new shirt, being careful to make sure the large folded map does not fall out from the interior pocket. He then picks up his old pants, pulling all of his pictures of Sophie out of the pocket and placing them in his new trouser pocket. He leaves his
clothes in a heap on the floor.

*I’ve got to find someplace to dump these…*

Ed scans the interior of the shed, seeing what he can see there in the darkness. He spies a pair of work gloves and a hunting knife.

*Those’ll come in handy.*

He takes the work gloves off the shelf, putting them on his hands to hide his automail, the rest of it hidden under the long-sleeved jacket. He then plucks the knife from its place on the wall, but before he puts it in his pocket, Ed pauses, looking at his ponytail which hangs over his shoulder, lying on his chest.

…*Better cut my hair, too. They’ll be looking for someone with long hair…*

With his free hand, Ed lifts up his ponytail, and placing the hunting knife at the base of his hair-tie, Ed starts to saw through his long blond locks, shearing them short. He tosses the fallen hair in with his clothes, picking up the bundle.

He then cracks open the door, just barely, peeking out into the frosty night. No one but the stars outside. Ed slides out of the shed, closing the door behind him. He sets his clothes aside momentarily, so he can pick up the wooden beam and put it back in its proper place. Then he picks up his bundle and quietly, cautiously, continues along his way, off through the back streets of the tiny town.

The village at his hindquarters and nothing but trees surrounding him, Ed stops at the base of a barren bush.

*I’ll bury the clothes here, he thinks. I’d rather burn them and dispose of them entirely. But a fire will just draw attention.*

He removes the glove from his right hand, and using his automail hand, Ed begins digging away at the frozen, rock-hard ground, removing rocks and pebbles and roots that get in his way. Once deep enough, the hole is filled with Ed’s old clothes, and Ed scoops the dirt back on top, patting it all down.

He stands back up, staring at the barely discernable pile.

*There’s no time to waste.*

He looks forward at the forest terrain ahead of him, the invisible horizon in the distance hidden behind the thick of trees.

*I’m coming, Sophie.*

“WHERE THE HELL IS HE?!” Geizsler thunders, swiping his huge hand across the lab table, crashing beakers onto the floor. “YOU KNOW AND YOU’RE NOT TELLING ME!”

Marcoh cowers before the large officer, but still he says, “I swear, Commander Geizsler! I thought he got up early for breakfast! I didn’t think anything of it when he wasn’t in bed this morning!”

Though they are not in on it, the others back Marcoh up. “It’s true, Commander!” Langelans
agrees. “You want to be first in line or else the pancakes are chewy!”

“Shut up!” Geizsler turns on the young lab assistant. “No one’s asking you!” He returns his attention to the doctor. “Now I’m gonna ask you again – Where is Elric?!”

Marcoh wrings his hands, looking down at the floor. “…Honestly, sir, I don’t know. If Edward did escape, I’m not sure where he’d run to… Well, aside from England.”

“England?” The commander raises an eyebrow over his sharp gaze.

Marcoh covers his mouth as if he’s said something wrong. “Nothing.”

“What about England?” the commander pries.

Marcoh is quiet at first, but then he says, “Well… Edward talked about his brother a lot. And I mean a lot. Said he’s in England right now. If I had to venture a guess, I’d say that’s where Ed is headed.”

A lieutenant at Geizsler’s side flips through a folder in his hands. He then looks up at the commander, saying lowly, “Sir – This info matches up with Commander Reistrom’s report. The Elrics were on their way to England when he cut this one off at the docks.”

“Is that so?” Geizsler mumbles while he strokes his beard, eyeing Marcoh skeptically. Well, Elric can’t be going after his girlfriend, he thinks. He has no idea where she is… Geizsler turns to his lieutenant. “Round up a squad. Send them out west and scan the forest. He can’t have gotten far,” the commander orders, already starting to leave the room, ordering further, “Send out word that any boats heading for Britain are to be detained.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant complies, following at the commander’s heels.

The science team is left there quaking, Dr. Marcoh’s knees knocking before he finally starts to teeter over, Langelans catching him.

“Doctor! Are you all right?”

Marcoh places a hand on the tabletop to prop himself upright again, through he is still visibly shaky. “That was terrifying…”

The team converges on him, Van Leeuwen asking in a hushed tone, “Where is Elric? Did he really escape?”

“Like I said,” the old doctor answers, pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe his brow, “I don’t know. Wherever he is, I hope he’s all right.”

A guard on the catwalk calls down to them, “Enough chit-chat! Get back to work.”

The team begins to go their separate ways, back to their duties, poor Langelans searching for the broom and dustpan to clean up the shattered beakers.

Vigne is about to return to his drawing board when Dr. Marcoh stops him: “Vigne, a moment?”

Vigne turns around. “Yes?”

Dr. Marcoh produces a small slip of paper from his pocket. “I was hoping you could look over this chemical equation for me.”
“Chemical?” Vigne squints his eyes, confused. “That is Holgerson’s job.”

“Oh I know,” Marcoh says assuredly. “I just thought you might like to take a look at it. It’s what Ed’s working on.”

Vigne tilts his head, but then shrugs, taking the paper from the doctor and looking it over, the equation reading: #s 16 + 79 + 23 + e +73 + 32

Vigne raises his eyebrow, walking over to Holgerson. “Holgerson, can you make any sense of this?”

Holgerson looks at the paper as it’s handed to him, he looking only slightly less confused than Vigne. “Numre? Atomnummer?”

He looks over at a small chart on his workbench – the periodic table of elements – and very quickly, as if second nature, Holgerson picks out the elements off the chart in a flash.

He passes the paper back to Vigne. “Dette?”

Vigne looks at what Holgerson has written, and cannot believe his eyes. The paper now reads: S Au V e Ta Ge

Vigne looks over, “Dr. Marcoh, sir. You said this is what Elric is working on?”

Marcoh nods, “Yes. But if that equation’s no good, then by all means, get rid of it.”

Vigne smiles, tears growing in his eyes.

Van Leeuwen notices this. “Hey. You all right, Vigne?”

Vigne wipes his eyes. “I’m fine. I’ll tell you later…”

Walking. It’s what he knows: walking – moving forward. Forward is the only direction that matters right now.

He’ll walk, and he’ll walk, and he’ll walk.

Ed won’t stop until he gets where he’s going – to Berlin. To Sophie.

She’s there, he tells himself fervently. I’m coming for you, Sophie.

Living in the woods – it’s no different than living on the island as a child: hunting, trapping, building shelter where possible; even avoiding enemies – the only difference is this time, instead of Mason in a mask, these are real enemies, people who want to kill him.

But he’ll fight. He’ll fight them all if he has to.

Surely they’ve noticed his absence by now and have sent out an all-points-bulletin on him. Best to stay away from the roads and the towns. Best to stay in the woods and just keep heading east.

East to Berlin.

Ed stares intently at the campfire before him while he roasts the small mouse he’s caught. It’s meager, but it’s meat. It’ll keep him going.
Keep him going on his way to Berlin. Right into the heart of Nazi Germany.

For four days he’s traveled. Four days of hiking in the cold, slushy weather. Four sunrises he’s seen. And now, as the fourth sunset begins, Ed gazes at the large city before him. He’s made it.

Berlin.

He knows it is. He’s seen it twice before, both times when he came to visit Fritz Lang. Surely he too has fled the country by this point. He won’t be of much help. Meaning Ed has no one to turn to. Though he does have somewhere to go – to Marcoh’s house.

Find Marcoh’s house.

Find Sophie.

Dark storm clouds begin to roll in, ever so slowly. Whether they bring rain or snow is yet to be seen.

Ed quietly walks along the busy sidewalks, trying to remain calm and casual, trying not to do anything at all to stand out or draw attention to himself. The people pass right by him, paying him no mind. The cars zoom up and down the roads. The street lamps come to life.

A policeman stands on a street corner, keeping watch.

Ed ducks into a back alleyway, heading the other direction.

The storm clouds begin to open up, slowly at first, a soft trickle of water misting from above. And then, as the minutes pass, more and more drizzle begins to come.

Ed holds the picture close to his body, using his hand to protect the pencil-drawn map from the rain. It’s hard to see, for the rain has extinguished the light of burning sun. He looks from Marcoh’s writing to the number plate attached to the house. The addresses match.

This is it. Ed can feel his arm and leg grow warm as his blood pumps. I’m almost there.

Ed turns around and faces the street before him. This is Marcoh’s street. He goes this way on his way to work, Ed follows the line on the map. Then this way, he takes a turn at the next corner. And then…

Ed looks up the street. There is an intersection. And on the right-hand side of the street, on the very corner, there is a large house, with a tall outer wall surrounding its grounds, a sleek, shiny black car parked out front.

Ed runs up the sidewalk, sprinting his way towards the house, his boots splashing through the puddles that gather on the concrete as the rain begins pouring harder and harder. He slows down as he approaches the wall, looking through the bar gate.

Inside the walls is a garden. In the center of the garden is the intricately patterned water fountain, its sides now overflowing with rainwater.

Ed looks up at the large house before him. The lights are on inside. Someone’s home.

…Best not to go right up to the front door… If they are looking for him, they know he’s going to come here. What if there are guards inside? Best to slip in quietly, through the back maybe…

Ed rounds the corner of the wall, making his way to the other side of the house.
The wall gives way, connecting directly to the house itself, and Ed finds himself in a back alley, the back side of the house not looking near as prestigious as the front, but instead more like the backside of an old apartment building.

A single electric lantern flickers above a doorway, a servant’s entrance perhaps. Hanging over the doorway too are wind-chimes, made of thinly cut shell, clinking and clattering softly as only every so often does a wind actually sweep past through the downpour.

Beside the door is an empty flowerbed, the wood rotted from disuse, the soil slopping through the cracks of the box in muddy plops onto the cobblestone street. Above the flowerbox is a window, somewhat high up, though not too high. Should Ed stand up on his tiptoes, maybe, just maybe, he might be able to look in.

Carefully, though. There is light coming through this window – soft, warm light.

Ed quietly sneaks past the closed back door, being careful to avoid the short stairs that jut out from the back of the building. He stands before the flowerbox, reaching his hands up to the high window, and even on tiptoes, he can’t see in, for the flowerbox prevents him from getting close.

He looks around, blinking against the onslaught of ice cold showers that tumble over his body, catching on his eyelashes, hitting him in the eyes. Ed squints through the dimly lit alley. Sitting against the wall is a wooden crate. He walks over and starts to pick it up but is startled as a gray cat dashes out of the box and into the chilly night.

Ed stands stock still for a moment, almost certain that someone will have heard that… But there is no movement from the house.

He moves the crate from the wall to in front of the flowerbox, and Ed climbs on top of the crate. Cautiously, he rests his fingers on the edge of the brick window sill, the shell wind-chimes timidly clattering. And cautiously, Ed lifts himself to the window, he able to hear the sound of laughter arising from inside the house.

Ed looks in through the windowpane – and his eyes go wide as he feels his breath leave him:

There she is. There is Sophie – sitting beside Reistrom, both of them smiling and laughing, happy. And not just her – but Matthijs is there too! And Sophie’s grandmother, and another fellow who Ed’s not even sure who this is. All of them, sitting before a table lain with dishes upon dishes of rich foods and warm candlelight, a shimmering chandelier above their heads, Sophie dressed in fine clothes, decorated in expensive jewelry.

And Reistrom – he holds her hand. And he looks happy. It’s not that same creepy, evil smile that Ed was used to seeing. This was a genuinely happy smile.

And Sophie. She’s smiling back at him, everyone laughing so hard their eyes are shut tight.

The ice cold rain washes over Edward’s body, he frozen to his spot, numb. Slowly he lowers himself down from his tiptoes, back down flat on his feet as he stands on top of the box silently. His hands slide off the window sill and flop down to his side, his arms dangling there, his shoulders drooping.

He turns and hops down off of the box, the puddles of bitter cold water splashing from under his boots and onto his pant legs, soaking him through, even moreso than he already is. He stands there, silently, staring at the drenched cobblestone below for a moment.

…And then Ed starts walking.
...At that moment... he starts doing the only thing he can think of... He starts walking... That’s the only thing that’s ever made sense to him... walking... moving forward... that’s all that matters...

Walking. It’s what he knows: walking – moving forward. Forward is the only direction that matters right now.

He’ll walk...

...and he’ll walk

...and he’ll walk...

...

He walks all the way back to Marcoh’s house, the lights here nonexistent, the doors and windows all boarded up.

Again, Ed thinks it best to enter through the back door lest anybody see him.

But does it really matter anymore?...

He goes to the back door, this too boarded up. He jiggles the door handle, testing it. The door does not budge.

So Ed kicks the door in.

...He should have just kicked down the other door, too... Why didn’t he? ...Why didn’t he just kick down their door and go in there and punch him in the face and sweep her off her feet and run out with her?

...Because she sure doesn’t look like she needs rescuing...

Inside, it is dry. Not warm. But at least it’s dry.

He enters the house, closing the door behind him, finding himself in the kitchen.

It’s silent in here.

There is no laughter here.

He leans with his back against the door for a long time, hanging his head.

... ...She’s happy...

He pushes off from the door, making his way through the mostly empty kitchen. There is not much here – the cupboards appear to have been cleaned out, the drawers emptied of their silverware. Ed glances into one drawer, seeing nothing but an old book of matches that was overlooked hiding way in the back. Absently, he picks up the forlorn little book and carries it out with him as he makes his way into the living room.

Everything is bare – only missing dust and scuff marks on the floor denoting where furniture had once been and had clearly since been stolen. Wire hangs from the walls where paintings once hung. Even the iron grate from the fireplace appears to have been ripped straight out of the stone.

Ed numbly shuffles his way over to the fireplace, and slowly he leans down, reaching his hand out
to the floor to help himself down as he gets down on his knees, tucking his legs up under himself as he sits down on the cold, bare floor, resting his arm across his leg, matchbook still in hand.

With his other hand, Ed reaches into his pocket, pulling out his pictures of Sophie, Marcoh’s hand-drawn map on top. …Ed doesn’t even look at the pictures.

…It was true… He really had just imagined that sad look in her eyes. He was just seeing his own sadness… She’s not sad… She’s happy… with him.

Ed sets the pictures aside. He lifts the small book of matches, folding back the flap and plucking out one of the thin, feeble sticks from its place, turning the book over and rapidly striking the red head across the rough sandpapery strip.

With a hissing sound the match lights up, its distinct smell flittering through the air.

Ed reaches over, setting down the book of matches and instead picking up the pile of pictures. He lifts them up, holding them above the lit match, the fire lapping at the edges of the paper – just barely at first, and then the fire catches a good hold, crawling its way up and up and up the photo paper.

Ed holds them there momentarily, just watching as the fire begins to glow brighter and brighter, the light beginning to fill up the cold, empty room. And then he tosses the burning mass into the empty fireplace, tiny sparks rising and quickly dying in midair. He tosses what’s left of the still-lit match in as well, the glowing little stick trying to hold onto dear life before it becomes nothing more than an ember.

The paper begins to curl up onto itself, wispy white smoke arising up to the chimney flue.

Someone might see the smoke. They might smell it.

…It doesn’t matter.

Nothing matters anymore…

Red-hot streaks blaze along the edges of the pictures, eating away at the black and white scenes, the flowers, the dresses, the smiles…

…The not-forced smiles…

Ed slowly leans to his side, sliding out his arm and resting his head on top of it. He lies there quietly on the floor, watching as the last nine months of his life go up in smoke, listening to the deluge of rain that falls upon the rooftop, echoing through the cold, empty halls…

…Lying down…

…That’s all he wants to do right now… He’s tired… He’s tired of struggling… He’s tired of moving…

…But he’s got to… he’s just got to move on… Move on… Move on with his life… Move onto somewhere new… Someone new… Move on just like she did…

Ed sighs.

*

The grey clouds of the night have given way to the dull blue skies of day, the birds leaving their
nests to try to find some food, winter berries perhaps, on the otherwise barren foliage.

He can eat on the train, Ed figures. That is if there’s any money leftover after he buys his train ticket.

He’s not even sure of where he wants to go. Anywhere but here…

People bustle through the station, some carrying their luggage in hand, others having their luggage pushed along on a trolley by an attendant. Ed has no luggage with him. He has nothing anymore.

All he has are the clothes on his back and a bit of cash in his pocket. Nothing more.

There are policemen everywhere, stationed every few yards or so, eyeing the crowd for any would-be pickpockets and such. The police might recognize him. They might pick him up.

Who cares…

Ed waits in line like everybody else. He buys a ticket, like everybody else. He gets on the train, like everybody else.

This line ends in Bremen. Where to from there? Who knows…

All Ed knows is that it’s away from here; that the train will move forward, and it will take him with it.

Ed sits in his seat with his head leaning against the window, his eyes dead forward on the empty seat in front of him. …That’s where Al used to sit most times…

…He’s out there somewhere, Al…

At least Ed hopes he is… He’s not sure what he’d do if he wasn’t… He’s not sure how he even made it through the night… cold, and alone…

…What would have happened if he had just burst the door down last night? Would Sophie have wanted to come with him? Would Reistrom have just shot him on sight?

…Maybe it’d have been better if he did…

No.

He can’t die.

Al’s still out there.

Al needs him.

*I’m coming, Al.*

The train sounds it whistle and begins to chug, slowly hulking forward, picking up speed a little bit at a time.

The people on the platform begin to pass him by, Ed not even taking notice of any of them, the crowd slowly becoming one big colorful blur. The train whistle screeches again, as shrill as a lady scream.

The platform disappears from sight, giving way to the large dun rocks and pebbles that line the
tracks and ties, Berlin station being left behind, Berlin being left behind…

Forever.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Reviews:

QueenCari1129 chapter 23 . Jan 20

really enjoying the villain. Well written :D
House of the Waiting Woman

Chapter Summary

Trigger warnings: abuse trigger warning; rape trigger warning; suicide trigger warning; depression trigger warning; stockholm syndrome trigger warning (if that's even a trigger)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fullmetal After opening [WITH LYRICS] 鋼の錬金術師 見えない世界 ポルノグラフィティ from Castiel Winchester on Vimeo.
Click-click. Click-click. The crutches echo noisily off the bare concrete walls as Sophie makes her way through the halls of the prison complex, being escorted by one of the guards who ushers her towards the open double-doors.

The sunshine streams through, growing closer to her – the first time she’ll have seen it in three weeks. As she passes through the open portal, Sophie looks around, gaining her bearings. Yards away, there is a solid steel front gate, a military truck parked in front of it.

But that’s not where she’s going, for the guard gently nudges her towards her left, and Sophie looks over and sees a car sitting there, another guard and an officer standing beside it. This must be her car, then.

Sophie begins walking, dragging her crutches along with her, the gravel-covered concrete out here a little harder to navigate than the bare floors of the hall.

The officer, a young man with dirty blond hair, looks over as the scuffling noise grows closer to him – and he does a double-take upon seeing her, he then giving an ample smile.

“Well, well!” he says as the lady in the red dress approaches. “I wasn’t told they kept pretty women on the premises.” He opens the backseat door, holding it open for her. “For you, little lady.”

Sophie gives a timid, “Thank you,” as she continues to approach, trying to ignore the man’s flirtatious ways (though admittedly, it is nice to see someone give her a genuine smile finally).

But it’s gone all too soon as Reistrom comes along, aggressively glaring at the young man. “Back off, Armbruster!”

Armbruster holds up his hands defensively, “Okay! Geeze…” And he walks away from the vehicle.

Reistrom now holds the door open for Sophie, giving her his calm, unnerving smile. “After you.”

Sophie stops where she stands, staring at the open car door, the empty seat waiting for her. But then she turns back, looking over her shoulder towards the double-doors of the complex.

There is Edward. He’s looking straight back at her, and their eyes lock. They are both quiet, unmoving for a moment. And then Ed gives her a solemn nod.
Sophie lets out a slow sigh. And sadly, quietly, she turns back towards the car, and she slides her way inside, pulling her crutches in after her, careful as to how much pressure she puts on her knee when doing all this.

Reistrom closes the door. And then she hears him knock on the roof of the car. The driver, in the seat in front of her, turns the key in the ignition, and the vehicle rumbles to life. With the shifting of a gear, they begin slowly inching towards the front gates, the guards standing before them moving the large steel plates back so that the car may pass.

Sophie looks over her shoulder once more, looking out through the back window, she catching just one last vain glimpse of Ed before the guards pull the large gate doors closed again.

And then he is gone.

Sophie turns back forward in her seat, resting her hands in her lap as she heaves a quiet sigh. … Where to now? she thinks. Does the driver even know where to take me?

She gets ready to speak up when the driver makes a right and, instead of heading straight up the road that’s in front of them, begins making his way around the base wall.

“…Um, excuse me,” Sophie asks, “Where are we going?”

“Back gate,” the driver tells her. “Don’t worry, it’ll only be a minute.”

Sophie cocks her head to the side. Did he forget something? And then almost immediately, her heart begins to pound. Oh god! They’re not going to put me back in there, are they? This isn’t some trick they’re playing on me and Edward, is it?!

The car draws to a halt by the back gate, and the driver puts the car in park for a moment. All is quiet, and as the seconds stretch on, Sophie gets more and more nervous. Why are they here?

And then the small back gate to the compound opens, Commander Reistrom exiting. He’s coming towards the car!

Please go away, Sophie thinks frantically. Please go away!

But he does not, for he is now opening the door of the seat next to her, and he’s climbing in.

“C-Commander,” Sophie nervously asks, watching him as he pulls the car door closed. “What are you doing?”

“I’ve already told you – call me Johann,” Reistrom smiles at her, though it’s not his usual condescending smile – yet it still makes Sophie shiver. He says to her, “Every young lady requires an escort. I want to make sure you arrive safely.”

Sophie stutters, “Th-that’s very kind of you, sir, but I’ll be all right.”

“Nonsense,” he says, turning up his nose at her, looking not unlike a spoiled feline. “You’re in no state to be traveling alone. You’re still injured, after all. As a matter of fact,” he leans forward a little in his seat, “Driver! To the nearest hospital!” He looks back over at Sophie. “We should probably get that leg looked at.”

Sophie can feel her stomach knotting.

The driver shifts the car into gear, and the vehicle takes off down the back road.
The faint smell of bleach water and sterile equipment fills the whole of the building, mixed with the odd and yet distinct air of illness.

Sophie shifts on the cold exam table, she coughing shortly as the parchment paper beneath her kicks up a little dust or particulate – whatever it is. Sophie is unsure. All she knows is that its newspaperish smell always coats her throat and nostrils, making it hard to breathe.

The doctor sticks the x-ray up onto the light-box, flipping a switch and illuminating the thin sheet. He hums, nodding as he looks it over. “Hmm. Yes. That is quiet a nasty fracture. You’re lucky your horse went for your leg and not your ribcage.”

Reistrom politely responds, “Yes, we are thankful for that.”

The doctor removes his glasses, wiping the lenses on his long white sleeve. “Still. I wish you had come in sooner. Your leg may never be the same again, even after treatment. Nonetheless,” he puts his glasses back on, “Let’s get a proper cast put on that, shall we? After that, I’ll write up a prescription for some antibiotics to stave off an infection.” He chuckles, “Some pain pills wouldn’t hurt either, I bet.”

Sophie gives half a smile. “That would be nice…”

An attendant holds open the door of the hospital as Reistrom rolls Sophie out in a wheelchair, her casted leg propped out in front of her. The driver has already brought the car around to the front of the hospital, and he now opens the backseat door, kindly waiting as the commander helps his passenger into the car.

Sophie has to readjust herself, unused to having her leg completely straight, finding it a little hard to sit in the back seat as it is not all that spacious.

The attendant is taking the wheelchair back into the hospital as Reistrom climbs in on the other side of the car.

Sophie’s eyes cautiously drift over to him. “…So… how long before we get to Amsterdam?”

“Amsterdam?” he questions. “That’s an active war zone. Why would you want to go there?”

“War zone?” She turns her head full towards him. “I thought you said it’s already been taken over?”

“It has,” he says to her. “But there is still a handful of petulant rebel fighters running through the streets, shooting up the place. It’s not safe there.”

“Oh…”

“You’d be better off coming with me to Berlin.”


“Why it’s the safest place in the world right now. It’s an absolute stronghold. Our enemies can’t penetrate our frontlines – there’s no way they’ll ever make it to Berlin.”

Sophie wants to shout. Yet she controls herself, just barely squeaking out, “…You said I was free
to go home.”

“And you will, someday. Just not right now, not when it’s still so dangerous. What if you’re in the market and a firefight breaks out? Do you really think you could get out of the line of fire in time? With that leg of yours?”

Sophie looks down at the floor of the car. “Well…”

He places his hand on top of hers, and Sophie instinctively jumps a little, moving her hand back just ever so slightly. He takes no notice of this, saying, “Come with me, Sophie. Come where it’s safe.”

She looks up at him, into his cool, unnaturally blue eyes.

He speaks once more, “At least until your leg is healed. It’s the smart thing to do.”

“Well… I guess that’d be all right.”

He nods, with a smile like a content fox. “I promise, I’ll see to it that you’re quite comfortable.”

The car rumbles through the streets of the sprawling neighborhood, Sophie looking out the window watching the large, well-to-do houses as they pass her by. Every lot is a manor is in its own right, with large front yards filled with sculpture and statuary, flowers and bird baths.

She looks out the windshield and sees that they’re coming up on a house on the corner – a large house with a tall outer wall surrounding its grounds, and a sleek, black car already parked out front.

The car draws to a rest outside, and as the driver puts the vehicle in park, Reistrom gets out of the car, making his way around the back to the other door, and opening it for Sophie, helping her out.

Now in front of the house, Sophie can see it better through its large intricate bar gate. The ground floor of the two-story house has large bay windows that stretch out over the long patio looking out into the lush garden. On the top floor, there are two small balconies that each stretch out from sizeable French doors.

Reistrom momentarily pokes his head into the car, saying to the driver, “You are to return to base.”

The driver nods, and after Reistrom shuts the car door, the driver takes off.

Reistrom turns around and approaches the gate, opening it up, and politely he holds out a hand towards the house as if to say to Sophie, ‘After you.’

Sophie carries herself through, swinging on her crutches a step at a time. And she looks around at the lush garden she finds herself in, a variety of flowering bushes blooming all around her, a nice tall water fountain with beautiful patterning on it situated in the center of the grounds.

“It’s beautiful,” Sophie admits.

“Thank you,” Reistrom says as he walks behind her.

“I’d love to come out here and do some gardening when I feel better.”

Reistrom laughs at her. “Why would you want to do that? I have a gardener. No need to filthy yourself.”
A silhouette appears on the other side of the oval stained-glass window that is in the oaken front door, and the handle turns as the door swings inward. An older lady, a portly little thing with a white apron over her black dress, steps out onto the front porch. “Master Johann, you’re home. Welcome back, sir.”

“Thank you, Frieda,” Reistrom responds.

The maid looks at Sophie, though she still addresses him, “And who is your friend? I wasn’t aware we were expecting company.”

Reistrom places a hand on Sophie’s back (she tensing up a bit), and he says, “This is Sophie. She’ll be staying with us for a while.”

Sophie politely greets, “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Welcome, young miss.” She curtsies. “I’m Frieda, the maid. If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to ask and I’ll take care of it for you.”

“Thank you.”

Reistrom looks to Sophie, “Let’s get you upstairs. I’m sure you’re tired and could use a nap.”

Frieda holds the front door wide open as Reistrom helps Sophie up the front stoop, the old maid saying, “I’ll get lunch started while you rest. I just bought some fresh lemons if you’d like a nice lemonade to go with it.”

He nods. “That sounds lovely, Frieda, thank you.”

Sophie looks around at the interior of the house, its inside seeming just as grand as the outside. Before her is a stairwell with an ornate carpet running down its middle and fine polished wooden railing on its sides. The carpeting topples over the final stair and stretches out to its left, filling the whole of the parlor that it runs into, wall to wall. And the walls – they are a light, creamy yellow, with a bas relief patterning that repeats itself every few feet. There is a large fireplace covered in a white façade – is it plaster? Is it wooden? Sophie cannot tell. She thinks perhaps it is stone, but even the most crafted of sculptors could not possibly carve in as much detail as there is on it.

On either side of the fireplace hang paintings – operatic scenes straight out of Wagner, with dark backgrounds and high contrasting foregrounds, not unlike a painting by Rembrandt. In front of the fireplace sits a long coffee table, short of stature and dark of wood. A high-backed arm chair sits at its head. At its other end, a two-seat sofa. And in front of it, facing the fireplace, is a long divan, each of these furniture pieces covered in a smooth light red upholstery, offsetting their dark rosewood framing.

At the very end of the room is a white door, on swinging hinges. To where it leads, Sophie does not know.

The whole scene is lit by the sunlight that streams in through the large bay window.

To her right, Sophie is unsure of what room she is looking at. Is it a study? A smoking room? (Perhaps not. She doesn’t recall seeing the commander smoke at all). Unlike the room opposite of it, this room has polished wooden flooring as opposed to carpeting. In fact, the whole room appears to be made of polished wood, the paneling here much stronger, bolder looking with its sharp angular designs. There is a fireplace in here too, its exterior covered in a beautifully designed wooden façade, its grain dark and deep. The wooden chairs here are short-backed and wide-seated, upholstered in green velvet.
Snugly placed against the wall is a bookcase, and sitting next to that is a globe on a tall, well-crafted, lathed pole with a wide brass base to keep it steady. This room, too, is lit by its bay window, echoing the parlor across the hall – but all in all, the room is inherently darker, the rich wood absorbing most of the light.

Reistrom looks at the maid, “Frieda, if you’d be so kind as to hold onto Sophie’s crutches while I carry her up the stairs.”

Sophie gives a short, nervous wave. “No, that’s all right. You don’t have to do that.”

He turns his head just slightly towards her, looking down on her, “As if you can get up the stairs on your own.”

Frieda moves her hands just slightly out towards the crutches, slowly as if trying one’s best not to scare a timid rabbit. “Come now, dear, it’s all right.”

No sense in arguing, Sophie supposes. It will be a lot faster this way. She puts her weight on her left leg, relinquishing control of the crutches as she hands them off to Frieda who takes them with both of her hands. Reistrom scoops Sophie up into his arms, much as before, with one hand underneath her legs and the other cradling her back, and he proceeds to take her up the stairs, Frieda following at his heels.

At the top of the stairs, he takes a left, rounding the railing and walking down a hall, down to its end to a nice white-painted door. Frieda slips past him, getting in front so that she can open the door for them.

“Thank you, Frieda.”

“Of course, sir.”

He says to Sophie, “This is the guest room, where you’ll be staying.”

The scene looks like something from a doll house. This room is also a light yellow, much like the parlor right below it – only here instead of the bas relief paneling, the walls are covered in a decorative wallpaper, long white stripes running up the wall – and instead of the bay window, the large French doors of the balcony light the space.

All the furniture in this room appears to be white – a white, cushy armchair with a small white table in front of it; a white bookcase up against the wall across from it; And next to the bookcase, a wide, white wardrobe cabinet.

Against the far wall of the room is a vanity, this too painted white wood, a large oval mirror situated in its middle, the glass trimmed all the way around its edges with yet more ornate wood. Before the vanity is a tall, round cushioned stool, covered on all sides by white cloth and lace.

Opposite the vanity is a four-poster bed, white lace curtains hanging from the white-washed posts. A small lamp sits on top of the little bedside table.

Reistrom sets Sophie on top of the bed, the soft cushioning beneath her giving way to her weight, Sophie almost certain she should sink in and be lost within the mattress.

He stands upright after having set her down, and he smiles at her. “There. Comfortable?”

Sophie shifts on the bed top, squishing her hands against the softness of the mattress. “It sure beats the last place I slept.”
He chuckles, “Quite. Frieda will bring you lunch when it’s ready. Until then, try to get some rest.”

“Uh… okay…”

And with that, he leaves the room. Frieda sets the crutches against the armchair and follows her master out, closing the door behind them both. And Sophie is left alone.

She just can’t seem to stop looking around, trying to take in everything she sees, unsure really what to make of all this, unsure of how she feels – or even how she’s supposed to feel for that matter.

*It could be worse, I suppose,* she thinks to herself. Not but a few hours ago, she woke up lying on a cold, hard, filthy concrete floor in a dark, dank, dirty little cell. Now suddenly she finds herself surrounded by this finery.

And yet there is something… off. Though this place is rather homey looking, everything smells… too clean, if that even makes sense. Everything smells like it’s brand new – brand new sheets, brand new wood frame. This place is too crisp, too clean-cut. It doesn’t feel lived-in, like there’s actually been people in here.

*I doubt he gets very many guests. I wonder why,* she thinks sarcastically.

She lays back on the bed, pulling her bad leg up with her. *At least I have a cast now,* she thinks as she lays her hands on her stomach, sinking into the mattress as the soft cotton sheets hug the edges of her body. She’s never felt a bed so soft before. And not until laying upon it has Sophie realized just how truly tired she is.

*A nap is exactly what I need… I’ll just sleep off the next couple of weeks… sleep until my cast is ready to come off…*

She yawns, stretching her arms.

*…Sleep until this war is over…*

Her very bones seem to grow heavy, sinking further into the mattress as she begins to feel worry creep up over her skin.

*…Why did it have to come to this? …Why did a war have to break out? Why did –*

She stares at the ceiling, just barely seeing it through the lacy canopy that hangs above her head.

*…Why did they have to take Ed away from me?*

She cries, though there are no tears. She whines, though there is no sound. She is too exhausted, and her body has given up on her for the time being. All it wants to do is sleep. All it wants to do is pass out, black out, and make all the world disappear.

*…*

*Knock, knock.*

A short gasp escapes her lips as Sophie startles awake, slightly confused as to where she is, as the grogginess still clouds her mind. She gently sits up, looking around, gaining her bearings.

The gentle knocking comes again, followed by Frieda’s voice on the other side of the door, “Miss Sophie – lunch is ready.”
“Oh,” Sophie says, getting her wits about her as she sits up. “Yes, please come in.”

The door opens and Frieda enters, carrying a tray in her hand, leaving the door open behind her. “Hope you had a pleasant sleep, miss. They say that’s the best thing for a healing body is a nice good sleep.”

Sophie rubs her eye a little. “Uh… yeah, I guess. I didn’t even realize I fell asleep.”

The old maid chuckles, “Well that’s the way with sleep, isn’t it? You never realize you’ve slept until you wake up. Now then,” she nods down to the tray, “Would you like to eat in the chair or in bed?”

Sophie looks from the chair to the bed and back again. “The chair is probably better. It’ll force me to get up and get some exercise. Last thing I want to do is become bedridden.”

“I know what you mean,” Frieda responds as she sets the tray down on the small table, then picking up Sophie’s crutches and crossing to the bed with them. “That’s why I’m still working, even at my age. Got to keep moving lest these old bones grow lazy.”

Sophie takes the crutches as they’re handed to her, “Thank you,” and she lifts herself out of bed, Frieda helping her to stand. And then together, they make their way to the chair, Frieda now helping Sophie to slowly slide down from the crutches and into the seat.

“There you are, miss.” Frieda turns to the table, lifting the tray from it and gently placing it in Sophie’s lap. “A nice sauerbraten and some baby potatoes, with a tall glass of lemonade. Just what the doctor ordered.”

Sophie looks down at the food on her plate, the roasted beef and boiled potatoes giving off just the tiniest wisp of steam, the savoury smell lofting through the air towards her nose. Her stomach rumbles with anticipation. “It looks delicious.”

“I thought you might like it,” Frieda says gladly. “The master tells me food on the front lines isn’t very tasty at all.”

“Front lines?”

“Yes, that’s where he found you, isn’t it? Says you were lucky he came along when he did, else you might have had bombs dropping on your head.”

“Oh. Right…” Sophie catches the drift pretty quickly. *So this is the lie he’s told to her, is it? First he tells the doctor a horse stomped on my leg, now he’s telling her that he found me during a battle…*

“I’m sad to hear what’s happened to Amsterdam,” the old maid laments with her eyes downcast, hands in the pockets of her apron. “Really I am. Always wanted to go there but never had the time nor the money. But who knows?” she cheers up a bit, “Now that it’s a part of Germany, maybe rail prices’ll be cheaper do you figure?”

Sophie now downcasts her own eyes, “Yeah. I suppose so.”

She is silent for a moment, Frieda having left her side as the old maid begins busying herself with straightening up the bed.

But then Sophie looks over at her and asks, “Frieda… What exactly did Johann tell you about the bombings?”
Frieda responds, “He told me how you were trapped under that house beam. You poor dear! Said he knew it wasn’t his place to give aid to the enemy, but he felt so sorry for you he just couldn’t leave you stranded. You’re quite lucky he found you, miss.”

Sophie looks down at the ground as she mutters, “Yeah…”

“And I got to say,” Frieda adds, “It’s nice to see the young master take a shine to someone. Normally he’s as cold as ice he is.”

Sophie asks, “How long have you known him?”

Having properly finished tucking in the sheets, Frieda turns around, saying, “I’ve been here for ten years, ever since his family first came here to Berlin. His parents were such a lovely couple.”

“Where are they now?”

The old woman’s face falls slightly as she sadly reminisces, “Mr. Reistrom I’m sad to say was killed during a riot. He was on his way home when it broke out and he got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Trampled to death.”

“That’s terrible.”

“And poor Mrs. Reistrom – her heart just couldn’t take it. The doctor says it was pneumonia, but I know a broken heart when I see it. She followed him a year to the day.” Frieda’s expression becomes a bit sour as she nods at the door. “That’s when he gained control of the estate.”

“Johann, you mean.”

“Yes…” Frieda falls silent, looking over to the open door. She looks back over at Sophie but then quietly scurries over to the door, carefully closing it so as to not make any noise. Then she looks back over at Sophie, saying, hushed, “Now I shouldn’t be saying this; It’s not my place. But if you’re going to be staying here then I think you should know – the master can be a bit… strange.”

Sophie narrows her eyes a little, “Strange how?”

Frieda shakes her head a bit, “He’s always been a strange one, that one: poring over books all hours of the day and night, hardly ever talking to anyone – anyone aside from himself – always walking up and down the halls muttering odd things.” She shrugs, “You get used to it.” Then she tries to lighten the situation, “He actually hasn’t done it since he was a lad… but he still does it from time to time. I just thought that if you should come across him doing it, don’t disturb him, else he’ll be in a bad way.” Her voice grows grim. “He can go off, that one.”

Sophie clenches her hand, looking away. “Trust me. I know.”

Frieda crosses from the door to the chair, kindly patting Sophie on the shoulder. “I’m sorry if you’ve ever had to see Master Johann in a bad mood. He really can be quite charming when he wants to be.” She gives a little bit of a scoff, trying to disguise it as a laugh. “To guests anyway.”

A moment of awkward silence passes between the two women.

And then Frieda brings the subject back around to lunch, “Well, you must be famished. Go on, eat up.”

Sophie stares at the food half-heartedly for a moment. It does look very good, yet for some reason her appetite seems to have fled. Still, no sense in wasting what’s been made. She picks up her fork
and knife and cuts into the little hunk of roast beef before her, taking a bit and putting it into her mouth.

The taste is even better than she imagined – tangy and sour like apple cider vinegar, and yet sweet with a flavor she can’t quite place (raisins?). And the gravy – sweet and spicy, like ginger.

She’s had roast beef before, more times than she can remember – but now, having gone so long on meager scraps, on not but a single meal a day with a bland cup of water – knowing that just across the hall, Edward was being starved to death… She’s not sure what overtakes her as suddenly all at once emotion bubbles up within her, coming out through her eyes as she begins to cry.

Frieda is surprised. “Oh goodness! My lady, what’s wrong?”

Sophie tries to apologize, but all that comes out are more sobs as she covers her eyes with her hands.

“Oh, there, there,” Frieda begins rubbing Sophie on the back. “You’ve been through a lot recently, haven’t you? It’s okay. Everything’ll be all right.”

So much. So much has Sophie gone through recently – more than Frieda will ever know, more than she’d ever understand, more than Sophie can ever tell.

The afternoon passes, Sophie eventually managing to find some calm – or perhaps just flushing out enough pent up emotion that she’s calm-er – calm enough to have eaten the lunch that Frieda provided her with.

And after yet another nap, taken to let the food settle and process in her stomach, and taken simply because she felt so upset, Sophie awakens once more, feeling now just a bit more refreshed than before. It’s amazing what wonders a meal and a nap can work on one’s mood.

She sits up in bed, and she looks over at the large French doors, and, curious, she grabs her crutches and stands, making her way out onto the short little balcony.

She leans on the railing, putting her weight on her left leg, and she cranes her neck to look down at the garden below. It’s just as lovely from above as it is from ground level – and from way up here she can see that the flowering bushes are planted in sort of a wavy, zigzag pattern, like the ripples in a running river, washing over the yard with their fragrance.

She turns her eyes out towards the cityscape, gazing out over the sea of roofs that greets her. A few church towers spike up here and there, blocking out the rays of the sun as it begins to descend. Sunset is just beginning, for though the sky is still mostly blue, a tiny bit of orange is beginning to creep its way up the horizon, casting a glowing aura over the whole city.

It does not seem much unlike Amsterdam, say for the lack of canals cutting through every neighborhood…

Amsterdam… How are things there right now, she wonders. Are they good? Are they bad? And what’s worse – her little country home – that town is right on the border, right next door to Germany. They’re probably suffering the brunt of any action that’s happening. At least Amsterdam is far away, near to the sea…

Oh… but even then… What if there are German ships in the ports? What if there are cannons firing at the city?
No, that’s stupid. Reistrom… uh, Johann… told her that it’s only a handful of rebels. If anything, they’re all ground battles…

Sophie sighs. *I just hope no civilians get hurt.* Keep the war to the soldiers. Let the armies do what they will, but keep the people out of it. How many lives must be ruined just because politicians can’t get along?

What about Matthijs? Has he been hurt? Is he all right? His house didn’t get hit, did it? Is he even still in Amsterdam, or has he packed up and left for Groningen to help Uncle Herman care for Grandma?

And Grandma – how is she? Can her poor old heart take this kind of upset? Sophie inwardly laughs to herself. *Yeah, right. Any Nazis come knocking at her door, she’d run them off with her cane.* She laughs aloud. *We should just conscript all the grandmothers. Have them drag all the soldiers out by their ears…*

Her brief moment of amusement begins to fade… *Mom couldn’t wait to be a grandmother. Always pester me, ‘When am I going to get some grandkids? When are you going to get married?’ …* She sighs. *Oh, Mom… If only you and Dad could see what’s happened to the world… You’d understand why I don’t want to bring any children into it – always wondering where the food’s going to come from when there’s rationing and shortages… Always afraid they might get blown to bits on their way to school… Wondering if they’ll be kidnapped by soldiers –*

She puts a hand over her mouth, trying to stop the emotions that are trying to seep through. She removes her hand, taking in a deep breath and then letting it back out.

Tired of standing, she gathers her crutches and turns around and goes back inside, closing the French doors behind her, leaning back against them momentarily. What to do now?

She scans the room and spies the vanity. And, curious, she goes over to it. Carefully, she sits herself down on the cushiony stool before it, enjoying the feel of the lace covering against the back of her legs. She looks up, and is startled by what she sees in the mirror. This is the first time she’s seen her face in nearly a month, and not until now had she realized just how thin and pallid her face looks, how flat and oily her hair is as it limply hangs over her shoulders and down her back, down over the bright red, clean dress that she wears. She almost doesn’t recognize herself, for she does not look the same as she remembers.

She sighs, looking away, not wanting to look at herself any further. She looks instead to the little drawers of the vanity, stacked one on top of the other, curious as to what may lay inside. She opens one up, peering into it. It is empty. *Well this is the guest room. I guess it’s expected that guests will bring things with them and need somewhere to put it all.*

She checks all the drawers, out of sheer curiosity. Only one drawer has something in it – some sewing supplies: needles, thread, a thimble, and a two pairs of scissors – little ones for cutting thread, and regular sized ones for cutting cloth. Other than that, nothing exciting.

She closes the drawer, and then turns around on the stool to look at the rest of the room. Now what?

She looks over at the wardrobe on the other side of the bookcase. Is there anything in there, or is it empty, too? She gets back to her feet, hobbling her way over, and as she comes to a stop in front of the wardrobe, she again shifts her weight to her left foot, freeing her right hand to open the cabinet. As expected, it is empty.
The bookcase, on the other hand, is quite full, every shelf upon it stuffed tight with books. She tilts her head sideways, reading through the titles printed on the bindings: there is a Bible, there is a book called ‘The Toadstool’, and then one book in particular catches her eye – ‘The Edda: Old Norse Tales from the Golden Age of the Vikings’.

Norse tales? Huh. I wonder if this is where Johann heard all the stories that he was telling to me…

She plucks the book from the shelf – but she’s not entirely sure of how she’s going to get it back to the chair. She can’t hold it under her arm – the crutch is there. She can’t hold it in her hand – her hand is busy with the crutch.

“Augh!” she grumbles aloud, looking from the book to the chair and back again. “Well, here goes nothing.” Carefully, she lines up the book with the chair, and then gently tosses the hardback across the room, the volume threatening to bounce off the seat and onto the floor. But luckily, it lands back onto the cushion, coming to a rest, and Sophie breathes a sigh of relief.

She shuffles her way to the chair, and putting her weight on her left leg again, props her left crutch up against the chair in order to free her hand so that she may pick up the book. She then gingerly turns around, sliding her way down into the armchair.

“So,” she says aloud to herself, “What do we have here?”

She opens the book, flipping through the pages, seeing if anything interesting catches her eye – and indeed, something does: a drawing of a warrior standing in the mouth of some great beast as he takes his sword and cuts at the monster’s jaws. The text on the page opposite reads:

Odin's son goeth | to strife with the Wolf,--
Víðar, speeding | to meet the slaughter-beast;
The sword in his hand | to the heart he thrusteth
Of the fiend's offspring; avenged is his Father.

Huh. Wonder what that’s all about.

She flips through a few more pages, finding a list of gods, or Aesir as the book calls them. “Thor, Baldur, Njord. Freyr, Tyr, Bragi. Heimdall, Hoder, Víðar. Valí, Ullr, and Forseti. Huh – well, I’ve heard of a few of these. Otherwise, this is all just gibberish…”

And all through the evening, Sophie flips through the book, keeping herself amused with the stories therein.

The crickets outside chirp rhythmically under the veil of scattered stars that fill the warm summer sky.

And though the night is calm, and though her bed is soft, Sophie finds herself unable to sleep. She lays on her side, staring at her bedroom door, listening to the silence that fills the house, only the crickets outside making any sound.

…Edward…
Where is he? …Is he all right? Has he been given a real bed finally? They’re not still keeping him in a prison cell, are they?

No. He’s not in a prison anymore. He’s at some sort of science lab. That what’s Johann told her… Johann…

Sophie stares anxiously at the door… He’s not going to come in here, is he? …He would, wouldn’t he? Her heart begins to pound, the beat pulsing in even her hands and feet. She’s tempted to get up and scoot the armchair in front of the door, barring entry.

…But what if in the morning he tries to come in, to say good morning or something, and then he can’t get in? That might just make him mad.

And Sophie knows what happens when he gets mad…

She pulls her blanket in closer around herself as she curls up tight, still staring at the door.

* * *

Birds twitter in the trees outside, sunshine cascading through the windows of the house to light the new day.

Sophie’s eyes flit open. And she lies in bed silently.

…So it wasn’t a dream. She really is in this big, strange house.

A gentle knocking comes at the door, and Sophie pulls herself upright in bed. “Come in,” she calls. And as the door opens, she pulls her blanket up to her chest – for it is not Frieda but Johann entering the room, though Frieda does follow behind him, a tray of coffee and seeded breads in her hands.

“Good morning,” he greets Sophie. “Did you sleep well?”

“Uh,” Sophie calms down a little, setting the blanket back on her lap. “Yes, thank you.”

This is the same man who brought her here, right? For half a moment she should think him someone else, not only by his pleasant demeanor but also because this is the first time she’s seen him in civilian clothing – and the sight of him… confounds her, to say the least, for now he seems much less threatening somehow.

He stops by the armchair, laying his hand on top of its back, saying to Sophie, “I thought I’d join you for breakfast this morning.” He turns to Frieda and says, “Fetch the chair from my study, won’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” she says as she places the breakfast tray on the small table, and then leaves the room.

Sophie in the meanwhile is rising to her feet, Johann helping her to her armchair as Frieda returns with a high-backed wooden chair, its seat and back clad in brown leather.

Reistrom takes his seat, “Thank you, Frieda. That will be all.”

The maid curtsies and leaves.

They sit silently for a moment as Johann pours some cream into his coffee, Sophie quietly following suit.
Johann quizzically looks Sophie up and down. “Did you sleep in your clothes?” He hums, “Well I suppose you didn’t bring a suitcase with you, now did you? We’ll have to get you a nightgown.”

Sophie just barely speaks up, “Um… actually… I was going to ask… I have clothes… back home… If maybe you could send someone out there to bring a suitcase of clothes here.”

He shrugs as he stirs his coffee, “That’d take too long. Besides – this way you get some nice new clothes. You’d like that, wouldn’t you Sophie? Some nice new things to wear?”

“…Yes… Thank you…” she mutters, “It’s just… Well, don’t buy me too much. I don’t have that big of a closet.”

“We can always buy a bigger wardrobe.”

“I meant back home.”

He pauses for a moment. And then gives a lopsided smile, “…But of course.”

They both quietly take to drinking their coffee, and after a while he finally speaks again.

“How are you liking it here?”

“Oh. It’s nice.”

“I’m glad.”

“I really like the garden,” she genuinely comments. “I’d love to go down and get a better look at the flowers.”

“In due time,” he tells her. “It’s best if you stay indoors for the time being. We don’t want to risk you getting hurt going up and down those stairs, now do we?”

“I guess not,” she looks down, a little sadly.

Johann takes notice of this. So he suggests, “If it’s flowers you want, I can have some brought up to your room.”

This does brighten her up a bit. “Really?”

“But of course.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

“Um, garden aside… The doctor said it’ll be two weeks before my cast is ready to come off. Do I really have to stay upstairs the entire time?”

He chuckles, “The downstairs is really not much different than the upstairs. If you’re worried about being bored, you’ve got an entire case of books to keep you busy. Just be patient. You’ll be on your feet in no time.”

Sophie inwardly sighs
The day passes much akin to the last, spent sitting and reading until the sun is no longer in the sky.

Sophie has received a new nightgown, as promised, and though it is silky and pleasant-feeling on her skin, she can’t say the she enjoys how short it is, the hem just barely touching her knees. Oh well. She supposes that’s not so bad given that it is summer and it’s only going to get hotter and hotter – in which case the low-cut back and sleeveless design is probably quite practical. Besides, there is always the blanket to cover her up and keep her warm if she does get cold.

She lays on her side, looking out the windows of the balcony doors, looking out into the night, listening once more to the chirping of the crickets, wondering once more where Edward is and how he’s doing. Is he listening to the crickets as well? Is he still awake, same as she? …Is he thinking of her?

But her thoughts come to a halt as she hears the handle of her bedroom door turn, and she freezes over though her body is under the warm covers.

A slender shaft of light from the hall creeps its way across the floor and up the bed, over the blanket and up the wall, and then disappears as a silhouette overtakes it, blocking the light out, it disappearing entirely as the door is closed with a quiet click!

She knows who it is.

She knows, too, that Frieda has left for the evening and won’t return until morning. There’s no one here to call out to…

Sophie remains stock-still as she feels the covers being lifted, and then she feels the mattress shifting under his weight as he climbs into bed with her. She clutches the pillow apprehensively.

His arm comes over her waist as he scoots closer to her, she feeling his body against her own, knowing he wears no shirt, for she can feel his bare skin against her exposed back.

He buries his face into her soft shoulders, right at the base of the neck, and he traces his nose all the way up to the nape of her neck, breathing her in.

He kisses her near her ear, right at the corner of her chin, where her artery beats strongly.

He hums contentedly, sliding his hand over her silky gown, his roving fingers rising and falling across every curve and contour of her form.

Sophie closes her eyes tightly, holding her breath.

* *

And every night, Sophie lays awake, fearful of what may come, if this night will be as that night was, alone with him.

Every morning, Frieda brings her breakfast, none the wiser – though after a few days she begins to comment that perhaps they should get Sophie some better pillows, for the young miss’s eyes are looking bloodshot.

The week passes in a blur of books and tales, of meals and chit-chats, of fearful and sleepless nights.

Again this night she finds herself lying in bed wide awake, though the siren of sleep does beckon to her. She cannot wait until her cast comes off. The sooner the better. The sooner she can get out of
Suddenly there comes a sound, a shrill wailing, piercing through the night. Sophie shoots upright. “What is that?!?”

The light in the hall comes on and the door to her bedroom is opening, Johann rushing in. “Come on!” he says, scooping her up.

“What’s going on?!” Sophie frantically asks.

“It’s an air raid.”

“An air raid?!”

They round the stairwell railing and begin to descend the stairs. It’s just the same. They go into the parlor and he sets her down near the parlor bookcase, in the corner furthest from the window, closest to the stairs.

“It’s just the same,” she mutters.

Johann grabs the divan and pulls it to the corner to block them from the window.

“It’s all the same,” she squeaks, trying to hold back the tears.

He hops over the couch, and he wraps his arms around her, petting her head as he says, “Shh. Everything’s going to be all right,” Sophie all the meanwhile sitting there shivering and crying.

Minutes pass in dead silence.

There is nothing, not even the sound of an airplane.

Was it a false alarm, perhaps?

And then from somewhere in the distance, there comes a loud boom, followed by a rolling rumble.

And then all falls silent again.

They wait there and they wait there, huddled in the corner.

After a long while, Johann finally speaks. “Apparently the worst is over. Seems we can go back to bed now.”

Sophie shakes her head. “No! What if it’s not over? What if more planes show up?”

“The sirens have stopped. And I only heard the one bomb.”

“I don’t want to go back upstairs!”

“Calm down,” he chides. But as he looks into her deep, quivering brown eyes, he can’t help but give a defeated sigh. “Fine. We’ll stay down here.”

He helps her off the floor and onto the divan.

“Now lie down and get some sleep. I’ll stay here and keep watch, just in case.”

She lays on her side, her clenched fist close to her mouth, looking not unlike a babe sucking on its thumb. She watches him as he sits on the floor, watching her.
“I said go to sleep.”

She closes her eyes.

But sleep does not come, no matter how much time passes, for even when it seems as though the Sandman is about to succeed, the tiniest little noise startles Sophie awake, frightening her back into the waking world.

“Did you hear that?!” she asks as she bolts upright.

“You’re hearing things,” he says, frustration seething through his tone. “There’s nothing out there. Now go back to sleep.”

“I can’t sleep!” she weeps as she brings her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth in an agitated manner. “You told me it was safe! You said that no one would think to invade Berlin! Well they’re invading!”

“Sophie, one bomb an invasion does not make.”

“I want to go home! I want to go home and be with Ed and Al again! Like it used to be! Like it’s supposed to be!”

Reistrom lifts himself up from where he sits, getting up onto his knees as he approaches the divan. Quietly, but firmly, he grabs her by face, glaring into her eyes as her tears stream over his hands. He says to her, in a deep, dark voice, “You are never to talk about Elric. Ever. Do I make myself clear?”

Scared, Sophie nods.

“Now go to sleep.” He releases her.

She lays back down, curling back up, trying, trying to fall asleep, trying to ignore every knock and bump and creak she hears for the rest of that night.

The morning comes and the world has not been set on fire. Sophie sits on the spacious sill of the large bay window, looking outside, and indeed, everything appears to be just fine.

A ringing from the other room causes her to jump, and she feels foolish when she realizes it’s just the telephone.

Johann rises from where he sits in his armchair and exits the parlor, crossing the foyer to the lounge.

Sophie returns her attention to the world outside, and she sees that Frieda is coming up the walkway to the front porch. Sophie gets on her crutches to go meet her, and by the time she makes it to the foyer, Frieda is already opening the front door.

“Oh! Good morning, Miss Sophie! Good to see you up and about!”

“Good morning to you too, Frieda,” Sophie greets.

The old maid immediately delves into gossip, “Did you hear the sirens last night?” She shivers. “Ooh! I was shaking in my robes! My friend Hilda was telling me just this morning – says her mother lives on the north end of town, saw the whole thing! Just BOOM! The old factory up the
“Where else did they hit?” Sophie asks.

“I don’t know,” Frieda admits. “From the sound of it, only the old factory got blown up. I only heard the one explosion. What about you?”

Johann has left the lounge, arriving as he announces, “We only heard one as well.” He motions a hand at Sophie, “I kept trying to tell her that it was no big deal, that the worst was over, but she wouldn’t believe me. Cried all night like a fool.”

Frieda takes Sophie’s hand, patting it, “Oh, you poor dear.”

Johann makes no effort to cover the annoyance in his tone, “You’re here to make breakfast, not coddle her like a baby. Go on, before I dock your pay.”

“Yes, sir.” And Frieda crosses the parlor to the swinging door, disappearing into the kitchen.

* * *

This is the first time Sophie has been in the dining room. Though the room is actually not that wide, it feels spacious with its high ceiling, a sparkling chandelier hanging over the long polished wooden table.

She stares at the plate of breakfast before her, not really feeling all that hungry.

“Your food’s getting cold,” Johann says as he sits in the seat across from her. “Eat up.”

Sophie holds in a sigh as she lifts her silverware.

Johann adds, “You’ll want to finish breakfast before the photographer arrives.”

She looks up from her plate. “Photographer?”

“Yes. To take your picture, of course.”

“Why do I need my picture taken?”

“You’re not going to be here forever, right? I should like something to remember you by.”

Sophie now tries to resist a smile. While she doesn’t really like the idea of him having anything of her to have as a keepsake, at the same time, she’d give him a hundred pictures if it meant being a hundred miles away from him for the rest of her life.

* *

Frieda brings down Sophie’s day clothes from upstairs, and Sophie changes in the dining room, away from prying eyes (Master Johann thoroughly annoyed that the old lady has shooed him out).

But he must answer the door anyway, for the photographer has arrived. Hands are shaken, pleasantries are exchanged, and Johann leads the photographer into the parlor.

Sophie arrives on the scene, and the photographer merrily greets her: “Ah! This is who I shall be taking a picture of?” He takes her by the hand as she approaches. “My camera may melt! You are simply too hot!”
Sophie giggles, but Johann presses, “Can we get on with this?”

The man wags his finger, “You cannot rush art. Now then,” he swings around to look at the interior of the parlor. “Where to take the picture…”

He roams the room, looking it up and down, hand to chin as he hums, nodding and shaking his head. Finally he stops in front of the bookcase.

“Perfect! Now then, if you’d be so kind as to slide that chair this way.”

Johann does as asked, the photographer in the meanwhile positioning his tripod.

He looks through his view-piece, giving a displeased. “Hmm. Hmm. No. No good. Too big. Do you have a smaller chair perhaps.”

Johann sighs, sliding the chair back to where it was. Then he goes to the lounge and comes back with one of the green-clad chairs.

The photographer looks through his view-piece again. “Hmm. No, that’s even worse. Too wide.”

Johann grumbles, picking up the chair and taking it back. He then tramps up the stairs, marching back down with his chair from the study. He grumpily sets it on the floor in front of the bookcase.

“Ahh! Yes! Much better!” The photographer looks at Sophie. “You may take your seat now.”

She does so, though still having a cast, she has to set her leg out in front of her, it looking a bit odd. Still, the photographer proceeds.

“Smile for the camera!”

Though she is tired, though she has had a long night (nay, a long week) and doesn’t really feel like smiling, Sophie does so anyway.

SNAP! A bright light flashes and the photographer says, “All done!”

The last time Sophie had her picture taken… it was at the fair… with Ed and Al… She looks down to the floor, hiding her face before any tears should be seen.

Johann is shaking hands with the photographer, “Thank you so much for coming.”

“It was nothing.”

Johann nods to the camera and asks, “How much for all this equipment?”

The photographer looks puzzled. “Sir?”

Johann gives his usual eerie smile, “I think I rather like this machine and I should like to keep it. How much?”

The photographer tries to convince him otherwise, “Sir, you can get a new one from the shop--.”

“As can you. How much?”

A few moments later, the photographer is leaving the premises with no camera or tripod to his name, and he grumbles uncouthfully even though he has new money in his pocket.
Another week passes, another blur of books and stories. Some of them are actually quite enchanting – tales of heroes slaying dragons and saving villages; some about ancient civilizations in mystical lands; another still about people living in the very center of the earth – but there are others that Sophie finds are taxing and trying with their words.

She is reading one book, a collection of tales, and is annoyed that the stories therein are clearly propaganda. There is a drawing of a rat with a yarmulke and curls, and a cat covered in scarves and bangles – a Jew and gypsy respectively (the book doesn’t say it, but it’s so obvious) – happily eating from a dog bowl. The page opposite has a picture of a German Shepherd chasing off the cat and the rat – ‘Defending his dog house’ the subtitle reads. Annoyed, Sophie closes the book.

She’s lost count of how many books on this shelf are filled with this garbage. But she won’t have to deal with it for long, because today is the day – today’s the day she gets her cast off.

It’s almost time to go home. Almost time to be free…

Johann enters the bedroom, a small box in his hand. He holds it up with his fox-like smile. “For you.”

Sophie takes the box as it’s handed to her, and she sets it in her lap, opening it up. Inside are small lenses, mostly blue, though their centers are clear.

“What are they?” she asks.

“They’re called contact lenses,” he tells her. “As the name implies, they make contact with your eyes.”

“What are they for?” she asks as she looks up at him.

“Normally, they’re for correcting vision. In your case, they’re for correcting color.”

She narrows her eyes, just ever so slightly. “What do you mean?”

He smugly responds, “I’m an SS officer – I can’t be seen with a brown-eyed girl. This way I can take you out, no questions asked.”

Sophie grumbles inwardly. Oh well. When in Rome… Or in this case, Berlin… And besides – it’s only for a day, she can live with it. She tilts her head to the side momentarily. “I’m not sure how to put them in though.”

He smugly responds, “I’ll help you.” He moves in front of her, and he leans down and plucks one of the lenses from out of the box. “Look up.”

As she does, he positions the small blue sliver over her eye. She instinctively blinks.

“Stop blinking,” he tells her.

“I can’t help it,” she says.

“Yes you can, now stop it.”

He puts his fingers on her eyelids, spreading them apart, Sophie trying hard not to close them though the air is beginning to dry out her eyes. He holds his hand steady above her iris. And then he drops the contact onto her eye.
“Ow!” Again, instinctively, Sophie blinks, turning her face downwards as she rubs her eye.

SLAP! Suddenly she feels his palm across her face as Johann yells, “Damn it! Stop moving! You want these in or not?” He forces her face back towards the ceiling.

Sophie sits silently, trying to hold her face still as she feels the tears beginning to well.

“And stop crying. You’ll blur the lenses.”

The familiar stench of bleach water and bandages surrounds her as Sophie sits in the waiting room, Johann ever by her side. Nobody’s even looked her in the eyes. She’s beginning to think the contacts were a waste of time.

She sits patiently, doing what else but more reading, only this time instead of a book, a magazine – The Waiting Women, it’s called.

She tries to read it, anyway. Her eyes are beginning to itch from the contacts, and she has to close her eyes tight, trying to get some moisture in them to fight the dryness. She rubs at her lids.

Johann curtly taps her on the shoulder, quietly scolding, “Stop rubbing.”

Sophie grumbles and then continues to boredly read over the articles about sewing and bridal schools. She truly can’t believe her eyes when she sees that one of the articles claims that Great Britain is responsible for the current war. Angry, she flips the magazine closed and plops it on the end table next to her.

The sound makes Johann look over. “Problem?”

Sophie heaves an annoyed sigh. “…I’m just tired of waiting is all.”

Johann chuckles. “Impatient, aren’t we? Don’t be so invitious.”

Is that even a word? Sophie grumpily wonders.

A nurse pokes her head through the door. “The doctor will see you now.”

In the exam room, the doctor removes the last bit of her cast. “There you go.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Sophie says with a smile.

“Now you’re still going to want to use your crutches for about another month,” the doctor tells her. “You don’t want to be putting too much pressure on that leg.”

“I see,” Reistrom ponders aloud, turning from the doctor to Sophie, “Sophie, perhaps it’s best that you stay with me for a little while longer.”

NO. She wants to cry, she wants to shout, ‘No! No! No!’ – but she controls herself, as best she can anyway, her voice still shaking, her volume rising, “I said I would stay with you until my cast came off. It’s off now.”

He corrects her, “No, you said you would stay with me until your leg was healed. It’s not healed yet.”
“Yes, it is.”

Reistrom turns back to the doctor, “Doctor, tell her that her leg is not healed yet.”

The doctor seems a little befuddled, “Well – ”

Reistrom throws up a hand in indignation, “Do you think it right for me to send her away when she’s still going to need help getting around the house? She can’t manage on her own. She needs someone there for her.”

“Well I suppose that’s true,” the doctor mumbles.

Reistrom turns back to Sophie, “There, you see?”

Sophie feels about ready to bite him, growling, “I can manage.”

The doctor speaks up, meaning what he says in all kindness, “My dear, you don’t have to be so proud. It’s all right to accept help when it’s needed. And I’ll admit, until you’re off those crutches, you’re going to need help around the house.”

Sophie feels like screaming, screaming until she’s blue in the face and her lungs give out.

Johann looks at her and says, “There’s no arguing with doctor’s orders.”

She grits her teeth, letting out a long, drawn breath

*

They return to the house, not a word being spoken on the drive back.

When they arrive, Johann opens the door of the car for her, Sophie angrily getting up onto her crutches, hobbling her way towards the gate.

Johann opens the gate for her. Still without a word, she angrily huffs her way up the walkway.

But then she stops, for she sees someone in the garden – a young man. He looks up from trimming the bushes, and then he smiles and waves at her.

“Hello.”

She greets back, “Uh, hello.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you around here before,” he comments.

“I’ve never seen you, either,” Sophie says. “Who are you?”

He tips his hat. “Otto. I’m the gardener.”

She smiles. “Oh. So you’re the one who’s made this place so lovely.”

He returns her smile. “I just cut and water, miss. The sunshine and the plants do all the hard work.”

Reistrom puts his arm around Sophie as he says to Otto, “If they’re the one’s doing all the work, I should be paying them instead of you. As you were.”

Otto quietly tips his hat and resumes his work.
Johann says to Sophie as they make their way up the front steps. “You don’t have to make polite conversation with the help. It’s their job to work, not talk.”

…She finally thought she was free. She finally thought that she was going to get away from this place – away from the lacy bed, away from the overly white furniture, away from the boring Sunday coffees, away from the sleepless nights, away from HIM coming into her bed, away from those god-awful books. If she never had to read another book again, she’d be just fine with that.

*It’s a shame, really,* she thinks to herself as she sits in her armchair. *I love books...* But when the only books available basically all have the same plotline of a farmer-turned-soldier saving the village from foreign invaders, it gets really old really fast.

She heaves a sigh, not realizing that the door has opened, Johann entering with Frieda at his heels, ever a tray in her hands. Sunday already?

Sophie sits up straight as Frieda sets the tray of coffee and cakes on the table, the maid then exiting, closing the door behind her.

Johann sits down in his chair, preparing his coffee. Sophie silently, with stiff movements, begins putting some cream in her own cup.

Johann eyes her as she moves. After a silent while he finally says, “You’ve been distant lately.”

Sophie slowly draws in a breath through her nose, never making eye contact with him as she continues preparing her coffee, now adding some sugar. She then heaves the breath out, again, through her nose. “…I’m... tired, is all.”

“How can you be tired? You don’t do anything.”

“Exactly,” she blurs, dropping her spoon onto the little plate beneath her cup. “I have nothing to do. I am so bored in this house. All I do is sit and read. There must be something I can do to pass the time.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t know, anything – sewing maybe.”

“If you need clothes, I can buy them.”

“It’s not that I need clothes--”

“Then why bother sewing?”

“Because I’m bored! I’d do some gardening but you won’t let me downstairs!”

“Even if you could get down the stairs, why would you want to get yourself filthy mucking around in the dirt?”

“Because I enjoy it.”

“And besides, you don’t need to bother with the gardening. That’s Otto’s job.”

“You won’t even let me talk to people. I try to have a conversation and you cut me off.”
“I was only saying that you don’t have to feel obligated to be polite to the lower class.”

She feels like strangling him, but instead decides to jab at him with her words. “Good manners go a long way.”

His demeanor grows dark. “I could say the same thing to you. I bring you into my home. I give you food. I buy you clothes. And this is the thanks I get?!”

He swipes at the table, knocking it over, spilling the coffee everywhere, the sugar flying, one cup shattering against the wall, the other bouncing off the carpet as the silver tray clatters.

Sophie recoils as he yells at her, his hands on the arms of her chair, he right up in her face: “Ungrateful wretch! I could have left you to rot, but I didn’t! I took you away from there and brought you here, given you every luxury! And all you want to do it play in the dirt like the filth you are!”

He storms out of the room, sweeping past Frieda as she dashes up the hall, she putting her back to the wall so as to not be bowled over by him, he shouting back to her as he passes, “Clean that up!” He turns the corner, heading down the stairwell.

Frieda scurries into the room, quickly looking from the mess on the floor to Sophie in her chair. “Miss Sophie! Are you all right?”

Sophie is quivering, hands over her mouth as the tears stream down her face. Her sobs break through, and she folds in half, laying her face in her lap as her shoulders shake.

Frieda runs over and hugs her, consoling her. “Shh, there, there…”

Sophie thinks that perhaps it is in her best interest to pass the month upstairs, in her room, away from him – although these days it seems that on a daily basis, Reistrom leaves the house, in uniform no less.

Having moved the stool from the vanity out onto the balcony, Sophie watches as Reistrom, in uniform, gets into the car and begins to drive away. He must be going to work, she thinks. It’s the logical assumption.

…What sort of terrible things are being planned within the offices of Berlin? What horrible schemes is he concocting with his superiors? Sophie dares not think about it. What’s the point? What can she do about it?

There is nothing she can do. Not while she’s stuck here, stuck in her room, stuck within these walls.

But at least he’s gone for now. She can breathe a little easier.

…He’s gone… He’s not here. He’s not here to keep an eye on her… What if…

…No, she can’t even get down the stairs. How possibly could she run away? Or, hobble away, rather. That’d be a sight to see, wouldn’t it? – a strange lady wildly hopping down the street on crutches. That certainly wouldn’t draw anyone’s attention.

She sighs as she leans forward, resting her chin and elbows on the banister before her. Then something catches her eye – the front gate below is opening as Otto enters with his gardening tools.
He spots her. And he kindly tips his hat with a smile.

Sophie smiles and waves back.

And Otto gets to work. Once or twice a week he comes by to tend to the garden – pull the weeds, trim the bushes, water the flowers, the lot. And Sophie enjoys watching him do his work. While it’s nothing exciting, at least it’s something different than staring at the wall or reading yet another book.

At least it’s something different than worrying. She finds that if there is nothing to occupy her mind, it immediately turns to worrying. She worries about her family and if they’re okay. She wonders about where Al is and if he’s okay. She worries about Ed.

She worries about Ed so much. And she regrets the way they were fighting when they last saw each other.

…Why did they say half the things they did to one another? Why did their last time spent together have to be spent yelling?

No. That will not be their last time spent together. He promised her – he promised that when all of this is over, when this war is done, that he’s going to come looking for her.

If only she knew where he was. Maybe she could write a letter and tell him… But then he’d break his agreement. She knows he would. He’d bust right out of whatever science lab they’re holding him in and he’d come running for her… But would that be so bad? They could sneak away together in the middle of the night…

Only foolish dreams…

And the month passes in this way, in a blur of fantasies and hopes, of alternating between sitting in her room and sitting on the balcony, of watching Otto garden – and, of course, with more reading – which, by the way, Johann ‘apologized’ for his outburst by switching out some of Sophie’s old books for some of the books from downstairs, giving her something new to read.

And as her month spent on crutches draws to a close, Sophie begins testing her limits.

This is the first time she’s put some real pressure on her knee in two months.

She stands by her bed, leaning on her left leg, and she sets her crutches up against the wall and bedpost at the head of the bed.

Slowly, she shifts her weight, just a little bit at a time, to her right. She winces as more and more weight is laid upon her knee. And then she stops, her shoulders level.

One step at a time. That’s all it takes is one step at a time. One foot. In front of the other…

She shakily makes her way towards the door, the top half of her body firm with stiffened muscles – but the bottom half of her body is starting to wobble.

Quickly she grabs onto the back of the armchair as she gets to it, using it to prop herself upright. She takes a few breaths, calming herself. Then with a determined glance she stares at the door and starts again – one foot in front of the other.

Almost there. Just a few feet more. *There, see? This isn’t so hard -!* Suddenly a pain shoots up her knee and into her thigh, and her right knee buckles and Sophie falls to the floor.
There comes a gentle knock on the door. “Miss Sophie?” Frieda does not wait for answer, cracking open the door, poking her head in. “Is everything all- Oh Miss Sophie!” The old maid scurries over, bending down to help the young woman up. “Are you all right? What happened?”

“Nothing…” Sophie says and she brushes off her dress.

“Ah young miss, you know you shouldn’t be walking without your crutches. You know better.”

“The doctor says I should be all right,” Sophie tells her, “It’s been a month.”

“Has it now?” Frieda wonders, then saying, “Well, we might want to get you a cane, just to help you get back on your feet – quite literally!” she giggles, proud of her pun.

Sophie can’t help but smile as well.

The next day, Frieda arrives to work, bringing with her the old cane that belonged to her husband (God rest his soul). And everyday Sophie becomes just a little more adventurous, seeing how far she can travel on the cane, building up her strength, she finally becoming brave enough to chance the stairs.

She keeps her left hand on the rail, using it for most of her support. And she keeps the cane on her right to help her every time she steps down a step.

Thank goodness the stairs are carpeted. Were they simply polished wood, a slip could easily happen.

Closer and closer the front door becomes. She’s almost at the last step…

Sophie reaches out her foot. And slowly sets it down. She’s on ground floor now. Finally. All on her own. She’s made it.

The sunshine beckons through the glass of the front door, warm and inviting. Sophie goes to it and opens the door, going out onto the porch. She stands on the front stoop, taking in the warmth of the sun on her skin.

“Good day,” she hears, and Sophie opens her eyes to see that Otto is there with his watering can.

“Oh, good day,” she responds. “I didn’t realize you were here.”

“Don’t mind me,” he cheerfully says to her. “I’m almost done. I’ll finish up my work and get out of your hair.”

“Oh no, it’s no trouble at all,” she tells him. “Take all the time you need.”

He tips his hat to her, “Thank you, miss.”

“I can’t tell you how much I love the work you’ve done,” Sophie compliments. “I’m just sad that it’s taken me this long to get down here to finally see this all up close.”

Otto nods, saying, “I’m glad to have kept the flowers in good condition for you until then.”

“You know, I’m quite the gardener myself,” Sophie says.

“Oh, is that a fact?” he politely chats.
“I don’t mean to brag, but I was the best tulip-grower in town back home.”

“Well then, looks like I’ve got a bit of competition.”

They both laugh.

Otto lets out a thoughtful sigh. “Ah, it’s the best job on the planet, isn’t it? Gardening – it’s what we were made to do. Says so in the Bible – Adam and Eve were meant to tend to the garden. It’s what comes naturally to us human beings.”

“I guess so.”

Otto nods towards some of the bushes, “Well, go on then, miss. Enjoy yourself whilst I finish up here.”

“Thanks,” Sophie says as she moves along her way, beginning to peruse the garden.

She lets the sunshine wash over her skin as she walks along the little cobblestone paths that wind their way through the bushes, she enjoying the flowers, enjoying the bees and the butterflies and the sounds of the birds that surround her on all sides.

She watches as some of the birds land in the fountain, they stopping to drink and wash themselves, ruffling up their feathers as they splash back and forth.

As she walks, Sophie comes to the wall that surrounds the small estate, and she follows the inside perimeter until she makes her way back around to the porch.

She goes up the steps, Otto calling to her, “You have a good day, miss.”

“You too, Otto.” And she goes inside.

Now what? Should she go back up to her room? But there’s still so much of this house left to explore. …And it’s going to be quite a few hours before Johann comes home. She’s got time.

Where to first? Sophie shuffles into the parlor, looking to the swinging white door at the end of the room. She’s almost certain that’s the kitchen. She feels something within her light up. Even though she probably won’t be able to do any baking while she’s still getting used to her cane, Sophie’s still excited to see what all the kitchen holds for her.

She makes her way across the parlor and gently pushes her way through the swinging door. As suspected, yes, she has found the kitchen – but it doesn’t look like the average home kitchen, but more like what one would expect from a restaurant: all the cooking surfaces are made of shining steel, various ladles and spoons and other utensils hanging from a rack. A large overhead vent is situated above stove range, and there are two different ovens available for cooking. And against the wall is a tall icebox, the biggest Sophie’s ever seen.

There is a single small square table in the corner with a single chair. Sophie supposes this must be where Frieda eats during her breaks.

The lighting in this room is rather dull though, mostly because the window here is small, and also it looks as though this side of the house is very shaded.

Sophie hears a soft, muted, musical sort of clinking, and she looks towards the sound. It’s coming from in behind a door. To where does it lead?
She shuffles over to it and opens it up, poking her head out and looking around. Then she ventures out onto the short concrete steps before her, finding herself in a back alley.

The musical noise starts again, and Sophie looks up. Above the doorway is a wind chime made of thinly cut seashells. They gently clitter and clank as a breeze rolls through the alleyway. Next to the chimes is a single electric lantern, currently off as it is daytime.

Sophie looks to her left, seeing the side street directly adjacent to the house. She then looks to her right: the alley stretches on for the length of the whole block, finally letting out at yet another side street.

She stares – stares down this long stretch of dark alley. …She could do it. She could do it right now – just take off while he’s not here. Get away while she has the chance…

And go where? She has no money with her. She couldn’t buy a train ticket. And even if she did, Johann’s an officer of the military. He could probably just call any station and have them hold the train, search it and have them find her.

But he said – he said she was free to go once her leg was better. It’s better now. She doesn’t need his permission…

…But what if she gets attacked on her way to the station? What if some thug sees her with a bad leg and thinks she’s an easy target? …Maybe it would just be better to have Johann drive her to the station…

She hears the front door opening and her heart begins thumping with fear. He’s home early! She quickly goes back inside, closing the alleyway door behind her.

She hears the front door close. She gets to the kitchen door.

She hears his footsteps going up the stairs. She gently swings the kitchen door open and then softly closes it behind her. As best she can, she dashes the short distance from the swinging door to the bookcase in the corner.

“Sophie?” She hears Johann ask, then she hears him call, “Sophie?”

“I’m down here!” she calls back to him. She begins scanning the bindings on the books as she hears his footsteps coming down the hall and then back down the stairs.

He rounds the corner, looking into the parlor. “Oh, I didn’t see you back there.” He looks a bit proud, “Did you get downstairs all by yourself?”

Sophie is hesitant at first. Which will result in not getting hit – the truth or a lie? She takes her chances, “I did.”

To her relief, Johann smiles, “I’m glad to hear it. If you’ve got your strength up, that means it’ll be much easier for you when we go to the ball.”

“The ball?” Sophie questions.

“Yes, of course – your health is reason to celebrate, is it not?” He gives a bemused chuckle, “Truthfully, the ball is in honor of some foreign dignitaries from Japan. The government is thinking of signing them on as our allies.”

“Oh, um. Thank you for the invite…” she says slowly, “But I don’t think I’d be very comfortable
at a big event like that.”

“You’re more than welcomed there. You’re a first-class citizen now – residing in Berlin, consort to one of the Reich’s top officers, blonde hair – and blue eyes, of course. We’ll have to make sure you’re wearing your contacts. You can’t be seen in public with those ugly eyes of yours, now can you?”

Sophie grimaces at him.

“Don’t give me that look,” he scolds. “You’re lucky that science has come such a long way. Not but a few years ago, those contacts would have been made of heavy glass. Now they are light and soft.”

She inwardly grumbles to herself. *Yeah, but YOU don’t have to wear them. My eyes hurt for HOURS after we went to the doctor’s…*

“All the high fancy and well-to-do of the Reich are going to be there,” Johann continues, unnoticing of her continued grimace, “And you **have** been stuck in this house for so long – I thought you might like to finally see some of the glitz and glamour of Berlin.”

“Well…” she considers, “It would be nice to get out of the house.”

“It’s settled then. We’ll need an early breakfast if we’re to get under way in time. There’s so much to do – including fixing your diction.”

“My what?”

“The way you pronounce your words. You sound like a stupid foreigner with that Dutch accent of yours. You’re going to be rubbing elbows with urbanites – you can’t be sounding like a country bumpkin.”

Sophie inwardly sighs to herself.

★

The next day, they awake and have their early breakfast as planned. Johann helps her put in her contacts, she being extra careful to remain still this time.

And then he escorts her to the car. Strangely, Sophie’s actually feeling a little excited. This is the first time she’s seen Berlin beyond the doctor’s office.

He drives them into the heart of the city. Sophie taking in the tall buildings that surround her on all sides, the aged and artistic statues scattered here and there staring back through stone eyes, the sidewalks busy with smartly-dressed ladies and sharp-dressed men.

The car comes to a halt in front of a boutique, their first stop for the day, and the inside of the boutique is big and lovely, the mannequins modeling the latest dresses and fashions.

A worker comes up and greets Sophie and Johann as they enter, and she begins helping them to pick out a dress.

Sophie likes the green one, and she tries it on, Johann telling her she looks ravishing, he then telling the worker that Sophie will wear it out. The worker rings up the purchase.

With Sophie on his arm, Johann escorts her down the boulevard, hitting shop after shop, sparing no
expense – shoes, hats, jewelry, fur, the works.

“Really,” Sophie humbly tells him, “You don’t have to buy all this for me.”

“But of course I do,” he says to her. “You want to look your best for the ball, don’t you?”

They come to a salon, he holding the door open for her, and they go inside. She gets her hair done in the latest fashion, and they even apply make-up for her.

“We’ve one last stop to go before the ball,” Johann tells her.

They walk down the boulevard a little ways more, to a cane maker’s shop, where he buys her a slender, well-decorated cane – engraved with a vine design, gold leafing inlaid into it.

“I thought you should have something a little more feminine if we’re going to a society party. It’s much better than that clunky old thing you’re carrying now.”

He takes her old cane from her as he hands her the new cane.

“We’ll put this one in the car for now. You can use it at the house and use this one in public. It’s much nicer, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it is quite beautiful,” Sophie comments.

“Come. We must return home so that I can get ready myself.”

* * *

They return to the house momentarily, Frieda marveling at how lovely Sophie looks. After a while, Johann returns from the upstairs, he now dressed in a fine, black tuxedo, wearing soft, white gloves and a white bow tie, gold cufflinks shining at his wrists, his hair slicked back.

He carries with him the camera equipment he bought off the photographer.

“I thought we might take a picture before we leave,” he says to Sophie, “Since you’re all nice and dressed up.”

Feeling unusually giddy, Sophie agrees, “Sure.”

She stands in front of the fireplace as he sets the tripod down. And after lining up the shot, he snaps her photo.

He changes out photo cartridges. “Frieda, get one of us together,” he says as he crosses to the fireplace.

“Oh,” the old maid frets, “I don’t know if I know how to work one of these.”

“It’s easy,” he says as he puts his arm around Sophie. “Just push that button there.”

After a little finicking and finessing, Frieda finally figures out the camera. And after that, Johann and Sophie are on their way.

* *

The well-dressed and pressed crowd gathered outside the meeting hall filters their way in through the open doors of the building, all the while a line of big, shiny cars on the street out front growing
longer and longer, each owner waiting to reach the valets.

Reistrom’s car rolls to a rest in front the valet station, and an attendant hops over and opens the door for Sophie, he politely helping her out of the car.

“Thank you,” she says.

As Johann steps out, he hands the keys to a valet, and the valet takes the car to be parked.

Johann then takes Sophie by the hand and together they walk towards the doors.

The large meeting hall is bathed in golden lights that are set out front, illuminating the tall, strong columns that hold up the massive roof. Above the giant entryway is a large art deco style engraving, the doors guarded on either side by godly Greco-Roman statues.

“Wow,” Sophie marvels. “It’s like something out of that movie Metropolis.”

Johann scoffs, “That’s a communist Jew movie. Don’t dare compare Berlin architecture to rabble like that.”

They enter though the doors – and the inside is even more grandiose that the outside. The ballroom floor is lain with giant marble tiles, and the high ceiling is painted with artwork done in the Romantic style, large, crystal chandeliers hanging down from them.

Three of the four sides of the dance floor have long-stretching tables bearing tasty treats and hors d'oeuvres, all finely crafted and plated, sitting next to buckets of ice filled with bottles of champagne and Riesling wines. A giant ice sculpture of a swan sits at the head table.

Orderlies confidently strut the floor, serving one guest after another without missing a step. And the guests – the women all glitter and glow with sparkling jewelry and fine fur, their decadent dresses flowing as they cross the floor with their stately-looking gentlemen.

And Sophie can’t help but notice that every gentleman here seems to be wearing a red armband bearing the emblem of the swastika, matching the large red flag that hangs at the head of the hall.

Sophie clings tightly to Johann’s arm.

“What’s the matter with you?” he questions.

She responds in a hushed tone, “It’s just… there are so many… well, Nazis…”

He gives an indignant laugh. “That's such an ugly word. Say 'Nationalist' – that's the proper term. And don't be so foolish. You’re one of us now. There’s no reason to be scared.”

Sophie doesn’t like to hear that – being called one of them…

“Johann!” a woman’s voice calls.

Sophie looks over and sees two people approaching them - a man, well-dressed of course, and a woman, a bit overly-dressed in Sophie’s opinion – gaudy, and yet somehow still quite fashionable with her flamboyant, almost peacockish ways.

The woman continues as she and her partner reach them, “Oh, Johann, it’s been too long!”

“Vilmina,” Johann greets as he accepts her gloved hand. “Lovely as always,” he says, giving her a kiss near her wrist.
She giggles, “Oh, you charmer!”

Johann then shakes hands with the man. “Hannes, good to see you.”

“Good to see you as well,” Hannes politely responds. “So, Commander – how’s the military life?”

“I’m on leave currently.”

Hannes turns his attention to Sophie though he still addresses Reistrom, “And who is this lovely young lady accompanying you?”

Johann gently pushes her forward by the small of her back, “This is Sophie.”

Sophie timidly greets, “Uh. Hello.” She holds out her hand towards Hannes. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Pleasure’s all mine,” he says, courtly kissing her hand. “Are you from Berlin?”

Before she can say anything, Johann answers for her, “No, she’s just staying with me for the time being.”

Vilmina gives a scandalous gasp as, with a smile, she playfully whacks Reistrom in the arm with her handbag. “You cad! Well! We simply must have you all over for drinks some evening.”

Hannes chuckles, “Vilmina here just can’t wait to get people into the music room to hear her sing.”

The lady melodramatically lays the back of her hand over her forehead, “Oh, darling, it’s what I live for! You know opera means the world to me! I simply adore Tannhäuser.” She turns her attention to Sophie. “What about you, dear? What’s your favorite opera?”

Sophie shuffles her foot a little. “Uh. I can’t really say that I have one.”

“Oh I know!” Vilmina beams. “There are just too many to choose from, aren’t there?”

“Well, no…” Sophie shyly admits, “I mean, I don’t know any operas…”

“Oh,” Vilmina says flatly, immediately seeming disinterested in Sophie’s existence.

Hannes questions, “Didn’t your parents ever take you to any?”

Sophie says, “I spent my childhood in the countryside. And when we did move into the city, I don’t know if they even had an opera house…”

Johann wraps his arm around her shoulders as he chuckles. “You’ll forgive her. As I said – non-Berliner.”

Hannes smiles, “No, it’s quite all right. It’s admirable to admit oneself as the farmer type. Why, the nation is dependent on the Blood & Soil folk, am I right?”

“But of course.”

Vilmina pets Hannes on the arm. “Come, darling. There’re still so many people to greet this evening.”

Hannes politely bows to both Johann and Sophie, “Until later.”

Johann returns bow while Sophie curtsies.
And as Hannes and his companion walk away, Johann sighs, muttering, “Well that could have gone better.”

Sophie looks up at him, “Did I say something wrong?”

“I suppose not,” Johann bemoans. “Hannes seemed to like it. Just try not to make it so obvious just how ignorant you are.”

Sophie looks down at the floor, holding in a sigh.

For being a night filled with glitz and glamour, it passes rather dully – meeting and shaking hands with people who after a while all began to look alike and sound alike, they all chatting about cotillions and drinks, classical music and the latest fashion that is trending.

Sophie would like to politely chat, but quite frankly she doesn’t have much to add to the conversation. And anytime she does open her mouth, she finds Johann’s voice is all she hears, for he constantly is speaking on her behalf. After a while, she just gives up, because what’s the point?

It’s well unto midnight before they return home, and Sophie, for once, is glad to see the inside of this house, glad to get upstairs to her bed and stay there.

The summer weather wears on, the air hot and heavy – though nowhere near as humid as back in Amsterdam. Not being so close to the ocean, there’s not nearly as much water in the air here as there is there.

…But why isn’t she back there yet? Johann should have sent her home by now. She’s been walking pretty well on a crutch for a week now. She’s okay to go home. Really she is.

She gets up from where she sits in the bay window, this quickly becoming her favorite downstairs spot, and she crosses over to the lounge, poking her head inside the large doorway. *Hmm. I thought he was in here.* She looks over towards the dining room. *Not there either. Did he go upstairs?*

She turns to the staircase, grabbing onto the railing for support, and, using her cane as well of course, starts making her way up the stairs.

When she gets to the top, she looks at the doors on her right… She’s never chanced coming to this side of the house before. This is Johann’s side of the house. One of these rooms is the study. The other is his bedroom.

But which is which? And which door should she knock on?

Apprehensively, she shuffles her way over, deciding to knock on the first door she comes to. She waits. There is no answer. …Should she do it again?

“Johann?” she asks, wondering if he can hear her.

Still no answer.

So she tries again. “Johann, are you in there?”

Still no answer.

*Maybe he left the house and I didn’t see him leave?* Silence still. *Or, maybe he’s asleep?* If this is his bedroom, that’s quiet possible.
She decides to crack open the door, just a little bit to peek in. But she barely turns the knob when suddenly the door flies inward, Johann standing right there, startling her.

“What do you want?” he demands.

“Oh. Um.”

“Speak up! Out with it.”

Sophie comes out and says it, “I wanted to know when you’re going to take me back. To Amsterdam, I mean.”

He heaves an annoyed sigh, rolling his eyes. “I told you – eventually.”

“How long is ‘eventually’?”

“If you keep pestering me then never! I’ll make arrangements for your transportation eventually, but I’m swamped with work right now. I don’t have time to worry about making travel plans.”

“Well… is there anything I can do to help?”

“It’s military business, it doesn’t concern you. Just be patient. I’ll get to it when I get to it.”

And he closes the door, rather roughly, the wind blowing past her.

Sophie sighs to herself.

“Eventually.” Yeah, right! He’s putting it off on purpose!

And the days pass – day after boring day after boring day, the summer stretching on, growing hotter and hotter.

He doesn’t have enough time to make travel plans, but he’s got enough time to snap another dumb picture, she thinks as she shifts in the chair.

“Stop fidgeting,” he tells her as he looks through the view-finder. “And smile. You don’t want that frown to be permanently put on film, do you?”

Sophie forces yet another smile though there is seething anger underneath.

And she must be careful not to let her anger show through lest it make him angry as well. But still, at times Sophie finds it hard feigning calm.

One evening, as they’re eating dinner, the entire meal has passed silently, not one speaking a word to the other, Frieda in the meanwhile patiently standing off to the side should the master and his guest require anything.

Sophie shoves a small boiled potato into her mouth, silently, angrily chewing with her eyes cast down on her plate.

Johann finally speaks, “Don’t stuff your food into your mouth like a pig. You’ll choke yourself.”

Sophie continues chewing, ignoring him.

Johann ignores that she’s ignoring him.
But then a sound catches all of their ears – sirens. The air raid siren.

Johann points at Frieda, “Turn out the lights!”

Frieda hits the switch and the room goes black.

Sophie can see Johann’s silhouette as he crosses the table to her, helping her to her feet. “Come on, to the corner, away from the window.”

Frieda scuffles over, joining them in the corner, and they all sit silently, waiting to see what will happen.

The siren echoes across the cityscape. The buzzing of plane propellers grows closer.

And then in the distance –BOOM! Followed by another one, and another one, and another one!

Sophie clings tight to him, she afraid of the commotion surrounding her.

The sounds of explosions continue all around them, a thunderous rolling rumbling the walls just ever so slightly.

Johann puts his hand on her head, resting his chin on her hair. “If it’s like this in Berlin,” he quietly says, “I’d hate to imagine what it’s like in the Netherlands right now.”

…So that’s it then, isn’t it? She’s never going home. It’s not safe there. If this is supposed to be the safest city to be in right now, and even it’s being bombed…

In just two weeks time, five more raids have taken place. The citizens of Berlin are thankful, however, that these attacks have done very little damage – for it is proving to them the might of Germany and the weakness of their enemies.

And the rebels in Amsterdam, Sophie thinks, quietly sitting on her bed, They’re Germany’s enemies. Meaning that if the German army is stronger than them... Then the air raids there are probably much worse than they are here...

She sighs to herself. If only she knew whether or not her family was all right. Have they survived all of this? She’d write them a letter, but she’s sure that’d just cause Johann to go off on her again.

There comes a knock on the door.

“Come in,” she says.

She is surprised to see that it is not Frieda however, but Otto! He carries a short, wide wooden box in his hands.

“Oh! Otto! What are you doing here?” Sophie questions.

“Well, miss,” Otto says to her, “You were saying that it’s difficult for you to be going up and down the stairs all the time. So I figured I could bring a little bit of the garden up here to you.”

Sophie gently puts a hand to her chest as she coos, “Oh, Otto, that’s so sweet of you. Thank you.”

“Ah, it’s no trouble at all,” he bashfully says while he crosses the room. He opens the French doors and sets the box out on the balcony. “I’ll be right back with the soil and some seeds,” he says as he
heads back to the door. “I’ll even let you plant them, if you want.”

She smiles, “Thank you. I’d love to.”

The next afternoon, Johann and Sophie are having their Sunday coffee.

Johann is blathering on about something or other, Sophie mostly tuning him out as she politely nods, going, “Mm-hmm,” taking a drink of her coffee as she does so.

And then out of the corner of his eye, Johann notices something. He looks to the balcony. “What is that?”

“Hmm?” Sophie looks over towards the balcony. She feels her stomach tighten, even though it’s something insignificant – it shouldn’t really matter… “Oh. It’s a flower box.”

“Where’d you get a flower box?”

Sophie is hesitant. “…Otto put it there for me.”

He turns on her, “You had a man in your room?”

“He wasn’t in my room – he passed through it to get to the balcony.”

“I see.” He sets down his cup and rises, heading for the balcony.

Sophie asks, semi-frantic, “What are you doing?”

Johann opens the French doors, “I just want to see it.”

“It’s JUST a flower box.”

“And a shoddy-looking one at that.” He knocks it with his foot. “Look at it – it’s falling to pieces.”

“It’s fine if you don’t kick it!”

“I’m not kicking it, I’m barely touching it – and look, it’s falling apart at the seams. It’s no good.”

He picks it up.

“Johann, no! Please!”

And he drops it over the balcony railing.

Sophie hears it crash on the ground below, the unmistakable splitting and clanking of wood being muted by the soft splat of soil. She cries, “Why did you do that?!”

Johann has re-entered the room, now pulling something out of his pocket – a key – which he uses to lock the French doors. He then crosses towards the table again as he says, “It was a piece of junk. If you want another one, I’ll buy you a proper one – not some weathered, homely little thing that’s been slapped together.”

“Why do you always have to be this way?!”

He gets to the door, hand on handle as he turns to look at her, “Why do you always have to be this way?”
She sees that he still has the key in his hand. “Wait! What are you doing?!” She hops to her feet, hobbbling forward without her cane.

But Johann has closed the door, and she hears it being locked.

She jiggles the handle, pulling back on the door, trying to force it open. “Johann? Johann! Let me out!”

“It’s for your own good,” his voice carries from the other side. “I can’t trust that there won’t be men making their way into your bedroom. Best to lock it tight to keep them out.”

“Oh please!” she begs, “Please let me out!”

“And why should I? I can’t trust you! I buy you clothes, I buy you jewelry, I take you to fancy balls – and then you turn around and betray me like this!”

“It was just a flower box,” she cries with her forehead against the door. “You can’t lock me in here just because of that!”

“It’s my house. I can do whatever I want. Now go to bed.”

“It’s the middle of the day!”

“I don’t care. I don’t want to hear another word out of you, do you understand me?”

Angry, Sophie lopsidedly runs to the table, picks up her cup, and throws it at the door, the ceramic shattering. Then she hobbles to her bed, flopping down on top of it, crying.

She’d finally gotten to the point where she could get downstairs. And now she’s stuck back up here again.

She’s stuck.

She’s stuck here.

He’s never going to let her go home, is he?

He’s going to keep her here for the rest of her life.

She sobs into her pillow, crying loudly, not caring how loud her voice carries through the house.

Hours have passed, the afternoon passing into night passing into day and already starting to turn back into night – and Johann has yet to release her from her room. Sophie is feeling very hungry, and she’s also starting to get lightheaded. She finished off what was left of the cake and coffee last night. And she’s gone all day without food, and now her headaches are starting to burn, as if someone’s set fire to her very brain.

She’s also been needing to use the restroom for so long that now her lower back is starting to hurt. Is it her kidneys? Who knows.

She lays on the bed, staring at the ceiling, her hands folded on her stomach as if she were a corpse in a coffin. She might as well be – she’s been laying still for so long that her hands and feet have grown cold – her entire right leg is feeling cold as a matter of fact. But it always seems to feel chilled. It probably doesn’t get good circulation like it used to, not ever since it was injured…
And who injured her? HE did. And yet he acts as if he had nothing to do with it. He acts like she’s been an invalid her whole life. Like she’s GOING to be an invalid for the rest of her life…

She is, isn’t she? The doctor said her leg would never be the same…

She moves her arm over her eyes, blocking out the light as it seems to be making her headache worse. She wants to sob but she’s too tired. And so the sob rests within her throat, sliding its way down into her chest where it stops on her heart, weighing it down, her heart feeling like it’s expanding, welling up with all the sadness and grief she’s keeping in, the heavy organ being pulled by gravity down towards her spine.

Then she hears the key turn in the lock. Sophie looks over and sees the door swinging open, Frieda on the other side. Timidly the maid says, “Miss Sophie – Master Johann would like to take your picture again. And then after that he says you can have supper.”

Sophie quietly sits herself up, swinging her legs over the side of her bed and down to the floor. Quietly, tiredly, she grabs her cane and stands, walking to the door where Frieda stands aside and allows her to pass.

The next morning, after Sophie has finished her breakfast, she figures she’ll go out front and retrieve the pieces of her smashed flower box.

She doesn’t know why. It’s not as though Johann will let her put it back together or anything. At the very least, she can clean it up and get it out of sight so she won’t have to think about that instance any more.

When she gets outside though, there is nothing there. It’s already been cleaned up. *I wonder who cleaned it.* Sophie sadly thinks, *I hope it wasn’t Otto. I’d hate for him to see what happened to it.* What will she tell him when she sees him today? Just that the box wasn’t her style? That the flowers weren’t growing? She’s not sure which lie to go with.

But as the day stretches on, Otto fails to show for work.

“Strange,” Sophie mutters to herself. “That’s not like him.”

The front door opens and Frieda pokes her head out. “Miss Sophie, you’ve been out here for an hour now. Is everything all right?”

“Otto hasn’t shown up for work today.”

Frieda’s face grows long. “Oh, I hate to be the one to tell you. Master Johann let him go.”

She turns and faces Frieda, “Let him go? You mean he fired him?”

“I’m afraid so, miss.”

Sophie squeezes her eyes shut, resisting the urge to grit her teeth. “That’s so unfair! He didn’t do anything wrong!”

Frieda comes up to Sophie, patting her shoulder, “I know, I know. But there’s no arguing with the master.” The old maid then looks around, and then leans in to Sophie. “If you don’t tell him, I got you a surprise.”
“What is it?”

The old maid giddily laughs, “Ooh! Follow me!”

Frieda leads Sophie through the house, into the kitchen and out the back door into the alleyway. As Sophie exits, she sees that nailed into the mortar of the house is the flower box, splits running down the wood in various places, the seams coming apart.

Frieda shuffles her feet. “I tried to put it back together as best as I could. And I’m hoping it’ll hold to the house once you put some soil in it. But it’ll be safe back here – Master Johann would never dare go into the kitchen.” She smiles, “That’s where the dirty servants work, not the fancy and well-to-do.”

“Oh, Frieda,” Sophie holds back the tears of joy as she wraps her free arm around Frieda, hugging her. “You’re not a dirty servant. You’re the sweetest person I’ve ever met.”

“Oh, you’re too kind.”

They release from the hug, Sophie asking in a concerned tone, “But what if he does find it? Frieda, you might get fired too!”

She waves it off, not looking concerned in the least. “I can always get another job. It’s YOU I worry about. I’m not about to leave you alone with him.”

Sophie softly smiles. “Thank you, Frieda.”

The days pass, Sophie watering the seeds she’s put in the hidden flower box. Unfortunately, back here, in this incredibly shady alley, there is little sunshine reaching the soil, no light to warm the seeds and help them to sprout.

Sophie is sitting outside on the back stoop, elbows on knees, chin in hands as she stares at the brick wall across the way.

She should just run away, even if she is an easy target for muggers. It’s got to be better than staying here…

…But it’s obvious. Even though Johann keeps saying he’ll let her go home eventually… He’s never going to let her go home. Ever. And she if ever tried?

She clenches her hands as she feels her stomach knot, for she remembers what he told her back in prison: That he’ll track her down wherever she’s hiding, be it with family or with friends… and he’ll kill them all. One by one, he’ll kill them all while he makes her watch…

She moves her hands to her elbows, hugging herself.

Meow!

Sophie looks down and sees that standing by the trash bins is a thin grey cat, its wide eyes a deep amber color. The tip of its tail flicks and shudders with curiosity as the little creature stares at Sophie.

Meow! it says again.

Sophie giggles. “I’m sorry. Did I disturb you?” Sophie leans forward, putting out her hand, seeing
if the cat is friendly.

The cat immediately dashes up to her, sniffing Sophie’s fingertips.

“Hey there,” Sophie greets, getting ready to pet it – but before she can, the cat dashes away again. “Oh, are you shy?”

Meooow!

“Ohh, I see,” she says slyly. “You thought I had food for you, didn’t you?”

The thin little thing trots back up to her, now rubbing up against her legs as it gives one long howl, Meeeeoooow!, still pleadingly looking up at the human.

Sophie laughs once more, “All right! Come on – let’s see if we can find you anything.”

Sophie lifts herself up from the stoop, the cat momentarily dashing away as she does, it turning back around to check and make sure the human is not pursuing it. Seeing that Sophie is turning back around to the door and entering the kitchen, the cat trots in after her as if this were its own house.

Sophie crosses to the icebox and opens it up, looking inside. “Well, I see some leftover ham,” she says as she rips a bit of the meat from its bone. She closes the box as she turns back towards the cat. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Meow!

Sophie tears the ham in hand into bite-sized chunks and then drops them on the floor for the cat, the feline immediately gobbling it up. As it eats, Sophie once more bends down, now getting to pet the cat as it holds still.

Sophie smiles. It’s been a while since she’s had a cat. Unfortunately their old cat, Urd, ran away after she moved in with Ed and Al. She figured it must have been trying to find it’s way back to their old house and got lost. She can only hope that someone found Urd and took her in.

“And what about you?” she asks of the grey cat. “What shall we call you?”

Having finished its ham, the cat looks back up at Sophie. Meeeeoooow!

Sophie laughs again, “I’m gonna call you ‘Noisy’ if you don’t cut that out.”

The swinging door to the kitchen opens, and Frieda comes walking in, carrying a mop and bucket. For half a moment, she looks glad to see Sophie and is about to say something – until she spots the cat, and the old maid yelps, “Oh! No! Get out!”

Frieda puts down her bucket and mop and begins chasing the cat towards the open back door, waving her hands at the little creature as it dashes away.

“Out, out with you!”

“Frieda!” Sophie complains. “What’d you do that for? It wasn’t hurting anyone.”

Frieda closes the door, quietly heaving a breath, trying to calm herself. She looks over her shoulder at Sophie for a moment, and then she looks back at the door. “I shouldn’t be telling you this,” Frieda says as she turns around, putting her back to the door, “This is between you and me – but years back, this family used to have a dog. Sweet old thing it was. And then one day, I went to
throw out the trash, and I found the poor beast cut wide open, slit to ribbons!”

Sophie puts a hand to her mouth, “Oh my god.”

“Now the police figured it was probably some passing hooligans who done it.” Her voice grows dark, “But I know better. The young master – he was always mistreating that poor creature – putting dog food on the mousetraps to trick the poor thing, nearly lopping off its nose; tying its leg to the fence until it rubbed its ankle raw.” The old woman shudders, shaking her head, then signing a cross across her chest. “I’m telling you, you don’t want to be bringing animals into this house – for their own safety.”

Sophie’s shoulders fall, as does her face.

Frieda sees that she sad, and so suggests, “I mean, I suppose you could feed it in the alleyway. That’d be all right.”

Sophie smiles softly, “I’d like that.”

Frieda warns, “Just don’t let on to the master that you’re keeping any pets.”

A few more weeks pass, the heat of the summer slipping away as autumn begins to take its grip, the cool winds blowing out all the humidity and ushering in a crisp dryness.

Sophie most enjoys her time spent on the back stoop in the alley, feeding and petting the cat that she’s taken to calling Little Miss Princess, for even though the cat is a beggar, she sure is a chooser, turning her nose up at any scrap that is not meat.

Frieda brings a crate from the market, filled with food for the people, but gives the crate to Sophie to give to the cat, Sophie using an old potato sack as a blanket for her pet. Set in the back alleyway up against the wall, Princess contentedly curls up, enjoying her little wooden castle.

And in another week’s time, it seems that a whole month has passed – for like clockwork it seems, Johann suddenly wants to take a picture of her again. Why does he keep taking her picture? Where is he even keeping them? She’s yet to see ONE print…

She’s sitting in the bay window in the parlor, Johann getting ready to snap her pic when, through the view-finder, he sees a car pull up outside.

He moves back away from the view-finder, looking out the window with a, “Hmm?”

Sophie is curious and turns around. There is a black car, small Nazi flags sticking up on either side of the hood.

“Sophie,” Johann says very firmly. “Get upstairs now. And do not come out of your room until I say so, is that understood?”

Sophie doesn’t waste another second, much preferring to be away from the scary soldiers that are exiting the vehicle. She hops up the stairs, still a third of the way from the top when a loud rapping comes from the door.

Johann takes his time going to the front door, allowing Sophie enough time to get to the top of the stairs and round the corner to her bedroom.
She closes her door and then holds her breath, remaining silent. She can hear the front door being opened, and Johann greeting whoever it is that is down there. …Who is down there?

Sophie sneaks over to the window and carefully peeks out through her curtains, looking to the car parked out front. It must be someone important. Why else would there be flags on the hood?

Someone from the government… or the military… *I mean, he is a soldier, it wouldn’t be too unusual…* But on what business has this person shown up for?

…Is it… about Ed?

Her heart skips a beat.

She backs away from the window, in case there’s still someone in the car who could see her, and instead makes her way to her bed, sitting down on it.

**Ed does** work for the military now, technically. This **could** be about him. Her heart skips yet another beat. What if he’s escaped? What if they’ve come to Reistrom because they need him to capture him again? He did it once, he might be able to do it again.

Especially if…

Sophie clenches her fist. No. She won’t be used as bait again. She’s already caused more than enough trouble that way.

…But what if that’s not it at all? What if this has absolutely nothing to do with Edward? Her heart falls. She’s not sure which option is worse…

After a long while, she takes to laying in bed, staring at the ceiling, growing ever more anxious as she waits for the visitors to leave.

Finally, a familiar knock comes at her door. “Miss Sophie,” Frieda says. “You can come out now.”

Sophie leaves her bed, going over to the door and opening it. “Who was it?”

Frieda holds her fingers towards her mouth, resisting the urge to bite her nails. “Oh, I don’t know if the master wants me saying. It’s business, after all. Not supposed to talk about that.”

“Did you hear any of the conversation at all?”

Frieda shakes her head, “Oh, no. I went straight into the kitchen when Master Johann told me to. Best to stay out of the way in matters like this.”

Sophie gives a discontented hum as she looks down at the floor.

Frieda changes the subject, “Well anyway, it’s safe to come back down now. Come on, I’ve got lunch all made up.”

Sophie follows Frieda out of the room – but as both women come to the end of the hall, they see that Johann is entering his study, an envelope in his hand, he closing the door behind him.

Sophie narrows her eyes.

“Oh my,” Frieda ponders aloud, “You might just be eating lunch by yourself this afternoon, miss…”
That night, Sophie lays awake, but not for the same reasons she’s been sleepless. It is not fear that keeps her awake, but drive.

She stares at the ceiling with a determined look. What’s he hiding in that study? She thinks back to the envelope in his hand. That letter… What’s in it? If it’s about Ed…

She sits up in bed, resolutely looking over at the door.

*I want to know.*

^~^ Quietly. Quietly now.

She opens her door, poking her head out. All the lights in the house are off. Sophie opens her door all the way as she exits. And then she gently closes the door behind her.

Her cane is not with her, for she doesn’t want it to make any sound as she crosses the floor. Instead, she uses the railing that surrounds the area leading to the stairwell for support. She stares at her feet as they move along, testing each floorboard with the tip of her toes. If it squeaks, even just a bit, she switches to a different, sturdier floorboard before proceeding.

She looks up at Johann’s bedroom door. It remains closed.

Quietly, she creeps her way towards the study, eventually having to let go of the railing and so now uses the wall on her left for support.

She reaches the study door and slides her hand towards the handle, grabbing it. She turns it, the springs inside squeaking, and Sophie winces. Quickly she looks over her shoulder. Johann’s door is still closed. She pushes the study door open, holding the handle in place as she wraps her arm around to the other side, grabbing the inside door handle to hold it in place still. And then she slips into the study.

Inside, she gently pushes the door closed, wood touching frame, and though she knows its coming, she can’t stand the tinny squeal that the handle makes as she slowly twists it back into position. She waits, holding her breath, holding her ear to the door to see if there is any sign of movement beyond it – but it is hard to hear much of anything for the sound of her heart beating loudly in her ears.

After a long while of hearing nothing more than silence, Sophie finally moves away from the door, turning around to face the inside of the study.

It is dark, hard to make out what all is here within. The only light is the pale moonlight that streams through the small, high windows, they echoing the windows in the kitchen and dining room below. As her eyes adjust to the darkness, Sophie can see that there is a large bookcase on the far wall to her left. On the wall to her right is a painting of some kind. Again, it’s hard to see, but it looks familiar – a warrior with a sword, fighting off a giant, monstrous wolf.

*It looks like that Vīðar guy again, Sophie thinks, fighting that – what was it called? – Fenrir, I think…*

She looks at the wall directly in front of her: below the windows is a stately desk.
That must be where the letter is.

She creeps over to it, and gently lifts the chair that sits in front of it, moving it to the side just enough so that she can work. She squints through the darkness – the desktop is clean, no papers on top of it.

*The drawer maybe…*

Sophie grabs a hold of the little brass knobs before her, and she pulls out the long, shallow drawer, looking to see what’s inside. Its contents are well organized – everything has a place and every place has a thing: pens, pencils, erasers, inkwells, and other assorted office bric-a-brac. But no letter.

*It’s got to be in here,* she thinks, growing irritated. *I saw him bring it in here.*

She thinks silently for a long while…

*I wonder…*

Sophie reaches up under the desk drawer, feeling around, her fingers groping across the smooth surface, looking for something, anything – a bump, a dip, a crook, a curve…

And then, on the very back of the drawer itself, she feels something – an impression of some kind, round and metallic – a button.

Excitement rushes through her as Sophie pushes the button, and a shifting sounds from the drawer, all the supplies shuddering for a flash of an instant. She stares at the inside of the drawer, looking it over – everything is on a slant now, angling in towards the desk. She gets closer to the drawer, looking at its inside, looking to its very bottom – on both the left and the right side there are holes, just big enough for a finger.

She slips her index fingers into the holes of the base of the drawer, and then she lifts – again, all the supplies shift as they slide towards the back of the drawer, for the whole bottom of the drawer is a fake bottom, hiding a secret compartment beneath.

And there it is – the letter – sitting in with several other papers. It is still in its envelope, though now Sophie can see that the red wax seal that is on its back has been cracked open.

She picks up the envelope and looks it over – it’s rather plain looking though the paper stock is heavy. She lifts the flap and pulls out the letter, reading it over.

Uh. Well. She *tries* to read it anyway.

“What is all this?” she mutters aloud, for there are not words printed on the paper, but rather a jumble of random letters, as if a tornado tore through a library and tried to write a book, not a coherent word or sentence to be found.

*It must be in code,* Sophie thinks to herself. *I guess that makes sense. An important letter, during wartime? A lot of things are probably encoded…*

At the top of the paper is the letterhead, a drawing of some kind. She can’t really make it out in the darkness, so she sidesteps the desk, stepping into the moonlight, hoping it can illuminate things for her.

The drawing is of a crest, not one that Sophie recognizes. The centerpiece looks not unlike a clock,
only instead of numbers, there are little animals drawn at every hour, with strange symbols drawn above their heads. The text is very small on the banners that run across its top and bottom, and Sophie can just barely make out what it says, unsure if she’s reading the German correctly.

“… ‘The… Teutonish Order… the Knights …the Black Sun’? What’s that?”

“What are you doing in here?”

Sophie gasps, putting the letter behind her back as she whips around.

There is Reistrom, standing in the doorway. She didn’t even hear him come in!

“I-! I-!”

He approaches her, “You know you’re not supposed to be in here.”

Sophie cowers, “I’m, I’m sorry! I was just curious!”

He backs her up against the wall, taking her chin in his hand, his ice blue eyes cutting through the darkness, reflecting the moon that shines through the high windows.

“Curiosity killed the cat, as they say. What does it do to the little she-wolf, I wonder?” He cracks a smile as her eyes quiver. “I can’t just let you get away with this. I think a little punishment is in order…”

*Knock, knock, knock.*

“Miss Sophie~!” Frieda chimes as she opens the door, carrying her customary tray with her. “Time to rise and shine… Miss Sophie?”

Sophie sits at the head of her bed, her back to her pillows that are set against the headboard. She wears her house robe as she sits with her knees to her chest, arms crossed and resting on her knees as her chin and mouth rest on her arms, she staring at her mattress.

Frieda sets the tray on the table. “Miss Sophie? Are you quite all right?”

Sophie’s voice mumbles over her knees, “I’m fine…”

Frieda walks towards her. “You don’t look fine.” She sits on the edge of the bed, patting Sophie on the back. “Why don’t you tell old Frieda what’s wrong. …?” Frieda spies something, visible only because Sophie’s robes do not cover it. “Good lord, child! What’d you do to your ankle?”

Wrapping all the way around Sophie’s leg at ankle-level is a bright red ring, a rash or a burn of some kind.

Frieda stares at it, aghast. She’s seen this wound before, on the old family dog – that’s a rope burn. She quickly leans forward, moving the bottom of Sophie’s robe aside as she checks her other ankle, then looking at the only wrist visible, for the other one Sophie has tucked under her arm and chin. All of them, ankles and wrists, have the rope burns.

Frieda takes Sophie by the shoulders firmly, looking her in the eyes, her voice quiet and still. “Oh Miss Sophie. What did he do to you?”
Sophie does not return her gaze, just continues looking at the mattress. “…It’s nothing.”

Tears begin to well in Frieda’s eyes as her lips tremble, her grip on Sophie’s shoulder’s tightening, her voice cracking. “I’m sorry.”

Sophie finally looks up at her. “It’s not your fault.”

Frieda wipes her eyes, “I never should have left you alone with that horrible man! The beast!” She now fans her face, it feeling hot from tears. “I knew what kind of a man is he, and night after night I’ve left you here to fend for yourself! I should be ashamed!”

Sophie gently takes her hand, “It’s not your fault, Frieda. I can’t expect you to stay here every hour of the day.”

Frieda takes Sophie in her arms, hugging her. “You poor child!”

The ladies sit there, hugging one another, Frieda’s motherly warmth helping Sophie to forget, even if just a little, the pain…

* 

After Sophie’s little misadventure in the study, Johann has retightened his leash on her, even more than it was before.

And the months pass in this way – day after day, week after week – not being allowed to do anything: not being allowed to do any gardening, not being allowed to do any cooking, not being allowed to go anywhere without Johann by her side. And then, even then, she is not allowed to speak. She is to be seen and not heard. She is to stand by his side at the parties, stand there and look pretty and smile and be polite. She’s just his pretty little pet, to be shown off in public, for Johann to boast and brag about how beautiful his woman is as opposed to all the others.

And she can’t stand the noise – the mindless, shallow chit-chat that happens at the society parties; the political elbow-rubbing and brown-nosing, the boasting of Aryan superiority, the crass racial jokes, everyone laughing at the suffering of others – all in the meanwhile none of them able to see how much she herself is suffering.

Sophie’s outlook grows colder and colder as each passing day does the same, the autumn slipping away to winter. And every month, Johann insist on taking her picture, keeping a little scrapbook of her misery, she having to force a smile every single time.

She feels utterly stranded here. Sure, she has Frieda for a friend – but even Frieda can never understand what she’s going through. She doesn’t know, she doesn’t know all the terrible things that have happened to Sophie, what she’s been through. She’ll never understand what it’s like to be a captive refugee – to be referred to as a ‘guest’ when you’re really nothing more than a prisoner.

There’s nowhere to escape to, nowhere she can go. If she leaves Berlin, she’ll likely be blown to pieces. The Germans are blowing up the Netherlands, France, England, EVERYWHERE. The only place they’re not blowing up is Germany.

Sophie sits at her vanity, her head resting on her arms on the tabletop, she weeping as the voices of carolers rise over the snow outside.

…There’s no way out…

She lifts her eyes, looking at the drawer on her right-hand side. She stares at it for a moment. Then
reaches over and takes it by its small knob, pulling the drawer out. Her fingers reach over the side, groping around until she finds what she’s looking for.

Sophie pulls the large scissors from the drawer and slides them across the tabletop towards herself. She turns the point towards her chest, pressing the metal hard against her skin.

No. That won’t work. It’s not sharp enough… The blades… are on the inside…

She takes the handles of the scissors in both hands, pulling them apart, lifting the blades to her throat, feeling the cold metal tickle her skin. Her grip on the handles tightens, her knuckles turning white.

One quick movement. One hard, fast motion is all it’ll take… And then she’ll be free. She won’t have to deal with the pain any longer.

…

…But what about Edward? …What would he say? What would he do without her?

She remembers… She remembers the time they went to the fair, when they went through the Tunnel of Love, and talked about Romeo and Juliet.

She remembers what Ed said to her - that if someone really loved you, they wouldn’t want you to die. …They’d want you to keep living.

Her breath shudders as she hiccups and sobs, dropping the scissors onto the tabletop as her face falls into her hands, she bawling, the tears running hot and heavy through her fingers, down her wrists and arms to her elbows.

For him. She’ll stay alive for him. He’ll come for her. He said he’d come for her. And he will. One day he will. Please God… one day he’ll come…

*

The Christmas season carries on, Johann of course showering Sophie with lavish gifts such as necklaces and earrings. But it’s Frieda’s simple gift of some cupcakes that makes Sophie really feel the holiday spirit, the two women chatting and enjoying themselves as they sit in the kitchen together. Frieda is even kind enough to get a gift for Little Miss Princess – a dried fish, from which Sophie can tear off a small piece to give to the feline every day.

The garden has become sparse, the leaves falling from the bushes, the weedy overgrowths turned to mush from constantly freezing overnight and thawing in the morning. And the tall fountain is full to its brim from the constant drizzle that seems to fall. And yet there is an odd beauty in this stillness of death, this silence of winter.

Johann looks through the view-finder of the camera, and frowns. “It’s an ugly backdrop,” he says to Sophie as she stands next to the water fountain.

She frowns sadly in return. “That’s why I wish you’d have taken a picture out here in the summer, when the flowers were blooming.”

“Let’s just go back inside already,” he complains.

But her frown grows even longer. “Please? I really had my heart set on a garden shot.”
Johann takes in a breath through his nose and heaves it out. “Fine. But let’s take it out in front of the gate. You’ll still get the garden in the background that way.”

They move along the walkway, Sophie taking great care to avoid any icy patches that might be hiding amongst the cobblestones.

Johann sets up the camera for the new shot, again looking through the view-finder as Sophie comes around the gate, leaning up against the tall outer wall. “There, that’s much better,” he says.

SNAP!

The winter nights press on, some of them filled with thin snowy covers lacing the ground, others filled with freezing rains that make the sidewalks slick and near impossible to stand upon.

The fireplace in the parlor is alive with a roaring fire, the orange blaze filling the room with a sleepy and comfortable warmth.

Sophie sits on the sofa, staring drearily at the fire, her face long, she not saying a word.

Johann sits in his armchair, watching her quietly as the fire crackles and pops.

“Sophie,” his voice quietly rises, “You seem so sad. What’s wrong?”

“…I’ve been away from home for so long…” she tells him. “I miss them… I miss them all so much…”

“You miss who?”

“My family,” she says. “I miss my brother. And I miss my grandmother… I miss all my friends and neighbors…” I miss Ed and Al, she wants to say, but of course she keeps this to herself. “…I miss them all so much. I’m so lonely here.”

“You have me,” he chimes.

But Sophie gives no response to this, only continues to sadly stare into the fire.

Johann is quiet while he watches her. And then he sighs and asks, “What if I brought them here for a visit? Would that make you feel better?”

Sophie brightens up, “Really?” but immediately, fear grips her. Bring them to Berlin? Isn’t that dangerous? No, if anything it’s probably safer than being in the Netherlands. Who knows – maybe I can convince them to move here and be close to me.

Johann is already rising from his armchair, “I’ll make the arrangements right now – make a few phone calls, send a letter, get everything in order.”

She smiles – a real, true smile. “Thank you…”

The old month passes into new, Sophie waiting impatiently for a response letter from her family, checking the post box every day with bated breath.

It finally comes and she tears the envelope open with anticipation – they’ll be arriving in a week,
the letter says.

“We should get you a new dress,” Johann suggests.

Sophie says, “But I already have so many dresses.”

He gives that foxish grin of his, “But another one can’t hurt. Besides, you want to look nice for your family, don’t you?”

The morning of her family’s arrival comes, and Sophie is removing the brand new dress from the wardrobe, proceeding to put it on. She crosses over to the vanity, putting on some of the jewelry he’s bought her, she thinking that it’s not really necessary for her to look this fancy. This is her family, after all – they only expect her to look like herself, not dolled up like this.

But still she knows that if she doesn’t do as she’s told…

She begins applying make-up to cover up a bruise on her cheek.

~

Later, Sophie waits in the bay window, her fancy dress cane laying across her lap, she anxiously watching the sidewalk, waiting for any sign of movement.

And then a taxi cab pulls up, luggage strapped to its top.

Sophie excitedly rises from the window, going to the door and going outside.

Matthijs is already out of the car, getting ready to get some luggage when he sees Sophie.

“Sophie!”

He runs through the gate and he hugs her, picking her up by the waist and twirling her around, Sophie laughing with joy.

He sets her back down. “Oh my god, Sophie! We’ve been so worried about you!”

“And me about you!” she says to him.

Matthijs notices that she carries something in her hand. “A cane? What happened to your leg?”

Sophie gives a nervous smile, waving it off. “Oh, uh, twisted knee. It’s no big deal.”

“Sophie!” she hears her grandmother call, and Grandma is making her way up the sidewalk towards the gate, the old lady pushing herself along on her own cane.

“Grandma!” Sophie happily greets, going to the gate to meet her.

“Where’s my hug, girl?” her grandmother playfully pesters as she enters the grounds. They give each other a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Hey Sophie,” her uncle casually greets as he comes onto the sidewalk with some luggage in tow.

“Hi, Uncle Herman,” she gives him a kiss on the cheek as well.

“Aw, thanks.” He turns his attention to her brother. “Hey, Matthijs! You want to help me with this or what?”
“Yeah, sorry,” Matthijs apologizes.

But before he exits the gate, they hear the front door open again, they all looking over. Coming down the front stoop is a tall, blond man with ice blue eyes, and his gaze freezes them to their spots momentarily.

*Why is he in uniform?* Sophie wonders. *He’s doing it on purpose. He’s just trying to intimidate them…*

He reaches them, the tall man tipping his hat as he gives a slight bow, “Commander Johann Reistrom of the Schutzstaffel. Pleased to meet you.”

Matthijs is hesitant. “Uh. Nice to meet you, too.”

Sophie introduces them one by one: “Johann, this my brother, Matthijs. This is Uncle Herman. And this is my grandmother, Betje.”

Old Betje moves forward, skeptically looking Johann up and down with a sharp eye, the wrinkles at the corners of her eye crinkling as she does so. “I don’t like the looks of him,” she blatantly says, Sophie’s heart clenching in her chest as her grandmother continues: “Big man in a uniform, thinks he’s hot stuff.” She pokes him in the chest with her bony finger. “Don’t you get any ideas about bossing me around. I ain’t one of your soldiers!”

Uncle Herman gently takes her by the shoulders and moves her back, “Okay, Mom, that’s enough…”

To Sophie’s relief (and extreme surprise), Johann simply smiles and laughs it off. “It’s quite all right, ma’am. I assure you that while you are a guest in my home, the only one in charge is you.”

Grandma gives a stiff nod. “And that’s how it ought to be.”

“Okay, Grandma,” Sophie tries to settle her down.

Johann moves his hand out towards the front door. “Shall we all adjourn indoors?” As the family passes him, he points at the cabbie and says, “You there! Don’t just sit there – help these people with their bags.”

The family enters the home, looking around.

“Wow,” Uncle Herman says. “Nice place.”

“Sophie,” Matthijs asks quietly, “You never explained in your letter how you ended up here. What are you doing here with a man like this?”

Sophie sighs a quiet breath as she looks at her brother. “It’s a really long story.”

“What about Ed and Al?” he asks. “Where are they?”

Sophie eyes are wide as she shakes her head, making a slashing motion across her neck as if to say, ‘Don’t! Be quiet!’; for Johann is entering through the front door now, the cabbie setting the luggage down indoors before turning and leaving.

“Would anyone care for some coffee?” Johann suggests.

“Only if you’ve got sweet biscuits,” Grandma says as she shuffles into the parlor. “That’s the only way to drink coffee is straight up black with some sweet biscuits.”
They all go into the parlor, each taking a seat to call their own, Grandma claiming the sofa, Herman sitting down next to her. Matthijs sits on the divan next to Sophie.

“Frieda!” Johann calls as he rounds the armchair to take his seat. “Coffee, please!”

A moment later, the old maid is entering from the kitchen, carrying a tray of cups and a pot. She beams as she sees the guests, “Ah! Welcome, welcome. You must be Sophie’s family.” She sets the tray on the coffee table. “The young miss has told me so much about you all! I’m so glad to finally meet you.”

Grandma Betje says to the maid, “I hope my granddaughter has been minding her manners.”

“Oh, she’s an angel!” Frieda compliments. “An absolute pleasure to serve.”

Johann flatly says, “Thank you, Frieda. That will be all.”

Frieda curtsies, and as she leaves, Betje calls after her, “And bring some sweet biscuits back with you!”

There is a little bit of silence, the only sound that of the cups as they are filled and then removed from the tray.

“So,” Uncle Herman comments, “Nice place you got here.”

“Thank you,” Johann acknowledges, taking a sip from his coffee. Then he remarks, “I hope you’re finding Berlin well so far.”

Grandma huffs, “You won’t believe the trouble they gave us at the station just to get here. Three different people checking our passports, looking at us like I was some kinda criminal.”

Matthijs says, “If you had just given the conductor your book when he asked for it – ”

“What am I, a child?” the old woman rebuffs. “Who’s to tell me what I can and cannot read? I don’t care if they are banning books, I’ll read what I please.”

Herman clears his throat, avoiding the conversation, “So, Commander Reistrom, what do you do for a living? SS, you said?”

Johann nods, “That’s right. And what about you? What career field are you in?”

“Who, me?” Herman asks, feigning humility, “I’m just a simple factory worker – packing and shipping canned fish, is all.”

Johann looks over Matthijs and asks, “And what about you? What do you do for a living, Matthijs?”

“I’m a trader,” Matthijs responds. “Mostly doing work with the East Indies.” He narrows his eyes just ever so slightly. “Though business hasn’t been very good recently. Too many warships patrolling the waters.”

Sophie grows nervous. Oh please, Matthijs, don’t do anything to set him off.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Johann politely replies. “But a trader, you say? Are you versed in any languages?”

“A little Javanese. Why?”
Johann sets his cup on its small plate after having taken a drink from it and says to Matthijs, “We’re always looking for translators in the military. You might prove of some use.”

Matthijs furrows his brow, “The military life’s not really for me.”

Johann hums a small laugh through his nose. “It’s every man’s duty to serve his country in some capacity.”

“And that service doesn’t have to come by shooting bullets at people.”

Sophie turns her head towards the kitchen. “Frieda!” she calls, trying to sound pleasant, though clearly nervous. “Did you find the biscuits?”

Frieda is coming out of the kitchen at that very moment. “Yes, yes. Sorry it took me so long.” She crosses to the coffee table once more, setting the cookies down. “I thought you all might like them warmed up a tad bit.”

Grandma happily reaches forward and takes a cookie for herself, “Oh yes! Nothing quite like warm biscuits and hot coffee.”

“So,” Sophie says, doing whatever she can to keep the conversation polite, “Grandma – I like your new necklace.”

“I was about to say the same thing to you, darling,” her grandmother says. “Look at you! You’re as shiny as a new penny!”

Johann smiles, “Only the best for my Sophie.”

The day passes in this way, sitting and chatting and making polite conversation. Outside, in the meanwhile, storm clouds begin opening up – slowly at first, a soft trickle of water misting from above. And then, as the minutes pass, more and more drizzle begins to come.

The wind chimes out back are clinking and clattering softly as only every so often does a wind actually sweep past through the downpour.

Matthijs sits at the head of the dining room table. Johann sits in the corner seat with Sophie by his side, and Uncle Herman sits directly next to her. Grandma sits at the other end of the table, across from Matthijs.

The table has been set for dinner, dishes upon dishes of rich foods lain out for the guests, warm candles lighting the scene, and a shimmering chandelier hanging above their heads.

Uncle Herman leans in to Sophie and whispers, “If I were you, I’d think about marrying this guy.”

“Uncle Herman!” she quietly rebuffs.

“I’m just saying – big house, good career, lots of money from the looks of it. You’d be set for life with a guy like this.”

She looks out the corner of her eye and sees that Johann is busy chatting with Matthijs. She turns back to her uncle, whispering to him, “I can’t marry him, he’s a Nazi!”

“So?” Herman asks. “They’re the ones in charge of Germany, right?”

“Yeah, but-”
“And the Netherlands are a part of Germany now. Might as well join the winning side…”

Sophie looks down at her plate dejectedly.

Johann returns his attention to the table as a whole. “What shall we do after dinner? Perhaps I can take you all on a late night tour of the city?”

“That’d be nice,” Herman comments.

“In the rain?” Matthijs asks.

Johann chuckles, “There are indoor activities. As a matter of fact, I believe the opera is in town.” He turns to Sophie, gently squeezing her hand as he softly smiles at her. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Sophie? Then you and Vilmina would finally have something to talk about.”

She reluctantly smiles back at him, feeling tense.

Matthijs quietly observes this scene, astutely picking up on just how uncomfortable his sister looks. So he tries to change the subject. “So… Heard any good jokes recently?”

Johann brightens up (an odd demeanor for him). “Oh, here’s a good one,” he says, looking a little sly, “Why don’t Jews eat pork?”

Matthijs is sorry for even asking, not sure what sort of jokes he expected out of a man like this. But he proceeds nonetheless, tempering his sense of decency. “…I don’t know. Why?”

Johann says, “Because that would be cannibalism.”

PFFT! Uncle Herman spits up his drink, lifting his napkin to his mouth as he coughs between his raucous laughing, pounding his fist on the table.

Shame fills Sophie at seeing her uncle laugh at such a joke. But she better laugh as well, she figures, or else Johann might get upset.

Sophie nervously laughs, forcing a smile onto her face, Matthijs himself already starting to laugh, though he’s pointing at their uncle, clearly amused at seeing him spit up his drink.

A slow, sly chuckle begins arising from Grandma Betje’s throat as the meaning of the punchline dawns on her, and she starts laughing as well.

Johann smiles, glad to see his joke has gone over well, and he joins in the laughter, Sophie’s laughter growing to match his own – and the table becomes one loud buzz of uncomfortable laughter, the sound rolling out in one wave after another, everyone beginning to laugh so hard that they squeeze their eyes shut.

And then, Sophie thinks she hears something outside the window – movement of some kind. She opens her eyes, looking out the high window. But there is nothing there. It must have just been Princess rooting around in the garbage bins again. Sophie hopes that it wasn’t her flower box falling off the side of the house. She’ll have to check that in the morning...

And yet still, for some reason, Sophie just can’t seem to stop staring at the window. Something’s pulling at her… but she doesn’t know what.

“You all right?” Johann asks her.

“Huh?” She looks over at him, and then she nods. “Oh, yeah. Just… enjoying the rain…”
The rainy night passes, all having retired to bed. Sophie kindly allows her grandmother to have her bed while she herself sleeps in the armchair. Johann, being a gracious host, decides he shall sleep on the divan in the parlor and allow Matthijs to have his bed (though Matthijs isn’t at all comfortable with this – so he lets Uncle Herman have the bed, and Matthijs decides he’s just going to sleep on the floor).

The dawn breaks through, the grey clouds of the night having given way to the dull blue skies of day, the birds leaving their nests to try to find some food, winter berries perhaps, on the otherwise barren foliage.

Breakfast time comes and Sophie makes the most of the meal, enjoying what last few precious moments she has left with her family for the time being – for all too soon is Johann tying their luggage on top of the car.

“We’d better get to the station before the train leaves,” he says to them as Uncle Herman helps his mother down the walkway.

“Keep your pants on,” Betje gripes, “This hip of mine doesn’t follow anyone’s schedule.”

Sophie sadly smiles. *I’m gonna miss Grandma. It’d be nice if she lived here. She’d keep Johann in line.*

They all pile into the car, and head for the train station, arriving in just enough time to have an attendant help put their luggage onto a trolley and cart it through the station to the platform.

They all stand in front of the train, people showing their tickets to the conductor, he nodding as he lets them on one by one.

Sophie hugs her grandmother tightly, “I’m going to miss you so much!” She gives her a kiss on the cheek.

“Don’t be a stranger, now,” her grandmother tells her. “Write us a letter every now and again! I want to hear from you.”

Matthijs comes to Sophie and gives her a hug, and then he kisses her on her forehead. He looks her in the eye, seriously. “…Are you going to be all right here?” he quietly asks.

Sophie hesitates, but then nods. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

The train conductor leans out the door of the train, calling, “Board!”

One more hug, and then Matthijs turns to help Grandma Betje onto the train, Uncle Herman in the meanwhile shaking hands with Johann, saying, “Well, Commander Reistrom, it was nice meeting you. I hope to be seeing more of you in the future.”

Reistrom politely smiles, “It was a pleasure having you over.”

Sophie asks her uncle, “Did you already tip the attendant, or should I take care of it?”

Uncle Herman responds, “Oh no, I already took care of it.”

“Tip?” Johann asks a little incredulously. “What for?”

Uncle Herman seems confused. “That’s what you do, isn’t it? Tip the concierge?”
Johann scoffs, “It’s his job to put the luggage on the train; he doesn’t deserve a reward for something he’s supposed to do anyway.” He looks over his shoulder. “Where is that attendant? I’m going to get your money back.”

Uncle Herman waves a little uneasily, “No, it’s okay, really.”

Johann’s already taking off, “No, wait here,” he says as he walks away.

*TOOT! TOOT!* the train sounds.

Grandma pokes her head out the window. “Herman! Get in here!”

“Right,” he quickly pecks Sophie on the cheek and then he dashes through the open train door, the conductor closing it behind him.

Matthijs leans out the window, looking at his sister, he saying somewhat quietly, “Sophie – get on with us.”

Her voice catches in her throat.

He says again, “Quick, before he gets back.”

Her stomach jumps, but immediately plummets as the only mental image she has is that of her family lying dead on the floor, Johann standing over them. She nervously smiles and waves, “I don’t have a ticket.”

Matthijs hums sadly. “…Come back to us when you can, all right?”

She continues her sad smile. “If anything, you guys should think about moving here. Berlin’s a really nice place. I think you’d like it here.”

*Ding, ding! Ding, ding!* The tiny bell at the head of the engine rings.

Matthijs says, “Goodbye for now, Sophie. Take care of yourself, all right?”

She nods, “I will.”

The train sounds its whistle and begins to chug, slowly hulking forward.

Her family waves from their seats, all calling, “Goodbye! Goodbye!” as the train is picking up speed a little bit at a time.

Sophie waves back to them, “Goodbye! I’ll miss you – !”

And then, time stops, every muscle in her body turning to ice.

There. On the train. Through the window.

She sees him.

“Edward?”

It’s him!

He sits in his seat with his head leaning against the closed windowpane, his eyes dead forward, not looking out to the platform at his side.
“Edward!” Sophie shouts, but her voice is being lost in the sea of noises – the chugging of the train, the dinging of the bell, the tooting of the whistle, the chittering and chattering of the crowd in the station. “Edward!”

The train is picking up more speed, starting to move faster and faster, Ed disappearing from view.

Sophie begins running alongside the train, her stiff knee catching and locking every few feet, her cane clunking and thunking across the platform, she unable to get back to his window.

“Ed! Ed!” She starts hitting her cane up against the side of the train. “Stop! Stop the train!!”

The faces of the people within the train are becoming nothing more than a colorful blur, each car passing her by and passing her by.

The train whistle screeches again, its shrill pitch covering her scream: “EDWARD!”

Sophie eventually drops the cane, running, running still, trying to match the train for speed, but all for naught.

Her knee buckles, and she falls, landing roughly on the platform. The train whizzes past, out of the station, the large metal beast starting to grow smaller and smaller as it moves further and further away.

He’s gone.

He was here and now he’s gone.

He was here in Berlin!

And now he’s left without her!

Sophie’s wails of despair carry out over the crowd as she lies there on the dirty platform, sobbing, weeping, crying harder than she’s ever cried before.

Johann returns from amongst the crowd, “There you are!” He sneers at her. “What are you doing laying on the ground? Pick yourself up. You’re making a scene.”

And she knows not from where it comes, but suddenly a fire fills her belly as Sophie grits her teeth, clenching her fists. She pushes herself upright, slowly rising to her knees as she wipes away her tears. And then she stands, a bit shakily, wobbly at first. And then she turns around and, with as much dignity as she can muster, she marches past Johann, not even looking him in the eye.

“Where’s your cane?” he questions. “Did you lose it?” He begins to follow after her. “I’m not going to buy you another one if you can’t learn to take care of them.”

She doesn’t care. She doesn’t care what he has to say. And she doesn’t care if it means being slapped, punished, locked in her room – she doesn’t care – but she’s never talking to him ever again. Not a word. She’ll be a mute for the rest of her life if she has to.

She’s not saying a word unless it’s to Ed.

*He didn’t realize I was here,* she thinks as she strides towards the car. *That’s the only reason he left. As soon as he finds out I AM here, he’ll come right back, I know it!*

She stops in front of the car, her hand on the handle. And she waits there for a moment. She turns around, looking in the direction of the train, the only thing visible just a little bit of smoke rising
from its stack in the distance.

…He’ll come back…

Someday.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:

Reviews:

Don’t mind me. I’ll just be lying over here on the floor.

This chapter. This. Chapter. This is easily the least fun of all the chapters. Do you
know how long I’ve had to live with knowing about the events in this chapter? Years,
people. Literal years.

So! Now you know the backstory behind that scene in Ch 23 – you know, the scene
where Ed shows up at the house and he looks through the window? Now you know
why Sophie was with Reistrom and why her family was there and why everyone is
smiling and laughing and “happy.” Isn’t being caught out of context great? :) IF
SOPHIE HAD JUST LOOKED UP 30 SECONDS SOONER! HOW DIFFERENT
And that train scene – that goddamn train scene. My heart breaks every time I think about it. IF ED HAD JUST LOOKED OUT THE GOD DAMN WINDOW! LOOK OUT THE WINDOW, DAMN YOU! Kill me. Kill me now.

Sorry I was a couple days late posting it. I normally write a chapter a week. This thing is 3 chapters in one – so be glad it didn’t take me 3 weeks to write. Nothing like compressing 9 months worth of events into one doc, eh? And consider how much of it I actually cut (all the R-rated rapey scenes. Basically, if it wouldn’t have been shown in FMA 03, I don’t show it. But suffice to say, there are innumerable instances of Johann helping himself into her bed. Imma stab that guy in the dick…).

Which, BTW, PSA: Reistrom and Sophie’s relationship – THIS IS WHAT AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP LOOKS LIKE. If you are in a relationship and it looks even REMOTELY like this, YOU NEED TO GET OUT OF THERE. There are resources out there that can help you.

So. Yeah.

Also, I would like to WHOLEHEARTEDLY apologize for that joke made at the dinner table. I feel ashamed for even writing it.

Hey! Here’s a fun game you can play at home, kids! Take a drink every time you feel like either stabbing, slapping, strangling, punching, or otherwise causing bodily harm to Reistrom. You’ll be drunk like a motherfuck! :) . I took a tally myself while doing proofreading (no alcohol was involved, just me scribbling with a pencil): 1 slap, 2 punches, 3 strangulations, 15 jabs with a needle, and 40 stabs in the dick. I hate that guy. I hate that guy so much…
The train chugs along, gently clinking and bumping over the tracks as the people inside sit and chat with one another. The towns and scenery fly by, each looking similar and yet different to the last, the outside air growing just a little bit colder and a little bit colder, evidenced by how thick of
clothing the townspeople here wear as opposed to the previous town.

Ed stares out the window, watching it all go by. The sooner he’s out of Germany, the better. He can’t stand the sight of it anymore. He looks back down to his lap, to where his open map lies. It won’t be long now. Soon the train will stop in Bremen, and from there Ed can catch a riverboat to the sea.

…They’re looking for him, he knows they are. You don’t just break out of prison and go unnoticed. Ed can only imagine what Commander Geizsler’s reaction was, and Ed can only hope that his friends haven’t been hurt because of him – especially not Doctor Marcoh. The younger fellas, they might be able to handle what Geizsler throws at them in terms of physical punishment. But Doctor Marcoh, at his age?

Don’t worry guys, Ed thinks as he stares down at the map Marcoh gave to him, I won’t forget about you. As soon as I get to England, I’ll tell the government there what’s going on.

He looks at the little star drawn on the map, denoting Geizsler’s base, and then Ed traces his hand around the map, feeling the little pinpoint holes that are scattered here and there. Clearly there must have been thumbtacks or pins or something stuck into the map – but why these places have been marked, Ed can only guess.

He folds the map back up, putting it back into the inside of his jacket – well, Marcoh’s jacket. None of the clothes he wears are his, all but the jacket stolen from a clothesline, the work gloves covering his hands stolen out of a shed, along with a hunting knife for insurance. The only things that are his are his shoes and his underdrawers.

Ed sighs, running his hand over his head to the back of his neck. He doesn’t even have his long hair anymore. It really shouldn’t matter – it’s just hair. And yet now that’s it’s gone, it just doesn’t feel right. Not to mention, it feels like he cut it for nothing…

Ed leans his head against the window, hand resting on the back of his neck as his arm hangs down his chest, and Ed lets out a sigh through his nose, his warm breath catching on the glass and fogging it over momentarily.

The train pulls to a rest, the conductor in the meanwhile going down the aisle announcing, “Bremen Station! End of the line, folks! Repeat, Bremen Station! End of the line!”

Ed stands up, rubbing his back, trying to get a bit of feeling back into it after having sat in one position for so long. He reaches up to the luggage rack – but then remembers he has no luggage. So he just puts his hands in his pockets and walks for the exit.

Outside the train, a few cars ahead, Matthijs is hopping off the train, while his Uncle Herman is helping Grandma Betje.

And as he steps onto the platform, Matthijs sees someone amongst the crowd – a man, a blonde man, with short hair and a black jacket, walking away, his back towards the train. He seems familiar for some reason, and yet Matthijs can’t place who he is…

“A hand, dear,” Grandma Betje says to him.

“Oh,” Matthijs turns back towards the train door, he extending his hand to help her, “Of course.”
Ed grabs a city map from one of the info stands inside the station, and he momentarily looks it over.

*Which way to the river?* he ponders. *And for that matter, do they even have riverboats? I hope so.*

He scans over the map, seeing that, lucky for him, the river is not too far away, just a bit to the south of the station. With that he folds up the city map and tucks it in with the country map he already has.

Ed walks out of the station, stepping out into the cold air and taking in his surroundings. People walk up and down the sidewalks, jovially chatting with one another, holding hands and bundling up against the light snow that is beginning to fall all around.

The architecture and stonework of the buildings is old and grand, many of the buildings here having sea foam green roofs, now beginning to be covered in patches of white as ice and snow begin to build up.

Ed shivers a little against the cold, having gotten used to the warm inside of the station, and so he buttons up his jacket and, with hands in pocket, he heads down the street before him.

He walks for a while, crossing over a short bridge over a creek. He stops momentarily, looking down at the sleepy little scene – no insects hovering above the water, seemingly no fish moving below it, not even any ducks swimming through it, for it seems winter has put all the world to sleep.

*For a country at war, he thinks to himself, it sure is peaceful.*

Ed walks on, passing through the city streets, buildings and people all around him, the smell of lit chimneys leaving a strong smoky aroma in the air, it mixing with the smells of the nearby restaurants and cafés, food and coffee taunting his senses.

Ed’s stomach growls at him, he grumbling back at it. *I’d love to feed you, old buddy, but I’ve got to save the money for the boat.* He sighs. *But how much is that gonna cost? Am I even going to have enough money to get on a ship to England?*

He comes to another bridge, this one quite long and busy with traffic, stretching over the river that he’s been looking for.

He looks off to his left, and there they are, the docks, with plenty of boats to be had.

But there’s something else there on the docks too, something Ed was hoping to avoid – soldiers.

Ed quickly backs up, putting his back to the wall as he hides on the side of the building. He peers around the corner, getting a good look at the men with helmets and rifles.

*Damn. Did they track me here? And why are there so many of them? ...Maybe they’re not here for me at all. You don’t need that many soldiers to bring in one guy... Still, best to stay away...*

Ed backs away from the corner of the building, he now looking back northwards from whence he came. *I’ll have to find another way out of here.*

He backtracks, making his way to the little café he already passed, helping himself to one of the patio tables, Ed pulling out his city map and laying it out on the table surface.
Hmm… It looks like there’s a main road leading to the sea. How to get there from here? He traces his finger along the map as he converses internally. I can follow these streets northwest… Hang a right here…

But there are so many buildings I’d have to walk past, so many people who could see me. Maybe there’s a less conspicuous way.

His eyes drift to the train station’s location on the map. Huh. It looks like there’s a lot of farmland out here. There’s probably not too many people there.

Ed moves the map around, orienting its position so that its north matches real north. Lemme see… It looks like if I stay close to the tracks, they eventually diverge and follow this road labeled R6, and that road looks like it heads to a place called Cuxhaven – but I’ll reach the sea before then.

Ed folds the map back up and once more tucks it into his pocket. Well, back to the station then.

Back up the street he goes, back past the restaurants and the smoking chimneys and the bustling people and the driving cars, back to the station he just left. Only this time, rather than going inside, Ed follows a little road that leads to a tunnel that passes underneath the train tracks, letting him out on the other side where he needs to be.

Before him now are tiny houses, each with their own small plot, the gardens bare with the cold of winter. And Ed follows along his planned path, following the rail until it comes to the highway, the tiny houses to his right eventually ceasing as they come against a grove of woodland. And the further and further Ed travels, the more wooded it becomes.

He takes care to stay off the main road lest the cars traveling along it see him – but so too does he stay close to road lest it be lost to his sight. And for that matter, Ed does not want to get too close to the houses that peek through the woods every now again, for if someone inside sees him, they may become suspicious of the strange man walking alone in the cold along the highway. People, no matter what town, no matter what city he’s gone to, ever seem to be too fond of wanderers.

I am a traveling man, Ed reminds himself, the old Masonic phrase having been true of him for practically his entire life. Always a wanderer…

Eventually, the houses disappear entirely, and after a short while longer, Ed comes upon another, smaller river. He stops to rest, momentarily, getting a drink of water and checking his map. Does this river lead out to sea? If so, he can follow it… No, no. It’s heading in an east-west direction, and he’s heading north. Oh well. Best to just stay on the road.

Along the road he walks, always using the woods nearby for cover. And anytime they begin to thin out, he always heads for the next patch of trees, even if they are further from the road, he looking periodically to his left, making sure the road is still in sight. Should a small street ever cut through his patch of woods, Ed quickly dashes across before anyone should see, he thankful that these country side-roads are hardly traveled.

Still onwards and onwards the woods stretch, more farmhouses eventually coming into view, and Ed just continues to walk past them. The highway on his left, though relatively empty, is still somewhat busy, busy enough that when the trees thin out and disappear entirely, Ed grows a little nervous, for now he is out in the open. He moves further away from the road, now keeping close to the fence that divides the public land from the land of whatever farmer owns these fields, the road still only about 70 yards away. So while Ed is still visible from the road, should any passing traveler look out their window as they go by, Ed’s face will probably be indiscernible, he nothing more than a figure against a snowy backdrop.
And the snow – *Brrrr!* Ed uses his left hand to rub his right shoulder, where flesh meets automail, the metal absorbing all the cold air around him, soaking the bitterness into his skin and nerves, making them numb and tingly.

*I should probably stop and rest for a while, he thinks to himself, Build a fire or something…*

He looks up, spying yet another river. He smiles.

*And who knows – maybe I can catch a fish to eat, too.*

Ed gathers some twigs, dry dead wood easy to find this time of year, for all the trees are dormant. And yet ironically, any dead branches left on the ground are becoming covered in wet snow, making many of them useless. Still, a campfire is not too difficult for Ed to whip up, he ever thankful for all the survival tactics he learned on the island as a child.

And one long, thin branch in particular is even better wet than dry, for its moisture will keep it pliable, keeping it from breaking when being used as a fishing rod. Ed pulls out his shoelaces, using them as his line and a short stick as his hook, it sharpened to a fine point using his hunting knife. The bait is a little harder to come by, all the bugs slumbering and buried deep within the earth, Ed having to turn over several rocks and logs before finding any.

He sits at the river’s edge, the fire beside him, keeping him warm, he keeping it to his right side to try and warm up his automail just a bit. Every so often, he’ll get up and move to the other side, letting his metal leg warm up, and then its right back over to the other side, for his right side has grown cold again.

After an hour of sitting on the snowy, muddied banks, and not a single tug at the line, Ed sighs, reeling it back in. He’ll have to wait for his shoelaces to dry before restringing them. At least that’s more time he can spend in front of the fire.

Trees, trees everywhere. Ed has found a little woodland path, he now covered on all sides. No one will be seeing him now. But by that same standard, he can’t see the road anymore.

*Damn it,* he thinks. *I hope I haven’t gotten myself lost.*

But eventually, after just a little while longer, the woods do begin to clear out, and the highway comes back into view. *I hope this is the right road, though, and not some other road.* On good faith, he follows alongside it, it leading to an even larger river than before, the largest he’s seen yet, it looking like a veritable lake in its size.

Ed looks up at the bridge that stretches over his head. *If I cross the bridge, no doubt people will see me.* He looks at the river before him. *But I don’t have a boat. And I’m sure not going to swim this thing. That’s all I need to do is catch hypothermia…*

The bridge is the better option, even if it is risky. He makes his way back up to the bridge, he trying to remain calm as the cars pass him by. The town on the other side of the bridge seems somehow further away now than it was when he was down at the banks of the river. Ed steadies his mind. It’s just a bridge, no big deal. Just got to walk across, don’t make eye contact with anybody in the cars…

“Hey, buddy,” a voice at his side calls.
Ed stops himself from jumping out of his skin.

A car has pulled up beside him, the man in the driver’s seat calling, “Do you know where the nearest hotel is?”

Ed gives a nervous laugh, “No, sorry. I’m just passing through, same as you.”

“Oh. Do you need a lift into town?” the man offers.

Ed again responds a little nervously. “No, it’s all right. I love this weather.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Ed assures.

“All right,” the man responds. “You take care now.” And he drives off.

Ed heaves a relieved sigh. *Here’s to hoping no more tourists stop me…*

Woods and farmland. Woods and train tracks. More farmland, some warehouses, and then more farmland.

Ed holds his growling stomach. *Why does it have to be winter? At least if the crops were growing I might be able to grab something without anyone seeing…*

For five hours now he’s been traveling, and sunset comes early this time of year, the sun already making its way towards the horizon. There’s probably only about an hour’s worth of light left. He’ll have to stop and make camp for the night. That doesn’t sound all too bad, for his legs are growing tired.

And then Ed hears a rumbling sound. It comes not from his stomach, but from the road behind him, another car surely. But it sounds bigger than a normal car. Ed looks over his shoulder, and can see a set of headlights coming into view, they attached to a rather large vehicle. It’s a military truck!

Ed quickly ducks down behind a tree, and he waits until he hears the truck pass him by before he pokes his head out from behind the trunk, peering at the large vehicle as it continues driving down the road.

*What’s a military truck doing all the way out here? There aren’t any bases out here as far as I know…* Of course, then again, if there was a military base, would they have bothered to mark it on a map? Seems like they’d want to keep it a secret…

*Hang on,* Ed pulls out the large country map from his pocket, looking it over once more. His eyes fall to one of the pinpoint holes, above Bremen but below the coastline. *The pins tacked to the map. I bet those are the locations of military bases. If that’s the case, that means there’s one not far from where I am now.*

His muscles tense.

*Dammit. If I keep heading the way I’m heading now, I’m going to run right into them. I’ve got to find another way…*
Ed’s eyes rove along the map, he measuring distances using his fingers. *If I breakaway northwest, I’ll reach this bay over here. It’s about the same distance as Bremerhaven, if not closer by just a bit. I’ll still get to the sea and I won’t have to go near that base.*

Ed tucks the map away, he peering out from behind the tree once more. No truck in sight. Good.

He dashes across the road to its other side, and waits there for a moment, making sure there is no one around to have seen him. When no sound or movement comes, Ed begins his trek in the new direction.

He walks along, his mind wandering. *I’ve been gone for five days now. How long before they give up looking for me?* He scoffs, somewhere between a chuckle and a sigh. *Good old Elric, always pissing off just the right people. Fuhrer Bradley was out for my head, and now this Himmler guy is doing just the same.* He inwardly, cynically laughs to himself. *Should’ve stepped up my game – gone to Hitler’s office while I was in Berlin and punched him in the face. THAT would have made sure that everybody was looking for me…*

His moment of amusement begins to fall as his eyes drift to his feet… That’s not why he went to Berlin…

But his thoughts are cut short as Ed hears the SNAP! of a twig. His eyes dart back up – soldiers! Dead ahead! They’re facing the other way.

Ed dives into the bushes nearest him, their dry, tangled branches bearing dead, brown leaves that hang limply from their tips, a dry shuddering sound arising as Ed wriggles his way in, disappearing.

“Hey, what – ?” a soldier’s voice arises, but it is cut off by another soldier going, “SHH!”

Ed covers his mouth, desperately trying to steady his breath, his heart jumping up into his throat. *Go away!* he thinks, hoping the soldiers will dismiss the sound he made as nothing more than a wayward bird or squirrel scurrying across the forest floor.

But no! He hears their footsteps growing closer now, their boots crunching through the icy snow! No! Not now! Not when he’s so close to the sea, so close to finally getting on a boat and leaving this godforsaken country behind!

Closer they come, and closer still, Ed trying to keep his muscles from shivering lest they shakes the bushes. Whether he shakes from cold or from fear is uncertain, but either way Ed is growing angry at his own body for defying him. *Hold still, dammit!*

They’re right next to him!

Ed stops breathing.

The soldiers walk past his bush, their eyes looking out to the woodlands directly in front of them, they never turning their heads to the side or looking down to where he hides.

They pass him by, continuing into the woods, the crunching of their bootsteps growing just a little bit dimmer and a little bit dimmer. Until eventually – they are gone.

Ed sits there quietly, in the cold, quiet snow. Everything is silent. And yet still, something in his gut tells him that it is unsafe to move yet. Best to wait here and give the soldiers ample time to
move along…

He waits. And he waits. And he waits. No sounds arise – not the rumbling of a truck, nor the
titter of a bird, nor even the wisp of the wind.

A good half hour passes before Ed finally gets the nerve to move again. Keeping low, he crawls
out of the bush, working his way around to the other side of the nearest tree. And slowly he stands,
sliding his way up the trunk. He stands there, waiting, seeing if there is any reaction to his
movement.

He hears nothing.

Cautiously, Ed peers around the tree, looking in the direction that he last saw the soldiers go.

There is nothing. All is silent and still.

Ed sighs, relieved. *They’re gone…* He turns away, finally once again starting to walk along his
way, heading northwest once more.

*Click-click!* 

That was a rifle cocking! Ed looks over his shoulder. *They’re still here!* They must be hiding
amongst the bushes, same as he was!

Ed takes off running as a chunk of tree next to him is blasted away by rifle fire. He darts from side
to side, using every tree as a shield, none of the grand old plants safe from the bullets that become
lodged within their trunks.

*I’ve got to outrun them!* Ed frantically thinks. *I’ve got to give them the slip! I got to – !*

**BANG!**

Ed jolts forward as a terrible blinding pain sears through his right shoulder, his automail arm
falling limp, he falling face-first into the cold snow below.

His mouth is wide open as he screams, but no sound comes out, the terrible pain stealing his voice
from him. Every nerve ending in his shoulder is on fire, and his head begins to pound as the whole
world around him starts to whirl, everything having a shady, ghostly afterimage.

*No. No! It can’t end this way!*

Even though it hurts, Ed forces himself up, just barely getting off the ground before his hand slips
across the icy ground, slipping under him, and he lands on his left shoulder. Feebly, he rolls onto
his back, the world still tilting side to side, the white sky above his head as snowy as the ground
below him,

Through the snow, he can hear boots pounding their way up to him.

This is how it ends, is it? After everything…

A soldier runs up to Ed’s side, the man pointing his rifle barrel right at his fallen victim.

Maybe it’s just because everything is hazy. Maybe it’s just because the pain is confusing him. But
in his dying moment, Ed is unsure as to why, of all people, **THIS** is the face he sees –

“…Havoc?” Ed mutters.
The soldier is taken aback, and he leans in. “Hey, how do you know my name?”
But Ed cannot answer, for all the world has grown dark, his eyes closing, his senses leaving him
...
...
...
All the world is dark. And still. And yet it is not still, for Ed thinks he can sense movement beyond
his eyelids. And things are not as silent as they seem, for even though all sound is muffled by the
pounding of his head, he thinks he hears voices all around him,

“I’m telling you, he said my name!”

“But you don’t know him?”

“No. I mean, maybe we were in the same boot camp? But I don’t recognize him-.”

Boot camp? SOLDIERS!

Ed bolts upright, his eyes snapping open. “Let me go!”

“Whoa! Hey!” the soldiers in the tent stop Ed as he tries to jump off the table, they gently holding
him back as he struggles.

“I’ve gotta get outta here! I can’t die in this place!”

“You’re not gonna die!” the soldiers reassure him, and yet still Ed struggles.

“Let me go!”

The flap of the tent opens, a man in a white doctor’s coat entering – “Stop upsetting the patient…”
And he stops, dead in his tracks, staring at the patient, Edward staring back at him.

“…Al?” Ed barely gets his name out before Al has run up and started hugging him. “Ow! Watch
it!”

Al pulls back from his brother, excitedly staring into his eyes. “Ed! Oh my god! Ed! You’re okay!”

Ed lays a hand on his automail shoulder. “Yeah. Mostly.”

“What happened? What are you doing out here?”

“I was on my way to find you.”

“Hey doc,” one of the soldiers asks, “You know this guy?”

Al’s wide smile has yet to leave his face. “This is my brother, Edward!”

The soldiers are surprised. “This is your brother?”

“Oops,” Havoc mumbles.

Al asks them, “Where did you find him?”

Ed points at them viciously, “They found me when they shot me!”

Al’s aghast, “They what??!”
Havoc raises his hand with a nervous chuckle. “That was me. Sorry.”

Al turns on him. “You SHOT him?!”

Havoc waves his hands in defense, “I didn’t know he was your brother!”

“Al,” Ed starts, Al looking back at him, “What are you doing out here? You’re supposed to be in England.”

“I was. But I came out here looking for you.” Al stops for a moment, quizzically looking at his brother. “Hey, what happened to your hair?”

“What happened to my hair? What happened to your hair?” Ed asks in return, having now noticed the ponytail hanging over Al’s shoulder.

Al looks at it, and then bashfully chuckles as he holds his ponytail in hand. “Oh. I thought it looked better this way. Looked kind of like yours…” his voice slows as he looks down at the ground.

Havoc looks at his fellow soldiers and nods towards the tent entrance. “We’ll give you guys some alone-time,” he says to Al, and the soldiers filter out through the exit.

Al quietly stares at the floor for a while before finally speaking again. “…I was almost sure the Nazis had killed you… When I saw them putting you in that car…” He suddenly gasps, “Sophie! Where’s Sophie?!”

Ed looks down at the ground, looking away quietly. “…I don’t want to talk about it…”

Al feels his heart break within him, his chest growing heavy. He too looks back down at the ground. “…I’m sorry, Ed… We tried to get out here sooner. Really we did.”

“It’s not your fault, Al.” Ed looks back up at him. “So who’s ‘we’? Just how’d you get out here anyway?”

Al brightens up a little bit. “Three guesses as to who’s in charge.”

Ed gives a bit of a smile, his old self finally starting to show through again. “Am I to understand the old captain came out of retirement?”

Al nods. “That’s right – Captain Roy Mustang – only fighting for the British this time around.”

“Well I’ll be,” Ed comments. “Sounds like the old softy finally toughened up a little.”

“And you won’t believe who else is here – Hawkeye!”

“The lieutenant? Really?”

“Her name is Lisa – and the funny part is, this time around she’s Mustang’s boss!”

Ed starts laughing, but then suddenly winces, holding his shoulder.

Al moves to him, “Ed! Are you okay?”

“My shoulder…”

“Let me see,” Al requests.
Ed removes his jacket and then slips off his shirt, exposing his automail.
Al looks it over, humming as he thinks aloud, “I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing that your automail got hit. Sure, you’re not bleeding, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to remove the bullet. I don’t know the first thing about working your automail!”

Ed gives a smarmy grimace, trying to play off the pain. “Where’s Winry when you need her, huh?”

“Well, we don’t have Winry, but we do have a mechanic.” Al crosses the tent, lifting open the flap as he calls to a nearby soldier, “Hey! Bring Breda in here would you?”

“Breda?” Ed asks. “He’s here, too?”

Al nods. “Just like old times, huh?”

“I’ll say.” Ed jokingly responds, “All we’re missing now is Armstrong in here posing.”

A few moments later, the tent flap opens again and in enters Breda the mechanic. He looks to Alphonse and asks, “What’s the matter, doc? The pressure cuff acting up again?”

Al shakes his head, “No, it’s a little bit more complicated than that.” He stands to the side, showing the patient on the exam table, he with a gleaming silver arm.

“Wow,” Breda comments as he looks it over. “Would you look at that. Is that prosthetic?”

Ed nods, “Yeah. It’s pretty sophisticated, too. I’d show you. But it’s damaged.”

“What are we talking about here?” Breda questions, “Loose spring? Bad hydraulics?”

Al confesses, “Honestly, we’re not sure how it works. A friend of ours built it. But she’s not with us anymore.”

“Eh, sorry to hear that,” Breda offers. He adjusts his belt, “But let me take a look at it, see what I can’t do.”

Al brings Breda around to the other side of Ed, pointing out the back of Ed’s shoulder. “Mainly, we’re concerned about getting this bullet out.”

Breda lets out a long whistle. “That’s pretty deep-looking. Germans do this to you?”

Ed again gives a smarmy grimace. “Friendly fire.”

Breda laughs. “It was that Havoc chump wasn’t it? Can’t hit the broad side of a barn and the first thing he hits is an ally!”

Havoc’s voice rises from outside the tent, “I heard that! And it was an accident!”

Breda calls through the tarp, “Go eavesdrop someplace else, would ya?” He turns his attention back to the doctor. “Let me get my toolbox and I’ll be right back.” He leaves, and as he does he shoves Havoc to the side, “Come on you, get outta here.”

“Fine, all right!” Havoc says, walking away.

Al in the meanwhile is helping Ed to lay belly-down on the exam table. Ed gives a short laugh. “Never thought I’d have Breda performing surgery on me.”

Al grins, “You probably never thought you’d have Havoc shoot you either.”
“No, there was that one time he almost did, remember?” Ed reminds him, “When we were on the run after Liore…” And then he falls quiet.

“…Everything all right, Ed?”

“…Hey Al… Did you ever wonder what happened to all those soldiers in Liore? The ones that Scar transmuted into the Philosopher’s Stone?”

Al tilts his head a little. “What do you mean?”

“I mean once they stopped being physical people and became a mass of energy… Were you able to hear any of them, inside of you?”

Al looks down quietly, thoughtfully placing his hand over his chest. “Well, no, not exactly. It was more like… thousands of hearts all beating in unison… their life force washing over me in waves… And yet it was something more. I don’t know how else to explain it, really.” He looks back up at his brother. “Why do you ask?”

Ed narrows his eyes, still looking at the ground, he saying a bit darkly, “Because I met one of them.”

“You what?”

Ed looks up at Al. “The man who came to the docks to take me away – he was a soldier in Liore.”

“You mean you recognized him from the Other Side?”

“No – I mean he is from the Other Side.”

Al is astonished, “Just like us? Like Huskisson?”

“Not exactly,” Ed tells him. “He says he was reborn, came out on this side as a baby – but he remembers everything from his past life.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you telling me this?”

“He’s the one who was holding me captive. Says he was doing it for revenge.”

“Revenge for what?”

“For what we did in Liore. He blames us. And once he finds out I’ve escaped, I don’t doubt that he’s going to come after us with a vengeance.”

Al defends, “But we tried to stop what happened-.”

“He doesn’t care. And I can only imagine what he’d do to you if he found you. It doesn’t help that he has friends in high places either. They’ve probably got the whole German army looking for us.”

“So what do we do?”

“First chance we get, we need to get out of here – get to England, or maybe even farther than that, to America.”

Breda returns, ending their conversation for now, he setting his toolbox down on a nearby table, then sliding that table closer, so he can grab tools as needed. “Bring that magnifying glass this way, would you, doc?”
Al swings the large surgical magnifying glass down over Ed’s back, and the mechanic studies the patient’s wound.

He hums, “Hmm. Mm-hmm…Do me a favor and move his arm up.”

Al gently lifts his brother’s arm, Ed giving a short yelp and then gritting his teeth. “Sorry,” Al apologizes.

Breda continues his thoughtful humming as he examines Ed’s shoulder. “If the bullet had just been five inches to the right, it might have passed right through this big opening right here and gone out the other side. Which by the way, what kind of a design is that, leaving all these wires exposed to the air? What if water gets in there?”

Ed says to him, “Hey, I just wear it. I didn’t build it.”

Breda moves around to all sides of the table, viewing the automail from all angles. He asks, “Is it possible just to remove his whole arm?”

“NO!” both Ed and Al shout in unison, Ed adding, “Do you realize how painful that is?!”

Breda motions his hands for calm, “Okay, sorry, just a suggestion.” He puts a hand to his chin, thinking aloud, “If that’s the case, I’m going to need to remove some of the chassis at the very least: that shoulder piece, the piece under it, this large covering that covers the shoulder blade – just this outer part, not the one underneath it – no need to look so worried.”

Al uneasily asks, “You will be able to put it all back together, won’t you?”

“Sure,” Breda affirms, “Just don’t get the pieces mixed up and it should be a piece of cake.”

Ed inwardly sighs as an air of foreboding overtakes him. *Great. I feel safer already...*

Breda pulls a screwdriver from his box, “Let’s get crackin’!”

The mechanic begins his work, unscrewing screws one at a time, Al resting his hand on Ed’s back (whether to keep Ed calm or keep himself calm is to be said). One by one, the pieces come off, Ed having to roll over momentarily so Breda can get to a screw on his chest plate. And carefully, delicately, Breda removes Ed’s shoulder coverings, exposing the workings underneath.

Ed gently rolls back onto his stomach, he in the meanwhile resisting the urge to clench his fist anxiously. He’s never had anyone other than Winry or Pinako touching his automail. Well, there was his dad – but that was with the fake limbs he made. They were nowhere near as sophisticated or as delicate as this.

Breda moves the magnifying glass a little closer to the patient. “All right, what have we got here?”

Al looks over Breda’s shoulder, looking through the magnifying glass as well. There is an internal covering of some kind, spherical in shape, the bullet hole just slightly above its center. Where the cover stops, there is what only can be described as a metal ‘bone,’ a seam between two pieces denoting where the shoulder ends and the ‘humerus’ begins.

Breda leans to his right a little, “Get me a flashlight, would you?”

Al looks into the toolbox, and pulls out a dull green, L-shaped flashlight, handing it to him.

Breda bends his knees, getting low to the table, looking into Ed’s arm socket, seeing if he can look
up under the internal covering. “Hmm… Move his arm up and down.”

Al’s a bit confused, “Up and down as in my left and right, or floor to ceiling?”

“Left to right,” Breda tells him, and Al does so, Ed yelping again. “Sorry, kid, just be patient.”

“I’m not a kid,” Ed gripes, Breda in the meanwhile continuing his examining.

“Hmm. It looks like there’s a copper ring of some kind slipped over the core. And if I’m not mistaken, the bullet’s stuck right through it.” He motions for Al to join him, then points to where he looks. “See right there? The bullet jiggles around every time you move his arm.”

Al moves Ed’s arm up and down a few more times, Ed finally shouting, “Would you quit moving my arm already?!”

“Sorry, Ed.”

Breda continues, “What I’m saying is, even if we had decided to remove your arm, it wouldn’t be able to come out anyway, not with the bullet going through that ring like a lynchpin. Not to mention that the trail a bullet leaves when it carves through metal makes nice metal barbs going out in all directions. It’d be like scraping nails across your insides.”

Ed’s anger simmers as he says, “You have really got to work on your bedside manner.”

Breda chuckles, “Yeah, well, the cars in the motor pool normally don’t talk back.” He stands up straight, addressing Alphonse, “Well, you can try getting in there with a long pair of tweezers, but it looks like the bullet is pretty well lodged in there. It’s not like flesh where you can just cut it back – unless you wanna get a can opener.”

Ed flatly responds, “Ha ha. Very funny.”

“I’m just saying, your arm might have to stay like that until we can get you to a real hospital with better equipment.”

Al looks down at his brother and asks, “Well, what do you say, Ed? It’s your call.”

Ed looks up at his brother with a firm smile. “I trust you, Al. You can do this.”

Al returns his firm smile with a confident nod. “Corporal Breda, keep that light over the wound. I’m going to need it to see in.”

“Roger that, doc,” Breda responds.

Al crosses to another nearby table, a medicine chest on top of it. He pulls out some rubber surgical gloves, some long tweezers and something else –

Ed gulps. “Al. What is that?”

Al turns around, a syringe in his hand. “Just some local anesthesia to numb the pain.”

Ed’s voice suddenly rises to a pitch it hasn’t seen since puberty, “It’s automail! It doesn’t need anesthesia!”

“Yes, but aren’t the wires in your automail connected to your nerve endings? I’m sure you’ll feel something once I get to work. I should at least numb the surrounding area – ”
“Skip it! I’ll be fine!”

Al sighs, “Ed, stop acting like you’re twelve. A shot is not going to kill you.”

Ed has his other arm wrapped around the bottom of the exam table, he looking like a grumpy cat stuck at the vet’s: “You don’t know that. We’re out in the middle of a dirty old forest. I don’t know where that needle’s been. There might have been bugs crawling all over it.”

“I assure you it’s sterile. Now quit fidgeting!”

“You’re fidgeting!”

“That doesn’t even make sense. Hold still!”

“OW! That hurt!”

“It wouldn’t have if you’d quit moving. Now lie still.”

Ed grumbles, refusing to admit that the anesthesia is already beginning to do its job, numbing the surrounding tissue near his automail.

Breda holds the flashlight steady as Alphonse looks through the magnifying glass, and carefully, steadily, the young doctor slips the tweezers down into the bullet hole. The tweezers touch the bullet, and Ed feels a shock, it jumping all the way through his shoulder to his neck, up to his ear.

“Ow! Damn it!”

“Ed! You okay?” Al asks.

“No! I felt that! You gave me that shot for nothing!”

“What did you feel?”

“It felt like a bolt of lightning just went through me.”

Al frowns, thinking aloud. “The bullet must be going through an electrical wire. The lead’s blocking the current, but as soon as my tweezers get down there, they touch the wire and close the circuit up again.”

Breda gives a short laugh, “Sounds like those wire loop games they have at carnivals, huh?”

Ed gripes, “Yeah, well I’d prefer it if you win this round and don’t touch the sides, okay?”

“All right, Ed, settle down,” his brother tells him.

“You can say ‘Settle down’ all you want when you get a bullet stuck in you…”

Breda suggests to Al, “Maybe if you put rubber tips on the tweezers?”

Al shakes his head. “There’s barely any room on the sides of the bullet as is. If we put tips on it, there’s no way I’ll be able to slip them around the bullet and pull it out.”

“Then just pull it out quick then,” Ed says as he braces himself, hugging tight to the table.

Breda sets the flashlight aside momentarily, pulling his leather belt off his waist. He folds it in half, holding it out in front of Ed. “Here. You might want to bite down on this. No telling how many
tries we’ll need.”

Ehck, Ed isn’t at all thrilled with this – but if it keeps him from breaking his teeth when clenching them so hard, might as well do as the, uh, assistant surgeon (?) says.

Ed bites down on the belt, Breda returning to his post, manning the flashlight as Al attempts once more. The tweezers go down into the bullet hole, and Al stops just shy of the lead bead, he taking a breath to steady himself.

And then he dives down, driving the tweezers onto either side of the bullet, sparks flying again.

Ed clenches down on the belt, his screaming muffled by the leather.

Al quickly pulls up on the bullet, but it does not move, the tweezers losing their grip and slipping right off the bullet.

“Damn it,” Al wipes his brow. “Sorry. I’m going to have to try again.”

“No worrieths,” Ed mumbles wearily with the belt in his mouth, “Take yer time…”

Al does it again, stopping the tweezers just a little ways above the bullet, making sure they’re in position, and then quickly slipping them around the bullet, the live wires reacting, and Ed screaming as he clings to the table. Al squeezes the tips of the tweezers together, the back of the soft bullet squishing under the pressure, and the flow of electricity stops, Ed sighing. Al pulls back on the bullet, trying to lift it up, and instead all that happens is that the lead stuck betwixt the tweezers rips off from the bullet.

Al holds up the little bit of metal in front of him, sighing.

“What’samatter?” Ed mumbles. “Did we geddit?”

“I’m afraid not,” Al tells him. He thinks for a little bit, staring at the little broken chunk of lead in front of him. And then says, “Maybe lifting it out isn’t the answer.”

Ed spits out the belt, catching it in his free hand. He looks over his shoulder and asks, “What do you mean?”

Al suggests, “What if instead we break the bullet into smaller pieces? Then all you’d have to do is lie on you back and hopefully all the pieces will fall out.”

Ed frowns, not liking the prospect. “And how do you propose we break it? You’re not gonna ram a chisel into my back, are you? That’d just jam the bullet in further.”

“We don’t have to literally break it,” Al tells him. “We can just dissolve it.”

Ed brightens up, “Hey, yeah! Lead’s real soft – nothing a little hydrogen peroxide and acetic acid won’t fix!”

Breda crosses his arms, “I’ve heard of that first one, but what’s the second one?”

Al looks at the mechanic and asks, “Do you know where we can find some vinegar around here? Any organic acid will do, really.”

“Vinegar, huh? Lemme go check with the cook.” And Breda leaves the tent.

Ed chuckles, “First you bring in a mechanic to fix me up like I’m a car, now we’re gonna get the
cook in here to dress me up with some vinegar.”

The boys both laugh, Al glad to hear his brother’s voice and jokes and laughter again.

Meanwhile, Breda is making his way across the darkened campgrounds, past the soldiers and trucks and tents, and he enters the mess tent. Soldiers sit around the short tables, they eating the grub given to them.

Breda cuts to the head of the line, the soldier behind him going, “Oi!”

“It’ll only be a minute,” Breda tells him, and then he turns his attention to the cook dishing out the food. “Hey, do we have any vinegar?”

“Vinegar he says!” the cook cries with indignation. “I’m lucky if they send us salt out here and he wants vinegar.”

Breda lowers his brow. “Look, have you got any or not?”

“No, I ain’t got any,” the cook tells him. “You want some, you got to talk to the boss o’er there,” he says, motioning his ladle towards a table.

Breda turns around, and sees that at a table not too far away is Chief Hawkeye, Captain Mustang sitting at the table with her, she dropping a sugar cube into her cup of tea. Sitting in front of her is a bowl of lemon slices.

“Anything acidic, huh?” Breda says with a smile, a light bulb coming to life in his head. He dashes to the table, sweeping up the lemons and running for the door!

“Hey!” Lisa protests. “Get back here with those!”

“Sorry, Chief!” Breda calls back to her, “Need these for a patient!” And out the tent he goes.

“A patient?” she questions, raising an eyebrow. “What’s he on about?”

“I don’t know,” Roy responds, already rising from the table. “Let’s go find out.”

Breda returns to the med tent, holding out the bowl towards the doctor. “I couldn’t find vinegar. But I found these.”

Al takes the bowl of lemons, looking them over. “Well, citric acid is as good as acetic acid I guess.”

Ed smirks, “Good. I’ll be lemony-fresh when this is all done.”

Al puts the bowl on the table, setting it next to the medicine chest, and starts squeezing the lemons into a nearby beaker.

Just then, the tent flap pulls back. They all look over and see Mustang and Hawkeye entering.

Roy looks down at the exam table and gasps. “Edward?”

Ed gives him that big old smarmy smile of his. “Hey there, Roy! Or should I say ‘Captain’? Nice to see you in uniform.”

Roy smiles in return, “It’s good to see you too, Ed. I’m glad to see you’re alive.”
A smirk crosses Lisa’s face. “So this is the older brother, then? Good. That’s one less thing on our To-Do List.” She approaches the table, just a bit, looking down to Edward. “Lisa Hawkeye, Chief of Operations. I’d shake hands, but I see you’re a bit indisposed at the moment.”

“Just a little bit,” Ed comments.

“What happened?” Roy asks.

“Got shot in the back,” Ed tells him. “For better or for worse, it hit me in the automail.”

Al, still at the medicine chest, is now stirring something into the beaker, the yellow liquid starting to lighten and turn clear. “The bullet’s lodged in there. I’m hoping we can soften the lead with hydrogen peroxide and lemon juice.”

Lisa gives a wry chuckle through her nose, “If that fails to work, at the very least you can use it to lighten your hair.”

Al pulls an eyedropper from the medicine chest, and he dips its tip into the beaker, sucking up some of the liquid concoction. He turns around, holding one hand under the dropper to catch any drops that might fall, and he crosses back over to the exam table. Then, holding the dropper steady over the wound, Al begins dropping the mixture into the open bullet hole.

Ed yelps, returning the leather belt to his mouth, biting down on it as more electricity begins to pulse through his neck and into his ear, it now feeling like the current is setting his brain on fire. And not just that, but the winter air has chilled the liquid, the cold being conducted down to the very core of his automail, the iciness seeping through the areas where metal meets bone, oozing into his marrow, chilling him to the bone.

Ed is now thankful that he didn’t catch anything to eat this afternoon – for he is beginning to feel nauseous, heaving dry coughs as his stomach shudders and jumps.

Al rubs him on the back. “We’re almost there. You can make it.”

A few more drops and the dropper is emptied. Al sets it aside, repicking up the tweezers.

“I’m going to break up the bullet now,” he tells Ed, “You’re probably going to feel this.”

Ed clenches his fist, preparing for what’s to come.

The tweezers descend into the automail, the metal probe squeezing and smooshing the soft material between its tips, Ed trying to hold steady, trying to keep his back from arching due to the shocks that jump through him. Al says to Breda, “Hand me that gauze.”

Breda does as requested, and Al pulls the tweezers out of the bullet hole, laying the gauze on top of it, keeping his hand on top of that. He lays the tweezers aside, slipping his free hand under Ed’s chest.

Al leans down a little. “I’m going to roll you over now, all right? Think you can manage?”

Ed nods though he says nothing, his eyes closed against the pain as he steadily breathes in and out through his nose. He starts to roll over onto his back, Al helping him – and as the liquid trickles out of his body, the nausea strikes Ed in the stomach again, he coughing so hard the belt falls from his mouth as he sits up slightly.
Al rubs him on the chest, “Hey, it’s okay, you’re okay.” And he helps Ed to lie back down onto the table.

Ed gulps in a breath of air, calming himself. “…Ugh…”

“You all right?” Al asks him.

“Yeah…” Ed nods, sweating. “I just hope I never have to do that again.”

“What did he say?” Breda asks, looking at Al.

Ed raises an eyebrow, “What do you mean ‘What did he say’?”

Breda looks back down at Ed, “Just now – you were speaking German.”

Ed is surprised. “I was?” He starts to laugh a little. “Wait, how long have I been speaking English?”

Lisa responds to Ed in German: “Funny thing about polyglots – we switch in and out of languages without even realizing it.”

Breda looks at Hawkeye, “Now wait, what did YOU say?”

Al laughs.

Ed smiles at Lisa, “So, you speak German, huh? Where’d you pick that up?”

Lisa has returned to speaking English, “My father made sure I had a quality education – that included the study of several languages. He wanted to be sure that I could pursue the family trade.”

“And what would that be?”

She says with a smirk, “Translating and code-breaking enemy messages, of course.” She says with pride, “You have stumbled upon the camp of Adelphi.”

“Adelphi?” Ed questions.

She explains, “We are code-breakers for the British Crown – interceptors of foreign intelligence, which we then crack and translate in order to ensure the safety of our country.”

“That’s neat,” Ed comments. “But what are a bunch of code-breakers doing out in the middle of the woods? Shouldn’t you all be manning radios someplace?”

Al smiles, “We came out here to find you!”

Roy adds, soberly, “Well, sort of. We’ve had our troubles.”

Ed looks over at Roy. “How so?”

Lisa instead answers, “For starters, you are but one man in the entirety of a large-scale war. The government has their priorities, you realize.”

Ed furrows his brow a bit, “Of course.”

Roy speaks up, “I’m sorry, Ed. I worked really hard to persuade them to let us come out here. And they only finally agreed after… Well… You’re probably not going to want to hear this, but – ”
“But the Nazis have the uranium bomb, I know.”

They all gasp, Al asking, “You do?”

Ed looks at Al, “Yeah. I found that out while still being held captive by Reistrom.”

“Who’s that?”

“The guy I was telling you about earlier.”

Lisa hums, one hand to her chin as the other holds her elbow. “So, you’ve met the Spider Knight, have you?”

Ed looks over to her, he raising an eyebrow. “The what now?”

Lisa reaches into her pocket as she says, “One of the members of an order called the Knights of the Black Sun. He’s the only one we’ve been able to identify so far.” She pulls out a piece of paper, unfolding it as she explain, “We’ve intercepted various messages referring to people by the code name ‘Knight,’ preceded by an animal moniker typically. Insofar, we have counted twelve in total, with a thirteenth member being referred to as ‘Raven King.’ We assume that he is the leader.”

Ed tilts his head a little, furrowing his brow in suspicion, “Animals, you say? One of those wouldn’t happen to be called ‘Goat Knight,’ would they?”

Lisa looks down at the paper and then looks back up at Ed, she a bit surprised. “Well, yes, actually.”

Ed looks aside, muttering to himself, “So, that explains the goats.”

Al asks, “What goats? What’s going on?”

Ed looks back up to the group, “After being held prisoner by Reistrom, I was transferred to a science lab where they put me to work. The commander in charge there, a guy named Geizsler, he’s real fond of goats – keeps them as pets.”

Roy comments, “That’s odd.”

Lisa quips, “If only they all kept pets, then they’d be much easier to find.”

Using his left hand, Ed reaches for his fallen jacket, lifting it up as he says, “I don’t know about all of them, but I know where Geizsler is.” He, now standing, lays out the map out on the exam table, pointing to a star drawn on the paper. “This is his base here. The Nazis have a lot of scientists held prisoner there.” Ed looks up, past Lisa’s glasses and into her eyes. “Please, the people in there are my friends. They’re good people. You have to break them out.”

Lisa eyes the map. “A science division you say? Am I to understand there are weapons being developed there?”

Ed nods, “And more than that – airships, missiles, even automated tanks.”

Al asks, curious, “Really?”

Ed grins at Lisa, “Imagine the feather in your cap when you return home with a boat-load of weapons blueprints under your belt. I bet the crown would be happy about that.”

Lisa, as her namesake implies, eyes Ed like a hawk, scrutinizing him as she sizes him up, trying to
get a read on him. And after a moment, she grins. “You make a clever point, Mr. Elric. But if it’s a rescue mission you’re after, that will have to wait. We already have a mission to attend to currently.”

“And what’s that?” Ed asks.

Roy responds, “We’ve slowly been working our way through enemy territory, trying to get here,” he points to the map, a pinpoint hole underneath his finger. “The Germans are running a mining operation not far from where we are now. We believe they’re trying to find more uranium to power the bombs they’re producing.”

Fear fills Ed as his eyes widen, “They’re already producing them?”

“We don’t know yet,” Roy tells him. “If they are, and if there’s a factory nearby, then we need to wipe it off the map.”

Lisa adds, “And even if there isn’t a factory yet, it’s hard to produce a uranium bomb if you can’t mine for uranium.” A catlike grin crosses her face, “Ours is a mission of sabotage.”

Ed mirrors her grin, a fire starting to stoke in his belly. “I like the sound of that. Think you all could use a hand?”

Lisa restrains a scoff, “Forgive me for saying so, but we need soldiers with both hands available. Judging by how your prosthetic arm hangs by your side, I’m guessing it’s not very useful.”

That fire moves straight from his belly to his head, Ed shouting, “You caught me on a bad day! You should see it when it’s fixed! I’ll show you who’s useless!”

“Ed, calm down,” Al pleads.

“Still,” Hawkeye says, still looking at Ed with a discerning eye, “You have been on the inside for nine months. I’m sure you could provide us with a wealth of intel that will aid us in our missions. For now,” she folds up the paper she’s had in her hand, placing it back in her pocket, “What do you say we all retire to the mess tent for supper? I’m sure you’re famished.”

As if on cue, Edward’s stomach grumbles loudly for all to hear. He blushes, covering it with his hand. “Yeah. That actually does sound pretty good.”

Al crosses back over to his traveling medicine chest, “First let me fix you up with a sling. That might help to take some of the pressure off your shoulder.”

Breda pipes up, “Let me put all that armor back onto his arm first. And while we’re at it, we got any extra tarp or leather hanging around? I can close up that hole for you. Really stupid design leaving it open like that.”

Ed can feel a vein slightly pulsing on his forehead. “Hey, don’t knock the automail, pal, or it’ll knock you!”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:
Reviews:

QueenCarri129 chapter 23 : Jan 31
That author's note. I cannot unsee it. Why?
'LESS! -hugs Ed and Al- The reunion I have been waiting for! Woot!
Also, TEAM MUSTANG! YAY!

Lucy chapter 23 : Jan 31
Edward and Al represents the devil and his brother defying god.
Listen to the words they use.
All anime is Satan worship lol
But I like the devi.
He is my brother.
Christoff Lohe
Age: 36
Gender: Male
Height: 136 cm
Military: Germany
Rank: Commander
Alias: 'Lion Knight'
Affiliation: Tannen Castle
Description: View and calm, though a fierce in battle. More often, calm and acerbic. Was at the head of a bandit group, but now serves the Kaiser in the military.
“Ed clenches down on the belt, his screaming muffled by the leather.” *looks around, confused* …Did I accidentally wander into a smut fic?

There are actually quite a few lines in this thing that when taken out of context sound like they came from a smut fic. “Al […] is helping Ed to lay belly-down,” “Al resting his hand on Ed’s back,” “Ed trying to hold steady, trying to keep his back from arching,” “probe,” “inside of you,” “We’re almost there,” “Ed clenches down on the belt, his screaming muffled by the leather,” “He starts to roll over onto his back,” “Al rubs him on the chest,” “You all right?” Al asks him.

“Yeah…” Ed nods, sweating.”

*UGLY IMMATURE LAUGHING* I’m sorry! I’m sorry! X’D I just couldn’t resist!

Let’s get back on point – AL’S BACK! :D YAY! *throws confetti*

My babies are back together! And they’re getting ready to bust down some doors and
kick some ass! Mustang’s here, Hawkeye’s here, Havoc and Breda – eeee! Things are heating up, folks!

And what is this mysterious Order of the Knights of the Black Sun? Who are they? And what are their nefarious plans for the world? *strokes villainous mustache* Buahahahahahaha…. 
The outside of the darkened base is silent, the nighttime scene frozen in clear, still ice. The inside, however, is rumbling, Geiszler’s temper as red-hot as a volcano.
The soldiers’ knees shake as they report to their commander in his office. “I’m s-sorry, sir!” one of them trembles, “But we searched every port! NO ONE fitting his description was seen boarding a ship.”

“Morons!” Geizsler bellows as he throws a cup full of pencils at them, the soldiers all having to duck. “All of you! He didn’t just vanish into thin air! Elric MUST be SOMEWHERE!”

“What?!” a voice breaks through, and the soldiers part to see who it is – standing in the now open doorway is Commander Adler! “You let Elric escape?!”

Geizsler is surprised, “Adler! What are – ?”

“Everyone, out!” Adler orders, and the soldiers do not hesitate to comply, scurrying out the door as quickly as possible, not even bothering to close it. Adler himself whips the door closed behind him.

Geizsler, still standing behind his desk, tries not to stutter, “I can explain!”

“Shut up!” Adler yells at him, his volume then lowering as he hisses, “Imbecile! How did he manage to get out of here?”

“A guard reported that he was knocked out while on duty. And when he woke up, there was a line of bed sheets leading out of the guard tower down to the ground.”

“Then THAT guard needs to be discharged! Immediately!” Adler fumes. But then he slows. “…No. Better to keep him here where he can’t be flapping his lips to people on the outside.” Adler takes a step closer to the desk, lifting a finger as he growls, “No one must know about this, do you hear me? NO ONE.”

“But if we alert the other bases, we might be able to find Elric sooner – ”

“No! Are you really that thick? Had it been any other scientist, it wouldn’t have been a problem. But you forget that Himmler has a personal vendetta against Elric. If the Lead Commander finds out that he’s escaped, you can be certain that he will do everything in his power to recover him, and in all likelihood kill him.”

“But we already have the technology he developed. What is one lost scientist?”

“BECAUSE – under threat of death, Elric just might be obliged to spill his guts about the goings-on of this lab. Is that what you want? What if he reveals the radio-controlled missiles? What then? Our plan goes up in smoke!”

Geizsler looks down at his desk. “Oh. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Of course you haven’t,” Adler criticizes. “Why would you? I give you a simple task, babysitting some intellectuals, and you can’t even handle that.”

Geizsler’s blood pressure rises, “You had better watch your tongue! Don’t forget, I am not your subordinate – we are equals!”

Adler calms down, though only slightly. “…This is true. Meaning we’ll all share an equal part of the blame if Himmler finds out.” His brow furrows as behind his eyes it can be seen the wheels turning. “We need to take care of this, just the three of us, as quickly and as quietly as possible.” He points at Geizsler, “Call up Bähr and tell him to mobilize his troops. We’ll find Elric and get him back here before Himmler ever even finds out he’s gone.”
Geiszler gives a firm nod, and he picks up the telephone.

The dull green of the tents narrowly matches the hue of the evergreens, both tree and tarp covered in a light dusting of snow, shining white under the light of the full moon. The tents form a circle in the large clearing, a handful of trucks and jeeps parked here and there. The grounds are mostly empty though, as everyone has retired to the inside of their tents to keep warm.

The mess tent is the best place to be, the warm food heating not only the space it occupies but also the bellies of all those who eat here.

Ed happily scoops up some beans with his fork, shoveling the food into his mouth, he holding the fork with his left hand – nothing new – but even if he wanted to use his right hand, it’s currently out of commission, held in place by a sling to help alleviate some of the pressure on his shoulder. Still, a small price to pay to finally be surrounded by familiar faces – Al on his right, Roy across from Al, and directly in front of Ed is Riza – uh, Lisa. Ed will have to retrain himself to call her by the right name. Perhaps just best to stick to ‘Chief Hawkeye.’

“So – Chief Hawkeye, huh?” Ed asks in between bites. “How’d a lady like you end up the head of a military unit?”

Lisa gives an irked smile, her eyes looking sharply over the rim of her glasses. “A lady like me? Someone beautiful, you mean.”

“Careful, Edward,” Roy warns, he himself smiling, “It’s a trap.”

Ed clears his throat, “What I mean to say is, you must be really good at what you do if the higher-ups have enough faith in you to put you in command.”

Lisa looks down at her cup as she calmly stirs her tea, the steam gently rising from the hot beverage. She asks Ed, “And what precisely is it that you think I do?”

Ed seems a little confused, “Uh. You said already. Code-breaking, right?”

She grins at him as she lays her spoon aside, then rests her elbows on the table, interlocking her fingers as she rests her chin on them. “My line of work is more than just translating messages. It’s getting into the enemy’s head,” she says as she extends a finger, gently tapping Ed on the forehead once or twice as she speaks, “Thinking what they think, predicting their next move.”

She brings her hand back to herself, resting her arms on the table.

“The saying goes, ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’,,” Lisa tells him. “My job is to be so perfectly Roman that even the Romans would never realize I wasn’t one of them.”

“Spy work, you mean?” Ed asks.

Lisa nods. “There are many things you can gain when no suspects you. For example, how do you intend to eat without a fork?”

Ed looks down at his hand, realizing now that it is empty. “What the?! When did you-?”

Al and Roy both laugh, Roy adding, “It’s not just you. She did the same thing to us as well.”

Lisa lifts Ed’s fork in her hand, “You said that the higher-ups must have faith in me. It’s because
they know that when running a covert operation, it’s best to have someone who can get the job done and remain undetected.”

Al is still busy being impressed by the fork trick as he compliments, “Bravo.”

Ed is sure his cheeks feel warm simply because it’s cold out and not because he’s blushing from embarrassment. He swipes his fork back from Lisa, “Lucky break! She caught me off-guard is all.” He stabs at a baby potato and grumpily shoves it in his mouth.

Lisa tilts her head as she watches Edward. “I’m curious – were you born left-handed, or is that simply the result of your fake limb?”

Ed answers, “I was right-handed as a kid. And let me tell you, it took me a while to relearn how to write using my left.”

“I can understand how that might be difficult,” she comments. “Not very many people are naturally left-handed – like my father, for instance.”

“He’s a lefty, huh?” Ed chats. “Does he have to deal with people giving him funny looks for using the ‘wrong’ hand?”

Lisa’s eyes are closed as she lifts her cup of tea, “He passed away, unfortunately.”

“Oh,” Ed condolences, “Sorry to hear that.”

Lisa finishes her sip and sets her cup back down, “He was killed in action during the last war – ‘the war to end all wars,’ as it were.”

Roy lifts his own cup to his mouth, cynically commenting, “Yeah. And we all see how that worked out…”

Lisa says to Ed, “But your limbs are astounding. I’d love to meet the man who built them.”

“It was actually a pair of ladies,” Ed proudly tells her, “An old woman and her granddaughter.”

The corners of Lisa’s mouth rise.

Al has started eyeing Ed’s back, Al thinking aloud, “Yeah, they’d have known how to fix this. Clearly the bullet severed an electrical wire. That’s why your arm’s not working. None of the impulses from your brain are reaching your arm anymore. I’d have to get back in there to patch it up somehow.”

Ed grimaces, “Yeah, well let’s wait until after my food digests, huh? Just getting that bullet out made me sick to my stomach.”

Lisa hums a little wearily, again stirring her tea as if that will somehow solve everything, “I haven’t the luxury of waiting before I need to get on with business. I still need to decide where the scouts should start their survey.”

“Chief, please,” Roy says with a bit of concern in his voice, “Take it easy. Stop worrying for just thirty minutes and enjoy dinner.”

“I’m not worrying,” she rebuffs, “I’m planning.”

“You’re worrying about planning.”
Ed swallows the food in his mouth and then asks, “So what’s the plan?”

Lisa returns her attention to Ed, “As I mentioned earlier, the Nazis have a uranium mining operation not far from here. We plan to send a couple of men out to do reconnaissance – find the entrances, see where the guards are posted and how many, things of that sort. As soon as we know the layout of the mine, we can commence to send in a team to plant explosives. A few well-placed charges should take care of things quite nicely.”

Ed grins, pointing his thumb to his chest. “If you need someone to take out some bad guys, I’m your man.”

Al pipes up, “Ed, no.”

Ed turns to his brother, “What? Why not?”

“Ed, you’re injured.”

“That’s never stopped me before.”

Roy insists, “Listen to your brother, Edward. You’re in no condition to be taking anybody on.”

Ed’s voice rises slightly, “Don’t treat me like a baby, all right? I’m not useless just because I don’t have a working arm.”

“Nobody said you were useless.”

“Then stop treating me like I am.”

Al quietly urges, “Calm down, Ed.”

Lisa says to Ed, “Leave this to the soldiers, Mr. Elric. I don’t want to be responsible for putting a civilian in harm’s way.”

Ed grumbles. “I haven’t always been a civilian, you know. I’ve done military time.”

“Strange. I didn’t see anything about that in your report,” Lisa responds – for no, anything about Ed’s life on the Other Side of the Gate wouldn’t be known to most people here, now would it? The only people who know about that aside from Ed and Al are the Brothers from the Frankfurt Lodge – Roy most of all, for several nights at home were spent regaling him with tales of adventure of days past.

Lisa continues,

“Besides, as a brain person, you’re of more use to us keeping that brain of yours intact rather than getting it shot out by the Germans.”

Ed frowns, holding in any more grumbling – for he doesn’t want to admit that Chief Hawkeye is right…

* 

The moonlight gleams off the snow-covered hill, a guard in a tall wooden stand keeping an eye on the roads below. One road stretches out directly before him, eventually disappearing into the woods that sprawl out in all directions. The other road runs directly alongside the large hill that he sits upon. And from where he is in his stand, he can now see that there are workers exiting the mine, for their shift has come to an end.
The two guards on the ground below stand on either side of the mine entrance, they checking the tags of each worker as he clocks out for the evening, making sure no one is trying to bail on their work earlier than they should be – for there are still several men in the mine, their shift yet to end. But soon, soon enough, and then they too can return to their homes in the nearby village.

The workers exit out of the mine, shovels and pick-axes over their shoulders, many with lanterns in their hands, all with helmets on their heads. The sun has been down for at least a couple of hours now – but the workers would never have known the difference anyway, for the inside of the mine is just as dark and cold as it is here outside.

The workers pull themselves up and into the back of one of the few trucks that have arrived to shuttle them back into town, many of them glad to see that their wives have sent up some thermoses filled with hot soup for the ride back home.

One more truck pulls up, but not from town, for this truck has soldiers in the back. They hop out and head for the entrance, stopping to salute the guards there. The guards salute back, and then stand aside as two soldiers take over their post, the other soldiers from the truck now entering the mine to take over for the guards inside.

The worker-filled trucks take off down the hillside road, while instead, the military truck, now filled with the soldiers done with their shift for the day, drives up the road, winding its way over the salt-covered mud and slush towards the base that sits neatly tucked amongst the woods.

Should one wander upon it while on some trek, one might think they had stumbled onto a castle, the large grey stones of the base’s outer walls made of roughly-hewn rock, parapets lining the perimeter like the spikes of a crown. Even the gate leading into the base is made of wrought-iron, lifted up from the ground by a sturdy wooden wheel.

The guard at the gate lifts up his hand to signal the truck to stop, and when it does, he approaches, checking the driver inside, checking the soldiers in the back, and then he waves, “All clear,” and the gate is lifted, allowing the vehicle to pass inside.

But there’s another vehicle here – not a truck, but instead a shiny black convertible car, the top down as a young man pulls up to the gate.

The guard lifts his hand at him, too, and the driver obliges, stopping his car. The guard approaches the young man who wears an officer’s cap and a large black cloak, and the soldier asks, “Can I see some identification, sir?”

The young man, a smile on his face and his nose in the air, snootily lifts a medallion that hangs about his neck. “I believe this is identification enough.”

The guard tilts his head, confused. “What is that? A pocket watch?”

The guard is almost certain he sees steam rising from the young man’s ears as he shouts, “What? No! It’s a sun symbol, you dolt! Don’t you know anything about the ancient German ways?”

The guard tells him, “I’m sorry, sir, but you’re going to need more than a necklace to get in.”

“Is that so?” he questions as he stuffs the medallion back into his shirt, his eyes closed and his nose
back in the air. “Won’t the Lead Commander be so displeased to hear about the way you’re treating me.”

“The Lead Commander?”

“Of course,” the young man responds with a malicious grin, “Lead Commander Himmler is a very good personal friend of mine. And I’m sure he’d love to hear about how you are disrespecting one of his officers.”

“N-now, hang on just a minute,” the guard defends, “I meant no disrespect, sir. I’m just doing my job.”

The officer’s gaze is sharp enough to cut as he demands, “Well do it better.”

*

A simple little potbellied stove stands in the corner heating the whole of the stone room, the rug on the floor a good distance away from it so as not to catch fire should any embers stray from their home.

Against the wall opposite the stove, further back towards the head of the room, is a bookcase, close to a hat stand that is tucked neatly in the back corner, a cap and cloak hanging from the rack. And on the wall, behind the desk, hangs a shield, painted half red and half black, with a white heraldic lion painted in the center – a picture of old Kaiser Wilhelm hanging on the wall to the left of the shield, and a picture of Führer Hitler on its right.

A man, as sturdy-looking as the castle that surrounds him, sits at the desk busily writing, unperturbed when the telephone breaks the silence. He picks it up, putting it to his ear. “Yes?”

The front gate guard’s voice comes over the line, “Uh, Commander Löwe, sir – I’ve got a young man here who says his name is Hirsch?”

Löwe sighs through his nose quietly, he then asking the guardsman, “Does this young man have his nose in the air and is acting overly-important?”

The guard turns around, quietly spying the young officer who sits in the car. “Uh… Yes, sir.”

Löwe sighs again, more audibly this time, “That’s Hirsch all right. Let him in. And don’t let him get to you,” he advises the guard, “That’s just the way he is.”

“Yes, sir.”

Löwe then hangs up the phone and returns to his writing, trying to get in some last bit of vital work before he knows what is about to come.

A few minutes later, the door to his office is being opened, and entering is Hirsh, the young officer
snapping to attention as he clicks his heels together, thrusting his arm straight out into the air before him. “HEIL HITLER!”

Löwe does not look up from his work as he says, “You need not say the salute so loudly, Hirsch. This place echoes terribly.”

Hirsch glowers at Löwe, “I will say it as loud as I please. And you would do well to salute back. HEIL HITLER!”

Löwe finally sets his pen down on the desk, and raises his hand, returning salute. “Heil Hitler.”

Hirsch smirks, pleased. “That’s better.” He shrugs, still smirking. “I know you are older than me, Löwe, but I did not realize your memory is already starting to slip. It is inconceivable to me that an SS officer would ever forget to salute.”

Löwe calmly responds, “I did not forget. I was simply waiting for you to mind your manners. But I would be sitting here all day if I did that. You really need to curb your stubbornness.”

“Hmph!” Once more his nose is in the air as Hirsch plays with his necklace, letting the pendant swing back and forth. “And you need to find less stubborn guards. Honestly, don’t they know anything? *Everyone* in Germany should know about the Black Sun – our ancestors did.”

“Knowledge which has been lost to modern times,” Löwe reminds him. “Give it time, Josef. As we reform and reeducate the country, the people will come to know the Ways.”

“Not soon enough in my opinion,” Hirsch utters, tucking the medallion back into his shirt.

“What can I help you with?” Löwe asks of the young man.

Hirsch puts his hands behind his back, looking very official as he says with a grin and a slink to his voice, “I have come to perform an inspection.”

“How?” Löwe questions. “Why did the Lead Commander send you?”

“He did not send me,” Hirsch admits, “I came on my own.”

“For what reason?”

“Somebody’s got to make sure that things are running smoothly.” Hirsch shakes his head with a frown, a light sorrowful tone to his voice, “And the poor Lead Commander – he is so busy.” He immediately cheers up, “I thought I would take it upon myself to help him.”

“A noble cause,” Löwe says, “But it’s not necessary.”

“Isn’t it?” Hirsch raises an eyebrow. “From what I’ve heard, you’ve yet to produce anything of any real significance in your time here.”

“True. But that’s why the Lead Commander assigned *me* to this task. Mining requires the virtue of patience.”

Hirsch purses his lips, “Spare me your lectures, Löwe. Are you going to let me see the mine, or aren’t you?”

“I’m not,” Löwe responds, picking his pen back up and continuing his writing, “I have reports to finish, and I don’t have time to be indulging your whims. You’d be wise to be attending to your own work as well, rather than poking your nose into everyone else’s.”
Hirsch crosses his arms, “It is all of our duties to ensure that the Reich runs smoothly, and that is just what I am doing. What I want to know is why you are so reluctant to let me look at the mine.” A grin once more crawls up his face. “That is, unless of course, you are hiding something perhaps?”

Löwe’s eyes drift up from his work, a stern glare on his face.

Hirsch leans against the desk, leaning in towards his comrade as he pesters, “Come now, Commander Löwe – you’re not hiding anything from me, are you? Something that you don’t want the Lead Commander to know about? You know how furious he gets when he finds he’s been lied to.”

“There are no lies here,” Löwe firmly tells him.

“How can I be sure of that?” Hirsch stands back upright, turning around towards the door as he heaves a rather theatrical shrug and sigh. “Oh well. I guess I will just have to make my way back to Berlin and explain to Herr Himmler how strangely you were acting when I came to see you.”

Löwe sighs through his nose. “If I show you the mine, will you leave me in peace so I can get back to work?”

Hirsch turns back around with a wide, cheery smile. “Of course! That’s all I was asking for – a quick pop in and out, and I’m gone.”

“Well,” Löwe resigns, standing up from his desk and pushing his chair back in. He says as he goes over to the hat rack, picking up his cap and cloak and putting them on, “But we’ll not be all night with this. I’ll not have you keeping the miners overtime.”

“No, no, of course not. I wouldn’t dream of it.”

*

One by one, lanterns go out all across the camp as the evening winds down, the troops wrapping themselves up tightly in their blankets, ‘to settle down for a long winter’s nap,’ or so the old poem goes.

Al is leading Ed from the mess hall towards their tent, Roy following in behind them as Ed continues his grumbling while kicking at pebbles on the ground. “It’s just a scouting mission, how hard could it be? You just sit there and watch.”

“Ed,” Al points out, “You’d need to be able to handle a rifle in case you’re spotted and attacked.”

“So give me a handgun, I don’t care.”

“Ed, no.”

Neither of them sees Roy as he plucks something out of the back of one of the trucks.

They reach the tent and enter, Ed looking around at his sleeping quarters. There are four cots laid out, one in each corner, with just enough room in between them for walking – though one has to avoid the pole that sits in the dead center, it keeping the whole tent up. A lantern dangles from this center pole, providing light enough to see by, though it is a yellow, mellow, sleepy light.

The cots at the back are currently occupied by Havoc and Breda respectively, Havoc currently pulling a pack of cigarettes from out of his shirt pocket. He looks up as the trio enters. “Hey, Doc.”
He then nods at Ed, “And brother. You all better now?”

Ed looks down at his sling, responding, “Mostly.”

Al motions at the cot immediately on their right, the one next to Breda. “This is where you’ll be sleeping.”

Ed sits down on the taut piece of canvas, it being held up by a low-standing metal frame, and he lifts his legs up onto the bed with him as he comments, “Well, it’s not the most uncomfortable thing I’ve ever slept on –”

CLACK!

“What the?!”

Suddenly Ed feels something around his ankle, and he looks up in time to see Roy snapping a handcuff to his ankle and then snapping the other end of the handcuff to a chain that he’s lashing around the center pole!

“Roy, what the hell?!” Ed shouts.

Al is equally confounded, “Roy, what are you doing?”

Roy looks very pleased with himself as he says to Ed, “You honestly don’t think I’ve forgotten what happened in Büren, do you? I told you, ‘Let the military handle it,’ and you went running off on your own, and nearly got yourself and Al killed. You’re staying put.”

Ed yells, “Damn it, Roy! I’m not a child!”

Roy gives a grin, “Careful how hard you kick. You don’t want to bring the tent down, now do you?”

Ed comically fumes, as Al interjects with a small smile, “Oh, Ed. You know if you weren’t chained to the tent right now that you’d sneak out to go see the mine.”

Ed calms down a little, his eyes drifting to his brother. “Am I really that predictable?”

Roy and Al answer in unison, “YES.”

Roy turns to leave, “Now get some rest. You need to recuperate.” And he leaves the tent.

Ed grumbles, “Didn’t even have the courtesy to cuff my automail leg – has to go for the one with blood flow in it…”

Havoc raises a hand like a child in class, “Can I ask what ‘automail’ is exactly? It sounds like a letter that delivers itself.”

Al chuckles as Ed says with a smirk, “Slightly more complicated than that.”

Al explains, “Auto- as in ‘automated’ and mail as in armor – think chain mail.”

Havoc pulls a cigarette from its pack, “Automated armor, huh? Is that regulation issue?”

Ed shakes his head, “Nah. A friend of ours built it for me.”

Havoc lights his cigarette and pulls a drag from it, blowing out the smoke as he says, “Well then I gotta say, your friend’s pretty talented.”
Breda looks over to Al and asks, “So how do you plan to fix his arm? Any ideas?”

Al has finally taken to sitting on his cot, he crossing his arms as he stares at Ed’s shoulder once more, pondering aloud, “Well, it seems the reason his arm’s gone slack is because the wires connecting his nerves to his automail have been damaged.”

Havoc throws out, “Again, sorry about that.”

Ed says, “Hey, you didn’t know. At least you hit me in the fake arm, and not someplace else.”

Al continues thinking aloud, “If we can repair the wires and get the flow of electricity moving again, it should be all right – mostly, anyway,” he shrugs. “But I was having such a hard time getting in there in the first place, I can only imagine what it would be like trying to fiddle with all the those tiny wires down in there.”

Breda says, “Maybe you don’t need to worry about wires. It’s an electrical current, right?”

“Basically,” Ed responds.

Breda suggests, “Seems to me like all you’d have to do is stick some metal down in there to bridge the gap – like what happened when you put the tweezers down in there.”

Ed shivers. “Don’t remind me.”

Al reminds Breda, “Yeah, but you saw the kind of reaction it caused. Is it really a good idea to put metal down there and leave it in there?”

Breda continues, “I figure the reaction was only as dramatic as it was because the tweezers were running up and down the full length of the hole. The electricity could jump out at any point along them and connect to the other parts of his insides.”

“That’s true…”

“The bullet’s gone, so you got plenty of room to work with. We put rubber tips on your tweezers, as well as insulate the metal we’re putting in, and that oughta keep the electricity from jumping around the way it did.”

Al nods, “Yeah. That sounds simple enough.”

Ed is still slightly pale, “Just promise that once it goes in, it can come back out if it hurts too bad…”

Breda reaches under his cot and pulls out his toolbox which he had put back before heading off for dinner. “A simple nail oughta do it,” he says, pulling one out, and then pulling out some heavy-duty cutters. “Just snip off either end, and voila – one tiny lightning rod.”

Al smiles, “A piece of rubber tourniquet should work well as an insulator.” He reaches under his own cot, pulling out his med kit, also put back in its proper place prior to dinner. He opens it up, pulling out what looks like a thin rubber hose, the aforementioned tourniquet, and he cuts off a small length of it with some scissors.

Havoc gives half a smile with a laugh, “Heh. I feel left out. I don’t have anything to contribute.”

Breda jokes, “Not unless you wanna plug up the hole with a cigarette butt.”

Ed grimaces, “No thanks. I’d rather not be used as an ash tray.”
Al says, “We can use the tourniquet to plug that up, too. Folding it in half ought to do.”

Ed looks down at his cuffed leg as he shifts positions on the cot, “At least Roy got a chain long enough. Any shorter and I don’t think I’d be able to roll over onto my stomach.”

Breda hands the nail across to Al, and Al slips it into the piece of tourniquet, he taking his scissors and shaving off just a little bit more rubber and a little bit more rubber until it comes flush with the metal ends.

Breda smirks at Ed and says, “Now we just install your ‘spark plug’ and you should be ready to go!”

Ed mutters, “Ha, ha. Keep it up with the car jokes.”

* * *

The pick-axes ring out with a tink! and a chink! as their points stick into the rock, the miners wielding them cautiously ripping the chunks of earth back from the wall, doing so by the light of the lanterns that line the ceiling.

Commander Löwe carries his own lantern in hand as he walks down the tunnel of the mine, Hirsch by his side, the younger officer’s eyes roving the interior of the subterranean passageway, taking in each and every inch with a calculating gaze.

A couple of men stand by a tall yet narrow table, looking over the blueprints of the mine, deciding where to dig next, when a new stream of light shows itself, beaming over the table. They both look up, the older gentlemen smiling as he says,

“Ah, Commander Löwe. You’re here late. Everything all right?”

Löwe nods, “Yes, Foreman, it’s quite all right.”

The foreman rolls up the blueprints, handing them off to his assistant who takes them away as the foreman asks, “What can I do for you this evening, sir?”

“We just came by to check up on the progress of the mine.”

“Oh, it’s splendid!” the foreman tells him. “The north and south tunnels are near to being done, and then after that we’ll carve our way out to the east side of the hill.”

Hirsch still eyes every rock and beam above his head. “That’s quite impressive. You must be very hard workers.”

The foreman tips his hardhat, “Thank you, sir. We try.”

“Tell me,” Hirsch probes, “What are your workdays like?”

The foreman answers, “Well, we’ve got three teams, and there are always at least two teams at work at any given time.”

“How very industrious,” Hirsch compliments, “So busy at work – you must have found quite a bit in your time down here.”

“Uh… well, actually,” the foreman lowers his voice as he turns to Löwe, “Sir, I was getting ready to hand in my report to you tomorrow. We still haven’t found any uranium deposits down here.”
Hirsch raises an eyebrow, “Oh? Is that so? All this time you’ve been down here and you haven’t found a single scrap of it?” He wags a finger. “Tsk, tsk. You realize of course I will have to report this to the Lead Commander.”

Löwe calmly responds to his young companion, “Again you underestimate the patience required for this operation. Just because we haven’t found it yet doesn’t mean that we never will. What if we find a deposit tomorrow? How foolish will you feel after having told the Lead Commander that there was none to be had?”

Hirsch aggressively points a finger, “Imagine how YOU will feel when you still find nothing!” He straightens himself up, brushing dust from his sleeve. “Clearly you are not working these men hard enough. This job will be done much sooner if they work ‘round the clock.”

“Around the clock?” the foreman recoils, “We don’t have that kind of manpower.”

“Don’t worry,” Löwe assures the man, calming him, “I’m not cutting anyone’s sleeping times.” The commander turns his attention back to the young man, “Hirsch, your input is appreciated, but ultimately the decision lies with me. You’ve had your fun running an ‘inspection’, but now I ask that you return to your base and allow me to run mine.”

Hirsch huffs, pursing his lips, “Showing me a single tunnel is hardly an inspection.”

“It’s all you’re getting for now,” Löwe says to him. He then turns to the foreman, holding out his hand to shake, “Thank you for your time. We’ll let you get back to work now.”

The foreman shakes his hand, “Uh, yes. You have a good evening, Commander.”

“Come along, Hirsch,” Löwe says as he turns around and begins walking back the way he came, Hirsch giving one last snide glance at the foreman before leaving as well.

Outside the mouth of the man-made cave, on either side of the entrance, the two ground guards stand watch, their eyes periodically looking to the left and to the right, checking the hillside road before returning their attention to the wooded road before them.

Commander Löwe exits the mine, Hirsch following in behind him, and the ground guards salute them both immediately, Löwe kindly saluting back. Hirsch lifts his chin, narrowing his eyes, “They are just foot soldiers. You do not need to return salute.”

Löwe, opening the door to the car, answers, “Every man who stakes his life for his country is deserving of a salute.”

Hirsch mutters under his breath, “Pfft! Yeah, big stake, guarding a pile of filthy rocks…”

They each get into the car, unaware of the eyes that hide amongst the trees watching them - for just a few clicks off, the British scouts squat silently in the underbrush, binoculars in their hands as they look on at the unsuspecting mine.

Ed is sitting up on the cot now, his feet on the ground, chain still dangling around the center pole of the tent. His sling removed, he tests his automail arm, he able to lift it up and down, back and forth. The elbow joint seems to be working, though admittedly, it’s a bit shaky. Twisting the wrist is even worse, for as he tries to make his palm face upwards, his hand moves partially but then seems to lose the signal, it flopping back over into its original position.
Al asks, “What about finger movement?”

Ed flexes his fingers back and forth, they all moving in unison. “They don’t seem to want to move individually. And my thumb doesn’t even want to move at all.”

“Still,” Havoc says, “That much movement out of a piece of metal. That’s really impressive.”

Ed comments, “It’d be nice if I could just hook a radio control to my brain and bypass wires entirely.”

“Radio control?” Al asks.

“Yeah, it’s pretty neat,” Ed brightens up, “You can use radio waves to control things long-distance.”

“Huh-uh,” Havoc denies, “Radio’s just sound. It can’t control things.”

Ed corrects him, “Radio waves are electromagnetic pulses. Sound is what you hear when the waves cause the speakers to move, which causes air waves, which causes sound.”

“Wait, what?” Havoc asks in confusion. “What do you mean the speakers move? I’ve never seen a radio set jiggle around.”

Al holds in a giggle, not wanting to be rude.

Ed continues, “If you remove the mesh cover, you’d see it.”

“That still doesn’t explain how you can control something,” Havoc bickers, “If it’s moving in waves, you could only make something move back and forth, right? Like with the speakers supposedly?”

“You don’t believe me, I’ll prove it to you,” Ed tells him. He turns to Breda and asks, “We got a radio around here that no one will miss? One that can transmit and receive? And maybe a small motor?”

Breda shrugs, “Dunno. I might have something in the workshop. Let me go check.” He gets up from his cot, and has to carefully step over Ed’s chain in order to get to the exit.

Ed watches Breda as he leaves, but then he turns his attention back to Havoc. “So you and Breda – I can’t place your accents. You’re not from London, are you?”

“Who us?” Havoc asks, taking his cigarette out of his mouth for the moment, holding it between his fingers. “Not even close. We’re American.”

“America?” Ed questions. “Have they gotten involved in the war, too?”

“Eh, not really,” Havoc answers, putting his cigarette back in his mouth. “We’re not engaging in any fighting – just lending aid to allies: food, bandages, Red Cross workers, things of that nature.”

“So what are you doing here?”

“Dropping off some ammo,” Havoc tells him, “And in Breda’s case, doing a bit of labor to keep all the vehicles running. But that’s all said and done. We’re moving out in the morning.”

“Going where?”
“Heading back to the States as far as I know, unless we get orders to the contrary.” Havoc blows out a bit of smoke as he removes his cigarette once more. “What about you? You military?”

Ed grimaces. “Technically. The Germans ‘recruited’ me as ‘politely’ as they’re capable of.”

Havoc smiles with a short chuckle, “Fancy way of saying they shanghaied you.” Ed’s not sure as to what that term means, but Havoc continues, “So you’re a runaway then? You know, we’ve got refugees pouring into New York all the time. I could take you back with me if you’d like.”

Elation takes over Ed as he smiles, “Really? That’d be great! We’d love to go.”

But then Al interjects, “Not ‘we’, Ed. I can’t go.”

Ed looks over at Al in confusion, “What? What are you talking about?”

Al lifts the dog tags he wears around his neck, “I’m a part of the British Army now. I have duties.”

“Duties?” Ed’s disbelief borders on indignation. “You’re not British – you don’t owe them anything.”

“I owe them a lot, Ed. Without them I’d never have found you.”

“And a lot of help they’ve been! I busted myself out! I’d have made to England on my own and found you!”

“And who got me to England in the first place? The English!”

“It was Roy and the Brothers who were helping us, not the government!”

“I can’t just abandon my post here, Ed – I have obligations.”

“Well I’m not leaving you here!”

“And I’m not leaving until I get orders to do so.”

Both of them fall quiet, each of their stubbornness simmering. After a moment, Ed grins at the irony of it all – “…Well look at you – dog of the military. Just like you always wanted.”

Al frowns, “That is not what I’ve always wanted.”

“Really? You were so determined to become a – ” Ed stops himself before he can say ‘State Alchemist,’ as he can provide no explanation to Havoc what exactly that is. So Ed finishes with, “- to serve in the military alongside me.”

“Only because I wanted to help you,” Al reminds him, “Because I didn’t want you to have to carry the burden all on your own.”

They both fall quiet again. And after another moment, Ed smugly smirks, “…So I’m the civilian this time around, huh? You have to follow orders. But I don’t.”

“Ed,” Al warns, “Don’t get any bright ideas.”

Ed still has a catlike grin, “Bright ideas are my specialty.”

Havoc is thankful that Breda has returned, providing a distraction from the tension between the two brothers. “So, what’d ya find?” Havoc asks the mechanic.
Breda carries a metal box about a foot and a half wide, “I found this busted old NC. I think they’re keeping it for spare parts, so anything you use, you’ll have to put back when you’re done.”

“Sure, no problem,” Ed agrees.

Breda remains standing, letting Ed use his empty cot as a workbench for the moment. And with some tools out of the tool box, Ed proceeds to remove the receiver antenna from the radio and instead hook it to the electrical wire of the little motor that Breda has brought along. A little bit of tinkering here, a little bit of tech wizardry there, and –

Ed smiles, “Then we just transmit a signal – ” He pushes down on the button of the radio and the little motor in front of them whirs to life, spinning around.

“Wait, what??” Havoc is both amazed and confused. “How’s that thing moving without electricity?”

“I’ve told you,” Ed explains, “The pulses of the radio waves are converted into electrical energy which in turn gets turned into mechanical energy.”

Al gives a slight chuckle. “Well, I’m no brain surgeon, so I doubt I’ll be sticking a transmitter in your head anytime soon.”

Ed says, “Yeah, I’d thank you not to crack open my skull.” He turns off the radio with a fond sigh, “Somebody will figure out the technology though. Someday.”

“Well as for today,” Havoc says, snuffing his cigarette on the bottom of his boot, “I’m tired. We all need to get some sleep.”

Al nods, “That’s true. When was the last time you slept, Ed?”

Ed frowns as he pouts, “I slept last night. Like I said, don’t baby me.”

“Just checking.”

Breda, still standing, lifts his hand towards the lantern. “All right, lights out.”

Everyone lays down, Ed’s chain jingling as he scoots back onto his bed, and then Breda turns out the light.

Ed says to him, “And watch your step getting into bed. Don’t forget the Captain’s hitched me up like a horse to a post.”

Breda laughs, “Funny considering he’s the one named after a horse.”

They all chuckle.

Steadily, the camp grows quiet, not even the sound of crickets filtering through the dark night air. And whether or not Ed wants to admit it, sleep is exactly what he needs. Yes, he does want to go out to the mine and do what he can to help the operation. But neither can he deny that exhaustion is finally catching up with him. He’s tired. So tired. He’s been traveling for five days straight in cold, wet weather. And now, with food in his stomach and a blanket over him, and the comfort of knowing that Al is here, that his little brother is okay, Ed feels a comfort coming over him.

And Ed is lulled to sleep by the hush of the winter night.
The base is quiet, the guards moving along the top of the wall, keeping a weather eye out for any signs of movement beyond the perimeter.

Inside, all those not on duty are enjoying the warmth of their beds and covers, momentarily unaware of the stark coldness in the outside world.

Hirsch, his cap and cape hung up on the coat rack, lies awake in bed, Löwe having been kind enough to provide him sleeping quarters for the night. But that’s all Löwe has done for him.

Hirsch scoffs, muttering to himself, “That was no inspection. I barely even got to look at the mine, what with Löwe leading me around like I’m a child.”

He grins. And then sits up.

“I’ll just have to inspect the mine without him.”

He reaches into his shirt pocket, pulling out a long, thin silver box, numbered dials on its top – a palm-sized photocamera.

“What do you think, mein schatz?” he asks his little Minox. “What say we go on an adventure?”

Hirsch struts across the grounds, his cape billowing behind him, he wearing both it and his cap now to provide a little bit of extra warmth. He approaches his convertible, and he hops in – literally hops, just right over the door and into the driver’s seat, he sticking his keys into the ignition, and he starts the car and drives it to the front gate.

The gate guard sees him and does not even stop to question the officer, lifting the wrought-iron gate immediately, and Hirsch smiles as he drives through, taking off down the road.

The hillside is quiet, and yet there is the growing sound of a humming, like that of an engine. The guard in his wooden tower looks to the north and sees a set of headlights coming into view. He picks up his radio mic and signals down,

“Ground Patrol, this is Tower. I’ve got a vehicle heading your way, coming from the direction of the base. Use discretion.”

“Roger that, Tower,” one of the guards on the ground responds, and he puts the mic back in its holder as both he and the other guard walk from their spot in front of the doorframe and instead stand in the middle of the road.

The car slows as the guards hold up a hand, saying, “Halt!” and the car stops a few yards away.

“Turn off those headlights!” one of them orders.

The driver complies, and as both the headlights and engine go off, they hear a young voice call, “You wouldn’t shoot one of your own officers, now would you?”

One of the guards approaches the vehicle, the driver’s face becoming more visible as he grows closer. “Oh. I recognize you,” the guard comments. “You were here earlier with Commander Löwe.”

“That’s right,” the young man responds. “The name is Commander Josef Hirsch and you will salute when you see me.”
The guard does as ordered, immediately snapping to attention. “Sieg Heil!”

“Very good. Now, return to your post.”

Again, the soldier does as ordered, walking back to the mine entrance.

Hirsch takes his keys and a lantern with him, and he approaches the mine.

But as he does, the other guard, still in the middle of the road, now puts up his hand, stepping in front of him. “I’m sorry, sir, but orders are no one is allowed in the mine after hours.”

“Well I outrank you,” Hirsch snaps, “And I say I’m going in.”

The guard is slightly nervous, but firmly he responds, “I’m sorry, sir. But you’ll have to take that up with Commander Löwe –”

“You would dare defy an order from a superior?”

“No, sir, I just – ”

“Then you will stand aside and let me in. I will deal with Löwe later if he has a problem with it.”

“Uh, Yes, sir…” Reluctantly, the guard stands aside, and Hirsch passes him by, making his way to the entrance.

The engine, still hot from running, hisses as it winds down in the cold air. What the guards don’t realize is that it is not just the sound of the engine they hear, but also the scratching of a pencil to paper…

* Inside her tent, it lit by a single lantern, Lisa is sitting at a table, papers neatly laid out as she looks over the map that Elric gave to her earlier. She lays her ruler on Berlin, and then lines it up with one of the pin holes, dragging a red map pencil across the paper.

For lack of a door to knock on, Roy instead clears his throat as he stands outside the tent. “Chief?”

“Yes?” she responds, not looking over her shoulder.

Roy enters the tent, looking over to her where she sits. “It’s late. You should try to get some sleep.”

Lisa sighs as she removes her glasses, letting her eyes rest for a moment. “No. I’m still waiting for the scouts to report back. In the meantime, I’m keeping myself occupied.”

Roy walks over, looking over her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Plotting how far away each base is from Berlin. Something about it just doesn’t feel right.”

“What do you mean?”

“Less than half of these seem to be in any strategic place. These ones here,” she points with her pencil, “Aren’t too far from the border. Good place to launch an invasion. But what about all these over here?” she says, pointing to the eastern bases. “They’re not close to the borders, they’re not close to Berlin – as far as I know, they’re not even close to any other military establishment. They just all seem to be in the middle of nowhere.”
“Covert bases like the one up the hill,” Roy observes.

Lisa nods, “Yes. They’re clearly meant to remain secret. The question is, what are they hiding?”

“According to Edward, at least one of those bases is a laboratory. And here they’re mining for uranium. It’s possible that all of these eastern bases are concerned with scientific research.”

“Yes, that’s true. Still,” she puts her glasses back on, “I’m hoping I can find a pattern. Why build at these places as opposed to others?”

Roy quips, “Have you tried connecting the dots?”

Lisa chuckles, setting down the red pencil. “You know, that’s actually not a bad idea.” She picks up instead a yellow map pencil, and begins drawing from one pin hole to the next.

Roy watches as she does, and as she gets further along, Roy’s eyes slowly start to widen. “Wait. Do you see what I see?”

Lisa sets her pencil down as she finishes, and she looks over the map. “I see a rough diamond shape. What do you see?”

“Let me see the pencil,” he requests, and she hands him a green one, he taking the ruler as well.

He lines it up against the western and eastern points of the diamond and draws a line. And then he lines it to the northern and southern points and draws another one. Roy pulls the ruler back, and he stares intently at the map.

Lisa looks from the map to him and back again. “It passes through the city of Büren. So?”

Roy darkly mutters, “Wewelsburg.”

“What’s that?” Lisa asks, trying to get Roy to speak up.

He looks her in the eye and says, “Wewelsburg castle. It’s where we found the uranium bomb in the first place.”

Lisa is intrigued, yet skeptical. “You honestly don’t think they’d have hidden it in the exact same place as before, do you?”

“It’s a possibility we’d have to look into.”

Lisa is quiet as she stares at the map, narrowing her eyes as she thinks.

* 

The rock walls light up as the camera flashes, illuminating the interior of the mine. Hirsch smiles, pleased with himself, and he scans around to see if there is anything else worth documenting.

Ah-ha! A cart with a bent axle! For shame – forcing the miners to work with such shoddy equipment.

Hirsch walks up to it, and lines his camera lens up with the axle, he looking through his viewfinder. He pushes down on the button – but it’s stuck.

“Agh,” he grumbles to himself, “Need more film…”
From one of the dials he lifts a small handle, winding it around and around, causing the film inside the camera to be wound up into its tiny drum. He pops open the back of the camera and removes the film, sticking it into his pocket. Then he reaches into his other pocket, producing another roll of film, installing it into the camera. He closes the camera with a smile. “There. Is that better, mein schatz?”

Hirsch lifts the camera back to his eye, focusing on the wheel axle before him.

FLASH!

He stands up straight, stretching his arms above his head. “There. That is more like it. Time to call it a night,” he chimes, tucking his camera into his shirt pocket.

Hirsch exits the mine, the guards outside wasting no time in saluting this time, to which Hirsch smiles, pleased.

He hops into his car, setting the lantern in the back seat. Then he plucks his keys from out of his shirt pocket, having to dig past the camera to get to them, and then he fires up the convertible, putting it into reverse and turning it around, driving up the little hillside road, heading back to base.

He snickers to himself. How proud the Lead Commander will be to see all that he has uncovered. Hirsch sticks his hand in his pocket, to happily reflect on his deeds – when something is very wrong.

He hits the brakes, the car sliding just a little on the icy slush of the road before coming to a complete stop.

“What the?!” Hirsch feels around the inside of his pocket. “The film! Where is the film?!” And then his finger slips through the seam – there is a hole in his pocket!

“Of all the stupid-!” He yanks back on the shift stick, putting the car into reverse and he begins driving backwards, he laying his arm over the back of his seat, looking over his shoulder to keep his eyes on the road. As long as no one is coming up the road, he should be okay….

Wait… What’s that moving amongst the trees?

Hirsch stops his car, turning the keys to silence the engine.

… There, in the woods – there’s movement, just barely visible through the strong shadows being cast by the full moon. It looks like two men. Is it the guards?

Hirsch’s eyes widen. Enemy scouts! He reaches for the pistol at his side. I will kill them where they stand! …No, a smile crawls up his face. Even better – I will let them lead me back to their camp. And then once I know where it is, we can launch a full-scale assault!

He quickly throws off his hat and cape, lest they slow him down or get snagged in a bush, and then he rips his keys from the ignition, pocketing them (in the good pocket) as he hops over the door, sprinting as quietly as he can into the underbrush.

The little camp in the middle of the woods is silent, everyone having gone to sleep already – everyone except for the watchmen posted at various points all around the perimeter.
One sentry on the northeast side stands with his boots cold in the snow, a jacket around him to keep himself warm – when suddenly he hears movement amongst the trees. He lifts his rifle, silently looking down the scope, into the white, moonlit woods. …He sees nothing.

But then a man lowly say, “Athena.” – That’s the password.

With a relieved sigh, the sentry lowers his rifle, quietly calling back, “All clear.” From behind the trees, the scouts come dashing out, tramping over the low bushes and snow banks. They approach the sentry, he giving them a nod.

“Chief’s waiting for you.”

“Thanks, mate,” one of the scouts says to the him.

Crouched low in the bushes a few yards away is Hirsch, his narrow eyes glaring through the darkness, absorbing the scene around him… Hmm…

Then he quietly crawls off towards his left.

The sentry disappears from sight, being left behind in the thicket of trees. But it’s not long before another sentry comes into view.

This sentry, same as the one before him, is scanning the forest, he being kept wide awake from the ice cold air that nips at his cheeks and nose.

“Athena!” a small voice suddenly calls from amongst the trees, and the sentry lifts his rifle, the tip of his bayonet gleaming in the moonlight.

“Show yourself,” he orders.

He hears the voice again, “Do not shoot. I am Dutch.” A silhouette rises from the bushes and comes closer. Stepping out of the trees is a young man in an SS uniform!

The sentry cocks his rifle, his muscles tensing. “Who are you?”

The young man has his hands raised above his head, “Calm, calm. Dutch Resistance.”

“Dutch Resistance?”

“Did not the Chief say? Undercover.” He waves a hand over his uniform, like an auto salesman showing off a choice car. “Good costume, no?”

The sentry has yet to lower his rifle, “I ‘aven’t ‘eard anything about that. You’ve got five seconds to produce ID or I shoot.”

“All right, all right,” the young man nervously says. “Dog tags, okay?” Slowly he reaches up to his neck, pulling something out from underneath his shirt.

“What is that?” the guard asks, leering through the darkness. “Toss it ‘ere.”

The young man lifts the necklace over his head, throwing it at the soldier’s feet.

The sentry bends down to pick it up, his eyes quickly looking down to the necklace – but half a second is all it takes, for he is being kicked in the face! Hirsch rips the man’s rifle from his hands and proceeds to butt him in the back of the neck with it, and then he stands on the man’s neck, forcing his face into the ground so he cannot scream as Hirsch flips the rifle over and stabs the
sentry with his own bayonet.

Hirsch grinds it in for good measure, waiting until he feels the man stop moving. Then he pulls out
the bayonet, lifting the rifle and slinging it over his back. He leans down and picks up his
necklace, looping it back over his head. And then he looks around, making sure there is no one to
see him as he drags the dead guard into the bushes.

Then he dashes out of the underbrush and into the camp.

Lisa, still in her chair, and Roy, leaning back against the table, both listen as the scouts report:
“There appears to be only one entrance. It’s very regulated who’s allowed in and out. They check
everyone.”

Lisa asks, “And how many guards on it?”

The scout replies, “While the miners are there, we counted five who went inside, and the same five
came out. But both during and after hours, at least three on the outside – two at the entrance, and
one up on the hill. He can’t see us when we’re in the trees, but I’m betting he can see the road
clearly enough.”

Roy puts a hand to his chin as he looks at the floor, “So we can’t just charge up to the front gates.
The sniper would take us out. And it’s hard to sneak up on the guards below. Once you leave the
cover of the trees, you’re free game.”

Lisa states, “This might require a long-term operation as opposed to a quick in-and-out sabotage.
We need to plant someone within the ranks of the base, let them work at the mine for a few
months. Then, when the guards have gotten used to his presence, our agent can sneak in a few
charges and plant them.”

Roy looks to her and asks, “So what’s the plan for now?”

Lisa sighs. “The plan for now is to get some rest.” She looks at the scouts. “You are relieved.”

They salute, and they leave the tent.

She looks at Roy. “You too, Mustang. Return to your tent.”

Quiet concern comes through his voice. “What about you? You are going to go to sleep sometime
tonight, right?”

She gives a soft, tired smile, “I shall attempt at the very least.”

Roy rises from the table and gives her a salute. “Good night, Chief.”

“Good night, Captain.”

And Roy leaves the tent.

Click!

He does not hear the quick opening and closing of the shutter as Hirsch snaps a picture of him
leaving the tent, Hirsch having turned off the flash so as to not draw attention to himself.

View-finder still to his eye, Hirsch scans the camp, looking for anything of interest. He spies a truck, a small U.S. flag painted on it.

*Click!*

What else? Immediately, nothing – nothing outside anyway. Time to check the insides.

Hirsch lowers his camera, looking to the tent from which the man just came. The light is still on. Best to stay away from that one.

Hirsch darts between tents, using the shadows they cast to keep himself hidden. He puts his ear close to the tarp next to him, hearing snoring coming from inside – soldiers’ quarters. Best to keep moving from this one, too.

He darts to the next tent and listens in – nothing. He creeps around to the tent flaps, peering in between. All he can see are large blocky shadows. He quickly slips inside, looking around. Boxes – crates stacked to the ceiling. He leans in closer to them, trying to make out the words, but with no light, he cannot see what they say.

And with no light, nothing will show up on film either. But he can’t use the flash…

Hirsch looks up at the ceiling tarp. He then climbs up on top of the boxes, and with his pocket knife, he quickly rips a slit, allowing the moonlight to shine through. It’s not a lot, but it’s enough, enough to illuminate the words printed on the box.

He hops back down, lining up his camera.

*Click!*

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Ed’s eyes crack open as he stirs from his slumber. *Ah, man… Where’s the latrine when you need it?*

He starts to roll over to get up, when his foot catches, Ed quietly cursing under his breath. “Damn it, Roy…”

He sits up, looking at his chained ankle. *What, does he expect me to go on the ground or something?*

Ed studies the design of the cuff for a moment. Then he grabs its hinge with his automail hand, slipping his fingers between the cuff and his ankle, Ed trying to squeeze down on the hinge, hoping it will break. Normally, it might have – but Ed is barely able to form a grip with his hand the way it is now.

Ed sighs. *Great…*

He then looks over to the cot beside him, where Breda lies snoring. But more importantly, underneath Breda’s cot is the tool box.

Ed watches Breda quietly sleep, hoping he’s a heavy sleeper. And then Ed leans over, picking up
the toolbox. He sets it on his lap and gingerly opens it, trying to keep all the metal whatnots on the inside from rattling around. *There must be something in here I can use…*

He finds a little jeweler’s flathead screwdriver. And then he picks out the tiniest allen wrench he can find.

*Let’s hope these work…*

He slips the tiny tools into the keyhole, and he starts rooting around, trying to find the mechanisms within. After a moment, he feels and hears a *click!*

**SNORT!**

Ed holds perfectly still as Breda flips over in bed, apparently disturbed by the sound. And then everything falls quiet again.

Ed sighs, continuing his work.

He shifts the allen wrench back and forth in the hole, none of the tumblers inside the cuff moving. *Now hang on, they were moving just a second ago. What did I do?*

Through trial and error, Ed eventually gets each tumbler to release, and soon enough he is freed from his cuff.

*About time…*

Quietly, he gently lays the cuff on the ground, trying to keep the chain from jangling as he does so. And then Ed stands and exits the tent.

Hirsch darts into the darkness against the next tent, again listening in, making sure the coast is all clear. He sneaks around to the flaps, peering inside – tables. Just the mess hall.

But then he grins to himself. There’s always time to sabotage enemies…

He slips into the mess tent, slipping his camera into his good side pocket as he crosses to the back where there is an open flap leading into an adjacent area – the kitchen, if it can even be called such, it not much more than a few large cauldrons over dead campfire ashes, this open-air ‘room’ made of tall poles holding up the four corners of a tin sheet roof, used to keep the snow from dousing the fires.

But where is the food? Ah-ha! It’s in that tent not far away, isn’t it?

Uh-oh, but there is a sentry. He stands a few yards away from the tent, he looking out into the woods, unaware of the enemy currently sneaking up behind him.

Hirsch slips his pocket knife out, creeping closer. Quickly he wraps his hand around the sentry’s mouth, stabbing him in the back! The man’s cry is muffled as he falls to his knees, and Hirsch twists the knife for good measure, making absolutely sure the man is dead.

Hirsch grabs the sentry by his ankles, dragging the dead body into the nearby tent to hide the evidence. He lets go, letting the man’s feet fall to the floor, and then Hirsch looks at his
surroundings. Indeed there is a stockpile of food here – burlap sacks of potatoes and beans and rice, as well as large drums of water.

The young man smiles. He leans down, wiping the blood on the knife off onto the dead man’s uniform – it’s his blood after all, he might be wanting it back – and then Hirsch stands back up, walking over to the burlap sacks.

He drives his knife into them, ripping them open one by one, letting everything spill out onto the ground, the potatoes bouncing and rolling away, the dry rice and beans sounding like the hush of a rain.

Then he approaches the steel drum, jutting the tip of his knife under its lid, prying the barrel open. He looks in and smiles at his own reflection. Then he rounds to the back side of the container, and with all his might, Hirsch pushes against the drum, toppling it forward, the water sloshing everywhere!

Ed is exiting the latrine when he hears something. *What was that? Water? Where did it come from?*

He starts to head in the direction of the sound.

Hirsch giggles maliciously, he gleefully grinning as he grinds the goods into the filthy mud with his boots. And why stop here? There must be matches nearby in order to light the campfires. He can go back to those munitions crates and set them on fire! It’ll be a regular fireworks show!

“HEY!”

Hirsch gasps as quickly whips around.

Ed stands in the tent entrance, pointing at him, “What are you doing in here?”

Without a word, Hirsch hops over the dead guard’s body and barrels forward, his knife thrusting outwards.

Ed quickly lifts his right arm to defend himself, and he swings his arm up, knocking the knife out of the young man’s hand, Ed then backhanding him with a metal fist.

The young man is momentarily stunned by the attack, but quickly he jumps at Ed’s midsection, tackling him to the ground.

He raises up, punching at Ed, Ed defending his face, and then he himself gets off one good hit, punching the Nazi right in the cheek, sending a tooth flying as the young man falls over.

Hirsch lifts himself to his knees, coughing, wiping his lip when he realizes there is blood on his hand. He glances down to look at it, and sees a tooth on the ground too! He growls as he glowers at his enemy, Ed already on his feet and coming towards him.
Hirsch pushes off the ground, darting off to his left, making his way back towards the center of the camp.

“Come back here!” Ed shouts as he chases after him. “Everyone wake up! Intruder!”

Lisa, who had just started to nod off in her tent, bolts upright on her cot, pulling her pistol out from under her pillow, and she runs out the exit!

Lights are coming on all over the camp, and Hirsch sees this! He has to get back to where he came in!

He ducks behind a truck just in time to hear *POW-PATING!* He comes to a halt, realizing someone is firing at him. He can’t move from this spot or they’ll get him.

“Behind the truck!” Lisa shouts to some troops as she jogs towards it, never lowering her weapon. The soldiers run alongside her, their rifles readied. *That’s right, Hirsch thinks, Just a little bit closer now.*

Lisa points her gun at the ground beneath the truck, anticipating the enemy to roll under it and try to slip away. The two soldiers with her diverge to either side, rounding the truck – and are surprised as the young man leaps like an acrobat, doing a cartwheel straight over the top of the truck! They fire at him, missing, and Hirsch nimbly tumbles to the other side, grabbing Lisa by her bun, and dragging her down, she landing roughly on the ground.

Though surprised, the adrenaline is running through her veins, and Lisa rolls over onto her stomach, opening fire at the young man’s ankles – but they’re not there anymore for once again he has leaped into the air, clearing a group of barrels, the metal now protecting him.

Lisa angrily curses, “Damn kid leaps like a deer!”

Roy has emerged from his tent, rushing to her side. “Chief! Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she says as he attempts to help her up. “Secure the perimeter! Make sure there aren’t more of them crawling out there!”

“Aye aye!” Roy complies, dashing off.

Meanwhile, at the mine, the guard in the tower peers out distrustingingly at the forest below, he picking up his mic and calling, “Report, fire. Friendly or enemy?”

“Unknown,” the ground responds, “It wasn’t us. Was it you?”

“Negatory. Is anyone hit?”

“Not down here.”

“Not up here either. I’ll keep an eye out. You contact base.”

A light on the radio begins to blink at the main guard station inside the base walls. The operator picks up.
“This is Base 12.”

“Base 12, this is Bergwerk. Report, shots fired in the vicinity. Origin unknown, target unknown. We are not under attack as of current.”

“Copy that. We’ll alert the commander immediately. Report back with any further developments.”

“Roger that.”

Hirsch’s pendant bounces back and forth over his chest as he madly sprints through the camp, his necklace having slipped out of his shirt when he pulled that truck stunt. More painfully, though, the stolen rifle he carries is bouncing up and down on his back, beating him in his spine. He needs to take cover before risking removing it –

Heavy bootsteps are closing in quick on his left – it’s the blond man from the food tent!

“Where you going?!” Ed yells as he runs at the intruder. “Don’tcha wanna stay for tea?!” he mocks.

Hirsch stops, grinding his boots into the dust as he reaches for his pistol. He’ll take care of this insolent little - ! Oh no! Where’s my pistol?! It must have fallen out during his cartwheel! Hirsch instinctively reaches for his pocket knife, but it’s gone too!

Ed grabs him by his collar, threatening him with a fist. “All right buddy! Start talking!”

FLASH!

“AugH!” Ed closes his eyes as the bright flash of a camera bulb pops him in the eyes, and Hirsch rips himself out of Ed’s grasp – but not before his necklace gets caught, the chain breaking off his neck as Hirsch dashes away into the dark woods.

Ed is busy rubbing his eyes, trying to make the bright spots dancing in his vision go away. “Son of a… Where’d he go?”

Two troops rush past Ed, following the intruder into the woods.

Meanwhile, Al comes running up to Ed. “Brother! Brother, are you all right?”

“Yeah. Just,” Ed has to stop and take quite a few breaths, his brain finally taking notice of the crying his lungs are doing, Ed feeling winded. “Whew! Aw man. I’ve gotten out of shape. It’s not like when we were kids, when we were training all the time…”

Ed then looks down at that which he’s snatched from the intruder, Al looking at it as well. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Ed says.

“Chief Hawkeye!” they hear a soldier say, and they look over to where she stands, the soldier reporting to her, “Perimeter secured, ma’am! So far, there appear to be no other enemies.”

“Good,” she says. “Keep us protected while we work.” Lisa turns towards the center of the camp and shouts, “PACK IT UP! WE’RE MOVING OUT!”

“Moving out?” Ed cries, jogging up to her, “But the mine!”
“Forget the mine, Elric,” she tells him. “It’s lost. Even if we do kill that spy before he gets back to base, they’ll notice his disappearance. The fact that they sent him here in the first place means that they know we’re here and our position has been compromised.”

A knock comes at the door, Löwe stirring as he shifts the covers back, sitting up. “Hmm? Yes? What is it?”

The door opens, a soldier saluting as he enters and then says, “Commander – we’ve received a report from the mine. They say they heard shots going off, but no one was firing at them.”

The commander adeptly states, “Well whoever it was must have been firing at something.”

The soldier suggests, “Perhaps it came from the village?”

“In which case, this is an issue for the local police to deal with. But it’s too close to mine. I don’t like it.” Löwe rises from his bed heading to his wardrobe to change out of his night clothes. “Send out a small squad to scan the woods for enemies.”

“Yes sir.”

The troops run around the camp as fast as they can, yanking anchors out of the ground, poles starting to lean to the side as the tarps go slack. Cots are folded, boxes are loaded, everything being piled into the trucks as efficiently as possible.

Lisa shouts as she walks along, “We’re falling back to our defensive position! If a truck is full, move it out!”

Ed is still following alongside Lisa as she busily works, Al and Roy following after him. “We can’t leave yet!” Ed protests.

Roy threatens, “Ed, don’t make me tie you up and shove you in a truck.”

Al is a bit softer in his approach, “Brother, please be reasonable.”

Lisa has entered her tent and is beginning to pack up all of her papers, Ed’s map included.

Ed of course has followed her in, he not backing down from his position. “We need to take care of the mine now, while we still have a chance.”

Lisa doesn’t even look at him as she says, “That window of opportunity has closed. I won’t say it again, Mr. Elric – help break down the tents and pack them up!”

“I’m not one of your soldiers, remember? You said so yourself.”

“Ed,” Roy interjects, “We may have lost the fight for now, but others can come back and fight later with the information we’ve provided.”

Ed turns around to him. “By that time the Nazis will have added reinforcements to the mine! Even if you plant someone in their ranks like you were saying, they’ll be suspicious! You’ll never pull it off!”

Still piling things into her trunk, Lisa says to Al, “Doctor, will you please remove your brother from my presence?”
Al gently tries to take Ed’s arm, “Come on, Ed.”

Ed swipes his arm away from Al, looking at Lisa as he says, “Listen – They’re going to come for us whether we blow up the mine or not. Better to blow it now while we still have the element of surprise.”

Lisa finally turns around and looks him in the eye, “What surprise? They know we’re here.”

“No yet they don’t.” Ed observes, “That guy was running on foot. If we take a car, we can beat him to the mine.”

“This is supposed to be a covert operation. It’s not covert if we drive right up to them.”

“We don’t need to be covert! We just need to be fast! Fill a quad car full of explosives, drive the car straight at the mine, and then bail before it hits. When the car crashes, all the explosives will go off, sealing off the mine.”

“And what if the car gets hit before then? One well-placed bullet and the whole thing will go up in flames.”

“We cover it in armor.”

“And protect the explosives from the crash as well? Then they won’t even blow up.”

Ed thinks for a moment, then gives a catlike grin, “They will if we remotely detonate them.”

Hirsch weaves in and out of the trees, chunks of bark flying here and there as the soldiers running after him fire their rifles, trying to line up their shots while also having to dodge the trees and bushes in their path.

The woodland floor is starting to become an incline, signaling that the hillside road is close. Hirsch clears the tree line, and he runs across the road, jumping straight over his car to the other side. He lands, pulling the rifle off his back and laying it over the hood of the car, taking aim.

A moment later, the soldiers are coming out of the trees. POW! POW! Two quick shots are all it takes, and Hirsch picks them off, the men falling down dead on the cold ground.

Hirsch then climbs into his car, dropping the rifle in the passenger’s seat as he delves into his shirt pocket, he fumbling with his keys momentarily. “I’ve got to get back to base! I’ve got to tell them!”

The car fires up, and Hirsch punches the gas, putting pedal to the metal, the tires squealing across the salt-covered slush as he takes off.

The team stands around a jeep, the passenger-side windshield busted out, the back being filled to the brim with explosives.

Ed stuffs in one last bundle of dynamite and then he stands aside as Breda slides a large piece of the tin sheet roofing down over this side, making it match all the other sides as well as the top.

“It’s not a lot,” Breda admits, wiping his brow, “But it might help.”
The truck with the U.S. flag drives up and stops, Havoc sticking his head out the window. “Hurry up or we’re leaving without you!”

“All right, all right, I’m coming,” Breda says as he approaches the truck, hopping into the back.

Havoc salutes them, “Godspeed, fellas.” And he drives off.

Chief Hawkeye looks at the two soldiers who stand before her. “All right, repeat the plan back to me. I want to make sure you’ve memorised it exactly.”

The soldier repeats the steps, “Headlights off, drive straight at the mine as fast as possible. I hold the wheel straight, he locks it into place, we both bail and run for cover. When the car reaches the mine entrance, hit the button to detonate.”

Lisa nods. “Excellent. Now, Elric, if you’ll give these men the -! Elric?! CAPTAIN!”

With helmets on their heads, Roy and Ed are already driving off in the jeep, Roy behind the wheel.

“Ed!” Al shouts after him, Lisa in the meanwhile shouting,

“Captain! Captain, you come back here this instant!”

*

The four German riflemen sit in their car, three out of four of them with their rifles already at the ready should there be any unseen enemies hiding in the trees or on the hill above.

The driver rounds the corner just in time to see headlights coming right at him! He gasps, as does the other driver, both of them swerving to their respective right, the driver’s comrades hanging on for dear life as the car slides off the icy road and rams right into a tree.

Hirsch’s car in the meanwhile is scraping against the side of the rock-hewn hill, his mirror being crushed, the side of the car being terribly scraped as the metal shrilly squeals. He hits the brakes and the car stops, the young man sitting wide-eyed and shaky, hands still on the wheel as the radiator from the car behind him hisses.

One of the soldiers has already exited the car and is approaching, his rifle pointed at the young man. “Who goes there?”

Hirsch turns on him, “It’s me! And we don’t have time for this! There are enemies in the woods! No doubt they’ve come to blow up the mine! I must alert Commander Löwe!”

“He already knows, sir,” the soldier confers, “We’ve been sent to defend the mine.”

“Then get in and I’ll turn us around! Schnell! Schnell!”

The soldiers do as told, all of them quickly piling in, trying not to get their toes run over as Hirsch backs up the car, its back wheels momentarily going off-road – but then he shifts it into gear and begins driving forward, turning the wheel so that they are now headed back down to the mine.

*

The jeep blazes up the woodland road, Roy keeping his hands firmly on the wheel.

“I’m glad this road is a straight-shot!” he calls over the roaring of the wind as it passes their ears. “Any sort of curve, and we might be looking at a spin-out!”
Ed wraps the chain, that previously held him, around the frame of the windshield. “Yeah! You figure without the headlights, we’ll never see the ice coming!”

He makes sure that the one end of the handcuff is already shackled tightly to the chain. And then Ed pulls out of the glove compartment the tourniquet that was thrown in especially for this mission, he tying it around the frame directly above the chain in order to keep it from sliding upwards.

“So I’ve got to ask,” Roy says, a grin on his face but nervousness seeping through in his voice, “This venture of ours - is this the sort of daring deed your friend the Colonel would have done?”

Ed watches Roy for a moment. Is he trying to live up to the tales of the Other Side that they’ve told him? Ed gives a firm smile. “Nah. Colonel Mustang would have just snapped his fingers and the mine would have blown up. It takes a lot more guts to do what you’re doing now.”

Roy gives a breathy chuckle, “Thanks.”

The car continues speeding up the road, the engine roaring, its sound carrying through the cold winter air.

The guard in the stand atop the hill hears the car, and he grabs his binoculars, looking out to the darkened road. There, in the moonlight, he can see it, a car heading this way!

He quickly radios, “Ground Patrol, this is Tower! Unidentified vehicle headed your way! Approaching fast! Fire at will!”

The guard drops the mic and picks up his rifle, aiming at the incoming car.

POW!

A bullet ricochets off the hood of the jeep, and Roy instinctively jumps, the car swerving just a tad bit.

“Hold her steady, Roy!” Ed encourages, “We’re almost there!”

More shots come, all three guards firing, they unable to see where their aim is landing in the darkness – but they know they’re hitting the car, for they can hear the metal ringing out.

Ed slips the handcuffs through the wheel, wrapping the chain a few times around the spoke, and then fastening the chain completely together with the cuffs, the chain holding taut. The wheel rotates side to side, but only by a margin, it now mostly stuck on course.

“BAIL!” Ed shouts.

They throw open the doors and he and Roy jump out of the moving vehicle, they tumbling into the icy grass and mud, rolling away from the road and towards the trees. When close enough to the trees, each gets to his hands and knees and scurries for cover behind the trunks. Ed, behind a tree, pulls a metal box out of his pocket, and he flips it open, exposing a button.

The guards are still shooting at the car, but it’s not stopping! They only have a few seconds left!

Good instinct kicking in, the ground guards run away from the entrance, just in time too, for the jeep is crashing into the mouth of the mine, taking out the support beams of the doorframe! Rocks crumble from the roof and down onto the hood of the vehicle.
Ed pushes the button –

And what happens within that split second, no one can see – for inside the box of sheet metal, at the bottom of the pile of dynamite is the small motor, a string wrapped around it, the other end of that string tied to the pin of a hand grenade, which is pulled out as the motor whirs around and around, wrapping the string tighter until –

**BOOM!**

The back of the jeep blows, bright orange fire hellishly rolling out as a burst of scorching hot air blows away the ground guards, the whole hill being rocked by shockwaves that cause the tower atop it to shudder, the guard in the stand falling onto the wooden floor beneath him.

Hirsch hits the breaks on his car, he and the soldiers with him staring up in horror at the column of fire they see streaking up not but a hundred yards from them.

Hirsch mutters lowly, “*Ah, Verdammt...*”

Away they run, Flame and Fullmetal, off into the dark cover of the woods, disappearing behind the foliage.

At the camp, not but a single jeep remains in the empty, muddy clearing, Lisa and Al waiting there, Al in the driver’s seat, and Lisa riding shotgun, her pistol drawn as she scans the woods surrounding them for enemies.

She hears movement, and she trains her aim on it. But lucky for all she is not quick to pull the trigger, for it is Ed and Roy reappearing from out of the trees.

Al smiles with relief, Lisa meanwhile shouting, “Hurry! Get in!”

Ed and Roy waste no time, doing as told. And then Al shifts the car into gear and they drive off.

Ed, though out of breath, is ecstatic, pumping a fist. “Yeah! We did it!”

Lisa, however, is not celebrating. “Why did you drive off?” she yells at Roy. “I ORDERED you to come back!”

“You did?” Roy smiles nervously, waving a hand, “Sorry, Chief. I honestly didn’t hear you.”

Ed adds, “Yeah, we were driving too fast.”

Lisa turns on him, “And as for YOU Mr. Elric!”

Ed gulps, preparing himself for a tongue-lashing.
Lisa glares at him, but slowly her blood pressure starts to fall. “…Well I supposed we should chalk this one up as a victory, shouldn’t we?”

Everyone is both surprised and relieved.

“You don’t follow orders like a soldier,” Lisa says, commenting, “But you certainly have the guts of one. I commend you. For now.”

“Thanks. I think…”

And away they drive, off into the dark woods, off away from the fire that rages on the lonely, snowy hill behind them.

* *

“So that’s your report, is it?”

Himmler sits behind his desk, flipping through the pages in the folder that sits before him.

Hirsch in the meanwhile is quietly standing on the other side, hands folded behind his back, his shoulders slightly hunched as he responds, “Yes, my commander. I am so sorry that I was unable to stop what happened.”

Himmler flips another page, “Let us just be glad that you were not lost to the attack as well.”

“I may not have been lost, but I certainly lost a lot!” Hirsch whines, “I lost my knife! I lost my tooth! I even lost one of the side mirrors on my car!”

“Hirsch, mind your volume.”

His shoulders hunch again, “Sorry, Lead Commander.”

“The mine can always be re-dug,” the older officer tells him. “Perhaps an open-pit mine this time around. Yes, I think that would be much better. Much harder to damage.”

Himmler lifts from the folder the photos, now flipping through them.

“And besides,” he chimes, “Some good came out of this. You’ve brought me intel on our little saboteurs.”

“I am glad I could be of service to you, Lead Commander.”

Himmler gets to one picture, a truck with the star-spangled banner painted on its side. “…Hmm. I never would have guessed that the Americans were involved.”

He flips through a few more pictures and then he stops, going wide-eyed, brows furrowing.

“What is this?!”

“Hmm?” Hirsch stands on his tip-toes, trying to see the picture from the other side of the desk, finally making out what, or rather who, it is. “Oh. Him. That is the man who punched me, my commander!”

Himmler slams the picture down onto the desk, spooking Hirsch. “I mean what is he doing at a camp with American and British soldiers?!”
“Sir?” Hirsch inquires, fearfully confused.

Himmler lifts the picture, turning it around and thrusting it out at Hirsch. “Do you know who this is?!”

Hirsch honestly responds, “Forgive me, sir. I do not.”

“This is Edward Elric!”

Hirsch gasps. “You mean the man who nearly destroyed Wewelsburg?!”

“The very same.”

Hirsch apologizes, “I am so sorry, Lead Commander Himmler! If I had known! I should have killed him when I had the chance!”

“Yes, you should have. You’d have saved me the trouble!”

He sets the picture back down on the desk.

“Leave me,” Himmler orders, eyes as well as voice burning, “I have a phone call to make…”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Next episode:
Chapter End Notes

“Just promise that once it goes in, it can come back out if it hurts too bad…” – Young man, you stop with that innuendo right now! That was last week’s gag. (*chuckle* gag...)

You know what makes me laugh? Thinking about Ed and Al with German accents. Yeah, the show was dubbed in America, but in the context of this story, they’ve been living in Germany speaking German, the Netherlands speaking Dutch, and now they’re speaking English. I mean, all I hear are the voices of Vic Mignogna and nowaday Aaron Dismuke. But within the world of the story, to the ears of somebody like Havoc, he’s going to be hearing them speak with a German accent. And that just tickles me.

Also, don’t act like you don’t ship Roy and Lisa. I totally love that the dynamic has been switched. *HEART EYES MOTHAH FUCKAH*

My inner critic is screaming at the amount of alliterations in this thing. I choose to ignore it because alliteration is always awesome.

P.S. – Just for shits and giggles, I have deemed the guard in the wooden hillside stand
to be named, “Major Tom.” Because of reasons.
The dark sky is clear, not a cloud in sight to cover up the stars that twinkle above. Everyone in the little hamlet, nestled near the bay, is wrapped snugly in their warm beds, sleeping off the chill of the winter night.
The dew on the ground mimics the stars above it, scattered and twinkling in the light of the moon. Thin sheets of ice form on the iron bars of the old church gates, the brick wall surrounding the grounds separating the mundane from the spiritual. The bell high above the chapel, too, is being wrapped in a cold blanket of ice, awaiting the rising sun to come and shed this chilly veil.

A tiny house, modest, built of stones, sits within the church grounds not far from the chapel itself. Inside this rather medieval looking little abode, a portly old man lays asleep in bed – when suddenly there comes a knocking at his door.

He sits up in bed, rubbing his bald head quizzically. “Who on earth could that be at this hour?” he ponders to himself.

He pulls back the covers and swings his feet over the side of the bed, tucking them into his slippers as he picks up the cane that leans against his bedpost, using it to help him stand. From the post at the foot of his bed, he plucks up his house robe, donning it as he makes his way to the door, the knocking coming again.

“Yes, yes, just a moment,” he responds, tying the robe over his night clothes. He puts his eye to the peephole, looking out into the darkness – and he can just barely make out the silhouette of a woman – one of the sisters?

The old man reaches over to the little side-stand that sits beside the door, and he flicks a match, lighting the candle that sits atop the table to bring a little light into the room. He waves the match out, a thin wisp of smoke escaping the stick as he sets it in the brass tray of the candle, and then he turns back to the handle, turning it and opening the door.

Standing on the front stoop is a blonde lady, serious brown eyes looking over her thin-rimmed glasses. “Pastor Cornello, I presume?” she asks.

He nods, saying to her, “You must be Lisa Hawkeye.”

She nods in return. “We’ve had to fall back. Think you can house a little over two score of a men and one lady?”

The old pastor chuckles. “Well, they’ll either have to double-up on beds or half of them will be sleeping on the floor. But I think we can manage. I’ll unlock the gates – which by the way, I see you had no trouble scaling.”

Lisa grins.

~

Through the empty, silent streets of the sleeping town Lisa sneaks, to its edge – which is not that far from church grounds, for this town is not but a few streets in length. Off into the darkness Lisa peers, out into the distance of the marshy countryside.

There, not too far off, she can see them – the convoy. From her hip, Lisa pulls a small flashlight, holding it out before her, and she begins clicking it on and off.

The headlights of the lead truck signal back, and shortly thereafter, the trucks rumble to life, and begin driving their way up the road towards her, they keeping their headlights off, using only the moon to see by.

Lisa looks all around her, checking for any movement other than their own. As the trucks close in
on the edge of town, they stop once more, the drivers turning the engines off. Everyone in the
backs pile out, and, keeping the truck in drive, the soldiers begin pushing the silent vehicles
forward.

Lisa leads the way, the hushed parade of shadows making their way towards the church, where
Pastor Cornello is pushing open the large gates. He exits out of them, pushing one side back as far
as it will go, then doing the same to the other side, holding it open as one by one the trucks enter
the church grounds.

All the way to the back – beyond the chapel, beyond the convent quarters, past the garden and a
longhouse – all the way in behind a small barn are the trucks hidden, some of them able to squeeze
into the grove of trees that lies behind the barn, the rest of them parked with their sides flush up
against the barn, one truck in front of the other, single-file.

A few soldiers hop into the backs of the trucks and begin handing off duffle bags to those outside.
It doesn’t matter who gets whose bag, that can be sorted out later. The important thing now is to
get the essentials unloaded while they still can.

When that’s all done, the soldiers in the back each grab up large dark-green nets covered in vines
and leafy-looking material, hopping out of the trucks and stretching the camouflage over the tops
of the vehicles, covering them completely. Viewed from a distance, they may look like nothing
more than large bushes. Viewed from above, they’ll simply appear as the trees of the grove itself.

Now with an old firelit lantern in his hand, the tiny flame flickering through the darkness, Pastor
Cornello approaches the gathering of soldiers. “The pilgrim house is this way,” he says to them as
he turns slightly, “Follow me,” and he begins walking away, the soldiers following after him.

Lisa trots up to him. “We can’t thank you enough for this, Pastor Cornello. You’re taking quite the
risk by housing us here.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” he tells her. “But more on that in the morning. I’m sure you're tired. The
men will be sleeping in the pilgrim house, but you may have the parsonage house for the night.”

“Oh no, that’s quite all right,” Lisa politely declines.

“I insist,” Cornello says. “I shall sleep in the gate house.” He smiles, “I haven’t done that since I
was a seminary. I’ll feel just like a young lad again.” Then he chuckles, “Though I’m sure sleeping
in a rocking chair won’t be as comfortable at this age now.”

“I promise, we’ll be out of your hair as soon as possible.”

He laughs as he rubs his bald head, “My dear, I have no hair for you to be in!”

Lisa restrains a chuckle.

The sun is rising over the hill, a long shadow being cast by the tall wooden lookout tower that
peers down on the crumbled mine below.

And just when they were making progress too, the miners think to themselves as with their shovels
and pick-axes they try to clear away the rubble that is blocking the entrance. The twisted wreckages
of a burnt-out jeep is coming into view as more rock and soil are pulled away. There’s no telling if
the inside of the mine is all right. Maybe it held up. Maybe it didn’t. They’ll only know once they
can get inside, if there’s an inside to get into.
Up the road that winds along the side of the hill, up at the castle-like fort, the young officer, Hirsch, crouches beside his car, he furiously polishing the damaged door, it covered in long streaks, its metal crunched inwards.

“Agh, this is terrible!” he whines, “I can’t drive this into Berlin! And on Heroes’ Day? It’s a disgrace!”

The older officer, Löwe, stands off to the side, commenting, “I don’t believe the Lead Commander will care about the condition of your car.”

“Hmph!” Hirsch stands, adjusting his hat so that it’s firmly planted on his head. “Well he’ll certainly care about the condition of your mine!” Hirsch pats his shirt pocket proudly, feeling the little camera tucked within. “You’re lucky I got pictures of their camp. At least now we have a lead on them. Left to you, they’d have blown up the mine and we’d have no idea who’s responsible.”

“Left to you, it appears they’d have blown up the mine regardless.”

Hirsch whips around, pointing at him, “That’s because I was on my way to tell you!” He turns back around, crossing his arms. “Clearly it was a waste of my time thinking I could rely on you. I should have just taken care of the enemies when I had the chance.”

“Now you know that for the future,” Löwe tells him, “Every failure is a learning experience.”

“Can it! I don’t care if you are older than me, stop treating me like a child!”

Lucky for either party, a soldier intercedes, saluting, “Commander Löwe, sir – your wife’s on the phone for you.”

Löwe gives the soldier a nod, “Tell her I’ll be right there.”

“Yes, sir,” and he takes off.

Löwe returns his attention to Hirsch, the young officer hopping into his car. “Have a safe journey, Commander Hirsch.”

Without a word, Hirsch fires up his car and begins driving towards the front gates.

The gate guard sees the car pulling up, and the guard proceeds to lift the gates, allowing the car to pass. And Hirsch drives off down the road, heading for Berlin.

* *

The morning sunshine streams through the windows into the dining hall, lighting the spacious room that is filled with rows of tables.

A handful of young monks and nuns bustle about, it being their turn to tend to the tables this morning, whilst everyone else sits and eats (after giving thanks, of course).

The tables are lain with simple fare – some rye bread, some water, some porridge – nothing fancy, and certainly nothing out of season. But all the same, all who sit at these tables are thankful for what they’ve been given.

Ed gives a wide-mouthed yawn, then lays his cheek on his hand as he mutters, “Man, what a long night.”

Havoc, sitting next to Breda and across from Ed and Al, asks, “So what happened after we left?”
Ed smiles wearily, “Mustang and I let those Nazis have it. Blew their mine right to Kingdom Come.”

“Which, while we’re on that subject,” Al comments, turning to his brother, “You and Roy shouldn’t have gone out there. The chief already picked a couple of people for the mission.”

Ed pouts a little, raising an eyebrow, “Yeah, but I’m the one who convinced her to go through with it in the first place.”

“What if something happened to you?”

“Well it didn’t.”

“Ed!” Al blurts a little loudly. But then he quiets down, a slight sorrow to his voice. “…I finally got you back, and only a few hours later you’re trying to get yourself killed.”

Ed has fallen quiet, too. “…I’m sorry, Al.”

“Just promise you won’t do something like that again.”

Ed gives a smarmy grin, “You know me.”

“Ed, I’m serious!”

Breda, nibbling on a chunk of bread, is distracted by something else, pointing to Ed’s chest, “What’s that coming out of your pocket there?”

Ed looks down at the top pocket of his jacket, a small length of gold chain dangling out of it. “Oh, this.” He reaches in and pulls it out, showing off the necklace. “I swiped this off of that kid who attacked the camp.”

Havoc blinks once or twice as he looks it over. “What is it?”

Breda comments, “Looks like a wheel or something.”

Al says to Ed, “You should show that to Chief Hawkeye.”

Ed re-pockets the medallion, “Yeah, I will, after breakfast.”

One of the young nuns on duty comes up to the table, placing a large bowl of porridge before them. “Here you go.”

“Thank you,” Al says as he looks up to her, but when his eyes catch her face, he freezes over, blushing.

The young nun, being only a postulate, still has the bangs of her hair uncovered, it a soft sandy blonde, accenting her blue eyes and naturally reddish lips.

Her face is one that Ed and Al have seen before, but just to be sure, Ed says, “Thank you, Miss…?”

She smiles, “Sister Clara, please.”

Al chokes on his words momentarily, stuttering as he smiles, “P-p-pleased to meet you! I’m Al!”

“Pleased to meet you, Al,” she responds. “Are you finding everything all right so far?”
The blush has yet to leave his cheeks, “Yes, you’re fine! I MEAN— I’m fine! We’re fine, we’re good…”

Sister Clara gives a small giggle with a smile, “All right. Just let me know if you need anything.” And she walks away to go attend to the other tables.

Havoc and Breda snicker between themselves, Havoc commenting, “Got a bit of the devil in you, huh kid? Trying to turn a nun?”

The blush spreads all across Al’s face to his ears, “What?! No!”

Breda says, “He’s just looking for the love of the Lord, that’s all.”

“You guys are terrible…” Al mumbles.

Ed is helping himself to a bowl of porridge as he adds, “Just don’t do anything to get yourself in trouble, Al.”

Al looks down, trying to hide his face as his shoulders hunch a little, “Will you guys just drop it?!”

★

The little hamlet is certainly much more lively now that the sun has risen. From the direction of the farmlands comes the milkman, bringing fresh bottles for everyone’s breakfasts. Though most stores are closed today, the general store is open, the shopkeeper’s wife sweeping off the porch, sweeping a circle around the old hound that lazily lounges there.

Each little shop and house has the national flag hanging above their entryway, the red banners gently moving in the almost unnoticeable wind. The flags hang there everyday anyway and most times go unnoticed, the townsfolk having grown accustomed to their presence. But as today is Heroes’ Memorial Day, a sense of pride fills the people when they see the flags as they go about their business.

The most number of flags to be found on any one building are at the police station, lining the awning of the creaky porch. The roof of the drab brick building slightly leans on one side, showing its age. And there’s not but a sing patrol car parked outside.

The inside of the building is as plain as the outside, the white-washed walls dun with years of dust. A breeze blowing past outside rattles the closed back door, the nearby window pane shuddering as well. There are only three desks as there are only three policemen, they currently all sitting around the same desk.

The head policeman leans back in his chair as he gives an aggravated sigh. “I can’t believe they have us working on a Sunday. And on a holiday no less!”

His two deputies sit on the other side of his desk, one of them asking, “What are we looking at, Inspector Geldform?”

The inspector lifts a telegram, “The military’s saying there’s an enemy convoy that’s on the move. All local law enforcement are to keep an eye out for it.” He tosses the telegram back onto the desk. “What are we supposed to do against an enemy convoy? Do they think we’ve got the manpower or the hardware for that kind of operation?”

The other deputy says, “Well we would, if the government didn’t re-route all the tax dollars to feed the war effort. Leave some of it here at home, guys.”
“Aw come on, Dunbar,” his partner says, “It’s not that bad. Besides, I’m willing to pull a little bit of extra weight here if it means helping our troops abroad.”

Geldform speaks up, “Yeah, we’ll I don’t see you working for free, Dee.” He grumbles, “And what’s more, who bets we don’t get paid overtime for this?” He grows quiet, his eyes getting a little bit wider. Then he says with an ecstatic grin, “Say! That’s it!”

“What’s it?” Dee asks.

Geldform is now standing, leaning forward over his desk, “If we can capture those enemies, I bet the government will give us a huge reward!”

“Really? You think so?”

“Sure! Think what we could do with that money! Hire on a couple more cops, maybe even buy a second squad car!”

“Maybe even a third squad car!” Dunbar interjects excitedly, “Then we can all have one!”

Dee smiles, “That does sound pretty good.”

The inspector happily slaps a fist to his palm, “It’s settled then! Dee! You take the side west of town! Dunbar! You take the side east of town! I’ll go south straight down the middle!”

“But wait!” Dee says, “What if we get a call? Who’ll be here to take care of it?”

“Ah… darn it, you’re right,” Geldform realizes, rubbing his chin. Then he says, “All right – YOU guys search the outskirts of town, I’ll stay here and man the phones. Ready? Break!” And he plops down into his chair, staring at the phone.

The deputies head for the door, exiting out onto the porch. Dunbar looks at Dee and says, “Man the phones. Sit on his butt and read the paper is more like it.”

* * *

The pilgrimage house, though narrow, fits two long rows of beds into the cozy interior. A large stone fireplace at the end of the cabin warms up the stretching room, and a large rug sits in the center of the room atop the wooden floorboards, the length of cloth doing what it can to help retain some of the heat, the large wooden shutters over the windows trying to do much the same.

The Adelphi soldiers sit around chatting, but they fall quiet as Chief Hawkeye enters the room, Captain Mustang with her, he carrying a crate of something.

“All right, listen up,” the chief announces, “While we’re staying here, we can’t risk anyone being seen in a uniform, otherwise the townsfolk may get suspicious and report us. As such, you need to change out. We have here some extra robes that Pastor Cornello has been kind enough to provide us with.”

“Cornello?” Ed quietly questions, he sitting on his bed.

Al looks at him, “You don’t think it’s that Cornello, do you?”

“Maybe,” Ed considers, “Let’s hope this one’s nice, huh?”

The chief continues, “You are to put your uniforms in your kit-bags and put these on instead.”
One soldier quips, “Does this mean we can’t curse?”

Hawkeye seriously says, “I’d advise against it.”

Another pipes up, “Aw damn it,” and a mild roll of laughter rises from the room.

“All right, enough.” Chief Hawkeye orders, “Everyone line up and come get a robe,” to which the soldiers comply, all of them standing and one-by-one taking a robe from Mustang as he hands it to them.

*

The church bell high in its tower rings out over the small town, and slowly the families emerge from their homes, wearing their Sunday best as they make their way towards the church.

The gates have been opened so that all may enter the church grounds, and outside the open doors of the chapel, a monk and a nun stand, one on either side of the entrance, each giving welcome and blessings to the townsfolk as they arrive.

A few young novice monks and nuns usher people to the pews, while high in the choir loft, a gleaming silver organ softly plays, filling the whole space with a gentle tranquility.

The music draws to a close as Pastor Cornello takes his place at the pulpit, leaning his cane up against the podium so that both his hands are free. What little murmuring that was going on in the crowd has grown quiet as the pastor begins.

“Peace be with you.”

“And also with you,” the crowd solemnly responds.

“Children, let us give thanks to our Father for this beautiful morning, and may we pray that He will open our hearts to his Divine spirit and wisdom, amen.”

“Amen.”

As Cornello carries on with prayers, the crowd repeating back that which he says, their heads bowed, their eyes closed, none of them sees the peculiar monk who stands in the wings beside the altar – it is Edward.

He stands behind a pillar, looking out into the crowd of faces, seeing if there is anyone here he recognizes, any ladies with pink in their hair – though on this side of the Gate, people’s hair only seems to be one color, never two. Maybe she’s wearing a pink headband? Or a pink hat?

He sighs. She’s not here…

Ed’s been wondering – if Father Cornello is here, then is this town Liore? And if so, is anyone else from Liore here? …Someone like… Rose?

…But then again, Clara’s here. Maybe this is Aquroya?

He again sighs to himself. Maybe this town is neither. What good is it comparing this world to the last? They’re not the same. Not really.

And besides, Ed thinks, his heart growing heavy, Even if Rose is on this side… If she has dark skin like the Rose back home… By now… she’s probably…
He tightens his lips, deciding to stop thinking about it.

“Amen.”

“Amen,” the crowd repeats.

Pastor Cornello opens the Bible that lays before him, he holding onto a ribbon bookmark and gently pulling on it to find the right passage. He solemnly looks out to the crowd as he says, “‘He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker. But he who is gracious to the needy honors Him.’ – Proverbs 14:31.

Poverty comes in many forms. Poverty of the stomach, called Hunger. Poverty of health, called Sickness. Poverty of sound mind, called Madness.

All too often are the impoverished looked down upon. There is the mistaken belief that if a man is lacking in some aspect of his life – be he lacking money, or a home, or even the ability to walk – that he is not worthy to exist among his fellow men.

Who among us has the right to judge who is worthy and who is not? Does not that decision lie in the hands of God? Had God so deemed these men to be unworthy of His gift of life, would he at all have granted it to them?

The God who made us is not a God who suffers the taunts of the arrogant, those among men who have more than their brother and solely on the premise of their riches see themselves as the great judges over mankind.

But still more does the God who made us not suffer those who turn a blind eye. If you see that your brother has fallen, do not you help him up? If you see that a child is crying with hunger, do not you feed them?

So then I ask unto you, what is it that prevents you from being gracious to the needy? What is it that stops you from honoring your Father, the Father who made you?”

Ed looks from Cornello back out to the crowd, and again, many of the people have their heads bowed – only this time, it is because their eyes are downcast, their faces long and poignant.

After a moment of silence, Cornello begins again: “As I said, poverty comes in many forms. And there are many who are among the less fortunate – the disabled, the diseased, the deformed, each suffering from a lack of something – lack of ability, lack of health, lack of ‘normalcy’ of appearance.

Our Lord, Jesus Christ, our Savior, would not leave these people to suffer, to wallow alone in their misery, to rot in a pit of despair. He would jump into the pit with them and keep them company. He would let them know that they are loved – that even though they feel trapped, they are not alone.

And should anyone come to the edge of the pit and look down upon the poor man, and taunt him, and throw dirt into the hole so as to bury him, deeming him already dead on the basis of his poverty, the Lord would not allow it, but would instead stand in the way and let the dirt fall unto his own head.

If you think yourself not brave enough to jump into the pit, if you think yourself unbrave enough to stand up to those who look down on the less fortunate, I say unto you to heed to the Word of God – ‘Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.’ – Deuteronomy, 31:6.”
Cornello quietly closes his Bible, he still looking out onto the faces of his congregation.

“And now, my children, please open your hymnals to page 493, and let us meditate as we praise the Lord.”

The congregation rises, people opening their books as the organ in the choir loft begins playing once more.

Ed in the wings steps back behind the pillar, making sure he remains unseen.

*#

The families are exiting the chapel, Cornello standing at the front doors, shaking hands with people as they come up to him.

“God bless you, my child,” he bids them.

And soon, the chapel is empty of its visitors, the nuns and monks busying themselves with tidying up, putting away any books that have been left out.

Ed approaches the old man. “Excuse me…”

Cornello looks to him. “Yes?”

“Father Cornello, is it?”

“Pastor is my official title,” Cornello tells him. “What can I do for you, my son?”

“I heard your sermon today,” Ed says.

“What did you think?”

Ed says honestly, “There didn’t seem to be too many people who looked happy about it.”

“Those were faces heavy with guilt,” Cornello states as he begins walking up the aisle towards the altar, Ed walking with him. “Everyone tries to ignore it, act like it doesn’t exist – but we all know what the hospitals have really been doing at the behest of the government. ‘Merciful death’ they call it. Being heartless is more like it.”

“Merciful death?” Ed questions.

“Oh yes – killing off anyone they deem unfit for life, on the grounds that they’d cost the welfare system too much money.” The old pastor shakes his head, “They value money more than they do human life. It’s absolutely despicable.”

They come to the end of the aisle, stopping before the altar.

Cornello looks over to Ed, “The layman lives his life concerned with his own needs – caring for his family and those closest to him. It’s only natural.” He looks up at the large stained glass window filled with colorful religious scenes. “But every now and again they require a reminder of God’s Word to help nudge them in the right direction.”

He tucks his arms into the sleeves of his robes, still gazing upon the images of the saints.

“Though I do feel that people are inherently good, I do not believe they are all inherently brave. And this world can be quite scary at times. But if a line of text can inspire people to stand up to the
evils of this world, then I’ll read all the lines I need to.”

Though Ed had already been thinking it, it seems much clearer now - “You’re using your sermons to speak out against the government.”

Cornello puts a finger over his own mouth, though it does nothing to hide his lips as they smile. “I’m simply pointing out what the Lord would have done under similar circumstances – and hoping that the flock heeds His teachings.”

A monk quietly appears from the wings, respectfully walking up to the pair. “Pastor Cornello,” he says, “Our guest, Miss Hawkeye, is waiting for you.”

“Oh yes,” Cornello says, “I did tell her I’d see her once service was done.”

Cornello turns back to Ed. “Well, my son, I bid you farewell for now. Peace be with you.”

Ed responds, “You too,” and Cornello chuckles as he walks away, realizing that Ed is not a church-going man.

*

While the police station may have the most number of flags covering it, there is no doubt that the building with the largest flag is the mayor’s manor, the only thing dwarfing the flag the mansion itself.

Perhaps it was just because he had the biggest house. Perhaps it was because not that long ago people would have called him ‘Baron’. But no one in town ever disputed the authority of the mayor. And even though elections were held, no one has ever run against him – not out of fear, but simply out of respect.

The mayor closes the gate to his estate behind him, and he begins walking up the sidewalk through the town, people politely tipping their hats, wishing him a good day as he returns the courtesy.

Up to the shanty of a police station he walks, stepping up onto the rickety old weather-worn porch.

He steps inside the building, removing his hat. “Geldform, are you in here?”

The only answer he receives is a snore, the sound emanating out from underneath a newspaper that lays tent-fashion upon the main desk, the edges of the paper gently fluttering up and down with every noisy inhale and exhale.

“Geldform!”

The inspector startles awake, throwing the paper aside as he quickly sits up, saluting. “Mayor von Müller, sir!”

The mayor crosses his arms, “Sleeping on the job, are we?”

“No, sir! Just… doing some brainstorming, and blocking out all distractions while I do so.”

“I see,” von Müller says as he sets his hat on the back of the chair, though he does not take the seat. He looks around. “Where are Dee and Dunbar?”

“Didn’t you hear, sir?” Geldform asks. “The military’s says there’s an enemy convoy somewhere around here. I’ve sent the deputies to keep an eye out for it.”

Von Müller turns his attention back to Geldform. “Well that’s exactly why I’m here. Do you know
what I’ve had to listen to all morning?”

“Uh, no sir, what?” the inspector asks.

“It’s the same thing every Sunday!” the mayor angrily cries. “The townsfolk go to church, and the next thing I know, my office is flooded with complaints about how the government in Berlin is running the country! Do you think I want to be the one to get his head lopped off, all because the people have bees in their bonnets?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but,” Geldform hesitantly asks, “What’s that got to do with the enemy convoy?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” von Müller questions. “That no good preacher Cornello is clearly a socialist, against everything this nation stands for! He’d have it so that everyone were equal, throwing the ancient aristocracy to the wind!”

“How dare he!”

“Exactly! Listen Geldform – ” Mayor von Müller lowers his voice a bit, scrunching up his old face as he closes one eye, as if winking though veritably more serious, “If any enemies were to be moving through our town, I’d bet my mustache that Cornello is hiding them in his church.”

“What do you need me to do, Mayor?” Geldform asks, “You want me to go arrest Cornello?”

“No, no, no. We can’t be that forward,” von Müller tells him. “What if we’re wrong? How would that look to the townsfolk? And what’s worse, what if we’re right? Reports estimate there are about forty soldiers in that convoy. What are three officers with handguns supposed to do against 40 soldiers with rifles and who knows what else?”

Geldform shivers at the thought, “You’ve got a point there.” He rubs his arms up and down once or twice to shake away the chills. “So, why don’t we just call the military? Let them handle this mess.”

The mayor rears back with indignation, “And have them come all the way out here for nothing? HA! No, I’ll save myself the embarrassment.” The pitch in his voice lowers as he rubs his hands together, gazing off to the side, “No, I want to be absolutely positive before we make a move.” He straightens up, gazing straight at the officer, “I want you to spy on the church. Gather evidence. If you see soldiers or people you don’t recognize, or even better, find those convoy trucks, you let me know straight away and I’ll call up the military immediately.”

Geldform stands up and salutes, “Will do, sir!” And then half a second later, “…Uh…”

“What is it now?” the mayor asks in annoyance.

Geldform motions a finger at the telephone. “Someone’s going to have to stay here and watch the phones until the deputies get back.”

The mayor grumbles a sigh. “I’ll watch the phones. You go round them up.”

Pastor Cornello opens the door to the tiny room, flipping the switch to turn on the lights. “This is one of the few rooms that actually has electricity,” he says to Lisa and Roy as he leads them inside, his cane quietly tapping across the floorboards as he walks. He points out the little radio at the end of the room.
“It’s not much, but you might be able to reach either a ship or someone in the Dutch Resistance who can relay your signal.”

“Thank you, Pastor Cornello,” Lisa says to him, “As I said before, we can’t thank you enough.”

“Anything to help the cause,” he responds. “If it means protecting good Christian people against the Nationalists, then by all means.”

“Against them?” Roy questions. “What do you mean?”

“I mean the government has vehemently been going after clergymen,” Cornello tells them, “And not just that, but that youth group of theirs is constantly sending out young boys to disrupt church services all across the country.”

“Huh, odd,” Roy comments, “The way they’ve been after Jews and Muslims, it seems like they’re on a Christian crusade.”

“Hmph. Hardly,” Cornello scorns. “In their quest to destroy the Jewish peoples, the Nationalists have pointed out that Christ himself was a Jew. In their vein of logic, the Jewish plot to take over the world is called ‘Christianity’, and as such should be stomped out.”

Lisa gives a disdain-filled hum. “It would seem no one’s safe from their wrath.”

“No one, not even their own people,” Cornello laments. “We’re in this fight just as much as you are. Now then,” he says with a nod, “I’ll leave to your business. When you’re finished, make sure to turn out the lights.”

“Of course.”

And with that, Pastor Cornello leaves the room, closing the door to give them some privacy.

Roy looks to Lisa as she takes her seat in front of the radio. “So what’s the plan?” he asks her.

Lisa puts the headsets on, saying, “Well I’ve thought about it. Either we return to Britain and regroup, and then come back later; or stay where we are and wait for the heat to cool down, then go out looking for the bomb again.” She looks up from the radio, looking over to him. “If we leave the country, it might be difficult to get back in again now that they’ve figured out the border can be penetrated. No doubt they’ll up their defences.”

“So we’re staying here then.”

She turns back toward the radio, turning it to the right frequency. “It really is the smarter choice. But we’ll have to be incredibly careful.”

She turns the radio on, it crackling to life.

Lisa picks up the microphone, calling into it, “Come in, Big Brother. This is Little Sister, radio check, over.”

There is no response.

She tries again, “Big Brother, this is Little Sister, do you copy? Over.”

After a moment of static, a voice comes on, speaking with a heavy Dutch accent: “Little Sister, this is Wayfarer. I copy, over.”
“Requesting radio check, over.”

“Roger, Little Sister, I read you 5 by 5, over.”

“Wayfarer, requesting radio relay to your west, over.”

“Wilco.”

A moment of silence. Roy and Lisa wait patiently for a reply.

Then the Dutch voice comes back on. “Little Sister, you have the airwaves. Out.”

Lisa waits for a moment, listening in to the hushed static that comes through her headphones, looking for any sort of indication that someone else might be listening in. When she feels confident enough, she speaks. “Big Brother, this is Little Sister, do you copy, over.”

Another moment of silence and then a voice comes on, “Little Sister, this Big Brother. Come in, Little Sister, over.”

“Big Brother, Operation Ourea is complete. We’ve had to move to our fallback position. Enemy discovered our camp. Over”

“Do you require any assistance? Over”

“Negative at the moment, over.”

“How many casualties? Over.”

“Big Brother, we count four casualties. But we’ve picked up one more person - Target Fullmetal has been recovered. Over”

“Excellent work, Little Sister. Where do we stand on Target Caelus? Over”

“Negative, Big Brother. Caelus has yet to be located, though we’ve acquired a map that has given us several potential leads. Over”

“Copy that. Over.”

Lisa continues, “Team Martius have completed their drop-off and require pick-up. Over.”

“That’s a negative, Little Sister,” the man on the other end tells her. “We’ve received word that the enemy has ordered all borders closed. Over.”

Roy furrows his brows with a concerned hum.

Lisa pushes the call button again, “Big Brother, what message do I give to Team Martius? Over.”

“Stand by.” And the voice disappears, just the quiet fuzz of static filling the room.

Roy looks to Lisa, “If the borders are closed, there’s no way the Americans are going to get out of here.”

Lisa looks up at him and says, “I’m sure they were looking forward to shipping out today. They’ll just have to wait, I suppose.”

The voice comes back on, “Little Sister come in, over.”
“Send, over.”

“Team Martius are to remain at the safe-house until we can get in contact with their superiors. Over.”

“Roger that. Over.”

“As for you, Little Sister, your orders remain the same: Locate and recover Target Caelus. If you deem Fullmetal to be an asset to your mission, retain him with your unit. If not, keep him at the safe-house until he can be remanded to us. Over.”

“Affirmative. No further questions. Over.”

“Big Brother, out.”

Lisa removes her headphones with a sigh, setting them aside as she turns off the radio.

“You all right?” Roy asks her.

“I’m fine,” she tells him. “I’m just not looking forward to having to bear bad new to the lend-lease troops – especially to that Havoc fellow. He’s a bit of a whiner, that one.”

Al is wandering the church grounds, enjoying the winter quiet that is all around him. Unlike the forest from which they just came, there is no snow on the ground here, probably due to the salty air blowing in from the bay – but still the grounds are very wet from the humidity.

He’s kept his normal clothes on under his monk robes, for since he doesn’t wear a uniform, should anyone see his clothes, one may not think twice about them.

Not far from where Al stands is the barn, its doors open as a couple of soldiers in monks’ robes exit the large shelter, each carrying a bale of hay just a tad bit too big for them, yet still they manage.

Curious as to what they’re up to, Al walks towards the barn. He stops at its corner, watching as the soldiers stack the hay along with several other bales, making a wall, all of it blocking the already camouflaged trucks further from view.

He then glances over to his side, over to the open barn door, and curious still, Al walks over to it and goes inside.

It’s what one would expect from a barn – the floor is dirt, covered in various piles of hay here and there; there is a ladder leading to a loft above, it now bare, for all the hay has been stacked outside. Here at ground level there is a stable, a horse inside of it, and a cow in the stable right next to it. A handful of sheep – some ewes and one ram – roam freely throughout the barn, and though it seems likely they’d get loose through the open door, clearly they’ve decided to stay indoors where it’s warm by comparison. A few chickens cluck back and forth between one another, scratching at the ground beneath them, looking for seed that might be hiding amongst the strewn straws below.

The horse nickers as if to ask, ‘Who are you?’

Al smiles, turning towards it. “Hi there,” he says, walking up to the door of the stall, gently reaching his hand over.
The horse rears its head back a bit, moving away slightly.

“It’s okay,” Al gently coaxes, hand still reaching out.

He stands there patiently, waiting, allowing the horse to grow accustomed to his presence. And after a long while of silence, the horse finally moves its head back towards Al, smelling his palm.

Al cautiously tries to pet the horse, but when he moves, the horse lifts its muzzle out of the way and takes a couple steps back.

A soft giggle comes from the doorway, “He’s smarter than that, you know.”

Al looks over, and immediately blushes upon seeing who it is. “S-Sister Clara!”

She carries with her a bucket of oats as she walks into the barn, coming up to Al’s side. “Here, try a handful of this,” she says, lifting the bucket.

“Uh, okay.” Al does as she suggests, and he takes a handful of oats from the bucket, and he turns back towards the stall, once more lifting his hand over the door.

The horse’s large nostrils move back and forth as noisily the large beast sniffs what Al has. And then its lips quiver back and forth as it helps itself to the oats, Al petting the docile creature with his free hand.

“There, see?” Sister Clara smiles. “Works like a charm.”

“Thanks.” If for only half a moment he’s forgotten his nervousness, Al remembers it as soon as he looks at her face. He quickly looks away, turning his attention back to the horse though he addresses Clara. “You must know this horse pretty well.”

“No, actually,” Sister Clara admits. “I’m still pretty new here.”

“Oh, really?”

She nods, “Mm-hmm. I’m from the city on the other side of the bay. But I needed to get away from city life. It’s too busy, too noisy.” Sister Clara scoops up a handful of oats as well, and begins feeding the horse, it now done with Al’s portion. She says, “That’s why I decided to be a nun here, in a small town, closer to God and nature.”

Al watches her quietly, feeling less jumpy now that her eyes aren’t directly on him. …She does look just like the Clara that he met back then. And she seems just as nice, too. He can only hope that her kindness runs deeper than the last Clara he met.

She looks over at him and he immediately diverts his eyes, looking back to the bucket, taking another handful of oats. She asks, “So you’re with the guests who are staying with us?”

“Um, yeah.”

“But you weren’t dressed the same as them. I get the feeling you’re not a soldier.”

“Oh, I’m not. I’m the medic.”

“I should have guessed,” the sister says, her soft smile yet to have ever left her face. “You seem like a sensitive fellow.” She chuckles, “If you ever decide to retire from people you could be veterinarian. You seem to be getting the hang of dealing with animals.”
Al smiles. “I dunno. Maybe. I think I’m doing more good by helping people.”

They both fall quiet, listening to the hushed sounds around them, the chickens clucking, the ewes bleating, the cow’s bell just slightly clanking.

Al clears his throat. “Um. … So… Breakfast was good this morning. Did you make the porridge?”

Sister Clara shakes her head, “No, that was Sister Margot.”

“Oh. Well. She makes good porridge. But I’m sure your porridge is good too!” he recovers.

She comments, “Well, everyone seemed to enjoy the food, no matter who did the cooking. We could hardly bring the plates out fast enough.”

Al falls quiet again, staring at his feet. “… You all are probably not used to having people like us around.”

“Soldiers, you mean,” she says.

Al’s eyes drift over to her. “You don’t… mind, do you?”

“Why would I mind?”

“Well. Because.” He looks back down. “…Never mind.”

“You’re worried because we’re German and you’re British.”

And Al lifts his face to her, looking at her straight on for the first time since she got here.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sister Clara tells him. “We make no distinction of nation within these walls. All are equal before the Lord and all deserve His kindness. A person is a person, and that’s all that matters. We help anyone who comes to us in need.”

Al can feel his nervousness melting away, and strangely, a bit of nostalgia takes over. “I had a friend whose parents were the same way. They were doctors. And they treated all patients, no matter what side they were on.” His eyes become distant as he thinks back. “They wanted to help the world not with guns but with medicine. It’s inspiring, what they did. I guess it’s one of the things that made me decide to become a doctor.”

One would think it impossible for Sister Clara’s expression to get any softer, and yet it does as she watches Alphonse reminisce. She mentions, “You know, many of the nuns here take shifts working the infirmary. So in a way, I’m kind of a nurse.”

Al keeps his laugh to himself. Of course you’re a nurse, he thinks. As long as you’re not a jewel thief, we’re okay. Al looks to her and he says, “Well, if I’m ever looking to hire a nurse, I’ll take you into consideration.”

A light giggle escapes her throat. “You heal their bodies and I’ll heal their souls. We’ll be an unstoppable duo.”

Al nods, “Yeah.”

She turns to the horse, “What do you think, Wouter?” she asks as she places her hand atop the short wooden door. “Ow!” Suddenly, Sister Clara pulls her hand back from the door.

“What’s wrong?” Al asks her.
“I think I just got a splinter,” she says as she looks at her finger, starting to fiddle with it.

“No, don’t put pressure on it,” Al warns, “That’ll just make it worse. Here, let me see.”

She lays her hand out, palm up, and Al takes her hand in his, looking her finger over.

“It’s not that bad,” he comments, “But it looks pretty small. It might be hard to get out with tweezers.” He looks up from her finger to her. “Which way to the kitchen?”

“The kitchen?”

“Yeah – believe it or not, a potato slice will take care of this.”

“Oh, well, the potatoes are in the larder. It’s this way.”

Sister Clara leads Al out of the barn and across the yard, past the pilgrimage house and to the nearest building where there is a set of low doors coming out of the ground, leading into a basement.

Al takes hold of the large metal rings that serve as the door handles, and he opens the larder for her, Sister Clara carefully making her way down the stairs, Al shortly following after her.

Wooden shelves inside the cool underground space are lined with various jars packed tightly with fruit preserves, and bags of beans and rice and other grains are piled one on top of the other.

The sister points out one burlap sack not too far off. “The potatoes are there.”

Al leans down, opening the bag and picking out a small potato. “Now, to get my pocket knife.” He starts to lift the bottom of his robe, but then turns his leg away from Sister Clara as he says, “No looking up my skirt.”

She giggles.

Al retrieves his knife from out of his pocket and he allows the bottom of the robe to fall back to the floor. Still holding the potato in his other hand, Al opens up the little knife, and he slices off the top bit of the dumpy little root.

“Okay,” he says, turning to Sister Clara, “Let me see your hand.”

Again she offers her hand, and Al takes it, gently placing the potato slice slick-side down, skin-side up.

Clara grins, “Did they teach you this in medical school?”

Al’s smile softens as he says, “No, my mom taught me … She was real good at little things like this…” His voice trails off as once more his eyes become distant.

Sister Clara watches him quietly. “…Did something happen to her?”

He comes back around to reality, “Why do you ask?”

“Because you look so sad.”

Al looks down, quiet still. “…Yeah… She died when I was real young.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”
A little more silence follows. And then Al speaks again, “…It’s the little things like this that I remember most about her.”

Sister Clara kindly says, “It’s amazing how the smallest things can have the biggest impact.”

Al looks up at her with a little bit of a sad smile, but looking at her kind face makes him feel just a bit happier.

“All?” Roy’s voice suddenly calls from above ground, Al jumping a bit. “Al, you down there?”

Both Al and Clara look up to the open larder door as Roy comes down the stairs.

“There you are,” Roy says, “I thought I heard your voice. …?” He notices Al holding Clara’s hand, and the lingering sadness in the young man’s eyes. “Everything okay?”

Al nervously laughs, “Yeah, just taking care of a splinter, that’s all.”

“All right,” Roy says. “The Chief’s called us for a meeting.”

“Yeah, okay.” Al turns back to Sister Clara momentarily, nodding to the potato slice, “Keep that on there for about ten minutes and the splinter should come right out.”

“Yes, thank you, Doctor,” she responds.

And Al makes his way towards the steps, following Roy out of the larder.

As the two men cross the church grounds, both are quiet, Roy smiling.

“…What?” Al finally asks.

Roy still smiles. “Nothing.”

“No, what?” Al nervously pries, “Why are you smiling like that?”

“I won’t tell anyone that you were alone with a girl in a dark room.”

“It was nothing like that, Roy! And besides! She’s a nun! I would never!”

Roy chuckles, “Calm down, Al, I’m just teasing you.”

* *

The four of them have packed into the little radio room, door closed behind them to maintain privacy.

Lisa has spread the map out onto the table so that once more they can look at it, and Roy points the cross he drew.

“Do you see it?” he asks.

Ed nods as he stares intently at the map. “So. Büren again, huh?”

Al looks to Ed, “You don’t think they’re trying to open a portal again, do you, Brother?”

“Portal?” Lisa questions with a raised eyebrow.

Ed looks to her and tells her, “The last time we were at Wewelsburg castle, the Thule Society was
using the uranium as a power source. They were trying to open a gateway to another world.”

She’s yet to lower her eyebrow. “You do realize that sounds absolutely preposterous, don’t you?”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s true or not,” Ed tells her, “What matters is that these people BELIEVE it all to be true and are willing to fight to the death for it.”

Roy looks back at the map as he thinks aloud, “Wewelsburg clearly holds some amount of significance for them. But ‘why’ is the question.”

Ed asks the chief, “How many of those knights did you say there were?”

“The Knights of the Black Sun, you mean,” Lisa checks, “We count twelve with a thirteen referred to as Raven King.”

“Right.” Ed points at the map. “I count twelve bases, with Wewelsburg as a thirteenth in the middle. I’m betting the bases belong to the knights, and the castle is the headquarters of this ‘Raven King’.”

Lisa nods, “Yes, I can imagine that.”

Roy observes, “What’s a king without a castle?”

Ed continues, “You said Reistrom’s a member of this order. And if I’m right, so is Geizsler. And if that’s the case, there’s something they have in common.”

Al asks, “What’s that?”

Ed looks to his brother and says, “They both wear capes.”

“Capes?” Al tilts his head.

Ed looks at Lisa, asking her, “Capes aren’t standard issue for SS officers, are they?”

“Not as far as I know,” she responds.

“Well I’ve seen quite a few who wear them,” Ed tells them all. “There’s Reistrom and Geizsler. And then there’s another one I met named Bähr, along with a fella whose name I didn’t catch.”

“What did he look like?” Roy asks.

“Gimme some paper,” Ed requests, “I’ll draw him out.”

Lisa indulges Ed, and with a pencil in hand, Ed takes to scribbling. A few moments later, he holds up the paper, Al holding in a giggle, for the drawings are less than spectacular. In fact, Al is reminded of the drawings Ed did a long time ago when they first met the Homunculi.

Ed points out the suspects one by one, pointing first to one with a large, sharp nose, “There’s this guy who showed up at Geizsler’s base with Bähr to watch a rocket demonstration.” Then he points to one with long hair, “Then there’s this guy who showed up at Reistrom’s base with Himmler.” Finally he points at one with circles(?) on his forehead, “And then there was this guy who I only saw at a distance, but I remember that he had pilot goggles on his head.”

Lisa questions, “And these were all SS officers, you say?”

“Judging by the uniforms, yeah. They all had the white cords hanging from their shoulders.”
Lisa puts a hand to her chin as she looks off to the side, “That young man who attacked the camp. He was an officer, too.”

Al pokes Ed in the arm, “Ed, the necklace.”

“Oh, right,” Ed, like Al, has his normal clothing on under the robe, and he delves into his pocket, producing the gold necklace, laying it on the table. “I grabbed this off of him before he got away.”

Lisa looks it over, giving a curious hum. Then she reaches for the folder off to her side, opening it up and pulling out a letter, which she unfolds and lays next to the necklace, the crest on the letterhead looking strikingly similar.

“It’s the same symbol,” she says. “The Black Sun, apparently.”

Roy looks at the necklace, saying, “I guess it does sort of look like a sun, with rays of sunshine coming out of it.”

Ed asks, “You think he’s one of those knights?”

Lisa says, “He seems a tad young, but it’s possible.” She looks back to Ed’s drawing, looking at the one with long hair, “And this fellow was accompanying Himmler, you say? If all these Knights are SS, I wouldn’t doubt the Reichsführer is somehow tied up in all of this. He is the head of the SS after all.”

Roy asks, “So what exactly are we dealing with here?”

“From the sound of things,” she says as she crosses her arms, “We’re dealing with some sort of militaristic cult. This very well may be the inner-most circle of the SS. And if Wewelsburg is where they’re hiding the uranium bomb, they’ve certainly picked a nice spot for it – surrounded on all sides by military bases.”

She uses her fingers to trace along the pin holes in the map.

“Unless of course it’s at one of these bases,” Lisa thinks aloud. “We’ll need to check them one-by-one.”

Ed pipes up, “Let’s hit Geizsler’s base first. We can check while we’re breaking out the scientists.”

“You really don’t understand the concept of a covert operation, do you?” Chief Hawkeye asks of him. “If we spring a hundred men from prison, then the Nazis really will sit up and take notice, moreso than they already have. We’ll never be able to move around the country quietly.”

Roy throws out there, “Maybe we don’t need to be moving all about the country to find the bomb.”

Lisa looks up the him as he continues,

“If Wewelsburg is an important hub, then all we need to do is bug Wewelsburg.”

“Go on,” Lisa asks in interest.

“We send someone in, have them plant mics all over the place, and then listen in on everything that goes on in the castle.”

Lisa nods once or twice while thinking, then says aloud, “We’d have to record it. If we transmit over the airwaves, someone’s bound to notice and inform them.” Though she is sitting, it’s almost as if she is pacing the room because her eyes keep slowly scanning back and forth. “That person
would have to be collecting tape reels and sending them to Adelphi, as well as putting in new tape reels, all without getting caught. It’s risky, but it’s possible.”

Ed pipes up again, “All right, so that helps us find the bomb. But how’s that help the scientists?”

Lisa bears no restraint in hiding her annoyance, “Mr. Elric, I understand your concern, but they’ll have to wait.”

“You can’t keep putting it off forever!”

“Tell me,” she asks in a most serious tone, “Exactly how many soldiers are at Geizsler’s base?”

“Uh,” Ed’s eyes drift to the ceiling as he mutters to himself, doing the math, “Well, there are six different science divisions, two guards inside each room, one guard outside the door. I think there are eight guards on the walls. … Then double the number, one for day shift, one for night shift, sooo… 52?. Oh wait, then there are usually 4 in the lunch room, one in each corner. Then there’s Geizsler and his assistant. There’re the two guards on the dorm level … So probably 60, give or take.”

“So probably double our strength,” Lisa points out.

“I thought we had forty people?”

“Forty-six as a matter of fact,” Lisa tells him. “But the Americans are not to engage in combat unless it’s for their own self-defence. You’re not part of the unit, your brother is a doctor, and excluding myself and the captain as we are commanders, that leaves 36 soldiers in my charge. And you said there might be over 60 enemy combatants at that base? I’m not too keen on 2:1 odds.”

“At least consider it,” Ed presses.

Roy gives a bit of a cocky smile as he hums to himself.

Lisa looks up at him. “What are you thinking?”

He looks to her and says, “We could always take the Colossus route.”

Ed cocks his head a bit, “Colossus?”

Lisa puts her hand to her chin, pondering aloud, “Get extra troops in that way, you mean.”

Roy says, “I’m sure the army would be willing to consider it. And you know how enthusiastic the prime minister is to get the project off the ground.”

A short laugh escapes Lisa’s lip, “Clever. Very well. If I can get a secure line through, I’ll talk it over with the supervisors – that, and see if we can’t plant a spy in Wewelsburg sometime soon. Until then, the plan remains the same – stay out of sight and stay out of trouble. Think you can manage that, Mr. Elric?”

Roy chuckles as he playfully nudges Ed in the arm, “She’s known you for less than 24 hours and already she’s got you pegged.”

Ed gives a small grumpy grimace.

The old nun opens the front gate, holding it aside as the two young postulates scurry out. “Hurry
now, children, before those pies get cold.”

“No, Sister Agnes,” the ladies respond.

Sister Agnes closes the gate after them, and together the three ladies begin walking into town.

Sister Clara looks at the other postulate, Sister Margot, and remarks, “I’ve never gone door-to-door giving out pies before.”

Sister Margot cheerily says, “Oh it’s wonderful! Wait ‘til you see the way people light up.”

The church already behind them, the three women remain unaware that just one street over, Inspector Geldform and Deputy Dee are sneaking their way up the street – well, they think they’re being sneaky about it as they tip-toe in broad daylight, looking back and forth to make sure the coast is clear.

The old dog laying on the porch of the general store lifts his head and watches the strange humans who pass him by. Then he gives a rusty old BARK!

Tingles run up the policemen’s shoulders, Geldform quickly looking over with a loud, “SHH!” as he looks at the hound. “Bad dog!” he noisily whispers.

The dog whimpers lazily and resigns itself back to its nap, ignoring the odd humans across the street.

The policemen tip-toe for about another yard before quickly diving into some bushes at the base of a tree, and then they pop back out to stare at the church before them.

“There it is,” Geldform revels, “I can already smell those fresh-printed Marks coming our way.”

“Now what?” the deputy asks.

“And now we wait,” Geldform answers.

“Wait for what?”

“Wait for movement. Wait for anything suspicious,” the inspector says as he pulls out his binoculars, putting them to his eyes as he stares at the church.

The deputy is quiet for a moment. Then he looks to the chief, then to the church wall, and then back again. “But sir, we’re just staring at the wall. Shouldn’t we be looking into the church grounds?”

Geldform grunts, removing the binoculars. “Hnn. Good idea. Here, gimme a leg up!” He starts to crawl onto his deputy’s back.

“Ow! Hey! What are you doing?”

“Climbing this tree! And keep it down, will ya? We’re under cover!”

* *

The soldiers laze about in the pilgrimage house, thankful for this bit of rest, even if they don’t know how long it’s going to last. Their chatter fills the room as they all converse with one another, their voices mixing with the crackling of the fire in the fireplace.
Ed and Al sit on beds across from one another, Ed lounging back on the pillows.

“How have you been, Ed?” Al pries a little anxiously. “How were they treating you?”

“The Nazis?” Ed questions. “Like jackasses, of course.”

“I mean… they didn’t hurt you did they?”

Ed is quiet, staring at the ceiling. “…Surprisingly… No. I guess I did that to myself.”

“What do you mean?”

Still Ed is quiet, the sounds of the soldiers’ chatter filling the long pause. “…They were less about applying and more about deprivation – starved me, kept me from sleeping, things like that… …The mind does strange things when it hasn’t slept…”

“What happened?”

…I was seeing things – everyone, from the Other Side, as if they were really right here, right in front of me, the way you are now… Every friend, every enemy… So many faces. And none of them real…” Ed gives a short laugh of a scoff. “Kinda like now, I guess,” he says, sitting up. “Clara and Father Cornello? Same faces – but it’s not really them. I don’t think I ever get used to that idea.”

Al smiles a little. “I know what you mean. I worry I’m going to turn around and my pockets will have been picked without my knowing it.”

Ed laughs, “A thieving nun. That’d be something wouldn’t it?” And then a little cat-like grin crawls up Ed’s face. “But it seems something’s been stolen already. Stolen your heart, has she?”

“Ed, stop.”

Ed continues to playfully badger, waving his hands with a singsong voice, “Hey, you can’t help yourself! The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“Knock it off, Ed.”

Ed snickers. “You always were such a sucker for girls.”

“It’s not like that, okay?! I just think she’s a nice person is all!”

“Okay, okay,” Ed winds down, though the singsonginess still lingers in his voice. “No need to get upset over it. Besides, if you’re feeling guilty about it, you can just step into a confessional and tell Pastor Cornello how you’ve got a thing for one of his nuns.”

“Cut it out!”

Ed can’t help but laugh at seeing his little brother all riled up.

Al frowns, a little grumpy as he says, “I never teased you about having crushes.”

“Yes you did!” Ed rebuffs. “You were always teasing me about liking Winry.”

“Well, yeah, Winry, but only because everybody knew it.”

“Well then who are you talking about?”
“There were other girls.”

“Like who?”

“Rose. You liked her, didn’t you?”

A lump appears out of nowhere in Ed’s throat, and he swallows it down. “No, she was just a friend is all.”

“See – you say the same thing.”

“Well if you don’t like Clara then my saying the same thing means that I really didn’t like Rose, so ha!”

“But you did, didn’t you?”

Ed lays back on his bed, angrily closing his eyes, “I don’t know where you’re pulling that from.”

“She was pretty. And she was a really nice person. I told you that she’s the one who found me after I got my body back, right?”

“Yes, you told me that. Her and the Tringham brothers, right?”

Al nods. “It was all a little disorienting that they knew me but I didn’t know them.”

Ed laughs through his nose. “Having to learn people all over again – like I said, it’s the same here. Only this is harder because we’re having to retrain our brains to see old faces with new personalities.”

Al smiles, “Well some things are the same. While we’re not exactly in a city on the water, we are in the middle of a marshland. It’s kind of like Aquroya, am I right?”

Ed shrugs, “I guess. It beats being stuck in the desert anyway…”

*

The six American troops sit around a table in the empty dining hall, they having gotten tired of sitting in the pilgrimage house, all of them (im)patiently awaiting dinner as they play some cards. Dinner’s still a few hours away, but lunch was also a few hours ago – and at this time in the afternoon, one’s stomach begins craving a snack. But here in this convent, one does not eat until called to sit for a meal.

A length of smoke billows from Havoc’s mouth as he sighs. “I could be eating right now if we were back home. Just drop off some supplies and leave. That’s all we were supposed to do.”

Breda pulls another card from the deck, “Hey, you knew what you were getting into when you signed up for the army.”

“Yeah, huh. To fight for America,” Havoc says, “Not babysit a bunch of Brits. I can’t believe they’ve ordered us to tag along with them. What good are we if we’re not allowed to shoot at the bad guys?”

One of the other Americans lays down a card, as he says “We just go where the big shots tell us to.”

Havoc sighs again as he moans, “Why couldn’t I get stationed someplace warm, like Hawaii?”
“Nothing bad ever happens in Hawaii.”

“Hey guys,” Al greets as he enters the dining hall.

They look over, giving a ‘Hey’ and a ‘Hi,’ Havoc saying, “Hey, Doc. Hey, you wanna play cards with us?”

Al shakes his head. “No. I’m just looking for Sister Clara. Have you seen her?”

“Can’t say that I have.” He looks at his teammates, “You guys?”

They all shake their heads with little no’s in answer.

Breda asks, “You sure you don’t want to play with us?”

Al says, “Yeah, I’m all right.”

Havoc picks up a still-sealed pack of cards and hands it to Al, “Well take this in case you change your mind.”

“No, really, it’s all right.”

“Nah, take it – they give us too many of these things anyway. I could build a literal house of cards to live in with as many as they issue us.”

“Well, okay,” Al accepts the small gift, putting it into the pocket of his robe. “Thanks,” he says as he starts to leave.

“See you later,” they bid the doctor, returning to their game.

Breda grins as he questions, “So you made sure to put all the aces back in that pack, right?”

“It was sealed!” Havoc tells him. “And what are you implying?”

Breda chuckles, “Nothing.”

One of the other soldiers kids, “Jeez, Havoc, no need to get so defensive. You act like you’ve got something to hide.”

“Y’all are just jealous because I keep winning!”

The soldier on the other side of the table mumbles seriously, “Yeah, cuz you’re cheating…”

“Oh that’s it!” Havoc slams his cards on the table as he stands. “I don’t have to put up with this!” He turns to leave, and suddenly falls!

“Oh jeez!” One of them asks, “You okay? What happened?”

Havoc hadn’t noticed that the bottom of his robe had snagged on a sliver of wood from the old bench they are sitting upon – and as he stood and tried to leave, the bench weighed him back, tripping him, ripping his robe.

“Aw man!” Havoc laments as he looks at the tear that runs down the side of his calf. “Look what you’ve done!”

“What I’ve done? You were the one being an idiot!
The pastel-painted room is filled with nuns who sit around working on various little textiles. Some of them sit in a circle, sewing a prayer quilt, leaving loose lengths of yarn for parishioners to tie, to signify that they have left a prayer of goodwill for the one to receive the blanket.

Other nuns are busy on the looms, lacing threads through the large harp of a machine, weaving colorful rugs. Others still busy their hands with knitting needles, knitting scarves and sweaters and other various winter clothing for the needy.

Havoc stands with one foot on a low stool as a young nun sits on another low stool, she leaning forward as she re-stitches the rip that runs up his robe, Breda standing off to the side and watching.

The nun ties a knot and snips the remaining extra length of thread, looking up at Havoc with a smile as she says (in German, of course), “There you go! All done!”

He smiles brightly back at her, though he has no idea what she’s said, “Why thank you, sister. Don’t know what I’d do without you.”

She smiles with a giggle, unsure of what he’s said, but she assumes it’s English for ‘thank you.’

Breda grabs him by the back of his hood, “All right, come on. Quit flirting with the nuns.”

“I’m not flirting with her. And besides, that’s Al’s job.”

The sunshine streaming in through the kitchen windows is starting to show just the faintest hint of gold, the steam rising from the boiling pots dancing in the shafts of light like dancers under a spotlight.

Al walks through the kitchens, looking around at all the faces. Hmm. Only monks here. He shrugs, beginning to move along his way towards the other exit at the end of the kitchen.

“AHbupbup!” An old fat monk grabs Al by the back of his robe. “Dinner’s not ready yet! I’ll not have you sneaking a bite before then!”

“Oh, no, sorry sir,” Al apologizes, realizing the monk has misunderstood why he’s here. “I was actually looking for someone – Sister Clara?”

The old monk looks at him with a stern eye. “What do you be needing with Sister Clara?”

Al points to his finger, “She got a splinter earlier. I wanted to check up on her and make sure she was okay.”

The monk finally lets him go. “She’s just fine – fine enough to be using a rolling pin all day.”

Al hesitantly asks, “So, where is she?”

“She’s off with Sister Agnes, delivering pies to people. She’ll be back in time for dinner.” He waves a spoon at him, “Now off with you! You’re crowding the kitchen.”

The old monk pushes Al out of the kitchen, not roughly though certainly bossily, and the man closes the door after him, leaving Al standing outside the building. He heaves a sigh before putting his hands in his pockets, kicking a pebble at his feet, and Al shuffles away.
What he doesn’t know is that there is a pair of lenses pointed right at him. “Do you see anything, Inspector?” Deputy Dee asks.

Geldform, up in the tree, has the binoculars pressed against his eyes. “Nah, he’s facing the other way. I can’t tell if he’s a regular or not.”

“How would you know?” Dee innocently asks. “You never go to church.” Geldform moves his spy tool aside, looking down at him, “That’s beside the point!”

“Can I have the tree now? I’m bored.”

“If you’re bored, go back to the station and switch places with Dunbar.”

“But watching the phones is even more boring!”

“Then hush up!”

“You there!” an old lady’s voice calls.

The cops look over, seeing the three nuns standing in the street. The older nun scowls at them. “What are you doing in that tree? And with those binoculars? You’d better not be gawking at the daughters of the church, you peeping tom! I’ve got half a mind to report you to the authorities!”

“I am the authorities!” Geldform retorts. Then he stops. “Hey, you on the left.”

“Me?” Sister Margot asks.

“Not you, MY left!”

Sister Clara points at herself, “Who, me?”

“Yeah,” Geldform states, “I don’t recognize you. You’re not from around here, are you?”

Sister Clara shakes her head, “No, I’m not.”

Geldform suddenly points at her as he shouts, “Grab her!”

The deputy jumps out of the bushes, taking Clara by the wrists, she yelping, “What’s going on?! “

Sister Agnes shouts, “Stop that! What are you doing?!”

“Stay out of this!” the inspector says as he points at the old lady, his other hand on his hip. “This is official-whOA!” Not holding onto the branch, he falls from the tree and straight into the bushes. He quickly stands up, brushing himself off, clearing his throat. “Ahem! Official police business!”

“But I haven’t done anything!” Sister Clara exclaims as the handcuffs go on, her hands being cuffed in front of her.

“I’LL be the judge of that!” The inspector says. “Let’s get her back to headquarters.”

“You stop this!” the old sister jumps in between them. “I won’t allow this! If you want to take this child, you’ll have to talk to the pastor!”

Geldform crawls out of the bushes, “Ahh, the pastor can suck on eggs, you old hag!”
The nun gasps, appalled, “How DARE you!”

Geldform looks at his deputy, “Take the girl to the station while I take care of the baggage, would you?”

“Will do, inspector,” Dee complies, while Sister Agnes shouts,

“How dare you! Unhand me!”

She tries to stop Geldform from grabbing her by the back of her habit, but he gets it anyway, pushing her towards the church gates.

The old dog on the nearby porch has been riled by all the commotion, and now he is standing, barking at the people before him.

The other young postulate is horrified and torn, unsure which way to go. She shouts after Clara, “Don’t worry, Sister Clara! We’ll get the pastor!”

“Howdy!” Clara shouts back over the loud barking of the dog.

The young postulate lifts the hem of her dress, running forward towards the gates. “Sister Agnes!”

“Let me go,” the old lady wriggles.

Geldform opens the gate. “Quit squirming and get in there!” He pushes the old lady in. “You, too!” he shouts at the younger nun, and after she’s inside, he slams the gate closed. And with a curt nod, he turns on heel and takes off.

Sister Margot rushes to the old woman’s side, “Sister Agnes! Sister Agnes! Are you all right?”

The old lady broods as she angrily stares through the iron bars at the backs of the officers. “I’m all right. Quickly now,” she instructs Margot, “Run to Pastor Cornello and tell him what’s happened. I’ll lock the gates before they decide to come back and arrest more of us.”

The young sister nods, once more lifting the hem of her dress so that she may run.

~

Pastor Cornello sits in his office with a cup of tea (a perk of being in charge – he doesn’t have to wait on dinner before grabbing a little something).

He sits behind his desk as he listens to what his guests – Miss Hawkeye, her assistant Captain Mustang, and the young fellow Edward he met earlier in the chapel – have to say to him.

Lisa states, “The habits that the nuns wear are black and white. And SS uniforms are black and white.”

Cornello puts a hand to his chin as he looks down at the floor, “Well, that is true… But still, that sounds like a lot to lay on the sisters.”

Al is making his way up the hall, walking towards the office. When suddenly Sister Margot is dashing up behind him, “Excuse me! Sorry!” she squeaks, blowing past him, rushing into the office.

“Pastor Cornello!”
Everyone looks to the young lady as she dashes up to his desk, Cornello asking, “What is it, my child?”

“It’s terrible!” the sister cries, “The police! They’ve arrested Sister Clara!”


Cornello queries, “On what charge?”

“They didn’t say!” Sister Margot tells him. “They just put handcuffs on her and took off!”

A determined look on his face, Al turns around and takes off down to the other end of the hall.

Roy looks at Lisa with concern, “Do you think they’re onto us?”

Lisa answers, “We may need to be ready to move out again.”

Pastor Cornello raises a hand, “Steady there. No need to rush,” he tells her as he rises from his seat.

“This may be exactly what they want – to make you panic and flush you out.” He looks Lisa in the eye. “Gather all your men into the pilgrimage house. Close the shutters, turn out all the lights and remain silent. I’ll go retrieve Sister Clara.”

“But what if they arrest you, too?”

He chuckles in his throat, retrieving his cane. “Even Jesus had to deal with the authorities. I’m sure He’ll watch over me as well as all of us in this moment of need. Sister Margot – ”

“Yes, pastor?” the nun responds.

“Find Brother Wilfred and tell him, ‘An angel is needed in the lion’s den’.”

“Uh, yes sir.”

“Then gather the brothers and sisters into the chapel and begin praying. We shall need it.”

“Yes, pastor.” She curtsies and she takes off.

Lisa looks at Roy and Ed and orders, “All right, let’s spread out. We’ll each take a corner of the church grounds. Tell everyone to get to the pilgrimage house now. …Wait, where’s the doctor? I thought he was on his way here.”

Roy looks to the open doorway, “I thought he was, too.”

And worry hits Ed full on. *Damn it, Al. You didn’t…*

*  

The town is being bathed in orange as the sun starts to set, the little rows of shops and houses beginning to cast long shadows over the streets.

There are no back alleys here, as every building is side-to-side, none back-to-back. Still, Al’s instinct is to duck and hide wherever possible – but neither does he want to draw attention to himself. Steadily he walks down the street, his hood thrown up to help hide his face from view.

He sees a break in between two buildings, the closest thing to a side alley he’s going to get, and Al ducks into it. From where he stands, he looks over the heads of the few scattered people who pace the streets, scanning the line of buildings on the other side.
He spies up the street a single police car parked outside a brick building covered in flags. That must be it.

Al pulls on his sleeve, pulling his arm into the inside of his robe so that he can get to his trouser pocket underneath, fishing out his pocket knife, and, still underneath his robe, he opens up the knife. Carefully, he slips his arm back through his sleeve, making sure the blade doesn’t catch on the cloth, and he keeps the knife hidden as he exits from his hiding place.

Towards the police station he walks, stopping by the car and standing beside it. He looks both ways to make sure no one is looking…

* 

The cops have plopped Clara down in a chair, Geldform pointing at her.

“All right, you, talk!”

“About what?” she begs to know. “I don’t understand why I’m here!”

“Don’t play dumb!” the inspector tells her, “You know very well why you’re here!”

Dunbar lifts his hat, scratching his scalp, “Uh, Inspector, do you really think she’s a soldier?”

“And why not?” Geldform poses.

“Well. She’s a girl.”

“Exactly!” the inspector declares. “That’s their game don’t you see? They think we’d never expect a sweet innocent little nun! I bet she’s got a gun hiding under them robes!”

“This is all a big misunderstanding!” Clara cries. “You must have me confused with somebody else!”

The inspector turns back to her, “I’m asking the questions here!”

Dee says, “She didn’t ask a question.”

“Shaddup!” Geldform looks back at Clara, demanding, “You’re going to tell us where you’re hiding those soldiers!”

Clara nervously asks, “Soldiers?”

“Yeah, you know, soldiers!”

“Are you talking about the veterans we visited today? Did something happen to them?”

“The veterans? What?! No! Not them! I’m talking about the enemy convoy that was seen moving through the countryside!”

“Sir,” Clara tells truthfully, “I never leave the church grounds unless I’m accompanied by one of the elders, and even then, we don’t go outside of town. If someone was moving through the countryside, I certainly didn’t see --!”

Clara is distracted, for out the back window, she sees Alphonse! He smiles and waves at her, then
he puts a finger to his mouth to signal, *Shh!*

“Hmm?” Inspector Geldform raises an eyebrow, and turns around, but Al has already ducked down out of sight. The inspector looks back at Clara. “What are you looking at?”

“Oh, sorry,” Sister Clara apologizes, “I… thought I saw snow falling.”

“It’s not cold enough for snow.”

“I know. That’s why I was surprised.”

“Get back on track! Where are the soldiers?”

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

“Huh?”

Everyone looks over at the front door.

Geldform looks at one of his deputies. “Get that, would you?”

“Sure thing.” Dunbar responds, going to the front door and opening it. But no one’s there. “Huh?” He steps out onto the porch, looking around, seeing no one. He shrugs his shoulders and steps back inside, closing the door.

“Who is it?” Geldform asks as Dunbar walks back towards the desk.

“There’s no one out th – ”

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

“Heh?”

Steam arises out from under Geldform’s hat. “It’s those darn kids again, isn’t it?” He stomps towards the door, whipping it open, shouting out, “I know you’re out there! Don’t think I won’t tell your parents!” He slams the door shut again, and then stomps back over to Clara, once more pointing at her, “Now you listen here! You’re going to tell us where those soldiers are, or we’re gonna – !”

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

“**AUGH!**” Geldform pulls down on both sides of the brim of his hat. “That does it!”

He runs at the front door, Dee running after him, “Inspector! Calm down!”

Geldform runs out onto the porch, yelling at the unseen perpetrators, “I can have you arrested for harassing an officer! Come out and face me, you little punks!”

Dunbar, still inside, watches as his partner tries to calm Geldform down. Suddenly, the wastebasket is landing on top of Dunbar’s head, his vision going black as the sound of crumpled papers fall all around his feet. “**HEY! What the?!”**

“Come on!” Al grabs Clara by the cuffed hand, lifting her to her feet, and together they run out the back door.

Geldform and Dee look back into the station and see Dunbar removing the basket from his head.
“Hey!” They run back inside, Geldform frantically asking, “Where’s the girl?!”

“She must have run out the back!”

“Come on!”

Out the back door the three men run, hopping down the short steps and rounding the building in time to see a monk running away with the nun, the two of them dashing out from the in between the buildings and onto the main street, taking a right and running back towards the church!

“Hey! Come back here, you!” The cops run alongside the building and out onto the street, the monk and nun getting further away.

Dunbar pulls out his pistol, but Geldform grabs him by the wrist, lifting the muzzle into the air. “What are you, crazy?! You can’t shoot a nun!”

“I thought you said she was a soldier?”

“But she’s still dressed like a nun! How would that look?” He nods towards the car. “C’mon! They won’t be getting away!”

The three police officers rush to the car, opening the doors and piling inside. The inspector fires it up and starts to drive, but something is wrong – the vehicle is… lopsided. It’s dragging on its right side, and now it’s starting to turn towards the station, crunching right into the corner pillar of the porch!

Flags flutter down onto the hood of the car as Geldform shouts, “What’s going on here?! Huh??” The inspector now sees that tucked under the windshield wiper, right up against the glass, is a playing card – the Joker.

He opens his door, looking down at his tires – they’re flat!

“Why that no good –!” He jumps out of the car. “Come on!”

They all get out of the patrol car and start running up the street.

The handful of townsfolk out on the street have taken notice of all the shouting, looking over to see the strange sight of a monk and a nun on the run. And the number of townsfolk begins to increase as, curious, more and more people begin to poke their heads out their front doors.

Geldform shouts, “Don’t just stare! Stop those two! Halt in the name of the law!”

Pastor Cornello, strolling along with his cane, is coming down the street when he sees Al and Sister Clara running towards him. “What on earth?”

“Run, Cornello!” Al shouts to him as they blow past.

“Goodness gracious!” the old pastor says, turning around, trying to follow them, but in his old age is finding it hard to keep up.

“Aw no you don’t!” Geldform says as he catches up to him, grabbing the old man by his wrist. “You’re under arrest!”

Gasps arise from all around as the people watch Geldform pull a set of handcuffs from his belt.

Al and Sister Clara stop running, turning around to see what’s going on. “Oh no!” Clara cries.
“This is absurd!” Cornello protests as Geldform handcuffs the old man’s hands behind his back.

“Be quiet!” the inspector orders. “I’m taking you in for questioning!”

“Hey!” the owner of the general store calls out. “You can’t arrest the pastor!”

“Stay out of this!” Geldform tells him, “This is official police business!”

Various cries ring out from the townspeople:
“Let him go!”
“This is wrong!”
“How dare you arrest a man of the church!”

Those who had been previously just standing in their doorways have now come out to join the rest of the townspeople who begin encircling the inspector and his deputies, the deputies holding up their hands just a little bit as they take a step or two back.

“Uh, Inspector?” Dee mutters, “Maybe this was a bad idea!”

“What’s going on here?” an authoritative voice demands.

Everyone stops and looks over as, parting through the crowd is the mayor.

“Mayor von Müller!” one man says, “The police are trying to arrest Pastor Cornello!”

“Yes,” the mayor affirms, “On my orders.”

Distraught noises issue from the crowd.

“I don’t understand!” another citizen asks, “Why?!”

Mayor von Müller points at Cornello, “This man has been speaking out against the Reich, and in all likelihood is harboring enemy troops in his church!”

“That’s crazy!”
“Pastor Cornello would never do a thing like that!”

“You think I’m wrong?” The mayor turns on them.

“Prove it!”
“Yeah, prove it!”

“That’s what we’re trying to do!” von Müller spits. “We’re taking him in for questioning! Once we get a confession, we’re calling the military to come out here and handle the matter!”

Cornello finally speaks, “If you are so certain, call the military now.”

“That’s just what you want, isn’t it?!” von Müller says with paranoia. “You want me to make a fool of myself! You want me to call them up and have come all the way out here for nothing!”

“Then you have your doubts?” Cornello poses. “You do not believe that I actually am harboring anyone.”

“Oh I believe you are!”

“Then feel free to search the grounds, by all means.”
“Ohhohohohoho NO,” the mayor distrustfully proclaims. “This is what you want! There are only 3 cops in this town, and 40 soldiers hiding in there!”

“Forty?” Cornello queries. “My goodness, we don’t even have that many extra beds. Where would we keep them all?”

“I don’t know, but I’m not going to send MY men in there and have them be killed!”

“I assure you there is no one in there who would wish them harm,” Cornello says. “But if it’s justice you’re worried about,” He looks over his shoulder to Al and Clara, “Brother, Sister, please come here.”

Clara starts to move forward, but Al grips her arm, he whispering, “What’s he doing?”

“Please,” Clara looks up at Al, “Have faith.”

Al is hesitant, but as he stares into Clara’s gentle, blue, pleading eyes, he finds himself saying, “All right,” even though his intuition screams Don’t do it!

Sister Clara and the monk that accompanies her walk through the crowd, up to the pastor’s side.

Cornello looks back at the mayor. “There are three of us. And there are three of your men. We shall stay here in your custody until your men return safely.”

Al can feel his stomach tying into a knot. This is risky…

Someone in the crowd pipes up, “Come on, Mayor! That’s fair!”

Agreements of “Yeah!” arise from the crowd.


“Right!” Geldform nods, waving to his men, “Come on!”

Al’s eyes shake a little. Brother, I hope you’re ready…

The townspeople chatter, “Come on!” “I want to go see!” “Yeah, let’s go!” They begin moving.

Von Müller shouts, “Stop! Where are you all going?! If a fire-fight breaks out, I can’t be responsible for all of you!”

The town-wide parade marches up to the gates of the old church, Geldform leading the band.

Sister Agnes stands on the other side of the gates, staring distrustfully at the officer and his deputies as they approach.

“Open up!” Geldform orders.

“I will do no such thing,” the old nun coldly responds.

Pastor Cornello, in the crowd, gently assures, “It’s all right, Sister Agnes. You may let them pass.”

The old sister frowns, holding in her worry as she quietly complies, “Yes, Pastor Cornello…”

“Hurry up, hurry up!” Geldform pesters as Agnes very slowly unlocks the gates.

She starts to push them open, but Geldform grabs the bars and whips the gate open the rest of the
way, he and his deputies entering the grounds.

Some in the crowd try to slide their way in, wanting to see more of the action, but Agnes pulls the gates closed, locking them back up quickly.

Geldform marches up the stone path that leads straight to the chapel, and pushes on the doors. They do not budge.

“Oh, chief,” Dee quietly says, “I think they open outward.”

“Shut up and help me!”

Each deputy tugs at a door handle, the entrance to the chapel opening wide. The psalm that had been going on halts as the brothers and sisters singing are startled by the sudden appearance of the police force.

“Nobody move!” Geldform orders as he strides up the aisle towards the altar. “Stay where you are!”

He hops up the short steps and then turns around, looking at the rows of monks and nuns that line the pews. He scans the crowd of meek and humble faces, looking for anyone that sticks out.

Dunbar climbs the steps as well and leans in to the inspector, “Well, anything?”

Geldform responds quietly, “Nah, they’re fine. I recognize everyone.” Suddenly he points at one young monk and shouts, “YOU!”

“Ahh!” the monk yelps.

Geldform asks, in a normal tone, “How’s your mom?”

The monk calms down, relieved. “Oh. She’s fine. Her ankle’s healing up nicely.”

“Glad to hear it,” Geldform says as he descends the stairs, his men following him. “You can go back to what you were doing.” And he and his men exit the chapel.

The young monk sighs, feeling woozy.

~

Place by place by place Geldform and company go, across the church grounds, checking each area: No one in the kitchens; No one in the dining hall; No one in the sewing room; No one in the bathrooms; Not even anyone in the dormitories.

Dunbar is on hands and knees, lifting up a blanket to see if there’s anyone under the bed. “All clear in here, Inspector.”

“This is driving me nuts!” Geldform blurts as he rubs his head. “Where haven’t we checked?”

Dee is looking out the window as he points. “Hey, look!”

The inspector joins him at the window and looks out, seeing the pilgrimage house and the barn. “Ah-ha! We’ve got ‘em now” He rushes for the door. “Come on!”

~
A boy sits on his father’s shoulders, looking over the wall, his dad asking, “Do you see anything?”

The boy shakes his head, “Nah, the police have disappeared. I don’t see anybody.”

Al is nervous but silent as he stands there, the head of the local government not but a pace away. Clara nervously clings to Al’s sleeve, the young lady trying to keep the chain of her cuffs from jangling as she shakes.

Von Müller’s eyes, almost hidden beneath his furrowed bushy eyebrows, drift over to Pastor Cornello, the priest quiet, but confident looking. And the longer that confident look remains on the pastor’s face, the more the mayor begins to sweat.

~

The three cops are galloping across the grounds from the dormitories to the pilgrimage house, Geldform moving in leaps and bounds. He turns pointing at Dee as he continues running, “You take the house! I’ll check the barn!” He points at Dunbar, “You check behind the barn!”

“Oh!”

And they break off into their three separate directions

Geldform dashes to the barn and throws the doors open, rushing in, startling the sheep, all of them hopping and bouncing out the door, one of them knocking Dunbar in the legs, causing him to flip over and fall onto the ground.

Dee, meanwhile, gets to the pilgrimage house, its door closed, its shutters drawn. But as he lifts his hand towards the handle, a wave of apprehension overtakes him. Slowly he pulls his pistol from its holster, and he places his hand on the door handle as quietly as he can. He pulls in a slow breath. And then he whips the door open! “FREEZE!”

But no one is here.

The inside of the pilgrimage house is dark, very little of the orange light of the sunset streaming in through the drawn shutters. The beds are neatly made, the sheets clean and crisp.

Dee creeps inside, leaving the door open to allow more light into the room. Warily, he approaches one of the beds, he cautiously taking the edge of its blanket in his hand as he leans down, pointing the muzzle of his weapon under the bed as he tosses back the blanket.

There is no one under the bed.

He breathes a sigh of relief.

But then where is everyone? Surely they’ve got to be around here somewhere.

He scans the room, looking over the well-made beds, his eyes drifting to the fireplace that sits at the end of the room, it looking as though it hasn’t been cleaned out in a while as there are ashes overflowing the hearth.

And then he sees it – a large rug, sitting in the center of the floor, atop the floorboards. The floorboards! Of course!

His heart races. His blood pumps.

Dee moves slowly, stealthily, quietly, praying that the floorboards don’t squeak as he moves
through the room towards the rug, he tip-toeing like his life depends on it – for it very well may!

He pulls back on the hammer of his gun, flinching just ever so slightly when it makes an audible Click! He pauses, waiting to see if there is any sound in response… There is nothing.

Just a little ways more. Almost there…

Dee reaches out for the rug, whipping the large length of cloth back!

“AH-HA!”

…But there is nothing there. No handles, no holes, no hinges. Nothing at all that would indicate a trap door. Just the floorboards.

While he is relieved that this means there are no soldiers to fight, at the same time, Dee can feel disappointment setting in. He was SURE they’d be in here.

He gently puts the hammer of his gun back in its original position, putting the pistol in its holster. He gets down on his knees, running his hands over the boards, looking for something, anything!

“Ow!” he pulls his hands back, looking at the splinter in his finger, the area around the sliver of wood beginning to redden. “Damn it…”

He stands up, grumbling, and he kicks the flopped-over rug as he exits, closing the door behind him.

~

Inside the barn, the chickens noisily scatter as Geldform tosses hay back and forth, he also looking for a trap door, certain that there must be one hiding under all these piles of straw. “I know you’re in here somewhere! Show yourselves!”

The horse whinnies loudly.

“Nobody asked you!” the inspector retorts.

Geldform looks up, spying the loft. He hops to his feet, crossing over to the ladder, pulling out his gun, and climbing as best he can while carrying his weapon.

He tops the ladder, brandishing the pistol.

“AH-HA!”

But the loft is also empty – not even a bale of hay up here.

Geldform lifts his hat as he scratches his head. “Where is everybody? EEE!” He quickly grabs onto the ladder as it teeters under his movements.

~

Outside the barn, Dunbar is still on the ground, just now starting to sit up as he rubs his aching head. “Agh! Dammit that hurt!” He sucks in air through his teeth as he now rubs his knee. “Damn sheep!”

He pulls himself upright, returning to his mission. He pulls out his gun, dashing up to the corner of the barn, cautiously peering around it. All he sees is a wall of hay.
“Huh?”

He steps out from his hiding place, looking at the large stack of hay bales that sits before him, the bottom bales currently being nibbled on by the freed sheep.

He walks a tad bit closer, curious.

**SNORT! STOMP!**

Dunbar stops.

The ram has noticed the human’s presence, and, defending his territory, the ram stomps the ground with his hoof again.

Dunbar nervously chuckles as he gently holds out a hand. “Nice sheep…”

**BAAA!** it bleats at him threateningly, stomping its hoof once more.

“No, no, it’s okay. I just want to take a look at the hay,” he says, reaching his hand towards one of the bales.

And the ram charges at him!

“Oh Jesus!” The cop turns and runs, trying to outrun the stampeding little farm animal.

Geldform exits the barn, giving an aggravated sigh. And then he sees Dunbar running across the grounds towards the garden, the ram following after him. “Dunbar! Quit messing around!”

“I’m not!” the deputy cries as he hops up onto the water fountain, climbing the stone structure. The ram stops at its edge, and satisfied, the stocky little beast turns around and begins trotting back to its hay.

Dee comes up to Geldform, the chief asking, “Did you find anything?”

“No, Inspector.”

Geldform sighs again. “Well this has been a waste of time. And what’s worse, we’re gonna be the laughing stock of the town now.”

“We were only following orders,” Dee consoles.

Geldform brightens up, slapping a fist to his palm. “Hey, you’re right! If anyone’s gonna look like an idiot it’s von Müller! It’s not our fault at all!”

“But Inspector,” Dunbar says as he climbs down from the water fountain, “Weren’t we looking for the soldiers before von Müller ordered us to?”

“Shh! No one has to know that!” Geldform says. “Keep it to yourself!”

~

The crowd murmurs quietly amongst themselves, awaiting to see if anything will happen inside the church walls.

“Hey, here they come!” someone in the crowd says, and the murmur turns into a clamor as everyone crowds in towards the gate, Sister Agnes doing her best to keep them all back as she
pushes the gates open. She manages to throw a dirty look to the cops as they pass her by.

Von Müller hurries up to Geldform. “Well?”

Geldform shakes his head. “Nothing. The place is clean.”

The mayor clears his throat. “Ahrmph. Well. Yes. I see.” He turns to Cornello, the mayor’s speech a little slow and reluctant. “Perhaps I was… a little quick to act. But you must understand – the security of our nation is of the utmost importance. No stone can remain unturned.”

Cornello humbly nods whilst Geldform unlocks his cuffs, the pastor saying, “It’s quite all right, Mayor von Müller. You care for the people of this town same as I. It is your duty to protect their bodies as it is my duty to protect their souls.”

The mayor grumbles, “Rrr, well, just do your duty a little more quietly, can’t you? Everybody seems to come down with a bad case of the Morals every Sunday and I’m the one who has to deal with it.”

Cornello chuckles quietly to himself.

Geldform is unlocking Clara’s handcuffs as he apologizes, “I’m sorry, miss. I guess I just got a little carried away. I hope the Lord doesn’t count this against me.”

Sister Clara shakes her head with a soft smile. “If there’s one thing Christ is about, it is forgiveness.”

Geldform now turns his attention to Al. “…You know, I recognize everybody in this town, but I’ve never seen you before. You new here, too?”

Al nervously rubs the back of his head, “Just visiting from Bremerhaven. I’m due to return soon.”

“Come along, Brother,” Sister Clara takes him by the hand, leading Al away before Geldform can ask any more questions. And before Geldform can say anything else, von Müller comes up to him, quietly pressing,

“Will you please disperse this crowd already?”

“Oh, right!” Geldform responds, now putting on his most authoritative voice, “All right, people! Move along! Nothing to see here! Return to your lives.”

Sister Agnes unlocks the gates as quickly as she can, reopening them once more as Pastor Cornello and Al and Clara come up to her. “Oh Pastor Cornello!” the old nun frets. “I was so worried!” And as Clara enters, Agnes hugs her, “Oh and you poor child! I was so frightened for you!”

Sister Clara smiles as they finish the hug, “I’m all right, Sister Agnes.”

“Come,” Cornello says to them all, “I believe our thanks are due in the chapel.”

Geldform continues his crowd control, “Come on! You all heard me! Move it!”

“Hey Janey,” one townsman hears her name called, and she looks over and sees a woman wearing a dark-pink headband approaching.

“Oh, Rose! Cain!” Janey responds, turning to the pair as they walk up, Rose carrying her son in her arms. Janey says, “You guys just missed all of the action!”
“Move along, move along!” Geldform pesters, and Janey says to her friends,

“Come on, I’ll tell you on the way back to your place.”

In no time at all, the land is covered in darkness as the sun disappears from the sky, returning the little hamlet to its usual hushed stillness.

Pastor Cornello is entering the darkened pilgrimage house, Brother Wilfred following him and Al and Sister Clara trailing after.

“Get the light, won’t you?” Cornello requests, and Al reaches up to the gas lamp on the wall, turning the flame up, brightening the room.

The pastor and his assistant walk to the fireplace, Brother Wilfred leaning down and picking up the metal grate that holds a half-burnt log upon it, he lifting it log and all, and setting it off to the side.

Cornello reaches his cane out and taps twice on the concrete floor of the fireplace. He says loudly, “Daniel has been saved.”

A short moment later, the bottom of the fireplace shifts, the sound of stone scraping against stone issuing forth as the concrete panel rises up, ashes sliding back, revealing an opening!

Havoc’s head pops out of the hole, he saying with a grin, “Actually, the name’s John, not Daniel. But nice to meet you anyway.”

Al smiles, both he and Clara surprised.

Brother Wilfred gives Havoc a hand up, helping him out of the hole, and then Havoc turns around and helps the next soldier. And slowly one by one, everyone makes their way out of the hidden basement.

Ed crawls out of the hole, Al rushing up to him.

“Al!” Ed says brightly, “You’re all right!”

“Yeah, I’m-OW!” Al holds his arm for Ed has punched it. “What was that for?” he asks, rubbing the sore spot.

“You idiot!” Ed chews him out, “You just got finished yelling at me for doing reckless things!”

Al purses his lips for half a second, and then he laughs, “Well, we are related. I guess it’s just in our blood.”

Ed can’t help but crack a smile in return.

After all the excitement to be had on just that first day, the next four days at the church pass relatively uneventfully – except for behind closed doors where Hawkeye busies herself coordinating with Adelphi headquarters, they instructing the ground team on all they must do for the coming battle.

Again the sun sets, and again the night falls. And just as they had come, so now the Adelphi Ground Team goes, uniforms on and pushing their turned-off trucks silently out from behind the
Lisa shakes hands with Cornello, “Thank you again, Pastor.”

“As I said, it was no trouble at all.” The old man’s smile fades as his face turns serious. “Godspeed, young warrior.”

Lisa gives a firm smile and salutes. Then she takes off to help the others push one of the trucks.

Al helps a handful of the others in loading the last truck, when Clara walks up to him.

He stutters and blushes, “S-Sister Clara! What are you doing out here? You should be in bed.”

“It would be rude to not bid farewell to the man who saved me.”

Al bashfully shrugs, “Aw, it was nothing.”

“Well, every good deed deserves a reward,” she says, the young lady then standing on her tip-toes to reach up to Al’s cheek, she giving it a kiss, Al’s cheeks then lighting up bright red. Clara plants her feet back flat on the ground. “May God be with you on your journey.”

Al is slow to respond, still just a bit stunned. “Uh… Thank you.”

Ed pokes his head out from behind the truck, “All right, Casanova, come on and help us push, will you?”

“Right!” Al looks at Clara. “Well… I guess this is goodbye.”

She smiles, “For now. You never know what the future holds.”

Al trots to Ed’s side, the two brothers helping the soldiers to push the remaining truck in line with the others, all the men making their way past the chapel and out the open gate, Sister Agnes standing there saying blessings for each of them as they pass.

And as the last truck exits, the old nun closes the gate and locks it.

Sister Clara walks to the end of the path, gazing out through the iron bars to watch the silhouettes disappear into the darkness.

Pastor Cornello joins her at her side, looking down to the young lady. “You know,” the wise old elder says to her, “As a postulant, you are not yet bound by the vows. You can still go after him if you so desire.”

Sister Clara kindly shakes her head. “No. My heart belongs to the Lord.” She smiles kindly. “Alphonse is a nice young man. He’ll find the woman for him one day.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode
Chapter End Notes

This episode came out a little longer than expected, probably because I was juggling three storylines at once: what the Adelphi Ground Team is up to, what the local cops were up to, and Al having a crush on Clara. Ah the little cornball. He gets crushes so easily.

Also, Al lamenting over his mother. *Shh. Hush my little lamb. Hussshhh…*

I haven’t the faintest idea why, but I hear Sister Margot’s voice as Judy Garland’s voice ala Wizard of Oz. Again, no idea why. Also, originally, Brother Wilfred was going to be Brother Cray, Cornello’s assistant in Liore. But I thought, nah – Cray’s a ridiculous name.
Jailbreak

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fullmetal After opening [WITH LYRICS] 鋼の錬金術師 見えない世界 ポルノグラフィティ from Castiel Winchester on Vimeo.
The sun has already past its peak and is now on the decline – and yet still the heat lingers, providing some warmth in these chilly working conditions.

The guards are watching over their prisoners, wishing their shift would end so they could break for afternoon coffee. But the prisoners, the sad, pathetic men – nothing more than skin and bones – will be receiving no such break. Their break only comes once the day of forced labor comes to end, and for a few hours they can cease building a castle for a cause and a leader they don’t believe in.

A few of the workers become distracted for half a moment as yet another shiny black car comes into view. The castle seems a bit busier than usual this afternoon, several cars having driven past the camp already, all of them parking outside the castle’s front gate.

The latest of these cars pulls to a rest, parking amongst the other cars that sit here already, and the driver-side door opens, a man in a long black cloak stepping out, looking over the castle with his ice-blue eyes – Reistrom.

The construction noises arising from the nearby camp catch his ears, and Reistrom looks over towards it, catching sight of the pitiful-looking prisoners. He sneers at them, narrowing his eyes with disdain, and turns away, making his way towards the bridge.

The soldier who stands at the gate house gives a salute as the officer approaches him, and Reistrom walks past, crossing over the bridge that leads into the castle grounds.

The courtyard is oddly both spacious and small, a visual trick created by the castle’s triangular design.

Already here are a few of the others, they standing around chatting. But Reistrom does not join them – he simply finds himself a nice quiet, dark corner to call his own, leaning up against the building as he stands there silently watching them, like a spider on the wall.

He’s not the only one engaging in people-watching – on a nearby set of short stairs stands Adler, the ever serious-faced commander watching everything from afar.

Reistrom grins to himself. It’s surprising that Adler chose so short a lookout post rather than perching atop the tower, as is typical of an eagle.

Across the courtyard, an older gentleman sits on a bench, his usually husky build coming off as simply pudgy as he begins slumping, starting to doze off.

Suddenly he gets a rather alarming pat on the back that nearly knocks him off the bench as Geizsler heartily laughs. “Hohoho! Look alive there, Rothbauer! There’s quite a while ‘til sunset. Not time to be sleeping yet!”

Rothbauer groans, “Sleep is a precious thing, my friend. I had to skip my afternoon nap to drive all the way out here – and that’s after having spent the morning attending the memorial ceremonies. I’m bushed.”

Geizsler reaches into his shirt pocket, saying, “What you need is a good eye-opener!” He pulls out a thin silver flask, holding it out to Rothbauer.

“Oh, I think I’ll pass.”

“Suit yourself,” Geizsler says, and he takes a swig.

Rothbauer sighs as he pulls out from his pocket his pipe and a little bag of tobacco. “At least if the
Lead Commander had had the servants prepare us a snack tray. *Then* I might care to be here right now."

He begins gently shaking a little bit of tobacco out of the bag and into the pipe, though his attention is momentarily distracted as out the corner of his eye he sees something moving up and down constantly. He looks over, seeing that one of his comrades is lifting a log up and down repeatedly, like lifting weights in a gym. The younger fellow, Hirsch, watches, bright-eyed at the untiring strength of the man lifting the log.

Rothbauer pries, “Koeman, where on earth do you find that kind of energy?”

“You’ve got to make the energy,” Koeman tells him, yet to take his eyes off his makeshift weight. “Even if you’re feeling sluggish, you’ve just got to get up and go. Once you get that blood flowing, you’ll feel great.”

As Rothbauer packs the tobacco down into his pipe, he chuckles, “When you get to be my age, your bones tend to speak louder than you blood.” He fiddles around in his pocket, looking for a match, “If I did what you’re doing right now, I’d probably pull something.”

“Herr Koeman,” Hirsch gushes, “You are so strong! Someday I will be as big and strong as you are!”

Koeman smiles as he continues his workout, “You just gotta work towards it, kid – just a little bit at a time.”

Hirsch eagerly asks, “May I try?”

Koeman finally sets the log down, it rolling just ever so slightly before he holds it in place to stop it. “Sure,” Koeman agrees, “Have at it.”

Rothbauer lights a match as he smiles. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

Hirsch stands in front of the log, and he bends his knees and grabs the log by either end. He lifts it, just enough to get his hands underneath it, and he stands up, pulling the heavy log up with him.

“No bad,” Koeman says.

“Wait!” Hirsch belts. “I’m not done yet!”

With a bit of straining and grunting and groaning, Hirsch’s muscles bulge as he lifts the log higher and higher, until finally he props it up in the air high above his head, he giving a toothy smile.

The three older men applaud, Koeman cheering, “Yeah!”

Rothbauer politely claps, “Good job!” Geizsler meanwhile rooting,

“That’s our boy!”

“Oh please,” Armbruster speaks up, finally making his presence known. He is standing off to the side, leaning up against the wall, and he says, “It can’t be that hard.”

Hirsch sets the log down on its end, sitting it upright, he laying his hand on top of it as he gives a snooty grin. “Really? I would like to see you try.”

“Fine, then I will,” Armbruster answers as he walks towards them.
Koeman sits down next to Rothbauer, nudging him with an elbow as he lowly says, “This oughta be good.”

Rothbauer quietly nods with a smile as he puffs on his pipe.

Armbruster pushes Hirsch out of the way, “Stand aside, Snaggletooth.”

Hirsch claps a hand over his mouth, “Hey, shut up! I lost this in a fight! More than you can say!”

“Whatever…”

Armbruster puts one hand on the top of the log, and he bends down to pick up the other end, tipping the log as he does so that he can get both hands on it. Same as Hirsch, Armbruster bends his knees and starts to lift.

Hirsch grins as he watches Armbruster strain. “What is the matter? It’s not too heavy for you is it?”

“No! And shut up, you’re breaking my concentration.”

Armbruster lifts the log a little more, leaning back just a bit to try to even out the weight — but as he does, he loses his balance and he falls over backwards, the log pinning him down.

Laughter echoes through the courtyard as they all watch Armbruster wriggle beneath the log.

“Don’t just stand there, you guys!” Armbruster continues his wriggling. He leans his head back, spying two more people entering through the large archway – Bähr and Schwangau. “Hey, Schwangau!” he calls, “A little help?”

Upon seeing Armbruster, Schwangau gasps and ducks behind Bähr, disappearing completely behind the large man.

Armbruster yells, “Oh would you quit being such a sissy and help me?! Ow! HEY!”

With his boot, Bähr has whacked Armbruster in the arm, the large man grinning, “Why help you up? It’s more fun this way.”

“Oh sure! Kick a guy while he’s down!”

Finally, Reistrom’s voice arises from the corner, “You do realize you can just roll the log off of yourself, right?”

Armbruster grimaces with embarrassment as those in the courtyard continue to snicker at him. “I knew that,” he defends, then rolling the log off of himself and sitting up.

“Everyone stop fooling around!” Adler finally scolds them all. “The Lead Commander’s going to be here any minute!”

“I’m already here,” Himmler’s voice rises as he enters through the stone archway, a briefcase in his hand, and Ritter and Löwe accompanying him on either side. Everyone immediately salutes. Himmler looks down and sees Armbruster on the ground. “Pick yourself up, Armbruster.”

“Yes sir,” he does so, brushing himself off.

Himmler scans the courtyard, looking at all present. “Is everyone here? Good. Then we can get star—.”
He is momentarily interrupted as Ritter begins coughing.

Himmler looks over at him. “Are you all right, Ritter?”

The pale commander clears his throat, “Yes, I’m fine. It’s just,” he hesitates, “— the smoke, is all.”

Himmler glares over at the bench, “Rothbauer! Get rid of that pipe! You know better!”

Rothbauer quickly dumps out the ashes from his pipe, “Sorry, sir.”

“Now then,” the Lead Commander says once more, “Let’s get started.”

He turns back to the archway from which he just came, starting to walk out, and all in the courtyard leave their spots, following him.

Across the bridge they go and then down to what was once a low-walled garden, now currently cleared out, nothing more than a flat land of dust and dirt as laborers move back and forth, hauling planks of wood, others mixing cement, some working atop scaffolding as they install stone facades of gargoyline faces along the castle wall.

The laborers know better than to make eye contact with the officers. Still, one finds himself unable to contain his curiosity as he stops what he’s doing to watch them momentarily.

But the moment is over soon enough as a guard hits him, “Stop gawking and get back to work!”

At the bottom of the north tower is a strong wooden door. Himmler pulls a set of keys from his belt and he unlocks the entryway, proceeding down the spiraling steps, his team following him into the darkened crypt-like chamber below.

Exiting the stairwell, it can be seen that across the room there is a second set of stairs leading up into the interior of the castle.

A large flame burns brightly in the center of a shallow pit, the light bouncing off the stones of the circular room, the heat rising to the small golden vent on the ceiling, the vent itself emblazoned with the swastika, its golden surface brightly reflecting the fire below.

Around the bottom edge of the room, there are large semi-circular stones that stick out of the walls, like pedestals, and above two of these there are windows, though curtains have been placed across them to prevent would-be snoopers from peering inside. Lining the walls are wrought-iron holders, unlit torches sitting within them.

Each of the twelve men takes their place between one of the twelve pedestals, taking the torch from their holder and holding it out before them.

Geizsler is first to move forward – silently he steps to the edge of the pit, leaning down and extending his torch to the flame, the broad end of the metal cone igniting. He stands back up, moving back silently into the shadows, his torch now illuminating his section of wall. One by one in a clockwise manner, each man does the same, lighting his torch and retreating back to the wall.

Himmler bows his head, the others following, he saying, “Recite now the canticle.”

And in unison, the men altogether chant:

"Black Sun inside of us shining
You give the Power of Awareness
Recollecting the kingdom of Atland  
This was high in the sky column  
Marriage of the Sea Fury engulfed it  
Recollecting the wise giant,  
They came beyond Thule and taught "

Then the voices die down.

Solemnly, the Lead Commander begins the invocation: “We call upon the heathen gods of our ancestors – guide us this day. Shine good fortune onto us, and help us defend our nation and our people, and ensure victory over our enemies. In the name of the All-Father we pray. So mote it be.”

“So mote it be,” they all reply in unison.

And then in procession, one after the other, they leave their spots, ceremoniously climbing the staircase at the other end of the room, silently winding their way up to the next level.

Here, too, there are long black curtains covering the windows that would otherwise allow the sunshine into the chamber. Columns hold up the archways that circle the darkened room, and as each man enters, they place their torches into the wall hangers on the columns, illuminating the space with an oddly eerie darkness, for the edges of the room are cast in the long shadows of the pillars that stretch up from the marble-covered floor.

Like the room in which it sits, the table in the center is round, and in the middle of its shiny polished surface is a gold inlaid design, echoing the mural that is on the floor underneath the table – the Black Sun.

Everyone takes their seats.

“All right, roll call,” Himmler begins. “Goat Knight.”

“Present,” Geizsler responds.

“Swan Knight.”

Schwangau answers, “Present.”

“Bull Knight.”

Koeman, “Present.”

“Boar Knight.”

Rothbauer, “Present.”

“Eagle Knight.”

Adler, “Present.”

“Owl Knight,” Himmler smugly smiles, with a nod to himself, “Of course.” He proceeds, “Horse Knight.”

Ritter answers, “Present.”

“Bat Knight.”
Armbruster says, “Here.”

Himmler inwardly sighs before continuing. “Spider Knight.”

Reistrom, “Present.”

“Bear Knight.”

Bahr, “Present.”

“Deer Knight.”

Hirsch raises his hand, “Present, my commander!”

“Thank you, Hirsch. Lion Knight.”

Löwe responds, “Present.”

“I hereby call this meeting to order.” Himmler lifts his briefcase off of the floor and rests it on the table top, opening it up and pulling out some folders which he begins passing around. “These are copies of the report that Hirsch submitted to me, along with the photographs he took. Again, excellent work, Hirsch.”

“Thank you, my commander.”

As everyone receives a folder, they open it up, looking over the documents contained therein, Himmler continuing.

“In the early hours of the morning, the mining operation outside of Löwe’s base was sabotaged, the entrance to the mine caved in using explosives. We know that British as well as a few American troops are responsible – but there is one person of particular interest wrapped up in all of this.”

Reistrom is flipping through the photographs, and as he reaches one, his eyes widen though the rest of his face remains calm – Elric. There he is, in the photo.

Himmler stares sternly at Geizsler, “Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

Geizsler’s lips tighten, and for a moment he glances at Adler, seeing his comrade looking at him sharply, threateningly, silently warning him.

Geizsler looks down and then closes his eyes with a pensive look. “Forgive me, sir. I thought I could recover Elric on my own.”

“Well your arrogance has cost us,” Himmler reprimands. “If you had alerted me sooner, then all twelve units could have been on the move looking for him.”

“I know, sir. Forgive me. I take full responsibility.”

“As you should.” Himmler crosses his arm, “With him out of our custody, he’s already returned to disrupting our operations as he was before. It was a mistake ever leaving Elric alive in the first place.” Himmler looks to his left, his voice a bit calmer, “Not that I blame you, Ritter.”

Ritter closes his eyes, slightly bowing his head, “I’m sorry, sir. It was misguided of me to give the prisoner a second chance.”

“You were only doing what you thought was best.”
Reistrom intercedes, asking, “Where is Elric now?”

Löwe answers, “My troops report that the saboteurs were seen fleeing to the west. They may be heading for the Dutch border.”

Himmler announces, “I’ve already ordered the borders closed. There won’t be a road, train, plane, or boat that they’ll be able to get on without my knowing. I’ve also sent out a plane to take aerial surveys around your base, Löwe. We’ll find them soon enough.”

The Lead Commander begins drumming his fingers on the tabletop, he saying,

“But Elric’s escape pales in comparison to the larger picture here: I want to know how enemy troops penetrated out borders.”

Hirsch narrows his eyes, they drifting over towards Armbruster. “I wouldn’t doubt that they came through the Belgian border, considering whose territory that is, after all...”

“Hey!” Armbruster barks, getting riled up, “Don’t pin this on me! I’ve got a lot of land to worry about! I’ve got Belgium, Paris, and the greater half of France to deal with! What have you got? The top sliver of the Netherlands? Oh yeah, that is SO hard!”

“Hey!” Hirsch fights back, “My work is just as difficult as yours is!”

“Quiet!” Himmler orders, the two young officers settling down. He brings the conversation back on point, looking ’round the table. “You are all to check the border defenses in each of your respective territories. Look for holes, weaknesses, any sort of means by which the enemy may have slipped through, or how they may try to get back out.”

Löwe speaks up, “Sir, if these enemy troops are still in the country, it’s possible that they are planning another attack. If so, we need to determine what their next target is and stop them before it happens.”

Himmler sets his elbows on table, folding his hands in front of his face as he concentrates. “Hmm. You’re right. Any suggestions?”

Koeman says, “Maybe their mission was to disrupt the Heroes’ Day services, but they got scared off once they got found out.”

Rothbauer astutely points out, “Well the day’s not over yet. There may still be celebrations going on that they plan to hit.”

“If that’s the case,” Adler agrees, “We need to contact all the local offices in the area and give them warning.”

“If we scan the airwaves,” Löwe says, “We may be able to find out more information. Chances are they may be trying to get in contact with their superiors, either to confirm a next attack or to try to procure transport out of the country.”

“Well, wherever they’ve gone,” Himmler asserts, “I want those troops found and destroyed immediately!”

Koeman asks, “The Elrics are from Germany, right?”

“We’ve been over this,” Himmler reminds him, “Those two are the only known people to have passed through the Gate from Shamballa and survived.”
“Well you know what I mean.” Koeman continues, “I’m saying that if they were living in the country for some time, maybe they know someone – a friend or somebody who’s hiding them.”

Himmler gives a bit of a “Humph,” at the notion. “Someone to hide just the two of them, perhaps. But an entire platoon?”

Reistrom, meanwhile, is looking at one of the reports in his folder, when he speaks up, “Am I the only one seeing this?”

Everyone looks over to him.

Himmler says, “Please, fill us in.”

Reistrom is still looking in the folder, “In addition to the Elrics, I’m seeing that we’ve also positively identified Roy Mustang as being amongst these troops. As I’m sure you’re well aware, Lead Commander, Mustang was in the same camp that the Elrics would later go on to burn down.”

“Yes, you needn’t remind me,” Himmler responds in a scathing tone. “What’s the point you’re making?”

“It wasn’t the Elrics who freed Mustang, but rather one of our own soldiers – a sergeant by the name of Hughes. Seems he knew Elric back in Munich during the time of the Putsch.”

Himmler tells him, “It is to my understanding that the traitor was already dealt with.”

Reistrom’s eyes drift up from the report to his commander, “But what if the sergeant is not the root cause of the discord?”

“What are you on about?” Himmler asks, starting to get annoyed at being strung along like this.

Reistrom finally says, “There’s one person here we’ve been overlooking – the sergeant’s wife.”

Little hums of curiosity rise from around the table, Rothbauer questioning, “His wife?”

Reistrom points out, “The older Elric was a tenant of hers, along with a fellow named Heiderich – the same Heiderich who, though he initially worked for us, would go on to betray us by sending Elric back to Shamballa, resulting in not only the failure of the Thule mission, but also a second Elric being brought over from the Other Side.”

Everyone listens intently, waiting to see where Reistrom’s going with this, “This landlady of Elric’s shortly thereafter married this Hughes fellow. And then Hughes later goes on to betray the Reich. I’m sensing a pattern here.”

Koeman tilts his head a little as he asks, “You think she’s secretly been working with the rebels?”

Schwangau speaks up for the first time during this whole conversation, less speak and more squeak, he quietly throwing out there, “I’m sure it’s just a coincidence.”

Adler crosses his arms, “Only fools believe in coincidence.”

Himmler thinks aloud, “Even if she’s not harboring the Elrics, I don’t want to take that chance. I’ll send out the order to have her arrested and her home seized.”

Hirsch chimes, “Excellent idea, Lead Commander!”

Koeman chuckles, “Some of the credit goes to Reistrom over there. He’s the one who noticed.”
Rothbauer adds proudly, “Yep. His instincts haven’t been wrong yet. He found that bomb after all, didn’t he?”

Reistrom closes his eyes with a smile. “The ability to recall one’s past life has its advantages. Of all the people the bomb could have ended up with, it turns up in the hands of a doppelganger of someone from the Other Side.” Reistrom reopen his eyes, a smug grin on his face. “And what are the odds that we’d live only a few streets away from one another? No, it was more than luck – it was Fate.”

Himmler says, “Well Fate was certainly kind enough to that man by giving him the gift of a scientific mind. Without it, he’d have been disposed of immediately.” He looks over at Schwangau, “Which by the way – this man, Marcoh was it?”

Schwangau nods, “Yes, Lead Commander.”

“Has he since come up with anything clever during his time with you?”

The young officer hides his trembling hands underneath the table. “…Well… No… You see… Dr. Marcoh was transferred out months ago.”

“What?” Himmler raises an eyebrow. “To whose base?”

Schwangau seems reluctant to answer, looking down at the table. “…To Commander Geizsler’s base, sir.”

Himmler shoots Geizsler an angry glance. “Is that so?”

Geizsler defensively cries, “What???”

“Use your brain for just five seconds, can’t you!” Himmler yells, his voice ringing off the marble walls and floor. “Elric steals the bomb; Marcoh ends up with the bomb; and then you decide to put them together at the same base?! Clearly they know one another!!” He whips his head towards Reistrom, “Did you know about this??”

Reistrom calmly shakes his head, addressing the Lead Commander though he glares coldly at Geizsler, “No, sir. I did not. But I wasn’t about to send Elric to Schwangau’s base and have him anywhere near the bomb.”

Geizsler defends himself, “I had Marcoh months before we even found Elric! How was I supposed to know he’d wind up at my base?”

“Why did you even want Marcoh in the first place?” Himmler inquires heatedly.

Geizsler frowns, slightly puffing his cheeks not unlike a pouting child, “Well. You give Schwangau all the good scientists! I wanted at least one for myself. I thought he could get that anti-gravity project you wanted so badly finished.”

Himmler seethes, “Well, that Marcoh helped Elric once before by taking care of the bomb. It’s evident that he’s the one responsible for Elric’s escape! I want him hanged, do you hear me?” He bangs his fist on the table, "HANGED!!"’

Geizsler responds, “Yes, Lead Commander. It’s the first thing I’ll do as soon as I get back to base.”
The sun sets early this time of year, and by the time the closed-door meeting comes to an end, the sky has already turned an orangey-gold.

Around the other side of the tower, away from the door and away from the laborers, Bähr and Geizsler stand as they watch Adler simmering with anger.

“If only we had caught Elric sooner,” Adler fumes, shaking a fist as he glares at the ground. “Now everybody knows he’s loose!” He looks up at the other two, “I’m going to find and destroy Elric first, before he has a chance to leverage his knowledge in exchange for his life.”

Bähr questions, “Do you really think that platoon is going after one of the memorial ceremonies?”

“No,” Adler tells them, “I was only agreeing with Rothbauer to keep everyone else distracted. In truth, I believe it’s clear that those British troops were after Löwe’s mine. And now that they’ve completed their mission, they’re likely returning home.”

Geizsler furrows his brow, thinking hard as he ponders aloud, “But why send that many troops for a simple sabotage mission? The final report states that it only took two men to blow up the mine after all that.”

Adler considers, “Perhaps their original objective was to take Löwe’s base. But upon being discovered, they decided against it.”

“With not but forty men? That’s gutsy,” Geizsler comments.

Bähr asks, “Do you think they’ll try again?”

Adler shakes his head, “I doubt it. It’s too risky. Now that they’ve been discovered, they need to get out of the country and quick. Forty men may be enough when pulling a surprise attack, but now that we know their strength and are on our guards, they’d never stand a chance.”

“How do you figure they plan to get out of the country?”

“Even with the borders closed, there’s probably a way. After all, they got past the border patrol in the first place; it’s possible they can do it second time.”

Adler thinks aloud, “The closest part of the mainland to England is the Netherlands. No doubt the Dutch Resistance snuck them in. That’s likely their escape plan.”

Geizsler gives a concerned hum, “I still worry though.”

Adler looks to him, “About what?”

“How it is that Elric ended up amongst those enemy troops,” Geizsler tells him. “Did he know they were going to be there? And if so, he knows where my base is! He very well may be leading them back to it!”

“For what purpose?”

“Why, to spring the scientists, of course!”

“Don’t be absurd,” Adler admonishes. “A mission such as that would be foolish. Hirsch reports the enemy had seven vehicles, one of which was destroyed in the explosion. Six vehicles may accommodate all the men they have currently, but how are they supposed to transport an additional hundred men? And without anyone taking notice?”
“For starters, I only have ninety scientists at my base” Geizsler points out. “But Elric may only be interested in his immediate friends, of which there are only five. That many they may be able to slip out.”

Adler looks at the ground as he considers this, “Yes, that may be possible. Even if they don’t have the numbers to overpower your base, they might be able to break enough of a hole in your defenses to get what they want. If that’s the case – Bähr,” he looks at the large commander, “Lend Geizsler a score of your men to boost his defenses.”

Bähr gripes, “Then what am I supposed to do if that detachment is moving through my territory? I’m down 20 guys!”

“Overall, the western border has more soldiers, even if they’re not under your direct command. If this platoon really is headed for a target in the interior, Geizsler may suffer the same problem Löwe did in being unprepared. You can stand to lend a few troops.”

Bähr grumbles, “Yeah, but I won’t be happy about it…”

Adler continues, “I’m going to the western border. I’ll check with all of the stations there, see if they’ve received any reports of suspicious activity. And if either of you find Elric – ” he narrows his eyes, “Show no mercy.”

*

The guards walk the perimeter walls of the base, looking out to the nighttime landscape – forest stretching out on all sides, the only civilization that of the little village at the southern foot of the mountain, its large lake shimmering under the stars.

And though everything outside is calm, inside the base however, trouble stirs.

A soldier pulls Marcoh out of his bedroom, while several other scientists are poking their heads out their doors, curious.

Geizsler yells at them, “In bed! All of you!”

They quickly duck back into their rooms, slamming their doors shut.

Marcoh is pulled out by the soldier, a second soldier arriving to hold him by his other arm, Marcoh in the meanwhile pleading, “Commander Geizsler, please!”

“Silence!” Geizsler commands. “Thought you could pull the wall over my eyes, eh? Failed to tell me that you and Elric knew one another before he ever got here.”

“That’s not true!” Marcoh says honestly, “I never met him until he arrived here!”

“A likely story!” the commander crosses his arms, “I know you helped Elric escape, and for that you must suffer the consequences! An execution at dawn!”

“Oh please, please Commander Geizsler,” the old doctor whimpers, “You’ve got to believe me! Please reconsider!”

Geizsler strokes his beard, “Well… I’m not an entirely cruel man…”

Marcoh perks up, but Geizsler continues,

“Are you familiar with the Dísaablót?”
Marcoh raises his eyebrows, “The what now?”

Geizsler explains exuberantly, “A rite performed by our ancestors long before the Romans moved in and brought their Christianity with them. At the Dísablót, an offering is made to the Valkyries.” He sounds as if he’s asking a child, “You are familiar with them, now aren’t you?”

Marcoh’s not entirely sure, but still he answers, “They’re from Wagner’s opera, right?”

“More than that, man!” Geizsler proclaims, “They are the Fates who decide who will die in battle and who will come out victorious!”

“…And the Valkyries will spare my life?”

“Hardly! Quite the opposite.” Geizsler tells him, “If you must die, I’ll at least see to it that you die for a good cause. Dísablót is in just a few days. You can rest easy knowing that when you are executed, your spilled blood will ensure victory for our army.”

“You’re using me as an offering?! To pagan gods?!”

“The gods of the German people, Marcoh. You should be proud!”

Marcoh blurts, “You’re insane!”

The back of Geizsler’s large hand smacks across the old doctor’s face. “I’m being gracious letting you live for a few more days! The least you can do is show some gratitude!” He looks to his guards, “Take him away!”

The guards begin dragging Marcoh away, he still begging, “No! You can’t do this!”

*  

The sunlight streams in through the high windows, lighting the inside of the spacious lab. Test tubes clink and ratchets clank, and even though there are many people and even a new aircraft in the works, somehow the hangar feels a little emptier than before. First Edward disappeared. And now Doctor Marcoh too is gone.

Langelans sighs. “This is terrible.”

Van Leeuwen says, “There’s not much we can do about it, now is there?”

Holgerson, his arms crossed and a frown on his face, says, “La oss opprør og styre kommandant.”

Langelans quickly covers Holgerson’s mouth, “Do not let them hear you say that!”

Van Leeuwen remarks, “It’s not like they can understand him.”

Vigne is very quiet, “But Commander Geizsler is right you know.”

They all look to him, Van Leeuwen asking, “What do you mean?”

Vigne looks around, making sure no one is looking at them. He moves in closer, saying even more lowly than before, “Dr. Marcoh really did help Edward escape. He is on the outside now, looking for a way to rescue us.”

Langelans says happily, “Really?!”
“Shh!”
“Sorry.”

A little worry seeps through Van Leeuwen’s voice, “Well if he’s planning a rescue, he better hurry up before it’s too late…”

* 

Same old lake. Same old village. Same old forest. It all looks the same, only easier to see now that it’s daytime.

The guard on the wall yawns. Yes he slept, all through the morning hours, but why they’d have him on night duty and then turn around and put him on the afternoon shift is a mystery to him. Well, all in all, the commander has seemed out of sorts (and a little wrathful towards the wall guards) since that prisoner got out.

The guard feels his eyelids growing heavier, starting to droop – but then he sees something and his eyes pop back open.

Not too far in the distance, coming over the tops of the trees is a trail of dust, being kicked up into the air.

The guard jogs to the nearest corner tower. He looks at his buddy, “Do you see that?” he asks him.

The other guard nods, “Yup. Better call it in.”

~

Geizsler is in his office, doing some paperwork when the phone rings. He picks it up. “Yes?”

It’s the guard from the tower, “Sir, we’ve got movement heading in from the northwest.”

“Ah yes, that’s probably the reinforcements,” Geizsler assures him, though he adds, “Stay on guard, mind you, just in case it isn’t.”

“Will do.”

Geizsler hangs up and then rises from his desk

~

The trucks have stopped before the front gate, and there the guards check the trucks one by one, and, satisfied, they allow the vehicles to pass into the base.

The lead car draws to a rest on the parade ground, and Bähr hops out.

Geizsler sees him and gives a hearty greeting, “Bähr! Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Am I too late for the execution?” Bähr asks with a cruel smile.

“It’s postponed for now,” Geizsler tells him, “I’ve decided to save it for the Dísablót.”

Bähr puffs an annoyed breath. “Is this more of that magic mumbo-jumbo?”

“Mumbo-jumbo?” Geizsler responds with a little indignation. “ ‘Tis not nonsense! Why the very
foundation of our Order is built upon the ancient ways.”

Bähr crosses his arm, “Yeah, well you and Himmler may take it seriously, but I don’t.”

“You should,” Geizsler says with a bit of seriousness. “Our very fate hinges on you.”

Bähr rebukes, “If you believe in prophecy so much, then you know there’s nothing I can do about it ‘til after the fact.” He continues his grumbling, “I don’t see why I’ve gotten saddled with babysitting Schwangau until then.”

“The longer we keep the incarnation of Baldur from dying, the better it is for all of us.”

“And for that matter,” Bähr continues, “If the Lead Commander’s so damn worried, I don’t see why he even made the position of Hoder in the Order. Doesn’t that kinda defeat the purpose of keeping Baldur safe?”

“Twelve Aesir are listed, and twelve Knights of the Round Table there are. Even Judas the Traitor was among Christ’s disciples.”

“Yeah, well as long as Armbruster’s not going around kissing people, I don’t care.”

A soldier comes up to them, saluting. “Commander Bähr, sir, we’re all unloaded.”

“Yeah, thanks.” He turns back to Geizsler, “So, this Dissa-whatever. When is it?”

“Four days from now,” Geizsler tells him. “If you plan to attend, be here early. I plan for a sunrise banquet, and the sacrifice at high noon.”

Bähr gives a wide smile, “If there’s a buffet involved, I’ll be here.” He turns to head back to his truck. “Well, I better get back to my territory and see if that Elric rat is sneaking around.”

“Have a safe journey, my friend.”

*

The old day passes and a new day comes. And still, all remains quiet.

The little outpost has been keeping a sharp eye on the western border, and yet no one other than military personnel have crossed – while civilians have been restricted, there is still a war going on, and troops must be moved lest the fronts stagnate.

The outpost is a wooden fort, its walls made of long logs laid on their ends, sticking up towards the sky, the ends of the logs sharpened to points so as to deter any would-be infiltrators from climbing over them.

The Fortress Master is crossing the grounds, Commander Adler walking alongside him. “I’m sorry, Commander Adler, but we haven’t seen or heard anything. We’ve been keeping a particularly close watch on the border ever since Lead Commander Himmler ordered it closed. We’d know if somebody was trying to get through.”

“Well you certainly didn’t see them come through on their way in, now did you?” Adler coarsely says.

The Fortress Master quietly gulps. “My men are top-notch. I’m sure one of the other outposts are at fault.”
“You know it’s funny,” Adler sardonically states, “That’s what the last Fortress Master said to me, as did the one before him. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that all of you are conspiring against the Reich to let enemies into our borders.”

“N-no, sir!” he panics a little. “I would never! I’m loyal to the Reich!”

Adler turns on him, “One of you is responsible for this mess and someone is going to pay! And I don’t particularly care whom!”

“Please, sir, believe me, I’ll do anything I can to help you find the perpetrators.”

“Where is your office? I need a quiet place to think.”

“Uh, it’s this way, sir…”

* *

Alone in the Fortress Master’s office, Adler is looking over a map, he with a pencil in his hand as he draws various arrows here and there.

He hums seriously to himself, deep in thought.

While the Dutch border may be how they got in… the sea is by far closer to their position… Even with all the ports closed, a small steamer and the cover of night would be enough to cart their platoon out without detection…

He moves the tip of his pencil up to the bay.

…While Bremerhaven bay is closer…

He puts a scratch through the city.

It’s far too narrow. The Cuxhaven bay would be much easier to maneuver.

He moves his pencil up to that city.

The waters are more open here. A small ship like a trawler may go virtually undetected if it gets far enough away from shore, especially if it kept all its lights off.

He looks at his watch. If he leaves now, he can still make good time.

He stands, rolling up the map and taking it with him as he exits the office.

* *

Though the basement level of the complex is just as if not colder than the ground level, at least down here it is not quite as humid, rather dry actually, making it seem somehow less chilly.

Still, a blanket would be a nice thing to have. Dr. Marcoh may be a prisoner down here in this cell, but that doesn’t mean he should have to be without some of the basics. This will be the fourth night he’s had to lay on this cold metal bench, and it must already be sunset outside for the temperature in here is starting to drop again.

He sighs to himself. That strange ceremony the commander was talking about, he thinks, I don’t even know what day it falls on. How much longer is he going to keep me sitting here?
Not that Marcoh wishes for it to come any faster. Yet it’s wracking to the nerves constantly being on edge, holding one’s breath just waiting, waiting for the inevitable, like having your foot on a land mine – you know you’re already dead: it’s simply a matter of when you decide to take your foot off it and face the consequences.

Once more Marcoh sighs, looking up to the ceiling, knowing the rest of the world is up there above him. Edward. Wherever you are... I hope you’re making good on that promise...

*

While cars and trains and planes may be restricted to staying within the borders, the fishermen still must make their living on the sea – and so to some extent they’ve been granted reprieve, being allowed to move their boats about the bay, but certainly no further than the buoy line that marks the end of German waters.

The comm station has its ears open, listening to the usual chatter, the radio tower that sits perched atop the building grabbing at the waves that fly about the air.

A worker inside the station is reading a newspaper, when the wireless telegraph begins tapping. Quickly he puts his paper down, grabbing up a pencil and a pad, and he begins scribbling the letters as they come in.

A fellow worker comes over, he nibbling on a biscuit while listening in to the tick-tick-tick-tick! of the little contraption, he decoding the message in his head. “…From the navy, huh?”

“Shh!” his coworker tells him, still scribbling furiously as the message comes.
Once done, the telegraph falls silent.

The fellow leans over his coworker’s shoulder, “Let me see how much I got right. I heard something about ship and Bremerhaven.”

“Well, you’re not wrong,” the worker says, passing the notepad up to his friend.
The man reads it over:

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*North Sea, Kriegsmarine captures British ship. German vessel damaged. Irreparable. Cannot be towed. Scuttled to prevent enemy use. Captured ship will dock in Bremerhaven to pick up army company before setting sail.*

---

The worker shakes his head, swallowing the bit of biscuit in his mouth before saying, “Shame we had to scuttle one of our own. Still, an eye for an eye, am I right? They sank our ship, so we take their ship!” He passes the notepad back to his coworker.

“You got that right,” he agrees, proudly adding, “Nobody messes with the German navy and gets away with it.”

*

Tiny bright green buds are beginning to plump up on the trees all around, signaling that soon winter will be but a memory, and spring has returned once again.

But winter is not a memory yet, and many of the men rub their arms to try to warm up whilst
standing in this chilly air. Everyone in the compound has been gathered outside to watch the coming execution, and they all know it is because the commander intends to make an example out of anyone who dares defy him.

Langelans is wringing his hands, his eyes glassy as he hiccups, “I can’t watch this!”

Holgerson rubs his friend on the back to console him.

Van Leeuwen and Vigne stand silently. Then Van Leeuwen quietly looks down at the ground. “… I’m sorry I called you a frog guzzler.”

Vigne looks to him. “What’s brought this on?”

In a staid tone, Van Leeuwen responds, “You just never know when the last time you’re going to see someone is.”

A morose little smile crosses Vigne’s mouth, and he jabs Van Leeuwen in the arm with his thumb as he quietly says, “Hey, don’t talk like that, you potato gorger.”

His friend smiles, albeit sadly, “Garlic muncher.”

“Gouda head.”

A couple of soldiers stand atop the scaffold, making sure the noose is properly in place, Geizsler watching them as they put on the final touches.

Bähr stands by his side. “That’s good enough. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Geizsler nods, “Quite right.” He turns towards a guard standing at the door of the building. “Fetch the prisoner!”

“SIR!” a guard atop the wall suddenly calls, everyone looking up to him as he shouts, “MISSILE INCOMING!”

Cries of panic ring out from the crowd, Geizsler ordering, “Take cover! Man the AA gun!”

The scientists scatter, trying to find the nearest bit of cover they can, be it the building, the open entryway of the lookout tower, or the goat barn. The soldiers, though they find cover as well, have their rifles at the ready, preparing for any enemy troops who may suddenly appear.

A team of six soldiers hop onto the anti-aircraft gun, mostly there to weigh the base of the cannon down, for its blast is so powerful, the machine can topple itself backwards from its own firepower. One of the men cranks the lever, lifting the angle of the muzzle. Then another gets a lock on the incoming missile.

The rocket is almost on top of them!

“Fire!” Geizsler orders.

**BOOM!**

The rocket explodes, pieces of fiery metal shooting out in all directions, everyone hiding from the shrapnel that flies.

But there is more than just metal coming towards them – fluttering through the air are, of all things, papers. Those that are not on fire gently float down towards the ground, landing in the
Everyone watches the shower of paper that rains down on them, many looking around, confused, Geizsler himself crossly questioning, “What is this?!”

Holgerson, curious, leans down and picks one of the papers up off of the ground, everyone crowding around him to see. “Hva er dette?”

They are greeted by a drawing of an angry little face, its tongue sticking out at them, the words, ‘Did you miss me?’ scribbled on the top and bottom of the page.

Every page here has the same thing on it, the ground littered with angry little cartoon faces insolently sticking out their tongues.

Van Leeuwen remarks, “Say. Do you know who that looks like?”

Langelans excitedly gasps, “I know who that is! That’s-!”

“Shh!” Vigne shuts him up.

Geizsler is looking at one of these papers as well as he growls, “Elric! I KNEW he’d come back!” He crumples the paper in his fist, turning and pointing to his comrade, “Bähr! Stay here and defend the base! Get all the scientists into the underground bunker immediately!”

Bähr nods, “On it!” The large commander turns towards the scientists and starts yelling as loudly as he can, “All right you maggots! Get moving! Inside, now!”

Geizsler meanwhile orders, “Half of my men to me! The other half of you stay here with Commander Bähr to protect the base! I’m going to need someone with a radio backpack so we can communicate with one another. Those coming with me, make sure you’re loaded up on ammo! We’re going out into the woods and meeting the enemy head on! Let’s move!”

A couple of guards hurry the scientists into the building, everyone’s brains reverting to a sort of auto-pilot mode - they’ve run emergency drills like this several times before, but this is no drill! This is the real thing!

They get to the end of the hall and take a left, going past the elevator lift and all the way down the hall to the set of emergency stairs. Down they go, down underground and into yet another hallway.

A guard jogs ahead them, to a large steel-plated door, where he pulls a large key from his belt. Into the door he sticks the key, turning it, the sound of locks shifting as he does so, and the key now stuck in place, becoming the handle for the handleless door. The guard pulls back on the heavy door, opening it wide, and the scientists all hasten inside.

Once all the scientists are in, the other guard enters as well, while the one at the door takes the key out of the lock. He rounds the other side of the door and grabs the large vault-wheel and pulls back on it, pulling the door closed. He spins the wheel, locking the door from the inside.

As practiced in drills before, everyone sits quietly, uttering not a sound. Though they say nothing aloud, Ed’s friends are all thinking the same thing – this is it; they’re getting out of here…

From northwards the rocket came, and so to the north Geizsler marches, forty of his men tramping
along with him, ready to take on the forty enemies that await them.

*You’re mine now, Elric!* Geiszler heatedly thinks. *You may have escaped once, but you shall not a second time!*

They march through the woods a little ways more before Geiszler suddenly holds out his arm, signaling the men to stop.

There, ahead of them, in the clearing – it’s Elric! He stands facing the other way, a helmet on his head, his hands in his pockets. His collar is popped up, covering his neck from the cold, and both his long brown coat and blond ponytail are covered in filth, he looking as though he’s been rolling around in the dirt.

Geiszler pulls his pistol from his belt, calling, “Elric!” as he takes aim. “Turn around and face me like a man!”

“No, I’m good!” Ed calls back to him. “I trust you more this way. You’d never shoot a man in the back. You’ve got your honor to defend.”

Geiszler frowns. “This is true,” he admits. “But I must also uphold my duties, and that includes bringing you in!”

“Let me guess,” Ed asks, “You won’t hurt me if I come quietly, right?”

“That can be arranged,” Geiszler tells him. “But I’m afraid it’s going to cost a little bit more than that.”

“What are we talking?”

Geiszler demands, “Surrender the British platoon that’s accompanying you! I’ll see to it that they’re treated well – simply prisoners of war, no executions. No one has to die.”

“Well gosh, that’s awfully nice of you, commander,” Ed drones flippantly. “But I’m afraid I’m gonna have to pass.”

Geiszler cocks his pistol. “I’m giving you one last chance, Elric! Come over here!”

Ed does not answer.

“You’ve got three seconds to turn around before I shoot! One!”

Nothing.

“Two!”

Still nothing.

“THREE!”

BANG!

The bullet hits its target, Ed stiffly teetering forward into the long tall grass with a thump.

Geiszler looks at the men directly on either side of him, “Cover me.”

The two soldiers nod, and they begin following alongside their commander as the three of them jog
through the underbrush.

Geiszler keeps his gun trained on his fallen victim should he get back up, but as the commander approaches, he notices that something is very wrong! Now that the helmet as fallen off his head, it can be seen that that’s not a head at all, but the top of a log, a ponytail attached to it!

Geiszler sticks out his foot, kicking the log, rolling it over, and he is greeted by the same cartoony face as that on the leaflets that fell on the compound, the angry little drawing carved into the wood.

“ Incoming!” a soldier shouts, a grenade flying this way, and everyone scatters. But as they spread out, those on the outermost circle of the ranks suddenly find themselves tripping and falling forward, caught on tripwires!

BOOM! The grenade lands, and those unlucky enough to be within range don’t last long. Neither do those tripped on the ground, for in quick succession, a hail of bullets comes from the trees, sniping the soldiers before they even have the chance to get back up.

“ATTACK!” Chief Hawkeye shouts, and from behind the trees, the rifles of the Adelphi Ground Team appear, opening fire on Geiszler’s forces.

“It’s a set-up!” Geiszler angrily shouts, “Return fire!” He himself begins shooting as he backs up, taking cover behind a trunk, his men all doing the same, finding cover behind the nearest tree to them.

Lisa, her back to a tree, looks down in the grass below her where Edward crouches, a helmet on his real head just as on the dummy. “Nice work, Elric,” she says, “Now get back to others and prepare for rendezvous.”

“Will do!” Ed answers, and keeping low, he dashes off northwards, away from the battle.

On the perimeter walls of the base, the guards keeping lookout can hear the sounds of the battle not too far off, a few of them tensing up as they remain alert, waiting for the enemies they know will surely come.

The distant sound of a POW! is followed by a whistling, and popping up out of the canopy and flying over the treetops is a mortar shell!

“Look out!” Those on the wall run towards the corner towers, getting out of the way as the shell lands on the wall, ripping a hole in it with great force.

Bähr, at ground level, covers his face to protect himself from the flying debris and smoke. The second it clears, he points at the forest before him, shouting. “Return fire!”

Even though they can’t see where they enemies are, the soldiers atop the wall fire at the thicket of trees.

Another mortar comes flying out of the forest, arching high over their heads and hitting the tall lookout tower, the stone structure tumbling down, the radio antenna perched on its long spire twisted and burnt to a crisp.

A third mortar comes, and Bähr dashes away from it, running towards the wall, for he knows the shell will land behind him instead of right on top of him. He covers his head as the mortar lands, the hot wind threatening to blow his cap off his head. And then Bähr turns around to see the
damage – they’ve hit the anti-aircraft gun!

And now he sees why! Flying in from the south is a plane, heading straight towards them!

Bähr looks around at the soldiers, “All those on the ground! Defend this breach! All those on the wall! Start firing at that plane!”

All comply, moving into position. And though he’s still on the ground, Bähr points his pistol into the air, firing rapidly and haphazardly at the incoming airplane.

~

The bunker rattles, a bit of dirt falling through the cracks of the ceiling, the scientist huddling together nervously in the darkness, wondering when it will be over.

Not far off, down here underground as well, Doctor Marcoh can hear and feel the shakes of the explosions above.

He looks up at the ceiling. “What in God’s name is going on up there?”

~

The soldiers defending the wall breach continue their firing. And finally from out of the trees, the British troops show themselves. And though they are being fired at from ground level, a good half of the troops are firing at the guards on the walls, stopping them from stopping the plane.

Or more importantly, that which the plane is releasing – troops on parachutes!

“Damn it!” Bähr exclaims. “There’s more of ‘em! Keep firing!”

Roy, taking cover behind a tree trunk, tells his troops, “Don’t let them shoot the paratroopers out of the sky! We need them to land on the ground alive!”

The paratroopers themselves are armed with rifles, opening fire at the guards on the wall, though a couple of those guards get lucky, actually managing to hit their targets, the rifles falling from the limp hands of the dead parachutists.

Bähr still has his gun pointing in the air, shooting at the tail of the plane as it begins to fly away.

ZZZIP! A bullet whizzes past his ear, and Bähr flinches, whipping around to face the paratrooper floating down towards him.

Click! Click! Oh no! Out of ammo!

Bähr dashes for the corner of the building, he bursting through the door to get inside where it’s safe.

~

The last sniper falls from the tree, dead, the branches providing him no good cover.

“Damn!” Lisa utters angrily under her breath as she loads another clip. “The minute their position was made known, they were sitting ducks! Poor bastards…”

Geizsler rallies his soldiers, “Come on, men! Keep pressing forward! We outnumber them! It’s only a matter of time! Keep firing!”
The men at the front of the line all duck to the next tree ahead of them, shrinking the gap between them and the enemy.

Lisa orders her own troops, “Hold the line steady!” She ducks out from behind the trunk momentarily, firing a few rounds.

~

The five trucks and one jeep sit quietly in the small clearing, the Americans standing watch over the vehicles, using the transport as cover should the enemies come at them through the forest. Al, too, is with them, a helmet on his head and a rifle in his hands, same as everyone else.

Suddenly, movement from the trees! They all lift their rifles, ready for what may come.

But they all breathe a sigh of relief as Ed pops out from amongst the foliage.

“Brother!” Al says happily, Ed rounding the jeep and ducking down behind it with him. Al passes him a rifle, “How’s it going? Is it working?”

“Well they fell for the tripwires,” Ed tells him. “Let’s hope B-Team can break through the perimeter of the base.”

“Do you think they’ll be all right?” Al asks apprehensively.

“As long as Roy can remember the directions and the password I gave him, he should be able to make it to the bunker all right.”

~

The German soldiers on the ground are dropping, for they’re not sure which way to fire – out into the woods at the troops who are shooting at them? Or to turn around and fire at the paratroopers who have landed and are now shooting at them from behind?!

The guards on the northern wall have all been dealt with, and guards on east and west, if they can see the enemies, are taking aim and opening fire. But the guards on the south wall, though they want to help, must hold their defensive position should an attack come from that direction, something of which they all fear may happen.

“Advance!” Roy orders, and altogether, everyone hiding at the tree-line begins barreling toward the open wall, firing nonstop.

The paratroopers within the walls fan out, getting out of the line of friendly fire, but still, they continue their assault on the German soldiers as the British ground troops break through, Roy and a band of four heading straight for the building, the rest of them staying on the parade grounds to fight the soldiers, a few of them even diverting to the south wall to take care of the guards there.

Roy pushes the door to the building open and enters –

POW! A bullet flies past his nose, sparking off a metal pipe next to his head.

“Get down!” Roy yells, and they all duck their heads, turning towards the two guards down the hall.

Bang! Bang! The British troops take out the German soldiers, and Roy’s team presses forward, running down the long hall.
They get to the end of it and make a left – when suddenly, the man on Roy’s left is being grabbed by the face, a huge hand nearly enveloping his entire head!

Commander Bähr lifts the man and slams him into the wall, making a rather large crack in the bricking.

The troops open fire on the large officer, but he lifts their comrade in front of him, using the poor man as a shield, he absorbing their bullets!

Roy gasps, realizing what’s been done, but there is no time to mourn, for now Bähr is swinging the dead man at them as if he were nothing more than a limp club!

Roy ducks and rolls – the others getting bowled over by their dead comrade – but Roy rolls right between the large man’s legs, and he points his pistol at his back.

Surprisingly swift for one so large, Bähr swings around and backhands the pistol from Roy’s hands, and then he tries to punch him, Roy having to jump back.

Bähr’s fist smashes into the ground, leaving a hole in the concrete! And Bähr lifts his hand like he’s felt nothing! Then he charges at Roy, trying to put him in a bear-hug, but Roy takes to running down the hall towards the stairwell, Bähr barging after him.

_I’ve got to lead this guy away! Roy thinks to himself. That way my team can get to the bunker! Besides, if I go down those stairs, he’ll probably push me and kill me that way! Or even if I get to the bunker, he’ll never let me open it!_

So instead of heading down the stairwell, Roy takes the next left he comes to, running down that hall. And as expected, Bähr is still pursuing him.

Roy bursts through the first door he comes across, finding himself in a large hangar, counters and tables filled with beakers and test tubes, a chalkboard on a rolling stand, and at the far end of the lab, a one-man aircraft of some kind, propped up on a large work rig.

Without his gun to protect him, Roy runs to a workbench, opening a drawer, looking for something, anything to use as a weapon, filtering through various tools and things: a hammer, a screwdriver, a lighter, other odds and ends --

Bähr enters the room, closing the door behind him. “Nowhere to run now,” he darkly chimes.

Propped up against the emergency water main that sits by the door is an oversized wrench, and Bähr picks it up, walking towards Roy. Roy rips the drawer from the work bench, slinging it at the large officer, tools flying out in all directions.

Bähr swings the wrench like a baseball bat, leaving a sizable dent in the drawer as it soars across the room.

“You think you can spring those scientists?” Bähr questions, swinging the wrench back and forth, Roy continually backing up out of the way. “Well you’re wrong!”

The wrench crashes through a table, shattering test tubes and beakers.

Bähr says assuredly, “They’re locked away nice and safe!”

He swings again, taking a large chunk out of the corner of the chalkboard, Roy ducking as the wood flies overhead.
Bähr grins maliciously, “Except for that Marcoh maybe – even if you do find the other scientists, we’re still gonna kill him!” He lifts the wrench high over his head. “Won’t Elric like that?”

Roy runs as the wrench comes speeding downwards, and the heavy metal tool cracks through the concrete floor, getting stuck, Bähr having to jerk back on it to try and loosen it.

Roy runs towards the work rigging, stopping beneath the aircraft, panting as he turns around to see where Bähr is.

Bähr yanks on the wrench, the tool being freed from its concrete trap, and he barrels towards Roy. “Hold still you little wimp!”

Roy narrows his eyes. *Come on!*

As expected, Bähr takes a swing, and Roy ducks and rolls, the wrench flying over his head and crashing into the pillar that holds up the rigging.

“Aw shit!” Bähr cries, and before he knows it, the whole aircraft comes crashing down on top of him!

Roy sits up, looking at the pile of rubble that sits before him.

~

In the dark and silent bunker, everyone still remains huddled together – and though the sounds of the battle above made them all quite nervous, that anxiety has grown even worse now, for things have grown too quiet.

“…Is it over?”

“SHH!”

*KNOCK KNOCK!*

Every man there must stop himself from gasping, lest whoever is on the other side of that door hear them.

But surprisingly, the response from the other side is, “Caramel!” the voice says, “Caramel!”

They all sigh – that’s the password, meaning everything is all clear.

Langelans lowly asks to Van Leeuwen, “But wait – does that mean Ed lost?”

Van Leeuwen motions for Langelans to remain quiet.

Meanwhile, one of the two guards is standing, turning the wheel and unlocking the door. He pushes the door open and immediately is shot in the head!

Several of the men panic, backing up, and the other guard stands his ground, not exiting through the door but instead waiting for the enemy to come to him.

But a surprise comes when Holgerson runs up from behind, shoving the guard in the back, forcing him out the door!

*BANG! And like that, the second guard dies.

“Jésus-Christ!”
“Holgerson!”

In the doorway, a hand appears, waving. A voice, speaking German but with a terrible English accent, follows, saying, “Friends! We are good guys!” The British soldier finally steps into the doorway, “We’re here to free you!”

The men smile and rejoice.

“Come on!” the soldier orders, “We’ve got to move quickly, and you’ve got to do exactly as I say!”

~

The plates of metal clink as they fall off the pile, Bähr’s hand reaching through as he grasps for fresh air, his palm plopping around on the liquid that leaks out of the broken craft and onto the floor. He pushes some of the junk aside, coughing as he pokes his head out. “Augh! Gross! What’s that smell?”

“Gasoline,” he hears a voice answer, and Bähr looks up to see Mustang standing in front of him, a lighter in one hand and a piece of paper in the other. “I light this paper and drop it and you go up in flames.”

“Now hang on just a minute,” Bähr urges, “Let’s not do anything rash!”

“Where’s Doctor Marcoh?” Roy demands.

“ Heck if I know! This ain’t my base!”

Roy moves the paper closer to the flame.

“Whoawhoawhoa! Slow down! I’m being honest!”

“You’re not Geizsler then,” Roy realizes. “Who are you?”

“None of your business!”

Moves flame.

“BÄHR! Bähr, my name is Bähr.”

“Name your comrades.”

“Who?”

“The rest of the Order. That’s right,” Roy tells him, “We know about your little club. Name them all and I’ll let you live.”

Bähr grins though some nervousness comes through in the way that the corner of his mouth twitches. “Ha! Like I’m gonna tell you anything.” What Roy can’t see is that underneath the wreckage, Bähr is currently wriggling his trapped leg, trying to get it out from underneath the heavy pillar that pins him down. “Even if you let me live, it’d be a short life. He’d have my head on a stick.”

“Your leader?” Roy questions.

“That’s right,” Bähr affirms, still cautiously wriggling his leg. “The head of the Order’s not a forgiving man. He’ll take down anyone who gets in his way – even that friend of yours.”
Roy furrows his brow, confused, “What friend?”

“That Hughes lady,” Bähr says. “We know she’s the one stirring up trouble, running your little rebellion ring.”

Roy’s eyes widen. “Hughes?”

“That’s right!” the officer grins wickedly. “It’s nice to have someone on the inside isn’t it? I’m betting she’s the one that snuck you guys into the country.”

Without warning, Bähr suddenly jolts upright, tossing the entire aircraft off of his back!

Roy lights the paper, dropping it onto the gasoline. Before it even hits the liquid, the flame ignites the gas vapors hovering just above the puddle, and slowly the gasoline begins to catch.

Bähr winds back his hand, swinging his arm down and backhanding Roy across the chest, sending the captain flying backwards.

He lands roughly on the ground next to the turned over table, winded, coughing and gasping for air as feels the blood rushing to his chest, it beginning to bruise.

Bähr laughs as he picks up the oversized wrench once again, walking over the flames, they still yet to have grown to any real threatening size, for against what one would expect, gasoline does not actually burn as quickly as most think.

“She may have snuck you in,” Bähr says as he approaches, “But she’ll have to sneak you back out in a box when I’m done with you.”

Roy’s hand is hidden behind the toppled table, gathering up a spilled white powder, he unsure as to what the chemical even is.

Roy pushes himself upright, getting to his feet, keeping his hand balled in a fist as the large man grows closer.

“Heck, who am I kidding?” Bähr gloats audaciously, “By now she’s probably already at Ravensbrück – and if she’s lucky, they haven’t gassed her yet! Haw-haw-haw!”

DOOSH! Roy slings the powder into Bähr’s eyes!

“AUGH!” the commander drops the wrench, it clanging loudly against the concrete, he clapping his hands over his face. “My eyes!”

Roy bolts for the door, opening it up and running out, Bähr madly, blindly swinging his fists,

“Come back here, you little punk! See what’s coming to ya!”

~

A large chunk of bark blows past Lisa’s head as a bullet tears through the side of the tree. She ducks down further. “What the hell is taking them so long?!”

Geizsler has a victorious smirk, “We’ve got ‘em on the ropes!”

“Commander, sir!” his soldier carrying the walkie-talkie pack hops through the tall grass to get to him, the soldier making sure to get behind the cover of the same tree as he. “Message from the base, sir!”
Geizsler picks up the phone of the backpack, listening in. “Report!”

It is Langelans’s voice, the young man on the other end crying, “Commander! Help! They’ve broken into the bunker!”

**BANG, BANG!**

“AUGH!”

Van Leeuwen in the background yells, “Holgerson! No!”

Langelans calls once more, “Hurry!” And then the radio falls silent.

“Damn it!” Geizsler shouts. He looks back to his men. “Fall back! Everyone back to the base, now!”

The German soldiers lower their weapons, darting between the trees as they start to head back from whence they came, a couple of soldiers slowly backing away, covering their exit, keeping their rifles pointed at the enemy line.

Lisa and the ground team take the opportunity to still fire a few shots at the enemy while their backs are turned, though the task is made more difficult by the soldiers covering the retreat.

The soldiers grow further and further away, and finally the remaining two turn and beginning running to catch up with their squad.

Lisa orders her troops, “Fall back!”

And just like their enemies, the ground team begins running, only in the opposite direction of Geizsler et al.

~

Marcoh stands at the bars of his cell, looking down the hallway, trying to see what he can see if anything.

“Hello?” the old doctor calls. “Is anyone out there?”

The sound of footsteps rushing towards him begins to grow louder, and rounding the corner is a soldier – but not a German soldier, someone else. He comes up to the cell door. “Dr. Marcoh I presume?”

“Yes, who are you?”

“Roy Mustang. Ed’s probably told you about me.”

Marcoh smiles a weary but thankful smile. “Oh thank God…”

~

Run, run, run. The base seems somehow further away than when they left it – or perhaps it’s just the phenomenon of time slowing down when the brain is speeding with worry.

The damaged wall of the complex is coming into view, smoke billowing from the rubble. Geizsler, with half of the men he originally left with, breaks through the tree-line, everyone in the group still ever alert.
But as they cross through the broken wall, they all slow, looking around – the only enemies they see are dead ones, littering the ground along with their own fallen soldiers.

“Spread out!” Geizsler orders. “Take down any enemies you see! Protect those scientists!”

“Sir?” one soldier says, pointing to the ground.

Geizsler looks down – and sees what has the soldier irked: the dead man on the ground, his uniform is gone! In fact, several of the dead men are missing their uniforms. Not all of them, but enough.

“What in blazes?” Geizsler questions.

At that moment, Bähr is walking out of the building, wiping a wet washcloth over his face, he muttering, “When I get my hands on that Mustang, I’m gonna ring his scrawny little neck!”

Geizsler marches up to him. “Bähr! What happened?! I leave you in charge and everything falls apart!”

“They had guys on parachutes!” Bähr shouts. “There were more enemies than we anticipated! And they took out the AA gun! It’s not like we could stop them all!”

“What’s wrong with your eyes?” Geizsler asks, for they’re all red.

“That damn Mustang!” Bähr rampages. “He threw some kinda chemical at me in the lab! I’m probably gonna wind up blind!”

Some of the white powder still sits on Bähr’s uniform. Geizsler wipes off a bit, rubs it between his fingers and then smells it. Then he narrows his eyes in a most perturbed manner. “This is chalk…”

Bähr chokes on his words for a moment before finally blurting belligerently, “I didn’t know that! And besides! I was a little preoccupied trying to put out the fire he started in the lab! Did you want this whole place to burn to the ground?!”

* *

The salty sea air blows in from the bay, its mist sprinkling the budding flowers that are just starting to show. The people of the little hamlet greet one another politely as they walk down the streets of town, enjoying the brisk afternoon.

Von Müller sits in his office, busying himself with the standard sort of paperwork that comes across his desk, waiting for the Friday to finally come to an end.

A knock comes at his door, followed shortly by his secretary, she not even waiting for him to say, ‘Come in,’ for she looks quite flustered.

“Mayor von Müller, sir! There’s—”

Before she can finish, a man walks past her, entering the room – it’s an SS officer!

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The mayor jumps to his feet, saluting, “Heil Hitler!”

The officer returns salute, “Heil Hitler.” He looks around, taking in the room, “My, what a quaint little place you have here. Rather drab, actually.”

The mayor, though a little offended, feigns humility. “Well, we are a small town, sir. We do our best.”
“Hmm, well, yes. Apparently your best is not good enough,” the officer says, turning his attention directly to the mayor. “We’ve received word that the local convent is a likely suspect in the harboring of enemy troops, is that correct?”

Von Müller clears his throat. “That was a dead end. My police force has already searched the premises and we found it clean.”

“Yes, well you can never be too careful, can you?” the officer drones on. “Not to shine a bad light on you and yours, but perhaps leave matters like this to the professionals, hmm?”

Von Müller is unused to having people talk to him like this, and he puffs up his chest, getting ready to give the young man a lashing, but he stops himself before he should say anything that he might regret. “Believe me, sir, I had every intention of calling the military in. But I didn’t want to make you come all the way out here for nothing.”

“Better overly-cautious and safe than reckless and dead,” the officer tells him. “Now. If you’d be so kind as to show me the way to this convent, please.”

* 

The smell of slimy algae clings to the smell of rotting wood clings to the smell of stinky fish.

Adler growls to himself. How does he always end up getting stuck doing grunt work like this? If Geizsler had just not been foolish enough to let the prisoner escape…

He sits at a table inside the busy little office building, typewriters and other typical office noises flitting through the air. There is no private room here, no office where Adler can tuck himself away, so he must do his thinking while trying to block out all of the distractions surrounding him.

Two days on the western border, and now three days in Cuxhaven, and still, there has been no sign of enemy movement, no little hint that could lead Adler to where they’re hiding or heading.

He growls under his breath as he flips through the report that Himmler gave to him at the meeting. There must be something that he’s overlooking, some clue as to where that convoy has gone!

What if they’ve already gotten out, right under his nose? Oh how many juicy secrets Elric could tell to the British. Damn, damn, damn it all!

A soldier walks up to him, laying a couple of papers on the table. “The daily report, sir.”

“Thank you,” Adler says flatly, almost sarcastically, for surely this paper is as useless as all the others.

But then something catches his eye.

“What’s this?” he mutters as he reads the transcription of a telegram. A British ship has been captured? And it’s landing in Bremerhaven?

He narrows his eyes.

* 

The ships all sit in their docks, the usually busy harbor rather quiet. Still, the fishing boats busy themselves with their business, the coast guard turning back any who even come near to the buoys.

And then a strong horn sounds. A guard on the patrol boat turns around to see that closing in is a
large ship, the Nationalist flag billowing from its high mast. As it grows closer, he can see that
there are a few holes lining the hull of the ship, dark splotches of powder burns here and there.

The guard checks his watch. The timing’s right. This must be the captured ship.
He hails the ship, it slowing, but not stopping, the large vessel still drifting along as the tide pushes
it towards shore.

“Ahoy!” the guard calls.

A sailor on deck calls back, “Ahoy!” he strolling slowly towards the aft so as to still be able to talk
to the guard.

The guard says, “Unless you all have the password, I’m gonna have to ask you to turn around.”

“That’d be the captain that knows that,” the sailor responds. “Hang on, I’ll go fetch him.”

The workers stand on the boardwalk, watching as the ship pulls in from the sea, the beast of a craft
finally coming to a rest at the dock.

From up on deck, sailors toss down the large heavy tow ropes, the dock workers tying the ship
down to keep it from drifting away.

The gangplank is lowered, and the Kriegsmarine captain, smartly dressed in his blue uniform,
begins to descend from the deck.

“Ahoy there, captain!” the dock manager greets him. “Heil Hitler.”

“Heil Hitler,” the captain greets.

“Can I see some identification, sir?” the manager asks.

“Of course.”

The captain reaches into his breast pocket, pulling out a small leather wallet, passing it off to the
dock manager.

As the manager checks his papers, the captain asks, “Where’s the best place to get a steak in these
parts? I’ve just about had it with seafood.”

The manager laughs, “Well you came to the wrong place. Mostly everything around here is
seafood.”

“Oh well. The life of a sailor, I suppose,” the captain relinquishes. “I can’t tell you how long it’s
been since I’ve had a nice juicy steak. With some buttered potatoes and sauerkraut on the side?
And a nice cold beer – MMM!”

The dock manager laughs again, “All right, enough. You’re making me hungry, too.” He passes
the wallet back to the captain. He then uses his pencil to point to the ship. “I need to tally the
damage the ship has suffered. This may take a while.”

“No rush,” the captain tells him.
Two soldiers stand outside the gate of the church, and by now, quite a sizable crowd has gathered around, the townsfolk both curious and upset.

“This again?” someone asks, others muttering,

“What has the government got against the church anyway?”

“God will strike them down, you mark my words.”

A little boy picks up a rock, throwing it at the soldiers. “Get out of here! Leave Pastor Cornello alone!”

“Thomas! No!” his mother pulls him back.

Her husband looks at her, “Come on, Rose, let’s get out of here before things get out of hand.”

Honk, honk!

Everyone looks through the gates, and they can see that driving up toward them are the military trucks.

“All right, everybody move back!” One of the soldiers outside the gates commands, and he and his buddy pull the iron bars open, and one by one, the trucks pass through.

The mayor is amongst the crowd, anxiously waiting, and as one of the trucks slows to a halt beside him, he can feel his feet grow cold.

The window of the truck rolls down, the officer sticking his head out the window. “Well, looks like you were right. Spic and span, just like you said.” He smiles, “Looks like I need to have a little more faith in small town police.”

The mayor can feel his nerves unwinding just a bit. “Thank you, sir. A safe journey to you.”

The officer pulls his head back in and rolls up the window. And then the convoy takes off.

On the boat deck, the dock manager scans to floorboards, shaking his head. “Your sailors need to do a better job of swabbing the deck. I’m still seeing bloodstains on it.”

“I think they were hoping that the ship would be outfitted with all new wood,” the captain guesses, “So why bother?”

The manager asks, “How come they’re having you take it all the way to Norway for a refitting?”

The captain shrugs, “You got me. Just another visit from the Good Idea Fairy, you know what I’m saying?”

The dock manager chortles, “Yeah. Never question the wisdom of the higher-ups.” He flips a page in his notepad, moving to a clean sheet. “All right. Any prisoners to report?”

“Right this way.”

The captain leads him to the narrow metal stairwell that leads to the lower decks, and down and down and down they go, until they get to the very last deck, just shy of the cargo hold itself. They make their way down a hall, the captain pulling the keys from his belt as they reach a door, he
unlocking it and pushing it inward.

The dock manager steps inside, looking around. Behind a row of bars are men in English naval uniforms, about twenty or so, half of them wrapped in bandages, some of them with blood seeping through, becoming browned and crusty in the cold air. An older man sits up front closest to the bars, he staring holes through the captain.

The Kriegsmarine captain smiles as he looks in on the prisoners. “After we land in Bergen, all these men will be sent to Bærum with the rest of their kind.”

The old man, presumably the former captain, growls, “aj hop ju rɑt hɛl, ju slajmɪ bæstœrd!” And then he spits on the floor.

The German captain turns his nose up at him. “We’ll see how long he lasts on the inside.”

A few moments later, the captain and the dock manager are reemerging from below decks when the growing sound of a rumbling catches their ears. The captain looks down to the docks, seeing that a line of trucks is pulling up. “Ah, excellent timing,” he chimes. “The convoy’s arrived.”

The captain descends the gangplank, while at the same time, the officer in charge of the convoy is exiting his truck. They come up to one another, saluting.

The officer asks, “Are we ready to board, captain?”

“Everything’s ship-shape. You can start boarding immed—”

“Hold it!” a strong voice calls.

They look over to see someone marching up to them: an SS officer wearing a long black cloak.

He stops in front of them. “Commander Markus Adler. What’s going on here?” he demands to know.

“Is everything all right, commander?” the captain queries.

“No, everything is not all right,” Adler says sharply. “Exactly where did you capture this ship?”

“In the North Sea, sir,” the captain tells him. “The exact coordinates escape me at the moment, but roughly around 53, 8. It’s all in the report.”

“And where is your ship? The one that captured this one?”

“Didn’t you receive the report, sir? We had to scuttle her.”

“Sink your own ship?” Adler questions.

“Why yes. Otherwise the enemy may have decided to come along later and use her for scrap metal, or else salvage any supplies remaining in the cargo hold. Better to get all that out of their hands, you know.”

“And now you’ve brought a battle-damaged ship into port, and you are immediately going to set sail again?” Adler continues to pry. “Clearly it needs to be taken to the shipyard and repaired first.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the captain apologizes, “But I have my orders. This company needs to get to
“Norway.”

“They can take another ship,” Adler snaps.

“Well--”

Adler turns towards the trucks, “NOW LISTEN UP!” he shouts. “THIS IS AN OF-8 SPEAKING! CHANCES ARE I OUTRANK EVERY ONE OF YOU, SO YOU ARE ALL UNDER MY COMMAND, UNDERSTOOD? NOW GET OUT OF THOSE TRUCKS AND FALL IN!”

Quietly, though quickly, the soldiers all hop out of the backs of the trucks, each of them shouldering his rifle, the boards of the dock rattling noisily as the soldiers line up in formation.

Adler strides up to them, and starting at one end of the company, he begins walking along the front row of soldiers, his eagle eye scanning each of them up and down.

He can sense it. He can sense their nervousness. Are they simply intimidated by his presence? Or is it something more?

He stops in front of one soldier in particular, this man rather short compared to the men around him. Adler looks down at the soldier, glasses sitting before his brown eyes, a rather odd fairness about his complexion.

Adler leans down to get face-to-face with the soldier. “You know, it’s strange…” the commander says as he pulls the glasses off the soldier’s face. “I don’t recall people with glasses being allowed in the SS. Especially ones with brown eyes.” He breaks the glasses in his hand. “What’s your name, soldier?”

The soldier remains silent, glaring sternly back at the commander.

“Answer me!” the commander orders.

“Incoming!” someone shouts.

Everyone looks up, Adler looking over his shoulder – coming towards the docks from the direction of the sea is an airplane!

The company officer begins shouting, “Quick! Get those trucks onto the ship!”

“Idiot!” Adler yells, winding back his hand about ready to slap him. “You go on the ship and you’re perfect targets!” He looks back at the company. “I’m in charge here! Take cover and open fire on that plane! Someone man the AA gun! NOW!”

The company spreads out, some taking cover behind the trucks, others ducking behind cargo crates. Each props up his rifle muzzle, taking aim, and opening firing – though their aim leaves something to be desired as the plane passes overhead unscathed.

“AA gun!” Adler yells again. “NOW!”

The dock workers, though not fulltime soldiers, have been trained for emergencies such as this, and quick as they can, they hop onto the anti-aircraft gun, readying the cannon.

Too late! A bomb is falling from the plane, right over the radio station!

*Boom!* There goes the tower!
“Fire!” Adler yells, and the dock workers fire the cannon – but the plane is changing course, turning, starting to arch back this way! It’s coming in for another strike!

Adler pulls out his pistol, staring down the sight of his gun, waiting for the plane to get close enough for him see the pilot in his crosshairs. “Come on, you bastard,” he mutters.

But something flashes at him, an intuitive burst, a sixth sense or something – for out of the bottom of his vision, Adler can sense that something is out of place.

His eyes come down from the sky and look straight forward out onto the docks. Virtually hidden, just barely poking out from behind a crate, is the brown-eyed soldier, rifle pointing straight at Adler!

Adler quickly moves the aim of his pistol down from the plane and onto the soldier.

**BLAM!**

Too late! A blazing pain rips through the commander’s cheek, throwing his head back, and all the world vanishes to black as he falls backwards, landing hard onto the boardwalk.

The young company officer sees that Adler has fallen, and he shrieks in terror.

“This is too dangerous! We’re getting out of here! Everyone! Get those trucks on the boat, now! We’re shipping out!”

Everyone moves quickly, most of them running towards the gangplank, a handful of others hopping into the drivers’ seats, firing the vehicles back up.

The dock manager dashes up to Commander Adler, getting down on his knees to check him. “Sir? Sir?!”

“It’s coming back!” one of the other workers shouts, the dock manager looking up.

Indeed, the plane is once more circling back, beginning to head towards the docks.

But rather than a bomb, the front-mounted gun on the craft bursts to life, shooting at the AA gun, the men controlling it running for cover to save their own skins.

The sailors from the boat have untied the ship, and they quickly run back up the gangplank, then turn around and draw it back into the ship.

The captain on the bridge throws the engine full ahead, and the metal beast lurches forward, water sloshing at its hull.

Further and further the ship moves away from the docks, pulling out of the narrow bay, starting to make its way out to sea.

But just when it seems like the plane is gone, yet again here it comes, heading straight for the ship!

“They’re doomed!” a dock worker cries.

The pilot drops his bomb – but too early apparently, for the bomb hits the bay, sending a column of water spewing up out of the harbor, raining down on the deck of the ship as it rocks with the waves.

The dock workers sigh, “That was close!”
“Hey look!” another points, “The plane! It’s finally leaving!”

“He must have run out of bombs.”

“Ahoi!” they hear someone call, and they all look off to their right. Coming up from the neighboring shipyard is a small speedboat, a crew of about six able to fit in it. The man at the helm calls, “Is everyone all right? Anyone need first aid?”

The dock manager frantically nods his head, “We’ve got an officer down! He’s still breathing but I don’t know for how long!”

The helmsman docks the boat next to the wooden ladder that reaches down off the pier, and one by one the medical personnel on board climb out.

~

On the bridge of the ship, the captain turns to his first mate, asking, “Have we reached top speed yet?”

The first mate checks a gauge. “Aye, captain.”

“Good,” he looks back out to sea. “Jolly good.”

Another crew member asks, “Do you think they suspect?”

Entering the bridge is the brown-eyed soldier, pulling off his, er, her, helmet as she lets down the bun hiding underneath it. “That commander certainly did. With any luck, he won’t survive his wounds.”

One of her soldiers, following her, comments, “That was a great shot you took, Chief Hawkeye! And without your glasses! I’m impressed.”

“Thank you, Private Havoc.”

The captain warns her, “Well you’d better have a rifle pointed out of every porthole until we get out of German waters. We may have slowed them down by damaging their radio tower, but news spreads fast.”

*

The sun has set and now the stars, old tried and true friends of the sailor, have come out to light the night sky.

The captain pours a cup of tea for Chief Hawkeye and Doctor Marcoh, as well as for the old man from the brig.

The old man smiles, “So, was I convincing captive do you think?”

The captain says, “I’m just glad you decided to spit on the floor and not in my face.”

Marcoh gives a weary chuckle, “My knees are still shaking. I don’t think I’ve ever done something so crazy in my life.”

The captain looks to Chief Hawkeye and says, “Please, you must fill us in on your half of the story.”
Lisa sets down her cup of tea. “Well, it was all relatively straight-forward at the beginning. It wasn’t until later that the real ruse began.”

The story plays out in the minds of her listeners as Lisa narrates for them:
“We started by sending a fake message to their commander.”

Geizsler has the radio phone to his ear, listening in as Langelans’s voice cries from the other end, “Commander! Help!”

What Geizsler doesn’t know is that on the other end, Langelans is smiling as a British soldier stands next to him.

The young scientist continues, “They’ve broken into the bunker!”

The soldier fires twice into the air, Holgerson dramatically holding his throat and croaking loudly, “AUGH!”

Van Leeuwen yells melodramatically, “Holgerson! No!” Vigne covering his own mouth to stifle his laughing.

“Hurry!” Langelans adds, and then he turns off the radio.

Back in the woods, Geizsler looks at his men, “Fall back! Everyone back to the base, now!” And they begin their retreat.

Lisa says, “That’s when we quickly began our own retreat. We had to get back to our own vehicles in time to rendezvous with the B-Team.”

Doctor Marcoh’s voice rises, “If I may, Miss Hawkeye?”

Lisa responds, “Of course. You can explain this next part better than I.”

Doctor Marcoh begins, “After the soldiers broke us out, they took us into the guards’ barracks and had us steal the uniforms from their dressers.”

Out on the open parade grounds of the compound, the ground is littered with dead soldiers, German and British alike. The B-Team exits the building with the scientists, Roy ordering them, “Quickly now! If you were unable to find a clean uniform in the barracks, grab one off a dead soldier! The cleaner the better! Move, move, move!”

Meanwhile, a couple of troops are opening up the front gates, while several other troops are firing up German trucks, pulling them out onto the parade grounds.

“Everyone pile in!” Mustang orders. “Quickly now!”

“And we did just that,” Dr. Marcoh tells, “All of us dressed like Nazis, driving away in German trucks.”

Lisa says, “This is when the rendezvous occurred—”

Parked on the side of the woodland road are the four British trucks, the one American truck, and
the single jeep.

Havoc has his head sticking out the window, resting his arm on the ledge, he looking down the road. Then he perks up. “Here they come!”

A convoy of German trucks is driving towards them, the lead car flying a white flag out the passenger-side window.

Ed and Al are joyous, Al cheering, “Yeah! They did it!”

The German trucks pull up alongside the British trucks, and Lisa orders, “Let’s make this quick! Transfer all these supplies and then let’s get the hell out of here!”

The soldiers from Team A start grabbing bags and begin tossing them to soldiers from Team B.

Ed pulls some supplies from the jeep, and he takes them to the back of the very last vehicle.

“Edward!” a throng of voices greet him, and Ed looks into the truck, seeing Doctor Marcoh and the others!

“Guys!” he hops into the truck, “You’re all right!”

“We’re all right? Look at you!” Van Leeuwen says patting him on the back. “You finally got a haircut!”

Holgerson wraps his arms around Ed, giving him a big old hug. “Jeg er så glad for at du er i orden!”

Ed pats his hand awkwardly, “Yep. Good to see you, too.”

“Edward,” Marcoh kindly smiles. “I’m glad to see you made good on your promise.”

Ed smiles with a firm nod.

“Ed,” Al asks, standing at the back of the truck, he smiling, “Are these your friends?”

“Yeah!” Ed says, moving toward the opening, “Come on in, say hi! I’ll go grab some more bags!”

Roy, meanwhile, stands beside the jeep, a serious look on his face as his hand rests atop a bag of supplies sitting in the back seat.


“I’m fine,” Roy answers.

Ed tilts his head a little, concerned.

The front truck is already starting to move forward.

Lisa is jogging down the line calling, “Is everybody in? Everybody get in! You too, Mustang! Don’t dawdle!”

Roy lifts the bag out of the jeep and he walks towards the last truck, he and Ed getting in.

Lisa runs for the truck currently at the head of the line, and she hops in. “We’re ready! Drive!”

And thus the convoy of German trucks filled with British troops and varied scientists begins
moving forward.

Everyone is jabbering happily, Al nodding politely with a smile as he does his best to try to comprehend what Holgerson is saying to him.

Roy is not listening, his eyes to the floor of the truck bed. He looks out the back, watching as the jeep starts to get just a bit further and a bit further away. Helmet still on his head and rifle still slung across his back, Roy lifts up his kit bag and he jumps out of the truck, hitting the ground running!

“ROY!” Ed and Al call after him, Ed shouting, “Roy, come back here!”

Al pounds a fist against the head of the bed, rattling the driver’s seat, “Stop the truck!” he shouts. “We’ve lost a man!”

The driver hits the brakes, looking through the small window that separates front from back. “Hurry! Or else we’ll lose the convoy!”

Ed and Al jump out of the truck, running after Roy, he already making it to the jeep.

“Roy!”

“Roy!”

Marcoh says to the chief and the captain and his mate, “I’m afraid I don’t know what happened after that. I couldn’t hear any of their conversation from that distance. All I know is Al turned to us and told us to go on – that they’d catch up with us.”

Lisa, a little restrained, asks, “So you have no idea whatsoever why he just jumped out like that?”

Marcoh shakes his head, “None whatsoever.”

Lisa sighs through her nose as she heaves her shoulders, inwardly saying, _Damn it, Roy. What were you thinking?_

The older fellow asks, “What happened after that?”

Lisa answers, “After the battle, we drove for a few hours, back to our fallout position. We convinced the local mayor to allow us to, ahem, ‘search’ the nearby church. How else to explain several military trucks parking within church grounds.”

Doctor Marcoh comments, “I must say, I never realized nuns were so industrious. A whole room of them, just busily sewing away!”

Lisa tells the captains, “We knew that there wouldn’t be enough uniforms at the base for everyone – so Pastor Cornello and his followers were kind enough to fabricate a few.” She smiles. “Quite handy when nuns already have plenty of black and white material laying around.”

She takes a sip of her tea, then gently sets the cup back on its plate. “After that, we came to the docks, and you know the rest.”

“Top-notch work, Hawkeye,” the old man congratulates. “I’m sure your father would be proud.”
Lisa is quiet, staring seriously into her tea. Then she says, “My father would have completed this mission 100%. I’ve only managed 90. No, more like 80.” Something between a grumble and a sigh escapes her throat.

She thinks to herself, Objectives were: Get Elric. Get the bomb. I got one, didn’t get the other, and now I’m returning home with neither of them. That’s just perfect.

Doctor Marcoh asks, “So what happens now?”

Lisa looks to him as she answers, “Now you go to England where we can protect you from the Germans. In return, we’d like for you to give us all the information you have regarding their scientific endeavors.”

Marcoh chuckles, “I’ll try to remember all that I can. Mind you, old age has not been kind to my memory.” He slows, turning serious. “…And what about Edward?”

Lisa looks back into her teacup. “That’s up to my superiors to decide. If they deem him not worth the trouble, those three may be on their own…” Her eyelids lower, a somber look on her face. “Still – I just wish I knew what was going through their heads when they jumped….”

“What the hell are you doing?!” Ed asked Roy after he had jumped out the truck, the boys having run up to meet him at the jeep.

Al pleads, “Come on! We have to get back to the truck before they leave without us!”

“I’m not going,” Roy says flat-out, setting his bag in the back of the jeep. “There’s something important I need to take care of.”

“Like what?” Ed angrily asks. “Getting yourself killed?”

“Repaying a debt,” he says, yet to turn to face them.

Both of them seem confused.

Roy continues, his shoulders falling just the slightest, “The man who saved my life – your friend, Hughes – the Nazis have taken his wife.”

They gasp, Al shocked, “They’ve taken Gracia?!”

“And in all likelihood, her daughter, too,” Roy tells them, finally turning towards them. “It’s because her husband committed treason to help me, they view her as an enemy!”

Roy opens the door to the jeep, sitting down in the driver’s seat.

He orders them, “Now get back to the truck, both of you.”

“To hell with that!” Ed says, jumping into the passenger seat. “I’m not one of your soldiers! You can’t order me to do anything!”

“Ed-”

“Gracia was my friend long before I ever met you!” Ed fervently states. “This is my responsibility as much as it is yours!”
The truck driver has his head out the window, looking back, “Come on!”

Al turns back to the truck, he shouting, “Go on ahead! We’ll catch up!”

The driver pulls his head back into the window, and the truck drives off.

“Al!” Roy says, “You need to run after them! I’m not following the convoy!”

“I know,” Al replies, climbing into the back seat, taking his rifle off his back and setting it across his lap. “We’re all in this together. Brothers on a mission.”

Roy gives a firm smile and a nod. And he fires up the jeep.

And off they go, Roy and Ed and Al, heading east, heading for Ravensbrück.

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Next episode:

Reviews:

QueenCar1120 chapter 28 | Feb 20

The Queen better be cafl!

Ahaha, sorry, but I know that Lisa is Riza’s counterpart in this world, but in some way, she still reminds of the Riza Hawkeye I know and love, so yahh I am getting feels for Lisa as well. x)

Chapter End Notes

“Down they go, down underground—” *begins dancing and singing like David Bowie* Daddy, Daddy get me outta here! Okay, that's enough of that.

Ah, just when I thought I couldn’t hate Reistrom any more than I already did. He goes and pulls a thing like this. I hate that guy. I hate that guy so much.

And yes, PLEASE, listen to Schwangau! He’s on the nose with that one! It really is just all a coincidence! Gracia’s innocent! D:

From across the distance, I can hear my sister’s voice call out: “There will be some
Fullmetal in this Fullmetal fic, right?” I know, I know – we’re 15 pages in before we ever even see Ed, but that was done on purpose. Suspense doesn’t build itself, you know.

“Well they fell for the tripwires.” *badum-tsh!*

Also because I’m a dorkbag, Van Leeuwen and Vigne shall henceforth be known as “Waffle Bros.” (…Get it? Because they’re Belgian. Waffle? Belgian? Aw you’re no fun…)

Am I the only one who read the phrase “troops on parachutes” ala Jack from YGOTAS? “CARD GAMES ON MOTORCYCLES!” “TROOPS ON PARACHUTES!”

*takes off hat* A moment of silence for the radio station workers at the dock. They were civilians. They didn’t deserve to die.

By the way: Lisa on the pier? *’BOSS ASS BITCH’ PLAYS IN THE BACKGROUND* Though when Adler started getting suspicious of her, I could hear the voices of her fans frantically worrying for their Queen. The Queen is safe.

So that scene from last chapter, where Lisa says to Cornello, “The habits that the nuns wear are black and white. And SS uniforms are black and white.” And then Cornello says, “Well, that is true… But still, that sounds like a lot to lay on the sisters.” Make sense now? Seemed kinda out of place earlier, but now it doesn’t, does it? :3
The workers of Munich push their brooms along the confetti-filled streets, sweeping up all the colorful paper streamers that have been left on the ground after today's Heroes' Day parade, the task made all the harder in the waning light of dusk tide.
The sounds of the day have quieted down, all the hubbub of the crowds dispersed as people have returned to their homes after a long day of activities.

The dinner table is quiet, too, the young girl who sits there, only about nine years old, absently pushing her vegetables along her plate with her fork, she watching the peas as they roll along.

Her mother, across the table from her, asks, “Did you enjoy the parade today, Elise?”

Elise shrugs her shoulders as she continues playing with her food. “I thought it was kind of boring… just a bunch of soldiers marching…”

The quietness returns, filled only by the sound of the cuckoo clock ticking on the wall, young Elise's legs gently swinging in time.

Elise looks up from her plate, looking to her mother. “…Did Dad ever march in any parades?”

Her mother quietly answers, “No, sweetie.”

Elise looks back down, still quiet. “I didn’t think so…”

Her mother looks up from her own plate. "What makes you say--"

*Knock, knock, knock!*

They both turn their heads towards the door.

"Who could that be?" the woman asks as she slides back from the table, rising from her chair and walking to the door.

She turns the handle, pulling the door open, and is surprised to see that there are two policemen standing on her stoop.

"Yes, officers?" she asks, "How can I help you?"

“Gracia Hughes,” one of the officers tells her, "We need you to come with us."

“What for?” Gracia inquires.

“We’ll tell you down at the station,” he takes her by the wrist, “Come on.”

“Stop!” Gracia pulls back, "Let go!"

“Mom?” The scooting of a chair is heard followed by a quick trotting of feet as Elise comes running out of the kitchen and into the front hall, “Mom, what’s wrong?”

Gracia looks to her daughter and shouts, “Run, Elise! Run!”

The other officer pushes his way into the house, Elise turning and running for the back door, but he swoops the little girl up, slinging her over his shoulder, she kicking. "Put me down! Mommy!"

"Stop!” Gracia begs, “Please, don’t do this! We haven’t done anything!"

"If you haven't done anything, stop resisting!” the officer says as he drags her out the front door, the neighbors now beginning to peer through their curtains, both fearful and curious as to who the police are taking away this time.
Elise continues her kicking, now beating her tiny fists on the other officer's back, the little girl shrilly screaming.

The officer holds his ear, "Agh! Shut up, kid!"

Elise tries to find something to cling on to, her fingers scraping across the wallpaper, she hitting a picture frame and knocking it from its spot on the wall, the picture crashing to the ground, wood splintering, glass cracking, leaving shattered slivers all over the floor. The officers don't even bother to close the door behind them, leaving a single beam of sunset light streaming into the house, illuminating the broken family portrait laying on the ground.

The little jeep blazes across the sunset landscape, the British vehicle out of place here in the German forest, the woodlands dotted with several ponds and lakes that just a moment ago were glistening but have now grown dull in the long shadows cast by the tall evergreens surrounding them.

Roy, in his stolen SS uniform, is driving as Ed sits in the passenger’s seat, keeping a lookout, helmet on head and rifle in hand.

Al sits in the backseat reading a map, he as well with a helmet and rifle, though his weapon lays off to the side as he busies himself with the paper.

It's still an odd feeling, Ed thinks to himself, to have to use a weapon at all. Even though neither he nor Al has fired a single shot, it's still such a strange thing to him that he can't just clap his hands and make the enemies run. Not like it used to be…

"We should be there by now,” Al breaks the silence, still looking over the map.

"While we may be approaching the town,” Roy says, keeping his eyes on the road, "There’s no telling where that prison camp is.”

Ed has to raise his voice a little to be heard over the wind that rushes past them, "If they took Gracia and her daughter to this camp, what do you think they’ve done with Hughes himself? Would they put them in the same camp or is this a ladies-only camp?"

Roy is quiet, a sadness about his demeanor, though when he does speak he too must speak up over the wind, “That’s right. I never got to tell you over the radio, did I? Chances are, Sergeant Hughes was killed years ago, immediately after my escape.”

Ed looks down at the floor of the car, inwardly sighing to himself as his shoulders fall.

Al, too, is quiet. Though this Hughes he did not know well, there's still a sting from the great probability that Roy is right. "So what's the plan?" Al asks, changing the subject.

"We've had a long couple of days,” Roy says while still driving, "Storming that base was no easy task. I'm sure we're all tired. What we need to do now is find a place to rest for the night, then get an early start looking for the camp in the morning. We'll all be better with fresh eyes."

Ed clenches tightly to his rifle. "...How long do you think Gracia and her daughter have been in there? What if they've been there for years?"

"Then one more day won't hurt."
"And what if it does?" Ed turns on him. "What if we're too late already?"

"From the way Bähr was talking, they only recently picked up Gracia," Roy tries to calm him. "And if she's anything like her husband, she's too stubborn to let them get her down."

Ed returns to looking at the floor, his brow furrowed with worry. "I hope you're right."

* 

While a lunch break at this hour seems odd to most, it's the norm for those who work the nightshift, for war does not keep office hours. The workers of the Berlin office who still wait for their own break to come continue busily typing or bustling from office to office delivering messages and such, whatever their duty entails. However, the secretary outside Himmler's office must watch as the stack of papers on the desk grows, for the Lead Commander has expressly forbidden that he be disturbed at the moment.

Quite frankly, the secretary finds it better to be on this side of the door anyway, for even though the door is closed, the anger of the Lead Commander is still audible to all in the vicinity.

“Eighty men!” Himmler yells. "EIGHTY men you had at your disposal, and you were defeated by half that number!”

Geizsler and Bähr stand before his desk, taking the lashing as it comes, though Bähr defends, “Plus fifteen. Don’t forget the guys on the parachutes.”

“Silence!” Himmler yells, the little man's face as red as a beet. “All of those scientists, gone! And what’s more, Geizsler, you’ve allowed Elric to escape TWICE!”

Geizsler bows his head humbly, though the bead of sweat rolling down his forehead betrays his nervousness. “Please forgive me, sir.”

“I find it hard to be forgiving when one of my best officers has been hospitalized." He rants, "What if Adler never recovers? Tyr is not the first god to die! If that happens it may throw everything out of balance!”

Bähr blurs quietly, "Oh for the love of--" but he catches himself before he should say anything more stupid.

Himmler whips his eyes over to the large commander. "Something you'd like to say, Bähr?"

Bähr nervously coughs, "Uh, what I mean to say sir, is, uh, well, if it's a prophecy, that means it written in stone yeah? Tyr couldn't possibly die before Baldur."

Himmler growls lowly but then says, "While I appreciate your optimism, Bähr, we're dealing with a real crisis here. No doubt Elric will tell the British about the projects he was working on while under our care. Everything's been compromised." He turns his attention to Geizsler, “I want all of the projects at your base to be packed up and sent here to Berlin immediately.”

Geizsler looks surprised, "All of them?"

“Everything – spare nothing," the Lead Commander tells him. "You’ve already proven your base fallible. Should the enemy decide to strike it again, the last thing I want is for them to make off with anything of importance.”

"Lead Commander, sir," Geizsler implores, "I'm sure it's fine. The enemy wouldn't be so gutsy as to..."
strike the same base twice."

"I'll not take that chance," Himmler tells him, "Not with you, Geizsler. You've already more than proven your incompetence to me. Now carry out your orders. You're dismissed."

Geizsler and Bähr both salute and then turn and leave the office, closing the door behind them.

Everyone outside the office continues their work, pretending as though they've heard nothing (which is mostly true, for all anyone could make out was the volume at which the Lead Commander was yelling, nothing more).

As the two officers walk away, Bähr looks over to his comrade, lowly asking, “What are we gonna do about that radio-control rocket?”

Geizsler keeps his eyes forward, staring seriously down the hall as he responds hushedly, “We’ll have to hide it away somewhere, both it and its blueprints. Nobody can know about it. If Adler should fail to pull through, the last thing he'd want is for his good name to be besmirched with such scandal.”

Moon sets and sun rises, and the lines of workers greet each other as they take turns clocking in and clocking out, day shift trading places with night shift.

Schwangau enters his office, quietly closing the door behind him as he begins to cross the room, past the bookshelf that sits against one wall and the couch that sits against the other, he being careful to avoid the coffee table that sits there in the darkness.

He gets to the windows, pulling back the long curtains and letting the morning sun into the room. Though it's still a little chilly out, the clear blue skies signal that it's going to be a nice day today, and already there are signs of spring as the flowers are beginning to bud on the bushes outside.

Schwangau turns to his desk, taking a seat and pulling his schedule book from his drawer. What's on the agenda today?

His eyes widen. "Oh no!" he mutters to himself, "Was that today?" Scribbled on the little calendar in front of him is a note – Today's when he’s supposed to be inspecting the nearby concentration camp! And he’s already supposed to be on his way! He’s going to be late!

He hums a little anxiously as he frowns. … Can’t somebody else inspect the camp? He’s tried for a while to avoid ever having to go to one of those… Even the labor camp outside Wewelsburg… Yeah it's there, but he's done his best to ignore its presence…

His thoughts are interrupted when from the door comes a knock. "Huh?" He looks up, curious, and so he closes his schedule book, putting it back into its drawer before rising from his desk. He crosses to the door opening it up, and is startled--

It's Armbruster! “Hey ther-!”

SLAM! Schwangau quickly shuts the door, leaning up against it, shivering.

A slow knock comes again.

Schwangau can feel his cheeks growing warm, the blood clearly leaving his hands as they've grown cold. This is stupid - why did he slam the door? That was so rude. He again hums anxiously,
hunching his shoulders as he turns the door handle, re-opening the door.

Armbruster looks unthrilled as he gives a curt wave. “…Hi.”

“C-Commander Armbruster,” Schwangau nervously asks, "What are you doing here?"

Armbruster is already walking into the office, not waiting for an invitation, “I thought I’d drop by, say hi.”

Schwangau wrings his fingers, “Um, well, you’ve just said hi, so – ”

“You know what I mean,” Armbruster says, flopping on the nearby couch, kicking up his legs. “So, what’s hanging?”

Schwangau continues his wringing, “Nothing much.”

“Did you hear the news?” Armbruster starts gossiping. “Himmler’s pretty pissed. Elric got away again.”

Schwangau gasps, “What?! Really?”

“Yeah. I’m just glad I’m not the one responsible,” he gloats as he pulls an apple out of the fruit bowl on the coffee table in front of him. “Hell, he treats me like dirt enough as it is. I’d hate for him to lord something like this over me too.” He bites into the apple.

Schwangau curls his lips in, hesitant to say anything before uttering, “Um, Commander Armbruster, I’d love to stay and chat, but I’m really busy today…”

Armbruster draws his lips to one side, somewhere between confused and annoyed, “I thought you said you had nothing going on?”

“I have to leave,” Schwangau tells him, "I’m already running late as it is.”

Armbruster sits up. “Oh yeah? Where to?”

“I have to do an inspection of the prison camp north of here.”

“I can help you out,” Armbruster offers.

Schwangau waves his hands nervously, “No, really, that’s okay.”

Armbruster stands, leaving the partially eaten apple on the table. “Nah, it’s fine. You said you’re running late? I can fly you there – push you out on a parachute. You’d make great time!”

Schwangau can feel his stomach doing flips, “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Armbruster laughs as he pats him on the back, ‘I’m just messin’ with you! Come on, we’ll take my car.”

“But, but…”

“But what?”

Schwangau almost doesn't want to say it, lest it come true, “…But what if we crash?”

“What, you afraid of driving?” Armbruster raises an eyebrow. "How else do you expect to get
“No, it’s not driving, it’s…”

Armbruster lets out a short, frustrated sigh. “This is about that stupid legend again, isn’t it? Look, I’m not going to kill you.”

“You say that now! But it happens by accident, doesn’t it!” Schwangau blurts rather loudly, atypical of the soft-spoken young man. "What if you have an accident while you’re driving?! If I’m in the same car-!”

“Schwangau, buddy,” Armbruster wraps his arm around his shoulder, making Schwangau even more nervous, “Tip for life: There’s a thing called a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you believe something’s going to happen, then it is. So all you’ve got to do is stop believing in it. Don’t believe that you’ll die and you won’t.”

The inside corners of Schwangau's brows rise as he frowns a little skeptically, “…I don’t think it works that way.”

“Why not? It’s worked for me,” Armbruster says. "I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, but for how long? You’re still mortal.”

“You don’t know that. The only way you find out you’re mortal is if you die.” He smiles widely, "So I’m immortal until proven otherwise.”

Schwangau grimaces, “That’s a terrible way of living life. It’s so reckless.”

“Hey, are we gonna stand here talking all day, or we gonna get a move on? The longer we stand here, the later you are for your inspection.”

Schwangau finally sighs, hanging his head. “Oh. Okay, fine. Let’s go…”

“Awesome! Road trip!” And Armbruster sprints out the door.

Schwangau sighs again, cradling his elbows before finally walking out of the office.

* *

The people of the town carry on with their daily lives, paying no mind to the camp that sits on the far end of the lake. Mostly it is hidden behind the trees anyway, so it's not like they have to look at it. And while prisons aren't the most pleasant thing, only in an ideal world would they not have to exist. But the world is filled with criminals, and they have to be put away someplace, away from society, away from good, decent people who are just trying to live their lives peacefully.

At least that's what the people tell themselves.

And besides, if all the other camps are anything like the camp across the lake, surely the government is being far too soft on criminals - or maybe it's just because this prison is for women that the grounds are so feminine: flowerbeds stretch out beside the manicured lawns, bright red flowers growing in the rows of dark, tilled soil, young trees growing up beside them. A wide street (if it can be called a street) runs down the center of the camp, separating the two rows of wooden barracks, the street leading to a large open square, not unlike a parade ground.

Still though, as pleasant as all this may seem, one cannot ignore the tall guard towers that look
down over the large rolls of barbed wire that line the tops of the fencing, reminding all who enter here that this place is indeed a prison - a goodly one, but a prison nonetheless.

The crowded dining hall is filled with the sounds of women chatting and spoons clattering against bowls as they eat their breakfast (again, a surprisingly goodly one) of sweet porridge with dried fruit. All have bread, a few have margarine, and fewer still have sausages, each woman here thankful for the little bit they have.

Though their uniforms of striped dresses and kerchiefs serve to remind them of their place as prisoners by forcing their conformity, the women still find little ways to assert their individuality - wearing handmade bracelets and necklaces made of simple items such as string and dried seed pods; some have even made dolls from torn rags to give to their daughters. Aside from that, the only things that set the prisoners apart from one another are the colored triangles that they’ve been forced to sew onto their clothing.

One lady, wearing a red triangle with a capital P on it, quietly scurries away from the breakfast line with her tray in hand, she keeping her head down, trying not to draw attention to herself as she makes her way through the crowded dining hall, finally taking a seat at a table with Gracia and Elise.

“Here!” the lady quietly smiles, “I was able to sneak an extra sausage!” she tells them as she passes both of them to her friends.

Gracia sadly smiles, “Thank you, Miss Herczog.”

“Please, call me Lidia,” the lady tells her.

"Thank you, Miss Lidia," Elise says, already biting into the sausage.

"Elise, honey," her mother reminds her, "Don't talk with your mouth full."

Lidia beams, "You have such an adorable little girl, Mrs. Hughes."

"Thank you. And you can call me Gracia if you like," she offers.

"Thank you."

"Do you have any children of your own?" Gracia chats.

Lidia shakes her head, looking down at the table. "No. I had hoped that maybe, someday…"

Gracia apologizes, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to touch a sensitive subject."

"No, it's all right," Lidia tells her. "I just worry about my dear Łucjan is all."

"Your boyfriend?"

"Fiancé," Lidia explains. "I haven't seen him in so long."

Elise interrupts, curious, "What kind of name is What's-Yawn?"

Lidia chuckles, "Łucjan. It's Polish."

"Are you Polish?" Elise asks.

Lidia nods. "Yes. Well, sort of. I tried to explain to the guards that my grandfather’s family came
from Hungary. But they don’t care. They just handed me a P-patch and told me to get lost.” She reaches across the table, gently pointing at the triangle on Elise's chest. "That is what the big D on your patch means, is that you are Deutsch."

Elise looks down at it, "But why do they even have D-patches at all? My teacher said that only foreigners are put in the camps."

Gracia briskly tugs on Elise's sleeve, "Elise, hush."

She looks up at her mother, "But Mom, I still don’t understand. Why did they bring us here? What did we do?"

Gracia puts her arm around Elise, rubbing her arm, “I don’t know, sweetie. I’m sure it’s all just a misunderstanding. Once they finally let me talk to the Overseer, I’m sure we’ll get things cleared up and they’ll let us go.”

A sadness crosses Lidia’s face, though she says nothing.

* 

The women slowly filter out from the dining hall, each beginning their workday, some having to push a heavy roller to lay flat ground for a new building foundation, others lucky enough to get sent to the sewing area to produce socks for soldiers.

On the parade ground sits a truck which has clearly seen better days, its front bumper caved in, the tarp covering on its back starting to thin, and overall just rather old looking.

A crowd of ladies stand in the open square as a rather fat, grumpy female guard shouts at them, “All right! Those whose last names start with H – you’re on electrical duty this week!”

Gracia, Elise ever by her side, turns to Lidia. “What’s electrical duty?”

Lidia tells her, “They take us to a factory in town nearby, and we build things – radios, cable lines, things like that.”

“Quiet in the ranks!” the old lady demands, and everyone falls silent. “If I call your name, come forward and get in the truck! Haber!”

A lady does as instructed, walking towards the truck and hopping in as the guardess continues,

"Hajek!"

"Herczog!"

Lidia quietly scurries forward, joining the others.

"Hughes!"

Gracia moves forward, she gently holding out a hand for Elise to stay put. She looks at the guardess, “Ma’am?”

“What?” the woman snaps.

“I’m supposed to meet with the Overseer today,” Gracia explains. “If I’m away, how can I-”

“Shut up and get in!”
“But-”

“It’s all right,” a third voice arises.

They both look over to see a woman in a clean-cut uniform approaching them, a clipboard in one hand and a riding crop tucked up under the other. Her pale skin accents her grey-blue eyes, they narrow and sharp, as sharp as her pencil-thin eyebrows. And though her hair is dark, her lipstick is a bright, rather outlandish red.

She introduces herself, “Overseer Franka Archer. How can I help you, ma’am?”

“Thank you for seeing me,” Gracia first thanks, then begins to explain, “The police arrested my daughter and I and brought us here without telling us why. There must be some sort of mistake.”

The overseer gives a small, snide little smile. “You’re not the first woman to say that.” She lifts her clipboard. “Name please?”

“Gracia Hughes.”

Archer chuckles, lowering the clipboard, “Oh my. I don’t even have to look that one up. Your arrest was especially ordered by Lead Commander Himmler himself.”

Gracia is more than surprised at this news. “What? Why?”

“Seems you’re connected to several people who have all committed treason.” The Overseer tells her, ”The Lead Commander finds it a good idea to take a bad influence like you and get her away from the public.”

“That’s a lie!” Elise steps out of line, jumping out in front of the crowd.

“Elise!” Gracia fearfully scolds, hoping her daughter will be quiet.

But no, for the young girls shouts, “My mom is not a bad influence on people!”

Archer chuckles. “My. Quite the little girl you have here, Mrs. Hughes.”

“Elise! Behave!” Gracia commands.

Elise continues, “We haven’t done anything wrong! Let us go home!”

Archer strides towards Elise, “Young lady, you’d do well to listen to your mother. Disobedient little girls get punished.”

With little warning, she strikes her riding crop across Elise’s face, the little girl yelping, holding her cheek as she starts to cry.

“No,” Archer devilishly smiles, "Are you going to make me have to do that again? Or are you going to be a good girl?”

Elise, though tears stream down her face, grits her teeth and furrows her brow, and she juts out her arms and roughly shoves the Overseer in the gut!

Everyone gasps, Archer herself momentarily surprised, but quickly that surprise turns to anger as she winds back her fist and punches the little girl, Elise falling to the ground!

“Elise!” Gracia screams, trying to rush towards her daughter, but Archer points her riding crop
threateningly at her,

“Stay where you are!” She swings the crop down to the girl while looking at the rest of the prisoners, “Nobody help her up! She can get up on her own.” Archer turns her attention to the female guard, “As you were.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the guardess nods.

And the overseer storms off.

The guardess looks at Gracia, “Go on, you! Get in the truck!”

Lidia has gotten out of the truck and is now gently ushering Gracia towards it, “Come on, dear. She’ll be all right.”

Elise lays on the ground crying as the guardess continues calling names. "Husa! … Hustovi!"

Ed and Al stretch the large green netting over the jeep, covering the vehicle in the leafy, vine-covered camouflage to hide it from any passersby.

Roy tosses his rifle's strap onto his shoulder. "We ready?"

Both boys nod, "Yeah."

"All right," the captain says, "Let's go."

As they start to leave the jeep behind, Ed comments, "Too bad the engine would draw attention to us. It'd be a lot faster if we drove."

Al silently nods in agreement.

Quietly they traipse through the marshy woodland, keeping their eyes peeled, remaining as silent as possible, only ever saying that which needs to be said such as, "Watch your step," as they cross over various protruding roots and deceptively deep puddles.

They come to the edge of a large lake, the hundredth they’ve seen, but the first they’ve actually passed on foot. And, cautiously, they take this opportunity to fill their canteens, doing so one at a time while the other two stand lookout.

Keeping hidden away in the trees, along the edge of the lake they walk, for where there is water, there are typically people. And as instinct would have it, that's exactly what they find, for after walking just a little ways more, Roy signals them to get low, all three of them crouching down in the bushes.

Cautiously, they peer back over them, looking into the distance - on the other side of the lake is a large camp, a beat-up old truck currently exiting through the main gates, a guard closing the gate behind it.

Roy grimaces as he glares at the camp surrounded by barbed wire. “These things look just how I remember.”

“I dunno,” Al points out, “I don’t recall flowerbeds last time.”

Ed looks to Roy and asks, “All right, great leader. So what’s the plan?”
“We need to stake it out, get a rhythm of the camp’s daily routine,” Roy plans aloud, still looking out across the lake, "Figure out where the guards are at and at what times. If we can find a break point, we’ll know when to sneak in.” He turns to them, “For now let’s backtrack and go get the jeep. We’ll bring it back here and set up camp.”

Ed nods, "Right."

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The soldier standing guard at the front gate stares absently out at the road before him. Unless there’s a new arrival of prisoners, which as far as he knows there is not, then nothing’s scheduled to come down this road until the evening when the workers return from the factory. Until then, it's just standing here with nothing more to do than stand and stare.

He heaves a bored sigh. But then suddenly, something catches his ears - a humming of some kind, growing louder and louder, coming through the trees. And that's not all, but a trail of dust is being kicked up, and the guard can see that speeding up the road right towards him is a car! It’s going so fast it’s going to crash through the gate!

He rapidly lifts his rifle, shouting, “HALT OR I’LL SHOOT!”

The car screeches as the brakes are applied, the stream of dust showering over the vehicle and clouding the air before it, and though the car is hidden, its screeching tires indicate that it's still yet to stop!

The guard dives off to the side, fearing for his life, and after he hits the ground he sits up coughing as his lungs are filled with the grit that clouds the air.

Amazingly, the car stops just short of the gates.

The guard hops to his feet, putting his rifle at the ready, several of the guards on the catwalk that lines the fence all crowding around, doing the same, all trying to see who it is that drives the convertible car before them.

The driver, goggles over his eyes, raises his fists, victorious.

“WHOO! Record time!” Armbruster boasts.

Schwangau, as white as a ghost, is in the passenger’s seat, gripping tightly to the door, his head hanging over it, shoulders shaking and knees knocking.

Armbruster lifts his goggles and whacks his passenger on the back, “SEE! I told you I’d get you here quick!”

The world is still spinning for Schwangau, “Maybe parachuting wasn’t such a bad idea…”

Not very much later, inside the camp, a guard escorts Schwangau and Armbruster along, many of the lady workers stopping to look at the unusual pair. It's not often they see officers, much less ones who wear large fancy capes - though the taller of the two has his casually draped, his shoulder pads not even on his shoulders but rather hanging down his back; nor does he wear his cap, but rather has it hanging from a keyring on his belt, right next to of all things a crossbow.

Schwangau quietly admonishes him, “Commander Armbruster, wear your cape right. And put your cap on.”
“Nag, nag, nag,” Armbruster complains as he adjusts his cloak, lifting the pads to his shoulders, “Who needs a wife when you’re around to do all the nagging?”

The guard brings them up to a female officer, he shortly saluting her before he turns and leaves.

She salutes them. “Chief Senior Overseer Franka Archer, pleased to meet you.”

Armbruster slides up to her with a wide grin on his face, “Pleased to meet you. So, Archer, huh? You know I’m an archer myself.” He lifts the crossbow off his belt, waggling his eyebrows. “Pretty neat, huh?”

She instead looks to the other officer, “You are Commander Schwangau?”

Schwangau nods, “I am.”

Her narrow eyes sharply glance to her side, “Who’s this then?”

He takes her by the hand, “Erik Armbruster, at your service m’lady.” He attempts to kiss her hand, but she abruptly pulls it out of his grasp.

She again returns her attention to Schwangau, “Captain Koegel is on leave at the moment, so I’ll be the one to show you around the grounds.”

Schwangau again politely nods, “That will be fine, thank you.”

Armbruster says to her, “Lead the way, you fine vixen!”

Archer rolls her eyes and turns and begins walking, the officers following her.

Schwangau trots up to her side, he quietly apologizing, “Please, forgive my associate.”

"As a lady you grow used to it," Archer says as she walks along, arms confidently folded behind her back. "No offense to you, sir, but men are simple creatures, many of them acting solely on base instinct." She looks up at him through her long eyelashes as her bright red lips curl into a tiny smile. "Though something as banal as instinct can be fun sometimes, yes?"

Schwangau's lips tighten as for the second time today he's felt his hands grow cold, his feet joining them this time, his little heart shivering with a wave of panic. He turns his attention to the path ahead of them.

As they stroll across the grounds, Archer begins speaking in a praising tone not unlike a tour guide: “You'll find that we have excellent conditions for our workers, resulting in a low turnover rate - hardly any deaths, not unlike many of the other camps. This ensures high productivity, which has proven highly valuable to the local factories and the war effort overall.”

Armbruster's eyes rove around the camp, he looking at all the ladies, “Heck, I should have got a job here. Look at all the girls.”

Though she smiles, a displeased little hum arises from Archer’s throat. “Most of these women are dirty – Poles, Gypsies, Jews – if you had relations with any of them, we’d have to turn around and put you into a camp.”

Armbruster slyly grins, “You just want to see me in handcuffs.”

Schwangau pulls down on the brim of his hat, “Please be quiet.”
"Get back to work!" a guardess's voice arises not too far in the distance, and Schwangau looks up to see what's going on. The woman is whipping a prisoner with a riding crop, the young lady holding up her hands defensively, her bruised palms and forearms taking the brunt of the damage.

Schwangau frowns and quietly looks around - the faces of many of the women here look tired and worn, their fingernails eaten up, their hands calloused, some with black eyes, and many more still with shaven heads, denoting they have been placed on the lowest of all rungs in this place.

A quiet gasp escapes his lips as he spots a woman with a rather rotund, rounded belly lifting a yoke on her shoulders, wooden pails filled with rocks on either end.

He points at her, asking Archer in a slightly raised voice, "What is that woman doing working?"

Archer looks to the woman and then looks back at the commander. "She's a prisoner, sir."

"She's pregnant!" he yelps with concern. "You can't make a pregnant woman work! Make her go lie down!"

Archer frowns, but does not question. "You there!" she shouts to the woman with the yoke, she looking over. "Return to your barracks and get some rest!"

"Wh… Really?" the woman questions.

"Don't make me tell you again! Go on! You!" Archer points at a nearby guardess. "Escort her back to her room. She gets the day off."

The guardess salutes and then goes and helps the pregnant woman set down the yoke and pails.

Archer turns back to Schwangau, "Shall we proceed?"

Though every smile so far has been merely out of politeness, a genuine smile is now on Schwangau's face. He nods, "Yes, let's continue."

Archer starts walking, leading them once more along their tour. As they near the square, there is a clattering as a trash can falls to the ground.

Armbruster raises an eyebrow, "You guys got cats around here?"

Archer's eyes are as quick as they are sharp, for she can see a shadow stumbling around near the can, followed shortly by a pair of boots coming around the barrack. She jovially laughs as she starts pushing Schwangau off to the right, dragging Armbruster along with her as she asks, “Did I tell you we have peacocks?"

“Peacocks?” Schwangau questions curiously.

Archer nods, “Oh yes! They’re quite lovely!” She leads them up to a pen, one large enough to be in a zoo. “Why don’t you look at them for a while. I’ll be right back.”

“Uh, okay.”

As she turns away, the smile drops from her face, rage and thunder filling her eyes and she marches back towards the main path.

Now stumbling around the trash can is a male guard, he swaying back and forth a bit, singing off-key to himself.
Archer sweeps by, dragging him by the arm. “Ow! Hey!”

“Shut up,” she throws him up against the wall of the barrack. “What’s your name, soldier?”

He dumbly looks back at her, his eyebrow raised. “Who me? Errybudy knows me. My name is,” he burps, “Fischer.”

Archer waves the smell away from her face, angrily questioning, “Have you been drinking?”

“Well it’s Saturday, isn’t it?” He spouts loudly, throwing up his hands, “Party day!”

Archer forces his arms down, “Shut up, you buffoon!” she harshly whispers. “We have officers from Berlin here inspecting the camp!”

“Ooohh!” He straightens his helmet. Then starts to walk, “I’ll just go say hi.”

“No!” She pushes him up against the wall again. “If they find out we’ve got drunk guards, do you know how that will look on the camp? On me?”

“On you?” he dumbly chuckles. “I’d like to be on you!”

She slaps him.

“Oh! Hey! That’s a compliment!”

“Moron! Get out of here before I have you discharged!”

“Where’s ‘Out of here’?” he asks, still rubbing his cheek.

“Anywhere but here,” she tells him. “Go for a walk in the woods – hell, *jog* for all I care! As long as you burn that alcohol out of your system.”

He lifts his fingers, signaling ‘okay’ as he smiles. “Sure thing, toots!”

She smacks him in the arm.

“Ow! Fiery!” He rubs his arm, walking away.

She waits, watching him, making sure he's completely out of sight as he turns the corner around the farthest barrack before she turns and starts to walk back towards the animal pen.

Meanwhile, Armbruster is sticking his finger in between the wiring of the cage, he flicking the tail of a colorful parrot as he smiles. “Who’s a pretty polly? OW! It bit me!”

“If you’d stop trying to poke it,” Schwangau says.

“I’m not poking it, I’m petting it!”

“So then,” Archer says cheerfully as she walks up to them, “Let’s look at the inside of the facilities, shall we?”

~

Fischer continues his stumbling towards the front gates when the guard there on the outside takes notice of him.

“Where are you going?” the guard asks.
He salutes, unsteady on his feet as he wobbles. “The head lady told me to wake a talk.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you hear me the first time?” Fischer grumpily blurbs. "She wants me to take a walk.”

“Oh.”

Fischer smiles, outstretching his arms as he looks at the gates, "Open says me!"

The guard shrugs, reaches up for the lock and handle and he pulls open the gate, allowing Fischer to pass, the drunken soldier staggering along his merry way up the woodland path.

One of the guards on the fencewalk calls down to the gate guard, "Is it such a good idea to let him be out on his own? What if he falls over and hurts himself?”

“Ah, let the idiot go,” the gate guard waves him off. "Let's hope he falls in a pond. Maybe the cold water will clear his head.”

What the guards remain unaware of - for their eyes are still on Fischer - is that off to their right, across the lake, a jeep is slowly rolling to a halt, Ed, Al, and Roy hopping out, re-covering the jeep in the camouflage netting.

* 

The high ceiling fans twirl around and around, stirring up the otherwise stuffy air in the large brick building that is the electrical factory. The ladies stand on the assembly line, each quickly attending to their duty before passing the radio down to the next lady, the little electronic item being cobbled together piece by piece.

Elise has been charged with running up and down the assembly line, looking for any screws and other whatnots that have fallen. She picks them up, carrying them in her apron, and once her pockets are full, she runs back to the large bucket at the head of the line and dumps her dull silver treasure.

Gracia in the meanwhile has been screwing screws into the innards of the radios, her wrist starting to hurt from the constant repetition of the motion, her fingers cramping from clamping so tightly to the screwdriver. She would stop to massage her hand, but to stop is to bring the whole line to standstill and cause a backup.

Elise comes up to her mom, gently tugging at her apron. "Mom, I'm bored."

"Hush, dear," Gracia quietly says, still keeping her eyes on her work.

"But I am!"

"Elise," her voice is more serious than before, "Your talking has already gotten you into enough trouble. You need to hold your tongue."

Elise frowns, the corners of her mouth trembling just slightly. "...You said we were gonna go home. You said after you talked to the Overseer that she'd let us out of here."

Gracia sighs silently. "I know, baby."

"Then why are we still here? I don't understand!"
"I don't understand either, sweetheart."

"It's not fair! We shouldn't be here! My teacher told me that only bad people end up at the camps!"

Gracia finally turns her attention from her work, looking her daughter in the eyes. "Now Elise, that's not true. Miss Lidia's a nice lady, isn't she?"

Elise looks down at her shoes, "Well... yeah." Then she looks back up at her mother, "But then why is she here? She must have done something wrong."

Gracia sadly frowns, once more returning to her radios and screwdriver. "Sometimes bad things happen to people who've done nothing wrong."

"But even you said, Mom - you said that the prisoners in the camps are bad people - like that prisoner who killed Dad. A good person wouldn't do that!"

Gracia silently continues her twisting of her screwdriver.

Elise stands there looking up at her mother, waiting for an answer.

Finally Gracia says, "There aren't always easy answers to everything, Elise."

Elise sighs and looks down at the ground.

* 

The late afternoon sun wears on, and though it causes the water of the lake to rise into the air making everything humid, Roy wants the sun to stay up for as long as it can - for that means more light they have to see by, more light to illuminate the buildings of the camp, making it easier to spy upon them.

A trail of bushes lines the lake, and beside a tree which grows behind this line stands Roy, he gently peering out from behind it with a set of binoculars to his eyes. Ed and Al in the meanwhile are sitting on the ground, they playing tic-tac-toe in the dirt with a couple of sticks they've found.

"I'm bored," Ed says, turning to Roy. "It's my turn to stand lookout."

"Yeah, in a minute," Roy tells him, "Note the time. The guards are changing out."

"Right," Ed says, pushing himself off the ground and to his feet, quickly hopping over to the nearby kit-bag from which he pulls out the map. He flips it over and pulls out a pencil as well, going over to Al. "Watch please."

Al pushes back on his sleeve, exposing the face of his wrist-watch so his brother can see, Ed scribbling the time onto the back of the map. Al looks up to Roy, asking, "Have you seen Gracia yet?"

Roy lowers the binoculars, shaking his head. "There's so many people moving down there -- and they're all wearing the same uniforms, it's hard to tell who's who, especially with those kerchiefs on their heads."

Ed leaves the map next to the kit-bag as he walks over to Roy, "All right, my turn. Hand 'em over."

Roy complies, passing the binoculars to Ed who takes them and lifts them to his eyes, he now looking out upon the camp.
Roy hums worriedly.
"What is it?" Al asks him.

"I hope we're at the right camp," Roy expresses aloud.

Al leans over, grabbing the map from where it sits, and he brings it to himself, setting it right-side-up on his lap. "I'm pretty sure we are."

"Dammit," Ed mutters, "We are," he says very seriously.

Al sounds both excited and nervous, "Gracia?"

"No, worse. Two of the people down there – they're wearing cloaks."

Al, too, has now hopped to his feet, joining Roy and Ed at the tree. "Cloaks? Members of the Order?"

“Yeah,” Ed passes the binoculars to his brother, letting him see. "Do you see there? The ones that just came out of that building. If they're here, chances are this is the camp they've sent Gracia to. No doubt they're questioning her." He growls. "Damn it. If that's the case, we can't just sit here any longer."

Roy warns, "Ed-"

Ed shouts, "You know what the Nazis are like!"

“Keep your voice down, someone might hear us!”

Al interrupts, a little excitedly, “Hang on – there's a truck that's just rolled in. People are getting out of it.”

Roy and Ed wait patiently as Al continues to stare down at the camp.

And then that little bit of excitement in Al's voice grows as he says, “There she is! There’s Gracia! And Elise is with her! Oh wow, Elise has gotten so big.”

Roy asks, “Did you know her as a baby?"

“Well, no," Al explains, "The other Hughes – the one from our world – his daughter’s name was Elicia." Al is still looking through the binoculars, his tone turning to a soft, almost paternal sort of coo, “She looks just like her…”

“Let me see,” Ed says, retaking up the binoculars from his brother, looking through them.

Standing beside the beat-up old truck, along with a handful of other women, is Gracia, Ed recognizing her face instantly, for truly it has not changed much over the years - perhaps a little more worn from stress, but still, clearly this is her. And beside her is her daughter, she clinging to her mother's hand. The little girl Edward had known so long ago back in his own world had baby-blonde hair, and perhaps this one did too when she was younger - and though her hair is still light, already it is starting to turn brown like her mother's.

Though the situation is serious, Ed can't stop himself from smiling just the tiniest bit. *I wonder what day her birthday is, he thinks to himself. Is it the same as mine or isn't it?*

Roy asks, “What are they doing?”
Ed tells him, “Looks like a guard is taking them to a building… they’re going inside.”

Al asks, “What about those officers?”

“…They’re just… standing there.”

~

Schwangau and Armbruster stand near the flag pole, Archer with them as Schwangau quietly jots something down in a little notepad he's brought with him.

Archer inquires, “I hope you’ve found everything in order today, sir.”

Schwangau nods, flipping the notepad closed and carefully slipping both it and the pencil into his pocket. “Yes, here at the camp anyway. I still need to inspect the factories.”

"Oh but Commander," Archer says with a bit of a light-hearted, amiable air, "It's already getting so late. You should rest.”

Armbruster stretches, “Yeah, I’m bored. Let’s take a break.”

“But-” Schwangau tries to protest, but already Archer is slipping her arm around his.

“The factories will still be there in the morning. Come, join me for dinner in the mess hall.”

Armbruster is slipping his own arm around her free arm, “Grub sounds good! Lead the way!”

A low annoyed growl escapes Archer's throat as she narrows her eyes at Armbruster, but she decides to ignore him and proceeds to start leading them both to the dining hall.

~

“What are they doing now?” Al asks.

Ed watches them quietly for a moment. “…They’re going into a different building.”

Everyone breathes a sigh. “That’s a relief,” Roy says. He grows more serious, telling Ed, “Keep a sharp eye on them. If at any point they do go into the same building as Gracia, then we can't waste time - we'll have to break into that camp.”

Al asks, “But how are we going to do that? Any ideas?”

Ed, eyes still to binoculars, says, “Well, Roy’s dressed like a soldier. Maybe he can work his way into the ranks.”

Roy shakes his head. “Too risky. Something like that might have worked if those officers weren’t down there. But if they're as close to Himmler as we think they are, then chances are they’re familiar with our faces. They catch sight of us and the camp will be on high alert.”

SNAP! A twig breaks amongst the shuffling of leaves.

Ed quickly snatches up the nearby rifle, Roy putting his hand on the gun in his holster.

A soldier, red in the face, comes stumbling out of the bushes. He blinks once or twice, bleary-eyed, looking around. “Uh, wait, this isn’t the gate,” he mutters as he looks around. He looks directly at Roy. “Hey buddy, you're from camp right? You know the way back?”
Roy slowly moves from the tree, still keeping his hand on his gun as he gradually starts to approach him. "Yes, I know the way," he slowly lies, "Here. Let me help you."

"Aw, thanks buddy," the man slurs. He wobbles a little as he stands, his hands limply dangling at his side as he takes notice of the other two men here. "Hey. Who are these guys?"

"Eyes on me," Roy says, trying to distract him, growing ever closer to him. "Come on, let's get back to camp."

Still though, he eyes the other two, "How come, um, how come you guys got brown uniforms? You Luftwaffe or something? Where's your plane?"

"It's back at the airfield," Roy lies, now almost right up on the soldier. "Let's go."

"Why you all hiding in the bushes? Unless," suddenly his eyes flash widely, "Oh crap!"

Roy lunges forward, grabbing the man by his arms, but the man begins struggling, loudly shouting,

"Sound the alarm! Spies! SPIES!"

Ed and Al now too have dashed forward, trying to help Roy subdue him as the soldier wriggles out of his grasp.

He backs up into a tree, thrusting his hand into his pocket and producing a set of brass knuckles. "Come on! Let's go!" He runs at Ed, swinging his fist, but Ed side-steps, and the soldier stumbles forward, toppling into the bushes.

Ed grabs him from behind, lifting the man upright and putting him in a sleeper hold to keep him from moving.

The man still babbles, flailing his arms, "Come on! Is that all ya got! I can take you on! All six of ya!"

Ed grimaces as he leans his head back away from him. "I think this guy’s been drinking."

"Only a couple drinks," the man 'admits'. "Besides, I’m German! I can hol’ my beer!"

"Yeah, well I think the beer’s holding you," Ed says. He looks at Roy, "Get some rope."

"Wait, what?!"

Roy dashes to the jeep, quickly tossing back a bit of the camouflage netting so as to get to the supplies tucked away in the back of the vehicle.

Al asks his brother, "What are we going to do with him?"

Ed puts on his best 'evil' expression, his face dark, his eyes shining with a bit of vicious glee as he gives a sharp-toothed grin (all in all, his face actually looking rather comical), "If he values his life, he’ll talk."

"Pfft! You think I’d betray my country?" the soldier rebuffs, "To a half-pint like you?"

Al can see a large vein bulge on his brother’s forehead, and he attempts to stop him, "Ed!"

But it’s too late – still holding the man's neck and chin in the crook of his elbow, Ed’s lifted him
off the ground and is swinging him back and forth. “WHO YOU CALLIN’ A HALF-PINT?! YOU CAN’T EVEN HANDLE A WHOLE PINT, YOU DRUNKARD! YOU THINK YOU STAND A CHANCE AGAINST ME?!"

Roy, now with rope in hand, says, “Ed, stop before you choke him.”

A light purple outlines the horizon in the west, the sun having set, and now all the sky is a rich, deep blackish-blue, the stars yawning and stretching as they come out to greet the night.

On a small patch of land, still technically part of the camp though not mingled amongst the prisoner’s barracks, is a decently sized house, Archer currently leading Schwangau and Armbruster up its steps.

“This is the guards’ residence,” she tells them as they reach the porch, she turning to face them. ”I hope you’ll find it comfortable for the evening.”

Armbruster leans his forearm up against the tall porch post, leaning in close to her as he grins. “It’d be a lot more comfortable if there were someone to warm my bed, if you know what I mean.”

Her eyebrow twitches, she asking Schwangau, “Permission to slap him, sir.”

“Ooh! Getting kinky!”

Schwangau waves his hands uncomfortably, “Please stop! Miss Archer, I am so sorry for the way he’s been acting!”

The front door opens, a soldier stepping outside. "Everything all right here?"

Archer nods. "Show these officers their quarters for the night."

"Yes, ma’am," the guard complies, standing aside to allow the officers to pass into the house. Archer turns and leaves, the guard shutting the door to the house. He looks to the officers, saying, "This way, sirs."

Several soldiers fill the parlor of the house, lounging around, chatting, some reading magazines, others still playing cards.

The guard leads Armbruster and Schwangau upstairs, taking them down the hallway to where he opens up a door to a room, it not very large yet neither cramped, a hat rack in the nearby corner and a tall bunk bed up against the side wall.

“I call top bunk!” Armbruster says, running for the bed.

Schwangau enters the room, the guard closing the door behind them, leaving the two of them alone. Schwangau wrings his hands as he quietly asks, “Can I have the top bunk?”

“Too late!” Armbruster is already climbing the small ladder, hopping up onto the top mattress. “You snooze, you lose!”

“But, I won’t be able to fall asleep if I’m on bottom.”

Armbruster lowers his eyelids, skeptically raising a brow. “Is this some weird psychological thing for you?”
Schwangau rubs his arm up and down. “No, it’s just that, well… What if the top bed breaks and falls on top of me and crushes me in my sleep?!”

“Oh, so it’s fine if it falls on me?”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“You over-think everything,” Armbruster comments, clasping his hand behind his head as he lays back on his pillow. "Relax, will you?"

“You don’t know what it’s like!” Schwangau blurts anxiously. "Always wondering when you’re going to die, and how. What if I eat a bad egg? What if I fall down the stairs?!"

“See, now you’re contradicting yourself,” Armbruster points out. "You only worry about dying because of that stupid fable, but if you really believed it, then you’d know exactly how you die.”

“Which is why I don’t like being anywhere near you!” Schwangau exclaims.

"Hey," Armbruster rolls onto his stomach, sternly looking him in the eye, “Have I ever done anything to hurt you?"

“You nearly made me lose my breakfast on the way up here!”

“Aside from that?”

Schwangau slows, “Well… no…”

“I’m telling you, you’re worrying for nothing." He rolls back over onto his back. "Now go to bed.”

Schwangau hums sadly, defeated. He takes off his cap, finally hanging it up on the hat rack by the door, and he begins to remove his cloak.

“So, that Archer lady,” Armbruster muses, “She’s got some nice gams on her, huh?” he says, referring to her long, curvaceous legs.

Schwangau shrugs, hooking the front chain of his cloak together as he holds it in his hands, “I guess.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice?”

Schwangau turns around to the coat rack, “I don’t stare at ladies,” he says plainly. "It’s rude.”

Armbruster responds with an air of sarcastic reverence, “Oh, well, excuse me, your baronship.”

"Hey!" Schwangau squeaks, turning his head around, "Don't be like that."

"Sorry if not all of us can afford etiquette classes."

"I didn't mean it like that," Schwangau defends, turning to face Armbruster. "I just meant that I don't want to make people uncomfortable by staring at them."

"Girls like it when a guy stares at 'em," Armbruster says (as though he were some sort of expert on the matter), "Let's 'em know they're beautiful."

Schwangau sighs, turning once more back to the rack as he finally hangs up his cloak.
"Don't you know the basics of flirting?"

Schwangau hunches his shoulders slightly. "Girls scare me."

Armbruster chuckles, "Everything scares you."

Schwangau pouts his lips as he crosses the room, making his way to the bottom bunk. "Not everything scares me."

"You sure act like it does. You need to toughen up - speak up, be loud, and confident - like me!" he cheerfully smiles, though Schwangau cannot see it for he has already climbed onto his own mattress below. "Dames love guys like that."

"Really?" Schwangau says a little flatly. "Miss Archer sure doesn't seem to be falling for it."

Armbruster shrugs, "Well, you can't win them all. You just gotta pick up and move on to the next one. That's the trick, you know - never get attached."

Schwangau looks up at the bottom of the mattress above him. "But, how are you ever supposed to form a relationship if you never get attached?"

Armbruster says, "I don't want a relationship with Archer. Besides, something long-term would never last - the Lead Commander would blow his top if he saw me hanging around with a black-haired lady. Ugh, I can hear the lecture now," he puts on a pompous air as he imitates Himmler's voice, wagging his finger in the air, "Armbruster! How dare you disgrace the Aryan race with your lecherous ways! Can't you ever do anything right? Why can't you bring home a nice blonde girl for your father and I to meet?"

Schwangau laughs at Armbruster's foolery, Armbruster smiling to finally hear his comrade lighten up a little. Schwangau comments, "The Lead Commander is a bit of a mother hen, isn't he?"

"An angry hen," Armbruster adds.

"Who's that make father, then?"

"Ritter, obviously!" Armbruster facetiously states. "For being the one in charge, Himmler sure spends a lot of time kissing his ass."

"Ew!" Schwangau grimaces with an almost childish air, "Thanks for THAT mental image!"

Armbruster breaks out laughing, unable to contain himself, Schwangau now quietly laughing at how hard Armbruster is laughing. He wipes a tear from his eyes, winding down, "Oh man…"

Schwangau speaks up, quietly though, "But Miss Archer is SS. I'm sure there's some sort of loophole or something, if you really did want her for a girlfriend."

"Ah," Armbruster brushes it off. "She's not real SS - she's just a girl. That's how she gets away with having black hair - the girls don't count."

"Hey," Schwangau defends, quietly scolding Armbruster, "The Lead Commander's said we're to regard the female guards as equals and comrades."

"If they're equal then they should be held to the same standards as the men are. Fair's fair."

Schwangau sighs. "Let's just get some sleep."
"Yeah, sure," Armbruster agrees…

The humidity from the lake that had previously made the air a bit too warm now makes it quite chilly - and while a campfire would be nice for warming the bones, the light would most certainly draw the attention of those in the camp nearby.

The captured guard, his hands tied behind his back, is sat up against a tree, Ed, Al, and Roy all sitting around him.

“And that’s everything?” Ed questions him.

The guard nods. "Yeah - from the time the bugle blows all the way down to scheduled toilet breaks."

“Good,” Al says, pulling a roll of gauze from his pocket, wrapping it around the guard’s mouth. “Now be quiet.”

The guard gives a muffled retaliation, rocking from side to side as Al wraps the gauze a few more times over his mouth, and eyes as well, making sure the gauze also covers his ears to keep him from hearing their planning (at least clearly anyway).

Roy is drawing in the dirt with a stick, thinking aloud as he plans. “Our best chance of rescuing Gracia and her daughter is when they’re being transported out of the camp to that factory.” He taps the tip of the stick against a small line that signifies the road. "That transport is the weak link in the chain.” He glances over at the guard, "As our new friend here has told us, there are only three guards in the truck."

He draws another line in the dirt, dividing the road in half.

“We need to strike when the truck is at the midway point – both far enough away from the camp and far away from the factory.”

Ed looks up from the drawing to Roy, “What’s our escape plan afterwards?”

“Let me see the map.”

Al leans over to the nearby kit-bag, picking up the map and passing it to Roy.

Roy looks at it for a while, saying aloud, “I’ve been thinking it over. The nearest port is about a hundred miles away.”

Ed quips, “Gosh, you make it sound so close.”

“It’ll only take us a couple of hours to get there, especially if we drive fast.”

Al points out, “Yeah, but how much gas do they put in those trucks? They probably keep them pretty empty for just this reason.”

Roy hums, concerned, but then remembers, "We've still got an extra can of gas in the jeep. We can take it with us."

Ed crosses his arms, he also doing his thinking out loud, "Hmm. The gas can and the kit-bag? Might make it hard to maneuver as we fight the guards." He then looks over at Al, "Which, by the way, when was the last time that you and I were really involved in heavy action like this?"
"What do you mean?" Al asks. "The rescue operation was just yesterday."

"But we weren't really involved," Ed says. "We just sort of hung back and waited on everyone else."

"Why do you ask?"

"When I was fighting that guy who snuck into our camp back by the mine - I got a little winded running after him."

Al chuckles, "That's the price of growing older."

"Shut up." Ed prods, returning to the subject, "The point is, I've spent about nine months in a science lab; We've spent four years playing house in Amsterdam; and while we did break into that camp to bust Roy out, we didn't actually do any hand-to-hand combat with any of the guards there. I think the last time we actually had a fist fight was back in Büren when we took the bomb from Huskisson."

Al points out, "Well no, we did beat up Yoki and those guys who were with him."

"The point is," Ed says, "When was the last time we did any real training, like when we used to back on the Other Side? Heck, I didn't even do any training when I was living with Dad."

"Gosh," Al looks up to the sky, thinking, "Has it really been that long?"

Ed nods. "I worry we've both gotten soft. If we're about to be fighting a bunch of soldiers at close proximity, we need to do some sparring - get our instincts back."

Roy adds, "As long as you guys keep it quiet. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves."

Al nods, standing up. He looks at Ed, "Are you going to be all right, though? Your automail's not at one-hundred percent after all."

Ed grins, standing as well, putting up his fists. "Like that's gonna slow me down. Don't underestimate your big brother."

Al grins competitively as well. "You forget which of us is bigger these days."

"Shut up and fight," Ed banters.

Al lunges.

*

An owl hoots in the distance, its eerie call echoing out over the nighttime landscape.

Elise gasps at the sound, drawing closer to her mother's body, hugging her.

Gracia adjusts the covers, tucking Elise in a bit. "It's okay," Gracia sleepily says as they lay in bed, her arms around her daughter to keep her warm, "It's just an owl."

"I don't like owls," Elise mumbles, "They're mean looking."

Gracia gently strokes her daughter's hair, "As long as you don't mess with them, they won't mess with you. Besides, they're helpful - they eat mice."
"Shh!" one of the other prisoners sounds.

"Sorry," Gracia quietly apologizes.

A moment of silence passes, the muted sounds of the night filling the void.

And then Elise quietly speaks again, softer this time. “…Mom?”

“Hmm?”

“Daddy was a prison guard, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Was he mean like the guards here?”

Gracia halts, slow to answer. “…I don’t know, sweetie…”

Elise asks, “Did he do bad things to people who didn’t deserve it?”

Again Gracia hesitates, truly unsure of how to answer for even she does not know. But then she shakes her head, “…No. Your father was a good person. I’m sure he did the right thing. Now go to sleep, dear,” she says, tucking the blanket even closer to them.

Elise sighs, hugging her mother.

*

The shafts of the morning sunlight stream through the windows of the residence, lighting and warming the whole of the place.

Schwangau stirs as the light hits his eyes, his lids slowly lifting as he awakens. He pulls himself upright, sleepily groaning as he attempts to get out of bed--

When suddenly Armbruster's face is popping down from the top bunk, "BOO!"

"AHH!" Schwangau recoils, falling backwards onto his bed, Armbruster laughing the whole time. Schwangau throws his pillow at him, "DAMN IT, ARMBRUSTER!"

*

The breakfast hall is emptying as the lady prisoners are ushered out, like a herd of cattle, each being carted off to begin their duties for the day. Elise, of course, holds onto her mother's hand, walking alongside her as they get ready to head for the truck as they did yesterday.

"Hey!" the old, fat, cranky guardess yells at Gracia, pointing her riding crop at the prisoner.

Gracia stops and looks over at her.

The guardess continues, "Where's your kerchief?"

Gracia pats the top of her head, realizing now that she can feel her hair. "Oh! I must have left it back in the hut."

"Get over here!" the guardess orders.

Gracia gets out of line, Elise following her, but the guardess points at her,
"Not you! Move along!"

Elise starts, "But-!"

"No buts! Get on!"

Gracia looks at her daughter, "It's all right, Elise. Run ahead and find Lidia. Stay with her."

Elise frowns, worried, but does as she's told, taking off at a run towards the head of the line.

Gracia reaches the guardess, the old lady addressing her, "Hold out your palms."

Gracia does as ordered. And like an old schoolmarm, the guardess starts whacking Gracia across her palms with the riding crop, Gracia wincing with each strike, but curling in her lips to keep her yelps in.

Elise continues her running, the little girl dashing past the ladies of the line, stirring up the bottoms of their dresses with the bit of wind she creates.

When suddenly, someone grabs her by her apron from behind: "Whoa! Slow down there!" the man tells her, "You're gonna fall and hurt yourself."

"Hey! Let me go!" Elise squirms.

He gently lays a hand on her shoulder, turning her towards him as he asks, "What's the rush?"

"I've got to get back to my spot before I get in trouble!" Elise says.

He tilts his head, "Where's your mom?"

Elise angrily pouts, "That fat old bat stopped her because she's missing her kerchief."

He smiles at her, "Well why don't we wait for your mom to get back? Then you two can go to work together."

"Well..." Elise considers, "All right."

He nods towards a hut. "Come on, it's a bit chilly out here. Let's get out of the cold while we wait."

Elise follows after him as he starts walking towards the hut. "But what if she walks by and we don't see her?"

"Don't worry - there're windows," he motions at them. "We'll see her." He turns the handle, pushing the door open and motioning inside with a smile. "Ladies first."

Elise trots inside, he following, closing the door behind him. Though it's not much warmer in here, at least there is no wind, making it far less chilly.

"There. This is better, isn't it?" He delves into his pocket, pulling something out of it. "You want some candy?"

Elise brightens up. "Thanks!"

"Don't mention it," he says as she takes the candy from him, he kneeling down to get eye-level with her. "You're a very pretty little girl," he comments. "I bet all the boys back home chase after you."
Elise is busy unwrapping her candy as she says, "Boys are stinky."

He chuckles. "You won't always think that," he says with a brightness, "Someday you'll see a guy and you'll think the world of him. You'll want nothing more than for him to love you - in which case you gotta know the moves."

"What moves?" Elise asks, puzzled.

"I'll show you." He touches her knee, his hand beginning to drift its way up her leg and skirt.

"HEY!" She smacks his hand. "Stop that!"

"Don't worry," he gently coaxes, "I'm not gonna hurt you." He tries again, hand now starting further up.

"Stop!" and she punches him in the nose!

"Augh!" he grasps his face, Elise running past him, whipping open the door and running out. He screams after her, "Come back here you little bitch!"

Elise runs down the line of workers, running back the way she came, shouting, "Mommy! Mommy!"

Archer is escorting Schwangau and Armbruster, when all three of them see a little girl running towards them, she blowing past, nearly taking Armbruster's cape with her. "Whoa! Hey! watch it!"

Gracia, now back in line, hears her daughter's voice growing closer to her, and she peers around the crowd of women, seeing Elise running towards her.

"Mommy!"

Gracia bends down for her, holding out her arms as she reaches her, "Elise, honey, what's wrong?"

"Come back here you!" the male guard shouts as he runs towards them.

Archer takes a step forward, stomping her heel in the dirt, "Hold it!"

The guard stops, tightening his lips nervously.

"What's going on here?" Archer demands to know.

The guard, still pinching his bleeding nose, points at the little girl, "She punched me!"

Elise angrily shouts, “Only because he tried to touch me!”

Schwangau gasps, mortified.

Archer, however, narrows her eyes at the little girl, turning her nose up at her. “You dare impugn the honor of a German soldier?”

“I do!" Elise shouts back, still clinging onto her mother. "My mommy always told me if a man tried to touch me in a bad place, I should punch him and run!"

A condescending smirk crosses Archer's face as she slowly paces towards them, arms behind her back as he taps her riding crop against her palm. “My, my. It seems your mother is as much a bad influence on you as she is on everyone else." She leans down, getting closer, face-to-face with
Elise. Her grin grows wider. "Perhaps it's best that we keep you two separated."
Gracia gasps, hugging Elise closer, "No! Please! You can't take her away from me!"
Archer stands up straight, sneering down at her, "I can do whatever I see fit. Guards!"
The frumpy old guardess as well as the male guard, his nose crusting over with dried blood, come forward and pry Elise away from Gracia, Elise kicking and screaming.
"Mommy!"
"Please!" Gracia fretfully begs, "Please don't do this!"
Archer suddenly feels a light tap on her shoulder, and she turns to see that Commander Schwangau is standing next to her. "Miss Archer?"
"Yes, Commander?"
He leans in close to her, quietly saying, "It’s not right to keep the mother and her little girl apart. There must be some other way of punishing her."
Archer holds in a growl, for she would like nothing more than to see this little girl suffer - but as a soldier, she cannot deny the wishes of a superior. Archer turns back towards the guards. "Fine. Release her."
The guards let her go, Elise immediately running right back into her mother's open arms, Gracia embracing her tightly. "Elise!"
"Mommy!"
Gracia cries, "Oh baby, it's okay!"
Archer addresses Elise, "From now on the only meal you get is breakfast, nothing more, do you hear me? Now get back in line and get to work." Archer turns her attention back to the officers, her tone immediately changing from one of authority to humbleness, "Forgive the disturbance, sirs. As I was saying before we were interrupted, this truck will take you to the electrical factory so that you may run your inspection there."
Armbruster nods, "Yeah, thanks."
And with that, Archer leaves, returning to her camp duties.
Elise quietly hiccups as she cries, "Mommy, I don't want to be here anymore!"
Gracia rubs her back, "I know, sweetie, I know… Huh?"
Gracia looks up, realizing that the young fair officer is kneeling next to them, he holding up a flower plucked from a nearby bush. He smiles sympathetically.
"I'm really sorry for all the trouble, ma'am," he says kindheartedly. "I assure you in the future it won't happen again."
Elise turns around and smacks the flower out of Schwangau's hand, surprising him as she shouts, "Go away!"
"Elise!" her mother starts, but Elise angrily continues shouting,
"You're a soldier, meaning you're a big creep just like the rest of them!"

"Elise! Stop that!" her mother scolds with panic, quickly turning back towards the officer as she nervously begs, "Please forgive her, she's just scared!" She bows her head gratefully, "Thank you so much for what you've done!"

Schwangau's shoulders have fallen a bit, and though he is disheartened, he puts a smile back on, a bit of sadness still showing through. "You're quite welcome."

The lady guard approaches Gracia, grabbing her by the arm and forcefully lifting her to her feet, "All right, get in the truck, we gotta go."

She moves the prisoners along, and as he watches them go, Schwangau's smile fades, a somber look overtaking his face.

The male guard is rubbing the blood off his nostril, the scabby bits flaking through the air as he quietly grumbles to himself. Just then, the other officer, Armbruster, pulls him to the side, uncomfortably laying his arm around the guard's shoulder.

"Hey. Buddy," the officer tells him, "Listen. It's one thing to be going after full-grown women. But if I ever hear again that you're going after little girls, you'll wish that the worst you got off with is being discharged. You understand me?"

"Uh," the guard nods uneasily, "Yes, sir."

"Good." Armbruster roughly shoves him. "Now get the hell out of here."

The beat up old truck clunks its way down the deserted woodland road, the guard in the back with the strap of his rifle over his shoulder, allowing the gun to hang at his side - though as casual as that seems, he remains steadfast in keeping his hands on his weapon should any of the prisoners get the bright idea to try to jump out of the truck.

But none of the ladies here seem to have that sort of fire in them, except perhaps for that little girl Elise, she still glaring holes through the guard, he still scrunching his blood-covered nose at her (though he must be careful how much he does that, for already he can feel a tickling on the inside of his nostrils).

Lidia sits on the other side of Elise, both her and Gracia keeping the little girl safely in between them - and though they do not stare at the guard the way Elise does, they are always aware of his presence.

Up front in the cabin, the driver apathetically drives along, attending to his daily duty of shuttling the prisoners from the camp. Normally, there'd be another soldier up front with him to keep lookout - but today, his passengers are two officers, they having squished onto the bench as best they can.

Schwangau sits in the middle, quietly staring down at his feet as they drive along. Armbruster sits in the passenger's seat, his elbow resting on the window ledge and his cheek resting on his fist.

"Can't believe you made me leave both my gun and my crossbow back at camp," he complains. "What good is it riding shotgun if I can't shoot anybody?"

Schwangau doesn't look up, "I told you, I didn't want it accidentally going off and hitting me."
"And what about you?" Armbruster asks with slight indignation. "You've still got your gun on you? Who's not to say that it might accidentally go off and hurt you?"

Schwangau clasps his elbows. "Don't say that! You'll jinx it!"

"Augh, you're such a baby..." Armbruster turns his head back towards the window, watching the trees go by, the cabin falling silent again, only the hum of the engine and the light breeze filling their ears.

After a long while, Schwangau's voice quietly rises, "Armbruster?"

"Yeah?"

"Are we bad people?"

“What are you talking about?” Armbruster asks, turning back to him.

Schwangau's face is long, eyes gloomy as he still looks at the floor, “We imprison women and children… And you've seen how pitiful they all look. What we’re doing, it’s… inhuman.”

Armbruster scoffs, “They’re mostly just foreigners anyway, who cares? It’s not like we’re killing puppies.”

Schwangau finally looks up, turning on Armbruster, “But children are more important than puppies! They’re human beings!”

Armbruster groans in annoyance, then telling him, “You need to toughen up. Live up to your namesake.”

Schwangau tilts his head with a frown. “What do you mean?”

“Have you ever actually met a swan? Those things are evil! Them and geese both…”

Out of nowhere, someone suddenly jumps out into the middle of the road!

All three men in the cabin shout in surprise, the driver stomping on the brakes before he hits him, the ladies in the back all sliding at the sudden jolt.

And then, everything happens so fast:

Up front in the cabin, the three men look out the windshield.

"Tell me we didn't hit him!" Schwangau worries.

"What the hell's he doing in the middle of the road?!" Armbruster irritably shouts. "Huh?!"

Both of them suddenly realize that they recognize this blond man who stands before them, he waving his hands next to his head, making faces at them.

"Elric!" they both shout.

"Come and get me, you dirty Nazis!" Ed taunts as he dashes off into the woods.
"I've got him!" Armbruster throws open the door, jumping out and running into the woods after Ed. Schwangau holds out his hand after him, "Wait! It's a trap!"

Meanwhile in the back: The moment the guard stomps on the brakes, not only do the ladies all slide across their benches, but the guard who's back there with them stumbles forward, landing painfully on all fours, his knees banging up against the metal truck bed.

The guard now at her feet, Elise stomps on his hand! He cries out in both surprise and pain, now feeling tiny fists beat across his back as Elise thrashes him.

"Elise!" her mother cries, "Elise stop!"

"Take that, you jerk!" Elise yells at him.

The guard pushes himself up to his knees, using his arms to block Elise attacks, and, angry, he reaches out and grabs her by her neck, "You little!"

"Stop!" Gracia screams, prying at the man's fingers, all the women in the truck now closing in on the guard, trying to help Gracia stop him. "Let her go!"

BAM! Suddenly a heavy metal gas can crashes over the top of the soldier's helmet, stunning him for half a second.

Roy drops the gas can, grabbing the soldier by the back of his uniform and he pulls the man back away from the little girl, the women gasping and clamoring in surprise and fright.

The soldier reaches his hands over his head, clawing at the man behind him, he and Roy struggling as Roy drags him to the back of the truck, tossing the guard out the back, the guard landing painfully on his own rifle.

Angry, the man sits up, aiming his rifle at Roy!

Roy pulls his pistol from his side!

But while all of this is going on, Armbruster is still running through the woods, chasing after Ed, the officer's boots tramping through the soft, freshly sprouted grass.

"Come back here and fight me like a man!" Armbruster challenges, shouting at his unseen enemy.

Suddenly Ed pops out from behind a tree, behind Armbruster, slipping his arms underneath the officer's and then locking his hands behind Armbruster's neck, leaving Armbruster's arms flailing in the air.

"All right, you!" Ed says, "You're gonna name off the rest of your Order buddies or I'm gonna snap your neck!" Before Ed can finish, he finds himself tumbling forward, the officer flipping him over his shoulder!

Ed clings onto the man's uniform, dragging him down with him as Ed lands flat with his back in the grass. Ed tucks his knees up to his chest, planting his feet squarely in Armbruster's chest as he pulls the officer forward, flipping him, sending him flying a few feet.

Ed then tries to get up to run, but Armbruster's grabbed onto Ed's ankle. Ed kicks at him with his free foot. "OW! Hey!" Armbruster shouts, "Not the face!"
Armbruster scrambles forward, getting on top of Ed and starts to pummel him.

Ed grabs him by the shirt collar and jerks him down, headbutting him roughly. Armbruster clasps his forehead, but he has little time to do so as suddenly Ed is rolling him over, shoving his shoulders into the ground. Ed gets off one good punch right across Armbruster's cheek, and Ed hops to his feet as fast as he can, leaning down and yanking on Armbruster's cloak, taking the long piece of cloth and wrapping it around the officer's head.

"Hey!" Armbruster's muffled voice shouts, he temporarily blinded as he tries to undo the wrapping around his head, Ed in the meanwhile running off, back towards the road.

And while all of THIS is going on, still more is happening - for immediately after Armbruster had jumped out of the front of the truck and Roy had jumped in the back, the driver's-side door was being whipped open, Al pulling out the driver and punching him across the face with the brass knuckles he'd stolen off the drunken guard.

The driver, knocked out, lands on the dirt road, while up front, Schwangau frightenedly fumbles with his pistol, trying to get it out of his holster.

"No, no," Al says, gently holding out his hands to try to calm him, "Don’t do that. Nobody has to get hurt."

Schwangau, hands trembling, points his pistol at the intruder, "I know who you are!" the young officer shouts, "You’re one of the Elric brothers!"

Al cautiously approaches, assuring, "I'm not here to hurt you."

"The Lead Commander wants you dead!"

"Why's that?" Al asks, not because he doesn't know, but because he hopes the officer may let something important slip.

"Because you stole our bomb!" the young man cries, "You put us years behind in our work! The world would already be ours if it wasn’t for you!"

Still, Al remains calm, friendly even. "What’s your name?"

Schwangau cocks the gun.

"I’m not a soldier, I’m a doctor," Al tells him, "I’m not here to hurt you."

BANG! Suddenly from the back of the truck, a gunshot goes off!

Startled, Schwangau screams and pulls the trigger, firing his own gun. Al whips the driver's door closed, shielding himself from the bullet, the metal bee ricocheting back through the cabin, grazing Schwangau across his forehead, right near his eyebrow.

The young man holds his bleeding head as he cries in utter panic.

Al reopens the door, "Hey! Are you okay?! Let me help."

Ed comes bursting out of the woods, pushing his way past Al and forcing his way into the car. "Come on!" he shouts at his brother, "Don't just stand there, get in!"

Schwangau opens one eye and sees who's climbed in. "AHH!" He tries to point the gun at Ed, but
Ed forces the gun up at the ceiling, ripping the weapon away from the young man.

Ed then points the pistol at him instead, "You're coming with us! You're going to tell us everything we want to know."

Schwangau is too afraid to even raise his hands to the sky, his trembling breath shuddering through his open mouth.

Al is clambering into the truck, shutting the door behind him, "Ed! I was trying to take a gentle approach!"

They hear a large rapping come from the back of the truck and they hear Roy shout, "DRIVE!"

Al stomps on the gas, the tires squealing as dust spews out from behind them and the vehicle takes off.

In the back, Roy holds onto one of the long poles that arches overhead, holding up the tarp that covers the truck bed. The ladies, too, each find something to hang onto as the truck speeds over the road, the truck bed bumping wildly up and down with every dip and hump in the road.

In the front, Schwangau frantically pleads, "Please don't kill me! You don't understand! I didn't even want to be a soldier! I didn't ask for this!"

Ed cruelly yells at him, "How many people never asked to have Germany come along and kick their doors in? How many wives have seen their husbands killed by your orders?"

A loud THUMP! comes from the top of the cabin.

Al gasps as he looks up, "Someone's on top of the truck!"

It's Armbruster, the young man having quickly climbed up a tree and leaped out onto the truck. The second he hits the cabin though, the speed and wind of the vehicle causes him to topple backwards, Armbruster flipping over once before clinging onto the tarp cover for dear life. "Ahh! Slow down!"

The ladies all clamor in fright, knowing someone's up there, for they can all see the tarp bending inwards under his weight.

Armbruster lifts himself to hands and knees, just in time too, for as he rolls just slightly to the left, a bullet breaks through the tarp, flying through right where his ribs were just a moment ago!

"AHH!" Armbruster hastily shifts side to side, dodging the bullets that come at him, Roy in the truck bed aiming at the ceiling, trying to anticipate his enemy's next movement.

Still dodging, Armbruster pushes backwards, landing on his bottom as he pushes away from the cabin. The old tarp, already thin to begin with, is now even weaker from the bullets, and it splits open, Armbruster spilling out onto the floor beneath him, landing flat on his back, knocking the air right out of his lungs.

He coughs once or twice, sitting up, rubbing his back. The ladies all huddle in fright, staring at the strange young man who's dropped in. He casually points at them with a wink, "Ladies."

Roy points his pistol at him and Armbruster yelps, rolling over backwards to avoid the bullet that comes at him. Armbruster rolls so far that he rolls out of the truck! but he quickly grabs onto the very last pole that holds up the tarp, his feet landing on the ground, Armbruster running in an effort
to keep up with the truck.

"Get down!" Roy shouts, and all the ladies duck, covering their heads.

Armbruster leaps, pulling himself back up, and he hops off the bumper, just in time to once more miss a bullet. He lands, again, on top of the tarp, and now keeping low, he dashes over it, landing on all fours on top of the cabin.

Ed and Al can hear the clambering on the roof over their heads, Ed shouting, "Shake him off!"

Al sharply turns the wheel, swerving the vehicle. The ladies in the back all holler in fright and surprise, once more hanging on for dear life as the vehicle veers from side to side.

Armbruster, too, hangs on, clinging onto the top of the cabin, waiting for the swerving to stop.

Al, eyes still on the road, asks, "Did we lose him?"

Suddenly the passenger-side door is opening and Armbruster grabs Schwangau by the back of his collar, tossing him out of the moving vehicle!

Schwangau lands roughly on the road, rapidly tumbling over dirt and rocks, the road ripping at his cheeks like sandpaper, pebbles sticking to his skin, as he flips over several times before finally landing in the grass by the roadside, he spitting out a mouthful of weeds as he coughs.

Armbruster whips his hand back before the door should slam on his fingers, the wind forcing the door closed. "Damn!" he mutters to himself, pushing up from laying on his stomach back to hands and knees, "If I could just get in there I could-"

WHUMP! Much too late, Armbruster sees the low-hanging tree branches as they come straight at him, and the officer is swept off the top of the truck.

Roy sees this, and he shouts up to the front, "WE'VE LOST HIM!"

Ed and Al breathe a sigh of relief, Ed flopping over to the empty seat beside him.

"Thank goodness," Al says.

Ed tiredly gripes, "Yeah, but we lost that other one, too. I was hoping by having a hostage, we'd have some leverage. All we've done now is signaled to the Order that we're still in the country! We need to get the hell out of here and fast!"

"First safe spot I find," Al says, "We'll stop and fill the gas tank - and then we're out of here!"

In the back, Roy, exhausted, finally flops down on the bench, he tiredly putting his pistol into its holster. He looks around at ladies who surround him. "Is everyone all right?" he asks.

Most nod, but Lidia, somewhere between excited and scared, asks, "What's going on?"

Roy chuckles with a tired smile, "Don't let the uniform fool you. I'm not one of them. We're here to rescue you."

The ladies all excitedly begin jabbering, some of them happy, a few distressed: "But my mother is still at the camp!"

"And my sister! Please, we must go back!"
Roy shakes his head, "I'm sorry, we can't. If we go back now, we'll all die."

The two women begin to cry, the ladies nearest them comforting them.

Roy looks over at Gracia and her daughter, he softly asking them, "Are you all right?"

Gracia nods. "Yes. Who are you?"

He gently smiles. "You probably don't know me, but I was a friend of your husband's."

Gracia tilts her head, curious.

He holds out his hand for a shake, "My name is Roy Mustang."

And instead he's greeted with a slap across the face!

Roy holds his cheek, surprised.

"Mustang?!" Gracia angrily cries. "You're the man who got my husband killed!"

Roy's face falls.

Though everything seems to hurt - his back, his knees, his face, especially his forehead (of which the bleeding seems to have stopped, mostly due to the nice patch of dirt coating it) - Schwangau jogs along the side of the road, looking around.

"Commander Armbruster!" he calls worriedly, "Commander! Where are you?"

"Up here!" he hears.

Schwangau looks up. Hanging upside-down, his ankle caught in a narrow, forked branch, is Armbruster, his cape dangling towards the ground.

He points and Schwangau and says, "Don't you say a word. Help me down."

Schwangau moves forward, though he hesitantly reaches out, "Uh, I'm not sure how..."

"Ow! Wait! Hang on, don't pull!"

"Sorry!"

"Push me."

"Like this?"

"No don't swing me! I mean lift me up!"

"How!"

"Push on my shoulders and push me away from the ground."

"Wait, like this?"

"Look out!"
"Ahh!"

Armbruster falls out of the tree and lands right on top of Schwangau, pinning him to the ground. They both cough, Armbruster waving away the dust in the air as he sits up. "Ugh. Thanks, man."

Schwangau timidly squeaks, "Please get off of me…"

* *

The guard at the front gate is keeping a vigilant eye open for anything odd or suspicious. Something doesn't seem right, and he knows it.

"I swear I heard a gunshot in the distance earlier!"

"But only the one?" a guard atop the fencewalk asks.

"Yeah, only the one."

"If that's the case, it just might be one of the townsfolk out hunting or something."

Suddenly they hear movement from the bushes off to the right!

The guard at ground level cocks his rifle, pointing it towards the unknown intruder. "Who goes there? Show yourself!"

Of all the odd things, it's another guard, his hands tied behind his back, gauze wrapped all around his mouth! His legs, too, are tied, and he comes squirming out of the bushes, crawling along like an inchworm!

"What the??" The guard cautiously jaunts over, bending down and unwrapping the man's head, and he's surprised at who he finds. "Fischer??"

Fischer sucks in a big breath. "Oh, thanks. I couldn't breathe with that stuff on."

"What happened to you?"

"We gotta move, quick!" Fischer says to his fellow guard. "There are three guys! They're gonna jump the truck on the way to the electrical factory!"

"Too late," they hear a third voice say.

They both look over to see Armbruster hobbling up the road, assisted by Schwangau, a streak of dry blood on the young man's face.

The guard dashes up to them, "Sirs! Are you all right?!!"

Fischer, hands still tied behind his back says, "Yeah I'm fine, don't worry about me."

Schwangau orders, "I need to get a phone, quickly!"

"Of course, sir!" The guard dashes back up to the gate, quickly opening it so that Schwangau and Armbruster may pass through, a few of the guards inside helping them in.

The other guard returns to Fischer, untying him. "How'd you get away?"

"I didn't get away, they let me go, sorta," Fischer tells him. "Said they weren't gonna leave me out
in the woods to die. But they didn't want me raisin' an alarm, either. So they uncovered my eyes and pointed me in the right direction."

"Didn't you even try to put up a fight?"

Fischer sits up, rubbing his still sore wrists, "'Course I tried to put up a fight! I was outnumbered!"

Phone boards are lighting up all over the northern countryside, telephones ringing off their hooks with orders being issued to be on the lookout for the fugitives and their stolen prisoners.

Of course Berlin is the first to get the news. And Reistrom, upon hearing it, wastes absolutely no time in setting out for the camp to the north.

The guard sees a car coming this way, and, being cautious of course, trains his rifle on the driver, just in case. "Stop!" he orders.

The car slows, coming to a halt, and the guard makes his way over, looking at the driver - he recognizes this sort of uniform, it just like the ones of the officers who've come to inspect the camp.

The driver glares up angrily with his unnaturally ice-blue eyes, "Let me pass."

Intimidated, the guard hastily salutes and rushes back to the gate, opening it, allowing the car to enter.

Reistrom pulls his car up into the parade ground, parking it, he stepping out of the vehicle, slamming the door behind him as he looks out across the field of both soldiers and slaves. "I demand to speak to whoever's in charge here!"

"I am!" he hears a woman's voice and looks over, seeing a uniformed woman striding towards him. "Chief Senior Overseer Franka Archer--"

And everything stops, Reistrom's eyes widening, his heart freezing over and clenching in his chest - that face! THAT FACE! He knows that face! He's seen it before! His commander! In Liore! ON THE OTHER SIDE! THE MAN WHO LEAD HIM TO DIE!

In sheer terror, Reistrom screams, everyone in the camp looking up from what they're doing, their attention drawn to the strange officer who stands shrieking, pointing at the Overseer, she herself taken quite aback.

Inside the nearby office hut, Schwangau and Armbruster sit, both of them with bandages on their wounds, when the screaming hits their ears, the next thing to hit the loud BANG! of a gunshot!

They quickly scramble to their feet in concern, Armbruster lifting his crossbow with him as they both run out the door.

Armbruster aims his crossbow out before him, but he slows as he recognizes his target.

Schwangau covers his mouth, speechless, horrified by what he sees -

There stands Reistrom, sweating, trembling, with a gun in his hand, the barrel smoking, Miss Archer laying dead on the ground as blood oozes from the gaping hole on the left side of her forehead.
Armbruster shouts in disbelief, "Reistrom! What the hell?!"

Reistrom is breathing heavily, his eyes and hands still trembling as he stares at the dead woman on the ground before him, her head thrown back from the force of the gunshot - and with her face now mostly out of view, the panic begins to fade from his pulsing veins.

Slowly he starts to look around, realizing that everyone here is looking right at him, and for a moment, he can't figure out why, until he realizes there's a gun in his hand. Reistrom himself seems surprised to see the blood that is puddling around the fallen woman before him.

He looks around again, seeing that everyone still stares at him in shock. He lets out a short, breathy laugh, gradually beginning to chuckle with his usual charm as slowly he holsters his gun. "Forgive me," Reistrom says to his comrades. "She startled me."

"She STARTLED you?!” Armbruster furiously shouts.

Reistrom smiles, his normal, calm demeanor overtaking him once more. "I had to act quickly. This woman was a traitor to the Reich," he promptly lies, "She's the one who helped the Elrics with their little escapade today."

Schwangau utters in confusion, "What? I don't understand-.

"I'll explain, but not out here," Reistrom says, approaching them both, walking past his victim without so much as even looking down at her, the bottom of his cape just barely tracing the edge of her spilled blood. "Inside, both of you, now," he orders as he walks in between them, making his way up the steps into the hut.

Armbruster and Schwangau look at one another, baffled by what's just taken place, and how quickly! Schwangau looks back down to Archer and back to Armbruster, and then quickly he scurries up the steps, Armbruster following.

Everyone else nearby is unsure of what to do next. The guards nearest to Archer finally move towards her, picking her up by both arms and legs to carry her away, leaving not but the large red puddle behind…

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Next episode:
Reviews:

**QueenCari1129** chapter 29, Mar 17

I loved this chapter. LJ Elise standing up to the guards brought a smile to my face. Classic Ed, having soldiers chase after your short ass :)  

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**Guest** chapter 29, Apr 12

Ugh! I love this story so much! The whole idea of it is just so interesting and angsty, you leave me hanging onto every word. Bless you!

---

**Guest** chapter 29, May 15

I like how you built up the plot! Involving the SS I guess himmler was always interested in ancient folklore and magic keep it up id like to read to the end ive always loved WW2 history and fma is one of my favorite anime.
damn, just honestly, wow. It has been a long time – too long, I would say – since I have been so purely entranced by a fic. Everything fell perfectly into place, and I could tell you took lots of time plotting out every little detail. I was driven to tears when Ed and Sophie were separated and Eds false "betrayal," and currently am rooting for their reunion and for explanations to be given (I just want Ed to be happy, damn!), you certainly have a way with ecs, making me care about (and loathe) them like I rarely ever do in fic featuring ecs. you grasp the canon characters personalities beautifully, make fantastic, subtle references to past adventures and characters (the whole "sister Clara" thing was absolutely hilarious to me, especially al having another crush on her), and despite a few minor discrepancies (Armbruster's attitude around superiors, despite being in the military, and Noah being canon confirmed to be roses alter on this side of the gate being the only two which I noticed as quite distracting) it is, altogether, the perfect fic. I have been looking for, really, you have no clue how long I have been searching for a good post-cost fic, and this fits the bill perfectly.

Alright, now that I am done ranting about how great this fic is, I have only a bit of constructive criticism to share. When writing, you may want to take the narrative a bit more seriously. While the story itself is great and balanced mixture of hilarity and soul-crushing angst, just like own, the way it is narrated seems somewhat unprofessional, and occasionally undermines just how serious the scene is. Sometimes, you try to write several things happening at once, so it might be best to just choose a certain pov and stick with it.

Please take your time in updating this with another great chapter, and have a lovely, lovely day!

A response to your review at https://www.fanfiction.net/r/10427212/ 20h ago

*gives you a big squishy hug* THANK YOU. =^_^-= I'm glad to see you're enjoying my story, and that I've done good in keeping it true to the soul of FMA. Is it weird to say that I'm happy I drove you to tears? The life of the writer is strange one, for we're happy to hear we made our audience cry. It means we did a good job getting through and touching their emotions. I'm also relieved to hear that my OCs are going over well. It's a tricky thing creating engaging characters from scratch.

Also, constructive criticism good - That's a hard thing to come by in fanfics. Very few people know how to give actual constructive criticism.

Armbruster's attitude: That's "exactly" how he's supposed to be. It shows the kind of person he is. But don't worry, he's getting his comeuppance very soon.

Rosa = Rosa: I know that's a bit of a fan canon for a very long time, but if you can direct me to official sources that say this is truly canon, I'll appreciate it. I only threw Rosa in there very quickly just to wrench reader's hearts just a "little" bit more. Because I am evil :D Otherwise, no, Rosa's appearance in the story does nothing to drive it forward and her absence wouldn't be entirely missed if I were to go back in and take her out.

POV: This has also been a bit of a tricky thing to manage. In the typical novel, yes, the pov is usually only that of the main character. But Fullmetal Alchemist 2003 is a television series, in which the scenes DO change and the characters and subject matter in those scenes changes with it. So while the writing style is that of a novel, the scene changes are more TV-esque. The written word and the visual medium are apples and oranges (hehe, more like apples and carrots), and I'm attempting to blend the two (into an apple-carrot smoothie??) into a coherent form. Normally I don't find this distracting – EXCEPT for Oh Shit: Jailbreak. I wrote the dam thing, and even I felt confused when proofreading it. It's hard to do flashbacks, when typically in novels, everything is real time. If anything I've learned stay away from doing flashbacks.

I'd like to get back to writing as soon as possible, but life has been pretty darn hectic lately. Even when I do have the free time, I feel like the motivation just isn't there. So thank you for this review – you've really helped rekindle that fire. I really am determined to finish this dam thing, even if it takes me a while.

*gives you another big squishy hug* Again, thank you! And you also have a lovely day ^)

PS: The only superiors that Armbruster has are Hitler and Himmler themselves. Anyone in the Order (aside from Himmler) is all the same rank [OF-E]. I really don't recall him getting snarky with Himmler at all, but yeah – even though they're the same rank, everybody else in the Order does think themselves better than Armbruster.
Chapter End Notes

If you haven't guessed it yet, this Lidia and her fiancé are supposed to be this world's version of Lydia and Lujan from that one episode with the weird rock virus/Lust's back story. Because why the fuck not?

Also, I have decided that the soldier guarding the front gate shall henceforth be known as Nail. Because he made the mistake of wishing that something exciting would happen.

That part with the guy in the hut - from beyond the grave, I can feel the fiery, unending wrath of Maes Hughes reaching out from beyond the veil to smite this asshole. I'd like to think he guided Roy's bullet back there at the truck. Roy could have just kicked him when he was down, or punched him until he was unconscious, but I feel Hughes used ghostly powers to influence the outcome of the situation.

When Ed's making faces at Schwangau and Armbruster, my only thought is that Hogan's Heroes sketch from Robot Chicken where Roddy Piper says, "Hey-hey, ya fuckin' Nazis!" and then he cracks their skulls.

Watching Reistrom lose his shit and freak the fuck out -- I love it. God help me, I love it.
In addition to major life changes and debilitating depression, I haven’t been working on Fullmetal After because I’ve been busy trying to earn money (and hardly succeeding at that). If I were to set up a Patreon (or maybe instead, a Kickstarter), I could make the money I need to live AND be able to give you guys the finished story that I promised you all. If you’d CONSIDER donating to this project, comment "Yes" (I won’t hold you to it, I’m just gauging whether or not to go through the trouble of setting up a Patreon) Even if you don’t plan to donate, please spread the word. Help an artist out. Thank you

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!