Jean Havoc: A Work in Progress

by HavocMangaWip (UrbanFaerie)

Summary

What happened, happened. What matters now is how am I going to get through this? You can retire from the military, but being on Team Mustang is for life - you can't run from it, even if you could run... and now I get to start life over as a civilian.

Notes

Good lord I just realized that Chapter 5 was uploaded TWICE... and has been WRONG for nearly 7 years. I am SO SORRY!!!!

AND Chapter 47 was a FUBAR as well! Again, I am so sorry!

I'm working on migrating this fiction from that dodgy not as good as Ao3 site that starts with an EFF... It's a lot of work, but great review for the drafting of the final probably two chapters... who am I kidding? Two and an epilogue.
Here are the quick and dirty particulars:

**Title:** "Jean Havoc: A Work in Progress"

**Rating:** M, for language, realistic description of spinal cord injury, and later sexual situations.

**Spoilers:** Manga Chapter 38+

**Pairings:** Main pairings are het some yaoi later without much detail, you'll know it happened. You will have to see for yourself for more info on the main pairings, I won't spoil you. Trust me, you'll like it.

**Characters featured:** Jean Havoc, Gracia and Elysia Hughes... and one other who comes in around Chapter 4.

**Other Characters:** Roy Mustang and Riza Hawkeye, Edward Elric, Alphonse Elric, Winry Rockbell, and manga only cameos.

**Disclaimer:** All of these characters are the property of the genius that invented FMA. No one but Jim is mine and he's purely fictional, Dr. Prick, er Parker as well. All smex scenes are fictional but technically accurate and hopefully spicy due to some personal experience as inspiration, however it would be creepy to write my actual sex life into fan fiction. This is a frank, detailed and realistic fic with some levity thrown in with the tragedy. Just like real life. If you can't laugh at yourself, you're left with others laughing at you. Better to laugh with them.

**Beta:** Anat-Astarte is amazing and wonderful. ANY and all mistakes up until chapter 29 are MY OWN. She hadn't joined this insane quest yet. ;)

**EDITs are COMING!!** They are up in Chapter 1 already. I consulted with my most excellent friend Karl who has a lot of knowledge on spinal cord injuries and he really helped me out with the medical setting. I think it's going to be great. (Explaining HOW they could have Titanium in a place with no computers and that YES there are antibiotics, no there are no computers, they have alchemy... THEY CAN SO DO THAT... they have AUTOMAIL! XD) Now I owe him my soul. He also thinks Havoc should cuss more, so he added quite a few F-Bombs. Karl is the MAN!

**Chapter 1: Awareness**

In a small black journal...

Disinfectant. That was my first impression upon waking up. I heard familiar voices, but unfamiliar noises. What was that smell and what the hell is in my arm? I searched through my memory and found: the Lab, Lust, Mustang, and me. Judging from the disinfectant I was definitely not in the lab. No stench of the lab, no ozone from alchemical reactions and definitely nothing burning. Shit! Was Mustang ok? No, he was, I just heard him in the room. Well, no time was better than the present to announce I was among the living.

"Hey, I need a cigarette. A drink of water and some whisky wouldn't hurt either." I rasped out.

I don't think I've ever seen people move so quickly. Breda and Fuery jumped to attention, Mustang slumped in obvious relief, and I could swear I saw tears in Hawkeye's eyes. I let that go. To be in the hospital I must be pretty messed up, and I didn't need the wrath of Hawkeye's 9 mil on top of whatever was wrong with me. Seeing that everyone I cared for was no worse for wear was a relief. I also think it was against the fire code to have that many people in one room. Mustang seemed a little jumpy and he could be dangerous even without the gloves; one could never be too careful.
Sure that everyone else was ok, and with cigarette in hand, I did a little mental inventory. *Eyes, check. Ears, check. Arms and hands, check. Torso, not so good. OW.*

"ROY, did you HAVE to do me well done? Seriously, the crispy look really does nothing to attract the chicks."

Mustang replied with some crack about leaving me rare and that he was medium done. I'm sure if he'd had to perform field cauterization that it had been necessary, which meant the situation must have been *bad.*

I'd always been pretty lucky, and I'd had the great good fortune to be a subordinate to the human barbeque pit. Bleeding out in the bowels of Lab 3 would not have been good. This more than paid off the debts Mustang owed me for ruining all the women in Central and all the money owed for losing to me at poker.

My assessment had to end as a rather pretty nurse ushered my well-wishers out as visiting hours ended. I groused to myself, "I'm sure Mustang will get her, but perhaps he'll have pity on me as I seem to be a little more banged up than he is."

As everyone left, I waved and requested they send cigarettes, booze and magazines. Breda winked and said he'd take care of my "intellectual pursuits." Mustang was deep in thought looking over charts of the Third Lab, so I was free to continue my self-assessment.

*Ok Jean, where were you? Ah, yes, torso, charred but serviceable.* I lifted the blankets and noted that the hospital gown was rather revealing and *THE HELL?* Well, no wonder I didn't have to pee after having been out cold for days. Safe to say, all of the nurses would be Mustang's as some genius had attached a contraption to my junk to make sure I didn't piss myself. How dignified. This was definitely not a shining moment in my manhood's history. Slowly the pieces began to fall into place, one by one. *Wait, What the fuck? That should hurt! That really should hurt! WHY the fuck doesn't that hurt?*

Now I was getting concerned. This couldn't be good. I pulled my gown up and I checked the bandages on my abdomen. The doctors had bandaged me rather thoroughly with a wrap that started at my chest and ended at the top of pelvis. I noted that there was extra thick gauze at the front near my navel. So much for a career in nude modeling as my navel was now one hole of many, and then I felt around towards the back and there was a very similar arrangement of gauze.

*That bitch had run me through!* The dressings were stiff and substantial. I would later learn it served two purposes; to protect my burns and wounds and to immobilize me until they could perform tests. As I felt lower centimeter by centimeter the feeling started to tingle and change and then… nothing. Just nothing. I felt skin, what I assumed to be my skin, but I could have been touching someone else. I repeated my test on my stomach; again, nothing. I then probed lower. Both legs were there, but both thighs just lie there like a broken doll's. I tried to wiggle my toes, I pinched myself and I even thought of testing for pain with a lit cigarette. My mind raced. I thought to myself, "Easy Jean, easy, this is probably just temporary. You've been in bed, what almost a week? It's pins and needles. That's all. You've just been sitting on your ass too long."

Then the final test, I touched IT. I felt NOTHING! Zero, zilch, nada!

I closed my eyes to keep them from stinging and waited for sleep. I had nothing else to do from there. It was over. I knew the doctor would be in in the morning to check on Mustang and myself. To "assess" the situation, as they had said most of the tests would have to be done when I was coherent.
Why bother? What could a doctor tell me? Lust had run me through and quite obviously I was broken. I settled in to try to sleep and prayed that the nurse would come in with something for sleep like they did at the cinema. My prayers were answered and I gladly took the offered sedative. As I nodded off into the fog I thought, "Fuck, I broke my back, now what?"

A new day dawned when an old crotchety nurse came in to, I can only assume, harass me and ruin some perfectly good sleep. In truth, she had come to turn me onto my side to prevent bedsores and empty the bag that was attached to the contraption violating my junk. She explained that it was called a catheter. I didn't need an explanation. I'd owned a pair my whole life, I knew how my stuff worked, and I knew mine wasn't working. All she really did was clarify just how totally fucked up I was. I'd been right about harassment part. This was not a shining moment in my life, or in the life of "Master Havoc".

Thank the gods Mustang is a heavy sleeper. I would have NEVER heard the end of this, either by witty retort or the sad look on his face that I would come to know later. I never got the pretty nurses any other time I got banged up, but in my current state this twist of fate was a relief. I was informed that I would be going for tests after breakfast. I wouldn't be learning anything I hadn't already figured out myself, but the time alone to think would be welcome.

Breakfast arrived, and Mustang of course had a few cracks about his lack of a "Command Suite" and the caliber of the fare. I picked at my food and was thankful they at least let me have a cigarette after breakfast. If there was ever a time to smoke 'em if you had them, this was it.

After breakfast a couple of orderlies came and transferred me to a gurney and took me for X-rays and a full physical work up. After the X-rays I was stripped, and then the Neuro Surgeon proceeded to show me a variety of blunt and pointy instruments, some which looked like they would be, should be, painful. I only ever felt a few of the pricks, but I suppose that was the aim of the whole test, to see if I could feel pain. I'd never wanted to feel pain so much in my life. I would hear the doctor move, and then he'd purse his lips or sigh, and I knew it was not good. I guess the doctors were surprised when they saw the results; I was either very out of touch with my body and ignorant of my situation, or one of the most together people they'd ever seen. Apparently, I should have been hysterical as soon as I woke up and realized I couldn't move. If only they knew what was going on in my head. I had been treating this mess like a mission, like I was gathering info on another person. But the tests made it impossible to distance myself any longer. This was me. This had happened to me.

It was no surprise to me when the doctor came back in with a grave face and informed me, "Lieutenant, you've broken your back at T-11. Your spinal cord was severed when you were stabbed. From the sensory function tests we did we can tell you have a little sporadic sensation below the injury site and no voluntary motor function at this time. It's too early to tell what the eventual outcome is going to be, only time will tell if you will get any return of sensation or movement or not. In a week or so we will insert steel rods to stabilize from T-10 to S-1 and repair some of the burns with skin grafts. You will be able to start Occupational and Physical Therapy shortly after that. I don't want to disturb you or hinder your rehabilitation progress, Second Lieutenant Havoc, but don't count on much return."

It was like I was no longer Jean Havoc. He'd referred to me in technical terms, like a broken or obsolete machine, devoid of emotion because I was the diagnosis.

"Excuse me Doctor…. could I have that in Amestrian?" I said in a snappish tone.
He translated it from jargon to the cold hard truth.

"Lieutenant Havoc, the stab wound in your back severed your spinal cord completely just above the waist. When the swelling goes down it may allow you more feeling & function than you already have, but the outlook is grim. This is probably how it is going to be for the rest of your life. I'm sorry, but you are paralyzed from the waist down. In medical terms, you are classed as a complete paraplegic. Now that you're out of immediate danger we plan to insert steel rods to stabilize the broken bones and to insure no more damage is done To minimize the risk of infection we will perform skin grafts to cover the burns on your torso. Once we are sure the grafts have taken you will be allowed to sit up and start rehabilitation."

He'd introduced himself before the "prick test". Prick. As the ceiling flashed by as the orderlies took me back to the room, I realized I couldn't remember his last name for the life of me. It should have stuck in my mind, since in ten minutes his diagnosis had completely changed my future and my general outlook on life. I had asked Dr. Prick not to tell any of my comrades about my injuries, that I would do that. He was rather relieved, as he already had to call my mother and give her the news.

"Live like this," he'd said. How in the hell could I live like this? How could I have become such a burden on my poor mother? What would she do with me? What would I do with me? A soldier, hell, a war veteran, reduced to living with his family? Life as I knew it was over. This situation was undignified and unsuitable I would be better off dead. I considered the fact that IT was as good as dead too. Dr. Prick hadn't mentioned that. But diagnoses don't get laid, do they? I might as well give all women to Mustang now. Hell, Fullmetal could have some of them, too. He wasn't getting much in the downtime he had between missions.

When I was delivered back to the room, and gingerly but gracelessly, placed back in my bed, Hawkeye and Mustang were poring over the blueprints for the Third Lab. They were discussing plans for how to discern who could be trusted in Central. As Mustang lectured on how we would be working doubly hard for him and how good it was to have something to fight for and Hawkeye was obviously honored to be included in Mustang's ascent to the top, I thought, "This is it, I have to tell them." It was then that Breda burst in with the "intellectual stimulation". I decided there was no time better than the present.

"Breda, my friend, I won't be needing that reading material anymore, hand it over to Fuery. He certainly needs an education beyond those dime store novels," I said, trying to control my tone and keep it light. Then I turned to Mustang, and said, "I regret that you'll have to count me out."

Mustang and Hawkeye glared at me incredulously, with fury in their eyes. I explained my blunt announcement gripping the sheets that covered my now useless legs, "My legs, I can't feel them, so excuse me," I paused trying to find the words. "I cannot go on."

We were all experts at escape and evade, so of course after I gave everyone the news, the room fell into an uncomfortable silence. With that, Breda left for Headquarters to do something. I'm sure it was important, but at that point I was beyond caring. Mustang and Hawkeye fell into silence. Hawkeye left, explaining that she had to go feed Black Hayate, though the housekeeper could have done it. My announcement felt like it had sucked all the air out of the room. Mustang announced that he needed a nap after all the plotting. I just needed a cigarette and a good stiff drink.

After a much needed smoke, I settled in for a nap. I suppose the blessing in this was that I was feeling no pain. Funny, had I known this when I woke up the day before, I would have wished for agony. Anything was better than this.
A very needed distraction came before suppertime in the form of a pretty nurse. The fates hadn't forgotten me! "Hello there you! Is it time for my sponge bath?" I said.

"Well you look like you are feeling quite well. How are you soldier?" the vision of loveliness before me said. She did indeed have the necessities for a sponge bath and commenced her work appearing rather eager.

"Havoc, you haven't lost it," I thought to myself.

She undid the shoulders of my oh-so-flattering hospital gown. I let her know my name was Jean and that I was, after all, a Second Lieutenant. She started washing my shoulders and arms. She added a little shoulder massage for good measure, as I seemed tense. *Was she flirting?* Then she moved onto the hair. Hopefully she'd get the 'do' back in place when she was done. It was heaven to have my hair washed, and man did I ever need a shave. She of course saw to that. Gosh, pretty *and* perceptive. She had it all. It was pleasant for once to have a blade to my throat that wasn't going to kill me. I admitted to myself that I must have looked like hell before that. I was glad I'd requested a toothbrush after breakfast. It wouldn't do to flirt with a pretty nurse with fuzz on my teeth. After she finished my shave and moved to lower regions, she faltered, and I realized that she had not read my chart. I thought to myself, "Jean, you idiot. She didn't know. Perfectly serviceable shoulders and arms, hell, perhaps even an attractive face. Lust left that intact. Perhaps she even thought that through… but Angel Nurse saw the damage, and what they've got going on with the manhood and she's pieced it all together that Jean Havoc, former loser in love, has been taken out of the race for good."

She apologized for the lapse of attention and continued my sponge bath, but it was no longer the companionable and flirty affair that it had started out as. Sponge baths from pretty nurses were supposed to be fun, and this was just another reality check. I was now to be taken care of by pretty women and definitely not an object of lust.

All dry and powdered like a newborn babe, it was announced that Mustang and I would be fed soon and the blushing Angel Nurse hurried out of the room.

After a few more days of being babied due to my helpless and hopeless state, it was declared that I was fit enough to undergo surgery. I found it kind of funny at the time that a knife would be repairing damage done by a knife. I didn't let anyone know that though; I think they'd already thought I'd lost it. I wasn't talking much to anyone, though my inner monologue was going a mile a minute.

The day of surgery arrived, and it was a relief to be put under anesthesia and then sedated heavily until they thought I was "out of the woods" pain wise. It passed the time. Since they wouldn't let me drink at all or smoke much, pain medication was a welcome escape.

With my state of mind I couldn't concentrate enough to read, and would read the same page over and over again if I tried. If I was awake, the unceasing concerned questions of my comrades grated on my nerves. I wanted to be left alone to fester in my self-pity. When medicated, I was too out of it to hear the comings and goings of my comrades and, more importantly, to hold the pained and polite conversations. The injuries I could deal with, the pain was manageable. The unbearable part was being pitied by my former peers. In addition to my list of battle scars that my comrades and I would compare and tell tall tales about how we'd gotten them, my back now looked like I'd been dissected in biology class. A long thin line ran from the top of my boxers to mid-back. This would be great with the ladies, maybe I should have asked Mustang to char that too, make it a matched set to go with his field medicine efforts.
Days flowed in and out. Almost two weeks had passed since the diagnosis. At times I slept through whole days, and some days seemed to drag on for an eternity. Food, meds, what passed for therapy, Mustang complaining and eventually being able to wander the hospital grounds (thank the gods, a room to myself some of the time), and the Dogs would come by to visit when they had some time. Nurses would come in and check on me, turn me over so I wouldn't begin to rot and I'd stopped really looking at them. They may as well have sent the homeliest nurses. I didn't really notice, and if I had, what good would it have done? I couldn't really DO anything about it in my broken state. I'd never been much of a success with the ladies when I was whole, what could I do from a hospital bed?

I got one smoke a day. This was truly a brutal medical facility. What's a guy supposed to do when he can't really DO anything? The answer is smoke. It is comforting. It's something to do with your hands. It takes up time. It is familiar. It was damned annoying that I could only have one and damned annoying if I spaced out while smoking my one mealy allotted cigarette for the day. Each drag should be appreciated if they are being rationed. Maybe they could have let me chew them? Or just hold onto one?

During my sacred smoking time, Breda came in. I must have been spacing out because he startled me, and handed me an ashtray as I'd about smoked it down to the filter and was about to have the cherry land in my numb lap and set myself aflame. I'd have known once I smelled the smoke or saw the flame. Normally a cherry landing in my lap would set me jumping. Bygones.

Breda informed me that Second Lieutenant Maria Ross was safe and sound, and though pleased for her, I didn't really smile. I was still kind of dazed and in my own thoughts. Poor Breda looked to be beside himself. I pulled out the gallows humor in an attempt to make him feel a bit better. 'I'll at least be a good joke around the barracks. 'Jean Havoc, the soldier who was retired from service because he was stabbed by a woman.' Somehow it's fitting really."

Breda, ever the loyal dog, was persistent. "What about automail like the Fullmetal Boss? Edward does ok."

I sighed and said, "No, the nervous system to my lower body is completely shot. It's useless. It won't work, it's impossible. The doctors, Doctor Prick in particular, said not to get my hopes up too high, or go looking for 'miracle cures'."

Breda got ready to leave and set his jaw, I can only imagine he was thinking up some hare brained scheme to get me back into working order. He said a cryptic, "Not quite. You're not suited to the life of a retiree," and strode out. Perhaps he and the Boss can share a room in the loony bin. It's just down the hall, quite aptly named since many of the Ishbal veterans are stashed there.

As a member of the military, you need your mind and your body sharp. My mind was sharp as ever, but the body, well, it was not cooperating and my sick leave was completely used and there was still no change in my condition. The swelling had gone down around my spinal cord and I still couldn't feel anything more than I could before. Even after the skin grafts had healed & I was finally allowed to sit up I could hardly move on my own. I called the Retirement Department. An officer was sent to my room and my mother came to the meeting. I could barely look at her. My limited options were discussed, and it was decided that when I was "better" or as good as I was going to get, I would be released to the care of my parents in the East. My mother cried the whole time.

They were just leaving as Breda came in. He saw my mother and the Retirement Department officer and asked what was up. I let him in on my plans and he tried to convince me otherwise, but WHAT can a soldier do if he cannot move on his own? My sick leave was up; I was clearly dead in
the water. What would I do if someone tried to attack my comrades? Fall in front of them to trip them? Roll my chair in front of them and pray that terrorists wouldn't harm a cripple or that they'd stub a toe on the clunky thing? Cripes.

Mustang of course was shocked that I would retire without first discussing my options with my him, and I think he was scared that I had talked to anyone without clearing my statement and cover story. After all, we were on an illegal raid of the Third Lab. I had covered our tracks well though.

The scenario I gave was that my injuries were caused while trying to seize the detention center attackers. Besides, who would believe that a gorgeous woman had shot out her fingers and skewered me like shish kebab? Breda continued to press me on my plans for my release from the hospital. The Retirement Department and my mother had decided that it would be for the best if I moved back to the East where my parents have a general store. In my state, I could probably still answer the telephone for them and take orders. I agreed, though I really didn't care where I'd be, or to be anywhere.

Mustang argued that it wasn't decided that I wouldn't heal. Was he crazy? What alchemy, medicine or miracle from the heavens would restore a severed spinal cord? Stubborn idiot. I was beginning to lose it. But Mustang was still my commanding officer. I couldn't yell at him. I simply stated, "I'm not so dumb that I think I will still be useful. A pawn that cannot move is not needed by the army."

Mustang said, "I won't accept it."

I finally just lost it. All the pain, loss, apprehension and fear that had been gripping me for weeks finally exploded to the surface.

"What in the HELL do you expect me to do with these legs?" I screamed while punching my slack thigh muscles.

Mustang dropped his gaze, trying to object it was useless. His eyes held a mix that I could only interpret as despair and possibly pity. This was the final straw for me.

"Why are you looking at me like that? Why don't you just throw me out? LEAVE ME HERE! Don't you have to keep your promise to Brigadier General Hughes?"

How could he keep his promise with me as literally dead weight in his command? I grabbed Mustang by the shirt, and with much effort pulled myself up so I was eye to eye with him.

"LOOK AT ME! LOOK!" I grunted out. I felt Breda's arm grab me to support my shoulders because I was shaking with the effort of even sitting up unsupported. "I have to be held like a baby to even sit up properly. I DON'T need your sympathy! Just cut me off... just GIVE up!"

I pitched forward and Breda caught me like a rag doll and I ground out my last request to my Colonel. "Please." Just that one word. Please. Like a child. I was exhausted with the effort of arguing and just sitting up. What had become of the soldier, the man that I was?

He left, but before he did he told me that I'd better catch up, he'd be waiting at the top. Even after my tirade and all we knew, he didn't give up on me. He let me know that he still wanted me to "cover his back", even in my state. Hawkeye explained that Mustang still needed me, that they still needed me. She comforted me, even after I'd been a total bastard. She and Breda carefully laid me back down on my pillows. They left without another word; just two long and puzzled looks.

After that I fell into a deep sleep. I wished I'd never wake from it, but I did. The country began to
fall into a mess. I stayed in the hospital and they began working with me to make use of what was left of me. I thought about what the General Store in the East would be like, and that didn't sound too appealing, but really what was there for me?

Mustang was released, my comrades Breda, Fuery and Falman were transferred and scattered to the winds. Hawkeye was made the Fuhrer's personal secretary. All this insult on top of injury was becoming too much to bear. Truly, this was the end I thought. I prepared myself to rot in the hospital, forgotten, and to then slink off to the East to fester in my self-pity.
Accomodation

Chapter Summary

It's time to start picking up the pieces and make a life.

Title: Work in Progress

Rating: T, for language, realistic description of spinal cord injury, and M later for sexual situations.
Spoilers: Manga Chapter 38+
Disclaimer: All of these characters are the property of the genius that invented FMA. No one but Jim is mine and he's purely fictional, Dr. Prick, er Parker as well. All smex scenes are fictional but technically accurate and hopefully spicy due to some personal experience as inspiration, however it would be creepy to write my actual sex life into fan fiction. This is a frank, detailed and realistic fic with some levity thrown in with the tragedy. Just like real life. If you can't laugh at yourself, you're left with others laughing at you. Better to laugh with them.

Accommodation

Eventually they allowed, correction forced me to go to occupational and physical therapy. By "occupation" they meant the basics like cooking, household chores and dressing and caring for myself, by myself. Oh how the "nearly mighty" had fallen. One blessing was that they removed the offending catheter and taught me how to take care of that by myself. It was still humiliating in my opinion, but at least it was taken care of privately. Perhaps if I had thought of this as "different" and not "awful" it wouldn't have been so bad.

To compensate for my lost ability to walk the therapists worked on increasing my upper body strength which had diminished while I was immobile, restoring muscle mass and range of motion to the areas Lust had made hamburger out of and since they felt it was important, to keep moving and stretching my legs for me. I also learned how to use my new mode of transportation.

I awoke one morning to find "the Tank" in my room. A blessing and a curse at the same time really. I could use it to move around on my own, get where I needed to go, if there weren't any stairs I would later find out. But this also began my life with an "ass eye view". It might have been a welcome sight before, at least the attractive butts. I'd have been able to look at ideal female derrière specimens all day long without getting slapped. The huge flaw in all this was that now I was stuck sitting down, and if I did get up the nerve to talk to a pretty female it got tiresome to continually look up at the person I was speaking with. Undignified is how I'd describe it. Always looking up. I'd shrunk from over six feet tall to a little over four feet tall overnight. The Boss was taller than I was now.

After breakfast my therapist came to help me into the wheelchair. It was exhausting attempting to sit up, pull my legs one by one over the side of the bed using my arms, which had grown weak. Sitting up without falling over was difficult because I was dizzy after lying flat on my back for so long. Then I attempted to heave my body without falling to the floor, into a chair a mere twelve
inches from the bed. It turns out it was MEANT to be an exercise in futility. My therapist caught me as I nearly planted my numm ass on the tile floor and put me back into bed. He gave me a moment to get myself together and said, "You're going to learn how to do this properly and then it won't be so hard."

The lesson was learned and it eventually got easier. This demonstration made me a much more compliant patient when it came to therapy. He'd pegged me correctly as a stubborn bastard and this object lesson though harsh had been needed. Jim, my therapist and eventual savior, wheeled me down to the therapy room for my session. It was a relief that the view was no longer of the ceiling tiles in the hall, but of the happenings in the hospital. I had definitely needed a change of scenery.

After a grueling therapy session I wanted nothing more than to get back to my room and sulk, smoke and sleep. That was not possible as when we approached my room I discovered I had company. The aroma of apple pie told me it was Gracia. Elysia's chirrup announced the rest.

Gracia and Elysia's greetings were warm as usual and for the first time in what felt like ages I was addressed as a person, not a diagnosis. Elysia had even drawn me a "Get Well" picture. She let me know that Mommy had helped with the letters. I let her know that I'd keep it on my bedside table so everyone could see it. Gracia served us all a big wedge of pie, and had had the forethought to get coffee from the cafeteria to wash it down with. Leave it to Gracia to know my vices. We talked companionably about what everyone seemed to be up to, Elysia's latest accomplishments and of course Maes.

I felt I owed it to Gracia to be sociable since she and Maes had always been so kind to us "Military Dogs". After we finished our pie Elysia climbed into my lap. It was the closest and most unaffected human contact I'd had since the accident. Gracia looked a little worried that Elysia might hurt me somehow, but I smiled letting her know it was safe. I felt myself misting up, but composed myself as Elysia settled on my lap and nuzzled into my chest to tell me about her latest tea party. I must have visibly relaxed with her contact. A flash of an idea came across Gracia's face, and she excused herself, presumably to clean up our dishes. Elysia had brought her crayons, and asked if I wanted to join her in coloring. I thought to myself, why not? I was being taken care of like a child. I may as well color. Besides, Maes had been right in his manic picture sharing. That vision of cuteness could make anything seem better.

Gracia came back to the room after we'd both nearly finished our drawings and sat down next to Elysia and myself. We showed off our masterpieces. I had drawn a picture of Roy buried under a pile of paperwork with Riza looking at him with a menacing expression. Well, as menacing as a stick figure can look. Art would not be my new occupation. Elysia had drawn her house and a garden full of flowers and while describing it said, "Jean, you should come visit! It really is that pretty!"

Gracia cleared her throat and said, "Speaking of our house, and the garden Jean, while I was out, I hope you don't mind... I called Roy. We discussed where you'd be going when you get out. I'm sorry."

I looked at her rather crossly, but let her continue. How dare she plan the affairs of a grown man?

"Hear me out Jean, Roy and Riza and everyone really, think that you should stay in Central with Elysia and myself until you finish all your outpatient therapy. Going to the East before you are fully recovered won't do you any good. After that you can do what you wish."

I scoffed when she said, "Recovered".
"Gracia, I'm not going to BE recovered. This is it. This is all there is for me. Me sitting wherever, and doing not much at all. This is my reality, we all just have to get used to it." I said in the calmest tone I could muster so I would not scare Elysia who was still in my lap.

"Jean, be sensible", Gracia said. "You might not get any sensation back but you can learn to function to your optimum and wouldn't you rather be in the city where there is better medical supervision and therapy? What about your friends? They'll visit when they can. Roy is also concerned about your safety. Whoever did this to Maes did this to you, that much he would tell me. The Military is not providing security for you after you are released, but my house is under twenty-four-hour surveillance. Besides, since Maes… the house is so big."

I looked at her; my gaze softened a little, as I think I had been boring a hole straight through her, to the wall.

"Gracia, I don't want to be a burden on you. I don't know what I can and cannot do for myself. I'd just be another mouth to feed, another 'child' to care for. I don't want that."

"Jean, we have a guest room on the first floor, I cook more than enough food to feed Roy's whole crew and it just goes to waste. As for care, you know you'll have a pension and if it comes to that you can hire a nurse to come for the 'burdensome' stuff. I want the company, Elysia adores you and I'm sure you will pull babysitting duty and could dry dishes once in awhile. Besides, I'll be charging you rent to keep it on the up and up on your conscience. I've been thinking about taking on a boarder to help fill the house up anyway. I can't think of anyone I'd trust more than one of Maes' friends."

I thought her words over, and again nearly cried. *What was going on with me? Perhaps Lust had poisoned me as well.* I'd gone from sarcastic and devil-may-care to an emotional wreck in a matter of weeks.

"Gracia, I am touched, but I will have to think about it. Princess Elysia, I will see you again soon and we will have to color. Gracia, bring pie!" I said, trying to sound as cheerful as possible.

With that, Elysia hopped off of my lap and Gracia and Elysia left the room. I dragged myself into bed and broke down in tears for the first time since I'd hit double digits. I sobbed until my breath came in wracking gasps and my eyes were raw and dry. The offer they extended was so tempting, but I was sure it came from pity. She treated me no differently than she had before. Either she didn't understand or wasn't aware. Either way she was the first person I'd felt completely myself with since the accident. Exhausted I fell into a fitful sleep.

Somewhere in the middle of the night I heard a familiar clanking noise. I opened my eyes and was greeted by Alphonse Elric. I was certainly confused. Life in the military had gone on without me and I was uncertain on the Fullmetal's whereabouts, but I was pretty sure that the Brothers Elric were not supposed to be in Central.

"Al, what are you doing here? Is the Boss ok?"

Al sounded like he was clearing his throat, actually, he sounded nervous, if a suit of armor could sound nervous and said, "Oh, Brother was just being Brother and he got a little carried away on a mission. He'll be fine if Winry doesn't kill him."

I chuckled a little and said, "Ah, so it's the wrench for him? No worries, it's only his head. He's survived more. What are you doing here, how did you know?"
Apparently word of the fall of Jean Havoc had traveled far and wide. But for some reason, Al was a comforting presence. I knew the kid didn't sleep, and as I was now wide-awake, I didn't want to either. Since the Boss was asleep I invited Alphonse to stay and chat for a while. He informed me of all he knew about what was happening. The wonderful thing about Alphonse was that people didn't often see him as a threat, even if he was a 7-foot tall suit of armor. So he faded into the background. This made him an excellent source of intelligence. I pumped his brain as politely as I could for any gossip on myself. He knew what I was doing, but didn't seem to mind and volunteered all the information he had obtained. The description of "poor bastard" had come up in the barracks and mess, and he gave it to me straight. I had suspected that would be my new moniker anyway.

He shared Ed's latest exploits and temper tantrums and those were good for comic relief. Again, I felt almost normal. Maybe this new existence could be bearable. Then I had a brilliant idea.

"Hey, Al, I am dying for a cigarette and I need to just get out of here without proper supervision, want to go up to the roof? We could go look at the stars and I think I remember an elevator somewhere on this floor. If anyone catches us just make like official military and we can bluff our way out of it."

So off we went, Al for a night that wouldn't seem quite so long and me for my cigarette fix and a change of scenery.

I showed off my new mobility skills transferring into my wheelchair that I had dubbed "the Tank" as it was heavy and difficult to maneuver. Al looked as impressed as a suit of armor could and said, "Lieutenant Havoc, you seem to be making some progress. I had heard that you couldn't even sit up by yourself… um, err… oops, I mean I had heard that you had been really badly hurt."

We made it to the elevator without incident and I had to stretch to reach the button for roof access but eventually got it. When the door opened, my hopes of freedom and a contraband cigarette began to fade. I looked at Al and said, "Back in the room, what you said, it's ok, you don't need to be careful about what you say around me. You can say it, and call me Jean. I'm pretty pitiful right now, worse before. It's all good. Unfortunately it looks like this is the end of the road for me, there are stairs, you go on ahead."

Al pondered my statement and slowly said, "Jean, I don't know if this would bother you, but back in Risembool, right after you know, I used to carry Brother out into the fields so we could see the stars. I wouldn't tell anyone, it could be our secret, like this 'mission'." I could have sworn that Al winked. I thought it over and agreed. I hadn't been outside in un-sanitized air in almost two months and I was beginning to get stir crazy. This was my chance to rebel just a little and I knew I could trust Al with my weaker moments.

"Ok Al, just do not drop me, I'm already messed up enough." I laughed. The gallows humor would save face for me yet.

He gingerly picked me up supporting me behind the shoulders and under the knees and carried me up the short flight of stairs to the roof. He then found a small wall to prop me up against. Al really thought of everything without needing to be told. We started out just gazing at the stars. The lights of Central blotted out some of them, but they were still a sight for sore eyes. They were quite welcome after the sea of white and surgical scrub green I'd existed in for what had come to seem like eternity.

Finally Al spoke up. "Lieutenant, um Jean, I know that you don't need or want people taking care of you, or making decisions for you, but when Gracia came to visit Ed she let us know about what
had happened and what she had proposed. She and the Colonel aren't doing this out of pity, and the
Colonel certainly isn't doing this to control you. Brother may say that the Colonel is a manipulative
bastard, but even he admits that the Colonel has the best interests of his team at heart. You should
think Gracia's offer over. Well, that and we could visit you more here than we could in the East,
and Ed says you could have pie all the time. He said that would be the best part about living with
Gracia and Elysia. You know Brother, always thinking with his stomach."

We sat in silence for a while. I really couldn't get mad at the kid. He'd spoken from what seemed
like true compassion and I'd always marveled at what he picked up was unusually perceptive and I
knew Hawkeye often trusted his powers of observation. His words caused me conflict because
what I really wanted to do was push everyone I knew away so they wouldn't see what I had
become. However, allowing Al to see my vulnerabilities hadn't been as bad as I thought it would be
and the kid did have a point, Central was much more convenient in many ways than the East and
Gracia did make one hell of an apple pie. I knew one thing for sure; it was cold up on the roof. I'd
gotten soft in the hospital and used to climate control.

"Al, I'll take it under advisement. Thank you for your honesty and thank you for this." I said as I
gestured with my stub of a cigarette at the rooftop and our view of the starry night. "At the moment
I am sure of one immediate course of action that needs to be taken."

He turned to me and asked hopefully, "Yes Jean, what is that?"

"I need to get inside. It is freezing up here. I have gotten soft in my infirmity. Don't tell anyone that
a tough soldier was complaining about the cold." With that I winked and both Al and I laughed and
he commenced preparations for the trip back downstairs.

When we arrived back in my room I heaved a sigh of relief once I'd finally gotten myself into bed.
I was worn out after our adventure. Between two transfers and pushing that awkward and heavy
chair I was wiped out.

"Al, I am beat. That chair is the heaviest, clumsiest thing ever and I am out of shape. You better get
back to check on the Boss and I had better get back to sleep. I was told that tomorrow I get to learn
how to dress myself. You're impressed, aren't you?"

He said goodnight, choosing to ignore my last sarcastic remark and went back to the Boss' room. I
did my nighttime hygiene routine and took care of all the necessaries so I wouldn't wake up wet in
the morning; I had learned that with planning I could spare myself some humiliation. I then
remembered that I should also spare my butt as I now spent a good amount of my time on it and
decided it would be best to sleep on my side, so I set to getting myself there. After a good amount
of struggling I was finally there and fell almost immediately to sleep. It couldn't have come a
moment sooner; it had been a very long day.

The new day brought more therapy, the same hospital routine, but it also brought a Winry. As I
wheeled back to my room with Jim as my escort I heard an unmistakable racket that could only be
the Fullmetal Boss being pummeled by the beautiful Miss Winry Rockbell.

"Who-are-you-calling-so-short-that-he-wrecked-his-automail-while-trying-to-scale-a-curb? I'm-
not-some-bean-sized-shrimp-midget-that-you-can-boss-around!" blustered Ed.

Winry replied with, "Whose automail Edward? My automail. You wrecked my precious automail
again you bean!"

"It was a fucking steel-reinforced concrete wall with barbed wire and DOGS! NOT A CURB
Jim and I arrived at my room just as the wrench went flying. Jim looked concerned and I just shrugged and laughed.

"No worries Jim, it's just his head. That is Edward Elric, the Fullmetal Alchemist, and if he is injured we are in a hospital. Thanks for the session."

Jim replied, "I thought he'd be taller. See you tomorrow Jean."

Al held Edward down while Winry gloated. I rolled in and settled in at the small table the nurses had placed in the room near the chairs for visitors. As I neared the table I heard a loud thud and Winry gasped. I looked down and realized that I must have bumped my legs against the table and couldn't get clearance under it. I'd have to check for bruises or injuries later, but I was pretty sure I was fine. I added this to my growing list of things I'd have to be more careful of from now on. Al had gone out to pick up pastry for Ed's enormous appetite and he'd remembered to get some for me so I was not about to ruin the party by letting everyone in on the realities. Ed had calmed down, Winry stopped gawking and Ed, Al, Winry and I got ready to enjoy our feast.

"This beats the hell out of hospital food, don't you agree Boss?" I said trying to change the mood and the unsaid subject as we settled in.

Ed mumbled something incoherent around a huge mouthful of pastry and Winry smiled and nodded in agreement. We continued eating in silence, my visitors seemingly becoming less aware of the elephant at the table as time passed.

"Al, you are truly too good to me. You think of everything." I said as I finished the last bite of baklava he'd brought for me because he'd remembered I'd liked it from a passing conversation we'd had months ago. People said Al was lucky to have Ed, but I thought it was the other way around.

Everyone had pretty much finished up when Winry finally gathered her words. "Um, Mr. Lieutenant Havoc, um Jean…Al told me that the um, wheelchair is really heavy and hard to get around in. I've started thinking of ways to make that easier, lighter and what not. You wouldn't mind if I worked on that would you? Um and oh gosh, I am really, really sorry that this has happened to you."

The poor kid was so nervous just asking, even addressing me. She'd dealt with automail and repairing massive bodily injuries almost her whole life and this was something she knew she couldn't fix and that fact made her very uncomfortable. It was sweet really, and she was honestly concerned. I sighed, and thought and finally smiled at her and gave her my answer.

"Winry, it's Jean, and you don't need to walk on eggshells around me. I won't break. Hell, Ed could probably throw me soon and I wouldn't sustain any damage. Didn't you know I'm the 'Fullmetal Havoc'? You should check out my X-rays, they're a feat of engineering. I have almost as much metal on my person as the Boss. I would love the services of such a talented and lovely mechanic."

I shot a wink at the Boss as I said lovely. The Boss turned shades of pink I didn't think were possible.

Winry clasped that wrench of hers in both hands and bowed her head and said, "Thank you Mister, I mean Jean, I will do my best." She then set to taking measurements of everything. I could see what the Boss meant when he called her a "Machine Freak". She was unfamiliar with the specifics of my diagnosis so I filled her in on what I could and told her she should go talk to Jim and "Dr. Prick" so she would have accurate specs for her next great creation.
Ed and Al took their leave, but Winry stayed. I surmised that this was a patient consult and I was right. She had a look of determination on her face as she got up from her chair and went to her toolbox. She tied up her hair in a bandana, got out a well-worn notebook and stub of a pencil and began asking me questions.

"I'm going to ask you some questions and they might seem weird and I'm sorry," she blurted and blushed as if rushing her statement would make it go away.

I just smiled and nodded and rubbed my chin a bit and said, "Winry, you are doing me a huge favor. I'm barely military anymore and I now have a personal mechanic. I thought only the Boss got one of those. I must be pretty important."

With that she smiled a shy smile and said, "So um, your back, I was thinking, to make the chair lighter some of the back rest could go. This "Tank" thing is huge, almost like an armchair on wheels. I noticed when you came in that it barely cleared the door jamb and that you had a horrible turning radius. What if we made it more like, I don't know…sporty?"

I laughed and rolled my eyes. She smiled nervously and I smiled back, hoping I could make her feel more at ease, as I know on my end this was uncomfortable as hell. How could a wheelchair be sporty? What kind of questions was she going to ask? I barely wanted to admit my weaknesses to my doctors or myself. Telling Winry, a child really, felt wrong. Kids should be protected from the nastiness of the world. Since she was already entangled with Fullmetal, I figured she'd seen worse than I could deliver, this was just new territory for her. Making a better alternative to the Tank would be a tall order, but if anyone could do it Winry could. I decided the best approach was to be direct.

"To answer your question Winry, it's easiest to sit up if I have support about here," I said pointing to where my ribs started in the back, "and maybe you could think about doing something with the seat so I don't tip forward either. It is hard for me to keep stable that way, and I've been told that it will continue to be hard. Gravity is not my friend. A seatbelt is really an undesirable option; I am not a racecar. Though Elysia seems to think I am." I added, partly in jest. This was not cool, and a seatbelt would just make my trunk weakness that much more conspicuous. Though I had to admit, Elysia did think that a ride on "Jean Racecar" was cooler than playing horsy.

Winry had me transfer to the bed so she could check out the specs on the Tank and she took more measurements. She rolled it back and forth, under the table noting the distance between seat and tabletop and I winced remembering how I'd bumped my legs rather hard at the beginning of the visit. She then attempted to pick it up and decided that it was indeed too heavy being made of wood and steel and then she scribbled some notes and sketches and it seemed like a light bulb went on. She made a little squeaking noise and said, "I've got it!"

"What? What have you got?" I said. But Winry was on a mission. Apparently she had found an answer to some of my problems and for that I knew I would be grateful. She sat on the bed and then almost tackled me in a bear hug. She popped up almost as quickly doing what Ed secretly called the "Machine Freak Dance" behind her back.

"Jean, I'll be back as soon as I can. I need to get some supplies and I think I'll need Al's help but I can do this. Do what Jim says, be nice to the nurses even the ugly ones and drink your milk!" she shouted over her shoulder as she raced out of the room.

I smiled, lit up my allotted smoke and thought of the options that might be open to me if I could move around a bit better. Winry had worked miracles for the Boss; maybe she could do something for me.
A few days passed in the usual way. Awake before the birds to some nurse poking me and prodding at me, and checking on me in invasive ways that I'd never imagined before. Then breakfast and that too was wearing on me. The Boss had been released so Al had gone too, so no more pastry to supplement the milquetoast fare that passed for food. Soon after my morning bathroom routine a nurse would come in to help me bathe, as they didn't think I was quite ready to attempt the shower by myself. The memory of my first sponge bath still stung my ego, so what should have been the best part of the day was something I just closed my eyes for and resigned myself to. Next a passel of young doctors would come through with their instructor to poke and prod me some more and discuss me in terms I was coming to know all too well, like I wasn't even in the room or deaf instead of paralyzed. Thankfully they would leave minutes after they arrived and then Jim would arrive. I never thought I'd look forward to therapy, but it was a trip outside my room and Jim was pretty used to seeing guys as banged up as I was. After all, it was a military hospital. It was routine to Jim and he seemed pleased to have a patient who wanted to work with him, didn't throw bedpans at him and above all wanted to get the hell out of the hospital under his own steam. Mostly I looked forward to seeing Jim because I knew I needed to get stronger and to learn how to live with this rather learning to live "like this" and he was a way to do just that. That was how he had phrased it the first day in therapy. I could find a way to do plenty of the things that I wanted to do with effort and creativity, and if I couldn't then I would find other pursuits that interested me. I had looked at him incredulously that first day. There was no way that I could ever learn to "like" this. I'm sure he was familiar with the look.

"Jean, you have a few options. You can go home and hide and be bitter and get weak or you can work on yourself to better as much as you can. You have a brain, two strong arms, resources from your retirement, and friends if you don't push them away. Figure out a new plan. The old plan got screwed up. That is horrible, but it's a fact. Life is far too long to be miserable. Get out of here and make a new life. This new life may be different but it doesn't have to be worse."

I was in pretty good spirits after therapy. I'd met some of my goals, even if they were small and I could maneuver the Tank a bit better. My stamina was increasing as well. As Jim and I neared the room a small blonde missile darted out and jumped into my lap.

"RACECAR JEAN! Go fast! Please?" cried Elysia obviously happy to see me.

I agreed of course, who could resist an offer like that? So Elysia and I went careening down to the nurses' station and back. When we got back I was a little winded, but when I looked up I saw Gracia standing in the doorway smiling. I moved over to her, squeezed her hand and mouthed, "Thank You."

We then entered the room and Gracia had again been thoughtful enough to bring some of her wonderful baked goods, this time a small cake. If I recalled correctly it was her special cake.

"Gracia, why did you bake a cake? What are we celebrating? This is an awfully odd place to be celebrating. If I knew you'd bake me a cake for breaking my back maybe I would have done it sooner. Your cake is the best."

She blushed and looked down at that last comment and I knew I'd said too much. I shrugged and said, "Gallows humor, sorry."

"But really, what are we celebrating?"

Gracia turned to Elysia and made a shooing gesture, and at that Elysia hopped off my lap and ran towards the bathroom. When she opened the door out came Winry with an object covered in a hospital issue sheet. I noticed Jim was hanging around in the doorway and said, "Jim, get in here. I have a feeling you know what is going on here."
With a flourish Winry pulled the sheet off to reveal her latest creation.

I looked and then wheeled over to it and was speechless. The object before me had more in common with a professional racing bicycle than the Tank that I was currently sitting in. It was sleek and compact, the tires were rubber like bicycle tires and the wheels had spokes. There were push rims that looked like they would be easier on my hands to push with and the most interesting thing from that angle was that the wheels were set at an angle. Inspecting the seat I noticed that it was also set at an angle, slightly higher at the knees and lower in the back. I pointed at the seat, still unable to speak, the back rest was low slung and lightly padded with no push handles and it was at exactly the level I had given Winry in our consult session.

Winry spoke up, "I angled the seat so that it would come up under your knees and be lower in the back, to help you sit and maintain a more stable position. You said no seatbelt, right? Oh, and the wheels are cambered for stability and to better your turning radius. Plus, they are quick release so it's easy to get it in and out of the car and stuff. Plus I figured you wouldn't want anyone to push you once you're stronger, so no handles so people won't even try." then she giggled a bit at her stroke of genius. She was giddy with pride in her accomplishment and eager to see my reaction.

There were more differences from the Tank. The armrests were thin tubing with a minimal amount of padding, set low, and were constructed with the same metal as the frame. The frame or chassis in and of itself was a work of art. Where the Tank was all angles and bulk, this contraption was compact and curvaceous. It was like Winry had made the pin-up girl of my dreams in metal. It was sad that this work of art was a wheelchair, but the girl had talent. The next feature I noticed was that the footrest was part of the frame and quite discreet. On it were two small wheels that appeared to be multi-directional.

The final test was weight. I timidly reached out with my right hand and grabbed the seat and attempted to lift it. I was overjoyed when I realized that I was in fact able to lift it a little bit and it was lighter than I had ever thought possible. I put my both hands to my face, and leaned over to rest my elbows on my knees for a bit and just sat there so I could breathe a bit easier. I was dizzy with amazement at what she had accomplished, at what I might be able to accomplish. I needed to compose myself.

When I finally gathered my thoughts I said, "Winry you are a genius. The Boss does not deserve you unless he shouts from the roof of Central H.Q. that you are the best mechanic in all of Amestris. This is a work of art."

Winry blushed furiously, and said, "I couldn't have done it without Al. I had this idea that we could take a long distance light weight racing bicycle and Al could follow my blue prints to change the shape of the tubing using alchemy. That's why it's so light. I think you'll find it's everything we talked about. I added a pneumatic, um air cushion to the seat. Jim said that would help with sores and stuff, and the armrests are perfect for you to do those pressure relief push-ups on. It'll fit under tables too. I checked."

Jim interrupted Winry's nervous presentation on the specifications of her creation, "Jean, I think you have to try this out now, and Winry, I want copies of your plans, this is amazing."

I looked at all the faces in the room, Gracia, Elysia, Jim and most of all Winry, swallowed and said, "Here goes nothing."

I carefully lined up the Tank with Winry's work of art and nervously transferred. Even though the backrest was lower I felt more stable in it than I had felt in the Tank. I rolled over to the full-length mirror that was hanging on the back of the bathroom door and gave myself an inspection. Whereas the Tank had made me look smaller and more fragile than I was, this wheelchair seemed to fade
into the background a bit. Granted I was still sitting in a walking world, but this gave me back a part of myself. Maybe people might see me first, then the chair. Even just going to the mirror I could tell that I moved much more freely.

"Halloo, Jean, are you with us? We all know you are a looker, but could you grace us with your presence?" Jim said, knocking me out of my stupor. He was exceptionally good at helping me through awkward moments with humor.

I made my way over to the table, first pushing the Tank out of the way, and settling neatly underneath it with Gracia on one side and Winry on the other.

"Jim, grab a chair and sit down, not the Tank though, it doesn't fit, and get rid of it when you finish your cake!" I said, "Hey, Elysia, stop playing with the Tank and get over here." as I patted my lap to let her know she was welcome to it.

We all dug into Gracia's now famous within the Amestris Army cake and laughed and talked. Jim finished his cake and had to excuse himself as he did have other patients to work with. I excused myself as well and went to the door of my room.

"Jim, you're forgetting something, take the Tank and burn it or something, would you? Oh, and I am so going to get you. You knew that they were planning this and you didn't tell me? I would have done something more with my hair." mock preening as I pretended to berate him. With that said, I motioned for his hand and he offered it and I shook it and said, "Thank you, truly. Thank you. I think you may be right."

When Jim had left I returned to my other guests, focusing first on Winry.

"Winry, get over here so I can thank you properly."

Winry's eyes widened, but she did what was requested anyway. I grabbed her around the waist in the best bear hug I could muster reciprocating the unaffected show of kindness she had given me when she had left that first visit and said, "Thank you, there are not enough words, just thank you." I held onto her as tightly as I could and just squeezed.

Once Winry had wrestled out of my grip I turned to Gracia and Elysia.

"Gracia, Jim gave me some good news today during my session. I can go to therapy on an outpatient basis starting in a week if I find a 'suitable lodging situation'. I was wondering if your offer of staying with you and Elysia still stands."

Gracia stood up, walked toward me and once again I found myself in an iron grip. Not to be left out Elysia squeezed into the hug and onto my lap.

"I am going to assume that this is a yes." I said as I looked up and cocked an eyebrow.

Gracia smiled, near tears and said, "Of course Jean, I'm just glad that you've come to this decision by yourself, I hadn't told Elysia about it because I didn't want to get her hopes up, but as you can see, she is thrilled."
Resignation

Chapter Summary

Gracia opens her heart and her home to help one of Mustang's men. Will she help herself and Elysia in the process?

Here are the quick and dirty particulars:

Rating: T, for language, realistic description of spinal cord injury, and later sexual situations. (Het, eventually.) Havoc x Canon Character, Riza x Roy, Gracia x OC.

Spoilers: Manga Chapter 38+

Disclaimer: All of these characters are the property of the genius that invented FMA. No one but Jim is mine and he's purely fictional, Dr. Prick, or Parker as well. I own nothing.

Resignation

My last week in the hospital flew by. I learned how to shower if provided with a little bench to sit on and to help me transfer into the tub. Jim taught me the finer points of moving stuff around from place to place without dropping it from my lap or injuring myself and how to safely reach items just above me and on the floor. Winry had thought of everything on her masterpiece, I even had a little bag under my seat and a cargo net attached to the frame in case I had lots of stuff to carry. Getting Winry's wonder chair and myself in and out of the car was on the agenda as well. The final and most complicated task was the dreaded "floor to chair" transfer. This was physically taxing and to my chagrin not the prettiest sight. I decided right then that not many people would witness that stunning feat.

Early on the morning of the appointed day I packed up the small cache of belongings I had accumulated during my three month stay, got my list of home care instructions from "Dr. Prick", who I had come to know as Dr. Parker and I waited for Gracia and Elysia to come. Before they arrived to take me to their home two visitors who hadn't been by in awhile surprised me.

I had been dozing on the bed, as I was pretty tired from the flurry of activity, when I was awakened by a familiar voice.

"Second Lieutenant Havoc, you look well," Mustang said from the hall. He entered the room and was followed by Hawkeye.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, self-consciously straightened my hair, and did my best to look dignified while moving from lying on my side to a sitting position. At this point this action was at best difficult and at worst just damned awkward looking.

When I'd finally gotten my legs straightened out and my body upright I saluted him and said, "That's Jean Havoc to you, I'm a civilian now, remember?"

My tone was more severe than I had intended it to be. I looked down and said, "That didn't come out right. I'm a civilian now, and it's ok. Thank you for everything and thank you for the space. I
needed it." Looking up at them again I said, "Now about you, how are you two? Hawkeye, I hear you are the Fuhrer's secretary. That has to be horrible. You can't very well take aim at him without consequences." I winked and they knew that a bit of the old Havoc was back.

We talked for about a half hour and I got the update on the state of Amestris and it was not good, but what could I do? I knew Mustang would get it under control eventually, he always had. I'd help him however I could, even if it was just by rooting for him from the wings. It was not long before I heard Gracia and Elysia in the hall. I smiled and said, "That's my ride."

Elysia skipped into the room, looked at Hawkeye and Mustang, gave a cute little salute and promptly planted herself on the bed next to me. I think as far as Elysia was concerned this whole situation was a pretty good thing. She had her own adult with lots of time on his hands, with a constantly unoccupied lap. I chuckled at that thought.

At observing this image of happiness, Hawkeye gave me a knowing smile, and I caught Mustang smiling a bit too.

When Gracia entered the room the Colonel turned a shade paler, saluted the widow Hughes and inquired about the necessaries. He was clearly very uncomfortable, but I had known about that months ago. You don't drive a man around Central or serve under him for as long as I had without knowing the small nuances of his behavior.

He took his leave and Hawkeye had to get back to Headquarters, as her lunch break would be over shortly. I mused to myself that Mustang's stack of paperwork must be huge without his First Lieutenant to keep him in line.

"You ready to blow this pop stand Jean?" Gracia said.

"You know it! Let's get out of here." I said.

"Mommy, this isn't a pop stand, this is a hospital. Jean, you grown-ups are so silly!"

As we got to the hospital entrance I noticed a military car and driver. I looked at Gracia questioningly.

"Gracia, did Mustang arrange this?"

"No Jean, this is how it's been. I told you we're under guard, I guess I am just used to it. We have a car and driver at our disposal. Roy really has seen to everything at least the practical aspects." That said Gracia looked away.

The driver opened the car door for Gracia and Elysia and they got in and I set to work getting myself in. The driver motioned to help me but I waved him away. I disassembled my chair and instructed the driver to just put it in the trunk and to bring it to me when we got to our destination. Awkward, but bearable, and Winry was a genius for the quick release wheels. In just a few minutes I was in, my chair was in the trunk and I was on my way to my new digs. The Tank would have barely fit in the trunk of even this spacious sedan and I know as a driver I would not have relished attempting to lift it into the trunk.

The sedan arrived at the Hughes' residence and I waited in the car while Gracia gave the driver instructions on how to help me get out of the car and Elysia jumped out of the car and ran for the front porch and started bouncing up and down with impatience. The driver went around the back of the car, popped the trunk and brought my chair without a word. I quickly assembled it, transferred
as gracefully as I could since this was only my second "out of captivity" transfer and made my way to the front porch. Someone had built a small ramp to traverse the step onto the porch and from there it would be a smooth trip. Elysia waved something excitedly in my face, and I gently took it from her and admired it. She had given me a small, crudely formed clay bowl painted in riotous colors with my name on it. Gracia put a hand on my shoulder, patted it and said, "That Jean, is your ashtray."

I laughed, placed it on the little table that was new to the porch, like the ramp and said, "Thank you for putting up with my vices, even if I am made to indulge outside. I am a little disturbed that you used child labor to produce an ashtray."

Elysia clambered up into my lap facing me and said, "Jean, do you like your present?"

I replied, "I love my present, you are such an artist already, but an ashtray? Smoking is a filthy habit young lady, don't ever let me catch you doing it," and I gave her a mock stern look.

Elysia scrunched up her button nose and parroted back at me, "Filthy Habit". It was all I could do to keep from cracking up right there. After all, I did have to be a role model.

From there I rolled the Princess and myself into the entryway. I looked into the living room and everything had been moved around, apparently for my convenience. There was a clear path for me to everything. I had my own little accessible utopia. I just sat there taking it in.

Gracia had come up behind me, and I said, "Gracia, really, you shouldn't have."

"I needed a change. We needed a change. You were as good a reason as any to make some change. Really, it's nothing."

I was shown to my room, a private and quiet airy little room at the back of the house. I realized that it had been Maes' study and paused a bit. Maybe this would be good for all of us. My apartment had been packed up and what wasn't here arranged thoughtfully so I could get to it I was told was in storage. Gracia instructed Elysia to go clean up her many babies and stuffed animals in her room and to get washed up for lunch. This gave me a little time to explore on my own.

My first stop was the closet. I found civvies, some calisthenics gear that I had been favoring lately, winter coat, shoes, but no uniforms or combat boots. They really had thought this move through, locking most painful remembrances of my past life in storage. Next I moved on to the chest of drawers. Upon inspection I discovered new, neatly folded boxer briefs and undershirts, pairs of socks, and a few of my less grungy standard issue wool sweaters. The top of the chest held a mirror, my toiletries, prescriptions and some framed photographs of my friends and myself. I noted that most of the photos were close-ups if I was in them. "Wouldn't want to see myself standing, right?"

Just off of my bedroom was my own personal bathroom. It was spacious, new looking and perfectly appointed. It was too perfectly appointed, as in almost identical to the occupational therapy bathroom. They had to have assumed I'd do this, or just done the construction in case I did. Mustang sometimes knew me better than I knew myself, and he had certainly run some amazing propaganda to get things to work out. Gracia, the Elric brothers, and even Winry were in on it. Within easy reach of the bathroom counter was a box of all my "stuff" that I had really hoped no one I knew had unpacked. I later learned, to my relief, that Jim had been working overtime consulting on this. Roy was truly amazing at subterfuge, even while planning a coup d'etat he'd managed to micromanage my life. I remembered that it was time to take care of hygiene manners and decided that I would have to thank Mustang for his thoroughness at some point when I wasn't
feeling utterly controlled by him from afar.

I chided myself for such petty thoughts after all the effort on my behalf, and decided to see what else had changed since the last time I'd been to the Hughes' house. The smell of something wonderful helped me find the kitchen and it too was spacious and easy to get around in. Gracia was at the stove and Elysia was setting the table. When I came in I thanked Gracia again for her hospitality and then I wondered to myself, "So what do I do, do I help? How can I help? This was a bad idea, truly... Gracia is not a waitress."

Elysia saved me just as my doubts began to get louder. "Come here Jean, you can do the silverware."

Gracia and I exchanged small smiles and I retrieved the silverware from the drawer Gracia pointed at. That hadn't been hard, now how to get it to the table?

I wracked my brain for occupational therapy wisdom and remembered: the lap. I thought about it, and really, it didn't seem that bad. Worse things happen to silverware than being placed on someone's lap. I decided it would sound obsessive for me to ask if that was unsanitary, so I just put three place settings on a clean dishtowel in my lap and went over to the table to set it.

*There, I smiled inwardly, Jean Havoc being a normal guy, and setting the table. You'd have thought I'd received a medal or something I was so proud.*

By this time lunch was ready and I pulled up to the table, noting that one chair had been moved to the other side of the table to clear a space for me. Gracia had not spared any details, but she and Maes had always been thoughtful hosts.

After lunch Elysia announced that it was time to color and asked me to join her. How could I refuse a request like that? I asked Gracia if she needed any help clearing the table and she answered that the best help would be if I kept Elysia out from underfoot. Just then I noticed the noise of my water glass shaking on the table, I looked down and realized I was having a muscle spasm in my left leg. I'd had spasms before in therapy. Jim and Dr. Parker had explained that muscle spasms occur when peripheral nerves that I couldn't feel got irritated fired and caused movement in my legs, which rightfully shouldn't move on their own. At first they caused me to be hopeful, then they were worrisome and now they were just annoying. Gracia noticed it. She looked hopeful.

"No Gracia, those are just spasms I'll tell you about it after Elysia goes to bed. It's not return it's a symptom. Nothing urgent. Mostly it means I've been sitting too long today." I shook my head and sighed a bit.

"Elysia, do me a favor and bring your coloring books and crayons out to the living room." I said. I had an idea that would possibly stop the spasm, and help Gracia at the same time.

I pointed to the middle of the floor for Elysia to set up her "art studio" and parked my chair and transferred to the floor, it was slow, and definitely not the most graceful transfer but Elysia was already engrossed in coloring. I then got down on my stomach so I could stretch and rest whatever muscles and nerves were bothered while I was coloring. Jim had been right about the creativity thing.

We settled in to color and I let Elysia "hog" the pink crayon. One moment I was coloring and the next thing I knew I woke up with my face resting on a coloring book, inhaling the waxy aroma of crayons. I looked up and panicked when I discovered that Elysia was nowhere to be seen and that it
was awfully quiet in the house. The little bit of information I had on raising children told me that quiet children were often up to no good.

I rolled myself over and propped myself up on my elbows. When I called for Elysia, I got no answer. My next move was to call for Gracia, again no answer. It wasn't time to panic yet; Gracia had probably gone upstairs. I instinctively worked my way up to a sitting position and reached back for where my chair was and met air and landed flat on my back. My chair was A.W.O.L. along with Elysia.

I pulled myself back up to an upright position, dragged myself over to the couch and leaned against it for support.

I called Elysia's name a little louder, with a little more urgency and I finally got an answer.

"Yes Jean, you fell asleep coloring. I went to my room to play. I have a surprise for you. Come here." she called from her playroom.

I called back to her, "Elysia, you'll have to come here to show me the surprise." I answered wondering just what the hell had happened to my chair, though I was beginning to get some good ideas about what had happened to it.

"No Jean, you come here!" Elysia called back stubbornly. "If I come out there it will ruin the surprise."

I lost it. There I was, a grown man stuck on the floor, apparently at the mercy of a preschooler.

"Elysia come here right now and bring my chair!" I barked, regretting my tone of voice as soon as the words left my mouth.

Slowly I heard her emerge from her playroom and when she arrived in the living room she was on the verge of tears, pushing my wheelchair covered in hair ribbons and stuffed animals in front of her.

"I'm sorry Jean, I just wanted it to be nice since you didn't have a party when you came here. You should have a party. I'm happy to have you here. Mommy is happy to have you here."

With that her little face crumbled and I opened my arms and luckily she ran to them.

I cooed to her and patted her hair as she cried and eventually calmed down. When she was calm enough to listen I said, "Elysia, you did such a nice thing for me and I'm so sorry I sounded mad. I wasn't mad, just scared. I wondered where you had gone and with my chair gone, and you in the other room I couldn't get to you."

She looked at me perplexed. Apparently the whole chair thing was not sinking in with her. It had barely sunk in with me so I couldn't blame her for not understanding.

I asked, "Why do you think I use that chair Elysia?"

She replied, "Well, I have a tricycle and it has streamers, so I thought that you should have streamers too."

I chuckled and messed up her hair and said, "Elysia, no, that was a nice idea, but I need that chair to get around, not just for fun. Did your Mommy tell you that I got hurt?"

She nodded yes, and looked a bit worried.
I continued, "Well, I did, but it's ok. The doctors fixed me as best as they could but they couldn't fix my legs. They don't work so hot now. So now I need that chair to get around. That's why it was so special that Winry made one for me. Winry is pretty great, isn't she?"

Elydia brightened and agreed that Winry had indeed made the best racecar ever.

"I'm glad you know I'm not mad at you. I'm sad and mad that I'm hurt, but it will be ok. But I need you to promise me a few things, ok?"

Elydia nodded and put up her pinky. This was some serious business to be a pinky promise.

"Please promise me that you won't take my chair again, even to make it pretty, and please come when I call you because it worries me when you don't answer and I can't get to you."

We locked pinkies and she gave me a hug. It turns out that Gracia had been watching the whole thing from the entry way and she came in, knelted on the floor and hugged us both. Thankfully it was dinnertime. All this activity had worked up an appetite and I was ready for the distraction of polite conversation.

Dinner came and went without major event. I had even saved the day and set the whole table and put some of the cold stuff out. It was little stuff, but at this point in my life it was all little stuff. A month prior I had been helpless and now I was helpful, even they were token gestures. Next time Gracia hosted a party, I would be more useful than most of my comrades as usually they could found at the buffet emptying it, rather than filling it. I joked with Gracia about that, and this time my self-mocking sense of humor was appreciated.

After dinner I checked out the bookshelves and picked out a book to read on the couch while Gracia helped Elydia with her bath and got her ready for bed. I was halfway through an exceedingly dry chapter on the founding of Amestris when Elydia crept up onto the couch and curled up next to me with her book of fairy tales and pretended to read herself.

"What'cha reading Jean?" she asked looking up from her book, which was upside down.

"A very dull book Princess Elydia, and what may I ask are you reading?" I asked while furrowing my brow and cocking my head to pretend to read her upside down book.

"Your Majesty, I think we have a problem, your tale is upside down. Would you like me to fix it?" I teased.

Elydia giggled, nodded in the affirmative and planted herself in my lap. I then proceeded to read her a story about a prince who was cursed and turned into a frog by an evil witch. She knew the book by heart in places it had been read so many times, and the pages had begun to get dog eared. By the last few pages of the story her voice began to trail off and head was nodding, fighting off sleep. Gracia came in and picked Elydia up to take her to bed. Elydia roused just long enough to request to be tucked in.

"Sorry, but your goodnight kisses and tuck in will have to be delivered by butterfly," I said and blew her a kiss. She was pacified and the question of why I couldn't go upstairs to tuck her in could wait until another day. I was far too content with our new bedtime ritual to explain.

Gracia came back down and asked if I'd like tea, and that sounded wonderful. She made two cups and brought them out. We started discussing the day's minutiae, making small talk as she sat in the armchair under a throw and I stretched out on the couch.
I changed the subject abruptly from the mundane to the very serious in my mind.

"I'm sorry I lost it this afternoon, you know, with the streamers. That was so sweet of her, and I wrecked it because I panicked when I felt trapped in the living room. What's more, what if it was an emergency and something like that had happened?"

"Jean, today was a very tiring day, a huge change for everyone and you both had a misunderstanding. It was sweet and funny in the end. You explained that very well. I held off on explaining everything to her when I saw how she just launched herself at you that first visit. I didn't want to wreck it, you looked so happy," Gracia said, then paused, took a sip of tea and thought a bit. "She handled it well, didn't she? I'm proud of her, and I'm proud of you. You even got a pinkie promise out of it."

"Ok, so I flipped out and that didn't traumatize her, but what if there was an emergency? Gracia, a preschooler held me hostage! It really hit home just how powerless I am now," I said and trailed off at the end and hung my head.

"There are guards outside. You must have noticed that this is the safest place in Central next to Headquarters, right? It is going to be ok. If something happened, we would get help, end of story. Is there anything else eating you alive? Talking about it with someone helps."

I hesitated and finally summoned the nerve to speak, "There is so much I have to say and I think it will come out all wrong and it is a very confusing jumble right now. Even if I did find the words to convey what is going on with me, I don't think anyone would be able to relate. With Maes...I mean you've noticed, everyone dances around the subject, right?"

Gracia's eyes welled up and I winced at the thought of hurting her by bringing Maes up. After all her kindness I did not want to cause her any more pain than she had already endured.

"Jean, you don't know how much it means to me that you WILL actually talk about him, it. Everyone inquires about our health, the weather, and tells me what a great person Maes was. Of course I know how wonderful he was. No one is there to talk about how much I miss him." Gracia wiped her eyes and regained her composure and smiled.

"I've found something that helps, and I think that it might be just the thing for you too," she said and grabbed a small book from the side table next to her and handed it to me.

"Religion? A book?" I puzzled and I wondered if Gracia had gone off the deep end.

"No, gosh, for someone as smart as you are, you can be thick headed. Look at it. Really look at it," with this announcement she opened the front cover for me. I instantly recognized it to be a small standard issue notebook that alchemists used to compile field notes in and that I had used to log shifts, intelligence and most often phone numbers for Mustang.

"You want me to write reports? Keep records? Get phone numbers for Mustang? What would I possibly keep track of Gracia? How many times I flip out over nothing, or I have a better one, how about how long it takes me to do something that I didn't even think about before..." I trailed off as I noticed she was frowning at me.

She then said, "Write it down. Write it all down. Read it later, bury it at the bottom of your underwear drawer, heck burn it when you fill a notebook. Just get it out. You will feel better. Trust me."

I was dubious, but I smiled at her, and thanked her sincerely.
"No Jean, thank you. I have not had 'grown-up time' in ages," she said and grabbed our mugs to put them in the kitchen. "Oh, and hey, the spasms earlier, are you ok?"

I sighed and she sat down at the end of the couch. "It's like this, for me they don't hurt, for others I guess they're not too comfortable. Dr. Parker said I was fortunate when I brought it up to him that I couldn't feel them. So I'm lucky, eh? But they're no big deal. They just mean I have to slow down a little and rest and figure out what is uncomfortable where I can't feel. I'm just a mess."

Gracia leaned over and patted my arm, in an almost motherly way, and I wasn't bothered by her mother hen instinct. It was comforting. She didn't pity me, couldn't know what it was like to be me, but it seemed like she might understand enough to help me figure it all out for myself.

After a day like that it was bedtime. Gracia went up to her room and I went to my room to prepare for bed. As I brushed my teeth and as I started the "bathroom hygiene" routine I chuckled to myself that maybe I should start timing myself. I chided myself for being an ass after Gracia's kindness, and decided that maybe a wise addition to my nighttime schedule would be some journal writing. It certainly couldn't hurt. I fell asleep with the notebook wide open and a stub of pencil in my hand, several pages filled with many of the thoughts that had been creeping in around the edges and brought more questions than answers. That night I slept the soundest I had since the accident.
Metamorphosis

Chapter Summary

Change and growth for all involved parties. Change is almost always uncomfortable.

Metamorphosis

I woke up the next morning and I was a little disoriented. Soldier's instincts dictated that I play possum until I was sure of my bearings. I felt soft sheets and a pile of down pillows propping me up in bed, smelled strong coffee from a few rooms over and I heard someone singing in there too. I opened an eye and turned my head and on my bedside table was a jelly jar with a small bouquet of tulips in it and two glasses, one of them which I assumed to be cranberry juice next to my prescriptions, and a glass of water from the decanter that sat on the nightstand to wash the pills down with. I remembered where I was, I was at Chez Hughes and I realized that Gracia must have brought in the juice and set up the meds and Elysia must have picked the flowers for me. What a way to wake up. This definitely beat the hospital. No strange noises in the night and no parade of doctors and interns making me their science project. There were definitely healing methods that modern medicine had forgotten about and Gracia was a master of them all. I sat up a bit, put the pills in my mouth and took a swig of water, I then turned to put the glass down being careful not to fall out of bed as I set it down. I then braced myself for the effort of sitting up fully, did so and drank my juice. Gracia was brilliant, some breakfast before shower and the whole getting dressed bit and the rest of breakfast after.

Gracia must have heard me moving around because she knocked on the door and told me that she'd held off on making my pancakes, and that she'd make more fresh when she was back from dropping Elysia off at preschool. I panicked at the thought of being alone. Gracia must have read my mind, because before I could even object she said, "No worries, Sciezka is here having some breakfast and reading in the living room. You won't be alone. If you need her just yell, otherwise she'll go about her business while you get dressed and ready. We have errands today. I'll be back soon."

Gracia was a Goddess of Domesticity. No wonder Maes had always been so happy. He'd never wanted or worried for anything at home, save for the worry of ever leaving. Who would ever want to go out the front door? This was paradise. I set my juice glass down on the bedside table, transferred to my chair and was on my way into the bathroom.

The old Havoc would have rolled out of bed cursing a blue streak, run into the shower and danced around a bit because the hot water heater was empty and the shower was like ice, then rinse and spit with mouthwash and pray he looked alright because he was running so late. Up and to work in twenty minutes or less was the objective and I did it well. I had it down to a science so I could race to Central and then stride into the office appearing cool and collected.

Those days were gone. I think Gracia must have alerted me early to our plans on purpose as a courtesy. Jim my therapist was an amazing organizer and he must have clued her in on how long just getting ready for the day would take. Never mind breakfast or niceties, I had reluctantly become high-maintenance. I admit I took my time getting ready so I wouldn't drop anything and then have to retrieve it, or worse have to ask someone to get it for me. I also indulged in the hot
water in the shower for a few extra minutes. The whole time I'd been in the hospital I'd only had three showers and I found the water beating on my muscles, the feel of the soap on my skin and the shampoo in my hair to be a soothing balm. Maybe I could just live in the shower. That wouldn't be so bad; it was nice and warm, smelled good, felt like heaven and the water beating down on me drowned out any voices of doubt in my head for at least a little while. I couldn't remember if a shower had ever felt this good in the before, if it had, I certainly had not appreciated it. Pondering this I turned off the water, reached for the towel on the bar that had been placed at the perfect height and started to dry myself off. After making sure I'd dried absolutely everything, even between my toes I could commence the orderly process that had become dressing myself. In the old days if it hadn't moved on its own it was clean, and on days off I could just rummage around on the floor of my bachelor pad and throw on anything. Now I'd been trained to bring my clothes into the bathroom with me and put them on in a prescribed order. Jim was a genius really, helping to get me organized to accomplish this small set of tasks in the most efficient way, but I resented having to be so planned. Every guy puts his pants on in the morning; mine just took an age to get on. After wrestling with my khakis and the lone commando sweater I had that wasn't in tatters for a bit I was dressed, if rumpled and I went over to the mirror to brush my teeth, shave and attempt to do something with my overly long hair. It was far from regulation and sloppier than even I could stand. I'd need to ask Gracia if she could drop me by the barber I frequented after we were done shopping since it was on that side of Central.

Once finished in the bathroom I rummaged around for a watch cap in the dresser to hide my hair until I could do something about it. "Vanity, they name is Havoc." I said to my reflection as I gave myself a final check. I located my wallet and stuck it in my back pocket as usual. Then I started the process of making my bed and promptly gave up. We were on a mission; I could make it when we got back. I did remember to get my juice glass from the bedside table. How would I carry it? Ah, yes, in the lap, between the legs so it wouldn't drop or tip, just not with hot stuff or dangerous stuff. Spill-able stuff was negotiable, it depended on if you wanted to be messy or not.

When I rolled out of my room after an hour of readying myself I found nary a sign of Sciezka and Gracia was dishing up my breakfast. I looked at Gracia as I pulled up to the table, placed my juice glass on it and looked around for Sciezka. Gracia must have been reading my mind.

"Sciezka's in the garden, picking flowers to put on the table. I thought that we might go pick you out some more comfortable clothes while Elysia is at school and then a play date, as all you have here are some civvies that have seen better days, some standard issue that looks like it came out of the dumpster and your calisthenics gear is getting tired looking. You're a looker, but really, sweat shirts and sweat pants with holes in them don't cut it. Did you put those khakis through a cheese grater?"

Gracia had very carefully glossed over the fact that most of my clothes had been uniforms and those were now gone, and that truly, I had been a looker and now I looked like shit. The khakis were comfortable and easy to get on, but really, I looked like an escapee from the hospital with my baggy tattered pants, ill-fitting sweater and "bad hair day" hat. I was pale and pasty and in need of some sun. I had lost a few pounds in the hospital as well and that didn't contribute to my overall "looker" status. Maes had always been dressed nicely out of uniform. He really was right about that whole, "get a wife" thing. If anyone could help me pull myself together it would be Gracia, and I trusted her to not push me into anything too dangerous too soon. I knew Sciezka from Headquarters, but was a little apprehensive. She was a new person, as she hadn't seen me like this.

"Um, that sounds like a great plan. Sciezka knows right? I mean everyone knew from my office but
Scieszka has always seemed kind of shy and strange, I don't know if this is a good idea...I'm not exactly 'Mr. Social Skills' right now." I broke off my train of thought for a bit and had an idea, "But Elysia raves about her, and so she must be great. I think I'm more worried about being out than about Scieszka. We can always talk about Elysia."

Gracia just smiled and nodded and then said, "We'll have the car and driver, we're only going to a few of my favorite stores. I think I know just what will work. It won't kill you to get out in the air, and I won't even make you try them on. I promise if you completely hate it, we'll go home and we can arrange for clothes to be sent to the house."

I nodded furiously and gave her a playful "Yes Ma'am" salute and dug into my breakfast.

Retired Second Lt. Jean Havoc, fighter of terrorists, a war and homunculi was afraid to go out shopping for clothes. This was definitely a complicated existence.

After breakfast I went outside for a smoke and settled in at my table with my ashtray. I lit up, closed my eyes and inhaled, dragging deeply and savoring the sun on my face. I heard someone come up the front walk and I abruptly opened my eyes and there was Scieszka, arms laden with flowers. I quickly stubbed out my cigarette in the ashtray and opened the door, because I could, and smiled at her in greeting.

Gracia saw that all the troops were ready and she suggested we get going.

When the car pulled up on the High Street I sucked in my breath, mustered my courage and readied myself for "public display". Gracia had been smart enough to tell the driver to pull over into a plaza a block or so away from our destination, but I still had witnesses to my balancing act. I wasn't sure if I'd ever get used to that.

We headed to the first shop and Gracia had indeed picked winners. Somehow she'd either sized me up visually, or in her unpacking had noted all my sizes and when we arrived at the store there was a range of stuff for me to look over being held at the front counter. The selection included khakis that looked more like my favorite cargo pants for missions, some v-neck sweaters in the softest wool I'd ever felt, a few short sleeve cotton shirts so the sweaters wouldn't itch, a couple button downs that looked like they wouldn't get all wrinkly even if I played all afternoon on the floor with Elysia and some house pants that looked suspiciously like the type Maes and Mustang favored in their off time. She'd also taken the liberty of having them select a few pairs of loafers and driving moccasins that looked comfortable. I wasn't sure why I cared that they were comfortable and I had accepted the fact that I wouldn't be driving anytime soon, but they'd at least be easy to get on and they looked presentable. I sized it all up and smiled, pulled out my wallet from my back pocket, paid and fumbled around a bit and found my back pocket again to put it back.

Gracia should have been a boutique owner with her fashion sense and instincts; I later learned that she'd met Maes while she was a shop girl. I selected a bright blue v-neck sweater, the black house pants and the black driving moccasins to change into as my attire was lacking and looked for a change room, said outfit in my lap. Gracia was having the rest delivered to the house later in the afternoon. We wouldn't even have to carry bags. She'd really thought of everything. When I couldn't find the change room I hunted for a clerk and found one. I asked about a change room so I could put on my new purchases. The sales girl blanched, the day had been so easy I'd almost
forgotten, until I realized I'd been looking up at her when I asked for help. She pointed to a set of stairs and I could see a small loft space with curtains that probably concealed changing rooms. I felt my face heat up, and was sure my cheeks were turning crimson. This had all seemed too easy, and I'd gotten complacent about how things are.

Gracia came to my rescue, and whispered something in the sales girl's ear. There was a broom closet on the ground floor and I could change there. I went and changed, and came out with nothing harmed but my dignity. I told myself that these things would happen, and to get used to it, though my day was a little tarnished as I was passing the plate glass window I snuck a look and noticed I looked a lot better since my clothes now fit properly, and the color of the sweater was almost as good as my uniform. Gracia carried the bag of discarded clothes and as we headed out I sat up a little straighter.

"Jean, I'm so sorry, that was the one thing I didn't think through. I'll have to remember that next time," she said as she put a reassuring hand between my shoulder blades.

I just sat there for a bit and thought out my next words. Finally I said, "Gracia, don't worry, you thought of more things than I would have even considered. I didn't have to weave through the racks or reach the higher shelves to find my size. That would have been a nightmare. Forget about matching, I'd have been lucky to get out of there with anything before turning coward and leaving. Besides, this is great. I love it. What is this sweater made of anyway?" and gave her an affectionate elbow in the side.

"That is cashmere, I knew you'd love it," she beamed. "Maes finally started wearing it after I threatened to burn his favorite Military Academy sweatshirt. He never went back to that old thing. The sweaters were just so much softer. Plus that color brings out your eyes. This way the ladies get their sharp dressed man and you get your sweatshirt. Everyone wins."

She'd tricked Maes into dressing sharp with the promise of fluffy sweaters. Maybe Maes had learned all of his investigation and espionage skills from Gracia. She had turned an experience that could have put a damper on the day into an ego boost. Mustang had been right with this whole arrangement, but maybe it had been Gracia's idea as she was obviously tactically brilliant.

Sciezka had opted out of the first clothing store as it was all men's items and met us in the next store. We went in and promptly left. It was just too cramped and the second store had only been back up if I'd hated everything in the first store.

I remembered that my barber's shop was nearby and said, "Gracia, if you don't mind I am getting disgracefully shaggy here," and pointed at my cap. "My barber is just down the street. Why don't you both get your errands done and I'll meet up with you in an hour somewhere close-by."

She and Sciezka agreed that the plan would work as they had accomplished the goal to get me dressed, and we agreed to meet at the coffee house across from the barbershop. I then made my way to the familiar shop. This would be fine. I looked put together, more like myself than I had in ages. I knew this world, these people, there was nothing unfamiliar, standard regulation cut, and leave the front a bit long had been my instructions since I'd hit Central. Maybe I could even get into some of the political discussions. I had really missed office banter since my absence.

I approached the shop, and near the entrance I decided it would be wise for a cigarette to help me muster the rest of my courage. It was simple; take smoke from pack, insert in mouth, light and then the worry would fade away. As I lit up some enlisted men walked past me on their way into the
barber. I watched them walk by and couldn't help feeling wistful. They went in to get their names on the list and to sit and wait. I took another drag and another blue uniform walked by. I tossed my cigarette into the bucket outside the door and made my way in to get my name on the list. I found a spot in the corner where I could observe conversations and people while I waited my turn. My name was called and I knew from my regular barber's expression that yes, it was indeed different here too. I asked for the usual and he gave it. I couldn't fault him for the cut. He'd been accommodating, having catered to war veterans before and just put the drape over my shoulders and chair and trimmed my hair while I sat in the wheelchair. We discussed the weather and sports. It wouldn't have been out of the ordinary if the barber's shop hadn't usually been a hot bed of bravado. In general the topics of conversation were our last lay, our next lay and if in a drought the pin-up girls adorning the walls. The barber went to get a mirror and I heard someone call my name, I turned to acknowledge him.

"Havoc, so good to see you, I got some bad intelligence, I'd heard you'd gotten messed up and ended up a cripple, it's nice to see you up and about," a young Sergeant whose name I never got said.

My face fell when I recognized him as someone I'd sometimes smoke and chat with outside of the mess; I swallowed hard and said, "No Sergeant, your intelligence was quite correct."

I fumbled for my wallet, took out a few bills and placed them on the barber's counter and then fought with the drape. My mind was racing and I heard the young Sergeant call my name as I got out of the shop as quickly as I could.

"Lieutenant Havoc, Havoc, I'm sorry, come back!" he called, but gave up when I headed across the street like a madman.

I don't know who was more embarrassed, he or I.

I found the coffee house, located a table in the corner and situated myself there. I could at least hide out there until Gracia and Sciezka arrived. The mission had been a critical failure. The only upside was that I no longer looked like a scruffy ward escapee.

I fished in my bag underneath the chair and pulled out my notebook and started writing. I didn't care that I hadn't ordered anything. No one would have bothered me. Not once they saw the chair. What was so conspicuous made me invisible to some and an oddity to others, though most saw me as some thing in need of aid.

It took a few tries for it to register that someone was once again addressing me.

"Hey, hi, hello…it's a bit crowded in here," said a female voice. "Mind if I sit here?"

"It's a free country for now, go ahead," I sniped and quickly closed my notebook. I looked up and realized that it was Sciezka.

I ran a hand through my hair and said, "Sciezka, I'm sorry. That wasn't because of you. Truly. I am an out of sorts bastard today. Have a seat, please."

She smiled shyly and accepted my invitation and forgave me with a smile and nod.

"Gracia and Elysia call you Jean, is it ok if I am that informal with you Second Lieutenant Havoc?" said as she stood at attention and saluted.
I chuckled, saluted back and said, "At ease, I'm a civilian now, and Jean is more than fine. To make up for my mood back there, can I persuade you to have a coffee with me while we wait for Gracia? I'll buy it, if you go get it. Coffee is dangerous stuff," and I pointed at my lap and pretended to shrink back in horror lest I be splashed with coffee.

She giggled and said, "Gracia was right, you are self-deprecating. Oh, maybe she didn't want you to know that. Um, I'll just go get that coffee, are cream and sugar ok?"

I nodded in the affirmative and pasted on my best pleasant smile. She turned to walk away and I was still distracted from my earlier experience that I didn't even check out her ass. Primo view and I turned it down. Mustang would lecture me for that later.

Sciezka came back with the coffee and I decided that we should stick to a neutral and common topic, that topic being Elysia. I had been right in the morning when I made my "orders" for the day in thinking up some discussion topics. Other than Gracia and Elysia I was horribly rusty talking to people on a non-medical or professional level. Our conversation was companionable until we came to the topic of children's literature.

When Gracia arrived we were engaged in a heated debate on the Frog Prince book that I had read to Elysia the night before and Sciezka had given her. She loved it and wasn't it a tale of true love conquering all, even princes cursed to ugliness until they found unconditional love? My opinion was that it was a fairy tale that some bumpkin had dreamt up and passed down and truly the frog should have taken the golden ball, found a new pond and dealt with it. If he had to be alone, at least he'd have the ball.

Sciezka declared me a "total cynic with no imagination" and I concurred. She prescribed a reading list for me to remedy my "ignorant" state and informed Gracia she'd bring it by when she came to visit Elysia in a few days. She thanked me for the coffee, turned on her heel and huffed out.

Gracia pronounced the day a success. She praised how I'd fended for myself, even if I did retreat to the coffee house early, spoke with someone outside of the home and managed to engage Sciezka in a conversation that lasted more than five minutes without losing her train of thought or Sciezka shrinking away in shyness.

I was utterly lost as to what Gracia was getting at, on how she could call this debacle a success, but the reading list Sciezka had prescribed would have to be more interesting than military history, economics and political science. The only other books Maes had on the downstairs shelves were photo albums.

When the car and driver pulled up I was more than ready to go home. I noticed my leg twitching and thought, "I must have been sitting on my freaking wallet."
Cooperation

Chapter Summary

You don't always have to go it alone...

Cooperation

Gracia and I got back to the house, I got into the house without incident and Gracia let me know that she had to go out and get groceries and do a few more errands.

"Jean, would you mind staying here and waiting for Elysia to get dropped off from her play date? You'd be alone for a few hours tops," Gracia smiled as she said this.

I think she could tell I was dying for some alone time to sort through the morning's happenings.

"That would be fine, I'm a big boy, and Elysia won't be any trouble. We're good like that. Besides, if anything does happen, like you said, there are those guards outside. Don't worry," I said. "Oh, and hey…what's for dinner? I'm famished."

Gracia just rolled her eyes at me, left and I settled onto the couch to write until Elysia got home. I had been writing for about an hour when there was a knock on the door.

"Wonder who that could be? I'll be there in a minute, hold on!" I shouted and rushed to get off the couch, into the chair and to the door.

Shit… can't see who it is through the peephole… it's too tall.

"Who is it?" I asked, a little nervous.

Jean Havoc, former big strong man, was at the door like a little old lady with the ten locks on the door and twenty cats.

"Delivery for Jean Havoc from High Street Men's," said the voice on the other side of the door.

"OH! Right," I thought out loud and opened the door.

I needn't have worried; it was only my clothes being delivered.

The delivery boy came in, gawked a bit and just stood there. I realized that I should probably tell him where to put it all, and then tip him. When had I forgotten the basic social graces?

"It'll be fine if you just put them down right in the living room. Thanks for the delivery," I said, and then reached for my wallet in my back pocket, remembered I'd put it in the bag, retrieved it and pulled out a few cens notes for his tip. "Here, for your trouble."

The boy hesitated a bit when I offered him money, but took it and thanked me nervously. I decided not to read too much into his hesitation at the tip. It could have been any number of things, it was probably me, but I was already driving myself nuts over-thinking things, why add paranoia about tipping delivery boys to the mix?
I began putting away my purchases. A few trips into the bedroom later, it was done. Things sure took a lot longer now, but even with the effort I noticed I wasn't as tired as I had been, and Gracia had been right about the clothes. I should have had her dressing me before all of this. I would have had a real chance against Mustang.

Just as I finished Elysia came home with art projects and the announcement that she was going to die from hunger if she did not get a snack.

"Jean, look at what I made at school today!" she said as she thrust a concoction of glitter, feathers and construction paper into my lap.

"Wow, it's gorgeous, what is it?" I asked, wondering just exactly what this multi-media extravaganza was. By now I was covered in glitter.

"You silly Jean, it's a parrot! See the feathers?" Elysia said, like it was the easiest thing in the world to guess what this thing was. "See the beak?" she said and pointed to a small triangle of orange construction paper.

"Oh, now I see it. We should hang this on the icebox so Mommy can see it when she gets home, and you did say you were starving, me too. Want a snack?" I said.

"YES!" Elysia squealed.

"Well, what should we have? Your Mom left apples and cookies, and I think there is some cheese in the fridge," I said, amused that I was playing at house.

"We should have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches Jean," Elysia said, as if this was the most obvious answer in the world.

"I agree Princess Elysia, those would taste really good. Want to help me make them?" I asked.

Of course she wanted to help me make them. Elysia loved helping in the kitchen doing big girl things. So we got to work.

"Ok we need bread, jelly, peanut butter, oh plates, and a knife. Do you want milk to drink?" I asked, thinking if there was anything out of my reach.

I busied myself getting the ingredients for our snack. I went over to the icebox, opened it, got out the bottle of milk and decided we should pour it at the table so I didn't make a mess. Putting the bottle between my knees I rolled over to the table, and set it there. One task accomplished.

Next I realized that Gracia would probably frown upon us drinking the milk straight from the bottle. I never minded at the bachelor pad, but Gracia was civilized, so I went to the cupboard for two glasses. It was a stretch, but I made it and soon our glasses were on the table as well.

Elysia watched and waited patiently from her seat at the kitchen table.

Next was the bread. Check, that was easy. It was on the counter. Jelly; also easy that was in the icebox. The knife for spreading our peanut butter and jelly was also easy enough. I was pretty good at this cooking thing.

"Ok Elysia, where is the peanut butter?" I asked.

She pointed to a cupboard that was just out of my reach. This was no good. I wracked my brain thinking of ways we could get to that peanut butter. We had come too far to have plain jelly
sandwiches. I had an idea.

"Elysia, you're going to help me get the peanut butter, ok? Because neither of us can reach it by ourselves," I said, trying to sound cheerful.

Elysia nodded eagerly, ready to help.

I was kind of put out but put on a brave face for the Princess. I couldn't even reach peanut butter for fuck's sake.

"What you're going to do is stand on my lap, and I'm going to hold you around the waist so you don't fall and then you are going to be able to reach that peanut butter."

It went off without a hitch. Mission accomplished. The peanut butter had been retrieved. But we had no plates, and they were in a higher cupboard too. I decided that we were not going to tempt fate and so we would have to improvise.

When Gracia got home she found Elysia sitting on my lap, eating what was quite possibly the messiest peanut butter and jelly sandwich ever off of the cutting board I had commandeered from the counter and used as our communal plate. I had a similarly sloppy sandwich and it was one of the best things I'd ever tasted.

Gracia stood in the kitchen entryway for a bit just smiling.

"What is it Gracia? Something wrong?" I said as I looked up at her.

"No, Jean, absolutely nothing wrong. You just have a little something…" and she fell into a fit of giggles and gestured at her nose.

I put my hand to my nose and discovered I had a big glob of peanut butter there. I wiped it off and licked my finger to clean up and grinned from ear to ear.

After our snack adventure I was a little tired so I excused myself to go have a nap in my room. This needing to rest business was annoying but today I'd at least done something, gone somewhere, and not fallen asleep in the middle of something. I supposed that this was progress.

An hour later Elysia came in to let me know that dinner would be ready in about a half hour. I was grateful for the advance notice as I had a few necessaries to take care of before dinner.

"Thank you for getting me up and being such a good helper. Tell your Mommy that I'll be out soon," I said.

With that Elysia scampered off and I prepared myself to get to the bathroom. I stretched a bit, transferred and handled all the bathroom business without incident and was ready for dinner.

Dinner was blessedly uneventful and as always delicious and Gracia made good on her promise to let me help dry the dishes.

I noticed that during my nap she'd moved the plates to a lower cupboard. She truly always thought of everything.

After dinner we all moved to the living room. I took up my now favorite spot on the couch and Elysia took her favorite spot, which was my lap. We all sat and talked until it was time for Elysia to get ready for bed. She went to get ready without complaint and like clockwork came down with her "Frog Prince" book.
I sighed as I opened it and thought to myself, "Jean, you may as well pay attention to the story so that next time you verbally spar with Sciezka you are better armed."

We read the story, I got my goodnight hug and kiss and Elysia went to bed.

Gracia came down and again offered tea. This was a good routine. I had been writing while she tuck ed Elysia in and Gracia nodded and smiled.

"So Jean, what do you think of the notebook idea, do you like it?" Gracia asked.

I hesitated, and closed it, thought a bit and finally answered.

"I thought you were seriously nuts when you gave it to me last night. I mean how is me making chicken scratch about what is going on around me going to help any of this situation? But I think it's helping, a little bit. I may actually have written down some feelings."

I averted my eyes, thought better of it and then said, "But don't tell anyone. This will be our secret, right? I mean between the injury, the cooking, if you can call snacks cooking, the new clothes and this 'Dear Diary' thing, you are turning me into a total girl."

Gracia just rolled her eyes at me, smiled and said, "Jean, what am I going to do with you?"

Then she got up and hugged me around my shoulders and said, "You should get to bed, big day again tomorrow. Jim gets you back for therapy and I'm sure he's going to kick your ass as you so eloquently put it."

I groaned in agreement and went to get ready for bed.
Independence

Chapter Summary

Small victories are still victories...

Chapter Notes

Good lord I just realized that chapter 5 was uploaded TWICE... and has been WRONG for nearly 7 years. I am SO SORRY!!!!

Independence

Today was the big day. My triumphant return to the hospital. So what if it was only forty-eight hours since I had left? I wanted to impress Jim with my newfound skills and worldly ways. Ok, I was a snappier dresser and could make a peanut butter sandwich. The point was, I had left and was returning, but got to go home when I was finished with my session at lunchtime.

I got out of bed and got going on my morning routine humming a little tune. I was in the bathroom when Gracia knocked on the door. She laughed and said, "Your meds are on the bedside table. Jean, I'm surprised, I didn't think you were a morning person."

I called back to her and attempted my best Mustang impression, "Didn't you know? Today is my triumphant return to rehabilitation. The nurses at the hospital will soon ALL be wearing TINY MINISKIRTS! It's a wonderful day to be Jean Havoc. The sun is shining, the cashmere is soft and my minion of cuteness Elysia will follow me anywhere!"

I could almost feel the glare coming through the bathroom door for my sass. "Gracia, seriously, I'm in a great mood. You should see my swagger. I think I have the Mustang impression down, don't you? I may even go to H.Q. to show the Boss. Sciezka told me that he was in town. I'm sure he'd get a charge out of it."

I'd finished dressing by then, left the bathroom and Gracia had made the bed and was sitting at the foot of it. I could tell she was worried about something.

"Jean, if you think you are ready to go, then I think it would be a wonderful thing for you to do. I'm sure everyone is still worried about you and you are so much better than when some people visited you. But do you think you are ready? It will have changed. I don't want to put a damper on your plans, but I don't want you to get hurt either."

I took a big breath, bit the inside of my cheek and thought about it and finally said, "I know it's changed, I've changed... nothing is the same anymore. That's why I need to see it for myself. Don't worry; there are phones everywhere and if I need to get picked up, I'll call. Mustang probably already knows I'm coming because I thought about it."

Gracia still had the look of concern on her face, but chose to stay silent.
"If I don't hurry up, I'm going to be late, what's for breakfast?" I said, trying to change the subject.

Shortly after finishing my breakfast a van arrived from the hospital and that was another new experience. An orderly came to the door and knocked, I answered and then he looked for push handles and didn't find any. I knew what he was up to and maneuvered out of his way as quickly as I could.

"I'll get that myself," I said coldly and opened the door.

The sight before me was the biggest, most conspicuous looking vehicle I had ever seen and there was a lift, lowered and ready for 'helpless' me. I would definitely be arranging for the driver to take me to the hospital tomorrow.

I went down the walk to the van, and the orderly loaded me in like cargo. This experience would never be repeated if I could avoid it.

Gracia was standing at the door like a concerned mother sending her child off to school for the first time.

Before the "Van of Un-Cool's" door shut I shouted, "Gracia, I'll get to H.Q. by myself after my session with Jim. It's just a block away and I will not be arriving at H.Q. in this thing. I'll call when I need a ride home."

I waved as the driver pulled out of sight of the house. What did I need an orderly for? Was he my babysitter or something? I'd definitely have to talk this over with Jim.

The van arrived at the hospital and the lift lowered me to the sidewalk so I could get in under my own power.

The orderly again tried to push me and I craned my neck around so I could look at him, glared at him and said, "Do you see push handles on this chair? There aren't any because I don't need to be pushed. I also know how to find the Therapy Department, so if it's ok by you I am going to be on my way."

The orderly put his hands up in surrender and I knew I'd overdone it.

"Sorry to be such an asshole, but I'm sick of people trying to help me when I don't ask for it and ignoring me when I need help. I'm guessing that you have to escort me to therapy?"

He nodded yes and I sighed and said, "At least make yourself useful, we're early and I'm dying for a cigarette and a cup of coffee. We have time to hit up the cafeteria, but if I want to bring it down to the gym, I'll need you to carry it for me. We'll get one for Jim too. I owe you one if you want one."

He laughed and said, "You're pretty ok Jean, let's get going… I know a spot where we can hide from the nurses and smoke."

We arrived at the therapy gym with just enough time for me to finish my coffee and hand Jim his.
Jim smirked at my "resourcefulness" and looked me up and down. I pretended to preen and said, "New man, eh? Gracia picked them out. Feel the sweater, it's cashmere. She's evil, it's addictive stuff. I'm a sensation junkie or something since the accident."

Jim touched the offered sleeve and nodded his approval and pulled up a chair next to me. Besides being a physical therapist, one of Jim's purposes was to talk me through things. I supposed it was going to be one of those talks.

"Jean, what you're experiencing isn't uncommon. Since part of your body is deprived of sensation you are either consciously or unconsciously craving sensory stimulation. This is a good thing when it comes to pleasant experiences. List some of your favorites so far, so we can sort out some of your sensitivities."

*That had to be the weirdest request he'd ever given me.*

"Jim, you are weird, but here goes: my morning shower, the sheets at Gracia's house; they're so much softer than the military issue I'd snuck out of the barracks to use at the bachelor pad, and other stuff like smells and tastes. I think that's just because everything in the hospital is just not as good as Gracia's."

Jim had been nodding at each favorite I'd listed and then asked, "Have you noticed that some sensations bother you more than they normally would have?"

"Again with the weird questions Jim, are you going to ask me my sign next? My old sweaters are all itchy and uncomfortable and I've figured out that sitting on my wallet is a bad idea and causes spasms. Hence the cargo pants today, sharp eh?"

I unbuttoned my pocket to show off my ingenuity. I had put my wallet and keys in one of the calf pockets so I had easy access to my stuff, but wouldn't be sitting on it.

Jim smiled and said; "You have learned your lesson for the day Jean. Over-stimulation is unpleasant, and even the things you cannot feel affect you. Remember the things that bother the parts you can feel, bother the parts you can't feel. Now, let's get to your work out."

Before he got up, I crossed my arms and said, "Jim, between you and Gracia you are turning me into a total wuss… talking about my feelings, wearing soft stuff, caring about what I wear? I think that you are in cahoots with Mustang to keep me from ever dating again. I'm kidding, except for that Mustang conspiracy theory thing."

We went over to the mat area and I showed off my chair to floor transfer and Jim started with my range of motion stretches. That was the easy part. By mid-session I was dying and was glad that I'd worn a t-shirt under my sweater so I wouldn't appear too mussed at H.Q. We finished up with more stretches so I wouldn't knot up after my workout and I was sent on my way… no orderly.

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I went to the restroom to take care of business because I did not want to embarrass myself at H.Q. and I needed to make sure I looked presentable. Assured that I looked as good as I was going to get, I left the hospital and made my way over to H.Q.

Outside the main gate was a hotdog vendor and I decided that I was thirsty. I got a drink and balanced the cup between my knees and then went up to the side entrance that I knew I could get into. The guard stopped me as I grabbed the door and attempted to enter.
"Hey, where do you think you're going?" he said. "You need clearance to get into Military Headquarters."

"I have I.D., here let me get it," I said.

I pulled out my wallet, showed him my I.D. and he went to the guard station to make some calls to see if it was authentic.

"Mr. Havoc, you aren't on the guest list. I can't let you in," he said.

Daunted, but not stopped I went around to the front guard tower where I thought I might know someone on duty. No luck there, no familiar faces. While I sat thinking what I was going to do next the guard came over, put some change in the cup between my knees and said, "I'm sorry mister, if you don't have military business you are going to have to leave."

I nearly lost it.

Sitting up as tall as I could I barked at him, "Call Colonel Roy Mustang right now and if he's not in call Fuhrer King Bradley's office then get me First Lieutenant Riza Hawkeye. I may be retired but THAT IS AN ORDER."

"I, I, can't do that!" the guard who was obviously still wet behind the ears said, obviously shaken.

At that moment Fullmetal was coming down the steps of the main entrance. He must have seen what was going on.

"Second Lieutenant Jean Havoc, Sir!" he saluted and stood crisply at attention.

I looked at him a little bit confused and then figured out what he was doing and decided to play along.

"Private, at ease," I said and tried to keep from laughing.

The guard sputtered barely intelligible apologies and promptly let me through security with a visitor's pass and "the private" as my escort.

As we left the guard station, we kept a serious tone and pretended to talk business until we turned the corner to the side entrance and then burst into raucous laughter.

"Ed, you just saved me a lot of embarrassment back there. Before you came along, he put money in my drink. He thought I was panhandling. I could have killed him. I should have…" I said.

Edward thought and said, "I saw that, and I thought about doing him some physical harm, but then I thought it might be more fun to fuck with him a little bit. But a private?"

"I know, I know, but Boss, you outrank me. I had to think on my feet. Ed, you were brilliant. Speaking of my drink, I was thirsty after P.T. and now it's obviously ruined. Where were you on your way to?"

"The Mess of course, it's Thursday, noodles with meat sauce day," he said with a smile.

"Mind if I come along?" I asked, hoping that I wouldn't have to roam H.Q. by myself after the first debacle.

"That would be great, I've just got to stop at the dorms and pick up Winry and Alphonse first."
We arrived at Ed's dorm room and when I entered the room, I was nearly knocked over by Winry's hug. Al greeted me warmly as well and it felt good to see them all again.

After asking about how I was and how therapy was going, the next thing that Winry was interested was the performance of the wonder chair. I couldn't blame her, and knew I'd better not wreck it or I'd be on the receiving end of a wrench like Ed. I gave her a glowing review and thanked her again because I would not have been doing as many things as I had been if I'd been using the Tank. Just maneuvering around Gracia's would have been exhausting.

To further illustrate my satisfaction with Winry's creation I popped a wheelie to prove that she had indeed created a feat of engineering.

"I know you're impressed," I said with a smirk "I am not the macho genius who came up with this stunt though. Thank Jim, I just learned it this morning and he says that it would be impossible to do without this chair. It's not just flashy… with practice I'll be able to use it to hop a step if there's only one or two, and to get onto the sidewalk if there isn't a ramp. This, you, this is going to change lives." I gushed.

Winry put me in a bear hug again and Edward whined, "C'mon guys I am HUNGRY and it is noodles with meat sauce day!"

Saved from Winry's death grip by Ed's stomach, we headed down to the Mess.
Chapter Summary

To heal one must look inward while reaching out.

Connection

Al, Ed, Winry and I arrived at the Mess and Al went to save us seats while the rest of us stood in line.

Ed was first of course because he was going to die if he didn't eat soon. I motioned for Winry to get in line next and said, "Ladies first," with a wink.

She insisted that I go first; I decided that I should listen as causing a scene, or receiving the wrench was not on my agenda. We went through the line with no major issues thought I did have to ask Winry to get a dessert for me that I couldn't reach, and she insisted that I have milk to drink. I pushed my tray along the rail, paid and then balanced the tray on my lap so I could get to the seats Al had saved for us.

Al had remembered that I would need a seat at the end of the table as the tables in the Mess Hall were set close together and moving chairs to get by would be awkward. As I settled in and placed my tray on the table I smiled and gave him a thumbs up.

Just as we started eating Sciezka walked by and Winry invited her to sit with us. Everyone scooted over and let her sit next to me since I was apparently the guest of honor. Sciezka sat down, gave a curt nod in my direction and began to talk animatedly with everyone else in our group.

I thought to myself, "She must still be mad at you about the Frog Prince thing… fix it."

I cleared my throat and said, "Sciezka, I read the Frog Prince story with Elysia again last night and you made some very valid points yesterday. I'd completely missed them the first time through the story."

Sciezka grinned and said, "I knew you'd see the universal themes, social moirés and the fable like nature of the work!"

"Whoa Sciezka, slow down," I said in a joking tone. "I'm afraid you may have to use small words at first and speak slowly, I'm used to hanging out with Breda and Feury. All Breda reads are magazines and Feury has a thing for those ten cens romance novels."

Sciezka shook her head and said, "That lack of culture will be the military's downfall. All great leaders were once schooled in the humanities as well as the martial arts."

"I quite agree Sciezka," I said trying to score points as she was interesting and wasn't afraid to challenge me… it was nice to talk with someone who didn't know me very well before the accident.

The Boss, Al and Winry had snuck off and I hadn't noticed, though neither had Sciezka.
"Jean, that reminds me, I compiled your reading list last night, you might like these books, even if you aren't..." she said and then paused.

"A total cynic with no imagination?" I said with a smile.

"I'm so sorry about that," Scieszka said and blushed. "I have to go; my lunch break is over."

"If you aren't running too late, I could walk you back to work, I'm on my way near there anyway," I said trying to sound casual.

"Sure, you could walk with me... sorry," Scieszka said, looking embarrassed.

"Scieszka, sorry? You didn't do anything. I'm confused, well more confused than usual," I said with a laugh.

"The whole 'walking' comment Jean, sorry," said Scieszka.

"Oh that. No worries, if that bothered me Amestrian wouldn't sound right. Phrases like 'side roll', 'roll about' and 'roll in the park' would be ridiculous. Not to mention the 'Do Not Roll' signs for intersections."

Scieszka smiled and said, "Well will you please walk me to my office?"

I grinned and said, "I'd like to see that!"

She gave me an affectionate punch in the arm and we left the Mess.

On the way to Scieszka's office we made small talk. We stuck to the weather, how I liked my new clothes and of course Elysia. When we got to Scieszka's office she turned to me and said, "Thanks for the escort Jean. Where are you off to?"

"I thought I'd drop by the lounge. Winry and Al will be there while Ed gives his report. It will be the easiest place to see the most people... though most of the old crew got transferred," I said, my mood dropping as I remembered that Breda, Feury and Falman wouldn't be there.

"I have an idea," Scieszka said. "Why don't you come home with me to pick up your required reading and then we'll get you home? I had planned on stopping to see Gracia after work anyway."

"That sounds like a plan. I'll probably be in the lounge for the rest of the afternoon, but if I leave, I'll be back there by five when you get out. I'll let Gracia know to expect company for dinner as well," I said.

Scieszka got back to work and I headed toward the lounge.

When I arrived at the lounge, I found Al sitting at the table reading one of the tawdry romance novels Feury had left behind. He closed it quickly and tried to shuffle it under a stack of papers when he noticed he had company.

"Scholar of Literature, eh?" I said and winked at him.
"They aren't too well written, but they pass the time. I've already read this one before, but I guess I miss Feury," Al said.

I sighed and said, "Me too Al, me too."

He changed the subject, as the transfer orders were not a happy topic of conversation.

"So, you and Sciezka seemed to be quite friendly in the Mess, anything I should know about?"

"Oh that? We had an argument, well more of a debate yesterday about a fairy tale of all things while we were waiting for Gracia at the coffee house," I said and shrugged.

"Which fairy tale?" Al asked.

"That Frog Prince one," I said. "A vain, asshole prince gets cursed by a witch and turned into a frog and can only be turned back if he gets someone to kiss him in that form. I thought it was pretty out there at first."

"Jean it's a metaphor for so many things!" Al said. "You could even compare that kiss to finding true enlightenment, or the Philosopher's Stone or any number of things."

"I suppose you are right Al, it is deep, but this frog isn't going to get kissed…ribbit," I said and rolled over to the bulletin board.

Just then Hawkeye came in. She looked surprised and happy to see me.

"Jean, it is so good to see you! I didn't expect to see you soon after your release. You look great. I was about to go down to the range for some target practice. Would you like to come?" she said looking at me hopefully.

"The range? Sure, I'll come to watch," I said.

She appeared deep in thought and then said, "I have a few spare firearms in my locker down there if you'd like to shoot as well, it could get awfully boring watching."

"That sounds like an excellent idea. I have some time to kill before Sciezka gets off work. Besides, if you want me to go, you are armed," I said sticking my hands up in mock surrender.

When we got down to the range Hawkeye stopped abruptly and said, "Jean, I haven't been completely honest with you bringing you down here."

I looked at her, searching her eyes for what she could mean.

"What are you talking about? We're going to fire off some rounds and blow off some steam. No big deal," I said. "Right?"

"I ran into Fullmetal in the corridor, I came looking for you. I'm sorry I wasn't completely forthright," she said.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out her key chain and removed a key. Then she took my hand and placed the key in my palm.

"What's this for, Hawkeye?" I asked.
"Jean, just look at it, and call me Riza, you are retired after all," she said quietly. 

Then it hit me. This was my locker key. 

"Hawkeye... um, Riza, I thought they'd cleared all that out..." I trailed off. 

"No, they didn't, now let's see if you're still a good shot Sniper."

We entered the range and went to our lockers. It was like opening a time capsule. It had been left untouched in my absence; a half-finished pack of smokes and the unchanged pin-up calendar page confirmed it. 

I sat in front of my locker dazed and then reached for my goggles and hearing protection. She interrupted my stupor when she set my bag and scope down on the bench next to me. 

"Riza, you called me a sniper, and I was, but I don't think I can handle the recoil yet. Really, I'm not sure if I ever will be able to. Besides, I'm a civilian now."

"You can take a man out of the military, but you can't take the military out of the man," Riza said with a smile. "Besides, today you'll be practicing tripod braced shots from a prone position."

"You are as brilliant as you are dangerous," I said with a grin. 

Once on the line Riza set up the tripod while I checked and assembled my rifle. 

As I locked on the scope I said, "Riza, you cleaned this, thank you."

I noticed she'd set down a tarp in front of the tripod so I wouldn't get dirty. 

"I may end up making a fool of myself, but at least I won't get dirty," I said and then said, "Could you hold this?" and handed her my rifle. 

I took a deep breath and decided that there was no time like the present to transfer and that it would let Riza down if I didn't at least try some target practice. 

I picked up my left foot and put it on the ground to the side of the chair, following it with my right. I set the brakes on the chair then placed my hands on either side of the frame and scooted forward and attempted to lower myself to the ground as gracefully as possible. 

Once on the ground I moved to my stomach and belly crawled to the tripod. I nodded to Riza that I was ready for my rifle and she started to position it on the tripod. 

"I'll get that. I'm picky about a few of the settings," I said, slightly out of breath from the effort of getting into position. 

I got my rifle locked into place and positioned myself. Once I was propped up on my forearms, I braced the rifle butt against my right shoulder. I placed my finger on the trigger, aimed and squeezed. I hit the target but missed my mark by a few inches. 

Riza was standing behind me and once I looked up from the scope said, "I knew you could do it, how did it feel?"

"I missed by a few inches, but it felt good you trigger happy freak!" smiling, as Riza was one of the few people I knew who would understand missing my gun. 

I shot off a few more rounds and decided to call it quits because managing the recoil was more
tiring than I had remembered.

I put the safety on, and then rolled myself over and propped myself up on my elbows. I reached into my cargo pocket for my cigarettes, pulled one out of the box and lit it up.

Riza just smiled, and then laughed.

"That good Jean?" she teased.

I blushed and said, "It was great, but no… not that good."

Riza then said, "You're really moving quite well on your own in such a short time. You must be working hard."

I nodded and said, "What else can I do? I attempted to skulk off to the East and you people won't let me. So now I've got to work extra hard to catch up."

Riza looked at me hopefully and said, "Are you thinking of coming back?"

"No, no…" I said shaking my head. "But if I'm going to live in Central, I'll need to be independent. I don't want to sit home wasting away. Besides, chicks dig muscles."

I pushed myself up all the way to sitting, found my balance and flexed to mockingly show off my muscles.

Riza smiled and I scooted back toward my chair and pulled myself back up into it.

She handed my rifle to me and I disassembled it and put away my scope.

"Riza, thank you," I said and I went to the locker room to put my things away.

As Riza and I put away our equipment she updated me on what had been going on at H.Q. since the accident.

"Jean, if Roy ever needed you to do something for him, would you at least think it over before saying no?" Riza asked her tone changing from the previously light mood.

"I'd do anything for Roy, for you for that matter, but what can I possibly do like this?" I said irritated she had asked such a question. "What could Roy possibly need that I could even offer him?"

"Nothing yet, but with your knowledge of the layout and protocol, if you were here regularly it wouldn't arouse suspicion if we needed you to help us," Riza said, lowering her volume.

"Ah, because I wouldn't be suspected or searched?" I asked, beginning to understand their strategy.

"Precisely," Riza said. "Let's get some coffee and scare Roy for a bit before I'm away from the office for too long. I'm lucky to be valued for my firearms skills, so my schedule permits range time. You should come more often. With training and adaptations, you'd be as good a shot as you were before."

"Riza, that's a great idea," I said.

"Which one?" she asked.

"All of them, especially scaring Roy," I said laughing a bit. "Maybe with more hand-gun practice I
can be your substitute and keep him from slacking off. I do a great impression of him, ask Gracia."
"For that, I'm buying," Riza, said with a smile.

We headed to the canteen for coffee and then up to Mustang's office.

Riza told me to go on ahead that she'd bring the coffee to Roy's office when there was a line at the canteen. I thought about arguing, but decided against it since as always, Riza was armed and I had some questions for Roy.

I arrived at Roy's office just as Ed was storming out.

I waited for Ed to clear the doorway and then made my entrance. There were new faces and I was not in the mood to get to know them. I wanted things back the way they were.

"Colonel Mustang, do you have some time to talk?" I asked.

"Sure, of course. You'd be a welcome distraction from this paperwork," he said and then dismissed his staff so we could have some privacy.

I stationed myself in front of his desk and was grateful that he was seated.

Roy started the conversation saying, "It's good to see that you are getting out. What have you been up to?"

"The usual, well, now usual; therapy, playing with Elysia, I'm reading a lot…" I said and paused. "Sciezka has compiled some required reading for me, we're going to get the books on the way home after work. I went to the firing range with Riza today."

Just then Riza came in with the coffee.

"He didn't just come to the range today," Riza said. "Jean don't be so humble, you shot a target at fifty yards with great accuracy. If that's rusty, I'm looking forward to seeing how you do once you've had more practice."

Roy nodded and smiled.

Riza put the coffee down on the desk and said, "I'm sorry, but I have to get back to Fuhrer Bradley's office. Jean, it was great seeing you, same time next week at the range?"

"Put me down on the visitor's list," I said with a smile. "Fullmetal rescued me on the way in today. It was pretty funny. I forgot about the whole clearance thing."

Riza left and Roy said, "It's nice of you to pay a visit and you're welcome anytime, but I get the feeling you didn't come by just to exchange pleasantries."

"Roy, you always could read me," I said. "I have some questions, some holes that I need you to fill in."

Roy put his hands together, hesitated a bit and then said, "What did you want to know Jean?"

"The mission, well where we were, was there any way I could have avoided you know…" I trailed off.
"You did everything right. You fought valiantly. I'm surprised we're not both dead with the traps and fire power they had in that lab," he said as if he was surprised I'd even asked. He looked like he had more to say.

I interrupted his train of thought and said, "So this… this isn't the result of a screw up on my part?"

"You did it by the numbers, the odds were just stacked. This is one of my biggest regrets," Roy said. "I'd understand if you hated me for putting you in danger."

"Like you said, it was unavoidable," I said. "As for putting me in danger you know I wouldn't have had it any other way."

"So, you don't hate me?" Roy asked.

"Roy no, never. Shit happens. I'm only sorry I can't help with what is going on right now."

"About that…" Roy said.

"Riza filled me in, no worries," I said. "Maybe sometime if you ever dig yourself out of that pile of paperwork we could go for a drink."

"I'd like that very much," Roy said.

With that, I excused myself and headed back to the lounge. Sciezka would be off work soon, and I didn't want to piss her off as I'd only just fixed the Frog Prince argument.
Thirst

Chapter Summary

Once you get a taste of something good, it's only natural to want more...

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Thirst

Back in the lounge I found Al, Winry, Ed and to my barely healed spine's chagrin, Major Alex Louis Armstrong.

"So nice to see you up and well Second Lieutenant Havoc! I see you are working diligently to aspire to the tradition of physical training in the Amestris Military. You have been performing your calisthenics!" Alex boomed as I was lifted bodily from my chair and squeezed to within an inch of my life.

"Major Armstrong, I can't breathe... put me down," I managed to say in a strangled tone.

Once I was able to breathe again, I shot a look at the Boss who was clearly relieved he wasn't on the receiving end of this greeting.

"Major Armstrong, yes, I've been training and thank you for your enthusiastic greeting," I said.

"But next time be more careful, eh? They may have made me the Fullmetal Havoc, but you could still break me."

I was saved from another pink sparkly attack when Sciezka came in with a huge armload of books.

"Those aren't all for me, are they?" I asked, silently praying they weren't.

"Jean, I didn't see you there... the books you know, but no, not for you," Sciezka said and colored a bit.

"Do you need help getting them home?" I asked, wondering just how we were going to get them home if she said yes.

Sciezka thought for a moment and as she was about to speak Winry chimed in.

"The cargo net!" she said with a triumphant smile. She truly had thought of everything when she created the "wonder chair".

"Winry, you are brilliant, and have I thanked you enough for this?" I said and gestured to the chair. "If I have to use one of these things, I'm glad that you were thoughtful enough to design it for me."

I thought to myself, "Way to be normal Jean, just bring up the chair again... they barely mention it, but notice it. No, quit being paranoid. If they do mention it, they are just concerned or have noticed that you are better."
"Sciezka, let's get those books, and get over to the house. Gracia is making pot roast," I said to her and the room in general.

"Pot roast? She really does pull out all the stops," said Sciezka, said feeling honored that her visit prompted one of Gracia's best dishes.

"Don't take all the credit Sciezka, it's my favorite and today was my big day. Give me some of those books," I said and loaded half the books into the cargo net.

I waved a casual goodbye to everyone and we headed off to Sciezka's.

As we headed out of H.Q. Sciezka suggested we cut through the park, to save time and because it was a warm night. We talked companionably about how our respective days had gone and soon we arrived at Sciezka's place.

It had all gone so well until then.

"We'll just drop these off and grab the new books and then call for the car," Sciezka said.

"Um, Sciezka, small problem," I said looking at the stairs leading up to her front door.

"Oh, I forgot. I'm so sorry," Sciezka said, obviously flustered.

"It's no problem, really. I'll wait down here and you make the call," I said in a slightly defeated tone.

"I have an idea. There is a coffee house just down the street. I'll call the driver and let him know to pick us up there," Sciezka said saving the day. "We can kill two birds with one stone. Coffee and a comfortable place to wait."

"Sciezka, you are a genius!" I exclaimed with a grin.

It had been a good day so far, and stairs were not going to ruin it. I also noted that Sciezka looked pretty cute from the rear as she went to go get my "required reading".

The driver arrived at the coffee house without complications and when I opened the door for Sciezka at the house the aroma of Gracia's roast greeted us. Gracia and Elysia were almost ready with the preparations so we were instructed to set our books down and come to the table.

After dinner we settled into the now usual routine of sitting in the living room and talking. I transferred to the couch to take up my usual perch and Elysia clambered onto her usual perch. Once I was positioned, I realized that I was hogging the couch and that a polite host would move a bit.

"Sciezka, here… sit on the end," I said as I pulled up my legs and put a pillow under my knees to give her some room. "It's a big couch, I've just gotten spoiled."

Sciezka grinned and sat down and said, "You're not the only one, and I see Elysia has a new favorite piece of furniture."
Gracia brought in the tea and we all talked and allowed Elysia to entertain us. Eventually it was bedtime for Elysia, and growing late for the adults as well.

Elysia let out a little yawn and I said, "Princess Elysia, I think it is time for bed. Go get into your pajamas and then we'll read."

Elysia scampered off and soon returned with the Frog Prince book in hand.

"Sciezka, I'll let you do the honors, since you are a pro. Just hold on, so we can both see the book," I said and pulled myself to an upright position on the couch. This procedure involved picking up my legs, moving them to the floor and using my arms to scoot to where I wanted to sit. I was getting better at it, but it was far from natural looking.

I had thought it would be awkward, to have an "outsider" see me out of the chair and vulnerable, but Sciezka barely registered it. This was a new addition to the routine that I could get used to. Everyone won really. Gracia and I had grown-up time and Elysia adored Sciezka her bookworm.

When we were all arranged on the couch with Sciezka sitting in the middle, she began to read us our bedtime story.

Sciezka clearly loved this story. She read each line with expression and brought the story to life. She'd pause in her reading to ask Elysia questions and point at the illustrations. The deeper meaning of the story began to sink in with me.

Sciezka was finished reading all too soon, and per usual Elysia had fallen asleep. Gracia silently came over from the armchair and picked her up and took her upstairs. She gestured that she'd be heading to bed too.

Sciezka and I talked for another hour or so, and then I alerted the guard that Sciezka would need a ride home.

While we waited for the driver to tell us that all was ready, I said, "Sciezka, thank you for coming over and of course, my reading list. You should come by more often. I could tell Gracia loved having you here and I liked the conversation. Besides, we'll have to discuss my reading list once I finish."

The driver came to the door and Sciezka and I said our goodbyes, and I came out onto the porch to wave and have a smoke. I needed one.

I thought to myself, "What are you thinking Jean? Yes, she's cute for a bookworm, you underestimated her but you can't do anything about it. Stop torturing yourself."

I finished my cigarette and began the process of getting ready for bed. Once in bed I opened up my notebook and began to write.

The next few weeks fell into a pleasant routine. Therapy with Jim, a few trips to H.Q. for target practice with Hawkeye at the range, and catching up with people in the lounge. My favorite part was evenings at home with Gracia, Elysia and the happy addition of Sciezka.

One day out on the range Hawkeye paused, turned to me and said, "So Jean, correct me if I'm wrong but the rumor mill says that you and Sciezka may be an item."
I blushed, thought a bit and said, "Riza, no, it's out of the question."

Riza straightened up and said, "Why would that be out of the question? You and Sciezka seem to have a wonderful time together."

I sighed and thought a bit and finally said, "It's just out of the question. Sciezka and I have great talks and have been out for coffee a few times, but that's all there will ever be."

Riza's expression softened. She put down her piece and pulled up a bench to sit down next to me.

"Jean, you're not telling me something. I can tell. You're like an open book sometimes. What is going on?"

I debated about telling her. My former superior officers already knew I couldn't walk, but did they have to know about that? I had Jim to talk to, but he'd really only ever known me as I was now. He hadn't known me before, what I had been capable of. He didn't have a common history with me.

I took out a cigarette and Riza gave a small smile.

"So, you're going to cough it up so to speak?" she said in a soft voice.

"Yeah, you already know a lot of the particulars seeing me on the range," I said. "When the 'lines' were cut so to speak I lost function below the level of injury. All of it."

I hoped I wouldn't have to be too specific. It was mortifying enough talking about this at all, but with Riza of all people I didn't want to get into the specifics of the equipment.

"I think I understand," Riza said and hesitated before she continued. "Speaking as a woman, that's not the only thing that is important to us."

We fell silent and then Riza got up and continued target practice. I was relieved that she hadn't pressed me any further and I emptied my clip into the target.

We finished up target practice and I went to meet Sciezka in the lounge so we could head over to the house together.

When we arrived at the house Gracia had a feast laid out in the kitchen.

"Gracia, is it my birthday or something?" I asked.

Gracia laughed and said, "No, nothing like your birthday, but it is special. You've been here a month and Elysia was concerned that you hadn't had a party. So here is your party."

Just then, Elysia burst into kitchen and showed me her newest drawing. It was a picture of me on the couch with a jaunty looking crown on my head. Apparently, I was the "King of the Couch". There I was in my stick figure glory, pointy gold crown on pointy gold hair.

"See Jean! You are a prince. I thought you would like it," Elysia said, awaiting my appraisal of her work.

"Elysia, I love it. We'll have to put this up in my room after dinner. Thank you so much. I do look like a prince in this picture. You got a good likeness," I said. "So what kingdom am I the prince of Princess Elysia?"
"Silly Jean. Mine!" Elysia said, as if that was the most logical answer in Amestris.

With that grand announcement Gracia told us to get to the table so we could enjoy my celebration. She'd even brought down the good stemware and poured wine for the grown-ups and juice for Elysia.

We spent dinner laughing, talking, eating, drinking and all the things that I'd begun to love about the Hughes' household.

After dinner Gracia said that she would put Elysia to bed since dinner had run late and that she was tired from the wine.

Sciezka and I headed for the couch and I arranged myself and we began to talk. Sciezka had had the presence of mind to bring our wine glasses. We chatted for a good half hour when both of us noticed the wine glasses were empty. Sciezka went to the kitchen for more and when she came back set them on the coffee table.

As she was sitting down, she stumbled and suddenly Sciezka was face down on top of me.

What happened next must have been the wine's fault.
When you have lacked for so long, a little bit goes a long way.

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When Sciezka looked up we were face to face and instinct took over. I ran a hand through her hair and drew her closer to me. She looked down shyly and I cupped her chin with my hand. I leaned up and kissed her, softly.

To my surprise she returned the kiss. She pushed up as best she could in that awkward position and I found that soon she was gripping the back of my head and kissing me so hard I had to break the kiss to come up for air and figure out what was going on.

We lie there in a daze and Sciezka spoke first, "I was wondering when you'd finally do it."

She then smiled shyly and I was stunned. What I had been feeling wasn't unrequited.

I pulled her closer to me and kissed her hungrily. Each time my lips met hers she found new ways to overload my senses; sometimes trapping my tongue and other times making me play tag to meet hers. She nipped at my lower lip and I reciprocated and I began to wonder if it was the wine that made me feel so warm, or Sciezka.

She pushed herself up and began to knead my arms and shoulders. As she moved against me she became frustrated with my clothing.

"This is in my way," Sciezka announced and began to unbutton my shirt. I protested but she covered my mouth with hers to silence me.

Once she'd undone the offending buttons and relieved me of my shirt she sat back and appeared to be surveying the layout.

She then began exploring the planes of my chest with her hands and mouth and continued the study of my shoulders and arms unhindered by my shirt.

I decided that Sciezka was a force to be reckoned with and eagerly accepted my fate.

As she was giving my arms a thorough inspection she began stroking and kissing the inside of my arm where the skin was especially tender from wrist to bicep, lingering at the top.

"Sciezka, wow, ahhh!" I moaned.

Sciezka looked up from her work, stopped and looked a bit concerned.
"Jean, are you ok? Did I hurt you? I am sitting on top of you."

"No, no… definitely ok. What you did just there, that was amazing," I said and blushed.

"I thought it would be," she said.

"Huh?" was all I could muster.

"I like you, and have for awhile and I thought I should research," she said matter of factly.

"Research? You did research?" I said incredulously.

She shifted her position a bit, while still having me pinned and said, "I thought that since maybe you might like me too, that I should be prepared and I um, did some reading."

"What exactly did you read?" I asked and then pulled her down for a quick kiss.

"Some medical stuff of course, romance novels, and a book from the far east called the Kama Sutra," she blurted out.

I laughed, "The Kama Sutra? No kidding… so with all this homework did you learn anything new?"

"Well, I learned this… "

Her voice became muffled as she began licking and pinching my earlobes with her teeth, then she began savaging my neck in the same manner. She was beginning to trail kisses down my chest and stomach when I had a sinking realization.

"Sciezka, I can't," I said and closed my eyes.

"Can't what?" she said and grabbed my hand and placed it in hers then began to lower it. First she guided me over her arms and chest, then over her thighs. I was beginning to think she had lost her mind when she placed my hand on my nether regions and stopped.

I could not believe what she had just done.

With that dramatic realization Sciezka sat up, straightened her hair and said, "I think I'll give you a some time to get used to that. I'll see you tomorrow."

She stood up rather unceremoniously, kissed me hard on the lips and left me on the couch in stunned silence.

I lie there in a daze and then surveyed the surroundings. A few candles, dying embers of a fire in the fireplace and two empty wine glasses. I knew Gracia had set me up and was thankful. I got up from the couch and into my chair, snuffed all the candles and decided to leave the wine glasses for the morning. I didn't want to disturb the sleeping household with any unnecessary noise. I wanted to savor the moment alone.

I then went about my nightly routine and got into bed. I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillows.

I didn't know what I'd dreamt of, but I woke up the next morning with a shit-eating grin on my face and "Master Havoc" standing at attention. I found this out after inspection and though it wouldn't be the same, life was indeed looking up.
I heard a knock at my door and Gracia said, "Good morning Jean, I trust you and Scieszka had a good night."

I sat up in bed, making sure the bedclothes gave Master Havoc some privacy and said, "Yes, yes we did… come in."

Gracia came in with a wicked looking grin on her face and my discarded shirt that Scieszka had so kindly removed the night before.

"Breakfast will be ready soon, are you hungry?" Gracia said.

I laughed and said, "You don't miss a thing do you Gracia and yes I'm famished."

At breakfast Gracia could barely contain her excitement when she made an announcement.

"I'm afraid there is more subterfuge on my part," Gracia said.

"Do tell Gracia," I said jovially. "You are a master of espionage. I didn't figure out what you'd been up to until I was getting ready for bed. You got me."

I then pantomimed being shot through the heart and we had a laugh.

"Elysia and I are going up North for a few days to see the grandparents," Gracia announced.

I looked at her, a bit concerned about being alone, but I could handle it.

"The other bit of news, and don't get mad… " Gracia said hesitantly. "I thought I'd ask Scieszka to stay over to help with the cooking and be some company for you."

At this I was indignant, a house sitter, no more accurately a babysitter at twenty-four years of age?

"Gracia, I do not want, nor do I need a babysitter. I am perfectly capable of doing for myself," I said in an exasperated tone.

"You are capable, but it's tiring and lonely and peanut butter sandwiches do not count as cooking," countered Gracia. "Besides, with this new development wouldn't a few days of privacy with Scieszka be a good thing?"

I saw where she was headed. It wasn't about being babysat or my helplessness at all. Her cupid act had merely enhanced a good plan.

"Again, you got me," I conceded. "You are truly evil. Brilliant, but evil."
Evolution

Chapter Summary

Change can be good. You grow and evolve along with the situation and others. Change can be scary or difficult, but most things worth having aren't easy to obtain.

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Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Warning: There is some mushy stuff in this chapter.

Evolution

The day that Gracia and Elysia left Gracia left me with a list of instructions, emergency numbers, wood for the fire place, a stocked ice box and some menu ideas for if I decided to cook. She told me to expect Sciezka after she got off of work and to be home to meet her.

Elysia said she'd draw me a picture every day and reminded me to check in on her "babies" in the playroom.

After receiving hugs from both Elysia and Gracia they left and I had the house to myself. I wondered if after all of the work on Gracia's part Sciezka would arrive wearing nothing but a big red bow. That image was tantalizing and nerve wracking all at once.

Today could be the day; it would either be wonderful or horrible and could make everything or wreck everything. I decided to put the horrible and wrecked thoughts out of my head and decided that the day would best be spent doing the small amount of preparation that was left to me and relaxing. If everything went well I would need my energy.

Around 3 o'clock I decided that a shower would accomplish two goals: making myself presentable for company and relaxing the knots that were beginning to form in my shoulders from waiting.

When I'd finished I got out, fixed my hair, brushed my teeth, and thought that cologne would be a wise idea. I hadn't used it in an age. What for? I was relieved to find a few splashes left in the bottle. I'd gotten the last time I'd thought about those little details. The scents of coriander, lemon grass and a hint of rosewater were comforting as they mingled with the ever-present smell of tobacco. It shouldn't have been a surprise as I'd picked it up in a small tobacconist's shop near Headquarters that also sold men's toiletries. I thought to myself, "You smell good, look as good as you're going to get and in a little over an hour she'll be here. Stay calm, look casual, and breathe."

I dressed in the blue cashmere sweater Gracia had helped me pick out. She'll focus on my eyes, a good choice. Then I decided that the house pants would be the most comfortable and easily managed later if things went well.

Once dressed, I went out to the living room to write for a while on the couch.
"If things go as plotted and planned then tonight is the night. Sciezka was quite forward and that is a plus, but what if I can't deliver? I do not want to mess our friendship up, but she seems to want more and I obviously want more. This will not be a one-night stand; she isn't the one-night stand type. This is not going to work if I go about it the same way I always did, if I make it all about her we'll both have a good time. Here's hoping her research skills are as good as that first sample."

I closed my notebook, put it on the side table and went outside for a cigarette. Just before my last drag Sciezka came to the gate.

"Hello, fancy seeing you here," Sciezka said with a wink.

I smiled and thought a bit and finally said, "I know, they've been letting the riff raff in lately."

She gave me a quick kiss on the lips and before I could return it she was in the door putting down her bags.

"Well just make yourself at home," I said in an amused tone. "Before you get too comfortable I have some unfinished business with you."

She came over to me and I quickly pulled her into my lap, before she could object I kissed her deeply, nibbling her lower lip a bit before releasing her.

When she could finally speak Sciezka said, "I thought you might be mad that Gracia had asked me to come stay while she's gone…"

Before she could finish I interrupted her with another kiss, this time less urgent then looked into her eyes, which held a mix of anxiety and hope. I then nuzzled her neck with my nose drinking her in, planting kisses every few inches. Her scent was intoxicating if hard to place; soap, spiced tea, citrus and something sweet. It didn't matter what she smelled of she was delicious.

"I'm glad you came. Honestly, I spent the day wracking my brain on what to expect," I said trailing off a bit.

I quickly changed the subject and said, "You must be hungry after work, can I get you anything? The kitchen is stocked and if what's in there doesn't sound good there is always going out, or delivery."

"Jean, don't be so nervous, you're going a mile a minute, slow down, and we have plenty of time for dinner. For everything," she said with a small smile and leaned in to kiss me again.

I tried to grant her request, but whereas my mouth was otherwise occupied my mind continued to go in circles. "Awkward, it's awkward just sitting in the entryway, suggest something," I thought to myself.

I wheeled us into the living room as we'd been at the door for what seemed like an instant and an eternity all at once.

Sciezka eyed the couch, and then slowly got off my lap and stretched with her back to me, like a cat. She was in her personal "uniform", but looked slightly different. In place of the ill-fitting black turtleneck was a form fitting black cardigan over a white top revealing delicate collarbones and a hint of cleavage. She'd pulled her hair back off of her neck, revealing a graceful curve of ivory. Her usual practical khaki pants had been replaced by a pair of dungarees that looked like she'd been born in them. I noted that the waistband was situated just above her hips, the seat skimming the line of her derrière and when she stretched they allowed me to see the small of her back. I looked her up and down again, and signaled my approval with a low whistle.
She preened a bit, remembered herself, turned and said; "I couldn't have all the women in Central taking you after that makeover. It's just a change in wrapping, all the emphasis women put on appearance is silly."

"You could have fooled me… I thoroughly approve," I said with a wink.

"Gracia… " Sciezka said.

"She's been at it again?" I laughed and Sciezka nodded and sat down on the couch leaving plenty of space. She removed her shoes, also new and delicate, suited more to dancing than walking, then folded her legs under her like an Eastern Sage. She patted the cushion next to her and I hesitated a bit.

She pursed her lips in a mock pout and I knew I was done for.

"As you wish," I said and joined her on the couch.

"Do you like it? The clothes I mean?" Sciezka said hesitantly.

I looked up from the soft hand I'd been admiring, and nipping a bit at times and said, "You're a vision of loveliness."

She colored a bit and said softly, "So the duckling is a swan?"

I was a little confused, and then remembered her love of fairy tales. I knew just what she was getting at.

"You were never a duckling, you were always a swan, and could never be anything but a swan," I said caressing her cheek with the back of my hand.

I then gently tugged her ponytail and said, "I think I like this the best."

She self-consciously felt the nape of her neck and I began to show my appreciation for her more accessible neck.

Then in one fluid motion she got up and settled astride my lap smothering me with enthusiastic kisses and nips.

I got into the playful act tickling her ribs and making her squirm and writhe and letting my hands roam over her to find her sensitive spots.

My hands eventually rested, cupping her pert behind. Sciezka stopped and blushed and said, "I have no butt."

I squeezed and she yelped in surprise.

"You do so have a butt. A tight little high-water butt… It's perfectly cuppable. Just the right size for these," I said, releasing what was indeed a butt and showing her my hands.

Her small, slender fingers entwined in mine and I then kissed each finger while appraising each digit individually. I then released her fingers and let my hands roam down lithe thighs, well-muscled calves and finally small narrow feet with very high, very ticklish arches.

She giggled and said, "Jean, is this inspection?"

I trailed kisses from her pert, upturned nose to her throat and said, "It's only fair after your thorough
inspection a few nights ago."

"Oh, that… " she said blushing at her previous brazenness.

"That was very necessary, very welcome and should be repeated immediately and often my pixie," I said and she squirmed in my lap and ruffled my hair playfully.

*What had I done to deserve this pixie in my lap and in my life?*

We nipped and licked at each other like puppies. Had it ever been this good? We were in tune mentally and physically to where the other would go next. Sciezka squirmed after a particularly merciless sneak attack on my part and she began to tip backwards. I caught her by the small of her back and said, "I think we need a bigger playground."

She stood up laughing at her clumsiness and again raised her arms over her head standing on tip toe, slowly working out every kink. After releasing each muscle she bent over in one fluid motion to place her palms on the floor and we regarded each other, me right side up still on the couch, and her "upside down" with her head between her knees sticking her tongue out at me. *Did she even know how sexy she was?*

"You monkey," I said. "Put that back in your mouth before I take it from you!"

She straightened up and put her hands on her hips in mock defiance, and blew a raspberry at me and flitted into the bedroom.

I followed as quickly as I could and found her sitting on the bed.

"I have to take care of a few things, then watch out," I said as I entered the bedroom and went into the bathroom.

With all necessary precautions taken care of I was ready to take my sweet revenge on that impudent little tongue.

When I finished in the bathroom and emerged into the bedroom I found that Sciezka was now standing up, studying the pictures on my bureau.

She paused and looked up, looking a bit flustered. She'd been looking at a picture of me with my unit. Breda, Feury, Falman, Fullmetal, Roy and Riza, and of course Black Hayate were there. It was after a particularly raucous party and even Falman looked a little disheveled.

"If I recall correctly, I had the beginnings of a horrible hangover there and we'd all gone out for some food to counter the liquor. Ed was just along for the food of course," I said with a chuckle.

"Do you miss it?" Sciezka asked.

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't," I said and paused, searching for the words to let her know that while I missed my old life she was a wonderful part of my new life.

Her eyes left the picture and met mine.

"You're so serious all of a sudden Sciezka," I said. "This has all been lovely, and I'd understand if you had second thoughts."

"No, no, it's not that at all. I just wonder if you might be settling," she said. "For me I mean. I'm not like the girls you dated before."
"Them? They hardly compare to you. You're brilliant and passionate, you challenged me when no one else would, you don't let me wallow in my own pity," I said and hauled myself up to sit on the bed. I then lay back so my eyes wouldn't betray me.

She remained standing, but moved closer to the bed, kneeling next to it as if worshiping some ancient deity.

With her voice shaking she said, "So you're not settling, I'm not beneath your former standards?"

I let out a sigh and said, "It's true, your right, before I wouldn't have noticed you. I was looking for all of the wrong things in a girl and caught up in the shallow stuff. Besides, I never would have been able to keep up with you before mentally. I bet you would have rebuffed me as some 'dumb military dog'."

"Very perceptive. I'm sorry to have brought the mood down," she said.

I propped myself up on my elbows, then up to sitting and put my hand on her head and smiled. She stood up about to embrace me, but I was too quick and caught her by the belt.

"Gotcha," I said and pulled her into a heated kiss.

I miscalculated and lost my balance; she tumbled onto the bed next to me and let out a soft sigh. I turned to face her and we began to kiss on an even playing field. She moved to take the superior position in the kiss and I dodged as best I could, flipping her using a wrestling move I'd learned in Basic Training.

"I said I'd get even for that display of cheekiness back there," as I straightened my position out so I was now propped on an elbow looking down at her.

She grinned up at me and said, "Touché."

"Whatever will I do with this advantage?" I asked playfully. "I could tickle you until you beg for mercy, be nice and let you have your way with me, or I could do this… ", and I began to unbutton her cardigan.

As I was toying with the buttons of her sweater she led the slow charge to the head of the bed so she could survey my work while propped up on pillows.

Our playful banter stopped and we began to let each other know the way with our eyes. She moved to turn the light on the bedside table off but I shook my head no.

"I need to see you," I said softly, casting my eyes downward.

She ran her hands through my hair and cupped my chin so I faced her again. She put a finger to her lips and settled against the pillows so I could inspect every inch of her.

I resumed my unwrapping.
Finally! Score!

A/N: THIS is why this piece is rated M. I apologize in advance... I hadn't ever written naked time before. I've been told that in later chapters it gets "old". I hope you enjoy it while it's still "hot".

This is from my EARLY and first fiction fumblings. I will be editing well, once the story is finished! I'll only be fixing grammar and n00b mistakes. I still like my storytelling, even if everything else makes me flinch when I re-read it.

Disclaimer: I still don't own it.

Rating: The rating climbs, this chapter contains sex. Nothing that they don't insinuate on prime time. Though I admit that the imagination is often dirtier than the television.

Communion

Button by button, I worked to claim my prize. When I had finished I studied my work and said mischievously, "This is in my way, it's got to go."

Sciezka smiled when she saw what kind of game I was playing. She complied and assumed her previous role as the worshiped.

I began my ministrations at her lips and attempted to drink in every part of her, careful not to neglect one inch. From her lips I trailed her jaw line with my tongue to finish with an earlobe. I then worked my way to the collarbones, paying equal attention to both fair sides. From there were the shoulders and arms, down to delicate fingers. I worked my way back up each arm leaving an invisible trail of nips and tastes. Sciezka was silent say for the occasional giggle or sharp intake of breath. When every part not covered by her tank top was finished I paused, looked at the sight before me and delicately slid my hands under the tissue soft garment.

Sciezka sat up at that moment and I was a bit stunned. "Is everything fine Sciezka? Doesn't it feel good?" I said, my voice full of concern.

Sciezka huffed in exasperation and said, "In every novel I've read the woman always ends up naked first and he's still got all his clothes on. It's undignified. My turn. You get an article of clothing, and then I get one. Quid pro quo."

I sighed in relief and said, "Your wish is my command, anything for equity."

Sciezka then pulled me down into a kiss, threw a leg over mine, and then rolled us. I had been pinned!

"No fair!" I said in mock indignation.
"All's fair in love and war and you were the one who pulled out the wrestling moves. Remember, quid pro quo," she said with a devious grin as she began a more in-depth study than her previous mission.

She straddled my hips and began pushing my sweater up, nipping and licking with each bit of progress. When she could go no further without my cooperation I said, "Looks like your plan has hit a snag."

She arched her brows and leaned in for a kiss, so near and yet so far. I pulled myself up to meet her using the headboard for leverage and she pushed my sweater over my shoulders.

I claimed my kiss and said in mock protest, "That was really not fair! Taking advantage of a man's weaknesses?"

She finished removing my sweater and set to work in earnest to make it up to me. I could tell that she was beginning to regret her insistence on equality but I couldn't help but be amused at the little bump and grind she was beginning while giving attention to each inch she'd liberated. I'd set the tone for torture and she was paying me back in full.

She started again with my mouth and we lingered in a kiss that was insistent and needing and continued slowly to my earlobes, trailing down my neck and ending at my chest. When she arrived there she began to alternately lick and nip in spots and then blow cool air to dry the places she'd licked. This was almost too much and I again attempted to steer her with her belt, having decided that it was my turn again.

She complied, allowing me take the lead again. I scooted down to remove her tank top as I was now the one wearing fewer clothes and decided to claim her bra as well. Once I had removed it I rolled to my side, propping myself on an elbow and pulled her closer to me with my other hand. I then gently cupped a pert breast and began to kiss from the perimeter and would stop just shy of the center, then I repeated this slow torture, ultimately teasing both nipples into attention. I ran a hand up her spine admiring the fine musculature and she arched her back to meet my touch when it left her. Her soft sounds eventually grew frustrated and I knew I'd done my job.

"Mm hmm, also cuppable," I said and then stuck my tongue out at her.

"Jean, screw quid pro quo… just… " she managed before I closed in for a kiss and began to loosen her belt. She grew impatient and started to help. I swatted at her hands and she laughed and said, "Let me… you too!"

The next thing I knew she was standing up and stealing my pants from me. She then did a little strip tease, slowly removing her pants and doing a playful burlesque with them. She stood just out of reach before me in nothing but low cut panties and all I could do was gawk. I'd lost the words and my mouth must have been hanging open.

She kneeled near the head of the bed, cupped my chin, closed my gaping mouth and kissed me. She then tossed my pants across the room and said, "You'll get those back when I'm finished with you."

She stood and stretched again, and while in mid-stretch I uttered the only phrase I could find to describe her.

"Breath-taking."

She blushed, forgot her sudden shyness and pounced and the wrestling match began again.
"I'm flattered, but you could say the same for yourself," she said in reply to my adulation, appearing to study me.

"One question, and then you can have your way for a bit... how were you hiding that in the library?" I asked, conceding that she indeed had control for the moment.

"Balance my dear. Healthy mind, healthy body was what my parents always said, so they exploited my love of stories and fantasy and sent me to dance classes, ballet to be precise. Ballerina or fairy princess, same thing to a kid," she said and then gave me a quick peck on the cheek.

"I have one thing to say about that Sciezka," I said with a grin.

"Oh?" she asked coyly, not wanting to take my bait.

"I am the luckiest man in Central tonight," I said with a huge grin on my face.

She opened her mouth to protest my "un-liberated" comment, but it was then that I claimed the advantage and had her at my mercy again.

To prevent her protest I trailed kisses down her stomach, to prominent hip bones, each toned thigh and then stopped, having deliberately left her panties untouched and hovered, propping myself up and simply breathing until she let me know that the torture was excruciating.

"Jean, damn it, you are a tease. An incorrigible tease," she said, clearly exasperated that I was stopping.

"And you want me to do what about it?" I said feigning innocence.

"Make me come now!" she said, shocking me with her brazenness once again and I think surprising herself.

"Now? But if I do that now, what's left for later?" I said, clearly amused that I was driving her crazy.

She wriggled free, turned to face me, kissed me forcefully again and then said through clenched teeth, "Then I come again." and she nipped at my lower lip to finish the kiss.

My eyes widened with delight and I matched her kiss.

Amused at this revelation she continued, "... and again and again and again."

I grinned and went back to work in earnest.

I deftly removed her panties and began this new research.

She lie back against the pillows, legs spread wide in invitation and I again trailed kisses and finally gave her what she'd been demanding.

I started slowly entwining myself with her knees, and nuzzling her clitoris with my nose. Her hips bucked a bit and I licked and moaned, "So wet."

Sciezka made a noise that I could only take as approval and agreement and I began to lick and suck at her outer folds sometimes forcefully and sometimes gently. With each movement she clutched at my shoulders and the pillows beneath her. I looked up at her face, met her gaze when she momentarily opened her eyes and knew from the way that she was biting her lower lip that she was close. I doubled my efforts and soon she stiffened and bucked wrapping her legs around my torso
as if that would keep her grounded. She failed and soon me ears were rewarded with her screaming my name as if it was sacred. I collapsed against her heat and shook with her, her first climax resonating through my body.

When she came finally released her grip on my shoulders she panted and haltingly said, "I need you now!" and gave another jerk and squeezed my body between her legs.

I crawled arm-over-arm to meet her lips in a kiss and she licked my lips to taste the fruits of my effort. She then grabbed me by the shoulders and pushed me into the pillows. In one deft move she was once more astride me grinding her wet heat into where I could still sense it and then moved lower to my groin.

All the while her hands roved and played sending me to what could only be purgatory. I wasn't sure if I was in heaven or hell. It was divine and torturous at the same time.

"Sciezka, I don't know!" I called out in agony.

She again took my hand, this time by force and I nodded hastily that I felt what she did. She then moved my hand with hers and guided me into her.

She slackened a bit in relief, and then bore down into me, hands on my shoulders to steady herself. I lifted my head and suckled her breasts as she continued her ministrations and arched her back. I then cupped her cheeks from behind to support her movements and partake in her frenzy.

With each thrust I felt a coil tighten within me, a warmth starting to spread, as she became more and more insistent. She began to buck and writhe wildly. Soon my back arched and my hips bucked with hers through the force of her will and strength, my head hitting the pillows with each effort and chanting her name in time with her movements, like a mantra. Just as I felt that my head was going to fly off as sensation rapidly alternated from pain to pleasure I closed my eyes and saw and sensed white light and heat. I heard her scream my name as I screamed incoherently. Every muscle I was aware of contracted and then fell limp as Sciezka collapsed on top of me, sobbing my name and kissing away my tears.

When I could finally move and speak again I held her tightly and thanked her over and over again. We then lie there spooned savoring the peace and warmth.
Contentment

Chapter Summary

It's been a long time coming...

This is from my EARLY and first fiction fumblings. I will be editing well, once the story is finished! I'll only be fixing grammar and n00b mistakes. I still like my storytelling, even if everything else makes me flinch when I re-read it.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Rating: Somewhere between T and M, because truly, you've all seen worse.

Contentment

I stirred first and said, "Can you move at all? Nothing broken?"

"That was unbelievable," Sciezka purred. "I must be dreaming. Pinch me."

"No, not a dream, and if it is I don't want to wake up," I whispered

Sciezka held me closer and pinched me, hard.

"When I'm no longer incapacitated I am so getting even with you for that!" I teased.

"It's on, later… rematch," Sciezka said. "But seriously, Jean, that was amazing. Are you sure that you haven't done this since?"

"Absolutely sure, so you have that dubious honor… " I said.

"About that… no self-deprecating remarks tonight. You were wonderful for anyone," Sciezka said.

"Well then that only leaves one thing," I said.

"Would that be a cigarette Mr. Filthy Habit?" Sciezka laughed.

"That would be nice, but no, I remembered that I thought I might offer you dinner, and now I am hungry," I said.

"I have the dinner part taken care of," Sciezka said. "Are you up for a picnic?"

"It's late and I am not going anywhere outside this bedroom," I said.

"You don't need to, and check the top drawer of your nightstand," Sciezka said.

I tentatively opened the drawer and found two cigarettes, a lighter and an ashtray with a note that said, "Just this once. -G"

"Sciezka, was I the only person besides Elysia who didn't know exactly what was going to be going on? I was optimistic but… " I asked, slightly irritated, though more amused.
"My lips were sealed. You're just an open book sometimes," she said. "Now share Mr. Filthy Habit."

I lit up the two cigarettes, handed her one and thought to myself, "Jean, in your wildest dreams it's never been this good."

We finished our cigarettes and Sciezka reluctantly left the bed, putting her tank top and underwear back on so she wasn't prancing about the house completely naked, though I wouldn't have minded. She started to leave the room to get our "picnic".

"Hey, wait a minute," I said as she was heading to the bedroom door.

"Yes, did you need something?" she said coming back to bed.

When she was within reach I pulled her down for a kiss.

"Just that," I said and winked. "I wouldn't mind if you turned around to model either."

She rolled her eyes, and then sashayed out of the room with the ashtray doing her best shimmy as she crossed the threshold.

Sciezka came back in with a small hamper and hopped up on the bed. As she began to unpack it I said, "I'm at a disadvantage here, you're still holding my pants for ransom."

Sciezka grinned and said, "I know! I have on more clothes than you do now. I WIN!" and fell into my lap in a fit of giggles.

"This, and you say that I am the incorrigible one?"

Sciezka merely hugged me around my waist and said, "You were hungry right? Let's eat."

She then sat up and finished unpacking the hamper. Before me was a veritable feast, and a shortage of utensils. If everyone's machinations hadn't worked out it would have been a gourmet affair in the kitchen with silverware. I looked at Sciezka and she winked and popped a strawberry in my mouth.

We lounged in the bed savoring the treats Sciezka had brought, all finger food, but some of it "too messy" for polite company. I caught myself starting to lick a finger clean and thought better of it and offered it to Sciezka instead.

She said, "Now you've got the idea."

I peered into the various boxes and found little pastry triangles that looked delicious. I picked one up and studied it, picking at the flaky dough.

"Those are spanakopita, a recipe from near Aquroya. It's filled with spinach, feta cheese, and some herbs and spices. The other ones are tiropita, just cheese," Sciezka informed me.

"Good food and an education. Did you memorize all the ingredients of this feast?" I said.

"Only the stuff I made," she said and smiled.

"You are a woman of many talents, I grovel at your feet," I said kissing her toes.

"So are you ready for dessert?" Sciezka asked, teasing me with another piece of pastry, and then feeding it to me.
"I think I am," I said with my mouth full of pastry.

Sciezka gathered up the hamper's contents then got up and headed into the bathroom, I heard her turn on the tap and called after her, "Where's my dessert?"

"I'm making it," Sciezka said.

She came out of the bathroom without turning off the taps, left the room with the hamper and came back in empty handed.

"Dessert?" I asked.

She nodded towards the bathroom, removed what little clothing she had on and said, "This way."

I was still in a post-sex, good-food stupor and sat there dazed.

A minute later she called from the bathroom, "So are you not having dessert?"

I finally put it all together, got into my boxers and transferred to my chair in record time.

When I entered the bathroom it was dark save for a few candles. Sciezka flicked some water at me from the tub and said, "Modest, eh?"

I looked down at my boxers and realized that any shred of modesty had gone out the window hours ago.

"One small snag, I still haven't figured out how to get in the tub for a bath," I stated.

Sciezka thought my statement over, looked at me and said, "Would it be so hard for you to accept help if it meant we could soak in the tub together?"

I thought her offer over, smiled and said, "I think that is the best incentive to accept help I've ever had."

I transferred to the side of the tub, and then onto the bench and Sciezka braced the bench while I lowered myself into the water. She then removed the bench while I leaned back against the back of the tub. She climbed in with me and folded herself into my arms.

We had been soaking like that for a while when she said, "Now it's time for your dessert."

I raised my eyebrows wondering what she could be up to and she began to soap up a washcloth. I smiled and thought to myself, "This is so much better than a damned sponge bath."

She then trailed the lavender scented washcloth over my shoulders and back, kneading any muscles that felt tight. I closed my eyes and moaned softly as she delicately traced the lines of my stomach and chest. She stopped for a moment and my eyes fluttered open wondering what was next.

I shouldn't have wondered, next was my hair. I knew that routine. I closed my eyes as she trailed her fingers through my hair, rubbing my temples and strangely enough, my ears. When she was finished she slowly rinsed with some fresh water from the tap. I cracked an eye and noted that she'd even tested the temperature.

"This being helped thing, not at all bad, not bad at all," I said and gave Sciezka a slow kiss when she came into reach.

She leaned back into my arms and sighed as my arms enfolded her.
"So it's your turn now, quid pro quo?" I asked hopefully.

"No Jean, this is dessert," she said as she laced her fingers with mine.

Sciezka stood up, water beading on her pale skin in the candlelight. She turned around, bent over and pulled the plug from the drain, taking her time for my benefit. She then stepped out of the tub and slowly dried off. I was beginning to wonder how I'd get out of the bathtub when she reached out to clasp my hand and said, "Your fingers are getting wrinkly, let's get you out of here."

She placed a towel on the seat of my chair, motioned for me to scoot forward in the tub and replaced the bench. She then gave me her hand and I placed my other hand on the bench. She nodded her approval and said, "On three?"

I placed my other hand on the bench, smiled and said, "Beautiful, brilliant and resourceful? You are the deluxe package."

We counted together and as she braced the bench I pulled myself onto it. She handed me a towel and said, "I trust you know the way to bed?"

When I got into the bedroom she was already under the covers, with my side of the bed turned down, the pillows fluffed and ready for sleep.

I got in and said, "How should I thank you?"

Sciezka leaned in, kissed me and said, "You're welcome, and you can leave the real thanks for the morning."

We exchanged soft kisses and caresses and before we began to get quiet and drift off to sleep I said, "Do I at least get my pants back?"

Sciezka nuzzled into my chest and said, "I'll think about it."
Havoc is figuratively stepping further outside of his comfort zone. It'll be worthwhile.

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Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Exploration

I rose first, got up to perform the necessaries, put on some pants, and when I entered the bedroom I found Sciezka curled up in the warm spot I'd left, and looking happy to see me even though I'm sure I was fuzzy because her glasses were off.

"Would you like some breakfast?" I asked.

Sciezka looked at me and said, "You put on pants. No fair. I liked winning."

I laughed and stuck out my tongue at her and said, "I'm getting some coffee while you stay here and pout. Maybe I'll bring you some."

I went to the kitchen to brew some coffee and root around for breakfast things, I decided just coffee and fruit would be fine.

I then poured two mugs of coffee, requisitioned the cutting board as a makeshift tray and slowly made my way to the bedroom with breakfast. Sciezka, who was dosing on my side of the bed perked up when she smelled the coffee, took the proffered tray and smiled at my attempt at breakfast.

"This is breakfast?" she said.

"It is on short notice. I was never a fan of breakfast until I moved in here, usually coffee and something quick was the norm," I said.

Sciezka smiled, took a bite of an apple and said, "So are you joining me?"

"Don't mind if I do," I said and got back into bed.

We ate breakfast in near silence and sipped our coffee. I hadn't had too many women stay until morning so this was a new experience. I could tell that Sciezka was new to this as well.

Finally she broke the silence and said, "You took your pants back. You do know you will pay for that."

I set my coffee mug down on the bedside table and said, "Name your price."
"Hmmm… I think that a repeat performance of last night and then going out for some supper would be sufficient, you never go out."

I balked at her last statement and replied indignantly, "I do so go out."

"I should have been more precise," Sciezka said. "You go out to therapy, headquarters and the corner store for smokes. That is not out."

I leaned in for a kiss and said, "You win, but first tell me the best part of the performance."

Sciezka lie back on the pillows, smiled and said, "I think I'll need a few reminders of the highlights."

I turned over onto my side, propped myself up on an elbow facing her and then ran a finger down her side. Then I said, "Does that ring any bells?"

Sciezka said, "You're getting warmer."

I lifted her tank top, then removed it entirely and threw it across the room. After a quick kiss I said, "Now we're even."

She pouted and said, "Get back to work. Did I say you could stop?"

"Demanding aren't we?" I chuckled.

I then pushed myself up so I could better reach her lips. I leaned in for a kiss stopping just short making her close the gap to meet me.

She gave a frustrated wiggle under me and I moved to kiss her again. She turned her head and said, "Not there. Getting colder."

I smiled as she said that. The game was on.

I then scooted lower to better access her now bare chest. I began kissing her collarbones and décolletage, with each kiss closing in on her breasts but just far enough away to frustrate her.

"You're getting warmer," she said.

I dove in to claim her chest with zeal at this point. I cupped her right breast gently kneading it and then lightly ran my tongue over the nipple and areole. She shuddered with the light contact and arched her back each time I paused. I then commenced giving her left breast equal treatment. When both nipples were erect I began to nip and suckle at them. She reached a hand down to touch herself and I gently placed it back on the pillows.

"Nope, not yet," I said, kissing her to appease her momentarily.

I resumed slowly worshiping each breast and again her hand moved toward her sex.

I swatted it away and said, "Impatient aren't we? This is revenge for stealing my pants last night."

Sciezka abruptly scooted up higher on the pillows so I was left contemplating her navel.

"For that I'll make you pay dearly!" I said in jest.

I began to kiss her stomach while still playing with her nipples. After circling her navel with my tongue I planted a raspberry next to it. She convulsed in laughter and scooted further up the
"You're going to run out of room soon Sciezka," I warned playfully.

"So I have to spell it out?" Sciezka said.

"Yes, I think you do have to spell it out," I said. "What could you possibly want?"

This drove her berserk.

"Jean, you are so mean," she complained. "Fine, I'll tell you since you seem hell bent on making me describe this as graphically as possible."

"You caught me," I said.

"Jean Havoc I want you to go down on me, NOW, and if you don't I'll take care of it by myself," Sciezka said, crossing her arms.

"Yes ma'am," I said and began to pull her panties down with my teeth. I surveyed what I had revealed and went to work.

When I finally came up for air I rested my head on Sciezka's stomach to vicariously share the third orgasm she'd achieved that morning.

When Sciezka stopped shaking she sat up and said, "That was amazing Jean, but we do eventually have to go out."

"Do we have to?" I whined.

"Yes, we have to. Go shower up lady-killer, you earned it," she said.

I slowly got up and grudgingly went to take a shower. As I entered the bathroom I said, "You're sure we have to put on clothes and go out? I was really liking naked."

Sciezka shot a look at me and said, "Shower, now."

I started the water, transferred to the bench and began soaping up. My disappointment at having to dress and leave the house was lessened because shortly after starting my shower Sciezka came in to join me.

"I thought I had to get showered and dressed," I said.

Sciezka laughed when my jaw dropped as she began shampooing her hair. She was putting on quite a show for my benefit.

"Just because I said you had to shower and get out of the house, didn't mean I wouldn't make it worth your while. Besides, we're conserving water," she said a she rinsed her hair.

She then did a repeat performance of dessert, depositing herself on my lap and shampooing my hair and making sure I'd cleaned every part to her exacting standards.

Eventually the water began to run tepid and our shower had to end.

Sciezka got out first and tossed a towel at me, then sashayed to the bedroom to get dressed.

I called after her, "You're absolutely sure we have to leave the house?"
She called back, "YES, we do. Get in here to help me pick something out to wear."

I hurriedly dried myself, decided to skip shaving for the day and went into the bedroom.

Sciezka was still standing there in all her glory and as I entered she began to slowly dress, a reverse strip tease if you will. I found she’d laid out clothes for me a well.

"You picked out my clothes? " I said trying not to sound irked.

She gave a small smile and nodded, she was up to something.

As I began to dress she said, "I did give you pants, I think I deserve a reward."

I laughed, "Yes, I am grateful that you are allowing me to wear pants if we have to go out."

She leaned in for a kiss and said, "You get to wear the pants, but I'll pick them out."

I pulled her into my lap, kissed her on the nose and said, "As you wish."

By the time we were finished dressing it was nearly lunchtime. Sciezka and I went into the front yard so I could have a cigarette and decide on a destination. After all the work I'd done that morning, I felt I deserved my filthy habit.

"So Jean, it is lunch time, where would you like to go?" Sciezka said, hoping to lighten the mood that had come over me at the thought of leaving my bubble.

"You're really making me leave? H.Q. is fine, I know people there but I don't know," I said pausing to think.

"So the High Street would be out of your comfort zone?" Sciezka asked.

"Yes, that would be an understatement after last time," I said, frowning a bit that she was even asking me these sorts of questions.

"It will be different this time. I promise," she said and added, "Besides you are more mobile now than you were then. It will be fun."

I thought for a bit and said, "If I go out of my comfort zone and do this, will you make it worth my while later?"

Sciezka smiled and said, "We'll have lunch and then maybe I'll let you help me pick out some new clothes."

I grinned and said, "Any type of clothes? Even unmentionables?"

Sciezka rolled her eyes and said, "Yes Jean, you can pick out whatever you would like for your viewing pleasure tonight."

I pulled her onto my lap and said, "You have a deal, but you'll be sorry. I still owe you for stealing my pants."

Sciezka leaned in for a kiss, then stopped short and said, "You are such a dog sometimes."

I smiled, pinched her butt and said, "I know, but you like it."

She repaid my sass with a kiss and said, "As much as I don't want to admit it, I do."
Just then the driver came around to the front of the house and I said, "You really had this planned out, huh?"

"Prior proper planning Jean, would you expect anything less from a researcher?" she said.

We were then off to the High Street where hopefully I would have a much better time than my first outing there.

We arrived at the High Street after a silent ride and at first I panicked thinking about getting out of the car in full view of everyone, Sciezka included.

"Jean, are you ok?" Sciezka asked, her voice full of concern. "We're here, can you manage it?"

I sighed and said, "I can manage it, I'm a 'pro' at this now, and I just don't like an audience."

She thought a bit and then said, "It's a busy day, I'm sure no one will notice one guy in a wheelchair, and if they do they need to get a life."

"I just hate it when people stare or make that pity 'tsk tsk' noise," I said.

Sciezka grinned and said, "If I catch anyone doing that, I'll give them something to look at, deal?"

I pulled the chair out of the car, assembled it and transferred, and then I said, "So far so good, and I'm dying to know what this something to look at is."

Sciezka winked and said, "I think you'll like it, but it's a secret weapon… I can't tell you until it's time or it won't be as effective."

With Sciezka's threat of a secret weapon I felt somewhat less self-conscious as we made our way up the street in search of some lunch. We had gone about a block when we got to the coffee house where it had all begun.

Sciezka paused and I stopped abruptly and asked, "What is it? Something wrong?"

She smiled and said, "No, not a thing. I was just thinking of the first time we really talked, my total cynic."

I laughed and said, "So shall we go there for lunch and a re-match?"

Sciezka nodded yes and leaned over to give me a quick kiss. We prepared to cross the street to go to the coffee house when she stopped again.

"If you keep stopping like that I'm going to run you over. What is it this time?" I said.

She looked concerned and said, "Jean, there is a curb."

"Oh that? No longer a problem, but on the other side I may need a hand. Watch and be impressed," I said and grinned.

I prepared to navigate the curb by lining the chair up with the edge, and then as I went over shifted my weight forward so I wouldn't tip over backwards. This was tricky, but Jim and I had practiced often on the hospital grounds and I hadn't dumped the chair all week.

After getting off the curb I smiled and said, "The wheelie is not just flashy, it's functional. I'll need it for getting up the other side as well."
She caressed my shoulder and smiled as I said this.

The curb on the other side was a little higher and as I'd predicted I got stuck. This would have been an issue if I'd been out alone, but Sciezka was there so I wouldn't have to ask a stranger for help.

Sciezka noticed I'd gotten stuck and looked a little perplexed.

"No worries," I said. "Give me your hand, and when I give the word pull my hand steadily. Don't pull too hard and keep a sure footing."

She did as instructed and took my hand. As I leaned forward and pushed one of the rims she pulled and I jumped the curb.

"Wow, I am impressed," Sciezka said.

"It's a great trick to know as most places in Central are built like this, and I don't know of too many places that have ramps," I said. "Gracia's and the hospital do but those places are a given."

"Well, necessary or not, I'm impressed," she said with admiration in her voice.

"We'll have to work on that some more," I said with a grin.

Sciezka scowled and said, "That wasn't so bad."

"Well, one false move and I could have pulled you into my lap..." I said. "Fun at home, but not so fun here."

That earned me a hair ruffle and an eye-roll.

"For that you are buying Jean Havoc," she said and shook her fist at me in jest.

We entered the coffee house and found a table in the corner vacant and decided to sit there. After we got situated a waitress came with menus and a list of the day's specials. Sciezka decided on the soup of the day and I opted for a sandwich. As we waited for our food to arrive we chatted about the weather and other neutral topics. Finally I gathered the courage to talk about what was happening, as we'd done an awful lot, with not a lot of discussion on what it meant.

"So Sciezka, what do you see me as? I mean yes, we had sex but was that some good deed or a curiosity thing? If it was a pity fuck, please tell me. I'd understand," I said, lowering my voice as I got to the last part.

Her eyes flared and she sighed heavily and said, "You keep coming back to that. I am absolutely not fooling around with you for some karmic good deed or because you perceive yourself as a curiosity. You are a guy, an attractive guy with a brain in his head who just happens to use a wheelchair. You are not the chair, dimwit. I'm beginning to think that you fell on your head and not your spine. Shit!"

I sat there stunned for a moment and opened my mouth to rebut her statement. She interrupted me.

"Issue closed Jean, I do NOT provide sex for the un-fuckable, period. I am not a charity. Understand?" she hissed.

I slowly nodded and said, "So the whole situation doesn't bother you?"

Sciezka's look softened and she said, "Of course it bothers me. It bothers me because it bothers you. I'd rather you hadn't had this happen, that you didn't have to start all over... but at the same
time I'm glad if that doesn't sound crazy."

"Glad? Explain that to me," I said, confused by her last statement.

"Both you and I know that if this hadn't happened you'd still be chasing after those bimbos in the secretarial pool and I would still lock myself up in the library or at home with all my books. We'd never be in this set of circumstances, and last night would have never happened," she said. "Correct me if I'm wrong."

I thought it over and smiled and clasped her hand.

"You're right as usual. So where do you see this heading?" I asked.

"Call me foolish to say this so early on, but I see this lasting a long time if we both play our cards right," Sciezka said.

I leaned over to kiss her and said, "I'd hoped you would say that."

Just then the waitress brought our order and we began to eat and our conversation turned to the plans for the rest of the weekend.

When we finished eating the waitress brought the bill and I paid. I was getting ready to leave when Sciezka stopped me and said, "Let's just sit here for a little while longer. I like holding your hand, this closeness and that is the one thing that I wish was easier when we were out and about. That whole cliché of strolling and holding hands thing is something I miss, but only because I want to show that level of affection in public."

I thought for a moment, frowned slightly and said, "We'll just have to think of a different way, because I miss that too. Though you're one of the few who has stuck around long enough to do the whole holding hands thing."

Sciezka gave my hand a reassuring squeeze and leaned in for another quick kiss. I smiled and said, "On a lighter note, we have shopping to do. You did promise to wear what I pick out."

"I'm going to regret that promise, aren't I," she said.

"Maybe, maybe not. I'll make it worth your while. I'm glad you dragged me out," I said.

We headed out and I led the way. Sciezka must have been a mind reader because she slowed when we got to an upscale lingerie shop.

"Jean, you are so predictable. I'm guessing that you will pick the skimpiest piece in the shop," she said with a slight tone of disapproval in her voice.

"You won't know until I've picked it," I said with a devilish smile. "We'll go in and look around and you pick some stuff out that you like as I've been rough on your panties and I'll pick out your punishment."

We entered the store and browsed together for a few minutes and then I let the sales clerk show Sciezka some items and keep her occupied. Another sales clerk, who apparently handled male customers often, came over to help me. After looking at what seemed like endless amounts of things that I knew Sciezka would hate I found it.

Instead of ridiculous ruffles and bows this selection was relatively simple. But simple didn't do it justice. This was a masterpiece in silk, or at least it would be with Sciezka wearing it. The bottoms
were cut like her usual boy style underwear, but made of very sheer silk the color of the palest pink rose. They were adorned with delicate black lace for contrast. The top, which the sales clerk told me was called a "balconnet", a fancy name for not very much brassiere was of the same material and so delicate it was translucent. To top it all off was a kimono that felt like heaven to touch. I whistled despite myself as I imagined how it would look on her lithe, pixie-like form and then on my floor.

"That is the one, see the girl? It's for her. Wrap it up," I said and then joined Sciezka. She had picked out a few pairs of her usual underwear, in colors, I hoped for my benefit. I asked her to wait outside and then paid and tucked the purchases under my chair and went outside.

"So what did you get?" Sciezka asked.

I feigned innocence and said, "Oh, nothing too special. You'll just have to see. But I thought crotchless would be fun."

"You did nothing of the sort," she said and huffed a bit. "Did you? You didn't."

"No, I didn't," I said. "I do have some couth. What's next on the agenda?"

"Birthday gift," she said.

I looked at her in utter confusion and said, "Birthday? Are we going to one?"

"Yes, it's Riza's birthday and provided you don't throw a fit, you were invited out with the Colonel, Edward, Alphonse and Winry and of course Riza," she said.

"A party? Sciezka I really do not feel like a big military thing this soon," I said.

Sciezka said, "It's not going to be a big thing. It's at a pub as almost everyone who would have been invited has been transferred and you know that Riza would shoot anyone who planned a big surprise. It'll be some food, some drinks and if you hate it we can leave."

I exhaled slowly and said, "You promise? Because otherwise I'll have Riza shoot me to put me out of my misery."

"You are horrible. If you pout too much I'll ask her to shoot you," she said. "You'll have fun, and they only asked me because they knew you would flat out refuse. Gracia gave them the heads up that she'd be out of town for the weekend, so that is the other reason they were so insistent on you coming."

"The other reason? So they think I need babysitting," I said.

"Jean, do we have to have a repeat discussion on the whole you are a normal guy to them and to me issue?"

"No, I get that I've tended to be a hermit and only gone places on my terms and spent entirely too much time in a safe little bubble," I said. "I'll go, but that leaves the problem of what to get Riza. She has a dog and a lot of firearms, so choosing the right gift is important."

Sciezka laughed and said, "That is an interesting thought. So you're not mad that I made plans without your input?"

"Sciezka, I am getting used to having my life arranged for my benefit," I said. "Just don't do it too often, you'll make me paranoid."
After much deliberation Sciezka and I decided that we could find something non-lethal and with the correct amount of sentiment at a small boutique that sold a varied assortment of items such as stationary, fine pens, curios and other unique finds the proprietor thought were apropos.

As we were browsing for Riza's gift I saw something I thought Sciezka would love. I had the sales clerk place it behind the register and wrap it discreetly so I could surprise Sciezka later. Sciezka and I finally settled on a silver paper weight depicting a dog that looked very much like Black Hayate. It was perfect. It had just the right amount of personal interest without being inappropriate. That and Riza was a stickler for useful items. This could be used to hold down the piles of paper Roy procrastinated on, or to bludgeon him with on his worst days.

We went home to change quickly and then head to the pub.
He can still roll with the punches...

This is from my EARLY and first fiction fumblings. I will be editing well, once the story is finished! I'll only be fixing grammar and n00b mistakes. I still like my storytelling, even if everything else makes me flinch when I re-read it.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Validation

The driver took us home to freshen up. While Sciezka got ready I excused myself to take care of the necessaries and shave. It wouldn't do to go scruffy to a known military hangout given my set of circumstances. I decided to change from house pants to khakis and chose the black cashmere v-neck sweater. Sciezka loved it and if I was going into an uncomfortable social situation I felt it would help if I looked my best. The feel of wearing a security blanket couldn't hurt either.

When I emerged from the bedroom I had not expected to see the vision before me. Sciezka had changed into the dungarees she had worn the night Gracia had started the ball rolling. She had again pulled her hair back and was wearing a simple black top that revealed her collarbones. She had her back to me and was putting the final touches on in the entryway mirror. I decided that this was as good a time as any to give her the gift I had picked out when we had been shopping. I approached her as quietly as I could and wrapped an arm around her thigh. She was a bit startled, and then relaxed when she saw what I was doing. She placed a hand on my shoulder and looked me up and down and smiled.

"You clean up nicely," she said as she straightened my sweater absentmindedly.


Sciezka blushed and demurred. I pulled her into my lap and said, "I must have done something right to be here right now."

"Me too Jean, me too," Sciezka sighed.

"I never knew dungarees could look so good, but those look like they were made for you, but something is missing," I said.

Sciezka looked at me, clearly confused.

"I can change," she said.

I smiled and kissed her tenderly and said, "Please don't ever do that. Stay just like you are."

Then I reached into the pocket of my pants and pulled out a small suede jewelry pouch. I placed it
in her hand, closed her fingers over it and then kissed her closed hand.

"This is all your outfit is missing," I said.

She carefully opened the drawstring on the pouch to reveal a delicate string of freshwater pearls. She gasped as she examined it when she saw the tiny charm near the clasp. It was a small silver frog with a tiny gold crown on his head.

She threw her arms around my neck nearly smothering me with kisses. When I could finally get a word in between kisses I said, "I saw it and knew it was perfect. I was going to save it for a special occasion, but this is just that."

Sciezka paused to think on what the occasion could possibly be, and then looked at me puzzled.

"You've broken the spell," I said.

After my declaration she said, "It's gorgeous, perfect in every way."

She then handed the necklace to me and said, "Would you do the honors?"

I carefully undid the clasp, placed the necklace around her neck and fastened it. I then sat back to admire her.

"Stunning," was all I could muster.

Sciezka thought a bit and said, "You know how pearls are formed, right Jean?"

"As a matter of a fact I do… something lodges in an oyster and irritates or threatens it. The oyster builds a protective mineral barrier around the irritant. That layer of minerals is called nacre and that is what is so prized… "

"Something beautiful comes out of a bad situation," Sciezka said.

"Exactly what I was thinking when I picked this out. The good in my life right now protects me from the bad, and it is beautiful," I said pulling her in closer for a kiss.

Sciezka broke the kiss first and said, "You still aren't getting out of that party. We'd better get going."

She then ruffled my hair and said, "Hey, where did you learn about pearls anyway?"

I smiled and said, "You've rubbed off on me, and I'm now a voracious reader with my large amount of leisure time. Just call me 'Jean Havoc, storehouse of useless knowledge'."

We waited on the porch for the driver and I lit up a cigarette. Sciezka gave me a mild look of reproach and said, "Nervous Jean? You shouldn't be. It's just some food and drinks; blow out the candles and then eating cake. You can handle that."

"How did you know I was nervous?" I asked.

"It doesn't take a mind reader, it's a given knowing you, and you had that cigarette ready to light before we even got out the door," she said.

"Oh, right," I said and grinned sheepishly.

"Don't worry so much, though I've noticed you've cut down a bit," she said. "Doctor's orders?"
"No, none of that," I said. "I'm just more relaxed living here, more comfortable I guess, well and then there is Elyzia. I've got to set a good example."

"Is that all?" Sciezka asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Well that and now I have better things to do with my hands and mouth," I said and goosed her.

The driver came and we got into the car and made use of the privacy screen. Couldn't waste a perfectly good opportunity to relax, could I?

When we arrived I saw that I recognized the pub as an old haunt. I was both relieved and anxious at the same time. Relieved because this was a low key place, but anxious because I could run into people who hadn't seen me since the accident.

Before we got out of the car I said, "No more subterfuge, ok? You may have to drag me kicking and screaming sometimes but I do want to go places with you. I'd just like a little advance notice from now on. Oh, and scratch the kicking part. I'm not a good kicker anymore. Screaming will have to do."

Sciezka kissed me playfully and said, "It's a deal, and I do believe you used up your ration of self-deprecating humor for the night. Let's go before we're late."

"I've found it is bad to keep Riza waiting long. She's probably taken the safety off already," I said with a smile.

Sciezka got out of the car and the driver brought around the pieces of my chair to assemble. I then transferred and noticed a rather soused looking man in uniform staring at me.

Apparently Sciezka did too because she leaned in for a very demonstrative kiss then under the guise of licking my ear whispered, "Here's the secret weapon."

I leaned into the kiss and whispered back, "Woman, I like the way you think."

We headed toward the entrance and I got the door. Sciezka entered, then stopped as she noticed the pub was packed and that there was a step down into the main room.

"Sciezka, it's just like a curb. No worries," I said and then navigated the step.

Roy was the first to notice me and he motioned for us to come over.

I said to Sciezka, "It's now or never, you go on ahead to part the crowd and improve the view."

She gave me a perplexed look and I laughed and said, "If I have to sit and look at the world from this point of view I'd rather see your fine ass than saggy spants, or worse be nose-to-pecker with some of these guys."

She nodded that she understood and began to sashay in front of me, clearly flattered. When we got to where Roy and Riza were at the bar rail I said, "Work it girl, hotcha!"

Sciezka blushed and in a flustered voice said, "Colonel Mustang, with your clout couldn't you get a table?"

Roy said, "We have one reserved for later, though I admit I hadn't thought all the logistics through."

Riza chimed in, "The Colonel thought it would be improper for me to plan my own birthday, sorry
for his oversight. I can try to get us a table."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," I said. "This is fine. By the way, happy birthday!"

Riza smiled and said, "I'm glad you and Sciezka are here to celebrate with me. I didn't think you'd come."

"It took a bit of coercion on Sciezka's part, but I wouldn't miss it," I said. "Besides, if I'd bailed you would have taken it out on me at the range."

Riza laughed and Roy smiled and said, "So are you two having an ok time of it with Gracia gone?"

I rolled my eyes and said, "Roy if you even think of laying a hand on her I will hurt you, and yes we are having a great time."

Sciezka blushed and excused herself to go to the restroom. I hoped I hadn't said too much or embarrassed her. Riza excused herself as well, citing the well-known expectation that women go to the restroom in groups.

Roy turned to me and said, "So things are going well for you?"

I laughed and said, "You see me at H.Q. all the time before I go the range with Riza, what do you think?"

"Well I'm surprised to say the least, I mean Sciezka? She's certainly different from the others, but that is no bookworm you have with you tonight, though she seems shy."

"Sir, I mean Roy, you have no idea and that's all I can say without sounding like a cad," I said.

"Oh really? C'mon Jean, spill it!" Roy said, almost begging. "For my peace of mind, you're happy, right?"

"My bad luck is changed and I didn't think it was possible, but I think Jim is right," I said and paused. "Happy is a possibility."

"Thank you, for not blaming me, and for letting me help. Seeing you in such good spirits lifts some of the weight," he said.

I smiled, reached up and clapped him on the shoulder and said, "You're still buying the rounds tonight Chief."

Roy looked grateful to hear that barb and said, "Jean Havoc is back, and soon the ladies will be too."

He nudged my shoulder and said, "So out of curiosity…"

"Roy," I said slightly irritated. "You have a one track mind sometimes. It is fine and she is a tiger."

Roy beamed and said, "Atta boy!"

"Remember what I said Roy, touch her and die," I said with mock seriousness.

Riza and Sciezka were almost to the bar when I heard a quick snippet of their conversation. I think I heard Sciezka say, "Breathes through his ears."

I gave myself a mental pat on the back and said to Roy, "I believe I would like a drink, what have
Roy held up his glass and said, "Bourbon, what else would I drink? Want one?"

"Hell no, you know my usual. I'll have a pint of stout, but just one," I said. "I can't hold my liquor the way I used to."

Roy smirked and said, "You never could!"

We talked and drank for a while and caught up on the gossip at headquarters. Riza announced that when the Elric brothers and Winry arrived that we'd sit down to order food. I refrained from commenting that I'd brought my own seat. I didn't need to get on Sciezka's bad side.

After awhile I noticed that a man in uniform seemed to be inching closer and closer to Sciezka. She had been standing at the bar talking to a colleague from the Investigations Department. When her friend left the, inebriated man made his move. He began chatting Sciezka up with one tasteless pick-up line after another. She seemed to be taking it in stride, though her smile was forced and eventually she looked my way with a death glare.

It was Havoc to the rescue. I navigated through the now standing room only crowd, cursing how long it was taking. When I finally got to her I could tell that Sciezka had had enough.

"Mr. Suave" launched into his last line as I got to her.

"That's a great outfit on you, but it would look even better on my floor," he slurred.

That was it. I positioned myself next to Sciezka and said, "Excuse me, is this guy bothering you?"

Mr. Suave looked me up and down and said, "What's it to you? She your nurse or something?"

I gripped the rims of my chair and counted to ten to rein in my temper and then said, "No, she is my girlfriend and she doesn't seem to be appreciating your witty repartee."

Mr. Suave looked down at me and then said to Sciezka, "Baby, what are you doing with half a man? I can do things for you that he'll never be able to."

Sciezka's jaw dropped at this statement and she took a few steps away from us when she saw my face twist into a scowl.

"Excuse me, but would you care to repeat that?" I said, schooling my tone.

"Sure thing cripple. I said that you can't satisfy her and I'll show her a good time," he said and leaned on my shoulder in an effort to intimidate me, almost knocking me off balance.

My tone remained calm as I said, "I doubt you could satisfy her either with that gut, rancid breath, and below average intelligence level. Go home whisky dick. The only date for you tonight is your hand."

At this his face turned crimson and he shook and said, "If you weren't in that chair I'd clock you!"

"Wanna know a secret buddy?" I said, deciding I'd had enough.

He leaned in so we were almost nose-to-nose and said, "What could I possibly learn from you?"

I grabbed his shoulders and head butted him and it was on.
He fell to the ground dazed, then staggered while getting up, and one of his comrades restrained him after helping him up.

Sciezka backed up to give us room and I was vaguely aware that Roy was standing behind me.

"Jean, this is ridiculous…” Roy stammered.

"Roy, don't stop me," I said. Then I pointed at Mr. Suave's friend and said, "Let him go. I can take him."

Mr. Suave's friend complied and Mr. Suave threw an off kilter punch and staggered past me. He righted himself and threw another. This one landed on my shoulder, knocking me off balance and out of my chair.

I heard a collective gasp from the bar and I knew I had to finish this if I wanted to keep any shred of dignity.

Mr. Suave stood over me, prepared to spit when I hit the pressure point at the back of his knee bringing him to ground. Before he could get up I was on him and we wrestled like that for a bit. He punched me in the face and I knew I'd be sporting a shiner the next day. I recovered from the blow, pinned him and put him into a chokehold.

When he submitted I said, "Repeat after me."

He nodded furiously, panicked that I might tighten the chokehold again.

"I am a pompous asshole," I said. "Repeat it whiskey dick."

"I am a pompous asshole," said Mr. Suave.

"My date tonight is Mr. Hand," I said.

He squirmed, but complied.

"I just got my ass handed to me by a cripple," I said.

He hesitated, but I tightened the hold I had on his neck and leaned into his kidneys. He knew the best he could do was to comply and maybe I'd let him up. By now the bouncers were standing over us.

"Shit! I give up. I got my ass handed to me by a cripple," he finally said in a defeated tone.

I let him up and the bouncers carried him out bodily. While they were doing that, Roy brought over my chair and attempted to help me into it. I refused his help and managed it myself.

Riza and Sciezka came over, and Riza said, "Jean, was that really necessary?"

I could tell it had upset Sciezka, but instead of being angry she was in my lap fussing over my minor scrapes and bruises.

The bouncers came back in and I was prepared to leave as I figured I'd be kicked out.

The biggest one said, "Thanks, that jerk was bothering the ladies all night, we just needed a good excuse to bar him from coming here again."

"Proud to serve, sorry I roughed him up," I said and grinned.
Apparently I was slightly roughed up too because Riza pointed to my mouth and I realized I had the beginnings of a fat lip. Sciezka kissed it ever so gently and I winced.

The barkeep came to my aide with a clean, wet towel and a fresh pint as payment for my services.

Roy clapped me on the back and said, "I would have had your back if you'd let me Jean."

I thought and said, "Not needed, but next time I get in a bar brawl I'll let you get in a few punches too if you like."

Roy chuckled and said, "That guy had it coming, if you hadn't thrown the first punch, I would have."

I laughed and said, "Next time, you're on. Maybe after this we can hustle some billiards and get that opportunity. I bet I'm still a shark."

We were then alerted that our table was ready, so we left the bar area to start the real festivities.

When we got to the table I found that Winry, Al and Ed were there and my ruffled appearance got a few looks, but we all settled in and began Riza's birthday celebration in earnest.
Tumult and Tranquility

Chapter Summary

After so much work, it's fine to just rest a bit.

This is from my EARLY and first fiction fumblings. I will be editing well, once the story is finished! I'll only be fixing grammar and n00b mistakes. I still like my storytelling, even if everything else makes me flinch when I re-read it.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Tumult and Tranquility

We were seated at a large, round table in the back room of the pub. I chose a spot in the corner so I could see the action in the room and so my chair wouldn't be so conspicuous. Roy sat to one side of me and Sciezka sat on my other side. I noticed that Riza had chosen to sit next to Roy, facing out into the room. Riza and I were alike, as we both felt uncomfortable with our backs to the door. We'd both been trained never to let our guard down. The Elrics and Winry sat across from us. The waitress brought menus and took our drink orders.

Riza went first, ordering a white wine, Roy followed with his usual bourbon even though he was already well on his way to soused, Sciezka decided that she would also like white wine and Ed and Winry ordered root beer. We'd slip them some booze later, as it had been an exception letting the teens into the bar at all.

Finally it was my turn and I debated inwardly on whether I should order root beer, or another pint of stout. Sciezka piped up and said, "He'll have another pint of stout and a glass of water."

"Sciezka, I didn't want to drink too much tonight," I said, slightly irritated.

"Jean, you haven't. Your first stout got left on the bar, and the next one was a reward for your chivalry. One more won't hurt," she said and smiled.

Roy shot a glance my way and I blushed. Riza just smiled and nodded. The other members of the table looked surprised as they hadn't witnessed the bar fight and the events leading up to it.

Winry looked like she was about to ask about this new level of rapport between Sciezka and myself when I said, "That's right, Sciezka and I are an item."

Al spoke first and said, "Jean, that is such good news."

Winry got up, threw her arms around each of us squealing with joy that her friends were happy.

Ed just said, "Havoc, you are so whipped." He then smiled and said, "But it suits you."

"Boss, that was low," I said. "But probably true!"

Sciezka reached out for my hand, gave it a squeeze and we held hands under the table. There was no point in telling them how nuts I was about her, they could all tell.
Our drinks arrived and Roy ordered some food for us to help absorb the alcohol and ready us for cake. The conversation eventually turned to my transferred comrades. Roy informed us that he had received reports from each of them and that they were fine, if lonely. I was glad to hear it, but then asked Roy what he planned to do to re-unite the group.

"After the plan goes through, everyone will be stationed here, under me," Roy said tone going from jovial to dead serious. "Until then, I will relay as much intelligence to them as I can so they are informed, safe and hopefully able to play a part in their respective regions."

I nodded and said in a hushed tone, "Will you be needing me?"

Roy and Riza both sat quietly for a bit, looked to each other, then looked to me.

"That is one part of the reason this celebration is taking place in public," Riza said.

I looked at Riza and cocked my head, indicating my confusion.

"You need to be seen out in public, mixing with the military in social situations so your increased activity level isn't noticed," Riza continued.

"Now I get it," I said. "Should I be looking for my own place? Will this compromise anyone?"

Roy nodded and said, "I have safeguards in place, but for your security and freedom, moving out on your own would be advisable."

"I'll have to get hunting then, I don't know of too many apartments in Central that are accessible," I said in a glib tone to cover my anxiety about returning to duty in this capacity, and moving out of my safe bubble at Gracia's.

"It's already been thought of, if you'll take it. It's about a block from Gracia's house," Roy said. "It's a little two bedroom bungalow, plenty of space to move around in and the rent is within your means."

I rolled my eyes and said, "Roy, do you have every move planned out for me? I thank you for the help but I am capable of making my own decisions."

Roy chuckled and said, "I know you are, I just observed your recent independence and thought it was time. It just also happened to be convenient for me. I do apologize."

"You were genius at Gracia's house, I assume that was you. The bathroom is a mirror of the bathroom at the Military Hospital," I said.

"Guilty as charged Jean," Roy said. "I'm sorry for the subterfuge, but if there hadn't been intervention you would have been in the East by now."

I sighed, considered his statement and said, "You are right, and it has been the best option for me but from now on, please keep me in the loop."

Roy shrugged and gave his best apologetic face. He did after all have my best interests in mind, though it bothered me to no end.

"Just one more thing Roy," I said. "As long as you're arranging everything, make sure the new place is as well laid out as Gracia's."

Roy laughed and nodded his head in agreement and the regular party conversations resumed.
Just before the cake was served, Winry pointed out my developing shiner to Ed.

"Hey, Jean what happened?" Winry said. "Did you get hurt or fall?"

I laughed and shook my head no.

Ed chimed in and said, "Did someone pop you? I'll kill him!"

"If you think this is bad, you should see the other guy," I said.

Riza and Sciezka laughed at that. Roy clapped me on the back and said, "You did put up a good fight back there. I was surprised."

I flushed a little and said, "Well, it was really not that much different than hand to hand trench fighting. Stuff you learn in basic really, stay low and aim for their weaknesses."

Roy beamed and said, "Well you can have my back any day."

Soon the cake arrived and Riza blew out the candles.

Sciezka asked, "What did you wish for Riza?"

Riza smiled and said, "I can't tell, or it won't happen, but it would be wonderful if it did."

I noticed that Riza moved a little closer to Roy and had a sudden realization. I nudged Roy, looked at him and he nodded yes.

It wasn't a grand surprise that Roy and Riza were together. I decided not to press her tonight, but to ask her the next time at the range.

As we finished our cake my legs began to spasm. The day had taken its toll and Sciezka noticed first, placing a hand over mine as I tried to quiet my quaking legs. She rubbed my hand and then squeezed it. She then saved the day.

She stood up, stretched and said, "I am so beat. Jean, let's go home."

With that, we said our goodbyes and made our way out.

When we arrived home my legs still continued to shake. I tried to ignore it and suggested that we have a snack before bed. Sciezka looked at me and said, "You don't have to be so stoic at home, let me fix the snack and you get into bed. It'll help the spasms. Is cocoa ok?"

I looked at her, and said, "You realize this isn't return, right?"

Sciezka nodded then leaned in for a kiss and said, "I know. Research you know."

"So this doesn't bother you?" I said.

"Jean, it only bothers me if it bothers you. It just means you overdid it. You've had a full day shopping, then a party and a fight? No wonder. We'll just have to go easy tonight, hop into bed and I'll be right in," she whispered in my ear in between nips at my earlobe.

I found her mouth again and said, "You can tuck me in this time, but next time it's my turn. Check the bureau."

Sciezka laughed softly and said, "What's in there?"
"You owe me, remember?" I said.

"It just better not be crotch-less," Sciezka said with a grin.

I maneuvered the chair into the room slowly, heading to the bathroom before getting to bed so I wouldn't lose the lease on my beer. I then went into the bedroom, transferred to the bed, cursing the fact that it took longer than usual to get in bed with my legs shaking the way they were. I finally found a stable footing and heaved myself into bed. I was so tired that I didn't bother undressing and just lie there for a bit trying to gather the energy to undress myself.

Sciezka came in bearing mugs of cocoa and a cold compress for my eye. I thanked her and took my mug. I blew on it, took a sip and said, "This is the best cocoa I've had in a long time, though it's different."

Sciezka smiled and said, "That would be the cinnamon and the vanilla."

She then sat down near the head of the bed and kissed me, licking at the bit of froth that had gathered on my upper lip.

She then got up and said, "While you finish that, and tend to that shiner I'll slip into your 'payment', ok?"

I hesitated and then said, "Not while I'm like this," gesturing towards my shaking legs. "That guy… what he said really bothered me. You're not my nurse. You don't need to take care of me."

Sciezka scowled and said, "That 'man' as you referred to that pig was entirely out of line. Put his comments out of your mind. He was wrong. Besides, I'd bring anyone cocoa. This isn't taking care of you."

I looked away and said, "But he was right about the half part. Half of me is utterly useless."

Sciezka sat back down and palmed the sides of my face, forcing me to look at her and said, "You will never be half a man to me."

I started to slide down the pillows a bit and put my hands down to push myself back up, exasperated that I had trouble with this just sitting up in bed.

She noticed I was slipping, grabbed my mug of cocoa before it spilled and when I'd recovered my balance said, "You've had quite a day. That's partly my fault."

"You shouldn't have to deal with this, or plan around it," I said and scowled.

Sciezka fluffed the pillows behind me then crawled into my lap and said, "Let me know if this is comfortable for you. I don't want to hurt you."

"No, you won't do any damage. I'm already broken," I said in resignation.

She sat up and looked at me hard again and said, "You are not broken Jean. Besides, it's better than the alternative, broken people who hide it all on the inside. You at least wear yours on the outside. I know what I'm getting into."

"It's just not fair. When I was lying next to you last night there was this wonderful closeness spooning you, and then it just stopped, nothing," I said placing a hand on my jumping thigh.

Sciezka leaned in and kissed me to silence me, and then looked into my eyes and said, "It's not fair,
that you don't feel me there next to you. But I am, and I feel safe in your arms. I'm going to change
now. Finish your cocoa."

She then handed me the mug and headed toward the bathroom, grabbing the tiny bag that
contained the lingerie I'd picked out in the afternoon.

When she came out she was a vision of loveliness. Her ivory skin blended almost seamlessly with
the peach mesh and it fit her perfectly. It was a shame that it was wasted on me in this condition.

"You look gorgeous," I said in a soft voice.

Sciezka approached the bed and I noticed she had something in her hand.

When she noticed that I was looking at what she'd brought she said, "It's massage lotion. I thought
it'd help with the spasms."

"You don't have to do that… " I said.

"This is purely selfish. I can't very well have my way with you if you're all self-conscious, can I?"
she said and winked. "Just relax and let me do this."

I complied and lie back on the pillows and she began to take off my sweater. When she had
removed it she started on my chest and shoulders. Sciezka took the lotion, squirted some into her
hands and warmed it up. She made sweeping motions over my chest and torso applying gentle
pressure all over. Then she began kneading the muscles in my arms starting with my biceps and
triceps, paying careful attention to each area. When she got to my forearms I moaned and closed
my eyes. She kissed each eyelid and said, "Is that helping?"

I murmured something incoherent and she nibbled on my earlobe and said, "I knew it would."

She then clasped her fingers with mine and worked those as well, gently pulling each one and then
massaging my palms paying attention to each small callous. I made a mental note that I should get
gloves so the rims of my chair didn't tear my hands up so much.

When she had finished she said, "Ok, flip over so I can work on your back. That can't feel very
good after sitting in one place all day. I bet that is contributing to the spasms."

I hesitated and said, "You know you don't have to."

She kissed me hard and said, "Just do it."

I raised my hands in surrender and slowly scooted down on the bed and turned myself over so
Sciezka could work on the knots in my back.

Next she applied more lotion to her hands and began to make gentle sweeps up my back. She then
methodically worked on each area, paying extra attention to my shoulders and the center of my
back.

"You hold a LOT of tension there, could you feel these knots?" Sciezka asked.

She then began to work at the knot that was almost always between my shoulder blades and I
sighed in relief when she released it. When she was finished there she moved to my lower back

"Sciezka, you don't have to do there, I can't feel it," I said.

"Whether you do or don't isn't the point, you're tense there," she said. "Trust me, this will help. Just
She then did something entirely unexpected. She stopped and traced the long scar that ran down my back. I shivered as she did it and she said, "Does that hurt?"

I hesitated and said, "No, it doesn't. It's just I'm a little insecure about that. It isn't exactly pretty."

She leaned in and ran a gentle line of kisses down my back, paying extra attention to the scar and said, "I adore every part of you."

She then declared that my back was finished and indicated that I should turn over again. When I'd moved she announced that it was time for my pants to come off.

"Sciezka, no. It's useless... they're useless. I don't want you to," I said and trailed off.

Sciezka moved in close to me, entwining her fingers with mine and said, "It will help the spasms and remember, I adore EVERY part of you. Even the parts you don't like."

"Fine," I said and frowned. "But it's a wasted effort."

She removed my pants and I closed my eyes as she began to work on my legs. Of all the physical changes that had occurred with the paralysis, this was the most embarrassing of all. Though Jim manipulated and stretched my legs every day, they were losing muscle mass and were beginning to get thinner.

When she finished she came to rest again on my chest and said, "They've stopped."

I opened my eyes and sure enough, the spasms had stopped.

"You were right, thank you. Though now I smell like lavender. What's with that?" I said with a smile.

"Lavender is relaxing, and helps relieve stress," she said matter-of-factly.

She pushed herself up on her arms to kiss me and looked into my eyes and said, "I want to try something else."

I searched her eyes and cautiously said, "What else did you have in mind?"

She got to her knees and crawled to the end of the bed. She then leaned in and began to toy with the edge of my boxers. She smiled and said, "Just this."

She then removed my boxers and as I watched I saw she was beginning to stroke my inner thighs.

"Sciezka, don't bother..." I said.

Mid-sentence I looked and noticed that IT was beginning to stand at attention. Sciezka grinned, mounted my thigh and took hold of my growing erection. I realized that she was a force to be reckoned with and let her go to work. She then began to lick and suckle while grinding her sex into me, making sure I could see every move. As she ministered to Master Havoc I began to feel it, a growing tension in my abdomen and lower back. My cheeks began to flush and everything I was aware of tightened. When I began to bite my lip to stifle a cry she quickly removed her panties and mounted me. She slowly began moving up and down on my erection, and leaned into me so I could remove her bra. Once I had revealed her breasts I began to nuzzle and suckle at them until they were erect and she increased her pace. She nipped at my earlobe and whispered, "Are you close?"
I furiously nodded yes and she guided my hand to her sex and I began to tease her clitoris. I couldn't believe how wet she was.

As I did so, she began to grind into me harder and I knew she would come soon. Her hips began bucking of their own accord and she came hard moaning my name. She continued writhing on top of me, grinding her heat into me and arching her back. Moments after she climaxed I went rigid and came. She smothered my cries with a kiss and then shuddered once more before going limp in my arms.

A few moments later she rolled off of me, and draped a leg over me squeezing me close. She nibbled absentmindedly at my earlobe. I said nothing and was still stunned at what she'd been able to do to me.

I gave a contented sigh and wrapped my arms around her. I kissed the top of her head and played with her fingers.

Sciezka broke the silence and said, "Half a man my ass."

I chuckled and said, "Thank you for that even though I protested at first."

Sciezka turned off the light then nuzzled my chest and said, "Time to sleep lady-killer, you'll have work to do in the morning."

We dropped off to sleep entwined with one another.
Surrender

Chapter Summary

Still getting it on like crazed weasels...

This is from my EARLY and first fiction fumblings. I will be editing well, once the story is finished! I'll only be fixing grammar and n00b mistakes. I still like my storytelling, even if everything else makes me flinch when I re-read it.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Warnings: Tender heterosexual couple getting it on, a lot, because they like each other, a lot. Getting it on like Crazed Weasels is mentioned.

Surrender

I woke up sometime near dawn to Sciezka calling my name and shaking me to wake me. I was sweating, my eyes were stinging and my heart was going so fast I thought it would explode. I knew with certainty I'd had another nightmare. Sciezka turned on the light on the bedside table and I covered my eyes to shield them from the bright light and to hide my tears. I felt a consoling hand on my shoulder and then she spoke.

"Jean, sorry I woke you, but you looked so terrified."

I rubbed my eyes and finally in a shaky voice spoke, "Well that was humiliating, what did I say?"

"There was nothing to be embarrassed about, I'd be surprised if you didn't have night terrors with what you've been through. You kept saying 'Solaris' and 'Lust' and you were I think warning the Colonel to stay back," she said. "Was there a prisoner there by that name? I mean the accident did take place during a jailbreak."

I hesitated and then said, "We cooked up that story. It wasn't an accident."

Sciezka's eyes opened wide at that statement, but she waited mutely for me to continue.

"It's a very long, very confusing story that I'm not even sure I believe. Are you sure you want to hear it?" I asked.

Sciezka embraced me and then said, "Of course I do... it's close to dawn, why don't we get up and talk about this in the living room over some coffee."

I hugged her back and planted a soft kiss on her forehead and said, "I think you're right. I'd rather talk about this in the light of day, and keep memories like that out of the bedroom."

With that, Sciezka got up and rummaged around in my drawers, finding one of my button-down shirts to cover up with. She tossed me some flannel pajama bottoms and a t-shirt without a second thought.

"Sciezka, you are too good to me. Let me take care of the necessaries and I'll be right out. Do you
know where the coffee is?"

"You'd do the same for me, and you know it. Stop apologizing," she scolded. "Yes, of course I know where Gracia keeps the coffee."

With that she left the bedroom and I began the chore of getting dressed and out of bed. I chided myself for imagining that anything could ever be normal or easy again.

I finished my daily ablutions and went to my drawer to grab a few of my notebooks. Maybe this would be easier if I could just read them and distanced myself, rather than reliving it all over again. I decided a smoke was in order as my hands were shaking and my nerves still jangled. The chill air on the porch and the cigarette did nothing to clear my head or calm my nerves. I decided that there was no other choice but to tell her.

When I came back inside Sciezka was sitting on the couch with two mugs of coffee on the side table. She patted the cushion next to her to invite me to sit close to her while we talked. With a subdued sigh I slowly moved over to the couch and transferred. At first I sat ramrod straight, fingering the journals in my lap. We sat in agonizing silence sipping our coffee. Finally Sciezka spoke up.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," she said. "I'll understand because it's painful for you, but I think…"

"No, I should tell you, you should know my demons if you stick around to deal with them," I said in a discouraged tone.

"You are not your demons, you are an amazing person who just has more to deal with than most," Sciezka said.

She then patted her lap and said, "Lie down here and tell me everything. I want to understand."

I handed her my mug, then pulled each leg onto the couch and using the back of the couch for support arranged myself so my head was in her lap and I was looking at the ceiling. This would be easier if I didn't have to meet her gaze.

I opened a journal and began reading in a monotone.

"The mission was to investigate the suspects in Maes' murder. We had gotten a tip and were pursuing the informant. We led us to the Third Lab and prison. When we arrived we split up, Alphonse with First Lieutenant Hawkeye and myself with Colonel Mustang. The Colonel and I ran into a woman I knew, rather dated, who I thought was named Solaris. It turns out she was the homunculus known as Lust. We held her at gunpoint to interrogate her on what she knew about Maes and then the Colonel shot her. Even after several shots to her vitals she continued to stand, and before our eyes she regenerated. She then knocked the gun out of the Colonel's hand with a lance that appeared to grow from her arm. The crushing blow was when she used this same weapon to break a pipe, rendering the Colonel's alchemy useless. Mustang had a brilliant idea, transmuting the water that was flowing in around us to hydrogen, we then used my lighter to ignite it and there was an explosion. We thought we were in the clear, because Lust had been immolated. We went in to find the corpse so we could be sure she was thoroughly destroyed. The next thing I knew I was impaled on spikes that seemed to sprout from her fingers. When she released me I felt myself sinking to the floor and I could do nothing about it. I was in utter agony and then everything went black."

My voice broke with that last sentence and I closed my eyes and swallowed hard. Sciezka
continued stroking my brow as she had been for the most of the time I'd been reading.

Sciezka spoke first after we'd sat in silence for a few moments, "Jean, that must have been terrible. I'm surprised you didn't bleed to death or die of shock."

I pulled up my shirt to point out Roy's handiwork. She tenderly rested a hand on the scars.

"Field cauterization, by flame… " I said flatly. "I'd be dead otherwise. Sometimes I wish I had."

Sciezka gasped.

"I think Gracia suspected it. When I first got here she kept my medication under lock and key, giving me only one dose at a time," I said almost inaudibly.

"Do you still feel that way ever?" Sciezka said.

"Sometimes at night, yes. During the day I have other things to take my mind off of it, but after a nightmare it's the worst."

Sciezka was silent and I felt hot droplets fall on my face. She sniffled and I knew she was crying.

"Sciezka, no… I promise that I won't take that way out. The moment it pops into my mind I think about what it would do to Roy, to Gracia and Elysia and now most of all to you," I said and paused. "I don't think that Roy would ever forgive himself if I did that, and now I finally have some hope."

She wiped her eyes and said, "You do? You promise?"

"I promise," I whispered and took her hand and kissed it.

We sat like that for hours. Sometimes I would read a passage that I thought was crucial, and other times when a passage was particularly agonizing I'd hand the notebook to Sciezka to read silently to herself. Every once in awhile she'd caress my cheek or lean in for a kiss. This was the first time I'd shared all of this with anyone. In time I dozed off in the sanctuary of her lap.

When I awoke it was nearly noon and I could hear that it was raining.

"I guess we're rained out," I said.

"No worries, there is plenty of food here and I don't feel like leaving the house today. It's the last day," she said.

I pushed up on my elbows and inclined my neck and Sciezka's lips met mine halfway.

"Thank you… " I said shakily. "Thank you so much."

I was glad for the rain because I was in no mood to go anywhere outside the comfort of those four walls and Sciezka.

I abruptly sat up and said, "After that, I need lunch. What do you want? I'm fixing it."

Sciezka asked, "You cook?"

"I have been known to, not well, but I would have starved if I'd lived solely on food from the Mess and takeout," I answered with a chuckle.

"Well, so long as it isn't a bother," she said.
"Not at all, I just hope it's edible," I quipped.

Once I got into the kitchen I opened the icebox and pondered my options. Gracia had left it well stocked and I eventually settled on omelets. Anything tasted good with eggs and cheese. I decided that mushrooms, spinach and goat cheese would be a good combination. I may have been a bachelor, but I wasn't completely devoid of culture.

Once I'd prepared all the ingredients I heated the pan and when it was ready I put in the eggs. When the omelet had risen and looked nearly cooked I put in the fillings and folded it over. To do this I had to take the pan off the flame and ever so carefully hold it over my lap. This was where my height disadvantage got me. I eventually managed it; even though it wasn't the prettiest I'd ever made and set it back on the flame.

I then called to Sciezka, "It's almost ready!"

She came in just in time to see me plating the omelet up on the counter. She stood in the doorway and said, "I'm impressed. Gracia said you couldn't cook peanut butter and jelly."

"I've come a long way since then, and I make an excellent sandwich," I said.

Sciezka sniffed the air and said, "Well that smells delicious, whatever it is."

"Omelets, I hope you like mushrooms and spinach," I said, as I inwardly chided myself for not asking if she liked the filllings.

I balanced the plates in my lap and rolled over to the table. I set them on the table Sciezka sat down and appraised my work. After the first bite I knew I'd done well.

"You get to cook from now on. I have complete confidence in you," Sciezka said.

"Only if you help. We'll cook together," I said and smiled.

We chatted, ate and my mood lifted considerably. Midway through the meal Sciezka looked at me and said, "Jean, you weren't serious last night about moving out, were you?"

I sucked in a breath and considered my answer carefully then said, "Actually I am. Roy needs me and I don't know if there will be any repercussions. With Scar, the Homunculi and the transfers it's a complete cluster fuck."

Sciezka knitted her brows, deep in thought and then said, "So you'll be in danger? Are you crazy? After what happened… "

I interrupted her and said, "I most likely will not be in any direct danger, I'll just be transporting documents, but if anything happened to Gracia or Elysia I would never forgive myself. The move is simply a precaution."

She seemed relieved to hear that I wasn't going to do anything completely reckless.

"Besides, in light of recent developments, I think I'd like the privacy," I said with a wink.

Sciezka blushed and said, "But you have plenty of privacy. Your own room, a private bathroom... "

"That being said, I can't exactly ravish you on the kitchen table without feeling incredibly guilty about it."

Sciezka's jaw dropped and I gently cupped her chin and closed her mouth.
"I fully intend on breaking in every surface in the new house, if you're amenable to that idea."

Sciezka threw her arms around me and I pulled her into my lap. The dishes could wait.

I rolled us to my room and Sciezka eyed the bed, and then got up to straddle my chair and kiss me. This was certainly a creative use of my mode of transportation and I fully approved.

I broke the kiss and gestured at the chair and said, "I think that this may be a GOOD thing today."

She began to nibble my earlobe and asked, "Jean, are you sure you didn't fall on your head?"

I laughed and said, "No, no more brain damaged than before. But I think that I'd be walking awfully funny today if I could. You're going to break me!"

Sciezka then claimed my lips for a kiss and nibbled a bit on my lower lip.

She then climbed off my lap, flopped on the bed and said, "Worship me like the goddess I am!" in her best theatrical voice.

I transferred to the bed as quickly as I could, positioned myself on top of her propped up on one hand and said, "Don't mind if I do."

I began to trace the features of her face with my free hand, caressing each part and planting kisses every so often. When I'd finished with her face and ears I moved lower to her neck at times kissing ever so lightly and sometimes nipping to feel her squirm under me.

The whole time I was doing this Sciezka lie back, almost passive, allowing me to explore at my own pace and pay appropriate homage to each part. I was after all, worshiping her. Once I had paid appropriate homage to her neck I began to unbutton the shirt that she was wearing.

"The lingerie was divine last night, but I think I like this better..." I said as I studied her in my white shirt. She was swimming in it, the cuffs almost covering her hands and the tails were long enough to provide her with some modesty. It emphasized just how delicate she was in comparison to me.

Sciezka merely smiled and sighed in contentment. Clearly I was a devout supplicant. As I undid each button I noted her attributes aloud: brilliant, persistent, resourceful, gorgeous and insatiable.

At insatiable she squawked in protest.

"Oh, insatiable is a good thing," I said while burying my face in her cleavage.

I nuzzled, sucked, nibbled and licked until she began to arch her back and then I moved lower to her taut stomach. I dipped my tongue in her navel a few times and she shivered and grabbed my hair. I wondered how long she could hold out before she would begin to plead for release.

I then nipped at each hipbone while I began to massage her inner thigh and she whimpered and parted her legs to allow me better access. I gently probed her folds, tracing them delicately until she heaved a frustrated sigh.

"I suppose I should get to work then?" I asked, nuzzling her inner thigh.

"YES!" Sciezka moaned, clearly through with my teasing.

"It's a good thing I can 'breathe through my ears'," I said brushing my fingers over her curls.
She sat up a bit, looking a little sheepish and said, "Just get to work."

"Yes Ma'am," I said and gave her a salute.

I got to work pulling out every trick in the book. When she came for the fifth time she grabbed me by the hair and said, "Jean, ENOUGH!"

I looked up in surprise and asked, "Really?"

She nodded furiously and said, "There is such a thing as too much of a good thing. My head might explode if you keep that up."

I grinned and said, "I was only doing my duty."

I crawled hand over hand to lie next to her on the pillows and she said, "You've still got all your clothes on. This has to be remedied."

Sciezka then began to strip off my clothes with urgency, starting with my t-shirt.

"Can't we just cuddle?" I said. "You're going to kill me."

She gave me a wicked grin, slid off my pajama pants and tossed them in the corner with my t-shirt.

"Fine, have your way with me. I surrender," I said, not too put out that she was going to have her way with me, whether I wanted it or not.

She kissed me forcefully to silence any further protests and set to screwing me senseless.

When she finished having her way with me she rolled off of me and we just shook for a bit unable and unwilling to move. When I could finally speak I said, "Now can we just cuddle?"

She patted my hand and said, "Sure thing. Until you're ready for round two."

I rolled onto my side and said, "Maybe insatiable is a bad thing."

She hit me with a pillow and I caught her around the waist and pulled her closer to me. She then entwined her legs with mine, murmured something about me being "one to talk" and we drifted off to sleep.

When I awoke the room was dark and when I moved to turn on the lamp Sciezka pulled me back down for a kiss before letting me turn on the light.

Out of the blue Sciezka said, "You're becoming an accomplished writer. How can you call it chicken scratch?"

"I only showed you the stuff I'd edited a bit to clarify it for myself, I assure you it is mostly chicken scratch," I said. "Maybe it's more than you expected from a grunt, but most of it is nonsense."

"Jean, if it's what you're feeling it is not nonsense," she said. "Don't negate its value just because you aren't a trained writer. Most of the greats weren't."

I sighed and said, "I'll admit there are a few passages that I'm pleased with how they turned out. They do the job setting down my feelings on paper. But that is all I'll admit."

"Have you thought about going to university?" Sciezka asked.
"University? You've got to be kidding me. I'm hardly an academic," I scoffed.

"You made it through officer training so you're clearly intelligent," Sciezka said exasperated that I didn't agree with her.

"Officer training is entirely different from anything I'd be doing at university. Besides, it's broken down so grunts can understand it," I said.

She pursed her lips and crossed her arms and said, "It's something you should think about. You don't have to choose what you're going to do right away. You could take classes that interest you and see what happens."

To appease her I said, "I'll consider it."

Thankfully Sciezka changed the subject once she got the answer she wanted and said, "So what should round two be?"

I smirked and said, "Woman, you are going to kill me. Would you object to some supper and cleaning up around here a bit so Gracia doesn't think she's running a brothel?"

Sciezka pouted and said, "You are no fun Jean."

"What can I do to sweeten the deal then?" I asked.

"Hmm… add bubble bath to the list and you may have a deal," she replied.

"That sounds doable, but remember you have work in the morning and I have therapy. We can't get it on like crazed weasels all the time," I said with a laugh.

"We could try… " Sciezka said with a wicked grin.

I got out of bed first, because if it were up to Sciezka we'd never leave the bed. As much as her idea was tempting, logistics wise it could be a problem.

I went to my bureau and grabbed a pair of clean pajama pants and put them on. Sciezka came over to me and wrapped her arms around my neck and said, "No shirt. That's my other condition."

"Fine… in that case, you get just my shirt," I said.

She picked my shirt up off of the floor and put it on and leaned into me for another kiss. She then climbed onto my lap to sit astride the chair and I touched her on the nose and said, "Oh no you don't. I know what you're up to and it's no good."

"No, it's very very good," she said as she deftly traced my ear with her tongue.

As much as I wanted to go back to bed right then as I surveyed the room I noticed that there were discarded clothes everywhere, the bed was a rat's nest and though Gracia had an idea of what we'd be doing all weekend, she didn't need to see the evidence.

She continued to assail my neck and ears and as she did so I buttoned up her shirt and said, "You, off, kitchen… now. Ahh!"

Sciezka giggled at the reaction she got when she wiggled just so and tweaked my nipples as I was ordering her off my lap.

We finally left the bedroom so we could get the lunch dishes cleaned up and scrounge something
quick to eat before our bath. Sciezka washed, I dried and soon the dishes were done. After pondering what we should have for supper the decision was unanimous. Chocolate ice cream was almost nutritionally balanced, quick, and delicious. After she dished up a big bowl for us to share we went out into the living room to eat on the couch. I arranged myself on the couch and Sciezka sat on my lap, leaning against the arm of the couch. I wrapped an arm around her, she held the bowl and with the other hand I spooned our supper, one bite for her and one bite for me. Sometimes I would deliberately miss her mouth and have to clean it up with a few well-placed kisses. When we finished we sat there for awhile savoring our last night of hedonism until I got my own place. Sciezka's place was right out; it had stairs, though if we got desperate we'd work around them.

Sciezka yawned and gave a little cat stretch. I said, "Hah, I wore you out! I'm glad I'm not the only one who is exhausted."

"You win, I'm tired. A bath and then bed sounds perfect," Sciezka said.

I went into the bathroom to take care of business and draw a bath while Sciezka put our bowl in the sink and then sorted our scattered clothes into neat piles. When she was finished we repeated the "Get Jean into the Bath" dance and settled in for a leisurely soak.

As I was washing her hair I said, "I hope the new place has a big tub."

Sciezka laughed and said, "Bigger than this one?"

"This one is fine, but any smaller and I'll be disappointed. I don't think a bath by myself will suffice anymore."

"I like how you think," she said.

We then got out of the bath and Sciezka tousled my hair as she dried it. I didn't mind her helping me as much this time. It was a means to a lovely end.

I lamented that the weekend was almost over as I got into bed and turned out the light. Sciezka kissed me softly and said, "It doesn't have to be, not yet."

I smiled and kissed her and said, "You have a one track mind and it's in the gutter."

"Aw c'mon, be a sport. I'll be gentle," she pleaded.

"Promise you'll go easy on me?" I said, half seriously.

She kissed me tenderly to demonstrate just how gentle she would be. I ran my fingers up her back and resigned myself to my fate.

All the ardor and lust she had shown before was somehow present in her tender touches as she slowly moved on top of me. She was sitting astride my hips, draping her body on my chest and rocking ever so slightly. Her fingers stroked my face and hair as she slowly began to increase the tempo. I ran my hands over her form caressing every inch of her, as if memorizing it. I sensed the familiar stirring and sought her mouth as I took hold of her hips to let her know I was ready. Silently she took me in and we were joined in a slow dance. We moved at a soothing pace exchanging languid kisses, ebbing and flowing into one another. We both balanced on the edge and then fell and Sciezka collapsed against me softly calling my name. The tantric rhythm ceased and we lay there joined. I buried my face in her hair and without a word she moved to my side, rested her head on my chest and I enveloped her. Soon sleep claimed us both.
Gracia and Elysia come home from their trip. Jean has an announcement to make.

This is from my EARLY and first fiction fumblings. I will be editing well, once the story is finished! I'll only be fixing grammar and n00b mistakes. I still like my storytelling, even if everything else makes me flinch when I re-read it.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Warnings: A lot less sex, sorry folks, they do have to leave the house and well, Gracia and Elysia DO get home.

Homecoming:

I awoke when the dawn filtered through the curtains. I leaned over to gently kiss Sciezka and got out of bed to start my morning routine. It wouldn't do to be late for therapy, and I hoped I could get some time to talk with Jim as the weekend had brought as many questions as answers.

I had just gotten into the shower when Sciezka came in to help me conserve water. She straddled my lap on the bench and I said, "We're going to be late if you start with that."

Sciezka pouted and ruffled my hair and said, "Fine, but can we at least have a quick shower together? I will mostly keep my hands to myself."

I kissed her and said, "If you're good in here I'll meet you for lunch today, if you promise to not take advantage of me in the supply closet."

As she was soaping my chest she said, "I can't promise that but lunch would be good. We can go in together too, if we time it right."

With that she stood up to rinse off and let me finish my shower. When I got out she was just fastening the final button on her jacket. I noticed she'd laid out my clothes as I'd neglected to bring them in with me, as I hadn't wanted to wake her.

I appraised the outfit and noticed that my shirt was slightly rumpled. I sniffed it and said, "Mmm, smells like you."

I got dressed in the bathroom and when I emerged I noticed she'd stripped and changed the bed. The dirty linens were neatly bundled and Sciezka tapped her watch and said, "I called the driver and he'll be here any minute. We'll get you to the hospital and then on my way to H.Q. I'll drop these off at the laundry."

"You thought of everything, thank you," I said. "How about you drop by here after work? I'm going to fix dinner as a surprise for Gracia since she'll be tired from the trip."

The driver arrived and we got situated in the car. I was pleased at my "time"; I had the transfer down to under a minute. We then headed to the hospital where I would be dropped off. Once we
got there, Sciezka gave me a lingering kiss goodbye and I got out of the car. I waited on the sidewalk as the car drove off, waving and then lit up a smoke.

When I was almost finished I saw Jim heading towards the front door. He shook a finger at me when he saw the cigarette.

"Hey, I've really cut down and I deserve this one," I said.

Jim arched an eyebrow and pointed at my neck and said, "So, did you cut yourself shaving and what about that shiner?"

I self-consciously felt my neck and realized that Sciezka had left her mark and said, "Oh, that… are you getting breakfast? We're early. I have a lot to talk about."

I stubbed out my cigarette in the ashtray outside the door and followed Jim to the Cafeteria.

Once we were through the line Jim and I sat down at a table. Jim was kind enough to move the chair to another table so I could just slide under it without any complications.

"You're maneuvering quite well Jean," Jim said. "Winry had just the thing, and she's working on something else. But first let's talk about your little 'shaving' accident."

"Well, that would be Sciezka's doing," I said a little hesitantly. How much would I tell him? I think he'd guessed already.

"So Sciezka? I didn't ever see her at the hospital when you were in-patient. Tell me about her," Jim said. "That is if you feel comfortable about it."

"This goes no further than this table, got it?" I said.

Jim laughed and said, "I am bound by a confidentiality agreement and I can tell you're dying to tell someone."

"I knew Sciezka in passing before I retired. She worked with Gracia's husband in the Investigations Department. But I didn't really know her. I thought she was some strange and shy walking encyclopedia. But she's been a great friend to Gracia and Elysia, especially since her husband was killed," I said.

Jim pondered this and said, "And she just happened to give you a hickey?"

"That part comes later," I laughed.

"So go on, I was pretty sure you were convinced that you were single forever," Jim said.

"I was, but Gracia… " I said.

"Say no more, she set you up, huh?" Jim chuckled.

"Well, more or less, I think so," I said. "I was dragged out one day to shop and Sciezka happened to come with us. We actually argued that first time."

Jim smiled and nodded and let me continue.

"Doesn't sound so good, but it was nice that she challenged me. Not too many people do nowadays. They usually indulge me and that gets irritating. So to make a long story short since Sciezka is a fixture at the house I saw her a lot and we had quite a few deep discussions," I said.
"That sounds good, so you were discussing politics and she bit you on the neck?"

I rolled my eyes and said, "That is where the set-up comes in. Gracia had fixed us all a nice dinner, there was wine and conversation after dinner and Gracia went up to bed early and damn if there weren't candles everywhere."

"I really like Gracia, she's good for you and I'm glad you stopped being such a stubborn ass," Jim said.

"Me too, me too," I laughed. "The stunner in this one is that Sciezka is ballsy as hell. When I expressed my doubts on whether everything worked or not, she gave me a little demonstration and then just left me on the couch without another word."

"So it's good then?" Jim asked. "I hadn't gotten to that talk yet, and you hadn't asked. I figured you'd ask when you were ready."

"It is very good. Though I do have a few questions," I said my volume dropping considerably.

"Like?" asked Jim.

"I still haven't figured out the logistics of being on top. It's a little embarrassing. She just…" I said, stammering a bit at the end.

"She just rode you like a wild horse?" Jim said his eyes gleaming, clearly stifling a laugh.

"More or less, yeah," I said sheepishly.

"So did she give you that shiner champ?" Jim asked.

"Oh, no that?" I said pointing at my eye. "Bar fight."

"Well that can't be good," Jim sighed.

"If you think this is bad, you should see the other guy!" I said proudly and related the incident to him.

When I had finished he said, "Quit stalling Jean, time for therapy. Sounds like you had quite a weekend."

"Oh, I did. I am going to be hurting when we're through," I said and smiled.

We got down to the therapy room and I noticed Winry was there. I was a little surprised but then I saw her manic grin as she went for her toolbox.

"Winry, what are you doing here?" I asked.

"First on my agenda would be a tune-up on my creation while you are working on the mats with Jim. Then there is something that I've been working on," she said.

"Do I even want to know what you have cooked up?" I asked, nervous because she had that wrench in her hand and I hoped she didn't think I'd been abusing her work.

"Trust me, you will like it," Winry said.

Jim and I went over to the raised mats, I transferred noting that I was sore from the weekend's exploits and Winry began work on my chair.
After going through my range of motion exercises and stretches Jim got to the strength training. I'd lifted weights before and that had helped, but it was time for more. Since my spine was fully healed Jim began working more on my trunk strength. I eyed the large inflatable ball skeptically. "How on earth will that work my abdominal muscles?" I asked.

Jim helped me onto the ball and held onto my legs to keep me stationary. It was difficult maintaining balance without support for my back but I eventually found my center and managed to avoid toppling over.

About five minutes into it I said, "And this is helping how?"

Jim said, "Oh, don't worry, you'll see."

He took my hand and placed it over my muscles. I couldn't believe it. Just maintaining balance had engaged every muscle.

"That my friend is going to smart later," he said with a wink. "The next thing we're going to do will be similar."

He moved behind me and said, "Just relax as I do this or you will fall on your ass."

He held onto my shoulders and slowly supported me while he rolled me forward on the ball. My head was hanging in space and I found that indeed, I could feel the muscles in my trunk working to keep me stable on the ball. He grabbed my feet to steady me motioned to an assistant to bring hand weights. The assistant placed them in my hand and then Jim said, "Now, raise those from where they are to the ceiling, then back over your head and back to where you began."

After ten repetitions I was sweating profusely and was acutely aware of the area of twilight sensation near the injury site. Ten more and it was painful, but welcome as I was losing definition there and I definitely did not want to get flabby around the middle.

When we were finished and I was back in my chair I wiped my brow and said, "Jim, that is the best one yet." I patted my stomach, smiled and said, "I was beginning to get a little tubby and we can't have that."

Jim laughed and said, "Well, vanity aside Jean you'll find that this will help your back and your abdominal muscles, and make it harder to knock you out of that chair."

"That was a low blow Jim," I said.

"Eh, next time you'll be ready for a fight and not lose your balance… it'll also help with that problem we discussed," Jim said cryptically.

"Oh?" I said.

"This one too, to the pull up bar," he said as he pointed towards a pull up bar just above my head.

"Get down on the mat, then get into position so you can do a chin up."

"But…"

"Just do it. I'll give you a boost and do them just like you did in Basic. You don't need to use your legs to do it and lifting your own body weight is the eventual goal," he said.

I got into position, Jim gave me a boost and I hung from the bar for a bit, getting used to it again. I
strained and eventually did the first chin up. I managed five more before I stopped, arms quaking with the effort.

"You are trying to kill me Jim," I said. "I used to do fifty of those every morning."

Jim nodded and said, "You did very well for the first time. Don't get discouraged. You are in great shape, you're getting stronger every day."

I smiled and said, "What's next on the gauntlet?"

Jim motioned over to the floor mats and said, "Push ups."

"Are you nuts?" I said.

"Just do it," Jim said.

I got down on the mat and just lie there for a while. I was convinced that Jim was truly a sadist.

He got down on the mat, instructed me to roll over and get into position and when I did so, at least with my top half he slid a bolster under my hips.

"Now, try a few pushups," he said.

I managed ten before I collapsed and said, "This is supposed to help how, other than further reminding me that I can't do a hundred of them anymore?"

"You'll be able to, and about that problem you asked me about. Get a little creative in that head of yours. What position are you in?" he said and grinned.

I rolled out of the rather undignified position and thought then pushed myself onto my elbows and said, "Oh… that position?"

He simply nodded.

I would be working in the gym solo as much as possible from now on, and hopefully "practicing" a lot at home too.

Next thing I knew he tossed me a pair of shorts and said, "Go change, then come right back."

I looked at him, clearly not pleased at that suggestion and said, "I don't feel comfortable with that Jim. My legs are so…"

"I know, humor me. Do it," Jim said.

I went to the restroom and changed, thankful that the therapy room had its own facilities so no one other than the therapy staff could see me. I attempted to comfort myself by remembering that they'd probably seen worse.

I emerged from the restroom and discovered that Jim and Winry were there to meet me.

"Jim, what the hell?" I said attempting to cover my thighs with the pants I had changed out of.

"About that, we need you in shorts so Winry can measure you, and try something out," Jim said.

His statement did little to ease my embarrassment about my legs, thankfully Winry's next statement did.
"Jean, I'm just going to measure you. I had this idea that maybe I could improve the existing design. That and I adapted an automail treatment for nerves so that maybe we could arrest the muscle loss in your legs," Winry said. "I'm sorry for springing this on you. Jim and I have been working on this for awhile."

Jim nodded and said, "I thought that it would be good to step up your rehabilitation routine. There will be this, and swimming soon. I haven't had many patients as hardworking as you are."

I considered what they said and finally shrugged my shoulders and said, "You win."

Winry hugged me and said, "You won't be sorry Jean, I promise."

I gave a small smile and said, "You did such a great job before. I trust you. I'm just glad you don't think I've abused your creation. I don't think my head is as hard as the Ed's."

"No, you keep it in fine shape, and you recognize excellent design when you see it." Winry said, beaming. "I just wanted to make sure it wasn't damaged in the fight. Sciezka said it had tipped over."

"That was only because I was pushed. He caught me off guard. I won't let it happen again," I said.

Jim smiled and said, "Easy tough guy."

I shrugged and smiled and said, "Ok Winry, do what you have to do."

Winry went to her toolbox and pulled out her tape measure and spent the next few minutes measuring. When she was finished she put the tape away and said, "Those are for later. Next is the Electronic Muscle Stimulation therapy."

"What?" I said.

"I'm going to place electrodes on some of your muscles, then hook them up to this machine and then we're going to pulse electricity through your muscles, causing them to contract," Winry said, as if this was the most normal thing in the world.

"That sounds painful," I said. "Good thing I won't feel it."

"When doing automail surgery it is painful, ask Ed. But this wouldn't be more than uncomfortable even if I did it to myself. I actually tried it on myself first," Winry said.

I gave a sigh of relief and said, "Hook me up."

In a matter of minutes I was on the therapy mat, with electrodes attached to several places on my calves, thighs, lower back and butt. I arched an eyebrow when she handed me the pads and told me where to stick them on my butt. I was extremely glad that she hadn't needed to attach them herself. I still had some pride. Winry then pushed a button and for the first time in months I saw muscle definition and tone. She explained that the electrical pulses fired the nerves that had been dormant since the accident. The spinal cord and nervous system connected with it runs on electricity, so it made sense. She said that if I did this a few times a week that I would maintain and maybe even build some muscle mass. This was good aesthetically and also practically. Muscles not only move bones, they also provide cushioning.

Winry then set a timer and she and Jim went off to discuss her next great invention. I watched the electrodes work for a while and then lie back because it was disconcerting to watch.
When they came back Winry had plans and diagrams in her hands. She turned off the unit and removed the electrodes, allowing me to remove the ones under my shorts.

They sat down on the mat next to me and Jim said, "How would you like to start trying standing Jean?"

I looked at him with disbelief and I clenched my fist. Then I said, "The doctors said that would be impossible, and you know that."

Jim nodded and said, "Under your own power, true. That will most likely be impossible. But Winry has a design for braces and you'll be able to stand with support, for exercise here and in a limited capacity at home. It won't be stable enough to ambulate much with, in fact it will be awkward, but short hitches around the house will be possible."

I furrowed my brow, thought about it and finally said, "Winry I trust you. It won't hurt to try it."

Winry then began pointing out the specifications for the braces. They would fit under pants and be self-locking at the knee. She did warn me that they wouldn't hold me up entirely, that I'd have to rely on the strength in my arms to keep from falling and that I'd have to be very aware of how I moved since I could no longer tell where my feet were.

Even with all the caveats it sounded like it would indeed be good for me and I was eager to try them out as soon as possible.

Jim said, "That's one of the reasons we stepped up your conditioning, that and that other special project you have. I think you'll be ready in a month or so to try."

I smiled at that thought. The next month it would be my birthday, and the six-month anniversary of the accident. While I might be sitting for most of the push to the top, standing now might be an option. A salute wasn't the same sitting and I'd nearly forgotten how tall I actually was.

Winry gave me a hug and said, "We'll get this worked out and then you'll be able to show Sciezka just how tall you are."

I laughed and said, "I don't have a height complex like your Bean Boy."

Winry blushed crimson and I patted her on the shoulder and said, "With all the subterfuge you all conduct I'm surprised you haven't started it with him yet. Maybe I'll have to start a mission of my own."

Winry then punched me in the arm. I was grateful that her wrench was in the toolbox across the room.

Therapy was over and I had just enough time to get changed and head over to H.Q. for lunch with Sciezka. It had been a productive session but I was wiped out.

I arrived at the Mess just as Sciezka was coming down the hall. My timing had been perfect. She greeted me with a quick kiss on the cheek and we headed in to get our lunches. We went through the line without incident, though I did have to have Sciezka get a pudding for me. All the chocolate was on the second shelf and pride or not, I preferred chocolate to vanilla. It had actually been quite easy; as when we got there Sciezka grabbed her own dessert she had me choose and just put one on my tray.

We found an empty table and Sciezka sat down next to me and we started eating. Sciezka asked me how therapy went. I told her all about the morning, leaving out the news that I might be able to
stand soon. I didn't want to get her hopes up, and if it worked it would be a great surprise. I also left out the part about debriefing Jim on our sex life. It was already clinical enough with Sciezka's "research" and given the givens.

Sciezka smiled and said, "I'm glad you're having a good day. What's next on the agenda?"

"Well, I have to go see the Colonel for a few minutes to discuss some things and then I'll go find Riza on the range and hopefully she'll let me off the hook for target practice. I'm wiped out and I still have to go home and fix dinner."

"So you don't want to get lost in the stacks for awhile with me Jean?" Sciezka asked, eyes full of mischief.

I smiled and said, "As appealing as that sounds I do not want to get caught on base in a compromising position, even if it is with you. What did I tell you about supply closets?"

"Rats, so should I meet you at Gracia's when I get off work?" Sciezka asked.

I took her hand under the table and said, "I think that would be an excellent plan. Just don't get any ideas. Gracia and Elysia could walk in at any minute and I think that would scar the poor kid for life."

Sciezka laughed and said, "She's already going to be a bit miffed that she has to share you."

I grinned and said, "There is more than enough of me to go around and no fretting, I'll have my own place soon enough."

With that I tucked into my dessert, licking the spoon a bit when I would catch Sciezka watching me.

We both finished, dropped off our trays and then Sciezka walked me to Roy's office before heading to the Investigations Department. She planted a quick kiss on my lips and I nibbled just a little since we didn't have any onlookers in the corridor.

As she walked away I said, "Maybe we could have a little bit of that before they get home."

Sciezka skipped off at that news.

I knocked on the door and Roy asked, "Who is it?"

"It's Jean sir, where is your adjutant?"

"Oh, I sent the staff to lunch. I wanted some time alone, but you're more than welcome. Come in," Roy said.

I made my way to his desk and we sat in silence for a bit. Roy finally broke the silence by saying, "So you're on board with the plan?"

"Of course I am, since you have everything under control, when do I see the new place?" I asked jokingly.

"You're going to do it?" Roy asked in disbelief.

"Of course I am, I said I'd support you to the top, it's just going to be in a different way than I had originally intended," I said.
Roy smiled with relief and said, "So is there another reason for moving out?"

I blushed a bit and said, "I may as well spill the whole thing Roy, since you'll find out anyway."

"So things definitely went well with Sciezka this weekend?" he asked.

"Everything went really well this weekend. Everything, and before you ask I'm in mostly working order," I said.

Roy cocked an eyebrow as if questioning what I'd just said.

I nodded and said, "Yes, exactly where your mind is going."

Roy stood up, came around the desk and shook my hand.

"But it also raised more questions, long story short Sciezka has seen some of my writing and has this insane idea that I should take some classes at the University or the Academy. I told her I'm just a grunt, but the woman won't listen," I said.

Roy reached into his bottom desk drawer and pulled out a file. I peered over the desk as best I could from where I was and I saw that it was my file.

I searched his face for an answer and it didn't come, it never did. Roy was frustratingly hard to read sometimes.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"This my friend is your file, all the way back to Basic Training. I read it before I took you into my command and I saw your test scores from Officer Training. You are not just a grunt, you have to have some brains to be a sniper," Roy said.

"Well, yeah… " I stammered. "You need basic mathematics, knowledge of the technical specs of your equipment, tactical maneuvering, strategy and military history don't hurt either. But going to and succeeding in university, that is an entirely different sort of smarts…"

"Jean, stop playing dumb. It's here before me in black and white. You could have written your ticket anywhere with the aptitude scores you had, yet you chose to stay in my command and passed up promotions," he said. "I admire that, but you sold yourself short. Now is your chance to work on those strengths and at the same time help me."

I wasn't sure what he was getting at and gave him a quizzical look.

"I have contacts at both the Academy and the University who can help the cause. If you were there for classes you could relay information to them without arousing suspicion. That and when I reach the top I will need advisors and though I trust your judgment I would prefer that you had some credentials," he said. "Well, other than being a ladies' man from the way Riza and Sciezka carried on."

"About that Roy, you and…" I said.

"Yes, for awhile now," Roy said.

"So I missed it all this time?" I said. "Well, it does make sense that I notice it now if I think about it. I have a lot of time to just sit back, observe and process."

"Another reason why you'll be a valuable member of the team," Roy said.
I thought a bit and said, "I'm not sure I'm comfortable with taking classes at the Academy. Almost everyone there is an up-and-coming officer and I'm… "

"It's already handled if you don't mind going to a Military History class at the University, but office hours at the Academy," Roy said and smiled.

"So I've applied and am enrolled already?" I asked.

"You have and are. The new quarter starts next month so it will give you time to move and settle in and then you will be taking Military History and Strategy and a Psychology class," he said and then folded his arms across his chest, appearing quite satisfied with himself.

"Psychology?" I asked. "What do I need that for?"

"You already put up with the insanity of this office and have shown an aptitude for keeping a cool head around distressed people. Riza thought it might interest you. For any more insight into that you'll have to ask her," Roy said.

"So it begins," I said and chuckled.

Roy nodded and asked, "Will you have time tomorrow afternoon to see the new place and make sure it is up to specs?"

"I still have to tell Gracia, but I'm doing that tonight, so yes tomorrow will be good," I said. "I have to go see Riza down at the range and beg off practice for today. I'm cooking dinner for Gracia and Elysia."

"They've domesticated you?" Roy asked with a hint of disbelief in his voice.

"We all have to go sometime."

When I got down to the range Riza was just exiting the locker room. I waved at her and she came over to me.

"Hey Jean, ready for some practice?" she asked.

"I came down to tell you I wouldn't be able to make it. Lot's to do around the house. Gracia is coming home today," I said.

"I'll miss the company, but you did have a rather busy weekend," Riza said, her face giving away nothing.

"So how busy do you think it was Riza?" I asked wondering how much Sciezka had told her.

"I think it was a long time in coming, and I'm glad you're happy. You won't hear any more powder room secrets from me, and Sciezka was very discreet. In fact I asked her why you were in such a good mood."

I smiled and said, "You were right about a lot of things. Thank you."

"You're very welcome, anything else before I start practice and you go home to clean up?" Riza asked.

"Well, two things actually," I said, praying that I had to say next wouldn't get me shot. "I noticed something at your party, and I think it has to do with your wish."
Riza balked at my statement, eyes going wide.

"It's safe with me, and I'll do whatever I can to help," I said.

Riza hugged me and whispered thanks in my ear, and it sounded like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"He'll do everything he can to make things right. I know he will. Soon everything will have quieted down and you can both be happy," I said. "This brings me to my next question, psychology? The hell?"

"Jean, despite the oblivious façade you put on sometimes you are very perceptive and I think that given what you've been through you could help people. You do put up with Roy's insanity," Riza said with a slight smile.

"He said you'd suggested it. I'll think about it. It wouldn't hurt to take one course," I said and sighed.

Riza stood up and got ready to head over to the firing line and said, "Though Sciezka seems to think you are a man of letters."

I shook my head and said, "She just wants to bed a writer."

"Have a good night, good luck with dinner, and tell Gracia hello for me," Riza said when she'd finished laughing.

"Oh! I almost forgot today too, with all the excitement on your birthday we forgot to give you your present. Sciezka and I picked it out."

I handed Riza the small, carefully wrapped box and waited for her reaction. When she opened it she smiled and said, "It's Hayate, he's perfect."

"We thought it would be useful in the Fuhrer's office to remind you of the good things you have in life, and when all is said and done to use to hold down the backlog in Roy's office, or bash him over the head with when he's slacking off."

With that I left, feeling rather good about the way my life was going.

I made my way home, stopping for flowers on the way to thank Gracia for her meddling and for Sciezka, just because. When I arrived home I began prepping dinner. I scrubbed the potatoes for baking, put the steaks in marinade and made a tossed salad. It's an impressive, yet easy to make and nearly impossible meal to ruin. I put Gracia's flowers into a simple earthenware jug to serve as a centerpiece. Then I set the table and went out into the living room to write for a while until Sciezka arrived.

A little before 5 p.m. I put the potatoes in the oven to bake and at 5:15 like clockwork I heard a knock on the door. I let Sciezka in and was nearly knocked out of my chair with the level of enthusiasm she kissed me with. She straddled my lap and I thought out loud, "They aren't due until after six, I suppose I could help you out with that little problem but, let's move this party to somewhere other than the entryway."

We made our way to the bedroom so if Gracia arrived home early we wouldn't jump the gun on having to give Elysia "the talk". It was awkward pushing the chair with her astride my lap, but well worth the effort. Once in the bedroom I reached under Sciezka's skirt and began fondling her through her panties. She let out a relieved moan and fidgeted, raking her fingers through my hair.
with each move I made. I then shifted her panties to the side, wet my fingers and began teasing her
with my saliva-slicked fingers as she kissed me. When she was thoroughly wet I slid in a finger and
her slick heat enveloped it. She leaned into me and bit my earlobe. After applying slight pressure
and tentatively pulsing my finger for a few moments, I added a second finger. As she held onto my
shoulders for balance and threw her head back as I curled my fingers to hit the ridged, sensitive
spot. It wouldn't be long now. Using my other hand I supported her back so when she arched and
bucked she wouldn't tip us both over. Finally my attentions paid off and she reached her apogee
uttering praises into my waiting lips. I kept my fingers in her until the waves of pleasure passed and
she'd finished writhing in my lap. I then wrapped my arms around her neck and pulled her closer so
I could take in the look of contentment on her face.

"What was that for Jean?" Sciezka asked between ragged breaths.

I chuckled and said, "Oh, that? That was a reward for not ambushing me at H.Q. and having your
way with me in a supply closet."

"I'll have to be a good girl from now on then," Sciezka quipped.

I rolled us into the bathroom so Sciezka could straighten out her clothes and I could clean up too
before we finished the last few details on dinner. We then headed into the kitchen and Sciezka was
thrilled with her bouquet. Just as I put on the steaks Elysia burst into the kitchen frantically waving
pictures and full of news of her trip. I backed away from the stove and Elysia clambered into my
lap to show off her work. Gracia came in shortly afterwards and I waved as best I could with my
lap full and my attentions on "my other favorite girl". Gracia shot Sciezka a knowing glance and
Sciezka blushed, averted her eyes and then smiled wide. Gracia then came over, patted me on the
shoulder and to change the subject I announced, "The steaks should be medium rare by now,
anything more and you'll have to finish it yourself. I refuse to ruin good meat!"

Gracia laughed at my insistence that beef should be cooked to just past "mooing" and stated,
"That's just how I like mine, but maybe Elysia's could be a little more done."

I smiled and obliged as Gracia gathered Elysia up from my lap.

Everyone sat down; I removed the potatoes from the oven cursing the heat and brought the steaks
and potatoes over to the table. Gracia surveyed the spread before her and said, "You really do earn
your keep, Jean. Did Sciezka help?"

I looked at her with mock indignity and said, "I said I can cook. Besides, this is pretty fool-proof."

Elysia's gaze immediately fell on the centerpiece and said, "Who are the flowers for Jean?"

I smiled and answered, "They're for your Mommy for being such a good hostess."

I decided there was no better time than the present to make my announcement. I cleared my throat
and shakily started saying, "Gracia you have been an amazing hostess and I would not be where I
am now without you… but all good things have to come to an end. I'm moving into my own place
soon. It's time."

Gracia hid her shock, gathered her words and said, "I knew it would happen eventually. We'll miss
having you here though."

I chuckled and said, "Not to worry. It's just down the block. You know Roy, always scheming."

Gracia visibly relaxed and we all tucked into dinner in earnest. When dinner was over Sciezka and
I cleaned up the kitchen while Gracia unpacked and got Elysia ready for bed. As Sciezka and I
were just finishing up the last pan Gracia came in and gave me tight hug and said, "I thought it would be soon. I trust you both had a good weekend?"

Sciezka and I both began to turn crimson, Sciezka stammered, "Please excuse me!" as she dashed out of the kitchen.

Gracia winked at me and said, "That good eh?"

I chuckled and said, "Yes, that good. Thanks for the surprise in the bedside table. They came in handy."

"I had to make an exception for that Jean," Gracia joked.

"Everything on the home front was beyond perfect, I'll miss this place," I said. "But I'm making Roy do as good a job as he did here, since I've gotten used to the amenities."

"Good for you Jean! You should make him squirm a little for running your life like he has," Gracia said with a laugh.

"On a serious note, it is just down the block so don't worry and if you'll have me, I'd love to drop by for dinner every now and then, and I'll happily repay the favor if you don't drop dead from my cooking. I also have a favor to ask."

"Anything, really, what is it?" Gracia asked with a note of concern in her voice.

"Could you come shopping with me this weekend to get some furniture? Well, that and figure out what I'll need for a non-bachelor pad. Sciezka is civilized," I said.

At that, Sciezka came out of hiding to stand behind me, placed her hands on my shoulders and rested her chin on top of my head. She sheepishly looked up at Gracia and said, "Thank you."

Gracia went over to Sciezka, hugged her and said, "No problem. Two of my favorite people are happy."

Elysia came down for her story, this time a new one about a princess who goes to a ball and is swept off her feet by a handsome prince. All too soon it was time for everyone to head to bed. Gracia called for the driver and I offered to wait outside with Sciezka until he came. When we got out onto the porch I pulled her into my lap and said, "It's all going to work out, just like in the fairytale. We just have to help it along as much as we can, and wait."

We exchanged a few kisses and sooner than either of us wanted the driver came to collect Sciezka and take her home. Once she was down the walk I lit up a smoke and waved until the car was out of sight. I then stared up at the night sky and thanked whoever had graced me with all this happiness.

Gracia came outside interrupting my reverie and said, "I was right, you two are perfect together."

I winked and said, "You have no idea."

Gracia pointed at my still bruised eye and said, "WHERE did you get that?"

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Bar brawl."

Her eyes opened wide with shock and concern and said, "Someone HIT you?"

"No worries, I hit him first. Ask Roy for the blow-by-blow…"
Gracia gave me a hug and said, "What am I going to do with you?"

"I have no idea Gracia, but seriously, you should have seen the other guy," I said in my best macho voice.

"Time to get in the house tough guy, or Jim will have your ass tomorrow," Gracia said.

I gave her a crisp salute and we both headed to bed.
Buoyancy

Chapter Summary

Life can be sink or swim...

This is from my EARLY and first fiction fumblings. I will be editing well, once the story is finished! I'll only be fixing grammar and n00b mistakes. I still like my storytelling, even if everything else makes me flinch when I re-read it.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Warnings: FLUFF abounds. I adore writing Elysia, well and Gen Fluff.

Buoyancy:

I again awoke before Gracia came in to get me up, as today would be another big day. I would be swimming in therapy and if I didn't drown, would be seeing my prospective living arrangement, after that there was a night out with Sciezka as after just one day with others around we needed alone time. Besides, I hadn't really taken her anywhere and had taken many liberties with her. I did at least owe her dinner.

As I was going about my routine Gracia knocked on the door and said, "Jean, you're up, good. Did you sleep well?"

I spat out my toothpaste and then answered, "Yes I slept great, and would you happen to know where my swim trunks are stashed?"

Gracia answered through the door, "Swim trunks? Are you going swimming?"

"Yes, Jim had another stellar idea," I said. "I guess that it's standard rehab stuff. I'm actually looking forward to it. Back home in the millpond I was a fish. Oh, and sorry I didn't tell you I needed them earlier."

"It's ok, I think they're in a box in the top of your closet, let me check," Gracia said as I came out of the bathroom.

As I put on my shoes Gracia stood on tiptoe and pulled down a box from the top shelf of my closet labeled "Warm Weather Clothes". She gave a little grunt as she set it down, then sat down cross-legged and opened it. On top were a bunch of t-shirts, some shorts that I would NOT be wearing and finally my swim trunks. Gracia tossed them at me and said, "Here Fish, you better get going or you'll be late."

She then put the rest of the clothes in the hamper so they could be washed, as the weather was getting warmer by the day. It had been a very mild winter and spring had come without much fanfare.

"Gracia, that reminds me, when we go shopping for furniture could you perhaps also help me find
suitable warm weather clothes as well? You did such a good job last time," I said.

Gracia smiled and said, "Of course, but hurry up. Looking good for Jim isn't going to keep him from making you work."

Once I arrived at the Rehabilitation Department Jim started me on my stretches and as we worked on the mat we discussed my future digs and my impending university career. Jim thought that it was time for both.

"So, are you excited about the move?" Jim asked as he stretched my hip flexors.

"I'm excited and a little nervous. I'm sure Roy has a great place picked out and whatever isn't accessible will be fixed. It's close to Gracia's so I'll see them all the time. I can even drop by to read Elysia her bedtime story if she wants me to," I said in a rather laid-back tone for someone in such an awkward position.

"It sounds like a good arrangement all around," Jim said. "After our discussion last session I can see that some more privacy would be a good thing and you have gotten very independent in the last month. You're ready."

I smiled at that last statement and said, "Yeah, never thought I would be, but I am ready. I owe you Jim."

"Jean, it's my job. Besides you are the one doing most of the work. You make me look good," Jim admitted with a smile.

"Are we finished here with the girl stuff? I'm nervous enough about swimming, which means I should just get in, right?" I joked.

"We are finished, let's get you swimming first before we finish the rest of your session. I don't want you too tired in there. Wouldn't want to have to fish you out. You weigh a ton." Jim teased.

"All muscle Jim, all muscle," I said.

"Yeah, yeah, I know… but you still weigh a ton, I'm a little guy," he said with an apologetic shrug.

I changed into my trunks, making a mental note to get new ones on our shopping trip because these had seen better days. I couldn't depend on my "good looks" for everything anymore; fashion would have to do some of it. Jim met me outside of the restroom and we went over to the hospital's indoor pool. When we got to the pool there were people swimming laps, and a few other therapists working with patients. I noticed a lift in the shallow end and eyed it intently.

Jim noticed and said, "Jean, that is one way you could get into the pool."

"Absolutely not," I stated flatly.

"I thought you'd say that," Jim mused.

"I'm not just being stubborn. There won't always be a lift everywhere I want to swim, if I decide I like swimming. Well, and the other reason is that is conspicuous as hell! Besides, if I don't absolutely need it I'm not using it."

Jim waved a figurative "white flag" and said, "Put your towel down on the bench Soldier and then transfer to the edge of the pool where it's about five feet deep."
"Wouldn't the shallow end be better?" I asked.

"For some people yeah, but you are tall and if you mess up and fall in this way you won't crack your head," Jim deadpanned.

"Good to know. You'll fish me out, right?" I joked.

Jim quipped, "I will only let you drown a little bit."

I transferred to the edge as carefully as I could because it was a little slippery and then dangled my legs over the side in the water. It was strange seeing them move of their own accord with the waves in the pool. I looked to Jim to see what to do next.

Jim tossed a kickboard into the water, pulled off his sweat suit to reveal swim trunks of his own and sat on the edge next to me.

"Ok, what you're going to do is hold your breath and push off as hard as you can with your arms. Relax as you get in, then reach for the kickboard to float as I'm not sure how buoyant you are and well, treading water is right out."

I nodded and gave a nervous smile and after Jim went in said, "Here goes nothing." and went in myself.

After the initial shock of the water I came up sputtering and grabbed the kickboard. When I could breathe and talk at the same time I said, "Well, I'm not dead."

Jim smiled and gave me instructions, "Now, with the kickboard in one hand you're going to lean back and try to float on your back… there you go. Now let go and let's see if you float. Good, you do. Obstacle one defeated. Remember the 'rest strokes' from Basic?"

"Sure I do, and I was a fish back home if the pond in the pasture got deep enough to swim in after the Spring rains," I said.

"Well, try the Elementary Backstroke, it should be easy and get you somewhere without sinking," Jim said and then demonstrated.

I complied and was surprised with my easy success. I tried a few more strokes then bobbed up and tread water a bit with my hands. "How about some different strokes Jim?"

"Ok Fish!" Jim said. "I knew you'd love this."

"You know it. Gravity? What gravity? This is amazing. I feel so light. Are you sure I have to get out?" I said.

Jim rolled his eyes and began to demonstrate an adapted breaststroke and front crawl to me. He then let me have at it for the remainder of my session as I was having such a good time.

Eventually the time came for me to get out of the pool. There was the hitch in my near perfect session. Jim seemed to get my dilemma and swam to the side of the pool, grabbed the side and using only his arms hauled himself out onto his belly, then rolled over and eased himself up on his elbows and then fully upright. I followed suit. Jim got up and tossed my towel at me and said, "Jean, there is open swim with a lifeguard every night from six to eight. You should invite Sciezka sometime."

He then left me to my own devices to get into my chair and changed. So far today was a victory.
After drying off I made my way over to H.Q. to meet Sciezka for lunch, take some target practice with Riza and then inspect my new digs with Roy. It was turning out to be a very productive day.

I arrived a bit early so went over to the Investigations Department to surprise Sciezka. She was indeed surprised as I came in as Major Armstrong was showing her the revered "Armstrong Family Archival Technique". Why it involved removing his shirt I'd never know. I peered in the open door frame and said, "Sciezka, are you ready? It's lunch time and I'm famished."

Unfortunately Major Armstrong had other plans when he saw me with wet hair and smelling of chlorine. He proceeded to grab my arm and palpate my growing bicep and "flexed" it for me, apparently approving of my increased size. He then said, "Sciezka, you have picked a good one. Even after daunting physical challenge Havoc continues to train himself to increase his endurance and aspire to the ideal masculine form. It even looks like he has taken to aquatics in his continuing quest for health!"

I pulled my arm away from him and rubbed it a bit to restore the circulation and said, "Why yes, today was my first time swimming at therapy and I did not drown. In fact I took to it rather well."

Sciezka smiled in approval and said, "Jean has a rather full day today and so do I Major Armstrong, so if you excuse us we're going to get going."

I saluted Major Armstrong and he said, "Jean and Sciezka, please call me Alex as I regard you both with such warm feelings. It warms the cockles of my heart to see young lovers such as yourselves. Go, enjoy each other's company."

We made our retreat as quickly as we could and when we finally rounded the corner near the elevator we broke into silent fits of laughter until tears were rolling down our cheeks.

Once we got down to the Mess it was lunch per our usual routine. I liked this new routine. We both avoided the "meat like" substance with gravy and opted for what looked to be a green salad. It probably wouldn't kill us.

Over dessert I decided that I wouldn't die if I formally asked Sciezka out on a date. Our relationship was more than a little out of order, but better late than never. I cleared my throat and said, "Sciezka, would you like to go out to dinner with me tonight?"

Sciezka looked at me a little shocked then replied, "Jean, why so formal? But of course I would. What time should I pick you up?"

I grinned and said, "It wouldn't be a date if you picked me up. I will pick you up at your place around seven. Wear something nice. We're going out to that trattoria we saw on the High Street. Then maybe we should take a stroll in the park because the weather is so nice. Oh, and I figured that I should take you someplace since we have everything a little backwards."

I blushed furiously at that last sentence and she grabbed my shoulder and rubbed it and just grinned and shook her head.

"Oh, and tomorrow Jim suggested you come to open swim with me at the hospital. I'd like to show off a little bit," I said and winked.

"Jean, I do not swim. I thrash around a bit and can dog paddle, but I do not swim," Sciezka said hesitantly.

I thought a bit and finally said, "Don't worry I'll work it out with Jim he'll have you swimming in no time. It's something athletic we could do together. Maybe even go to one of those resorts near
"I love how you think Jean but I have to get back and don't you have to see Riza, then inspect the new place today before you come and sweep me off my feet?" Sciezka asked.

"That I do. Can you manage Armstrong on your own or do you need me to escort you back?" I joked.

"You should escort me back just because we don't get nearly enough time together," Sciezka said.

"We will soon enough. You'll get sick of me. Trust me on that one," I replied.

With Sciezka safely back at her office I headed down to the firing range to get in some practice and hopefully chat with Riza. She always eased my mind about issues big and small and I think helping me out eased her mind about the many matters she couldn't fix. I went to the locker room to get my safety gear and headed out to the firing line. As expected, Riza was waiting there, handgun and clips ready for me to expend. I gave a quick and admittedly rather sloppy salute and she smiled at me and said, "Glad to see you. I have it on good authority that you have a rather busy day today."

"That I do, what have you heard?" I replied.

"Major Armstrong says you have been dutifully training yourself physically and the Colonel says you are going today to look at your new house."

"Your intel is correct First Lieutenant," I said. "So why the formality?"

"Habit, I'll drop it to deliver this next piece of information. Lieutenant General Grumman has extended the use of his lakeside cabin for my use on the weekend of your birthday. So I was wondering if you would like to share it with Roy and myself," Riza said in a rather authoritative tone.

"'You' is referring to Sciezka and myself?" I asked.

"Yes, that would be the general idea," Riza said and smiled.

"That would be great. But why would Lieutenant General Grumman do something so nice for you?" I said.

Riza grinned and leaned in to whisper in my ear, "I will shoot you if you tell anyone this, but he's my Grandfather."

I leaned back in my chair and laughed at that piece of information.

"When did Roy figure that one out?"

"After we transferred back to Central," Riza said and smirked.

"Enough stalling, I have news and I should probably not look a gift horse in the mouth but I'll have to ask you about the floor plan and grounds and then there is the whole 'shooting stuff' aspect to the firing range," I quipped.

"Yes Jean, we'll get to that and of course you will have a chance to fully plot your revenge on Roy for bamboozling you into moving into Gracia's," Riza said with a laugh.

"You'd help with that?" I said incredulously.
"Of course I would! With all the slacking off he did when I was under his command he has it coming," she said.

"Let's start with the layout..." I said and was interrupted.

"The main building is two floors with bathrooms and bedrooms on each floor and the guest house is all on one floor, no stairs. I was thinking of putting you two there. The grounds are really well landscaped because Grandfather dotes on his horses so the paths have to be level and the landscapers have some rather heavy equipment so they are paved as well all the way down to the lake," Riza informed me.

"Wow, that is so not a cabin. Try estate, compound or complex Riza. One more small question, is there a pier or dock to get access to the lake?" I asked.

"There are two actually. One to launch the boat off of and then one that is attached to the shore and is on pontoons so it is level with the water, why?" she asked with a perplexed look on her face.

I thought it over and then realized that I still wasn't expected to DO much. I couldn't get mad at her after all she'd done. She'd seen me utterly helpless so this was to be anticipated.

"Riza, I've regained a talent. I can still swim. I'm actually pretty good at it. So if it's warm enough, I'd like to take a dip in the lake. Maybe I'll even dunk the great Flame Alchemist a few times," I joked to lighten the slightly dampened mood.

Riza in an uncharacteristic gesture hugged me and then sniffed and said, "You reek of chlorine, you're right. So this a new development?"

I nodded and grinned wide and then put on my goggles and hearing protection and squared my shoulders and emptied a clip into my target. I was getting better at a lot of things. I didn't put every bullet into "the vitals" like Riza, but my paper target was still very dead.

When we'd finished practice Riza said, "Let's keep the swimming thing a secret from Roy. He always knows everything and it would be good for him to see that for himself and maybe catch his comeuppance."

I smiled and said, "Good idea as always Riza. I'm going to head up to his office and then home to clean up a bit as I'm taking Sciezka out to that trattoria on the High Street. We've gotten everything kind of backwards. You should try it sometime, the restaurant I mean. I think they do take out."

With that I winked, left and was thankful she was cleaning her weapon and wouldn't shoot me anyway. Well, at least she wouldn't aim for anything important.

I arrived at Roy's office just as he was strolling out to grab a cup of coffee at the canteen. Apparently today I had perfect timing. I accompanied him and we decided that rather than going to the canteen we'd stop by a coffee house for real coffee and a snack before seeing the rental house.

At the coffee house I found a table for us while Roy got our drinks. I may have gotten good at a great many things, but I still hadn't mastered carrying piping hot coffee in my lap and I was not ready to practice by trial and error. When Roy got back to the table we discussed the lake trip and I let him know that I was looking forward to it and would ask Sciezka if it would be something she'd like to do. She of course had to give the go-ahead, as she didn't approve of Roy's habit of making unilateral decisions.

We made short work of the coffee and cinnamon rolls and then headed to the house. As I surveyed it from the sidewalk I gave a low whistle and raked my fingers through my hair.
Roy looked at me in askance and said, "What?"

"Did you sell your soul to get this?" I said.

"No, the General who got promoted to the West lived here and this is your due so to speak. Just take it," he said.

"The military knows that this is going on?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact they do. Lieutenant General Grumman suggested that since the house was sitting empty and suited to you it would be a liability having it remain empty, and that the government could recoup some of the loss by renting it to you. It's also good public relations to do a retiree a service at the same time," Roy answered.

"Fine, good enough answer for now. Let's see the inside spin doctor," I said.

With that we entered through the gate of the white picket fence, went up the paved walk, took the discreet ramp onto the wrap-around porch and directly into the Arts and Crafts style bungalow after Roy produced the keys. Once inside I marveled at the expanse of space before me. The walls were a pristine white and there were hardwood floors in every room. Large windows framed by crisp white sheers were what impressed me most in the living room, along with the built-in shelves made of dark oak. I would have plenty of room for enough reading material to keep Sciezka happy for quite awhile. Each room flowed into the next with a wide doorframe and I moved freely. My first stop after the living room was the master bedroom, as there were two bedrooms in this palace. The master bedroom was huge, complete with double glass doors that opened onto a small private patio shielded by hedges. On the far side of the bedroom was the master bathroom. I went in to explore and discovered a bathroom the size of a barracks room. There was a double shower and separate tub that looked to be large enough to be ample for two.

I took it all in and finally jokingly said to Roy, "You sold your soul, really you did. You can tell me. Where is the real place? In the red light district?"

"Second Lieutenant Havoc you may not have read your retirement papers over very well but you are deserving of proper accommodations and as a recipient of a Silver Star and the Purple Heart, I would say that you gave enough in Equivalent Exchange to deserve this. I didn't want to tell you outright before the deed was signed but this is yours if you want it," Roy said.

"Deed? You mean this is mine, forever…"

Roy placed a hand on my shoulder, looked me squarely in the eye and just nodded yes. I could only sit there slack jawed.

We continued our tour of the house in near silence as in addition to the rooms I'd already seen there was a spacious kitchen which I could tell would be very convenient for me as the counters were fairly low and there were many cabinets underneath the counters and a large pantry with shelves that I could just roll into to get anything I needed. The guest bedroom was also roomy and would be perfect for when Elysia stayed over. The bathroom for the general household was spacious as well, had good lighting and a sink that I could fit under, actually, everything was pretty well laid out. Between the living room and kitchen was a dining room that I could tell was large enough to fit a table with seating for eight, and that would be good as I intended to entertain every chance I got once life calmed down. I had been shown good hospitality at every turn and fully intended to repay the favor. I also thought Sciezka might like that. Next was the best room in the house as far as I was concerned. The study, or more accurately the library was a cozy yet spacious nook that was lined top to bottom with bookshelves built into the wall with a ladder attached to a rail so you
could reach the topmost shelves. I thought to myself, "Sciezka will finally have proper book storage. Wait... was I planning on having her live here? Why yes, I think I was once everything blows over." I smiled to myself at that realization.

Roy waved a hand in front of my face and said, "Hello, Jean are you in there? Everything ok?"

"Oh, Roy yes, everything is perfect, more than perfect," I said and blushed.

"Cens for your thoughts," Roy teased.

"You'll laugh, in fact I won't blame you. I was just imagining this place in a couple of years filled with books, all lived in with my stuff and Sciezka's stuff, when all the craziness has ended and everything is the way it should be. A big table in the dining room with all my friends around it having leisurely dinners and wine... " I trailed off.

Roy smiled, nodded and said, "I want that too, we'll make it happen."

That said we determined it was time to go and sign that deed. I decided I had indeed paid "Equivalent Exchange" and did deserve to have good things happen to me. I might still have to pay, the flux in the government wasn't finished and only time would tell. But for now life was good.

We signed the papers in Roy's office, I was handed the keys and then made my way back to Gracia's. When I got home a very enthusiastic Elysia and an expectant Gracia greeted me. I went to my room to put my stuff down, came out and said, "The house is gorgeous, and there just aren't enough words to describe it. It was a General's house. It's MINE."

Gracia's mouth dropped open as I dangled the keys in one hand and she came over, embraced me and said, "Oh Jean that is so wonderful, no one deserves it more than you do!"

I mumbled something about being relatively unscathed compared to some and she nodded and held me closer. When she finally released me I said, "About that, you'll have to help me shop. It's empty, and since you two will be over a lot I'd like you to feel like it's your second home. Are you two free tomorrow afternoon? I'd like to take you both to lunch and then let you work your magic. I'll just sit back and observe as you are more in your element in domestic matters."

Elysia chimed in, "We're going shopping?"

"We sure are Princess," I said. "I thought we'd pick out a bed for your babies for when you sleep over too, and some storybooks."

Elysia rushed into my lap and I knew that even though Sciezka had a rather large place in my heart and my lap it hadn't dimmed Elysia's view of the "King of the Couch".

"Oh, Gracia about my birthday, did you have anything planned?" I asked.

"I thought you'd never ask Jean, we'll be going to the lake with Riza and Roy," Gracia said and smiled.

I chuckled and thought to myself, "There go my plans for a romantic getaway."

Gracia must have been reading my mind because she added, "Elysia and I will just be going up for the day and then heading on to my parents' house as they don't live far from there."

"You are all always a step ahead of me, but not for long. Will you two be bringing your suits? I will be," I said casually.
Gracia looked a bit surprised and said, "So swimming today went well?"

I grinned and said, "Oh it went very well. Though Sciezka informed me that she can only dogpaddle a little bit so tomorrow night we are remediying that at open swim with Jim. You and Elysia are welcome to come as well. It wouldn't hurt for Elysia to have proper swimming lessons. I want her to be safe."

Gracia thought a bit and said, "I think that is a very, very good idea. Maes and I had been meaning to sign her up for lessons as a girl from my town drowned when I was little and that is one of my biggest fears."

"Well then, it's settled. She'll have her water wings of course just in case, but we'll make sure the Little Princess can fend for herself in the water. She'll be a fish in no time," I said.

I then went to my bathroom to rinse out my swimsuit and hang it up, take care of the necessaries, freshen up and change for dinner. After a quick shower, shave and a splash of cologne I was good to go. On second thought, the hair needed a little bit of stuff. I took care of it and was then as handsome as a frog could be.

I quickly dressed deciding on dungarees, the black v-neck sweater and driving moccasins. Something fairly dressy, yet comfortable was in order as it had been a long day. Thinking it might be chilly later I grabbed a tweed blazer and put it on. I then checked to make sure I had my wallet and smokes and then went out into the living room.

When I came out Gracia and Elysia were sitting on the living room floor coloring and Elysia gave me an up and down glance and said, "You look very handsome Jean. Are you going out tonight with Sciezka?"

"Why yes I am Princess Elysia. You are very, very clever," I replied with a wink.

"Is Sciezka your girlfriend?" Elysia asked with a note of concern in her voice.

I thought for a bit, because clearly someone was nursing a crush and said, "Well she is Elysia, but only because you are too young to marry."

Gracia bit her lip to keep from laughing, Elysia just beamed and all was right with the world. I headed out to pick up Sciezka and decided that I should pick up a little something on the way over.
Dates, logistics, and buying furniture in the days before IKEA...

This is from my EARLY and first fiction fumblings. I will be editing well, once the story is finished! I'll only be fixing grammar and n00b mistakes. I still like my storytelling, even if everything else makes me flinch when I re-read it.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Warnings: Fluff and exposition abound. Take note of the furniture though, Jean has plans for it later. :D

Various and Sundry:

On the short trip to Sciezka's I stopped to pick up a dozen roses, a trite gesture but tested, and I was on a tight schedule. When I got to her place I again confronted with those damnable stairs again. I thought to myself, "Don't panic just improvise." So I did.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel let down your hair!" I called to her open window.

I got nothing; no response, and then I heard a racket and wondered if a pile of books had fallen over crushing her. If I didn't hear from her soon I would get a Civil Officer or the Military Police to check on her. I looked down at the ground and saw some small pebbles and thought that I might try throwing them like I did as a kid at my best friend's window, but then remembered working the harvest on his father's farm to pay off the repair bill for the window I'd busted. "Well, the next best thing would be the flowers," I thought with a chuckle.

An un-informed passerby would probably think I was insane as I began throwing the flowers one-by-one into the open window. I had pretty good aim, and they made enough noise that by flower number four Sciezka was at the window. She called down to me and when she peered out and saw me with a rose between my teeth said, "I'll be down shortly Don Juan, cut it out before they haul you off to the asylum!"

She finally came down to accept the remainder of her flowers, quickly went back upstairs to put them in water and when she came back I handed her the rose I'd held clenched in my teeth and said, "You clean up really nicely."

Sciezka flushed and said, "You're not so bad yourself."

She leaned in for a lingering kiss and said, "So how is the new place?"

I patted my lap and she sat down and turned her head to face me and leaned in so our foreheads touched. We just sat like that for a few moments and finally I broke the silence saying, "It is beautiful. My description won't even do it justice and it gets better, it's mine outright. I got the deed today."
Sciezka sat bolt upright her mouth agape, shaking her head and I furiously nodded yes. She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me passionately and when we finally stopped I said, "This isn't now, and this isn't a promise you have to make..." I paused then continued, "Or an obligation, but someday when things are right in the world I want you there with me, always. I know it's too soon to ask so I'm not and I know it's crazy but I want you to know that is what I felt when I first saw the house."

She held me closer and said nothing. She hadn't pulled away or jumped off of my lap and run up the stairs, so that was a good sign.

I hesitantly kissed her and she reciprocated and when I broke the kiss I said, "Good to know you'll hang in there, as it's not always a smooth ride and all."

Sciezka leaned in to nuzzle my ear and I was grateful that she lived on a fairly quiet street. I didn't want that moment to end, but Sciezka's stomach growled. She giggled and I said, "All right then, after heartfelt confessions dinner is next on the agenda."

We made our way over to a busier street where we flagged down a cab so we could get to the trattoria; we eventually got one to stop and got in with as little incident as possible. It was always an event giving instructions to new people but I had gotten used to it, perhaps even accepted it. I wasn't going to let taking a cab put a damper on the night.

When we got to the restaurant I was relieved that I had made reservations as it was packed. I flagged down the maitre d' and informed him that "Havoc party of two" had arrived. He gave a quick bow and with a wave of his arm said, "This way."

The maitre d' led us not far at all to a table on the edge of the patio that was very easy for me to get to. He clapped his hands and the extra chair was whisked away and he then pulled Sciezka's chair out for her and she sat down. I then offered him a handshake and some well-concealed cens for his attention to detail.

"Thank you so much, the wine list if it's not too much trouble?" I said.

The maitre d' replied, "Of course Mr. Havoc, right away."

We would be dining here often as a few simple instructions when making the reservations had removed many stumbling blocks. It didn't hurt that Roy had taught me the secrets of obtaining five star service. Generally speaking one only needed to know the right people, that flattery gets you everywhere, and that the "cash handshake" seals the deal.

When the wine list arrived Sciezka decided on Valpolicella and I decided on Pinot Grigio. Before all this I had been a beer drinker, period. Since Gracia's influence, I had expanded my horizons and to my surprise I liked wine, and food other than meat with potatoes. As we decided on what to order and waited for our drinks I said, "I'm sorry I didn't compliment you in more detail earlier, but you look simply gorgeous tonight."

Sciezka was wearing a simple black dress that skimmed her figure, concealed and revealed all at the same time. She was also wearing delicate black heels and had worn the necklace I had given her. The effect was sublime. Understated, classic, elegant, and alluring all at once from just a little black dress.

I reached for her hand and said, "Please wear that for me on Saturday at the housewarming."

She smiled, nodded and said, "Really Jean, it's just a dress."
I said, "No, it's THE dress and YOU, and after I kick everyone out I am going to have the distinct
pleasure of getting you out of that dress. Oh, and JUST wear the dress so I can better imagine
what's under it."

Sciezka blushed at my last statement.

The waiter arrived to take our order and it was an easy choice, we'd sample the tasting menu, as
that was a good way to see what was best on the menu. Soon the waiter brought out a platter of
antipasti laden with prosciutto e melone, slices of polenta and a simple salad consisting of fresh
mozzarella and tomatoes with balsamic vinegar, olive oil and basil. Sciezka marveled at the
presentation and asked how I'd known what to order, and I confessed that I'd had a basic idea, but
this new "suave" Jean was partly Roy's doing.

"I'll have to thank Roy," Sciezka said with a laugh.

"So you didn't like the stout swilling dog?" I joked.

Sciezka grinned, "Oh no, I still like a dog sometimes, but this is wonderful. I could get used to this
kind of place."

I popped a prosciutto wrapped piece of melon into my mouth, smiled as I savored the mingling of
savory and sweet on my tongue and said, "Me too."

The restaurant had amazing service. Just as we were dividing the last piece of polenta in half the
main course came out. They'd made two smaller sized entrees so we could try more of the
specialties of the house and brought us each a plate so we could pick and choose what we'd like.
The most impressive dish was ravioli made with assorted fillings and three different sauces. I was
in heaven because I always hated choosing. It was beautifully arranged. They also brought out the
standard chicken Parmesan and we were both pleased because it was light for something fried.

Midway through the entrée I said, "I don't think I will ever be satisfied at the Mess again. I'm now
spoiled. It was bad enough at Gracia's as her food is heavenly, but this is just mind blowing."

Sciezka agreed saying, "I think the only thing that would be better would be having this delivered
to your new place."

I grinned wickedly and said, "They deliver! We'd never have to leave the house. Imagine it… long
weekends where we never dressed except to answer the door to bring in heavenly food. It would be
perfect!"

Sciezka playfully slapped my hand and said, "You have a two track mind Jean."

I looked at her quizzically and said, "Two tracks? Huh?"

She rolled her eyes and stated what she thought was obvious, "Your libido and your stomach."

We both laughed and continued with our meal. As we were eating I had what I thought was a
brilliant idea. I decided to check Sciezka's reaction.

"What would you think about having Pane Fresco do the food for the house warming? I'm going to
have enough going on this week without worrying about cooking or having Gracia worrying about
it, which I am NOT about to do," I said.

Sciezka smiled and said, "That is a wonderful idea. You know you don't always have to be a
wonderful host by the sweat of your brow."
"I'm figuring that out. Sometimes you are a good at what you do by knowing when to let others do it for you and by knowing who to call," I said.

Then the maitre d', who introduced himself as Sal, came over to our table and asked if everything was to our satisfaction. We couldn't say enough good things, and then I remembered I did have a question about the house warming.

"Sal, I noted when I picked this restaurant out that you have catering, take-out and delivery service. I'm having a little house warming for hmm... eight people on Saturday. Would it be too much of a rush to do this menu plus a large mixed salad for delivery, oh and a large order of spaghetti and marinara with meatballs for Elysia and in case Fullmetal 'is hungry'? "

Sal smiled and said, "Mr. Havoc, that would be easy. What time would you like it delivered and where?"

He pulled out a small notepad, I wrote down the details and my mind was eased. One detail was taken care of. Though I didn't have a table to serve it on, or anywhere for my guests to sit.

Sciezka caught my slightly perplexed look and I said, "Furniture."

She just laughed and said, "Don't worry, if I know Gracia she's already got it planned, called ahead and you'll just have to open your wallet."

That said, the waiter cleared our plates and Sal brought a plate of tiramisu with two forks and asked if we'd prefer espresso or cappuccino. Sciezka and I would indeed be coming here a lot.

When we'd finished our dessert and coffee Sal came back and asked if we needed anything else at all I said, "Just the bill and if you could have this exact menu with the additions I added ready for eight people delivered at six p.m. on Saturday to the address I gave you I will be eternally grateful."

Sal brought the bill, I settled up our tab leaving a generous tip for the waiter and Sciezka and I left.

As we left the restaurant I suggested that we walk through the park as it was a starry night and she shivered a bit. I offered her my blazer and she accepted.

"It's a pity to cover up such a lovely dress, but it is a bit chilly tonight. You're dressed perfectly for the occasion, but not for the weather," I joked.

When she'd warmed up a bit we stopped at a bench to better enjoy each other's company.

I remembered I had another question to ask her, this one not as serious as the awkward and rushed declaration I'd made earlier at her place.

"I forgot to ask you at dinner, but have you made any plans for my birthday next week? I don't want to spoil anything you are planning... but as my life is pretty much mapped out for me, there are plans in the works," I said sheepishly, and then laughed.

"I'd just planned to spend it with you, why? Did you have anything planned?" she questioned.

"Well, yes, actually I did. Riza had a great idea. Would you like to go away to the lake for a few days?" I asked.

She looked to see if anyone was around and since the park appeared to be deserted she clambered onto my lap, clasped me around the neck and said, "Yes, of course I'll go! It will be perfect. Days
and days together, relaxing in the country. You can help me with my swimming, we can go on picnics, go exploring, laze in the sun, nap in the shade of a tree, have bonfires, stargaze and watch sunsets. It'll be just like a romance novel…"

I kissed her to see if I could get her to slow down at all because her enthusiasm was all a little too much. "Yes Sciezka, all that… and a small party with just Gracia, Elysia, Roy and Riza. But definitely a romantic get away. I'm glad you are excited."

We sat there for awhile kissing and I had to stop saying, "Sciezka, you do things to me that I didn't even think were possible a month ago. Hell, I didn't think that this was possible before everything. But I've got to get you home. Thankfully my place will be ready on Friday and we'll have a little time to break it in before the party on Saturday."

Sciezka kissed me again lingering at my lower lip to nibble and suck a bit and said, "I'm going to hold you to that buster."

She then gracefully slipped off my lap and we continued making our way through the park to Sciezka's, her hand gently draped on my shoulder.

When we arrived at Sciezka's we lingered at her stoop for a bit, neither wanting to break the goodnight kiss, but it eventually had to be done. Before she ascended the first step I said, "Remember, I won't be meeting you for lunch tomorrow. I'm taking Gracia and Elysia for lunch and then furniture hunting. But there will be swimming; Elysia and Gracia are coming as Elysia dog paddles too. I still can't wait to see you in a suit!"

She huffed a bit and said, "You have seen me in my birthday suit, numerous times!"

"Well, yeah, but not in days, and swimsuits are different. They cover so little, yet reveal so much. Be my pin-up girl, please?" I begged.

"Jean, you are a dog," she teased.

I growled and whined at her when I left as she climbed the stairs blocking my entrance into paradise and she blew a few kisses to console me.

I arrived home and Gracia and Elysia had already gone to bed. I went into my room to get ready for bed and saw that Gracia had left a note on my pillow.

Jean,

Hope you had a nice night. I'll see you in the morning and if I miss you, the plan is that Elysia and I will pick you up at the hospital after therapy for lunch. Sleep well and don't skimp on the details!

Gracia

I prepared for bed, then climbed in and opened my notebook feeling the need to remember everything about the day and the ensuing night. So many things had changed in just one short day. If I really examined it so many things had changed in six months. At times they had dragged, painfully so. The first few months after the incident, as I had decided it was not an accident, were both physically and emotionally draining and they were a blur of self-doubt and angst. Eventually the realization hit that I could either figuratively continue to die, or choose to live. I'll forever be thankful that people continued to reach into my darkness even as I pushed them away. I closed my notebook, turned off the light on the nightstand and settled in for the night.

I awoke to someone knocking softly on my door as the morning light filtered in through the
window, I adjusted the duvet, sat up a bit and said, "Come in, Gracia."

I was correct, as the knock was higher up on the door than Elysia could reach. Gracia came in and
sat on the foot of the bed. I pushed up onto my elbows so I could see her a little better and said,
"You were in bed when I got home, and it wasn't all that late when I got in."

"I figured you would be tired and that a game of 20 Questions wouldn't be that welcome. Besides
we have a big day today, right?" Gracia said.

"We have a huge day today. The house is gorgeous, but pristinely empty, a completely blank
canvas," I said. I then grabbed my notebook, wrote the address down for and handed her my keys
so she could drive by to get a feel for it and said, "Swing by before you guys pick me up, so you
can have an idea of what you want to do to it. I give you carte blanche, that is if it's not a bother for
you."

She clasped her hands together in a gesture that looked vaguely like Winry's "Machine Freak"
dance and said, "Your place is going to be so wonderful! I promise it will have a masculine feel as
it is your place after all but it's going to be such a great little love nest for the two of you!"

I blushed and searched for the right words, finally found them and said, "For a minute there I
thought I heard Maes... in your mannerisms. It happens a lot actually and I think he'd be pleased.
You and Elysia are living testaments to his love. He'd be proud of you."

Gracia misted up a bit and scooted closer to me on the bed and held me close. Neither of us said
anything for a while until I broached the subject of how she felt about the move, "Are you going to
be ok alone with Elysia in the house? You do know that you can come over any time. You don't
even need to call. In fact, today while we're out I'm having a copy of the key made for you. Just
knock hard before coming in if you have the little one with you. I don't want you to have to have
'the talk' early on my account."

She squeezed me tighter and laughed a bit at that. They would be fine, we would all be better than
fine.

"I'll let you get ready Jean," she said getting up and jingling the keys. "Thanks for these."

She closed the door behind her and I pulled off the covers, made my way over to the bureau to pick
something out to wear settling on dungarees and a white button down shirt and went into the
bathroom to get ready. Once done with my daily ablutions I went back out into the bedroom,
grabbed some sweats for therapy, as jeans and a button-down wouldn't do for work down on the
mats. I stowed them in a duffle bag and put it in the cargo net under my chair, grabbed my wallet,
smokes and keys, stashed them in duffle as well and headed for the kitchen to try and bolt some
breakfast as I didn't want anything to delay the day's plans or Sciezka in a bathing suit.

Once in the kitchen Gracia thrust a slice of buttered toast at me and I held it in my teeth as I went
out the door to wait on the front walk for the driver to arrive.

As I finished my last bite of toast the driver pulled up and without incident we arrived at the
hospital for my session with Jim. I would have just enough time to have a smoke and change my
clothes before my session. As I lit up my cigarette I noted that it was a gorgeous day. Blue sky, not
a cloud in it and it was warm enough to go without a sweater, but not so warm that you would work
up a sweat while out on a jaunt. This was my favorite part of the year in Central. The flowering
trees and shrubs were beginning to bloom, gardens were starting to color up and the birds were
building nests. It was the stuff cinema romances thrive on. I sure was.
I tossed my cigarette butt in the can outside and headed down to the therapy wing for my session. Once I got changed I met Jim in the room.

Jim sat down on the edge of the raised mats and said, "So, what's the verdict on the house?"

"It's perfect. Absolutely perfect, I can forgive Roy for meddling on this one. Every detail was seen to if you didn't have a hand in it, then I'm scared," I said.

"I'm innocent on this one," Jim said. "Perhaps he has just been observing you or used a little common sense? Really the world would be a much nicer place if they designed everything that way. Kids could reach stuff; old people would be able to get around better. The problem isn't you per se, it's your environment."

"Jim, you are ahead of your time. Speaking of the time, we need to get a move on. I am being picked up by two beautiful women for lunch after my session so I cannot afford to be late," I joked.

We first worked on range of motion exercises and stretches to warm up my muscles. As we worked Jim and I did a mental checklist of some of the things I'd need that I might not have on my list. Some of the items were common sense like pot holders and thick dishtowels so I wouldn't get hurt in the kitchen, a first aid kit, an anti-skid mat for the tub, perhaps a bigger bench for the shower since this shower was bigger and a "reacher" which he would give me to reach things in places I couldn't get to myself. This was a new one; I figured things were just out of my reach. After he showed me I was pretty sure that this would be on the list of things I did not want to have to use unless desperate along with the "Van of Un-Cool". The items I was surprised at included a full length mirror so I could assess everything that was going on with me, longer pull cords for the lights, and a pull up bar which though I used one at therapy, I hadn't thought of for home.

At the last item I looked at Jim and then said, "You want me to do more? Is that possible? You're already killing me!"

Jim shook his head and said, "The real world starts eventually. Soon I'll start seeing you every other day for less time, then once a week and eventually just for check-ups. You'll be responsible for making sure you stay in peak condition."

I nodded in understanding, and smiled. It was a scary thought at first as keeping myself in working order was a daunting task, but I had been well taught. Besides, going to physical therapy for half the day and university for half the day then homework would leave very little time for a social life. I fully intended to have one of those.

Jim nudged my shoulder and said, "Are you in there Jean? Care to share?"

I shook myself out of it and said, "Oh, I was just thinking that it will be nice to be on my own a bit more once classes start, what with the house and Sciezka and I'll still see you as I can drop by as this is a Military Hospital. I can come to open gym and use the equipment."

"You know you can and I'll come hunt you down if you don't," Jim threatened in a jovial manner. "Speaking of which, get down on the floor, time for push-ups."

I made my way down to the floor and in-between repetitions managed to ask Jim if he'd like to come to the housewarming and he accepted. He couldn't resist the offer of Aquroyan food, as that was where his parents had been from. I was pleased that he would get to meet my friends outside the confines of my hospital room.

The session progressed and as usual Jim was a taskmaster. After a particularly brutal combination
on the balance ball I said, "Do you stay up nights thinking to yourself, 'How can I find a new way to torture Jean tomorrow?' I appreciate it deep down, just not right now."

"I am a sadistic bastard sometimes aren't I?" he joked.

"Yes you are Jim, but I wouldn't have it any other way. Because anyone else would have taken one look at my sorry ass and sent me packing to the East where my Ma might still be wiping it for me," I said in a tone that was an odd mix of humor and gratitude. "I was pretty pathetic."

"Not now," he said. "Now go get cleaned up, you have those two beautiful ladies coming to pick you up soon. Take tomorrow off, Friday too. I'll see you on Saturday."

"You are a lifesaver Jim. I wondered how I was going to manage it all. I'll stretch at home and we're all going swimming tonight, speaking of which, I need a favor. Will you be around at all later tonight? Sciezka can only dog paddle and we're going to the lake on vacation next weekend… I know it's a lot to ask, I'm sorry."

"I'll be there tonight," he said. "No worries, I worked my way through school as a lifeguard so I'm used to giving swimming lessons. Now what is that address so I can get there, meet this girl and see this house?"

I pulled out my notebook, wrote down the address, tore the page out and handed it to him and made my way to the change room.

I changed quickly, took care of the necessaries then splashed some cool water on my face to clean up a bit more. I cursed the fact that I had neglected to bring some cologne. Sniffing under each underarm I determined that I was not too stinky but perhaps I should get a new shirt and some cologne before lunch. I ran my fingers through my hair ruffling it and gave myself a satisfied smile.

I headed up to the front entrance to wait on the sidewalk and lit up a cigarette. I took in the sun and sat in my own little world smoking until the dark sedan pulled up and Gracia rolled down the window and said, "Hey soldier, going my way?"

I carefully leaned over to stub out my cigarette on the sidewalk then tossed it into the nearest garbage can and said, "Sure, I'm going wherever you're going."

I got in as quickly as I could, the driver who by now was familiar with the song and dance took away the pieces of my chair and put them in the trunk and we were on our way.

We arrived at the High Street and went to High Street Men's first to get me a clean shirt. It wouldn't be right to accompany two beautiful women smelling like a locker room. I quickly selected a fresh white button down shirt while Gracia busied herself sampling some of the colognes. Remembering that I also needed new swim trunks for the trip I looked for and found knee-length black trunks that provided me with more coverage than my current trunks. I'd at least feel a little better about how I looked even if Jim had reassured me that no one would notice. When I was finished I found Gracia over by the toiletries. She had narrowed it down to three favorites and let me smell each of the contenders. I chose one that smelled like a mixture of citrus, musk and cloves. I closed my eyes and inhaled nodding my approval and Gracia said, "That one is my favorite. It smells like you've just gotten out of the shower."

I paid, and then went to "my" change room; the broom closet and we were off to lunch. The broom closet wasn't an ideal change room but it beat smelling like the locker rooms at the firing range.
When we got out onto the sidewalk Elysia climbed up onto her favorite spot, my lap, and before we got moving said, "You smell good Jean. You're also very handsome today, are you going on a date?"

I replied, "Why yes I am, with two of my favorite lady friends."

Elysia wrinkled her nose, a little confused and asked, "Are we meeting Sciezka?"

"No Elysia, we aren't meeting Sciezka until later. You and your Mommy are my dates today," I replied, chuckling.

Elysia turned around and hugged me around the neck and then settled back into her preferred spot and said, "Ok, let's go!"

The kid was simply too cute, as Gracia and I exchanged knowing glances she suggested we go get lunch at the coffee house.

Once in the coffee house a waitress directed us to a table and we settled in. We debated on what to have and Gracia decided on soup and salad, I chose the club sandwich and Elysia got her favorite, peanut butter and jelly.

I laughed when Elysia made her order and said, "Elysia, you could have that at home."

"I know Jean, and you make them the best but it's what I like."

I shook my head and we began to go over the "War List" for what we had to accomplish to make the house a home. When the food arrived we had a plan of attack laid out. We would first be going to a furniture store up the street for the bulk of it, then across the street to a store that had all manner of household textiles, then to a restaurant supply because that was where Gracia had gotten most of her kitchen goods, next a home decor store for some of the niceties to make the place more "mine" and finally the toy store for some things for Elysia. It was a long list but we were prepared.

We ate quickly as we were on a mission and by the time the waitress came back to check on us we were ready for the tab. This was serious business. The waitress returned and I settled up the tab and we headed for our first destination.

As we made our way to the first store I said to Gracia, "What should I expect from this place?"

Gracia smiled and said, "Well, it's nice. It's where Maes and I got our couch, so I thought you'd approve."

"Your couch is what I would call epic," I noted.

"But you don't need a couch, you have one in storage Jean," she said.

"THAT couch is getting burned," I said. "If I recall correctly I had some of the guys help me get it up the stairs after we found it in the street on garbage day."

Gracia just laughed and said, "We're here."

I took in the sight before me; massive stone pillars with heavy wood doors composed the façade of the building. In comparison to the architecture the forged brass sign over the door announcing that we were at "Central City Fine Furniture" was minute. I supposed that the architecture more than made up for the sign. The store's reputation did what advertising couldn't.
I sucked in a breath between my teeth and said, "Gracia, you two go on ahead I'm just going to sneak around the corner for a smoke to brace myself, and I'll meet you in there. Look around, pick some things out and don't tell me any of the prices. Just look for things that are 'reasonable' that you think I'll like. I don't want to have a coronary."

Gracia giggled and said, "Maes was the same way. We'll see you in there."

Once I finished my cigarette I made my way over to the imposing set of wooden doors. I gave the handle a tug and thought to myself, "Way to go Jean, you are not going to be able to get in."

I pulled a little harder, then wedged my footrest in the small opening I had made then pushed at the door again until there was room for me to pass. I hurried in so it wouldn't figuratively smack me on the ass on the way in.

Gracia and Elysia were waiting near the front entrance with a gentleman in a well-tailored grey suit and he extended his hand to shake mine.

"Hello, my name is Andrew, I'm the floor manager here at Central City Fine Furniture and I'll be assisting you today. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help," he said.

I shook his hand and said, "Did Gracia brief you on what we'll be requiring?"

He nodded and said, "Yes she did and she described the layout and style of the house. I think we'll have just what you're looking for."

I smiled and said, "Andrew, you are a life saver."

Andrew led us further into the show room and we started looking at living room furniture. I saw it almost immediately, THE couch. It was long and deep, the cushions looked like they would be fluffy and the armrests were overstuffed. It was the kind of couch you could spend all day on.

Elysia ran over to it immediately, hopped onto it to sit and tested the cushions by bouncing up and down a few times.

"Jean, it's so soft!" she squealed.

Gracia noted that it was also practical, as it was covered in a "dark taupe" slipcover that could be washed, in case Elysia or I spilled anything.

Andrew, ever the dutiful salesman said, "The cushions are stuffed with goose down. That is why they are so soft. There's a matching armchair and ottoman over there if you'd like to see it."

It could fit three people comfortably, and four people if they were good friends. Being a tall person I like a big couch, and I do not like sharing, so the armchair would be necessary.

When I saw the armchair I laughed, this was not an "armchair"; there was enough room that I could sit in it with Sciezka and Elysia comfortably. I said to Andrew, "I'll take both, in that light brown color."

Gracia said, "While we're in this area, you need tables and lamps Jean."

I sheepishly said, "Oh, right. Lead on fearless Andrew."

He smiled and said, "Gracia told me that your new place is in the Arts and Crafts style, and I think these tables in the Mission-style will be perfect."

He pointed over to some tables in dark wood that looked to be made from polished beams of old
buildings. Displayed on them and on the floor next to them were lamps that had simple white shades.

I smiled and said, "Gracia, I like these please check the prices to make sure they aren't astronomical and I am going to take Elysia to go test mattresses. Andrew, is it ok if she jumps on the beds a little?"

Andrew nodded and smiled. Apparently at Central City Fine Furniture the customer was always right.

Elysia skipped in the direction of the bedroom furniture showroom and I followed. Upon entering she began running and took a flying leap onto what appeared to be the biggest bed I had ever seen. The mattress was over a foot thick and I was surprised that Elysia didn't bounce off of it. The frame containing it wasn't shabby either. The style mirrored the tables I had picked out for the living room. I was inspecting the construction of the dovetailed joints when Andrew and Gracia came in.

"Gracia, you and Elysia should go into the interior decorating business!" I said and grinned. Andrew chuckled and said, "So did Elysia pick another winner? This one is also in the Mission collection. I had a sneaking suspicion you would like it."

"Add it to the list Andrew. Oh, Gracia will it fit in the bedroom?" I said.

Gracia nodded that it would indeed fit in the bedroom. I was relieved, as I knew Sciezka would love it and find many, many uses for all that room.

"Would you like the matching armoire, bureau, full length mirror and bedside tables as well?" Andrew asked.

I heaved a sigh and said, "Yes, may as well. Oh, and twin beds and some furniture for the guest bedroom. Do they have them in this style?"

Of course they did and of course they were perfect and they were added to the list. Gracia had impeccable taste and a keen eye and I could tell Andrew had good instincts. Luckily he had good judgment as well as a keen sense for when someone needed things done quickly.

Next on the list was a dining room set. We selected a dark oak Mission-style table with seating for eight, complete with chairs.

Andrew then brought us over to his desk where he offered cups of coffee for Gracia and myself and juice for Elysia while we firmed up the final details and arranged for the furniture to be set up and delivered the next day. The only room not yet furnished was the study, but I thought I would leave that up to Sciezka as I had come to think of that room as hers.

Andrew and I shook hands and he thanked Gracia for coming in, mentioning that if she ever wanted to work outside the home that she should apply for work there. We then headed across the street to Amestris Woven Goods and Sundries. As we entered I realized that this store was nothing like my parents general store in the East.

"Gracia, the name of the store sounds like it's a general store but this is NOTHING like that," I said.

"Yes, it's kind of a marketing thing… but you like your sheets and duvet, right?" she smirked.

"That I do, and those down pillows. So they're from a fancy place too?" I asked.
Gracia nodded and said, "They have everything here for the house. Sheets and towels, things for
the bathroom, kitchen supplies including some hard to find spices and tools, they even have
decorative items like candles."

"There you go trying to turn me into a girl again," I said and smiled.

Gracia gave me a playful tap to the back of the head saying, "You like it."

"Maybe I do, I know Sciezka is into the whole candles and romance thing and yeah, it's good to
smell nice and I really like the soft sheets. Do your worst," I quipped.

Gracia pulled out a list and flagged down the nearest sales clerk. She then asked me a few
questions in rapid fire.

"Jean, what is your favorite color? What accent color do you want in the living room? Do you want
do color in the kitchen or keep it monochromatic?"

My head still whirling with that line of questioning I sputtered out my answers, "I like light blue,
whatever you want for the living room, and just go with white in the kitchen in case I spill so I can
bleach it."

Once my rather limited tastes were ascertained Gracia determined that my kitchen goods could be
purchased here too. This would save us a stop. I was relieved, as all these choices were getting a
little overwhelming. I didn't have to be moved by Friday, but the weekend of my birthday would
mark the six-month "anniversary" of my new life. I wanted concrete proof of my success. I was
grateful that Gracia seemed to understand that my urgency was not about dissatisfaction with my
life with her and Elysia, but a need for more independence.

Gracia laughed a bit at my preferences saying, "You are a military man through and through. Light
blue, white, stainless steel and wood. It looks stunning together really, but when it's all put together
you will be able to tell that a man lives there."

The sales clerk, a rather attractive brunette named Leah, blushed a bit and said, "I think it will be
elegant. It's understated and useful, but definitely elegant. You have very good taste Jean."

She bustled off and continued finding the items on the list for our approval while Gracia, Elysia
and I went to go look at fire irons and candles. One of the many fine features of the new house was
a fireplace. Once we got out of earshot I whispered, "Was she hitting on me?"

Gracia smirked and said, "Yes Jean she was, is that so hard to believe?"


Elysia piped up saying, "Remember Jean, you're very handsome."

I patted her on the head and said, "Thank you for the reminder Elysia, if I get too many admirers
will you protect me?"

Elysia nodded sternly. Gracia just rolled her eyes and said, "Let's go check on your admirer's
progress and see if you need anything else."

We found the clerk in the glassware section and as she was selecting many "fancy" as I deemed
them types of glasses I said, "No need, just pints please. They'll be serviceable for all types of
beverages and it will mean fewer dishes to wash."
Gracia laughed but agreed that it was highly unlikely that I would need a diminutive set of cordial glasses. We also nixed the small, gilt-edged cups and saucers. Large, plain white porcelain mugs for coffee would be much more my style. Besides with my coffee cravings I'd be refilling my cup constantly. We also decided on the matching plain white porcelain plates and serving platters that could be warmed up in the oven. For silverware I selected a basic pattern that reminded me of the simple lines of the house. Gracia picked out some canisters to store flour, sugar, coffee and other non-perishables as well. A set of steel pots and pans completed the kitchen supplies.

Gracia quickly selected some potholders and dishtowels before the stock assistants whisked our selections to the back. From there we moved on to what we'd need for the bedroom. The sales clerk, Leah had picked out a huge duvet that looked like it would fit on the bed I'd selected. I felt it and it was just like the one on my bed at Gracia's. From there we only had to find blankets, pillows, sheets and a cover for the duvet to keep it clean. I dictated that it should all be light blue. The hospital had turned me off of white sheets permanently. Elysia selected white coverlets with embroidered Forget-me-Not's as decoration for the guest bedroom, as it would be her bedroom at my house.

The next room to furnish was the bathroom. It would be easy enough. Bathmat, towels, soap dish and the like, small garbage can that wasn't a "step can" and we'd be done. The guest bathroom was furnished similarly. Gracia picked it all out efficiently and Leah motioned for shop assistants to take it to the back so it could be delivered tomorrow.

Now we could choose the small details and refinements. I decided that the finishing touches would be several large pillows that could be placed on the floor in light brown and dark blue, a few throws to keep in the living room, a thick wool Xingian-style rug to go in front of the fireplace and best of all a phonograph. I had always coveted Roy's phonograph. Gracia winked at me when she noticed me testing the rug for thickness and softness as it was hanging on the wall. It was as if she knew exactly what I had in mind.

Finally finished with the bulk of the household shopping I made the arrangements to have everything delivered, paid for and we left to go to back to the coffee house. We all needed a bit of a snack and Elysia appeared to be doing the potty dance. Quite frankly so was I. We took care of business, had cookies and milk and then headed to our last stop, the toy store.

As soon as we came into sight of the toy store Elysia bolted from my lap and ran. There was no stopping her. Gracia and I followed her and when we entered the store she had already found what she wanted. She was on her knees before a small pram that was gray with blue bedding. She announced, "Jean, this would be the perfect baby bed for your house!"

I chuckled and said, "Anything for you Princess Elysia, now pick out some books and we can get home and get our suits so we can meet Sciezka to go swimming."

While I was paying for Elysia's "loot" Gracia called the driver. Then Elysia pushed her new pram as Gracia and I escorted her out to the sidewalk to wait.
This is from my EARLY and first fiction fumblings. I will be editing well, once the story is finished! I'll only be fixing grammar and n00b mistakes. I still like my storytelling, even if everything else makes me flinch when I re-read it.

Disclaimer: I still don't own it, well, Jim, but that's all!

Freedom:

When we arrived home we had the driver wait with the car while we grabbed our suits and dropped off the pram. Then we headed over to the hospital to meet Sciezka for open swim.

After arriving at the hospital we waited in front for Sciezka so I could show everyone to the pool. While we waited I went around the corner to have a smoke while Gracia sat with Elysia and talked about what to expect at the pool. I finished my cigarette and Sciezka still hadn't arrived. I was a little worried that she was delayed, but took my mind off of it by playing "Got Your Nose" with Elysia.

Just as I was starting to panic Sciezka came racing up the sidewalk. She nearly knocked me over when she kissed me, quickly remembered we had an audience, straightened up and said, "I'm so sorry I'm a little late. I forgot about a swimsuit, I had to go get one."

I reached for the bag and Sciezka snatched it out of my hands and I pouted. She did however let Gracia peek in the bag and Gracia gave the contents an appreciative smile. Gracia then said, "Patience Jean, we're going in now you'll see it soon enough."

I let out a heavy sigh and said, "You never let me have any fun."

We headed toward the locker rooms and when we got there agreed to meet at the pool.

I changed quickly and when I arrived in the pool area Jim was already swimming. Scanning the pool I saw a few other people swimming but the it was largely deserted. I headed to the side of the pool where we had my therapy session before. When Jim noticed me he waved and said, "Come on in Jean, the water is fine."

After setting my things on the bleachers I went to the side of the pool, set the brakes on my chair then carefully transferred to the tiled floor, as it was wet, then scooted to the edge of the pool. Since there was no sign yet of the girls I decided to get in and warm up a bit before they joined us. I swam over to where Jim was and simply floated for a few minutes before beginning my workout.

Jim said, "You're a natural. Where's Sciezka?"

I rolled my eyes, laughed and replied, "I'm sure they are having a fashion show in the locker room at the moment. Gracia and Elysia came along as well. While you work with Sciezka I'm going to help Gracia with Elysia. They're going to the lake too and I want to make sure that the little one is safe."
He nodded in agreement and said, "When I'm done with the basics with Sciezka you can help her practice and I'll take over with Elysia."

"That's very kind of you, but you don't have to do that. You're already doing so much," I said.

"Don't you want to show off a bit for your woman?" Jim teased.

I blushed a bit and nodded.

Just as I was wondering if they'd taken up residence in the women's locker room I heard Elysia giggling and Gracia calling after her, "Elysia Hughes NO RUNNING in the pool area!"

I saw a streak of pink and blond followed by Gracia and Sciezka walking at a clip. Gracia was wearing a modest black tank suit that was still very flattering and Sciezka had made an excellent choice. I wondered where she'd found a black two-piece suit that resembled her usual briefs and camisole so closely, but I could extract that piece of information and "punish" her on Friday night. She knew what that combination did to me in private, keeping my hands off of her in public would be torture.

Elysia was finally captured and Sciezka waved at us. They entered the shallow end using the steps and Jim and I swam over to meet them.

I spoke first, introducing Sciezka to Jim, "Sciezka, this is Jim Bruno my physical therapist and I'm honored to say friend. Jim, this is Sciezka."

Sciezka was sitting on the pool steps and I swam over and sat next to her. She extended her hand to shake Jim's and said, "This will certainly be a story to tell people. I've never been introduced to anyone in a pool before."

Jim laughed and said, "Jean is a unique individual. From what I hear from him, you are extraordinary. So it is fitting that we should meet someplace out of the ordinary."

She smiled and said, "Thank you, we should get to the lesson. I noticed that Jean can already swim circles around me."

Elysia sat on the top step impatiently and it was agreed that everyone should begin swimming. Sciezka and Jim went to where the water got a little deeper so he could teach her some basic strokes while Gracia and I worked with Elysia on putting her face in the water and learning how to float in the shallow end.

"Gracia, before you both get all the way in could you go get some kick boards for us to use?" I asked.

She quickly got them and then both she and Elysia sat on the top step of the pool to get used to the water temperature. They did so quickly since the pool was heated for therapy purposes. The next step was to get Elysia to hang onto the side of the pool, put her face in the water and blow bubbles turning her head to the side when she needed to breathe. If she could and would do that the rest would be fairly easy.

I swam over to the side first and Gracia waded in and carried Elysia and luckily she complied and didn't get any water up her nose. That would have complicated matters immensely. After we were sure she'd had enough practice with her face in the water I had Gracia show her how to flutter kick her feet. The next step would be to have Elysia hold a kick board and kick at the same time. It was a grand success; she was able to do it easily. I went over to the steps to sit and rest for a bit as Gracia and Elysia did a few laps across the shallow end. Gracia brought her back to the steps and I
decided we probably had time for one more lesson before Elysia lost patience with us.

Once back on the steps Elysia quickly found her favorite spot, and this made the next part easier. I turned Elysia around to face me after dandling her and praising her prior efforts and said, "Ok the next part is going to be a little tougher because you're going to have to stay still and relax for it to work. You're going to have to trust me as well that you'll be safe."

Elysia wrinkled her nose and said, "Is this going to hurt?"

I shook my head no and laughed, "Absolutely not Princess, you're going to learn how to float but since you'll be on your back you won't be able to see what's going on and I don't want you to try to sit up quickly because as soon as you do, you'll sink!"

Elysia nodded in understanding and said, "Promise it will be ok?"

I held up my pinky finger and said, "Pinky promise."

She locked her tiny finger in my much larger one and I smiled inwardly at what was serious business in my new world. Elysia was something that had worked in my favor in the exchange.

After instructing Elysia to lie back against my hands and keep her body and legs still and straight, she was floating. Gracia smiled as I said, "You're floating Elysia, keep still and I'm going to hand you off to your Mommy so you can try floating and moving at the same time."

Gracia took firm hold of Elysia and slowly waded out into the water with her. I swam beside them forming the cheering section eventually coaching Elysia, "Ok now just kick your feet and you'll be able to swim by yourself."

Gracia let go and Elysia was doing it. With practice she'd be a little fish. Now all we had to do was get her to swim with her face in the water so she wouldn't run into the side or end up halfway across the lake.

Sciezka and Jim came over and everyone clapped and cheered for Elysia. Hearing her name with her ears underwater Elysia attempted to sit up to call out an answer and her little butt sank and the rest of her began to as well. I quickly wrapped an arm around her keeping us both afloat.

"A little help please?" I said.

Jim swam over and took Elysia from me and brought her over to Gracia. Luckily Elysia barely noticed her rescue and was more proud of her aquatic accomplishments than she was scared.

Sciezka and I headed over to the side and I held onto the edge to rest and calm down, as I was the only one shaken. I pulled up and propped myself on up my forearms on the side and Sciezka said, "Wow, I'd forgotten how tall you are."

I looked down at her, smiled and said, "It could just be that you are petite."

She flicked water at me and I said, "That suit is incredible Sciezka. It is very unfair as it looks like your unmentionables, but very nice. Why don't you show me what you learned?"

Sciezka swam off, splashing me as she left for my comment and she had learned quite a few strokes. I lowered myself all the way back into the water, went after her catching up quickly and gently tugging at her ankle. She swam toward me and we floated on our backs letting our fingers brush every once in awhile.
I interrupted the silence saying, "I should get some laps in since I won't have therapy the next two
days."

Scieszka nodded and tread water watching me for a bit and then began practicing her strokes as
well. After a few laps she tired and went to the side of the pool to rest. I swam over to her and said,
"For someone who only dog paddled when she got in the pool tonight you are doing really well."

Scieszka smiled and said, "Jim's great. I can see why you like him so much. He really likes you. He
gave me the short list of your achievements."

I nodded and said, "He has seen me in pretty pathetic condition. He started right working with me
right after the stabilizing surgery. He saw me when I couldn't even sit up by myself."

She moved closer and said, "You were never pathetic, you were hurt and you were scared. There is
a difference. You're making the best out of a bad situation. I can't say I understand, because I'm not
you but I can say that I don't see anything pathetic in you. Heck, you've all but mastered swimming
on the second try and you're in better shape than most people who haven't been injured."

"I have to admit I love the water, I always have," I said and hesitated. "Though now since, well
since the incident it's freedom for me. Once I'm in the water I can move so much more easily,
maybe even gracefully. I don't do much of that lately. But in here you can barely tell me from any
other guy."

Scieszka smiled and said, "Well I can, you're the cute one."

I smiled and splashed her. Then the others called us over to the shallow end.

"Elysia is beginning to get wrinkly fingers," Jim said as he helped her out of the pool.

Gracia put a towel around Elysia and they all went over the bleachers to sit, talk and dry off before
going to the locker room. Scieszka got out of the water, grabbed her towel and went to wait by my
chair. I went over to where I'd left the chair, hauled myself out of the water and Scieszka put my
towel over my head and ruffled my hair. She then knelt down and hugged me around the shoulders.

She then whispered in my ear, "I think that Jim and Gracia are getting along famously."

Oblivious I said, "Well, of course they are, they know each other from when I was in the hospital."

"Jean, I think they are getting along better than that," Scieszka hissed.

"Oh, you mean that?" I said and I smiled a small smile.

Scieszka just pecked me on the cheek and sauntered off to the bench to join them leaving me to
catch up.

After getting myself arranged I went over to them and said, "Should we get changed and have
something to eat?"

"I'm going to starve soon!" Elysia moaned.

"That settles it, we can't have that happen. Does anyone have any suggestions?" I asked.

Gracia said, "It's getting late, why don't we just head over to the house and have some sandwiches?
Tomorrow is a big day. Then we'll send Scieszka home in the car. Jim, would you care to join us?"

"I wouldn't want to impose," he said hesitantly.
This was not the confident Jim I was used to.

Gracia smiled warmly and said, "Nonsense, it wouldn't be any extra trouble at all. It's the least I
could do after all you've done for Jean."

Sciezka patted my hand at this statement as she could see the blush beginning to creep up my neck.

We headed for the locker rooms to change and made arrangements to head home.
Opportunity

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Opportunity:

When we got to the house Gracia gave me instructions to give Jim the grand tour and then play host while she prepared our late supper. Sciezka asked if there was anything she could do to help and indeed there was.

"Sciezka, if you wouldn't mind making Elysia a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and then getting her ready for bed it would be a lifesaver. She's going to go into C-R-A-N-K-Y mode any minute after such a long day," Gracia said.

Jim and I started with the living room, and I showed him the pictures on the mantle, giving anecdotes about some of Maes and Roy's choicer moments. Then I showed him some of Elysia's artwork taking special pride in her picture of the "King of the Couch".

Jim laughed and said, "Elysia is a great kid, very intelligent and very sweet. She's lucky to have you."

"Are you kidding? I'm lucky to have her, and Gracia," I said.

"Well after everything, you know… don't think that news didn't reach us at the hospital eventually," he whispered.

I nodded grimly and said, "But you know it's not like that. I feel protective towards her, I'd do anything for her… but nothing I do can replace him. I'm trying to be an adequate stand-in though, perhaps the favorite uncle. For now she's thrilled with having a ready playmate, a steadily available lap and her own personal race car."

He chuckled at the last one and said, "The kid idolizes you and if this picture doesn't prove it to you then the way she sang your praises during her swimming lesson should convince you otherwise."

I shook my head and said, "You've got to be kidding me Jim. Pull the other one."

"You have a serious fan club, but I hear you have been spared from marriage because she is too young for you," he said and winked.

I smiled and said, "Yes, she was not thrilled Monday when she figured out that Sciezka and I are an item. I'm glad she has recovered from the disappointment."

Jim said, "So is there more on this grand tour other than discussing the fact that you are adored by three beautiful women?"

"I can't help it that I'm pretty Jim," I joked. "There isn't much else on the main floor other than the kitchen, Elysia's playroom and my room. I'm afraid I haven't seen the upstairs, so I can't be much help with that."

Hastily changing the subject Jim said, "Well I haven't seen your room finished. You knew I was in on that already, would you mind showing me? I'm curious to see what Colonel Mustang and Gracia cooked up."
"Yeah, sure. Sorry for that last part. Sometimes I just let the little stuff get to me," I said.

"You're entitled to it sometimes. It's just rooms upstairs, but Elysia mentioned that you 'Butterfly' tucked her in and I'm sure that is what gets to you about the rooms upstairs."

I nodded and said, "Let me show you your handiwork in use. Don't mind the mess. Not that it gets that messy with Gracia around, but I'll excuse myself beforehand just in case it's not regulation."

We entered my room and Jim walked around, taking a peek in the bathroom and stopping to stand in front of my bureau. He surveyed the room, crossed his arms and said, "Not too shabby."

"No, not at all shabby. It's been perfect. Though I'm sure neither you, nor Mustang has Gracia's keen taste in linens. Go ahead sit on the bed. You'll never want to get up."

Jim tested it out and said, "So you've been staying in a Five Star joint all this time?"

"Gracia is a classy lady Jim, but I think you've already noticed that," I said.

He abruptly got up and walked back over to the bureau and picked up a picture of my comrades. In the picture were Roy, Maes, Breda, Falman, Feury and myself.

"That one was taken on an R and R trip, I believe we were all spectacularly inebriated at the time. It was before Elysia was born and everyone but Maes got transferred East with Colonel Mustang. It was a great time, Fullmetal hadn't enlisted yet and the war was a fading memory."

"Your comrades, they got transferred right?" Jim said.

"Yeah, that's why they didn't visit. I didn't scare them off with my piss poor attitude," I said chuckling wryly.

We were interrupted when Sciezka came in announcing that dinner was served and I was relieved. I could only take so much introspection on what had happened in the recent months.

***

Once in the kitchen we were greeted by Gracia's tomato soup that she'd canned from tomatoes grown in the garden the summer prior and grilled cheese sandwiches. We settled in and began talking, laughing and eating.

"Gracia, this is amazing!" Jim exclaimed.

"It's just grilled cheese and soup," she replied modestly.

"But the soup tastes fresh, it reminds me of home. I'll have to share Mama's sauce recipe with you," he said.

"A family recipe? How wonderful, thank you," Gracia said.

"Purely selfish, I don't have your expertise," Jim said sheepishly.

Sciezka nudged my arm under the table and I took her hand and squeezed it. Things were looking better for everyone.

After we finished eating I started clearing the table, shooing Gracia out of the kitchen to sit and rest in the living room with her guests. Sciezka offered to join me in the clean-up effort.
"All right you lovebirds, we get the hint that you want to be alone," Jim said.

I chuckled and thought to myself, "I guess I'm not the only oblivious one."

While Sciezka washed and I dried we would occasionally pause to exchange kisses and hushed words of endearment.

"I can hardly wait until Friday," I said as I finished the last bowl.

Sciezka leaned in for a kiss, beginning gently and then probing my mouth hungrily. She then sat astride my hips and we continued like that until Gracia called from the living room, "Do you guys need any help cleaning up in there? It's taking an awfully long time."

***

We emerged from the kitchen, Sciezka a vivid shade of crimson and me grinning like the cat that ate the canary.

Jim checked his watch and said, "It's late, and I should get home. Thank you so much for inviting me to dinner tonight."

Gracia smiled and said, "It was no trouble at all. We should all do this more often. Elysia loved the water."

"Sciezka, where in town do you live? I live just a few blocks from the hospital, would you like a lift?"

Sciezka smiled and said, "That would be wonderful, I live in that direction."

Gracia walked Jim to the door and before leaving Sciezka planted a chaste kiss on my lips.

***

After they had driven out of sight Gracia closed the front door and sat in the armchair for a few moments. Then she abruptly got up, went to the kitchen and returned carrying a few small bottles. I had moved to the couch to stretch out as it had been a long day and if I didn't rest soon I would suffer the consequences.

Gracia deposited the bottles in my lap and I looked at them and said, "So where were you hiding these Gracia?"

"At the back of the cabinet behind the icebox. Partially so Elysia wouldn't get into them…" she mumbled.

"Thank you Gracia," I said taking her hand.

She sat down on the small sliver of couch next to me and said, "For what? Living here? We've loved having you. You'll be sorely missed. You're a huge help with Elysia and you were just what we needed as well."

"No, thank you for hiding my meds," I said, averting my eyes.

"They weren't hidden, I would have told you where they were if you had asked," Gracia said attempting to retract her previous statement.

"C'mon Gracia," I said picking up the bottles one at a time, listing the contents. "There are enough
drugs here to put down a raging bull. The short list alone contains sedatives, muscle relaxants, anti-
spasm meds, two kinds of pain killers and one for sleep."

Gracia bit her lip and said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be, you read me right. There were times I'd thought about going through with it but I just couldn't... it would kill my parents, eat Roy alive, and you and Elysia have already lost so much. Well and now I've got a lot to live for."

"Sciezka?" she asked.

"Well Sciezka yes and you two, of course. But most importantly, me. It wouldn't have been that dishonorable, not after everything that happened but I have too many things I still have to do. It's different for sure, but it's definitely not all bad. In fact there has been so much good. I'm a lucky bastard. The only way to describe it is it's just different than I expected my life would be," I said as I wiped a tear from her cheek.

I pushed up on an elbow and she leaned in to hug me and said, "Thank you Jean, I was so worried the first time I saw you at the hospital. I knew something had to be done and when I saw your eyes light up, the haunted look fading while you were talking to Elysia... I thought that maybe we could do something."

"You have Gracia, you've worked a miracle. The hospital should hire you. Speaking of which, anything you want to tell me?" I said.

"We do get along quite well. I don't know if I'm ready, but I'd love to get to know him better... " Gracia said hesitantly.

"It could be arranged, you know pick up poor Jean from therapy and head out to lunch but then I'm just too tired and Elysia is cranky and needs to go home too?" I joked.

"You are bad Jean," Gracia said.

"I learned from the best," I said with a grin. "Don't think I don't figure out when I've been set up. I'd love to plot your life for you, but it is late and tomorrow is going to be a long day. We should get to bed."

Gracia agreed and we both made our way to bed.

***

I awoke to a knock on my door and Gracia's chipper voice asking if she could come in. I checked to make sure that Master Havoc was behaving and he was and I said, "Come on in."

Gracia entered with two steaming mugs of coffee and as I accepted mine I asked, "What am I going to do without you Gracia?"

"You'll manage somehow," she said and smiled.

I pouted a bit and said, "I will, but I'm hopelessly spoiled now."

"We have so much to do, and the first delivery will be in a little over an hour. Time to get moving," Gracia ordered in her best commanding tone.

I gave her a crisp salute and a "Yes Ma'am" and quickly drained the rest of my mug.
After taking care of the necessaries and dressing I was met in the living room by Elysia, who was dressed in overalls, and Gracia who had a hamper and a box of cleaning supplies.

"Jean, I'm helping you move!" Elysia said and flexed her little arms.

I stifled a laugh and said, "You sure are Princess. We'll get your room all ready so you can come visit as soon as possible."

Gracia announced, "I have lunch taken care of and supplies so while the deliveries are being made we can unpack your things from storage and spruce things up a bit."

I put up my hands in protest and said, "You're doing more than enough already Gracia."

"Nonsense, I won't have you living someplace that's not spic and span, and I've taken the liberty of calling a few of the wives I know who take on cleaning for extra money."

I was a little indignant at this; "they" were doing it again.

"I can do those kinds of things for myself," I muttered.

Gracia rolled her eyes and said, "I know you can and Jim knows you can. If you would listen to reason… " She hesitated, wondering how to phrase the next bit. "Wouldn't your time and energy be better spent on university, your friends, and yourself? Is it so important that you do your own laundry and clean your own floors?"

I crossed my arms over my chest and said, "After thinking about it the shelves in the study are awfully high and it is a big house. I always hated cleaning before. This wouldn't be a charity project for your friend, would it?"

"I assure you it wouldn't be," she said. "These women's husbands are away and they need something to take their minds off of that fact and you know how little enlisted men make. You'd be doing them a favor."

"In that case, it's a good idea because the last thing I would want to happen would be for you or Sciezka to be doing those sorts of chores for me. You are my friend and Sciezka is not my housekeeper or nurse, end of story."
"Well then it's settled. Speaking of the study, Roy had your things from storage delivered. We could go through them while we wait for the delivery men to come," Gracia asked.

"Oh, that stuff? I assume Breda and the guys packed that up, it's probably a mess unless Feury saw to the organizing," I said shrugging my shoulders. "It's nothing I really need at the moment. Just some mismatched dishes and kitchen stuff, uniforms and reading material."

"We could dust the shelves in the study and sort through the books," she suggested.

"Gracia, there are a few novels and the rest is um, questionable material," I said.

"Questionable material?" Gracia asked with her best poker face.

I debated on how I'd phrase my next statement and said, "You know, under the mattress stuff Gracia."

Gracia gave me a blank look and I finally said, "Elysia, go look at your room, it's just down the hall."

Elysia perked up her ears at mention of her room and skipped down the hall.

Then I whispered, "I cannot believe I am telling you this Gracia, but I do not want YOU or Sciezka seeing it. It runs the gamut from porn, pin-up girls, dirty books, to whatever you want to call it. Lots of it."

Gracia just smiled and finally let out a guffaw and said, "After dating and eventually marrying Maes and knowing all of you for this long did you think I did not know what you were referring to? I just wanted to see how many shades of red you would turn!"

I thought it over and half gasping said, "I should ship some of this to Breda as a practical joke!"

Gracia smirked and said, "Save some for Roy. Have it delivered to the office addressed from a 'Secret Admirer'!"

I pointed at her and no words came because I was laughing so hard at the image of the great Colonel Mustang opening a large box of porn in front of his staff.

Elysia came back in and I was doubled over in my chair and Gracia had a hand over her mouth barely stifling girlish laughter.

"What's so funny Mommy?" Elysia asked.

At this I let out another snicker and Gracia said, "Nothing Elysia, how do you like your room?"

We were saved from explaining by a knock at the door.

***

While Elysia and I dusted the lower shelves in the study Gracia split her time between playing Field Marshall to all deliveries and their set-up and making sure the house was up to her high standards. I was convinced that if she had the inclination to do so that she could become the next Fuhrer.

The house that had seemed so cavernous and empty that morning soon looked like a home with inviting furniture and the familiar lavender scent of Gracia's cleaning products. I peeked around the door of the study and said, "Gracia, where did you get that stuff?"
"It's a family recipe Jean. I come from a long line of herbalists," she said.

"So the sheets?" I asked.

Gracia nodded and said, "That would be lavender oil, sweet orange oil and a bit of rose water. Elysia calls it 'Monster Water', she uses it to keep away the Bogey Man."

"Well it certainly helps. I should have known there was some trick to your house being so soothing. Alchemists and doctors aren't the only people in Amestris who have all the secrets," I said with a chuckle. "Though Fullmetal says alchemy started in the kitchen and I'm convinced he's right."

Gracia blushed and said, "You did a lot of the work on the peaceful front Jean, give yourself some credit. But I did make enough of your favorites to keep you happy for awhile here."

"Thank you, I think I'd go through withdrawal without it," I said.

The last of the workmen left around noon and Gracia took the hamper and placed it on the dining room table and we all had lunch. While we were eating Gracia gave me a progress report and miraculously other than making up the beds we were done.

"Gracia, you?" I asked in disbelief.

"All of the dishes are washed and put away, you didn't get that many," she said modestly. "The bathrooms are set up, all that's left are some finishing touches and hospital corners."

"I hate that term," I said scrunching my nose.

"Me too," Gracia said. "Let's get finished here and go home to pack up your room."

I agreed to her plan of action and we ate our lunch in companionable silence.

Once back at the house Gracia sent Elysia to the playroom to tidy up a bit and we busied ourselves with packing up the things I'd collected during my stay. Armed with only newspaper, orange crates and twine in a couple hours my life with Gracia and Elysia had been reduced to a small pile and a large duffle bag containing the things I would need overnight.

Gracia called dispatch at the motor pool and asked if a driver would mind taking us over to the new house, and if he'd mind terribly helping us carry a few things. She was assured that it would be no trouble at all and that someone would be over directly.

I surveyed my room and Elysia came over to me, patted my hand and said, "You can come visit all the time, and I love my new room. I'll be over a lot. We can have tea parties."

I leaned over, kissed her on the top of her head and mumbled into the mop of blonde hair, "I would like that very much Princess Elysia."

The driver at the door interrupted my contemplation. It was our usual driver and I was relieved. I said, "Hey, come in. I'm sorry, I never got your name."

"Kennedy, Staff Sergeant Michael Kennedy, Sir," he said and saluted.

"No need for formalities soldier. At ease," I said. "I just wanted to thank you for coming over and doing this on such short notice."

"Lieutenant Havoc, it's no problem at all. This detail is a plum assignment in the motor pool. Mrs.
Hughes makes the best cookies," he said sheepishly.

"I remember those days, I was always after an assignment in this direction."

"Before I started this detail Sergeant Smith said you were in a bad way, I'm glad to see… " He trailed off.

"That I'm not such a sorry S.O.B. anymore?" I answered for him.

He gave me an apologetic look and said, "I'm glad to see that you're happy living here and that you are moving out on your own. The guys in the motor pool were worried for you. You're a good guy, it's hard to see something bad happen to one of your own."

I nodded and said, "Let them know I'm just fine, better than fine. If you see Smith let him know I feel like an ass for how I treated him."

Gracia and Elysia met us in the entry way and Staff Sergeant Kennedy started loading boxes into the car. I made my way onto the walk to have a smoke and think things over.

The crates were quickly unloaded and unpacked at the new house and just after dusk we arrived home. Gracia suggested that the three of us go out for something quick in the neighborhood and I agreed. It had been a long day and the weekend did not look like it would be any less tiring.

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We left the house and as we made our way to a small café a few blocks away I held Elysia in my lap as I usually did when we were out. As we passed an old couple I heard one of them say a hushed tone, "What a sweet little family, but that poor young man, so tragic."

Gracia looked my way, waiting for the anger but it didn't come. I stopped and said, "To the outsider that is how it looks, I've come to accept that. Besides, they don't know me or how my life is. I'm honored that Old Bat thought Elysia was mine, same goes for you."

Gracia ruffled my hair and said, "Ditto, Sciezka's a lucky woman and you know where Elysia stands on the subject of Jean Havoc."

"Jim made me very aware of that last night."

"Oh?" Gracia asked.

"Yes, he filled me in on the whole swimming lesson and he thinks that you are a very classy lady. But I bet you knew that," I said.

Gracia looked exasperated, but then smiled and said, "Dinner, now buster."

We continued to the café laughing and joking. Once there we were seated, ordered and ate without incident. I prayed to no one in particular that life under my own roof might be as placid as things had been under Gracia's roof.

***

When we arrived home it was almost time for Elysia to go to bed. In honor of the occasion she chose two bedtime stories after she'd had her bath and gotten her pajamas on.

Gracia, Elysia and I huddled together on the couch and read my last bedtime story as a resident in the household. When I got to, "And they lived happily ever after" I looked to Gracia and then
Elysia, swallowed hard and said, "I think it's bedtime, goodnight Princess."

Gracia picked Elysia up and once they got to the stairs turned around and I blew Elysia a kiss and Gracia went to tuck her in.

I made my way to my room, got ready for bed and as I was coming out of the bathroom saw the door open a crack. Gracia called, "May I come in?"

"'Course you can. I'm decent," I said.

I hauled myself into bed, scooting toward the middle so Gracia would have somewhere to sit and said, "Anything troubling you?"

"Not really, it's just that while I'm happy for you, at the same time it's bittersweet," she confessed.

"I know," I replied hesitantly. "It's nice having you both just upstairs, or Elysia in the playroom down the hall ready to show me something amazing to her… or cuddling before bed. Bittersweet is how I'd describe tonight."

Gracia smiled and said, "You'll be just down the block, you can come over and read her a story every night if you want. Come over until you're sick of us."

"Likewise with my place," I said. "Goodnight, because thank you doesn't even begin to cover it."

Gracia pulled the duvet up to tuck me in as I settled into the pillows in one of her trademark nurturing gestures and I said, "Remember to take care of you too."

She turned out the light without another word and I was left alone with my thoughts in the dark until sleep came.

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Chapter Summary

1,001 Nights

HTML dogs me... reformatting all of it to transfer here, with all its foibles... It IS under the same pen name at FF.net.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Warnings: Good sex turns into BAD SEX! (I'm sorry Jean, I had to! It was just going TOO well.)

1,001 Nights

"The sensations of searing agony, acrid air scorching my lungs, and my body being too heavy to move, as I lay prone on the floor flash through my dreams. The smell of charred flesh, distant voices, heat and light assault my senses. Images of the hospital, of Dr. Prick, the realization of what had happened, and the words that I wish I'd never heard. Repeat throughout the night until scared shitless and thoroughly demoralized…"

"Jean wake up. Jean!" someone called to me. Now I was being shaken.

"Jean, you're having a nightmare, wake up!" a female voice said urgently.

I opened my eyes, the lights were on and I lie contorted in my sheets covered in sweat. When I finally got untangled I saw the person that had woken me up was Gracia. I raked a hand through my hair, struggled to sit up and failed miserably.

"I'm going to go get a cold cloth and some tea and give you some time to collect yourself," Gracia said.

I nodded and as she exited the room beat my fists against the mattress in frustration.

By the time Gracia came back in I had straightened the twisted mess of blankets as best as I could and was on my side with my back to the door. I supposed she'd want to talk about this.

I heard the soft click of porcelain being placed on the wood of the bedside table and she settled on the side of the bed. I was surprised when she placed a cool damp cloth on my forehead. Using my free hand I steadied it and then wiped my face and neck with it.

"Do you want your tea yet?" she asked in a neutral tone.

I sighed and for a moment said nothing then asked, "What time is it?"

"It's a little after three," she answered.

"Great, I woke you from a sound sleep, I'm sorry… " I said sullenly.
"Jean, have your tea and talk about it if you want to, or don't," Gracia said sounding almost stern.

I reluctantly rolled over and pushed myself up so I was sitting up against the headboard. Crossing my arms I said, "What do you want to know?"

She picked up a mug from the bedside table and offered it to me and I grudgingly accepted it. She then retrieved her mug and took a sip.

"I'm just anxious, they're worse when I'm anxious," I said quietly.

Gracia nodded and said, "I thought you might have them, with all your medications for sleep and anxiety. It's common in your situation you know, in soldiers actually."

I nodded and took another sip of my tea.

"They're just worse sometimes. They'd gotten better for a while… "

Gracia interrupted with, "So what's got you so anxious?"

"The long list or the short list?" I asked sarcastically.

Gracia sighed and said, "Which one has you the most worried?"

"To sum up both lists would be a fear of failure," I replied.

Gracia fretted at this rather broad range of possibilities.

"It's late, suffice to say I'll soon have more responsibilities and I'm not sure I'll be able to deliver and that scares the hell out of me."

Gracia nodded in understanding and said, "You wouldn't have been given responsibility if people didn't think you were up to it. Believe in yourself, I do. Sciezka and Elysia do and everyone you're afraid of letting down does as well."

I started to speak and she said, "As you said, it's late. Would you like something to help you sleep?"

"I hate those things, they make me all fuzzy and groggy," I complained, then leaned over to put my empty mug on the bedside table and winced.

"You overdid it today. Are they in your duffle bag?" Gracia asked rather insistently.

"Yeah, they are and you're right. This twinge in my back couldn't have helped any," I said.

Gracia went to the bathroom and when she returned brought a glass of water and then dug through my duffle bag until she found my shaving kit and retrieved the proper medications.

She handed the pills to me and I took them and chased them with a swig of water.

"I'll wake you in the morning. Did you have anything planned or can I let you sleep in a bit?" she asked.

"Nothing too pressing, just a final details for the new place and then Sciezka will be coming over to the new place after work. Sleeping in would be nice, thank you," I answered.

"Try and get some sleep," she said as she turned out the light and left the room.
The smell of strong coffee was the next thing I was aware of and I smiled as I cracked an eye.

"Did you sleep well after I left?" Gracia asked.

"Like the dead, those things put me out, but I needed it. One more worry though, what if I'm not brave enough?" I asked.

Gracia pursed her lips and said, "Bravery isn't about not being scared. Being brave is about doing what scares you despite being afraid. You're brave every day Jean."

I set my jaw, nodded then gave a slight smile.

"Have some coffee, it's a little after ten and Elysia and I are going to run some errands, do you want to come along?" she asked.

I thought for a moment and said, "Is it ok if I get some things finished first on my own and meet you?"

Gracia replied, "That would be fine, we'll grab some coffee or something before we drop you off at the new place. Does that sound like a plan?"

"Just let me get showered and we'll get going."

Once I was showered and dressed we headed out. Gracia and Elysia needed a few things for the trip East to the lake and then on to the grandparents. I needed to get copies of the house keys made and then had a few last minute details to take care of before Sciezka saw the house.

The driver, Staff Sergeant Kennedy, dropped us off in front of the coffee house and said that he'd be just up the block if we needed to drop off any packages in between errands.

Gracia asked, "How much time will you need Jean?"

I thought for a moment and replied, "I shouldn't need more than an hour or so. Why don't we meet back here at one-thirty?"

Gracia agreed that a late lunch would be in order and we both went about our business.

My first stop was the locksmith's to have copies of the keys made; he said it would take about an hour to complete my order. The next item of business would be a bit more complicated. I wanted the house be inviting and romantic, but how much was too much? I didn't want Sciezka to laugh at me for being an utter sap, but at the same time I wanted the night to be memorable.

After deciding that take-out for dinner, a bath, and nixing the idea of a roaring fire I headed to Amestris Woven Goods and Sundries for candles. It might be unseasonably warm, but there wasn't any reason that the fireplace couldn't be useful for something. I made a mental note that I'd need to pick up bubble bath as well.

Before entering the store I stopped to have a cigarette, go over the list again and calm my nerves. This wasn't any different than last time other than it was at my place and not Gracia's. It would be fine, better than fine. We'd have a lovely time and then tomorrow would be an informal gathering of my closest friends, again nothing to worry about and we'd have Sunday to ourselves. I stubbed my cigarette out and headed in.

Once inside I grabbed a basket, balanced it on my lap and headed straight for the candle section. I was on a mission. I browsed through various types eventually deciding that all the scented ones
stank like a brothel with all of their heady perfumes mingling. I finally settled on tall, white unscented candles in their own glass containers.

"Jean, you're back so soon, stocking up for an emergency?" a somewhat familiar voice behind me asked.

I steadied the now laden basket in my lap and turned my chair around and said, "Um, sort of... emergency?"

"Oh, you might not remember me, from a few days ago," the brunette sales clerk said.

"Right, Leah, you helped me a few days ago. But candles, for an emergency?" I asked mildly perplexed.

"Those are utility candles for when the power goes out, things like that," she said, mildly amused.

I flushed a bit and said, "Well the others all have a smell to them, and so I'll be going with these. I think I'm ready."

She gave what I could have sworn was a sniff of disappointment and directed me to the register. She had a stock assistant box the candles up and follow me to the car. I was relieved that I didn't have to lug them around for very long. I hadn't thought that out very well. I tipped the boy a few cens for his trouble and he said, "Thank you sir, and if you were wondering, she was hitting on you."

With that he winked and trotted back to the store.

I gave Staff Sergeant Kennedy a perplexed look as he placed the box in the trunk and he said, "You know, they say when it rains it pours."

I chuckled, shook my head and said, "I guess so. Thanks for waiting around for us."

Then, I headed in the direction of the shop where Sciezka and I had purchased Riza's birthday gift. Perhaps they'd have something small to give Gracia as a token of appreciation and I vaguely remembered it smelled good in there.

Once there I found what I needed quickly. Two small silver key fobs, appropriately masculine "foaming bath" as the proprietor called it, and a few scented candles that didn't remind me of a brothel. Browsing the stationary I selected a larger journal, as I'd found that my hand cramped if I wrote for long in the smaller ones and it had become a habit. There was also a "travel pen" that had a self-contained inkwell. I was left on my own and appreciated it, as there were so many different items to explore. I'd never figure out why he'd ever put together such a diverse offering, but they were all just the thing and selected with care. I'd have to remember to stop here first from now on. As he rang up my purchases he asked how the necklace went over. I was surprised he'd remembered but said, "Perfectly, she barely takes it off."

"I thought it would be a good fit," he said knowingly.

He commented on the two key fobs, one a small heart and the other one a star and said, "So if I may ask, who are these for?"

"The heart is for Sciezka, my girlfriend for lack of a better term and the star is for my friend Gracia," I told him. He was honestly interested.

"Gracia Hughes?" he asked.
I was surprised that he knew the name and answered, "Yes, my friend and landlady."

"Then you must be Jean," he said.

I took a moment to collect my thoughts and finally said, "So she must come in here a lot?"

He nodded and said, "She likes the essential oils and soaps."

"That would be 'my' Gracia. She makes this lavender water for Elysia that I love," I said.

"She should sell that Monster Water. I keep telling her I'd stock it," he said laughing.

"I'd love to stay and chat, but I'm on a schedule today. Oh, one question, where do you find all of this?" I asked.

He smiled at my question and answered, "Well most of the things I stock are favorites I've stumbled upon in my travels, but the silver and pewter are mine. It's a hobby that got too big to be just a hobby."

"Well it's beautiful. Sciezka truly loves that necklace and the paperweight was a big hit," I said.

"Come back soon, even if it's just to browse. Have Gracia and Elysia come visit as well," he said as I turned to leave.

I thanked him, wished him good afternoon then hurried to the locksmith's to pick up the keys and to meet Gracia and Elysia.

While waiting outside the coffee house I lit up another cigarette. I wasn't smoking nearly as much as I had before, but today I noted that I was indeed nervous as I'd smoked quite a few already and it was only early afternoon. As I finished my cigarette I heard Elysia before I saw her blonde pigtails bobbing up and down as she skipped down the sidewalk with Gracia chasing after her.

"Whoa Elysia," I said as she crashed into me as she hugged me.

Gracia slowed her pace and smiled at the scene, then suggested, "We should eat something. That one ran all over the High Street for the last hour."

I laughed and said, "That sounds like a very good idea."

Once at a table we ordered and while we waited for our food to arrive Gracia and I compared notes on what we'd accomplished.

I pulled out the star key fob and placed it in Gracia's hand and said, "Here are your keys."

Gracia turned it over in her hands and said, "Where did you get it?"

I told her about the little shop and she smiled and said, "That shop is one of my favorites. I'm glad you found it. Isn't the proprietor darling? He always stocks the best things and listens to Elysia's stories."

I replied, "Both are a find. He remembered you, and me apparently. You must go there often."

Gracia flushed and said, "Sometimes, yes. His rosewater is the best in Central and he has good prices for the quality of the product."

"It doesn't hurt that it's so cozy in there either," I said and winked.
"No, that doesn't hurt either. You didn't have to put my keys on something so nice," she said.

"Yes, I did," I said. "I saw it and I thought it was perfect. It's a wishing star, for lack of a better description. You and Sciezka have warped me beyond all recognition. I don't mind though, not much at least."

"What else did you get?" Gracia asked, wanting to see my spoils from her favorite shop.

"Hmm… new notebook, pen and some bath stuff," I replied.

"Bath stuff? What kind of bath stuff?" she said barely concealing a smile.

"Some orange and honey scented stuff that you know, foams," I mumbled.

"Bubble bath?" Gracia snickered.

"Manly bubble bath, very manly bubble bath," I huffed a bit.

"Can I at least smell this manly foaming bath?" Gracia asked.

I dug under my seat, found the bag and handed her the bottle. She uncapped it and sniffed and said, "Yes, oranges, honey, sandalwood and maybe some musk, it's manly. For bubble bath!"

I slumped in my chair and she added, "She'll love it."

Perking up a bit I said, "So what did you do besides chasing Elysia?"

"Well, I did my errands and some browsing and then stopped at the green grocer to drop off my list and yours," she answered.

"My list? I have a list?" I asked.

"I figured you would completely forget about stocking the icebox with everything else you have going on this weekend. Don't worry; it's just a few of your favorites and Sciezka's favorites. They're bringing the ice as well," she added.

"Gracia, you didn't have to do that," I said.

She smiled and said, "Don't thank me Jean, it's on your tab. I set that up too. I hope white wine is ok. I noticed that you two seemed to prefer it."

I laughed and said, "Gracia, when you become Fuhrer this country will run so smoothly."

Gracia grinned and said, "That's someone else's job."

I lowered my voice and said, "Then he'll just have to put you on the cabinet in an advisory capacity."

Our food arrived and we all continued talking jovially. Elysia had changed her order to peanut butter and honey from her usual, which we all had a laugh about and soon we went back to the car to head to my place. I noticed that Gracia had a small brown bag with her that she handed to Staff Sergeant Kennedy. He was right; this was a good detail to be assigned to.

We arrived at my place around three o'clock. I calculated that I had a little over two hours before
Sciezka arrived. Gracia and Elysia came in for a few minutes to help me bring in my purchases and Gracia left a list of phone numbers of all the different repairmen and services she used at her house.

Elysia went to go visit "her room" and Gracia said, "You're going to have a wonderful time tonight. She's going to love it. Call if you need anything, ok?"

I rubbed my temples and said, "I hope so. If preparation counts for anything then it will be great."

Gracia smiled and nodded. Elysia came bounding back into the living room and said, "Jean when do I get to sleep over?"

I laughed and said, "Soon Princess, soon. Let me get settled over here first."

That answer was fine by Elysia and as Gracia took her hand to go she said, "We'll see you at your party tomorrow Jean!"

"Yes, you will! I'm so glad you're coming," I exclaimed.

"Will there be streamers and balloons?" she asked.

Gracia covered her mouth to stifle a laugh as I answered, "No, it's a grown-up party Elysia. But why don't you wear your best dress and lots of hair ribbons. That would be just as good as streamers."

Elysia nodded furiously in agreement as Gracia led her out by the hand.

I surveyed the room around me and decided that the first order of business would be to set up the "emergency" candles in the fireplace. It was too warm to have a fire in there but it would look nice with something in there. Especially with the plans I had for the Xingian rug.

I'd set out all the candles in the living room, bedroom and bathroom when I heard a knock at the door. I cursed thinking that Sciezka must be early and hurried to go answer it. Luckily it was only the grocer's delivery boy. I directed him to set everything down in the kitchen and fished for some cens notes. It was only then I realized that he had a few trips to make.

After three trips to the delivery truck the large block of ice was in the icebox, and I had enough food to feed a small army for the weekend. Gracia was indeed thorough. When the delivery boy had left I hastily put away the food and put the wine in the icebox to chill and returned to my plotting.

Sitting in front of the linen closet I thought to myself, "How do I make that rug comfortable without making the living room look like a Xingian harem?" I laughed inwardly at that thought and realized that maybe that wouldn't be such a bad idea. Sciezka and I had never ventured outside of the bedroom and I had promised that we'd break in every surface of the house. Why not make the first one memorable?

I grabbed a duvet, some sheets and made my way back into the living room and set them on the ottoman for later. We'd eat, have a bath and then we could come back out here for dessert. Gracia had even thought to order strawberries and those would be an excellent late night snack.

With the house prepared I went to the bedroom to change and after much deliberation finally settled on a white button down shirt and faded dungarees. I left the shirt un-tucked as it would just be us and rolled the cuffs of the shirt so they wouldn't get caught on the rims of my chair. I decided that shoes would be unnecessary as well.
I went into the bathroom, turned on the taps and splashed some water on my face and ran my fingers through my hair, mussing it a bit before putting it back into place. Next I took care of the necessaries then washed my hands and finally satisfied with how I looked splashed on a little cologne.

As I came out of the bathroom I checked the clock on the bedside table and noted that I had about fifteen minutes before Sciezka would arrive. I grabbed a book of matches and my cigarettes and as quickly as I could began lighting the candles. I wanted to appear casual when she arrived, if I could pull that off in my current condition.

When I finally got the candles lit I went out onto the porch to have a cigarette and wait so I could see her reaction as soon as she got to the gate. I stretched, shifted my weight in my chair then settled again and retrieved a smoke from the pack. I was nearly finished when she came into view. She had a piece of paper in her hand and a rather quizzical look on her face.

"Sciezka, over here! You made it," I called to her.

She shoved the paper in her bag, ran through the gate and up the steps onto the porch. She turned around slowly, taking it all in and said, "Wow, this is perfect, just like you described."

"Yeah, it's great… Roy picked a good one and wait until you see the inside. Gracia did a number on it. But I left the study to you. You'll love it, there are bookshelves from floor to ceiling," I said.

She put down her overnight bag, crawled into my lap and began to absentmindedly stroke my forearms as she nuzzled my neck.

She then whispered in my ear, "The house is perfect, but I was talking about you. You fit with this house, this porch, and I didn't think a white shirt could look so good."

"Let's get you fed, you are obviously delusional from hunger."

As we studied the takeout menu I decided that it would be easier if we both just picked our favorites and had small orders of each as Sciezka and I sat in the living room.

"Just circle what you want on the menu, I'll call and then while we wait I'll show you the house."

She circled what she wanted and I placed the order while she changed out of her uniform. I decided that the grand tour could wait and went to the icebox for the wine, poured two glasses and called Sciezka into the kitchen.

Sciezka snickered at my pint glasses and I shrugged and we went back into the living room. I hadn't gotten a chance to try out the new couch yet so I suggested we sit there while we waited for the food to arrive. After rearranging some of the pillows I transferred and stretched out so I was leaning against one of the overstuffed arms. Sciezka handed me one of the pillows to put behind my back and then straddled my lap.

"You don't want to see how comfortable the couch is?" I asked, amused at her choice of seating accommodations.

She answered my question with a kiss, setting the tone for the evening. When she broke the kiss she surveyed her surroundings and said, "It's beautiful in here at this time of day. The sky is just starting to go pink." She leaned in for another kiss and added, "I like what you did with the fireplace too."

We exchanged kisses until we were interrupted by a short series of knocks at the door. I moved to
get up and Sciezka put a hand on my shoulder and said, "Jean, let me get it."

I started to protest but the couch was comfortable. Shrugging my shoulders I pulled my chair over closer so I could get at my wallet, retrieved it and pulled out enough money to cover the food and tip.

Sciezka went and took care of the delivery, then brought it back to the coffee table. After unpacking the bag and inspecting the contents of several cartons she handed me a set of chopsticks and a carton, then reclaimed her position astride me. She leaned over, deftly grabbed a carton and a set of chopsticks and dug in.

Gesturing at her carton with my chopsticks I said, "Hungry?"

Sciezka slurped a noodle from her chicken lo-mein and said, "I'm famished, plus you have work to do tonight. I haven't seen you since Wednesday."

Dinner continued in a leisurely manner, trading tastes of dishes between chatter and sips of wine.

We finished and it was time for fortune cookies. I grabbed all three and had Scieszka pick one. She unwrapped it, broke it open and then according to "the rules" read it, "Beauty will surround you - open your eyes to see it."

"In bed," I added.

"What? What was that for Jean?" she asked.

"Oh, that," I chuckled. "It's a game you play with the fortunes. You read them and then to each one you add, 'in bed'. Best one I ever got was, 'Tiny acorns grow to mighty oaks.'"

Sciezka rolled her eyes at me and laughed and said, "Well then, it's your turn. Pick one."

I selected a cookie, opened the wrapper and broke it open and read the small slip of paper silently to myself, and then aloud, "Be a good sport and you can't fail!"

I snickered at that one and Sciezka squealed, "In Bed!"

"One left, should we open it together?" I suggested.

Sciezka nodded and said, "Yes, this is fun."

I opened it, we each took an end and we broke it together. I handed the small slip from my half to Sciezka to read, "A romantic evening awaits you tonight… in bed."

She collapsed against me in a fit of giggles and I joined in her laughter. When we could finally both breathe I said, "So, after that long and hungry day at work would you like a bath?"

"That sounds like heaven… did you get your wish for the bigger tub?" she asked, sounding slightly mischievous.

"Yes I did," I answered. I think you'll be pleased. The bathroom is big enough that if we wanted to have the party in there tomorrow, we could."

Sciezka pushed up on my shoulders to nuzzle my neck, and then kissed me on the forehead and said, "I'll take care of the left-overs, and you go draw us a bath."

Once in the bathroom I went over to the tub and put the plug in the drain and turned on the taps. It
wasn't too hard to get the water to just the right temperature and I poured a few capfuls of bubble bath under the stream of water. When the tub was half full I began undressing and transferred to the tiled edge of the tub. From there it was simple for me to ease in on my own.

I leaned back and let myself relax against the cool porcelain. Sciezka came in, turned the lights out and soon the only light in the room came from a few candles. Quickly shedding her clothing she stepped into the tub, turned off the taps, faced me and gently knelt in front of me. Cupping my face in her hands she kissed me slowly, almost methodically and carefully lowered herself until she rested against my chest. She just lay there for quite awhile saying nothing.

"You alive?" I asked.

Sciezka nodded against my chest and said, "I'm digesting and conserving my energy for later."

I sighed contentedly and said, "In that case, rest up because you are going to need it."

We floated there in the scented bubbles until the water began to grow tepid. Sciezka got up first, her wet, pale skin luminous in the candlelight. She toweled off slowly, placed one on my chair and set the remaining towel on the edge of the bath for me.

"I can get out by myself, if you're wondering," I said.

She leaned over the tub, kissed me and said, "I figured you'd ask if you needed help. The was lovely. Meet me in the bedroom."

Sciezka was sprawled on the bed in a pair of pale blue panties and a simple white ribbed undershirt. Though frills and lace had appeal, somehow this was infinitely better. I approached the bed but then made no move to join her, she looked at me quizzically and I answered her un-voiced question when I said, "I thought we'd start with the living room."

She cocked her head wondering what I was talking about and then seemed to remember that we were going to break in every surface in the house. A slow smile spread across her face and when the glint reached her eyes she said, "Should I wait in here?"

I nodded and said, "Just give me a few minutes, I want it to be just right."

Once in the living room I spread out the duvet and sheets hoping it would be soft enough, then arranged the floor cushions. I quickly went to the kitchen and got the wine and strawberries and went back into the living room with them balanced precariously on my lap. After lighting the scented candles I'd gotten at the stationary shop and placing them in the center of the coffee table I transferred to the rug, pushed my chair so it wasn't so obviously in the line of sight and decided that it was either going to go over very well or amuse her to no end.

"You can come out now," I called to Sciezka.

I was sitting up with the bowl of strawberries next to me, nervously playing with the stems as she emerged from the bedroom. When she came into the room her eyes immediately came to rest on me and she whispered, "It's just like in Scheherazade. It's gorgeous. You have to read it."

I beamed at her approval and offered her a berry. She knelt in front of me and delicately plucked it from my fingers. We fed each other berries and exchanged slow kisses, then she straddled my lap and said, "I'm ready for dessert now."

Her tongue slowly circled my lips removing any traces of strawberries that may have lingered there. I wrapped an arm around her delicate waist while the other traced circles over her back and
shoulders. As her tongue was lightly massaging mine, occasionally flicking the tip to tease I'd catch it and she'd squirm with delight. When I began to nip at her lower lip she grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, pulling me on top of her.

Reclaiming my balance I pushed up on my forearm and shifted my weight so I was over her. While tracing the fine lines of her jaw and neck with my free hand I let her know my plans for her in hushed tones, punctuating my sentences with nips and flicks of the tongue. When biting her lower lip and sharp intakes of breath no longer sufficed, Sciezka would grind against me insistently.

Shifting to my side I motioned for her to follow and she willingly complied. I slid a hand ever so slowly under her tank top and she moaned and said, "It's been torture this week Jean, don't make me wait."

I cocked an eyebrow and said, "You win, but I want to try something. Are you game?"

"What did you have in mind?" she asked, taking the slight lapse in conversation while I gathered my thoughts as an opportunity to attempt to relieve me of my boxers and when that failed reaching under the waist band instead.

"You are insatiable, and I adore it but could we try a different position first tonight? As much as I love being screwed senseless into the bed it might be fun to try something else," I said hesitantly.

She pursed her lips, looking a bit dejected and I added, "Oh, this is no reflection on you… this is definitely a 'being masculine' thing for me."

Nodding in understanding and smiling she kissed me softly allowing me to take the lead in setting the pace. While nibbling her earlobe I said, "About those boxers…"

She slowly slid her hand from where she had been playing with the hair at the back of my neck to my shoulder, trailing fingers over my chest, finally resting her palm over my stomach tracing muscles that were becoming more defined every day.

"You're working hard, Jim must have killed you on Monday and Tuesday," Sciezka observed aloud.

"That's kind of where I got this idea," I said sheepishly.

She continued working her way down to my boxers and I watched her slide them down past my hips then she sat up and slid them down over my legs tossing them aside when she'd finished. I maneuvered to my back, raised myself onto my elbows and then pushed up into a sitting position. Moving forward to find my balance I carefully placed one leg in a bent position to help me keep upright and after shifting my weight to the other side moved the other leg out further for added stability.

Thankfully Sciezka saw where my idea was headed and said, "Should I sit and wrap my legs around you or kneel with my legs on either side?"

I smiled a little at the technical details of all of this and said, "Sorry it's all so complicated, I think it will work best if you kneel with your legs on either side if that's comfortable for you."

She removed what little clothing she was wearing, then moved with ease to position herself astride my lap and wrapped her arms around my neck and said, "I don't care if we have to make up every new position, I want you. Besides, it will be fun doing the research."

With that she touched her nose to my nose, rubbing them together a few times, then sought my
mouth for a deep and lingering kiss. I cupped her bottom, gently kneading it and lifting her a bit so her body was closer to mine. She nipped at my throat and ears, straying to my shoulders and chest while allowing her hands to roam. Eventually a hand drifted to the area of twilight sensation and I dipped my head to better reach her breasts. As I suckled and teased her nipples she began pressing her body against mine to meet me partway. Feeling myself beginning to lose balance I placed my left hand behind me to steady myself and Sciezka kissed me deeply. With this shift in position I seized the opportunity to make good on the promises I'd whispered earlier and began idly stroking her with the pad of my thumb while gently tracing patterns on her inner thigh. When she began biting her lip and wiggling in my lap in frustration I kissed her hungrily as she took my hand and placed it on my erection.

Taking hold I stroked it a few times and then Sciezka took me into her. She let out a soft moan, grasped my hair and then began to move slowly. In this position I was able to fondle and kiss Sciezka's breasts with her every rise and fall. As she increased the pace my cheeks began to flush and I tilted my head back panting hard. I placed a hand under her thigh to help steady her, felt muscles taut and quivering slicked with sweat and her juices. It would be soon.

Her pace became more urgent, her breathing and movements erratic and she bit down on my shoulder to stifle a cry. I felt the familiar jolt of electricity run up my spine, grabbed her tightly and as I held her she erupted in one more burst of frenetic energy then slumped against me. Caught off guard and barely able to tell up from down I toppled backwards and Sciezka collapsed on top of me, still coupled.

We lie there languidly for a few moments. Sciezka spoke first and said, "The rug needs more testing. I think I need to take you here like this, now."

I groaned and said, "May I please have some time to recover, maybe a snack, or some wine first?"

Sciezka moved to get up and get our wine when she winced and clutched her knee.

"What is it, are you alright?" I asked.

When she removed her hand from her knee, even in the dim light I could see a trace of blood. Sciezka got up to turn on the lamp and I felt utterly helpless. I should be the one tending to this; she should be sitting down being looked after.

After looking at it in the light we determined that it was just a small cut, but from what? Peering at the duvet I saw shards of glass. Sciezka looked around for her glasses so she could go get the first aid kit and I could tend to her knee but failed to find them.

A look of concern spread across her features as she said, "Jean, don't move."

She gingerly crouched so she wouldn't get cut on any of the glass and followed the trail of shards then said, "You are not going to like this. I think I found my glasses."

I looked at her dumbfounded, they weren't anywhere to be seen that I could tell.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"Roll over towards the coffee table very slowly and carefully," she said apologetically.

I did as she instructed and as I did she winced.

"Did you find them?" I asked hopefully.
"Yes," she said in a rather dismal tone. "I found them, but you are not going to like this. I didn't put them in a very good place when I took them off, heat of the moment and all and…"

"Oh, I broke them? I'm so sorry. We'll have to replace them as soon as possible," I said.

She sat down next to me and said, "I think we smashed them when we toppled over. There is glass all over the duvet, and um, you got cut."

"Well it doesn't... oh fuck, course I can't feel it," I said. "Where and how bad?"

"I don't think it's that bad, but it looks like there is glass in the cut from what I can see so it will have to get looked at," she said.

"Where is the cut Sciezka?" I repeated.

"It's on your butt, I'm sorry!" she yelped.

I sighed heavily and said, "It's not your fault. Shit, how are we going to explain this at the emergency room?"

"No idea, but I will vouch that you were magnificent," she said with a small smile.

"The first aid kit is in the bathroom next to all the other special supplies, Gracia left a list with the number for a cab service, and I guess I wait here eh?" I said wryly.

Sciezka hurriedly began making preparations to get me checked out and I was left prone on the floor to wallow for a while. This was not how we were supposed to be spending tonight.

Chapter End Notes

It's asking for a note... good writing shouldn't require notes.
One hundred seventy-four days, and 12 hours

Disclaimer: Still don't own it.

Warnings: Sciezka drops the F bomb. :D

One Hundred Seventy-Four Days and Twelve Hours:

After cleaning and dressing the cut as best she could, Sciezka went into the bedroom to find some clothes for me. I heard her fumbling with the drawers a bit, then the taps in the bathroom running and finally she came out.

"I'm still sorry about your glasses, fuck," I said as I hit a pillow.

She handed me a warm, wet washcloth and said, "You had better clean up before getting dressed, and Jean, it was an accident. They can be replaced. I'm more concerned about that cut."

I grumbled a bit and started to roll over to sit up.

"Be careful, you don't want the glass to go any deeper," Sciezka warned, her hand resting on the small of my back.

"So how do I do this then?" I asked, rather irritated at the situation.

"Well if you'd let me help you won't have to move as much… " she said, trailing off when she saw my scowl.

After much complaining on my part we finally arrived at the hospital. Sciezka paid the cabbie and instructed him to go get the chair. She then helped me out of the cab so I wouldn't worsen "the wound" as we had dubbed it.

As I began to sink back into my chair she reminded me to try to keep my weight off of my left side. I nodded and complied.

At the entrance I asked, "We're going to laugh about this later, right?"

Sciezka leaned over and planted a quick kiss on my cheek and said, "You aren't being too bad a sport for someone who has glass in his ass!"

I pulled her in for another quick kiss and said, "Of course it had to rhyme, didn't it?"

She nodded and grinned and finally said, "Let's get you checked out. The sooner we do, the sooner we can go home."

Once we got inside I went to the front desk and explained my condition in rather general terms, and indicated that I needed to see a doctor. The charge nurse handed me some forms and after filling them out I was ushered into an examining room.

Sciezka was asked to wait in the lobby and I was handed a gown to change into and told to sit on the examining table while I waited. Well that would be a difficult request to fulfill. Instead I removed my shirt and put the gown on and took off my shoes. I could at least get that much done myself.
There was a knock on the door and without waiting for an answer a man entered.

"Hello, you must be Second Lieutenant Jean Havoc, I'm Dr. Knox and I'll be treating you tonight," the man said.

"That would be me, but I'm retired. Just Jean is fine," I said.

"You were one of Colonel Mustang's men if I remember correctly," he said scratching his chin.

"News travels that fast?" I asked.

"No, no Roy is an old friend. He had me look at your case sometime back. I see you're doing well," he replied.

"All things considered I'm in perfect health, other than that whole walking thing," I said in a neutral tone.

He was silent for a moment then said, "So what are you here for? The admitting paperwork was rather vague."

"I had a little accident at the house and sat on some glass… " I told him hesitantly.

"So you got cut? Did the young lady pacing in the waiting room have anything to do with it?" he questioned.

I felt my cheeks getting warmer, but answered, "She was there."

Dr. Knox simply nodded and smiled and I was relieved that he didn't press the issue any further.

"Well, let's get you up on the table," Dr. Knox said.

As I was wondering just how that feat would be accomplished Dr. Knox came to stand in front of me and said, "You're working with Jim Bruno in P.T., right?"

I nodded in the affirmative, smiled and answered, "Yes I am. He is tough but I can tell that I'm getting stronger."

Dr. Knox smiled and said, "Good, because you'll need it to help me. Plant both feet on the floor, place both hands on my shoulders, and when I count to three pull up and try to keep steady. I'll then pivot with you standing and help you onto the table."

This sounded complicated but I trusted that he knew what he was doing. I did as instructed and after some maneuvering on both our parts I was face down on the table.

Dr. Knox wiped the sweat from his brow and said, "There that didn't end in disaster, let's see what you did."

He pulled an instrument tray closer to the examination table then left my line of vision. He came back with a pillow to put under my chest to make propping myself up on my elbows more comfortable and said, "So this injury would be under you pajama bottoms?"

"Correct," I muttered.

I heard him move around the table, re-arrange some of the equipment and then the rustle of fabric.

"Well, you did a number on yourself, it's good you came in to get it checked out… " he said as the
exam room door flew open.

"Knox how is he? Is it bad?" a very panicked Colonel Mustang said as he burst in.

"Fucking hell Roy, I'm fine! How did you even know?" I yelled.

Roy, who still appeared upset, looked around the exam area and once certain I wasn't mortally wounded said, "I have a list of my people, they call if anyone on it comes through here."

"Well you can leave now," I said sullenly. "It's obviously not fatal."

Roy laughed as he took note of the location of the injury and I turned my head to face him and shot him a glare.

It was Dr. Knox who acted as referee, "Jean he came all the way out here in the middle of the night, humor him."

"Fine, but he waits with Sciezka," I said before I was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Knox, it's Parker, you have a patient of mine in there. What's he in for?"

Thankfully Dr. Knox left the room to talk to Dr. Prick.

"Roy, grab something, cover me. I do not want him to see me like this!" I pleaded.

Without another word Roy took a sheet from the counter and covered me. I had just enough time to mouth, "Thank You" before Dr. Prick came in with my chart.

Without greeting me or even making eye contact he asked, "So any return?"

I left my commentary on his bedside manner unsaid and answered his question in a neutral tone, "No, I haven't had any return."

He continued, "So Knox tells me that the rehab is going well, let's check you out. It'll be what, six months soon?"

"It's been one hundred seventy-four days and what time is it Colonel Mustang?"

Roy moved to stand between Dr. Parker and myself and said, "It's two in the morning Second Lieutenant Havoc."

"Well then tack twelve hours onto the previous figure since the incident," I said flatly.

Dr. Parker was silent for a few moments and said, "If you would cooperate…"

Roy interrupted him saying, "I believe my subordinate has a formal appointment with you in a few weeks. Tonight he's here for another matter that hasn't been tended to yet. Please allow Doctor Knox to do his job."

With that Dr. Parker left.

Once he was out of earshot I said, "Thank you that was Dr…"

"Prick, I know. Gracia told me of your fondness for him, so did Alphonse," Roy said. "He lives up to the nickname. He should be in the medical examiner's office instead of Knox with that bedside manner of his."
Dr. Knox came back in and said, "Sorry about that Jean. Let me get you patched up and out of here, and Roy go wait with his friend and tell her he'll be just fine."

Roy clapped me between the shoulder blades and said, "So should I ask Sciezka exactly how this happened?"

I pushed up on my elbows as far as I could and said, "You wouldn't, would you?"

"He won't, now go keep Sciezka company and behave," Dr. Knox said.

With that Roy left the room and Dr. Knox finally began his examination.

After a few minutes spent silently pulling shards of glass out with tweezers, he cleaned and dressed the wound and asked, "So what really happened?"

Sighing I said, "Well it's about how it looks."

Dr. Knox chuckled and said, "I'm glad to see you're on the road to recovery. Roy had me worried when he first brought your case to my attention. So what are your plans?"

"In the immediate future, my housewarming and then a trip East to a lakeside cabin," I answered. "Oh what about that? Will this put a damper on the trip?"

"Don't worry, I didn't have to put in any sutures. Keep it clean, put the ointment I give you on it when you change the dressing, twice a day, and above all stay off it as much as possible the first two days so it can close," he instructed.

"Stay off of it?" I asked.

"Yes, as in other than that housewarming and the necessaries, in bed or otherwise on your side," he answered.

"Fair enough, at least you're human, that Dr. Parker…" I said

"Dr. Parker…" Knox interjected. "Is a fine surgeon, but your appraisal is correct. Since you didn't finish before, what's are the rest of your plans?"

"It has been decided that I should give academia a try. I'll be taking Psychology and Military History this quarter at the university," I said.

Dr. Knox nodded and said, "I think you'll do well if you apply yourself. Roy wouldn't steer you wrong."

I smiled and said, "No, he hasn't yet."

Then Dr. Knox helped me get ready and get back into my chair. I put my shirt back on as he went to the waiting room to get Sciezka.

When he came back in with Sciezka and Roy in tow he repeated the instructions and Sciezka promised to follow them to the letter.

"Oh, Sciezka, your glasses," I said remembering the cause of all of this.

Dr. Knox said, "Don't worry about it. I'll talk to a colleague of mine who owes me a favor. They'll be replaced by tomorrow afternoon. I'll call when it's arranged."
Roy winked at Dr. Knox and said, "I thought something was missing. So how did your glasses get broken Sciezka?"

Sciezka turned several shades of pink and I grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

Dr. Knox said, "Roy, make yourself useful and arrange to get them back to Jean's place."

I grinned, shook Dr. Knox's hand and Roy shrugged and headed towards the door.

Roy insisted on escorting us to the front door even though I protested that it wasn't necessary.

"Sciezka, I'll have a car come for you to take you to your appointment. Take good care of him and don't let him give you any lip," Roy said as he turned to leave.

"Roy, thanks… " I called after him.

"No thanks needed, though I think I've pieced together what happened, carry on," he called back.

As the car pulled away and Sciezka opened the door I said, "Smug…"

"Bastard," Sciezka said as she finished the barb for me.

Once inside Sciezka pointed towards the bedroom and said, "In there, now. Doctor's orders."

"I think I'll like this," I said.

Sciezka frowned and chided me saying, "No, you're going to get ready for bed and then stay there. I won't be the one who has to explain why it's not healing properly.

"So no fooling around?" I said and pouted.

"Not tonight," she said crossing her arms across her chest.

I went into the bathroom to take care of some things, and then entered the bedroom where the sheets were already turned down and transferred. Sciezka came in and sat down next to me.

"There will be plenty of time for that, so stop pouting. Will you be horribly offended if I help you get ready for bed?" she asked.

Still pouting I said, "Maybe."

"I promise this will be as painless as possible to your ego and you might even enjoy it," she teased.

She got up from the bed, went into the bathroom and came back with a shallow basin and washcloth.

"You have got to be kidding me, a sponge bath?" I asked.

"Is that a bad thing? I thought you might want to get cleaned up and then have a rubdown," she replied.

"Ugh, just nurses and sponge baths," I said wrinkling my nose at the memory.

Sciezka nodded, then grinned and said, "I bet they weren't naked and completely focused on making you feel better using any means necessary."

Upon further consideration, maybe sponge baths weren't evil.
Lying in bed on our sides like spoons I whispered in Sciezka's ear, "A good massage is like a fairy tale."

She turned a bit and asked, "How so?"

In my best dead-pan I answered, "They both have a happy ending."

It took a moment for Sciezka to register what I was getting at, but I knew when she did because she elbowed me in the chest and exclaimed, "That was perverted!"

"I was just making an observation," I protested.

"Well at least you're in a better mood now. It's late and I have no idea when my appointment will be tomorrow," she said. "That and I'm tired."

I yawned and pulled her closer.

The incessant ringing of the phone roused me from a deep sleep, but Sciezka's cursing was what woke me up.

"Smug bastard, arrogant jerk, the car will be there in ten minutes I trust you'll be ready. Ouch, fuck my toe!" she shouted.

"You used the F word. Sciezka are you ok?" I asked.

She was hopping around attempting to pull on a sock and finally gave up, then answered, "I'm fine, just in a rush. You stay put, that's an order. I'm calling Gracia and she'll handle whatever needs handling."

"But Sciezka… " I whined.

"It's not up for negotiation. Your role is strictly supervisory until the party. You are to stay off of that butt," she said pointing a finger at me.

"Can I at least get cleaned up a bit before Gracia and Elysia come over?" I asked.

"Of course," she said tossing a pair of pajama bottoms and a t-shirt at me.

The doorbell rang; she kissed me quickly and ran to go answer it.

She called on her way out, "Stay in bed!"
Housewarming Pt 1

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Housewarming:

As quickly as I could while minding that I didn't put pressure on the cut I made my way to the bathroom, took care of my routine, brushed my teeth and splashed a little water on my face. It would have to do for now. I then got dressed in pajamas and stole out to the living room.

Thankfully, Sciezka had cleaned up the evidence of last night's disaster. I returned to my room and my bed, and had just gotten situated when I heard a key in the lock and Elysia's voice announcing that she and Gracia had arrived.

Gracia came into the bedroom and said, "So I hear you had quite an adventure last night."

I blushed and asked, "So how much did Roy tell you?"

"Pretty much all of it," she said with a smile.

"Did Sciezka even need to call you?" I asked rather glumly.

Gracia shook her head apologetically.

"I'm sorry this leaves a lot of the party preparations to you," I said changing the subject.

"It's catered, right? I'll just set the table and get out the serving trays. It's nothing too taxing. Oh, and maybe I'll pick some flowers from the garden," she said.

Elysia chimed in, "My job is to read and color with you on the big bed."

I smiled and said, "I think that sounds like a very good plan."

Gracia left the room and Elysia hopped up on the bed to keep me company.

***

When Gracia returned she brought in two steaming mugs of coffee, a glass of milk for Elysia and some pastry and set it down on the bedside table. She then commenced fluffing the pillows and making a general fuss about me. I let her; it was easier to let her get her way when she was in mother hen mode.

As Elysia munched her breakfast she said, "This is like a picnic. We should do this all the time!"

I chuckled and said, "Maybe next time we'll move the picnic to the front porch. Speaking of which, do you think it needs a porch swing?"

Gracia nodded and Elysia answered, "Yes it does and a hammock. Every good porch has both."

"Well, you seem to be an expert. I'll have to have both," I said hiding my amusement at her sureness in the ways of the world.

"You should put some candles on the porch so if people gather out there to talk after dinner it has some decoration," Gracia suggested.
"That's a great idea, I hadn't thought about that. I've never really decorated before. Last night was my first real attempt," I said.

Gracia smiled and said, "I bet the fireplace looked lovely. When Sciezka gets back I'll run out and get some more candles and other incidentals."

"You are a lifesaver, can I ever thank you enough?" I asked.

"Don't be silly. Besides, if you haven't noticed Roy thinks you are my hobby. He might be right, but it's nice to have you and Sciezka around as often as you are. It was lonely before cooking for just the two of us," she said.

"Well I intend to repay the favor and watch Elysia so you can have other interests too. You wouldn't mind coming to stay at my house, would you Elysia?" I asked.

"No Jean! I love your house. You have good floors for dancing on and I love my room," she replied beaming.

"Maybe you can get Sciezka to play ballerina with you sometime," I said.

Gracia laughed and said, "I won't tell her you were the one who suggested that."

With breakfast finished Gracia cleared away the dishes and left Elysia and myself to color. She'd come in every now and then to freshen up my coffee and ask if we needed anything. It was Elysia who nodded off first and I decided I might as well nap too.

***

The warm haze of my nap was disturbed by a popping sound and girlish laughter. I flailed a bit trying to roll over, caught myself before falling out of bed and finally saw the sources of laughter.

Gracia, Riza and Sciezka were standing next to the bed and Gracia had a camera in her hand. The flash bulb must have made the popping noise.

"Honestly, blackmail photos? Ladies, I am hurt," I scolded them.

Riza was the first to speak, "These will go over well at the firing range and perhaps we should print a copy to send to Breda."

"You wouldn't..." I said.

Gracia giggled and said, "You know she would."

"You have a little something on your chin," Sciezka said, gesturing towards my face.

"The hell? Oh great, I was drooling. This is just wonderful," I complained.

Elysia finally woke up, stretched, rubbed the sleep from her eyes and said, "What's so funny Mommy?"

Gracia smiled and said, "We caught Jean sleeping with your stuffed bear."

Elysia didn't think this was so odd, grabbed her bear and snuggled up next to me and said, "Bears are a good thing, aren't they Jean?"

Matching her indignant tone I said, "I completely agree Princess Elysia, stuffed bears are a very
good thing."

I hugged her close for emphasis and stuck out my tongue at the three "traitors".

Riza stifled a laugh and said, "I'll see you all later. Sciezka, glad I was able to help with your errand this morning."

I was a little confused but then took a good long look at Sciezka and said, "You got different frames. I like them. Did you get a haircut too?"

Thankfully, the expressions registering on the adult female faces ranged from relief to approval.

The frames Sciezka and apparently Riza had picked out were made of thin silver wire and oval shaped. They complemented Sciezka's delicate features perfectly.

Sciezka touched her hair a bit self-consciously and said, "Do you like it? It's not that different…"

I patted the bed next to me and said, "Get over here so I can fully appreciate you."

She smiled and Gracia left the room with a reluctant Elysia trailing behind her.

***

Once we were alone I propped myself up on an elbow, looked her up and down, smiled, and then ran my fingers through her hair.

"So you like it?" she asked hesitantly.

"I like whatever you like, but I must say I like this window dressing. The new glasses suit you. Guess I just had to take one for the team to get you to change things up," I answered.

Gracia called from the living room, "I'll be back in a few hours to help Sciezka set out the food. I suggest you both have a nap as last night was so late."

Sciezka went to the bedroom door and said, "That's a great idea, thanks so much for all the help."

I heard the front door close as Gracia and Elysia left and Sciezka closed the bedroom door, stretched and said, "I could really use a nap."

"You just woke me up from one and you want me to sleep more?" I asked.

"You are awfully cranky. Trust me, there will be plenty of time for non-sleeping activities later. Right now I'd like to curl up and just rest with you," she replied.

"When you put it that way I think a nap would be an excellent idea. Get something more comfortable on and join me," I said.

Sciezka stood up, stepped out of her loafers, slowly removed her sweater and unbuttoned her pants and then let them fall to the floor. She stood before me in just her panties and camisole.

"I thought…" I stammered.

"We are just napping, but that doesn't mean I don't want to be as close as I possibly can be to you and this is comfortable. Let's lose your shirt and get under those covers. Oh, I should set the alarm," she said.
Sciezka wound the clock, removed her glasses carefully placing them on the bedside table, pulled impatiently at the covers I was lying on to help me get under them, then tugged off my shirt with equal fervor. Then she climbed over me, lie down to face me and whispered, "We'll rest now, get ready, have the party and then you can have your way with me."

"Really?" I asked. "It hasn't been the best weekend so far. After a sex disaster and a trip to the hospital I don't know… I'm not exactly a party to be around."

Sciezka nestled closer to me and said, "What you are overlooking is that the accident and subsequent trip to the hospital were caused by some amazing sex. I was careless with my glasses because I could hardly wait to be thoroughly bedded."

It took me a few moments to think over what she said, "So the complications…"

She interrupted me with a kiss and then said, "All worth it and not as off-putting as you make them out to be."

I returned her kiss and said, "Just smack me or something when I worry like that, would you?"

She smiled and replied, "Any time, but I think that I'd rather convince you some other way. Now hold me close and let's sleep."

Holding onto my shoulders she fidgeted to get comfortable, finally settling on draping an arm and leg over me as she buried her face in my chest and mumbled, "You're a good pillow."

After playing with her hair for a few minutes I noticed she had fallen asleep. I wrapped my free arm around her, closed my eyes and tried to get some sleep too.

***

The alarm clock went off; Sciezka startled, flailed a bit and finally got it turned off. She then stretched, rubbed her eyes and said, "See, you needed more sleep too."

"I figured if I didn't sleep I'd at least be able to hold you. You're much better than Elysia's stuffed bear. I won't object to more napping or enforced bed-rest as long as you promise to join me," I said.

Sciezka grinned and said, "That can be arranged. Now c'mon, it's shower time and I have to change that dressing."

"Could you do 'Naughty Nurse' again?" I asked hopefully.

"Maybe, now hit the showers," she answered.

***

I rolled over, sat up and carefully transferred to my chair so she wouldn't scold me. Then I headed into the bathroom. Once in the bathroom I got out of my pajama pants ran the taps until the water was the correct temperature and turned on the shower. I had no sooner gotten in and started lathering my hair when Sciezka joined me, to help she explained. I've decided I'm definitely all for help if it involves mutual nakedness.

Once we were both clean Sciezka set two towels out for me and made a peep show worthy production of getting us both dry. We then headed into the bedroom to change my bandages and get dressed.
Sciezka suggested that it would be easiest if I lie down on the bed and though I wanted to protest I knew she was right. After I complied she changed the dressing and thankfully the wound had stayed closed. Hopefully I would be good-as-new by the time we had to leave for the lake.

My good behavior was rewarded with a back and shoulder massage.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"You're tense, I can tell you hate staying in bed all day," Sciezka replied.

"Well I've done enough of it for a lifetime in the last six months," I grumbled.

"I'll just have to keep you company tomorrow and maybe Monday," she offered.

When she finished she said, "We should get dressed. You requested the little black number, is that still ok?"

"I think it would be perfect. I can show off the girl while showing off the new place," I said with a wink.

That earned me a smack, but she relented and kissed me despite my cheekiness.

"Do you think the blue sweater and black house pants will do?" I asked. "There aren't many options for pants with this cut."

"Even without the current situation that would be fine, though I do prefer your faded dungarees with that sweater. I just love that sweater," she answered.

We finished getting dressed and I ducked into the bathroom to fix my hair and splash on some cologne. When I was done Sciezka was in the living room talking animatedly with Gracia and setting out flowers.

Elysia ran up to me and thrust a bouquet of flowers at me. I invited her onto my lap and said, "So what have you got there?"

"These are flowers from the garden, um hyacinths, daffodils, tulips and the little ones are the last of the crocuses," she informed me.

"Well they are beautiful," I said. "Did you help?"

She beamed with pride and said, "I did. We put bulbs in the ground in the autumn and these are what came up."

"Gracia, thank you for plundering your garden for the decorations. They look and smell wonderful. The hyacinths especially," I noted. "You'll have to tell me what and when to plant. Ma always had a garden back East."

While Gracia appreciated my input, I was still shooed to the couch to "supervise and rest" in her words.

Sciezka, Gracia and Elysia bustled around the house setting out candles, arranging flowers and soon the food arrived. I checked my watch and called to Sciezka, "They'll be here soon. May I please have a glass of wine and a smoke on the porch while we wait for them?"

Sciezka came into my line of sight, shook her head and asked, "You must be climbing the walls, eh?"
After I nodded vigorously in reply, she shrugged and said, "Go check out the food and have a glass of wine. You deserve time off for good behavior."

I got off the couch quickly and headed to the kitchen before Sciezka had a chance to change her mind.

Gracia met me in the doorway with an ashtray and a pack of smokes in one hand and one of my sturdy pint glasses half-full of white wine in the other.

Eagerly accepting both I took a sip of wine and said, "Bless you Gracia!"

As I headed out the front door she called after me, "Light the candles on the front porch so it's ready when they arrive."

***

After surveying what they'd done to the front porch I lit the candles then sat back, fished a cigarette out of the fresh pack and smiled. Once I got it lit I took a long drag and exhaled. This was as close to paradise as it got. After I took my last drag I stubbed the butt out in the ashtray and set it on the railing. I then had a swig of wine to wash the slightly acrid taste from my mouth. I put the glass between my knees to hold it and stretched.

"Well you're awfully comfortable," Jim called as he came up the walk.

"Sure am, what's the curbside impression?" I asked.

Jim thought for a moment and said, "It's nice, and very slick how the ramp is hidden by the hedges."

I grinned and said, "I agree, the house doesn't scream 'Cripple lives here.' at all."

Thankfully Jim knew I was poking fun and not wallowing. He looked at my drink and said, "So where can a guy get one of those?"

"In the kitchen, let me show you in and then I'll come back to my post as greeter," I said.

Just as I pushed the front door open I heard Roy call from the sidewalk, "Second Lieutenant, should you be exerting yourself like that?"

"Get up here and in the house so this thing can start," I groused.

Jim arched an eyebrow and asked, "Is there something I should know about?"

I grimaced and said, "For the love of… so you didn't hear?"

He shook his head and gave me a quizzical look.

"Ha! Finally my name is out of the rumor mill for a little while. It's nothing big, I had an accident last night and had to get patched up at the hospital."

Roy, Riza, Jim and I then went into the house. Sciezka directed us into the living room and Gracia brought out trays of appetizers and asked what everyone wanted to drink. A few minutes later they came back in and it was officially a party.

Once introductions were taken care of we all made small talk until Jim smiled and said, "Well Jean, you look fine. So what did you hurt?"
Roy guffawed and said, "Jim, it was priceless…"

I cut him off warning, "Roy, not in front of the K-I-D."

He simply smirked and said, "Well it was G-L-A-S-S in his…"

"Colonel Mustang, permission to speak freely," I cut in.

"Yes Second Lieutenant Havoc?" he asked in an amused tone.

"If you are so concerned with the injuries I incurred last night you are more than welcome to kiss them all better," I retorted.

Riza, Sciezka and Gracia covered their mouths to stifle their laughter, Jim gave a hearty chuckle and Roy simply sat there, stunned into silence for once.

"What's so funny?" Elysia asked, clearly lost.

Thinking quickly I answered, "Everyone is just surprised that your Uncle Roy can spell."

That answer seemed to satisfy her for the time being. We'd be in big trouble once she learned how to spell.
Housewarming Pt 2

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Housewarming - Part Two:

After recovering her composure Gracia said, "Jean, do you think we should sit down to dinner?"

"I don't see why not," I answered then asked. "Roy, are Fullmetal and Alphonse out on a mission?"

Roy nodded and answered, "They send their regrets and Winry is in Rush Valley until Fullmetal does something reckless and needs repairs."

"As much as I love seeing and working with Winry, I hope I don't see her for a long while," Jim mused.

"Same here," I said, then added. "With Fullmetal, no news is usually good news. It means he hasn't leveled any buildings, overthrown the local government or pissed off too many people in general."

"He seems to have quite a temper," Jim observed.

"That happens mostly when his height or age are called into question," Roy said glibly.

"Fullmetal has matured since he passed the exam, he thinks things through, on what rationale I'm not sure," Riza said. "Though yes, he can be a loose cannon."

"Give him some credit, he's barely legal to enlist and he's all over the country righting injustices in his own way," I said. "Alphonse and Winry care about him and they're loyal to a fault. Besides, he's brilliant."

Roy chimed in, "Sounds like Fullmetal has a new member of his fan club."

"No, I've just come to appreciate the underdog," I said.

Gracia interrupted the conversation suggesting, "We should eat, you planned for more people, and Ed's appetite. There is a lot of food."

"I quite agree," I said. "We'll have dinner, the five cens tour and then dessert."

Elysia led the way to the dining room, informing everyone that there were place cards showing where to sit and that she had helped with the flowers. She further directed that everyone should keep their elbows off the table and use their napkins.

Gracia had greatly downplayed her plans for the party when she had explained them. She'd placed white candles of various sizes down the center of the table and instead of one large flower arrangement there were several small ones placed between the candles. The way she'd arranged the food only contributed to the overall effect.

"Roy, she'll plan State Dinners, eh?" I said after taking it all in.

Riza then said, "Gracia, it's all so beautiful and Jean from now on all parties are at your house."

Gracia smiled, colored a bit at the flattery and said, "Well really the menu was all Jean and Sciezka's doing, and this house is easy to get ready for a party. Jean would have had it handled if
"Sciezka would have let him lift a finger today."

"Roy, your tip on Pane Fresco was the best. Sal, the maitre d' was so helpful," I said.

Sciezka who was sitting to my left elbowed me and whispered, "You should propose a toast."

I whispered back, "You're right I'm used to gatherings like this being the beery sort."

I looked around the table, noting that everyone had a full glass, and cleared my throat to get their attention. Once all eyes were on me I raised my glass of wine and said, "I'd like to thank you all for coming, for helping me through the rough parts that make nights like this seem that much sweeter. So enjoy tonight, this is a small gesture to repay you all."

I heard murmurs of "here, here" and "nicely done". Then Roy raised his glass.

"Riza, quick kick him for me," I said in jest.

Roy cleared his throat and said, "Here's to those I love the best…"

I recognized that one immediately and shot him a glare.

"Oh right," Roy said sheepishly. "That one is not for mixed company. Thank you for catching that. On a more serious note, and before dinner gets cold, our friend has gathered us here to thank us. He didn't need to. We wouldn't have stuck around if you were an utter dick. We like you. You are stuck with us, enough said. To Jean."

My guests raised their glasses and after a bawdy start, Roy's toast was truly heartfelt.

With the toasts made we passed around the serving platters and everyone settled in to eat in earnest.

"So this Pane Fresco place, what's it like?" Riza asked.

The question had been directed at me, but my mouth was full of chicken parmesan. I nudged Sciezka and she answered Riza's question.

"The food is great, with a really diverse offering of Aquroyan specialties on the menu. The wait staff is amazing. I don't think Jean is going to want to go anywhere else in Central, Sal saw to everything. We sat on the patio, but I guess inside there are two dining areas and they also have more private dining booths. Oh, their wine list is extensive and there was a full complement of dessert offerings."

Riza smiled and said, "I take it you'd both recommend it highly?"

I took a sip of wine, wiped my mouth and said, "Anything less would be an understatement, and Sal put all this together with just a headcount, address and delivery time."

Jim looked up from his plate and said, "It is good, not quite like Mama's but every family has their own secret sauce and this one is good."

Elysia, who was sitting to my right, was enjoying her plain pasta with sauce and I asked, "Would you like to try some of the other dishes?"

She wrinkled her nose at first, then reconsidered and said, "I'll try a 'no thank you' helping."

This had become a fairly common practice when Gracia, Elysia and I would dine out. Anything off
of my plate was better than hers. I cut a few bites of chicken for her and a corner off of each of the
types of ravioli and put them on her plate. She poked at the chicken at first, then took a bite and
smiled. It was a success.

Gracia smiled and shook her head, and Jim said, "You'll have her eating calamari next!"

Riza caught my gaze and gave me a small smile, which from her spoke volumes.

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We continued eating, swapping stories and laughing. When everyone finished Sciezka suggested
that I show Roy, Riza and Jim the house while she and Gracia put away the food.

"Are you sure? I can help," I said.

She got up and gave me a quick kiss and said, "Go be the gracious host. We're going to make
coffee and then have dessert in the living room."

"If you'll all follow me I'll show you around the place. I still have a lot of things I want to do with
it, I'm thinking of planting a garden, but you'll get the general idea," I said. "That and you'll know
where the bathroom is."

I left the dining room with Roy, Riza and Jim in tow. Our first stop was the study.

"Don't mind all the boxes, after the trip Sciezka and I will be clearing it out, getting a desk and
some comfortable chairs and I will hopefully write top mark papers here. Next you'll get to see the
well appointed linen closet, coat closet and guest bathroom," I said in my best tour guide voice.

Riza lagged a bit behind and said, "The study is beautiful. Sciezka must adore those bookshelves."

"Yeah, we're looking forward to getting it just right," I said.

"You will," she said as she patted my shoulder and smiled.

We rejoined Jim and Roy who were inspecting the guest bathroom, then moved on to the guest
bedroom.

"This is Elysia's room, and if you ask nicely she'll share it," I said.

Jim laughed and said, "She's got you wrapped around her little finger."

Shrugging I said, "Pretty much, but I don't mind."

"This is definitely a little girl's room," Roy said as he knelt by the pram. "I didn't see this
happening when I suggested that you stay with Gracia."

"Well of course you couldn't have," I said. "What with my track record with the ladies and
everything else on my mind… "

Roy paused, frowned and said, "I was looking after your best interests and I thought they'd be a
good fit. But I think you were as good for them as they were for you."

I hesitated and said, "That outcome was something no one could predict. Everything has been for
the best."

Riza crossed the room to stand next to Roy who was still kneeling.
"Hey Jim, I'll show you how slick the modifications to the master bathroom are, those two will be bored senseless by the details," I said as I headed for the door. "Catch up with us in the living room for another drink."

Jim and I headed for my room so Roy and Riza could be alone.

I could tell that though Roy was able to make polite conversation around and with Maes' family that he still felt personally responsible, as if he'd killed Maes himself.

Perhaps the only reason he was even remotely comfortable with me was because I seemed to be adapting to my circumstances. After rationalizing that it could have been worse, or a higher injury, the hand I'd been dealt was better than the other possible scenarios I'd worked out. As soon as I decided that I was glad I had lived, complications be damned, the setbacks weren't such blows to my ego. But I still reserved the right to sit in the bitter-barn whenever I felt like it.

"I can tell by the look on your face that you're thinking too much," Jim said. "So point out the special features, I can't find them. This looks like a regular bathroom."

Grinning from ear to ear I said, "I know! Instead of hastily installed pull-bars and benches it's all built in as part of the design… and thanks for the wake-up call."

"So what's on your mind?" Jim asked.

I sighed and said, "I'm just frustrated that something as minor as a damned cut can put me out of commission for this long. Six months ago this would have been nothing, a scratch, I'd get patched up and get back to work without a second thought."

Jim considered this for a moment, sat on the edge of the tub, tugged at his salt and pepper hair and finally said, "Setbacks will make you think about those kinds of things. This has really been the first roadblock in your recovery."

After searching his face for a moment I asked, "So you were expecting something like this?"

"I'd be lying to you if I said no. You've been so focused on your rehab and making sure others are comfortable with what has happened that I think you push all your thoughts about what you've lost aside," he answered.

"When I'm around Sciezka and Gracia, well even you, I don't feel that different. You all see me daily so we don't have stilted conversations about how well I get around or I'm doing," I said.

"Yeah, I get around and I'm not helpless. It's nothing heroic, it's just what I have to do."

"That would get old pretty quickly," Jim said.

"After all the whining I've done and all the time we've spent together I barely know anything about you," I said changing the subject hastily and then paused. "It feels awkward to not know anything about someone who is such a big part of my life."

"What do you want to know?" Jim asked, smiling a bit. "Why are you so curious?"

"Well, I should know something about you, and if you spend more time with Gracia I'll have to know," I answered and folded my arms across my chest in a protective gesture.

"I'm 38, was born in Central, my parents were from Aquroya, they owned a restaurant, I have no siblings and I served in Ishbal as a medic," he said. "What else do you want to know?"
"Why a medic?" I asked and added. "That was awfully name, rank and serial number. Let me know if this makes you uncomfortable."

"Mama wanted me to be a doctor, I was only half-way through my studies when I was drafted. So I became a medic," he said with a shrug.

"Have you ever been… um any other family?" I asked, uncomfortable that I might be prying too much.

"Jean, just ask it happened a long time ago. I was engaged before Ishbal, but she didn't wait for me," he answered. "It's just as well. I had a lot on my mind afterwards."

"So you're not a medic or a doctor now, why?" I asked, changing the subject.

"As a medic on the front there were severe injuries that either died, or went home broken men. A lot of new treatments came out of Ishbal, yours for example. A decade ago you might not have been able to live independently outside of the hospital. The point is more soldiers survived who needed rehabilitation. But the cases that haunted me the most were the soldiers that were sent back out after being patched up just to be put in harm's way again," he paused then continued, "Doing what I do now I can do more good. I may not get you back to your original condition, but I have more time to try."

"We should probably get back to the party," I said. "Oh and about Gracia, you should move slowly, but move all the same. I see something there."

"I don't know, it's only been… " Jim said hesitantly.

"Yes, true. You'd both be wise to move slowly, but you're two of my favorite people," I said. "Besides, you're not too bad in the looks department. Maybe you're a little short, but you're still passable."

"Hey, look who's talking," he said jokingly. "You're 4'6"."

"No fair, that is sitting down. You're about an inch shorter than Roy by my estimate, the brown eyes and physique from hauling the likes of me around give you bonus points, but I'm still almost a head taller than you are," I joked.

"You are a tall guy. But seriously, do you think I have a chance?" Jim asked.

"Yes, I do. Now let's get back to the party," I said.

***

When Jim and I got back to the living room the other guests were talking, laughing and having another glass of wine. Roy and Riza were on the couch and in my absence Elysia had decided to occupy Roy's lap. Gracia sat on the overstuffed armchair. I looked around and couldn't see Sciezka.

I glanced at Gracia and without asking I had my answer, "She's in the kitchen."

Relieved I sighed and said, "Jim, find a seat. I suggest the ottoman, though the chair is big enough to fit three easily."

Elysia looked up from her chatter with Roy and said, "It is a very big chair. I can fit in it with all of my babies at once."
"Well, there you go Jim," I said with a wink, and Gracia scooted over a bit to offer him some room which he bashfully accepted.

Sciezka came back from the kitchen with dessert on a tray, which she offered to everyone. She asked if anyone needed any more coffee or wine and when she was satisfied that everyone was taken care of she looked to me and said, "So where were you going to sit?"

Laughing I said, "Brought my own chair, where are you going to sit?"

Sciezka rolled her eyes and leaned in and whispered, "You've been sitting for quite a long time. Why don't I pile up some pillows against the ottoman and we'll sit on the floor?"

I wasn't thrilled with this option as it meant I'd have to transfer to the floor with an audience, but the only person in the room who had not seen that was Roy. He'd see it sometime, it might as well happen sooner than later.

Sciezka arranged the pillows, I got myself on the floor propped on one elbow on my side to take the pressure off my rear and Sciezka placed my tiramisu and coffee on the floor in front of me. Then she settled in behind me with her dessert. This wasn't too conspicuous, it could have been worse.

As we all worked on our dessert we fell silent and thankfully Elysia came to the rescue when she asked, "Uncle Roy, this is a party, right?"

He was taken aback as Elysia hadn't called him that in awhile, but he answered, "Yes it is, why do you ask?"

She crossed her little arms, gave an exasperated sigh and said, "Well if this is a party, then where are the presents?"

Sciezka giggled and said to Elysia, "Everyone left them on the table in the entryway, should I go get them?"

Elysia nodded furiously and hopped off Roy's lap to follow Sciezka and "help" carry what everyone had brought. Sciezka reclaimed her place behind me, placing a hand on my shoulder and Elysia sat next to the small pile of presents they'd placed in front of me.

"Which one should I start with?" I asked.

Elysia handed me a long, narrow box and said, "This one first, and you should save mine for last."

I chuckled and checked the box for a card, seeing none I searched the room to see who it was from.

Jim said, "That would be from me, just open it. It's a start to your wine cellar as this place has everything."

After opening the box I saw that it contained a smaller wooden case, and opened that. Carefully nestled in wood shavings was a bottle of wine. With the care it was packaged with it looked like it was probably "the good stuff".

"Thank you Jim, I'll have to save this for a special occasion," I said.

He smiled and said, "It's from one of my favorite vineyards in Aquroya, a good year, and I think you two will love it."
Sciezka squeezed my shoulder as he said "you two" and I was sure she was blushing.

The next present Elysia selected was from both Roy and Riza, as indicated neatly in Riza's hand on the small white card that was attached to it. From looking at the simple felt bag I was fairly sure what it was. I opened the drawstring and pulled out a glass bottle filled with amber liquid. After studying the label I said, "This is older than I am, and single malt. Thank you, both of you. We will be breaking this out tonight for a nightcap."

Riza smiled and said, "It's good of you to share. There's also something for you at the firing range. I'll give it to you next time you're there."

Elysia wrinkled her nose and said, "Jean, your presents aren't very much fun."

Roy laughed and said, "These are fun for grown-ups." He gestured toward the pile of presents and said, "In addition to sending their regrets on not being able to attend, Edward and Alphonse sent gifts."

He directed Elysia to a neatly wrapped package in the dwindling pile and she handed it to me. Upon unwrapping it I saw that they'd sent a small leather-bound journal and a box of chocolates that had obviously been opened. I opened the journal and noted that Alphonse had written a small inscription:

Dear Jean,

Sorry Brother and I couldn't make it to your housewarming. I noticed you always have a notebook with you and thought you might like this one. I hope you do. Brother picked out chocolates for you, but he got hungry while I was choosing which journal to get you.

Sincerely,

Alphonse

P.S. I only ate one of the chocolates, if it helps any, they're good. If that bastard Colonel makes any cracks about it, deck him for me.

Ed

I laughed as I read Alphonse's note, as did Sciezka who was peering over my shoulder. It was a good thing I hadn't read it out loud. I set the journal down and said jovially, "Only a few more presents left Elysia. Would you like a chocolate? Edward sent them."

She did want one and she agreed with Fullmetal that they were delicious. Elysia didn't quite connect Ed with the title "Fullmetal"; I figured both names were interchangeable. It depended on the situation. I'd always liked calling him "Boss" myself. I'm sure he preferred that to "Shrimp", "Pipsqueak" or some of the expletives he'd had hurled at him when he'd bust places up.

"Alright Elysia, what next?" I asked and she handed me a brightly wrapped package.

"It's from Mommy!" she said.

I smiled at Gracia and said, "After everything you've done you didn't have to get me a gift, thank you."

Gracia laughed and said, "Just open it, in the end I'm saving myself time."
After carefully removing the paper from the gift I noted it was a book, but then opened it and after scanning the first few pages I realized that it contained some of my favorite recipes, in Gracia's handwriting.

"These are your recipes, aren't they?" I asked.

"Most of your favorites and some of Sciezka's favorites, now you can cook them here," she said modestly.

Elysia piped up and said, "She got you the percolator too. Mommy says you are grumpy without coffee."

We all laughed at her statement. When the room quieted I said, "Thank you so much, that was such a thoughtful gift. Both of them are actually, and I am very grumpy without my morning coffee."

There was only one more package in front of me and I said, "Elysia, is this your gift, the one I had to save for last?"

She handed it to me, then nuzzled into my chest and said impatiently, "OPEN IT!"

Someone was getting tired and cranky, besides me. I obliged her and made a show of opening the misshapen package.

"Oh, wow, this is so great. It will be the first picture on the mantle," I said.

I hugged Elysia close and looked over at Gracia then said, "It is permanently of record that I am the 'King of the Couch'."

The grown-ups all chuckled and I said to Elysia, "Go show them the beautiful picture you gave me. I love how you painted the frame."

Gracia must have helped, as photographer and framer, but this was definitely one of the best gifts I'd ever received. The brightly painted wood frame contained a photograph that had been taken of me napping on the couch with Elysia curled up on my chest. That one photograph captured the best parts of my time under their roof.

As she flitted through the room with my treasured gift the adults told her how beautiful the colors on the frame were, and smiled at me.

"I definitely saved the best for last. Thank you Princess Elysia," I said.

She'd finished showing the picture around the room, returned to her spot on the floor next to me and yawned.

Gracia smiled and said, "I think that is our cue to go, I had a wonderful time. It was nice seeing everyone."

Jim got up and said, "Would you two like a ride home?"

"That would be wonderful, it's not far but it has been a long day," Gracia said.

Jim picked Elysia up from her spot next to me on the floor and said, "It was nice meeting everyone. Jean thanks for the hospitality."

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After Jim, Gracia and Elysia left Riza said, "Sciezka why don't you let me help you with some of the dishes."

"Riza, you don't need to help with the…” I said before her scowl silenced me.

*Well, if Riza wanted to help or wanted me to talk to Roy alone, who was I to argue?*

Roy said, "Why don't we have a nip of that single malt?"

"I'll go get the glasses and ice, you go out onto the porch. We can talk there," I said.
S.N.A.F.U.

After Riza and Sciezka shoved us out of the house, liquor in hand, Roy and I went into the front yard to talk. He sat down on the front steps, so I took the ramp and stationed myself on the sidewalk. I'd found that since the incident I'd go to great lengths to see eye to eye with others.

Bracing myself with a swig of the amber liquid I paused then asked, "So why all the secrecy? By the way this is good stuff, thanks."

"Not much secrecy, well not much more than what you already know. I you're up to it on Monday come by my office to pick up your books. Fourth quarter starts in two weeks," Roy replied.

"Is that all? I appreciate the chance to get a head start as despite what you all think, academics are not my forte," I said.

"There is one more thing, well a few more things," he said grimly.

"Things?" I asked, not quite following.

"We've lost contact with Fullmetal. Alphonse called this afternoon in a panic," he answered.

"Lost contact? Shit, this is serious Roy, and what are you doing? Have you sent backup?"

"It's not that simple. Alphonse promised me that he would be in contact with information when he knows more. He would have requested assistance if anything could be done," he said.

"Is it that rogue Ishbahlan, the Alchemist Killer?" I asked.

Roy shook is head no and said almost inaudibly, "Homunculi."

That mere mention of that word sent a shiver down my spine and I took a belt of my drink, and then fumbled for my pack of cigarettes and lighter. "Plural, as in more than one?" I asked, my voice shaking.

Roy only nodded in reply. As I tapped a cigarette out of the pack with shaking hands a few fell to the ground. Ignoring them I lit one up and took a long drag. Roy leaned over, retrieved the cigarettes from the walk and wordlessly offered them to me in his outstretched palm.

Ignoring him I cast my gaze to where the cigarettes had been and muttered more to myself than to
him, "Here I sit, unable to do a fucking thing about it…"

Riza came out onto the porch and said, "We're finished cleaning up, are you ready to go Roy?"

Roy stood up, placed a hand on my shoulder and turned to go up the stairs. He and Riza were inside for a few minutes and then left. Thankfully Riza must have sensed I was in no mood for conversation and simply said as they departed, "Jean, it was a lovely party, take care."

"Hey, thanks for coming. Roy, I'll see you Monday to pick up those books," I called after them when they got to the gate.

Sciezka came out onto the porch and then sat down on the bottom step, shivering a bit in the night air. She hugged her knees in a futile attempt to warm herself. Her chattering teeth pulled me out of my thoughts and I said in the lightest tone I could muster, "You're underdressed for the weather, but shivering aside, it suits you. C'mere and warm up."

I flicked my cigarette onto the front walk, she sat on my lap and I wrapped my arms around her. While I was rubbing my hands up and down her bare arms attempting to warm her she asked, "So what did you and Roy talk about?"

What was I going to tell her? She didn't need to know about any of what was happening, shouldn't have to worry, and couldn't have the danger that knowledge carried with it. I quickly said, "You know him, over planning and scheming, I can't embarrass him by showing up in class unprepared. He's gotten my books so I can get a head start. I'll be picking them up Monday."

"Generous host, dashing, and a man of letters? You are a catch! I find it hard not to swoon," Sciezka said, placing a hand to her forehead for comedic effect.

"Let's get inside, before you turn into one of those romance novel heroines you say you despise, but are secretly fond of," I teased.

Once inside the house I excused myself and went into the bathroom to shower and get ready for bed. After brushing my teeth I got out "the supplies" and took care of my hygiene routine, cursing softly that even this was an effort, despite the words of reassurance Jim had given me earlier. Turning on the taps I decided that as appealing as a shared shower could be that this was not the time. I went to the door, locked it, then got into the shower hoping it would wash away or at least drown out some of my doubt and worry. As the water beat down my back I felt the tension I'd been holding between my shoulder blades begin to ease, but as I let go of my tight grip on my emotions I lost it. My mind raced.

Perhaps this was what I deserve, this life. I've taken lives in a cold and calculating manner, from a distance. I can pretend I was only following orders, but isn't taking a life still like playing god? If Equivalent Exchange truly is the way of the world then these feelings of powerlessness and taking
my ability to function normally, much less kill are the least I deserve. The daily reminders of my former arrogance in the humbling grind of just existing; memories of the lab and my broken state are not enough punishment. The distance I perceive in my comrades in their communication, when it comes at all, their letters are safe and chatty. 'We mustn't disturb Havoc, he's fragile, he's changed...’ is what they must be thinking. Events beyond my small locus of control are spiraling as well. Fullmetal is larger than life, he can't be missing, the Fuhrer cannot be one of those Things and all that I believed in my life cannot be a lie. When will it be enough?

No, nothing was simple anymore. Nothing was the same, now situations, things that had been certainties and comforting, from the mundane to the monumental were fucked up beyond all recognition.

I sobbed softly until the water ran tepid, then turned off the taps, hauled myself into the chair, and dried off. Then I wrapped a towel around my waist, and wiped the steam from the mirror so I could assess the damage. After studying my reflection for a few moments I concluded that though I'd looked far better, I only appeared tired after my melt down. I prepared myself mentally and entered the bedroom hoping that Sciezka wouldn't think anything was amiss.

She'd made good on her promise to reward my good behavior, as while I was in the bathroom she had brought the phonograph in and had a symphony I wasn't familiar with playing softly. She'd also lit the candles and changed out of her party dress into a pale blue silk chemise. She sat on the edge of the bed waiting expectantly.

My reaction must have been less than she'd anticipated because she bit her lower lip and said, "Don't you like it? We can lose the music if you want. It's Scheherazade."
I sighed, gave a small smile and shook my head. "No, it's not you, it's not the music, and it certainly isn't that lingerie."

After moving closer to her perch on the bed I placed a hand over hers, squeezed and said, "I am wiped out. Can I make this up to you tomorrow?"

Her expression brightened and she said, "Of course, you're just tired. It has been a long day. You get into bed while I snuff the candles and shut off the music."

Relieved that she'd bought my cover story I turned down my side of the bed and got in. Sciezka was just about to join me when she said, "Nuts, we can't sleep just yet. You can't go to bed with wet bandages and that wound should be checked after putting pressure on it all night."

She went to get the bandages and ointment from the bathroom and quickly returned.

"I think I can figure out how to do this myself, " I said flatly.

She sighed and said, "I know you hate this and yes, you probably could do it with a hand mirror and some contortions. If I minded I'd tell you to do it yourself."
I huffed, rolled over and said, "Just so we're clear on that."

Sciezka changed the bandages wordlessly and put the supplies away then got into bed putting as much distance between us as possible. Now I had done it. Fix it.

She was lying on the far edge of the bed, staring up at the ceiling with the covers pulled up under her chin.

"I'm sorry, you're the last person I want to take this out on. It's not even really about my ass, but I'm being one. Forgive me?"

I heard a sniff and she rolled over to face the wall wrapping herself tighter in the duvet and pulling it over her head. The few minutes of silence that ensued were almost unbearable. If she left and never came back I'd have deserved it. Finally, the small lump under the covers rustled and said, "Really?"

Patting the mound of covers I said, "Really. I've just had a lot of changes lately and the pace this week hasn't helped my mood any. I'm looking forward to this trip. No set agenda other then sleeping late with you, getting some sun with you, and if we're feeling ambitious, maybe swimming a little. It'll be just us for the most part."

The covers rustled again and the lump of blankets that was Sciezka came to rest near my chest and asked softly, "You'd tell me if it was me, right?"

"Always, and it could never be you," I whispered, then lifted the covers and kissed the top of her head.

Crisis averted, I leaned over, turned off the light and thought to myself, "Great job nearly screwing up the best thing you've had in a long time."

"What a great dream," I mumbled as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. Then it registered, that what I was feeling wasn't entirely a dream. I opened my eyes and sure enough, Sciezka was at my side tracing lazy circles on the duvet with her finger.

"Good morning, you look like you slept well," she purred and moved her fingers slowly from my chest to my navel.

"I did sleep well, and I'm going to take this as a sign that I'm forgiven?" I asked hopefully.

She nodded and swiftly got up to sit astride me, leaned over and fished through the drawer in my bedside table and after righting herself said, "Here, open your mouth."
"What?" I asked, extremely confused. She popped something small, white, and mint flavored into my mouth. After realizing what she'd done I said, "Well that is one way to take care of morning breath, is it that bad?"

Kissing me to shut me up, giggling a bit as she did so, she finally said, "No, I just thought it might make things more interesting in the morning."

Checking my hair I laughed and said, "Well, I am damned sexy when it's completely flat on one side and standing straight up in the front. You know you want me."

Still astride me she grinned and twirled my hair with her fingers, then sat back a bit to study her work and laughed. "What is so funny?" I asked.

She simply pointed and continued laughing. I sighed, and felt where she had been playing with my hair.

"HORNS? You gave me horns? You are so going to pay for this!" I exclaimed as I caught her off balance and rolled us.

The bed was in a tangle and we were in an awkward pile, but I had the advantage.

"I'm going to make this up to you," I whispered into her ear.

"Is that a threat or a promise?" she moaned as I nibbled the delicate flesh behind her ear.

I moved lower to her neck, accenting every word with a flick of the tongue while saying, "Maybe a little bit of both."

As I slowly pulled at the hem of her chemise so I could keep my word she sighed in what could only be appreciation and when I took too long for her taste, removed it for me. I chuckled as I lightly kissed her stomach sending her into fits of giggles and causing her to arch her back in the most enticing way. Her fingers worked through my hair and played with my ears as she gently but insistently guided me lower. I couldn't help but comply with her wishes.

She shifted a bit, wrapping her knees around my shoulders, finally settling against the pillows. Once I was sure she was comfortable I continued at a leisurely pace. Every now and then she'd signal her approval with a low moan or the involuntary quiver. I thought to myself, "She's going to kill you later if you don't get down to business."
That thought in mind, I spread her legs wider and went to work, letting her small cries and shudders tell me what came next. Every few moments I'd look up from my vantage point to take in her expression. At times her eyes were closed, lips pursed in concentration, one hand idly ruffling my hair and the other gripping the bedclothes. She finally shuddered, clasping my shoulders tightly between her knees and then went limp. I looked up and her face said it all. She was looking down at me, eyes slightly glazed with a silly grin on her face. Taking that as a sign of approval I pulled myself towards her and before I'd made it she pulled me into a passionate kiss. Once she released me I moved to her side and collapsed next to her. I was a bit tired from the effort, but knowing Sciezka in a few minutes she'd be ready for another round. For now, I was content to bask in her afterglow.

I must have dozed off for a few minutes because the next thing I knew Sciezka was nibbling on my ear and whispering her plans for sweet revenge. Once I was fully awake she began her assault on my neck and chest.

She was painfully thorough, but I'd made my bed and would now have to lie in it. I decided that this really wouldn't be a bad way to die. She'd mapped my every ticklish spot and erogenous zone in record time and knew just what to do to leave me begging for mercy.

As she made her way across every inch of skin she could seize she'd take a quick peek at my expression and smile or laugh. I knew I deserved it, but it didn't make it any easier. I'd bit my lip to stifle the frustrated noises and she'd use that as motivation to see how much further she could push me. Just as I thought I was going to go out of my mind she tweaked my nose and said, "There, we're even, are you ready?"

A vaguely strangled noise was all I could muster by this time and she correctly assumed that I was indeed ready. She gave me a lingering kiss, then pulled away leaving me to follow as best I could, leaving me waiting for more. Finally she traced a finger down my stomach, smiled coyly and said, "Since you're not supposed to be exerting yourself too much, I'll have to go easy on you."

I cracked a small smile and matching her conspiratorial tone said, "I won't tell the doc if you won't, do your worst."

Her worst turned out to be very, very good and as we drifted entwined with one another I vowed to myself that nothing would ruin this. If it took working twice as hard to be a better man I'd do it, if the government crumbled around our ears I'd find a way around it. This was too precious to not hang onto with tooth and nail. Life hadn't turned out the way I thought it would, but I wouldn't trade anything if it meant giving up Sciezka.
Chapter Summary

Music you might want to listen to: "Sunday Morning" by Maroon 5, "Mad Word" by Gary Jules a cover of the EXCELLENT Tears for Fears song, oh, and the last chapter and the next? "In Your Room" by the Bangles. It's bitten my brain HARD. My little love birds have got it BAD for each other. Sorry they are so mushy.

Author's Indulgence:
Chapter 27, this is a quickie. Just over 2k words, but it gets a few things done... WHERE the hell did Sciezka come from? What's her family like? Plus there is crossword puzzle fluff. Ok, so that is my ultimate favorite part of a relationship: lazy Sunday mornings spent eating breakfast, reading the paper, and smexing. Ooooh, and coffee. Lots of coffee. THAT is what Sunday is for!

Sunday, Lazy Sunday:

After we both recovered I suggested that breakfast, well after checking the clock I amended that, lunch was in order. I showered and dressed quickly while Sciezka took advantage of the bathtub and bubble bath. While she soaked I prepared breakfast. This was one meal I was a pro at as it was a favored request of my friends after a drunken night.

I decided that scrambled eggs with cheese, bacon, and home fries would be well received. By the time Sciezka came into the kitchen I was putting the finishing touches on the eggs while everything else stayed warm in the oven.

"Need any help?" she asked as she peered over my shoulder.

"Sure, help me get all this to the table while I stir these eggs a few more times and put in the cheese," I replied.

A few minutes later we were both sitting in the dining room with piping hot mugs of coffee, glasses of juice, orange for Sciezka and cranberry for me, and plates piled high with my efforts.

"So how is it? Edible?" I asked.

"Are you fishing for compliments, or just oblivious? It's good. You'll do all the cooking, end of story," Sciezka said.

"As long as it is breakfast food I've got it covered, or meat. I can do that too. I can't bake to save my life," I said, chuckling.

She laughed and said, "I can cook, a few things quite well, but a whole meal is usually beyond me. I think I was made for the cocktail hour."

I smiled and said, "Well I got a lot of practice when the guys and I would come back from the pub. Falman and Breda lived on base, and well Fuery has too many damned animals, so we usually came back to my place after last call, or after we got kicked out."
"You cooked for them?" she asked.

"Well, you have to be able to eat, and it makes sense to cook it yourself. Breakfast food is known for sobering you up and helping avoid a hangover."

We continued eating and Sciezka stole the last piece of bacon off my plate. I made a mental note to make more next time as we were apparently both very fond of it.

After eating we cleared the table and decided that after stacking and rinsing the plates that they would keep while we relaxed.

Sciezka suggested that we put the couch to use reading and I thought she had the right idea.

"How about you top up our coffees and bring them out while I have a smoke on the porch?" I said. I went outside to get my fix, and noticed that there was a Central Sunday Times on the porch. Gracia had truly thought of everything. I leaned over to carefully pick up the newspaper, set it on my lap and had my cigarette. When I was finished I went back inside, set the paper on the coffee table and joined Sciezka on the couch.

When Sciezka saw the paper her eyes lit up.

"It's just the paper, but wasn't it nice of Gracia to arrange it?" I commented.

"We can do the crossword puzzle!" she said excitedly.

"Whoa, I like the funny pages, but I don't get that excited over them," I joked.

"I used to do these all the time with Papa…"

"You never talk about your family, why is that?" I asked.

"Can we please change the subject? Let me get a pen so we can do it together. It's more fun that way," she said as she quickly got up and went to her bag to get a pen.

She came back to the couch, scooted in next to me as close as she could and started the puzzle. I read the funny pages, while she worked the puzzle. At each clue in the puzzle she'd read it aloud and give me a chance to guess at it. She was much better at crosswords than I was; I think she only asked me for the answers to give me a sporting chance. Whenever I worked them I used pencil and sometimes there would be holes from the places I'd had to erase multiple times.

Once we finished I thought I would try to pry some more information about Sciezka's past out of her. It felt awkward not knowing, and worse not knowing what topics of conversation would upset her.

"I feel kind of guilty about going as far East as we'll be going without seeing my parents. It's only three hours more by car," I said tentatively.

Sciezka nodded in agreement and said, "Maybe after the quarter is over we can take the train and go see them. You'll be ready for another vacation by then."

"I fell like a sneaky bastard doing this, well even asking this, but why don't you ever talk about your past or your family?"
Sciezka stiffened in my arms and I noticed that she was balling her fists.

"You don't have to tell me, I'd understand… but it's just that I know nothing about your past. What if I start talking about my family, and you can just chime in whenever you do find something you want to talk about?" I said softly.

Her muscles slackened noticeably and she settled back into me and said, "I guess that wouldn't be so bad. It's only fair since I know so much about you."

"Well, as you know I was born a few hours outside of East City in a small town. The main street is about a block long and has a doctor's office, the post office, a schoolhouse with two teachers, a pub that has an inn upstairs, and the general store. It barely qualifies as a town, but people from the surrounding farms come in for supplies so it's busy during the day. My parents own the General Store and I'm an only child. But I have a pack of cousins around my age, so it was almost as good as having siblings. We caused so much trouble around town. It's a good thing I went off the Academy or they'd have run me out on a rail. Oh, the train station is a few towns over."

Sciezka cleared her throat and whispered tentatively, "I'm an only too."

I waited for her to continue, but she remained silent, so I continued talking about my hometown and family.

"My Ma is great, a little overbearing at times, but great. I really feel awful about how sulky I was in the hospital as it worried her. I hope she can tell from my letters that I'm doing better. She seemed to be amused at some of Elysia's antics. I'm waiting to see what she has to say about what I wrote about you."

"You told her about us?" Sciezka asked sounding a bit worried.

"Well not everything. But I did mention that I was seeing a very intelligent, beautiful, and kind girl," I said. "I'm hoping she skims over the sex goddess part."

Sciezka sat bolt upright, mouth agape then said, "You didn't!"

I looked her square in the eyes and nodded in the affirmative just to get a rise out of her, then smiled, laughed, and said, "Are you kidding? As far as my parents are concerned I will die a virgin. If I ever father children, they will be immaculate conceptions and my wife will be a miracle maker. By the way, I assume I was an immaculate conception."

She rolled her eyes and said, "You are nuts! I can tell you are a Mama's boy."

"Actually I'm closer to my Pa, but yeah I'm pretty lucky to get along with both of my parents. Ma is pretty good at believing I can do no wrong and though Pa is pretty stoic, we get each other."

Sciezka and I sat in silence for a few moments and she finally broke it saying, "My Papa was the one who understood me the best. He thought books were as important for living as food and water. Libraries and universities were to be held as sacred space, like temples."

She paused and we sat in silence again and I held her closer to me.

"He was a professor of anthropology at the university. I remember when I was little I would beg to attend lectures and he'd let me. Afterwards we would go get something to eat, just the two of us, usually at the coffee house near campus, where the intellectuals would gather. Then, as a reward for being good, we'd stop at his favorite bookshop to get a book for my bookshelf. That was my most prized possession, my bookshelf."
She turned away from me, grabbed her mug and took a sip of coffee that had gone cold by now, and continued, "As a professor he had access to all sorts of cultural events. Tickets to the ballet, plays, and the symphony weren't uncommon. Mother almost always begged off saying she had a migraine, so I would go in her stead. I don't know if mother was ever truly happy. I know that it was better before he went off on research to the East."

I interrupted her, "The East? Where and why?"

She hesitated, and then said, "He went to study the connection between the lost civilization of Xerxes and Ishbal. His letters, the ones we got at any rate show that he was sympathetic to the Ishballan cause."

"So…" I said hesitantly.

She nodded and her voice wavered a bit as she said, "Yes, he died when I was eleven. Nine years ago. At least that's when we got word."

Her voice had been almost devoid of emotion as she related her history. I stroked her hair and she nestled into me.

"Mother and I have agreed to disagree. She wasn't well last year. Thankfully my job provided her with extra money for a specialist. I know I sound cold, but I think I'm just too much like Papa, with my useless books and words. I'm proud it was my useless, yet precious words that got me my job."

I could tell there were tears in her eyes and all I could think to do was to thank her, hold her as close as I possibly could and just be there for her. It seemed like that was what she needed.

We remained on the couch in silence for quite awhile. Eventually Sciezka rolled over to face me and kissed me ever so gently. I returned the kiss and held her close to me.

"I'm sorry I pushed you to talk about your family like that," I said as I rubbed her back.

She kissed me on the forehead, then rested her head back on my chest and said, "No, it's good that I told someone. I'm glad it was you. I remembered some of the good things."

"We'll just have to work on making new memories, speaking of which we should probably get started on packing for the trip," I suggested.

"That's a good idea. I need to get some things at my place and do laundry," she said.

I thought for a bit and said, "Why don't you go get your stuff, including your laundry. We'll just throw it in with mine. You can take a cab and I'll fix dinner while you're gone."

Sciezka sat up, kissed me and said, "You keep saying you're just a dumb grunt, but I don't know… I think it's just an act."

Chuckling a bit and shaking my head I said, "Act? What act? I don't know what you're talking about woman."

She got up, stretched and asked, "Is there anything you want while I'm out?"

"I can't think of anything really, but if you can think of a good prank to pull on Roy that would be great," I replied with a wink.

Sciezka went into the bedroom, and changed quickly while I called a taxi to take her to her
apartment.
While Sciezka was out I sat down on the couch to write. She'd be gone for a while so I used the opportunity to clear my head of some of the things that had been bothering me all weekend. I cursed the fact that something as small as a flight of stairs was keeping me from going with her to help. As old-fashioned and antiquated as Sciezka thought the idea was, boyfriends were supposed to be good at things like getting your bags, helping you get stuff off the top shelf and other trivial chores that loomed large in my mind. "Thankfully Sciezka is progressive," I thought to myself. "I can at least get the door for her."

On that note I pulled myself out of my moment of self-indulgence and began figuring out what I'd fix for dinner. Heading into the kitchen I decided that we'd have the leftover chicken cutlets in sandwiches, salad and some wine. That would be simple and it would be a shame to let such good food go to waste. To "mix it up" a little I added slices of fresh tomato and mozzarella to the sandwiches. Sciezka was right; I wasn't half bad at this cooking thing.

I had become rather domesticated since the incident, but since I had more time on my hands I had fewer excuses for take-out and a lot of my Occupational Therapy had been life skills. Besides, the courtship and mating rituals of most animals involve food and nesting, as Sciezka had randomly pointed out in one of our conversations early on in the relationship.

Chuckling to myself I thought, "Well, this is a very nice nest and we eat very well. It must make up for a lot. I'm not complaining about the sex, and neither is she."

Just then I heard a commotion on the porch, I assumed it was Sciezka and went out to investigate. I was correct; she was on the front porch, loaded down with bags, with a flustered taxi driver hot on her trail.

"I said I can do it myself Mister, go help some other damsel in distress!"

Repressing the urge to laugh out loud at the absurdity of her protest I held the door open for Sciezka, and once she had stormed into the bedroom with her many bags I discreetly tipped the driver a few cens extra.

"She's just really liberated," I said and winked.

The driver smiled, tipped his cap and said, "It's ok buddy, good luck with her. She seems like a handful."

He left and I went inside and called to her, "Dinner is ready, you must be famished after carrying all of that. Is there even anything left at your place?"

Sciezka came out of the bedroom, cuffed me lightly on the back of the head then leaned in and kissed me.

"That's enough out of you buddy."

Once we sat down to dinner her mood mellowed considerably. Apparently Sciezka had more in common with Fullmetal than I'd originally suspected. In addition to both of them being walking libraries, they both got very cranky when hungry.
After eating we did the dishes, she washed, I dried and we finished quickly. The next task on our un-official chore list was to collect and sort the laundry. The clothes were done quickly. Stripping the bed took awhile longer as a pillow fight delayed our progress. Eventually all the laundry was bundled and ready, and the sheets on my bed were changed.

We both sprawled on the bed, a bit winded from the pillow fight and I said, "How about a shower, and then we can turn in early? You have work in the morning and I have to meet with the housekeeper before therapy."

She smiled and said, "That depends on what you mean by 'turn in'."

"Hmm… I suppose we could sleep, but I thought we might fool around until we're exhausted, then sleep," I said grinning from ear to ear.

"I like your definition of turning in, you start the water and I'll turn down the bed," she purred.

I'd no sooner finished getting cleaned up when she joined me in the shower. After quickly lathering up and rinsing off she carefully knelt in front of me, dragged her fingers down my arms and chest several times, then took the tip of my penis into her mouth. After a few moments she took hold of it with her hand to continue with her plans then asked, "How quickly can you get from here to the bed?"

I was owned, she was amazing and I think I transferred in record time even with the hindrance of an erection to consider. Still damp from the shower we moved our play to the bed and Sciezka picked up right where we'd left off. She continued sucking and teasing me until I let her know I was close. In one graceful move she mounted me and I held my erection steady to help guide it into her. I let my fingers linger at her entrance. It never failed to impress me that I could make her that wet.

She bore down, wiggled a bit, then leaned over so we could kiss and fondle each other. Each time I'd nip or suckle at one of her pert breasts she'd shiver and grind a little more insistently. When she buried her head in the juncture between my neck and shoulder, the stifled noises she made let me know she was on the brink. I placed my hands behind her back to support her as she arched upwards and bucked. She sucked on her lower lip in what appeared to be concentration and closed her eyes. I felt her every muscle contract, sensed a similar tightness in my own back and the regions of twilight sensation.

She opened her eyes, we locked gazes and she ground down for one more frenetic volley. I saw the familiar stars in my field of vision and she slowed her rhythm, eventually collapsing in a quivering pile on top of me. I whispered, "Three… you came three times?"

Sciezka could only nod weakly and I chuckled and said, "Maybe I'll wear you out someday. If you would get off me I'll try my damnedest."

Still in a coitus induced haze she flopped against the pillows and twitched a bit when I gently stroked her folds with my fingers. I watched her face and withheld my reaction. She was so utterly relaxed and sated it was funny. As she lie there with a silly grin I continued, then slowly kissed and licked. The taste and scent of our mingling fluids was strong and quite a turn on for me. I wrapped my hand around my erection and pumped in tandem with the attention I was paying to Sciezka's pleasure. She produced a few more quiet moans, sighs, quivered and fell still. Satisfied with my work, I came the second time that night.

I collapsed, pillowing my head on her thigh and just lie there recuperating. When I finally had the energy I crawled to the head of the bed and kissed her. We lie there holding each other and
exchanging kisses. I decided that before we slept we should at least towel off. I slipped out of bed to get a warm, wet cloth, then silently cleaned us both up and spooned Sciezka and drifted off to sleep.

The last thought that ran through my head was, "Screw the carrying heavy stuff and stairs. I more than make up for it in other ways."
The morning sun filtered in through the patio door, waking me up a few minutes before the alarm was set to go off. I rolled over as noiselessly as I could and nuzzled closer to Sciezka. She stirred a bit and wrapped her arms around me.

"Good morning sleepy head, it's time to get up," I whispered in her ear.

She grumbled and burrowed deeper under the covers.

"Come on, time to get up, it's going to be a busy day," I cajoled.

From under the covers I heard her say something that resembled, "Just five more minutes, promise."

I chuckled, extracted myself from the tangle of covers and Sciezka, put on some pajama pants and went to make coffee. Maybe that would help coax her out of bed.

After setting up the percolator I went out onto the porch for a cigarette. I was pretty sure Winry never intended for me to use the little storage pouch under my chair to keep my smokes and lighter in, but it came in handy.

It was warm and the sun on my skin felt good. I stretched out to better take it in and hoped that the weather would hold for the trip. Though I was worried about if I would be able to keep up with Mustang and Hawkeye and get around under my own power, I quickly put it out of my mind. Hawkeye had always been amazing with the finer details in a mission and she knew my capabilities and limitations from our sessions at the firing range.

After taking a final drag on my cigarette I stubbed it out in the ashtray and went inside to check on the coffee. The aroma coming from the kitchen confirmed it was ready. I grabbed two mugs out of the cabinet, poured the coffee and set both mugs on the counter. I went to the table for the sugar bowl and brought it over to the counter. After adding two heaping spoonfuls of sugar to my mug and one level teaspoon to Sciezka's I went to the icebox for the milk. She liked almost as much milk in hers as coffee, so I was glad I remembered to only pour her half a cup. After adding a splash of milk to my mug I put the milk back in the icebox, set our mugs on a tray and took them into the bedroom.

I set the tray on the bedside table, and then leaned over as far as I could to try and wake Sciezka.

"All right you, you got fifteen minutes. It's time to get up," I said.

She gave a muffled moan and pulled the covers tighter around her.

"C'mon, there's coffee and if you hurry up you can catch me in the shower."

The mound of blankets moved and grunted something unintelligible, but I think it was obscene. I decided that the situation called for more extreme measures.

I yanked the duvet off of her and said, "You, coffee, then shower."
That woke her up and she was pissed. She sat up, glared at me and said, "Coffee, now. If you know what's good for you."

I handed her the mug, then began to drink mine. A few sips into her coffee she smiled and said, "Thanks for the coffee. Sorry to be such a bear, it's just that your bed is so comfortable and I don't want to get up. Can't you get back in here?"

After finishing my last drop of coffee I set my mug down on the bedside table then said, "Nope, no can do. It's time to get up. I'm going to take care of a few things, then shower. Feel free to join me if you think it'll make getting up any easier on you."

She smiled, nodded and I headed into the bathroom.

We got showered and dressed without incident other than our now routine shared shower arrangements, and agreed to meet for lunch before Sciezka headed off to work.

Once she was out the door I went out onto the porch to have a cigarette while I waited for the housekeeper. I finished and decided that leaving dirty coffee mugs in the bedroom would not make a very good first impression. As I was putting the mugs in the sink the phone rang. I quickly made my way to the phone on the wall and caught it on the fourth ring. It was the housekeeper and she was running late. I thanked her for letting me know, and after hanging up called Gracia to see if she could brief her while I was at therapy.

Gracia saved the day, as usual and told me to just leave a list of what I wanted done and she'd take care of the rest.

After calling a cab to get me to therapy I wrote out the list, left it on the kitchen counter and headed out the door so I wouldn't have any delays in my schedule.

At the hospital entrance I ran into Jim. He cast a glance at the cab and I shrugged and said, "The driver is now the chauffeured. I guess I'll have to get used to it. Add it to the list?"

Jim smiled and said, "Maybe Winry will be able to figure something out. I'm sure she'd welcome the challenge."

"You two are the best. Some days it really is all the small things that get to me the most. Let's hurry up and get to work."

"Busy day?" Jim asked.

"After having to rest all weekend I'm going stir-crazy, and there are a few more details to see to before the trip," I answered.

We got down to the therapy room and Jim instructed me to get behind an exam screen so he could check "the wound". After he was satisfied that it was healing nicely and the session wouldn't make it worse we did my usual routine.

As my session wound down and I was stretching on the mat Jim and I made small talk about my plans for the day and the trip.
"Well, today I'm meeting Sciezka for lunch, then getting in some target practice with Hawkeye, and finally picking up the books for my classes at Roy's office. Then home for dinner with Sciezka and packing for the trip."

Jim nodded and asked, "Are you excited?"

I thought for a moment then answered, "I'm looking forward to it, but I'm still anxious. I just hope I can do everything on my own there. That's my only worry."

"I'm sure it will be fine. Lieutenant Hawkeye is quite astute and has a reputation for meticulous attention to detail. She was all over the staff while you were an in-patient."

I raised an eyebrow at this revelation.

Jim nodded and said, "She put some fear into them, but it got you the best care. So don't worry, I'm sure she has things handled."

"Thanks for the reassurance, I should get going."

As I was leaving he called after me, "Don't forget, tomorrow is your evaluation with Doctor Parker."

I groaned and said sarcastically, "Thanks for the reminder, like I could forget about something that pleasant."

Jim chuckled and said, "If it's any consolation I'll be in presenting my findings so you won't have to go it alone."

"Thank goodness for that. I'll see you tomorrow, and I'll try to behave."

I then headed over to Sciezka's office to meet her for lunch after a quick stop in the locker room to clean up after my work out.

When I got to the Investigations Department Sciezka was barely visible at her desk because of the mountain of files heaped upon it.

I rapped on the doorframe and she gave a startled yelp and the papers went flying.

After making my way over to the desk I leaned over to help her pick up the papers. Between the two of us we finished quickly and set the piles neatly on the desk.

"Is this a bad time?" I asked as I handed her another stack of papers.

Sciezka took the stack, placed it on the desk and then wrung her hands.

"I'm sorry, I won't be able to do lunch today. I have to finish this for Major Armstrong."

Frowning, I thought for a moment and said, "I have to go see Lieutenant Hawkeye at the firing range. Why don't I pick up sandwiches afterwards so you don't go hungry?"

Sciezka threw her arms around my neck in an uncharacteristic display of public affection and said, "You're the best, thank you for understanding!"
I chuckled and said, "Well that was easy… apparently all I have to do is feed you to keep you happy."

She smirked, tweaked my nose and shooed me out of the office so she could get back to work. I made my way down to the firing range so I would be set up when Riza got down there. It still felt odd calling my former C.O. by her given name, but as she had argued, we are friends, and I had earned it.

By the time Riza got down to the line with Hayate at her heel I had shredded one paper target beyond recognition and was preparing to lay waste to another.

"Nice work Sniper. Were you here long?" she asked.

After putting the safety on my rifle I rolled over, sat up and pulled out a cigarette.

She gestured at the cigarette and said, "You've cut down, haven't you."

I lit up, took a drag, exhaled, and then said, "Yeah, I guess so. But I still like one first thing in the morning, after meals and after well… not to be crude…"

She smiled and said, "I get where you were headed. No need to explain."

"What can I say? They're a social crutch, something to fiddle with, and help take my mind off things."

Riza then did something rather unexpected. She sat down on the drop cloth next to me and hugged me.

"What was that for?" I asked stammering.

"That was for being you and for listening, and most of all for coming back. He needs you."

She then placed a box in my lap. I opened it carefully and once I saw the contents said, "I can see why you saved this 'gift' for here. Will I be needing it right away?"

She shook her head no and said, "Better safe than sorry, and I can't have you involved if you are unarmed."

After carefully taking out the .38 caliber pistol, I loaded it. I then placed it in the leg holster she'd thoughtfully included and strapped it to my right calf under my pants.

"Good thinking. I don't think anyone would check me there and I can get to it fairly easily," I said. "By the way, thank you."

Riza hugged her arms closer to her and said quietly, "I just hope you never have to use it."

I squeezed her shoulder and said, "Me too."

She glanced at her watch and said, "Shit! This is what happens when I let myself get distracted, I had to make sure I wasn't followed."

"What's the matter?" I asked.
"There's more to today besides your gift. He's gone off to get Fullmetal, it should be fine… if we timed this right."

"It's natural to worry," I broke in. "He can handle himself. Is there anything I can do?"

Riza sighed and said, "The departure date is moving up to tomorrow. After your evaluation you'll go with Jim to the compound."

"So I am going with Gracia and Elysia, Sciezka, and Jim? Wait… I don't need him for a trip."

She paused and said, "Stay calm, he's not for you. There has been an injury."

"Fullmetal? Shit, this is no good!"

She grabbed me by the shoulders, held me tight and said, "No, not Ed. It wasn't Ed. They're going to be fine."

Scrubbing my hands across my face I asked, "So it's not a pleasure trip anymore?"

Riza smiled a small smile, scratched Hayate's ears and said, "You don't get off that easy Birthday Boy. We'll just have to multi-task. Keep this under your hat. Just tell Sciezka and Gracia there has been a change in plans. Jim knows and he'll help you deflect suspicion."

"I won't let you two down. I'll see you both soon. Hopefully you can relax out there as well."

Riza stood up and said, "I gave the directions and keys to Jim before I came here. Your books are up in Sciezka's office. I suggest you hurry up with that sandwich."

I gave her a lopsided salute as she walked away and then started putting away my things. On my way to the locker room to stow my rifle and scope I saw her emptying round after round into a target with startling accuracy. She didn't flinch once. She never did.

On the way up to the Investigations Department I stopped at the canteen to get Sciezka a sandwich. They'd always had better food there than at the mess. While I was scanning the menu I thought about how I'd tell Sciezka we were going early without alarming her. I hated lying, but in this case an omission of facts was needed. She'd understand, I hoped. I must have been staring off into space because someone tapped me on the shoulder to get my attention and asked if I was all right.

That was a big mistake, as when the voice didn't register as familiar I caught my would-be rescuer by the wrist. Hard. Once I got a good look at him I was so embarrassed.

"Staff Sergeant Smith, I'm so sorry… you caught me by surprise," I stuttered.

He held up his hands, equally embarrassed and said, "I should have known not to do that to a soldier."

I smiled weakly and said, "No harm done?"

He inspected his wrist, flexed his fingers and said, "It smarts, but no, no permanent damage."

I chuckled for a moment at how absurd it sounded and thought to myself, "No, not on the magnitude of a blown out spinal cord. But even that's better than dead."
"Hey, I owe you another apology," I said. "For the barbershop… sorry I lost it like that."

"It was a stupid thing to say," he said, looking down at his feet. "It came out all wrong. I didn't think you'd be out on your own if it was as bad as they'd said it was."

"Don't worry about it Smith," I replied. "Half a year ago I could have made the same mistake. You meant well."

"Really?" he asked sheepishly.

"Really," I said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to pick up some lunch for my girlfriend. She's in Investigations and swamped."

"Girlfriend?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yep, just had to get out of the secretarial pool," I said and chuckled.

"My wife talked to Mrs. Hughes and she said something to that effect."

"Wait, wife?" I asked.

"Oh, that, I meant to thank you for that too. For hiring her," he answered.

I was confused and then put the pieces together: the housekeeper.

"Well, you know Gracia, she likes to make sure everything runs smoothly for everyone. I guess she sets a lot of the wives up like that."

"Well we just appreciate that you didn't hold my comment against her. We're trying to save money for a house. I'll let you get going, and thanks again," he said.

I waved as he walked away, quickly picked out two sandwiches, some fruit and juice for Scieszka. I'd let her pick first and eat what she didn't. That is if she let me live for keeping her waiting for so long.

When I got to Scieszka's office I noticed the mountain of files had diminished and that Scieszka looked utterly frazzled.

She looked up from the file she was poring over and said, "My hero! What did you bring me?"

I laughed and said, "Roast beef, turkey or both if you're that hungry."

After retrieving an apple from the bag I offered the rest of it to her. She came over to me, gave me a quick kiss and snatched the bag out of my hands.

As I ate my apple she devoured the first sandwich, then looked at the second, handed me half and promptly ate the other half. I made a mental note to order extra groceries after the trip.

When she finished and was sipping her juice she slumped in her chair and rubbed her temples. I moved closer to her and massaged her shoulders and neck and said, "No worries, I won't pull any funny business. Really I'm doing a service to the military."

She relaxed noticeably and I hated to break the news to her, but the longer I waited the worse it
"I have an appointment with Doctor Parker tomorrow morning," I started.

She wrinkled her nose like she'd smelled something foul at that news.

I continued, "But then it will be a great day because we'll be leaving straight from the hospital. Jim is driving. Riza just gave me the good news."

Her shoulders stiffened and I continued kneading them.

"I guess they were able to get an extra day of leave. Don't worry, yours has been arranged for as well. It'll be a real vacation. This will be one of my best birthdays to date," I said, hoping she wouldn't catch on.

She turned around to hug me and said, "You'd better get going. I'll have to stay late to finish this, then go to your place to finish packing."

"I'll get out of your way," I said, and then pecked her on the cheek. "Oh, and don't worry about packing. I'll lay it all out for you so you just have to check it and stuff it into your bag. Do you need anything else?"

She ruffled my hair and said, "Gracia's rubbing off on you. Here are the books for your classes. Now shoo!"

On the way home I stopped off at Gracia's to give her the news and found out she'd already heard. That was a relief as knowing Jim's spin on the story would keep me from blowing our cover. Gracia and Elysia came back to my place with me and I arrived home to Mrs. Smith taking the laundry down from the line in the side yard.

"Gracia, I have a clothes line?" I asked, half seriously.

"If you'd checked out the garage you'd have noticed the washing machine and wringer," she said and winked.

The three of us then went around to the side yard so I could introduce myself to Mrs. Smith properly.

I extended my hand to shake hers and said, "Hello, I'm Jean. Thanks for coming and doing this. I should have had a housekeeper ages ago."

She smiled, shook my hand and said, "No, thank you really. Michael and I appreciate it."

Smiling I said, "I ran into him at the canteen today. Don't mention it, the thanking part that is. We should all thank Gracia."

Mrs. Smith nodded and said, "She does this for so many of the wives. It helps so much."

Gracia blushed and suggested we get the wash inside, as there was a lot to do before we left the next day.

While Gracia and Mrs. Smith folded and put away the laundry Elysia played in her room and I packed. Soon I had my bag ready and started laying Sciezka's things out on the bed. Once I'd
finished I had Gracia check it over to see if I was forgetting anything.

"Um, she might want to wear underwear," Gracia said, barely stifling a giggle.

I blushed and said, "Honest, I forgot! Thanks for the reminder."

Once that problem had been remedied Gracia deemed my efforts a success. By then it was almost
dinnertime and Mrs. Smith left and Gracia and Elysia went home to finish their preparations for the
trip.

I sat down on the couch to read my text books while I waited for Sciezka to get home from work.

Just as I was finishing an outline for the first chapter of my psychology text Sciezka got home. She
dropped her bag in the entryway and flopped onto the couch next to me. I shut the book, set it and
my notebook on the coffee table and pulled her into my lap. As I ran my fingers through her hair
and massaged her temples she sighed contentedly. Then she rested her head on my shoulder and
wrapped her arms around me.

"Whatcha reading?" she asked, her voice muffled by my sweater.

I rubbed her back and answered, "Just school stuff, for psychology. I'm only one chapter in and I
think the major theorists are loonier than their patients and preoccupied with getting laid."

She giggled and nuzzled my neck.

"You must be exhausted. It's after nine already. How about I draw you a bath and make you some
dinner?"

She shook her head in protest and said, "I'm too tired, and I still have to pack."

After kissing the top of her head I said, "I already took care of that and Gracia supervised. It's all
laid out on the bed. You take a quick look and then go have a soak while I get it packed for you.
Well, and so we can sleep on the bed."

"That sounds wonderful. You are brilliant," she said dozily.

Sure that she was properly prepared for the trip Sciezka went into the bathroom to soak and I
packed her bags.

Once I had finished packing I went into the bathroom to check on Sciezka. She had a washcloth
over her eyes and looked utterly content.

She smiled and said, "Get in here."

Remembering "the wound" she removed the cloth and asked, "Is it healed enough, your butt I
mean?"

Laughing I said, "Jim gave the ok for swimming, so this should be fine."

I stripped, got in and moved so Sciezka was sitting on my lap. After thoroughly massaging her
shoulders and arms I said, "You're starting to get all pruny. We should get you into bed."

She stood up, steadying herself on my shoulders, got out of the tub and towelled off. Even tired and
groggy she was a sight to behold as the water beaded on her skin and she stretched, yawning softly.  
"Go get into bed and I'll bring you something to eat and then we can get some sleep," I suggested.  
"I'm too tired, how about just sleep?" she whined.  
"Trust me, you'll like it. Now get in bed."

She headed into the bedroom and I heard her flop on to the bed heaving a contented sigh as I got out of the tub. I toweled off, took care of the necessaries and went into the bedroom to check on her.  

Sciezka had propped herself up on the many pillows and asked, "So what's for dinner?"

Gesturing to my attire, a towel, I said, "Whatever is easy. Besides, by the time I cook something you'll have fallen asleep. I was thinking ice cream."

Smiling at that idea she said, "See, you are brilliant! Hurry before I fall asleep on you."

I came back to the bedroom with a large bowl of chocolate ice cream balanced on my lap. After passing it to Sciezka I turned back the covers and joined her. Before she started eating, she noticed there was only one spoon.

"Fewer dishes this way and less messy too. You're so tired you'll spill."

She giggled and handed the bowl over to me. Suddenly she frowned, pointed at my chest and asked, "Did I do that?"

I looked at where she was pointing, inspected the small mark on my chest, and found a few others on my shoulders and biceps.

Smirking I answered, "You most certainly did. Parker is going to be so confused. The man is oblivious."

Sciezka blushed as I said, "Imagine his surprise when he finds out that an innocent boy from the sticks, cruelly cut down in the prime of his life has become thoroughly debauched."

Cocking an eyebrow in confusion she asked, "Care to explain? That didn't make too much sense."

I kissed her, nibbling on her bottom lip and then explained, "I am having ice cream for dinner in bed, naked and covered in love bites, with a wanton sex goddess. I'm not complaining."

She shook her head and said, "I'll never be quite sure you didn't get hit on the head at some point, but that is one of the things that makes you so cute. Hurry up with the ice cream. It's melting."

We shared the rest of the bowl and when we were finished I set it on the bedside table, and then turned out the light.

Wrapped up in each other we kissed softly and slowly and then settled in to sleep. Sciezka made the small night noises, contented sighs and murmurs, that let me know she had drifted off. I draped an arm over her, turned my head so I could bury my nose in her hair and whispered, "I love you."

Chapter End Notes
This is pretty much being transferred with very few edits from ff.net. This is before I
got my beta, anat-astarte... I flinch at this stuff. I started writing this story in 2006... I
promise it gets better. PROMISE... and it is "up to date" on ff.net... and the chapters
are in the 60s.

I promise this fan fiction will be finished, if it kills me.
Chapter 30:

"I'm getting up, I promise," I mumbled as I rolled over onto my side and covered my head with a pillow.

"Liar, you're planning on going right back to sleep," Sciezka said as she pried the pillow out of my hands.

I grumbled and said, "I really am not looking forward to this check-up. It's not like it's going to tell me anything I don't already know."

She hugged me and said, "The sooner you get this over with, the sooner we can be on our way to the lake."

"True..." I conceded. "But it's really a formality. He'll go over my diagnosis and re-state the obvious. 'Mr. Havoc, you're perfectly healthy, except that whole paralysis problem.' Only it'll be in jargon."

"C'mon, get up and get ready. I'll let you crack as many jokes at your own expense as you like in the car, and work on your Doctor Prick impersonation."

"Could you at least shower with me?" I asked.

Sciezka laughed and replied, "Will it help you stop sulking?"

Grinning I said, "Mostly, though I might need another dose of morale later on."

She kissed me and said, "You'll find any excuse to have your way with me, won't you?"

I nodded and said, "Pretty much, you've got me pegged."

After our shower, and it was a wonder we managed any washing up, we both got dressed and Sciezka gave me a kiss goodbye.

She'd asked if I wanted her to come along and wait in the lobby. I declined, preferring to go it alone. I had enough time that I could get to the hospital under my own power. Perhaps physical exertion would relieve some of the tension.

The eight-block trip went smoothly and I was thankful that more streets had curb cuts, probably for prams, but they served my purpose. Two blocks before the hospital I felt warm, so I removed my sweater and tucked it into my pack. To my surprise that stopped the offers of assistance from "do-gooders". I guessed the display of muscles indicated that I could handle myself.

When I arrived at the hospital Jim was sitting on a bench out front with what appeared to be two cups of coffee.
"You're here, good," he said as he handed me a cup. "I thought you might be nicer to Parker if you were caffeinated. Have a cigarette as well, we have time."

I chuckled, fished for my pack and lighter and lit up.

"Thanks for the coffee," I said. "Even if you're only condoning my vices so I'm not a grouchy bastard."

"No worries, I know you've cut down," he replied. "So did you get too warm on the way? Or are you just advertising that tickets are on sale for a gun show?"

This cracked me up and I had to fight to not spit coffee at him. When I recovered my composure I flexed and jokingly said, "Yup, you got me. The gun show is right here."

Jim smirked and said, "Ok smart ass, time to see Doctor Parker."

"May as well get it over with, we have a long ride ahead of us. You do have to tell me how you conned Gracia into thinking that you coming was nothing out of the ordinary."

Once Jim and I got to Doctor Parker's office I was ushered into the exam room and handed a gown. The first item on the agenda was having a new set of x-rays taken. The technician explained that Doctor Parker and my therapist would compare notes on my case while they developed the x-rays.

I was used to the lack of privacy afforded by the thin exam gowns and the cold, clinical environment of the hospital. That didn't mean I had to like it. But raising a fuss wouldn't make any of it go any faster so, resigned to the fact that this was how things would be, I cooperated.

After the x-rays were taken I was escorted back to the exam room. Jim helped me up on the table and then went into the hallway to let Doctor Parker know I was ready.

When Jim came back in he smiled and said, "He sounded almost human Jean, and there weren't any surprises in your x-rays, so relax."

"So he'll just do the usual? The sensory tests and a physical?" I asked, relieved that it wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary.

Doctor Parker came in, shook my hand and asked how I was doing. So far, so good.

Before Parker began the physical examination he had Jim give an overview of my progress in therapy and his recommendations for my rehabilitation.

"Jean, you've heard this from me in your sessions, but for the record, you're doing better than the team had hoped. Your work is paying off and you should be proud of yourself," Jim said.

"So the technical part is like this: you've got good range of motion in the affected extremities, recovered some muscle mass in your torso that had wasted while you were hospitalized and greatly improved your upper body strength and maneuvering skills," he read from his notes.

Doctor Parker nodded in agreement and said, "Mr. Havoc, I am impressed with your progress. Mr. Bruno, what are your recommendations for further treatment?"

"I'll want to have Jean come in three times a week for an hour, and swimming on his own at least that much in addition to daily stretching. He should be able to work that in around classes and social engagements," Jim said, winking at me when he came to the "social engagements" part.
With Jim's report complete it was time for the part that I hated most.

Doctor Parker opened my file, and then instructed me to lie still while he conducted the sensory tests. He went through the various instruments in succession alternating between asking me if I felt anything and what the sensation was, and then asking me to try moving various parts. He'd take notes on my chart, which in six months had grown rather thick, and purse his lips.

When he got to the injury site he paused and checked his notes again, showed them to Jim, and then asked me several more times to describe what I felt. Then he had Jim help me lie face down on the exam table and repeated the process again.

After he finished he told me I could get dressed and he then left the room. A few minutes later there was a knock on the door. Jim went and answered it, said a few words to the nurse and then said, "Now we go get the verdict in his office and then vacation."

I heaved a sigh of relief and said, "The only thing that has me worried is how long the exam took. Do you think he found anything?"

Jim patted me on the back and said, "Only one way to find that out. We should get in there."

Once we were in Doctor Parker's office Jim sat down in the chair in front of the imposing desk and I chose to position my chair to the right of Jim.

Doctor Parker cleared his throat and said, "I'm glad to see that your injury over the weekend hasn't set you back and is healing well. I was a bit shocked to hear how it happened, and to see your 'other' injuries."

He must have been referring to the marks on my chest and arms. I blushed slightly and suppressed a chuckle, as I really didn't want to explain how they had gotten there, but was amused that Parker had noticed and "understood" how they came to be there.

"I'm pleased at what the x-rays revealed," Parker said. "Your vertebrae are fully fused, or healed, and so far there is no curvature or scoliosis."

I nodded and said, "So the stabilizing surgery was a success. Good, I'd read that there were sometimes complications."

Parker continued, "Circulation in the affected limbs is good, but keep an eye on that, and remember to shift your position often and continue doing pressure relief every fifteen minutes."

I thought to myself, "They're all pre-occupied with my butt."

Glancing down at my chart Parker cleared his throat again and said, "The swelling around the cord is gone now. I'm sorry Mr. Havoc, the window for improvement in your condition is closed."

Looking down at the floor I reminded myself, "You knew that already Jean, shake it off."

"I do have some good news, but remember it doesn't mean you will walk again," Parker said, pausing. "I double checked my results so I wouldn't get your hopes up unnecessarily."

Frustrated with how long Parker was taking I said, "Well, what is it? Just spit it out."

"It appears that now that the swelling has gone down around the injury site, you have more areas with sensation than you did when you were first diagnosed."
Before I could interrupt again Parker continued, "Again, it's not meaningful recovery as far as walking goes, but you can feel pressure approximately four inches lower than you could previously. There was a weak voluntary response, or flexing, of the abdominal muscles."

"That's good, hell, that's great!" I replied.

"Mr. Havoc, I want to remind you that this isn't an indicator of meaningful recovery," Doctor Parker stated calmly.

"I know. I won't walk again, but every part that I can feel is precious to me," I said in a hard tone, pissed that he was minimizing the value of any return.

Jim cleared his throat and said, "If we're finished here, it's a busy day. Thank you Doctor Parker."

I nodded and said, "Yes, thank you. I never thought about it before, but you don't get to give much good news, do you? It explains a lot."

Doctor Parker was taken aback, but replied, "You're right Mr. Havoc. Keep working hard. I am sorry I can't give you more good news, but you are indeed making the best out of a bad situation. If you wouldn't mind, when you get back, I have a patient I'd like you to talk to."

I smiled a small smile and said, "I'll do whatever I can."

I meant it too, because it would have been a lot easier back then if I had someone who had gone through the same things to talk to after I'd woken up.

Doctor Parker got up and said as he left, "It's time for rounds, so I should go. Mr. Havoc, have a good trip and good luck with university."

Jim and I made our way down to the parking lot. Once we got to the car Jim unlocked it and said, "Why don't you get in back? We'll swing by your place and pick up your things and Sciezka. Then we'll pick up Gracia and Elysia."

"That sounds like a plan," I said, and then transferred to the back seat, disassembled my chair and handed the pieces to Jim to put in the trunk.

He came back with my chair pad and said, "You better use this, it's a long ride. In fact, I want you to stretch out and lie on your side once we get going."

I rolled my eyes and said, "Yes Jim, by the way, you are all obsessed with my ass. It never got this much attention before. I think I'm upset about that."

He blushed, then laughed and then said, "Ok wise guy, let's get going."

When we got to my place Jim asked if I needed anything other than what I'd packed and told me to wait in the car. I wasn't thrilled that I wouldn't be loading the car, but it made sense. It would go faster if I stayed put.

Soon Jim and Sciezka had the bags loaded in the car and we were on our way to Gracia's.
As soon as Sciezka got in the car she was asking questions in rapid-fire and kissing me before I could get out an answer.

I smiled and asked, "Can I get a word in edgewise here?"

She blushed and said, "Yes of course. I'm just happy to see that you're smiling. How did it go?"

I took Sciezka's hand and placed it on my stomach, "There was some good news. Here, feel them moving?"

As I concentrated on flexing my abdominal muscles Sciezka hugged me tightly around the neck and asked, "So you could feel that? When I touched you?"

"Barely, but it's better than nothing. Every little bit counts, right?"

She grinned and said, "I'll have to give you an exam of my own once were alone."

Gracia and Elysia's bags were loaded into the car and we were on our way. Ever the attentive hostess, Gracia had packed a hamper full of snacks and lunch. Elysia was talking a mile a minute in the front seat. I called up to the front seat and said, "Hey Elysia, you sure sound excited."

She turned around and peeked over the seat and said, "You're going to take me swimming, huh Jean?"

Grinning from ear to ear I answered, "Yes Princess, we're going swimming, as much as you want."

Satisfied with my answer she sat back down and began playing "I-Spy" with Gracia and Jim. I smiled and shifted position so I was on my side, with my head in Sciezka's lap.

She ruffled my hair and said, "Well you sure made yourself comfortable."

I wrapped my arms around Sciezka's waist and said, "I sure have. I think I'm going to nap until we stop for lunch."

Rubbing my back she said, "That's a good idea. You've already had a big day and didn't sleep too well last night. Besides, I'll have you almost all to myself all week."

The car came to a stop and I roused a little. Sciezka kissed me and said, "It's lunchtime sleepy head."

I sat up slowly and looked around. Elysia was out cold in the front seat. I guess that she wasn't the only one who was tired.

"Gracia," I said, trying to get her attention in the front seat. "Did she sleep at all last night?"

She laughed and said, "It was hard getting her to go to sleep last night. She was so excited."

Looking out the car window I asked, "Hey Jim, where are we anyway?"

He smiled and said, "We're at a farm stand a few hours outside of Eastern H.Q."
I checked my watch and said, "It's one o'clock, so if we're on schedule that means we have about three more hours of driving left. We'll get there around dinner time."

"Yup, that's about right. Let's eat lunch," Jim said.

He got out of the car, brought me the pieces of my chair and I put it together and transferred. Gracia and Elysia were already laying out a blanket and setting out lunch.

The ground at the farm stand was full of ruts and it reminded me of the obstacle course at basic training. It was slow going for me and I thought I would get stuck a few times. Sciezka looked concerned but kept quiet. We'd been together long enough that she knew I'd rather dump the chair than get help. She stood by quietly, and I was sure she was probably worried. I hoped that Riza was right about the compound being level, and I was almost tempted to mention it. I thought better of it and didn't say anything, mainly because I didn't want Sciezka to think that I brought it up because I was having a hard time right now.

I was sweating by the time I got over to where Gracia had laid out the picnic. She'd picked a great spot under a large oak tree. Sciezka sat down on the blanket and motioned for me to join her. I transferred from my chair to the ground, next to Sciezka, and Gracia handed me a glass of lemonade.

"Wow, Jean, you can do that really fast!" Elysia exclaimed.

I looked at her and said, "Thanks, Elysia. I've had a lot of practice and help. Jim taught me how to do it, pretty cool eh?"

Elysia agreed and handed out the sandwiches and so we could begin eating.

I saw Gracia smile at Jim and he got all rosy in the cheeks again. I stifled a chuckle, hiding my smile as I took a drink of lemonade.

Midway though lunch Elysia announced that she had to go to the bathroom. She and Gracia left to go find one. When they came back I said, "That's a good idea, where was it?"

Gracia frowned and said, "It's in back of the farm stand, it was clean enough, for an outhouse but…"

I sighed and said, "Let me guess, stairs or a steep rocky hill? Maybe a narrow door?"

"Two out of three Jean. Narrow door and a rather rocky path," Gracia answered.

Sciezka looked concerned again and I hated it when she worried.

Jim was awfully quiet, apparently deep in thought. Gracia attempted to change the subject and put away lunch, suggesting that Sciezka take Elysia to see what they were selling at the farm stand. She then whispered in Jim's ear and handed him the picnic blanket.

Jim stood up and headed in the direction of the outhouse.

"C'mon Jean. I think Gracia figured out a solution to one problem," Jim said.

I got back into my chair and followed him.

Once we got nearer to the outhouse Jim handed me one of the disposable cups the lemonade had come in.
"So your brilliant plan is this?" I asked holding the cup up.

Jim shrugged and said, "When you gotta go, you've gotta go. I'll cover you."

He held up the picnic blanket as an improvised privacy screen and I took care of business.

When I was finished Jim took the cup from me using a paper napkin and disposed of it in the outhouse. Gracia had also given him the small bottle of soap she carried for Elysia, and he went over to the hose at the back of the building and turned it on so we could both wash our hands.

"Thanks for your quick thinking, though I hope we don't have to do that again any time soon," I said.

Jim said, "Let's get back to the car and get out of here."

"Good idea. The sooner we get to Riza's grandfather's place the sooner we can settle in."

When we got back to the car the girls had already gotten in and were waiting for us. Jim helped me with my chair and once I was in the car Sciezka asked, "Want some dessert?"

The thought of that lightened my mood immensely. Just as I got my hopes up she handed me a chocolate chip cookie.

"They're really good, and we'll have plenty of time for what you were hoping for once we get there," Sciezka said, then kissed me.

The rest of the way to the lake couldn't go fast enough as far as I was concerned. Something told me Jim felt the same way. Maybe it was the way he finally cut loose and hit the gas.
Napping in the backseat with Sciezka made the trip pass quickly, and I was thankful for the rest once we entered the compound. Riza had greatly understated the size of the place and Sciezka's gasp of surprise was what woke me. The main house could hardly be called rustic. It was a proud revival style manse with columns surrounding the wrap around portico and balcony above it. The next thing I noticed after the sheer size of the place was the wooden ramp that covered one half of the steps leading up to the front door. Instantly relieved I smiled at Jim and Sciezka and said, "Let's unpack and start this vacation."

Jim handed me the keys to the guesthouse and directed me down a brick path to the side of the house. Sciezka and I had packed light so we were able to manage our luggage easily. Our path was lined with flowering vines draped on trellises and well tended rose bushes. The heady perfume they gave off and the feeling of seclusion made it feel like we were entering our own paradise. After a short trek we finally came to a small garden surrounded by a high hedge that provided extra privacy for the whitewashed cottage.

I thought it might be funny to "carry" Sciezka over the threshold and get down to business. Ever the conscientious guest, she reminded me that we should put away our belongings quickly, freshen up and see how we could be of help with dinner and setting up. We surveyed the layout of the cottage: a small living area and eat in kitchen, a bathroom with a large cast iron tub (with a small bench in it), and at the back of the house a bedroom with a wrought iron bed that was just large enough for two, piled high with quilts. Sciezka informed me that the walls were covered in bead board and that the wood floors had "tongue and groove" construction. The old me would not have cared, the new me found it "charming or quaint" and filed it away under decorating information. What had they done to me?

While the kitchen had electricity, we discovered that oil lamps lighted the other rooms. We'd have to be careful with those so we didn't burn the place down.

After exploring the cottage, hanging our clothes in the closet, washing up a bit and a few stolen kisses we went up to the main house. The ramp was steep but manageable and soon Sciezka and I were in the kitchen with Gracia, Elysia and Jim.

While Gracia seasoned and sautéed chicken, Jim sliced bread, Elysia set the table and Sciezka and I prepared vegetables for a tossed salad. A car pulled into the drive just as we were sitting down to dinner. Elysia ran onto the portico to investigate. Soon she came back in and reported excitedly, "Aunt Riza and Winry are here and they brought two boys!"

Gracia's eyes went wide, but she stayed calm. Sciezka got out four more place settings and Jim got out another loaf of brad. Gracia had the best idea of all. Instead of smaller servings of chicken, we all had salads with a generous topping of chicken. It was lucky that the boys Riza brought with her were Russel and Fletcher Tringham and not the Elric's. NO amount of creative meal stretching would have satisfied Ed's appetite after a mission.

During dinner Riza announced, appearing relieved, "The Colonel and the Elric brothers will arrive sometime tonight."
I looked around at what I could see of the house from the dining room, as I hadn't seen most of the main house and asked, "Where?"

Riza smiled and said, "There are four bedrooms upstairs and two on this floor if we include the study and living areas. There are plenty of bedrolls. We're soldiers, we've slept on worse."

I scowled and said, "Why do I get a bed?"

"Because I say so, and it's your birthday. Besides, if there are many more surprise guests they'll be on your living room floor," Riza said and winked.

We all began to eat heartily and agreed it was an ideal warm weather meal. Russel and Fletcher seemed especially pleased with dinner. I wondered what boys that young would have to do with the military, and if they just had typical adolescent appetites, or if they lived in privation.

We lingered over dinner partly due to the Aquroyan wine Jim had brought and partly because we were impatient for our downtime. When it appeared that we had all eaten our fill of the main course Gracia brought out fresh raspberries with whipped cream for dessert. For what was intended to be such a simple dinner, it had been exceptional and delicious.

After dinner we moved to the living room and I stretched out on a thick rug in front of the fireplace without a second thought. The only people who weren't familiar with my condition were the Tringhams and I figured if Riza brought them, they could be trusted. Why they were here was still troublesome to me. I decided I'd get answers later and relax for now. Once I caught Sciezka's eye I pointed at her, then my glass, and patted a spot on the rug next to me.

She refilled her glass, almost to the top and sat down behind me, patted her lap, then whispered in my ear, "Curl up here and help me drink this."

I smiled and eagerly followed her instructions.

As we all chatted and got to know each other better, the subject of occupations came up. Russel and Fletcher had thought that we were all military. They were very surprised by the answers given by Jim, Sciezka, and Winry, and were curious to learn more. As tight-lipped and taciturn as Riza could be, she was very tender with the boys and they were also at ease around her. Fletcher asked Jim many detailed questions about his work in rehabilitation and about the hospital, listening intently to Jim's every word. Russel, impressed with Gracia's description of her garden in Central, complemented her on the variety of vegetables she'd used in the salad and the herbs she mixed into the lemon juice with balsamic vinegar and olive oil dressing. Sciezka had told me earlier that Winry had talked their ears off about automail the whole way to the lake and, seemingly exhausted, she was content to just sit and listen. Once the boys learned of Sciezka's unique gift of total recall of everything she'd ever read, they inquired about what texts and manuscripts the Central Library had about botany and plant alchemy.

Then it clicked for me that this was their specialty, but I still didn't know why there were here. Finally it was my turn to discuss what I did for a living. *What exactly did I do?*

Thankfully Riza intervened on my behalf, "Second Lieutenant Havoc is retired, but he has been gracious enough to act as an intel and firearms specialist when we need him. He's also attending classes at the university in addition to his rehab work with Jim."

Fletcher, the younger brother, said, "Lieutenant Havoc, that is very impressive. I couldn't help
noticing that you are very strong."

I flushed a bit, wondering how to reply to that and finally said, "Well thank you Fletcher, and call me Jean. As for being strong, I kind of have to be, and owe a lot of that to Jim. Oh, and I can't neglect to mention this chair. Winry and Alphonse made it for me. I get around so much better with it."

Winry had been dozing off, but perked up at the mention of her creation. Fletcher and Russel both nodded and then Russel said, "We're here because Lieutenant Hawkeye requested that we come and work on some botanical medicines."

I quirked an eyebrow at Riza and she cleared her throat. Gracia excused herself to go put Elysia to bed and get some sleep herself, and Sciezka took the hint as well saying, "Jean, I'm going to make up the bed and finish unpacking. I am beat."

After they both cleared out in record time, I got back in my chair and Jim, Riza, Winry and the Tringhams and I moved the discussion to the dining room. Once we were all seated around the table Riza pulled out a small, battered notebook from her pocket.

Speaking in hushed tones she said, "Sometime tonight Colonel Mustang will be arriving with the Elrics, Doctor Knox and two more people."

"Wait, Knox, why him? You had said there was an injury. Was it that bad?" I asked.

Riza nodded and said, "The two others are here illegally from Xing. One is a noble, and having him as an ally could help the cause. It was his bodyguard who was seriously injured. I didn't get many details, but it seems that we'll be needing all the different medical specialties we've assembled here."

I nodded and said, "So then why am I here?"

"Because you know how to run a mission and I need help," Riza snapped, then thinking better of it smiled and added, "Moral support?"

Smiling and saluting I said, "Whatever you need ma'am, even if it's only a good diversion. I'm sure Sciezka and I can come up with something."

"Ok, good. Now Russel and Fletcher... I have enough information about this to know that you'll need remedies which aid localized clotting, and minimizing infection and pain while keeping the patient alert," Riza said.

She continued her briefing, "Jim, when the patient arrives I want you to help Doctor Knox with her positioning and then work with Winry to come up with solutions. Winry, I have no idea what awaits you in this, but you were specifically requested because of your expertise. Edward damaged his automail as well, but he is fine."

Winry heaved a sigh of relief, but in the next instant anger flashed over her features and she hissed, "That Bean, he is getting into trouble again! I'll kill him!"

Suppressing a chuckle I said, "Winry, go easy on him. I'm sure it couldn't be helped. At least the rest of him is in one piece."

She glared at me and said, "Don't take his side too often buster."

Grinning sheepishly I replied, "You are the boss when it comes to mechanics."
After everyone was briefed, Riza suggested that we all get some sleep and to expect an early wake-up call when they arrived.

When I got back to the cottage I let myself in quietly, stopped in the bathroom to get ready for bed and found a note from Sciezka on the edge of the sink:

"Get ready for bed and then get in here."

-S

I completed the necessaries in record time and hurried into the bedroom. Sciezka had dimmed the lantern, turned down the bed and put on the blue silk chemise I loved. She took a small, brightly wrapped bundle from under her pillow and set it in her lap. I took that as an invitation to join her. After stripping down to my boxers I got into bed with only a little bit of difficulty, as it was higher than I was used to. Once I had propped myself up against a few pillows and was sitting comfortably, Sciezka handed me the bundle and said, "Open it, Happy Early Birthday."

She knelt next to me to kiss me then sat back on her heels and waited expectantly to see if I liked the present. The bright wrapping that I undid was actually two narrow silk scarves, which I carefully folded and set them beside me on the bed. I then opened the latch of the intricately carved wooden box that the scarves had concealed, and I immediately smelled the delicately sweet scent of honey. After inspecting the box's contents further, I found that it held a fine amber colored powder and a small, fluffy feather duster.

"Ohhh, I think I know what this is, but why don't you tell me? This isn't a hint that I stink, is it?" I asked.

Sciezka dipped a finger into the powder, traced my lips, kissed me and said, "No, you smell delicious. I just thought that this might be fun, and a good excuse to lick every inch of you."

"What should I do with the scarves? Do I need to accessorize? I really don't think that red is my color," I said and winked.

She moved her pillows to the middle of the bed, then took mine, scowled and said, "You, get in the middle of the bed."

Once I was positioned there she fluffed the pillows so that I was leaning against the headboard quite comfortably. I said, "I think that I really like this special birthday treatment, but what are you doing?"

Weaving the finishing touches on a series of intricate loops and knots in one of the scarves, she smiled, placing her handiwork around my right wrist and tied the loose end around the headboard. Smiling wickedly she said, "I'm tying you up... if at any time you want me to stop just say 'ceasefire' and I will stop immediately."

I thought it over, and though the time and effort she'd put into her scheme was admirable, I wasn't sure if I wanted to be more immobile than I already was. Unable to think of a joke or play on words to distract her from how much my limitations still bothered me, I just came right out and said, "I'm sorry, that would have been fun before… but I don't think it will work like this. Though I'm pleased that you had forgotten that detail when you were planning this."

Sciezka kissed me on the forehead and then replied, "You have nothing to worry about. I just
wanted to do this so you could focus solely on your pleasure. The bonds will be quite loose; I intend to make you move a lot. You were right about the last part though, the chair is the last thing I think about when I think of you."

I surrendered my left wrist to her and smiled.

She hitched it up to the headboard and asked if I was comfortable, and then she gave me a piece of her mind.

After making quite a production of removing her chemise, straddling me and applying the honey powder with fluttering strokes of the feather, she began the task of "cleaning up" as she called it.

She ran her tongue from my navel to my neck and kissed me, making sure I got a taste of my present. When I raised my head to try and deepen the kiss she said, "Just let me worship a bit."

I was thankful that turn about was fair play.

She put a new twist on things by telling me what she thought of when she thought of me and then touching me in ways I'd only imagined before, followed each with a kiss. Placing another on my forehead she said, "I love your mind. You're intelligent, but quiet about it, no… humble." Then she ever so delicately ran her tongue around my ear and whispered, "You're an excellent listener. You even pick up on the things I don't say." She moved to my eyes and kissed each eyelid saying, "You see through people's masks and you still look for the good in them." Next was my nose and as she nuzzled it with hers she giggled and said, "This is not only an aristocratic profile, it's very functional. It knows just how to drive me wild."

Whereas she had started with my high-minded ideals and lofty goals, my list of attributes quickly grew to include things that made even me blush. If I'd had any remaining doubts about being tied up, hell everything, they were gone now. I was thoroughly enjoying myself.

I could tell that this turned her on too because she began to do her usual bump and grind. I asked, "So is this how it feels when I won't let you do it yourself?"

She smiled and said, "Maybe, but this isn't payback. It's just so fun watching you. That's another one. When I think of you, I think of a very expressive person."

I gave her my best puppy dog eyes and whined, "IS this expressive enough? Please?"

Sciezka kissed me passionately and said, "On it!"

I decided right then that being thoroughly owned and ridden into the mattress was at times a very good thing. Well, the realization hit me later after the blood came back to my brain and I could think straight again.

"Ceasefire!"

"What Jean? I'm not doing anything," Sciezka said as she looked up at me from where she had collapsed after a spectacular climax.

"As much as I enjoy the cuddling, I am still tied up, I have to pee, and I need a cigarette after all that veneration. Damn woman, you are good."

After all was said and done, we both slept like rocks.
Authors Note: So many thanks to anat-astarte for being just amazing with the editing on the fly and concrit. WOW, and yay. You know just how to stroke a girl's ego. My head is going to inflate like Mustang's.

Disclaimer: I still don't own it. Besides, where would they air something with this much sex in it?
Revelations

Chapter Notes

In the morning I woke up to the sound of birds chirping outside in the garden and Sciezka lightly stroking my cheek. I smiled, opened my eyes and the first thing I saw was Sciezka's face. She kissed me tenderly and I thought to myself, "What a wonderful way to wake up."

Sciezka pressed her lips to mine again, and said, "I'm going to get dressed and help with breakfast. Why don't you get some more sleep? You certainly earned it last night. I'll come get you when it's ready."

I admired the view as I watched her walk into the bathroom, and then rolled over onto my stomach to comply with her request.

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When I woke up the second time, the experience wasn't as pleasant. I'd thrown off the covers at some point, and the sweltering heat was my wake-up call. As I savored my last few moments of peace before what would probably be a very busy day, I had the distinct feeling that I was being watched.

There wasn't much that I would be able to do if my audience was hostile, so I decided the best approach was to be quick and direct. I opened my eyes, pulled up the blankets, propped myself up on my elbows and scanned the room, with a speed I didn't know I even possessed. My eyes landed on a grinning foreigner, dressed in red and perched on my wheelchair.

"Good morning, you've finally woken up," the foreigner said cheerfully.

"Good morning? Is that all you have to say for yourself?" I growled, realizing that a massive case of bedhead did not help with my "intimidation factor".

The foreigner smirked as he continued looking at me, appearing to be sizing me up. I sighed, knowing that if I were in his shoes I would have laughed my ass off at such a sight. As he leaned over and untied one of the scarves from the head board he asked, "Sciezka, the delicate looking one with the glasses in the kitchen, she is your lover, yes?"

I blushed crimson, my anger steadily rising, and replied, "It's not any of your business, but yes, Sciezka is my girlfriend."

His audacity infuriated me and I asked in rapid fire, "Just who the fuck are you, how the hell did you get in here and have you any concept of privacy?"

Still grinning, he replied, "The bonds are too far apart to be for her, I assume you were tied up then?"

"I don't even know why I'm dignifying that with a response, but yes, I was tied up," I answered, growing really uncomfortable about having this discussion with what looked like a fairly young foreigner.

His amused expression remained unchanged as he said, "Ah, I see, then..."
Cutting him off I said, "I don't even know your damned name, but get this straight, I can, and we do!" I glared at him for a bit before letting out an exasperated sigh.

His eyes glinted in amusement as he finally answered, "My name is Ling, I came in through the window and does my being here make you uncomfortable?"

"Yes it does you little pervert, and get off of my chair!" I yelled.

As I was telling this 'Ling' person off, Fullmetal appeared in the doorway. He smirked at the spectacle and said, "Jean, meet Prince Ling Yao of Xing, Ling, meet Jean Havoc."

"Boss, hey," I said. "Is his Royal Highness always such a presumptuous pain in the ass?"

Fullmetal nodded and said, "You're lucky you don't have to put up with His Royal Moochery all the time."

I shot Ling another glare and said, "You're still on my chair. Scram, before I sick its creator on you."

"You better do what he says," Ed said as he rubbed the angry looking bump that was rising on his forehead, "if this what she did to me I can imagine what she will do to you."

Ling vacated his perch both gracefully and unapologetically, gave me that silly grin again, then waved and left the room.

I rolled over onto my back, pushed up into a sitting position and said, "Thanks Boss, and I'm glad to see that you're mostly in one piece. You had us worried."

Ed self-consciously touched his empty shoulder port and said, "Winry took it off this morning to work on it. I really did a number on it."

Understanding completely, I nodded and said, "I take it breakfast will be ready soon?"

Ed replied, "Yeah, Sciezka sent me to come wake you up. Well that, and I'm hiding from Winry."

"Feel free to hide in the main room Boss, and I'll get ready," I said, chuckling at the amount of fear a young, blonde girl could strike in him.

Ed pointed to the remaining scarf on the headboard and said, "I see you've returned to 'active duty'. By the way, nice hair."

I shook my head and said, "What would you know about that? Maybe I just felt like decorating."

"Sure you did... you'd better hurry, His Royal Moochery will eat all the food if we don't get there fast," Ed said as he headed for the main room.

I was not about to let that mooch eat my breakfast, so I quickly put on some boxers, grabbed a pair of khakis and a t-shirt and headed into the bathroom to wash up.

Once I'd gotten myself cleaned up, I went into the main room. Ed was sitting on the couch waiting for me. I noted that he had an especially sour expression on his face and seemed to be deep in thought. I knew the kid always had plenty on his mind, but this looked different to me. Knowing that he'd never spit it out on his own, I asked, "Hey Boss, you look to be especially chipper this
morning, do you want to talk about it?"

He fiddled with his watch, blushed and said, "It's kind of embarrassing."

"You're talking to the guy who had to have glass picked out of his ass, shard by shard, just last weekend. It can't be that bad. I promise I won't laugh," I replied, moving closer to the couch so that we were eye to eye.

After considering my offer he said, "I really like someone, but... I don't know how to say it."

Grinning I said, "Just tell her, she'll be thrilled."

A panic-stricken look crossed his features and he mumbled, "It's not Winry."

I sucked in a breath, and said with a grin, "Oh shit! In that case, who is she and do I know her?"

"That's another um, issue," he said, clearly uncomfortable.

Giving him a puzzled look I asked, "So who is it?"

Ed's cheeks flushed a deeper shade and he answered, "Russel."

Masking my astonishment as well as I could I cheerfully said, "Well, I gotta admit, I wasn't expecting that one, but you have to follow your heart." Treading carefully, I asked, "Does Winry know?"

Ed looked at the floor, appearing miserable, and I had no doubt he was imagining Winry's reaction.

He had opened up to me, and this was a rare moment for us both since he never confided in anyone other than Alphonse. I wonder if Alphonse even knew about this. The Boss could be counted on to cause complete chaos and lots of collateral damage in his efforts to champion the underdog, but handling human emotions -including his- was never his strong suit.

I really couldn't be surprised that he seemed to have no clue as to how to handle this. After thinking about how I was going to phrase it, I finally said, "First of all, you'll need to run damage control. Tell Winry as much as you feel comfortable telling her, but most importantly be honest with her and let her tell you off. It might be less physically damaging for you that way." Ed winced, clearly not convinced. " As for Russel" I continued, "well, I don't really know him, but then again, I think honesty is still the way to go."

Ed looked relieved and said, "Thanks Jean, for... well, just... thanks. We should head over to the main house now." He was smiling now and running his fingers through his long blond bangs.

"Yeah, you're right, if we're gonna beat that mooch to the table," I said as I headed toward the bathroom. "Just give me a minute."

I took out the small bottle from my kit and thought about what I was going to do. Ed probably didn't know why I was giving him this, but since he was a prodigy and all I was sure he'd eventually figure it out.

After looking at the small bottle I'd just handed him and then back at me, it seemed that he was utterly confused as to what he was supposed to do with it. I cleared my throat and said, "Lube Ed, it's lube. What am I using it for? Strictly medical purposes and trust me, you really don't want to know the specifics. As for why I'm giving it to you, well... you might need it."
Still confused and speechless, Ed stood up and went to the door. I lit up a cigarette and followed him, and we headed up the path to get some breakfast.

Once the Boss and I got to the front of the house, he eyed the ramp and asked, "Can you manage it?"

I grinned and said, "Yeah, I've got it handled, but thanks for the offer. Let's get that chow. I can smell it from here."

Breaking a sweat as I inched my way up the ramp, I grit my teeth with the effort and finally arrived at the top, out of breath, but no worse for wear. Recovering quickly, I looked up and saw Ling perched on the railing. He climbed down to stand on the porch, flashed that grin of his and said, "Allow me to get the door for you."

"It won't be necessary," I said coolly as I wheeled past him, opened the door and went inside. Ling and Ed followed me into the house and headed towards the dining room, their stomachs growling in unison.

Sciezka peered out of the kitchen, thanked Ed for coming to get me, then came over to kiss me and asked, "Did you sleep well?"

I lightly pressed my lips to hers again and said, "I met Ling. C'mon, let's eat."

She ruffled my hair and said, "You look like you need some coffee."

Nodding I replied, "You have no idea."

We went into the dining room and sat down for breakfast. Gracia and Sciezka had outdone themselves cooking; platters were piled high with scrambled eggs, bacon and sausages. I chose a place near the center of the table, where I would have the best access to everything. I filled my plate and began to eat heartily. Gracia had also set out some of her preserves, which were delicious slathered on buttered toast. As I was settling in to eat, Sciezka nudged my elbow and said, "Oh, you weren't hungry at all, were you?"

I gave her a sheepish grin, swallowed and whispered in her ear, "I think you'll agree that I earned it last night. But look at those two! I thought the Boss could eat, but Ling is worse than he is."

They were both on their second helpings and devouring it like there was no tomorrow. As Ed reached for the last piece of bacon, Ling jabbed his fork at Ed's hand and growled, "It's mine, shrimp!"

That set Ed off. If the dining room hadn't been so packed it would have been fun to watch an all-out sparring match between the two of them. While they were tussling, Riza deftly plucked the bacon off the platter and fed it to Hayate as Ling and Ed watched, completely crestfallen.

I popped my piece of bacon into my mouth and said, "Well done Hawkeye. You never fail to quell a hostile situation quickly. You'd be good at babysitting."

Riza laughed, winked at Sciezka and said, "Most women are. How do you think we put up with you men?"

I rolled my eyes and replied, "I thought I was exempt from comments like that. This dog is housebroken. Speaking of which, Gracia, can I help with clean up?"

Gracia came out of the kitchen with her mug of coffee and said, "No, I've got it covered. But could
you keep Elysia busy?"

I chuckled and said, "Of course, get over here Princess, we'll go exploring and then take a swim."

Sciezka followed us onto the porch. I pulled her closer and said, "Maybe you should stay behind. I have a hunch that Winry might need you."

She looked confused and asked, "What for?"

"You'll know it when you hear it. Someone is either going to be in the doghouse or completely disassembled."

As Elysia skipped down the steps and I made my way over the ramp, I heard a shriek followed by a dull thud and what sounded like the contents of Winry's toolbox being thrown at some unlucky soul. The next thing I knew the Boss streaked past me, apparently running for his life.

Sciezka came down the stairs and said to me in a low voice, "It was only a matter of time. It's better that he told her now than have her figure it out on her own later."

"So you knew?" I asked, rather puzzled, as the news had been a shock to me.

She nodded and said, "You are so oblivious sometimes. I'll go see if Winry wants to talk."

Elysia and I had wandered around the lake, picking up shiny pebbles, smelling the wild flowers and chasing down and observing every living thing she could find. Whenever she found a butterfly or insect she'd ask me what kind it was, what it ate, and where it lived. I had no idea that kids from the city didn't know this stuff. She also had to know all about each type of bird we saw, and I found out that my birdcalls weren't as rusty as I thought they were. Of all the living things we saw, there was no sign of Ed. Clearly he was making himself scarce. Elysia finally sat down at the picnic table and announced, "Jean, we are going to have a tea party."

Smiling I said, "Ok Elysia, but what are you going to serve?"

Instead of answering she scampered off. I called after her, "Stay where I can see you!" I allowed myself to relax while she was on her mission. Stretching my arms over my head, I realized that I should probably take a swim in the afternoon as my back and shoulders were tight from anxiety. This was supposed to be a vacation, but so far it was more stressful than life back in Central. I told myself, "Things will be better once Winry calms down."

Elysia came back quickly and set out acorn caps, which she informed me were our teacups. We were finishing dessert, which were acorns on leaf plates, when a car came up the road kicking up dust and parked in front of the main house. I wondered who it could be and was elated, if not a tad bit nervous, when Breda, Feury, Falman and a striking blonde woman got out of the car.

I waved and said, "Hey, get over here! What are you doing out here?"

Elysia got up from the picnic bench and hid behind my chair when the four "strangers" approached.

"It's ok Princess. These people are my friends," I told her, trying to reassure her. I almost reminded her that they were her daddy's friends too, but thankfully I caught myself just in time. "Breda, why don't we all go up to the house? Elysia and I need to find her Mommy and I bet you would like to
The guys, and that blonde woman, retrieved their bags from the car and went to find their rooms and unpack. I dropped Elysia off with Gracia, grabbed a beer from the icebox while I was in that direction and went out onto the porch to wait for Breda. As I pried the cap off of the bottle I thought to myself, "Damn, Falman did not do that woman justice when he described her in his letters. She is a long, tall, cool drink of water."

My stream of thought was interrupted when I noticed the spasms. Whether it was from exerting myself more than usual as Elysia and I explored or the car ride the day before, I didn't know. I just knew they needed to stop. I put my beer down next to my chair and put both hands firmly on my knees, willing the spasms to stop. I knew that was hopeless, but I tried in vain anyway. I heard the screen door open, and heaved a sigh of relief when I saw that it was Winry coming out onto the porch.

Winry quietly slid down the wall and sat with her shoulders slumped, clutching her knees tight to her body. Her eyes were red and a little puffy, and from her posture I knew she was still very upset by her conversation with Ed.

"Would you like to talk about it?" I asked tentatively. It was no secret that I'd had my heart broken many times before, but nothing quite like I suspected had gone on between Ed and Winry. I'd always assumed that they were childhood sweethearts and that they'd end up together.

She sniffed and softly said, "Maybe later, Jean. Jim had me come get you for a session."

"A session?" I asked. I chuckled softly and continued, "Only I am lucky enough to have a physical therapist and a mechanic on-call while I'm on vacation."

Winry's expression brightened a little at the mention of her engineering skill and she said, "It looks like you're in bad shape too."

Carefully leaning forward to stretch my back and pick up my beer I said, "Yeah, I must have overdone it. The session will be good for me. Maybe it'll help stop the spasms. I don't want the guys to know."

She nodded and said, "Go change into your swim trunks and wait at the cottage. I'll tell Jim that we're doing your session there, and then you can take a swim."

I took a swig of beer and said, "Thank you for covering for me Winry. I meant what I said, I'm here if you ever need someone to talk to. I don't know if it helps any, but Ma always said something along the lines of 'every pot has a cover.' Look at me... I think I've found my 'cover' and you will too."

Sciezka stepped out onto the porch as I was heading for the cottage to change and she was smiling. "You know," I said smiling back at her, as I pulled her onto my lap, "I like the way you 'cover' me."

She leaned in and kissed me, and I softly whispered, "I love you."

With tears in her eyes and a big loving smile, she replied, "I know Jean, I know. It shows in everything you do."

Chapter End Notes
Huge thanks to anat-astarte for the beta. Go read her stuff! She can even make GluttonyxScar hot.
Of all the hurdles I'd ever faced, overcoming my fear of saying the three scariest words in the male vocabulary to Sciezka was the moment of my greatest triumph. I was still in awe over it. I'd done it! I'd actually done it! Although Sciezka had known what was in my heart all along she was still happy to hear it, and to my great relief she reciprocated my feelings as well.

We sat there on the front porch in silence for a few moments before we resumed kissing each other with a renewed sense of intimacy between us. Words weren't needed. My legs jumped particularly fiercely and Sciezka placed a hand on my knees and said, "They're bad today, aren't they?"

Frowning I said, "Yeah, I don't know what I did to cause them. As much as I'd rather stay just like this for the afternoon, with you, I've got to go down to the cottage for a session."

She leaned in for another kiss and said through her smile, "I bet that will help. We'll go for a swim afterwards. You can help me put sun lotion on my back."

I took her bottom lip and nibbled on it a bit and then said, "Mm hmm, spreading lotion all over that nubile body of yours makes it sound like will never get around to swimming."

Giggling and shaking her head at me she replied, "Get to your session Mister One-Track-Mind."

I grinned and said, "Then you're Miss One-Track-Mind, and I'd say that makes us perfect for each other."

She carefully got off of my lap and said, "I'll walk over with you and no worries, I have plans for you tonight."

We went down the trellis-lined path to the cottage, stopping every few steps to admire the flowers and steal a kiss. Once in the small, hedge-enclosed garden Sciezka leaned in for a particularly effusive kiss. She then ruffled my hair and said, "I can tell you're craving a cigarette, I haven't seen you with one all morning."

Grinning as I fished in the bag under my chair for my pack of smokes I replied, "I had much better things to do with my mouth. If we could make-out all day long I don't think I'd ever light up again."

She chuckled wryly and said, "We wouldn't get much done. In fact, we'd never leave the house."

"You're probably right, but it would be fun," I said and winked.

Sciezka turned to leave and said, "Have a good session. I'm going to help Gracia get everyone settled in and then we'll take that swim."

I watched her walk, no, saunter, as I sat and smoked until the flowering vines on the path obscured my view.

After surveying the garden I found what I was looking for as someone had placed a coffee can just outside the door of the cottage, apparently for my benefit. I stubbed out my spent cigarette and put the butt in the can, then went into the cottage to change into my swim trunks for my session.
I'd just finished changing in the bathroom and taking care of the necessaries when I heard a knock on the door. I called out from where I was and said, "Come on in, I'm decent."

When I came out of the bathroom I saw that Jim and Winry were in the living area setting out a blanket and some pillows on the floor. Jim noticed the spasms after a rather violent one that nearly knocked my feet off of the footrest and frowned. Then he said, "It looks like we have our work cut out for us today. Are they usually this bad?"

Looking down at my twitching legs I swallowed hard and then said, "No Jim, not normally. It's probably just stress. They usually pass."

Jim helped me out of my chair and onto the floor, as the spasms made it hard to find a secure footing. After I stretched out on the floor on my back Jim began bending and stretching my legs and said, "I'll go easy on you today. Elysia said you both got a lot of exercise after breakfast on your nature hike."

I laughed remembering Elysia's astonishment at all the different types of wildlife and said, "We had a great time. She's so curious, and whip smart. She was able to remember everything I told her."

Winry sat on the couch and listened as Jim and I talked and said, "Someday you'll make a great father Jean."

I quirked an eyebrow and asked her, "You really think so? I'm flattered. I don't even know if it's possible, but it'll be fun trying. Jim, what do you think?"

Jim stopped what he was doing for a moment and said, "I don't have a lot of experience in that area, medically at least. It might be impossible, but I agree with Winry. If you want it, it will happen, even if you go the adoption route. You'll make a great father. Not to put the cart before the horse, but you and Sciezka seem like you'd be great parents. I'll bet you'll have Elysia's vote too."

The rest of my therapy session continued with Jim putting my joints and muscles through their full range of motion. Winry moved to the floor to better observe what Jim was doing. He paused and asked, "Jean, would you mind if I showed Winry how to do this?"

After pushing up onto my elbows so I could see them both I said, "It's fine, really. I just hope it helps with the spasms. If the guys found out it would put a damper on my day."

Winry nodded and said, "We won't do the electro-stimulation today, I think it would just irritate your nerves more. But I don't think anyone would think any less of you if they saw the spasms."

"Nah Winry, they wouldn't. It's just, I guess... I just want to be 'one of the guys', like nothing happened," I said softly. "Having to explain another thing that's wrong with me wouldn't help with that."

There was a knock on the door and I startled at the noise. Jim must have noticed my concern because he got up, walked to the door and asked, "Who is it?"

Thankfully it was just Sciezka. Jim let her in and she crossed the small distance from the door to where I was on the floor, sat down next to me and asked, "So how is the session going?"

I smiled and said, "Today I got to be lazy, they're doing all the work. Jim and Winry weren't their usual slave-driver selves."
Jim and Winry both smiled at that and Jim said, "He's all yours Sciezka. I think a swim would be just perfect today. I'm going to check in with Doctor Knox and hopefully I'll see you two down there. Winry, take the afternoon off, go take a dip."

They headed up to the main house after I thanked them both for the session and Sciezka went into the bedroom to change into her swimsuit. I was getting back into my chair as she came out. Once I'd gotten myself situated she came over, hugged me and whispered in my ear, "Care to help me with that sun lotion now?"

She handed the bottle to me and I squeezed a generous amount into my palms and began spreading it on her in slow, long strokes. She shivered at first because I hadn't warmed it up first. I guess I was a little too thorough, as she snatched the bottle out of my lap and said, "Now it's my turn."

Eventually we made our way to the lakefront and onto the dock. Sciezka went in first and waded out until she could no longer touch bottom so I could tell how deep the water was. I set the brakes on my chair, carefully eased myself on to the dock, then crept to the edge and dangled my legs over the side. I was thankful that the dock was made of smooth metal, as the last thing I needed were splinters. Doctor Knox had already seen enough of my backside as far as I was concerned.

I got into the water just as Breda and Feury approached the lakeshore. After swimming a few strokes I swam back to the dock and began to tread water. Feury was wading in the shallows and I suppressed a chuckle when the image of comparing him to a wet cat crossed my mind. Breda was out on the dock and I teased, "Who's the father? Do you think it will be an ale or a lager?"

Breda grinned, rubbed his belly and said, "I'd say it was you, but we haven't been out drinking in ages."

I chuckled, and then replied, "We'll fix that, and it's a stout, isn't it?"

He shook his head and said, "You know I only drink that muddy swill when I'm out with you."

Then he made a running start and jumped off the dock landing with a spectacular splash as he shouted, "Incoming!"

Feury was startled when he got splashed and gave up his timid wading to swim out to where Breda, Sciezka and I were. I decided I would get in a few laps before everyone else in our group joined the fray.

After my second lap from the dock to the raft that was anchored about twenty-five yards out, Breda commented, "Havoc, you're still a fish. I remember last R and R trip was the same way, you spent almost all your free time in the lake."

I stopped treading water and replied, "I have been since I was a kid swimming in the mill pond."

With a mischievous smirk, Breda smiled and said, "If I recall correctly your Ma said you had a thing for skinny dipping."

Blushing a bit at the mention and the memory I said, "Yeah, well I couldn't come home in wet clothes. It would be a dead giveaway that I'd been shirking my chores and swimming and smoking behind the neighbor's shed instead."

Sciezka splashed me and asked, "How did your mother find out?"
I splashed her back and said, "She wouldn't have, if my cousins hadn't swiped my clothes."

We all had to laugh at that. I'd always been good at getting into embarrassing situations. I was relieved that Breda could still poke some fun at me, though I sensed he was holding back. I'd talk to him about it later if he kept it up for much longer.

The rest of our motley crew came down to the shore; Mustang looking pale and skinny in his trunks, Hawkeye a knock-out in a dark blue tank suit, Falman, stiff as ever and pasty from his time spent at Northern H.Q. and his girlfriend Denika. Sciezka smacked me on the back of the head when my jaw dropped as she unwrapped the towel she had around her waist.

"What? I just can't believe that Falman has a girl, much less one that looks like that!" I said apologetically.

They all got into the water and soon the girls were lounging on the raft taking in some sun, and we boys were engaging in horseplay. I caught Sciezka watching and smiled wide. This was like old times.

Jim, Winry, Gracia and Elysia arrived next. Well, Elysia arrived first and ran to the end of the dock and shouted, "Jean, come catch me!"

I knew I could do it, so I gave Jim and Gracia the thumbs-up and swam over to the dock to catch her. Elysia backed up, got a running start and leapt into my arms. The guys cheered and we took turns having Elysia swim to us and launching her into the air. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed that Jim and Gracia seemed quite content talking to each other in the shallows.

I left Elysia with "Unca Roy" and started to swim to the raft to see what Denika, Riza, Sciezka and Winry were talking about. They were all giggling and carrying on about something and I was happy to see that Winry was smiling and chatting. As I got closer the only thing I could make out of the conversation was a thickly accented "Laps like a true military dog" before they all noticed my approach and went silent.

As I hung onto the raft I asked jokingly, "Are boys allowed in your club?"

Sciezka pretended to consider it, rolled her eyes and asked, "What do you think ladies?"

Winry giggled and said, "I suppose so, but we'll have to swear you to secrecy."

Chuckling a bit I replied, "The things I put up with to enjoy the company of beautiful women such as yourselves."

I pulled myself out of the water and rolled over onto my back easily. Sciezka leaned over and whispered in my ear, "You're getting good at that, and yes, I was bragging about you."

After pulling her down for a kiss I said, "I bet I'll hear from Breda and Mustang what a looker you are. I'll be spending the rest of the weekend beating them off of you with a stick."

We all basked in the sun and soon everyone decided they'd better get into the shade before they burned. Sciezka gave me a quick peck on the cheek and said, "I'm going to go get cleaned up and then take a nap before dinner. Care to join me?"

I smiled and said, "I'll be in soon. I just want to talk to Breda first."

We both left the raft and I swam over to Breda, but couldn't help watching as she climbed the ladder on the dock.
"She's gorgeous," Breda said, breaking the awkward silence that had developed.

"I'm a damned lucky guy to have her," I said softly.

He nodded in agreement, seemingly at a loss for words. I headed for the dock to get out and Breda rushed ahead and said, "Ah, Jean don't strain yourself. Let me help you."

"Breda!" I said sharply, then my tone softened. "Heymans, I'm not going to break... physically or emotionally, so cut it out."

I hauled myself onto the dock, rolled over onto my back and eased myself up until I was sitting. Breda got out of the water and sat down next to me.

He cleared his throat and said, "You look good, stronger... since I saw you last."

I smiled and said, "Thanks, I feel good. Therapy is going well. I have my own place now... really you should see it. I start classes at the university next week and well, you saw Sciezka."

"Don't deck me, but man... how was she hiding that body in the Investigations Department and between the stacks?" he asked tentatively.

I laughed and said, "For a guy who is afraid of dogs, you sure are one. But, agreed, she is hot and don't tell her I said this but she's really liberated and has no qualms about smacking me around."

He looked more than a little dumbfounded, then asked, "So... it's all good?"

I shook my head and I'm sure some of my sadness slipped through the strong front I was trying to put up, "It's great, I mean I'd be lying if I said it was perfect. You know the deal, but it's still mind-blowing. Neither of us is complaining."

Breda breathed a sigh of relief and said, "We were all so worried. You were so down..."

I threw an arm around his shoulder, clapped him on the back and said, "I know buddy. I scared myself sometimes."

He nodded, then smirking he said, "So you and Sciezka? Wow, I would have lost my shirt if I'd bet on that one."

I began laughing so hard I had to catch myself as I nearly lost my balance and once I regained my composure I said, "If you want to find one like her I suggest you start spending time in libraries and coffee houses. Maybe take up yoga as a hobby."

"Yoga? You are nuts Havoc!" he replied, convinced that I really had lost my mind.

"I'm not going to give you too many details, you're a smart guy... for a grunt!" I said grinning slyly. "I'll just let you in on the fact that Sciezka can bend in ways I didn't think were humanly possible."

Breda winked and said, "I'll keep that in mind. Maybe I'll even find a woman who plays Shogi."

"Speaking of women, Sciezka and I are due for a nap," I said in a low voice, waggling my eyebrows to emphasize 'nap'.

Breda quickly got up and said, "Here, let me help you up."

I sighed agitatedly and said, "I don't need help, and I'll ask if I do."
He put up his hands in surrender and said, "Ok, but you don't have to always do it all yourself... maybe eventually you won't need to depend on that thing."

I glared at him and said in a commanding manner, "Sit down and **really listen.**"

He did as I asked without a word, stunned into silence.

I gave Breda a hard look, knowing what was going through his mind. "You are under no circumstances to look for Tim Marcoh or the stone on my behalf. I forbid it. If anyone was hurt or killed I'd never forgive myself. I bet you think I'm nuts, but at least this way I can sleep at night. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to be able to feel again. At this point, fuck walking, even the stone wouldn't get me much more than standing, but to **feel** her..."

He hugged me, hard, not like before, not like I'd shatter if I got touched the wrong way. When he let go we both wiped our eyes and I said, "I just wanted to make that clear. We can both be dense sometimes."

Laughing our emotional display off he smiled and said, "So we can drink, curse, spit and play pool like before? I can even tease you?"

After catching him in a headlock and giving him a fierce noogie I said, "I'll beat you up if you don't, though you'll have to settle for funny looking as dateless is no longer applicable."

I let him go and got into my chair and headed to the cottage. Breda stood up, laughing as he said, "I knew the old you would be back. See you at dinner... go get her, she's been waiting for you a while too."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to anat-astarte for the beta.
When I got back to the cottage I found Sciezka in the bathtub relaxing. She smiled as she heard me come in and asked, "Care to join me?"

I got out of my trunks as quickly as I could and Sciezka helped me get into the bath. I was thankful we had practice with this at Gracia's and relieved that it wasn't an issue at my place. Once I was in, Sciezka settled in behind me and began washing my hair as I chuckled and asked, "More royal treatment?" Instead of answering, she kissed the back of my neck and lingered there awhile.

She finally broke the companionable silence when she asked, "So did you and Heymans have a nice chat?"

Leaning back as far as I could without losing my balance, then easing the rest of the way to settle against her I answered, "As a matter of fact we did. He'd been pussyfooting around me all day and it was pissing me off, so I set him straight. We'll be back to teasing, spitting and cussing in no time.
Oh, and he thinks you are really good for me."

She giggled, squeezed my shoulder and replied, "Oh really? I'm glad I've got your best friend's approval."

I couldn't resist teasing her so I added, "Plus he thinks you're hot. I completely agree."

She flicked some bubbles at me, but I could tell she was secretly flattered.

"So about that Ling fellow, you don't seem to care much for him," she said.

"You noticed?" I replied, cocking an eyebrow. "It's not that he's a bad person or anything, he just strikes me as arrogant as hell and a perverted voyeur."

Sciezka's jaw dropped and she asked, "You figured all this out how?"

"After you went up to the house this morning I had the dubious honor of meeting His Royal Moochery while I was still in my birthday suit. He helped himself to a seat, my chair, and proceeded to make snoopy insinuations about our sex life."

She frowned and asked, "So did you tell him anything?"

"Only answered 'the question'..."

"He didn't!" she exclaimed, and then laughed at the absurdity of it all.

"Oh yes, he did. I told him everything worked just fine, thank you very much."

"Good!" she replied. "Let's put on a show, just in case he's forgotten about common courtesy and privacy again."

"I love the way you think Sciezka," I said, then kissed her passionately to really drive my point home.
After we got out of the bath and dried off we made our way to the bed.

"So how much time do we have?" I asked, unable to hide the excitement in my voice.

Sciezka smiled at me from where she was kneeling on the bed and answered, "We're all going out for dinner around seven. Riza said it's a local hangout with great food, real low-key... plus they have a pool table."

"Gracia deserves a vacation too, and that sounds like fun. Maybe I can play a few games with Breda and Falman. Now, how would you like me to thank you for my birthday present last night?" I asked playfully.

She lay back against the pillows with a sly smile and said, "I'm sure you'll think of a way. You always do."

I transferred to the bed, moved hand over hand to where she was and placed a lingering kiss on her lips. When I moved to nibble on her earlobe I whispered, "Were you serious about putting on a show?"

Grinning wickedly she arched her back and moaned loudly, "Oh yes... Jean!"

Nuzzling her playfully with my nose I warned, "I'm going to make you do that for real. No need to act for his benefit. Though your sense of humor is just one of the things I love about you."

She wriggled in anticipation as I moved lower to her breasts and began teasing her into arousal as I gently stroked her sex. Where she would normally bite her lip to stifle her small noises of contentment, she now let them all out and that only made me work harder to get her to keep making them. I thought fleetingly, "Maybe I'll have to thank this Ling pervert later."

When I felt that she was ready I moved over her, cradling her head in one hand and claiming her mouth while I slowly sunk first one finger and then a second into her and gently teased and stroked her sweet spot. She wrapped her legs around my waist, grinding and arching into me, moaning insistently as she tightened and pulsed around my fingers. Finally sweating and bucking under me she came, moaning incoherently. I slowly removed my fingers from her heat, and moved lower, leaving a trail of kisses as she continued to respond under my touch.

Settling between her thighs I began to gently lick and caress her folds, she bent her knees and hooked them over my shoulders and we fell back into a languorous rhythm. Exploring deeper I sucked gently as I nuzzled her clitoris with my nose. It didn't take long for her to begin clutching her legs around me tighter and calling my name. We lay still for a few moments while Sciezka recovered and then I felt her running her hands though my hair.

"That was so good," she murmured as she helped me shift position and then straddled my waist. She knew it drove me wild when she did that. Grinding into me she took my hand and placed it under her. I massaged her thighs and stroked her folds as she moved against me, a slow dance from my navel to my sex and back again. It wasn't long until I was hard and wordlessly she guided me into her. Once she started moving again the springs in the old mattress began groaning, punctuating her every rise and fall. Leaning over me so I could touch and suckle her breasts as we moved together she'd arch and sigh with every flick of my tongue. As I got close I gradually pushed up into a sitting position and she shifted position and wrapped her legs around my back, then bounced up and down on my lap, gradually increasing her pace. Leaning forward until I found my balance and after cupping her firm bottom, I felt that familiar snap after a few more fluid motions and cried
out. She again quickened her pace and climaxed soon after. Holding her position she wrapped her arms tightly around my neck, showering me with kisses.

Once I had recovered I pushed her sweat slicked bangs off her face and said, "So much for getting cleaned up." Then placing my hands behind me I carefully lowered us back to the bed and she remained on top of me, her muscles limp and her breathing shallow.

"Comfortable?" I asked and winked.

She could merely nod and smile. I'd let her sleep for a while before I woke her to get ready for dinner.

I must have dozed off shortly after Sciezka; thankfully I woke up with plenty of time to get ready for dinner. Sciezka roused as I was carefully extracting myself from the tangled sheets and her embrace. She smirked and said, "It's lucky your hair is usually a mess, you do get spectacular bed head."

After tousling her hair and kissing her on the forehead I transferred to my chair and headed into the bathroom to attempt to make myself presentable. Soon Sciezka joined me at the mirror, making funny faces behind me. I turned on the water, wet my hands, flicked the excess water at her and then ran them through my hair to tame the errant strands. It would have to do as there wasn't enough time for another bath, but luckily I did have time to shave and splash on some cologne. As I finished putting away my toiletries I looked at our reflections in the mirror. Sciezka was pulling her hair back into a pony-tail, stretching on tip-toe to see over my head and arching her back and pushing her breasts up in a most enticing manner, unaware that I was watching I leaned my head back just a little I would be able to feel them brush the back of my head, but instead all I could think as I looked back up to see her face was "Holy crap she does have great tits!" Before I left my spot at the mirror I commented, "We clean up quite nicely, don't we?"

Sciezka giggled and replied, "We're not exactly cleaned up yet, we're not even dressed!"

Wrapping my arms around her waist I caught her off-guard and pulled her into my lap. When she finally broke the kiss I whined, "But I like you naked."

She stood up she placed a quick peck on my cheek then flitted into the bedroom to get dressed calling over her shoulder, "If you're good and hurry up we can have an encore to your performance when we get back from dinner."

I joined her in the bedroom and saw that she'd laid out my clothes already. "So you're picking out my clothes now?" I asked, cocking my head.

"I'm letting you wear pants. Riza said this place was casual, but they must have some protocol regarding pants," she said as she put her hands on her hips in mock annoyance as she playfully mimicked my whiny tone. "Besides, I like you in jeans and rumpled white shirts."

She tossed my clothes at me and began getting dressed herself. After slipping into a tank top and wriggling into those ass-hugging jeans I love she slid into her shoes and said, "So are you ready slow poke?"

I finished buttoning my shirt and let her fuss with the cuffs. After stealing a kiss she grabbed a cardigan out her overnight bag and purred, "Let's go, before I'm tempted to undress you."

'When you put it like that, why would I ever want to leave?' I said, casting a look at her that was more sinister than a grin but not as wicked as a leer.
Sciezka went up the porch steps while I waited out front and had a smoke. She was right, no point in tempting fate more times than necessary, especially since I would be on a steep and slippery ramp with two wheels and limited braking power. Hanging out with Breda all afternoon had made me realize that perhaps this old military dog was becoming too well trained, and I was itching for a little more rowdy play. Hopefully this weekend would undo some of my "Obedience Classes", and hopefully Sciezka wouldn't mind it too much. Hell, I knew I was on a short leash, and kind of liked it, but I couldn't let anyone else in on that fact. But who could argue with getting laid often and well by a hottie with amazing bedroom skills?

As I was finishing up my cigarette I heard a commotion that could only be the Boss. I turned around and the first thing I noticed was that he was wearing something other than that ratty red coat and leather pants as the Boss was still fidgeting with the collar and cuffs of his button down shirt. Al was behind him, pushing him out the front door onto the porch. Once they were closer I heard Al say, "Brother, you look nice and after all you are going to Jean's party. Besides, don't you want to make a good impression with you-know-who?"

While I was shaking my head and chuckling at the notion of Al playing matchmaker for Ed and Russel the rest of the party came down the steps, loudly discussing logistics. It was eventually decided that we'd go in three cars and that Al and Fletcher would stay behind to look after Elysia, and Doctor Knox would be on hand if Lan Fan needed immediate medical attention.

Looking at the people gathered in front of the house I realized that Ling was nowhere to be found. Then I saw him, though he looked less smug now that he was dressed in what appeared to be some of Roy's civvies instead of his usual bright silk robes. I supposed there was no need to make the prince look more conspicuous than he already was.

Finally we were off, Jim, Gracia, Sciezka, Winry and myself in one car and Roy, Riza, Ed, Ling and Russel in another. Breda, Feury, Falman and Denika brought up the rear in the car they'd rented. Riza had written out the directions and firmly suggested that drivers follow "convoy protocol". Even though we were only going out to dinner, Riza had managed to put her stellar organizational skills to work again, though that had always been one of her most valued skills in the office- even if it meant less goofing off and more paperwork.

We arrived at the restaurant, or should I say, roadhouse, with no major incidents. Ed and Ling behaved more or less; thankfully Riza had already called ahead and told the staff to be prepared for a party of fourteen.

Once the cars were parked we all met near the front door. While Feury looked apprehensive about the appearance of the establishment because of the locals congregating in the parking lot, Breda looked right at home as he held the door open and said in an uncharacteristically gentlemanly way, "Ladies first, oh, and Havo... age before beauty!"

I grinned and gave him a middle-finger salute as I followed the ladies in. As far as I was concerned, I had the best view in the place as Sciezka sashayed in front of me.

The proprietor met us in the entryway and led us into the dining room. It caught me off guard when he trapped Riza in a bear hug, picked her up and twirled her around a few times. I was surprised that he didn't end up on the floor riddled with bullets after sneaking up on her like that. When he finally put her down Riza breathlessly announced, "This is my Uncle Matt, he's known
me since I was a little girl who would stand on a chair to shoot pool with him and Grandfather."

Riza's Uncle Matt was a physically imposing man, but he carried his tall and broad frame in a way that reminded me of Major Armstrong. Though a hulk of a man with darker features, his smile and mannerisms suggested that he too was a gentle giant at heart, and I couldn't help but wonder about what became of the Major as I kept looking at him. He motioned for us all to sit down at a large table that was already laden with pitchers of beer, bottles of wine and a basket overflowing with hot, fresh bread, the aroma reminding me that I was famished after the afternoon's activities.

I waited for everyone to get situated before I took a place at the table next to Sciezka. As I moved closer to the edge of the table I realized that my knees wouldn't clear underneath it. Winry must have noticed the expression on my face when it dawned on me, because she stood up quickly, grabbed a chair from an adjacent table and leaned over to whisper, "It's just for dinner. I'll have Matt put your chair someplace safe while we eat."

While not thrilled with the prospect of transferring in front of everyone, let alone being without mobility for any length of time, I conceded that it would be easier to just get it over with as fast as I could. After positioning myself next to the wooden chair I transferred, and Matt scooted my chair in place next to Sciezka, winking at her as she watched the whole process with her concern written all over her face. He then motioned for Winry to follow him to the back where they could safely stash my chair until we were finished eating.

After we had worked out the logistics of who would sit where, more accurately, where I would sit, Breda broke the short silence by asking what kind of booze everyone wanted, though he was barely intelligible through the mouthful of bread he was chewing. The minors had root beer and the rest of us had various hard liquors, since there were only so many rules we could bend and no one wanted to see the Boss drunk. A waitress came to the table with a small stack of menus. Glancing at it I noted that most of the selections were meat dishes, and as far as I was concerned that was fine by me. After we'd all had a chance to ask Riza what was good, to which she answered that it was all good, we placed our orders with the waitress and resumed drinking, laughing and talking.

Everyone who had remained in Central was eager to hear what the other posts in the country were like and Breda, Falman and Feury obliged by relating humorous stories of their new commanding officers and the quirks and habits of their new co-workers. Breda had found a few people he could trounce at Shogi, Feury was in his element as he had plenty of pets and electronics projects in the works at his apartment and Falman looked like he was doing quite well up North as evidenced by Denika sitting next to him. Vato did mention being the target of practical jokes at times, and upon hearing that I asked, "Falman, it sounds like it's not that different from our old post, but the big question is, can anyone get as many pencils stuck in the ceiling as I could?"

Falman smiled and Denika laughed loudly and said, "Vato, Havoc is just as you said he would be. Oh Havoc but not to worry- he has not turned into what you call a popsicle and I have not let him alphabetize the storage closet!"

"Denika, I know you have done something to loosen Falman up. What's your secret? Vodka?" I asked playfully.

She shook her head, while turning a little pink then said, "Ah, Havoc I have done nothing!"

I smiled and replied, "Well whatever it is you are doing, keep it up. I can tell he's in good hands."

This only deepened the shade of pink flushing her cheeks, and I could see it creeping up on Falman as well. They were saved from further teasing by Breda and me when dinner arrived. I was unprepared for the size of the steak that Matt put down in front of me and thoroughly astounded
when he set a platter down in front of Sciezka that was piled high with fried potatoes and a burger that looked to be as big as her head. She swatted my hand away when I reached over to swipe a few of her potatoes and said playfully, "Back off buster, this is mine!"

When I reached over again Sciezka picked up her fork and I could tell she meant business. I made a mental note not to get between her and her chow in the future. Studying the table, I heard the clicking of utensils and an almost continuous flow of Xingese coming from Ling as he struggled with his knife and fork. I think the little pervert was cursing, though it stopped when he eventually abandoned his silverware and began eating with his bare hands. Everyone else had equally generous portions and were hungrily tucking into them, but even though the Boss was just as ravenous as the rest of us he'd slow his pace every now and then to look under the table and then at Russel. I could swear they were playing footsie!

Breda had also ordered a burger and marveled when he noticed that Sciezka had eaten more than he had. Pointing at her empty plate he stammered, "Where did she put it all?"

Sciezka smiled demurely and replied, "I eat like a bird."

Feury laughed and said, "She does, Breda."

As Breda tried to understand what Feury was getting at Sciezka fell into a fit of giggles and hugged me. I could tell the wine was getting to her, not that I minded. When she finally regained her composure she said, "Breda, most birds eat an amount close to their weight on a daily basis!"

She and Feury chuckled at their mutual understanding and strange animal references and I thought it was so cute that my two favorite bookworms were getting along so well. I also noted that she'd eaten more than I had, though thankfully she was not in the same league as the Boss or Ling. That would be downright scary.

The waitress returned, offering to pack up the left-over food for later, and I was sure that Black Hayate would have a feast when we got back to the house. Our server also brought the dessert menu, though it was decided unanimously that we would pass on dessert for now and move the celebration to the tavern. Winry retrieved my wheelchair without my having to ask and soon we were headed to the next room for more drinks, dancing, darts and perhaps a few friendly rounds of billiards.

When Lieutenant General Grumman entered the dining room, it was his lakeside retreat after all, it stunned us all into silence and my comrades jumped to their feet to stand at attention and salute. I self-consciously straightened my posture and saluted as well. The General clasped Riza in an embrace as she stood at attention, then pulled back and smiled broadly. After chuckling to himself he said, "Soldiers, at ease. This is a vacation; in fact I order you all to relax. You've earned it."

Riza, in an uncharacteristic display of emotion, jumped forward and wrapped her arms around the General again and said, "Grandfather, this is such a wonderful surprise! I've missed you!"

He beamed and replied, "Here, let me look at you. Are you eating enough? Don't let what's going on throw you too much. You'll need your strength."

Then he turned back to the motley crew assembled around the table and had Riza introduce those he didn't recognize already. As soon as the formalities and introductions were taken care of, General Grumman suggested that we continue the night's festivities in the tavern. We followed him into the large, candle lit room to find another table stocked pitchers of dark beer and bottles of exotic wine. He smiled broadly and announced, "If it isn't on the table, it's at the bar and the tab is on me."
From there we split off to drink and amuse ourselves. The Boss and Russel went to the back, under
the premise of playing darts. Breda sidled up to a barmaid, whispered something in her ear and the
volume on the Victrola was turned up. He then crossed the room and asked a very flustered Winry
if she'd care to dance. Falman, Denika and Feury were having a lively discussion at another table.
I'd decided to sit back and watch while I had a pint of stout. Sciezka soon sat down next to me with
a large glass of ice water, and discreetly clasped my hand under the table. Roy, Riza and her
grandfather sat down at the table with us. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jim and Gracia
dancing, and I smiled to myself as I'd never seen either of them look that content.

A few minutes after we all settled in Riza excused herself to go to the ladies' room. Sciezka
decided to join her to which Roy commented, "They never go there alone, do they? I'll bet the best
kept military secrets were negotiated in a women's lavatory. One of these days I will have to
dispatch a spy to find out what really goes on in there, but for now maybe a little more bourbon will
help unravel that mystery."

While Roy made his way to the bar I watched him as he strode confidently up to the counter, with
most of the female patrons eyes on him.

Shaking my head I said more to myself than the General, "For the life of me, I can't figure out how he
does that."

General Grumman slid his chair closer to where I was sitting and said, "I can't figure it out either,
but I assure you that most of the Mustang charm is an act. I remember there were times just after he
got his certification where we would give him an order and he'd jump out of his skin so much
you'd have to practically scrape him off the ceiling. It took a long while for him to calm down
down enough to stop stammering when he gave his reports too."

I stared at him blankly for a few seconds, and then awkwardly fumbled underneath my chair for
my pack of smokes and lighter. He chuckled as I lit up and gave a contented sigh. He looked me in
the eye and quipped, "Don't look so shocked, I've always seen potential in him and I've seen him
grow, and I have also seen the same potential in you."

He laughed as I gasped and practically inhaled my lit cigarette. "You never fooled me, not even in
basic when you were a hayseed, right out of that bumpkin town," he continued, "sure you were wet
behind the ears, but watching you at target practice, I could see the gears cranking in that head of
yours." He patted me on the back and said, "Don't sell yourself short my boy," pausing there to let
me absorb what he'd said. "So while we've got this chance to speak man to man, is everything
going as well as can be expected? When Riza first gave me the news I..." he paused, trying to find
the most tactful words he could, and said,"well, you're all like family to her. She was so distraught
and there wasn't much I could do for any of it."

I considered what General Grumman had said and decided I could let my guard down with him.
After a short, yet awkward silence I finally cleared my throat and hoped I wouldn't get choked up,
then hesitantly said, "Thank you... the Colonel told me all about the strings you pulled to get my
rehabilitation approved, my hospital bills paid, and about arranging for the house. There aren't
enough words to express my gratitude. I won't lie, I have bad times and situations that taxed my
nerves. I didn't see it at the time, but I was pretty lucky to survive it all and afterward, and I owe
most of that luck to everyone here tonight."

Riza came back to the table, minus Sciezka. I was about to ask if she had fallen in, but my question
was answered when Riza pointed to the makeshift dance floor where Breda was dancing to a rather
fast tune, and Sciezka was trying her best to keep up. Roy sat back down at the table with fresh drinks for everyone. I was beginning to feel the effects of my second beer, but I figured one more wouldn't hurt, much. The song ended and Bread and Sciezka flopped into their chairs, winded from dancing.

"I hope you don't mind that I borrowed your girl," Breda said, beaming and wiping his brow with a napkin.

I winked at Sciezka and then said, "I don't mind you taking my girl for a spin around the floor. I know who she's going home with."

A slow song began playing and out of the corner of my eye I saw Feury cautiously approach Winry and he appeared to be asking her to dance. Roy stood up and asked Riza if she'd like to dance with him. She accepted, looking a bit bashful and Roy beamed. Sciezka sighed, sounding wistful and I decided that even though it might look awkward, that I could manage some semblance of a slow dance. Patting my lap in invitation, then taking her hand I asked, "Fancy a dance? I promise I won't step on your toes."

The wistful look left, her smile reaching her eyes and they twinkled with mischief as she said, "That's the best invitation I've had all night."

She stood up, and then gracefully settled on my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck and nuzzling my cheek. We sat there swaying slightly with the music, and were unaware that it had ended and a fast song had begun playing until our friends came back to the table. We came out of our reverie and Sciezka blushed and gave me a chaste kiss on the lips.

Breda grinned and said, "Don't stop on account of me. I have to figure out how to coax beautiful women onto my lap."

I chuckled and shook my head then replied, "Damned if I know how I do it- Sciezka, maybe you can clue us in?"

Roy's neutral expression turned to one I had come to dread and then he said, "It's rumored that Havoc recently developed the ability to breathe through his ears. I didn't even know he'd had any underwater survival training let alone passed the course with such flying colors."

I was used to this sort of comment from him, but Sciezka blushed for a moment, burying her head in my shoulder. She then recovered her composure and ruffled my hair then calmly retorted, "Well Roy, there's that and who could resist those big blue eyes from that angle?" "Besides," Sciezka continued, "I heard a rumor that when all the girls from the secretarial pool found out about his talents they all wanted him back."

Roy grinned and said, "So that's the secret? All you had to do was make big puppy dog eyes, show off a few parlor tricks, and she was yours?"

It was my turn to blush as I said, "Search me, and it wasn't just parlor tricks, 'Mister Used to Steal All My Girlfriends'. Guess I got lucky that the perfect girl for me was the one who was immune to your charms from the start."

Breda chimed in and said, "Oh, point for Havo! Should we ask the bartender for a ruler?"

Both Roy and I glared at Breda and said in unison, "No!"

After Roy wadded up his napkin and tossed it at me, I took a few ice cubes out of Sciezka's drink and tossed them at him. He fished for his gloves and I pretended to duck. Thankfully, cooler heads
prevailed.

"Enough boys," Riza said in reproach. "Don't make me play referee." Knowing that Riza kept a gun with her at all times, we quickly complied.

Falman, Feury, Denika and Winry came over from their corner table and Feury asked, "So did we miss anything?"

General Grumman approached us from the side, cleared his throat and said, "From what I saw, just the usual banter Master Sergeant. I can tell that my Riza had her hands full with you men."

Falman nodded, knowing full well that we could be a handful in the office and then said, "That would be par for the course with this lot. Say, Havoc, would you like to shoot a round of pool?"

"That sounds like it would be fun," I said. "It might take me a few minutes to figure out the logistics. I haven't tried it yet."

He smiled and replied, "Don't worry; we won't play for money, this game at least. I'll go easy on you."

Fighting the urge to frown at the idea that any concessions would be made for me I pasted on a smile and then said, "You'd better not go easy on me. Last game we played, if I recall correctly I kicked your ass. But I may have to break the leaning rule."

As we made our way over to an available table I caught the Boss's eye and he grinned and gave me the thumbs up sign. I was glad that he seemed to be having a good time with Russel as they chatted and appeared to be drawing arrays on cocktail napkins.

Breda, Feury and Winry joined Denika and Sciezka on the side as Falman as I racked the balls on the table so they could watch the game and talk amongst themselves while we played. I hoped that I wouldn't lose too badly; I had always been able to beat most of the members of my team. Riza always gave me a run for my money, but she had the same advantage I had- marksmanship practice. She and Roy looked very cozy sitting at a table by themselves and leaning into each other.

I called over to Sciezka and said, "If anyone is placing money on this game, you hold the money, and then run!" I teased. As I looked in her direction I noticed that Ling was sitting under a table not far from where Roy and Riza were quietly talking, holding a huge plate of complimentary Happy Hour munchies and grinning wickedly. His appetite knew no bounds and neither did his sense of decency.

The game got underway, I was solids by default as Falman broke and sunk stripes. To my chagrin I didn't clear the table in my first few turns. I did however, manage two shots in a row. Not half bad for not having played in what seemed like ages and an instant all at once. I comforted my deflated ego, reminding myself that I'd still sunk more balls than Falman and I was having a good time, like old times. Admittedly it was different but not bad, and the lines that creased Falman's forehead as he calculated and took his shots told me that he was trying his damnedest, yet was still losing. I'd been using the bridge to help me line up shots that were too far away from the edge of the table. I cleared all my balls and was down to my last shot to pocket the black ball, feeling that victory was so close and yet just out of my reach. Gritting my teeth and cursing under my breath, I found myself thinking "If I could only stand I'd have pocketed the ball by now and lit up a cigarette before he could blink- Hah, standing would fix it, it would fix a lot of things, but getting hung up
on what I can't change isn't going to help me do what I need to do."

Then it came to me. I called Sciezka over and she crossed the few paces separating us, the beginnings of a frown forming on her lovely lips. I gestured for her to come closer, to lean over so I could whisper my instructions to her. She looked confused for a few seconds and then it dawned on her and she snickered. Shaking her head at my insistence on secrecy and beaming as she crossed the floor again she exclaimed, "Creativity to the rescue!" She then proceeded to drag a sturdy bar stool over to the pool table.

Without another word and with a great amount of concentration, I carefully transferred to the tall stool, arranged myself so I was sure of my balance, then gestured for Falman to hand me my cue as I'd left it at the other end of the table. I leaned over as far as I dared, lined up the shot and sank it. Falman came over, shook my hand and said, "Impressive game Jean... as always."

I got back into my chair without incident and sat back, rather satisfied with myself. Everyone else found seats near the pool table so Roy and Riza could have some privacy. The table we'd chosen was short a chair and rather than taking one from a nearby table I suggested to Sciezka that she just take the only other available seat, which happened to be my lap. Once she was situated she kissed me full on the mouth, much to my surprise and when she pulled back she said, "A kiss for the victor."

I chuckled and replied, "Thanks, I'm impressed with it myself. I didn't even have to break any rules to play. But what if I'd lost?"

She kissed me again, this time more passionately and said, "I'd have had to kiss you anyway, to comfort your bruised macho ego."

We'd been talking quietly between ourselves and neglecting our companions. When we finally began talking with the group again Breda teased, "Oh, you're gracing us with some conversation Havo? I see how it is; you'd rather talk with your woman than us."

Blushing and stammering I said, "Sorry guys, I got distracted."

Breda's grin was a mile wide as he clapped me on the back and said, "I was kidding! I know I'd be distracted too. I'm surprised you're capable of intelligible speech with a girl sitting on your lap like that."

Falman cracked a smile and Denika laughed in reaction to what Breda had said. I noticed they were holding hands. Winry and Feury then excused themselves to talk shop. Though when I looked their way a few minutes later it didn't look they were talking about electronics or mechanics at all. In fact, from the shade of pink Feury's cheeks were, I'd bet they were flirting. It must have been contagious because Jim and Gracia also appeared very cozy at a table in the far corner of the room.

For now everything was right in the world. It wouldn't be permanent as my friends would all have to go back to their assigned posts, and no one is able to predict what the future holds. But, for now we would eat, drink and be merry. The present, the right now, was all I could hope for and it felt so good to be with my comrades again. I was relieved that by Breda's example, or instruction, everyone treated me like they had before, and that they knew that I wouldn't break. Even if that meant that I got teased and made the punch line for jokes having to do with being unlucky in love. Though, looking at Sciezka, those lonely days seemed to be long behind me now.

Sciezka leaned back against my chest, turned her head so she could whisper in my ear and said, "You holding up ok?"
I nipped her earlobe and replied, "I'm a little tired but otherwise I've never been better."

She sank back further and sighed contentedly, "Me neither."

The peaceful, yet festive atmosphere was broken by the sound of metal hitting wood and the loud exclamation, "WHOSE HAIR IS SO LONG THAT HE COULD BE MISTAKEN FOR A GIRL? GET BACK HERE YOU BASTARD!"

We all looked in the direction of the commotion with alarm. Everyone stared dumbfounded for an instant and then instinct kicked in. "Breda and Falman," I called out, "go hold the Boss down before he kills someone."

They rushed over to the other side of the room and I followed, pushing chairs that were in my path out of the way. When I arrived where Russel and Ed had been sitting I saw that although Breda and Falman were having a hard time keeping the Boss from launching himself onto the man in coveralls and wearing a self-satisfied smirk, they still had him restrained.

"He's a feisty one for someone so small," the local said.

The Boss snarled, frothed and blustered, "'I am NOT SMALL! I'll turn you into a cow! You, you... YOKEL!"

Breda and Falman were having some trouble keeping hold of Ed but held their ground and kept him in check. I turned to the man and said, "I suggest you and your friends leave now. They won't be able to hold him down for much longer."

The "yokel" as the Boss had called him, crossed his arms over his chest, spat tobacco juice on the floor and then said, "Well lookie here, the invalid thinks he can order me around."

He then threw a wild punch at the Boss who was still being forcibly restrained then sneered as he looked down on me, "It would have been you, but I don't hit women or cripples."

The men standing behind him, I'd gathered they were his friends assumed similarly hostile stances and I knew this wouldn't end peacefully. Matt was now standing next to me looked at the assailant and said, "Now Wally, we've been through this before. You are not to harass the city folks."

This did nothing to diffuse the situation. Wally stood his ground and attempted to stare Matt down. Matt sighed in exasperation and said, "Boys, let Fullmetal go."

The melee erupted and ended in less than two minutes. Breda and Falman each had one of Wally's friends pinned, Matt was holding one by the ear, the Boss was sitting on top of Wally, who was out cold and I had the last one in a headlock. Roy had crossed the room during the commotion and said smugly, "I'm glad I wasn't needed, you all took care of those small nuisances perfectly."

We all let go of our "captives" and they staggered to the door. They only looked back menacingly once. Roy put an end to that by snapping and lighting the cigarette I'd pulled out. I smiled and said, "Thanks for the light."

Deterred by Roy's display of fire power they left without uttering another word. Roy smirked when he was sure he'd achieved the desired effect and said, "Don't mention it."

Matt dumped the remainder of Ed's root beer on Wally and he spluttered back to consciousness and hightailed it out of there. Breda walked a still fuming Ed and a dazed Russel to the car to wait there until we left. That would probably keep the Boss out of trouble. The remainder of our party had gathered around the scene and Riza dryly said, "Uncle Matt, thank you for your hospitality, drop
by the house tomorrow for dinner. I hate to cut the night short, but I think that was our cue to leave."

Matt smiled and clasped her in another bear hug and said, "You're welcome anytime darlin'! You bring your own bouncers and I know the little guy didn't mean to bust up the bar. He was provoked." When Matt realized what he'd just said, he smiled and whispered to Riza," Just don't tell him that I called him little."

We left and headed back to the house, and the only change in transportation arrangements was that Winry rode back with Feury.

Back at the house everyone who had stayed behind seemed to have survived without us and we said our goodnights out front. It had been a long day, a good day, but more action than any of us were used to lately. Ling commented to the group in general, "Such an interesting display of Amestrian culture. Thank you very much."

He had watched the commotion from his vantage point under a table. Leave it to him to eat and run. Before he went into the house I said to Ling with only a hint of sarcasm, "Sorry buddy, no show tonight. I'm wiped out."

For someone as shameless as he seemed, he turned an awfully bright shade of crimson and Sciezka covered her mouth with her hands to contain her laughter. With the goodnights taken care of we headed down the path to the cottage. Once I had lit the lamp in the bedroom, Sciezka flopped on the bed and said, "I quite agree, there will be no show tonight. I'm exhausted."

I joined her on the bed, still fully clothed and said, "I am an old man at twenty-five. Remind me not to do that again."

I rubbed a shoulder for emphasis; as I was sore after all the activity. She undressed slowly, then folded her clothes and set them next to her bag. Then she began unbuttoning my shirt. I scowled and said, "You don't have to do that, I can manage it."

Straddling my hips she purred, "I know you can. I want to, now relax Birthday Boy. It's after midnight, so it's official. How about a rub down so you're not cranky tomorrow?"

Surrendering, as I knew she'd win this one anyway, she relieved me of my pants and I got myself situated so my head was on the pillows. She folded my clothes and placed them next to hers and got a bottle of lotion out of her bag.

I felt her sure and gentle hands sweep across my skin in fluid motions and I let the scent of lavender lull me to sleep.

I mused to myself in my last coherent thoughts, "I am such a lucky bastard."

Chapter End Notes

So many thanks to my editor/beta anat-astarte. I absolutely love the way she's able to help me clarify what I want to convey. Yes, I'm channeling Dave Matthews Band and Jason Mraz again.
Birthday Suit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Beta: anat-astarte, who is amazing as an editor and rules on rare pairings. Check out her ArcherxA1

Disclaimer: Blah Blah, Woof Woof! I don't own anything, so enjoy. I do however have a great MustangTachi shitajiki and more Havoc schwag than you can shake a stick at.

Spoilers/Warnings: Takes place after manga chapter 38 and is fairly current to the releases in Japan. Read the manga, it's AMAZING. Warnings? Grown ups do what grown ups do, and frank discussion of life post spinal cord injury. Also, Jean is a pervert.

Chapter 35: Birthday Suit

"On the day you were born the midwife smacked you on the bottom and you gave such a loud and strong cry. When she handed you to me you opened your eyes wide and they were blue like the sea after a storm! How is my big boy? Jean! A woman? Father, there..."

I thought that I must be dreaming. I had to be dreaming. My mother had not just seen me naked, in bed, with a girl! She did not. No! No! No! Opening my eyes and focusing as well as I could that early in the morning; I noticed that Master Havoc had pitched a tent under the bed sheet and set up camp. I pulled the covers up to my chin and looked from Sciezka who was asleep next to me, to the door and back again. My mother and father were standing in the doorway to the bedroom! Oh God, aw Hell... she did see me naked, in bed, with a girl. It would have been funny, if my Ma hadn't looked like she was gonna turn me over her knee. Pa was standing slightly behind her and he gave a small smile and waved. He looked amused.

Ma then turned on her heel and stalked into the main room. Pa smirked at us and said, "We'll just wait in here until you are decent." Sciezka, who had awoken by now, reached for her glasses on the nightstand and after fumbling a bit finally found them. Once she got them on she looked from me, to my father in the doorway. Her mouth dropped open and she squeaked while she pulled the covers up to her chin, as if trying to disappear. Pa, ever the calm one said, "Nice to meet you dear. Breakfast is ready."

He then closed the door behind him as he left the room. I could hear my mother wailing and carrying on about her "dear innocent boy" and Pa trying to calm her down. I pulled Sciezka close to me and sheepishly said, "That was my mother."

Sciezka nodded and swallowed hard, seemingly at a loss for words. I forced a smile and said, "Don't worry; her bark is worse than her bite. We may as well get dressed and face the music. I am so sorry about this. I also think I have to kill either Breda or Roy... one of them was behind this, I just know it! My parents would have needed a key to get in and I can't see Gracia or Riza letting my Ma see this."

"Yeah" she said, "especially with that."

It finally dawned on me what she meant. "Shit!" I exclaimed, completely mortified.

From the main room I heard my Ma scold sharply, "Jean Havoc, language!"

She always did have super hearing when it came to things like that.
"I'm with you on the revenge idea. I just would have preferred meeting your parents with my clothes on," Sciezka said and then frowned. "She's not going to hate me forever for corrupting her innocent son, is she?"

I held her closer and said, "No, I mean she had to know something was up with the amount of times I came home late with straw in my hair."

Sciezka smiled mischievously and asked, "So you were a Country Casanova?"

Grinning wickedly I replied, "I've seen my share of haylofts and been chased by many angry fathers."

She giggled and said, "Good to know you weren't such a lothario that you didn't get caught."

Shaking my head I said, "I've been shot at a few times with a double barrel shotgun loaded with rock salt. It's hard to run with your pants around your ankles, and a behind full of rock salt stings."

She looked at me questioningly and I explained, "Those good ol' boys will load up with rock salt instead of buckshot when they need to scare off rodents, or boys. It's non-lethal and will scare most anyone back to the straight and narrow."

She tweaked my nose and said, "You probably deserved it. C'mon, we better get dressed. We're going to have to talk to them eventually."

Grumbling, I got out of bed and started getting dressed so we could head up to the main house for breakfast.

Pa was sitting on the front porch when Sciezka and I got there. He started to stand and said, "Son, do you need help getting up here?"

I hadn't seen my Pa in so long and I missed him so much, I couldn't be annoyed with him for asking, he meant well. Even now I can see the sparkle in his eyes that Ma always said I inherited from him. Smiling I replied, "No Pa, but thanks for asking. I can do it."

Once I got to the top of the ramp he clapped his hand on my shoulder, smiled and said, "You're getting strong, son. I was worried when your Ma came back from Central, but I should have known better, eh?"

"Well Pa, I was in some pretty sad shape, and things weren't looking too good, probably only made Ma worry more."

"Your mother would have worried either way. Your friend helped her see that you needed some time and space to work it out for yourself," he said.

"Colonel Mustang said that?" I asked.

He laughed and said, "No, that blonde woman with the guns... Lieutenant Hawkeye, if my memory serves me right."

"Ah, that sounds like her, she always was pretty good at blasting some sense into me," I said, "even had the nurses jumping when she shot off a few rounds when I was at my low points. What do you say Pa? Shall we go get some breakfast?"

"Don't you think you should introduce me to your lady friend first?" he asked and then winked at
I blushed and said, "Where are my manners? Pa this is Sciezka and Sciezka this is my father."

Sciezka extended her hand to shake my father's and he hugged her instead and said, "We've heard a lot about you through our boy's letters. Glad to meet you."

I remember Pa being a lot more reserved when I was younger, his feelings showing more in actions than words but I guess somewhere along the way change had been in the winds for him as well. I cleared my throat, feeling a bit awkward, then got the door and said, "We should get in there."

Sciezka went in first and I mouthed a silent "thank you" to Pa and he again put his hand on my shoulder. Now all Sciezka had to do was win over my mother.

There were a few more leaves in the table and chairs were pillaged from all over the house to accommodate everyone at the table for breakfast. The guys were all sitting down; clearly tired as it was a very early morning and we'd had a late night. Roy looked completely hung over. I almost laughed, but it had been so long since I had seen him this way that it was getting harder to contain myself, even if my amusement was at his expense. I hadn't seen him this plowed since, well since just after the war. Ma was helping Gracia and Riza in the kitchen and as soon as everyone was at the table they began passing large plates of food around family style. When the basket of muffins came around I was tempted to keep them all to myself, instead I said, "Ma, you baked my favorite, thank you!"

She smiled and replied, "Of course I did. You would have pouted like you did when you were ten if I hadn't. Besides, you can't tell me that the food in Central is as good as mine. You could be half-starved for all I know."

"Ma, I eat just fine in Central and I can cook," I said stopping abruptly when she grabbed me by the ear like she'd done when I was little and mouthing off. Stammering I said, "I-I-I mean, yes there is nothing like your home cooking Ma!" With that, I grabbed two muffins and passed the basket, and Ma let go of my ear. Hopefully my appetite would appease her.

We all settled in to eat and I noticed that Ma was purposely ignoring Sciezka. I knew that look, and I knew I'd have to talk to her about it after we ate. She'd always been very slow to warm-up to my girlfriends back home, as to her, no one was good enough for her only boy. Even my Pa would say that there was no talking to her about it.

Gracia and Ma had cooked enough to feed a small army, and that was a good thing as we were all hungry after our adventures the night before. Ling and Ed were able to eat their fill, Roy still looked a little green around the gills even after a cup of coffee and a shot of whiskey, or as we liked to call it, 'some of the hair of the dog that bit him', but he dug in anyway. It must have been all that bourbon, as Falman and Breda looked fine after all the stout they drank. Ed and Russel sat next to each other and they seemed to be quite at ease with one another. I also noticed that Feury and Winry were chatting quite companionably. I squeezed Sciezka's hand under the table and glanced in their direction. She squeezed my hand back and smiled, acknowledging that she'd noticed the pair as well.

When breakfast was finished Sciezka and I offered to help clear the table. Ma told me in no uncertain terms that it was my birthday and I would do nothing of the sort. Gracia also said to Sciezka that things in the kitchen were well in hand, and so Sciezka took it upon herself to watch Elysia. Pa and I went out onto the porch to sit and catch up. Sciezka took Elysia to play on the lawn. Ma was still inside bustling around the kitchen, probably fussing to Gracia that I wasn't eating enough. I chuckled at the thought of that and said to Pa, "Those poor women didn't know
what they were getting themselves into when they invited you two out to surprise me."

He smiled and replied, "No, I reckon they didn't. So how are you doing son? Besides spending time with that lovely little lady that is."

"I'm good, as well as can be expected, probably better. I've been keeping busy going to therapy with Jim, I'll have to introduce you two properly later... um, and I've been taking target practice a couple of times a week with Riza on the base, and I start school next week."

He nodded and said, "You've got quite a bit on your plate for it being so soon..."

"Yeah, it helps if I keep busy, gives me less time to think about things. I know I probably should eventually, but..." I said trailing off.

"But if you think on it too long and too hard it'll get you down?" Pa asked.

I considered his question and nodded. Abruptly changing the subject I said, "So Sciezka is really something, isn't she? She's smart and beautiful."

Pa smiled and said, "Well just looking at the two of you at breakfast tells me that you're both equally smitten with each other. Your Ma wasn't too thrilled with your sleeping arrangements, but she'll get over it."

"What will I get over?" Ma asked sternly as she stepped onto the porch and then sat down in a chair next to me.

"I suppose I have a lot of explaining to do," I said sheepishly.

"Yes you do young man," Ma replied. Her expression softened as she said, "So tell us why you're so taken with this girl."

I grinned and said, "Well that's easy. Like I was telling Pa, she's smart as a whip, funny though her sense of humor might strike you as odd, sweet and kind, and she doesn't let me get away with much. Mostly she just believes in me and accepts me for who I am."

They both nodded and Ma dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"Besides, look at her playing with Elysia. That's really how we met. She'd come over to visit Gracia and play with Elysia, and eventually she just found ways to warm my heart. Look at them," I said, cocking my head in their direction. "Aren't they cute? I bet they're playing ballerina. I hope someone gets a picture of that," I hesitated after the last bit, knowing that if Maes were here he would have already snapped a whole roll of film.

Ma smiled and said, "She does seem to have a way with children, and she was very sweet at breakfast. So when will you stop living in sin and make an honest woman out of her?"

My jaw dropped and Pa merely chuckled as he said; "Now dear, things are different from when you and I were courting. Our boy has a lot on his mind. Right Son?"

I blushed and said, "No worries Ma, when things settle down and if she'll have me, I have every intention of proposing."

She appeared satisfied with my answer and asked, "So how is the new house and can that girl cook? You look good, but for all I know you're almost starving in that city."
Shaking my head I replied, "I assure you, I eat well. Sciezka and I cook together and you know
Gracia, she's always sending food over and Elysia has said she'll never forgive me if Sciezka and I
aren't over at least a couple of times a week for a meal. Oh, and Mayflower Street is a very posh
address."

Ma huffed, crossed her arms and said, "Good to see that the Colonel finally made sure things were
taken care of when all is said and done."

I could understand how Ma would blame Roy, but more likely she was blaming the whole military.
After considering my words carefully I told her, "You can't continue to blame Colonel Mustang.
He feels bad enough as it is. It couldn't be helped. If anything, you should thank him. He saved my
life even though he was gravely wounded himself. I got the best care because of him. Really,
laying blame gets nothing accomplished."

Elysia and Sciezka approached the porch and I beckoned for them to come over and join us. Elysia
helped herself to a seat on my lap and Sciezka cautiously approached and looked relieved when Ma
smiled and pulled one of the chairs next to her and indicated that she should sit down.

We made small talk and Elysia entertained us with the story of how she'd played fairy princess
with Sciezka. The guys came up to the porch and invited me and Pa to take target practice with
them later. We excused ourselves, leaving the women to talk and promising to be back in time for
lunch and an afternoon swim. As Pa and I left I gave all three ladies a kiss on the cheek.

Pa laughed and quipped, "You always were a charmer Jean."

Smiling I replied, "It's the blue eyes, gets 'em every time. Besides, who do you think I learned it
from?"

He kissed Ma on the cheek and we headed inside to grab a couple of beers in the kitchen before
making our way to the "back forty" where the General had told us there was a makeshift firing
range set up. Riza had let me know that the path back there wasn't the smoothest and that I should
probably go early. The general left the kitchen and came back quickly with a canteen and a blanket.
I looked at him in askance and he stated, "Get a little rest once you get up there. Riza has your gear
and extra for your father."

I smiled, thanked him and Pa and I were off.

Al, Ed and Russel were now sitting on the front porch and Ma was fussing over the state of Ed's
battered coat. If I knew her, it would be washed and mended by the end of the afternoon, whether
the Boss approved or not. As I made my way slowly and carefully down the ramp I nearly lost it
despite my efforts to control my speed and keep my balance. Ed and Russel ran down the porch
steps in an effort to catch me should I dump. I made it, but just barely and Ed quietly said, "Russel
and I will see if we can improve on this design while you're on the rifle range."

I started to protest and Ed just smiled and said, "I need to work on my architectural stuff anyway."

Deciding it would be next to impossible to argue with Ed when he'd set his mind to something I
thanked him and Pa and I made our way to the range.

After cresting a small hillock we were there and I was drenched with sweat. I pulled my shirt off
without giving much thought to it and wiped myself down. Pa gasped once he saw the scars the
accident and subsequent surgery had left. I considered addressing that issue for a moment until I
figured he'd ask about it if he felt comfortable later, which I could say that at that moment suited me just fine. Once I got the blanket spread out on the ground I transferred onto it and after I got myself situated pulled both beers out of the pack under my chair. I opened one with my utility knife and said, "C'mon Pa, sit down, relax and have a beer. We have a little time before the rest of them get up here."

Pa obliged and I handed him a cold beer, its surface covered in beads of condensation. I filled the silence saying, "It's a scorcher today, isn't it?"

He agreed, nodding in silent ascent and pursed his lips. Finally after swallowing hard he said, "So you were pretty banged up, weren't you? Hell that's a huge understatement..."

Propping up on an elbow I reached over and fished in my pack for my cigarettes and lighter. As I shook one out I offered one to Pa and he accepted on the condition that I didn't tell Ma.

Figuring that was as direct as he was going to get I looked out towards the fields and began telling him the unclassified version of what had happened.

"Don't breathe a word of this to Ma, I never let her see or be in the room when they changed the bandages or bathed me..." I said quietly. "It happened at the closed down lab and prison. It was supposed to be a routine mission but everything went sideways. Mustang and I were ambushed. I was impaled by falling debris."

I pointed to the still fading scars of the entrance and exit wounds at waist level. "The rest of it came from where Mustang cauterized my wounds with alchemy so I wouldn't bleed out and where they operated to stabilize the broken vertebrae and fix the internal damage."

Pa wiped his eyes on his shirt sleeve and said, "So it was worse than your Ma thought... she said it was nerve damage that you wouldn't..."

He was getting pretty choked up and I interrupted, "Yeah, on paper it's a pretty grim looking prognosis, the doctors say that I'll never do a lot of things again. But there is so much stuff I can still do. I try to focus on that, because well, the alternative just doesn't do anyone any good."

He smiled weakly and said, "That's my boy. But you don't have to be so brave, not on my account."

I heard the guys in the distance and quickly propped myself up on my elbows, put my shirt back on and finished my beer in a big gulp. After handing the empty bottle to my father I hauled myself back into my chair.

Smiling I said, "See Pa, I got it handled and from your experience and observations this morning the doctors don't know everything."

He winked and said, "Well I know what your priorities are."

Chuckling I said, "You have to focus on what's good in the world, that's all I'm saying."

He stood up, smiling wide and excused himself saying, "Son, I'm gonna go see a man about a horse. I'll be back directly."

I saw him disappear behind a bush as Riza and the guys crested the hill in an unruly gaggle with an unwilling Ed bringing up the rear, dragged by his brother. I caught snippets of their conversation and gathered that the Boss was going to be issued a side arm, just in case. He was less than thrilled with the idea. Once everyone was assembled Riza cleared her throat and briefed us, "As you all know the situation in Amestris is tenuous at best and deadly at its worst. Firearms aren't effective
against the Homunculi, but they can buy you some time to escape. No heroes here, you are to bring back what intel you obtain and regroup. That said, you've been sitting behind desks getting paunchy and I doubt most of you have even been issued side arms at your new posts."

She then pried the top off of the crate that Breda and Falman had carried between them and issued weapons. As she did this I reached for the holster strapped to my calf to retrieve my gun. After removing the .38 from the holster I checked it to make sure everything was in order, and then placed it on my lap.

Breda gave a low whistle and said, "A .38, nice but not your usual piece. You've been practicing?"

Amused that Breda had even noticed the difference in caliber I replied, "My old piece wasn't exactly subtle. I can conceal this better. It was Hawkeye's idea."

Hawkeye interjected, "A good idea at that, your aim is as good as ever. Gentlemen, and I use that term loosely, you'd be wise to practice as much as you can without arousing suspicion."

Breda glanced at my gun again and I said, "I promised I'd meet you all at the top, didn't I?"

He smiled and replied, "I should have never had a doubt about it. You are stubborn about keeping promises."

"Speaking of which, was it you or Mustang who gave my parents the spare key to the cottage this morning?" I asked, without a hint of malice in my voice.

Caught off guard his eyes went wide and his voice shook as he asked, "Practical joke? Harmless prank?"

"It would have been funny if it had been someone else however, my Ma saw entirely too much of Sciezka and me. This is your fair warning," I said and then grinned. "Payback is a bitch."

Hawkeye cleared her throat, though she clearly appeared amused and then said, "All right children, social hour is over. Get on the line and show me what you've got."

Breda, Falman and Feury stepped up to the old wooden fence that served as the rail and aimed at the various targets that had been set up. Empty bottles perched precariously on the opposite fence line and there were paper targets attached to hay bales as well I nudged my Pa, who had returned and stood beside me, "Reminds me a lot of the set-up we had back home when I was a kid. Do you still slip out there to get away from Ma when she's sore at you?"

He chuckled and said, "You know it." He ran a hand through his dirty blond hair that had more gray in it than the last time I'd seen him and then said, "Give me another smoke if you can spare it. Seems the only place I can do it anymore is out back. Oh, and don't let your Ma catch you with those."

"How could I forget that? She tanned my hide the one and only time she ever caught me. I'm still amazed that little woman was able to get me over her knee."

Pa guffawed at the memory and said, "Your Ma, though little, is a formidable force and not to be trifled with."

"Don't I know it? Sciezka is the same, only it's a battle of wits," I replied, omitting any reference to her physical prowess for her size as well, since the only time she really showed it off was in the sack.
"She sounds a lot like your mother in some ways. I hope they are getting on well down there without us to referee."

"With any luck Ma's pulled out the naked baby pictures. I'll suffer the embarrassment if it means they get along," I said half-jokingly as my mother was rather fond of showing me off in the tub with my rubber ducky. I could only hope that Elysia didn't grab any and show them to the Boss or worse yet, that little nuisance Ling.

The first round of practice was soon over and Riza directed Ed, Roy, my father and me to take positions to start practice. I chose to use the pistol as I'd had less practice with it than the rifle. I cleared my mind, took aim and hit all my shots clean in the vitals. Once I'd emptied my clip I went over to where the guys were assembled to join in their conversation and observe the others practicing. Pa was still a crack shot, but Ed and Roy needed serious practice. I wondered if Ed would let me teach him as Riza had her hands full with her official duties.

It was hot up there on the hill and it affected me worse than it used to. I told Riza I was going to go check on Sciezka and Ma. She seemed to understand and didn't question it. An idea flickered in her eyes and she pulled Ed off the line saying, "Fullmetal, your automail has got to be heating up in this sun. Go back to the house to cool off."

He didn't put up an argument; you could have fried eggs on his arm. After checking my piece to make sure the safety was on and locked I put it back into my leg holster, the Boss and I folded up the blanket and stowed it under my chair before we headed back. As we started down the gently sloping hill he looked a bit worried, but didn't ask if I wanted help. He knew what my answer would be. It was a shame that a kid that young had personal experience in that area, but it was nice for me not to have to politely refuse offers of help. No matter how well meaning the offers were, they still annoyed me.

Back at the house Ma, Winry and Sciezka were on the porch, sitting in the shade, drinking iced tea and talking up a storm. I made the remark to Ed, "It looks like they survived without us. You've got your arm back too. So you're on speaking terms with Winry?"

Ed's expression brightened and as he said, "Yeah, more or less. It'll take time and lots of shopping in Rush Valley to get back in her good graces. But once she got over the shock it made sense to her. I'm waiting for her to threaten Russel's life with that wrench of hers if he hurts me."

"It's good to know some things never change. Speaking of which, I'm going to check in with those lovely ladies and then find Jim for a session," I said.

Once I was up on the porch I went over to Sciezka, positioning my chair next to hers, and then reached over to grab her glass of iced tea. She swatted my hand away scolding, "Get your own!"

Ma and Winry laughed, and as Ed came up the porch steps Winry said, "Oh Edward, would you go get Jean a glass and bring some more iced tea for us from the kitchen?"

I objected saying, "I can get it myself Winry."

She laughed and replied, "I know that, but you can't go in the kitchen right now. Elysia and Gracia are busy in there. Elysia would not be happy if you see the surprise before it's finished."

Ed grudgingly went inside, grumbling a bit that he wasn't a "damned waiter" and Ma pulled out his coat, which she had hidden underneath her chair, and continued mending it. I could tell that when she got finished with it, it would be as good as new, possibly better. As she worked Ma announced
that she had shared her muffin recipe with Sciezka and Winry. I smiled at that, not only because I'd be able to have my favorite breakfast more often, but because Ma did not give that recipe out to just anyone. Come to think of it, I didn't even have it!

Ed came back with an ice cold pitcher of tea and filled the glass he had brought out for me before setting the pitcher down and pulling up a chair. He'd apparently graced us with his presence because Russel and Fletcher were busy working with Doctor Knox. He eyed my mother suspiciously as she continued mending his coat. Seeming pleased at her handiwork he smiled and inquired about what she was "doing" to the pockets. Ma smiled, held up her handiwork and said, "I'm reinforcing the pockets. I used to do it to Jean's overalls. He was always filling them with pebbles and things he'd collected and they would get holes in them. All I have to do now is wash this thing. It's absolutely filthy!"

The Boss looked like he was about to object, but then a nostalgic expression came over his face and he eventually smiled. Ma patted him on his good hand and then squeezed. I was glad that Ed was accepting the mothering. He didn't get nearly enough. I made a mental note to invite him and Alphonse to stay at my place the next time they were in Central. It would be a nice change from the dorms and though not quite on par with Gracia's culinary expertise, I wasn't half bad in the kitchen and certainly better than the chow offered at the mess.

It was then that I noticed my knees beginning to twitch. I excused myself and went inside to use the bathroom and see if Jim had time for a session. After finishing up in the bathroom I studied my hands as I washed them. The usual calluses on my trigger finger had returned and I smiled at that, however as I examined my hands further I realized I'd have to get some gloves as the rims on my chair really did a number on me. It would only get worse in the future negotiating the university and military academy grounds. After drying my hands I left the bathroom and set about finding Jim. Even though I was technically on vacation, my body was telling me otherwise and a session would do me some good.

I wandered the first floor and finally heard Jim and Doctor Knox talking in hushed tones outside of one of the bedrooms. Jim smiled and greeted me with, "Happy Birthday Jean!"

All things considered it was shaping up to be a very happy birthday. I smiled at that thought and replied, "Thank you and it is a great birthday so far. There is one minor snag; my body doesn't seem to understand that I'm on vacation. Think you could squeeze a session in?"

Jim looked down and his lips became set in a straight line as he watched the spasms, which had gotten worse and said, "You always overdo it, but sure I can, if you don't mind if we have your session in here. Maybe my other patient will come around to the idea of staying in Central with Doctor Knox and working with me and Winry."

Doctor Knox nodded in agreement and opened the door and pointed me in the direction of the unoccupied bed. The other bed was partially obscured by a makeshift screen. Jim moved the screen aside and I quickly glanced in the direction of the other bed. Its occupant laid still, eyes seemingly glued to the ceiling. Upon further study I noted that the patient was a girl, who couldn't be older than fifteen. This was Ling's bodyguard? As I transferred to the bed she turned her head appearing to study me, but said nothing. I took off my shoes and placed them on the floor next to the bed and then pulled my legs on to the bed and leaned back so Jim could get started. Maybe this would help her see that it could have been worse, that Winry and Jim could help her.

After Jim had been working with me for a few minutes a small voice form the direction of the other bed said, "So you were a warrior too?"

Jim stopped the range of motion exercises he was doing with me so I could prop up on one elbow.
to better see who was addressing me. I turned my head and said, "I suppose so, I was a soldier under Colonel Mustang's command. My name is Jean."

She replied, "I am Lan Fan, I was Master Ling's bodyguard, but now I don't know."

Jim resumed working on me and I said, "I'm helping the Colonel differently than I did before, but even now I can still be useful, thanks to Winry and Jim here. Give it time. Winry will have you almost good as new. She helped Ed, and she made that chair there."

She nodded and said, "I see, that is what they told me."

I smiled, hoping my words could reassure her and said, "For now you should rest and eat. That is the best way you can help the Prince, so you can get better."

Laying back down I hoped that my words had some effect on her. Then I focused on the stretches Jim was doing with me, as soon I'd have to do a lot of this on my own. We were nearly finished when there was a light knock on the door. Jim got up to answer it and it turned out to be Ed, with a tray of food and a shy smile. He came in and set it on the table next to Lan Fan and she smiled. Ed looked pleased at this and gently said to her, "You should drink your milk, or Winry will scold you."

Lan Fan nodded and though she eyed the large glass warily she sat up slowly and allowed Ed to place a few more pillows behind her. Gracia must have made up the tray because there was a small vase of flowers adorning it.

Ed turned to me and Jim and said, "Lunch is almost ready." Jim nodded and got up to leave. Ed, Lan Fan and I were alone in the room. I sat up, placed my legs over the edge of the bed and once I was sure of my balance held onto the seat of my chair and carefully leaned over to put on my shoes. I was aware of Lan Fan and Ed watching me as I grabbed the armrest of my chair and hoisted myself into it. Ed averted his eyes when he noticed I saw him watching me. Smiling I said, "It's really not all that bad, just different."

Ed nodded and Lan Fan gingerly picked up her sandwich and began eating it slowly. Satisfied that she was eating Ed said, "I'm starved after this morning. Let's go get lunch."

Chuckling I turned my chair around, opened the door and held it for Ed. I quipped, "After you Boss, and when aren't you starving?"

Once we were out in the hall Jim joined us and asked, "So is she eating?"

When we both nodded in the affirmative, Jim grinned broadly and shook both our hands and said, "Mission accomplished thanks to both of you."

Gathering that she must have been off her chow for a while I smiled to myself. Maybe Doctor Parker was right about my talking to guys at the hospital after all.

Gracia had set the table up buffet style with sandwich fixings and fruit and told us to "fend for ourselves." Most of us fixed our plates and headed onto the porch to eat and escape the worst of the heat. My crew, Russel and Fletcher, Ed and Al, Sciezka and my parents all took our various chairs or sat cross-legged on the smooth boards. Sciezka chose to sit at my feet, leaning against my knees. Every once in awhile, she'd tilt her head back to look up at me and I'd kiss her quickly or alternately feed her a grape or strawberry from my plate. We tried to time it when Ma wasn't looking, I think she caught us a few times, but she merely smiled and laughed. Elysia came bounding out the door with Gracia following closely behind her and Elysia planted herself in Sciezka's lap and
announced, "Jean has a surprise!"

She then covered her mouth to avoid telling what it was. Gracia smiled and said, "Jean if you and
Sciezka don't mind, could you watch Elysia for a little while this afternoon?"

I quickly answered saying, "No problem Gracia, this is hardly going to be a vacation if you spend
the whole time in the kitchen."

Gracia winked at me and said, "I'm almost done in there, and I've missed cooking for parties. But
don't worry. Someone is taking me for a boat ride."

That was all that Sciezka and I needed to know. She leaned back again, giving a knowing smile
and she said to Elysia, "Let's get these dishes into the kitchen and get you changed into our
swimsuit."

Elysia quickly obliged scampering into the house. I told Sciezka I'd meet her down at the pier and
then I headed for the cabin to change into my trunks.

Once I was changed I went down to the lake shore and found Ma and Pa sitting on a blanket under
the large beach umbrella. I winced inwardly when I realized Ma would see my scars when I was in
my trunks, but it would look awkward if I went back to change into a shirt and maybe once she saw
me swimming that would alleviate some of her worries.

Before going down to the pier to get in I stopped to talk to Ma and Pa. They were doing the
crossword together. Well, Ma was doing it and pestering Pa when he wouldn't chime in with the
answer right away. When I approached them Ma set the paper aside and said, "You found yourself
a nice girl. That said, I expect you to settle down and visit more often!"

Shaking my head vigorously I said, "Yes Ma'am!"

Just then Elysia and Sciezka appeared on the path down to the lake and I said, "If you don't mind,
two of my favorite girls expect me to swim with them."

Pa grinned and chuckled, and then waved me off saying, "You always were such a flirt as a boy."

Ma scowled at him and said, "He gets that from you."

He replied, "I reckon he does, but he got that stubborn streak from you." Then he took her hand and
kissed it. I pictured Sciezka and myself bickering like an old married couple and smiled as I pushed
my chair down to the pier.

Once at the water I set the brakes on my chair, scooted to the edge and carefully lowered myself to
sit on the pier. As I slid in and then floated I was mildly shocked at how bizarre it still felt to be
aware that I was in the water but not sense it until an instant later when I was fully immersed and
felt the coolness of the lake. It was similar to most things really, like balancing atop something
foreign, yet in reality it was my body. Thankfully the water minimized that sensory disconnect and
deprivation and I could move freely. I swam a few strokes before Sciezka and Elysia waded in to
join me.

Elysia's swimming had improved and she kept pace with Sciezka. We both still kept a watchful eye
on her, but she was like a little fish, quite content to paddle on her own. Everyone save for the
Boss, Russel, Knox and his charge had come down to the lake to swim, wade or sit in the shade
and enjoy the cooling breeze coming off the water. Jim rowed the little skiff close to where we
were swimming and Gracia waved at Elysia. It looked like they were having a wonderful time
talking and a few times Gracia threw back her head in what appeared to be a very hearty laugh. I
swam over to Sciezka and said, "You're right, this trip has been good for everyone. Look at Gracia, how happy she looks, Jim too."

Breda, Fletcher and Ling looked to be playing some sort of game that involved an awful lot of splashing and shouting. Falman, Denika, Roy and Riza had swum out to the raft and were lounging in the sun. Feury and Winry were sitting in the shade of an old oak tree. It looked like Cain might lean over at any moment to kiss Winry, and she was likely to welcome and reciprocate it.

My parents came down to the pier, took off their shoes and socks and put their feet in the water to cool off. Elysia swam over to them quickly and said, "Look Cookie Lady, watch me! Jean taught me to swim, even though he won't marry me because I'm too young. I still love him anyway."

Ma smiled and said, "Well I'd be honored to have such a fine young lady in the family."

Pa winked at Elysia and said, "Well I'd marry you if I wasn't already married to the Cookie Lady."

I chuckled in amusement, swam over to the pier and said, "Why don't you marry a boy like Fletcher or Alphonse?"

Elysia appeared to be considering both boys seriously and then said, "You are all so silly! I am too young to get married!"

We all laughed at her reply and Elysia yawned. It looked like someone was ready for a nap, and that didn't sound like a bad idea to me.

Sciezka seemed to think it sounded like a plan as well. Stifling a yawn myself I said, "Ma and Pa, if you wouldn't mind putting our little friend here down for an N-A-P it would be wonderful, because I think I'm about ready for one too."

Pa asked Elysia, "What do you say we go on back to the house, have some of Mrs. Havoc's cookies with some milk and then read a story?"

He had always been better at tricking me into a nap than Ma had been. Elysia jumped at the idea of cookies and a story and swam to the shore quickly and ran onto the pier to give my Pa a wet and clingy hug. Ma stifled a laugh and the three of them left for that snack and story.

I pulled Sciezka closer to me as I held onto the pier for balance. She looked up at me, a rare but sweet point of view and asked, "So how about a nap?"

Kissing the top of her head I murmured into her hair, "I thought you'd never ask."

Back at the cottage we got out of our wet suits quickly, dried off and after making sure the door was locked got into bed and dozed together.

Sciezka must have woken up first as I sensed someone playing with my hair and stroking my face as I gradually gained awareness. She must have grown impatient as the next thing I felt was her lithe body rubbing against mine as she cooed, "Wake up sleepy head, time to play."

As comfortable as I was and as much as I was still wiped out from all of the day's activity I opened my eyes and asked jokingly, "You needed something?"

She took that as an invitation and straddled me, kissing me before I could get a word in edgewise and purred between kisses, "You, just you."

If I'd been tired before it didn't matter now. Propping up on my elbows, a feat not easily
accomplished when someone was on top of you, petite or not, I said huskily, "So what should we
do about that?"

Her answer was to throw the covers off of us and begin showering my arms, chest and neck with
kisses. It was good to be me at that moment. I pushed with my arms until I was sitting up straight
and had a better view. Sciezka shifted position and wriggled in my lap as I played with her nipples
and whispered what I thought I might do with her when we got home and had a whole house to
ourselves. She quivered in anticipation when I mentioned some ideas I had for the kitchen
counters.

Thumbing her clit had the desired effect and I marveled at how aroused she could become from
just this. I was beginning to feel the effects of our play as well, my skin tingling with the slightest
stimulation, the brush of lips playing over my throat, her soft hair across my cheek as she traced the
shell of my ear ever so lightly with her tongue, her fingers tapping staccato rhythms on my arms as
she sought purchase. I took hold of my growing erection and pumped it a few times, until I was
fully hard. She rose onto her knees and as I held myself steady she sank down hard, shuddering
when I was finally deep inside her.

She placed her hands on my shoulders for balance as I lifted her again and again setting the pace.
Biting her lip to stifle her insistent whimpers I quickened the pace, making penetration shallower so
each motion stimulated the spot I knew would make her orgasm more intense. I was on the edge
and I could tell she was as well. I grazed her clit again and she shuddered. I had one hand on her
hip and the other stroked her as she maintained the pace I'd set and raised herself up before
slamming all the way down until she was filled completely. I felt the tension building and
concentrated on allowing it to grow until I could barely stand it. Throwing my head back as the
first wave seized me I toppled backwards and she came with me, quickly shifting position and
grinding against me until it passed.

Shuddering and shaking together in a sweaty heap we reveled in each other, the scents of sunlight
and fresh air mingling with the earthy tang of musk and sweat. Sciezka rolled off me, limp and
relaxed and sighed, "We have to do that one again."

"All this upper body strength has got to be good for something, right?" I drawled lazily.

Curling up next to me she stroked the tender skin of my inner arm, where it was most sensitive and
in not so many words agreed murmuring, "Mmmm hmmm."

As nice as this felt, after checking my watch on the bedside table I realized that if we were going to
take a bath, we'd better start soon.

I nudged Sciezka and said, "Bath time, c'mon as cozy as this is we have social obligations."

She rolled over and put a pillow over her head and grunted in reply. As loquacious as she was, she
always seemed to have trouble forming coherent sentences after sleep or sex.

Tossing the covers off the bed I said, "We'll have plenty of time to sleep later and as I recall, you
were very alert when you woke me up earlier."

Transferring to my chair, because one of us should make an effort to get up I said as I patted my
lap, "You're so lazy, I'll even give you a ride."

She peeked at me from under the pillow and stuck out her tongue. Finally she crawled to the edge
of the bed, and then stood up, faltering a bit before righting herself.
"Good to know I still make you weak in the knees," I said and winked, then encircled her tiny waist and pulled her onto my lap. As I rolled us towards the bathroom I mused, "Glad this contraption is good for something."

Once we were dressed Sciezka and I headed to the main house. Edward and Russel were in front of the porch putting the finishing touches on the new and improved ramp. True to Fullmetal's reputation Ed had overdone it. In place of the slightly rickety wooden ramp was a stone behemoth complete with ornamental sculptures, wait... was that a fountain on top of the railing? It was. When I ascended the ramp to meet everyone for dinner as I got to the top I discovered that Ed had made an exact replica of Al's armor and he appeared to be relieving himself under the blue fabric loincloth. I laughed out loud when I realized the flow of "water" was directed at a rather accurate likeness of Colonel Mustang, who looked poised to snap, and wore a very irked expression.

This wasn't the most bizarre sculpture the Boss had ever created, but it was right up there on the list of the funniest. I went down the ramp to test how steep it was and was pleased to find that it was as architecturally sound as it was ornate.

Smirking I said, "It's perfect Ed. The statues are a nice touch. What does the General think of this fine addition to his house?"

The boss laughed and answered, "He likes it well enough. I may remove the embellishment once Al and that Bastard Colonel have been teased enough."

"I know about you and the Colonel, but what did Al do to raise your ire?" I asked.

He grinned and replied, "Target practice and dress clothes."

I looked over to Sciezka who was sitting on the porch steps and commented, "Remind me not to piss him off."

Russel smiled and laughed at that and we all headed inside.

Everyone was sitting in the living room on the various furniture and the "younger folks", Winry, Fletcher and Ling were on the floor entertaining Elysia. The only people missing were Roy and Jim.

"Hawkeye, where are Colonel Mustang and Jim?" I asked. I'd wanted to have Jim sit down with my parents for a few minutes so they could get the "official" progress report.

Breda answered for Hawkeye saying, "They are down at the barbeque pit."

I was surprised by that answer. Roy had many talents, but cooking was not one of them.

Gracia smiled and said, "Don't worry Jean, he's not cooking much. He's getting the fire lit and Jim is putting everything I prepped and marinated on the grill. It's fool proof. I wrote out instructions for them."

I was relieved to hear that and then Ling asked Gracia, "What is for dinner?"

We all laughed, as that always seemed to be what was on the Prince's mind. Ma answered him as she's apparently had a hand in the planning and preparation, "Barbequed chicken, corn on the cob, biscuits and baked beans. There are salads and other cold dishes too."

Elysia chimed in and said, "Dessert too! I helped."
I smiled, all of my favorites. It was like a pot luck or barn raising back home. This was definitely shaping up to be one of my better birthdays. All of my friends were here, and so were my family and my girl. Though I'd need a vacation from my vacation, the trip had been worth it. I knew we'd be focusing on tactical issues tomorrow, but today was perfect and hopefully memories of it would help motivate us toward our common goal.

We all headed outside, towards the lake and I was surprised to find a large stone structure with metal grates had been erected and picnic tables brought in. A large pyre of wood for a bonfire had been collected as well. This truly would be like parties back home. Riza caught my attention and smiled and I went over to her and said, "Thank you, this is amazing! You were all very busy while I napped."

She replied, "Well, it's your birthday. It's not everyday that you have one and we'll all enjoy this. Besides, the barbeque pit was Fullmetal's doing, along with Al, and the picnic tables too. Pretty easy when you're an alchemist who excels at transmuting solids."

Jim and Gracia came over to stand by Sciezka and I and I waved at my parents to come over and talk with us. Feury and Winry were keeping Elysia busy as they strung lanterns in the trees. The sun was giving the first hints of setting, tinting the sky rose and lavender around the edges.

Ma and Pa sat down at a table on the perimeter of the party and we joined them. I introduced Jim to my parents and Pa shook his hand vigorously and Ma got up and hugged him. My letters had described my progress in therapy, but I realized that seeing the results in the flesh was another matter entirely. Six months prior I wasn't even able to sit up on my own, much less do all that I was doing. Jim was very modest as usual, protesting that I had done most of the work. Both Jim and I knew that had he not intervened I'd be what I'd originally resigned myself to: a shut-in invalid being cared for by others. I certainly wouldn't be living on my own, or starting university and a relationship had seemed out of the question then.

Just as the delicious aroma coming from the direction of the fire pit was becoming overwhelming Riza came over to let us know that dinner was served and to go get it ourselves, if we wanted any before Ling and the Boss ate it all.

They'd set up a buffet for all the food: chicken, corn on the cob, baked beans, biscuits to slather with butter and honey, huge wedges of watermelon, a couple of tossed salads and Ma's buttermilk cucumbers. I'd have to be careful to not stuff myself too full, lest I need another nap.

We piled our plates high and sat down to eat at the picnic tables. Roy and Riza joined us and Ed, Al, Fletcher, Russel, Feury, Winry and Elysia made up a "kids' table" adjacent to us with Breda sitting in as an "honorary member." Breda insinuated that he was sitting there because he intended to misbehave and I believed it. Ling joined them after he brought trays up to Doctor Knox and Lan Fan.

Turning to Gracia and Ma in between mouthfuls I said, "You really outdid yourselves. Truly, it's just like back home Ma, only better because of the company."

Roy smiled at that and I was so happy that he and Riza seemed to be enjoying the time to themselves. They were among friends and could forgo protocol and relax and be together openly.

Once everyone had had seconds and the Boss and Ling finished their third helpings the task of clearing away dinner was an easy one. Al collected the paper plates and threw them out and Russel and Ed took the platters up to the kitchen and handled dish duty Breda and Falman moved the tables so they formed a loose circle around the pit where the bonfire would be and we all gathered there to digest and talk after dinner. Once Ed and Russel returned, Winry and Feury lit the lamps
they'd strung in the trees with a boost from Al and we then watched the sun set over the lake. It put on quite a show and as it dipped below the tree lined horizon, and soon after Mustang lit the bonfire with a snap and a flourish.

The alcohol was flowing freely as there were several washtubs filled with ice and bottles of beer. We sat around the fire laughing and joking. As the stars came out and the fireflies began their dance Elysia and Gracia left, and quickly returned with Gracia's special cake. It looked like it was ready to catch fire with what appeared to be twenty-five candles on top of it. Elysia exclaimed, "Make a wish and blow out the candles!"

What could I possibly wish for that I didn't already have at that moment? I smiled to myself, pictured my wish and took a deep breath and blew out all the candles in one go. Thankfully Breda hadn't gotten to the cake and they weren't trick candles like last year.

Ma and Gracia dished up large slices of cake with generous scoops of my favorite ice cream, chocolate, on the side. Turns out Fletcher and Al had spent the better part of the afternoon cranking the ice cream maker.

Sciezka wiped my nose with her napkin, as I had some frosting on it and said, "You look like a kid when you eat something you love."

Admittedly, I did and I grinned sheepishly and said, "It must be the combination of strawberry cream cake and chocolate that does it." I leaned in, wiggled my eyebrows at her and whispered, "Of course they're not the only things I like to eat."

She kissed me quickly and laughed as she messed up my hair.

With the "birthday formalities" taken care of I suggested to Sciezka that we move to one of the blankets that had been spread out by the fire circle and warm up. It had gotten cooler after sunset, almost chilly, and what better way to warm up than lounging together near the fire? Gracia took Elysia up to the house to put her to bed, but before they left she crawled into my lap and asked, "Did we make a good birthday for you Jean?"

I kissed her on the forehead and answered, "It was my best birthday ever Princess! Thank you so much for celebrating it with me and making it so special."

She threw her little arms around me and squeezed hard, then scampered towards the house to get into her pajamas.

The pop and crackle startled me and I glanced anxiously in the direction that the racket came from. Squinting to get a better look I discovered that Breda and Ling were setting off fireworks on the pier. Hopefully they wouldn't blow themselves up.

After a few choruses of bawdy drinking songs barely fit for mixed company, the group around the bonfire began to thin out, with couples heading off to be alone and look at the stars. The sky was a vast expanse of dark blue and countless stars twinkled brightly. You never saw a sky like this in Central. Roy and Riza were conspicuously absent from the gathering as were Jim and Gracia. Hopefully I'd be filled in on how things were going on those fronts tomorrow. I yawned and Sciezka nestled closer to me and said, "It's been a long day, you about ready to turn in?"

Stretching my arms and then holding her small body closer to me I answered, "I think that would be a perfect conclusion to an amazing day."

We said our goodnights to the remainder of the revelers and made our way back to the cottage. The
night blooming jasmine on the path was at full intensity and the smell was intoxicating. I plucked a few blossoms and pulled Sciezka into a passionate kiss. When we finally separated I tucked the small, fragrant blooms into her hair. She beamed and skipped the rest of the way down the path.

Once at the cottage Sciezka lit the lamps and turned them down low. We undressed and got into bed and she rubbed scented oil into my complaining back and shoulder muscles. I was too tired and by that point too relaxed to protest. It was generally useless arguing with her on matters like this anyway. Besides, her touch felt so wonderful, so right.

I whispered, "I wish things would stay like this forever."

After kissing me tenderly, her lips barely brushing mine she said, "It's utopia, nearly impossible to achieve but if anyone can make it happen, your team can."

The lamps had gone out and in the still darkness, and each other's arms we drifted to

Chapter End Notes

I'm posting chapters unimproved from when I initially posted them, minus adding section breaks. This work was originally posted in April of 2006 on ff.net.
Calm Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

Beta: anat-astarte, who is amazing as an editor and rules on rare pairings. Check out her ArcherxAI
Disclaimer: Blah Blah, Woof Woof! I don't own anything, so enjoy. I do however have a great MustangTachi shitajiki and more Havoc schwag than you can shake a stick at.
Spoilers/Warnings: Takes place after manga chapter 38 and is fairly current to the releases in Japan. Read the manga, it's AMAZING. Warnings? Grown ups do what grown ups do, and frank discussion of life post spinal cord injury. Also, Jean is a pervert, with a potty mouth in this chapter.

Sciezka and I got up, dressed quickly and went to get breakfast at the main house. Last night's good mood had carried into the morning and we stopped quite a few times on the path to admire the flowers and of course, kiss.

Jim, Pa and Roy were sitting on the porch with mugs of coffee and Sciezka volunteered to get me some while we talked "guy stuff". I parked myself next to Jim and nudged him with my elbow and asked, "So how are things going with you and Gracia?"

Jim flushed and after collecting himself, he winked and replied, "A gentleman never tells."

I smiled and Roy looked relieved, and we were both pleased that things were indeed going quite well. Gracia and Elysia meant so much to both of us, and after Hughes' death we all wondered how they would fare. I knew from experience how painful loneliness could be. I also knew that it broke Roy's heart to see the spark in Gracia's loving eyes dim so much after Hughes' passing. We all wanted her to find happiness again, and Jim seemed like the kind of guy Hughes would have liked.

It occurred to me just then that maybe Hughes had a divine hand in bringing them together.

Sciezka came out with my coffee, fixed just the way I like it, two teaspoons of sugar and a little milk, and informed us that breakfast would be ready in about ten minutes. She then leaned over and whispered, "You may want to get in there to rescue Heymans, as your mother is fussing over him."

Shaking my head when I brought that image to mind I said, "I'll be in soon, though let's let him suffer for a little while longer."

Sciezka went back inside and, turning my attention to Roy, I said, "You aren't a gentleman. So tell me, how are things going with Riza?"

Roy laughed and replied, "I suppose I deserve that with all the teasing you've endured from me. However, Riza would shoot us both, so, no comment."

I drained the rest of my coffee, placed the empty mug between my knees and chuckled, "You're off the hook this time Roy. I'll assume that your secrecy on the matter means things are going well. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got to go save Breda from my Ma."
Pa grinned and said, "Good luck with that, rescue me next time?"

"You knew what you were getting into when you married her Pa. I have no sympathy, though you can hideout at my place any time you like."

Once inside the house I could hear Ma all the way from the living room, "Heymans, when are you going to settle down with a nice girl? You're a bad influence on my Jean, with the drinking and the gambling, not to mention your stubborn bachelor ways!"

Breda's eyes lit up when I entered the room and seemed to plead "Save me!"

Ma and Breda were sitting on the couch and I pulled up close to my mother and said, "Are you giving Heymans a hard time? He can't help that he's a military dog. Besides, he's mostly housebroken. Maybe we should send him to 'Gracia's Charm School for Wayward Bachelors'."

They both smiled at that, both apparently relieved that my sense of humor had been left intact. Ma then said, "You're a good boy Heymans, just a little rough around the edges, but nothing a good woman can't smooth out."

I resisted the urge to snicker when I saw the naughty look in Breda's eyes. He was obviously taking what Ma said literally, and having a bit of fun playing the scene out in his head.

He blushed and stood up to hug Ma, then replied, "I'll try to be a better influence on Jean from now on. I've missed your care packages. He always shared them."

"Hah! You'd never stop pestering me if I didn't share Breda!" I protested.

Ma smiled and intervened saying, "Now now boys, don't fight. I'll send you both care packages."

Breda grinned and asked, "Could you send some of those chocolate chip cookies... oh, and your famous brownies too?"

I cracked, "Breda, easy boy, we don't want to ruin your girlish figure."

He shot me a look that said he wouldn't mind it if a lovely lady would help work him back into shape.

The dining room was buzzing with conversation as I entered. Sciezka had saved a place for me and as I made my way around the maze of chairs she fetched the coffee pot and placed it on the table in front of my plate. I got there without incident and poured myself a fresh cup. Gracia and Riza came in with the food and the feeding frenzy began. A casual observer would have thought we hadn't eaten in weeks. After filling my plate with scrambled eggs, home fries, bacon and a few of Ma's muffins I tucked into them in earnest. Sciezka eyed my plate and then her own. She had a muffin, some fruit and nothing else. I asked her, "Are you feeling all right?"

She laughed and replied, "I feel fine, but after all the rich food this weekend I think I've hit my limit."

Nodding in agreement I said, "That's quite true. You never go hungry when Gracia and Ma are in the kitchen. When I used to go home on leave I'd think that Ma was trying to make up for every missed meal in the year in one sitting. Though I've heard it said that an army marches on its stomach."
Gracia snickered when she heard that and said, "If you people are any indication of that, I'd have to agree with the old saying."

Ling and Ed were fighting again over something or other and I could see that Elysia was feeding Black Hayate under the table, on the sly. Riza was attempting to stare the dog down, but failing miserably due to the glint of amusement in her eyes. Roy patted her hand and said, "You can go back to the strict discipline on Monday."

Turning to Sciezka I asked, "So how will you occupy yourself while we're discussing strategy?"

She looked at me, appearing surprised by my question and answered, "I'll be in there with you. Didn't you know?"

I picked at my eggs and chased a few potatoes around my plate with my fork and said, "Sciezka, you're clerical staff, not enlisted."

She shot me an annoyed glare and said, "Roy asked me to sit in. My access in Investigations could come in handy. Besides, I can take care of myself."

Our discussion was interrupted when Feury came back into the dining room and announced that the living room was set up for the strategy session. Ma approached me and refilled my mug, kissed me on the cheek and said, "Your Pa and I are going to keep Elysia busy while you all talk business."

Nodding I said, "I take it you're not too thrilled with my choice to stay involved?"

The corners of her lips turned downward into a frown and she replied, "You made a promise to that Mustang fellow and I appreciate that you are a man of your word. I'll just be happy when this is all over and I know you are safe."

I took her hand and said, "Thanks for understanding."

Ma pulled me close and said, "Just be safe. I almost lost you before..."

I squeezed her hard and held on for a long time at a loss for words.

I entered the meeting and scanned the room for Sciezka. She had taken a spot on the floor and I positioned my chair behind her. Looking around the room I saw that Doctor Knox and Lan Fan were present. Frowning I thought to myself, "This is insane! Involving civilians and women, not to mention children and the infirm?" I kept my thoughts on the matter to myself but continued seething inwardly, my expression an impassive mask. "What the fuck is he thinking? Sure the situation is desperate but this is just bat shit insane!" Hadn't Elysia lost her father already? Her mother should not be involved!

Mustang began the briefing by listing the known homunculi, their appearances and capabilities. Jim and Gracia gasped when Mustang described the incident with Lust that had led to my present condition. I had neglected to mention that part to them. Mustang had tactfully left out the gorier details like the fact that she had been my "girlfriend" and nearly killed him too. He then gave the floor to Ling who described the run-in with Envy and Wrath, the Fuhrer, in detail. Before he finished he turned to Lan Fan and asked, "Did I leave out any details and do you have anything to add?" I had a few choice words on the tip of my tongue but held it in. Lan Fan was supposed to be resting, not re-living a traumatic event in front of a group of strangers. If a homunculus could take
down trained warriors like Maes and Lan Fan, fuck, me... what would they do to Sciezka? Winry was already at risk for even being associated with Ed but so far the only thing tying all of this danger to Sciezka was me.

She slowly shook her head no and then Doctor Knox helped her back to bed. As far as I was concerned Knox was the only person in the room who had any common sense at all.

Hawkeye took the floor next and said, "You will all have to be sure to commit all of this to memory. If your homes or offices are ever compromised or searched there can be no evidence. This is for your safety and for the integrity of the mission. Do I make myself clear?"

My thoughts still racing I countered with the thought, "If our homes or offices are ever compromised, do you think they'd let us live? The homunculi don't exactly play by the proper rules of engagement. Not that the army ever does, but you have a decent shot at it."

Everyone in the room nodded in agreement.

She continued, "You will all be responsible for securing a local safe house near your respective posts. All correspondence will be sent there, in code. If the mission is compromised you are all to report to the rally point to await further instructions. Colonel Mustang and General Grumman have secured permission to utilize Madame Christmas' establishment should we require it."

At that point Elysia peered around the door frame and all conversation regarding strategy ceased. Gracia said, "Come in Elysia. Did you need something?"

Elysia cautiously approached her mother and crawled into her lap. She whispered something in Gracia's ear, and Gracia smiled, and then announced, "Elysia says that the 'Cookie Lady' will be bringing in coffee and sandwiches soon."

She hopped off of her mother's lap, came over to me for a quick hug and then left the room. Ma and Pa came in with a tray piled high with sandwiches and a large pot of coffee and set it all on a side table. As Ma left the room she said to Gracia, "We'll be taking Elysia swimming, so take your time."

"Oh, I don't want her to be a bother," Gracia protested.

Ma smiled as Pa chuckled and said, "She's no bother at all, in fact, she's a darling."

Gracia smiled and then started handing out sandwiches while Sciezka poured the coffee. After we had finished eating the briefing continued. A notification method was established for all parties, as well as an "all clear" signal. The room darkened as an abrupt storm rolled in and clouds obscured the sun. It seemed to be an omen and thankfully the rain stopped almost as quickly as it had started.

The meeting was over by 1400 hours. I was tired and my back was complaining rather loudly by this time. I predicted that the spasms would kick in at any moment and I was right. Ducking out of the room unnoticed I went out to the porch for a smoke, watchful so my Ma wouldn't catch me with it. Pa was on the driveway loading the rattletrap truck that was used to make deliveries for the store. After putting out my cigarette I took the ramp and asked Pa if he needed any help with the bags. Sciezka and Ma came down the stairs and it looked like my parents were ready to head home.

Ma spoke first after she thrust an awkward looking burlap bundle into my hands, her voice almost breaking. "Jean promise to visit as soon as classes let out, understand?" She pulled Sciezka close
and whispered something in her ear. After letting go of her, she latched onto me and embraced me fiercely as she said, "You study hard. You're a bright boy. Expect company soon, as I need to make sure that your house is up to par. That and I'd like to visit Elysia and Gracia."

She then let go of me and hurriedly got into the truck, no doubt crying.

Pa simply hugged each of us and said, "See you soon son, take care."

As they drove out of sight I remembered the bundle in the burlap sack that Ma had given me. Upon opening it I discovered that it was the ratty looking stuffed bear that I'd had since I was born. She must have figured that I needed it, and sometimes she was right.

I announced that I was going swimming. I didn't much care if anyone joined me or not. I went down to the cabin and changed into my trunks. Once in the water I swam laps, hard and fast, attempting to work out my frustration before I snapped and lost my temper. Once I was winded I swam to the raft to catch my breath. Sciezka had come out to join me and said, "You left pretty quickly. I was wondering where you had snuck off to."

"Well, you found me," I said curtly.

She frowned at my response and said, "Well you're in a foul mood."

I was silent for awhile and Sciezka let me stew. Finally I said, "I don't want you to have anything to do with this coup business. It's too risky. I don't know what I'd do if anything..."

Stunned she hissed, "So it's just fine for you to risk your life and I get no say in the matter? But if I want to help the cause I can't? Besides, when did I ever give you any indication that I was asking for your permission?"

"I was a soldier, I can defend myself!" I shot back.

"You are overreacting Jean. I'll just be keeping an eye out for files that concern this matter. Research and librarian stuff, not dangerous at all," she huffed.

I narrowed my eyes and said, "That's all that Hughes was doing." I could feel my temper rising again.

Sciezka must have seen it as well. "I can't even reason with you right now! Ugh!" she yelled, then swam for shore and stalked out of sight, leaving me alone, which was what I thought I wanted.

I got out of the water and towelled off while I sat on the edge of the pier, still seething at the world in general. Once I hauled myself into my chair I noticed that the spasms were still there, though they had lessened in severity. I heard a clap of thunder and sure enough, the sky opened up again. I cursed under my breath, "Well this is just fucking great!"

The path from the lake to the cottage had become slippery from the rain. Since it was muddy and uphill I leaned forward to shift my balance so I wouldn't tip over backwards. Slogging through the mud I was almost there when a front wheel got stuck in a rut. Gritting my teeth I pushed hard, hoping I'd dislodge it. No such luck today, if it could go wrong, it did. I pitched forward and
landed face first in the mud. To make matters worse my chair was upended just out of my grasp.

Cursing loudly I crawled through the mud, righted my chair and set the brakes. Pausing to catch my breath I was so preoccupied that I didn't notice Breda, Feury and Winry coming towards me. I attempted to get back in my chair, lost my footing and shouted, "FUCK!"

I'd landed flat on my back, belly up in the mud and I closed my eyes tightly to keep back the tears I could feel forming. The rain beat down harder and I heard Breda exclaim, "Havo are you all right? What happened?"

I sat up slowly, glared at him and said, "What do you think happened?"

He merely looked at me, stunned and tried to help me up. I recoiled from his touch, snatching my arm away and snarling, "I'll tell you what happened. I'm a fucking cripple is what happened! I'll do it myself!"

They all stood back, averting their eyes as I tried and failed again. Finally Winry said softly, on the verge of tears, "Let us help."

Muscles slack, I let Winry and Breda help me back into the chair as Feury held it steady.

Breda put a hand on my shoulder and said, "It's ok man, I know you're not mad at me."

"No, it's not ok, it's not ok at all, nothing is ok," I replied sullenly as I headed for the cottage, head hung in shame.

Once in the privacy provided by the hedges surrounding the garden I realized that I'd have to face Sciezka. It had been bad enough that we'd argued, but now I was a bedraggled mess. Some tough solder, eh? I pulled out a cigarette and lit it. The muscles in my back and shoulders were screaming at me, protesting loudly with each movement and I leaned forward resting my elbows on my knees in an attempt to ease the tension. My cigarette went out several times and I tried in vain to relight it, swearing up a storm each time. I didn't hear Sciezka come out onto the porch and I was startled when she scolded, "Get in here before you catch cold. You're a mess."

I followed her inside grudgingly. I hated to admit it, but she had a valid point. I was soaking wet and covered in mud. After inspecting my knees I noticed that I must have scraped them when I fell. Her expression was neutral when she asked, "Would you like help into the bath?"

I considered her offer; she was giving me an out. This was my chance to apologize. Searching for the words I finally settled on saying, "I'm sorry."

She looked directly into my eyes and said, "I'm not, it needed to be said. I promise I'll be careful, just let me do this. If I can help keep you and your friends safe with the information that I gather...
"

I hesitated and asked, "Are you sure?"

Smiling confidently she replied, "I've never been surer."

"You know I was only so angry because I love you, and I don't want anything to happen to you, right?" I said softly.

She wiped some of the mud off of my cheek with her hand and said, "I know. I love you too. Now if you're finished being stubborn, can I convince you to let me help you into the tub?"
"About that... "I said hesitantly, reluctant to accept her offer.

"I can tell that your back is bothering you from sitting still all day, you are covered in mud and you would do the same for me," she said with her arms crossed. When I remained silent she added, "You'd be doing the world at large a favor. Maybe it will improve your mood."

She left the bathroom to give me time to peel off my sodden, filthy trunks and returned with my shaving kit and a glass of water.

"Take your pain meds and soak for awhile, just call for me when you're ready to get out. I'll be reading on the couch."

I took the pills without further argument and she helped me into the tub. As the water level rose the heat began loosening up my muscles. I heaved a sigh of relief. I caught myself beginning to nod off and decided it would be a good idea to get out. I called for Sciezka and she came in and asked, "Feeling better?"

Admittedly I did, though I panicked when I remembered how I'd acted with Breda, Feury and Winry earlier.

"Is something else wrong?" Sciezka asked calmly, as she handed me a towel.

As I rubbed the towel through my hair roughly I answered, "I went off on Breda and Winry... after I fell. They found me."

Sciezka was quiet and after considering her words carefully she said, "Just apologize to them. Winry is probably used to it and I'm sure Breda won't hold it against you. You were embarrassed and angry."

"It's still no excuse," I replied softly.

"No, it isn't. But that's what happens when you hold your feelings in until you're ready to explode. You're tired and sore from getting around here. I'm sure Jim and Winry aren't shocked at all by your reaction."

I looked at her blankly and she said, "Come into the bedroom, you have time for a short nap, and we should probably clean up those scrapes."

After checking my knees she decided they had gotten clean enough in the bath. Once on the bed she curled up next to me and said, "The super hero, brave little soldier routine is getting old. It's expected and ok for you to express anger, just don't misdirect it at people who are just trying to do what they think is best for you."

She got up and asked, "Do you need anything?"

"Could you get my stuffed bear out of my bag, and maybe stay with me?" I asked shyly.

Smiling broadly she said, "Admitting that is so much sexier than pretending to need nothing. Want me to give you a massage? The way you've got your jaw set makes me think your back still hurts."

"You don't have to, but thanks for offering."

She got up from the bed, fetched my bear and the lavender lotion and said, "Don't you think I like touching you?"
I noticed she paid special attention to my arms and shoulders as she worked. When she realized I was watching her she said, "I can't help it if I find your muscles incredibly sexy. Men like tits and ass. While on the other hand, for me it's all about the arms and hands. Your chest isn't too shabby either. It doesn't hurt that you also have a pretty face."

She finished up and pulled the covers over us and then asked, "So what is your bear's name? I should know who I'm sharing the bed with. We haven't been properly introduced."

I chuckled as I looked at my threadbare and flattened childhood companion and answered, "It's just 'Bear'... always has been."

She shook his paw and said, "Pleased to meet you Bear. Just remember, he's all mine."

Resting her head on my chest she sighed contentedly and my next conscious moment she was gently kissing me to wake me up. Sciezka let me doze for a few more minutes while she got dressed. She had put on those great jeans again and had swiped my black sweater. I smiled at that and teased, "First you take my pants and now you're after my sweaters."

She got back on the bed, sat next to me and replied, "As much as I want you naked, that wasn't my aim this time. It's chilly out and this sweater is so soft and warm. Well that and it smells like you."

"I suppose that you want me to get dressed so we can get some dinner?" I asked. She stood up in an effort to lure me out of bed standing just at arm's length.

"That would be the plan," she replied as she dug through my duffle bag and then tossed some clothes at me.

She came back to where I could reach her and I pulled her down by her belt loops so she was sitting on the bed. I pouted when she didn't get back in bed with me. She smiled at me and said, "Nice try, but we do have to eat."

"You mean I can't stay in bed hiding so I don't have to face Breda or Feury?" I asked, dreading talking to them after my outburst earlier.

She pursed those bowlike lips and said, "Just tell them the truth. I'm sure they understand that you weren't angry at them, that you were angry at your situation and being seen in a vulnerable position."

Sitting up slowly I looked at her and said, "You make that sound so easy."

"Well it is, in theory," she replied. After pausing for a moment she put her arms around me and brushed her lips across my forehead. "They're unsure of how to talk to you sometimes, it's natural and expected. Show them that in most ways you are the same guy as before. Same lousy jokes, same loveable quirks, just about the same everything, you're just doing it sitting down. You were doing a good job of that. You are coping much better than most people would in your set of circumstances."

I nodded in agreement, kissed her softly and held her closer for good measure and then began getting dressed in the clothes she'd picked out. The less I had to think about the better I'd feel. Once I was dressed Sciezka and I went to get dinner. I was a little sleepy from the medication, but it was easier staying calm when I wasn't in pain.
Breda and Feury were sitting on the porch watching the rain and I decided to get what I was dreading over with, as it would only get worse the longer I waited. Sciezka kissed me on the cheek and went inside so I could have some privacy while I talked to the guys.

I approached them slowly and they smiled. Breda said, "Get over here Havo." Feury nodded in agreement and slid his chair over so I could sit between them.

Starting hesitantly I said, "I'm sorry about this afternoon. I was just so frustrated at falling and ashamed that someone had witnessed it. That was still no excuse for yelling at you."

Breda frowned and said, "I can't blame you buddy. It was instinct to try and help you up, to not let you struggle. I am still at a loss for how to act sometimes."

Sighing I replied, "That's a mystery to me too. I often don't know what I'm going to feel from one minute to the next. I don't reckon I'd know how to act if the situation were reversed."

Feury chimed in, "It would help if we were all in contact more often. We don't get to see each other everyday anymore and that makes it hard to find something to talk about. No wonder it's been awkward."

Breda nodded and said, "I'm ashamed that I didn't send more letters. I started to write them, and then tossed them in the trash. I'd have your phone number halfway dialed and would chicken out. Vato was keeping us all informed, but that's not the same, it's not enough. It must have been lonely, since it looked like we'd all forgotten about you."

I smiled at that, his words had articulated what I'd been feeling since the transfer orders had gone through.

We were interrupted when Sciezka poked her head outside and announced that dinner was ready.

Dinner was simple, but delicious. Gracia had made a hearty beef and vegetable soup accompanied by thick slices of homemade bread and a salad. It was a perfect meal on a damp and chilly night, comfort food. We all sat around the table but were quieter than usual. The briefing had subdued the celebratory mood and we were all tired. Once finished with the meal most of the group moved to the living room where Roy had lit a fire in the fireplace for warmth. I went out onto the porch for a cigarette and saw Feury and Winry, Denika and Vato, and Gracia and Jim engaged in what appeared to be intimate conversations. I kept a low profile so they wouldn't feel self-conscious as I never appreciated an audience when Sciezka and I were together. After I stubbed out my cigarette I went back to the living room. Sciezka had found a spot on the floor near the fireplace and I joined her. It would feel good to stretch out, and perhaps the heat would ease the dull ache that radiated up my spine. Lan Fan was bundled up in blankets, reclining on a couch near where Sciezka and I were sitting and she and Ling were speaking in hushed tones in their native language. Roy and Riza were now noticeably absent, as were Ed and Russel. Al came in and sat down near Lan Fan and she smiled as they talked. Al always seemed to know just what to say to make me feel better and his kind words seemed to be easing Lan Fan's worries.

Elysia came into the room and planted herself in my lap. She must have been playing with Black Hayate because he came in shortly after her and "asked" politely to sit with Sciezka. It was warm in the living room and I nodded off for awhile. When I woke up Gracia told me that she and Jim had put Elysia to bed and that Elysia said goodnight. She hadn't fussled at all, as she didn't want to wake me up. Maes would have been proud of what a sweet and thoughtful child she was becoming.
Lan Fan was still on the couch and Winry and Sciezka were talking with her. Feeling too groggy to participate in the conversation I shifted position so I wouldn't get stiff and closed my eyes again. Feeling a gentle hand on my shoulder I opened my eyes and gazed blearily at Sciezka.

I slowly got back in my chair and we said our goodnights. Back at the cottage I flopped onto the bed after considerable effort and would have gladly slept in my clothes if Sciezka hadn't intervened. Somehow I got under the covers and slept deep and dreamlessly.

My back was still bothering me the next morning. I had woken up while it was still dark, in pain. I lay awake, eyes fixed on the ceiling until the first rays of sunlight crept through the window. Sitting up slowly and carefully I winced at each slight movement as I transferred to my chair. I was startled while deciding what to wear when Sciezka came up behind me and began massaging my back. I thanked her and leaned into her touch since it brought some relief. Finally deciding on loose pants and the sweater Sciezka had borrowed the night before I began the chore of getting dressed. I didn't bother shaving as we would be leaving shortly after breakfast. Once dressed, I packed my duffle bag and declared that I was ready as I would ever be to face the day.

Breakfast seemed to fly by even though I wanted it to last longer. I didn't know when we'd all see each other again.

Everyone gathered their things, the cars were packed and we all began to say our goodbyes. There was a sense of finality for all of us, and I hoped that soon Amestris would be sorted out and we'd be able to look back on the trip fondly as a good memory, followed by many more.

As we waited outside I announced that everyone was welcome at my house in Central whenever they were in town. I extended the invitation personally to Winry and the Elric brothers. They never wanted to impose on anyone, so I made sure they understood that I looked forward to their company.

Breda came over to Sciezka and me and shook my hand and as he hugged Sciezka said, "Make him behave."

She laughed and replied, "I'll try Heymans, though you're not one to talk about behaving."

Vato and Denika said their goodbyes and Denika joked as she said, "Jean, we will visit you in winter, to get warm."

I winked and replied, "Bring some of that vodka and you've got a deal."

I noticed that Winry and Feury had been kissing and that Winry was beginning to tear up. Breda, Falman and Denika, Feury and Ed, Al, Russel and Ling piled into the rental car bound for the train station. It was good that it was only a short trip as the car was packed. Ed had been tight lipped about their destination.

Roy and Riza's group was the next to head out. Winry rode in front between them while Doctor Knox tended to Lan Fan in the back seat. It had been decided that she would recuperate at Knox's house, and then Winry and Jim would treat her. Once back in Central Winry would return to Rush Valley to catch up on her work and design automail for Lan Fan.

Before I left General Grumman pulled me aside and said, "Keep an eye out for Riza for me. She doesn't tell me everything... doesn't want to worry an old man. She confides in you though, and I'm grateful for that."
Slightly shocked by his admission I said, "I'll do my best sir. She's always had my back."

He smiled and said, "On a happier note, good luck with your studies. If you need any help with that Military History course let me know. Hell, call anyway."

Smiling I answered, "I'll be sure to do that sir."

As he turned to go back into the house he said, "Give Madame Christmas and her girls my fondest regards. Oh... I will let the boys back East know just how well you are doing. They were concerned."

"Thank you sir," I said as I saluted. He was a good man to have in our corner. Upon further reflection I noticed many similarities between him and Riza.

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For the ride home we had an extra passenger and the car was cramped. Gracia had insisted that Fletcher stay in Central with proper adult supervision instead of following his brother and Ed. The rain had made the roads a bumpy, rutted mess and each time the car was jostled it sent a fiery jolt of pain up my spine. I grit my teeth and was silent for fear that I would be short with someone again.

Sciezka and I were dropped off at my place and we hurried into the house. After putting down our bags in the bedroom Sciezka turned to me and said, "It looks like you have seen better days. Does it hurt much?"

I shook my head no and she cupped my chin and said, "You are a terrible liar. Get in the bath while I scrounge up some supper and then we'll go to bed."

Nodding weakly I said, "You're right, I'm horrible at lying. Thank you."

I'd already finished in the bathroom and crawled under the covers when she came back in. I took my pain and sleep medicine without complaint and settled in to sleep.

"What about dinner... aren't you hungry?" Sciezka asked softly.

"No, eat without me," I answered groggily.

She pulled the covers up around my shoulders and after eating something quick she came back into the bedroom and read her book. I barely stirred, even with the light on, but felt her calming presence next to me and thought to myself, "It's good to be home."
Chapter 37: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

It was good to be home and I slept like a rock in my familiar bed. As I rubbed my eyes to clear the
sleep I realized that I was alone in the bed. I panicked, thinking that I’d driven Sciezka away with
my shitty mood of the past few days. I was relieved when the bathroom door opened and Sciezka
came out, though she had a very sour expression on her lovely face.

I was about to ask her what was the matter when she crossed the room, flopped on the bed and then
curled in on herself, knees drawn to her chest, apparently in pain. She then wailed, "I know it's
natural but that doesn't mean I have to like it!"

Well at least it wasn't anything I had done that had her so cross, though I was confused. What could
be wrong with her?

She answered my question before I got to ask it saying, "I think men are right when they say,
'Never trust anything that bleeds for five days and doesn't die.' This is ridiculous to have to put up
with!"

Then it dawned on me. So, that was her problem. I reached over to rub her lower back. She
groaned and leaned into my touch. I hadn't been in a relationship for a long time, so this was new.
How could I make her feel better? After wracking my brain, I figured that spoiling her rotten might
help. Maybe taking a few pages from Gracia's book was in order. I knew a hot shower, cocoa and a
back rub usually did wonders for me.

I would have to be careful about how I went about it, as I recalled that Hawkeye had been
especially trigger happy every four weeks or so. I gathered my courage, cleared my throat and said,
"Why don't you take a long, hot shower while I get you something to eat and drink?"

Sciezka smiled wanly and nodded. I continued working on her lower back and then asked, "So
would coffee, tea or cocoa taste good? What about food?"
Groaning again she said, "No food... nauseous."

I moved closer to her so I could hopefully offer her some comfort and said, "Peppermint or chamomile? Those are both good for sour stomachs."

"Peppermint... and please shoot me!" she replied.

"Mmm, no can do with the shooting part, I'd miss you. I do have some pain killers that would put you out for the next week."

She giggled and said, "That is tempting, but I think a couple of aspirin will do the trick."

I smiled and said, "Just let me take care of the necessaries and the bathroom is all yours. Prepare to be fussed over my darling."

***

After finishing up in the bathroom I put on an undershirt and pajama pants. Sciezka got into the shower while I knocked around in the kitchen, had a smoke and fetched the newspaper off the porch.

She was curled up under the duvet when I came back in with a tray balanced on my lap with tea for her, coffee for me, a glass of water and the bottle of aspirin. I'd plucked a flower from the plantings out front and placed that on the tray on a whim. I had the newspaper as well, in case she felt up to doing the crossword with me. She giggled when she saw how seriously I'd taken the task of fussing over her.

She sat up and helped me unload the tray, placing her beverages on the bedside table and then sniffed the sprig of geranium I'd brought in. I smiled and said, "If you're hungry later we can order in, or I'll go get something. Anything that sounds good, you just name it and it's yours."

After she took two aspirin I reached under my chair and handed her the hot water bottle I'd brought in as well. I got into bed next to her after putting my coffee on the side table and setting the tray down. She rolled onto her side and I took that as an invitation to curl up behind her so her back was against my stomach. Letting out a contented sigh she closed her eyes and said, "You're an excellent nurse."

I kissed the top of her head and replied, "I've had good teachers. You should get some more rest and then we'll do the crossword."

As she slept I held her close and thought to myself, "It's not good that she's so miserable, but at least I can make her feel better... like she does for me."

Sometime after noon she woke up, feeling much better. I went to get more tea for her and some coffee for me. I read the crossword to her, and of course she had the answers before I even had time to think about it.

***

The afternoon passed pleasantly, and by dinnertime Sciezka was feeling better and very hungry. We decided on Xingian delivery, and joked about giving it another try minus the trip to the emergency room to have glass shards plucked out of my ass. Sitting in the dining room after the food arrived, I unpacked the cartons and we fixed ourselves plates of spicy beef with broccoli and noodles. I lit a few of the votive candles left over from my housewarming, in an attempt to set a romantic mood. It was just delivery food but I wanted everything to be special, all the time, just for
her. Especially for her. I cursed when I noticed they'd forgotten the fortune cookies. Maybe we could make up our own "in bed". When we were finished, I suggested that Sciezka go read "in bed" while I cleaned up and she smiled. She was letting me take care of her, and that felt good. Before she left the room, she giggled, then said, "You will be spoiled rotten today, 'in bed'."

Before the trip, we'd cleaned out the icebox so we didn't have any "surprises" waiting for us when we got home. As I was putting the leftovers away I noticed it had been restocked. Mrs. Smith and Gracia were truly too good to me, and apparently mind readers. Taking a cue from Gracia I dished up a bowl of ice cream, chocolate of course, and added some of the fresh raspberries that I'd found in the icebox for us to share. When I entered the bedroom, she smiled at me, and her eyes lit up when she saw the ice cream. I handed it to her to hold while I transferred to the bed and once I was propped on pillows next to her I said, "We came home to this."

Sciezka smiled wide and replied, "We should have expected that Gracia and Mrs. Smith would have things taken care of." Admiring the contents of the bowl she added, "Mmm, fresh raspberries and chocolate, it looks like a good combination."

Dipping the spoon into the bowl as I nodded in agreement we slowly finished the bowl, one bite for her and then one for me, savoring each bite. This was definitely the best way to eat ice cream. When we'd finished, I told Sciezka, "Get ready for a shower, I'll join you and then after I give you a rub down, we'll sleep. Tomorrow will seem early after being on vacation. I'll cook breakfast, and walk you to work before my session."

She protested, "You don't need to do all that."

"But I want to. It will give me more time with you, well and if you have time I can drop by with lunch too," I insisted.

"That would be nice, but we just spent the whole trip together, aren't you sick of me?" she asked.

"Nope," I said then kissed her. "Besides, classes start next week. So, don't get too used to seeing me this much."

She set the bowl on the bedside table and then curled up in my lap and in between kisses she whispered, "We can have study dates... in the university library stacks... or I could keep you company while you work here..."

Returning her kisses, I replied, "I don't think I'd get any work done, not if I had better things to study."

She smiled and said, "I'd behave, mostly. Besides, you aren't the only attraction at the library."

I gasped, feigning a hurt expression while clasping my hands over my heart before saying, "I'm wounded! You'd rather look at all those books instead of me?"

Pulling me down onto the bed so we were nose to nose she said, "You can't be the only smarty pants in this relationship."

"Last time I checked you are the brains in this room."

Kissing me passionately, perhaps to shut me up, she finally broke the kiss and said, "You're going to give me a run for my money. I just know it."

Chuckling after considering her grand prediction I said, "Well I could be the first head shrinker not preoccupied with sex."
"Hah!" she exclaimed. "The only reason it isn't constantly on your mind is because you're getting some."

Holding her closer I said, "I prefer to think of it as 'often and well'. But we could always try for more. I wouldn't want to be one of those theorists."

She got up and said, "If you had your way, we would have done it on Roy's desk by now."

As she walked into the bathroom I said, "Don't forget Central Library, your office, the third-floor lounge..."

She rolled her eyes and said, "I have created a monster! Hurry up and join me so we can turn in."

***

The hot shower did us both some good. With all the wonderful amenities the house had, I could safely say that the bedroom and bathroom were my favorite places. Maybe it had to do with the many happy, naked memories Sciezka and I were making there. It was just wonderful to be able to relax and be enveloped in comfort. I'd heard it said that a man's home is his castle, I tended to agree, and I was rather fond of the "imperial throne room".

Once I was ready for bed I set the alarm and got under the covers. Sciezka was on her side and I moved closer to her, so we were belly to back. I moved my legs with my hands until I was sure my knees were nested behind hers. She had fallen asleep, so the massage would have to wait. Draping a protective arm over her I closed my eyes and listened to her soft, serene sounds of sleep.

I woke up a few minutes before the alarm went off and gently nudged Sciezka to rouse her. She rolled over to face me and smiled as her eyes focused. After excusing myself to take care of the necessaries and clean up a bit I asked, "So what should I cook for breakfast while you get ready?"

She laughed and said, "You were really serious about that? I feel like royalty!"

"Yes, Your Highness, I'm utterly serious," I answered then winked.

"Anything you fancy," she replied, playing along with me.

While Sciezka showered, and got ready for work I dressed quickly and started making breakfast. After assembling the few ingredients I'd need and setting the table I decided to experiment with an idea I'd been playing around with since my pool game with Falman.

When she came into the kitchen Sciezka was surprised to see me sitting on the counter, my feet resting on the seat of my chair as I gave the scrambled eggs one more stir before they were pronounced finished. Smiling broadly, she remarked, "There is more than one way to get things done. Want me to help with anything?"

"Sure, bring our plates over here, and tell me when... I made plenty."

I was quite pleased with myself, in short order I'd made eggs and toast and once Sciezka was seated at the table I got down off the counter and into my chair without much trouble at all.

Sciezka nibbled on toast with butter and some of Ma's red currant jelly and appeared quite impressed. I'd also set out the rest of the raspberries and poured us each a tall glass of milk.

"You're a good cook, but you really shouldn't have gone to all this trouble," she commented after tipping her glass to get the last drop of milk.
Shaking my head I replied, "It's the most important meal of the day; it should 'stick to your ribs'. Besides, it took all of fifteen minutes."

She smiled and said, "Well thank you. I think I like your country boy habits."

Before I could protest Sciezka began clearing the table, rinsing the dishes and stacking them neatly in the sink. As she worked she said, "Go get your stuff together and meet me on the porch so we can get going. Oh, and I hope Mrs. Smith doesn't mind the dishes. Maybe I should write a note telling her to leave them for us to do."

"Good idea. I'm not too used to having someone to clean up after me."

I went to the bedroom and grabbed the small duffle bag I'd packed the night before and went out onto the porch for a smoke. I'd earned it.

It was a sunny day and our route to work was pretty. Most of the houses had gardens and flower beds and we'd stop every once in a while to admire them and discuss plans for our yard. Simple words like: "ours", "together", "us" and "we" were music to my ears. I think they made Sciezka slightly giddy too. She had been right when she'd said the first day was the only bad day and she had a spring in her step. She'd gotten some color on the trip and it only made her lovelier. She caught me looking at her and asked, "See something interesting?"

Taking her hand in mine I answered, "Just the prettiest girl in Central."

Blushing as she said demurely, "Flattery will get you everywhere. Just Central?"

I tried to keep my expression serious, but I couldn't help smiling as I replied, "To be fair to the other women of the world, yes, just Central... but I'll never know because they no longer exist for me."

She sighed and rolled her eyes before saying, "So where is the white horse and suit of armor?"

When we arrived at headquarters I pulled her into my lap for one last kiss before we parted and said, "Left the horse at home, hospital policy frowns on livestock, and the armor chafes something fierce."

After one last lingering kiss she stood up and as she straightened her skirt said, "I'll see you at lunch, behave, and don't go overboard. A sandwich would be just fine."

She turned to walk away and I watched for a few moments until she turned around and shooed me away, pointing at her watch to indicate I'd be late for my session if I continued ogling her. I knew Jim wouldn't mind if I had a good reason to be late and I figured he'd appreciate the view too if he were in my circumstances. Though I was pretty sure I was more lecherous than Jim. I couldn't help myself, I was a hopeless case.

I wasn't late and Jim finished my range of motion exercises and stretches first so he could work with another patient while I worked on my own doing push-ups and pull-ups. I'd gotten strong enough that I no longer needed assistance with either and I was considering installing a bar in the house. After finishing fifty push-ups I was sore, but knew that after stretching and a short break I'd be ready for more. As I was getting ready to get back in my chair to head over to the bar I was caught by surprise when a medicine ball went flying by me, mere inches from my face. I remarked loudly, "You missed; you'd better work on your aim."

Someone snarled from across the room, "I see we have a comedian. There's always one in every crowd."
Unable to see where the bitter comment came from I shrugged it off, got off the floor and into my chair. I headed to where the pull-up bar was and heard the voice again, "Bruno, I'm done. Take me back to my room."

"So, it's another patient," I thought to myself.

"Private, you still have another hour down here... " Jim protested.

"I'm leaving, whether you help me or not, this session is finished! It's not like it's helping anyway!"

I called over and said, "You should listen to Jim, he knows what he's doing."

"You have no right to say anything. You don't know what it's like!" the other patient growled sullenly.

Maneuvering to where the racket was coming from I parked myself next to Jim and asked, "Is this guy giving you lip?"

Jim's mouth was set in a grim line, and I could tell that his abundant patience was wearing thin.

The young man on the mat struggled to sit up, failed miserably and cursed as he flopped back down on the mat.

"A word of advice, if you prop yourself on your elbows first it makes it easier," I commented wryly.

"You think this is funny? It's fine for all of you to tell me how to do things, you'll never understand!" the man said, and I could see that he was sweating from his failed attempts to sit up.

I moved closer to the mat and said, "Look over here, so you can tell me to my face that I don't understand."

He turned his head to look at me, scowling at my challenge.

"I'm Jean, and it would be wise of you to do what Jim says. I've found that he is the person closest to understanding all of this in the hospital. Oh, and shave, you look like shit. You may feel like shit, but that's no reason to look like it. Think that over, and if you want to talk about it, I'll be here again Wednesday. But right now, I have to go to H.Q. to see my girl."

I didn't give him time to answer and Jim walked with me to the door and said, "That is Private Hart, the patient that Parker wanted you to talk to."

"I guess I have my work cut out for me," I said quietly, and then left to go get cleaned up.

***

The trip to H.Q. was uneventful and I was thankful that the Sentry post had my name on the list. I stopped at the canteen to pick up lunch for Sciezka and myself, deciding that sandwiches and a fruit salad would suffice and that we could have some of that sludge that passed for coffee in her office to drink.

I arrived at Investigations and before I could get in the door I was greeted by Major Armstrong. His booming voice echoed down the corridor as he exclaimed, "You look well after your vacation. Miss Sciezka filled me in on all the details. I'm so glad you enjoyed seeing our comrades! I can also tell that the swimming is doing wonders for your constitution and physique."
Thankfully he'd said all this without pulling me from my chair or removing his shirt and showering me with his pink sparkles. I could feel a blush rising, due to all the attention his display drew from people standing in the hall. I smiled and said, "Thank you Major, it was like old times. Is Sciezka in there?"

He winked and said, "Why yes she is. I'll leave you two alone."

He left and I went over to Sciezka's desk. It appeared to be not too buried in backlog from her absence and she smiled when she saw me, closed the file she was working on, stood up and kissed me hello.

I set the paper bag from the canteen down and asked, "So would you like to eat in here?"

She picked up the bag, peered inside, smiled and then said, "How about the lounge? I need a change of scenery."

"Good idea, if you'd get us two cups of sludge to drink, you've got a deal."

After handing the bag back to me she quickly fixed two cups of coffee and we headed for the lounge. When we got there, it was empty and I smirked and said, "Today is our lucky day. We've got it all to ourselves."

She laughed and said, "Let's eat; I have lots to catch up on. Besides, that whole girl stuff mess."

"I promise I'll behave, for today," I replied.

We ate quickly and quietly since Sciezka had a lot of work to do and when we finished Sciezka asked, "So what's on your agenda this afternoon?"

After pondering her question, I answered, "More psychology reading and notes, and maybe I'll drop by Gracia's to thank her for helping Mrs. Smith and to check up on Fletcher."

Sciezka kissed me on the cheek and said, "That sounds like a good plan. Should I pick up something for dinner on the way home?"

"Nah, we have plenty in the icebox. I'll whip something up when you get home. I bet you'll be tired."

She nodded and after ruffling my hair she went back to her office. I considered stopping by Roy's office, but he was probably hopelessly behind on paperwork, and had his hands full with Lan Fan's arrangements to top it all off. Besides, I was tired after the exchange with the Private.

***

I stopped by the range on my way home to let Riza know that I'd have to beg off practice today. She looked pleased to see me and said, "I'm glad to see you survived the ride home. You looked pretty run down the last time I saw you."

"Yeah, the ride home was less than pleasant since the roads were so bumpy from all that rain. How did the patient do?"

Riza winced at the reminder and said, "She didn't complain, but she wouldn't. I'm sure she was relieved when she arrived at her destination."

I nodded in understanding and said, "I'm going to have to skip out on you today. I'm still a little
sore and I should be hitting the books more before classes start."

She gave me a knowing smile and said, "No problem, you know where I am if you want to blow off some steam."

Riza put her hearing protection back on and resumed her practice as I left. I decided that I really was still tired and went straight home. I could call Gracia when Sciezka got home from work.

***

After reading and outlining the second chapter of my psychology text I dove into the first chapter of my military history book. It was the same text they had used for officer training and I was relieved. Hopefully the class would be mostly review for me so I would be able to spend more time on my psychology assignments. Once I finished studying I set the table and started dinner. Hopefully Sciezka wouldn't have to work late. She came home just as I was tossing the salad. She called from the entry way, "I'm home and I'm famished!" She then came into the kitchen, grabbed a piece of bread and gnawed on it.

"Well you certainly worked up an appetite. It's a good thing that dinner is almost ready," I said as I set down the salad bowl and pulled her close to me, wrapping an arm around her thigh.

"So, what did you make?" she asked eagerly.

"I made beef tenderloin, baked potatoes and a salad. Tasty and fool proof," I answered. "Why don't you change out of your uniform while I finish up in here?"

She kissed me, lingering for a moment and pulling on my lower lip and then went into the bedroom to change.

While she was changing, I lit the candles, poured the wine and brought the food to the table. I'd just gotten settled and was congratulating myself on a job well done when she came in. Sciezka pulled her chair closer to mine and I smiled. Raising my glass to her I said, "Cheers."

"What are we celebrating?" she asked.

I chuckled and said, "Nothing in particular. If I have to choose something, then how about we drink to Monday?"

She rolled her eyes at me for the second time that day and quipped, "It's a good thing you are good in bed, because you have the oddest sense of humor."

Nodding in agreement and after taking a sip of wine I said, "But you like it."

"Admittedly I do. You wouldn't be the same if you were serious," she whispered in my ear, nipping a bit at my earlobe before tucking into her dinner.

I'd learned a few kitchen tricks from my time at Gracia's and Sciezka ate with zeal. It was a miracle she ate the way she did and stayed so small. Though I had a few good ideas on how she worked it off. Besides our bedroom antics she was always aflutter. Even when reading, or at work she always fidgeted and you could see the gears whirring at break-neck speed. She was rather like a hummingbird.

Once we cleared away dinner and did the dishes, with Sciezka washing and me drying, we moved to the living room. I lit the candles in the fireplace, turned on the phonograph and we sat on the couch reading. Well, she was reading, a book on Ishbalan mythology, and I was back to psychology.
Since I was determined to do well at university I knew that going into the quarter over-prepared would help. Besides, this was similar to preparing for ops. Learn all you could about the target, do it by the numbers, get in and get out. We were able to control ourselves for an hour or so, and then having her draped casually against me became too much, and the study session deteriorated into a make-out session. Not that I minded much. The location was perfect actually, the wine and overstuffed furniture only contributing to my scholastic delinquency.

In a pause between kisses I asked, "So I was wondering, since you're here every night anyway... would you like to move in? There's too much room for just me... it's soon and all, but you could sublet your place."

She caught me off guard when she took my face in her delicate hands and kissed me hard, wiggling as she straddled my hips.

I raised an eyebrow and asked, "So was that a yes or are you just trying to distract me?"

Collapsing on top of me in a fit of giggles she answered, "It's a yes you goof! I've almost forgotten what my place looks like and this feels like home!"

I poured us each another glass of wine to celebrate and we toasted each other, and then said, "Good! We can start packing up your stuff this weekend."

Worry lines creased her forehead as she said, "But Jean, the stairs..."

"Don't worry about it. I want to see your place and the only thing that will be hurt going up the stairs on my butt will be my pride. It will be worth it," I said in a light tone.

"Really?" she asked and then took another sip of wine.

"We still haven't had sex in your bed and I bet there are bunch of things we could try in between packing up all of your books."

As I said that she began giggling and I was lucky she didn't have wine come out of her nose. That would have smarted. Once she regained her composure she scolded, "Is that all you think about?"

"Don't get me wrong, I love what you do to me physically, who in his right mind wouldn't? But what I love more is cuddling like this and talking. Though I will admit that's more fun after we've had our way with each other and are basking in the afterglow, because that's when I get to have the best of both at the same time." I looked deeper in to her eyes and said, "Sciezka, three little words don't seem like enough at all, but... I love you."

We turned in early and even though female troubles put Sciezka off of sex, there were other things we could do that would alleviate any of her remaining discomfort.

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Tuesday was my "day off" from therapy with Jim. I still went and swam, then met Sciezka for lunch at the mess. It wasn't palatable at all. I remarked to her, "I don't know how I ever ate this chow. If you want, since I think I'll be packing a lunch for school, I can make one for you too."

We couldn't do worse than the mess and we'd be sure we were eating right, not to mention if we ate out much the groceries would go bad before we could eat them all. When we had finished eating I escorted Sciezka back to her office and I was relieved that Major Armstrong was still at lunch. I was pleased that he'd noticed how hard I was working in therapy, but his method of expressing himself could be a bit much.
Next I went down to the range. Riza wasn't there and I had the place to myself. After signing in and getting my equipment I practiced with the .38 and then cleaned it. My accuracy with a pistol was improving, though I hoped I'd never have need of it.

On my way home I stopped in at Gracia's and I watched Fletcher playing tag with Elysia. Fletcher really had a way with her. Gracia and I sat in the living room drinking coffee and rehearsing the trip. She was tight-lipped about Jim and blushed whenever I brought him up. Things apparently had gone very well. Now was as good a time as any to remind her of my offer to watch Elysia at my place. I'd have to tread carefully as they both seemed shy about their developing relationship.

"Gracia, if you'd like I can take Elysia and Fletcher overnight Friday or Saturday. I'm sure you'd like some time to yourself," I offered.

She blushed, wrung her hands and said, "Oh, I wouldn't want to put you out."

"Nonsense, tell my girl it's a date. We'll all go to the park, maybe get some ice cream and then dinner. She'll be completely tuckered out by bedtime and we'll have her back to you by lunchtime. We'll take Fletcher too if he's still staying with you."

Gracia got up, hugged me tightly and I chuckled and said, "I'll take that as a yes."

When I got home Mrs. Smith was still there and I thanked her for how thoughtful she had been while we were away. She blushed at the perceived flattery and I added, "Truly, it wouldn't be half as nice here without your touch. I don't know what I ever did without you."

She left shortly afterwards and I brewed some coffee and set up camp in the large armchair to get more reading done for school. I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew Sciezka was sitting in my lap, whispering in my ear.

I teased, "You're like a cat, begging for your supper. Are you starving?"

Of course she was, when wasn't she? We decided that rather than making dinner at the house we would go to the little cafe that Gracia liked. Sciezka changed out of her uniform and we were on our way. It was a pleasantly warm night, so we decided to walk. I lit up once I'd managed the ramp and she asked, "So how many have you had today?"

"I've had four including this one, why?" I replied.

"I was just wondering if it had any correlation with your oral fixation."

Chuckling as I shook my head I said, "Mostly I think I was too lazy to go outside. I'm better than I was on Saturday, but I'm still sort of tired and sore. That could just be because I've ramped up my weight training in therapy and swam today."

I flexed for her, jokingly and she felt my bicep and lingered there a little too long for it to be purely innocent. She leered and said, "A few more days and that is all mine. I always thought I liked brains over brawn. I got lucky with you, I don't have to choose."

After putting out my cigarette I pulled her into my lap and teased, "You're delirious with hunger; we simply have to get you fed!"

She pulled me into a slow, lingering kiss and when she'd finished having her way with me said, "Nope, not delirious, but still hungry. We'll have to eat hearty for later."

"But what about your female stuff?" I asked.
She giggled and said, "You can sound like such a bumpkin prude sometimes. No, not that, but you've been so good. You deserve something for taking care of me."

I kissed her again, taking my time worrying at her lower lip, being much more demonstrative in public than usual and then said, "Let's eat and then get home. Can we get this to go?"

"Easy Jean, I think you can at least wait until we've finished eating," she said, attempting to scold me, but she was smiling too much to be taken seriously.

***

When we arrived at the cafe we decided to sit outside so we could enjoy the weather and people watch while we ate, though I was quite pleased with the view across the table. Many couples walked by, some with dogs or children in tow and it was an idyllic setting. I told Sciezka about my conversation with Gracia and our plans for the weekend. She thought it was brilliant and her eyes flickered when she said, "I still get you all to myself on Friday night. I'll have to plan something special."

Our dinner arrived and we began eating, though I could barely contain my excitement about Friday. Hell, tonight was hard enough to wait for! Waiting almost a week was nearly killing me. I was spoiled and I knew it. We finished eating quickly and when the check arrived I left enough to cover the bill and a generous tip. The food had been good, but mostly waiting for the change would mean waiting that much longer for what Sciezka had in store for me.

I knew she could be incredibly inventive, but she amazed even herself when she teased my ears and nearly brought me off just by whispering in graphic detail exactly what she planned to do to me on Friday night. The picture she was painting was almost too perfect, touching so many of my non-erogenous zones as well.

We turned in after a shared shower, though it should have been a cold one for me. Was it Friday yet, and was it possible to die of bliss? I'd be lucky if I didn't have a raging hard on until Friday at quitting time.

***

I didn't die in the night, and woke up Wednesday with Master Havoc standing at attention. I slipped out of bed and quietly got into the shower. Sciezka soon joined me, and I realized that she must have woken up when she heard the water. After getting into the shower and pulling the curtains closed behind her, she bent down and saluted. "Good morning Master Havoc," she said mischievously, "May I be of some assistance to you?"

She always knew when to lend a helping hand and, as usual, had excellent timing. Her moving in was going to be great, but would we ever leave the house? Scratch that, would we ever get out of bed?

We got dressed, despite the odds working against us. Sciezka had to work; I had therapy and hopefully lunch in the hospital cafeteria with that Private. On our walk in I told Sciezka of my plans and asked her how I should go about it. Complete disclosure would be ideal, but would probably scare the crap out of him. If I glossed over too much of it, I'd feel like a hypocrite. Sciezka liked the idea of balancing the good news with the bad. Thinking that over I finally said, "That would have made my first few months of rehabilitation marginally tolerable. Hopefully our talk helps him out, though after the trip... there were so many things I hadn't come up against before."
She put her arms around me from behind and said softly, "So tell him about that, that you sometimes face limits and setbacks but then you pick yourself up again, and try again. Remind him of the support he has, that it's not a weakness when he feels depressed, or needs help. He'll hopefully listen to it coming from you."

I looked up at her and she leaned over, giving me an awkward, upside down kiss. Smiling into the kiss I hummed contentedly and then asked, "You really think I'll make an impression on him?"

She sighed, touched her forehead to mine and said, "It's a good thing you're humble or you'd get a swelled head with the amount of times I've told you this... you're handsome, intelligent, a snappy dresser and just look at that physique!"

I blushed, shook my head and said, "If you insist."

She moved to stand in front of me, put her hands on her hips and said, "I do insist. Now hurry to the hospital. You have a full day ahead of you. But don't work too hard; you have to save some for Friday."

I pulled her towards me by the epaulettes on her uniform, stole one more kiss and we went our separate ways. She didn't scold me for watching her walk up to the sentry post this time.***

I arrived at the hospital early, so I smoked a cigarette to kill some time and then went to my session. The private was down there already and, surprisingly, he was being compliant. I wouldn't have noticed him if I hadn't been looking for him. Jim waved at me and turned me over to a therapy aide who had me get changed into shorts so I could have an electro-stimulation treatment. When I was finished with that I pulled my sweats back on and began doing pull-ups and pushups while I waited for Jim to finish with his other patients. We'd be working my abs on the balance ball and hopefully I'd be able to figure out how to do that at home, as I'd noticed that my stronger abdominal muscles helped make just about everything easier. It didn't hurt that Sciezka particularly liked tracing my now defined abs with her tongue. No, that didn't play into my continuing effort to strengthen my core muscles at all. Well, maybe it did just a little.

Jim finally came over, helped me off the ball and started stretching my legs, putting them through their full range of motion and I laughed. Jim looked at me in askance and I said, "Sorry, I was just thinking of how
odd this would look to an outsider, how odd it must feel for him. Oh, and I'm going to let him ask the questions. I'm sure he has plenty."

"What if he's not that talkative?" Jim asked.

"Eh, I'll tell him about how I ended up in the emergency room with glass in my ass, and the fun that led up to it. My utter embarrassment should put him right at ease."

Jim beamed and said, "That sounds like a plan. Good luck, and thanks for Saturday."

As I left to go get cleaned up I winked and said, "No problem, any time."

My talk with Private Hart went well, and I agreed to see him sometime in the next week if he had any more questions. We'd had a lot to talk about, and surprisingly had a lot in common besides our similar medical conditions. He'd also enjoyed getting out of his room and I felt that I should somehow help with that. I'd been lucky and had so many people trying to bring me out of my depression. His family was far away in the West, and from what he told me they all seemed rather estranged.

***

Friday night was everything that Sciezka had promised, and when I woke up on Saturday I was more than ready to have fun with Elysia and Fletcher. Sciezka suggested we take the kids on a picnic and watching the three of them fly kites had been great, but I wished I could have been the one teaching Elysia and running alongside her. We went out to dinner and had hamburgers. I was surprised that Elysia hadn't requested peanut butter and jelly, but she would be five in the fall, and her tastes were changing. She was growing up in front of my eyes. The highlight for the kids was camping out on the living room floor after we'd stuffed them full of hot fudge sundaes.

Jim and Gracia appeared quite content on Sunday at brunch and I was happy that I could contribute to that by helping them have some time alone. We'd have to do it again soon. After lingering far too long over coffee Sciezka and I decided that her apartment could wait. The next week would be a very busy one and Sciezka had brought up the very valid point that maybe she should "keep" the apartment at least until her mother had met me. She might like me better if she didn't think I was shacking up with her daughter.

The days had flown by and the weekend was over all too soon. The days had flown by and the weekend was over all too soon. Sciezka and I went to bed early on Sunday night, and she had suggested I take a sleeping pill in case I was worried about how tomorrow would go, but I was stubborn.

***

After a fitful night's sleep spent tossing and turning it arrived. The first day of classes for the new quarter dawned sunny and full of promise, I hoped. After showering, splashing on some cologne and taking an inordinate amount of time deciding what to wear, I settled on a button-down shirt and jeans. I figured that wouldn't make me stand out from the other students too much. I could hardly call them my peers, as I was a few years older, and I was pretty sure I was a unique situation for the university. I'd already finished dressing when Sciezka woke up and after putting on her glasses she looked me up and down and asked, "Are you planning to pick up innocent coeds in class?"

I blushed and answered, "No, I won't be hitting on any girls today. I really don't think they'll be all that interested anyway."
She stood up, wrapped her arms around me from behind and said in a low voice, "It's going to be fine Jean. You can do this, so stop fretting."

I began to protest, sputtering indignantly, "I am not fretting!"

Interrupting my outburst with a kiss she countered, "You are so. Just be yourself, it will be fine. You should get going so you get to campus with plenty of time to get your bearings."

Giving her a shaky smile I said, "I hope you're right. I'll see you tonight."

***

The trip to campus was uneventful as it was a short way from home. Since I needed the distraction that exercise would provide I nixed the idea of a cab. I got to the Humanities building where my first class of the day would be held, got in without any major problems and made use of the first floor's facilities. The building was old and unimproved so I had to improvise and hope that no one would decide to use the last stall. I'd been able to get in, but not close the door, so with the stall door wide open I got out my supplies, took care of things, then washed my hands. Pleased that I'd remembered a disposable cup I made a mental note to do some recon to find a bathroom that provided a little more privacy.

After checking my watch, I noted that I had over a half hour before class. I searched out the elevator anyway, as with any luck I'd be able to find an out of the way place in the lecture hall if I arrived early. My plan hit a snag when I reached the elevator and realized that you needed to have a key to use it. Seeing no janitorial staff or anyone else who might have a key I sourly thought to myself, "Well this is just great."

I checked my watch again and grimaced when I realized that I would be late after a trip to the Dean of Student's office in the main administration building. I'd thought I had everything taken care of in the brief meeting I'd had the week prior. The Dean had proudly informed me that all university facilities were accessible, and I'd taken him at his word. After calmly explaining to his secretary that I needed a key for the elevators she blushed and opened her top desk drawer. She handed me the key and apologized, "I'm sorry that we forgot to have a key made for you. You're a new situation for the university. Again, I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

I thanked her and hurried back to the Humanities building. I really couldn't fault them, I should have thought of that myself. I still wasn't used to all the logistics involved in my daily life.

Once on the second floor I made my way down the deserted hallway, found the correct room number and pulled on the door handle. It was locked. I heard the muffled sounds of a lecture going on, checked my watch and cursed under my breath. Class had started ten minutes ago, so much for my plan to slip in unnoticed.

I calmed myself down and knocked firmly on the door. A man's voice said gruffly, "Ah, we have someone who doesn't believe in punctuality."

The class laughed and I began to consider giving up right then and there. The door opened and a dignified looking man looked out into the hall. He apparently hadn't noticed me, must have been expecting "the offender" to be taller.

After clearing my throat, I said, "Please excuse my tardiness. I had a problem with the elevator."

He nodded sternly, turned crisply on his heel and returned to the lectern. I felt a room full of eyes on me as I carefully scanned the room for an empty spot, all the while averting my eyes to try to
avoid the inevitable awkwardness that meeting a stranger's gaze could create. Thankfully he didn't mention my offense anymore and I found a place near the wall where I could sit and take notes. Almost two hours later the professor, a retired General who I learned later was the illustrious Martin "Lightening" Lockheed, announced that class was over. The other students filed out, talking amongst themselves and finally the General and I were alone.

"General Lockheed, I'm sorry I was late. There was a mix-up at the Dean's office about the elevator keys. It won't happen again."

He nodded and said, "See that it doesn't Second Lieutenant Havoc. I'll see you at 1300 hours tomorrow at the Academy."

He turned to leave and I said as I saluted crisply, "General Sir! Thank you, Sir!"

Grinning he said, "That rogue Mustang said to expect good things from you, as did Lieutenant General Grumman. Don't disappoint them, remember 1300 sharp."

After he left the room I stowed my books under my chair and checked my watch. I also heaved a sigh of relief. It could have been worse. I had an hour to kill before my next class; it was also in the Humanities building so I would hopefully have no trouble finding it. Though I wasn't hungry, in fact I still felt queasy from the anxiety the elevator fiasco had caused, I knew I should at least attempt lunch. Remembering that the student union was where most students ate I headed there. Perhaps lunch would make me feel better.

***

The union dining area was crowded and after looking over the menu and finding nothing of interest I settled on an apple and a carton of milk. Realizing that finding an empty table would be next to impossible and since I was not about to ask if I could join anyone I went outside and ate in the shade of a tree. The Humanities building had an impressive fountain in the pond, and couples sat on benches watching ducks paddle in lazy circles. They looked carefree and I felt a pang of jealousy. I had Sciezka and I was grateful, but I resented their young, untroubled faces and had my own little pity party right there. I'd only finished half of my apple, but it no longer tasted good. I found a trash can and checked my watch. I had thirty minutes before class. I headed back into the building anyway and after finding the proper lecture hall empty, I found a spot in front and off to the side.

As I was getting out my materials for class a young, bookish looking man came in. He looked to be barely older than I was. He gave a startled yelp when he realized he wasn't alone in the room and said, "Oh, you scared me. I thought I'd have a few minutes alone to gather my thoughts."

I forced a smile and said, "Don't mind me. Pretend I'm not here. I just didn't want to make a spectacle of myself."

He crossed the room after setting down his portfolio and extended his hand to shake mine.

"You'll have to pardon me for not standing," I said as I offered him my hand.

He looked taken aback, but then looked down as he shook my hand and a flicker of recognition crossed his expression, "I'm Doctor Kohut, and I'm going to assume that you are Lieutenant Havoc."

"That would be correct," I said. "I see my reputation precedes me."

"Lieutenant Hawkeye and I were in the Academy together. Thankfully the military realized I could
serve them better as a civilian specialist. In addition to teaching I see a few patients at Central Hospital.

I nodded and said, "I wondered how Hawkeye picked my classes, now I know."

He looked troubled and asked, "So psychology wasn't your first choice?"

Trying to smooth it over I replied, "To be perfectly honest, before the accident I never considered it. The few chapters I've read were interesting, but none of it seems particularly useful in a case like mine."

Chucking he said, "Riza had warned me that you are a sarcastic one, that I'd get a kick out of you. I've got to sort through my notes. Why don't you meet with me after class?"

I shrugged and said, "Why not? By the way, thanks for letting me into the class on such short notice."

The other students had begun to stream in and I hoped I could sit in relative anonymity. After introducing himself to the relatively small class, thirty or so people as opposed to the hundred who had been in Military History, he directed the class to move down to the first four rows of seats. Well now at least I wouldn't be the only person sitting in the first row. Once everyone had moved and settled back in, Doctor Kohut said he'd leave introductions for the next class when study groups would be assigned. I was thankful that I wouldn't have to talk to anyone just yet. Doctor Kohut then dove right into the first chapter, skipping the historical details saying, "As long as you read the chapter, the history of this discipline should be self-explanatory. I'm not here to hold your hand through material you should be able to figure out yourselves. What we will be discussing is newer theory that hasn't made it into the texts yet. You'll still be tested on what's in the book."

I heard several groans coming from behind me and thought to myself, "Well their hopes and dreams of an easy A have been dashed."

The lecture went at a fast pace and my dictation skills came in handy, though my hand was rather cramped by the end of the class. When class was over Doctor Kohut approached me, and said, "Why don't we have a cup of coffee in my office. I'd like your opinion on something."

"I have no idea how I could be helpful to you, but sure," I said, feeling that it would be rude to refuse his request, "I'll help however I can."

He smiled and replied, "You're still got quite a bit of 'Yes Sir.' in you for a civilian. I'd like your honest opinion on this, as I've never taught this material to a first-year class before."

As I put away my books I said, "I owe you one for slipping me in after the registration deadline. Besides, somehow I think Hawkeye would find out about it if I wasn't a model student."

Dr. Kohut laughed and said, "Well if she is still anything like how I remember her then yes, yes she would."

The professor's office was small, filled with books; so many that they spilled out of the shelves and onto the floor. Sciezka would have loved it. In the corner was a desk piled high with professional journals and on it sat an abused looking coffee maker. He told me to make myself comfortable as he fumbled with the coffee filters and pointed toward a stack of papers and said, "What I wanted to discuss, it's on top. If you'd skim it while I'm fixing the coffee."

I picked it up and began reading and gathered that the gist of what he wanted to discuss was:
A model for the Five Stages of Grief

1. Denial and Isolation
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

I scoffed when I read the last one. Acceptance... didn't you have to accept things eventually? If you couldn't change something, what was the point of fighting with it?

Doctor Kohut pulled his chair closer to where I was sitting, handed me a chipped mug containing coffee and asked, "So what do you think of that line of reasoning?"

Deciding that I should be diplomatic, as this theory sounded better than some of the crack-pot babble I'd read so far I answered, "It seems like a rational argument for how people deal with death. It's more logical than what that nut in Drachma has to say about the subconscious mind revolving completely around sex. However, I really fail to see what this has to do with me."

He sat quietly for a moment, worried the sleeve of his tweed sport coat and removed his glasses. I was mildly amused that he looked like I'd expected him to, if perhaps younger. Bespectacled, bearded and in tweed; head shrinks must have a dress code. Finally, he spoke, "It's oversimplified when you think about the stages of grief as applicable only in a situation like death. They could also apply to the end of a relationship, a major life change or other loss. Riza told me a few things about what happened, how you ended up here..."

I felt like I was at a disadvantage, he apparently knew a lot about me and I knew almost nothing about him. Did he expect me to talk about the incident? Had Hawkeye wanted me to be one of his research subjects?

After taking a deep breath to calm myself down I said, "I don't know how much you were told, but it was an accident. Things went sideways and I don't blame anyone. It was unavoidable."

Appearing to be choosing his words carefully he said, "Even without laying blame, can you see a parallel with death? Can you honestly say you're the same person you were before?"

I took a sip of my coffee, then held the mug to steady my hands so they wouldn't shake, giving away how angry I was. Schooling my tone, I said, "So you'd like to know what stage I'm in, is that it?"

He nodded, indicating that I should continue.

"Honestly? I'm fine now. Yes, I was angry and I hoped I was wrong, that maybe it was all a bad dream. That didn't last long. The doctors at the hospital made it abundantly clear to me the extent of my injuries, and what they entailed. The only thing left to do from there was to work hard at becoming self-sufficient again. Really, I'm lucky. I've got good friends, my family, a roof over my head and plenty of opportunities ahead of me."

"I see, so you've accepted it?" he asked, his tone similar to if we were discussing a topic like the weather.
"Accepted it? Things happen and you get through them," I answered, my knuckles white as I gripped the mug.

"Well I'm glad to see you're so well adjusted. I apologize if this seemed too personal. I was curious to see what your take on it was," he said and then sat back and took another sip of his coffee.

I set my mug down on the desk and said, "Well if that's all you wanted to know, I'll be going. It's been a long day and I still have to outline some chapters for my Military History class."

He stood up to show me out, but paused at the door and said, "Thank you for your time. Our discussion reminded me of a quote from a philosopher in the North; he said, 'The most painful state of being is remembering the future, particularly one you can never have.' I'm glad it doesn't seem to apply to your situation. I'll see you in class."

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I left his office and the university grounds in a daze. That quote had struck me right in the gut. It had been an intellectual sucker punch. He'd been right, I'd died that day. That future was gone. Solaris, Lust, whatever the hell that demon's name was had torn my future to shreds just like she'd done with my body.

Somehow, I found my way home. Mrs. Smith had left for the day and I had the house to myself. My first stop was the kitchen for a glass of water, and then I went into the bathroom and performed the necessaries. After washing my hands, I took a long, hard look at my reflection. I dug in my shaving kit and found the right bottle, opened it, shook a pill out into my hand and took it. Then got in bed and stared at my notebook. Even though I had so many things going for me, I couldn't get rid of the "what ifs" swirling in my head. Maybe the medication and writing would get rid of this feeling.

"I'll never rise any higher in the ranks and will never be able to stand by my comrades now. Sure, I can do small things to help Mustang's cause, but it seems terribly inadequate. I've failed him, despite how he's protested to the contrary. I'm now dependent on others to get places, and it bothers me to no end. Driving had been one of my duties, something I was good at, but I had also enjoyed it. I'll never dance with Sciezka on our dates or at our wedding, or stand with her at the altar and declare my love for her in front of our family and friends. I'll never carry her across the threshold; she'd probably have to open the door for me. She deserves so much more. We may never have children of our own, grandchildren for my parents to dote on. Even if we could, what kind of father would I be? I can't do most of the things that a father is supposed to teach a son. What I have to offer seems hopelessly inadequate. Why is Sciezka even with me? I can't give her half of what most men can. All of this loss because I had failed once on the battlefield, there had to have been some way I could have prevented this from happening. If I hadn't been so pathetic, I would have never fallen for Solaris and wouldn't have lost focus when I'd had to face Lust. I'd told Dr. Kohut that I blamed no one, I should have told him that the only person to blame was me."

After a few minutes the lines began to blur, my words becoming a jumbled mess. It was too soon for the sedative to have had an effect. Scrubbing my hands across my eyes the lines still refused to make sense, still didn't give me any clarity or relief. I heaved the notebook across the room and it hit the wall with a thud, a few pages fluttering to the floor when they were knocked loose by the impact.

I lay there in bed staring at the ceiling, my chest tight and breathing shallowly. Dusk fell and I still hadn't moved, still caught up in it all. I was knocked out of my stupor when I saw Sciezka kneeling on the floor, picking up the papers strewn across the floor and carefully putting them to rights. She crossed the room to stand near the bed and asked, "Rough day?"
Still in my panic induced stupor I refused to meet her gaze and flatly said, "I learned about the five stages of grief today. You've probably read about them."

She knelt next to the bed, took my hand and squeezed it, but said nothing.

I whispered, "Some intellectual in the North once said, 'The most painful state of being is remembering the future... "

I heard her stand up, and she lay down on the bed next to me and finished my sentence murmuring, "Particularly one you can never have."

Swallowing hard, still staring at the ceiling my mind failed me. I couldn't think of anything else to say except, "I died... I died that day."

Closing my eyes, since the ceiling had become as fuzzy as my notebook had been, I felt her arms wrap around me tightly and her small body pressed against mine as she tried to stop the shaking.

She was silent; there were no words to be said, so she just stayed with me in the dark.
Chapter 38: The Dog Days

I woke up hungry, rolled over, turned on the light and checked the clock. Even after sleeping for almost three hours, I was tired. Between the physical activity of the day and sheer emotional exhaustion, I had had it. On top of all that the room was stuffy, as I'd neglected to open any windows or turn on the fan.

When I settled back against the pillows so I could think about what my next move would be, I noticed Sciezka silently watching me. Her brows were furrowed and she was scrunching her pert nose like she'd smelled a bad odor. For a moment, I was afraid she was mad at me, but my fears were allayed when she sat up and leaned over to kiss my forehead. She then took my hand in hers, intertwined our fingers, and squeezed gently.

Not sure what to say after completely losing it in front of her I said, "Sorry about that, I guess I did too much in one day is all."

She bit her lip and was fidgeting and finally said, "We can talk about if you want, or not."

I groaned at the thought of telling her about any of what had set me off, but she already knew part of it and I felt I owed her an explanation.

"I'm just... it's just that... sh!t I don't even know how to make this mess make sense. Talking with Professor Kohut made me realize a few things I'd pushed to the back of my mind. Stuff I'd deal with later..." I said, trailing off.

She nodded and asked, "Was it strictly academic?"

I shook my head no and pulled her closer to me. Very quietly I said, "Mostly I'm afraid that I won't be able to do or give you everything you deserve. I'm afraid I won't be enough."

Squeezing me very tightly she said, still embracing me, "You are enough, just you is more than enough. Besides, we'll get through all of it together."
"Thank you," I replied, my voice muffled as I buried my nose in her hair and kissed the top of her head.

"So, anything else have you worried?" Sciezka asked.

"No, I think I'm fine for now," I answered and wrapped my arms around her tightly.

She sat up and said, "I was worried that you were handling things too well. Since quotes from dead poets and philosophers started this, here is one that I think best explains your situation: 'In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life. It goes on.' He's a poet, but aren't they all philosophers of some sort? And that was Robert Frost, if you want to read more."

"I like that, it fits. This may be a different future than I hoped for, but it's still a very good one. Thank you for reminding me of that. Should we fix something to eat?"

Sciezka nodded and then said, "Glad to see your appetite is still there. It's a good sign."

She stood up, opened the windows and turned on the small fan on the dresser.

I smiled as I felt the evening breeze come in through the window and said, "Maybe salad and fruit would be a good supper. It's hot out and anything heavy wouldn't sit well."

"I'll start fixing us something while you change into something more comfortable. You must be wilting," she replied.

After Sciezka left the room, I changed into some drawstring pajama pants and an undershirt. Maybe after we ate we could soak in the tub to cool off. It wasn't the same as a swim, but it would do in a pinch.

Once we'd finished our light meal it was pretty late, almost bedtime. I suggested we take a cool bath and Sciezka agreed, instructing me to draw the water and that she'd join me in a few minutes.

When she returned, she lit a few of the candles in the bathroom, and then turned out the lights. She also had a bowl of something in her hand.

"You aren't suggesting that we eat ice cream in the bath, are you?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

She grinned, the one that told me she had plans for me and said, "I thought we'd get cooled off and cleaned up before we turn in. Besides, chocolate ice cream always puts you in a good mood."

"If I solve too many more bad days that way I'm going to get fat," I teased.

Once she had gotten into the bath, nestled between my legs, facing me, she ran a finger from my chest, down my stomach, and lightly traced the muscles. She took a bite of ice cream, then offered me one, and said, "You know plenty of ways to work it off. I'm not worried."

After we'd dried off, I straightened the covers and got into bed. Sciezka joined me and refreshed my memory of why I'd been so happy these last few months.

When I woke up, Sciezka was already in the shower. I got out of bed quickly and joined her. She
had to be into the office early to complete a rush order on some files. Thankfully, the military paid her well for her unique talent and even working around the clock, it would be years before all the lost files were restored. As I massaged her hands once I’d finished scrubbing her back, I noted that they were strong, if small and delicate and quite tense. Perhaps she could get an assistant to take dictation. It would certainly make the work go faster and keep her from burning out. I must have let my attention linger there too long as she giggled, pulled her hand away and asked, "What is so fascinating?"

I blushed at having been caught admiring her and day dreaming, then replied, "I was just thinking they should get you an assistant or a Dictaphone."

She simply shook her head and continued giggling. We got out of the shower, dried off, and while Sciezka was in the bedroom dressing I took care of the necessaries. I was shaving when she came back into the bathroom to kiss me goodbye. Before she left I said, "I'll see you this afternoon. I have therapy, then a meeting at the Academy with my Military History professor, and then I think I'll stop by the range. I need to let off a little steam and target practice usually helps. We should call Gracia too."

Sciezka brightened when I mentioned Gracia and she said, "I'll call her from work on my break. Talking to her and Elysia will be a bright spot in all the paperwork." She paused, sighed, and then said, "Brigadier General Hughes was right."

I wrapped my arms around her waist and squeezed. I had found that actions could do wonders when words failed me. She kissed me one more time and smiled, putting on a brave face. The sooner Roy was securely in power the better, as I could tell the uncertainty was wearing on Sciezka. It was too bad that we had to leave the house at all, as together in our cozy home with our good friends it seemed like nothing bad could ever happen.

At my session with Jim, it was business as usual until I figuratively hit the wall while doing push-ups. I had gotten to thirty and just collapsed. Still on my stomach I growled into the mat, "Fuck! This is ridiculous. I did fifty last week! Let me rest and I'll try again."

Jim knelt on the mat next to me and said, "Calm down. You're doing fine. You had classes yesterday. I bet that was tiring. Besides just navigating the campus you sat still for longer than you are used to. How did that go by the way?"

I rolled over, grunting with the effort, and then sat up so I could look Jim in the eye. Finally, I said, "Well, I didn't shoot anyone and as you can see I'm physically in one piece."

Jim nodded and said, "Yes, I can see that, how about the rest of you?"

"Other than lacking an elevator key and ending up late and locked out of my first class, the morning wasn't too bad. Then I had lunch and met an Academy friend of Hawkeye's, a Doctor Kohut."

"How did that go? I'm acquainted with his work at the hospital. He's very perceptive," Jim said.

After pausing for a moment before I replied to shift my position, I finally said, "Perceptive is another word for nosy in my opinion. He had me meet with him in his office after class so I could tell him what I thought about a theory on grief."

"Ah, the five stages..." Jim said then trailed off.
"That would be correct," I said tersely. "Let's just say I did a lot of thinking yesterday afternoon."

"Thinking about things you hadn't before?"

I sighed heavily and finally admitted, "I lost it when I got home. I'd pushed so many of the what-ifs aside trying to focus on what I do have that I neglected to grieve for everything I'd lost. I scared myself, the meds barely touched it."

Jim frowned, then put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. I gave him a small smile and then said, "Thanks. Sciezka found me in bed, in the dark. I'm so lucky she's strong and wasn't scared off by that. She actually said she'd been expecting something like this for a while."

His expression brightened when he said, "She's amazing and she's good for you. Remember that you're good for her too."

I nodded and smiled, this time genuinely and said, "Are we finished here? I have to be at the Academy by 1300 hours."

He nodded and then said, "Go easy on yourself and do something to let out some of that tension."

Grinning I replied, "Already had that planned. After the meeting, I'm heading over to HQ to shred some targets at the range. Oh, and Thursday I'm going to swim after I have lunch with Private Hart. I'll see you then."

Jim got up and helped me back into my chair. I took his hand without hesitation. He didn't offer help out of pity and he knew I could do it myself. He also knew I was tired after a hard session. He then said, "I bet I'll see you sooner than that."

I gave him a confused look and then said, "Oh, yeah? That would be great too."

He merely winked and smiled.

I was glad to see that they were both happy. Once I was cleaned up, I went to the hospital entrance, had a smoke and then hailed a cab to take me to my meeting.

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The cab ride across Central was uneventful, and after a short trip, I had the driver drop me off at the Academy and requested that he come back in an hour. I figured that would be enough time to meet with the General. I was a quarter hour early, but that turned out to be a good thing. The marble façade that graced the front of the building was impressive, but it was the steep stone staircase that was truly imposing. Thankfully, there was a sentry posted at the entrance. I rolled up to the edge of the stairs and called to him, "Excuse me, could you show me to an entrance without stairs?"

He looked around, puzzled as to where the voice that was calling him came from. A few moments later he looked down the stairs and blushed, then came down to where I was, apologizing profusely and then directed me to follow him. He led me around to the rear of the building to the Mess Hall loading dock and service entrance. This didn't bode well and I hoped that this venerable old institution had elevators, or barring that, that General Lockheed's office was on the first floor.

After taking the scenic route through the kitchen and navigating several narrow corridors I was in the grand entrance hall. With a sour expression on my face and wrinkling my nose in disgust, I peeled a piece of wilted lettuce off of one of my chair wheels and chucked it in a rubbish bin, then
checked my watch and was relieved that I still had five minutes to spare. I rolled my chair into the
office and waited patiently at the counter so I could check-in and get directions to Lockheed's
office. After what seemed like an eternity, a clerk came to the front of the office. Apparently, I
startled her; I guess she figured I'd be taller. I was saved from further mortification when the clerk
suddenly stood ram rod straight and saluted. It couldn't have been for me, right?

"At ease, Private," a commanding voice coming from behind me said.

I turned my chair around, looked up and saw it was none other than General Lockheed.
Straightening up in my chair, I gave him a crisp salute.

"At ease, Second Lieutenant Havoc," he said, and then extended his hand to shake mine. "I hope
you didn't have much trouble getting here."

I smiled and said, "My tour of the back loading dock and kitchens was very informative. Scenic
even."

"It's good to see that you are resourceful and keep your sense of humor when situations like this
come up."

"I've found that it's really the only way to handle inconveniences. Besides, getting angry isn't my
style, though I do tend to enjoy target practice more after a trying day."

He chuckled and said, "Why don't we move to the teachers' lounge. It's more secluded than the
main office and my aching bones appreciate the furnishings in there."

I followed him down the corridor and once in the lounge, he sat down in a high-backed leather
chair. An aide came in and moved the chair across from him to an out of the way spot. The young
man left wordlessly when Lockheed nodded and I positioned my wheel chair in the space the aide
had cleared. Lockheed folded his hands in his lap and said, "Thank you for meeting with me here,
Lieutenant."

"It's no problem, General. The Academy reminds me of my early days in East City. Was there
anything specific you wanted to discuss with me?"

The aide came back in with coffee for each of us and a large manila envelope. He handed the
envelope to the General, set down the tray, saluted, and left as quickly as he'd come in. Lockheed
picked up his cup and saucer, indicating that I should do the same. After taking a few sips he set
his coffee down on the dark wood table and opened the envelope.

He flipped through the file it contained, then paused and said, "You have quite a distinguished
service record and could have gotten further if you'd stayed with Special Ops, but you chose to stay
under Colonel Mustang's command. Why is that?"

I considered his question and chose my words carefully, and then finally replied, "Colonel
Mustang, despite his reputation, is an honorable man. I, we... my comrades and I, would do
anything to help him."

Lockheed nodded and said, "Thank you for being candid with me. Mustang has often ruffled the
feathers of the wrong people, but I agree with you, and that is why you are here."

"If I can be frank with you... " I asked hesitantly, "Why exactly am I here today?"

He handed me a small envelope that he'd produced from his inside jacket pocket, chuckled and
then said, "Give Mustang my regards, and no, you aren't serving as a glorified delivery boy. I'd like
you to take an active role in class discussions. There are too many damned ignorant civilians in that
class, so your input will be valuable. You had very high marks in officer training and I assume you
are interested in the subject."

"You're quite correct, General Lockheed, thank you for having faith in me, Colonel Mustang, and
the cause."

The General looked at his wrist watch and then said, "As much as I'd rather discuss more with you
I have a room full of cadets waiting for me. I'll see you in class tomorrow."

He stood up to leave and as he was gathering his papers commented, "Again I'm impressed at your
resourcefulness and apologize about the less than stellar architectural accommodations." He smiled
and added, "Have a good time at the range. Hit a few for me."

I saluted him and said, "Sir, again, thank you. Don't worry about the accommodations, I'm used to
it."

After draining my cup of coffee I set out to find the men's room. I found it without much trouble
and took care of the basics. Then I made my way back through the maze of service halls, the
kitchen, and finally down the ramp at the loading dock. I checked my watch and hurried to the
front of the building. I was relieved when I saw the cab idling in the drive, the driver leaning
against the hood casually, smoking a cigarette. Smiling I said, "I hope you didn't have to wait
long."

He chuckled and said, "Nah, just got here and it wasn't any trouble." Then he stubbed his cigarette
out on the bottom of his shoe and asked, "Where to next?"

Grinning I replied, "Headquarters, if it's not out of your way."

Tipping his cap, he said, "Not at all." He then opened the rear door and once I was in he asked,
"You want the chair in back with you?"

I replied, "That'd be great, it's really easiest that way, and thank you."

"You're welcome. That chair is pretty slick, never seen one like it before."

We both smiled, and he then got up front and drove me to H. Q. in silence.

I arrived at H. Q., delivered Lockheed's message to Roy and then dropped by Sciezka's office. Her
desk was piled high with files and she looked utterly frazzled and deep in thought. I looked around
the room and when I was sure that Major Armstrong was nowhere to be found I approached her
from behind without her noticing and began rubbing her temples.

Sciezka set down her pen and leaned back with a soft sigh. She closed her eyes and said, "Hey you,
any special occasion, or am I just lucky?"

"You're just lucky. I thought I'd stop by to let you know I'd be at the range and to ask if you wanted
me to walk you home."

She smiled, stretched her arms and said, "That would be nice, but we're invited to Gracia's for
supper."
I chuckled and then replied, "So that's what Jim was getting at. I swear I'm always the last to know everything."

After nodding in agreement, she said, "Face it, it's just too easy."

I shrugged my shoulders and quipped, "Probably, but it's just part of my boyish charm."

Just then Armstrong came in. I tried to leave quickly, hoping to avoid him, but failed miserably. The Major stepped between the two of us, leaned over and wrapped his massive arms around our shoulders, nearly knocking our heads together.

"Such dedication and tenderness is wonderful to observe! Katherine did not know what she was missing out on when she refused your invitation!"

Chuckling nervously, I said, "There are no hard feelings Major Armstrong. In fact, tell her I said hello. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to get in some target practice."

He released us and we both gasped for breath. I waved to Sciezka from the doorway and noticed that the Major had pulled out a rather large pink handkerchief and was dabbing at his eyes with it and going on about something.

Once I'd cleared the door and shut it behind me I heard him proclaim, "So inspiring and brave!"

I hurried down the corridor before I could hear any more. I found it embarrassing and though his sentiment was genuine, in my opinion, I was doing what needed to be done. It wasn't heroic or inspiring at all. It was my reality.

When I got down to the range I went to my locker to get my gear, and to clean my side arm before practice. I could clean it again when I was finished, but I'd neglected to maintain it at the lake, and being careless with your gear was a good way to get into a jam, literally and figuratively. The locker room was quiet and as I cleaned and oiled my piece I thought to myself, "If I didn't know better, I'd think I was becoming an intellectual. Nah, that's not even possible, no matter what people are saying. I have no clue how I impressed General Lockheed. I may curse a lot less, and I've begun slipping quite a few fifty cens words into conversations, but I don't see the correlation. I suppose it's Sciezka's influence and all the damnable talk with doctors. It's a good thing I suppose, as I have to at least sound smart in my classes."

I took my safety gear out of my locker, placed it in my lap and made my way to the rail. After loading in a clip, I aimed, fired and looked at the hole I'd made in the target with a sense of satisfaction. I'd just clicked in a third clip when Sciezka came into my peripheral vision. I put the safety on and placed my piece on the rail. Considerably calmer than when I'd arrived I smiled, took off my hearing protection and said, "So are you ready to leave?"

She slouched, leaned against the wall and said, "Yes please, let's head over to Gracia's. I need a drink."

After taking my pistol off the rail, I pulled up my pant leg and put it back in the leg holster Riza had given me. Sciezka frowned and I looked at her apologetically and said, "A necessary precaution."

She nodded and then followed me to my locker so I could stow my gear. We left in silence and I smoked a cigarette on the way over to Gracia's. We could talk at home after dinner.

Just before we got to Gracia's Sciezka stopped abruptly and I went a few yards further before realizing I'd left her behind. I turned around and set the brakes on my chair, then looked up at her
face and when I couldn't read her expression finally asked, "Is something wrong? Did I do something?"

Shaking her head no, she finally said softly, "I know why you carry it, the pistol I mean. I want to learn too."

I was stunned by her answer, but when the shock wore off I said, "But you hate guns, the very idea of violence..."

She nodded, and then said, "I'm sure Riza isn't thrilled with them, despite her expertise. She is armed for a reason, to protect and help someone she loves very much."

She moved toward me and I opened my arms, and caught her around the waist in a hug. I looked up at her and said, "You're sure you want to do this? To be perfectly honest I'm not that keen on the idea. But since you seem set on it, I'll see what I can do to help make it happen. I just have one request... may I watch while Riza gives you lessons?"

Sciezka guffawed and tumbled into my lap. When she finally stopped laughing so hard she nuzzled her nose against mine and then said; "Only a goof like you could get away with saying something like that without getting slapped."

"It's a special talent of mine. I don't question my innate abilities."

Our moods were considerably lighter when we arrived at Gracia's. Before I got a chance to ring the doorbell, Elysia bounded out the door and into my lap. She had me take her to the kitchen where Gracia and Jim were putting the finishing touches on supper. Then Elysia grabbed Sciezka's hand and dragged her into the playroom to show off her new book. Jim turned to Gracia and said, "I'll finish up here while you talk to Jean."

"Whoa, what are you two planning for me?" I asked keeping my tone light.

Gracia's face flushed as she said, "Why don't we talk in the living room?"

I still had no idea what she wanted, but followed close behind her. Instead of sitting down on the couch she stood at the mantle. She was holding a picture of Maes and Elysia together; it looked like it had been taken at a party.

Gracia cleared her throat and finally asked in a timid voice, "Elysia has a school function on Saturday. I... we were wondering if you could take her."

Puzzled as to why this request was so difficult I answered, "Sure I'll take her if you're busy. Of course, I'll take her."

Visibly relieved Gracia said, "Well there's a part I didn't get to yet. It's a tea party and dance."

My tone of voice betrayed me, as I couldn't help but sound disappointed, "Oh, it's a dance. I don't want to go back on my word, but can't Roy do it?"

She turned away from me as she returned the treasured photograph to the mantle and her voice broke as she said, "It's the Father Daughter Dance... Elysia hasn't stopped talking about it since her teacher announced it at school. She told me that she hoped Sciezka wouldn't mind if you went as her 'substitute daddy', since her daddy is very busy in heaven."

Gracia turned back to face me, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. I took her hand and said, "Not another word. I'll pick her up in my best clothes and we'll have a wonderful time."
She kneeled, hugged me and said, "She'll be so happy. Jim said you'd do it. You should go tell her."

I went to go find Elysia and Sciezka. Jim came into the living room on my way out and hugged Gracia. As I glanced over my shoulder he smiled at me and said, "Thanks Jean, this means a lot."

Elysia and Sciezka were coming out of the playroom when I found them. There was no point in making Elysia wait any longer, so I just said it. "I have some great news. It is my distinct pleasure to be Princess Elysia's guest at a tea party."

Her eyes sparkled as she said, "It's a dance too! Thank you, Jean!"

I leaned forward, tweaked her pert little nose and said, "Just remember, I've got two left wheels. I can't guarantee that I won't run over your toes."

Sciezka beamed at me from behind Elysia and then said, "I bet dinner is ready. Why don't we all go check?"

Elysia skipped down the hall boisterously and Sciezka ruffled my hair, and then jokingly asked, "So, should I be jealous?"

Smiling I replied, "Well, I always did have a thing for bubbly blondes, but no... no need to worry."

Gracia and Jim were already at the table and they had prepared a veritable Aquroyan feast. My favorite by far was a dish made from ripe tomatoes from the garden, fresh mozzarella cheese, some basil and tangy, yet sweet balsamic vinegar. We all had tall glasses of iced tea to wash it down with and I could smell something wonderful in the oven that I would wager was dessert.

I asked Gracia where Fletcher was and she said that Roy had taken him out to dinner and then they'd go over to Doctor Knox's to check on Lan Fan. When I asked Jim if he and Knox were making any progress with her, he smiled. He was relieved to report that she was now eating and resting and had asked if Fletcher could visit. I was amazed that she'd wanted to talk with anyone. This was a true sign of progress, and I could see why Jim was so pleased.

At dinner, I entertained everyone with a description of my misadventures at the Academy. Jim said it was a good sign that I'd come out of it in such a good mood. When I mentioned the cab driver and how normal it had seemed Jim replied, "Some people will go out of their way to help you, others will ignore you, and some people, like that guy get it just right and let you tell them what you would like."

After dessert, which had been shortcake with strawberries and fresh whipped cream, we all decided that it had been a long day. We said our goodbyes in the entryway and before I turned to leave I winked at Elysia and teased, "Make sure you wear your best dress for our date."

When we got home Sciezka and I settled into our new routine. Sciezka moved the fan out into the living room and we sat on the couch, me with my school books and her with a thick volume of poetry. Every once in a while, she'd read me a passage. I was thankful that I was quite a few lectures ahead of the assignments in both of my classes. Once my eyes began to fatigue, I organized my supplies for the next day and shut my eyes, just to rest them I assured Sciezka.

I dozed off, and I woke up to Sciezka gently nudging me awake, "C'mon sleepyhead, get up and get ready for bed."

Smiling sleepily, I nodded, hauled myself back into my chair and headed for the bathroom to get ready. Face washed, teeth brushed and the necessaries taken care of I went back into the bedroom.
I noticed that Sciezka had moved the fan back into the bedroom, turned down the bed, fluffed the pillows and I could smell that she'd misted the linens with Gracia's lavender sheet spray.

She came back into the room with a glass of ice water and sat down on her side of the bed and patted it in invitation. Once I was in bed, she reached over and opened the nightstand. I protested a little, but once she had squeezed some of the massage lotion into her hand and started working it into my sore muscles, I stopped protesting.

Her smile was hard to make out in the dim light and I felt it, more than saw it. She continued tracing patterns on the sensitive skin of my inner elbow and chuckled when I sighed, utterly relaxed and calm.

She whispered in my ear, "I thought it would be wise if I took this precaution after your busy day."

I couldn't manage anything more intelligible than a few content murmurs before I fell asleep.

After drifting to sleep in such a peaceful and relaxing way I didn't have any of the night terrors or pain that I had come to accept as normal after a long or difficult day. I woke up before the alarm and Sciezka, quickly finished my morning bathroom routine and went out to the kitchen to make coffee and smoke a cigarette. Once I'd added some fresh fruit to the tray with our coffee, I returned to the bedroom.

Sciezka poked her head out from under the covers tentatively and sniffed. She looked across the room at me, my outline no doubt fuzzy to her, and she gave me a silly, lopsided grin. She sat up, fumbled on the side table for her glasses and her eyes lit up when she saw I'd brought coffee and breakfast.

"This is a good way to wake up!" she said enthusiastically. "Coffee and you beat the alarm any day."

I approached the bed, handed her a cup and she scooted to the edge so we could share the breakfast I had balanced on the tray on my knees. She ate and drank quickly, apologizing that it would be another early day between bites. When she went into the bathroom to shower I took care of the dishes, then made my best effort at making the bed. It was truly terrible, lopsided and wrinkly. I was relieved that we had Mrs. Smith to take care of things. Gracia had been right, sure I could do it, but putting my energy and time elsewhere was a wiser choice.

When Sciezka came out of the bathroom, I kissed her goodbye, explaining that I should leave early too. I still had more of the campus, including the library to explore. The more I knew about the layout ahead of time, the better.

My quick recon "mission" let me know exactly what I should plan for on future trips to the campus and Military History was uneventful. Thankfully it was a lecture period and not a discussion, though General Lockheed warned the class that we should be prepared on Friday to discuss the first two chapters of the text in detail. I wasn't sure if it helped or hurt that he wrote the book. He seemed to focus his attention in my direction when he emphasized there would be a "class" discussion. Was there anywhere here that I wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb? As much as I'd felt utterly average before, there were advantages to being able to blend in with the wall paper.

Lunch was unremarkable as well. I didn't feel as lonely and overwhelmed as I had on Monday. After buying a sandwich and some milk, I went outside to eat in the shade near the humanities
building. If I packed a picnic Sciezka and I could make a date of it. Lunch by the fountain and a visit to the library would be a great date. I knew she was eager to explore the university library. Once I'd finished eating I had a cigarette and thought to myself, "So far today is a good day."

I took care of my trash and headed into the building, maybe I'd be able to find a more secluded bathroom than the first-floor men's restroom. Maybe I'd be lucky. I ran into Professor Kohut as I was coming out of the elevator. He discreetly slipped me an envelope; I assumed it was for Roy. After asking me the routine questions about my day and exchanging pleasantries he excused himself. Today was a lucky day, he was in a hurry and hopefully I wouldn't have to endure another "Five Stages of Grief" discussion after class. He was useful when I asked him if there was a men's room on the second floor. He loaned me his key to the faculty facilities and promised to get me one of my own.

Since I had arrived at class early, I pulled out my notebook after I got settled. I didn't end up writing much before class started, but it was nice to have the time.

Doctor Kohut spent the first half of class lecturing on my "favorite" topic, human emotions and those damned five stages. Our assignment for Friday was to write in a thousand words or less our reaction to it, both as a scholar and as a person. He limited the word count as he explained it to save his sanity and to make us really condense the information. He joked that by now in school it was harder to accomplish a goal with fewer words as most students have become experts at "bull shitting". Maybe my initial assessment of him had been harsh, as invasive as his questions had been, they had gotten to the deeper meaning quickly, and most of my anger and pain had been about my baggage, not him.

The second half of class was dedicated to assigning us to study groups and then meeting with them. I had hoped this could be avoided as I was nervous about new people and could have lived without "scholarly discussion in an informal setting" as Kohut phrased it. The groups were composed of four or five people each and fairly mixed as far as major and gender Kohut explained. "There is a method to my madness," he joked. He must have thought the placement out thoroughly, as he directed where each group should sit for future classes and discussions. Assigned seating at this level of education seemed odd, but I was relieved that my group had been instructed to sit near where I was. I had to hand it to Kohut since he'd remembered not to put my group higher up in the lecture hall, since that would involve stairs.

We moved into our groups and my anxiety level rose a bit when Kohut suggested we take the rest of class to get to know one another and set up our weekly meetings. The others looked friendly enough, and didn't seem to be too nervous talking about themselves and to me. A pretty blonde introduced herself first. Easy enough, right? Her name was Laura, her major education, from West City, aged nineteen and for a hobby she enjoyed photography. Next up was Chris, a guy with a slight build who reminded me physically of Feury, but his attitude was much more intense and assertive. He was also nineteen, wasn't sure what to major in yet, but still very intelligent sounding, figuring that he could complete the general requirements with classes that interested him and decide what interested him most out of those topics. He didn't seem unlikable, but struck me as very opinionated. Sciezka would have had a field day with him. After Chris finally finished it was Dan's turn. He'd gotten a scholarship in his home town for academic merit. He was soft spoken and other than his bright red hair nothing much stuck out about him. He said he'd just turned twenty-one, and mumbled about having gotten a late start with university. We at least had that in common. Granted, I was the oldest in the group, but I felt less alone as a "grown up" in the group. Most of the students in class were first years, so fresh out of their compulsory education and new to living out from under their parents' supervision. It turned out that Dan's major was psychology and he thought that after school he'd like to go to the East, to work with troubled children. He'd grown up in a rural area like me, on a farm. Maybe we could talk outside of school. No matter how nervous I
was about new people, I had to admit that I missed hanging out with "the guys".

Finally, it was my turn. I opted not to state the obvious first thing. They could see my physical condition and didn't seem to be making anything much of it. Jim's advice of showing people how I wanted to be treated led me to start by saying, "It was great to hear about what everyone is interested in. My name is Jean, my course of study is to be decided, and psychology and military history are my first university level courses. I grew up in a tiny town in the East where my folks run a general store, I moved from East City to Central almost a year ago. Hmm, what else can I tell you all...? I'm twenty-five and before this I was in the military." After a slight pause, I said dryly, "Obviously, I'm retired. In my free time, I like long walks on the beach, candle lit dinners, ball room dancing and reciting sonnets."

They looked a little stunned, Laura's eyes went wide and I could tell Chris was suppressing a grin. I chuckled and said, "Well I'm retired at any rate, and the last four aren't true. I should have just told you that I can be a smart ass at times."

They laughed, nervously at first and then they relaxed. It was decided that the best time for the others to meet would be directly after class. Laura had a great suggestion that we have our meetings at the coffee house on High Street. Everyone has to eat, and we would be able to talk more than if we met at the library. Dan agreed it would be a nice change of pace.

Doctor Kohut sent a piece of paper around so we could write down where and when our groups would be meeting. He added, "It's not so I can check up on you, but I might drop by your study sessions sometimes so I can keep up with your thoughts on the class."

He then dismissed class and my group gathered their books and headed for the door. Once out in the hall Matt asked hesitantly, "Jean, how are you going to get downstairs?"

Smirking I answered, "The same way I got up here, the elevator. But thanks for being concerned. Don't worry about that stuff, I'll tell you guys if I need help with something or can't get somewhere."

Dan looked relieved and we all headed for the elevator. In the lobby, I quipped, "There are some perks to this whole thing. I've got the keys to the humanities building kingdom and I always have a seat, even in standing room only crowds."

Thankfully everyone seemed to "get" my dry sense of humor and they all laughed. It was only a few blocks from the campus to the cafe and the trip went quickly. We were all pretty sociable and I enjoyed hearing everyone's take on Doctor Kohut. Once we got to our destination I checked my watch and asked, "Will we be long? If so, I gotta call my girl."

I was able to get a hold of Sciezka at her office and she said she'd stop home quickly to change before meeting up with me. As I hung up the phone it dawned on me that it was nice to have to let someone know where I'd be. She didn't demand it, but taking her feelings into account was a new and welcome responsibility. It was definitely less lonely than the "freedom" I'd had when I was single. Nobody cared enough to want to know if I'd be late for supper or if I was staying late at work, or was going out for a drink with my coworkers.

Once inside the cafe I ordered a drink and went over to the table. We all compared our notes and
impressions of the material. I mentioned my thoughts on the experts being nuttier than their case studies and we all laughed about it. A waitress brought me my coffee, well, latte. It wasn't a very "girly" drink, but it was something I wouldn't have tried before. We were just wrapping up when Sciezka approached the table. I introduced her and asked if anyone would mind if she sat in on our discussions sometimes. The group was of a mind that the more help we had the better. It didn't hurt that when Chris mentioned a section in the second chapter and started leafing through his notebook that Sciezka was able to rattle off the information he was looking for verbatim. Dan smiled and declared, "Sciezka, you can sit in with us any time!"

She beamed and we all decided that we'd studied enough. Once everyone had left I kissed Sciezka on the cheek and asked, "So are you hungry? How does Pane Fresco sound?"

Her eyes lit up at that and we left the cafe to go see if Sal could hook us up with a table on short notice.

Sal was eager to hear about how the party had gone and Sciezka gave the full report. Since it was early, they had space on the patio. It was a warm night, so we decided that a few cold dishes would be a good choice. Anything and everything on the menu was good, but Sal said to leave it up to him. After some prosciutto e melone we had that great tomato and mozzarella salad and polenta. Sciezka teased me about eating almost the same thing two nights in a row, but agreed it was a perfect warm weather meal. Dessert was a lemon shaved ice concoction, with sprigs of mint on it. I thought it looked like a fancy carnival snow cone. Sciezka informed me it was called "granita". I just knew it was good.

I settled up the check, thanked Sal again and Sciezka and I took the long way home, through the park. We found a spot by a fountain to stop and rest midway and both talked about how the day had gone in hushed tones. She made the mundane extraordinary for me and I was pretty confident she felt the same way.

When we got home we went straight to bed, though it was quite a while before either of us got any sleep.

We both woke up early so we had time to stop at the nearby cafe on the way to work for Sciezka and therapy for me. It was going to be a long and busy day for Sciezka and she was pretty sure she'd have to stay late at work so we decided that a leisurely breakfast together would be a good idea. I ate heartily, while Sciezka sipped her coffee and nibbled on a croissant. She teased me for my enthusiasm as I dug into my waffles. "You are so funny about your sweets. Watching you reminds me of watching a little boy... you're wearing this silly grin and you're positively dancing in your seat."

Smirking I teased, "I could say the same for you when you find a good book. It's almost impossible to pull your attention away for even a moment."

She blushed as she said, "I didn't know I did that."

Taking her hand across the table I replied, "You do and it's adorable."

I snuck a peek at my watch and then said, "We should be on our way."
After leaving enough cens on the table to cover our bill I kissed Sciezka goodbye and said, "I'll be stopping by Mustang's office late in the afternoon. I'll come visit you and check if you need me to bring you dinner. That and I don't want you walking home alone in the dark. Ok?"

Sciezka nodded and replied, "I am a big girl, but if it makes you feel better, then yes, I'll either take a taxi or you can be my escort."

"Thanks for humoring me, I know I worry too much," I said. "Have a good day!"

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My session with Jim was grueling. Since I only went to therapy two days a week my sessions lasted at least two hours. Not that I complained much, but electro stimulation, range of motion stretches, and the ball in addition to strength training was tiring for me. I knew I'd be sore afterwards, but it would be a good ache.

Jim had a light patient load so after we'd finished the range of motion exercises, he sat and kept me company while I had the electrodes on. When the treatment was finished, he had an assistant help me while I did my core strengthening exercises on the ball. Jim teased before he left to work with another patient, "Don't let him do too much, he doesn't know when to quit."

The assistant smiled and nodded and I did my sets in silence. It was too hard to talk and keep my balance at the same time. After I completed fifty reps each of pull ups and push-ups I sat on the mat to recover a bit before getting back in my chair. Jim walked by and tossed me a towel, "You're a mess. You'll scare Private Hart out of therapy if you go to lunch like that."

Smirking I replied, "Is it the look of me, or the smell of me that is scary?"

Jim chuckled and simply said, "Both."

"I get the hint, I'm going to get changed and then find Hart. Is he in his room?" I asked.

"He sure is. I expect the nurses will have presents for you," he joked.

"I'd better get going, thanks for the session. After lunch, I'm going to swim some laps and then head over to H.Q.," I said. "Anything in particular you think I should talk to Hart about?"

Jim considered my question and mumbled, "If you could work in something about your social life and recreational activities that would be a big help."

I shook my head from side to side and laughed when I realized what he was getting at and then said, "Jim, you put that so delicately. Yes, I'll try to give him the talk. I don't know who will be more mortified, him or me."

"Thanks Jean," he said, still blushing. "Oh, you'll get a kick out of this. Gracia called before I came into work and Elysia cannot stop talking about Saturday. We're all so glad you're taking her. I'll see you then."

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I got myself cleaned up quickly and headed to Private Hart's room. When I got to his floor he was already waiting by the nurses' station. He'd cleaned himself up quite a bit since the week before and he was wearing civvies and not his calisthenics gear. When I got to the desk a few of the nurses
recognized me and asked how I was doing. I gave them the condensed version and they seemed happy to hear I was doing well. I greeted the private and he saluted.

"No need for that, you can call me by my first name," I said.

He smiled and said, "In that case you can call me Ron."

"You hungry?" I asked.

"Definitely, it's still hospital food down there but at least I get to choose," he replied.

"Ugh, I remember that. Sometimes I got lucky and people would sneak me the good stuff. Let's get down there while they still have some good desserts left," I suggested.

He laughed as he said, "As long as it's not gelatin I'll be happy."

Once we had paid for our lunches, we found a table in the corner. I set my tray on it and then moved the cafeteria chairs out of the way so we both had space. Ron shook his head and said, "I'm still not used to that."

I was smiling as I said, "It's a little weird at first, well even still. When I was picking out furniture for my place I had a friend test it, since how am I to know if it's comfortable? I've since found it's great to nap on, but yeah, needed to borrow my friend's rear to be sure."

He laughed and said, "Well that's one way to solve that problem."

"That gives me an idea; before you get discharged you should come take a look at my place. I'll even cook dinner, just to prove it can be done."

He was quiet for a moment and said, "I wouldn't want to impose any more than I already am."

"Nonsense, it'll be great. Besides I was lucky to have well-meaning subterfuge when this first happened. It annoyed the hell out of me at the time, but Jim helped me get set up with a place that makes life a little easier."

"That would be great, um... so do you live alone?" he asked.

"No, but I could. My girlfriend is moving in with me. She practically lived there anyway. It's just a matter of moving the rest of her stuff in."

Ron blushed and said, "So she doesn't mind?"

Laughing I said, "The chair or one of my many other quirks?"

Turning a deeper shade of pink, he said, "Something else... you know, below the injury."

"You mean like the hygiene stuff? The bowel and bladder routine?" I asked.

He nodded and replied, "Yeah, it just seems so unnatural and well, gross."

I chuckled and said, "I'm with you on that one. That's how I knew something had gone terribly wrong during the mission. When I woke up in the hospital I wasn't in any pain and upon further inspection I saw the catheter. That's how I knew I was seriously screwed."

He asked, "So how do you deal with it, away from home and all?"
I considered his question for a moment and then answered, "I always have that stuff with me." Then I pointed to the small compartment under my chair. "I've always got a few catheters in there in case I drop one, or whatever, disposable cups and tissues."

He wrinkled his nose in disgust and then looked confused so I clarified, "Sometimes, well most of the time, restrooms are sub-par space wise so you gotta improvise."

His expression changed from puzzled to one of understanding as he paused and then commented, "I still think it's utterly unnatural crapping on cue, the same time every day."

"It's an inconvenience, sure, but would you rather be in diapers? I know that would be more humiliating than the rest of it."

He conceded that point and said, "So you have a girlfriend, right? How does that work? Doing it I mean..."

After nodding that I understood what he was getting at I said, "It's different, but definitely not bad, and she's not complaining. For me it's about giving her as much pleasure as possible. Seeing what I do to her is incredibly satisfying. It's a good thing I liked that anyway."

"So, you mean you, you know, go down on her?" he asked sheepishly.

"Every chance I get," I said, grinning.

He seemed somewhat relieved and then asked rather awkwardly, "So can you, you know... get hard and do the rest?"

"That, well that's where the biggest difference is. It's weird, I can't feel what she's doing, but watching her that's what does it. I guess nature built in a fail-safe. As for how we do it? I'll be frank; she at times pretty much rides me into the mattress. It's a good thing she's adventurous. We're still finding new positions."

He looked shocked and I added, "Keep that under your hat when you meet her."

"So, you can come?" he asked, sounding hopeful.

"I'm lucky that the bedroom faces the neighbor's carriage house or else I might get some pretty funny looks," I joked. "But seriously with someone you care about, take your time, and explore each other and it will be great. The research is the best part."

"So, I know I have so many other things to worry about besides that, but thanks for leveling with me."

"It's no trouble at all. I wish I'd had someone I felt I could talk to about this kind of stuff," I said. "So, I can be more helpful, what did the docs say?"

As I was asking, Doctor Parker walked past our table and Ron frowned.

"Well, that one told me I'd never walk again after he'd barely cracked my file. The damage is at waist level, but there are still some signals getting through. I have a little sensation down to my knees."

I nodded and then said, "About Parker, he's not all bad, but he isn't my favorite either. With your injury being incomplete you have a little more to work with than I do. Use it."

"Thanks again, I have a session with Jim now and I'll remember what you said."

"Don't worry about it. I'll head there with you. I need to swim," I replied.

His eyes went wide as he asked, "You swim?"

I answered, "Of course, it's great. You should try it. Ask Jim about it."

"I grew up in the city, so I never learned as a kid," he said.

"It'll take a little longer to learn then, but it's safe and I think you'll really like it. Swimming makes it seem like this never happened," I told him. "I can stand if I'm in deep enough water."

We left it at that and headed to the therapy wing together.

I changed quickly and as I slipped into the water, I felt the built-up tension in my muscles fade quickly. After swimming for about an hour I figured that was enough and headed home to shower and change before delivering Roy's message. I decided to bring my psychology book with me so I could wait for Sciezka to get off work in the lounge and write my paper. I hoped she wouldn't be too tired after work to proofread it for me. She was much better at that type of thing than I was.

Roy looked extremely frazzled when I arrived at his office. He had a stack of files a foot deep in his in-box. I placed the envelope on top of his blotter and said, "That's from the Head Shrink. Looks like you are busy. Do you want me to sit here with my gun pointed at you?"

He smiled wearily and said, "You aren't nearly as intimidating as Lieutenant Hawkeye." He patted the envelope and then tucked it into his pocket and then said, "Thanks for running that errand for me. Any plans this afternoon?"

"First, I'm going to drop by Investigations and then if no one minds I'm going to sit in the lounge and write a paper," I replied.

"Homework already?" he asked with an amused expression playing across his features.

"Yup, unfortunately I'm abandoning my life of leisure. It had to happen sometime, "I quipped. "I'll let you get back to work; I know how you love paperwork."

His shoulders slumped and he sighed, "Sure, desert me in my hour of need."

Smiling I replied, "I have to get going. I'm sure you'll survive without me, somehow."

Sciezka looked like she was in worse shape than Roy and I only stopped in long enough to tell her that I'd be in the lounge until she got off work. She smiled and apologized for not being able to take a break.

I left and when I got to the lounge set up at the table and started writing. I was surprised that the words came as easily as they did. Perhaps everyone had been right and I was well suited for university. I was completely engrossed in my work and was just finishing up the conclusion when Sciezka must have slipped into the lounge.

"How's it going?" she asked as she stood behind me and rubbed my shoulders.

I set my pen down and said, "I just need help proof reading it and then I'll copy it over. But first
let's get a bite to eat at home. Does that sound good?"

She moved to stand at my side, then smiled and agreed, "That sounds perfect. I'll read your essay over while you fix dinner. I think that's a fair trade."

I took her hand, pulled her toward me and said, "First give me a kiss and then we'll get going."

She leaned over and smiled into the kiss. She moved to tease my ear and whispered, "I like how you think."

Sciezka didn't find too many errors in my writing. I'd always been an excellent speller, well, not always. Ma had gone over my words for the school bee and tests with me every day after school. Some days I swore my hand would fall off from copying lines. I was grateful for it now as I wanted Sciezka to see me as "smart" and Ma's insistence on neat penmanship came in handy as well. But when I saw Sciezka go into her bag to get her thesaurus I started to worry a bit. I couldn't believe she carried one, since she was already a walking reference book. When I teased her about it she said defensively, "You never know when it will come in handy. I suppose I could leave it here, since you need it."

I asked, "What's so wrong with my choice of words?"

"Well, there isn't much wrong, except you used the word 'complicated' ten times in one thousand words," she replied.

Smiling as I took a look at her corrections I said, "You win, but the subject is complicated. Please enlighten me, O Wise One, but first let's eat. I hope sandwiches are ok."

She took her plate and started eating. She finished her sandwich before I'd eaten half of mine. I offered her the rest and she took it. When she was done, I took the dishes into the kitchen and washed them. She called from the living room, "Stop dawdling in there. I can finish that; you need to finish this essay. Why don't you do it at the dining room table?"

I grabbed my stuff from the coffee table and got to work in the dining room. She was right, she hadn't had to correct much. It didn't take me long to copy it over and when I was finished I whined, "I've finished my homework, may I please go play now?"

Sciezka came in and said, "Your mother must be a saint to have put with you as a child."

Smirking I said, "Who says she put up with it? My ears hurt just thinking about it."

I put my books away and left the table. As I left the room I said, "Are you coming? It's recess time."

She shook her head and said, "I bet you made all the little girls at school swoon."

I patted my lap and she sat down and wrapped her arms around my neck. It was just too tempting; I couldn't resist tugging gently on her pony tail. She caught my hand, smiled mischievously and said, "That might have worked on the playground Buster, but you're going to have to work harder than that to impress me."

Before she could protest, I wheeled us into the bedroom. She could play hard to get, but she was only playing and that made it more fun.
We woke up to the alarm. Well, I woke up fairly alert and Sciezka sat bold upright when the alarm startled her awake. She was so cute in the morning, her hair sticking out at odd angles in some places and completely flat in others. She always said it was a mess, but I liked it since I usually had a hand in messing it up. Our morning routine was well established, with me taking care of "the necessaries" as I called it first, then getting in the shower, she usually joined me to save water and because I had it all warmed up for her. Next, we'd get out and Sciezka dressed in the bedroom while I shaved. Sometimes she'd lay out my clothes for me while I was still occupied in the bathroom. She teased that though I get to wear the pants, she would pick them out. I didn't mind that a bit. Besides, it was one less thing to think about. Gracia had taught me a few things, but I still had to admit that I was essentially clueless about fashion. If the ladies in my life said it looked good, then that's what I'd wear.

We left the house and stopped for one more kiss when we got to the corner. Sciezka wished me good luck and playfully reminded me not to break any hearts as she straightened my collar and smoothed the front of my shirt. I checked to see if there was anything wrong with what I was wearing and she blushed and then said, "You weren't mussed, I just like touching you."

In my bachelor days, I would have felt ill if I'd passed a couple being so romantic. Mostly I would have felt lonely and jealous. Thankfully I didn't have to worry about that anymore. After one last quick kiss, I said, "I'll see you tonight. We should go out. What do you think?"

She grinned and said, "So you've given up on becoming a hermit?"

"You people won't let me!" I exclaimed. "It's not for lack of trying; I'd make a very good hermit. But we should see what Jim and Gracia have planned, and we should invite Roy and Riza too."

"We'd better stop lollygagging or we'll both be late, see you tonight and have a good day," she said as she headed for work.

I arrived at the Humanities building with enough time to buy a cup of coffee from the snack cart in the lobby. After finishing it I went upstairs and crossed paths with General Lockheed as I was coming out of the elevator. I saluted in greeting and then said, "Mission accomplished sir."

He smiled and said, "Excellent. So, are you prepared to participate in the discussion today on Amestris' various treaties, alliances and enforcement policies?"

"Of course, sir," I replied. "But just how detailed is the discussion going to get? I'm not here for popularity, but if the prevailing opinion is starkly different from mine I might not be too vocal. Well, that and you never know when the walls have ears."

He nodded and said, "I understand completely. But if you provided unclassified information about what the average soldier does it would go a long way to improve public opinion in the future."

"I'll try to show them that not all soldiers are corrupt dogs of the state who are devoid of ethics," I replied.

"Good plan soldier, I'll see you in class," he said, then saluted and turned crisply on his heel.

I watched him go, thinking about all the times that Hawkeye had reprimanded me for not having
that kind of sharp salute, and even though I had to put forth a show every time that Hakuro was around I could do it and did it well. I'd looked damned fine standing at attention in my dress blues. I'd grown so accustomed to protocol and order that it felt wrong saluting now, but I knew it would feel worse if I didn't.

The class discussion ended up getting fairly heated and I was glad that no one singled me out to give my opinion on Amestris' aggressive policies towards border expansion and the prospect of annexing Xing. One student stated that if Amestris needed Xing's technology and natural resources that the country should be invaded if they didn't participate in trade willingly. Another argued that if the country couldn't be self-sufficient then Amestris would have to do without. My thoughts on the matter dictated that the state protect the existing territories with the least amount of force necessary and to attempt to open free trade routes with our neighbors. It seemed like a practical compromise to me and the least damaging for all parties involved. It was ridiculous to me that for the last decade the country had been involved in armed conflicts, seemingly without rest. I knew why, but that was not information that could be released or would even be believed. I'd had a hard-enough time wrapping my head around the concept of the country being controlled by monsters.

Before the discussion degraded into an all-out shouting match the General called for order and said, "You've now heard quite a few opinions. I'd like each of you to formulate a position paper over the rest of the term. There is no word count requirement and you may cite as many sources as you deem necessary. There is no right or wrong answer if your research backs up a logical argument. Don't be too relieved, since I'll be able to tell if you haven't seriously examined the facts. That said, class dismissed."

On the way, out several students continued debating loudly and Lockheed chuckled to himself and then said to me, "Well that got them thinking. I'm glad I didn't need to put you on the spot just yet."

I smiled, then replied, "Me too."

"So, do you have anything pressing?" he asked.

I answered, "No, just lunch and then psychology."

"Why don't we grab something at the union and continue the discussion we started on Tuesday?" he asked.

"That would be great, lead the way," I said.

He'd said we'd be eating at the Union, and we did, in the faculty tea room. This was a definite departure from my usual lunch on campus. The General's position on foreign policy was very similar to mine. He'd decided to retire from active duty after Ishbal to teach; feeling that if he could influence cadets in their formative years he could improve the military. He called it "leading from the bottom up rather than from the top down."

The time passed swiftly and it had felt more like talking with one of my peers than with a highly-decorated officer. Roy had chosen him wisely, though I suspected he'd had General Grumman's input. We headed back to the Humanities building together, stopping for a smoke on the way. He joked that his wife would kill him if she knew he was still at it. I smiled at that and then said, "My Pa has the same problem. I don't think my girlfriend likes it much either, but she puts up with it. I've cut down a lot since... "
He was quiet for a moment and then said, "Being away from the job and having a good woman after you will do that."

"You can say that again," I replied and smiled.

"So, have you given any thought to what courses you'll take in the fall term yet?" he asked.

I balked and then stammered, "The summer session just started! I have no clue."

He smiled and said, "I don't want to put you on the spot, but you might want to try Political Science. I teach the course and that friend of yours might need that kind of know how in the future."

"I'll take that into consideration. I know I'd like to stay involved, and I don't think the desk job part of my old duties would be interesting anymore."

"You're right about that Havoc; your mind would be wasted on that. I think Mustang is aware of that as well."

I smiled, thanked him and headed to psych class. I would have just enough time to use the restroom and get to class with a few minutes to spare.

When I entered the lecture hall Dan and Laura were already in their seats and they smiled when they spotted me. They'd remembered to save the seat on the end for me and after I thanked them I got out my notebook and pulled out my essay. Sciezka had said it was good, but I was still nervous. Dan took his out as well and looked it over while fiddling with the clip holding the pages together. Laura looked over at him and said, "Worried, Dan? You shouldn't be. Doctor Kohut seems to be very fair."

I smiled at him and said, "You're in good company. I'm a little worried myself."

Chris rushed into the room just before class started and he looked flustered. It turns out that he'd left the assignment at the place he was boarding at and had to rush back to get it between classes. Doctor Kohut called the class to order and had us spend the first fifteen minutes discussing our essays with our groups. It was interesting to see the different perspectives each of us brought to the material and I had to admit that as much as the idea of working a group had made me uncomfortable, I was starting to enjoy it.

Doctor Kohut made good on his word. The rest of the class period was spent on material that was not in the book. He promised that we would have a question and answer period on Monday to make sure we understood everything in the first three chapters of the book. He also apologized for the fast pace of the class, but he needed to pack as much into eight weeks as he could. I made a mental note that in the future I would try to avoid the summer session.

The subject of the lecture was an introduction to human development, specifically the stages of cognitive awareness in children. It was quite a departure from the subject of grief. His reasoning was that he wanted us to look at the rest of the information in the class from both perspectives. In his experience, he had found it more conducive to truly understanding the concepts and history of psychology. As a footnote on his lecture he added that these were also more modern and practical theories than what were covered in the text. I found myself having to stifle a laugh when he explained the way the average four-year-old perceives the world. He'd described Elysia perfectly, though she was more precocious than most children her age.
Kohut glanced in my direction and asked, "Did you want to add something Jean?"

"I'm sorry," I said sheepishly. "I have a lot of experience observing a four-year-old. I was just amused with your description. It was right on, down to the examples of art you showed on the overhead. Though in my very biased opinion, she's brilliant."

He smiled and replied, "Children are characters, aren't they? Do you have anything else to add?"

"One question, is it possible for children to be more developed in some areas than others? Is it a concrete measurement or are the different benchmarks on a scale?"

"That's a very good question. The idea of growth on a continuum with more development in certain skills is what I have observed in my research," he replied.

I was relieved that I hadn't frozen up and become tongue tied. But I had just shown myself that I did indeed have a brain in my head.

He continued the lecture and at the end of the class period he gave us the titles of some books in the library if we wanted to learn about the subject in more depth. Once we were dismissed he approached my group and said, "You seemed quite interested in the topic. If you'd all like to get together later tonight to discuss it informally that could be arranged."

Laura smiled and replied, "That would be great. The teaching curriculum doesn't devote as much time to Vygotsky and the zone of proximal development as I think they should."

Dan added, "That would be great. I'd planned on staying home and studying."

Doctor Kohut smiled and said, "Then it's agreed. We'll meet around seven at The Cavalier for some dinner and a few drinks. That's how the Philosophy Department seems to do it, so it won't be thought of as improper."

I chuckled at that and began to gather my things. I waved to Chris, Dan and Laura as they left. Doctor Kohut sat down in the chair next to me and asked, "You're coming, right? I've invited Colonel Mustang as well, so this is a bit of a ruse. I hope you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all. It won't be a problem, I've been there before. Quite a lot actually," I replied. "We, my girlfriend and I, had been thinking about going out tonight anyway. I'll let Sciezka know and we'll see you there."

Where I had been nervous the last time I'd been dragged out I was excited about this. It would be a good time.

I dropped by H.Q. on the way home to let Sciezka know, check in with Roy and hopefully run into Riza on the range to invite her as well. Since she was an old friend of Kohut's it wouldn't be suspicious if she arrived there with us.

Riza agreed to come out with us and said she'd stop home to change, feed Black Hayate and then head straight over to our place. Sciezka and I hurried home so we could shower and spruce up a bit. It was a warmer summer than had been anticipated and though weather like this was good for crops it wasn't doing anything for my constitution. Once we'd showered I felt much better. Sciezka got ready in the bathroom while I dressed in the bedroom. I decided on faded jeans and a black t-shirt. The pub we were going to was casual and on any given night you'd see everything from dress..."
uniforms and formal wear to civvies that had seen better days. Besides, I knew Sciezka liked how fitted t-shirts showed off "my physique" as she called it.

When she emerged from the bathroom I looked at her smiling face and wondered to myself, "Is that makeup she's wearing?" It was, the slightest bit really highlighted her features. She was wearing a slightly revealing white tank top that showed off her graceful neck and collarbones and a silk skirt that swished as she moved. She hustled about the bedroom, her delicate ankles and feet moving quickly as she looked for her black flats. Finally finding them and putting them on, she dabbed a bit of perfume I had bought her as a surprise, which brought back beautiful memories each time I caught its scent. Watching her dress made me mentally undress her quite easily all evening, which made coming home and getting to do it for real all the more exciting. As she stood in front of the mirror on the bureau and put the small bottle back down she caught the look in my eye and scolded, "Down boy."

I winked and then said, "I just can't help it when you get all dressed up."

She crossed the short distance between us, kissed me and then handed me the necklace I'd given her and said, "Could you please help me put this on?"

I had her sit on my lap so I could reach, among other reasons, and after I was sure the clasp was securely fastened placed a few kisses at the nape of her neck for good measure. She wriggled in my lap and leaned back a little and I whispered in her ear, "Tonight when we get home I want you in bed wearing nothing but that necklace and a smile."

"You have a dirty mind Jean," she replied. "Then again, so do I. It's a deal."

Any further flirting was interrupted when the doorbell rang. Sciezka got off my lap quickly and I went to the door to let Riza in while Sciezka called a cab. We waited outside where it was cooler and I passed the time smoking while Sciezka and Riza talked about "female stuff". I'd rarely seen that side of Riza and it was refreshing. Hopefully tonight would be relaxing for both her and Roy.

The cab came and once everyone was in I told the driver where we were headed. We arrived at the pub and while the driver was getting my chair out of the trunk the ladies got out and waited. I assembled my chair quickly and we headed in. The step down into the pub didn't pose a problem and Professor Kohut spotted us immediately and waved us over to his table. We stopped at the bar to get a drink and then made our way over to where he was sitting. Dan was already there and he slid his chair over so there would be room for me. After the introductions were taken care of we all talked about the day, the weather and anything but politics. We could do that later.

Professor Kohut ordered a few appetizers to "soak up the alcohol" he joked and Laura arrived shortly afterward. Roy got there as the waitress was bringing the food. He quipped, "I have an excellent sense of timing."

After another quick round of introductions, the get together was in full swing. Riza and Doctor Kohut, who asked us to call him Seth outside of class, got caught up and entertained us all with stories from their time at the Academy. They had some very interesting anecdotes about General Lockheed, who in his prime had been dubbed "Lightning". This moniker referred to the speed at which he could whip a lackluster group of soldiers into a cohesive unit.
Later in the evening Laura was feeling tired and Dan, being a gentleman volunteered to walk her home. They said their goodbyes and left. The plotting and planning we had intended to accomplish would have to wait, as the pub was crowded and you could never tell who was listening. It wasn't a total waste though, as for meetings like this to appear to the casual observer as regular social gatherings, we'd have to be seen together often.

I excused myself and went to the restroom and on the way back got another beer. When I got back to the table Sciezka and Seth were talking. Sciezka did not look pleased. I'd have to ask her about that later. Conversation seemed to be lagging and I checked my watch. It was only ten, but it seemed later. In the interest of not overdoing it and because Saturday would be another big day I suggested to Sciezka that we call it a night. Riza, Roy and Seth said they'd stay a little longer and to take care.

Once outside I was able to flag down a cab without a problem and soon we were home. I could hardly wait to get Sciezka out of her clothes and into bed. As I was unlocking the door I asked Sciezka, "So what did you and Seth talk about while I was gone?"

She scowled and answered, "I let him know that you aren't an experiment or guinea pig."

"Sciezka, you shouldn't have done that," I said, trying to disguise my irritation. "Sure, what he said knocked me for a loop, but I needed to talk about it. I'm not that fragile."

She knelt in front of me and said apologetically, "I'm sorry, you aren't mad at me, are you?"

I cupped her chin and replied, "I could never be mad at you. You were just trying to protect me. Let's get some sleep, I'm exhausted."

She stood up and yawned. It had been a long day for both of us. Sciezka clad in nothing but pearls and a smile could wait until tomorrow night. I wasn't thrilled that starting university had put a crimp in our sex life, but I was sure we'd find a way to make it worth the wait.

We slept in since Elysia's party at school wasn't until three o'clock. Around noon we finally left the bed and started getting dressed. It was hot again and I cursed as I got into my suit. Someone needed to invent something that would cool off buildings and make it less humid. I'd have to tell Winry about that idea the next time I saw her. They already made refrigerated trucks, how hard could it be to make something like that powered by electricity?

When we got to Gracia's Elysia was decked out in an adorable pink dress with puffed sleeves. She told Sciezka that it was a perfect for dancing in and then demonstrated by spinning around until the petticoats billowed around her. She warned Sciezka that you shouldn't spin too much or you'd fall down. I resisted the urge to laugh and instead asked, "Are you ready to go?"

She was indeed ready to go. Jim gave us a ride over to the school and said he'd be back at five when it was finished and then we would all have dinner at Gracia's. Jim teased me saying, "Don't eat too many of those fancy sandwiches. Gracia is making enough to feed half of Central."

I smiled and replied, "No worries. We'll see you at five. Hopefully I don't run over any little ones."

The gymnasium had been decorated with streamers and tables were set up around an improvised dance floor. There was an over-abundance of pink. Pink streamers and balloons, pink table cloths
and a buffet table overflowing with baked goods in shades of salmon, rose and fuchsia, there were a few shades of pink I didn't know existed. The center piece of the buffet was a large punch bowl, filled with what appeared to be pink lemonade to wash it all down with.

Elysia's eyes sparkled as they darted around the room and took it all in. She exclaimed, "Jean, it's like a princess castle!"

Next thing I knew she was leading me by the hand and introducing me in rapid succession to her teachers, her friends and anyone who would listen. I was relieved for Elysia's sake that I wasn't the only "ringer" in the room. Many of the little girls' escorts were substitutes as many of their fathers were in the military and off on assignment. This event was apparently a chance for students to practice manners and etiquette. Soon after we arrived Elysia led me to a table and asked, "Would you like some refreshments?"

I noticed that most of the little girls in attendance were doing the same thing. I answered, "Yes Elysia, I would love some punch. Thank you for asking." She held the sides of her skirt, curtsied primly and then said she would be right back. She started skipping, then remembered herself and slowed to a dignified walk.

She came back with two glasses of punch and said, "You have to wait until I get back with the food before you start."

I winked and replied, "But of course, it's the polite thing to do."

When she got back to the table we toasted each other and began eating. The small punch glass looked ridiculous in my hand, my index finger barely fitting in the handle. When we finished eating Elysia dabbed at her mouth with the corner of a lacy napkin and I followed suit.

The volume on the phonograph was turned up and soon some of the escorts stood up and invited their "dates" to dance. Elysia and I sat the first one out and I watched wistfully as one of the couples danced close to our table. The little girl stretched her arms over her head to hold her father's hands and he was showing her the steps by having her stand on his toes as they danced. The first song ended and the men bowed and the little girls curtsied. I could tell Elysia wanted to be out there. After gathering my courage, I backed my wheelchair away from the table, took Elysia's hand and said, "Would you do me of the honor of joining me in a dance?"

Elysia beamed and answered, "It would be my pleasure."

She sounded and looked so grown up as she led me to the dance floor. She curtsied and I leaned over a bit in the best approximation of a bow I could muster and then I picked Elysia up and sat her on my lap. They were playing a slow waltz so we just swayed to the music. It definitely wasn't the same as dancing, but it would do. When the song was over Elysia wrapped her arms around my neck and whispered in my ear, "Thank you for dancing."

I kissed her on the forehead and whispered back, "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

After a few more songs, I noticed that Jim had slipped in and was snapping pictures of us. I smiled and waved at him and then asked Elysia, "Would you like to dance with Jim?"

She smiled shyly and nodded yes. I beckoned for him to come over and Elysia got down off my lap and timidly asked, "Jim, would you please dance with me?"

He smiled broadly and replied, "Of course, as long as Jean is fine with me cutting in."

"As much as I hate to share, I suppose I could," I answered.
Jim handed me the camera and he and Elysia went back to the dance floor. Jim bowed, Elysia curtsied and soon they began a slow waltz with Elysia atop his toes.

I snapped picture after picture and when the song was over one of the teachers announced that it was time for the last dance. Elysia quickly curtsied, then skipped over to me and clambered onto my lap.

"Jim said it's rude for a lady to leave her escort to be a wallflower during the last dance."

I chuckled and then asked, "Shall we dance?"

Elysia held me tightly as I wheeled back onto the floor. I had thought it would be incredibly awkward and that people might stare, or cluck about what a pity it was. If they did I hadn't noticed. I was too busy dancing with my favorite little girl.

When the song was over Elysia stayed on my lap and directed me to go say goodbye to the people she had introduced me to. Her friend's father remarked, "My daughter always comes home talking about Elysia and 'her Jean'. It's nice to finally meet you. You probably already know it, but she's quite taken with you."

I shook his hand when he extended it and said, "I'm pretty lucky to know this great girl. It was nice meeting you and your daughter as well. We have to get going as Elysia's mother has prepared quite a dinner for us."

Elysia and I went over to Jim who was standing by the door and Elysia said, "Home Jim!" I would have to take her to fewer movies as they were rubbing off on her.

When we got to Gracia's the most delicious aromas were wafting out of the kitchen. Sciezka came and told us to join everyone in the living room. I was surprised to see that it was a full house. Roy and Riza were there and Al, Ed, Fletcher, Russel and Winry were present as well. I found an unoccupied spot and took off my tie and jacket, and then rolled up my sleeves. Sciezka came in with two glasses of wine, kissed me and then took my suit jacket. Since all of the furniture was occupied, when she came back in she sat on my lap. Elysia regaled everyone with her adventures at the party and Sciezka whispered in my ear, "Well if you weren't already her knight in shining armor, you are now."

I scanned the room and noticed that Ling was conspicuously absent. I gave Roy a puzzled look and he mouthed, "Later." As much as I disliked Ling I didn't wish him any ill will. I hoped he was all right.

My stream of thought was interrupted when Jim came out of the kitchen and called us all to the dining room. Gracia had outdone herself. We all sat down and after a quick toast we started passing the plates around. Ed was in his glory as Gracia had made his favorite, spaghetti with marinara and meatballs from Jim's family recipe. We all ate heartily and talked and soon everyone was stuffed. Gracia suggested that "the men" go talk outside while she, Winry and Sciezka cleared the table. When I protested, she said it was an order and not a request.

Al, Ed, Fletcher and Russel went into the living room to play a board game with Elysia. Since Gracia was so insistent Jim, Roy, Riza and I went outside with our drinks, and Jim and Roy smoked cigars and while I had a cigarette. Before I could ask Roy about what had happened on Ed's mission he answered, "About our foreign guest... there was an incident. He was partly
successful in his quest for immortality... but something happened. He has become a homunculus, Greed to be specific."

My jaw went slack and my cigarette fell into my lap. I panicked and brushed it off before it singed my pants. I quickly fished in my pack for another one and fumbled with my lighter. This was news that called for a smoke. Finally, I sputtered, "The hell? You've got to be kidding! That is impossible!"

Roy nodded, a grim expression shrouding his features and said, "Unfortunately I'm deathly serious. The only good news in this is that Fullmetal observed the process, so we now know how homunculi are created. He also says that sometimes Ling is in control of 'the body'."

I took a long drag off my cigarette and said, "So where does that put the operation? Is it compromised? Ling knew an awful lot."

"I don't think we have to worry about what he knows already. Fullmetal thinks that Ling, well Greed, will keep our secret because it's in his best interest."

Gracia came out onto the porch and announced, "Dessert is ready if you have any room left for it."

We all found a place in the living room. I chose to sit on the floor on a large cushion as I'd been sitting in my chair for quite a while. Sciezka and Elysia sat near me. We all tried to make small talk but it seemed strained. I was pleased to see Russel and Ed sitting together and Winry seemed to be taking it in stride. She joined us on the floor and we talked about how her apprenticeship with Garfiel in Rush Valley was going. She'd come to Central when Roy called to tell her that Ed was coming back. Luckily Ed hadn't damaged his automail. However, Winry insisted he get a tune-up and Ed was pleased that he'd grown enough that Winry would have to adjust the length of his automail.

Eventually Sciezka nudged me and then whispered in my ear, "We should get going..."

I knew what she had in mind and I agreed. I got back in my chair and we began to say our goodbyes. I mentioned to Gracia that if there was any overflow house guest wise that they were welcome to stay at our place from tomorrow on. She winked, as she must have figured Sciezka and I had plans tonight.

I was glad that Sciezka and I lived just down the street. I was hot in my dress clothes and I wanted to get out of them and into the bath as soon as possible.

Luckily, she agreed.

As soon as we hit the door we began peeling off our clothes. I ran a tepid bath while Sciezka opened the windows wide in an attempt to catch what little breeze there was and then turned down the bed. Once in the bath we were still. It was just too hot to move since Central was enveloped in the kind of heat that makes it nearly impossible to do anything more than breathe. I hoped this weather would pass quickly since it would make it hard for me to get my school work done. When we’d cooled off enough that sleep was an option we got out of the tub, dried off and while I took care of the necessaries Sciezka went to the kitchen for a pitcher of ice water. She'd insisted on it as she'd read that I was more susceptible to dehydration and heat exhaustion in my "condition".

Settled into bed, laying side by side in our underwear on top of the covers we talked quietly about how the day had gone. Sciezka giggled when I told her about the decorations and refreshments at
Elysia's party. "Seriously, I am not kidding. It looked like a cotton candy factory had exploded! I think there were a few shades of pink I'd never laid eyes on before," I joked.

"Well I'm sure the little girls all loved it. Did Jim take a lot of pictures?" she asked.

"Of course, he did. Elysia even let him cut in for a dance. They looked cute together," I replied.

Sciezka said hesitantly, "It's good that you took her, it's still too soon for Jim to be doing that stuff."

I considered her statement briefly and then said, "You're right. I'm sure things with Jim and Gracia will work out, but the idea of them eventually marrying is a ways down the road. I think they're handling it well with Elysia."

"You were sweet to do that for her, even though I know you were nervous about the dancing part," she said.

I could tell I was blushing when I answered, "It wasn't so terrible. We stayed on the edge of the dance floor so we weren't too conspicuous. Besides, she's my other best girl... I couldn't disappoint her."

Sciezka sighed contentedly and then said, "Goodnight Jean."

I leaned over to get a drink of water and as the condensation dripped down my arm it gave me an idea. I fished an ice cube out of the glass, set the glass on the night stand and dropped the ice chip down the front of Sciezka's tank top. She yelped and wriggled trying to dislodge it and scolded, "Jean Havoc, it is too hot for that and you know it!"

I sat up, smirked and offered, "I could fish it out for you if you like."

She tousled my hair, then smirked and said, "Nothing puts a damper on your libido, not even record high temperatures."

Sciezka watched, an eyebrow quirked in interest as I took another drink of water, making sure to keep a piece of ice in my mouth and then kissed her. She shivered when the kiss drifted lower to her neck and as I ran the quickly melting ice along her jaw line and then her collar bones. She shed her top before settling back against the pillows. When the first piece of ice melted I quickly took another and starting from her toes ran a line of cold kisses up each leg, to her stomach which made her writhe and protest, "That tickles!"

After taking a fresh piece of ice between my teeth I slowly traced around each of her small, firm breasts. I could feel her tensing up as her arousal heightened. I began to tease her nipples alternating between cold fingers and warm mouth. I could tell she was close with just that stimulation.

She sat up abruptly saying, "Don't think you can get away with doing that and not getting teased back in kind."

After pinning me under her she took a long swig of water, allowing the condensation from the glass to drip onto my chest. I gasped as the cold droplets hit me and tensed in anticipation of what she'd do next.

Holding an ice chip between her lips she ran a trail from my palm to the inside of my elbow and then along the extremely sensitive skin of my bicep and then higher to my shoulder. She paused at the hollow beneath my Adam's apple and then kissed me hungrily, worrying at my bottom lip and starting a game of tag with our tongues. The tip of her tongue would dart into my mouth and I'd catch it gently between my teeth. When the chill of the ice faded, she took another sip of water and
repeated the agonizingly slow teasing trail on my other arm. The areas of my body where sensation remained were so sensitive that her every move was magnified and it was almost unbearable. If I could still feel my toes I was sure I'd be curling them caught between agony and ecstasy. When she finished, she sat up and in the dim light of the room I could see her grinning wickedly. She knew she was driving me nuts and she loved it.

Before she resumed the divine torture, she asked, "So does that feel good?"

I could only give her a strangled sounding moan in reply.

She giggled and then said, "I'll take that as a yes." She took another sip of water and before setting the glass back on the night stand ran it from my navel to my chest, relishing the way each muscle tensed on the way up. Once she began following the outline of my abdominal muscles I was almost ready. By the time she began teasing my nipples it was almost too much.

I took hold of my erection and she eased herself onto it slowly. She leaned forward as she sank down and we kissed as she moved languidly over me. As I caressed her breasts her movements became more insistent. She deepened the kiss and then nipped at my throat. I was pretty sure that would leave a mark and I could have cared less.

My hands roamed lower and I wrapped one around her hip to steady her as she ground into me. I knew my other hand had found its mark when she shuddered as my fingers gently grazed her. Her thighs were quivering and I could tell she was close. I felt warmth beginning to radiate through my gut and I knew I was on the edge as well. She shuddered, was still and after pausing briefly bore down and I found release as well. After one more frenetic volley she gasped again and collapsed against me.

We lay there in a sweaty heap and when she finally rolled off of me she said, "You and your bright ideas. I should make you go get the washcloth."

Still fuzzy and sated I drawled, "But you won't, right? You know you can't get enough either."

She stood up and stretched, the moonlight cast a glow on her pale skin, her shadow a silhouette on the wall. As she walked into the bathroom she turned to look back over her shoulder and quipped, "You're lucky I'm as bad as you are."

Sciezka was right; we were both very lucky indeed.
We had every intention of sleeping in on Sunday, after all, we deserved it. However, that didn't happen because at 0900, the doorbell rang. Sciezka sat bolt upright in bed, startled by the noise and then put on her glasses and her robe. As she left the room I whined, "Sciezka, let them wait! If it was an emergency whoever it is would have called. It's probably just the paperboy collecting or some other nonsense."

She clucked her tongue at me and then scolded, "It could be important. Besides, you told Gracia you'd take the overflow off her hands."

I scowled as I remembered that I had indeed promised Gracia that I'd take Winry and the boys today. Winry, Al, and Fletcher would be no problem, but Ed and Russel? They were a disaster waiting to happen.

The doorbell rang again, this time accompanied by someone pounding on the door. Sciezka went to get it and I commandeered the bathroom. It took me longer than most to get ready, so I figured I'd get started while I had the chance. A few minutes into my shower, Sciezka joined me. As I was soaping her back I asked, "So who was it?"

She smirked and said, "You were right. It was the boys and Winry. She's in the living room tuning up Ed's automail. He's grown an inch since his last adjustment. Russel, Fletcher, and Al are out in the back yard."

I pasted on a smile as I asked, "Why are they here so early?"

"My guess is that Gracia turned Ed and Russel out into the street because they were getting antsy," Sciezka replied.

"That sounds about right. Gracia is a saint for putting up with them as long as she did," I commented as I rinsed my hair.

Sciezka turned off the water and while she was drying off said, "We should probably hurry up. If we're not careful they'll get bored and start transmuting things."
"Agreed," I replied as I worked a towel roughly through my hair.

We dressed quickly and went into the living room to find Ed laid out flat on his back on the floor, clutching his forehead.

I made my way over to him, bumping into him gently with the footrest of my chair to check for life signs. He grunted and I announced, "You didn't kill him this time Winry."

Winry blushed and then replied, "Nope, I didn't kill him. Nearly, but it'd be a shame to have to scrap his automail. By the way, you're up next Jean."

Sciezka made herself scarce, with the excuse that she'd supervise in the back yard. I called after her, "Fine, leave me in my hour of need!"

Winry giggled, opened her tool box and ordered, "Get over here so I can see if you're taking good care of my work."

I moved to the rug where she'd set up, transferred to the floor, and then retrieved my cushion from my chair. She was cross when I didn't remember to do that. She'd gotten Sciezka into the habit as well.

Once she'd disassembled my chair and oiled the bearings she commented, "You've almost worn the tread off of these tires. You must have put a lot of miles on this thing."

I shrugged and replied, "I suppose so. I prefer to get places under my own power. I hate taking taxis."

She nodded and said, "The bicycle shop is open today. We should go there to get replacement tires and then I'll show you how to change them."

"That sounds like a great idea. Sciezka and I had thought about going to her old place today to start packing some of her things, but your plan sounds like it would be more fun. Well, that and it'll keep Ed and Russel out of trouble."

Winry got my chair back together and we went out back to where Sciezka and the boys were. Al and Ed were sparring and Russel and Fletcher were having some success reviving my wilted rose bushes. I'd hardly had time to do anything with the garden, and it showed. Sciezka was sitting on the back steps taking it all in.

Ed and Al paused long enough to say hello to me when they saw me come around back. I announced, "Winry and I have to go to the High Street to get some parts for my chair. You're all welcome to come; we'll have lunch while we're at it."

Everyone agreed that it sounded like a good way to spend the afternoon. Russel and Fletcher offered to help me with the garden and Sciezka said she'd help them pick out what to plant. Ed was excited because there were several book stores.

Since we were a large group and it was a nice day we walked. We could have our purchases delivered if they were too bulky to carry. Once we got to High Street we split up. Russel, Fletcher,
and Sciezka went to the garden store, Al and Ed to a rare books dealer, and Winry led me to a store that sold cycling equipment.

When we entered the store Winry was greeted warmly by the proprietor, a wiry man who looked to be a few years younger than my Pa. His eyes lit up when he saw me and he exclaimed, "You must be Jean! How do you like the wheel chair? Winry really outdid herself."

I blushed, still unaccustomed to being the center of attention. Winry cleared her throat and explained, "Jean, this is Paul. I got the materials for your chair here, and he saw the plans, but not the finished product."

"Ah, I see," I said. "So, I should be grateful to Paul in addition to you and Al."

Paul circled the chair, inspecting it from various angles and right away he noticed the places where the tread was wearing thin on the tires. He motioned for us to follow him as he headed for the back room. Once in there he disappeared for a moment and came back with two new tires. After rooting around in a supply cabinet he produced a drop cloth and said, "Here Jean, for you to sit on while we change the tires."

I complied and soon the chair was disassembled and I watched Winry remove the first tire and inner tube from the rim with a small tire iron. It only took her about ten minutes to reassemble the whole works. Next it was my turn and I only fumbled with it a little bit before I got the hang of it. It was similar to changing a flat tire on an automobile and I'd done that far too often during my time in the motor pool. When I'd finished, Paul checked both wheels to make sure they were in good shape and had no broken or bent spokes. Once he'd given the ok, Winry and I reassembled the chair and Paul marveled at how light it was. I dusted myself off and hauled myself back into my chair.

I reached for my wallet and Paul protested, saying that since Winry had shared her design that this was the least he could do. He saw us to the door and I decided to show off a bit by popping a wheelie as I went over the curb. He clapped and said, "That's brilliant. Excellent work, both of you."

I grinned and once I had Winry's attention I said, "Paul is right. If I have to be stuck in one of these I'm glad that it's your work. It's reliable and light and makes it so much easier to get where I need to go."

She blushed and tried to protest that it wasn't all that brilliant and I took her hand, squeezed it and whispered, "Thank you."

Trying to change the subject she said, "We should head over to the coffee house to meet everyone. Would you mind if I went to therapy with you on Tuesday?"

I replied, "Great idea, I'm hungry and of course you can come on Tuesday. Well, it's ok with me and I'll just call Jim to give him a heads up that you are coming. I'm sure he'd love the help."

Winry smiled and then said, "Thank you, well for everything. But especially for appreciating my work, unlike Edward."

We'd arrived at the coffee house and Sciezka and the others were nowhere to be seen. I decided we should wait outside so I could have a cigarette and so Winry and I could talk. She'd become quiet and pensive and even though I didn't want to overstep my bounds, I hated seeing her like that. I
began, "Winry, it's not that Ed doesn't appreciate your work. He's always said you're the best mechanic and will only let you work on it, even when it would be more convenient to get someone else. If he seems mad at you, that isn't it at all. He's angry at himself for needing automail in the first place."

She nodded and wiped her eyes. I decided to change the subject, hopefully to a happier topic and asked, "So have you heard from Master Sergeant Fuery since the trip?"

After glaring at me and brandishing her wrench, her expression softened and she answered, "Not that it's entirely your business, but yes. He sent a letter and we talked on the phone last week."

Smiling broadly, I exclaimed, "Sciezka and I knew something was up! You two looked so cute together at the lake!"

That outburst earned me a punch on the arm, but it was worth it. I was rescued from further assault and battery when Sciezka and the others came into view. Al was dragging Ed by the ear and Russel was smiling smugly. I wondered if they were fighting but then surmised from Ed's ranting that a short comment had been made. My suspicions were confirmed when they got closer and I heard Fletcher exclaim, sounding rather flustered, "Brother only wanted to help when he said he'd get that book off the top shelf for you!"

Sciezka and I exchanged knowing glances and I resisted the urge to laugh out loud. I pitched my spent cigarette in the ash can and we went in to get seating for our motley group. I told our young guests to order anything they liked and the boys looked like a pack of wild dogs, or something else equally feral as they ate. I made a mental note to slip some cens into Fletcher's bag before they left and to insist that Russel and his little brother take payment for the work they did in the yard.

They all talked loudly about their plans and what types of shrubs and flowers they'd purchased. Ed mentioned something about transmuting a trellis or a fence and my eyes went wide, as I protested, "I think you might need a permit to do something like that and I wouldn't want to trouble you..."

Ed backed down and I was relieved, because I did not need a repeat performance of the ramp he'd made at the lake. It was well constructed and architecturally sound, but gaudy as hell.

After we finished eating we hurried home so we'd be there when the garden shop delivered the supplies. Sciezka and I went out onto the porch to study and supervise our young charges. Later on, Sciezka and I we unpacked and put away some of the boxes in the study so we'd have more space for our guests to sleep. When it was close to dinner time, I called Pane Fresco and had them deliver. I figured I owed it to Ed since he'd missed my housewarming and Aquroyan had been a hit with the others as well.

Dinner was a rowdy affair and it reminded me of how Breda and I had acted after basic training. I'd have to call him soon to see if he'd taken my advice on how to pick up women. Besides, if he teased me too much I'd picked out a whole bunch of dirty magazines from my collection to send him. I was very surprised when Sciezka offered to help!

Nothing got transmuted or broken at the dinner table and Russel and Ed offered to clean up. I didn't argue as I had class work to do and Sciezka and I claimed the big chair and ottoman and kept our hands to ourselves for the most part, since we had an audience. Winry had spread out technical diagrams on the floor and was humming contentedly to herself as she traced various connections and circuits. Al and Fletcher had settled on the rug and played game after game of chess. Al must
have picked up some strategy from Breda after watching him as much as he had in East H.Q. When Ed and Russel finished the dishes, they sat down on the couch and read an alchemy book together. It was quiet and pleasant until Ed and Russel had a difference of opinion on what sounded like a formula. Fletcher rolled his eyes and I could have sworn Al did as well.

Before it came to blows Sciezka stood on the ottoman, pointed towards the front door and ordered, "You two, out until you can be civil. Take a walk or something."

The two older boys left and once they'd shut the door behind them, Sciezka sat down and then buried her face in my shoulder. I thought she might be upset, but then I saw that she was laughing.

Winry looked up from her work and said, "Those two deserve each other."

Fletcher chimed in, "I never thought Russel would find someone as headstrong as he is."

Al chuckled and added, "They are both stubborn as mules."

It was getting late as we'd all talked for quite a while after dinner. The change in environment seemed to do wonders for Fletcher who had seemed shy once the rest of the group had arrived at the lake. He was quite bright and considerate, and reminded me of Al in so many ways. Russel and Ed came back just as we were settling the sleeping arrangements. Al and Fletcher moved the big chair and ottoman into the study for Fletcher to sleep on and Al said he'd stay in there too, and if no one minded he might read in the dining room. I put Russel and Ed in the guest bedroom so they'd have some privacy. That and if they argued there was a door separating them from everyone else. Winry volunteered to take the couch and commented, "I think I got the best place to sleep of all. The couch is so soft and it's huge."

I chuckled as I handed her some linens and pillows to make the couch up with and remarked, "It's so big because I hate sharing. Take a look at the picture on the mantle. Elysia made it. I am the 'King of the Couch'."

After we were sure the kids were settled, Sciezka and I got ready for bed and curled up together to sleep. It was nice to see the house full; as sometimes it seemed too large for just us, but I was glad our guests would be leaving later in the week. As much as the thought of a full and happy home sounded appealing in a few years, I was very content with it being just the two of us in our "love nest" for the time being. Major Armstrong had said something to that effect when I'd moved in, but he was right, if overly dramatic and sentimental.

I woke up to the smell of coffee and something wonderful. After checking to make sure that Sciezka was still in bed I was puzzled. Who was cooking? It was quiet. When I was a little more awake I reasoned that it must be Winry or Al. I got up to start my morning routine, gently nudged Sciezka awake and told her to join me when she got up. We didn't take as much time in the shower as we usually did since we'd be bad hosts if we used all the hot water. Once we were dressed, we came out of the bedroom to find breakfast ready and waiting in the dining room. Winry, Al and Fletcher had already cleaned up the kitchen and were gathered around the table. Winry had made muffins from Ma's recipe and Sciezka teased her, "Careful, Jean is ruled by his stomach, he might take a shine to you."
I laughed and grabbed another muffin as Russel and Ed staggered out of the guest room. I heard Ed's uneven footfalls on the hard wood floor. They both looked a little worse for wear, but apparently hadn't beaten each other to a pulp in the night.

Sciezka pointed at her wrist and said, "Jean, you're going to be late if you don't leave soon."

I downed the rest of my coffee, thanked everyone for breakfast and got my books. On the way out Sciezka met me in the entryway and gave me a chaste kiss goodbye and then said, "I'll make sure Ed and Al get to Roy's office without incident. I'll see you tonight and would you mind cooking dinner?"

"Of course, I'll make dinner... " I said, but was cut off abruptly when Winry offered to help.

"See Sciezka, it'll be great and thank you Winry," I continued.

I opened the door to leave, then thinking better of it added, "Ok guys, stay out of Mrs. Smith's way, don't take anything apart, don't transmute anything and above all, don't kill each other!"

That said I left and hoped they didn't run into any trouble, or cause any.

Military history was uneventful, though General Lockheed called on me a few times, and thankfully I knew the answers. I was slightly embarrassed when he mentioned that if anyone had questions on the material they should talk to me to sort it out. I was flattered and relieved that the attention was for my know how, and not the chair, but I was still uneasy being regarded as an export or authority on anything being discussed in class. Afterward I ran into Doctor Kohut on my way to the dining hall to get some lunch. He suggested we eat together and even if he picked my brain during our meal, it was better than eating alone.

We got our food to go and found a bench in the shade for Kohut to sit on. I joked that I'd brought my own, out of habit and he replied, "There's that self-deprecating humor Sciezka told me about."

"Doctor Kohut... " I stammered.

He corrected me mildly, "Seth outside of class, but please continue."

"Seth, I apologize if Sciezka said anything to offend you on Friday night," I said. "She's just really protective and outspoken."

He shook his head, laughed and then replied, "Don't worry about it Jean. She didn't say anything that wasn't true. I'm sorry I put you on the spot like that during our first meeting. Sometimes I have a hard time taking off my therapist hat."

I smiled and said, "I was pretty bent out of shape, but it was something I needed to think about and figure out for myself. I'd been avoiding it, and I know that now. In your professional opinion, what do you think about me, how I'm handling it?"

After pausing to think he said, "You are doing better than most people would be. You've got good people around you and that helps. You're stubborn, but channel it in a positive way. You're determined not to settle. Though I think you should take a break sometimes to reflect more. Sure, you want to be 'useful' in the eyes of others, but don't do that at the expense of your happiness or health."
I nodded and then after considering what he'd said, replied, "Thanks for being honest. A lot of the time people try to soft-soap things with me and I'm sick of it. I don't want to carry a chip on my shoulder or anything, it's just not me. But when I accomplish something big or small, I really hate it when people call it inspiring or other bullshit like that. I wish people would leave the chair out of it. I don't want pity and I don't want praise. I just want to be treated like a regular guy. Riza and Roy do, and my close friends do, well after I gave them a stern talking to. Of course, Sciezka does. She doesn't let me get away with anything. I think sometimes she forgets about it."

Seth laughed out loud at that and said, "That was quite a speech, feel any better?"

Grinning I said, "Yeah, I do. I'm going to have a smoke. I'll see you in class. Oh, thank you for the special treatment when it comes to the facilities. Using the faculty wash room is a lot easier for me."

I'd definitely pegged him wrong. He wasn't your typical "head shrink". He was human and a good listener. I could learn a lot from him, about myself and about what to do with the rest of my life.

Class went quickly and despite my initial skepticism, psychology was becoming one of my favorite subjects. I'd always liked watching the world go by and since I was often behind the scenes in the military I'd gotten good at reading people. Riza had chosen wisely for me, even though it was mostly useful to the cause from an intelligence standpoint.

When class was over I left the campus after a quick chat with my study group. I then headed straight for the hospital so I could squeeze in some swimming. The water really relaxed me better than anything else I'd tried. I could get in my conditioning for my body and mind at the same time. The weightless feeling took the world off my shoulders, and with my hearing dulled I could really listen to what I was feeling.

After an hour, I got out, dried off and once I was changed went home, prepared to face the worst.

I arrived at my place and was overjoyed to see that the house hadn't been burned down or demolished in my absence, and there were no signs of bloodshed. After dropping my books off in the bedroom I went back outside to look for everyone. When I got into the backyard Russel and Fletcher were putting the finishing touches on some plantings around the trees. Fletcher told me they were Impatiens and that they would grow well in the shade. Winry and Al were watering a small patch of ground with wide stone walk ways and told me it was an herb garden since Sciezka and I liked to cook. Winry started talking a mile a minute about what was planted and then Al stopped her chiding, "Go get the best part Winry."

She ran into the carriage house and came out with a mechanic's creeper that was fitted with wider wheels, like off of a lawn mower. I was utterly confused as to what purpose it served until she put it down on the paving stones and scooted through the herb garden on it.

Grinning broadly, I said, "That is ingenious. Simple too, form and function and I won't get a muddy ass. Plus, it's compact enough that I can move it around myself."

Russel and Fletcher came over and then showed me the smooth brick path around the perimeter of all the flower beds. Sciezka and Ed got home a bit early and Sciezka pointed out the new ramp
from the back deck, which I'd neglected to notice.

"I'd forgotten about that one, you all really thought of everything," I said.

Not to be left out Ed walked over to a small clearing near the now flourishing rose bushes and clapped. We all held our breath, expecting the worst. When the dust settled, there was a simple stone bench where there had been nothing.

He smiled and said, "I didn't want to overdo it."

Al teased, "Your sense of aesthetics isn't for everyone Brother."

Sciezka beamed, then hugged Ed tightly and said, "It looks like pictures of the ruins at Xerxes! It's beautiful!"

I smiled, thinking to myself, "This is amazing. It looks beautiful and I can get to everything, even if it's muddy. They really put some thought into this."

Someone elbowed me to bring my attention back to Amestris and when I turned to look who it was, it was Sciezka. I smiled sheepishly and said, "Thanks so much everyone. Are you all hungry?"

It was unanimous. They were famished after all their hard work. Ed complained that he'd had to put up with Colonel Bastard all day while Al got off easy.

I went inside to make dinner and Sciezka and Winry joined me. The boys stayed outside and sparred. Once inside Sciezka pulled Winry aside to talk and when Sciezka returned to the kitchen I was putting the potatoes in the oven.

"Where did Winry go?" I asked Sciezka.

She smiled coyly and replied, "I told her about the bathtub. I hope you don't mind. She'd mentioned that she was curious about the modifications to the house."

I chuckled and said, "Great idea. I sometimes forget she's a girl and likes that kind of stuff, though I guess that makes me kind of girly too."

Sciezka reached down and massaged my neck and shoulders and then said, "No, that makes you civilized, well that and you smell good."

I pulled her onto my lap and we kissed until we thought we might get caught. Fletcher came in with a bouquet of roses, looking for a vase. Sciezka stood up abruptly, slightly flustered and found one in the pantry. Fletcher offered to set the table and we took him up on it.

While I made the salad, Sciezka cooked the steaks and soon we all sat down to dinner. Everyone was in a good mood and I was happy that Sciezka and I had been able to provide a place where kids who had seen too much, too soon, could relax.

After dinner, we played charades and it was almost like back home in the East when the whole family would get together for the holidays. Around 2000 hours the phone rang and Sciezka jumped up to answer it. Her face lit up when she answered it and she said, "Winry, it's for you. You can take it in our room."

When Winry emerged from the bedroom a few minutes later she was smiling and I was about to ask if it had been Fuery. Sciezka, who had become excellent at predicting when I'd put my foot in
my mouth kissed me to keep me quiet.

We all had a bowl of ice cream before bed, the one dairy product that Ed didn't object to, and then we all turned in for the night.

A ruckus that sounded like it was coming from the kitchen roused me from a sound sleep. I got out of bed, pulled on my boxers and hurried to investigate. Once I was in the living room I realized it was Winry and Ed. They were in the dining room, engaged in a battle of wills. There was a large glass of milk in front of Ed and he sat with his arms crossed, as far away from it as he could get, his nose turned up in disgust and a scowl on his face. Winry was standing over him, threatening bodily harm if he didn't drink it. I rolled up to the table, with sleep still in my eyes and horrible bed head and said, "Winry, you know he hates that stuff. Don't press the issue, at least not at this hour."

She looked sheepish and apologized, "I'm sorry we woke you up."

Ed grinned like a maniac and said, "I had nothing to do with it, Winry. You are the one who is pushing this vile white shit on me."

I rubbed my eyes, sighed heavily and then picked up the glass of milk, downing it quickly and then said, "Problem solved. I'm going to shower now. Winry, please make some coffee and lots of it."

When I got back to the bedroom Sciezka was already out of bed and in the shower. I quickly joined her and she inquired, "What was all that noise about?"

"Just another round of the Fullmetal Alchemist versus milk," I joked.

Sciezka rolled her eyes as she said, "You'd think that one of them would give in already."

"They're both strong-willed. They'll be fighting about it forever, just accept it."

"So how did it end?" she asked.

"I fixed the problem for Ed and drank the milk," I said with a smirk on my face.

Sciezka giggled and replied, "That's one way to solve things. Did you tell Ed that milk is what made you so big and strong?"

I shook my head and then said, "I don't have a death wish."

Once we were dressed and ready, Sciezka and I had some coffee and she left for work with Ed and Al in tow. Russel and Fletcher went over to Gracia's to help in the yard and Winry and I headed to the hospital.

Jim was working with Ron when we arrived, and he waved us over so he could introduce her to the Private.

"Ron, this is Winry Rockbell. She is an automail mechanic, and the person who made Jean's wheel chair," Jim said.

There was a spark of recognition in Ron's eyes and he sat up to shake her hand and then said, "That
chair of Jean's is really amazing compared to the ones at the hospital."

Winry blushed at the praise as she replied, "I'm pretty proud of it, but a lot of credit goes to Jean. He's worked a lot on his strength and mobility in therapy. He makes the hard stuff look easy. He used to call the old chair 'The Tank'."

It was my turn to blush and I said, "I don't want to break up the party, but I should get started."

I went and changed into shorts so Winry could attach the electrodes for a stimulation treatment and then we got to work. She upped the time to fifteen minutes and when we were finished as she took off the electrodes she asked, "So do you feel ready to try standing today?"

Her question confused me, but when she came back with a large box it jogged my memory. She opened the box and took out a set of braces. She's been right that they'd look and be cumbersome, but it would be good for me to stand. After helping me get strapped into them she went and got Jim. He came over, helped me into my chair since I wasn't used to moving in the braces, or with that much weight and we moved to the other end of the room where a set of parallel bars were set up. With Jim in front of me and Winry spotting me from behind they pulled me into a standing position and had me hold most of my weight with my arms. I almost passed out from the effort and the blood rushing to my legs.

After just a minute, they eased me back into the wheel chair and Jim said, "We'll work up to more eventually. Winry, watch him in case he faints. He's probably pretty dizzy."

It had been almost as bad as the first time they'd let me sit up after surgery, but I didn't faint. After I'd recovered, Winry helped me get the braces off and asked, "So how was that?"

I smiled as I said, "When the room stopped spinning, it was great. I'd almost forgotten what the world looks like from that height."

She was beaming as she said, "Good! We'll save that as a surprise for when you've gotten better at it. Now, let's get you stretched out and then extra conditioning."

"You and Jim are trying to kill me, aren't you?" I teased.

I wasn't convinced otherwise when she grinned and rubbed her hands together. It was confirmed. She and Jim were both sadists.

After pushups, pull-ups, seemingly endless sets with weights on the ball and more stretching Winry introduced me to the tilt table. This supported me in an upright position and once the dizziness passed she put weights in my hand and had me do more strength training.

Ron finished his session and came over to watch us work. My arms felt like wet noodles by the time Winry said it was time to stop. Even though I ached all over I said, "Just one more set. I know I can do it."

She had to look up to talk to me and I grinned. But she wouldn't budge. Placing her hands on her hips she called over to Jim and said, "I need help getting Mister Tough Guy down from here."

I heard Jim chuckle and he came over to help her. As they lowered the tilt table he said, "Don't overdo it."

Once back in my chair I teased, "The view isn't nearly as good down here."

Winry smirked and said, "I suppose we could get Sciezka to come and stand in front of you."
I balked at her statement and Winry winked and teased, "Oh, I'm onto you, pervert. No worries, I think it's cute."

Once I cleaned up and changed back into street clothes, Ron, Winry and I got lunch in the cafeteria. Over lunch Winry and Ron talked a mile a minute and I was so wiped out it was hard to keep up with their conversation. I picked at my food and I couldn't stay focused. I wasn't sure if it was because I had overdone it, or something else. From what I caught of their conversation, it was a good one. I'd never seen Ron excited about something and I remembered how hopeless everything had seemed at first. Jim joined us midway through the meal and the three of them discussed working with Paul at the cycling store to produce more chairs like mine for the rehabilitation department under contract.

Jim must have noticed how out of it I was as he quietly asked me, "Rough day?"

I had been zoning out. I was exhausted and standing, though exhilarating was tiring and not the same as the "real thing". I smiled wanly and replied, "I'm just a little tired is all and well, I'm still trying to wrap my head around being vertical again."

He nodded and his gaze moved to my legs, which had begun to shake violently with spasms. I frowned and he said, "Come back to the P.T. room before your swim. We'll get you stretched out and hopefully the spasms will stop."

We finished eating and returned to the rehabilitation wing. Winry worked with Ron and took his measurements while Jim attempted to make my leg muscles behave. I frowned as he worked and didn't make eye contact. It wasn't Jim's fault and if he noticed my sullen mood he didn't mention it. He knew how disconcerting the spasms were for me. When Jim had done everything possible he said, "Swim for a little bit, but don't overdo it. Take it easy and if they haven't stopped come back here."

I nodded, quietly thanked him and went to go change and swim. It was a bitch getting out of the chair and onto the edge of the pool when my legs shook as badly as they were. Luckily there was only the lifeguard and few other people who were too busy swimming laps to notice me. After a half hour I was too tired to continue safely, so I got out. I dried off and changed, then reported to Jim.

This wasn't good, since usually the spasms stopped after a session or a swim.

"You've been overdoing it Jean," Jim said, his mouth set in a straight line. "Go over to the raised mats, on your stomach. We'll heat pack you and hope that helps."

He felt along my back, explaining that he was checking to see if I'd pulled or strained any muscles. He sighed and said, "You're really tight back there, but it doesn't look like you did any permanent damage. I'm going to hot pack the area; have you stretch again and then we'll ice you down. When you get home, go straight to bed. I'll sic Winry on you if you don't."

I groaned and complained, but agreed as he went to work on me.
On the way home Winry talked a mile a minute about the production specifications for the wheel chairs. I was glad she was getting recognition and compensation for all her hard work, though I was quiet and my praise must have sounded half-hearted. She stopped talking suddenly and asked, "Hard day?"

Frowning I answered, "Yeah, nothing to do with you or Jim. I'm just frustrated."

I stopped abruptly and lit up a cigarette. My legs were still jumping and I grabbed my left leg roughly, attempting to quiet it. Winry cleared her throat and then said, "Let's go back to your place. Russel, Fletcher and I are visiting Lan Fan tonight, and I'll call the Colonel's office to have him keep Ed and Al busy. Ed deserves it after the stunt he pulled this morning."

"You don't have to do all that... " I protested.

She smiled and replied, "You've barely had any downtime since we all got to Central. You've finished all your class work, right?"

I nodded and she continued, "Well then see? You can nap until Sciezka gets home and then order in, just you two. I'll tattle to Jim if you don't."

That earned a chuckle from me and I conceded, "You win. Let's get going. I'm bushed."

Once we got back to my place, I changed into pajama pants and dragged myself into bed. Winry came in with a glass of water and I thanked her and asked her to get my meds from the bathroom. I hated taking them, hated the way they made me groggy and out of it, but I hated the spasms more.

When Sciezka got home, she crept into the room quietly and turned on the light, asking, "Will the light bother you? Do you want something to eat?" She got into bed next to me and I rested my head in her lap, encircling her waist with my arms and went back to sleep after mumbling, "Not hungry, too fuzzy."

I didn't stir when she shifted our positions when she finally went to sleep. I was glad she didn't make a big deal out of it, it was embarrassing enough.

Wednesday began in a flurry of activity. Sciezka, Ed and Al left for H.Q. very early in the morning since they'd be leaving for a mission the next day and needed to be briefed. Gracia and Elysia dropped off bag lunches for Winry, Russel and Fletcher who would be leaving on the 0900 out of Central Station. She packed one for me to eat at school and I was pleased to see she'd included some of her amazing chocolate chip cookies. A cab arrived at the house at 0800, and I had just enough time while Fletcher was saying goodbye to Gracia and distracted to slip an envelope into his bag, with a note enclosed instructing him to use the cens inside as an emergency fund. I shook Russel's hand and gave him an envelope saying, "Here is some compensation for all of your work in the yard. It's great and as guests you didn't have to. Come visit soon, you always have a place to sleep in Central."

My goodbye to Winry came last and she leaned over and hugged me tightly. I squeezed her back and whispered, "Be safe, you're my favorite mechanic. Tell Fuery hello for me and don't worry. We're working on fixing that transfer situation. It won't be too much longer."

She didn't hit me for mentioning Fuery this time and her eyes glistened. I hadn't wanted to make her cry. Trying to lighten the mood I joked, "I'll keep Ron and Jim in line while you're in Rush Valley. You can count on me."
She smiled, finished loading her belongings, then got in the cab and they were off to the train station.

As soon as I got to campus I got a cup of coffee in the Humanities Building lobby. I needed it, since we'd all been so busy from the moment we woke up that we skipped breakfast. I felt much better than I had the day before and was relieved. I didn't have time to deal with my body rebelling just because I was tired or busy. As miserable as basic training had been, I'd gotten through it on adrenaline and willpower alone.

After Military History, General Lockheed pulled me aside and handed me an envelope. Figuring it was a message for Roy I quickly stashed it in my notebook for safekeeping. The General laughed and chided, "Aren't you going to see who it's addressed to? I'm having a do at my place on Saturday. You and a guest, I'm guessing that lady friend of yours, are invited. Bring your swimsuits."

I smiled, thanked him and he added, "Don't worry about not knowing anyone there. I think you'll be pleased with the guest list."

He excused himself, saying he had a lunch appointment with the department chair. I headed outside to eat by the fountain and see what else Gracia had packed in my lunch.

When I finished eating I had a cigarette out of habit and because after the last few days, I needed one. The kids had been great, but it was hectic and I had to admit to myself that once I got home every day, I liked to and needed to relax.

I headed back into the building after another cigarette. Once on the second floor, I used the faculty facilities and then went to class. I was glad that I arrived early, as I had time to go over my chapter notes. Laura, Chris and Dan got to the lecture hall shortly after I did and we had a good time teasing Chris that he'd missed a good time on Friday. He'd had a date, but she ended up canceling at the last minute. I remembered the feeling of being ditched and was glad to be rid of it.

Class was interesting as we were discussing the hierarchy of needs. The basic premise being that in order for development, intellectual growth and self-actualization to occur a person must have basic needs like food, shelter, safety, nurturance and self-love must met before one can focus on, "higher pursuits" such as acquiring knowledge, and seeking out aesthetic pleasure, or the nurturing of the soul. It made perfect sense to me. I was at amazed at how much psychological theory was common sense and amused at how often it got twisted until it was unrecognizable. Perhaps the academics could sacrifice some intellect for more common sense, compassion, and better listening skills.

At the end of class my study group headed to the coffee house. Sciezka would meet me there after work and maybe we'd grab a bite to eat. Roy had insisted that Ed and Al stay in the dorms that night so he could put them on the train personally in the morning.

My classmates were friendly when Sciezka arrived and exchanged pleasantries with her. I was happy we'd both found a place that we "fit" outside of the military. Laura suggested to Sciezka that they ditch the men sometime to do girl stuff. I smiled at that thought. Sciezka had been shy and a bit of a loner before the Hughes family came into her life and she into mine.
Once we’d finished eating, Sciezka agreed that a swim would feel good as long as I wasn't pushing myself too hard. On the way home to pick up our suits, she said, "I was worried about you last night. Winry left a note letting me know where she and the boys went. She also wrote that you had a rough day and were having really bad spasms."

"I'm sorry about that. I just did too much; I know I'm stubborn about pushing for just one more set. I'm just not very patient," I replied.

She bit her lower lip and then said, "When I saw you for myself, it was worse. It must have been bad if you willingly took your medication."

I took her hand and said, "I'm a big boy. I can handle myself. But I promise to be more careful."

She smiled, kissed me quickly and said, "Let's get going."

I couldn't have agreed more.

Once changed and at the pool, we were pleasantly surprised to see that Gracia, Elysia and Jim were there too. Elysia's swimming had really improved and after Sciezka and I had completed a few laps, I decided that I could get almost as much exercise playing with Elysia.

Apparently, Jim approved of that plan, as he swam over to me and said, "I'm glad to see you're taking things easy today."

"I've learned my lesson, mostly," I replied sheepishly.

When Elysia started getting pruny fingers, Gracia decided it was time to go home. Jim left with them. I gathered that they'd have a late supper after Elysia was tucked in.

"How about we swim a few more lengths and then head home," I asked Sciezka.

She laughed and then said, "I'm all pruny like Elysia. I'll get out and watch. But you go ahead, just remember you don't have to do it all at once."

When I was out of the water, drying off Sciezka eyed me up and down and then said, "You looked good in there, better out here."

I smiled and then replied, "Good, I won't scare people at the General's party on Saturday if I decide to swim. Sorry, I didn't mention it earlier."

"Wow, you've begun running in some awfully important social circles lately," she teased.

"Well you're invited too, if you're interested."

She grinned as she replied, "I might be persuaded to accompany you, though you'll have to sweet talk me."

I pulled my shirt over my head and said, "I'm not even going to bother changing, since as soon as I get you home it's coming off."
We got home and ran a bath. Sciezka said she'd join me shortly and I lit some candles, got undressed and got in. I'd added some foaming bath and by the time Sciezka joined me the tub was filled with piles of fragrant bubbles. She seemed excited and rushed and I wondered what she had planned for us. We'd barely soaked for fifteen minutes when she abruptly announced, "We are clean. Get dried off and meet me in the dining room."

"What could she possibly be plotting?" I asked myself as I pulled on my robe and did as she'd all but commanded.

She'd been busy while I was in the bath. There were candles everywhere and two glasses of wine and Sciezka stood there naked as the day she was born.

I grinned devilishly as I asked, "So we're breaking in a new room?"

She merely nodded and handed me a glass of wine before picking up her own. This was going to be interesting. There were candles on the table, so I was pretty sure she didn't plan for us to do it there and the hardwood floors didn't make any sense. After she set her glass down she took mine and said, "I've been looking at some rare books on my breaks and one piqued my interest."

The look on her face clued me in to which 'rare books' she meant, as did the wicked smirk on her face. Leave it to Sciezka to find the dirty books in any library. She took my hand and led me over to one of the high-backed chairs that she'd set in the center of the room and whispered as she toyed with my earlobe, "Sit on that, I have an idea."

I transferred to it, still in my robe and waited patiently. She untied the robe and brought it past my shoulders. When I reached out to touch her she gently took my hand and placed it on my lap. I mused to myself, "So this is how it's going to be. How did I get this lucky?"

She pulled my robe down the rest of the way and began placing kisses and small bites starting at my neck and moving lower at an agonizingly slow pace. Watching her work as she had me sit passively was incredibly erotic. The chill of my bare skin contrasted with her hot caresses was exhilarating. When she'd moved low enough that she had to kneel she allowed me to lean over to kiss her and play with her hair. She turned her head to the side so I could watch as she massaged and sucked until I was erect. Once she was satisfied that her ministrations had been effective she stood up and appeared to be admiring her handiwork.

I looked at her, my eyes beginning to go half lidded with arousal and sheer lust. She then sat astride me, kissing me passionately as she ground against me. This position gave an excellent view as she moved over me and once I was securely inside of her, she slowly and deliberately rose and fell in a languorous rhythm. I held her hips to support her when her thighs began to quiver with the exertion and alternated between kissing her graceful neck as she tossed her head and sucking her breasts as she arched her back, baring them to me. My entire being began to tingle and my cheeks flushed. She panted and asked, "Having fun yet?"

I could only answer by shifting my hands to cup her from behind, quickly lifting and lowering her and lifting her again to increase the tempo. She leaned into me as she rode me harder and faster, at times burying her head in the crook of my neck and biting me to stifle her cries. The tension was building in the pit of my stomach and soon I leaned back as far as I could, almost toppling us over backwards. She placed her palms on the floor behind her, bracing herself as she hooked her legs over my shoulders and locked her ankles around my neck. The rest was a blur of sensation as seemingly every muscle tightened until it was almost unbearable and I bellowed as I came. After she cried out she wrapped her arms around my neck and clung desperately. We were both breathing heavily as she tried to disentangle herself, and finally stood, staggering a bit, clearly weak in the knees.
She managed it, barely, and then knelt with her head in my lap, idly tracing patterns on my arms and stomach. After a few minutes, I came out of the pleasure induced haze and bent to kiss her. She looked up at me, smiled and then went to the table to get our wine. When we had both finished she said, "I think after that, we should get to bed."

I chuckled and hoarsely said, "I thought you said I should take it easy."

She winked and then said, "I'll make an exception for this."

I transferred back into the wheelchair after she brought it over, retrieved my robe from the high-backed chair and patted my lap in invitation, since Sciezka still seemed a little woozy. Once she was on my lap I circled the dining room so we could snuff all the candles.

I pushed us into the bedroom, making a quick detour to the bathroom so we could get cleaned up. When I started getting frisky again Sciezka batted my hands away scolding, "That was an exception. Now it's bedtime. We'll be sleeping."

I slept like the dead. Sciezka had been right about needing to sleep; she usually was about things like that. What a way to get worn out. I had to hand it to her, I'd never thought about having sex in that position. Now we just had to break in the study, kitchen and back yard. I was not up for al fresco sex, but knowing Sciezka, we'd try it sooner rather than later. Maybe I should have had the boys transmute a privacy fence.

Sciezka and I woke up early, dressed quickly and took a cab to the train station to see Ed and Al off and to deliver some goodies for the trip to Ed. Gracia had the same idea and Jim had given her and Elysia a ride in his car. Knowing Ed's appetite, he'd eat it all and still have room to spare.

Roy stayed at the station until the train left to make sure Ed was still on it. From the open window, Ed and Al said their goodbyes and thanked us all for our hospitality. As the train pulled away Ed shouted as he saluted, "Don't bother with any more digs, Colonel Sarcasm. We'll be gone for a while, more than enough time for you to think up one or two good ones."

Roy was about to retort when Gracia scolded, "Roy, behave!"

We all waved until they were out of sight and Roy offered Sciezka a ride to work. I rode with Jim, Gracia and Elysia and after the ladies were dropped off, Jim and I hurried to the hospital.

Once at the hospital we went right to work. I'd gotten smart and worn my shorts under my jeans. Jim laughed at that as he was attaching the electrodes for a muscle stimulation treatment. Then we went right into an extended session of range of motion stretches. Once we were finished with that he had me work with an assistant on the ball and then they set me loose for push-ups and pull-ups. Jim called from across the room, "Jean, just do twenty reps each. That's an order."

When I'd finished, I got back in the chair and reported to Jim. He got me fastened into the braces and had an assistant come with us over to the bars. This time I managed five minutes before my balance started to go and they eased me back into my wheel chair.

They had me right back up again for another ten minutes on the tilt table. Ron rolled by and said, "I start swimming next week and a friend is coming to visit."
It was difficult to hold a decent conversation while I was working out, but I nodded and smiled. I was more than ready to stop when Jim came to get me down. He had me move to the raised mats so he could take off the braces before he did another range of motion session with me. He had me roll onto my stomach so he could check my back muscles and then ice me down to prevent spasms.

"When I have you work this hard we'll have to make sure to stretch you out and reduce any swelling as a preventative measure," he said.

I replied, "Thanks, I don't want a repeat of last session any time soon."

Sciezka and I met at the mess hall entrance and went through the chow line together. It didn't take long for us to find a place to eat and I ate quickly. Therapy had really taken it out of me, so I was surprised that I was so hungry. Sciezka commented, "Slow down, it looks like you haven't eaten in a week. That or you're becoming Ed, in appetite if not in stature."

I wiped my mouth with my napkin and apologized, then added, "Jim has me doing some new exercises in therapy. I didn't think I'd worked up this much of an appetite."

She leaned forward and quietly said, "Interesting... you didn't tell me about that on Tuesday. It must be something pretty neat if you're keeping it hush hush."

I winked and then said, "It's a secret alright. A surprise if you will. You'll never pry it out of me."

Sciezka looked cross for a moment and then replied smugly, "I'll just ask Winry or Jim."

"They're sworn to secrecy. I'm afraid you'll just have to wait patiently," I said as I put my tray on my lap and then took it to the conveyor belt to be washed.

Following closely behind me Sciezka whined, "That is so unfair! You are doing this on purpose."

Once we'd both taken care of our trays, we left the mess and she continued trying to wheedle the secret out of me. When we got to Sciezka's office, I gave her my most winning smile and said, "Trust me, it will be worth the wait. I want it to be perfect. Can I at least get a kiss before I go?"

"I suppose so," she said grudgingly before brightening with an idea. "I am in Investigations. We have ways of making people talk."

I pulled her down for a kiss and she dropped the offended act and I whispered in her ear, "Ok, I'll be at the pool, then the range and then we'll go home together. You start thinking up ways to torture it out of me."

She kissed me one more time and replied in an eerily devious voice, "You can count on it. Remember I'm an expert at the persuasive arts."

I was able to swim for about an hour and it felt great. When I was finished, I went back to the P.T. room and Jim was pleased with what he found after examining my back. Once he'd gotten me stretched out, he told me to keep the cold pack on for ten minutes and then I could leave. He was busy lately as there were more patients opting for rehabilitation than before. His staff was growing to accommodate the demand and he was really excited. Before Jim left he asked, "Guess who is going to try swimming today?"

After thinking for a moment, I replied, "Ron, right? He said he was considering it."
Jim came back into my line of sight, since it was hard to carry on a conversation while I was face down and said, "Thank you for bringing it up with him. I don't think he would have considered it without your input."

Pushing up on my elbows so I could make eye contact again, I said, "Jim, it's all you. I wouldn't be so gung-ho about rehab and swimming if it didn't work and get me somewhere."

He nodded, blushing slightly from the compliment and said, "You have a good day. I promise I won't let Hart drown."

I chuckled and then said, "Good, I wouldn't want my favorite person to get fired. See you around."

Riza was at the firing range when I got there and she smiled when she spotted me. I went to my locker, got my gear and then set up next to her on the rail. There was a massive amount of spent shells and a few empty clips at her feet. I cleared my throat and asked tentatively, "Is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

She sighed heavily and sat down on a nearby bench and I positioned my chair close to her so we could talk. "It's nothing I can't handle on my own but it's driving me nuts, waiting around really gets to me."

"I'm with you there. It's hard to feel not very useful... but every little bit helps, right?" I asked.

She smiled and nodded, then pulled two envelopes out of the top of her boot and gave them to me. She then replied, "You're proving to be incredibly useful. Keep at your studies. He may need your brains later."

I chuckled and then said, "I never thought I'd be needed for anything other than brawn and fire power."

"You underestimated yourself back then," she said. "He would have never let you do solo ops if he didn't think you were both smart and loyal. Give him some credit."

"Duly noted," I replied. "It's getting late. Can I escort you back to your office before I swing by Investigations?"

Riza looked concerned until I added, "I'll make sure to look really pathetic. Maybe it will throw them off. We can say you're my escort or something."

She smiled genuinely for the first time in a long while and teased, "But I know better. What's this secret that Sciezka is so worked up about?"

We left the range and I quietly said, "News spreads that fast? Can I trust you not to tell Sciezka?"

Nodding vigorously, she replied, "Of course I can keep a secret."

"Jim and Winry have me working on standing... don't look so surprised. It's aided by braces and my arms are doing most of the work, but I can do it for about five minutes already."

In an out of character gesture Riza threw her arms around my neck and then exclaimed, "Oh Jean, I'm so happy for you! That is going to blow Sciezka away!"

Grinning broadly, I replied, "I sure hope so."
I dropped Riza off at the Fuhrer's office and made a show of how difficult it was to push my chair over the plush carpet in the Executive Wing. Riza would probably scold me later for being such a ham, but I couldn't help myself. Let that bastard and his gang of monsters think they'd taken me out of the game. That would make it easier for me to strike when the time was right.

Once I was in Sciezka's office I waited patiently for her to finish for the day. I picked an out of the way spot and must have nodded off. Sciezka gently nudged my shoulder to wake me and I was startled when I realized I had fallen asleep. She smiled and said, "Let's stop by the cafe for some dinner on the way home. You look exhausted."

I stretched my arms over my head, then stifled a yawn and replied, "Me tired? Nonsense... but I do like the soup there."

She ruffled my hair and we left. Major Armstrong assured Sciezka that he'd lock up the office. I was relieved that he was too busy to fuss over me today.

After a light supper at the cafe we went home. I changed into some house pants and camped out on the couch with my books, taking notes. When I could barely keep my eyes open I put my supplies away, took care of the necessaries, and then took a long, hot shower. I hauled myself into bed, thinking I'd rest my eyes a bit before fighting with the covers. The duvet won, as I fell asleep before managing it.

Sciezka came in and whispered in my ear, "That must be some surprise you're working on if it has you this worn out."

I nodded groggily and reached out for her. She followed my cue and curled up in my arms.

Friday was a blur. My morning class was engaging so it passed quickly. On my lunch hour, I went to the library and checked out some history and military strategy books that General Lockheed had suggested when I delivered the message I'd gotten from Riza. I wrote down some articles on developmental psychology to look at some time over the weekend. Maybe Sciezka and I could have a picnic and explore the library together. It almost felt like cheating having her help me with my class work... almost because usually she just checked my assignments when I was finished.

Psychology passed quickly as well. Doctor Kohut used our time for the promised review session to make sure we all had a good grasp of the material. The session boosted my confidence because I had understood everything. I not only understood it, I could explain it and not sound like an army grunt.

When class let out, I delivered Doctor Kohut's message. I considered going to the library for more research materials but dismissed that idea. I had plenty to read already. Instead, on the way home I picked up provisions for a light supper. Breda would have teased me as fruit, cheese and wine were all "chick foods" in the context of a meal. Mostly I was pretty sure neither of us would feel like cooking and a quiet night in with Sciezka was in order.

I checked the mail when I got home and I was happy to see that I had two letters, one from Breda
and another one from my Ma. Once inside I called Scieszka's office to see when she'd be home, put away the groceries, got some iced tea from the kitchen and commandeered the couch to get started on my research for Lockheed's paper.

Once my head started swimming with information overload, I put away my books and took a shower. I got dressed in a standard issue t-shirt and jeans since I knew Scieszka really liked that on me. After splashing on some aftershave, I went out back to pick some flowers. Fletcher and Russel had done an amazing job and I ended up choosing some roses after I watered everything.

Back in the house, I put the roses in a vase and set them on the coffee table for decoration. So Scieszka would have no questions about my amorous intentions, I placed candles around the living room and lit the candles in the fireplace. When it was closer to the time that she would get home, I ran a bath for her and lit the rest of the candles.

When Scieszka got home, I was on the porch waiting for her, smoking a cigarette. She smiled when she saw me and ran up the front walk to greet me. After a lingering kiss hello I said, "There is a bubble bath with your name on it and then dinner. Does that sound like a plan?"

She grinned, threw her arms around my neck and then said, "You are good. That sounds perfect."

While she was in the bath I set out dinner. I'd gotten grapes and strawberries, two kinds of cheese and a crisp white wine. I congratulated myself on my developing courtship skills. I settled down on the couch to wait for Scieszka and read Breda's letter.

"Havo,

It was great seeing you, though I think your ideas on how to find women out West are a little nutty. Are you sure you didn't sustain a head injury too? I'm kidding. Seeing you with that great catch was enough to convince me that I should spend more time in the library and I looked into one of those yogi classes. It could work, you've had worse ideas. Don't turn into a blowhard bore with all those snooty university eggheads. I'll call sometime soon to see for myself if they've succeeded in thoroughly whipping you.

Tell the Colonel and Hawkeye hello for me,

Breda"

I chuckled at the thought of Breda in a yoga class, though maybe enough Down Dog would knock some sense into him about the fairer sex. I had enough time to read Ma's letter as well.

"My dear boy Jean,

Your father and I had such a lovely time visiting with you and your friends for your birthday. I hope this letter finds you and Scieszka well. I enjoyed meeting her and she seems to keep you in line. Do you have any news from Edward? Is he keeping out of trouble? I hope so. Your Pa says you're lucky I didn't scare your friends off, though he's talking nonsense. Heymans was very interested in your baby pictures. He's such a dear boy.

I'll stop here as business is picking up.

Love,
When Sciezka emerged from the bedroom, she was dressed in jeans and a tank top. I loved how she looked amazing in just about anything. She wore what suited her, whether it was traditional or not. She dressed for comfort and utility and was still gorgeous.

We ate dinner on the couch, well fed each other and goofed off and enjoyed our quiet night in thoroughly.

Saturday morning was lazy. Sciezka and I had our coffee in bed, and then played possum for a while, putting off the inevitable... we did have somewhere to be in the afternoon; otherwise I think we would have stayed in bed all day. When we finally got up, we showered together and I put up a fuss about what I was going to wear. Sciezka contended that even though it was a casual outdoor affair, it was at a General's house. We compromised and I wore khakis and a t-shirt as it was warm out and we'd eventually be swimming. I picked a black shirt as with my luck I'd spill something on myself. Sciezka wore a sundress I hadn't seen before with the pearls I'd given her and her ballet slippers. As she dabbed perfume on her wrists I teased, "Nervous about today? You got something new for the occasion."

She stuck her tongue out at me and retorted, "One of us has to have some sense of protocol. Besides, I don't want to make you look bad."

I approached her from behind, pulled her down onto my lap and kissed the nape of her neck. As I inhaled the delicate perfume I asked, "Are you sure we have to go?"

Leaning back to rest against my chest she answered, "Yes, we do. General Grumman expects you to be there. If you really hate it, we can duck out early."

After standing up and straightening her dress, she went to the mirror and smoothed her hair. She packed a bag with our suits and towels and stowed it under my chair. I smirked as I said, "I see how it is. You keep me around to be your personal pack mule."

She giggled and then replied, "More or less. You're eye candy as well. Oh, and you're good at opening jars."

We could both be so goofy at times. Pa was right, it was a match. As I pulled the door closed and locked it behind us I said, "Thanks for coming to this thing with me. I'd hate to go alone."

She took my hand, squeezed it and smiled. This could either be a great time or an absolute disaster.
All in Motion

Chapter Summary

"Old info being reposted... this story is over a decade old.

Editing Team: anat-astarte and sevensuitnes at LJ
Beta Team: azysaphy the Sooper Sekrit filter on the journal. (I LOVE FEEDBACK AS I DRAFT! Thank you!)
Rating: M, sorry folks the naughty is only implied in this chapter.
Dedication: Cheesy, but my sister who has never seen this gave me a HUGE S'buck's card, because she knows that I do a lot of writing there and would live there if I could.
Disclaimer: I don't own it... I wish I did. I could BUY my own coffee house, and then my lattes would be free.
Warnings: Spoilers for current situation with Xing characters, current to most recent Japanese releases.

Sciezka and I were greeted at the door by General Lockheed and his wife Marjorie. She was a handsome older woman, pleasingly plump, beautifully dressed and best of all, incredibly friendly. The General apologized profusely for her effusive fawning the minute we arrived. Apparently, he'd told her about me. I laughed it off and she ushered us first into the kitchen for some of the "special" baked goods she'd made and then to the backyard with the other guests.

The kitchen had been abuzz with activity as the wait staff went in and out with food that smelled and looked delicious. When I saw the back yard, I gave a low whistle and thought to myself, "This looks more like a public park than a private residence. It's huge!" There were several large tents set up and a buffet like I'd never seen before. Mrs. Lockheed directed us to a small clearing near the pool where we had a good vantage point, but were still out of the fray. I began to object to her kid glove treatment when she silenced me by winking and then saying loudly, "You brave, dear boy! Let me know if you get too hot or need anything."

I noticed that the Fuhrer himself was standing nearby talking to Brigadier General Hakuro and some other high ranking officers. When he glanced in our direction I replied, "A glass of water please, if it isn't too much trouble."

Sciezka jabbed me hard with her elbow and I winced, since it hurt and then whispered, "Play along, I'm pitiful, be nice to me."

She leaned over, pretending to smooth out my shirt and hissed back, "You are horrible and she's just as bad! But I'll play along since it does help the cause and because it's the most fun we're all going to have tonight around these big wigs."

Mrs. Lockheed led Sciezka to the buffet to get us both a plate and made a point of going on about making sure I was comfortable in "my condition". It could have been a disaster maneuvering through the crowd, coupled with the line at the buffet. The food looked good, but wouldn't look as good on me. It was all I could do to not laugh out loud and I'd have to thank the General later for his quick thinking and overall thoughtfulness. He had been the one who arranged for makeshift ramps so I could get in and out of the house easily, though the staff found them to be convenient as well for the service carts.
Lieutenant General Grumman came over to talk to me after he'd finished talking with the brass. "They've left you all alone to fend for yourself," he teased, "That won't do."

I smiled and replied, "At least I've been graced with the kindness of Mrs. Lockheed and Sciezka, who are off procuring food for the charity case."

He winked and quietly said, "Though I know better."

Sciezka and Mrs. Lockheed returned with plates piled high and glasses of lemonade. They made a point of fussing over me, but my tolerance of it had reached the breaking point when Sciezka attempted to tuck a napkin into the front of my shirt.

I snatched it from her, draped it across my lap and snapped, "Sweetheart, even I have limits."

Grumman chuckled and then remarked, "I see you're in good hands Lieutenant. Wave the white flag if you need me to save you from them."

I saluted before he left to go talk with the brass again. Sciezka and I began eating and Jim, Gracia, and Elysia joined us. When I glanced over at the cluster of highly decorated officers I noticed that Hawkeye was standing a few paces behind the Fuhrer looking stoic and Mustang was next to Grumman, his expression mirroring Hawkeye's. To anyone who knew Mustang, he was seething underneath his collected appearance. I couldn't tell if Hawkeye's expression was hiding despair or rage, if not a combination of the two.

When we finished eating Jim made a production of pushing me past the huddle of big wigs, who were each trying to throw their weight in accomplishments around trying to outshine the others in their group, so I could get out of the sun. Ordinarily I'd be furious and he knew it, since as soon as we were out of earshot he said, "Just helping out with the ruse, Jean. Should I take you all the way inside to further the illusion? Is there a particular place I should escort you to?"

It was hard to keep a straight face when he put it that way and I replied, "Could you please take me to the little boys' room? You might have to help me hold it too."

Once we were in the house Jim cracked up, punched me in the arm and exclaimed, "I know you enjoy messing with them, but my friend I have my limits too!"

I smirked and replied, "Well, maybe just a little bit. But don't you worry, once we're out of their line of sight we can both breathe a little easier for a while."

Once Jim and I felt we'd spent a sufficient amount of time inside to make our trip convincing, we went back outside, making sure to make a similar production out of negotiating the ramp. Jim had me push myself and normally it would have been no problem since the yard was level and the grass immaculately kept. I feigned getting stuck a few times and lurched forward in my chair like a rag doll. I overheard someone in the group of higher-ups mutter, "What a sorry mess."

It took a lot of self-control not to chuckle and I had to admit it was jaded to find that funny.
We got back to the group and Seth had joined it. Mrs. Lockheed came over with a cool towel for me and to suggest I hold court from one of the chaise lounges where I'd be "more comfortable." This was rich and I'd have to congratulate my co-conspirators later, both for their convincing performances and for giving me one of the best seats in the house.

Jim helped me transfer, which made for a good show since he grasped me firmly under the arms and picked me up bodily for the first time since I'd started rehab. I reclined in the chaise and allowed Mrs. Lockheed to adjust the back so I "could" sit up. Sciezka held my hand and played the sympathetic martyr companion and when the Fuhrer approached I attempted to straighten up to salute and feigned needing Jim's assistance by nearly toppling over in the process.

"At ease Second Lieutenant, I just wanted to tell you that Amestris appreciates your sacrifice," Bradley said.

I smiled wanly and replied in a small voice, "Thank you Fuhrer Bradley sir, that means a lot coming from you."

Sciezka dabbed at my forehead with the damp towel Mrs. Lockheed had brought out and asked, "Are you sure you aren't tired dear?"

I shook my head no, appearing truly pitiful and replied, "No, it's ok. I want you to have good time, you deserve it for putting up..."

The general's wife ushered the Fuhrer away saying, "If it's not too presumptuous for me to suggest, you should let the poor boy rest, spare him some of his dignity."

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I was truly grateful when the Fuhrer and Hakuro left and the mood of the party changed dramatically with their departure. I noticed Roy and Grumman talking to a group of heavily made up young women, with a large similarly made up older woman seemingly heading up the group. Riza finally had a free moment and came over. She sat down next to me and after teasing me about being such a spectacle, her eyes drifting occasionally to her grandfather and Roy. I nudged her, gestured discreetly over to them and asked, "So that doesn't bother you at all Riza?"

She chuckled, shook her head no and replied, "It's just Madame Christmas and her girls. It's mostly business."

I did a double take and sputtered, "So those girls are working, paid to be here... that kind of work?"

Sciezka sidled up beside us, giggled and then said sagely, "It is the world's oldest profession."

Jim and Gracia came over to us and Elysia clambered into my lap and then asked, "Will you take me swimming Jean?"

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Since the Fuhrer had left I didn't see any harm in it, so Jim and I went inside to change, though this time I pushed myself. When Jim tried to help me up the ramp I teased him, "That last time was just for show. The audience has left, so you can cut it out now."

Jim put his hands up in surrender and protested, "You are stubborn as a mule. That ramp is steep, but you'll see when you dump your chair."
"You know I'd rather make an ass of myself, by myself. Now c'mon, let's get changed and get in the water."

I got back outside without incident and got into the pool easily enough. Sciezka moved my chair off to where we'd been before, so it wouldn't be in the way and then joined Elysia and me in our play. Elysia eventually got tired and Gracia and Jim decided to call it a night. Sciezka and I moved toward the side so we could talk with the other party goers. Seth came over to talk to us, taking off his shoes and rolling up his pants so he could put his feet in the water while we all surveyed the rest of the party from a distance.

Between the dusk, the lanterns that had been lit and the chest high water you could hardly tell anything was wrong with me. It was kind of nice to be able to blend in with the crowd again, and not being the center of attention. Doctor Parker approached us, greeting Seth by name and was surprised to see me apologizing, "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you sooner Lieutenant Havoc."

Seth laughed loudly when I replied, "I know, I'm taller than you're used to seeing."

Parker appeared embarrassed and I added, "It's ok, that was supposed to be funny."

Sciezka excused herself since she was getting chilly. As I watched her go into the house to change I couldn't help myself and gave a low whistle. I blushed when Seth grinned at me and quipped, "You have excellent taste in women, looks and brains. Congratulations. By the way, I loved the show you put on for the distinguished guests earlier."

I chuckled and then replied, "Mrs. Lockheed and Sciezka helped. I think Jim was worse than the three of us together. Oh, and you're right... she can do this backbend thing... " I said enthusiastically as I moved my hand over my head and looked skyward. "Shit, did I say that out loud?" I blurted out, sure I had colored a few shades and Seth nodded that yes, I had indeed been thinking aloud.

Roy came over with Doctor Knox, General Grumman and a few of Madame Christmas' girls in tow. A loudly dressed redhead attracted Parker's attention and he suggested they go get some refreshments. Seth shook his head and asked rhetorically, "Do you fellows think he has any idea?"

That earned a smile from the normally stern Doctor Knox and I asked, "How is your charge?"

He furrowed his brow and then replied, "She's in the wind. Her father came to get her yesterday, some nonsense about not wanting to impose or incur a debt. Foolish girl."

Seth and Knox went off to talk shop when a leggy and busty brunette started getting too close for their comfort. Every time Roy or Grumman would say anything remotely witty she'd begin to laugh like it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. Her laugh, no cackle, grated on my nerves and it got worse when she tried flirting with me. She sat down on the edge of the pool, between Roy and Grumman. She'd placed a hand on Roy's thigh in an altogether too provocative gesture. Then she asked Roy, "Is this dream boat one of yours, Colonel?"

Roy smirked as he answered, "He sure is. Kiki, meet Second Lieutenant Jean Havoc. He's one hell of a sharpshooter."

He winked at Grumman and they excused themselves. Roy must have something up his sleeve, and I was pretty sure this was pay back for some of my lip. He called over his shoulder as he left, "Havoc, please entertain Miss Kiki by telling her all about your exciting adventures. She always wanted to meet a real soldier, and I keep telling her I'm basically a desk jockey battling against
paperwork. I'm sure your tales would be much more arousing for her."

This Kiki woman eyed me up and down, looked at me like a vulture looks at carrion. Inwardly I cringed at the idea of being trapped here with her, but instead I put on a brave face and sighed. I could hear the amusement in Roy's voice as he added, "Lieutenant, that's an order."

I did as requested, bored the whole time as she oohed and ahhed over my physique, asking me to flex as she ran her fingers along my upper arm. She was attempting to do the same with my chest just as I noticed that Sciezka was outside again with Marjorie. I pulled away and said, "Kiki, if you'll excuse me, my girlfriend is coming over here." It didn't faze Kiki in the slightest!

Expecting Sciezka to be irritated I smiled at her and waved, she made no effort to come any closer and stood back instead, watching, apparently having a hilarious conversation with Marjorie. At least they were having fun. Kiki kept ogling me and touching me. She dipped her feet in the water, sliding a foot down my side and then lower and lower until -holy crap, did she just do what I think she just did? I looked down and discovered she'd slipped a foot down the front of my swim trunks. I was actually glad I couldn't feel that. Then I'd really have some explaining to do. I grabbed her ankle as tactfully as I could and removed her foot from Master Havoc's vicinity. Thankfully I was already in the water or I'd need a shower to wash her off of me. Grumman eventually rescued me, calling Kiki over to introduce her to Brigadier General Hakuro's nephew, who was clearly fresh out of the sticks and grinning like an idiot.

She stood up, pulled her very short skirt lower in a mock attempt at modesty, slipped back into her impossibly high heels and then teetered over to Grumman. She blew a kiss over her shoulder at me and I was horrified. Sciezka was going to kill me! I was sure of it! I remember back when I was waiting for things like this to happen, and now that it did I felt somewhat violated and dirty. Sure, it was nice being admired, but I wasn't sure if Sciezka was the jealous sort, or if she even knew that this was all Roy's fault!

I put both hands on the side, pulled myself out of the water and sat on the edge. I would be stranded until some kind soul rescued me and brought my chair over. I was surprised that Sciezka took some pity on me, and came over with my chair and a towel. She winked and then asked, "So who's your new girlfriend?"

I groaned and replied, "That was Kiki... how much did you see?"

"Marjorie and I saw enough," she coolly replied. Upon seeing me cringe she smirked in a superior manner for a moment and added, "To see that you were practically crawling out of your skin."

I dried off with the towel Sciezka had tossed at me and then got into my chair. Sciezka headed inside with me since Marjorie wanted to show her the house. As we passed Roy, Grumman and Madame Christmas' group Kiki's jaw dropped. Apparently, she didn't notice in her prodding of me that I wasn't working so hot from the waist down. Sciezka leaned over and whispered in my ear, "She may not have had a clue, but I bet she still wishes she could sit on your lap. Lucky for me that seat is already reserved."

"I'm so glad that my misfortune amuses you, though it was kind of neat that she didn't catch on about the whole injury thing. Not too surprising since she's not the sharpest tool in the shed."

She giggled quietly, "I don't think she's on the payroll for her brains."
I pulled Sciezka down on my lap and she protested loudly that I was getting her all wet. I whispered suggestively in her ear, "No, that's later."

She kissed me quickly, got up and scolded, "You are hopeless."

I waggled my eyebrows as I said, "I know, and you're a saint to put up with me. But I know you'll be merciful, though maybe if I'm lucky you'll punish me a little bit."

As the party wound down and the other guests filtered out in small groups, we decided it was time for us to leave as well. The General and Mrs. Lockheed thanked us for coming and the Missus sent us home with her homemade lemon bars. She was even thoughtful enough to call a cab for us.

When we got back to the house, Sciezka put the lemon bars in the kitchen and I took our swim suits and towels to the bathroom to hang them to dry. Sciezka joined me in the bathroom, and all but ordered me to take a bath. This boded well for me; perhaps I'd have to be naughty more often. Maybe she'd do that backbend thing again. Hey, a guy could only hope!

I got up before Sciezka to have a smoke and make the coffee. I was licking lemon bar crumbs off my fingers and she caught me in the act. She smirked, rolled her eyes and I justified it by saying, "What? It's breakfast dessert!"

Sciezka grinned and replied, "It's a good thing I caught you red handed. I don't think you intended on saving any for me."

"It was a tempting idea. These are really good. I admit, I am powerless when it comes to sweets," I said as she picked up the last lemon bar and began eating it slowly, taunting me.

She fed me the last bite, then curled her finger in a come-hither gesture and sauntered back into the bedroom.

After a long shower, we got dressed, packed a lunch and headed over to Sciezka's apartment to start packing her books. She was pretty sure she had some titles that would help with my studies. I figured once we had it all boxed up I would hire movers to get it all at once.

When we got to her place there were more stairs than I'd remembered and I hesitated just a bit before getting out of my chair and sitting on the bottom step. Sciezka grabbed our things from under my chair, took them to the top of the landing and came back down. She frowned and then asked, "Are you sure you want to do this? You could wait at the coffee shop across the street, or we could do this another time."

I smiled and then replied, "No it's ok. I want to see your old place, piles of books and all. Ed told me about the first time he met you. I just have to figure out how to get up there. Either on my butt like a toddler learning how to climb stairs or, if you feel you're strong enough, we could try that wheelbarrow race thing that kids do at picnics."

She giggled at the mental image and I asked, "So it's option one then?"

Sciezka sat down on the step next to me, took my hand and squeezed it. After a soft, lingering kiss she said, "I love you." Then stood up, grabbed my chair and took it up the stairs, apparently not
having to strain too much. I didn't want her to get hurt or feel like I was a burden. Logically I knew she didn't, but there was always a lingering doubt at the back of my mind.

When she got to the top she called down and asked, "So are you coming?"

Deciding that I couldn't put it off any longer, I placed my hands on the step behind me, transferred my weight to them and pushed up. When my rear was on the next step I picked up my legs, making sure I had a stable footing and repeated the process. Eventually I was sitting on the landing, slightly winded and glad that I'd worn jeans as my butt was dirty and less durable fabric would have ripped. Sciezka pushed my chair toward me and, after she had it positioned parallel to the staircase, set the brakes. I smiled and said, "Thanks. That was quick thinking, can't have me get up here just to roll back down."

She smiled, leaned over to tousle my hair and said, "Want me to hold your chair steady just in case?"

"I think you'd better," I said and smiled.

The hassle of getting up there was worth it, though there was barely a navigable path around the tiny apartment. Every shelf was full, every flat surface covered and waist high stacks sat on the floor in every available spot. After going into the kitchen to wash my hands I thought aloud, "I'll have to see about having shelves installed in every room in the house."

Sciezka wrapped her arms around me from behind and suggested, "Let's eat lunch, pack up the books that are on the bed and then I'll reward you for helping with this mess."

"I like that plan... though you won't offer to pay the movers that way, right?" I joked.

She sat down on my lap and teased, "Maybe, though you keep me busy enough. C'mon, I bet you're hungry."

I couldn't argue with her there and I really hoped that she still felt as amorous after packing as many boxes as it was going to take just to clear a path to the bed.

We were sweaty and dusty after packing over twenty boxes of books and trying out Sciezka's mattress. It was always special with her, no matter how many times we'd made love, but it was different today. Maybe it was finally seeing what Sciezka's life had been like before we met or being in a place that was solely hers. My place, our place, was an amalgamation of the two of us. I was somewhat relieved that she'd never see the disaster area that was my bachelor pad. Granted, I'd barely moved in and it was rented on short notice, but it lacked a woman's touch, other than my Ma's. I had used the crocheted doilies she sent as coasters and my cabinets were filled with some of her old dishtowels and pots and pans. Back when the guys used to visit for card night they didn't know if it was my place or my Ma's. Now I had a place all my own and I remembered the first thing I had wanted do to was build a library for Sciezka.

Even with the boxes stacked neatly there were still so many books left to pack, but we did make a dent. She boxed up some of her smaller personal effects, like pictures and trinkets, and we'd take those back home with us when we left for the day. We lay together resting until we felt we had enough energy to get home. It wasn't much of an issue for Sciezka, but when she teased me for being reluctant to leave, she quickly remembered about the stairs. I reassured her that nothing was hurt, not even my pride. I did tease her that I would be hiring professionals to move the boxes to the
house and maybe if I offered to baby-sit at our place, Gracia would help Sciezka with packing as well.

Going down the stairs was accomplished by the same awkward process as going up had been, but in reverse. After Sciezka got my chair and what she'd packed downstairs she looked up at me and said softly, "Thank you for doing this with me and for me."

I stopped for a bit midway down to catch my breath and Sciezka came to sit next to me. She rubbed my shoulders which had begun to ache from overuse and said, "I'm sorry this is hard for you."

I wrapped an arm around her narrow shoulders and replied, "I'm not and usually the hardest things to do are the things that are most rewarding. Besides, gravity is the real enemy here, so you shouldn't be apologizing."

That earned a smile from her and she kissed me deeply, lingering to nibble on my lower lip, and then pressing her forehead against mine. It was times like this that made everything worth it.

When we got home I attempted to help Sciezka unpack her small box of belongings and she shooed me away. When I suggested that I start dinner while she unpacked she wouldn't hear of it. Yet again I was ordered into the bath and then bed "to rest" as she put it. As much as I felt the urge to pout and protest like a toddler being put down for a nap, the idea of resting was appealing and I knew Sciezka would never patronize or coddle me and she generally knew best.

Once I was out of the bath and in loose, comfortable pants, I stretched out on the bed. Sciezka brought in some books she'd picked out to help with my research and my notebooks. She left briefly and came back with a tall glass of iced tea and the Xingian take-out menu. She said dinner was "on her" as that's what friends do when they help you move.

Her ideas on feminism generally ran contrary to my thoughts on being a gentleman, but we usually reached a compromise quite easily. Well, usually I let her win. A key point of the code of chivalry that is often forgotten is doing as a lady wishes and giving her sovereignty. At least that was how Ma had explained it, Pa agreed, or he seemed to. Ma had always been a force to be reckoned with.

When the take-out arrived Sciezka called me out to the living room to eat. She'd poured us each a glass of wine and set the various cartons on the coffee table so we could fix ourselves a plate. As much as I liked the dining room, it was a bit formal for just the two of us. We ate dinner sitting together on the couch and when we were finished I helped her put away the left-overs and then Sciezka suggested I continue working in bed. She brought in the rest of the bottle of wine and divvied up the pile of books she'd selected for my research. She'd read them before, but went above and beyond by writing down page numbers that I should concentrate on in my paper.

We turned in early since we were both worn out. It had been a busy weekend. Curling up next to each other at the end of the day was quite possibly my favorite thing. Don't get me wrong, the sex was great, but I always appreciate the cozy feeling I get when I'm around her. Roy would probably tease me if I ever told him that but seeing how happy he is with Riza makes me think that he would completely understand.
Monday was routine for both of us. I had class and then went swimming at the hospital. Sciezka took a cab home and I had dinner on the table when she hit the door. She sat down and I poured her a glass of wine. She looked so tired and wasn't very talkative at dinner. Once we'd finished eating I moved closer to her, felt her forehead and then said, "Well, no fever, yet. Why don't you take a bath and put on your pajamas while I take care of the dishes?"

She smiled and said, "You are as bad as a mother hen sometimes. But a bath and then bed sounds so good right now."

I cleared the table, washed the dishes and made us each some tea. Sciezka was in bed when I came in and she took the two steaming mugs off of the tray. I showered, took care of my hygiene routine and then changed into clean boxers. Once I was in bed Sciezka handed me my tea. When I saw her nightgown, I had to try hard not to laugh at it. It was so different from what I was used to seeing her in. White cotton, floor length with ruffles down the front and at the cuffs. I smiled as I looked at her. It was large enough that it slid off her shoulders just so, showing off her collarbones.

She looked drowsy, so I reached over, took her mug from her and set it on the bedside table. It was very early to be going to bed, but I didn't want her to get run down and get sick.

"Have you thought about taking a day off Sciezka? You're working too hard," I said. She replied, "There is no way I can take time off. There are two case files that need to be ready for trial by Wednesday and then there is still a backlog from the fire."

"Are you eating enough? What did you have for lunch today?" I asked, growing even more concerned.

She rolled her eyes at my question and replied, "I worked through lunch today. I get that way when I'm on a tight deadline."

After heaving an exasperated sigh, I said, "So I'm just going to have to meet you for lunch more often, or pack you a lunch and have a talk with Major Armstrong about letting you work without a break."

"I am a big girl; I think I know what's best for me. I do not need Major Armstrong to baby sit me," she replied, sounding slightly irritated with me.

I turned out the light on my side of the bed and said, "Ok, but please take better care of yourself. It's just a job. Besides, if you get sick you'll miss more time than if you stopped to rest and eat."

She turned off the lamp on her night stand and conceded, "I suppose you are right. So, if you pack me a lunch it won't be peanut butter and jelly, right?"

I chuckled and then replied, "It won't be gourmet, but it won't be the 'Elysia Special' either."

After sleeping for ten hours Sciezka still looked run down. While she was in the shower, I brewed coffee, went outside for a cigarette and then brought her coffee into the bedroom fixed just how she liked it. I placed it on the bureau so she would see it as soon as she finished in the bathroom. I got showered and shaved while she dressed. By the time I was out of the shower, she was on the way out the door. She popped in quickly, kissed me good bye and hurried to work.

Therapy with Jim was great. I was sore afterwards, but I'd been able to stand with the braces for
seven minutes before I got tired. After therapy, I had lunch with Roy in the Mess. I was relieved to see Sciezka there. She had picked up something to go so she could eat in her office. She stopped by our table, kissed me on the cheek and said, "See Jean, I'm taking care of myself so you don't need to get the Major after me."

Roy laughed and teased, "Jean, you're as bad as your mother."

"Take that back Mustang, or I'll tell her to stop sending you cookies," I replied indignantly.

"Colonel Mustang, that sounds serious. I'd cut it out if I were you," Sciezka joked. "You two play nice. I have to get back to the office, so I can't referee."

I watched her walk away and so did Roy. I quipped, "Roy, don't get any ideas. I'll beat you up."

Roy snickered and replied, "I think I could try wooing her away daily for a year and it would have no effect. She only has eyes for you. No accounting for her taste, but she's a good catch and pretty cute. She should probably get her head examined."

He reached under the table and when I looked down at my lap there was a file in it. I put it in the small compartment under my chair. Roy cleared his throat and said, "I gave you instructions on where to find the best flowers for your girl, and since time is of the essence with these seasonal blooms you'd better get moving. If you doubt my advice, you should talk it over with your shrink."

That meant this was a file that needed to be copied and the original would go to the university with Seth for safe keeping.

I nodded and said, "Thanks for the tip. I hear that Jacqueline and Elizabeth are getting together for tea tomorrow. Does that concern you at all, having two of your women in the same place at the same time? You never know what secrets those chatterboxes will spill about you."

Roy smiled and replied, "I'm sure they'll have a wonderful time, and besides, they do play well together and know the value of discretion. Besides, tea for two is always nice, though three is equally fine."

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So, three p.m. at the range tomorrow it was. I'd have just enough time to get there to meet Riza if I went straight from Kohut's class to the range. I'd have to reschedule my study group meeting, but I was sure they'd understand. I could always use the excuse of an extra P.T. session.

I left the mess and headed straight home with the file to minimize the chances of being intercepted with it. The game was afoot and I could hear my heart beat in my ears as I passed Brigadier General Hakuro and the Fuhrer in the lobby on the way out.

Hakuro stopped me and said, "It's nice to see you're out and about Lieutenant Havoc."

I appeared to struggle, sat up straighter in my chair and saluted them both.

The Fuhrer smiled as he said, "At ease soldier."

"Thank you, sir," I replied. "If you don't mind, I need to get home. Therapy today really wore me out."

General Hakuro nodded and said, "You must be working very hard. It's admirable."
"Thank you General. I'm doing all I can to live with this, though it can be frustrating. I'm so grateful for the use of the military hospital's facilities and resources."

The Fuhrer commented, "Keep up the good work soldier. You're an excellent example to others."

That rang hollow in my ears. He seemed to have two meanings. Yes, I was working hard, but I was also a living example of what happened to people who were in the way. I saluted once more as they turned to leave and hurried home. The sooner I got there, the sooner I'd be able to breathe easy.

When I got home, I went straight to the bedroom to secure the file until Sciezka got home. It was thick, but typewritten so it wouldn't be too difficult for her. Mustang had even included the appropriate blank forms and official letterhead necessary to pull it off. I didn't want her wrapped up in this, but she was right, we wouldn't be safe until the government was securely under Roy's control. We'd be in a holding pattern of doubt and suspicion, and that was no way to live. I wanted Roy to be Fuhrer before I officially proposed and Sciezka and I married.

I got cleaned up and changed since I was always grubby after therapy, took care of the necessaries, and got together a light supper. I was out on the porch smoking when Sciezka got home. The Major had dismissed her on time tonight. Was he in on it? She looked tired as she slowly climbed the steps but smiled when she saw me. After stealing a drag from my cigarette, she went inside. I quickly put it out in the ash tray and followed her.

She was in the kitchen surveying dinner when I snuck up behind her and pulled her onto my lap. She laughed when I tickled her and then said, "Either you are getting really good at sneaking up on people, or I am more out of it than I thought."

I kissed the back of her neck and quipped, "I think it's a little bit of both. But you need to wake up. I'll brew coffee. Roy has something for you to copy tonight."

She groaned and then asked, "Where is it and how much?"

"It's in the bedroom, top drawer of the bureau, under your panties. It's about ten pages," I replied.

"Ugh and it's due tomorrow I suppose," she complained, her expression glum.

"Of course," I answered. "It gets better. The original is going to Seth for safekeeping and evidence. The copy you make is going with Hawkeye."

She sharply sucked in a breath in understanding, got off my lap and said, "Ok, put on the coffee. I'm going to change, eat and then get right to work."

After a quick supper, Sciezka set up her typewriter in the dining room. I closed the curtains in case the house was under surveillance. I brought my books in and worked at the opposite end of the table so I would be nearby if she needed anything. Around 2200 she started asking for her coffee black. This was serious. Around midnight she told me to go to bed, that it wouldn't do for both of us to be exhausted.

I grudgingly did as she asked and sometime shortly before dawn she crawled into bed next to me. I hoped that Mustang wouldn't have too many assignments for her. Her work was amazing, but I could tell she found it nerve wracking.
I got up first, showered and dressed quickly and then brewed a pot of coffee. She gulped it down when I brought it and hurried into the bathroom to shower and dress. She'd put both the original and the copy back in the bureau and with a cursory glance you couldn't tell which was which. Even under scrutiny the copy would be deemed the "real thing". I put both of them into my school bag and then sat back in my chair to wait for her to come out of the bathroom.

When she opened the door, she looked exhausted and I said, "You should really consider staying home today, you have sick days."

She shook her head no and said emphatically, "It would look suspicious if the file is ever called into question."

I nodded, took her hand and replied, "You have a point, though the copy is amazing. Promise me you'll eat lunch today and take it easy."

"I'll relax when I know you have the files out of your possession and are home safe," she said quietly, then bit her lip in a nervous gesture I'd come to know and dread.

We locked up the house, left and I hoped she would be all right. Even in my current condition I could take care of myself better than most and I was pretty sure I was the last person the bad guys would expect to be working against them.

Seth was in the lobby of the Humanities Building at the coffee cart and he followed me to the elevator as I went upstairs for General Lockheed's class. On the ride up I handed him the original and he nodded and shuffled it in with his other papers. When the elevator door opened, he said, "So Jim is working you pretty hard, extra P.T. sessions and all. I'll let your group know you'll be absent today and I'll get you a copy of the class notes."

I was relieved to hear that as I didn't like lying. I would now have enough time to get to the range before Riza and actually take target practice, then head to the hospital for a quick session on my own.

General Lockheed's class went smoothly and I left immediately afterwards. I went to H.Q. under my own power due to the fact that taking a cab might arouse suspicion and the file would be out of my custody if I had to put the chair in the trunk. That was a risk I was unwilling to take. Besides, I was full of nervous energy and the trip over might help calm me down.

My first stop at H.Q. was the Canteen to get Sciezka a sandwich and some coffee. I was too nervous to eat even though I knew this was routine and the exchange would go smoothly. Hawkeye was a pro, with impeccable intelligence skills. I had nothing to worry about, though I still had an unlit cigarette clenched between my lips and I was gnawing on the filter like back in the old days.

I stopped in the Investigations Department only briefly to deliver Sciezka's lunch and sit with her to make sure she ate it. Even though she looked pale and had the beginnings of dark circles forming under her eyes she looked gorgeous. She thanked me for bringing her lunch but scolded me for skipping class. I shrugged my shoulders and said, "I have an extra P.T. session, doctor's orders."
She stood up, stretched, then kissed me on the cheek and said, "Shoo! I'll see you tonight."

I chuckled and replied, "I'm leaving, after you eat your lunch. Then I have to hit the range before I go to the hospital."

Once at the range I looked around cautiously before opening my locker and putting the file in it, then retrieving my gear. I went to the line and fired off several clips. Hawkeye joined me shortly afterward and as we shook hands I palmed my locker key to her.

She went back to get her gear and pick up the file and when she returned she said, "Lieutenant, thanks for the loan of the mineral oil. I can't believe I was careless enough to run out."

I smiled and said, "It's not a problem. I'm just glad I could help you stay prepared."

She patted my shoulder and discreetly dropped my locker key onto my lap. I went back to clean my piece, then left. My hands were shaking as I lit up a cigarette and made my way over to the hospital.

Jim wasn't surprised to see me; in fact, he appeared to have cleared his schedule as it was just me and Hart working with him. Hart's new, lighter chair had arrived in the morning and he was trying it out when I came in. Jim called him over to the mats to start working on transfers and I remembered, not too fondly, how difficult it had been at first. While Jim spotted Hart, I went through my strength training routine. It was getting easier and I wondered what Jim would add next to make it more challenging.

Once I was finished Jim came over and helped me get on the exercise ball to work on my core muscles. He noted that the areas where I'd regained some feeling and motion were finally toning up. I smirked and said, "They're not just functional, Sciezka really likes them."

Jim laughed loudly at that and asked, "Do I have permission to use that as P.T. motivation for non-compliant patients?"

I smiled and replied, "Sure, I have no qualms about admitting that I can be vain at times."

Hart chimed in saying, "Shallow isn't all bad."

I grinned at him and said, "Thank you! I thought you might agree. You're doing well in the new chair. So, when do you get sprung from here?"

"In a month, if I'm ready. Jim's working on a release plan, helping me find a place and all," he answered, his tone serious.

"Well before that, you'll have to come over for dinner. If you don't feel comfortable coming over alone, you can bring Jim," I offered.

He considered the invitation and smiled, then replied, "That sounds like a plan."

I'd been thinking about trying to set Laura from my study group with Broche, as I'd heard he was still very upset about Lieutenant Ross, but from what I'd seen of Hart, he and Laura might get along. I'd have to see what he was interested in outside of rehab, as that was what we'd mostly talked about so far.
Jim stretched me out and had me stand in the braces for ten minutes, warning me that he'd have me try moving with them on the bars my next session. The plan was that I'd eventually be able to ambulate on crutches, that it would be slow and unsteady, but good exercise at home. I didn't figure it would be practical for long distances, or even outside of the house. But I'd be able to practice in the hall and stand every day without assistance and that was more than I'd dared hope for in a long while.

After another short range of motion session Jim had me stretch out on a mat so he could get my back iced down. I passed the time by watching Jim work with Hart on floor to chair transfers, and by the time I was ready to go home he wasn't half bad at them.

When I got home I took a quick shower, made coffee and then hit the books while I lay on my stomach on the couch. I sat so often that I had to get creative in how I positioned myself when I was out of my chair. Sciezka got home shortly after I'd finished studying and had begun thinking about what to fix for dinner. I'd just started listing various options when she covered her mouth and bolted for the bathroom. My cooking wasn't that bad, at least I didn't think it was.

I rushed after her and found her on her knees in the bathroom, retching and heaving. I felt queasy just watching and excused myself to go get her a glass of water and a cool washcloth. I really wanted to be there for her, but it wouldn't be good if her caregiver ended up right next to her because he was a wimp about people getting sick. I'd seen dead people, hideously mangled soldiers and things no one should have to see, but none of that made the bile rise in the back of my throat quite like watching someone get sick.

By the time I returned with water and a wash cloth she had stopped, but was curled up in a ball on the tile floor. I set the glass of water next to her and wet the washcloth. She sat up slowly, using the commode to steady herself and she appeared very pale. I felt her forehead and she was burning up. When she made no motion towards the water I picked the glass up, put it to her lips and said, "Drink some of this, you'll feel better."

When she'd finished sipping the water she leaned against my legs for support. I wiped her face with the cool cloth and then asked, "Is that ok?"

She nodded and made no effort to stand. She was clearly exhausted. I helped her up and had her sit on my lap while she brushed her teeth. Then I rolled us into the bedroom and had her sit on the bed while I got her night gown. Getting her into it was like dressing a rag doll. When I was sure she was comfortable I went to the kitchen to call Doctor Knox to ask what I should do next. Her symptoms worried me since they had come on suddenly and reminded me of when Breda and I had roomed together and he'd had to have his appendix out. It had all started the same way.

Knox sounded concerned on the phone and said he'd be right over. I called Gracia to see if there was anything else I could do to help Sciezka. Gracia suggested I get out some of the winter blankets to help keep Sciezka warm when she got the chills. I went to the linen closet and fetched some woolen blankets and extra towels and then went back into the bedroom.

Sciezka was shivering in her sleep so I spread the extra blankets over her and quickly refilled her glass of water. I set it on the bedside table and she turned towards me, her eyes glazed with fever. I felt powerless with her so ill and did the only other thing I could think to do, which was to hold her hand.

When the doorbell rang, I hurried to answer it and let Doctor Knox in. I showed him to the
bedroom and he promptly kicked me out while he examined her. I went out on the porch for a cigarette, or six, to try and keep my mind off of Sciezka. Doctor Knox came outside to talk to me. He had quite a poker face and I couldn't tell if the news was good or bad. His silence got to me quickly and I snapped as I asked, "So what is it? Will she be ok?"

He lit up a cigarette, took a drag and finally replied, "The fever should break soon. I've ruled out appendicitis and pregnancy. It looks like a combination of exhaustion and nerves, not to be confused with hysteria... antiquated diagnosis."

"Pregnancy?" I asked, completely shocked. I hadn't even considered that possibility. Given the number of times I'd spotted Sciezka popping her oral contraceptives like candy and the debriefing I had early on regarding my blown out spinal cord I was sure there was a slim to none chance of that ever happening.

"I'm relieved it's not her appendix. Breda was ill for weeks after his surgery," I said after I'd recovered my composure.

Knox nodded and said, "Watch her closely, she's a little dizzy, making her unsteady on her feet. Make sure she gets plenty of fluids. Take her temperature every few hours and give her aspirin per the prescription I left. Keep her in bed and under no circumstances is she to return to work before Monday. I'll file the excuse for her tomorrow. If she's hungry keep it bland, dry toast and applesauce. Tea and juice would be fine as well."

I shook his hand vigorously and asked, "What do I owe you? Thank you so much for the house call."

He chuckled and then said, "Don't worry about the bill. It was good that you called. If her fever goes above 102, call me, no matter what time it is."

I nodded and hurried into the house so I could keep an eye on Sciezka. Soon afterward Gracia came over, letting herself in with her key. She'd had Jim take Elysia for ice cream. I was startled when she came in, but relieved. She felt Sciezka's forehead and quizzed me on Knox's instructions. When she was satisfied with my answers she said, "Jean, eat something and get cleaned up. I'll sit with her until you're finished."

I showered again, took care of the necessaries and changed into pajama pants. After fixing a sandwich and having another smoke I returned to the bedroom. Sciezka was resting quietly and Gracia whispered, "I'll be back tomorrow while Elysia is at a play date. You shouldn't miss P.T. At least this is something you can't catch. You need to be careful of illnesses, as they can be worse for you."

When Gracia stood up I hugged her around the waist and after she ruffled my hair she said, "You get some rest too, ok?"

I nodded and got into bed next to Sciezka so she could wake me in the night if she needed anything. I set the alarm to go off every few hours so I could check on how she was doing, take her temperature and make her drink some water.

Sciezka slept through the night save for when I'd checked on her. When the sun came up I stayed in bed with her until she stirred and had her drink some more water. She was still rather warm but not
as disoriented and weak as she had been. I slipped out of bed, got ready and then woke her again. I decided to risk offending her and ask if she had to use the bathroom. Thankfully she was glad that I'd asked as when she first tried to stand up slowly she sank right back to the bed, her legs as wobbly as a new foal's. I had her sit on my lap and she giggled for no apparent reason. She must still be delirious. I was sure I must have been worse when I was first injured between the high fever caused by the infection and the pain medication. I'd have to ask Breda, as Roy seemed pretty tight lipped about the whole thing at times.

She was back in bed, sleeping soundly when Gracia arrived. Gracia suggested that I head straight to the hospital and was very insistent that I eat breakfast there saying, "I won't have you getting sick too. Something like this could land you in the hospital."

I hated to admit it, but she was right. I thanked her profusely and left. As I was on the way out the door I nearly ran into Mrs. Smith. She looked flustered and said, "Gracia called and told me what was going on. You should get going and I'm glad she talked some sense into you and convinced you to go to therapy. Don't worry about a thing while you're out. We'll have it well in hand."

I smiled and replied, "Thank you so much. There isn't a lot that I can do for her right now anyway. The doctor said she'd be fine after plenty of rest. You being here really takes a load off of my mind. I'll see you at lunch time."

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Gracia must have tipped Jim off, as the first thing he asked when he saw me was, "How is she? Did you sleep at all last night?"

I ran a hand over the day-old stubble on my chin and said, "I slept a little, not much, so go easy on me."

"Be careful, make sure you're eating and sleeping enough since a fever like that would most likely require hospitalization," he replied.

I sighed and then said, "Everyone has said that to me today. I'm well aware of my limits. Let's get started. The stretching is going to feel good since my shoulders are killing me."

Jim winked and then said, "Tension will do that. I'll see what I can do about it."

Most of my session was spent with Jim doing an extended range of motion session and teaching me a few stretches I could do on my own when I felt tight. He let me out early, excusing me from swimming for the day.

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When I got home, Mrs. Smith had lunch ready and we took shifts with Sciezka. Her fever broke shortly after I left and Sciezka was alert, though weak. After I finished my lunch I went in to see her and sit with her so Gracia could have something to eat.

Sciezka looked over at me when I came in and smiled. I rushed to her side, took her hand and kissed it. She frowned and said, "I'm so sorry I worried you."

"Don't apologize," I replied. "Just get well and promise me you'll take better care of yourself from now on."
She squeezed my hand and said, "It's a deal."

Gracia came back with tea and toast for Sciezka and after she ate, Sciezka said, "I see you called in the whole cavalry."

I nodded and bashfully said, "I even called Doctor Knox."

She looked confused, knit her brows, then smiled and replied, "So that wasn't a weird dream last night, he actually was here."

"Doctor Knox said it was stress and exhaustion that brought this on. You need to relax more," I chided.

"I am not under undue stress Jean! No more than you are," she protested.

I cocked an eyebrow and teased, "No, it can't possibly be stress, Sciezka. In the last few months we have committed or conspired to aid and abet fugitives and illegal immigrants, espionage, forgery and high treason. I'm completely fine with it, you?"

She sighed loudly and conceded, "You are right, ok? You win."

"It's not about winning or losing, but you can talk with me about what's bothering you," I replied softly.

She sat up, leaned over and hugged me, then wrinkled her nose and said, "I stink. Do you think my nurses will let me take a bath?"

I grinned and said, "I'll see if I can talk Gracia into it. I want her here in case you feel dizzy again. I'm not sure I could get you out of the tub by myself."

Sciezka ruffled my hair playfully and tried to console me, since she knew it really bothered me that I could not do that, even though I said otherwise. The old me could have picked her up no problem, even carried her for miles.

"If I wanted a boyfriend who could throw me around like I weighed nothing I'd be with Major Armstrong," she offered.

I chuckled at that mental image and said, "All right Stinky, I'm going to inform Gracia of our plan."

When I came back in, I ran a bath for Sciezka, adding the oils that Gracia had brought along and then helped a still wobbly Sciezka into the tub. While she was in the bath, Mrs. Smith and Gracia put fresh sheets on the bed and got out a clean nightgown.

Sciezka was able to get out of the bath without much help and I had her sit on the edge of the tub while I retrieved her night gown from the bedroom. Mrs. Smith was already washing out back. I thanked Gracia again and when Sciezka was dry and dressed I helped her back to bed.

I stretched out on the floor next to the bed and did homework while she slept. Around dinner time Gracia stopped by briefly to drop off chicken soup, homemade bread and salad. When I woke Sciezka she was feeling much better and her appetite had come back. We ate in the living room where I prepared a place on the sofa for her to sit under a pile of blankets. She teased me for
having been so worried and I let it slide, she was in no shape to argue, even if it was in jest. Despite her protests, I chased her back to the bedroom when we finished dinner. She attempted to get her clothes together for work, an idea I was firmly opposed to. Luckily, Major Armstrong called and interrupted her, ordering her to stay home the next day.

When she hung up the phone I smiled and teased, "If the Major hadn't commanded it, I would have. Second Lieutenant outranks Civilian Specialist Grade Six."

She scowled as she said, "Pulling rank Jean? I'm disappointed."

I grinned as I replied, "Whatever it takes. You can be as headstrong as Fullmetal sometimes."

That earned me a punch in the arm. It smarted, but that meant she was getting her strength back. I made amends by suggesting she join me in the bath and she agreed, on the condition that I didn't coddle her too much.

As I was washing her back she leaned against me and asked, "Did it bother you at all, being helped I mean?"

I considered her question for a moment and then answered, "It bothered me a lot in the hospital. I think it was worse there because I was still helpless. Everything just reminded me of what I couldn't do."

She nestled closer to me and said softly, "But it was different having Gracia here to help, right?"

"It was definitely different. I wanted to make sure we did everything possible to make you feel better. I was pretty sure you'd be ok getting around and out of the bath, but if you weren't? Well, I wasn't completely confident I'd be able to do it. That bothered me, but making sure you were safe was more important to me," I replied as I ran my fingers through her hair.

She sighed contentedly, then yawned and I suggested, "Let's get you back to bed."

Sciezka didn't put up a fight when I helped her dry off and put her pajamas on. Once she was tucked in I took care of the necessaries, put on my pajamas and curled up next to her.

Gracia was already bustling around the kitchen when I woke up the next day. She'd let herself in, made coffee and was already working on breakfast when I got out of bed, still bleary eyed to investigate where the heavenly aroma was coming from. She smiled when she saw me and handed me a cup of coffee. Elysia peeked around the corner and said, "Hush, Jean, we can't wake up Sciezka."

That pulled at my heartstrings more than I would have liked. Elysia was so clever, already very perceptive and empathic at the age of four. Doctor Knox's house call had reminded me that Sciezka and I might never have children. I pushed that thought out of my mind and focused on the positive. If we couldn't have our own children, we did have Elysia and Gracia was wonderful about sharing her.

Elysia came around to the side of my chair, hugged me and then said, "Mommy and I will be here while you are at school. You should hurry up and get ready and then have breakfast. It's pancakes and bacon, your favorite."

I leaned over, kissed her on the cheek and then said, "You are such a good helper. I'll hurry so we
have plenty of time to talk over breakfast."

She grinned and scampered over to her mother who beamed with pride, then winked at me. I was so grateful for Gracia. She and Roy had been brilliant. I would be living with my parents if the two of them hadn't been so determined to not give up on me.

After showering and dressing I kissed Sciezka goodbye. She stirred slightly and I softly told her, "Gracia and Elysia are here if you need anything. Sleep well."

She nodded groggily and rolled over.

Gracia's cooking was as wonderful as I'd remembered. Breakfast was delicious and I joked, "It's like I never moved out at all."

She blushed and said humbly, "I just threw this together, you flatter me too much. Though I have to confess this is to make up for the message I have to deliver."

I raised an eyebrow then asked suspiciously, "What have you got planned for me now? Spill it."

"It's nothing awful! Jim wants you to drop by the hospital for a swim after you get out of class. He said he'd be starting with Private Hart today and would appreciate your help," she stammered.

I chuckled and then replied, "That isn't anything bad. I thought you and Roy might be plotting behind my back again."

Gracia smiled and said, "I'll call Jim to let him know the good news. Don't worry about a thing today. I'll have dinner for all of us ready when you get home."

Then she handed me a brown paper bag and as I'd hoped, packed me a lunch. I thanked her again for staying with Sciezka and then headed to campus.

_______________________________________________________

General Lockheed's class was exciting; the topic was a debate on the current Ishbal policy. Quite a few students had looked to alternative texts that told the events as close to the truth as you could get without being imprisoned or killed. When class let out the General looked quite pleased that he'd gotten us thinking. He pointed to his bag lunch then approached me and said, "Care to join me? Marjorie sent extra lemon bars."

I smiled and then replied, "That is a wonderful idea. Sciezka caught me red-handed trying to keep those to myself."

We ate in the shade by the fountain. When we'd finished, he pulled a manuscript out of his briefcase and handed it to me. My eyes went wide when I saw the title and my mouth dropped open when I read the author's name.

"Your shock is appropriate Havoc. This was collected and then suppressed during the Ishbal massacre. These are exactly what you think they are, Sciezka's father's field notes," he said quietly.

"I don't know how to thank you, but are you sure she should see them? She was just a little girl when it happened," I stammered.

He smiled and said, "You'll know when the time is right. Marjorie was even more impressed with you after she talked with Sciezka at the party."
I blushed as I said, "I'm so lucky to have her. I wouldn't be doing any of what I'm doing now..."

"It's like Marjorie told Sciezka, you make each other want to be better people," he replied.

I smiled and then excused myself. I needed some time alone to think and a cigarette before I went to my next class.

I had just gotten into the elevator when Seth spotted me. I held the door on the elevator open and he got in and then asked, "So therapy went well?"

Ah, more code I thought to myself and then replied, "My session was right on target."

He nodded, smiled and then asked, "How is the walking library?"

"Sick in bed," I replied.

He frowned and then said, "That's not good."

I quickly replied, "A few more days of bed rest and she'll be just fine. Gracia and I are working on giving her the royal treatment."

We entered the lecture hall together and I was relieved that none of the people in my study group thought anything was amiss. Laura had been put in charge of taking my class notes, which Doctor Kohut had facilitated by giving her carbon paper so she could simply create the copy as she wrote her own notes. I smiled as I looked the notes over and then said, "Thank you so much Laura. These are great, very detailed and organized."

She smiled and replied, "I could say the same about your notes."

The lecture started and the more I thought about it, the more determined I was to introduce Laura and Ron to each other. The first step would be for her and Sciezka to start hanging out together outside of the study group.

After class I stopped Laura on the way out saying, "I have an idea, if you'd let me run it past you."

She sat back down so I didn't have to crane my neck to speak to her and asked, "So what's your big idea?"

I blushed as I said, "This is awkward, but you suggested that you and Sciezka should go shopping or something else girly. She can be really shy at times."

Laura smiled and exclaimed, "I'd love that! I don't have much time to socialize and the little bit of time I've spent with the two of you has been so fun. I'll call tonight and invite her to lunch this weekend."

"You're the best. She's home from work today, they're overworking her. But a girls' outing might be just the thing to lift her spirits," I replied.

"Now, if Sciezka could help me find a boyfriend who is as thoughtful as you are!" she said.

My cheeks turned crimson and then she added, "Humble too!"

We left the Humanities building together and parted company at the edge of campus.
I wondered how Laura felt about having a romantic candlelit dinner with a guy who brought his own chair.

When I got to the pool Jim greeted me and said, "Hart's in the locker room. Could you go in there and reassure him that we have the pool to ourselves and I won't let him drown?"

I saluted Jim and quipped, "I'll see what I can do. I can always order him to come out."

It took a few minutes to find Hart and a few more to convince him that no one would consider him a freak. Relating the incident with Kiki had him laughing so hard he was nearly in tears. After he got a good look at the scars on my torso and decided that he wasn't nearly as bad off he said, "Ok, if you can do it, I can do it. But I just have to know. Did that Kiki woman seriously put her foot down your trunks?"

On the way out of the locker room I answered him saying, "She did indeed. Sciezka laughed so hard at me."

He asked in disbelief, "She wasn't mad at you?"

Shaking my head vigorously and shuddering at the memory I answered, "She could tell that if I hadn't been trapped there I would have run away screaming.

That had Ron laughing loudly and once we were at the side of the pool I demonstrated how to get in and talked him through it step by step. He got in without much trouble and clung to the side. Jim told me to swim some laps while he worked on showing Ron how to float and before they both got out he had me demonstrate a few strokes since it was more effective and would have more of an impact to have me show him it could be done.

Ron was tired, but able to get out on his own. He had a smile on his face and I could tell that he had just achieved a real milestone in his recovery.

I left the pool area and got changed, and stopped by Ron's room before I went home. Gracia was true to her word and had dinner ready. Sciezka was sitting at the table in her robe chatting with Elysia as Gracia brought the rest of the food to the table. The color had returned to Sciezka's cheeks and the glassy cast of fever had left her eyes. Knox had been right, after sleep and taking it easy she had gotten better.

Gracia had made a hearty chicken soup, some of her fantastic bread and a spinach salad. She warned us to save room for dessert since the strawberries in her garden were ripe and wouldn't keep long. As we ate dinner we could smell strawberry short cake that was still warm from the oven, which Gracia had covered in puffs of whipped cream and served us for dessert. Afterward, Gracia shooed us into the living room while she cleared the table and took care of the dishes.

Sciezka curled up on the couch and I joined her. Elysia took her favorite seat, me, and told us all about what she'd done at her friend's house. She was enchanted with the dog and I was sure that if she worked on her mother they'd soon have one. It was almost a good thing that Feury was at Southern H.Q., since he found strays all the time.

Elysia decided we needed to read a book and that since Sciezka was sick, the honor fell to me. I laughed and protested, "Elysia, Sciezka is so much better at reading stories than I am, I won't be nearly as good."

"I don't mind, I'm good at imagining. Please?" Elysia pleaded.

I couldn't refuse those big green eyes, no one could and finally I said, "Go pick a book from the
shelf in your room."

She beamed when I called it "her room". The guest room was the most feminine room in the house, but with the toys, books and that pram there could be no doubt that a little girl was there often.

While Elysia was gone I hesitantly confessed to Sciezka that I may have done some plotting and meddling. I danced around the subject, talking about the debate in Military History and my psychology group. She smiled when I talked about Laura and asked, "How is she? I liked her and it was so good of her to take notes for you."

I cleared my throat and said, "Well, I'm glad you think as highly of Laura as she does of you."

Sciezka was quiet for a moment then asked, "What are you planning exactly Jean Havoc?"

As she glared at me suspiciously I stammered, "I just suggested to Laura that it might be fun if you went out to lunch and maybe shopping soon. You know, what girls like to do!"

She huffed and then said, "Don't you think I can make my own friends and plans? I'm not that socially awkward am I?"

I cursed the fact that I couldn't just stand up quickly from where I was sitting, to hold her and show her that social awkwardness was the last thing on my mind when I'd talked to Laura, then gave up and blurted, "You hardly ever do anything nice for yourself! You're supposed to be able to do whatever you want, whenever you want. Sleep late, attend guest lectures, or take off to someplace exotic just because you can. Hell, you don't even take the time for yourself to just laugh about the stupid things I do, like this!"

Her expression softened and she moved closer to me and said quietly, "So you just want me to have more fun and to be happy?"

I held out my arms and she draped herself over me as I answered, "I think that you work too hard and I think you and Laura would have a good time. Gracia and Elysia are great... but you and Laura could go to lectures or shopping or I don't know, like I said before... do girl stuff."

She giggled and said, "Coming from anyone else that would sound sexist, but you mean well. I do need to be more spontaneous."

I kissed her and then said, "Well, I do have ulterior motives."

"I thought so," Sciezka said as she pulled away. Then asked abruptly, "What's the evil plan?"

Grinning I said, "We're going to find out all the information we can about both Laura and my friend Ron and see about playing matchmaker."

I was saved from physical harm or a tongue lashing when Elysia came back in with an armload of books. She set them down on the coffee table and put her little hands on her hips, seemingly waiting for Sciezka to move from her spot. I wondered where she'd seen the "she who must be obeyed" pose. I also suspected that Gracia would secretly be proud. Sciezka grinned and returned to the end of the couch and Elysia commandeered my lap so I could read to her.

Laura called while I was reading, so I couldn't eavesdrop on the conversation, but Sciezka was smiling when she returned to the couch. She announced with a grand flourish, "Jean, you will have to entertain yourself tomorrow!"

As I got ready for bed I realized that I hadn't thought my plan out that far ahead, or about the
drawback of having to share Sciezka and having even less time with her. Then I remembered the secondary purpose of Sciezka's outing and decided that if she was busy with Laura and gathering information, I should get some intel on Ron.

The hospital was lonely on the weekend, maybe I'd be able to convince Ron to venture off the grounds with me. It helped that Jim could pull some strings for the day pass and he would probably enjoy going for a beer with us.

I would have done just about anything for a drink and some freedom when I was in Ron's position. If he felt a pub was too public we'd play cards, drink and be manly men at my place.

As I figured out how to approach Ron about dragging him back out into the world I got to thinking about what it had been like for me. What had motivated me to return to society? I could have hidden away for the rest of my life; no one would have blamed me. But I didn't, I moved forward even though it would have been more comfortable to stay where I knew it was safe. But the price of staying still began to outweigh the risk of taking a chance, and changing.

It's true, you can sum up life in three words; it goes on. In a short time, I'd gone from being nearly helpless and depressed to a man of action, self-sufficient, independent and trying to help others and so far, succeeding in making things better. Not many people could say that they were certain they'd made an impact and I was doing it, in spite of everything. The excitement was growing for me, I could help Roy and the country would be better for it. I didn't know when or exactly how, but plans were moving forward, with me. The waiting was almost over, I'd nearly caught up and I could see the top. The view was good.
Promises to Keep

Chapter Summary

Editor: anat-astarte
Beta Team: sevensrikes and the Sooper Sekrit filter.
Rating: M or NC-17 for "creativity of the Sciezka kind".
Disclaimer: I don't own it... I wish I did. I could BUY my own coffee house, and then
my lattes would be free.
Warnings: Spoilers for current situation with Xing characters, current to most recent
Japanese releases. As always, I am never work safe.
Begging: I'm getting discouraged! I see the hit counter go up on a chapter and have
NO reviews or ONE review and it makes me very sad. If you like this story and have
been keeping up with it, please review! I know it's a lot to ask for! It's a long long
story... longer than some novels but I've really been putting my all into it. I just get
neurotic sometimes, an author's indulgence if you will.

Sciezka and I woke up early Saturday. It was going to be a full day for both of us, but the sun
wouldn't be up for a few hours yet and we took advantage of the extra time. We stayed in bed
together, talking, kissing and fooling around, until the morning sun beamed right into our eyes.
When we absolutely had to get up, we moved our activities to the shower, spending more time
lavishing attention on each other until the hot water turned cold. We got out, and I slowly began to
dress as Sciezka rummaged through her things.

I could tell that Sciezka was nervous about her plans with Laura as she'd changed her outfit twice
before she exclaimed "I have nothing to wear!"

Since I was already dressed and in what was, in my estimation, a modern gentleman's attire I
suggested, "Why don't you wear the dress that you wore to the General's party?"

She frowned, considered my input and said, "But I don't want to be overdressed... "

After taking her hands I pulled her closer to me and then replied, "I don't think that will matter at
all to Laura. She's excited to have a friend to do things with. Just wear what makes you
comfortable."

She smiled broadly and said, "Thank you, and you're right. All that fussing over clothes must have
sounded ridiculous."

I pulled her into my lap and kissed her, cutting her off before she could finish her sentence. Once
I'd taken advantage of the fact that I had caught her by surprise I said, "You didn't sound silly at
all. Sometimes you're so focused that it can be intimidating. It's good to see that you do think about
some things that are frivolous."

She stood up, kissed me passionately and then chose a cotton sundress from her closet, another of
my favorites, with the skirt that swished when she walked. She was as bad as Elysia at times and
would twirl when she didn't think anyone was watching. I watched as she pulled her hair back into
a loose ponytail, dabbed some perfume behind her ears and then put on the slightest hint of lipstick.
She went to the closet again for a sweater in case the sun got to be too much for her fair skin. I
don't think she realized how beautiful she was without even trying.

After one last look in the mirror she turned to me and smiled. It was radiant, she was radiant and I was rendered speechless. She laughed and then said, "Cens for your thoughts."

My lips still couldn't form the perfect words, so I kissed her.

We left together but she picked up her pace so she wouldn't be late, and I watched her as she walked ahead. She knew me too well; she knew that I'd be watching, and spun around to blow me a kiss as her skirt billowed around her knees. She disappeared around the corner and I hoped she would have a good time with Laura.

When I got to the hospital I dropped by the Rehab wing first to see if Jim was there. He was sitting at a desk, that I'd never seen him use. There were stacks of files and he must not have noticed he had company since when I called his name he nearly fell out of his chair. He stammered, "You nearly scared the life out of me!"

"Sorry about that," I apologized, then asked, "What are you doing here on a Saturday?"

"I'm usually here on Saturdays so I can catch up on my charts. Did you miss me so much that you want an extra session?" he teased.

"No, I think I'm good, thanks for offering," I replied.

It made sense that he was working on the weekend since during the week Jim normally had patients back to back. I didn't want to pull him away from his work, but I did want his help convincing Ron to go out for a while and we'd need Jim to swing a day pass.

"Um, I was wondering about something... " I said, hesitating slightly.

He looked up from the file he was reading, turned to me and then asked, "Anything bothering you?"

"Oh, no, nothing's wrong with me," I replied quickly. "I just thought that Ron might want a change of scenery. So, well, I'd like your help convincing him to get outside for a while and springing him for the day."

Jim smiled and then replied, "That's a good idea and it's thoughtful of you to think that it might be lonely for him on the weekend."

I shrugged and then said, "It's boring on the weekend, no therapy to get you out of your room and if you don't get visitors, well that just makes it worse watching everyone else. But it's not purely for his benefit."

"Oh?" Jim asked suspiciously.

"Well, Sciezka is out with Laura from my psychology class, they'll probably take all afternoon. I didn't think about that part, so I'm high and dry for plans today. But she's having fun and hopefully thinking of me while she's shopping."

He laughed and then joked, "So you're hoping that she'll miss you so much that she brings you presents?"
"No, no, no... get your mind into the gutter," I said and then winked for emphasis.

That elicited a chuckle from him and he replied, "All right then, moving on, where do you plan on going with Ron?"

I considered his question and then said, "I thought we'd go for a drink and maybe play some pool at the Cavalier. If he's not up for that we'll hang out at the house."

"It sounds like you guys will have fun. I'll handle the paperwork and then you can go ask him," Jim replied, sounding very businesslike.

I teased, "You are invited, I thought you'd figure that out. If you're not too busy that is. I don't know about Ron, but I wouldn't be ashamed to be seen with you."

He grinned, closed the file on his desk and replied, "Just let me put this paperwork away and we'll ambush Ron."

Jim and I went up to Ron's room, knocked on the door frame so he had some semblance of privacy and he asked "Who is it?"

"The social committee," I answered, then asked, "Are you decent?"

He sounded surprised and seemed pleased to see it was us. Ron hastily put down the book he was reading and motioned for us to come in. After we'd made small talk for a few minutes Ron asked, "So what are you two up to anyway? It's Saturday and I know you're not here because you miss the place Jean."

I smiled at that and then replied, "It's true, I'm thoroughly sick of the hospital and I figured you might be too. What would you give for a drink right about now?"

Ron grinned and then said, "Anything... what's the catch?"

Jim chuckled and then teased, "Ron, have I really been that bad to you?"

I didn't give Ron a chance to answer interjecting, "The catch is that you do have to leave the hospital and go to the Cavalier with us. I thought you might want to play some pool or darts."

"I don't know if I'm ready yet," he quickly replied.

"You'll never know unless you try. I've been there a few times and I haven't had too much trouble. Playing pool isn't too bad either. I picked it right back up. Plus, if you get stuck you have Jim here," I said, trying to encourage him.

He was silent and looked like he was mulling it over.

I quickly added, "If you absolutely hate it, after even a little while, we'll head over to my place. I've got some single malt that's older than I am that I save for special occasions."

Ron's eyes lit up, he smiled broadly and then said, "It's a deal."

Jim and I went to wait in the hall while Ron got ready to go out and I hoped he wouldn't change his mind about going.
Ron was ready quickly and we headed to the parking lot to get Jim's car. I coached Ron through the logistics of getting into the car and disassembling his chair. I got in the back seat, choosing to keep my chair with me. Jim didn't need the extra effort of retrieving two wheelchairs from the trunk and I didn't want Ron to think that going places wasn't worth the bother. Though I'd been out to the Cavalier before, I was still slightly anxious about going without Sciezka. I was also concerned with how Ron would handle being out in public for the first time, and how he'd manage that one step down at the entrance knowing that all eyes would be on him. I remembered how I hated it and hopefully doing it with me and Jim would make it easier on Ron.

Once Jim parked the car about a block from the pub he went to the trunk and got Ron's chair and then helped him get out. By the time I'd gotten myself situated and gotten my bearings they were ready to go. Ron struggled pushing himself over the cement of the sidewalk, but quickly got the hang of it and smiled proudly. At the Cavalier Jim got the door for me and I showed Ron how to get a chair down the steps without dumping it. He gave it a shot and the first try was a success. I motioned for Ron to follow me to the back room where the pool tables were. Jim smiled and said, "You handled that really well, Ron! Jean thanks for inviting me along. I think I'll learn a lot."

The pub was pretty empty, save for a few people eating lunch and it was quiet. Before Jim had a chance to sit down I asked, "Jim, if it's not any trouble could you go get the lunch menu and the first round? It's on me, but I want to start showing Ron here the finer points of 'sit down' pool before this place gets crowded."

I handed Jim enough to cover the first round and asked Ron, "What's your usual?"

Ron smiled and replied, "I'll have a pint of lager if it's ok with Jim."

"One pint won't hurt, just don't get drunk and get us all in trouble," Jim answered good-naturedly.

While Jim was up at the bar I racked the balls, and got cues and the bridge for Ron and myself. When Ron eyed the bridge suspiciously and I said, "I know, I never used it before either... I thought it was for chicks, but there are spots on the table that are hard to get to even with the damned thing."

He smiled and quipped, "I suppose it's better than not playing at all. You break."

"I'll warn you, I'm pretty good at this," I said and smiled.

"I'm just happy to be out of the hospital for the day. I was going stir-crazy," Ron replied.

After I broke I said, "Well, I'm stripes. I figured you might be going nuts. I know I sure did. Besides, you're doing me a favor."

Ron raised an eyebrow as he asked, "How would I be doing that?"

I smirked and then replied, "My girl is out all day with a friend. You're saving me from boredom and Jim from a mountain of paperwork."

I missed my second shot so it was Ron's turn. He made his first shot and scratched on the second. Jim came back with our beers and menus. I decided on a bacon cheese burger with fries. Ron had trouble deciding and sheepishly admitted, "I'm a little overwhelmed with all the choices!"

Jim and I both chuckled and I said, "Well, order whatever sounds good to you. The food here is great."

"It all sounds good!" Ron replied grinning broadly. "Though I think I'll have a cheese burger. I
haven't had one of those in ages."

I waved to get a waitress' attention and we put our orders in. Ron turned bright red after she left and I nudged him and asked, "Is everything ok?"

He mumbled, "Gosh, I forgot there would be women out here."

"There are plenty of women at the hospital, if you count the nurses, though I didn't either. I feel you," I teased.

Jim suggested we make a toast and started, "I propose a toast to Men's Day out!"

Ron grinned and then said enthusiastically, "To day passes!"

After thinking for a moment I added, "To Jim!"

He blushed and Ron chuckled and then said, "I'll drink to that."

Ron and I got back to our game and we were fairly evenly matched once Ron got the logistics figured out. We were tied when our food came and decided to call it a draw. When the waitress set the platter in front of Ron his eyes went wide and he broke into a grin. He rubbed his hands together, put his napkin in his lap with a flourish and then said, "I have missed food like this while I've been cooped up. Come to Papa."

Jim and I both laughed and Jim quipped, "If I remember correctly, Jean was the same way whenever Gracia would swing by his room with sweets and coffee."

"No cigarettes, but when she and Elysia would visit it made my day," I added.

Ron swallowed, wiped his mouth with his napkin and said, "You and Jim have made this whole mess so much easier on me. Thanks."

"Don't mention it, it's the least I could do," I replied, and then added, "I had so many people pulling for me and I still struggled. Your unit is still deployed, so I imagine it must be lonely."

He nodded and said, "I don't know if I would have let them visit even if they could. I think it would be ok now. I should write to my old roommate. They told me he sat with me until they put me on the train to Central."

Conversation slowed down as we tucked into lunch in earnest. I had almost finished my food when Ron sat back and announced, "My eyes were much bigger than my stomach."

Jim replied, "That's common. You don't have much of an appetite when it's bland hospital food. I'll have to have Gracia invite you over soon."

Ron colored and said, "Oh, I couldn't impose. Besides, it would be too much trouble."

I smirked as I said, "What you're forgetting is that this is the same woman who offered, no insisted that my broken self stay with her after I got discharged. The house is easy to get around in and she's an amazing cook. She used to feed everyone in the office."

Ron smiled at that and said, "I think I'd like that. If she's even half as wonderful as you've described her..."

Nodding enthusiastically Jim said, "I'm biased, but she worked wonders with Jean and you'll love her little girl Elysia."
I was stuffed and suggested, "Why don't I pay the tab while you and Jim get the car. We can go over to my place, have the five cens tour and then a nip of that single malt."

Ron's eyes lit up as he said, "That sounds like an excellent plan. It's even educational if the hospital questions how long I'm gone."

"The alcohol is strictly medicinal," Jim joked.

I chimed in, "I agree. It's getting crowded in here; you guys should head out and I'll settle up."

Jim nodded and asked, "Will you need help up that step Jean?"

I rubbed my head and debated for a moment then replied, "I've never done that one on my own, but I'll ask for a hand if I need it. There are a couple of burly looking guys in the front room. If Sciezka can do it, one of them certainly can."

Ron smiled and said, "I'll see you out there Jean. Again, thanks for showing me the ropes."

We got to the house with no problems and Ron had no trouble with the ramp. I commented, "You did that really well. Just remember, usually they are steeper."

Jim rolled his eyes and said, "Ron, I can only hope you're less stubborn than he is."

"Why?" Ron asked, seeming concerned.

Jim smirked and then replied, "It's a good trait in moderation, except when you know a ramp might be too steep to take safely on your own and then do it anyway, tipping your chair over in the process. This is how, by the way, Jean still scares the living daylights out of Sciezka and Gracia."

I sighed and then complained, "I've only dumped the chair a few times and I didn't get hurt. You all make such a big deal about stuff like that."

Ron laughed and then said, "Jean, you are bull headed, but it suits you."

"Thank you for your vote of confidence. How about I show you around and then we can relax with a nip of that single malt?" I asked.

"That is one of the best offers I've had in a long while. My social life is in a sad state," he replied jovially.

I got the door, then ushered Ron and Jim in.

I concluded the tour in the kitchen, demonstrating to Ron that good design and planning helped make me self-sufficient. Granted this was accomplished by taking down three glasses, getting ice from the icebox and Roy's housewarming gift from the pantry. Ron and Jim clapped appreciatively anyway. I could tell that Ron was enjoying just being one of the guys again. I had hated being treated like a patient by hospital staff, strangers and worst of all my friends. Jim had been the exception. He'd always been honest with me and friendly without that false cheer that I loathed.

Jim teased that my "feat" hadn't ended in a trip to the emergency room. Ron quirked an eyebrow and I jokingly ordered, "You two, outside. I'll need a cigarette to tell the story properly."

They quickly complied as Jim had never heard the uncensored version and I figured a laugh at my
expense might help show Ron what was possible. Once out on the porch I lit up a smoke as I
leaned back in my chair, prepared to begin telling them about what I had dubbed "The Xingian Rug
Debacle".

Jim looked lost and turned around, a couple of times, then finally asked, "Where should I sit?"

Ron and I both cracked up at that and then Ron quipped, "Honestly Jim, get with the program. Jean
and I came prepared."

I probably laughed harder than I should have, but between the delivery and Jim's reaction, it was
priceless. Once I'd stopped guffawing and was merely snickering I said, "That is jaded. I love it!
Jim, bring a chair from the dining room, or you could keep Sciezka's seat warm. I won't tell, cross
my heart."

This made Ron start laughing all over again and as Jim went inside he muttered, "Smart asses, the
both of them... the things I put up with."

I called after him, "But we're your favorites!"

We were enjoying a second drink by the time I'd finished telling the sad but funny truth about the
first night Sciezka and I had spent at the house when Jim must have noticed Ron doing pressure
relief using the rims of his chair. Jim cleared his throat and suggested, "Jean, you should do the
same."

I complied but commented wryly to Ron, "No one was this interested in my ass when it was in
plain sight."

Just then Sciezka and Laura came into view with Gracia and Elysia in tow. I grinned at Ron,
winked and said, "Remember, I'm a perfect gentleman."

Sciezka must have overheard as she rushed up the stairs and immediately teased, "Jean, are you
trying to put one over on them? I'm sure Jim knows better already."

Jim greeted Sciezka warmly and answered for me, "Don't worry, I'm making sure he behaves and
sets a good example for Private Hart here."

Ron extended his hand to shake Sciezka's and said as she took it, "I've heard so much about you.
I'm so glad to finally meet you."

The others got to where we'd been gathered and Elysia clambered onto my lap. Laura smiled and
waved at me and after I'd introduced everyone she said to Sciezka, "I've always thought that Jean is
a perfect gentleman. Even Elysia is enchanted with him."

Gracia put a hand over her mouth and Sciezka joked, "Gosh, he sure has you fooled!"

I grinned, then reached over to pull Sciezka closer to me and she leaned over to kiss me and then
said, "Not that I'm complaining... much."

Elysia whispered in my ear shyly and I smiled, and then gave her a hug. Then I announced, "The
Princess here is hungry and so am I. What would everyone think about going for some dinner?"

Ron looked to Jim and he nodded and smiled then said, "I'll go call to let them know you'll be back
late."

Sciezka leaned over again and quietly suggested, "You boys freshen up. I'll show Laura around
while you're at it."

She kissed me again quickly and scolded, "I don't know why you think that rank liquor is so great."

Smirking I said, "Good, that means fewer people I have to share it with."

She tousled my hair and then showed Laura inside.

I noticed she had a small shopping bag with her that I recognized. Once I was sure she was out of earshot I whispered to Ron, "Just like I was telling you guys... she brought home a surprise for me."

Ron blushed and replied, "I'd kiss your feet or something, but yeah. I worship you, truly."

He couldn't keep a straight face and we both cracked up again. I said, "We should get inside and get ready before we get ourselves into trouble."

As we passed the kitchen on the way in Jim just shook his head at us, smiled and then mouthed, "Incorrigible."

On the way over to the cafe for dinner Elysia chose Ron's lap over mine. It was cute watching her ask shyly, then climbing on and I noticed that it made Laura smile. I left Sciezka's side for a moment to tease Ron and sounding genuinely upset I said, "I thought I'd never have someone steal my girl again. Elysia, I'm shocked! Do you like Ron better than me? You aren't going to marry him, are you?"

Ron chuckled and replied, "My girl here just has good taste."

"I'm sorry Ron, I'm too young to get married," Elysia said, her tone very serious.

Ron sighed dramatically and replied, "I suppose you are right. Will you wait for me?"

We all stopped to listen to Elysia's answer. She blushed and whispered in Ron's ear since the audience made her shy. When she was finished, Ron said, "Elysia, you've made me the happiest man alive."

I kept my amusement to myself, though I wrapped an arm around Sciezka's thigh and when I had her attention quietly said, "No that would be me."

Sciezka leaned over for a chaste kiss and then replied, "Then that would make me the happiest woman."

"You are all being silly and mushy!" Elysia complained.

Jim assumed the lead, taking Gracia's hand and then said, "You heard the boss, let's hurry up and get some dinner."

Once we arrived at our destination we were seated quickly for a large group. We were able to sit out front so we could enjoy the night air and watch people walk by. Everyone found something that they liked and we all talked animatedly. Laura and Ron seemed to be getting along famously and it turned out they were both from near West City. While I was interested in the group, I was also very interested in Sciezka. There was something different about her that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Maybe it was that she seemed more confident and relaxed. I could hardly wait to
hear about what she and Laura had done and talked about. She looked like she had very much enjoyed the day and as I continued studying her I took her hand and laced our fingers together. I looked down at our hands, my hand almost completely enveloping hers. When I turned it over to check the time on her wristwatch was when I saw it. The barest hint of pale pink polish on perfectly filed, buffed and manicured nails. I squeezed her hand as I whispered, "This is new. What color is on your toes?"

She flushed and said, "It's a surprise. Not that I mind all your attention focused on me, but shouldn't you pay more attention to the dinner conversation?"

I nodded and quietly replied, "I noticed you had a bag from my favorite store..."

After kissing me quickly, presumably to shut me up she said, "That's also a surprise."

Dinner and then dessert at Gracia's was going to seem like forever.

On the way over to Gracia's I offered Elysia a ride and thankfully she accepted. Ron and Laura lagged behind the group and seemed to be talking up a storm. I would have to drop by Ron's room Monday after my swim to see how it went in his opinion.

Once we'd had dessert, vanilla ice cream with the last of the strawberries, Elysia was put to bed. We all talked over a glass of wine and I for one had a great time. Around 20:00 hours Jim checked his watch, then looked over to Ron who smiled as he said, "It's been a long day. Thanks, everyone, it was great. But I don't want to be declared A.W.O.L."

Laura stood up and discreetly handed Ron a slip of paper, what I assumed to be her phone number. Then she stretched and said, "I should think about heading home too."

"While I'm at it, I'll give you a lift, if you'd like," Jim offered.

As long as everyone else was heading out I thought Sciezka and I might as well too. There was the matter of that little bag to investigate. I feigned a yawn and said, "I agree Ron it's been a long day. Sciezka are you ready to head home?"

She agreed, we said our goodnights and went home. Once we'd cleared the door I pulled Sciezka onto my lap and she teased, "I thought you said you were tired."

I nipped at her earlobe, causing her to squirm and replied, "I always have plenty of energy for you. That and I'm still curious about what was in that shopping bag."

After pushing us both into the bedroom I got to find out.

We slept in on Sunday until almost noon and I smiled as I passed the bits of black lace lingerie strewn across the bedroom floor on my way to make coffee. Sciezka's foot was hanging off the side of the bed and I paused to admire the bright red polish on her toes. It was attention to little details like that that made women incredibly alluring to me. Maybe it was the air of mystery with all the potions and lotions they used, or that they carried themselves differently after being pampered. As Sciezka said it was just wrapping, but who doesn't like surprises?

After a light breakfast and a long shower, I put on a pair of sweats and got ready to stretch on the floor for a while. Once I was finished I'd scheduled a marathon study session. I had exams in two weeks and papers due in three. I was more than a little anxious and could feel the tension building in my shoulders and back.

As I was spreading blankets on the living room rug Sciezka peered over my shoulder and asked,
"What are you up to?"

"I thought I might get in a workout and some stretching. All that sitting yesterday did me in. Then I'm going to hit the books. I have so much due in the next few weeks."

She smiled and said, "Mind if I join you for the work out? I haven't practiced any poses or meditated in ages."

I smiled and replied, "Sure, go for it. Hopefully I'll learn something, and I'd like the company."

As she walked into the bedroom to change into something more comfortable I thought to myself, \textit{besides it'll be entertaining to watch.}

She came back out in loose, flowing pants and a tank top and then joined me on the floor. She pulled her legs into a position that looked extremely uncomfortable, closed her eyes, placed her palms face up on her thighs and began breathing deeply. It was all I could do not to laugh.

As I started doing the stretches I could manage on my own she opened her eyes and asked, "Is there anything I can help with? I know a lot of your P.T. is done by Jim or an assistant."

I was silent while I thought it over and while she waited for an answer she got on her back and pulled her knees to her chest. After careful consideration, I answered, "Sure you can help if you want to. I'd like that. You've watched my sessions enough times."

She smiled as I told her what to do and once we finished she sat back down in that odd position and proceeded to work herself into a few more painful looking poses with ease. She paused and then said, "I bet we could adapt a few of these. I think you'd like it."

I smirked and said, "Me... do yoga? I was mostly teasing Breda when I suggested it."

I went along with her suggestion anyway since she seemed so eager for me to try. She was right. A lot of the seated poses could be adapted and once I got used to the deep breathing, I liked it. She smirked as I moved into what she called a modified Lotus and then felt along my ribs. I continued breathing deeply and she said, "You won't believe it, but you're going to feel this later."

I rolled my eyes and teased, "Yes, oh wise one, Swami Sciezka."

She got on the floor next to me, flat on her back looking utterly relaxed and I asked, "So is that a pose too? That one looks easy."

After cracking an eye to glare at me she replied, "It's called Corpse pose and it's more difficult than it looks. You have to relax every muscle and let every thought go."

I wrangled myself into position to try it and she was right. It was hard not to let thoughts creep in around the edges.

I grew impatient, sat up and noticed that Master Havoc had enjoyed the workout. Sciezka slowly roused, then rolled to her side. When she opened her eyes, she was mere inches from my lap. Her eyes sparkled with amusement as she said, "We've worked hard, what would you say to a little play?"

I rolled her onto her back and began working her pants down over her hipbones in reply. She squirmed with glee - I'd apparently hit one of her more ticklish spots - and then lifted her hips to help wriggle out of her pants. She sat up, peeled off her tank top and said, "Now it's your turn."
She had me lie back as she worked my pants off. When she'd finished, she sat back on her heels with a mischievous smirk on her face and said, "There, now we're even. Whatever should we do next?"

After propping myself up on an elbow I grinned and said, "I think I should show you my gratitude for helping with my workout. Does that sound good?" She nodded and gently pushed me back to the floor and straddled my chest, giving me easy access and a prime view. I could tell she was already quite worked up and that only made me want her more. It didn't take much for her to reach her first climax and after she'd rested for a few moments she gracefully shifted position so she sat on my thighs. I sat up so I could better see what she was doing. After kissing me passionately she lightly raked her fingers across my chest, then lower and a chill ran up my spine causing me to shiver. She grinned and then took my erection in one hand while she toyed with my hair with the other.

We shifted so I could sit in a more stable position and she settled with her knees on either side of my thighs. I quickly checked to see where she'd put her glasses and she nipped at my lower lip and then said, "They're on the coffee table so don't worry."

"You read my mind," I teased and then placed my hands on her hips.

She took hold of my erection again and slowly eased onto it. Resting on my lap for a moment she kissed me again, languorously and deeply. Swiveling her hips tentatively at first, then faster I felt relaxed and aroused all at once. I caressed her folds as her muscles pulsed around me rhythmically. We were each barely moving, yet it was so intense. She began the deep breathing she'd shown me again and I followed. The orgasm built slowly, almost torturously so and as I came she again swiveled her hips and fluttered around me, prolonging my climax. She finally shuddered against me and I gently lowered us to the floor, still joined. She put her forehead to mine and we exchanged slow, tender kisses. After sliding off of me she put her head on my chest and draped a leg over mine, idly drawing circles on the sensitive skin of my forearms.

We both drifted off for a bit and when we awoke Sciezka reluctantly got up and dressed to work on packing some of her books while I concentrated on my studies. We both agreed that neither of us would get much accomplished if we stayed together at the house.

When Sciezka got home she looked tired, but happy. As we ate supper she told me that she'd gotten quite a lot accomplished and we'd be able to complete the move soon. We went to bed early to get ready for the week since I didn't want Sciezka getting run-down again.

Monday was routine for both of us and I picked Sciezka and some documents up from H.Q. after my swim. This time would be easier as it was a thin file and the copy would go to Seth. I could return the original on Tuesday at the range after my session with Jim.

Things seemed almost too easy. I was knocked out of the sense of confidence I'd been lulled into when Ling - no, he was Greed now - pushed his way on to the elevator with me on Wednesday after lunch. After hitting the emergency stop button he grinned, showing a pointed smile and had an almost feral look in his eyes as he said, "Looking through the Prince's memories I see you finally hit a stroke of luck with the ladies. Well one in particular. I must say I'm a bit surprised, I never realized the mousy little bookworm had it in her. Good for you, you lucky boy. How is she?"

I clenched my teeth as I said, "Leave her out of it. What do you want?"

"Oh, I want it all. Who could blame me?" he answered casually.

Quite irritated at his flippancy I said, "That didn't answer my question. What do you want from
me?"

"So suspicious, aren't we? I can't blame you. My dearly departed sister did a number on you, though you're still quite attractive and apparently not as out of commission as some originally thought," he said almost seductively, his eyes trailing down my body.

He leaned over and I did my best not to flinch as he hissed in my ear, "Just wanted to remind you that the walls have eyes and ears. Be careful pretty boy."

This was confusing; whose side was he on now? He read my puzzled expression expertly and assured me, "My only loyalty is to myself. You seem to be serving my purposes, for now. Carry on."

He pressed the stop button again and when we arrived at the second floor he stealthily slipped out of the elevator, strode down the hall and waved back at me as he disappeared around a corner.

I couldn't be too careful since one of those things was a shape shifter who could take on anyone's appearance. My heart sank. How would I even know? What if I gave the documents to - it - by mistake? I nearly dropped the key to the washroom and it took a few turns to finally get inside and splash some water on my face.

I didn't even want to think about how he knew such details about Sciezka.

Laura was all smiles before class. Hearing about how she and Sciezka had spent the day took my mind off of all the unsettling matters for a while. Constantly worrying wouldn't fix anything; it would just drive me nuts. I didn't ask about Ron, but as we chatted I mentioned I'd be at the hospital the next day for therapy, and Laura smiled and casually commented, "I might run into you there."

"So, you two hit it off?" I asked. "Wow, that's great!"

"Sciezka and I got to talking and you came up, don't be mad at her... I made an observation about how thoughtful you are and the topic of conversation came down to what you were like, well before," she stammered and then blushed.

I sighed and then said, "It's ok. I don't mind much. I'm pretty used to it. In fact, I'd rather people just asked. That's my piece of advice on the 'Ron subject'.'"

She nodded, seeming to understand, and I continued, "But if you have any questions or concerns about if you can handle it in the long run, I'd be more than willing to help. I got lucky with Sciezka. I don't think most girls would understand, and she's hung in there through some pretty rough stuff."

Laura processed what I'd said for a moment, and then replied, "Thank you for being honest. The last thing I would want to do is to hurt him."

Class started and I focused on the lecture to take my mind off of everything. I'd really need a session at the range or more of that yoga soon.

After class Seth came with the study group to the coffee house. I was able to give the file to him and included a note that alluded to my run-in in the elevator and needing to establish an alternate drop site for files in the future. If I ever needed to store or hide things, I'd decided that mixing it into the box of porn would work. That was where I'd stashed Sciezka's father's research until I figured out a way to break it to her gently.

We had finished discussing the recent chapters and concepts and were goofing off by the time
Sciezka arrived out of breath, with a bewildered looking Winry in tow. This was very much out of the norm and it worried me. Sciezka getting out of work late wasn't a concern; she stayed late all the time when she was wrapped up with something. *What was Winry doing in Central?* It would have to wait until after the rest of the group left. I greeted them both warmly, introduced Winry to everyone and they sat down with us after Chris and Dan left.

Winry went to get herself something to drink and while she was away I studied Sciezka, attempting to figure out what had gone wrong as surely something had. She was jumpy. She was talkative and friendly with Laura and Seth but something wasn't quite right. When I placed a hand on her thigh, to rub it and reassure her, I felt it. It was unmistakable, she had a leg holster on and upon discovery she crossed her legs and shot me a look that clearly said, "Not now."

When Winry got back to the table Seth said his goodbyes and left. Since Winry had gotten her drink to-go the rest of us left soon afterward. Laura walked part of the way with us. As soon as she was in her apartment I whispered to Sciezka while pointing at her leg, "What exactly is that?"

Winry protested, "It was the Colonel's idea."

I gritted my teeth to prevent myself from saying something I'd later regret, but I was furious. I had known that Sciezka wanted to learn to shoot- I hated the idea but I loved her and wanted her to be safe- but Winry was a child, granted she was an engineering prodigy, but a weapon seemed like too much. Winry was a civilian and should be back in Rush Valley practicing her craft, not here, in the middle of all this. As for Sciezka? I hadn't wanted her to be involved in any of this either and here she was packing heat! My mind went fuzzy remembering all the times she had tripped over her own feet and fallen flat on her face and hoped with all my heart that Riza's teachings were as ingrained in her memory as the texts she effortlessly absorbed and recalled at will. Once we were home Winry made herself scarce and Sciezka stalked into the bedroom, closing the door behind her. I followed her and as soon as I got in there she whirled on me and said sternly, "It's not up for debate. Don't hold this against Riza or Roy either."

I started to speak and then thought better of it. In truth, there was nothing else that could be done to ensure her protection when I wasn't with her. They say to choose your battles wisely, and I decided that a strategic retreat was in order. Rather than staying in the house fuming I thought it was best to get out and cool off before we talked.

"I need to go to the library tonight, you're welcome to come along," I announced, hoping she'd refuse the invitation.

She replied, "Winry and I are going to pack some more of my books, but thanks for asking."

At least she wasn't mad or didn't seem like she was mad. She kissed me on the cheek and before I left I asked, "Would you like me to bring home a late supper?"

After considering my offer, she seemed to soften, then nodded and smiled.

I left, relieved that we weren't fighting about this.

While I was at the library I forced myself to concentrate on the task at hand and found a few more books that seemed to support my arguments and assertions. I hoped Sciezka had already read them; otherwise I would have a *lot* of work to do. I was pretty sure about what I was going to try to say, and in my estimation, that would be winning half of the battle right there. Satisfied that I'd done enough research for the night I headed home.

I stopped at the neighborhood cafe on the way home and got soup, salad and pie for them.
Everyone likes pie. Maybe it would help lighten the atmosphere.

Sciezka ruffled my hair and then grabbed the bag of take-out while Winry grabbed some drinks from the ice box. I was relieved that she was in what seemed to be a much better mood. We ate in the living room and Winry offered to do the dishes as she said to "make up" for imposing on our hospitality. Even after I insisted she was always welcome she added, "Besides Jim and I have major plans for you tomorrow. Go get some rest."

I sighed and then asked, "When you put it that way, ok. You can wash the dishes. Now I'm worried."

Winry winked and replied, "Trust me, you'll like it."

"You two always say that and you're usually right. Though somehow it always means more work for me," I said and then smiled.

Sciezka joined me shortly after dinner in the bedroom and sat down next to me on the bed. She smiled, swallowed hard and then asked, "Could you please teach me how to clean and maintain a pistol?"

I pulled her closer to me, held her for a moment and then answered, "Of course. Go get it, mine too and I'll demonstrate on mine, while you do yours. Bring them out to the dining room."

I spread the table with newspaper so we could clean up easily. When she sat down I began telling her about the various solvents and the importance of proper firearms handling, and drew a few quick pictures to make sure my instructions stuck in her photographic memory. After both weapons were cleaned, oiled and reloaded I had Sciezka strip hers down and reassemble it one more time. Satisfied that she'd learned the necessities I put my sidearm away, washed my hands and went back to bed. Sciezka curled up next to me and fell asleep quickly. I stayed awake for a while thinking about everything that had happened during the day and finally willed myself to just stop so I get some sleep.

Winry made breakfast before Sciezka left for work and we left for the hospital. She cleared away the dishes while I showered. As we headed out I noticed she had a large case with her. I was curious about what it could possibly be. When I asked her about it she remained tight lipped.

Once at the hospital Jim met us out front with coffee. This can't be good. He only ever brings coffee when there is bad news. Last time it was my check up with Doctor Parker. He handed us each a cup as he said, "I have a favor to ask."

I groaned, fished for my cigarettes, lit up and then asked, "What is it? I knew when you had coffee waiting for me that it couldn't be good."

"It won't be that bad. Doctor Parker and some other muckity-mucks from neurology and orthopedics would like to observe your therapy session today."

I shrugged and then replied, "Sure, I don't mind. Was that the surprise Winry hinted about yesterday?"

She blushed, grinned and then said, "Oh no. You will like the surprise. Though I imagine Doctor Parker will want to watch."
After shaking my head I said, "I'm not even sure I want to know what you two have cooked up. I throw myself on your mercy."

"Stop being so dramatic," Jim said and then chuckled.

Winry patted my shoulder as she said, "If they like what they see they'll adopt this rehab model in all of the military hospitals."

I pitched my cigarette butt into the can near the door and said, "Fine, I'm willing to sacrifice my dignity for the betterment of Amestris."

Jim had me change into shorts as soon as I got down to the rehab department. Doctor Parker and the other physicians exchanged pleasantries and introductions while Jim put me through my first set of range of motion exercises. Next Winry hooked me up for a short electro stimulation treatment. Parker and the others marveled at how "well preserved" my muscle mass in the affected extremities was. After a few quick sets on the ball and one set each of pushups and chin ups Winry disappeared while Jim stretched me out again. She came back with the large case, set it down next to me with a flourish and whispered to me, "The final version of the braces, the first set was just a prototype."

I grinned and replied, "This is a good surprise. Let's do it!"

While Jim explained what we'd be doing and the many benefits of standing for rehab patients Winry went to work on me. This set was lighter, appeared to be less bulky and much easier to get me strapped into. I was able to transfer from the raised mats to my chair unassisted and once at the parallel bars pull myself to standing on my own. Once I was sure of my footing I propelled myself forward using my hands.

Jim explained to the observers, "We've had Jean standing for about a month working up to this. By increasing his upper body and core strength he is now ready to try short distances on crutches."

This made me nervous, but I knew Jim and Winry wouldn't push me to do anything that was beyond my abilities or dangerous

I was able to stand for almost a half hour total and take a few faltering steps with the crutches. Jim stood in front of me coaching me and Winry followed closely behind with the chair. It wasn't walking as I'd plant the crutches firmly and then swing through, but it was upright motion. When it appeared to Jim that I was becoming tired and unsteady he and Winry stood on either side of me and eased me back into the wheel chair. After I wiped the sweat dripping into my eyes with the towel Winry thoughtfully handed to me I burst out laughing. *I'd only gone a few yards at most but I'd been standing! I'd done it!*

Doctor Parker cleared his throat and after turning to the other physicians looked to me and said, "I wouldn't have thought it was possible. Even without this development you've proven that this rehabilitation model works. Congratulations you've earned it."

Next, he turned to Jim and said, "Mr. Bruno, you've really turned this program around. It was brilliant bringing Miss Rockbell and her expertise in."

They both blushed at the compliments and then left to eat lunch and talk shop about what replicating the program would entail. Winry hugged me before they left and then Jim shook my hand and said, "Well done and thank you. Go find Ron and get some lunch. But don't eat too
much. You and Ron will be doing a demonstration in the pool afterwards."

"Glad I could help out. As much as Parker used to bug me, he's a good guy. I'll see you later. Oh, how did you get Ron to agree to this?" I asked.

Jim winked as he replied, "I told him you were already on board."

"That was sneaky. I think I'm offended," I said and sniffled.

Winry cuffed me on the back of the head and scolded, "Behave!"

I almost bumped into Ron in the hall on the way out of the therapy room. He smiled and said, "Just the man I was looking for. How did it go?"

"It went really well. Winry brought the finished braces and I was able to go a few yards by myself," I replied grinning ear to ear.

He shook my hand vigorously and then asked, "Did it impress Parker and the other white coats?"

I nodded and said, "He sounded pretty impressed. We should get some chow. Remember; don't eat too much since you're swimming too."

He grumbled a bit and I consoled him saying, "I'll sneak something up from the cafeteria before I leave for the day."

Once we'd gotten a table I decided to test the waters on the subject of Laura. He smiled when I mentioned I'd seen her in class the day before and his face grew flushed and he stammered as he said, "She's coming by today after class."

I was really happy for him, but worried. If things didn't go well with Laura it had the potential to crush him. I kept that thought to myself as I asked, "So what do you two talk about?"

"We talk about out West and stuff. She says she makes a mean stew and they do something different to it back home. I like hearing about her classes. She and Jim have the idea that I should get my teaching certificate," he replied.

"They're trying to railroad you into academia too!" I exclaimed. "What do you think about it all?"

He considered my question and then replied, "You'll laugh, but when I was a kid I always really admired my teachers. Home was rough and my teachers though they were strict were kind and fair, and smart and clean. That's probably one of the reasons I got along with Laura so well right off. I think I always had a crush on my teachers."

"You're good with Elysia and quick on the uptake. I think you'd be a great teacher," I stated sincerely.

He chuckled nervously before he said, "I'm worried that the chair might hinder me. Laura disproved that idea soundly. Especially when she argued that children are more comfortable with it than most adults."

"I think she's right about that. Elysia readily accepted it, even after she found out that I was hurt, but ok as I could be. She doesn't pity me, just likes me for who I am. That's why I'm so lucky to have her and Sciezka. Honestly, I think sometimes she forgets I'm different," I said.

Ron thought about that for a moment, averted his eyes and quietly said, "I'm happy that Laura is
my friend, I think I'd like more. Just friends would be fine too, better than nothing."

"Just take things slowly. Make sure you two talk and are honest. If it's meant to happen it will," I advised and then got ready to leave.

He followed me and on the way out said, "Thanks and you should seriously consider being a head shrink. You're a good listener. Heck, even though you probably knew what I was thinking you pulled it out of me instead of telling me how I feel."

Swimming went well and once I got out and changed I found Winry in the P.T. room. She was crating up the braces and when she spotted me said, "These and the crutches are going home with you."

I winked and then joked, "See, I told you most of your surprises mean more work."

She didn't beat me. Instead she secured the crutches to the back of my chair with twine, then picked up the case and said, "Let's get this stuff home. Then you can thank me properly at the specialty hardware store. We'll get you something to eat too. You must be delirious from hunger to sass me like that."

I turned to go and replied, "Yes Ma'am. Will it be the deluxe ratchet and socket set today?"

She squealed and did that machine freak dance that I'd come to know well and enjoy. Then she hugged me tightly and practically dragged me out to the lobby.

It was settled. After we stopped home to drop off our things and freshen up we were going shopping. Though I insisted on getting something to eat first as I didn't want the extortion at the hardware store to be too exorbitant.

Winry made sure I was fed, as she was hungry too. She'd barely touched her lunch because she was so excited. Our next stop was an automail shop. I made good on my word and got her the chrome plated socket set she'd been coveting for ages. She squeezed me tightly around the neck to thank me. The window display next door caught her attention and I almost left without her since she was stunned speechless. Once I realized I was talking to myself I turned around and went back to where she was standing and staring.

There were pocket watches in the window that I figured she was just itching to take apart. She had a faraway look on her face and I decided I wouldn't pry. I moved over to the next window attempting to look busy to give her some space. This display caught my interest as it was filled with rings. After my run in with Greed I definitely had that on my mind. A ring wouldn't protect either of us, but I'd feel better if we made it official. Winry snapped out of it and came over to stand next to me. She nudged me and I swallowed hard and nodded. She smiled as I quietly said, "Don't tell her about this. None of these are right. They're all too big and flashy, all the same. She wouldn't like one like this at all."

Winry grinned and said, "You're right. None of these suit her taste. Want to look someplace else? I can keep a secret."

I thanked her and we headed down the street to see if anything caught my eye. I was defeated. At every store on the High Street it was just more of the same. So many stores had huge rings that would look silly on Sciezka's delicate hands and catch on things driving her nuts. I gave up. I'd have to have something custom made to even remotely equal how unique and amazing she was.
Just as I was about to give up and suggest we go home I found that we were in front of the little shop where I'd had so much success finding just the right thing. I figured it couldn't hurt to browse. Maybe I'd find a small surprise for Sciezka. I still felt bad about the argument we'd had the night before.

The proprietor was sitting at the counter when we went in. The bell on the door startled him. He carefully put down what he was working on and took off his loop. When he came around the counter he wiped his hands on his apron and then shook my hand. I introduced him to Winry and apparently Gracia had mentioned her too. I smiled as he showed her some heavy-duty hand cream. She pulled me over suggesting I needed some too. She was right. I still hadn't bothered to dig through my boxes to find a pair of leather gloves. I'd have to do that when we got home.

We continued browsing and before I had him ring us up I peered in the glass case. It was all beautiful, but nothing was jumping out at me. He'd sat back down to continue working. I watched as he worried at something with a flannel cloth. When he noticed, he looked up and asked, "Would you like to see it?"

His work was always beautiful and I was genuinely interested. I smiled as I said, "Sure."

When he opened his hand, there was a tiny ring that sparkled brilliantly. He handed it to me and I put it on my pinkie finger. It only went to the first knuckle. As I studied it further I noted that it had a small, oval-shaped, deep blue stone set in it. When I held it up to the light the four minute, but perfect diamonds set flush in the ring fragmented the light, covering the work bench with fiery reflections.

His chuckle brought me back to attention. Then he said, "It's a beauty, isn't it? One of my experiments with mixed metals. It's white gold with platinum plating to be precise. I'm pretty partial to the bezel set as it shows off the stone and protects it."

I tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice as I asked, "So it isn't for sale?"

Grinning he said, "No, it isn't for sale to just anyone, though it would look perfect on the right woman."

I could feel my cheeks heating up as I stammered, "Actually I've been looking all afternoon for the right one and I'd given up."

Winry came over from behind a display of stationary she'd been looking at and when she saw the ring her jaw dropped and she exclaimed, "That is the one! It's perfect!"

It was confirmed. It would be perfect. I wrote a check for our purchases as I never carried that much cash. He handed Winry a small paper bag and me a small, velvet covered

On the way home Winry could barely contain her excitement. She decided the best bet would be to visit Gracia and Elysia when we got home so she wouldn't blurt out the secret.

Winry stuck around long enough to make sure I was able to get the braces on properly and to ensure that I could stand and then sit down safely. Once she was satisfied she wished me good luck, hugged me tightly and left for Gracia's. As she opened the door I said, "You're the best! Oh, and remember I'm not asking her just yet."

She turned to me and replied, "Don't worry. My lips are sealed until I see the ring on her finger."
I waited in the kitchen for Sciezka to get home from work. When I heard a key in the lock I held onto the counter and pulled myself to stand. After getting turned around so I could see her face when she walked in I called to Sciezka, "I'm glad you're home! I'm in the kitchen."

She stood in the doorway looking confused when she saw the wheel chair with me not in it. The expression on her face was priceless. She furrowed her brows and scanned the room. Her jaw dropped when she finally saw me and she rushed over to where I was standing and threw her arms around me. The impact nearly knocked me over and I gripped the edge of the counter to steady myself. She looked up at me, stunned speechless for a moment and then finally exclaimed, "Oh, Jean! You did it! You really did it!"

I wrapped my arms around her as she rested her head on my chest and squeezed me around the waist with all her might. Savoring the sensation and the view I dipped my head, resting it against hers and whispered, "I wanted to surprise you. I've been working up to it for a while. We've got Winry and Jim to thank."

She looked up at me again, stood on tiptoe and still couldn't reach for a kiss. I winked as I suggested, "There's a step stool in the pantry or you could hop up on the counter."

"It's not that I'm short. You're just really tall," she teased as she got on the counter. "Mmm... you're handsome too."

I steadied myself by placing my hand on her knees as I pivoted. She wrapped her legs around my hips to pull me closer and help me stay upright. After kissing, for what seemed like not long enough at all, I began to feel tired. Nuzzling Sciezka's ear I said as I nibbled, "You should come to my sessions. This makes the time pass faster."

She brushed my bangs out of my eyes, noticing the sweat beginning to bead and said, "This was an amazing surprise. I'm so proud of you."

I smiled as I asked, "If you would get my chair for me that would be great. I'm sort of stranded."

Once she brought my chair over to me she helped me ease back into it. After kissing me again passionately she suggested we take a hot bath and then celebrate my progress.

With Winry in town the house was bustling with activity and I can't say I minded it. On Saturday Sciezka got help packing the rest of her things from Gracia, Jim and Winry. I volunteered to watch Elysia at the house and direct the movers when they arrived. While they were away I had Andrew from the furniture store come over to take measurements of the library and help me select furniture. He promised that he could have it all arranged by the end of the week. Between the two of us we came up with something Sciezka would love. I'd decided to create the library of her dreams, a room as unique and precious as she was to me.

The ring was still burning a hole in my pocket on Saturday. I'd distracted myself by organizing my things, finally finding my leather gloves and making room for Sciezka's boxes. Elysia kept me company some of the time, singing, telling me stories about school and jokes. Once she was bored with me went to the guest room to play with her toys. That's when I quickly transported the boxes of porn to the back of my closet. When Sciezka and Winry got back we all went out for dinner at Pane Fresco to thank everyone for helping with the move. I suggested that Elysia sit with us while Gracia and Jim sat out of sight. Sal winked at Jim and then showed them to an out of the way table in the back.
Winry left for Rush Valley on Sunday afternoon. She gave me an extra hug while we waited on the platform with her. She whispered, "Have her call me."

I smiled, flushing at the thought of popping the question and kept quiet because I was sure I'd give it away if I spoke.

We were standing at the sink taking care of the dinner dishes. Yes, standing. I'd found that one of the best places in the house to practice was hanging onto the kitchen counters or leaning against them. I washed, Sciezka dried and she joked, "You are one of the few men I know who likes washing dishes."

I chuckled and then quipped, "The novelty will eventually wear off, and I'll be as bad as the rest of them. Plus, I like it when you get wet and your clothes cling against those curves of yours even tighter."

She was smiling as she replied, "I knew that even you would have a secondary objective here."

For the next few minutes she washed the dishes and I dried them and it dawned on me.

I didn't need to wrack my brain to come up with some elaborate plan to give Sciezka the ring that seemed to be burning a hole in my pocket. This was what I'd always wanted and had never found with every girl before her. I wanted a partnership with someone who I could tell everything, even my darkest secrets and fears. I didn't need someone to complete me and neither did she. We were both good enough on our own, but so much better together. Through all the change and mess, she was there, unconditionally and if the worst happened in the future I wanted her to know that regardless, it was forever, for better or for worse.

I handed Sciezka the last plate to be put into the cupboard and then held onto the counter. This was it. I turned around carefully, so I was leaning against the counter, it wouldn't do to topple over. I didn't want this to be another memorable moment that involved a trip to the hospital.

I cleared my throat and then began, "Sciezka, I have never been so sure of something in my life as I am about this. I want us stay like this forever."

I paused and she looked over at me, cocked her head in confusion and asked, "You want to wash dishes forever? Stand? What?"

Shaking my head no and smiling I started over, "This would make a lot more sense... close your eyes for a bit."

She held her breath as she felt the small soft box in her hands, her eyebrows rising in anticipation. "Open your eyes."

Her eyes filled with what I had come to know as happy tears, and she tilted her gaze upward until her eyes met mine. I began, "It would make the luckiest man alive if you allow me to keep a promise to you..."

I hesitated and she nodded for me to continue, "This isn't an obligation for you, but a promise from me. I promise to love and protect you until the day I die. Sciezka, will you marry me?"

She wrapped her arms around me, tightly and then stood on tiptoe and kissed me hard. When she
finally broke the kiss, she exclaimed, "Yes! Did you even have to ask? Well, yes yes of course you
did... oh Jean... oh Jean... yes yes yes!"

I took the box from her, opened it carefully, took out the ring, held her hand and then slipped it on
her finger. It was a perfect fit. I said, "I picked this out and wracked my brain trying to find a way
to propose that was as unique and wonderful as you are, but then I realized that everything that we
have together is amazing. Even doing the dishes, as long as I'm with you is where I want to be. So
this was the perfect time." As she held out her hand to get a better look at it I said, "Come spring,
whether it's in front of a justice of the peace or the biggest wedding in Central, we'll be married. No
matter what, come what may."

She wrapped her arms around me again and said, "Let's go in the other room where I can properly
show you how happy this makes me. "This was the best moment of my life. My heart was soaring
as we exchanged more promises and declarations of love under the covers.

Outside our window, even the birds were singing.
Waking up next to Sciezka never ceased to amaze me. I was reluctant to get out of bed and start the day on Monday, but we couldn't stay in bed together for the rest of our lives - though we agreed it would have been fun to try. I rolled over and kissed her awake and she smiled as she reciprocated. After taking care of the necessaries I started the shower and per our pleasant routine Sciezka joined me. Once we were both dressed we headed to the neighborhood cafe for breakfast, another part of our established schedule. We were loathe to part for the day, but eventually gave into the inevitable and kissed goodbye before I headed to the university and Sciezka to work.

Class with General Lockheed went well and we ate lunch together next to the fountain. Mrs. Lockheed had packed an extra lemon bar just for me and while we worked on dessert I said, "I think that since we are dealing with masters of disguise we should work out an authentication code amongst ourselves. What do you think?"

The General nearly choked as he laughed and once he regained his composure replied, "That's a little out of the blue, but it's a good idea. What made you think of that?"

Once I'd looked around to be sure that there were no eavesdroppers I said quietly, "I got a visit from a friend last week. We know what he looks like and he doesn't worry me too much. It's the shape shifter that bothers me. That thing could be anyone, anywhere."

"Agreed, so what should the word be?" he asked.

I discreetly pointed at the remnants of my dessert. He smiled, nodded and then said, "Good choice, that would require a more intimate knowledge of our day to day activities than I believe they possess."

We went back into the Humanities Building together and I caught Seth as he was coming out of his office. I was able to communicate the password to him before class. Thankfully he was catching onto espionage tactics so it didn't require an explanation.

After class I went to Headquarters. I had to talk to Roy, wanted to see Sciezka and needed to let off some steam at the firing range. I dropped by the Investigations Department first and Sciezka appeared busy, but not too stressed. She smiled when she noticed me and beckoned for me to come over to her desk. The first thing she asked after kissing me hello was, "So have you told anyone..."
I smirked as I replied, "Not a soul. I kind of like having a secret just between us."

She grinned and said, "Me too, though I think we should tell Gracia and Jim together. I can hardly wait to see their faces."

"That goes without saying. We should invite them all over or something. I imagine Elysia will be thrilled about it, if we make her a flower girl," I added with a wink.

Sciezka nodded in agreement and then stood up to stretch. When she sat back down I started rubbing her shoulders and we chatted a bit. She could take a short break, for her future husband.

"I think I'd like to tell Riza today, if that's ok with you. She's been a friend to me through all of this and a true confidant for a long while now. She was the one who told me to just go for it when we first started seeing each other."

"Really?" Sciezka asked.

"Yes, really," I replied and then continued. "Those first few times at the range I really opened up to her. She seemed to understand as well as anyone could have and didn't judge what I said, or have lower expectations for me. I didn't have Breda to talk to and didn't want to burden Gracia with any more than I already was. I know it sounds horrible, but I really don't think of Riza as anything other than a soldier and friend. She's like one of the guys, but smarter."

She snickered and then replied seriously, "Coming from anyone other than you that would sound awful. But I get it. She gets you. Go tell her."

"Will do," I said and then stole a quick kiss before asking, "How about we grab a quick dinner and then head to the university library? I know you've been dying to see it. Does that sound like a plan?"

She shooed me out and called after me, "Pick me up later, you're on!"

When I stopped by Roy's office he dismissed his subordinates early. They had kept up with the workload quite well. He was actually a bit ahead and it was only Monday. He suggested we go to a cafe just off base to talk since he was hungry after having worked through lunch. Once we got there it appeared he was a regular as instead of taking his order the waitress simply asked, "The usual?"

Roy nodded and then said, "Oh and anything my friend here wants as well."

I hadn't had time to look at the menu, but wasn't all that hungry. I decided one of those girly coffee drinks would taste good and the caffeine would help keep me focused at the library later.

The waitress came back quickly and brought Roy coffee, black and the most decadent looking chocolate dessert I'd ever seen.

"I didn't think you liked sweet stuff Chief," I remarked.

After savoring the first bite he replied, "Normally I don't. I make an exception for dark chocolate. You should take some home for Sciezka."

"Good idea," I agreed. "Now, the reason I came to see you today... I ran into Ling last week and I
have some security concerns."

His eyebrows arched at the mention of the Xingian Prince, but he let me continue.

"I think we need an authentication code or password. With what we're dealing with it's a sure way to know we're speaking with the proper person. The General and I thought 'lemon bar' would be easy enough. Doctor K is apprised and catching onto the cloak and dagger act quite well."

Roy smirked and commented casually, "Leave it to you to think with your stomach."

"I'm a simple man with simple tastes," I quipped.

He scoffed and said, "Your choices in linens and furnishings indicate otherwise."

I scowled and attempted to defend myself saying, "I resent that! That's Gracia's influence and you'd find it hard to resist too!"

Roy simply chuckled, paid the bill and headed back to his office. I ordered some of that mousse stuff to go for later, with an extra for Riza. I went to the firing range to shoot a little and talk to Riza, but she wasn't there. After I finished up and put away my piece I delivered the dessert to the Fuhrer's office.

She smiled when she saw the packaging, apparently recognizing it. I'd slipped a note written on a napkin in there telling her what the code word was. She'd know to destroy it. Before I left I asked, "Would you be free sometime this week to give me some more pointers at the range?"

Appearing worried she replied, "Sure, of course I can find time for you."

"It's nothing too pressing. How does tomorrow look for you?" I asked.

Nodding, her calm demeanor having returned she said, "I'll see you tomorrow around 15:00 after your swim."

I saluted as I left and she called after me, "Thank you for dessert!"

It was just about time for Sciezka to be dismissed so I headed to Investigations. Major Armstrong was still there and when I came in he announced in his booming voice, "Private your boyfriend is here to escort you home! A similar code of chivalry has been passed down the Armstrong line for generations."

I resisted the urge to laugh out loud as Armstrong added, "Go home to the nest young lovers. It touches my heart so!"

Sciezka quickly put away the files she was working on and we got out while the getting was good.

Once we were home Sciezka changed into civvies while I fixed sandwiches for dinner. I hid the chocolate mousse in the back of the icebox for later. I had an idea.

We ate quickly and then went to the library. The first hour we were there Sciezka helped me locate a few more sources for my research. I was glad she was there not only for the company, but because most of the titles I needed were on shelves higher than I could reach. She sat next to me, reading and taking notes. Not much later I could tell, in a huge library or not, she was getting antsy. She ran a finger up and down my forearm just so and I whispered, "Not here, not now."
She leaned over, feigning propriety as she cupped a hand over my ear, to disguise the fact she was in fact nibbling on it as she whispered, "You could sign out a study carrel..."

I abruptly closed the book I was reading and said, "I think we've done enough work for one night. Let's go home."

Once outside she giggled and said, "Don't you want to get it on with me in the library?"

I grabbed her around the waist, pulled her onto my lap and while nuzzling the back of her neck said, "I want to get it on with you everywhere. But I don't want my library privileges revoked."

It was quiet on campus and since there didn't seem to be anyone coming we made out for a few minutes before going home. I didn't let on that I already had plans for her when we got there.

Once we were home I could barely contain my excitement or keep my hands to myself. I could tell she was still pretty randy too since I'd made her behave in the library. On the way to the bedroom I quickly stashed my books on the coffee table and undid the top two buttons on my shirt. Sciezka smirked and teased suggestively, "You're not impatient at all, are you? Should I start stripping here or in the bedroom?"

I winked and replied, "You, on the bed. I'll be right in."

After quickly taking care of the necessaries I met her in the bedroom, fished through the nightstand for one of the scarves I'd gotten for my birthday and then handed it to her. She grinned in an almost feral way as she purred, "So who's getting tied up this time?"

"Nobody... put it on. I'll be right back and no peeking!" I called over my shoulder as I left the room.

In the kitchen, I quickly retrieved dessert and when I passed the vase of flowers Mrs. Smith had picked I had another idea. I grabbed a rose then took it all into the bedroom. Once in there I got the massage lotion as well. She was so good at overloading my senses; I was going to do my best to do the same to hers. She turned her head to the direction my voice was coming from and smiled when I announced I'd come back. She was sitting up in bed, fully clothed and I was glad. I loved getting her out of her clothes ever so slowly. It made mentally undressing her during the day while we were apart easier.

I set everything down on the nightstand and got into bed next to her. She smiled and asked, "What have you got planned?"

Once I'd checked the blindfold to make sure she wasn't peeking I began kissing her quickly and then pulling away, just out of her reach. I then replied, "You have no idea... trust me, you'll like it."

After fluffing the pillows behind her I took a small spoonful of the dark chocolate concoction and put it to her lips. She hesitated at first until she smelled it, then smiled and took the offering. She sighed with pleasure as she savored it and I teased, "It's good to let me spoil you."

I had a bite myself and completely agreed with Roy. This stuff was good. No wonder women loved chocolate so much. It was my favorite, but I could do without. I still didn't get the chocolate being better than sex references. There was no question I'd choose sex over chocolate every time. Though sex and chocolate? That was a great combination.

I kissed her again, this time deeper and savored the bitter-sweetness mingling on our tongues. When I broke the kiss, I fed her another bite, but missed and got a little dab on the corner of her
mouth. As I wiped it away with a finger she took it into her mouth, sucking on it slowly to get off every morsel. Enough of this, I thought, time for more.

I set the plate back on the nightstand and began unbuttoning Sciezka’s cardigan. She wriggled in anticipation and surprise since she was especially ticklish because she couldn't see what I was doing. I slipped it and her t-shirt off of her as she attempted to undo a few more of my buttons and failed miserably, giggling as she fell back against the pillows. Leaning over I guided her hands to the placket and she tried again. This time she succeeded.

She ran her hands over my chest, then under my shirt over my shoulders and biceps, helping me shrug off my shirt. Our pants were next, so we'd "be even" since the next part of the plan necessitated her being completely naked as I alternated brushing a rose over her skin with the lightest kisses. Her spine arched in ecstasy when I nuzzled her breasts, caressing them and teasing with the soft, cool petals. She squirmed and protested, "I think that was your eyelashes, it tickles! What are you doing?"

I kissed her again and apparently, my eyelashes tickled her cheek as well. She attempted to take off the blindfold and I stopped her by guiding her hand to my face. She smiled, caressed my cheek and said, "It's not fair for a boy to have such pretty eyes. You do know they're why you get your way so often, right?"

I went back to lavishing attention on her neck and breasts and mumbled a muffled, "Mm hmmm... "

Now that her every nerve was abuzz I took some of the lotion and gave nearly every part of her a rub down. She was growing frustrated since I had deliberately avoided her inner thighs as well as other hot spots. I was pretty sure she'd about had it when she sat up abruptly, flailed and finally grabbed me by the hair, bringing me to her lips, narrowly avoiding a collision with my nose.

I lay back in the spot she'd vacated, sighed contentedly and quipped, "All done, time to sleep."

She felt her way up my body, stopping at my shorts and then said with a slightly sinister edge as she worked them down, "Not on your life buster!"

It had all had the desired effect. I'd riled her up to almost her breaking point. Still blindfolded she began exacting her sweet revenge. She ground into me as she kissed me hungrily, her hands roaming everywhere, skillfully doing everything she could to bring me to the edge. It was unbelievably hot watching her work, wearing nothing but that red silk scarf. She stopped for a moment and commanded, "Scoot up closer to the head board."

I did as I was told, I didn't dare disobey, not now. Once she was satisfied she returned to her position astride me, knees tucked in tight. She placed a hand on either side of the headboard for support and then slowly worked her whole body against mine. I began massaging the sweet spot between her legs with the pad of my thumb as I enjoyed an eyelevel view of her décolletage. After working my hand over my penis a few times I was ready. She kissed me hard and then said, "I suppose you want me to take care of that. It's poking me."

She sank onto my erection then began rocking back and forth. I continued stimulating her with my fingers until her pace picked up. It didn't take long before I came and she stopped abruptly. I sank back to the pillows and once I could think asked, "You stopped... is everything ok?"

After she rolled off of me she pulled off the blindfold and began stroking my side whispering, "That was great, but I like watching you."

It took a moment for that to sink in with me and when it finally connected I asked, "So you held off
deliberately?"

She giggled, draped a leg over me and replied, "Maybe... maybe not. Try me."

I was still fuzzy and rolled over to have some more dessert. When I offered her some she teased, "Oh, there'll be time for that later. Rest up and then get to work. You make this face when you don't think I'm looking. I love it."

I was speechless, so she continued, "You get this look of utter concentration and sometimes you'll look up and grin. It is about the sexiest thing ever."

After I offered her the last bite I set the plate on the nightstand and went back to work. I had research to do. There was no way I looked that goofy when I was going down on her.

Tuesday morning I awoke to a treat. Sciezka was up first and just about to attend to Master Havoc as I cracked open an eye. I thought I was having one of those dreams where I'd wake up with a grin on my face, not sure of what I dreamt of but really sure it was dirty and fun.

She smiled at me when she noticed me stirring and said sheepishly, "Sorry, I couldn't resist. You were poking me again."

I chuckled, pushed up on the pillows so I could see better and then replied, "No man in his right mind would object to waking up to this."

She went back to work and I was tempted to pinch myself. This was good enough that it could have been a dream. I had a beautiful girl, smart and sweet who underneath it all was an absolute tiger between the sheets. Sciezka had been worth the wait.

Once we'd showered and dressed we left the house together. On the way to H.Q. we talked about our plans for the day. I apologized in advance for not having lunch with her. I wanted to talk to Ron. She wasn't mad and told me to have a good time with him and to work hard at therapy. I grinned and replied, "Working hard at P.T. is a given. I have to stay in top form so I can keep up with you."

She ran a finger up my arm, stopping to feel my bicep as it peeked out from the sleeve of my t-shirt. She leaned in for a kiss and said breathily, "You do have a very nice form. Have I told you that you should wear t-shirts more often?"

I kissed her back, deepening it as she continued to massage my arm and after I broke it whispered, "You have and I will if it gets me more of this."

A black sedan pulled up alongside us, distracting me. The dark tinted window was rolled down halfway and the familiar voice of one Roy Mustang teased, "Would you two get a room? If I recall correctly, you two have some very nice rooms a short way from here."

If there wasn't the possibility of an outsider seeing me do it, I would have given him a one finger salute. I settled for pulling Sciezka in for one last very demonstrative kiss. When we parted, we straightened up, saluted and did our best to stifle a giggle.

Roy shook his head, then opened the car door and invited Sciezka in. This was unusual, but the whole situation was odd. I waved goodbye to both of them as the car pulled away.

Ron was already in the therapy room working with an aide. Jim wanted to know all about Sciezka's reaction to finally seeing me stand. As he stretched me out and put me through the range of motion
exercises I gave him almost the whole story. I left out the part about Sunday's proposal.

After a full session, I was tired, hungry and looking forward to lunch with Ron. Once we'd gone through the line and gotten our food Ron led the way and found a table. As I set my tray down I told him, "You're maneuvering really well. When do you get out?"

He grinned as he replied, "Just under two weeks until I'm on my own. Jim and I found a ground floor apartment not far from here and we're working on it a little bit every day. The landlord doesn't seem to mind the improvements either. I guess the last tenant was less than ideal and since the landlord lives on the second floor... well you know how that can be."

I chuckled a bit before I said, "I can only imagine. You will probably be a model tenant by comparison. Does Laura know yet?"

"No, not yet," he answered hesitantly, coloring to the tips of his ears. "I'm nervous about being released, but excited at the same time. I think Laura will be too. She visits a lot."

I leaned across the table and whispered, "So still just friends?"

"I think I'll be asking you for some pointers soon and I'm willing to bet that Laura will have some questions for your girl," he answered quietly as he turned a deeper shade of pink.

I reached across the table, shook his hand and said, "Congratulations, glad I could be even the smallest help."

"You're too humble, you've been a huge help. I don't know how I'll ever begin to repay you and Jim," he replied quietly.

After thinking for a moment, I said, "There's no need to thank me. Just seeing you happy is payment enough. I'm glad you've turned it around and it's nice to have someone who understands. Not that I'd wish this on anyone..."

He replied after I trailed off, "I get it. I think expanding the rehab program is going to be a good thing. Maybe it'll help make more buildings accessible, or at least get a few more curb cuts and elevators put in. They'll have to with more guys out and visible in the community. You and I won't be the only ones out on display anymore."

I nodded enthusiastically in agreement and then got ready to leave. I'd barely touched my lunch. I must have had too much on my mind. Before I left I said, "I'm having a few people over for dinner on Saturday. Let Laura know she's invited too, when you see her."

Grinning he replied, "Will do... you're holding out on me, aren't you?"

Smirking I said, "Maybe. You'll just have to come over on Saturday."

After a swim, which I'd really needed, I changed and stopped by Jim's office to invite him and Gracia over on Saturday as well. He eyed me suspiciously but didn't ask what I was cooking up. I might have been able to keep a lot of secrets in my professional life but I failed miserably at it when I had good news in my personal life. It would be a relief to make the official announcement to our closest friends. I could hardly wait to tell Breda. Maybe we could call everyone on Saturday so they could share the excitement.

I got to the range before Riza, so I grabbed my bag, tarp and tripod and got set up. I hadn't
practiced with the rifle and scope in a while and didn't want to get rusty. I'd already made quite a dent in my ammo supply when Hayate came over and sniffed in my ear. I locked the safety, rolled over and pushed up onto my elbows so I could pet him. Riza came over shortly afterwards and scowled as I lit a cigarette. I protested, "It's only the second one today. Now, do you want to hear the news or not?"

She sat down next to me on the tarp and Hayate sat on her lap after she gave him permission. As she scratched him behind the ears she was silent. Finally, she asked quietly, "So is it good news or bad news? I don't think I can take much more bad news."

I stubbed my cigarette out in the dirt next to me, propped myself up a little higher, then turned to her and said quietly, "You're the first person I'm telling, well, besides Winry. I've asked Sciezka to marry me and she said yes."

Riza threw her arms around me knocking me off balance. I hit the ground with a thud as she fell over with me. Her eyes went wide with worry. I laughed loudly, dusted myself off and reassured her, "I'm not going to break. Sciezka would have done it ages ago if that was all it took."

She held my hand and squeezed it, still speechless. I cleared my throat and said, "I thought you should be one of the first to know. I asked Sciezka for permission to tell you. We're telling everyone else on Saturday at our place during a dinner party. Yes, you're invited too."

"But why me? Surely I wasn't the first person you thought of... " she said sounding puzzled.

I draped an arm over her shoulder, pulled her closer and said, "I might not have had the opportunity to ask her if you hadn't been there for me all this time. You dragged me out to the range, gave me advice and the confidence to pursue her... in so many ways you dragged me back into the world. Thank you."

She grinned and whispered, "So Roy doesn't know yet?"

"Nope and he won't until Saturday. I never get to catch him off guard," I replied in an equally conspiratorial whisper.

"So, the ring, what's it like?" she asked.

I described it as she listened, smiling and nodding at the details. Our conversation seemed to have lifted a weight from her shoulders, if only for a little while. She checked her watch, cursed under her breath and got up quickly apologizing. I caught her by the ankle after she stood up and said softly, "Thank you again for listening, for trying to understand and for just being there."

Hayate pranced after her as she left the range and I went back to my target practice.

After the longest session I'd had at the firing range in a long while I felt better, more focused and less tense. I went to the lounge and worked on my outline for psychology until it was time to meet Sciezka and head home. We made salad and cooked up some chicken for dinner, nothing fancy. When we'd finished eating we washed the dishes together and I practiced moving with the crutches in the hallway that ran from the front door to Elysia's room. Sciezka was impressed, but concerned about how much energy and concentration it took for me to do something so basic. She let it slide and instead came over to the sofa with my chair to help me get the braces off when I was finished.

While I studied, she read next to me, only interrupting to ask if I'd like a glass of wine and if some cheese and fruit would taste good to me. I thought about putting up a fuss, but then realized she'd have offered regardless. Not everything was about what I could and couldn't do. I continued
working and it felt so good just to sit next to her in our living room. I was beginning to feel tired when she yawned next to me, stretching her arms over her head and making the cutest sleepy face. I could tell she was really pushing herself at work still, but kept it to myself. At least she was resting now.

"You look as tired as I feel," I chided. "We should turn in soon."

She took my book from me, carefully marking the page I'd left off on, and set it down on the coffee table with the others. Then she took our dishes into the kitchen while I got ready for bed. I was dozing on top of the covers when she came in and without a word began massaging my shoulders and arms. I was worn out and she knew it and it was ok. After she'd gone over every muscle with the lightly scented lotion she curled up next to me, wrapping a leg over mine. She sat up to kiss me and asked, "Do you think we should get under the duvet?"

I propped myself up on my elbows, smiled at her and nodded in agreement.

She worked the linens down as I pulled myself up. Once that was accomplished she went back to her spot next to me, covered us both and got comfortable. We exchanged slow and gentle kisses for a few moments and when I murmured, "I love you, sleep well" she replied, "Love you too and I always do when I'm with you."

I was still tired when I woke up on Wednesday, the empty spot in the bed next to me still warm. Sciezka came in with coffee for both of us and I smiled. She handed me mine and sat next to me, her robe opening a bit giving me a tantalizing peek at her creamy skin. I drained my mug quickly and she took it from me. I grunted with the effort as I transferred to the chair so I could start my routine. She winced and I said apologetically, "Maybe I should rethink using the braces on days that I do therapy, swim and go to the firing range."

She kissed my forehead and then comforted me saying, "You don't have to do it all in one day, every day. Start your shower and I'll join you."

I smiled, pulled her onto my lap for a quick kiss and replied, "Thanks for not saying 'I told you so'. I should know better by now. I promise I'll try to take it easy today."

She took our mugs into the kitchen and I got started on the necessaries. I was sitting on the shower bench just letting the hot water wash over me when she joined me. She could always tell when I was having a rough time of it and once she'd finished soaping herself up, got me too.

As we were drying off she said, "You could stay home today. I'm sure your professors would understand."

I scowled and then replied, "Not an option, ever. You know I hate special treatment. I can't afford to miss the material. Besides, I'd just work twice as hard to make it up."

"Point taken, but tonight you are taking it easy. That's an order. As your future wife, I do outrank you sometimes Lieutenant Havoc."

I knew she meant it and didn't argue the point any further. I would always lose when it came to the subject of pushing myself too hard.

We headed out and as we kissed goodbye I promised to take it easy between classes and to see if I could arrange for study group to move to Friday. That appeased her and as she turned the corner she paused, waved and shouted, "We'll get take-out tonight and behave!"
I chuckled, waved back and started the trip to campus. On the way, I was troubled by the thought of what the short trip would be like when it rained or in the winter. I wasn't looking forward to that.

When I got to the Humanities building General Lockheed was out front, smoking a cigar. That wasn't his usual routine, but I went over to him after he called me over saying, "Second Lieutenant Havoc, I'd like a word with you."

He wasn't usually so formal with me, but maybe he was acting that way for appearances sake. I saluted the best I could once I'd made it over to him and what he said next put every fiber of my being on alert, "I'd like to meet with you tomorrow at my office hours, here on campus."

*We never met here! Our meetings were always at the Academy for a very good reason. He hadn't authenticated, there was no pass code!*

"General Lockheed sir, I will have to respectfully decline as I have a prior commitment. I'll be at the hospital all day. Could we please meet after class today?" I replied in a calm and steady voice.

The General crossed his arms, took a puff of his cigar and blew an impressive smoke ring as he said, "That would be acceptable. I'd forgotten that you dedicate a considerable amount of time to your convalescence since your accident."

He turned to head into the building after making a show of discarding the cigar and pulverizing it under the heel of his boot. I straightened my posture to salute and he all but sneered, "At ease."

*It, I was by now sure that that had not been one Martin Lockheed, disappeared through the massive front doors of the building. I retrieved my smokes and shakily lit one up. I'd never been so grateful for a goofy phrase like "lemon bars" in my life. This was getting too close for comfort. Those monsters were up to something. Luckily, I didn't think that thing would attempt to teach a whole class in disguise. After I finished my cigarette I'd head upstairs, make sure the General gave the code and arrange to leave class with him so the meeting would happen and perhaps they'd think I was none the wise. I could hardly wait for all of this to be finished.*

I was able to talk to the General before the lecture started and keep it together during class. Afterwards we went and got coffee at the Union. I finished two cigarettes on the way over. Once we were at an out of the way table he said, "Sorry this isn't something stronger. What has you so rattled?"

I held the mug tightly to disguise my quaking hands and asked hopefully, "Did you smoke a cigar before class this morning?"

He looked puzzled, then it dawned on him and he replied, "The Missus rations those. I try to save them for when I really need it."

"Well that answers that question. I'm wondering if a cripple and his nurse would stick out too much in the South or in Creta. I hear it's lovely there this time of year," I said grimly.

"Having second thoughts about school?" he asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"I'm sticking it out for now, but I'm beginning to think the cost is too high."

We sat in silence drinking our coffee and when he got up to leave I said, "On a happier note, you and Marjorie are invited to dinner at our place on Saturday at 19:00."
His expression brightened considerably as he said enthusiastically, "We wouldn't miss it for the world. She'll be so excited."

On the way back to the Humanities building I chain-smoked and put off going in until the last minute. I didn't want to run the risk of encountering that thing again. I was barely keeping a lid on my emotions as it was without it right in front of me. The monster had looked like it almost enjoyed goading me. I wanted to fill it full of lead.

After psychology, I arranged for study group to take place on Friday at my house. Everyone seemed relieved as we were all feeling the pressure of the impending exams and looming due dates. Laura took the elevator with me after class and I told her about my surprise for Sciezka. She suggested that Sciezka wouldn't catch on if she invited her out on Saturday and really it was brilliant. Ron had already invited Laura to the dinner party and I was happy that at least this would go off without a hitch.

I made it to Roy's office from campus in record time and barged in without knocking. I wished I could kick open the doors dramatically like Fullmetal. I'd have to settle for entering unannounced. When I parked myself in front of his desk he looked up in surprise and asked, "Can I help you with something Second Lieutenant?"

I placed my palms flat on his desk, leaned over as far as I dared and hissed, "You're damn right you can."

He stood up, making a show of yawning and stretching and asked one of his lackeys if they'd bring us some coffee. They made themselves scarce. It was code in this "administration" as well.

Once we had the office to ourselves I seethed, "I ran into one of them again today before Military History... masquerading as the damned professor of all people. They're getting even more brazen."

He sat back down, sighed and said, "That is troublesome, especially with Falman and the Elrics at the Briggs outpost."

I clenched my teeth as I replied, "That is the understatement of the century. Just when were you going to tell me that tidbit?"

He narrowed his eyes right back at me and stated, "When you needed to know."

I balled my fists, wracking my brain, trying to think of a remotely civil response to that and couldn't. I needed to get out of there before I punched him in the nose. He seemed awfully cavalier about the whole thing and I was ready to spit. Logically I knew he couldn't possibly be fine with things the way they were, but would it kill him to just admit it? Or at least share intel with me that I felt I had earned the right to know.

I left as abruptly as I'd entered and headed to Investigations. I needed to see for myself that Sciezka was safe.

When I got there Major Armstrong was alone, working at his desk. He greeted me warmly saying, "Salutations Jean! Sciezka is down at the main records room picking up some files for me. You are more than welcome to wait for her here. Would you like some refreshments?"

"That won't be necessary," I replied stiffly. "However, I do need something from you."

He stood up and approached me and apparently hadn't noticed my foul temper. Attempting to make
small talk he said, "I was told that your hard work has been paying off, that you are standing."

That was it. I was convinced that underneath the carefully constructed jovial act he knew something.

Sciezka would be back shortly, so I decided I had to act now. I pushed my chair forward so the Major and I were toe-to-toe. Since I only came up to his waist I knew that wouldn't do. I grabbed him by the jacket and yanked him toward me hard and commanded fiercely, "Forgive the insubordination, but sit down now and tell me everything you know."

He complied, his blue eyes wide, as he straightened his lapel and then pulled a chair over then sat facing me.

"Calm down Second Lieutenant, I assure you... " he soothed, barely meeting my gaze.

"Cut the crap, Armstrong! Mustang is holding out on me, I'm sure of it. Spill it, everything you know about Briggs," I hissed, my fists clenched and half of me at least, shaking with rage.

He cleared his throat and said evenly, "That's on a need to know basis."

"Sciezka is under your chain of command. I assure you this is a need," I sneered.

After taking out a handkerchief and wiping the sweat from his forehead he whispered, "Fine, I'll tell you what I know. I sent the Brothers to Briggs with a letter of introduction for my sister Major General Olivier Armstrong. I don't know why they needed to see her so badly."

"What about Falman?" I asked, slightly calmer.

Armstrong sighed, defeated and said, "I honestly don't know why he was transferred or who ordered it."

I frowned and replied, "Look, I'm sorry it had to come to that, but this isn't just about me now. I have her to protect and I will. I ran into Hughes' murderer today. I couldn't have done a thing about it. Not one damned thing."

He was stunned and I said shamefacedly, "I'm going to leave before Sciezka gets back. Could you go with her when you leave, escort her home? I've already asked for so much, perhaps compromised everything... I'm sorry."

"It's the least I can do. That was brave of you," he offered.

"Talking to a monster... hah," I replied not getting his meaning.

"Man handling me... your convictions are strong and you're brave even if that was foolish. I'll do what I can to help you protect her," he said as he extended his hand.

I shook it, and then left. I had a lot of thinking to do before Sciezka got home.

When I got home, I was still shaken from my encounter with the shape shifter and the events of the day. I was still furious with Roy. How could he seem so nonchalant? I knew he was looking out for everyone, but he wasn't in a situation making it nearly impossible to escape if he was caught. My injuries had made me quite literally a sitting duck. All I could really do was stay alert and pray that the forces at work didn't find me a big enough threat or valuable pawn. Besides being involved romantically with me, Sciezka was a part of it as well, just by having access to the materials she
Mrs. Smith was surprised to see me home by mid-afternoon since I was usually busy until after she'd finished for the day. After checking in with her I went to the bedroom to nap. As kind and friendly as Mrs. Smith was, I didn't feel like talking to anyone. I washed my face, hoping that would help calm me down somewhat, and it did. I was taking care of the necessaries when I noticed my legs beginning to twitch in a spasm. *Just perfect, this is just what I need today.* Since I was already tired, sore and in a foul temper I actually looked forward to the side-effects of my medication. At least if Sciezka noticed I was off I could blame it on the pills.

Major Armstrong was true to his word and took Sciezka home after work, escorting her all the way to the door. His usual cheerful proclamations pulled me from my drug induced haze. When Sciezka couldn't find me in any of my usual favorite spots she checked the bedroom. I played possum, not wanting to talk to her yet. She quietly went back to the living room and in a low voice said, "Thank you for the ride Major Armstrong. Jean is napping, but I'm sure he'll be grateful as well."

It didn't sound like Armstrong had told her anything about our confrontation earlier and I was relieved.

Once Armstrong left Sciezka came back into the bedroom. She placed a hand on my forehead and then crawled in next to me. I wrapped my arms around her and held her, perhaps a little too tightly.

"You don't have a fever, I checked. So, what's wrong?" she asked.

"It was just a long day. You were right; I should have taken the day off. The good news is I think the spasms have stopped," I replied, omitting all references to homunculi and losing my temper.

While burrowing further under the covers she asked, "So are you hungry yet?"

I hadn't really eaten all day, but the thought of food turned my stomach so I answered, "I'm still out of it. Why don't you order what you want and I'll pick at it if I get hungry."

This appeased her and before she got up she kissed me and said, "You rest some more. I'll get some of that spicy beef that you like and unpack a few boxes of books."

"That sounds like a plan. Have I ever told you how wonderful you are?" I asked.

She tweaked my nose and then giggled as she replied, "You tell me so often I'm beginning to believe it."

I slept for another hour or so then went to the kitchen when my rumbling stomach wouldn't let me sleep any longer. I grabbed a beer, one of the cartons from the icebox and a fork. I went into the library to keep Sciezka company while she unpacked.

She smiled when I came in and teased, "So this is how you lived in your bachelor days?"

"Cold takeout and beer are foods fit for the gods," I quipped.

"Well yes, I was commenting on that too, but mostly I noticed your rumpled pajama pants and some of the worst bed head in Amestris," she replied.

I began eating and it must have looked pretty funny as I gestured, fork in hand and said, "This look has taken years to perfect."
She took my beer from me, took a sip and then handed it back. I scowled and protested, "Hey, get your own!"

"I suppose I could take a break. Want another one as long as I'm out there anyway?" she asked. "Sciezka, you are a goddess. Smart, beautiful, great in the sack and you bring me beer!" I exclaimed.

She rolled her eyes at me, but was otherwise mildly amused. I wasn't losing my touch.

We unpacked and shelved books for a while longer then took a bath together and turned in. By the time I fell asleep I felt a lot better about the day. Sciezka tended to have that effect on me.

I felt much better on Thursday. We woke up bright and early and then went to the neighborhood cafe for breakfast. The sun was shining and it was already beginning to feel warm. Before we went our separate ways at headquarters I said to Sciezka, "It's going to be a scorcher. We should swim for a while after dinner. Would you like that?"

She kissed me and then replied, "That sounds great, but therapy and swimming twice in one day?"

I grinned as I said, "I'll mostly float and look at you in your swim suit tonight. Nothing too taxing... I promise I'll take it easy and just relax while we're there."

This appeased her and she kissed me one more time for good measure before heading through the security gate.

Therapy was great, just what I needed to get rid of the residual tension from the day before. After lunch with Jim and Ron I swam laps for an hour, hard and fast. It was invigorating and it felt good to tire myself out that way. It was like the high I'd get after a long run when I was just a kid.

I stopped at home to clean up before going to H.Q. to study in the lounge while I waited for Sciezka to get off work. When I got there, she was already home. Her jacket was in the living room and nothing seemed to be out of order. Maybe Armstrong had given her a half day.

When I opened the door to our bedroom something flew over my head, hitting the door frame behind me and falling to the floor in a flurry of pages. I picked it up, noticed it was a dirty magazine and I chastised myself. I hadn't thought that porn would piss her off. The next projectile hit me squarely in the chest. Sciezka had all the drawers open and was hastily stuffing clothes into an overnight bag.

"Sciezka, I'm sorry about the porn. I don't even look at it anymore. If I'd known it bothered you so much I would have gotten rid of it ages ago."

She stopped abruptly, glared at me and spat out, "Typical male. You don't even know what I'm mad about!"

After snatching something off the bed she stalked over to me, thrust it into my hands and said coldly, "Does the title 'Ishbal and Its People: An Ethnography by Elliot Mead' ring any bells for you?"

I put my hand to my mouth, speechless and then stammered, "I didn't know how to tell you. I promise I didn't read it. It's yours to know and decide to share. I didn't want to upset you..."
She cut me off shouting, "Didn't want to upset me? You asshole! It wasn't your decision to make. It's not your job to decide what I can and cannot see!"

"Sciezka, I'm sorry, forgive me, please?" I begged.

Her eyes flashed like fire and then turned to stone as she asked, "How long?"

I wasn't sure what she was talking about, how long since what?

"How long have you kept this from me Jean? I'm waiting for an answer," she repeated.

"General Lockheed gave it to me at the beginning of the term," I answered calmly.

She snatched the book out of my hands, put it in her bag and left without saying another word. The front door slammed shut with a force that shook the windows and I was left alone.

What was I going to do? She was furious with me, with good reason and I had to fix it. I was pretty sure she'd go stay with Gracia. At least I hoped she would. I didn't want her to be alone when she was like this. At least at Gracia's she'd be safe. How could I make this up to her? Was it even possible? I had wanted to break the news to her gently, at a time when she'd have time to be alone to think about her father, to really grieve. Well, I'd fucked this one up spectacularly.

I decided that finishing off the bottle of scotch and chain-smoking on the porch would be a start. Not a good one, but it would have to do for the time being.

Once I'd drained the bottle I still didn't feel nearly drunk enough and I didn't feel any better. To make matters worse I'd smoked my last cigarette. The sun was beginning to set and I went inside for my wallet so I could go to the corner market to get another pack of smokes before they closed. I bought three packs and a fifth of whisky to prepare for a long and lonely night in case I couldn't get her to come home.

I steeled my resolve and pushed fast and hard until I got to Gracia's front stoop. I lit up one more cigarette in an attempt to steady myself and work up the courage to ring the bell. I'd finished the cigarette and was reaching for the button when the door opened.

It was Gracia. She just stood there with her arms folded across her chest, her lips set in a thin, straight line. She stepped aside so I could come in and then she said in a disapproving tone, "It took you long enough."

A flash of blue crossed my peripheral vision and rushed up the stairs.

I sighed with relief and said, "Good, she's here."

Gracia frowned and remarked, "No thanks to you."

I scrubbed my hands across my face and asked, "Did she tell you anything?"

"No... not a word. She just showed up here in tears, asking if she could stay for a while," Gracia replied, her expression softening.

I slouched in my chair, elbows resting on my knees and waited for Gracia to yell at me. It would be better than silent disapproval. She didn't yell and instead asked sincerely, "Jean, what did you do to upset her this much?"

I started by saying, "I was an idiot. General Lockheed gave me a copy of her father's manuscript
from his time in Ishbal. Her father went missing there and is presumed killed and branded a traitor for being sympathetic to the rebels. But you know that anyone not exterminating them was accused of sedition or worse."

Gracia nodded and observed, "So why does that have her in tears and refusing to speak to you? There has to be something more to this."

"Professor Mead was a cultural anthropologist at the University. He was studying the connection between the lost civilization of Xerxes and the Ishballans. To do that he was living with them and working with them to learn their customs, talk to their elders and really look at the culture from their perspective. He'd been there for over a year when the tensions really began to escalate. General Lockheed thinks he was most likely told to evacuate and didn't. Bad things happened to people who didn't obey. They disappeared. He never did have a proper funeral."

She frowned and patted my shoulder. I was the bad guy in all of this and Gracia still tried to comfort me.

I squeezed her hand and then continued, "That is where I screwed up. I put it away to give to her when I felt she could handle it. When things with the government had calmed down... I've had the damned thing for over a month. I'd packed it up with some of my more favored books, hoping she wouldn't pay too much mind to that pile."

"That couldn't have looked good to Sciezka," she commented.

"What makes it even worse is that because she's still upset and confused and didn't know everything about what happened she almost never talks about it. It was like pulling teeth trying to get her to talk about her family. She was just a little girl when he went away and they were very close. Her mother changed drastically afterwards and I don't think Sciezka has ever fully recovered from it. You saw her with my parents. She was so shy at first and then when they warmed up to her, she almost didn't know how to handle it. She was happy, but it was almost foreign to her."

Gracia had winced as I was describing the circumstances surrounding the loss of Sciezka's father and then said, "Jean, you handled that about as badly as it could have been handled. This isn't good."

"No, it's not at all good. She was probably trying to do me a favor by putting my books in the shelves. At first I thought it was the fact I still had dirty pictures, since she threw two of them at me hard... with good aim."

"So how are you going to make it up to her?"

"I have no idea. Where's Elysia?" I asked.

"She's asleep in your room. I put her down after Sciezka got here. I figured you would come looking here first," she replied.

Sciezka was upstairs, deliberately. This was just great. I went to the foot of the stairs and called, "Would you please come down here so we can talk about this?"

There was no answer except for the sound of her blowing her nose and sniffing.

I waited for a few minutes and then tried again. She still didn't answer.

Gracia shrugged her shoulders and then went into the kitchen with the excuse that she wanted
some tea. Really it was the only thing she could do. I'd messed things up and now I had to fix them. I was lucky she didn't seem to be choosing sides.

I decided that the only thing I could do to even start would be to swallow my pride and drag my ass up there. I was sure that Sciezka wouldn't be coming down any time soon. When Gracia came back, mug in hand, I was already half-way to the landing. She turned around as soon as she saw me and went back into the kitchen. Once at the landing I rested for a few minutes and then continued until I was at the top, sweaty and winded. I heard a lock click and looked toward the noise. This was not good. We'd had four of the major events for classifying disastrous fights: projectiles, name calling, door slamming and now locking the bathroom door. Add my drinking and chain-smoking to that and we were a match... and I completely deserved all of it.

I leaned against the wall and said, "Sciezka, I know you're in there. Would you please come out so we can talk?"

She didn't reply and all I could hear were a few muffled sniffles followed by the water running. I could tell she'd been crying. I thought to myself: some protector you are. She needs protection from you. You'll be lucky if she doesn't wash her hands of you after this.

I tried again by saying, "I'm sorry. I am an idiot and an asshole and I fucked everything up completely and would you please come out?"

The door opened a crack and she said, "I'm listening..."

It all came out in a jumble as I tried to make things right between us.

"I was going to show it to you when everything blew over. You're under enough stress as it is and I didn't want you to hurt. I was wrong to withhold it from you for any length of time and that was crappy judgment on my part. I am willing to do anything to make you stop being angry with me. Please? Tell me what I need to do."

The door opened and she came out and sat down across the hall from me. She had her back to the wall and her arms wrapped around her knees. She'd taken her glasses off and looked so small and vulnerable, like she was desperately trying to curl in on herself. What I'd done had broken her. She wouldn't look me in the eye and instead stared at the electrical outlet next to me. Finally, she said, "You can tell me the truth... that 'error of omission' was a lie. You lied to me about something huge. You broke my trust."

I scooted closer to her, wanting to wrap an arm around her, to comfort her and she turned away from me. She continued, "You need to tell me what you know that has you convinced that things are so bad. What makes you think I will fly apart at the smallest hint of bad news?"

I bit my lip, thinking and she said, "I knew it, there's more. Brigadier General Hughes taught me about tells in poker. Tell me all of it now."

"Please don't be angry... Ling contacted me last week..." I stammered.

She frowned and then asked, "Did that have anything to do with you proposing so suddenly?"

I hung my head, averting my eyes as I answered, "Yes and no. It's something I'd been thinking long and hard about. Being scared of what could happen, all the what ifs cemented the decision for me."

She nodded and said, "That makes sense. What else?"

I was silent for an instant too long and she started to stand up saying, "If you can't be truthful this is
over."

"Yesterday a homunculus pretended to be General Lockheed before my first class. It tried to lure me into a meeting scheduled for today. I was able to talk my way out of it. I'm scared that they know about us, what we're doing... that we're too close to the truth!" I blurted out.

I stopped to catch my breath and she said icily, "So yesterday, that's what you were upset about?"

I nodded slowly and she accused, "Liar. That was intentional. I deserve to know these things! I am an equal partner in this, right?"

All I could come up with was, "The Elric brothers and Falman are at the Briggs outpost. That's all I know."

Her eyes watered and she put her head in her hands as she slowly and steadily said, "Go home now. Just go home."

I opened my mouth to speak but she didn't give me the chance, instead ordering in a way that could freeze hell over, "Jean, go home now before we both say things we'll regret."
On the Mend

Chapter Summary

Title: "Jean Havoc: A Work in Progress"
Author: havocmangawip
Editor: anat-astarte
Beta Team: xsinfinityx and the Sooper Sekrit filter.
Rating: M or NC-17 (No fun this chapter, sorry.)
Disclaimer: I don't own it... I wish I did. I could BUY my own coffee house and then my lattes would be free.
Warnings: Spoilers for current situation with Xing characters, current to most recent Japanese releases.
Sources Cited: When I was grasping at straws for a title with my editor we thought of all the themes presented and "On the Mend" was mentioned... fixing broken promises, Jean's continued perseverance with P.T., a development I won't spoil on you... this poem by the brilliant Judith Viorst just FIT.
(My antiquated, decade old author's notes... this is a repost from ff.net.)
Absolutely listen to The Lucksmiths "Sunshine in a Jar".

Mending by Judith Viorst

A giant hand inside my chest
Stretches out and takes
My heart within its mighty grasp
And squeezes until it breaks.

A gentle hand inside my chest.
With mending tape and glue,
Patches up my heart until
It's almost good as new.

I ought to know by now that
Broken hearts will heal again.
But while I wait for glue and tape,
The pain!
The pain!
The pain!

Chapter 43: On the Mend

After ordering me to leave Sciezka got up slowly, refusing to look at me and then went back into the bathroom. She shut the door and locked it, and the click of the mechanism echoed with a somber finality. I'd messed up so badly that it didn't seem like we'd get through it. I couldn't even think of what to say or do other than go to ground.

I dragged myself back downstairs slowly. I ached, not from exertion, but from defeat. Gracia came out of the kitchen just as I was getting back into my chair. Neither of us said a word at first and I
headed for the door. I needed to get out of there and just go somewhere, but to where I wasn't sure. Home didn't sound appealing, as without Sciezka there it was just a house. No place else seemed right either. Nothing was right.

Gracia said softly, "It will be ok. Give her some time."

Choking back tears, I replied, "You have to be right, you just have to be. Please take care of her."

She nodded solemnly and I left.

When I got back to the house I wandered the empty rooms, and then went to the kitchen for a glass and an ashtray. As I prepared for my pity party the phone rang. It was Laura, for Sciezka. I told her that Sciezka was out and gave her Gracia's number. I didn't mention the fight. Sciezka would tell her about it if she wanted to. After I hung up the phone I went into the living room and started drinking. By the third shot on an empty stomach the tears started to fall. I felt like I was nothing without her. I wasn't a soldier anymore, but still acted like it. My job had ruined relationships before, but this was my fault. After all, she was in this mess with me and had a right to know. I'd kept secrets and told lies and I wasn't sure if she'd ever forgive me.

Once my eyes were dry and the wracking sobs had subsided I decided to call Breda. Maybe he'd have some advice. At the very least he might cheer me up. The house was so silent and empty without her. I refilled my glass and then dialed. It took a few rings for him to pick up and he answered, sounding rather groggy, "Hello, who is it?"

When he recognized my voice, he sounded more alert and cheerful as he said, "It's late. Shouldn't you be sleeping with your woman?"

I paused for a long time before replying flatly, "I fucked up, big time."

Breda had nursed me through breakups and fights before saying I was better off without dames. They just complicated life. This time that was not the case. After I explained it all he emphatically instructed, "Drink lots of water, take an aspirin, and tomorrow make it up to her. Do not let this one get away. Do everything you can. This is too good to let go of."

After I hung up the phone I did as I was told. I camped out on the couch with a glass of water. I couldn't bring myself to sleep in our bed, so I curled up under the small throw blanket and was awake for hours. The sun was just beginning to rise when exhaustion finally claimed me.

I slept fitfully until Gracia came over and I sat bolt upright on the couch when I heard the door. She apologized for startling me and then immediately started bustling around the kitchen brewing coffee and making noise. Apparently, she wasn't going to let me wallow in this, or hide out from the world. Getting off of the couch and into my chair was tricky. I was stiff and sore and the hangover didn't help. My head was pounding and my eyes itched from crying.

When I went into the kitchen Gracia met me with a glass of juice, a cup of coffee and the wry observation, "You look horrible."

"That's good, since I feel horrible," I replied flatly.
I drained both the juice and the coffee and still felt parched. After checking my wristwatch, I debated skipping class and going back to bed. That wasn't an option as I couldn't let the members of my study group down. Additionally, missing class would alter my routine, possibly tipping off the homunculi. Once I'd refilled my juice glass with water and sipped at it I asked, "Is she doing any better than I am?"

Gracia shook her head, her expression sad and then she replied, "I'm pretty sure she didn't sleep. I made her call in sick, as it is I told her I was going out for groceries so I could check on you."

"You didn't have to. I don't need a nurse," I snapped back.

She scowled at my tone, rightly so and said, "No Jean, you don't need a nurse. But I thought you could use some company and a kick in the pants."

"I'm sorry I snapped, I didn't mean to. This is just so messed up. I don't even know where to start with her. To add to everything, I'm having study group here. I suppose I could send Mrs. Smith for something, but it feels like I'm taking advantage...

"Apology accepted. Go shower, you'll feel better. I'll make a list and call the grocer while you're getting ready. Coffee, tea and cookies should be fine, right?" she asked.

I moved closer to her, hugged her tightly and murmured, "Thank you. You always know how to fix things. Do you have any advice about how to fix things with Sciezka?"

She squeezed me back and said, "I'll send her over around dinner time. Maybe she'll feel like talking then."

A long hot shower did wonders for me physically. After I shaved I took a long look in the mirror. I looked tired and like I'd aged years overnight. There was nothing to be done about it, so I dressed quickly and then collected the things I'd need for the day.

Gracia was still fussing with things when I was ready to leave. Before I left she confessed, "I just wanted to make sure you were all right. I'm worried about both of you."

I sighed heavily and replied, "I'm worried about us too. Keep your fingers crossed. Thanks again for coming over. Last night was awful and lonely."

My trip to school was incident free and when General Lockheed spotted me in the lobby he called me over to where he was standing at the coffee cart. My stomach flip-flopped as the strong aroma hit me. So far, I'd avoided being sick, although the urge to heave came in waves. I was pretty sure it was nerves and not the alcohol. The General handed me a paper bag saying, "I think Marjorie times making these for days that I'll see you."

I smiled weakly and replied, "I'll have to make a point of thanking her tomorrow, provided I don't have to cancel."

He frowned as he asked, "Is everything all right? Come to think of it, you look worse for wear."

"She found the manuscript, left and won't speak to me. I can't say that I blame her," I answered quietly.

After taking a deep breath he said in an almost fatherly way, "Give her time. She'll come around
and listen. Then, beg her to forgive you and do whatever she asks. After forty years of marriage I've found that usually works."

"I sure hope you're right. Thanks for the advice. You called it correctly... I barely slept last night. We should get to class."

He smiled and then quipped, "At least you won't be late. I'll let you go in first."

Military History went well and I felt confident about the exam on Friday. I wasn't so sure about the paper, but I'd had leads and it would come to me. It would be a lot harder to do without Sciezka's recall to manage my growing list of sources, but I'd muddle through. The idea of talking or eating much still turned my stomach so I got a carton of milk at the coffee cart and went outside to eat by the pond by myself. After picking half-heartedly at the lemon bar Mrs. Lockheed had been kind enough to make for me I wrapped it back up, half eaten. I lit up a smoke and coughed a bit. I'd definitely smoked too much the night before.

I went upstairs, used the washroom and arrived at the lecture hall early. Seth was preparing for class and I hoped he wouldn't notice I was off. He did, asking, "Is everything ok? If you don't feel well begging off class won't hurt your grade. You have an A so far."

"I'm fine. Remember, study group is at my place today," I replied casually.

He frowned and said, "I won't go into therapist mode unless you ask, but I'm not convinced."

"It's that obvious?" I asked.

He nodded, flipped through a book and then set it down on the lectern.

"We're fighting and it's my fault," I said quietly.

"Would you feel uncomfortable telling me what about?" he asked sincerely.

"Secrets... work secrets and personal secrets," I answered. "That's really all I can say about it here."

"I'm a confirmed bachelor so I might not have the best personal advice, but if you want my professional opinion? Talk with her once she's cooled down. After that, I'm told bribery works with some women," he suggested, trying to lighten the mood.

I chuckled and then replied, "Thanks, I needed a laugh."

I was setting up my books and shuffling through papers when Laura came in and sat down next to me. She barely paused to settle in before asking insistently, "What is going on with you two?"

"Can this wait until after class?" I pleaded.

She huffed and said, "I suppose so, but I gather it's serious."

"That's an understatement," I replied grimly.

After class, we headed over to the house. It was a short walk and the weather was nice. Chris, Dan
and Seth walked ahead while Laura and I lagged behind talking. Periodically I'd call up there to give directions to them. The guys stood in the front yard surveying the layout while they waited for us to catch up. I quickened my pace so they wouldn't have to wait too long and Laura had to struggle to keep up with me. Dan chuckled as he observed, "You're pretty fast."

I smiled as I replied, "The chair sometimes has its advantages. Let's get started, that test isn't going to be easy."

Seth shrugged and then quipped, "What can I say? I'm a task master."

Mrs. Smith met us at the door. She'd really outdone herself since I smelled something wonderful coming from the kitchen. I got everyone situated in the living room and then went to see if there was anything I could help with. She scolded me saying, "Go take care of your company and study. I'll bring it all out soon."

"You really didn't have to go to this much trouble," I protested.

She smiled and then replied, "It's nothing fancy. But store-bought cookies simply won't do. I baked brownies. They're easy."

"Well, they smell delicious. I don't know what I'd do without you," I said.

She winked and then teased, "You'd probably starve and work yourself to death."

She was probably right.

Since the couch and chair were occupied Laura sat on the floor. I didn't want her to be the only one, so I joined her. My chair to floor transfer had gotten a lot smoother. It almost looked easy. Laura smiled and commented, "No wonder Ron admires what you've accomplished. I know for a fact that is difficult."

I thanked her, blushed and quickly changed the subject.

Mrs. Smith brought in refreshments and once we had all served ourselves we got down to business. We worked quickly and Seth seemed pleased as he observed, "Your group seems to be more on the ball than some of the other groups I've looked in on. Do any of you see yourselves majoring in psychology?"

Chris grinned and replied, "I took this class to make it easier to get people to spill during interviews. It's really helping with my work on the paper."

Seth chuckled and said, "Ah, a journalist. Do you have any investigations going on right now?"

"Nothing I can talk about yet without getting scooped," he replied with a smirk and a wink.

We got back to work, finished the most recent chapters and then began to draft a list of topics we thought would be on the test. Seth excused himself saying, "I'll be going now. I don't want to be anything but impartial. Good luck!"

Once we'd made the list we divided it among us. We'd each write summaries of the topics and hopefully that would make studying easier. Before the session ended we agreed to meet again on Tuesday and Thursday. We all sat around for a bit talking and eating. It was a nice way to relax.
Everyone was getting ready to leave when Scieszka came home and quickly slipped into the bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Laura suggested that everyone get going. On the way out she gave my shoulder a squeeze and mouthed, "Good luck."

After they left I took care of the dishes and gathered my courage so I could face Scieszka.

I knocked softly on the door and she didn't answer. I knocked again a little harder and asked, "Scieszka, may I please come in?"

This elicited a curt response of, "It's your house. Do whatever you want."

That stung, but I went in anyway. She was curled up on the bed, with her head buried under the pillows. She looked incredibly small and vulnerable like that. Her energy level and presence always made her seem larger. Both were subdued. I went over to the bed to sit near her so we could talk, but she turned her back on me. She was frightfully good at the silent treatment.

I cleared my throat and then said, "Can we talk about this? I know I hurt you and I'm sorry. I went about everything all wrong, but I was trying to protect you. The last thing I'd ever want to do is to hurt you. You know that, right?"

She was silent, but turned to face me. She still wouldn't look at me. It was a small improvement.

I tried to speak again and she stopped me abruptly when she said, "Stop it. Just stop it and get over here. I'm mad at you but I miss you."

My jaw dropped in my confusion and she emphasized her point by saying, "Get in bed next to me. Quick, before I change my mind."

She moved over and I curled up behind her. When I tried to talk again she shushed me and whispered, "No talking yet. Just hold me."

We lay in bed curled around each other until Scieszka's stomach began growling loudly. As if on cue mine replied and I chuckled and then joked, "I quite agree."

She smiled, nuzzled closer to me and then said, "That means getting out of bed and I don't want to."

"I don't want to either, but I'm hungry. I didn't eat much today," I replied.

Her smile faded as she said, "That makes two of us. Gracia kept trying to entice me, but nothing sounded appetizing."

"Mrs. Smith made brownies today, how about one of those and a glass of milk? It would take me five minutes tops," I suggested.

"That would hit the spot," she replied.

I reluctantly got out of bed and made my way to the kitchen. I got it together quickly, and decided that bringing the whole bottle of milk might be less messy than pouring it in the kitchen.
When I got back to the bedroom we ate in silence. It was awkward, but I knew she'd talk when she was ready. After we finished eating I took the dishes back to the kitchen. Sciezka was in the shower when I got back. I wanted nothing more than to join her, but decided that like talking, she'd let me know when I was welcome.

I kept busy by turning down the bed so when she got out of the shower it would be ready for her. I noticed my knee jumping and cursed under my breath. A hot shower and medication would help. Hopefully she wouldn't make me sleep on the couch. That was probably a contributing factor to my current condition.

Sciezka came back into the bedroom and before I took my shower I knew I had to tell her about the dinner party. It wasn't too late to call and cancel. I cleared my throat and said, "I have another secret... don't worry, it's a good one."

She looked doubtful but replied, "Go on, I won't bite your head off."

"Well you see, I planned a party, rather a dinner for tomorrow night to announce our engagement to all of our friends in Central. I can call it off, given the current circumstances." I said hesitantly.

"No, don't... I think it's sweet. Yes, I was very angry, but the more I think about it, the more I realize I might be tempted to do the same thing to protect you. That and despite it being utterly illogical, I can't stay mad at you," she said, sounding like herself again.

"Thank you, that's such a relief. I know I'll have to earn your trust again," I replied softly.

She leaned over, kissed my forehead and said, "You're welcome. I'm going to go to bed now. I'm so tired after being worked up. I'll be out with Laura tomorrow."

"Good, I'm glad she got a hold of you last night. I'm with you on the going to bed idea. I'm just going to shower and get ready for bed," I replied.

She sat down on the bed and then said, "When you get out of the shower you're welcome to sleep in here with me."

I smiled as I replied, "I thought I'd be exiled to the couch."

"That would be punishment for me too. I don't sleep well without you," she said quietly.

I brought my pajamas into the bathroom with me, took care of the necessaries and then showered. When I got out I dried off and got into the cotton drawstring pants. I quickly brushed my teeth and took my meds. Before I settled in for the night I went onto the porch for one last cigarette. Sciezka crept outside in her nightgown and stood next to me. She looked down at my knee that was till quaking and said, "Let's not fight ever again."

I smiled and then tentatively pulled her closer to me so I could wrap an arm around her waist. She leaned into my touch and I felt her muscles relax. We would be fine again with time and effort. When I finished my cigarette, I crushed it in the ashtray and suggested we go to sleep.

Even with the spasms I slept like the dead. Sciezka must have too since she barely moved all night.

When I woke up on Saturday morning Sciezka was still asleep. She had been worn out, so I let her sleep. I took care of my morning routine and showered quickly. I hoped she'd join me like she
usually did, but Sciezka woke up just as I finished and jumped in as soon as I got out. She showered while I got dressed in dungarees and a t-shirt.

Sciezka dressed quickly once she got out of the shower and after a quick goodbye kiss went to meet Laura to the coffee house on High Street. Laura knew she was part and parcel to my plan, and I knew I could trust her to keep Sciezka away from the house until at least 1600 hours. I hoped that would be enough time for Andrew to work his magic. We'd talked everything over and I trusted his judgment. I could hardly wait to see what he had dreamed up.

Less than half an hour had passed when I heard a knock on the door. I went to answer it and it was Mrs. Smith. Today was her day off.

I was surprised to see her but smiled, greeted her warmly and then asked, "What are you doing here today? Don't you get enough of me during the week?

She laughed as she replied, "Gracia and I figured you might like some help getting ready for tonight."

I shook my head and sighed, chuckled and then quipped, "You women know me better than I know myself, though I insist on paying you overtime. That and would you and your husband, please be my guests at dinner tonight? I can guarantee the food here will be a lot better than what the Staff Sergeant would find at the mess."

She graciously accepted and called Michael before we started working. While Mrs. Smith was on the phone Andrew arrived with his crew, I'd no sooner let him in when he set some books and pictures on the dining room table. He gestured broadly for me to come see them. He'd provided color swatches and a drawing of his "vision". Speaking a mile a minute he said, "I picked a midnight blue for an accent color with the furniture being a deep chocolate color. I found the perfect overstuffed velvet chaise and to temper all the feminine aspects a distressed brown leather club chair and ottoman for you. The best part is the Rococo style console desk. Oh, she is going to adore the pendant lamp shades, in blue silk."

Saying I was overwhelmed by all of the details would have been an understatement. There was so much to absorb from his description. But it all looked fit for an Eastern Princess. It reminded me of how Sciezka had described Scheherazade.

Andrew looked at me expectantly and then asked, "Well, what do you think?"

"She'll love it. It's better than I could ever imagine," I replied.

"Don't worry; there is something in there for you. I thought you'd like one of those hidden bars in a globe," he said and then winked.

I chuckled as I said, "I knew you were the right person for the job. I'll let you get to work."

While Andrew and his crew worked, Mrs. Smith and I planned the menu. I realized it would have been a lot harder doing it alone and that dinner might have ended up being peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I knew Elysia wouldn't have any objections, but General Lockheed didn't strike me as a peanut butter connoisseur. Once we finalized the menu we called in the orders. We were able to get most of it from the grocer and Mrs. Smith remembered to order extra ice for the drinks. The next call was to the liquor store. I decided to stock "my" bar while we were at it.
The next step was to set the table and decorate while we waited for the groceries to be delivered. Mrs. Smith and I put the extra leaves in the table and put fresh candles in all the holders. We nixed the idea of buying flowers and instead went out back to trim some of the roses. She was very clever, using a serving tray to create a centerpiece with the candles, floating the roses and some loose petals. It was simple, yet elegant and made the room smell wonderful.

We took a break for iced tea and a quick sandwich around noon and shortly after we finished the groceries arrived. Mrs. Smith put me to work chopping vegetables and slicing cheese at the kitchen table while she got the meat ready to cook.

The menu would be an appetizer course, beef tenderloin, new potatoes, tossed salad and Mrs. Smith's cherry cheesecake for dessert. It would be delicious and elegant, but not so fancy that Elysia would turn her nose up at it.

My next chore was to peel a stripe of skin off of each of those little potatoes. I complained at first saying, "Is anyone going to notice this?"

Mrs. Smith clucked her tongue at me and chided, "It's better if food looks as good as it tastes."

She was about the same age as I was, but I respected her authority and know-how completely. As my Ma drummed into me from childhood, it's best not to tick off the cook or bite the hand that feeds you.

At 1500 hours Mrs. Smith declared our work done for the time being. She left detailed instructions on when I should open the wine to let it breathe and when to put in the meat. She smiled as she said, "I trust you to do it right, but just in case Michael and I will be back at five to make sure. Now you rest!"

I chuckled and joked, "I'm not sure that Gracia's influence is a good one. I already have Ma on my case from hundreds of miles away."

She rolled her eyes and then said good-naturedly, "Well a mother would take care of her little angel. With those blue eyes and blond hair, you'd fit the part too, though I know better. Besides, you like it and you know it."

"I have gotten rather used to being spoiled. Thanks again for all the help," I replied.

She left and I went out onto the porch for a smoke before settling in to study on the couch.

I'd been reading for about an hour when Andrew came into the room and exclaimed, "It's finished come look!"

I transferred from the couch to my chair quickly and followed him to the library. He chattered on the way about how pleased he was to see the furniture he'd help pick out being used and enjoyed.

The library exceeded every expectation I'd had. It was well lit, but still cozy and comfortable, but luxurious. There was a rug in front of the small hearth with an Ishballan motif in muted blues and browns. Andrew said it was representative of the vast expanses of sky and sand in the Eastern desert. She was going to love it, I just knew it!

I shook his hand vigorously and praised his work saying, "This is amazing. She's going to adore it!"
Andrew smiled and replied as he handed me the invoice, "I just hope you're this pleased when you see the bill."

"It's all worth it, though your work should come with a warning. It's so nice inside it's sometimes hard to leave the house," I said as I fished for my checkbook.

I wrote out the check and tipped his crew in cash. They'd gone above and beyond by working that hard on the weekend.

After they left I sat in the library for a few minutes taking it all in. My next chore was to set up the bar. I had a feeling that this room would be our new favorite place, though it would be hard to decide. We'd just have to lounge in every room.

I checked Mrs. Smith's list again and decided I had time for a quick shower before getting changed for dinner. I'd asked Laura to keep Sciezka out until late afternoon. This time I was sure they were having fun and I wondered if Sciezka would have her nails done again. I was curious to see what color she picked this time.

I was getting dried off when I heard the girls come in. They were boisterous and loud. This was a new side to Sciezka and I liked it. There was a knock on the bathroom door. I was still naked and given the recent circumstances I decided to cover up before letting her in. It was a good thing too, as Master Havoc was feeling ignored the past couple of days. Once I was sure my towel hid the problem I said, "Come in. Just shaving and attempting to make my hair behave."

She came in, kissed me quickly and teased, "You'll be in here forever if you wait for your hair to behave."

I reached up to wipe the bit of shaving soap she'd gotten on her nose when she kissed me and then said, "You're probably right."

I splashed on some aftershave and went into the bedroom to dress. Figuring chinos and a white button down would be good enough I put them on and then went out into the living room to entertain Laura while Sciezka freshened up.

I offered Laura a drink but she reminded me that she still had to go home to change and then pick Ron up at the hospital. She blushed and mumbled, "I suppose this can be considered our first date."

I chuckled and then replied, "Don't be so nervous. You two should hang out on the porch after dinner, that or the backyard is lovely at night."

She opened her eyes wide and I added, "I don't know what you'll do with the privacy and I don't want to. But the hospital has no ambiance whatsoever."

She giggled and said, "You're right about that. Thanks."

I followed Laura out to the porch as she left and had a cigarette. I deserved it. I'd only had two all day. Sciezka came outside once she'd changed and looked beautiful. Apparently, she and Laura had done some shopping, as I hadn't seen what she was wearing before. I smiled when I noticed the long sapphire blue silk skirt. She'd like the colors in the library. It looked like it would be soft to touch. It shimmered in the light when she turned revealing a hint of green as well. She turned around once more to show it to me and I smiled as I said, "You're breathtaking as usual. Are you ready for the party?"

She smiled, swiped my cigarette and took a drag and then said, "As ready as I'll ever be."
When she gave my cigarette back to me I took one more long drag and then put it out in the ashtray. I turned to head inside to put the potatoes and roast in the oven and she came in with me. After peeking in the icebox, she teased, "You should go into catering. It all looks delicious."

I put up my hands in protest and said, "I did no such thing. Thank Mrs. Smith. She let me chop up vegetables, peel potatoes and slice cheese. I'm just the help."

Sciezka giggled and replied, "Well it looks good. This is going to fun."

I took two glasses down from the cabinet and grabbed a bottle of white wine from the icebox. After opening it I left the kitchen and Sciezka followed me. When we got to the sliding doors to the library I said softly, "This was planned before I landed myself in the doghouse. I hope you like it."

She stood there, stunned until I said, "Open the door, the suspense is killing me."

As she opened the door she gasped and her eyes lit up. She rushed over to the desk and examined the inlay work. Next, she walked along the shelves admiring the way her books looked displayed in perfect order, all in one place. She spotted the leather-bound edition of "1,001 Nights" almost immediately and caressed the spine of the book lovingly. Finally, she sat down on the chaise.

I had been at the door watching her and once she sat down I approached her. After setting the wine and glasses down I looked over to her expectantly, waiting for her to say something, anything. She finally whispered, "This has to be a dream. It's too perfect."

I moved closer to her and asked softly, "Mind if I sit with you?"

This brought her back to her senses and she threw her arms around me. I'd done well. I poured us each a glass of wine and we sat together talking about her day until Mrs. Smith and her husband arrived.

Sciezka gave Staff Sergeant Smith the tour and kept him company while Mrs. Smith and I worked in the kitchen. She checked the oven, smiled and then congratulated me. I complained, "Mrs. Smith, I assure you I can read, follow directions, and use the oven."

She chuckled and teased, "Michael's mother is Mrs. Smith. You can call me Julia."

"Sorry ma'am, err... Julia. Old habits die hard," I replied sheepishly.

Julia and I set the appetizers out and opened the wine, making an improvised bar so guests could serve themselves. Andrew had been smart suggesting a long, thin table to serve as a sideboard and buffet. I'd been using a card table at my old place. Once Julia told me we had everything handled I poured each of us a glass of wine and we toasted a job well done.

We went out on the porch to wait for the guests to arrive and Sciezka and Michael joined us. I had a cigarette to calm my nerves and once again Sciezka swiped a drag from me. I took it as a good sign that she was as nervous about making the announcement as I was. Julia and Michael went back inside after Julia suggested, "We should light the candles."

Michael chuckled and then said, "You and Julia certainly thought of everything. This is great!"

"Thanks, but it was mostly your wife's doing. I just did as I was told," I replied.
He smiled broadly and quipped, "I've found that is the wise thing to do."

Once they were inside Sciezka moved closer to me and rubbed my shoulders. I patted my lap inviting her to sit down and thankfully she accepted. She rested her head on my shoulder before taking my wine from me. I teased, "I'd say get your own, but I really like you right here."

She smiled and then replied, "Me too. I missed it."

I wrapped my arms around her as I asked, "So when do we make the announcement? Do you want to do it?"

After shaking her head vigorously and emphatically 'no' she said, "You do it. But I think it should be after dinner and before dessert."

"Agreed!" I replied and then kissed her gently.

That familiar conspiratorial expression crossed her features and I asked suspiciously, "What are you up to?"

She giggled and then whispered her reply in my ear. This would definitely be a memorable night for our guests.

I lit up another cigarette as we worked out the logistics for the second surprise.

The guests trickled in just before seven. Seth, Dan and Chris must have met beforehand as they arrived in a group. Turns out they'd gone for a few beers. Luckily, they all seemed to be handling their alcohol. Riza arrived next and she hugged Sciezka tightly, then discreetly took a peek at the ring. She gave me the 'thumbs up' and I grinned.

After getting drinks and finger food I had the guests congregate in the living room. General Lockheed and Marjorie arrived next and I was glad that he had dressed casually. I'd neglected to mention a dress code. Thankfully everyone figured that dinner at our place was informal. Roy arrived next and made a beeline for Riza. She looked amazing in a flowing sundress and heels. Gracia, Elysia and Jim arrived about twenty minutes later and apparently, they still had no idea I had proposed. Finally, Ron and Laura arrived and the party could officially begin.

After everyone mingled for a while and introductions were made Julia called us in for dinner. Since General Lockheed was the highest-ranking officer in attendance I gave him the honor of giving the first toast. I was nervous I'd give it all away if I did it. Everyone commented on the food, teasing me about my "culinary expertise". I smiled and then said, "Thank Julia for the wonderful meal. All I did was slice cheese and chop vegetables."

She colored slightly at the attention and flattery but I could tell she was pleased.

We continued eating and talking and too soon for my taste it was time for dessert. I helped Julia clear the table and bring in dessert. Once everyone was served I glanced at Sciezka and she nodded. It was time.

I pulled away from the table and Sciezka stood next to me, placing a hand on my shoulder. I put both hands on the table and pulled myself part-way up and Sciezka helped me the rest of the way, like Winry had.
Everyone at the table gasped, except Jim and Ron who had seen me do it before. Sciezka stood next to me, helping me stay balanced and once I was sure of my footing I said, "Thank you, I didn't think I'd be able to stand again either, but that isn't the reason we've invited you all here."

Sciezka began blushing furiously and squeezed my waist.

I chuckled and then continued, "My better half would like me to hurry up and just say it. The reason we've invited you all here is to tell you that I've asked Sciezka to marry me, and against her better judgment she accepted."

That earned a hearty laugh from everyone and before I sat down again I took a look at their smiling faces. Ron tapped his glass with his spoon and started up the chant, "Kiss, kiss..."

Sciezka tried her best to reach and mostly got it. I grinned and quipped, "As much as I love the view up here, I'm tired. That and Sciezka is petite."

She helped me ease back into my chair and wiped my forehead with her napkin. Then she gave me a very demonstrative kiss. Once we broke it she teased, "At the wedding, make sure Ron doesn't do that."

Roy interjected, "Ahh, but I will! It's tradition to make the happy couple kiss as many times as possible during the reception."

I winked and then said, "Sciezka, I can't say I have any arguments with that tradition."

She ruffled my hair and we all tucked into dessert. The conversation at the table was lively after our announcement and I was so pleased. I was pretty sure Sciezka was as well.

We all moved to the living room. The women seemed to keep to themselves and I could tell that Gracia, Julia and Marjorie were already full of ideas. I'd let them handle it. Whatever Sciezka wanted, she'd get it... even if it involved trained elephants and a thousand white doves. The men and I all talked and I was relieved when Elysia came to sit on my lap. All the wedding planning was already getting to me.

She asked tentatively, "So you are going to get married?"

"I sure am Princess. I have something very important to ask you," I replied softly.

Her eyes went wide and I could tell the kid was worried about how things would be after the wedding. The suspense was killing her, so I finally said, "Elysia, would you like to be our flower girl?"

She broke into a huge grin and hugged me tightly. Then she ran over to her mother, bouncing up and down with excitement. She quickly returned and asked, "Will it be a pretty princess dress?"

I picked her up and sat her back down on my lap and then said, "The only girl in a prettier dress will be Sciezka."

Elysia nodded and replied in her nearly four-year-old wisdom, "That's because the bride is always the prettiest."

"Exactly!" I said and then kissed my other favorite girl on the cheek.
It was getting late and soon people began leaving. I hadn't gotten Ron's reaction yet and after a bit of looking found him with Laura on the front porch. They both blushed at being discovered. To break the awkward silence Laura said, "Thank you so much for inviting us. Those were some pretty big secrets you were keeping."

I replied, "I'm glad you could come share this with us. Thanks for all of your help."

They held hands and Ron said, "Could you tell everyone bye for us? We're going to head back."

"Sure thing man, glad you could come," I replied.

I went back inside after they left, made the rounds again and then went over to where the women were congregating. They went quiet and I joked, "I see how it is. Girl talk... I'll just go talk with my kind."

Sciezka pulled me back to her, kissed me and said, "We're making dress plans. You can stay, but you'll have to cover your ears and sing."

When the last guests had left and we'd finished cleaning up, Sciezka and I retired to the library with some wine and the last piece of cheesecake. Sciezka had me stretch out on the chaise and she curled up next to me. We were well on our way to being fine again.

I woke up early on Sunday and quickly showered and took care of the necessaries. After I got dressed I went into the kitchen to start the coffee and while it brewed I went outside for a cigarette. Sciezka joined me in her robe and asked sleepily, "What are you doing up so early?"

I took another drag, put my cigarette out and quickly lit another one and then replied, "I am writing, all day long. I figure I can knock out the Military History pretty quickly and then do some more on the psych paper."

She giggled and then commented, "Two cigarettes in a row... you're not nervous at all."

"It's just a lot of work on top of the exams on Friday. If I can write a paper on the material, odds are I'll do fine when I'm tested on it."

She sat in my lap and then said, "It sounds like you've got it under control. Would you like me to proof read them when you're done?"

I grinned and held her closer to me as I replied, "You don't have to, but I'd love the help and the company."

While Sciezka showered, I got started. I spread out all of my research and notes on the coffee table and while drinking my coffee formed a plan of attack. By the time Sciezka came back in I'd drained my first cup and was writing an outline. Before she got herself some coffee she asked if I wanted a refill. She was a lifesaver.

She came back in with two mugs, filled to the brim and then got comfortable in the big chair to read. Around noon my stomach began to rumble, but I ignored it. Sciezka looked up from her book and said, "I'll make some lunch. Would salad with some of the leftover beef and bread taste good?"

I stopped what I was doing and replied, "That would be great. Thanks so much."
She came back in a little while later and I took a short break to eat with her. We didn't talk much; she had mentioned she didn't want me to lose my train of thought. After we finished eating she cleared away the dishes and came back with more coffee. I'd written about five pages longhand and I was anxious to see what she thought about it.

I continued writing while she looked my work over. When she handed it back to me I was amazed. She'd hardly changed anything. I looked up from my notebook and asked hopefully, "So, how was it? You didn't make too many revisions."

She grinned and then replied, "That's because I didn't need to. Your composition is great and your grammar has really improved. I didn't use the thesaurus once!"

I blushed at her praise and said softly, "Wow that is a huge compliment coming from you."

She came closer to me and wrapped her arms around my neck, giving me a fierce hug as she exclaimed, "I told you that you could do it!"

By mid-afternoon I pronounced the paper finished and if it wasn't, I sure was. Sciezka smiled knowingly as I shook out my right hand. It felt like it was going to fall off. She found a sliver of couch next to me, sat down and grabbed my hand. She massaged it briskly trying to get the circulation to return, paying careful attention to each finger. Then she kneaded the muscle between my thumb and index finger roughly. I bit my lip, since it hurt! When she was finished, I felt a lot better, but she had been brutal.

She giggled and then teased, "I cannot believe what I'm seeing! Did that hurt? It couldn't possibly have been that bad in comparison to the stuff Jim and Winry do to you."

I winced as I shook my hand out again and whined, "Well that is... different."

She took my hand and kissed it as she asked, "Is that better?"

"Yes, much," I replied as I pulled her closer to me and kissed her back.

She stood up and was all business again. She tugged at her chinos to smooth out the wrinkles and then practically commanded, "You've earned a smoke break. I'll put more coffee on and then do a final edit. Want me to type it for you?"

"You don't have to do all that," I protested.

She grinned and replied, "No, I don't. I want to. The faster you get all this done, the sooner your term will be over and we can relax."

I nodded and then teased, "So you're not being completely selfless?"

She leaned over, kissed me quickly and replied, "A girl has needs. The sooner this is finished, the better."

I transferred from the couch to my chair and stretched. I'd been sitting still for far too long and was paying the price for it. Sciezka came outside with me and sat cross-legged at my feet. I was still in awe of her flexibility and grace. She was like two different people sometimes. She could be so clumsy when she was nervous. When it was just us, it was like watching a cat. She caught me looking at her and she smiled as she took my free hand.
After I finished my cigarette I reluctantly went back inside to start work on the psych assignment after grabbing more coffee. When I took too much time in the kitchen Sciezka snapped a dish towel at me and joked, "Back to work!"

I saluted and hurried back to the couch after a quick pit stop. I was just getting settled when she came back in to tell me she'd set up the typewriter in the library and to just holler if I needed anything.

Before she left I pulled her down for a quick kiss and she chided, "You don't have to suck up."

I whispered in her ear, "I know... but I like to. You do know you're a goddess, right?"

She smirked and then quipped, "I'll collect on that after your exams are finished."

I could hardly wait.

It was dark out by the time Sciezka finished typing and I had had enough of school work altogether. She attempted to release the knot that had formed between my shoulders, but it wasn't budging. She asked, "Are you hungry for some supper?"

I shook my head no, I was exhausted and sore. I was glad I hadn't gone back to a desk job after getting out of the hospital. If the boredom didn't kill me, the sitting would have.

Sciezka squeezed my shoulder and I hissed in pain. She got a very determined look on her face and said, "Go take a hot bath and don't even think about getting out until I tell you to."

I grinned and she called after me, "Don't get any ideas buster... this is for your own good."

It was a good thing I was exhausted, we hadn't had sex since Monday and I was getting pretty antsy. It would be a week soon and I was waiting for her go-ahead before making any advances.

Sciezka came in as the water was just starting to cool with pajama bottoms for me to put on. I still wasn't going to get any. Not that I was in any condition to.

When I was finished getting ready for bed I went into the bedroom and she had her pajamas on and a sandwich and a glass of milk waiting for me. When I got into bed without touching it she insisted saying, "No complaints just eat it."

Once I'd finished she took the dishes into the kitchen. The next thing she did wasn't much of a surprise. She went straight for the lavender lotion. After giving me a rub down and finally working out the knots in my back I felt like a wet noodle.

She turned off the light, curled up next to me and said so softly it almost didn't register, "I love you."

I was so tired that all I could do to answer was to hold her closer.

I did not want to get up Monday morning, but dragged myself out of bed anyway to face the day. Scieżka must have had an early day as she seemed to be long gone. As much as I'd miss my kiss goodbye I was relieved. I needed a long shower and would have all the hot water to myself. I took
care of the necessaries quickly and then brushed my teeth and shaved.

I noticed that Sciezka had left a note on the bathroom mirror for me:

Jean-

I went into work early to get ahead on some things and so I can hopefully get out right at five. Feel like a swim? Go home and rest after class and when I get home we'll head to the pool,

Love,

Sciezka

As I was getting ready to transfer onto the bench I saw that Master Havoc demanded attention. With Sciezka around to "take care of it", it was a good thing. I was on my own on this and though I really hadn't tried it, well since the incident, I was pretty sure I could handle it myself. I washed my hair quickly, rinsed it and then looked at my lap again. I was still standing at attention. I took the bar of soap, worked up a good lather, and got to work. I closed my eyes and using the suds to reduce friction I thought of what Sciezka would do in this situation and then did it. We'd gone a week without sex and I was so tense. It didn't take long for me to find much needed relief. Once I'd rinsed myself off, I rinsed the tiles across from me down as well, just to make sure I didn't leave a mess for Julia to clean up. Feeling much better I shut off the water, dried off and then got back in my chair. Hopefully this would keep my baser needs in check for a while. I chuckled as I thought, at least that still works for the most part.

I dressed quickly, collected my books and hurried to campus. General Lockheed was at the coffee cart again and offered to carry mine upstairs for me. While we were in the elevator I asked, "So what did Marjorie think?"

He smiled and then replied, "She loved it. She had ideas all day Sunday. I'd warn Sciezka. Though it will mean extra lemon bars for you."

"That's what I like to hear," I said, happy for authentication and happier for the sweets.

"So how is that composition going?" the General asked.

I grinned as I replied, "It's finished! My hand still feels like it's going to fall off, but it's done."

He handed me the paper cup, since I could manage the short trip from the elevator to the lecture hall and then said, "Congratulations! I'm guessing you're in the minority. How do you feel about the upcoming exam?"

"I'll let you know Friday afternoon," I quipped.

He laughed heartily and said, "Good answer soldier!"

Military History went well and I was relieved I had most of the work in that course out of the way. I'd need the extra time to prepare for psychology. Thankfully I'd gotten used to the routine and academic demands quickly. I had doubted Riza and Sciezka's opinions on the matter at first, but they'd been right.

After grabbing an apple and another cup of coffee I went outside to smoke and clear my head.
Once I'd finished eating I got out my leather-bound notebook and wrote for a while. I still hadn't processed everything that had contributed to the fight and afterwards. I was just lucky that Sciezka was sticking it out so we'd be able to talk about it eventually. Mostly, we were no good without each other and we both knew it.

I figured she must be waiting until after my classes were done – she wouldn't want to distract me. But soon we'd have more time together and we'd get it sorted out. This wasn't going to be the end for us. If anything, it was going to make us stronger.

Psychology lecture seemed to race by. My group congratulated me again on a great dinner and both surprises. I reminded them they'd have invitations as soon as we set a date. I was so happy that Sciezka and I had friends outside of the Military. As ridiculous as it may have sounded, I felt validated. They had no obligation to be my friends.

We agreed to hold off our weekly study session until Thursday. It would be an all-nighter if necessary at our place. I made a mental note to ask Julia to order extra coffee. We'd need it.

When I got home I followed Sciezka's note to the letter, if not the intent. I changed into loose pants and brought my books into bed with me. At least I was resting my body. The spasms kicked in predictably, around four. All that sitting in one place the day before had been no good for me. At least we'd be swimming tonight. That usually helped.

Sciezka hit the door exactly fifteen minutes after quitting time. She came into the bedroom and when she saw the books spread out around me she scolded, "I thought I told you to rest."

"I am, mostly. Half of me is completely asleep... I'm just making up for it, honestly," I joked.

She bent over, kissed me and then asked, "You ready to go?"

"Just let me take care of a few things in the bathroom, oh and put on some shoes. Because I totally need shoes to go anywhere," I replied.

She rolled her eyes and said, "I'm ignoring all self-deprecating humor tonight."

As I transferred I had a particularly fierce spasm, but if she noticed she kept it to herself. She changed out of her uniform while I was in the bathroom and soon we were on our way.

It was a nice night and I pushed hard. I'd been physically idle far too long for my tastes. Sciezka kept up, just barely. She was winded when we got to the hospital and I teased, "We need to get you a bicycle or something so you can keep up. I could even hitch a ride sometimes."

She smiled and then said, "I'm glad you're in a good mood."

"Me too," I replied. "I had a good day. Well that and I'm almost done with classes, at least for the summer term."

Once we were in the water we each did our own thing. Sciezka swam laps in the slow lane and I swam hard and fast a few lanes over. She got tired before I was ready to stop. I snuck a few glances in her direction and she was watching me. I sped up a little to show off. When I'd had enough I
swam over to the shallows where she was waiting and she rewarded me with a few kisses.

We got out, dried off and headed home. My legs were still at it, but the spasms had lessened in severity. After a quick dinner, I'd take a long bath and then my meds. After we fixed sandwiches we sat in the living room to eat. While I took care of the dishes Sciezka ran the bath. I figured I'd have to wait for mine. She called from the bathroom, "Care to join me?"

She didn't need to ask twice. I got undressed in the bedroom and hurried to join her. My right leg jumped hard enough to knock it off the foot plate. I frowned and asked the rhetorical question, "Can we just flee to Creta and live by the sea? All this stress is killing me. Think of it, great wine, good food, sun and no homunculi or intrigue..."

Sciezka replied softly, sounding very serious, "That would be nice. What made you think of that?"

I focused on getting into the bath first and once I'd wrapped my arms around her I whispered, "That was the first thing that ran through my mind after my run-in with Envy. I wanted to take you away from all of this to someplace safe."

We sat in the bath for quite some time, not talking. We didn't really need to. She understood how I felt about her and what I wanted for us. Once we'd both gotten out and dry we brushed our teeth and headed to bed. She noticed that I took my meds, but didn't comment; she simply nodded and hugged me. All of this was tough on both of us, but we'd make it.

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Tuesday flew by since I had therapy for most of the day, followed by target practice with Riza and then a marathon study session. Sciezka came home with files to copy for Mustang. I made a quick supper for us and then we moved into the library so we could at least be together while we worked. Every few pages Sciezka would take a break with me on the chaise.

We turned in late since we both had a lot to accomplish. Sciezka completed the files in record time, but shrugged off my compliments saying, "I have to get these done quickly. Roy mentioned you'd be his 'errand boy' a lot in the next few weeks."

As I pulled the covers over us I asked, "So I'm an errand boy now?"

She giggled as she replied, "But they're special deliveries. Your packages are the best."

We were both far too tired to act on our banter, but I had a feeling the "delivery schedule" would be back to normal any day now.

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Wednesday morning felt like it had arrived god awful early. It was going to be a long day. Thankfully Sciezka joined me in the shower shortly after I got in and though we didn't fool around, the view as great and she knew it.

After we got dressed we headed our separate ways. As she kissed me goodbye she wished me luck with the delivery. She knew that part of the whole operation made me nervous. I was excited when she mentioned she'd have a big tip for me tonight for my effort.

*Finally!*
When I arrived in the Humanities Building lobby I was surprised to see Lieutenant General Grumman standing with General Lockheed. I rushed over to them, saluted and Grumman said jovially, "At ease Lieutenant. It's nice to see you again."

General Lockheed handed me a small brown bag, undoubtedly containing baked goods and then said, "Marjorie says hello. She was wondering if you and Sciezka would join us for dinner tonight."

"I'll have to call her after class to make sure, but I'm sure she'd love to," I replied.

I ordered my coffee and while I waited Lockheed said, "I understand, it's short notice. Don't worry about dressing up or decorum. It'll just be a do in the back yard. A few old geezers like us. Bring your suits if you'd like."

Grumman noticed that after I'd fixed my coffee and taken a few sips that General Lockheed offered to take it upstairs for me. He teased, "Well that is one way around that problem."

"Jean and I are creatures of habit. Running into each other here has become routine. I rather like it. His insights help keep me young. That and my wife dotes on him. But I really like the honest feedback about my lectures," he said. "I believe you had a similar rapport with Colonel Mustang when he was at Eastern H.Q."

"Indeed, I did," Grumman replied and smiled.

I checked the time and said, "We should probably head upstairs... at least I should. You two have enough rank you can afford to be late."

Grumman winked and then replied, "Would you mind terribly if two old men hitched a ride with you?"

"Not at all," I said as I led the way to the elevator.

Lieutenant General Grumman's guest lecture on current politics in the East and the aftermath of the Ishbal War was excellent. He held the class in rapt silence until it was time for questions. He'd really gotten the class thinking and his responses to our questions were very insightful. He had chalked the cause of the war up to the state's aggressive expansion policies clashing with the Ishballans views that alchemy was heresy and a crime against nature. He tactfully explained that many of the annexed territories had cooperated, and left it understood that if they didn't routs like New Optain and Ishbal happened. He did admit that it was nearly impossible to pinpoint what exactly had prompted the first shots. He even shared his theory, which I knew from my days on active duty had caused some fuss with the brass, that the whole war may have been started by friendly fire. The final solution, bringing in the State Alchemists, to level the place had originally appeared to be desperation; to end a war that was draining the treasury. However, subsequent anti-Ishballan legislation and policies contradicted that. We all knew that it had been calculated genocide. I was proud of myself because my paper had elaborated on a few of the points that he'd touched on and I had been careful to word it in such a way that neither of us would be questioned about it if it ever made its way to the Dean's office.

When class was over I phoned Sciezka's office and she was happy to be invited but added that she was worried today might be long for me. I reassured her that it would be causal and I could swim while I was there. She was fully satisfied with the plan once I promised I would head straight home.
after class and take a nap.

Grumman and Lockheed walked past me while I was on the phone and when I hung up Lockheed quipped, "The missus is giving him hell already."

Grumman looked to each of us in askance and then said, "So you're off the market Jean?"

"I am. I asked Sciezka to marry me and she accepted," I replied, grinning from ear to ear.

He clapped me on the back and gave me hearty congratulations as he shook my hand.

Lockheed smiled slyly as he said, "Grumman, keep Madame Christmas' girls away from him tonight."

They excused themselves to go have lunch in the Faculty Lounge. I went back to the coffee cart for a sandwich and a carton of milk. I was fortunate today, since I had a lemon bar for dessert.

I sat outside in the shade and smoked after I finished eating. To pass the time I took a few more notes on my assigned material for study group and then headed inside.

Once class wrapped up I reminded everyone that our study session would be on Thursday afternoon at my place. I teased, "Feel free to bring your tooth brush and a change of clothes. You're welcome to crash when we're finished."

We'd worked hard all term and felt prepared for the most part, but we all wanted top marks.

Laura and I left campus together since my place was on the way to the hospital. When we got to my street we stopped at the corner to talk for a while. She looked nervous and commented on the weather.

Finally, I asked, "So what has you so keyed up? You almost never make small talk."

She fiddled with the strap of her satchel as she said, "Ron gets released next week... "

"I know. Isn't it great? He was telling me about the apartment Jim helped him find. It sounds pretty nice," I replied and then thought that maybe there was more to it. "Is that what's bothering you?"

"Oh no, I'm excited. I'm just anxious for him and well, about all the privacy," she stammered and blushed.

This was uncomfortable for me to talk about with her, but I felt I owed something to both of them. I thought out my response carefully and then said, "It will be fine. Take things as slowly as you both need to. Talk and really listen a lot. Just focus on making each other happy. Sometimes it's awkward and things don't always go as planned. I'm sure Ron is just as nervous as you are."

Laura leaned over and hugged me and I added, "I bet if you asked Sciezka she'd have some advice too. I'm not exactly a relationship expert."

She said goodbye and headed on with a skip in her step. I went inside as I'd promised to take a nap.
I woke up to Sciezka kissing me awake. I'd missed that kind of wake-up call. I was so grateful that things were back to normal. I pulled her down to my level and she giggled and then said, "You should shower. There's no fixing that hair."

"We could just stay in. You know, call and say something came up," I teased as I held her closer to me.

She squirmed and wriggled trying to get up. Finally, she said, "As persuasive as you can be, it's not going to work this time. I promise... when we get home. Ok?"

I pouted a bit and then said, "You promise? I am so completely deprived, it's felt like forever."

"Likewise," she replied huskily as she slowly traced the crook of my elbow.

Once I was showered and dressed we called a taxi to take us to the General's house in the Waugh District. Sciezka looked great in a flowing skirt and simple white blouse. It was all I could do to not slide a hand up her leg as we sat in the back seat. I was convinced she chose clothes like that to drive me nuts. It showed just a hint of leg every time she moved and was so soft to touch.

When we arrived at the Lockheed's Marjorie was at the door to greet us. She invited us to join the other guests out back and have a drink. Roy and Riza were already there, sitting in an out of the way spot. General Grumman was surrounded by a bevy of the Madame's girls. I gathered it was mostly for show. In a whisper, Sciezka assured me it was. Was she a mind reader?

We got ourselves glasses of wine and decided to see what Grumman was up to. We didn't end up getting over there, because Marjorie came outside to announce that dinner was served. It was barbeque, one of my favorites. Ma would have commented that Marjorie came from "good people – salt of the earth". Sciezka giggled when I told her that in a rather poor impression of Ma, but agreed.

After dessert, peach cobbler, everyone went outside to enjoy the grounds and the pool. It was nice to swim without a set purpose. As much as I enjoyed swimming laps at the hospital, I also loved just floating aimlessly, or talking at the side with people. It felt amazing to stand with such little effort. I could tell Sciezka liked it as well, even though she had to really stretch to kiss me.

When the fireflies came out we agreed it was time to dry off and make the rounds. General Lockheed pulled me aside and said, "Marjorie is talking wedding plans with Sciezka. Would you please come with me? Grumman has something to show you."

It could be more subterfuge or one of Madame Christmas' girls. I was prepared for more subterfuge, but if it was one of Madame Christmas' girls then I'd be in serious trouble. Out of respect I followed Lockheed out the front door and around the side of the house. When we turned the corner an automobile horn honked at us. Grumman opened the door of the black jeep and said, "What do you think?"

I smiled and then replied, "Pardon me sir, but don't high ranking officials get a luxury sedan and a chauffeur?"

He chuckled. "The military is stuffy like that. I much prefer these, but Lieutenant, it's not mine," he replied jovially, a hint of mischief in his eyes.

General Lockheed turned to face me as he asked, "Well, don't you want to know who it belongs
They were acting in an awfully strange manner, but I took the bait and asked, "I like cars and all, I loved driving back when I still could. But since you've piqued my curiosity... who does it belong to?"

Grumman quickly joined us and replied, "You'll have to revise that statement. It's yours!"

I was too stunned to speak, think or act.

Amused at my reaction, General Lockheed suggested, "Why don't you go check out the driver's side. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. There are a few non-standard features that were custom made just for you."

I did as I was told, they were my superiors, retired or not; and both of them wanted me to look at this thing.

When I peered inside the first thing I noticed was that there were extra knobs and levers. *What could they be for?* As I continued inspecting it Grumman peered over my shoulder and said, "When I told the boys back East how you were doing they were so happy. They got new jeeps in and this one was headed for the scrap heap. The boys thought that would be a terrible waste and started fiddling with it, 'souping it up' they said. I contacted Miss Rockbell with the specs and she sent plans for hand controls."

I was stunned speechless until Grumman said, "Well what do you think of it?"

"I'm amazed. This is far too generous. How did they ever pay for it?" I asked haltingly.

Grumman guffawed, clapped me on the shoulder and announced, "I sold it to them for one hundred cens!"

We all laughed at that and when he regained his composure he added, "I also ignored some missing supplies like paint, tires and oh... a transmission."

Now I knew where Mustang learned it.

"Wow, how can I ever repay you and them?" I asked, utterly touched by their generosity and thoughtfulness.

"The boys said that a visit and buying the first round would suffice. For some odd reason, they miss you," Grumman teased.

"I think they miss the money they made off of me when they'd bet who'd get the girl, me or Mustang," I joked.

We all had a laugh and before we went back to the party General Lockheed quietly told me, "We need to find someplace off the beaten path that you can go to with the files and lay low. You'll have Sciezka, Gracia and Elysia with you. Mustang wants them safe."

"I know just the place. I'll talk to Gracia over the weekend so she has 'go bags' prepared. Sciezka and I will do the same," I replied.

He smiled and said, "We'll start diverting munitions and supplies to you immediately. There's a portable wireless in back. Feury's got it on its own scrambled signal."
"How long will we be at ground?" I asked.

"Long enough for the weather to blow over and in time to ride in with the truth that sets everyone free," he replied cryptically.

I was more than overwhelmed after that so I found Sciezka and we said our goodbyes while we waited for a cab. Before we left General Lockheed pulled me aside again and said, "Your driving instructor will come by bright and early on Saturday morning. Grumman and I thought we'd let you get your exams over with first. I know you will master the controls easily since you are a quick study."

I was quiet on the way home since I wanted to tell Sciezka in private. When we got inside I poured each of us a glass of wine, went into the living room and then said quietly, "Sciezka, please sit down."

She protested at first and then said, "What is it? That request never leads to anything good."

I smiled, took her hand and led her to the ottoman to sit. She complied and I handed her a glass. Finally, I cleared my throat and said, "It's good news and bad news. Grumman and Lockheed showed me something wonderful..."

She interjected, "They did whisk you away for quite a long time."

"They sure did. I'm going to be driving again. The guys in East Motor Pool pulled off a miracle. They salvaged a jeep and customized it just for me."

She threw her arms around me and squeezed me tightly and then exclaimed, "That's amazing! I know you hate having other people drive... having to rely on them."

I set my glass down next to me after she let go and said, "The bad part is that we'll have to be ready to bug out of here on very short notice with the files and take Gracia and Elysia with us."

"For how long?" she asked, her forehead creasing with worry.

"No clue, as long as it takes. You'll have to go AWOL, but will be cleared if everything goes right. If it doesn't, how would you feel about a new identity and hiding out in exotic locations?"

Her jaw dropped and after a long silence she replied softly, "As long as with I'm with you, I'll be fine."

She stood up, took my hand, and led me into the bedroom. After what had seemed like forever she let me show her just how much I loved and adored her.
Chapter 44: Measure of a Man

It had seemed like forever even though it had only been a week. How had I coped before? Oh yeah, lots of masturbation. I smirked as I cleared the fuzz out of my brain. Sciezka was sleeping curled up next to me, her head over my heart. She was smiling and looked perfectly imperfect, her hair mussed and cheeks flushed a delicate pink.

I stroked her face and ran my fingers through her hair and she stirred, murmured something incoherent and squeezed me tighter. It wouldn't hurt if we played possum for a few more minutes. I loved watching her sleep.

Eventually we had to get up and I whispered, "Wake up gorgeous."

Her eyes fluttered open, she rubbed the sleep from them and when she was fully awake said, "You were amazing last night. Feel like another round in the shower?"

"We are up before the alarm so we do have a little time. I've missed this so much," I replied.

She arched an eyebrow as she asked, "What did you miss, the sex?"

"Well, that yeah... but mostly I missed the closeness, the emotional intimacy," I answered softly.

She kissed me full on the mouth and then teased, "I promise I won't let anyone know that you're that mushy."

I returned her kiss gently and then said, "Only for you."

After a long shower where not much washing up occurred, we dressed quickly and left together. In front of H.Q. Sciezka commented, "Pretty soon you can drive me to work."

I chuckled and, as I pulled her onto my lap for one last kiss, quipped, "It's only fair since you drive me to distraction."

She smiled mischievously as she replied, "Just you wait until tomorrow. We'll order in and you'll get a reward for being so studious during your cram session tonight."

"Why are you making me wait?" I whined, mostly joking.

She shook her head as she replied, "Psychology and Military History have nothing to do with Human Anatomy."

I'm sure I looked lascivious when I asked, "So you'd let me study you all I want if I took anatomy?"

She hopped off my lap, straightened her skirt, and shook her head as she scolded, "You are hopeless. Now scoot or you'll be late."

I watched her until she was through the sentry post and then hurried to the hospital.
Jim greeted me warmly at the rehab wing entrance saying, "I hear that soon the streets of Central won't be safe."

Grinning broadly, I replied, "They'll need to lock up all small children and pets, Jim. You heard correctly."

We made our way to the therapy room and started my usual routine.

By midmorning the room was deserted. Jim walked over to the wall and dragged two thick mats behind him. After clearing a space in the middle of the room he went to the door and locked it.

"What are you doing?" I asked, then thinking better of it added, "Correction, what are you going to do to me?"

He rubbed his hands together menacingly as he replied, "I'm beating you up today."

My eyebrows shot up and my mouth was agape. I reckon I looked like a surprised goldfish.

Jim slapped his knee and then attempted to reassure me, "We're going to work on some of your hand-to-hand combat skills and teach you how to take a spill properly."

His explanation was only mildly comforting.

The first time he knocked me out of my chair I flailed about trying to right myself. That was my first mistake. The next time I tried to direct myself in the direction of the impact and didn't resist it. I landed softer this time, and was able to get my bearings, and then get back in my chair quicker.

As I rubbed my shoulder and checked for injuries I said, "They taught us how to take a fall in Basic, but rolling out of one now is different."

Jim nodded and then replied, "But you're getting it."

The next skill we worked on was ambulating quickly on the floor if I got separated from my chair. I hoped that never happened, as I was awkward as hell without it. When Jim was satisfied with my progress he got down on the mats next to me and said, "Pin me."

He really fought hard and didn't hold back. After we'd both worked up a sweat and pinned each other a few times he said it was time for a break. Before we left the therapy room he put me through another quick set of stretches and then we headed to the cafeteria.

It was a working lunch. Jim brought a thick notebook with him and, once we were situated, immediately started familiarizing me with the jeep's layout. Winry's design was fairly straightforward and when Jim was confident that we both understood how it worked he said, "When you're finished eating, meet me in the P.T. room so I can ice you down. No swimming today."

I started to complain but he interrupted me by saying, "You have two exams to ace. Besides, you're all mine for the next few weeks while school is out."

I respected the hell out of Jim, but sometimes I wondered if he didn't enjoy pushing me this hard a little bit too much.
When I got home I changed out of my sweaty workout clothes, washed up and then camped out on the couch to study. Julia came out of the kitchen with a glass of iced tea for me, setting it on the coffee table without a word. I smiled and thanked her and got back to work.

At 1500 hours, I took a break, took care of the necessaries and started to brew what would be the first of many pots of coffee that night. I was out on the porch smoking when Julia left for the day. When I'd finished a second cigarette I went inside to set up the dining room for the study session.

I kept the refreshments simple figuring that coffee, iced tea, and the fresh cookies that Julia had made that morning would be more than enough. If we got hungry later on we could always order in or make sandwiches. Once I was certain that everything was set I poured another glass of iced tea and went back onto the porch to wait.

Everyone arrived on time and we got right to work. Our idea to split the work load up and present a summary worked wonderfully. I gathered this wasn't a standard cram session. We all knew our stuff and added on to our knowledge.

When Sciezka got home from work we took a quick break for dinner. We decided on sandwiches since they were quicker and, as Laura pointed out, less messy than takeout. Sciezka cleared the dishes when we were finished and Dan asked if she'd like to sit in.

"I'd love to, but I brought some work home with me," Sciezka replied.

I pulled her towards me, kissed her cheek and she went to work in the library. She'd come in every hour or so to freshen up our coffee and check on our progress. At midnight, she announced, "You can all stay as long as you like, but Jean has two finals tomorrow."

I started to protest but before I could finish, Sciezka kissed me, cutting me off and pulled away to say, "You know all you're going to. Now you need to sleep."

Chris chuckled and then quipped, "She's right. Any more studying and we'll be too tired to do well on our exams."

With a consensus reached, we agreed to meet at lunch time near the fountain and made plans on where to get a drink regardless of how we thought we did on the test.

Once everyone had left I went into the bedroom to get ready to sleep. I heard the water going and Sciezka called, "Are you going to join me?"

I was tired and sore but who could refuse that offer? I quickly stripped down to my shorts and went into the bathroom. As I transferred to the edge of the tub I winced. My shoulder wasn't too bad, but it was still sore. Sciezka noticed and her eyes went wide when she saw the many bruises on my arms and ribs.

She scowled as she asked, "How did you get so banged up?"

I eased into the tub and hissed when the hot water touched a scrape on my elbow and once I was situated behind her replied flippantly, "Oh, these? I got them while I was working with Jim."
She leaned back and tilted her head so she could get a better look at me. "I'll ask you again, how did that happen?"

She looked pissed. I held her closer as I said, "It's nothing big. Jim was teaching me some stuff… how to take a spill from my chair, new fighting techniques, stuff like that. Don't hurt him... it was fun, well interesting at least."

Her shoulders and back relaxed noticeably against me, and finally she teased, "So I don't have to beat him up on your behalf?"

I laughed heartily and then grabbed my ribs. *That hurt!* I was sure nothing was broken, but ouch!

Sciezka stood up and pulled the plug to drain the tub and then said, "C'mon Champ, it's bed time. I'll give you a rub down before we go to sleep."

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I woke up an hour before the alarm was set to go off in a cold sweat. Thankfully it hadn't been the usual sort of night terror. Sciezka sat up and asked, her tone worried, "Are you ok? Was it *that* dream again?"

I chuckled wryly and then replied, "Not this time."

She nudged me and asked impatiently, "What's so funny?"

"I dreamed that I showed up to the wrong exam room, buck naked."

She settled back under the covers with me and smiled when I said, "Yep, it's pretty nice to have a normal nightmare for once."

Even though it was really early, we got up and showered together. While I got dressed, Sciezka fixed us a quick breakfast so I'd have "brain food." We sat on the porch and though I was too nervous to be hungry, I ate anyway. Once we'd both finished we went inside. I got all my books together, making sure to have extra pens and pencils, and Sciezka wished me good luck with a lingering kiss in the entryway on my way out the door.

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I got to the Humanities Building with plenty of time to spare, bought a cup of coffee, and sat in the lobby going over my notes. At 0945 I went upstairs for the Military History final. The lecture hall was quiet for the number of people already there and the air was full of tension. When the clock struck 1000 hours General Lockheed cleared his throat before announcing, "The department staff will hand out your exams and blue books. You will have two hours to complete the test. Do not open your exam booklet until you are instructed to do so. Good luck."

Good luck indeed. I breathed a sigh of relief as I read over the first few questions. I knew this stuff. Now all I had to do was spit the answers out on cue.

It took me the full two hours to complete the test and check my answers over before handing it in. My hand was cramping from the short answer and essay portion of the test. I hoped Dr. K's test was multiple choice.

I went downstairs and got another cup of coffee and an apple and then went outside to meet with
my study group. Laura smiled and waved when she spotted me. She sat on a bench in the shade and I pulled up next to her, set my cup on the bench, and got out my pack of cigarettes.

"Normally I'd disapprove of that, but can I bum one?" she asked.

I grinned, handed her one and then replied, "No problem. Just don't tell Ron I'm corrupting you."

She laughed and we smoked while we waited for the rest of the group to arrive.

We went into the lecture hall fifteen minutes before the test was scheduled to begin. Seth smiled and instructed everyone to find his or her name on the index cards taped to the desks. He grinned as he said, "It cuts down on cheating, though you folks won't need to."

I was assigned my usual seat, which wasn't a surprise. There were only a few spots in the room that would work for me.

The exam started promptly at 1300 hours and unlike my first final, had no time limit. This was both good and bad. I wouldn't be feeling the pressure of a deadline, but I'd have to be careful to not obsess over checking and re-checking my answers.

Two hours into it, I finished and started going over my test booklet. I hadn't had any trouble with most of the questions and it was far from being an easy test. I caught myself smiling and thought, *this is not supposed to be fun.* I'd have to tell Sciezka about that. She'd get a kick out of it.

When I was certain I'd completed everything and it was as good as it was going to get, I closed my booklet and raised my hand. As I glanced around the room, I noticed that most of my group - no friends- had their hands up as well.

We'd be celebrating tonight at The Cavalier.

Once Seth collected all of our materials we were dismissed. While I waited downstairs in the lobby for the others to come down, I bought a coffee. I was beyond exhausted and my right hand was cramping again from all the writing. We were all pretty tired and agreed we'd go out at 1900. This way everyone had time to catch a nap and a shower.

Laura walked home with me since Ron's place was on the way. Before we went our separate ways, I said, "Remember, Ron is more than welcome tonight. Sciezka's coming. The more the merrier."

She smiled and then replied, "I'll tell him you said that. I think he's more comfortable when you and Jim come too."

"I remember being like that. It'll pass. Trust me. He'll get sick of me," I joked and then winked.

When I got home it was all I could do to ditch my books and get in bed on top of the covers. I was done.

Sciezka slipped into bed next to me and kissed me awake. After a shared shower, we got going.
We only stayed at the bar for two rounds. I was pretty tired and just wanted to go home.

I went straight to bed once we hit the door. It was pathetic. As much as I had been looking forward to the promised roll in the hay it just wasn't going to happen. Sciezka brought a book into bed after I assured her that the light would not keep me awake. A freight train or Fullmetal could have torn through the room and I would've kept on sleeping.

I felt much better in the morning and I was up and ready for anything. Master Havoc apparently agreed, as Sciezka slid the covers off of me tantalizingly slowly and slid up my body leaving a trail of nips and kisses. After a quick romp, we showered, dressed and I headed to the hospital for my driving lesson. Sciezka stayed home and worked on files in the library. I pushed hard and by the time I got to the parking lot I'd worked up quite a sweat.

Jim pulled up in the jeep and honked the horn. When he got out I noticed the suspension made it sit lower than most. He held the door open for me and pointed out the sturdy canvas strap bolted into the frame. I laughed as I commented, "Usually they call those the 'oh shit' handles. They prove very useful when the driver isn't very good."

I pushed the seat all the way back so I'd have room to move, reached for the strap and hauled myself to standing. After pivoting without too much trouble my butt was on the seat. So far, so good. Jim gave me the thumbs up and I grinned. The next step was to get the chair apart and in the back. I hung onto the strap to steady myself while removing the wheels with the other hand. I passed them to Jim who had moved to the passenger side and he tossed them in the back. The frame of my chair just fit as it passed the steering column. That accomplished I pulled my legs, one at a time, into the jeep. Once I was settled in I closed the door. I was already tired, but moved my seat forward and Jim handed me the keys. The hand controls were exactly like Winry's diagrams and I felt confident. I reviewed how it worked one more time with Jim saying, "So I rotate this to accelerate, right? The lever here is for the brake, and to put it into drive or reverse the gears move just like other cars, but on the same lever as the hand controls... "

I didn't sound as confident as I'd felt a moment ago, but Jim smiled and indicated I should give it a go. I put the key in the ignition and turned it. The engine came to life and before we officially started the lesson I took in the view through the windshield. I definitely preferred being behind the wheel to being a passenger. I squeezed the brake and put the car into drive. Once I released the brake it rolled forward. I tentatively gave the accelerator a nudge and it moved faster. Steering with my left hand and working the controls with the right was tricky at first. After a few laps around the parking lot Jim had me practice backing into spaces, parallel parking, and three-point turns.

"You're a natural Jean. Why don't you drive to your place to show Sciezka?"

"I don't know. Do you think I'm street legal again?"

Chuckling he replied, "I trust your driving better than most and in this case, you're recertified on my say so. So yes, let's go!"

Jim had me drop him off at Gracia's since he'd left his car there. She and Elysia waved to me from the porch and smiled. I backed out of their driveway without incident and when I pulled up in front of our place I couldn't resist honking. It took a couple of tries before Sciezka came out onto the porch. When she finally did she ran out to the car and got into the passenger seat.

"So, are you going to take me for a ride?"
Grinning I replied, "Anywhere you want darling. I'll warn you, there isn't much room to make out in the back seat."

She smiled back at me, rolled down the window and exclaimed, "Let's go!"

I drove around the block a few times, up past H.Q. and finally to High Street. I had an idea. I parked in front of Pane Fresco, turned to Sciezka and asked, "Could you pick something out for lunch, to go?"

She went in to place our order and while I waited I enjoyed watching cars and people pass by. It was tough getting in and out of the jeep, but that wasn't too worrisome. I was now able to get places on my terms and schedule.

Sciezka came back with the food and I headed to our place. When I pulled into our driveway she looked puzzled. I laughed and explained, "We're going to have a picnic in the backyard. You go get a blanket and I'll handle the rest."

Once I got myself and my chair out of the jeep I hurried inside, grabbed glasses and a chilled bottle of wine and headed out the back door.

Sciezka had spread out the blanket and unpacked the take-out boxes. I joined her, poured the wine and toasted, "I thought it might be fun to remember our first real date."

She leaned in for a kiss and then whispered, "This is a lot like the park, only better. We have it all to ourselves."

We savored every bite, eating slowly and feeding each other. Sal's staff was good. You asked for a picnic, you got it. They'd sent big pieces of bread to pile mozzarella and tomatoes on, prosciutto wrapped melon and strawberries dusted in sugar for dessert. It was simple, but perfect and decadent. When we finished eating we moved the empty containers to the side so we could spread out on the blanket and look at the clouds.

Sated and comfortable we nodded off bathed in the dappled afternoon sunlight. Our garden was in full bloom and the roses delicately scented the air. Sciezka woke up first and nudged me saying, "Shouldn't you go inside and work on your psychology paper?"

I pushed up on my elbows so I could get a better look at her and replied in a serious tone, "Today I'm dedicating my considerable intellect and means to the study of botany and female anatomy. I have a mind to stay out here long enough to include astronomy."

She kissed me to shut me up. Though apparently, she didn't mind being a research specimen as we made out like teenagers in the backyard, only moving inside when my sense of propriety made what we were doing too risqué for the neighbors.

The cursing coming from the bathroom was what roused me from a sound sleep on Sunday morning. Sciezka sounded fine, if pissed and I called from the bedroom, "Is everything all right in there?"

I heard the water run, she came out, scowled and then announced, "Female anatomy is inherently
flawed."

So, that's what the problem is... female troubles.

She crossed the room and flopped on the bed next to me and then curled up in a ball. I rolled over onto my side so I could rub the small of her back.

"What would make you feel better?"

"Shooting me!" she wailed.

"I already told you, no can do on the shooting. How about I bring you some peppermint tea and the paper so you're at least entertained while you are miserable?"

She nodded and gave me a wan smile. While I brewed coffee for myself I made toast for both of us. Maybe she'd eat that. When it was ready I balanced it all on a tray and went back into the bedroom. She wrinkled her nose in disapproval when she saw the lightly buttered toast, but nibbled at it anyway. After we ate I took care of the dishes, brought her the paper and then camped out on the couch to finish my psych paper.

Around lunch time Sciezka padded into the living room looking much better. She peered over my shoulder to see how my work was coming along. I covered the page with my hands teasing, "No peeking. It's the weekend. Stop working."

She flopped down next to me on the remaining sliver of couch and wriggled to get more space. I scooted over and asked, "Is that better?"

"It would be better if you showered with me."

Well that was all the excuse I needed to take a study break.

The long, hot shower did wonders for her constitution. While she got dressed I made lunch and then went out onto the porch for a cigarette. When I got back inside Sciezka was already sitting on the couch with our sandwiches and two frosty glasses of tea.

"You should have let me do that. You're supposed to be relaxing," I chided.

She leaned in for a kiss and then said, "You worry too much. I'm fine. Besides, you'll spoil me."

Once we finished eating Sciezka did the dishes while I set up "camp" again on the couch. I would finish this paper today if it killed me.

At 1500 hours, I decided that my work was as good as it was going to get and handed it to Sciezka to proofread. She only pulled the pencil she'd tucked precariously behind her ear out twice to make corrections.

I started typing it myself and was becoming increasingly frustrated at the time it was taking me to hunt and peck my way over the keyboard. Sciezka came into the library, stood behind me and rubbed my shoulders.

"So how much of it have you gotten done? You've been in here long enough."

"I've gotten through the first four pages of draft," I replied flatly.
"Of how many pages?"

"Thirty longhand."

She continued to work on my shoulders, digging her elbow into a particularly stubborn knot. Finally, she leaned over and whispered, "Go make dinner. Get out in the air. This will take me a couple of hours tops."

I took her up on her offer. Before I left I pulled her onto my lap and just held her.

"You don't have to kiss up to get me to type for you," she teased.

"Nope, I know I don't. I just like to. What would you think about some supper from the cafe down the street? I could get pie."

"That sounds like a plan. Now go, relax or something! If you get any more tightly wound you're going to explode."

Before I picked up dinner I stopped at Gracia's to see Elysia. I'd been so busy with school that I'd barely seen her. Once I got my fill of cute I headed to the cafe, pushing hard. It felt good to move. I'd always hated sitting still.

When I got home with big salads and pie, Sciezka was sitting in the living room reading. A sturdy cardstock folio was on the coffee table. I couldn't believe she'd finished already, but she had.

While Sciezka unpacked the paper bag full of food I set the table and on a whim lit a few candles for atmosphere. She must have had the same idea, since instead of tea or water she came in with a bottle of wine.

It was a low-key sort of celebration. Technically the term was over for me. Now all I had to do was wait patiently for my grades. After dinner, I called my folks to catch up with them and see if we could visit the next weekend. I wanted to do a dry run for the road trip we'd be taking when all hell broke loose. I also wanted to see their faces when we announced our engagement. We both deserved a long weekend.

When I asked Sciezka if she wanted to call or visit her mother she abruptly grew quiet. I knew I'd brought up a sore subject. To try and smooth it over I said, "I still feel bad I didn't ask her permission. It's old fashioned, I know..."

She smiled and replied softly, "It's ok. I'll call her tomorrow after I've worked up the courage. Can we just be happy tonight?"

I couldn't deny her that. If she didn't feel up to it that was fine. I knew it had nothing to do with her feelings for me.

It had been a long day, unusually tiring for a Sunday, and we got ready for bed. Once in bed we curled up together talking quietly and exchanging soft kisses until we both drifted off.

Monday I woke up feeling sore all over. It couldn't still be from Thursday's P.T. session. I stretched
and shrugged it off figuring that Friday's exams and all the school work were finally catching up with me. Sciezka was already in the shower and after I handled the necessaries I joined her. She was going in early to make sure she'd get out on time. She wanted a leisurely dinner with me before she faced the challenge of talking to her mother.

As I shaved and she stood behind me putting the finishing touches on in the mirror I teased, "So should I have two bottles of wine at the ready tonight?"

Once I put my razor down she poked me hard in the shoulder and replied, "Not funny, buster."

"So, if I cook something sensational will that ease the sting a little bit?"

She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. I'd hit the grocer and the butcher after I finished at the range.

I arrived at campus with plenty of time to spare. The short push had really winded me and for some reason my lower back ached, right above the injury site. It wasn't too bad considering, so I continued with my routine and got a cup of coffee. I needed it.

The girl at the cart knew my order by now, "Gimme the biggest one you got, black."

Seth was behind me in line and teased me about the enormous cup. "Now I know how you manage to get it all done. You mainline caffeine."

I chuckled as I replied, "Pretty much. It's the only way I can find enough hours in the day."

"Would you have time in your busy schedule to pencil me in for lunch? I want to talk to you about course selection for next term."

"I just got finished with this term, your paper included. But lunch would be good and I should plan my schedule before Riza makes it for me. You're on."

Seth took my cup from me and gestured toward the elevator. It was a symbiotic exchange. He avoided the stairs and I had someone to carry my coffee.

General Lockheed's class was dedicated to going over the exam answers. He hadn't finished grading them yet, but remarked that so far, he was impressed. After class, he pulled me aside to talk.

"I was pleased with your exam."

"So, I did well? The suspense is killing me."

"Well, if you couldn't tell from the lecture, I suppose I can tell you off the record. I only subtracted a few points and that's only because no one has ever gotten a perfect mark from me."

That blew my mind. I knew I'd been well prepared and enjoyed the class, but wow! I could hardly wait to tell Sciezka and Riza. I'd keep it under my hat with Mustang, because he probably already knew and because I'd never seen myself as the book smart type. The man could only be right about so many things before it got annoying.

General Lockheed interrupted my train of thought when he said, "Come see me tomorrow at 1400 hours. I trust you have transportation."
I grinned as I replied, "I sure do. I'll see you then. I'm just still in shock that I did so well."

He clapped me squarely on the back and said, "Well, I knew you could do it. See you tomorrow."

I hurried to Seth's office where he was waiting and the silly grin I was wearing still hadn't faded.

"I take it Military History went well?"

"It sure did Seth. Any chance I could get your verdict on the test?"

He smiled as he replied, "Why don't I tell you over lunch. Is the faculty lounge ok?"

The lounge was rather crowded and Seth apologized as we weaved through the maze of tables until we found an empty one in the corner. The waitress came quickly with menus and water and it took no time to order. I barely had to look. I knew they made a great B.L.T. Seth was set in his ways as well and we were able to get right down to business.

He interlaced his fingers, leaned over and quietly said, "You aced the exam. I only took off points on one of the essay questions."

"Which one?" I asked, curious since I was sure I'd had it down.

"The question about the Five Stages of Grief, I thought you were somewhat evasive and overly clinical."

I was slightly put out by his answer, but he was the professor and I still had an A on the exam. He did have a point. That had been my least favorite part of the curriculum.

He noticed my expression and said, "I'd like you to take my Abnormal Psychology class next term. I've waiving the prerequisite. I want you to get a taste of it."

"So, are you bending the rules as a favor to Riza?"

"Absolutely not, I'm trying to get you into my program. The Humanities Department would love to have you."

I shook my head in disbelief as I replied, "That is something I never thought anyone would say about me."

He grinned and teased, "Well get used to it."

Our lunch arrived and we ate quickly. It wouldn't be proper to arrive at class together, late. Seth went into the building and I had a quick smoke before going in.

Class sped by and though I listened to the explanations of the exam questions I didn't pay the usual amount of attention. I was still in shock about how well I'd done.

After class I hurried over to H.Q. hoping to find Riza at the range. I was lucky and caught her there just as she was getting her gear together. She asked what I'd be firing and requisitioned extra ammo for my .38. Once at the line we practiced without speaking. After I'd shredded three targets I
started to fatigue, I wasn't bad, but it wasn't my best. I noticed my knees starting to quiver and I decided to call it a day. Riza must have noticed because she emptied one last clip and joined me at the lockers.

"Are you ok?" she asked quietly in case anyone was around to overhear.

"I'm great, just a little tired after exams and all that school stuff. It was worth all the work."

"Well spill it! How did you do?"

"No official grades yet and there's still the matter of the research papers, but I nearly aced both of them."

She hugged me tightly, kissed my cheek and then asked, "So what will you take next term?"

I chuckled at her reaction, shook my head and finally replied, "Everyone is jumping the gun, but so far I know I'll be taking Abnormal Psych with Seth and I'm talking to the General tomorrow after P.T."

"Do you need me to arrange for a driver to pick you up at the hospital? I feel bad having you running all over Central for us."

So, she didn't know... leave it to Lockheed and Grumman to keep her out of the loop in the spirit of fun. It was almost impossible to put one over on her, but they'd done it.

I sat up a little taller and all but crowed, "I'll be driving myself, in my new jeep."

She smiled broadly, crossed her arms over her chest, and commented, "Grandfather had something to do with this, I knew he was up to something."

After she finished putting her gear away she gave me one more hug and said, "You should get home and rest. You've earned it."

"I will, after I fix supper. It's gotta be good. Then I'll rest, at least until my session with Jim tomorrow."

After a quick stop at the green grocer and the butcher on the way home I got right to work on dinner. I figured a tossed salad and steak would be hearty enough if we paired it with crusty bread. It would make leftovers to pack Sciezka a lunch tomorrow as well. I'd gotten pretty quick in the kitchen and by the time Sciezka arrived the salad was ready; the meat was marinating and the table was set. I'd lit the votives and picked a few roses to make it look fancier. It was amazing what a little candle light could do. It didn't hurt that I met her at the door with a glass of wine and a kiss.

While she changed, I heated up a cast iron pan to give the steaks a quick sauté, brought the salad to the table and warmed up the bread in the oven. When she sat down at the table she sighed contentedly and said, "You've outdone yourself."

"That's nonsense... this isn't even real cooking. It's heating and assembling at best."

She took a bite of her stake and then replied, "You could have fooled me. This is good."

"Good enough to have cold for lunch tomorrow?" I asked and then winked.
After another bite and a sip of wine she said, "You really want me to call her, don't you?"

"I have dark chocolate ice cream and raspberries for dessert after you get off the phone."

While I cleared the table, and took care of the dishes Sciezka used the phone in the library to talk to her mother. When I'd finished, she was still on the line, apparently listening. She had her back to me so I couldn't see her expression. I didn't want to distract or pressure her so I went outside for a cigarette while I waited.

She came outside a few minutes later with another glass of wine and promptly commandeered my lap and stole my cigarette. I was dying to know how it went. Finally, she sighed heavily and said, "She'll be coming out when it's 'not so hot and stuffy' in Central. I'm hoping for an unseasonably warm autumn."

"Well that wasn't as awful as you thought it would be. Did you tell her about the engagement?"

She shook her head no and I could see tears forming and threatening to spill. I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed hard, hoping it would reassure her. She put her head on my shoulder and I took us inside and headed straight for the bedroom.

She got ready for bed while I went and got the ice cream. The spasms were bad enough that they nearly knocked the tray off of my lap. I positioned my chair next to her and hoped she wouldn't notice as she savored the bittersweet chocolate and plump, juicy berries.

Once we'd finished I took care of the bowls and she was sound asleep when I got back. I breathed a sigh of relief and took my meds before I took care of the necessaries. After a hot shower the spasms had lessened in severity. I got into bed carefully so I wouldn't wake her. I'd been lucky she hadn't noticed. I hadn't done enough to cause them to be so bad. I attributed it to leftover stress and decided I could sleep them off.

I felt marginally better on Tuesday when I woke up. My lower back was still stiff, but the spasms had stopped. It was the worst they'd been in a while. I never had them this often. I decided it would be fine. I'd just increase my sessions in the water. That always helped.

Sciezka and I showered together. I paid extra attention to her back as I knew it bothered her. It didn't hurt that I found the small of her back incredibly sexy. The combination of creamy soft skin and lightly defined muscles was beautiful.

Once we were dressed and ready we changed up our routine. I drove and dropped her off at H.Q. Roy's usual car was pulling up to the sentry post and I decided to have a little fun with him. After Sciezka got out I laid on the horn a bit and Roy got out abruptly, not waiting for the driver to open his door for him. He was poised to snap and once he got a better look at the asshole that was honking, his jaw dropped.

He quickly came around to my window and leaned in, apparently surveying the layout and possibly verifying that what he was seeing could be believed.

"You wouldn't happen to need a driver, would you?" I joked.

"As a matter of fact, Lieutenant, I've missed your services," he replied and winked.

"Just know I won't be ferrying you on dates with strange women. That can get you into trouble."
Roy said goodbye and as I pulled away I caught Sciezka blowing me a kiss from the gate in the rearview window.

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I'd gotten better at getting in and out of the jeep and I was excited about the trip to see my folks. They'd been reassured when they'd seen me with Sciezka at the lake, but Ma was a worrier. The news of the engagement and the new wheels would do a lot to ease her mind.

Jim was working with Ron when I got to the P.T. room and even though I could tell from experience he was struggling, he was smiling. Jim did my range of motion and stretching while Ron did push-ups on an adjacent mat. Ron suggested a wager, whoever did the most push-ups in two minutes would be the victor and the loser owed first round on Wednesday night.

"You're on! Just be prepared for defeat. As much as I like you, it's a matter of pride for me."

Jim rolled his eyes but agreed to be an impartial observer. I think he was just happy to see progress and a healthy sense of rivalry between us. The first minute was easy. I was doing well, had good form and I was on push-up twenty-five when my arms just quit on me. How embarrassing. But I ceded defeat gracefully and was happy for Ron. He'd really progressed. I was worried since I was off and more tired than usual. I decided that if I wasn't better by Thursday I'd talk to Jim about it. I was confident it would pass by then. It had to be from deadlines and finals.

When we broke for lunch I ate with Ron in the cafeteria. He was so excited about his new place and Laura. He was a gentleman and left out the details, but apparently, privacy was a good thing for their relationship.

"We should double sometime, though I don't know how the girls will feel about being crammed in the backseat with the chairs."

Ron grinned at that idea and suggested, "We could always do dinner at one of our places."

"That is true. If you're cooking, I'll pass. If it's at your place, we'll have something delivered."

"Jean, I haven't killed Laura with my cooking... yet!"

I just shook my head at that. We were certainly a pair of something. I wasn't sure what. It was probably a miracle the girls hadn't gone on strike in protest of bad self-deprecating humor.

The drive to the Academy was scenic. It was situated on the outskirts of the city, past the Wague district. The road leading to the main building was lined with trees and the perfectly groomed lawns stretched out as far as you could see.

I parked in back by the kitchen loading docks and hurried inside. It was considerably cleaner back there this time and I didn't end up tracking produce into the grand foyer. General Lockheed smiled when he saw me. I didn't even have to wait. I followed him to the staff lounge and he sat down in a large leather chair. The staff had apparently been given the heads up, as there wasn't a chair opposite Lockheed. After the General poured each of us a glass of iced tea, he got right to his agenda.

"Your exam results were of excellent quality. I enjoyed reading your views on Ishbal and current diplomatic policies. I'm looking forward to seeing your research. Did you bring it?"
"Just in case, yes. I'll be glad to have it out of my hands. I'm happy with it. I just hope you are too."

He smiled when I handed it to him and thumbed through it quickly.

"If you don't mind, I'll keep this. Consider this term complete and a success. Now, have you given some thought to what courses you'll take next term?"

It was the same with all of them I supposed. Better to be in demand and having to turn down opportunities than scrambling for them. "I know I'm taking Abnormal Psychology. Doctor Kohut waived the pre-requisite for me."

"Ah, he got to you first. But did he offer you an assistant position?"

I was surprised at that. As far as I knew first year students didn't get offered positions like that.

"I'll take your silence as a no. Would you like to help me next term with the Introduction to Military History course? It'd be mostly scut work, like grading and tutoring. However, it would look good on your transcript and hopefully steer you to my department."

"That's too generous. I'm sure there have to be better qualified candidates. I'd hate to take the job away from someone else. It feels like favoritism to me."

"That is not the case at all Lieutenant Havoc," he replied sternly, suddenly formal again.

I could feel my cheeks heating up and was it hot in here? I stammered, "I meant no disrespect. Of course, I'll take it, I'm honored. I'm just concerned my other duties might interfere."

He smiled, his fatherly demeanor returning as he said, "You let me worry about that. I'll need you to focus on my busy work and Political Science. Mustang will understand. I'm grooming you for a consultant position on his staff."

It always came down to Mustang. At least I'd earned this on my own merit.

"I've already got Grumman working on Riza for me. Seems she thinks you'd be a good shrink. I don't doubt that, but you'd be of more use to them with a degree in Civics. Those old battle hounds will never see you coming."

That seemed so preposterous that I chuckled as I thought about it later.

When the General dismissed me, I went straight home to rest. I had a lot to think about. That had to be why I felt so off.

On Wednesday morning I was relieved that Sciezka went into work early. Since I didn't have to be at campus until the afternoon I went to the hospital for a swim. The spasms had lessened in severity, but had become near constant. I couldn't shake them. As much as I didn't want to, I'd have to tell Jim about them. At least with a break from school I'd have time to rest and get to the bottom of whatever was causing them.

After my swim, I grabbed a sandwich in the hospital cafeteria and then drove to campus. My friends had all finished their papers, though Dan and Chris both looked like they hadn't slept. Once our work was turned in we all stopped at Seth's office and invited him out with us for a drink later. He accepted, though he joked, "Don't think that'll make me go easier on any of you."
Laura pulled me aside and asked if we could walk home together. I dangled my car keys in front of her and replied, "I'll do you one better. I'll give you a ride home."

When we pulled up to Ron's apartment she smiled and said, "He'll be jealous that I got a ride first."

"Probably," I said and shrugged. "But you're prettier. He's just not my type."

"Sciezka's right. You are a horrible flirt and bad at it. You're lucky she knows you're absolutely nuts about her."

I grinned and replied, "Don't I know it? I'll see guys tonight."

When I got home I took my meds and caught a nap. Hopefully I'd shake the spasms by the time Sciezka got off work.

I had meant to be up and ready by the time Sciezka got home, but instead of the alarm going off I woke up in a much more pleasant way. After she kissed my forehead she asked, "Are you sure everything is all right? You're awfully warm."

I brushed her concerns aside saying, "It's hot outside. I must have gotten some sun this afternoon. I'm fine."

She changed out of her uniform and into dungarees and a t-shirt. I loved it when she looked like that... so sexy without even trying. I opted for loose fitting khakis and a short-sleeved shirt. There was no way I was going to be able to wrangle myself into anything tighter with my legs going the way they were. Hopefully the loose pants would camouflage the near constant twitch in my right leg.

While Sciezka called a taxi, I sat on the porch and had a cigarette. When she came outside to wait with me she stood behind me and rubbed my neck and shoulders. Usually I'd have her sit on my lap at times like this, but I didn't want her to think anything was wrong with me. If she noticed, she didn't mention it.

Everyone was at the pub by the time we arrived and we situated ourselves next to Laura and Ron. He teased that it was nice to have someone to talk to on his level and I agreed. I was in no mood to have to crane my neck to talk to people.

Since everyone was now present and accounted for we went into the back room and got a table. Chris and Dan challenged me and Ron to a game of pool. They had no idea what they were up against.

After the first round I declined a second game, suggesting that Laura play in my place. Chris and Dan were hot for a rematch. "Best two out of three?"

Sciezka and I sat and talked to Seth while we sipped our drinks. Since the rest of our group was occupied with a game of pool, he took the opportunity to talk shop.

"I was wondering if you'd be interested in an assistant position in the upcoming term. I got funding for the Introduction to Psychology course."
I smiled and was flattered, but there was no way I'd be able to handle two positions. I politely declined saying, "I'm sorry, you're too late. General Lockheed has already asked me and I accepted. Thank you so much for considering me. I'm honored."

He shrugged good-naturedly and said, "It's not a problem. Who would you suggest?"

That was an easy question. "Dan or Laura would be perfect."

He smiled and agreed. He got up to make the rounds again and Sciezka squeezed my hand under the table. I could tell she was proud of me.

I sat back in my chair and tried to relax. I was so tired and it was enough to just watch everyone else have fun. It was getting hard to follow conversations and I felt fidgety. Sciezka noticed and put a hand on my knee, attempting to quiet it.

She made a show of yawning and stretching, we said our goodbyes and we left.

When we got outside I could tell she was not happy with me. As we waited for a cab she said quietly, "So how long has that been bothering you? They've never been this bad."

I avoided her eyes as I answered, "I've felt a little off for almost a week. I figured it would pass."

"A week? Typical male," she huffed. "You're telling Jim about this tomorrow, right?"

I nodded solemnly. The cab arrived; we went home and headed straight to bed.

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Sciezka's hand on my forehead was what woke me up Thursday morning. She was checking my temperature and apparently did not like what she found one bit.

"You're burning up. I'm calling Doctor Knox," she said tersely

"You don't have to bother him. This is nothing. I'll go see Jim and then get checked out by one of the docs at the hospital. Really, I'm fine."

"I'm not thoroughly convinced, but you're a grown man. Do what you want."

She stood up, and went into the bathroom, letting the door close loudly. I was pretty sure I wasn't invited.

Getting dressed was a chore and the short push to the hospital drained me. Maybe Sciezka had been right. I went over to the mats to start my stretches, and as I was transferring to the floor everything went fuzzy.

I was vaguely aware of a flurry of activity going on around me. My senses were overloaded with bright lights in my eyes, medical jargon being thrown back and forth at a rapid-fire pace and sharp pokes in both arms. I tried to open my eyes to see where I was, but I was exhausted. I was starting to panic when I felt a strong and steady hand holding mine.

"Just hold still Jean. You passed out in the P.T. room. The doctors will get you straightened out. I called Sciezka and Roy. They'll be here soon."
The room was quiet and cool when I came to again. Sciezka was sitting near the bed and I smiled and whispered, "I'm sorry."

"You sure are. Pathetic," she hissed.

She moved like lightning and before I could shake the shock of what she'd said she was astride my chest, covering my mouth roughly with her hand. She was heavy, too heavy and it was hard to breathe.

"Don't bother screaming. I'll just kill the unfortunate soul who tries to play hero."

It looked just like her, but the eyes were a giveaway. Where Sciezka's were a deep green and sparkled, these were cold, dead, and flat looking.

Envoy.

I was going to die right here. The hospital was a perfect place. I was sick already. It could be written off. I'd simply taken an unexpected turn for the worse.

The homunculus morphed back into its usual form and removed its hand from my mouth. A smug grin crossed its features as it said, "Relax. I'm not going to kill you today. You're much too fun to play with. I'm glad Lust didn't kill you all the way."

It scooted back to straddle my hips, picked up my right leg, and then dropped it so it dangled limply over the side of the bed. It nudged my foot and watched if flop uselessly like a pendulum. "Nope, just half dead."

I gritted my teeth as said, "What do you want?"

"Oh, want? Nothing. I'm just bored. Greed was right. That little book waif of yours has a hot little body, for a human."

"Don't you dare touch her!" I threatened.

"What would you do about it? Like I said... pathetic. Wrath finds your struggle admirable for some reason. I think that's why Father lets you live. Well, that and it's delicious to watch Mustang struggle and squirm as he drags along dead weight."

I wasn't dead yet. What did this thing want?

"You're not the brightest bulb in the box, are you? I can almost hear the gears whirring in that tiny brain of yours. As for what I want today, I just thought I'd remind you that we hold all the cards," it taunted, briefly taking on Mustang's voice and appearance.

It got off of me, stood up and changed back into Sciezka. It ran its hands over her lithe frame, stopping entirely too long at her breasts as it cooed, "Not as well-endowed as Lust was, but beggars can't be choosers." In an instant, it changed again. This was the sickest impersonation of all.

"They're all safe for now," it said in a sing-song voice, pig tails bobbing. "You'll know when it's time. I'll make you watch. You'll be the last broken dolly, helpless and powerless to do anything. I think I'll kill Mommy first... it'd be divine for her to be murdered by my Daddy."
The homunculus returned to his usual form and crowed, "I do have a flair for the dramatic, don't I?"

Next was Gracia...

"I think I'll strangle that mewling, whining little girl. Nice and slow... she'll make such beautiful music as she breaks."

The last form it took was the most horrific. After the alchemical glow faded I was staring back at myself, before all of this started. It was surreal... there I was, untouched and standing at my full height. I'd almost forgotten what it had felt like. Envy strutted around in the clothes I'd worn on my last mission. It seemed to be trying my body on for size, flexing his muscles and running in place.

"Lust said you were attractive, for a human. Your girl trouble certainly wasn't caused by your appearance. It must have been your personality. Yes, if I recall correctly she said you must have been raised in a barn. You were strong and agile for your size. I'm almost impressed. Wouldn't it be nice if before she died your little woman got to see you in peak form? You're packing some heat, if you weren't gentle, you could hurt someone. Yes, it's perfect. Give her everything she deserves and hasn't gotten, while you watch. I scare myself sometimes with my brilliance!"

"I'm sure she'll be the most fun of all of them. Well, the most fun that day. I'll have to make sure I can hear both of you screaming. Maybe I'll let you live... yes, that would be the most painful way to leave things. Useless, impotent you, all alone in the carnage... helpless."

Bile rose in the back of my throat. I tried to choke it back and failed, spewing, and then dry heaving on the floor.

"That reminds me," it said as it carefully skirted the pool of vomit on the floor. "Do you remember what it was like in the Lab? Wrath said it was glorious! The scent of fear mixed with fire and every foul bodily fluid imaginable. I bet you pissed yourself after you went down. Oh, I'm sure of it. Why did Mustang even bother with you? It must have been his guilty conscience. It would have been more humane to have left you to die. After all, you're like an elderly toothless dog. A good master would have taken you out back and shot you to put you out of your misery. But this one just lets you suffer and linger. Human emotions... intriguing and amusing, but pathetic."

Finally, satisfied that it had rattled me as much as it was going to, it shifted into the form of one of the nurses and slipped out the door.

I tried to sit up, to get my leg back on the bed... my body felt so heavy and I couldn't make it work. I fell, toppling the I.V. pole and it crashed on top of me, ripping out the lines. My veins felt like they were on fire as I scrabbled and scraped on the floor in a puddle of my own sick.

The lights went on, blindingly bright, and rough hands grabbed at me; people shouted, and finally held me down. I was surrounded. I fought them off until I felt a sharp pain in my neck and everything went black.
The room was dim and the curtain around my bed was pulled. Mustang sat slumped in a chair at my bedside, his eyes alert, but stormy. When he noticed me watching him he spat, "What the hell was that? Have you lost your mind?"

I looked at my wrists, which were fastened with thick, leather straps to the guard rails. *Why had they done that?*

"They thought you might do something else to hurt yourself. You tore out the I.V.; you tried to clock an orderly. I'll undo them if you don't pull a stunt like that again."

I still wasn't sure if it was him yet.

"Sir, please authenticate."

He was stone faced as I repeated my request, "Sir, I'll need you to authenticate before I say anything more."

I was ready to go into name, rank and serial number mode like I'd been taught when he blurted out, "Lemon bar! What happened? Tell me everything. I knew you wouldn't just lose it like that."

He undid the restraints quickly and pulled his chair closer. I was hoarse and my mouth felt like a desert and I fumbled on the bedside table for some water.

"What are you looking for? There's no one here. I swept the room personally," he said, as his tone grew more and more alarmed.

"It was Envy... but before I start, can I please have something to drink? Whatever they put me down with gave me cotton mouth."

"I think it's just ice chips for you. Can you wait a minute? I need to hear what happened before they come to check on you, and before Sciezka gets back."

My eyes went wide at the mention of Sciezka's name. I wasn't sure what was worse, the hateful things "she" said or what Envy said he'd do to her.

Finally, I stopped postponing the inevitable. I would have to tell him. My voice faltered as I barely whispered, "It was Envy. I thought it was Sciezka at first, until she, no *it* spoke. It appeared to be Elysia, and Gracia too. They said such horrible things. Why would it go after me? *Why?* Even if the Homunculi know what I'm doing, I'm nobody to them. Why would he threaten to hurt *them?*"

My voice broke and I could feel the hot tears running down my cheeks. He cut me off sternly at first, barking, "Havoc, calm down!"

His face crumbled, and his voice broke as he said, "Jean, you aren't nothing to me... Gracia and Elysia aren't nothing to me... I think Envy was using you, to get to me. They can't actually *harm* me yet. They still need me or something. But I think, no, I know they know my vulnerabilities. I'm so sorry that being mixed up with me is still hurting you."
"Roy, it's fine. Can I get those ice chips now?"

"You're leaving something out, I can tell."

"It's not important... really. Can you just let it go? Knowing won't give you any more leads or intel."

He folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in the chair. He was as stubborn as I was.

"Fine, if you hadn't already guessed, Envy is a twist. I think that sick fuck actually gets off on it. After Sciezka belittled me, she felt herself up. Fucker was comparing her body to Lust's..."

Apparently, I'd stunned him silent, "Oh and you'll love this... I got to take a walk down memory lane, almost literally. Saw myself standing in ops gear, just like that day." I balled my fists as I continued, "Says he'll give her everything she's missed and I'm the lucky son of a bitch who will get to watch."

He stood up abruptly, straightened his lapels and said, "I'll go get those ice chips."

**Well I'd done it now. He didn't even know how to respond to that. He must think I'm weak. Bitching and bawling like a baby.**

When he came back in his usual confident demeanor had returned.

"I let my driver know he could bring Sciezka back to the hospital, that it was all clear. I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell her about your ahem... visitor."

"Roy, I mean sir, is that an order? I promised I wouldn't withhold information. Though I wish I could. I don't want her to know about it... I don't even think I could give her the sanitized version without completely losing it."

He came closer to the bed, put his hand on my shoulder and then handed me the small cup of ice chips. He looked me squarely in the eye as he said, "I didn't let her see you after Envy got done with you. I knew something serious must have happened to set you off like that. At least I was pretty sure that was the case, that and I knew you'd do the same for me. I can tell her the very barest bit, no details..."

"I can do it, you shouldn't have to. It's not your job..."

"I got you into this mess. I'll do whatever I can to get you out of it. She'll be in the waiting room soon. I'll go talk to her while a nurse helps you clean up, you look like hell."

For once I was relieved to have Roy a step ahead of me, planning my life. When Sciezka came in she made a beeline towards the chair to sit next to me. When she took my hand, I held it tightly.

"I'm so sorry, Sciezka."

She shushed me, "Roy told me that you don't want to talk about it. Just rest..."

I pulled her closer, even though it took most of my remaining energy to make some room on the narrow bed for her. She settled in next to me, so gingerly, like she'd hurt me with the slightest wrong move.
I held her to me in a death grip and she just let me. When I let her go she stroked my face and arms until I finally relaxed and slept.

Mustang must have pulled some strings because the doctor who came in to explain what had gone wrong was Knox. Sciezka scrambled to stand up so he could tell me what was wrong with me. I was relieved that if I was going to be poked and prodded any more it would be by a familiar face. I thought better of it when I saw his expression.

"You really did a number on yourself this time. A simple urinary tract went to your kidneys because you neglected it for so long. Not to mention, I doubt you're hydrating properly. The water and cranberry juice wasn't just a suggestion, it was a prescription," he stated sternly.

I nodded and listened as he continued, "We'll have you fixed up by Saturday if you respond as expected to the antibiotics and extra fluids. If you've noticed, they put an indwelling catheter in for while you're here. Let this be a lesson to you… watch your fluid intake and your symptoms and you won't end up in this situation as often."

"Yes, Doctor Knox. I'll mind my health better. I was just cutting things too close."

"See that you do, though I've seen worse neglect. I'll make sure to update your charts and course of treatment." He winked as he said that. If I knew Roy at all, he'd already consulted Knox about field medicine solutions for me, just in case. Scratch that, it had probably been Riza.

"Can I get something to drink?" I asked, still thirsty.

Knox shook his head as he said, "Now he wants to hydrate himself properly… nothing by mouth, save for some ice chips. We want to be very accurate on your output ratio and kidney function."

"I know I screwed up, but thank you for coming in on my case. I am not in any shape to be breaking in new doctors."

He closed my chart, said goodbye, then called jovially over his shoulder from the door, "Sciezka, I expect you to hassle him if he gets out of line."

I saluted them both. For now, I didn't mind letting someone else be in charge. I was in good hands and I was tired.

After Knox left, Sciezka sat back down next to me on the bed and said, "I called your parents. They'll be here in the morning."

"You shouldn't have, I hate worrying Ma… "

"She would have worried anyway. Trust me; she'll worry less if she sees you in person. Besides, don't you have something to tell them?" she asked coyly.

I pulled her down to kiss me and as I nuzzled her neck whispered, "Correction, we."

I panicked when I realized they'd be leaving on short notice and asked, "Who is minding the store? Not my cousins I hope! They'll burn it down!"

She rolled her eyes at the things that were suddenly so important to me, and as she went back to rubbing my arms, and patting my hair she said, "Relax, it's going to be better than fine. Just rest."

The nurses didn't shoo her out when visiting hours were over and even brought in an extra blanket and pillow. I was relieved. I didn't want to let her out of my sight.
Ma and Pa were scheduled to arrive around noon on Friday. I'd slept the morning away despite the numerous invasions by nurses to check my temperature and other vitals. Sciezka sat next to the bed reading a book from the waiting room that had seen better days. Though she seemed to be barely skimming it, her attention undoubtedly elsewhere, I'd still put money on her ability to recite it verbatim in a year or so. She was so jumpy when anyone passed by the doorway. I'd be extra careful from now on so she never had to endure this again.

As expected, Ma made a huge fuss when she saw me. I got quite a lecture that was only cut short when Pa interjected, "He's got good color, and they're releasing him tomorrow. Sciezka said this was just a precaution, so calm down."

I smiled at Sciezka, and then mouthed, "Thank you" to Pa, who winked back at me.

Sciezka set her book on the tray next to the bed, and then stood up, vacating her seat, so Ma could sit near me. She played with her ring, twisting it nervously with her other hand, and biting her lower lip as she rocked back and forth on her heels. I patted the bed beside me and when she sat cautiously on the edge of the bed, I wrapped an arm around her waist, and pulled her closer. She squeaked in surprise as she lost her balance, and Ma's eyes went wide.

"It's fine Ma, that won't hurt me," I said cheerfully. "I'd appreciate it if you pulled up a chair too, Pa."

He did as I asked, and I took Sciezka's hand to stop her from worrying at the ring. She understood that simple gesture, and she leaned into me as she relaxed.

I sat up a bit taller, cleared my throat, and then said, "I... no we, wanted to tell you under better circumstances than this. It should have been somewhere with more ambiance, like a fancy restaurant, or the park. But you know me... you should always have a backup plan."

Sciezka squeezed my hand and then whispered, "Maybe you should just tell them. All that explaining seems to be making them nervous."

I chuckled and then said, "My better half is right. I'll just say it. I've asked Sciezka to marry me, and she said yes."

Ma hugged Pa tightly as the water works began. Thankfully they were happy tears this time. Pa must have gotten something in his eyes, as he was dabbing at them with his handkerchief.

It couldn't have gone much better if I'd planned it. The first bit was taken care of. Now to get both Sciezka and Ma out of the hospital so Pa and I could work out the logistics for the cabin and so I could get some rest. Mostly, I wanted them both out and having a good time. I hated to have either of them worrying about me.

Roy had apparently thought this out rather well. Sciezka was startled when Major Alex Louis Armstrong filled the doorway with his considerable bulk, and announced in his booming voice, "Sciezka and Mrs. Havoc, I've come to be your escort around Central as you prepare for the impending nuptials."

He was dressed in a fine suit, and everything from the top of his head to the toes of his wingtip shoes sparkled. I refrained from laughing, and simply said, "Ma, you and Sciezka go and have a good time. I don't know when you'll have the chance again. Pa and I will play cards, and I'd like a nap."
I leaned over as far as I could, opened the drawer of the nightstand, and dug around in it for my wallet. When I handed it to Sciezka I said softly, "Have fun. Elysia expects a fairy princess dress on you and so do I. I can hardly wait to see it."

She kissed me quickly, since we had an audience, and suggested, "If you'd all like to freshen up at the house before we get started that would be wonderful. I've been here all night."

Then, they were off, but not before Armstrong declared, "Rest well, Jean. Colonel Mustang has ensured that everything is to be taken care of and I will not shirk my duties. The Armstrong line has a long-standing tradition of appreciating couture and ladies' finery."

I grinned picturing how one practiced the fine art of appreciating ladies' finery, and then saluted him. I could relax with him watching "my girls". They might even enjoy it. If they didn't, Sciezka would have a few horror stories for me about overly frilly dresses and all their purchases would be carried easily by that behemoth of a man. Thankfully his heart was just as big as his body.

After they left Pa pulled his chair closer to the bed, and joked, "You always did know how to kill two birds with one stone."

"I had nothing to do with the Major ending up here on a Saturday, but couldn't have done a better job myself. I couldn't have them both here fussing over me. I'd never get any rest. Well, that and they both worry so much. I don't want Sciezka seeing me like this and Ma saw enough of it before."

Pa nodded and pulled out a well-worn deck of cards from his shirt pocket as he quipped, "I came prepared. Glad it rubbed off on you."

"We can play after we do some plotting and planning. I need you to do me a favor… well, do everyone a favor. Help me get the cabin ready. I may have to bug out of here in a hurry with Sciezka and Hughes' girls."

Even now, he was still such a presence in our lives. Nothing could undo that. Elysia may look like her mother, but she will always have her father's smile.

Pa's demeanor changed. I could see why he was the point man for his team back in the day. Even at Private First Class he had a way about him that would identify and coordinate everything to the last detail, and put it all together for the brass in such a way that they would easily think they thought it all up themselves. Quickest thinker in the unit, and none of the stress that came with the stars. He did however, use his smarts and country manners to score himself the best paycheck the military ever shelled out for a private though, and it wasn't too hard to see why.

We made some lists of what provisions we'd need, and he sketched some plans for how to jury rig the outhouse so I could use it.

When we were finished, I pressed some cens notes into his hand along with General Lockheed's address and instructed, "Take a taxi there and he can take care of everything. They'll make it look like a supply order for the store so you can get it back East in the truck. Be sure to ask about his wife Marjorie's lemon bars first thing."

Pa winked, and then stood up, and hugged me hard as he whispered, "I'm proud of you son."
I got some much-needed rest while Pa was at the General's house and Ma and Sciezka were kept busy, and hopefully entertained by Major Armstrong.

Pa and I were playing acey-deucy when they got back. Sciezka looked frazzled, but happy. Ma was just beaming. Armstrong looked the most vibrant. His smile glistened almost blindingly white. After setting down the bags and packages they had collected, he quickly approached me, and shook my hand vigorously saying, "Jean and Mister Havoc, she's a vision to behold! After countless confections she has picked..."

He was cut off abruptly when Ma tugged hard on his sleeve and said, "Remember Alex Louis, he is not supposed to know!"

Armstrong looked from Ma to Sciezka apologetically and then sheepishly said, "She's a vision, Jean and it will be even better once they finish the custom made one. That description was but a sample."

Sciezka sighed and then said, "It's really much simpler than it all sounds. They are all making too much of a fuss. But I like it, and I think you'll like it too, Jean."

Ma and Pa gave each other knowing smiles, and then Alex announced, "I've been selected by Colonel Mustang to make sure your parents are shown the best of Central before they retire for the night. Dinner for Miss Meade will be delivered around 1800 hours. I hope that Pane Fresco is acceptable."

Sciezka smiled at that and then furrowed her brow for a moment.

"What's wrong darling," I asked.

"Nothing serious, but you won't get to have any," she said.

"Oh, right... don't worry about it," I replied.

"I'll eat out in the hall," she replied. "So, it's not too torturous."

My folks went with Armstrong and eventually, despite her protests, I had Sciezka call Roy to arrange for a car home. The argument that both of us shouldn't have a bad night's sleep is what finally won her over.

After the nurses finished poking and prodding me at shift change, I slept well. There was an armed guard outside my room, and I was fairly sure that the Homunculi didn't have anything else planned for me for a while.

I was released from the hospital just before lunchtime. Doctor Knox had come back bright and early to advise me of everything I'd need to do to avoid being admitted again, but gave me the go ahead to travel if necessary. He sent me home with pills that looked like they would choke a horse, and had a nasty aftertaste. I was grateful for them anyway, as anything was better than an I.V. line.

Sciezka and Roy came to spring me, and we were off. An orderly attempted to push me to the front entrance where there was a car and driver waiting, but I was having no part of it.

When we got to the house Pa greeted us at the door with a fresh pack of smokes, and a book of matches. Ma warned from the kitchen, "For the record, I don't approve of that, Jean."
I called back to her, "I know Ma, it's a filthy habit. I'm glad I'm too big to turn over your knee."

As an aside to Sciezka I said, "Not that it would do any good or be much of a punishment, I wouldn't feel it anyway."

Pa, Roy, and Sciezka got a laugh out of that until Sciezka thought better and said, "We shouldn't be laughing about this."

After I handed my cigarette off to my Pa I caught Sciezka around the waist and pulled her onto my lap. As I faced her and we were nose to nose I said, "Crying does no good. You know that."

She nodded, and I turned to Pa, and Mustang, who had gone quiet and said, "It's better to have a dark sense of humor than none at all. Let's go inside for some lunch. The doctors and nurses were trying to starve me. I'm famished."

Roy left without lunch, citing a need to finish some urgent paperwork. I think he was still uncomfortable around my parents after everything that had happened.

Once we finished lunch Ma insisted that I take a nap, not that I argued much. I was still so tired and off. When I woke up I took a shower. My stay at the hospital had been short enough to avoid a sponge bath, but long enough that I felt dirty. I was pretty sure I stank after sweating the fever out. Despite my parents being at the house, Sciezka joined me in the shower. She had excused herself by suggesting to Ma that I might need help, and Ma bought that excuse, or at least seemed to. The only thing I needed was to see my girl in nothing but lather, and what she was wearing the day she was born. When we finished our shower Sciezka stood behind me fixing her hair while I shaved. I had been pretty scruffy looking.

As she left the bathroom to dress she said, "If you're up to it, Marjorie invited all of us over for dinner. She's eager to meet your parents."

I sighed heavily and then said, "The last thing I want to do right now is get dressed up, and be trotted out in front of the brass."

"Jean, it's nothing of the sort. It's just the Lockheeds, your parents, Roy and Riza and us. The General teased that you could wear your pajamas if you wanted to," she chided.

I really couldn't object when she put it that way.

I didn't put up a fuss when Marjorie all but ordered me to stretch out on the couch after dinner. It was a balmy evening, so she felt the garden would be too chilly for me. My parents and the Lockheeds talked and talked after dinner. I had been right about Ma and Marjorie. They swapped recipes and got along famously. Pa and the General hit it off as well. I could swear I felt my ears burning from time to time. I tried to eavesdrop since I was pretty sure they were talking about me. It was just too much effort. Sciezka was sitting on the floor next to the couch despite the offer of a seat and I idly played with her hair when I wasn't dozing. Roy and Riza spent most of the evening in the garden. Marjorie was like Gracia in a lot of ways, since she'd suggested that they go out there in the first place.

When we got home I went straight to bed. Sciezka must have stayed up awhile longer keeping my parents entertained. As she slipped into bed next to me I woke up just long enough to pull her closer, and spoon her.
Ma cooked breakfast with all the trimmings on Sunday morning, and that is what woke me. The aroma of coffee coming from the kitchen was heavenly. The dull headache I'd had for days suddenly made sense. Maybe I had been overdoing it on the coffee, but I needed a fix, and I hoped Ma and Sciezka would let me have at least a small cup.

I got out of bed feeling better than I had in ages, took care of the necessaries, showered, and dressed quickly. Everyone was already up and bustling around when I'd finished. Pa smiled when I entered the dining room and said, "You look good. Did you sleep well?"

I smiled back at him as I replied, "I slept like the dead. Hey... should I be offended? Did I not look good before?"

"You looked tired and sick. Peaked and pale. It looked like the city slickers had run you over the bumps a few too many times."

"Well, I'll concede that point. Now, more importantly, what did Ma make for breakfast?"

"Your Ma and Sciezka made muffins, bacon, scrambled eggs, and a fruit salad. Get situated and they'll start serving."

It was easy to tell which place setting was mine. There was a huge glass of cranberry juice and one of those horse pills smack dab in the middle of my plate. Not to mention the missing chair.

Everyone else pulled up a chair and started passing the food around. I choked the sour, vile red juice down, and then said, "There, I drank it. Are you satisfied? Now I understand how Fullmetal feels about milk. Could I please have a cup of coffee?"

Ma and Sciezka exchanged knowing glances, and Pa laughed. He got up, got a mug of the divine liquid, and as he handed it to me said, "Remember son, they're trying to do what's best for you, even if it's not pleasant. There is nothing like the care of a good woman, right son?"

Before he sat down again he wrapped his arms around Ma's shoulders, and hugged her. Sciezka took my hand under the table, and squeezed it.

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Once the breakfast dishes were cleared away it was time for my parents to head home. Pa had loaded up the truck bright and early, so there wasn't much left for them to do. I helped Ma retrieve the remainder of their bags from the guest room.

She was fussing with the coverlet on one of the beds for the umpteenth time, and then sat down abruptly. I heard her sniffle softly and went over to her and asked, "What's wrong Ma?"

"It's nothing. I just hate leaving you. Always have."

"Well, you did cry the first day of school, every year without fail. It didn't get any better after kindergarten."

She held me close and whispered, "I just have to face the fact that you're a grown man. Doesn't mean I have to like it. But, you have good friends here, and I feel better after seeing the house. I'm so happy about your news. You and Sciezka are a good match."
"Will you cry this much at the wedding?" I asked, hoping I could make her smile.

She ruffled my hair like she did when I was a little boy, and then replied, "Of course I will, but those will be happy tears. She really is a sight to behold in that dress. You'll cry too, I just know it. You're sentimental like your Pa."

Pa came in to see what the holdup was, and didn't look surprised when he found Ma in a "state" as he called it.

"C'mon, we'll see him again soon. They'll be fine. You're lucky he's not more of a Mama's boy than he already is the way you fuss over him, and coddle him."

He winked at me and then helped Ma up. We took their bags out front where the truck was idling. The back bed was piled high with crates and sacks, clear to the tailgate. Lockheed and Pa had done a good job. It didn't look much different from their usual supply order. They'd hidden the munitions well and I didn't think they'd have any problems getting it all home without anyone suspecting what they were up to.

Once they got in the truck, Pa said quietly, "We'll call when we get home. The General and I have things all worked out."

As they pulled away, Sciezka and I waved until they were out of sight. I found myself misting up, Sciezka noticed too and she kissed my ear, and then whispered, "I don't mind that I have to share your heart with another woman... she raised you right."

We just stayed there on the front walk for a few minutes, holding hands. Before we went inside, Sciezka kissed me again, so tenderly. She smiled into the kiss just before I broke it to ask, "What was that for?"

My chin was cupped in her hand as she said, "I was just thinking about how proud your parents must be. They did a good job."

"Really? You think so?" I asked, suddenly feeling bashful.

"How can you think anything else? You're so smart, and such a hard worker. Not to mention that what most parents want, the good ones at least... is for their children to be good, and happy people. You do all of that, and so much more."

"Sometimes I don't feel that way... I feel guilty and weak and pissed off. I should be grateful that I even lived, you know? It just gets the better of me sometimes when I think about how everything that I used to take for granted, is so much harder now."

I was startled when she abruptly stood up ramrod straight, and with a determined look in her eyes straddled my lap. After she looked at me long and hard, as if she was studying me, she finally said, "If it helps at all, I think you make it look easy."

We spent some of the afternoon out on the porch, sipping iced tea, doing the crossword together, and watching the world go by. It would have been perfect if we had a porch swing or a hammock. It wasn't the most pressing detail in the grand scheme of things, but since I was on break from classes I'd find the time to look into it. I'd do anything for a bright spot, since it was certainly easier to think about that, than all that was going on outside of our small home.
Just after lunch the telephone rang, and Sciezka dashed inside to answer it. When she came back she sidled up next to me, and began playing with my hair, and massaging my shoulders.

"Who called, and what do they want? Tell them we're not interested," I joked.

"Am I that transparent? Can't I lavish attention on you just because you're wonderful?"

"Of course you can. But I'm still not buying it."

"It was Jim. He's coming over for a session in a little while."

"I knew there was a catch!"

"If it's any consolation, Gracia invited us over for dinner afterwards."

"Is she making apple pie?" I asked.

"Of course, it is your favorite," she said and then kissed me, nibbling a bit on my lower lip, since I'd been pouting.

Once we broke the kiss I quipped, "I suppose that would make it worth moving from this spot, though I was enjoying just spending time with you here. We have to do this more often. I'll go get ready for a session."

When Jim came up the front walk I was on the porch having a cigarette. He shook his finger at me and chastised, "Put that thing out and get to work."

I grumbled, but did as I was told. Sciezka had helped me spread out some blankets on the living room rug, and as soon as I was on the floor Jim started putting me through my paces. A few minutes into the session Sciezka came in and asked, "If neither of you minds, may I watch?"

"I'd really rather you didn't," I replied hesitantly after I sat up, so I could get a better look at her.

She nodded, appearing dejected, and said, "I understand. I just thought it would be a good if I learned some of your stretches, for when we go."

"She's got a point, Jean," Jim offered.

I smiled and patted the floor next to me and said, "Get over here, you're right. I'll want and need you to know this if we're gone for any real length of time."

I took a quick shower and changed before we went to Gracia's. It was a warm night after a hot day, so supper was light. She had fixed green salad, cold chicken, corn on the cob with apple tart for dessert. It really hit the spot. After dinner, we sat out back in the garden. The last few fireflies of the summer flickered near the hedges. A light breeze kept us comfortable. Elysia was in bed, and that was when Gracia offered everyone but me a glass of chilled white wine.

I complained at first, but really it was for my own good. I was still pretty tired, and on medication. Besides, the tall glass of ice water was so refreshing. Gracia had even put a slice of lemon in it. She was so detail oriented sometimes that it was astounding.

I must have looked as tired as I felt, since I was quite surprised when Sciezka started massaging the nape of my neck, and I let out a yawn. She moved closer to me, and as she messed with my hair
said, "I'm with sleepy here. It's time to go home. Thanks so much for dinner, Gracia."

I added, "Yes, thank you Gracia. Jim, thanks for the house call."

We made our way home slowly. It was barely a block, and it seemed to take forever. When we hit the door Sciezka pointed towards the bedroom, and said, "Bath, and then, bed."

I saluted her sloppily, and did as she ordered. By the time she joined me I had started a tepid bath, and was stripped down to my underwear. While we waited for the tub to fill she did a slow strip tease, with the added excitement of some ice cubes. As she straddled my legs, and thought up some uses for ice cubes that I never would have expected, I smiled and leaned back, just letting her.

Before she got in the tub, Sciezka turned off the lights, and lit some scented candles. Once she was in the bath, she slowly lathered up a washcloth, and tenderly washed every inch of me. I was too tired to complain, or stop her, and quite frankly, why would I? When we were both clean she lay back against my chest, and I cradled her. This was one of the best parts of our relationship, the way we could just be.

When the bath got too chilly we got out, dried off, and after brushing our teeth went straight to bed. It was still quite warm and sticky, so we slept with the fan on, under just a sheet. It was too hot to sleep close together, so we spread out so just our fingers touched.

Monday dawned muggy as hell, and should have been back to business as usual. Sciezka woke me up with an enthusiastic "rise and shine", and a cup of coffee fixed just the way I like it. When I cracked an eye, I noted that the tray she was carrying had a huge glass of cranberry juice on it, and one of those horse pills. I screwed up my face, and she teased, "C'mon it's not that bad! Cheer up. I have a surprise for you."

She set the tray down and came back with a tissue wrapped package. After she handed it to me she waited patiently for me to open it. Once I had it out of the paper and twine I was confused and asked, "What do I need a canteen for? Are we going camping?"

Grinning she replied, "You need it to carry water in. Your Ma and I picked it out on Saturday. You have to stay hydrated. Doctor's orders, remember?"

"Well yeah, I do. But there are drinking fountains all over Central."

She arched an eyebrow, and smirked but said nothing. Her expression said it all.

"Fine, so there aren't that many that I can reach easily. But, honestly... this is getting ridiculous. Just leaving the house I have to pack for an expedition. I've already got bathroom stuff, meds, gloves, a freaking tire patch kit, and now a canteen. Next thing I know you'll all want me to carry a pup tent and flares."

"So, you don't like it? I can take it back," she murmured.

"Get over here, and bring the damned juice," I replied in a much happier tone than before. "You had a great idea. Even if I don't like the reason I need it. You're right. You usually are."

I took my pill and downed the juice, hoping that if I drank it fast enough I wouldn't taste it. After I set the glass on the nightstand, she kissed me and said, "I have to head into the office early to get caught up. I'll see you tonight."
I was about to ask her what she had to catch up on, but then remembered that she'd missed two days of work on my account. Instead I said, "Thanks for waking me up. Don't work too hard. I'll fix supper, and it'll be ready when you hit the door. Just call if you'll be too late."

After one last lingering kiss, she left, and I started getting ready to face the day.

It was still oppressively hot, even after a shower, so I figured that cargo pants and a standard issue undershirt would work. I also put on a white button down, since all of Central didn't need to see my "muscles" as Sciezka called them, and Ma had always scolded me about getting too much sun.

Before I left the house, I filled my canteen, and stashed it under my chair. Once I had my gloves on I was out the door. The short push from the house to the hospital felt good. I was starting to sweat by the time I got there, but that was fine by me. No one had let me lift a finger since Thursday, and I was getting antsy. I'd never liked sitting still, even as a kid. I shoved the irony in that memory to the back of my mind. It was thinking like that that slowed me down. After I smoked a cigarette, I headed inside for my session.

Jim said he would go easy on me, and I wondered how long it would be until I was back to my regular routine. After an especially long range of motion session, he set me up for an electro-stimulation treatment before he went to work on another patient. I didn't recognize this one. Just how many guys was the military chewing up and spitting out?

While I was on the mat and hooked up, Ron stopped by and gave me an update. He skirted the issue of my recent hospital admission, and I was glad. I didn't want to talk about it. He leaned in, and his voice dropped to a whisper when he started talking about how things were going with Laura.

The next bit was mumbled and rushed, though louder. "So, does anyone ever talk extra slowly or loudly to you?"

I guffawed. I couldn't help it. I gestured for him to pull up closer, and then took his hand and shook it as I said, "You have officially been out in public unsupervised. I was waiting for that."

"Has anyone ever asked about it?"

That was confusing... oh, wait. It.

"I am almost glad, if that's the right word that I'm not the only one who has had someone ask that question. Usually, I just ignore it. I often have the urge to do Winry's Garfiel impression. 'Oh, c'mere big boy, and sit on my lap. I'll take you on the ride of your life.' Or something like that."

He grinned, and nodded his head. Maybe someday one of us would have the guts to actually do that.

He couldn't stop to talk for long. Jim had upped his P.T. again, and I could tell that Ron was getting stronger every day. Before he started his routine, I said, "This shows me that you need to get out more. Why don't we go out with the girls on Friday? Does that sound like a plan?"

"That would be great. I'll talk to Laura about it, and then call you," he said. "I'm pretty sure you have to check with Sciezka too, right?"

"Don't let that get around," I teased.
Jim came back a few minutes later, unhooked the electrodes, and said, "Have a good day, rest up, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wait, no calisthenics or swimming today?" I asked, confused since usually my sessions were twice as long.

"Maybe later in the week I'll have you swim. I don't want you pushing yourself too hard yet. Go home, rest, and read a book or something. Just don't wear yourself out."

I pushed up onto my elbows so I was sitting up, and then replied, "I feel fine, but you're the boss. I'll see you in the morning."

As I headed home I thought out loud, "Last week you were on overdrive. This week you're going to be bored out of your mind." I didn't worry about people on the street staring at me for talking to myself... they were probably already staring or trying to ignore me anyway.

I took a mental inventory of things I could do to keep from going stir crazy. I could get that hammock, pick up my materials for the next term, and pack our bags just in case... that would keep me occupied. If all that failed to keep me busy, I could go to the range more often, or start a new hobby. I laughed out loud when I got to that part. *Who was I kidding?* Besides I was sure Sciezka would find plenty of things to keep me entertained.

When I got home I decided that I would bring Sciezka lunch, since she'd probably neglected to pack one. The grocery order hadn't come yet, and Julia was out, so I scrounged around the kitchen and finally settled on peanut butter sandwiches with some of the jam that Ma had brought. I had a hard time wrapping them in waxed paper, but eventually got it. I put the sandwiches in a brown paper bag, and tossed in a couple of apples. It wasn't the nicest looking lunch, but it would taste good. Before I left I went to the bedroom, and got my side arm. After lunch, I'd go to the range. Maybe I'd catch Riza there.

Sciezka's desk was buried in paperwork when I got there. I could barely see the top of her head from behind it all. Major Armstrong winked when I signaled that he should be quiet, so my entrance would be a surprise.

She smiled when a squeaky wheel gave me away. After giving me a chaste kiss hello she asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I brought lunch, and Jim let me off the hook without swimming today."

"So, you're bored?"

"Maybe, but can't a guy bring lunch to his girl without it being declared a national incident?"

Grinning, she replied, "He can, and it's appreciated, but I still think you're bored. Now, what did you bring?"
I reached under my chair, found the bag, and pulled it out with a flourish. It was more squished and wrinkled than I remembered. Once I handed it over, she inspected its contents and said, "Did you make lunch for Elysia too, and mix them up by mistake?"

I was about to protest when she shushed me with another kiss, and said, "I was just teasing. Thank you for thinking of me. You're right... I forgot to pack a lunch, and I missed you."

We were quiet while we ate. I could tell that Sciezka was in rush. Once we both finished, I told her I'd be going to the firing range, and asked if there was anything special that she'd like for supper.

"I'm glad you're feeling better, but it looks like it's going to rain, and I'd really rather you went home and rested. We'll order out. Besides, it's too hot to cook."

"So, I get wet. I'll see you later. Call if you're going to be late."

After one last kiss, I went down to the range. Riza was there and apparently not too pleased to see me. As I petted Hayate and we tussled a bit, she said, "You should be home resting. I was worried about you."

"I'm fine," I replied, trying to hide how irritated I was by the whole resting thing. "Everyone worries too much, and like I said, I'm fine. Besides, I spent the whole weekend resting."

"You're taking this too lightly, Jean. Go see Roy in his office, then go home and get some rest."

"Is that an order?" I asked tersely.

"Does it have to be?" she countered, as she put her hands on her hips and patted the holster that I knew held a 9mm that she could have drawn, aimed and fired before I could blink.

I put my hands up in surrender and said, "I'll do it. But I still think you all worry too much."

I quickly turned my chair around and headed to Roy's office, smoking a cigarette and grumbling the whole way.

As soon as I hit Roy's office his subordinates scattered, and tried to look busy. Roy stood up and clasped his hands behind his back. He looked ready to give me a lecture. When I parked myself in front of his desk, he sat down and glared at me.

"Wow, what great reception. I should visit more often. What gives?"

He opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and then took a deep breath. He leaned forward and said under his breath, "What in the hell do you think you're doing here?"

I rolled my eyes and calmly replied, "Hawkeye sent me up here. If I had my way I'd be taking target practice right now."

"It wasn't a rhetorical question Lieutenant. You just got out of the hospital. You should be home resting."

_The hell?_

I bit back the urge to yell at him, and instead asked, "Just so I'm sure you are informed correctly Colonel, how old am I?"

He narrowed his eyes and said evenly, "Last I checked? Twenty-five, though I often doubt it with some of your antics."
"That was below the belt Colonel, not that it'd bother me much."

"Could you take your condition seriously? It could have been a lot worse this time. I'm worried you'll get hurt trying so hard."

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

He waved a hand dismissively and sighed.

"It's none of your damned business how I take care of myself. End of story. I've worked everything out with my doctors and therapists. I know what I'm doing."

"Obviously... " he snorted derisively.

"Take that back," I hissed.

"I just think you should reconsider well... everything," he said, his expression softening.

"I screwed up. I know. But I'm ready. I just have to be more aware next time. I won't be left behind."

Before I left he shook my hand and saluted. I could tell that he still was unhappy about my involvement, but he was resigned to it. He knew how stubborn I could be. Lucky for him I was still a damned good shot, and he'd need a second gun.

The clouds were rolling in, growing darker every minute as the heat felt more oppressive. They loomed and threatened, but no rain fell. Not yet at least. The moisture hung heavy in the air, permeating everything it touched. By the time I got home my clothes were soaked through. I'd pushed hard, like a man possessed the whole way. Once at the gate I tried breathing deeply to reign in the feelings. I was furious with Roy. How dare he tell me what I am capable of? I already had so many limitations, and so many people judging me at face value without asking or observing. I met most of it with resignation, certainly not acceptance... but it was expected. It galled me that Roy and Riza seemed to have joined that group of people.

That's when it hit me... or when I got it. As I turned to get some leverage to open the gate I realized that my hand was in something. It was sticky and slippery, and when I pulled my hand away from the rim it stretched. Someone had seen fit to spit gum out on the sidewalk and I had rolled through it. The heat made it worse than usual. The unnaturally pink, gooey substance was not going to budge on its own. It was wrapped around some of the spokes, and in the tread, and I was probably going to track it all over the house.

It was then that I laughed, quite loudly. So loudly that anyone walking by would have called the men in white coats to take me away. Just a few moments before I could have shouted every foul word I knew and come up with some new ones. I'd certainly been in a foul enough mood. I was still pissed at Roy. But he meant well, even if he was completely misguided.

I did the best I could to scrape the gum off on the stray bits of grass that stuck though the fence. I opened the gate, got up on the porch, and just sat back. After roughly shaking a cigarette out of the pack I smoked it, and then another. I was bracing myself for the clean-up effort. My nerves calmed, I went inside and decided that after covering what I could of the gum with some tissue, I'd take a shower. Then I'd tackle the mess.
The tepid water eased some of the tension that had lodged in the pit of my stomach and all through my back. Once I'd dried off I put on clean boxers. It wasn't like I was expecting anyone other than Sciezka. The mercury was high enough that any degree of modesty was too much. As I rummaged through the ice box for ice and put it in a mixing bowl I was tempted to just sit there with the door wide open. It felt so good. It reminded me of when I was a kid and I'd hide out in the root cellar in high summer. I smiled at that memory and then got ready to work. I set all my supplies on the kitchen tile. Rags, oil, some of Gracia's cleaning spray and the ice. I might as well strip the whole chair down and clean it while I was at it. Winry would have a fit if she saw the state of her work of art. I'd been busy and I'd neglected it.

A few minutes into my project I had the wheels off the frame, and as the gum froze... in a burst of ingenuity I'd tied rags filled with ice around it, I began to wipe down the frame and oil all moving parts. I'd never had it all the way apart before, and I was again in awe of Winry's ingenuity. The axle for the back wheels was integrated into the chair, making it more efficient for me to push. Constructing the frame in one piece had to be the single most innovative thing about the chair. That feature made it stronger as well. I hadn't realized how much grit and muck I must have pushed through, and with the amount of gunk I picked out of the ball bearings it was a wonder they hadn't locked up. I got the gum off by scraping at it with a butter knife. It took a while, but after freezing it, I had an easier time than I'd expected. My gloves were a loss. Luckily, I had an extra pair. I made a mental note to get extra inner tubes, rims, and tires for the trip. My parents would be able to get a loaner chair, but it would be like "The Tank" and that was not an appealing idea. As a precaution, I tightened any spokes that looked like they were coming loose, and checked the pressure in my tires. I was humming contentedly as I reassembled it, and nearly finished when Sciezka came home.

BANG!

I snapped to attention when a gust of wind blew the front door shut behind her. As I turned towards the noise the lights flickered, and the thunder that followed shook the windows. Sciezka jumped at the commotion, and then laughed.

She crossed the small distance between us quickly, kneeled, and then kissed me on the forehead. After she stood up she said, "We should get the candles out. It's going to pour. The good news is it's cooling off."

As she hurried to the dining room she called over her shoulder, "What are you doing in there anyway?"

"It's a long story," I replied and then chuckled.

My chair, which I'd begun to think of as almost a part of me, was back together quickly. I got back in it, cleaned up the mess, and joined her in the living room. She was standing at the window, entranced by the flashes of lightning illuminating the overcast sky. She shivered and I wrapped an arm around her waist.

She put a hand on my shoulder, and then said, "I always used to hate storms, but this isn't so bad..."

"Likewise. Want some dinner?"

"It's too hot to eat," she complained.

"Agreed, ice cream it is."
We'd just finished our dinner, if chocolate ice cream qualifies as dinner, and were washing the dishes together when the phone rang. Sciezka answered, since it was easier for her to get to. Her eyes went wide in surprise, and I wondered who it could be. She held the receiver away from her ear, and spoke more loudly than she needed to in order to be heard clearly.

"So, you want advice about Jacqueline?" she asked, a caricature of the gossipy girls in the typing pool.

This should be interesting.

I put down the bowl I was drying, and moved closer to the phone. Sciezka sat on my lap so I could hear the conversation better. Turns out she had a mind for subterfuge. She handed me a notepad and pen so I could write out my responses and questions without being heard if the line was tapped.

"So, what did you do this time Roy? You can be such a cad sometimes."

It was hard to keep my amusement to myself.

"You're right Sciezka. I can be an insensitive jerk. I invited Jacqueline on a date, well actually, a formal party."

"So, she had to buy a dress, and spend all sorts of time getting ready?"

"Yes, I know. It was bad of me. I can't blame her for being cross with me and disappointed. I did promise after all, and then had to cancel at the last minute."

"She should be mad at you! You got her all dressed up with nowhere to go!"

"So, what can I do to fix it?"

I scribbled how to "fix it" on the notepad, and Sciezka fought hard to keep her composure as she relayed my message.

"What I would do if I was Jacqueline, is I'd let you try and make it up to me. It would take some serious effort. Flowers, candy, and a secluded, candlelit dinner in one of Central's best restaurants would go a long way."

"That's all? Don't you think it would take more?" Roy asked, sounding puzzled.

Sciezka winked at me and then said, "You didn't let me finish."

"I apologize for interrupting."

"Don't apologize, yet. After ordering the most expensive thing on the menu, I'd let you escort me home, and then leave you on the doorstep without so much as a peck on the cheek."

"Remind me not to cross you, Sciezka."

"See to it. Though I think Jacqueline will eventually forgive you."

She hung up the phone, and then demanded, "So what was that all about?"

"It's a long story, and really, it's nothing. You don't want to hear about it. Besides, I'll sound like
"I'm whining."

"You... whine and pout? I'm shocked," she teased as she got off my lap and headed into the living room.

I hurried to follow her and grinned as she flopped on the couch.

When I got over there I asked, "So are you going to share? I honestly didn't think it was even possible for you to take up that much space."

She sat up from her sprawl, scooted over to make room for me, and patted the space she'd made next to her.

Once I'd transferred, I leaned back against the plush cushions, put my arm around her, and sighed contentedly.

"All better. I forgot what I was even cross about."

"Sure you did," she replied and then moved to the floor between my feet, clearly expecting a back rub.

"So, I have to tell you, and rub your back?"

She nodded vigorously in the affirmative.

I cracked my knuckles and began kneading the muscles between her shoulder blades, and as I worked on her, filled in the details.

"Roy is getting cold feet about my involvement. I tried to explain that the infection was a temporary setback at most. That it had been caused by me being too busy and preoccupied to notice."

She turned to glare at me, and I quickly added, "Well that and I was brushing it off, and I shouldn't have. I ignored my health needs, and I was dumb... did I get it right?"

As she leaned back further and relaxed, I could tell I had.

"Riza was in on it too. The two of them combined really put me in a foul mood. I'm used to strangers underestimating me, or worse pitying me, but them? I thought they knew better. Since you are involved in the whole mess, it's worse. I'm not about to break my promise to meet him at the top."

I'd begun attacking a tight spot in her lower back with a little too much vigor. She wriggled away and curled up next to me and began to massage my arms and hands.

"That is exactly what I needed. Thank you, you do know you're amazing, right?"

"Stop stalling. I know you'd do almost anything to get out of talking about feelings, like a girl," she almost scolded, but mostly teased and then put my hand to her lips and kissed it.

I breathed deeply, and then continued, "So I basically let Roy know that I was pissed that he'd even thought of taking me off the mission, and that Doctor Knox, Jim, and I have it handled. Thanks for the rub down... I guess I am still pretty wound up."

"So, what did he have to say to that?" she asked.
"Our adult conversation disintegrated into barbs and sarcasm."

She winked and then said, "Per usual. So, what else went wrong? Why did you have your chair in pieces all over the kitchen floor?"

"Oh, that," I replied and then chuckled, still amused that I'd had an epiphany of sorts, over gum.

"I went through some chewing gum. It got all tangled in my rims and spokes, stuck in the tire tread, and my gloves were a total loss. I trashed them."

That pert nose of hers scrunched up, looking adorable for an expression of disgust as she said, "Eww."

"I know gross, right? I think I got everything I tracked in. Sorry if you find any of it that I may have missed with your bare feet."

"So, that's it?"

"That's it."

In one fluid motion, she was kneeling on my lap, wrapping herself around me as tightly as she could. I was sure she was feeling what I was... like as much as we pressed ourselves together we still weren't close enough.

Sciezka was kissing my neck, driving me to distraction, when I interrupted her to say, "Bed, now."

"You sure you're up to it so soon?" she asked, concern in her voice.

"You tell me," I replied huskily.

I must have been a sight as I clumsily wrestled with my boxers with my left hand in the dim room, and attempted to undo Sciezka's pants with my right. The room had a soft glow from a few candles that flickered from the breeze wafting through the open windows, but in my excitement, and limited vision I kept tickling her by accident as my fingers brushed sensitive skin. Lucky for me, it enhanced her excitement as well.

Finally nude she whipped the covers back and jumped, yes jumped on the bed. She lounged on the pillows, like in a painting, but laughing as I joined her. Hand-over-hand I inched closer to her. I stopped and held myself over her, so I could look into those green eyes.

My kisses were light and playful at first. Little licks and nips in her favorite spots. Her skin was salty from the heat of the day, the delicate perfume she favored combined with something more primal. I grazed her collarbone with my teeth just so as I cupped a breast with my palm, toying with her pert nipple with my thumb. She arched her back and her breath hitched, then moaned my name as her fingers curled through my hair.

I took my time moving lower. I nuzzled the firm and supple expanse of her stomach. Resting there a moment, my cheek against all that goodness, I watched her chest rise and fall. She was patient tonight, letting me take my time, wanting me to take my time.

I traced her inner thigh, and she opened her legs wider. I circled the mound of soft curls and then kissed her there, tenderly at first, and then with much more urgency as I heard her breathing deeper
and felt her arch in response.

After she still she sat up, extending her hand in invitation. I clasped it and squeezed.

Once I was situated at the head of the bed Sciezka draped herself over me. She steadied herself by grasping my shoulders. I placed my hands on her hips and she slowly took me into her. We kissed and she seemed to savor the evidence I was sure was still on my chin and nose.

She deepened the kiss, then swiveled her hips and ground against me. There was no space between us, hardly any distinction between where each of us began or ended, like a circuit.

Slowly and steadily, our climax was building. We both felt it coming and looked into each other's eyes. I fought hard to keep my eyes open as the wave swept over me, but it was just too much. Sciezka came soon after, and muffled soft noises as she pressed her lips to mine and tightened her grip on my shoulders.

We just stayed like that, entwined in each other's arms for a few minutes more. I could have fallen asleep right then and there, but I had a pill to take and some things to take care of. Sciezka watched me from the bed, her green eyes taking in my every move. When I'd finished in the bathroom I brought her a damp washcloth. Then, when we were belly to back, Sciezka fell asleep. Her breathing was slow and soft, her ribs rising and falling, so delicate under my hand, and I savored it all as I drifted to sleep.
Chapter 46: Call of Duty

Before, what I'd always hated about prepping for missions, was the waiting. I'd always found it easier to keep my bag packed, and to be ready to go at the last minute. Hawkeye had always been the exact opposite. She wanted as much time as possible to make her lists, pack, and then repack, and then check it all again. Me? I always kept all my weapons in top shape, and couldn't remember a time I'd been without sufficient ammo, extra packs of smokes, and c-rations.

Hawkeye would reproachfully glare at me when I'd show up right on time, whistling a tune, while she looked as frazzled as she could be. Some missions didn't take much time at all, just a lot of ammo and speed. Then again, some were all about lying in wait, firing a single perfect shot at just the right time, and then disappearing. I'd always hated stake outs, hated staying still.

Other than the way it ended, that last mission was more my style- hard and fast, guns blazing and some real knockdown, drag out action. If it had been just a drill I would have had the time of my life.

Sciezka and I made the most of our time at home. We cooked together often, but ordered out a lot too. Even if we weren't going to be hiding, the selection in my home town did not include Aquroyan or Xingian food. Most likely our rations would consist of room temperature food straight out of the can, and if we were lucky, some fresh fruits and vegetables we'd find a way to get in. I was fairly sure even Elysia would be sick of peanut butter by the time we got the all clear.

I would miss my bed. I'd been won over by Gracia's idea of civility, and anything less than super soft sheets, and throw pillows would be a let down. Sciezka and I usually slept close together, but I liked to be able to stretch out. We wouldn't have any privacy either. We'd be four people in a one-room rustic cabin after all. To be honest, it was a shack with "improvements". If gas lamps, a hand pump from the well, and an outhouse that wasn't a tree could be called modern.

That got me thinking about the bathroom. I could forget about having any long, hot baths and showers that I shared with Sciezka. If we could make a fire in the wood stove, and not draw attention to ourselves there'd at least be warm water to wash with. Better than getting clean with a washcloth and soap, and rinse off with freezing cold spring water.

All of these things reminded me of what would be the most different. The house was set up for my convenience and comfort. It was very easy for me to get around in, and I could do most things by myself, without much effort. The cabin would be a whole different story.

I pretty much kept to my routine over the next few weeks. I had therapy in the morning, followed by swimming, or going to the range in the afternoon. One small change from when school was in session was that I'd often meet with General Lockheed; I still couldn't wrap my head around calling him Martin, at his house, and then swim after our talks. It was a time saver for me, and though his pool wasn't as big the one at the hospital, it was outside. One afternoon a week I'd meet with Seth for coffee on High Street, usually directly after target practice, and would have a message from
It was after one such meeting that I got it into my head to finally buy that hammock. Seth came with me to Amestris Sundries and Dry Goods, and helped me get the two large boxes into the jeep. It would have been a perfect plan, except he had an appointment right after our meeting. I drove home without giving it too much more thought. If it came down to it I could empty the boxes on the drive and take the damned thing to the porch piece by piece. Sure, it would be slow and inefficient, but I'd be doing it myself.

As I pulled into the drive, Staff Sergeant Smith was just walking up to the house to pick up Julia. I parked and got out of the car while he was inside, and then set about getting all that stuff unloaded, and put together.

I was cursing out a bag of nuts, screws, and washers that wobbled on my lap a few times, and finally spilled all over the porch when Julia and her husband came outside. Julia, who was by now used to me and this asked, "Do those little metal parts really deserve to be damned to hell?"

After chuckling and shaking my head no I said, "This hammock will eventually be relaxing. But right now? Not so much."

Michael busied himself picking up the small bits of metal and then shyly offered, "I can help you with this if you want."

I bit back the urge to snap that I didn't need help, because he meant well, and I did need help. At the rate I was going it would take half the night, and I'd lose half the small fasteners, and have to improvise.

I smiled at him, and then replied, "Thanks for the offer, but don't you two have somewhere to go? I hate to take up your time."

"Jean, we would just be going home for dinner. There's still plenty of time for that, and Michael will not drop dead from hunger."

"You are both life savers, Julia. But I insist on paying..."

Julia frowned as she crossed her arms over her chest. I hoped I hadn't offended her. I quickly backtracked saying, "Don't get me wrong, by now you and Michael are my friends. I hope offering payment didn't offend you. I just don't want to take advantage of your kindness."

Her face softened and she smiled as she said, "That's better. I was beginning to feel like I was just the hired help."

"Absolutely not! I don't know what Sciezka and I would do without you. She works so much... and truthfully I think we'd starve, and the whole house would fall into chaos."

Michael chimed in as he stood up from gathering what I'd dropped, "She runs our house like a Field Marshall. I catch hell when things aren't put back properly."

"I think I've found a solution. Julia, while Michael and I work on this, could you call up Pane Fresco? Just tell Sal it's the usual, for four and have it delivered. He'll know what to send. Then I'd like it if you sat down and relaxed with a glass of wine or something. Does that sound fair?"

She smiled and then replied, "I think that sounds perfect."
Later on, after a leisurely supper, Julia and Michael went home. Sciezka and I were in the hammock, and she dangled a leg over the side to make us sway to and fro. It had taken quite a bit of effort for me to even transfer to the damned thing, but it had been worth it. Getting out of it would be a trick too.

"So how did you think you'd get this thing together?" she asked playfully.

I smiled and after studying her features in the twilight replied, "Everything can be accomplished if you take it one thing at a time."

"That makes you sound so wise," she said and then kissed me. When she broke the kiss, she mused, "Like one of those Eastern Mystics. Only you aren't an ascetic hermit."

I rubbed my belly, as I'd eaten a bit much, and said, "I'm certainly none of those things, and I pity the fool who thinks I'm wise."

She giggled.

"I've made you giggle, that just reinforces my argument that I'm the least likely to be a wise sage or monk. That is unless an order is formed that likes good food, good wine, comfort, and a good woman."

After that the deep conversation ended and we moved into the bedroom for the night. I'd been right, we'd needed a hammock.

The afternoons that I spent at the Lockheeds' were wonderful. Marjorie seemed to go out of her way to make sure the General and I had enough lunch and snacks. He explained it one afternoon as we sat under an ancient shade tree with glasses of iced tea garnished with mint.

"We never had children, tried for a long time, but it just didn't happen. So, you'll have to humor her, well us, if we're too overbearing. I can just tell it makes Marjorie so happy to entertain, and she really adores Sciezka."

I nodded and thought a bit, and finally replied, "It's not too different from how my parents are with Elysia, in lieu of grandchildren just yet. I know I'm very protective of her."

"So, bless the first boy who takes her out?" he asked and then winked.

I nodded, thought a bit and finally replied, "I'll be sitting on the couch, polishing my shot gun. Chances are Roy would be next to me, wearing his gloves."

He laughed and nodded. "You'll have to pardon me, I was so eager to talk the particulars of the course I forgot to mention your compensation. You'll get a stipend for your work with the class."

"That really isn't necessary," I stammered. "It's an honor just to be chosen."

"Once the term starts you'll be grateful for it. Besides leading small group sessions you'll be doing a lot of the busywork. How are you at collating handouts and filing?"

I chuckled, remembering Mustang's office, and my dislike for paperwork, and then replied, "I'm pretty good at it, usually... that was my 'official' job description for the last couple years."
He nodded, knowing that it had been hush hush what I was really doing for Mustang and then said, "It's not all grunt work and tedium. There is a bit of glamour. You'll get extra library privileges, which I'm sure Sciezka will appreciate."

When we'd finished talking, Martin stood up. He stretched as he said, "This old man is going to take a nap. I'll be in the hammock, if Marjorie comes looking. It's her turn to host Bridge this afternoon, so she probably won't."

"I can reschedule my swim, or do it at the hospital instead," I said, and then added, "I don't want to impose."

He clapped me on the back and said, "Don't be ridiculous. They won't even notice you're here. They'll be too busy gossiping. Marjorie doesn't particularly care for them, but you know... appearances and whatnot."

After Martin left I got situated next to the pool. As I peeled off my t-shirt I got the feeling I was being watched. I brushed it off as paranoia, since the yard had a high wall around it, and was quite secure. I tossed my shirt on the lawn so it wouldn't get wet and then started wrestling with my shoes and jeans. The shoes didn't take long, since they were sandals, but my pants were quite a trick. I had my trunks on underneath and would go commando on the way home. I'd gotten pretty good at planning my day out to make things easier.

Once undressed I transferred to the edge, being extra careful since concrete is not as forgiving as carpet or dirt. Then, I pushed off the side into the water. I started swimming, harder than usual for a warm-up. The water was cold, not heated like at the hospital. I'd rest sometimes and float on my back; my eyes closed and feeling the sunlight. When I was finally tired, I spread out my towel on the deck, and without too much difficulty, got out. I decided to air dry, and it felt good to stretch out on my stomach. Maybe my legs wouldn't look so bad to me if I had a tan.

Once my back felt too warm I turned over and shut my eyes against the light. The heat of the sun and the slight breeze felt amazing. I dozed off and thankfully Marjorie came out before I burned. She had startled me, and I sat up quickly. Glancing around I noticed the drapes in the sitting room window closed quickly. Marjorie chuckled and said, "That would be the Bridge Club. You had some of the city's matriarchs positively atwitter."

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to fix it, feeling utterly self-conscious. "How much did they see?"

"Enough to impress them... I ended up calling the game early. It was positively disruptive. One or another of them was always getting up to refill their plate or excuse themselves to go to the powder room."

"I am so sorry," I replied as I attempted and failed to cover myself with the towel I was sitting on.

"Don't feel bad, Jean. They're all widowed or married to old goats like Martin. They haven't seen a frame as fine as yours in years."

I must have been blushing and Marjorie added, "Don't go getting bashful on me. Sciezka's a lucky girl. You are rather well built."

"They must not have noticed the chair... too busy with my chest or whatever."
She gave a small smile, winked, and then said, "They did and they didn't care. You were," she said and stopped abruptly, looking back at the house, "...and are being ogled."

I smiled shyly, shrugged and said, "I think I'll get back in the pool until they leave."

"That would be a good idea. You should hear them in there, twittering like schoolgirls."

---

Sciezka came by after work. When I wasn't at home when she got back, she'd realized that I'd be at the Lockheeds'.

After another swim, Marjorie cooked a light supper. She had "help" as she called it, but preferred cooking dinner herself.

We left around twilight and went straight to bed. I was worn out after all that exercise and sun. Thankfully the only part of me that had gotten too much color was my nose.

---

The call came that night, a few hours after midnight. We showered quickly since we didn't know when we'd get to again. Once we were dressed, I made some sandwiches, tossed what would keep in a hamper, and started helping Sciezka load the jeep. When we only had a few incidentals left, I pulled the jeep around front, and we were off.

We were two hours out of Central when the horizon started to pink up, and I finally had time to get a good look at Sciezka. She had her knees pulled up to her chest, and her head was resting against the window. She was sleeping fitfully and roused when I hit a bump in the road, knocking her forehead against the door.

She looked around, eyes wide with panic, but still unfocused. Sitting bolt upright, she straightened her glasses, and then seemed to remember where she was. Turning to me she spoke softly as she asked, "So how long was I out?"

I kept my eyes on the road as I answered, "You fell asleep just after the checkpoint leaving Central."

"Right... I remember now. They didn't hassle us too much. Do you think anyone is on to us?"

"The posted sentry was half asleep. Besides, with the jeep and fatigues I was almost convincing. I could very well be heading East on official business. Too bad these are bucket seats. You could sit closer. I'd even let you work the accelerator."

"You'd let me, eh?" she teased.

"Yep, I'd let you. It would make smoking and driving at the same time feasible. As things are now, I need both hands where they are."

---

We were silent for a while after that. She appeared to be deep in thought, and I didn't blame her. Me? I was in my element. Back in action, just another mission, even with all that had changed.
Eventually, I noticed that she was fidgeting, and looking awfully uncomfortable. Her eyes were fixed on the horizon, scanning it, and then darting around.

"What's got you so jumpy? Is everything all right?"

She crossed her legs, and then said, "I have to go. Now."

I glanced at my watch, realized that I should go too, and then said, "We'll stop in the next town I promise, unless you need me to pull over now."

"Pull over!" she commanded.

As I pulled over to the shoulder of the road, the dust the jeep had kicked up had barely settled, and she was off like a shot in an awkward, desperate sprint towards a cluster of trees.

She returned a few minutes later, appearing considerably more comfortable. In her absence, I'd lit a cigarette, and was trying to aim the acrid grey plume out the window. However, the breeze was blowing a fine covering of ash back in on me. She snatched the butt away from me, took a drag, and then flicked it into the dirt.

I shook my head and scolded, "Littering... I'm disappointed."

She nodded, and then offered, "Desperate times?"

I put a hand on her thigh and patted it gently. She leaned back in her seat, clearly enjoying it. Her muscles felt tense, though I had to admit my shoulders were getting rather stiff.

"While you were indisposed I checked the map. Ten more miles and we make a formal pit stop. If I recall correctly, there is a greasy spoon in that town. They only make a few things... but I'm pretty sure I can get into the bathroom."

"Good idea," she said and then pulled her knees back up to her chest as she hooked her heels on the front seat. "I'm hungry."

Her stomach growled, and she clutched it as she added, "Make that famished."

As I turned the key in the ignition I remarked, "That's a good look on you... but where did you get the fatigues? They're not mine. You could fit two of you in mine."

She rolled her eyes as she answered, "I have sources too. Riza added a couple of extra pairs to Feury's order. Someone in Purchasing owed her a favor."

I looked again, and then said, "They look a lot better on you than they ever did on Feury."

"I'm glad you think so. Don't breathe a word of this to Breda. Feury would never hear the end of it... being small enough that his pants fit me and all."

"No worries. I couldn't do that to Feury. Besides, you'd just supply him with all my deepest, darkest secrets."

"I would not!"

"Sure you would... Jean sometimes sleeps with his stuffed bear, he uses girly soap... et cetera et cetera."

"I might do that. But, only if you deserved it."
Once in town, if Johnson's Creek population 100 could be called a town, we found a place to park. Sciezka had read the sign on the way in, and I quickly corrected her, "It's 'Crick' to the locals."

"Well, whatever it is. You said there was something to eat here! I'm hungry," she complained.

With Sciezka's help, I didn't have any trouble hopping the curb a few times, and with one good tug I was over the small step leading into the restaurant. There were a few old timers at the counter, who turned to look at us, but thankfully they directed their attention back to the farm report on the wireless, and we found a table in the back corner. Sciezka went to wash her hands while we waited for menus. The waitress was just coming back and I ordered as Sciezka sat down.

"I'll have the special. Two eggs over easy, hash browns, and bacon... oh, coffee too, black."

Without missing a beat Sciezka chimed in and said, "I'll have the same, but I'd like a glass of cranberry juice if you have it. The biggest you have."

The waitress left to place our order with the cook, and I headed for the bathroom, grumbling about juice. Sciezka smirked and blew me a kiss.

I'd remembered correctly, the bathroom was a tight fit, but manageable. It wasn't like home by any stretch, but it was better than most out in the rural areas. In fact, I was lucky it wasn't an outhouse.

When our food arrived, we both dug in enthusiastically, and as soon as the waitress was gone Sciezka scouted the glass of sour, red liquid across the table.

I sighed, fished under my chair for my meds, and washed them down with the juice. Sciezka had watched me intently, and then said, "You missed two."

"Yep, you're right. Those don't mix with driving. I'll be fine."

She frowned as she said, "Sure. Fine."

"I'll tough it out then. I'll take them as soon as we're at the lake. Is that better?"

I paid, and we headed back to the jeep. Before getting in I had another cigarette. Sciezka loaded my chair into the back, since it was hard for me, with so much gear in the back. I resisted the urge to scowl, and we were off again.

We didn't make any more stops. I drove straight through. There was no set time to be at the cottage, I just wanted to get there. Riza had slipped me a set of keys weeks ago at the firing range. As soon as the jeep came to a stop, Sciezka scouted through the glove box, snatched the key ring, and sprinted towards the cottage, most likely to get to the bathroom.

Since she'd bolted, and I didn't blame her, I opened my door, wrestled with the pieces of my chair, and finally got them out of the back, and then assembled it. It didn't take too much more digging to find our overnight bag. I set that on the floor boards, so I'd be able to get at it once I transferred. I'd gotten a lot better at getting in and out of the jeep, but my shoulders complained as I slowly lowered myself, and got situated. After putting the duffel on my lap, I pushed toward the cottage. Sure, it was mostly flat, but it was still unpaved. I wasn't looking forward to spending much time
like that while we were away.

I got to the door just as Sciezka was coming out. She kissed me on the cheek and then asked, "Need me to get anything out of the back?"

"The hamper, I'm starved."

"Agreed. We'll eat something, have a bath, and then nap."

"A bath? That'll feel good, but am I that dirty?"

She smiled, leaned over and wiped a smudge off my cheek, and kissed me quickly. As she stood up I pulled her back down for another kiss. When I finally let her up I asked, "Want to pick up dinner at Matthew's restaurant? Take-out of course, but I bet he could arrange it. We'll eat it here, and then turn in early."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I'll wait outside while you go in. I'm kind of conspicuous. Besides, we need to see him anyway to confirm the delivery tomorrow."

She smiled, and headed for the drive to get the rest of our stuff. Before she disappeared down the trellis lined path again, she turned around, blew a kiss and said, "Get inside and run us a bath."

I blew her kiss back to her, and then headed inside.

---

After a much-needed bath together, we bedded down for a nap. Around 1800 hours we got up. My clothes were in a rumpled pile on the floor, and I was pretty wrinkled looking as well. My hair was worse. If we'd been going to eat in the restaurant, I would have shaved. I was sporting some impressive stubble, though it had taken two days to develop. Sciezka looked put-together after pulling her hair into a ponytail, and fixing the mussed bits with some water. As for me, before we left I shoved my watch cap over the bed head. It was a hopeless case.

I groaned as I strained to reach the canvas strap. I hoisted myself up so I could get in the jeep. Once I was sitting in the seat, I took a deep breath, got my legs in, and then situated the rest of myself. I whistled at Sciezka, who was bent over my chair taking it apart. The small of her back showed where her shirt didn't quite meet her pants, and I resisted the urge to lean over and pat her on the butt. When she finished, she handed the pieces to me so I could stow them in the back, and said, "If anyone else whistled at me like that I'd be mad... and you know it."

She stood on tiptoe to give me a kiss, and then dashed around the front of the vehicle, and got in. I rubbed her thigh before I put it in gear and commented, "I never thought standard issue khakis would ever make me so hot."

"They're just baggy pants, you goof!" she scolded, blushing crimson.

"I suppose that's true, then again, I know what's underneath 'em."

---

The parking lot of the restaurant was nearly deserted. Though it made sense, since the tourist
season was winding down, and it was a weeknight. Sciezka had put her feet on the seat while we were driving, and her knees were tucked into her chest. As I parked the car I turned to her and asked, "You chilly?"

She nodded and I dug in the back for the other duffel and quickly found what I was looking for. I tossed the wadded-up article of clothing to her, and she smiled when she realized what it was. After she pulled the sweater over her head she wrapped her arms around herself in a hug.

"Well, you know it's my favorite. To wear..." I said and then added "...and to let you borrow."

"I should get my own," she replied softly.

I rubbed her arm, as I said, "I don't mind sharing. We should figure out what we're ordering. Hamburgers shouldn't give Matt much trouble."

"Good plan. I'll go in and order, and then be right back. You wait here."

When she was out of earshot I muttered, "That was the general idea."

---

I was on my third cigarette by the time Sciezka came out. The trip had really taken it out of me, and I was pretty crabby, but trying hard not to take it out on anyone else. Matt was right behind her, with two bags that looked too big to have just dinner in them.

"You couldn't have just hamburgers, Jean!" he said jovially. "You'd waste away from hunger if that's all you ate."

"Really, that's too much! We'll never finish it all," I replied, touched by his gesture.

"Well I'd hope not, at least not all in one sitting. I thought you might want salad, and dessert too. Well that, and there's fresh fruit. I didn't figure you'd have time to pack much."

I stuck my hand out the window to shake his. He leaned in the window for a hug instead and said, "I'll see you bright and early for breakfast tomorrow."

Sciezka put the bags on the passenger side floor and doubled back to hug him one more time. They'd only just met when we were on vacation. There had been plenty of time to talk while the food was being prepared. I briefly wondered what they'd talked about.

---

The ride back to the cottage was quiet. Not uncomfortably so, we were both just tired. When we pulled around the drive, Sciezka got my chair out, and waited for me to get situated. She carried the bags in, and I followed her, admiring the view the whole way.

She unpacked the food, put it on the small coffee table, and then I joined her on the couch. I didn't think I'd be hungry after the long drive, but I was wrong. I was glad Matt packed extra. By the appreciative sounds, and rate that her dinner disappeared I could tell Sciezka had been hungry too. I shouldn't have been too surprised. She'd given Heymans a run for his money, and often ate as much as I did.

While I took care of the necessaries, and got ready to sleep, Sciezka put away the leftovers, and
turned down the bed. She was sitting on the bed in a camisole and panties, and had a determined expression on her face when I got in there.

"Range of motion time," she said, a little too cheerfully, and then stood up and took my hand.

This time I did scowl as I said, "I did that yesterday, and I'm tired. Besides, I'm fine."

I transferred to the bed. She must have noticed me wincing. My back and shoulders had seen better days. If I wasn't careful, I'd end up having spasms. I sighed, and then officially surrendered. "Ok, you're right. I'm not fine. I'll be a mess if I don't let you do this."

She got my dopp kit and some water. I took my meds, stretched out on the bed and let her get to work.

I watched as she slowly and carefully bent and flexed every joint and muscle from feet to hips. I noticed a slight tremor in my left leg, and she must have too, since she spent extra time on it before moving on. "Am I doing it right?" she asked, sounding tentative.

"You're doing a great job. You know how I feel about help with this kind of thing. But it's not as bad as I thought it would be."

"Does this make you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed?"

"A little, but it's fine. I know I'm in good hands."

She smiled as she said, "Now turn over; I'll rub your back. I thought your shoulders might be bothering you."

"Can't we just curl up together and cuddle? That's about all I wanted to do the whole way here. I wish the jeep had bench seats."

"After I make sure you're not going to fall apart on me tomorrow."

"Fair enough," I replied as I complied with her request.

The massage felt so good. By the time she was finished the spasms were gone. I rolled over onto my side and had her get close. Facing each other, I took her hand, kissed it and whispered, "Thanks for putting up with my stubborn streak."

She shimmied closer, kissed me back and replied, "It's one of your many loveable quirks."

We just lay there for a while. Then Sciezka got up to finish turning down the bed for the night, fluffing the pillows and retrieving the extra blankets she'd moved to make room for my session. When I was situated in bed and the lamps were out she nestled beside me, her head on my chest.

"Is there anything I can do to make you feel as good as I do right now?" I asked quietly.

"You can get a good night's rest. Tomorrow will be a long day too."

"Oh," I replied, trying to cover my disappointment. Having her hands run all over me really put me in the mood. "I thought we might..."

"That sounds wonderful, I'm a fool to refuse, but aren't you tired? I know I am."
I ran my hand over her firm thigh slowly and she shivered. As I rubbed the small of her back my hands drifted under her panties. "I'm on to you Jean Havoc," she teased, "I have some will power left. But not if you keep that up!"

"Please?" I asked, trying hard not sound like I was whining or begging, though I was.

"You'll regret it in the morning. We do have to get up early."

"Never," I replied as my hand slid under her camisole, causing her to relax and sigh contentedly.

Her voice sounded low and husky as she said, "I surrender."

In the morning, I held Sciezka close for a long time before finally getting up. We took a bath together, since we both knew that was an amenity the cabin didn't have. After she helped me up, she tossed me a towel and said, "So what will you miss most while we're away?"

I thought for a moment and then replied, "Everything. The only upside to any of this is that you'll be with me so I'm sure you're safe. I'd go insane with worry otherwise."

"Likewise..." she said and then moved closer. As she held my hand she added, "Though I was thinking about less serious things. I'll miss baths together, our bed, and Pane Fresco."

I tugged her hand, coaxed her into my lap and said, "Ditto. The first thing we're doing when this is over is holing up together for days on end... naked... with food from Pane Fresco.

She nodded and said, "We should hurry up, the rendezvous is soon."

Sciezka and I were already at a table in the pub section of the restaurant. Matt had seated us there so we could hopefully keep our cover. The dining room was full of regulars, older men drinking coffee and discussing the almanac, and rating threshers. Elysia dashed out of the back room with Gracia close behind her. She clambered into my lap and then whispered in my ear, "Shhh, we're playing hide and seek."

That was one way to put it, but a good way to achieve the desired outcome of secrecy, without scaring the kid. Gracia and Elysia ate quickly while Sciezka and I put their few belongings in the jeep. I'd been worried about whether or not everything would fit with additional passengers, but after Sciezka repacked the back it was fine. Thankfully Sciezka's small, she would just fit in the back.

It was also fortunate that we only had another three or four hours on the road ahead of us.

Matt came out front and told me to pull around to the delivery entrance. The girls were back there, ready to go. When Sciezka got out Elysia latched onto her and hugged her tightly. Though Gracia offered to sit in the back seat Sciezka wouldn't hear of it. Elysia sat next to Sciezka and Gracia, under protest, rode in front with me. She smiled and said, "Let me know when you get sick of driving."

"What?" I asked, confused and clearly in need of a second cup of coffee.
She replied, "Jim has been very busy. If physio therapy doesn't work out as a career, he can open a
driving school."

"That is great news! Now you'll understand how great it is to have the wind in your hair. Nice to
know I have reliable back up too."

"I'll have to tell Jim you said that... the next time I see him."

The ride was quiet. After a bathroom break, Gracia and I switched places. Sciezka was napping in
the back. She'd been so worked up about leaving and making sure I was all right that she must not
have slept well. Gracia was concentrating on the road. She was a good driver, but I could tell it
wasn't second nature to her yet. Ely sia and I played I-Spy until she drifted off. Since my services as
court jester were no longer needed I assumed the role of navigator.

I felt a pang of guilt at the fork in the road just outside of my home town. It wouldn't have added
much distance to the trip to stop and see Ma. Pa knew we'd call from a payphone to let him know it
was time. It would be too risky if we were seen in town. We couldn't afford to give away our
position this early in the game.

Mustang had worked too hard to ensure we wouldn't be followed. Gracia and Ely sia had bought
tickets to her parents' house in the North and departed by train. They got off four stops in to the trip
and were spirited off by a contact of Mustang's who ran a shipping company. He'd even gone as far
as booking a compartment so it would take longer to notice that they'd gotten off the train.

If we were to be discovered, it wouldn't be inconceivable that we'd go to a remote cabin to get out
of the city. Once there, the documents and armaments would be stowed in the root cellar and
hidden compartments in the floor. The way Ma's family got into the mercantile business wasn't
completely on the up and up. After the embargo with Xing, certain goods were still in demand.
There was a need, and Ma's family stepped in to fill it.

The good thing in all this was that the cabin was well fortified and the hollow spots in the floor
undetectable unless you knew where to look.

Ten miles away from our destination we pulled into a small burg and Sciezka called the store.
Luckily Pa picked up and the whole thing took less than a minute. Sciezka had kept it short, and
when I asked rather impatiently about what was said she replied, "Your father wanted to know if
you were behaving, and if you'd fancy a beer."

"So conceivably you could be calling from Central... "

"Of course, I'm not a complete novice at this."

"Did you tell him that beer would be very much appreciated right now?"

She rolled her eyes at me and said, "Of course! I told him I needed one too."

"Well that's one bright spot in all of this."

"We're together, that's all that counts."
It was just after dusk when we arrived. I’d misjudged the distance and we had doubled back often to avoid staying on one route for too long. After taking turns in the outhouse, which was now attached to the house with the addition of a screened porch, we unloaded the jeep.

Once Sciezka stowed the documents and munitions we lit the lamps, ate the last of the sandwiches and set out our bedrolls on the bunks.

The road to the cabin was little more than a single lane path cut through the woods. Elysia went to bed right after supper and I took the jeep with Sciezka to the head of the trail. As I suspected, Pa had stashed a few supplies in the bushes. He’d also included a copy of the newspaper. Besides the necessities he’d brought chocolate, cigarettes, a coffee pot that would work on a camp stove and of course, beer.

When we got back I stretched out on my sleeping bag on the floor with the paper and a beer. So far there was no news of unrest anywhere in the country.

Sciezka and I bunked together even though it was a tight fit. She’d offered to take the top bunk, but I wouldn’t hear of it.

I hoped this would end quickly and go as planned. I didn't want to imagine the alternative.

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We'd been living on canned food warmed through on a small camp stove for two weeks, and we were all getting crabby. Elysia had run out of coloring books, and quickly grew tired of tic-tac-toe. She did burn off some energy skipping rope, but she, like me was sick of being cooped up. Sciezka had read her almost all of the stories in "A Children's Treasury of Tales" and I hoped by the time it was done that we would be back home.

One afternoon both Sciezka and Gracia were napping. I was sprawled on the floor, re-reading my text books for the next semester for the umpteenth time. Elysia came in from the porch, where she'd been jumping rope, and flopped down next to me.

Snuggled closer and then hooked her arm through mine and asked, "Are you busy Jean?"

"Not particularly. I'm getting pretty sick of these books. What can I do you for, Princess?"

"I'm bored," she replied, her tone subdued.

"Me too. What should we do about that?"

"We could play hide and seek, or tag..."

"Too loud, we'd wake up your Mommy and Sciezka. How about Go Fish?"

"Boring. We've done that a bajillion times."

I chuckled and then replied, "Bajillion is not a number. But I get it. Want me to read to you?"

She shook her head and then got a look on her face that Roy would have recognized in an instant. Maes used to get it when he was up to no good. The grin only got wider as I saw the gears turning and I asked cautiously, "So what do you want to play?"

Elysia got up, rushed to her bag and came back with a small pink box. She opened it and said triumphantly, "Beauty parlor!"
"Oh, I'm not any good at doing hair, Princess."

"I know that silly!" she exclaimed. "I'm going to do your hair."

Under any other circumstances the answer would have been a firm no. However, Elysia was very persuasive, and we were very bored.

When Sciezka woke up she found Elysia standing on a chair behind me, putting the finishing touches on my coif. I had little pig tails and braids secured with multi colored barrettes all over my head.

Sciezka smirked and then commented, "You look like a pretty princess, Jean."

Elysia scowled as she said, "Sciezka, he's a prince, and he's handsome."

Sciezka came closer, hugged me and whispered, "You're a good sport."

As we tried to get to sleep that night I remarked, "We're running out of stories to read to Elysia. We'll have to start making some up."

"That shouldn't be too hard," Sciezka replied as she nuzzled closer to me.

"How about this one... Once upon a time there was a handsome knight who served a prince faithfully. One day an evil witch tried to kill the prince, but gravely wounded the knight instead. Even though he failed in his quest the knight was handsomely rewarded with a castle, vast wealth, and he even found true love."

"That story sounds familiar..."

"However, after having all this good stuff happen, the retired knight may not get a happily ever after, after all."

Sciezka propped herself up on an elbow, kissed me and then said, "Stop thinking like that. It's going to be fine."

"I hope you're right."

"I am. Also, you are never telling made-up stories to Elysia. You'll have her as jaded as you are before she loses her first tooth."

I'd forgotten that Gracia was only a few feet away until I heard her attempting to stifle her laughter. The situation wasn't so grave yet that we couldn't find some humor in it.

Chapter End Notes

Reposted from "that other site" with some cleaning/editing. Currently working on chapter 62. This is such an old fandom, and old piece, I'd LOVE to know if people are still reading. Even kudos help.
The time we spent in hiding passed slowly. Elysia had run out of patience for the "quiet game" and complained that she'd like to go back to Central immediately. Thankfully she didn't threaten to hold her breath until she turned blue. She was too well mannered to do that, but I might have tried it myself if I thought it would work.

Every few days Pa would drop supplies at the trail head and there'd often be a stack of newspapers with it. I let Sciezka read them first, since she was as addicted to the written word as I was to cigarettes. Pa kept those coming too.

As the days passed the headlines got bolder, bigger and eventually in all caps:

"Armed Conflict at Northern Border"

"Looting in Dublith"

"Siege on Southern H.Q."

"ISHBALLANS DEMAND SUFFRAGE IN LIORE"

Just over two weeks after we went into hiding the wireless crackled to life. I could tell the voice coming over the airwaves was Feury, even though he'd attempted to disguise his voice.

"Come home from the pub, last call."

It was time.

The girls packed up their few belongings and loaded them in record time. They took the documents too, to leave with Pa who would deliver them to Grumman when I gave him the all clear.

I'd decided that until I was sure of what was going on in Central that they should stay in hiding. I wrote a hasty letter to Winry, in care of Garfiel and told Gracia to drive them all to Rush Valley. I knew we could trust Garfiel from the way Winry had described him.

The only good news in all of this was a headline that had been smaller than all the rest, buried in the op ed section. I was surprised it had gotten past the censors. Well, that any of it had. The military must have had its hands full with other worries.

"Public Demands Free Election and Decentralization"

and on the next page...

"Persons of Interest Sought for Questioning"
Here we go. The heat was on.

I was glad that Sciezka had passed the paper to me before she saw that my name was on the list, though at the bottom of it. There were other people besides my unit on the list, so it wasn't just us in this fight. I'd hoped that would help Mustang, having other commanders fighting for the cause, but somehow, I had a sinking feeling that it only meant they'd all be lined up for the firing squad together if we failed.

Before they left, I pulled Sciezka aside. Gracia busied herself with a last-minute check of the supplies she'd packed in the back of the jeep, to give us some much-needed privacy. Sciezka all but smothered me as she held me close, not saying a word.

"I'll see you soon. I won't do anything too stupid, all right? I will come back in one piece," my voice muffled as I was smashed against her chest.

She loosened her grip and said, "You'd better."

"I promise. Listen, don't go with anyone but me, ok?"

"I only trust you."

"I mean it and only go with me if our first destination is the nearest inn. Got it?"

She cocked her head, looking puzzled until I added, "Any other response from me would have to be coerced. I'll make sure to bring Jim with me. If he's not along, something is up. In that case, run."

"What do you have planned after we leave?" she asked, sounding wary.

"I'm going to surrender. I'm just going to sit here waiving a little white flag. No danger at all."

She kissed me, this time slow and lingering. After she broke the kiss she turned away. I cupped her chin, tilting it so I could get a better look at her. Tears were welling up behind her glasses. I was holding mine back as well.

Time was growing short. They needed to leave now. I kissed her one more time, hard and then said, "You should go. The sooner you do, the sooner we'll see each other again."

I watched her get into the jeep and waved until they were too far down the trail to see.

As I headed into the cabin, I swallowed hard and prepared myself to break radio silence and surrender.

If I knew the military, they were scanning all channels hoping for something... anything that would give away the position of the traitors.

Since Eastern H.Q. was about 120 clicks from where I was, I estimated I'd have just over an hour before they found me.

I decided to keep it simple and announced over all open channels, "This is Second Lieutenant Havoc, retired, turning himself in for questioning."

I packed just the essentials in a small duffle bag. Meds, bathroom equipment and my tooth brush. Underneath that stuff I had a change of clothes. It might take them awhile to figure out that I was of no use. Then I laid my small arsenal out on the kitchen table, unloaded and disassembled. Finally, I tied the universal symbol of defeat on the front door, a plain white handkerchief, which waved in
the breeze.

Sure, that I'd done everything I could to appear helpless, I moved my bag to the center of the cabin and parked next to it.

Then I just waited.

I left the door ajar, to indicate I'd go without a fight. The troops who came for me burst through the door, looking green and itching for a fight, when it offered no resistance landed in a heap just inside the threshold.

I put my hand up and said nothing; snickering behind my cigarette.

The first one to get up strode over to me and grabbed the front of my shirt, shouting roughly, "Get on your knees!"

I remained silent, only moving to point to the chair. He didn't seem to get it as he barked, "I said get on your knees traitor!"

Finally, one of them seemed to get it and said, "I don't think he can sir."

"He's right," I said quietly.

Ignoring me, he spoke to the other, smarter guy.

"And what makes you think he ain't just making you think that? One of you get over here and help me get him to the ground to search him."

They manhandled me to the floor, face down. When I turned my head so I could breathe better and see, the first one pinned my shoulders with his knees and forced my face back to the floor. Dammit, my legs were dead, but the rest of me was hurting.

My voice was muffled as I said, "All weapons are on the table over there."

One of them patted me down more thoroughly than necessary and then cuffed my hands behind my back before flipping me over. I couldn't have been more humiliated, but at this point I'd be grateful if they didn't kick me in the face.

When their leader, who must have been all of nineteen was sure I wasn't a threat he ordered two of his men to put me back in my chair, hands still cuffed behind my back.

I didn't want to rile these guys up, as green and untrained was more dangerous than seasoned and steady in my opinion. More prone to panic, they could snap at any time, and my bones could too. I calmly said, "I'll need that duffle bag."

I tilted my head towards it and said, "It's got medication and stuff for the pisser in it. Things below the waist don't work so hot." I figured I'd come right out and say it, in case they still didn't get it yet.

The guy in charge eyed it suspiciously and then said, "Search it and then get him out of here."

"If you undo the cuffs, I can get there myself. After all, does it look like I can outrun or hurt you?"
Unfortunately, that just pissed the guy off. He screwed up his face, pointed and barked, "You two, pick him up and toss him in the back. You, get his chair. The rest of you search the cabin and then report back ASAP!"

The two assigned to get me to the transport seemed small, even from my current vantage point. They grunted and strained as one got me under the arms and the other grabbed my ankles. They lurched across the room and I was sure they'd drop me. Guess I wasn't as frail as they thought. If I made it out of this mess, I was definitely going to thank Jim for those sessions.

"Ah fellas, I don't want to contradict your C.O. but you'd better let me do it or you're going to end up hurting yourselves."

The one at my feet gave me a dirty look and I decided it would be better to keep my mouth shut.

After I was unceremoniously dumped in the back of the truck, they tossed my chair in after me. The two that had carried me sat in the jump seats and watched me intently most of the way to Eastern.

When they stopped to fuel up, they took a break for water and cigarettes. It was torture watching them, but I kept my mouth shut and averted my eyes. The first thing I learned about situations like this was never to show your weakness.

Then I realized everyone knew I smoked and it made me wonder if they lit up in front of me to spite me.

They did get me a drink, but the bastards tipped the cup in such a way that most of it went up my nose. While I was still spluttering one leaned over, blew smoke in my eyes and said, "Want some of this?"

Oh yeah. But hell if I was going to tell them that.

Mustang would have had our asses on a spit if anyone under his command acted like this. The recruiters who signed these boys up must have been scraping the bottom of the barrel.

My body ached when we finally stopped at Eastern. They hauled me out and dumped me in my chair with a thud. That was going to leave a mark.

They undid the cuffs and before I got a chance to restore the circulation to my hands, put them in new restraints. Wooden boards with holes in them for the hands like they used on alchemists.

I held my tongue as they pushed me past the main entrance to the back. I was about to ask where we were headed when I figured it out. The brig.

The air down in the bowels of H.Q. was stale and clammy. If I spent too much time down there it was almost certain I'd end up with pneumonia and bed sores. With my hands restrained I couldn't transfer or even shift position for pressure relief. Damn.

Once they located an empty cell, they picked me up and heaved me onto a pallet with only a grungy cotton blanket for warmth or padding. They must have wised up, since before they locked me up, they left my chair in the corner, in my line of sight, but out of reach.

I sighed. Nothing much to do now but think up a way to avoid those sores. I closed my eyes and
didn't stave off sleep. I pleaded with the fates and asked that they wouldn't forget me down here.

When I woke up the cell was dim, with just a small sliver of light coming through the lone, high window. The heavy iron bars cast shadows on the floor. They'd taken my watch, but by my estimate it was early morning. It had been late by the time we got to Eastern and I'd only slept fitfully. That and it was quiet and breakfast was nowhere to be seen, which was assuming I'd get breakfast.

I was hungry, but more importantly I had to get to a bathroom. From my vantage point, flat on my back on a narrow pallet, I couldn't see the guards, but I could hear them.

"Hey! Anyone out there?" I yelled. I hoped they'd come, and do what I needed them to.

"What do you want traitor?" the lanky guard who came to the door asked.

"I need to get to the can, it's urgent. My parts don't work as well as they used to and if I don't take care of this right away, I'll get real sick."

"So just go. Don't think you've found the perfect way to escape. How do I know you won't jump me as soon as I unlock the door?"

"Please, check the bag I came in with, I can't just go anymore. If I don't get to the bathroom now, you're going to need a mop and I'm going to need a medic."

I looked at him and from my vantage point I could just make out his expression. He appeared to be mulling it over. No guard ever wanted to deal with questions when things went bad with prisoners on their watch.

"So, you're telling me this could really mess you up?"

I was pretty sure I was backed up all the way to my kidneys, putting me at risk for another bad urinary tract infection if they kept me much longer, and at worst...well, I'd been told I was lucky I didn't go septic last time.

"Yeah soldier. That and like I said, you'd probably have one hell of a mess to clean up."

I heard the reluctant jingling of keys and the click of the lock and he came in, his side arm trained on me.

"Look soldier, I'm in restraints. I can't even roll over let alone hurt you. Honestly? The manacles are nice and all. Sturdy... real quality stuff, but you're better off saving them for a whack-job alchemist."

He frowned, but put his piece back in its holster and approached me. Once he got the hardware off, I flexed my hands and rubbed my wrists, trying to get the circulation going. Just as I could feel my fingers again, he cuffed me. At least in these I could move my hands a little. I'd still need both hands free to get the job done but I couldn't exactly keep pushing my luck.

He pushed my chair next to me and looked at me expectantly until I said patiently, "As long as my hands are bound, I'm going to need your help just to sit up, let alone moving into that chair."

After a lot of exertion on his part I was finally in my chair. I struggled to get my feet on the
footplates and I was reminded of how hard it had first been. Once I was situated, he hurriedly
pushed me down the corridor to the bathroom while my hands were still tied. When we got there,
he dumped my kit in my lap and undid my right hand, attaching the free end of the cuffs to a wheel.

I sat staring at my lap. It would be difficult to get the kit open let alone catheterize myself. He
looked puzzled until I said, "Unless you want to do this for me, I'll need both hands free."

At first, he seemed torn, but gradually it dawned on him.

He watched me intently while I washed my hands and laid out my supplies. He saw the rigid
catheter and his eyes narrowed, as if daring me to try something. He was right to be cautious. My
training had taught me that prisoners improvised weapons all the time. I sanitized the catheter and
tubing and then placed them on a clean towel to dry. I got my pants undone and was ready to get
Master Havoc out when he went pale. He finally realized where the tube was going to go.

"You really don't need to watch this. It doesn't hurt, at least not now," I explained, nudging at my
knee for emphasis and letting it flop to the side.

Everything was as clean as it was going to get. I connected the catheter to the tubing, lubricated it
and was ready to insert it. The guard looked positively green and held his hands over his groin,
shielding his manhood.

Poor guy was leaning against the wall looking like he was going to faint. Truth be told if I had been
in his shoes a year ago, I'd have hit the floor already. Now I could catheterize myself without even
blinking an eye. I hadn't tried yet, but I could probably do it in the dark.

I held it steady with my left hand, guiding the catheter in with my right. Slowly, inch by inch I
threaded the tubing in. When I felt some resistance, I stopped and then it was time to wait. I opened
a valve in the tubing and let it drain into the toilet. He didn't look at me and I didn't say a word.
The room was silent save for the steady sound of the slow trickle.

As I rinsed and sanitized everything and then put it back in the bag he leaned against the wall as he
regained color and asked, "So you got hurt pretty bad..."

I shrugged my shoulders and then replied, "I guess so. It could have been worse. My C.O. nearly
died too. They said I was lucky to have survived."

He was quiet, an expression I recognized all too well as pity on his face. I held out my wrists,
prepared to be restrained again. He put the cuffs in his pocket. Patting his hand over them he said,
"Eh, you stay on good behavior and these will stay in here."

"Thanks. But seriously soldier? Don't feel too bad for me. Life been good since, except for this
part."

He stood behind me, ready to push and I asked, "Thanks for the offer but really I can handle it.
Never been too good at accepting help, so I never let anyone push me. Besides, this wheel gets a
bit tricky when banged up."

He got out his weapon. I was pretty sure it was just for appearances sake as he didn't take the safety
off and then escorted me back to my cell.

I got situated on the pallet and shifted to my side. My docs were not going to be thrilled with the
condition of my skin if I didn't keep changing position. I finally understood why everyone had
seemed obsessed with my ass in the beginning.
I spied the private's small smile as he put my chair back in the corner and headed toward the iron barred door, taking my kit with him.

Before he left, he turned and said, "I'll make sure the supervisor knows you need the kit, ok?"

I saluted him, smiled and thought, wait until he sees the rest of what I have to do.

The guards brought me three squares a day. It was leftover mess hall food, but it was edible. Odd thing was they had a real interest in making sure I ate it all. Made me wonder why they wanted to keep me so healthy. I started to think about what I knew had happened to the other prisoners, the ones who ended up in Lab 5. I shuddered at the memory of the chimeras Fullmetal had described. I didn't want to imagine the horror of any creature being dissected for its genetic parts, and it made me sick to think that human beings were being experimented on in such a similar fashion.

I remember the first time I tried cooking my Ma's recipe for casserole, burned it at least seven times. I shook my head trying to shut out the one question that haunted me since Ed's report: How many people had died before these chimeras had been developed?

They were the most advanced, but what about the ones before them? The ones that weren't strong enough to make it? The ones that were-

No, I repeated in my head, trying to ground my thoughts, I'd get out and none of that would happen. My hands started to shake and it had nothing to do with the cold cell.

After my night rations on my second day in captivity the guards were getting ready for lights out. I was escorted to the bathroom. When I got back Lieutenant General Grumman was in my cell waiting for me, sitting on my pallet.

He stood up slowly, since it was low, and I sat ramrod straight in my chair and saluted him.

"At ease, Havoc," he said kindly. "Guard, at ease," and then added, "Go take a break. You've earned it. My staff has it handled."

The young private looked unsure of what to do. Follow his standard orders or those of one of the highest-ranking men in the military. Grumman added for good measure, "Get the prisoner's paperwork and belongings ready. He's being transferred to the infirmary. He's being questioned in the morning and this environment is not good for his health."

He hurried his two aides out as well and then whispered, "Your Ma sends her regards and cookies. I'll bring you some in the infirmary after you get a shower. You look and smell like hell."

He'd gotten the documents. Pa was smart to send my Ma in. Ladies were almost never searched or questioned.

"Thank you, sir. I was scared I'd be forgotten down here."

"No worries, Jean. It's all been handled. Being commander of East H.Q. has some perks after all. Actually, there's a vacuum of power lately."
"What about..."

He cut me off, answering before I'd even asked, concern evident in his voice, "No word yet. But right now I think no news is good news."

"Wait, what all has gone on. I read some of the news but..."

"Fuhrer King Bradley is MIA and presumed dead. Thus far there are no suspects."

"What about his wife and son?"

"She's fine. She'd been at her sister's. But whoever comes to power next will be at another residence until they repair the Fuhrer's mansion."

"What?" I gasped. After recovering my composure I asked in rapid succession, "So what happened? Who is in power? A committee? Does it appear to be internal?"

"Indeed."

I whispered, "Indeed? That's the answer to which question?"

"There were some rather impressive rock formations jutting through the walls that were left standing. Though I've been told it was hard to tell with all the smoke and fire."

"That is encouraging, I guess," I replied, still confounded by the amount of information I had and was still lacking.

"You just take care of yourself. Are you prepared for the inquest?"

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be. It's a shame my vacation was interrupted."

"I'll escort you to the infirmary. After you get cleaned up we'll have tea and some of your Ma's baked goods."

After Grumman dropped me off at the infirmary, I was handed towels and pajamas and then led to the shower by a nurse.

The shower felt heavenly. I hadn't had one in weeks and hadn't washed up in days. When I was dry, I got into the pajamas, which were hospital issue, but better than a gown and the nurse took my filthy clothes from me. Now that I was comfortable, I noticed she was cute and blonde, nothing like Sciezka, and not nearly as attractive to me.

"I'll help you into bed and you can rest while you wait for the doctor," she said.

Normally I would protest. I didn't need to see a doctor and I'd been "resting" all day. I know I would have put up a fight with Sciezka. But common sense dictated I should comply. They'd roughed me up pretty good when they took me in. I still hadn't had a chance to check for cuts and bruises. For all I know I could even have some glass in my ass.

The doctor brought my duffle bag and kit to me and said, "I took the liberty of restocking it. Lieutenant General Grumman said to ensure you got the best care."

He started the examination by checking my vitals and talked to himself as he worked,
"Temperature normal, heart rate regular, B.P. is a little low, but I'll take it... Lieutenant Havoc, if you'd remove your shirt."

"Deep breath in, now hold it and exhale. Again, good," he instructed and then put away his stethoscope. He averted his eyes as he said, "Those are some nasty scars. You got them when you were injured, right?"

I put off answering and instead asked, "Can I put my clothes on yet?"

"After I get a good look at you; I was informed that you were handled roughly."

"It wasn't that bad. It could have been worse... both the scars and getting taken in. I'm sorry if I've been difficult. After all the time I spent at the hospital, I just really dislike the whole process."

"I don't blame you one bit. I'll be brief," he replied. He took my hands, turned them over and inspected them. "The scrapes on your palms tell me I should check your knees. They had you face down, right?"

"Yep, you're good. You should probably check my backside too. I was too heavy for them or something when they'd try to move me. I kept telling them it'd be easier on everyone if I did it myself."

That made him chuckle. He looked uncomfortable as he stammered, "I'm sorry, that's not funny."

He finished the exam and then cleaned the abrasions on my palms and put some ointment on the raw spots on my wrists where I'd been shackled.

"Thanks, that's much better. Don't worry. You're allowed to laugh if I crack a joke, even if its poking fun at my situation. Hell, I do it all the time."

The blonde nurse came back with a tray and announced brightly, "Lieutenant General Grumman will be in shortly."

"After you have your tea, you should get some rest. I'll be in my office. Just hit the call button if you need anything," the doctor said before he left. I'd neglected to catch his name. I was just happy to see a friendly face.

They both left my bedside, the nurse left last and hurriedly drew the curtain around my bed and followed the doctor. She had been kind to me, but nearly fawned over the doctor. Come to think of it, he was a bit pink in the cheeks when she spoke. I wondered if they were an item.

Grumman came in a few minutes later.

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Over a cup of tea and some of Ma's sugar cookies the general and I mostly made small talk. We couldn't discuss much, as the walls have ears. Being clean, fed and in a soft bed made me physically comfortable, but I was worried about what would come next. If they were going to torture me, they hadn't yet. I was sure I'd at least be interrogated and put through court proceedings.

I must have been quiet and lost in my own thoughts for too long. The general cleared his throat to get my attention and then asked, "What's on your mind? Maybe I can help."
"Sir, I'm worried about what happens next."

"That's an awful tall order. Could you narrow it down a bit?"

"I'm worried about everyone else. I want to know what they're going to do with me. I'm hoping the girls are alright."

"I haven't heard anything on the last matter. I'm keeping my fingers crossed. As for your unit? I think the materials I have on file will be more than enough. And you, you're coming to Central by train with me. That is after I'm satisfied, you're in any condition to travel."

"The train... I haven't taken one since... "

"I know it's less than ideal. But it's a military convoy charter, to ensure my security. Bah is what I said to it. But protocol dictates... "

"That sounded like I was complaining. I'm sorry. You've done so much already, just by getting me out of the brig."

"You don't sound ungrateful at all. We can talk more logistics in my office while we have a smoke. I have some things you left at the cabin that I thought you might need."

"Now that is an offer I can't refuse. As soon as I get my chair from other side of the room, we can go right away."

"I was told that they had you restrained. Are you sure you are fine after the ordeal?"

"Yeah, other than some raw spots on my wrists, the only thing that still hurts is my ego. All they really needed to do was put my chair out of my reach. In the old days it would have taken a lot more than hand cuffs. You don't go through Special-Ops training without becoming an escape artist."

Once I was in my chair Grumman went to the office door and said, "I'll be taking Lieutenant Havoc to my office for a talk. He'll be back before lights out."

There was a long pause before the doctor came out, flushed and disheveled. As he straightened his tie he stammered, "Thank you for letting me know sir."

Grumman waved a hand casually and said, "I'll let you get back to what you were doing."

The general's office was much bigger than Mustang's was and plusher. I'd hardly ever been to Grumman's office and certainly not to have a cigarette.

He pulled a leather wing chair away from the coffee table and then sat down in its twin. After pouring a snifter of brandy he said, "I hope I got the brand on your cigarettes right. Would you care for a nip as well?"

"That would be wonderful," I replied as I reached for the pack of cigarettes.

I banged the pack against the side of my chair to tamp the tobacco more firmly, opened the cellophane and pulled one out. I lit it with the impressive silver lighter that sat on the table, next to the general's pipe. I inhaled deeply and then coughed.
"A few days going without will do that to you. Here, drink up."

I chased my second drag with a sip of brandy and rolled the amber liquid around in my mouth. The only thing missing that would make this just right was Sciezka rubbing my back. I was tight as hell from anxiety and my accommodations earlier. That and I just missed the hell out of her.

"So, what did your men collect from the cabin?" I asked, curious now that I was more relaxed.

"Some photographs, a couple changes of clothes, a notebook and your braces."

"How did they find all that? It was pretty well hidden."

"I know it was well hidden, since the other detail that turned the place inside out couldn't find any of that."

He handed me the photographs first. Sciezka must have brought them as I hadn't packed them. There was one of me sleeping with Elysia's bear, another of the gang at my birthday and one I'd never seen before. Sciezka was on my lap; we were kissing and apparently too wrapped up in one another to notice we'd had our picture taken.

Grumman pointed at the last one and commented, "That's a good one of you two. It'll be back to that soon. Have a little faith."

"Thank you, sir," I replied, my voice betraying my emotions. I'm sure my expression did as well.

He changed the subject abruptly; as I was sure he was as worried for Riza and Roy as I was for Sciezka. "I've requested a compartment for you on the train. It'll give you a little privacy and make it easier on you. Can you get yourself on the train using crutches?"

"I haven't attempted stairs yet. I know that while the train is moving it could be dangerous. It's hard enough to find my footing as is."

"I'll have two of my men appointed as your guards. You just tell me how you can do it and I'll make sure they're instructed."

"How did you convince them to get a compartment for me?" I asked.

"I reminded the paper pushers that someone would have to take you to the bathroom if you didn't have one in your compartment. That changed their minds right away."

"That's brilliant General Grumman," I replied and grinned. "The whole plan sounds like it will work well enough. You've already done so much, but can I ask you one more favor?"

"You're the one doing me quite a few favors, but shoot."

"I need to get in contact with Jim Bruno, my physio therapist... and friend too. I want to make sure he's ok."

"Consider it done."

"I also need him to bring a new set of wheels and rims. Mine are out of round."

"Should I let Miss Rockbell know?"

"If you can even find her, don't trouble her. Besides, she'd hurt the guys who brought me in for banging up her creation."
"True enough", he said and then chuckled. After checking his watch, he yawned and then suggested, "You should get back. Have one more cigarette for good measure and then we'll go back to the infirmary."

It was a good thing I was mentally and physically exhausted. I was pretty sure I'd sleep well with some meds and I'd need to be well rested if I was going to get through questioning and not crack. After Grumman was sure I was safely in bed he alerted the nurse I was in for the night. She'd blushed when we passed her desk and smoothed her hair, which was still a bit mussed under her white cap. My instincts had been spot on. She and the doctor were an item.

When she came to my bedside a few minutes later she asked, "Do you need anything before you retire for the night Lieutenant Havoc?"

"I should get to the bathroom one more time and I need some meds from my bag."

She nodded, pushed my chair closer to the bed and held it steady while I transferred. I didn't point out that I was more than capable. She looked like she was still on cloud nine in her own thoughts.

I got back from the bathroom and she was waiting for me, my prescriptions set out on the bedside table and she was studying the label on one of them.

"I'm sorry Lieutenant Havoc, but I can't make heads or tails of these. There are just so many of them. I'm going to consult the doctor," she apologized.

"It's fine. I can wait. I'm not too uncomfortable," I replied and added silently, "Yet."

As I was getting a back in bed, I noticed the spasms. I wasn't surprised. It had been five days since I'd had any type of therapy and weeks since Jim had done it. The work Sciezka had done with me had helped, but I was in dire need of an intense session and swimming.

"Lieutenant," the doctor said quietly as he parted the privacy curtain around my bed.

"Oh, yes?" I responded, surprised. My mind had been wandering. "Did you have any questions about my meds? By the way, what's your name? I feel bad not knowing it after you've been so kind."

"It's Knox," he answered and then continued, "I had a long talk with Doctor Parker. Well, he talked and I took notes. He was quite upset about the conditions you'd been subjected to."

"Doctor Knox is it? Are you related to the Doctor Knox in Central?" I asked hopefully.

"He's my father. We talk sometimes, more so the last few months. It's encouraging. He went into Pathology after Ishbal. He's too talented to work on corpses. How do you know him?"

"He's a friend of a friend. I've seen him a few times. He's practicing again, on a case by case basis and in the emergency room on weekends."

The younger Doctor Knox looked like a light went on and then exclaimed, "You're the case he asked me about for a consult last winter!"

"Seeing as I'm one of only a few patients he sees, with a fairly unique condition, I'd say you're right."
"I'm sorry for straying from the matter at hand. Parker gave me your abbreviated medical history and then said medication-wise I should just sign off on your suggestions."

I smirked at that and then asked, "Did he really?"

"I'll quote him, 'No damned resident is qualified. Just ask him what he'd normally do with his symptoms and check it over, then sign off on it. He knows more about his body than you ever will.' Then he hung up on me."

"I'll have to thank him when I see him again. I'm sure you're a good physician. But with all the specialists I've seen... well, it's a lot to take in at once. So, symptoms-wise, how am I feeling? My back and shoulders are tense and achy and I've got some spasms that I'd like to keep in check. That and despite being tired as hell, I doubt I'll sleep well."

He nodded and selected bottles from the line-up on the table and then listed their properties aloud, "Anti-spasm, muscle-relaxer, pain reliever and sleeping pill. I'm going to add heat packs followed by cold therapy as well."

"That sounds about right. I'd give just about anything to have a session with my physio right now."

"If you don't mind, I've read about it and my nurse could give you a rub down," he suggested hesitantly.

"That would go a long way towards keeping me together. I think tomorrow is going to be rough. The General said they'd be questioning me. That will mean a lot of sitting, without a break."

"Consider it done. I've not been told about why you're being detained. However, I took an oath to help and not harm. So just let my staff members know what you need."

A couple of days passed and I still hadn't been questioned. I'd been isolated other than a few visits from General Grumman or one of his staff members, to as he said, "check on me". The only thing the younger Knox mentioned was that the powers that be, what was left of them anyway, wanted me in good health. I figured I'd either have a lengthy incarceration and trial followed by something bad, a summary execution with the others... well something was going to happen. All of this speculation was old regime S.O.P. I was surprised I hadn't been shot in the head yet, after having all of the intel I was good for tortured out of me.

There was nothing to do but wait patiently and stay calm, or at least appear that way.

At lights out on my third night in the infirmary, a message was sent and things hurried up. The nurse, her name was Rachael, helped me get ready to shower. The clothes I was wearing when I'd been brought in were washed, ready to wear and sitting on the end of my bed, near my feet.

I gathered I'd be transferred soon. Grumman had said Central, and I trusted him. If dinner had been better, I'd have been worried. But they hadn't given me the "last meal" treatment, yet.

I was right. Once I'd finished with my bathroom routine and shower, Nurse Rachael knocked and said, "I laid your clothes out behind the privacy screen. Please dress quickly. Doctor Knox needs to speak with you."
Doctor Knox announced himself and when I let him know I was decent, ducked behind the screen, pulled up a stool and said, "I just need to check your vital signs one more time so I can sign off on your travel papers. Someone from the general's staff will come pick you up. I had Rachael pack your things."

"Thanks for the heads up. I figured something was going on with the change in routine."

"General Grumman sent me a message. He said you'll need the braces to make getting on the train easier."

I didn't want to sound disrespectful, but figured the Doc would understand it when I asked, "So he thinks it'll be easier... on whom?"

I'd never seen his father smile like he did just then. He grinned, chuckled and then replied, "Too true. I'd imagine just standing is an accomplishment."

"If I'm staying in one place, the standing isn't as difficult anymore. Keeping my balance is, sure... but I cheat and lean on the counters. When I'm home I stand while washing the dishes," I replied and then added, "I like washing the dishes."

"You should advertise that. Not many men enjoy washing dishes. That ought to make you popular with the ladies," he quipped, but then looked away abruptly.

I was pretty sure what he was getting at, what he probably assumed even with his training. It wasn't the 'norm' for me to be normal. I smiled as I broke the awkward silence saying, "I'm relieved that most of the military isn't aware of my sex life. Your father sure takes confidentiality seriously."

He turned his head to the side, clearly puzzled.

"Doctor Knox, I'm engaged to the most amazing woman in Amestris."

He appeared astonished.

"I should elaborate. Your father has seen and treated the repercussions of my returning to a normal civilian life. He spent almost an hour plucking shards of glass out of my posterior after I rolled on Sciezka's glasses."

"So, if it doesn't offend you or feel too nosy, everything is fine in that department?" he asked tentatively.

I nodded enthusiastically and he smiled and then continued, "I'm glad my father could help you out. I think treating you has helped him. He'd given it up after the war. As I said before, he's too talented to work on cadavers."

"Agreed on all counts, his bedside manner is wasted working on stiffs," I replied. "So, when do I leave? Should I get into the braces now?"

"General Grumman is sending a couple of his men soon. I was told the train leaves at midnight. Where should we do this?"

I pointed towards a nearby bed, transferred to the edge and we got to work. It took about ten minutes to fasten the buckles and straps. Doctor Knox wasn't experienced and wanted to know about how they worked. Wrestling my pants on over the braces was a trick, but we managed.

We'd just finished when there was a knock on the infirmary door and two green looking officers
entered and stood at attention.

Once situated in my chair I pushed towards them and before they could "help" me Doctor Knox called them over to carry my belongings. He gave them a full set of instructions, a copy of my file and a small duffle bag. He added, loudly enough for me to hear him, "These are supplies that will make Lieutenant Havoc's trip more comfortable. You'll need to follow my instructions to the letter."

They took me out a back entrance, near the loading docks. Parked close to the doorway, lights off and idling, was a black sedan. General Grumman rolled down the window and greeted me in a chipper tone saying, "You look well rested. That's good! The departure time has been moved up on our itinerary. The train has a few extra stops to make."

I transferred to the back seat after waving off my overly helpful guards and the General and I rode to the station. I noticed we were taking a rather round-about way, almost entirely back streets. When I looked at the general in the light afforded by street lamps he just nodded and then looked out the window again. He appeared calm but I was pretty sure he was running scenarios as quickly as he could.

There were soldiers milling about getting ready to line up and take seats in their assigned cars. I peered through the tinted glass as the driver parked and saw that many had already gotten on the train already. So much for being inconspicuous.

Someone had brought the pieces of my chair around while I'd been thinking. I snapped out of it, assembled the chair quickly and then transferred. So far, so good. I felt hands on the back rest and I set the brakes, craned my neck and in the most polite way possible told the guard his help wasn't necessary.

He cited protocol verbatim stating, "S.O.P. indicates I should keep prisoners in my custody under close surveillance."

"Does this look like S.O.P. soldier?" I snapped as I placed my hands firmly on the rims. 

*This shit bird wouldn't know S.O.P. if it bit him in the ass.*

He looked from me, to Grumman, who was still in the vehicle. Grumman chucked and said, "New orders private. Show the lieutenant to his compartment. I'll send two more men behind you in case you run into trouble."

*Or I need to be carried onto the damned train.*

I could feel my heart beating faster and my palms started to sweat as I approached the platform. I realized I should have worn my gloves and cursed inwardly. I'd be at the train with a few more pushes.

*Steady Havo, you've gotten up on your own before. Just ask him to hand you the crutches. You can do it.*

After rolling to a stop I set the brakes, swallowed hard and then said to the private who had my
crutches, "I'll need those now. I think it'll work best if you stand in front of me, to spot me. The other guys can handle my stuff. A guy bringing up the rear wouldn't be a bad idea either."

I knew I had a limited amount of time that my strength would hold out, so I figured they'd either get the chair apart with no problems or deal with it as is. Even though it was my most important possession, right now I had other things to worry about. If it came to it, I could always hire out a "tank" from the hospital.

Everyone had their instructions, so now it was up to me. I took my feet off the footrest and set them carefully on the ground so I would be steady as I got up. Then I used the crutches to push myself to an upright position. I tipped forward, but quickly righted myself. I looked at my feet and set out.

*Crutches forward and pull. Regain your balance, repeat.*

In a few steps I was at the stairs preparing to board. I sized them up. There were four of them, about a foot wide and the riser was about that high as well. There was no room for error. Hell, my feet were about as long as each step was deep.

*Suck it up. Just do it. Try this half-assed or timidly and you will fall.*

My escorts seemed nervous about the whole thing. I'd been concentrating so hard on not falling that their inquiries on if I needed help and if I was fine went unanswered.

"Sir, what can I do to help?"

I looked up from the step I'd been staring down and replied, sounding more winded than I would have liked, "Just stick close by, but out of the way. I've never done this before."

The young private's eyes went wide; he nodded to the guy bringing up the rear and then said, "Right then. Just tell us what you need as you think of it."

I could tell why Grumman's subordinates had picked these guys up fresh out of boot camp. They seemed to be quick on the uptake.

After a final sizing up and a bracing breath I planted the crutches on the first step and swung forward. It was parallel to the platform, and there was a small gap between it and the train. I'd successfully negotiated the first step. Only three more to go.

A quick look around told me that it would be a tight fit with the crutches. Luckily there was a sturdy railing on each side. I'd use those like the bars at therapy.

"Private, so far so good, if you'd take the crutches and put them at the top, I think I've got it."

Once I had my hands firmly on the railing, he took the crutches, turned around and propped them against a seat at the top. All he'd had to do was reach behind him.

I hauled the dead weight behind me, careful to clear each riser since it would have been easy to bruise my shins or break something. The steps cleared, I stood at the top for a moment to catch my breath.

I repositioned the forearm crutches. These were different from what I normally used and though I couldn't cheat and rest on them as easily, I could move better on them.

The car seemed to stretch on forever in front of me. It may as well have been endless, since fifteen
meters was like a mile to me.

Row upon row of soldiers with blue covers and freshly cropped hair quickly studied their boots, laps or the floor as I passed by. I pressed on step after awkward step. The aisle was narrow, but clear of obstructions. Midway through I paused and took a quick look around. I was grateful that I didn't recognize anyone. It was hard enough doing this in front of total strangers much less people who knew me before. These guys all looked too wet behind the ears for me to have known them at Eastern. Before moving again, I calculated roughly how many steps I had left. I reckoned it was about forty, doable but daunting.

At the three-quarter mark I faltered, pitching forward. One of the crutches had slipped in a wet spot and went clattering to the floor. I flailed my arms, expecting the impact at any moment and was astonished when I met strong and steady hands instead of the hardwood.

"Easy Havo, I got ya," a familiar voice said.

The guard scurried behind me, retrieved the crutches and helped me right myself. Once I was situated, I forced a smile and looked my rescuer in the eye. I had to look down to do it; this vantage point was good for something. It was the chief mechanic from the motor pool. The pasted-on smile became a grin as I said, "Thanks man, I owe you one."

"No worries and you don't owe me anything for that," he replied.

"You saved me from a broken nose and a nasty shiner at least. At least I still got my looks," I quipped. "But seriously, I was talking about the jeep. I owe you and your crew a drink. I intend to make good on that."

"We were mostly kidding about that Havo, we're just happy you're back on your feet."

"Me too, though don't let the crutches fool you... I use a chair most of the time. Usually they're reserved for therapy and around the house. It's too damned slow."

He was quiet after that. I'd said too much. I abruptly changed the subject to a less awkward one and said glibly, "When this mess blows over in Central, call me up. I'll take you out. You can meet my girl."

"Girlfriend? Mustang didn't get her away from ya?"

I chuckled, winked and then replied, "She's too smart for that. She's probably too smart for me. You'll see. It's great catching up, but I still gotta get situated."

"Do you need any help?" he asked.

"Nah, I think I got it. Thanks again for the save."

*That wasn't as bad as it could have been. Twenty more steps to go and then you can stretch out. Man, I need a session... I hope I can see Jim with everything going on. I'm a mess.*

I got to my compartment without further incident. The bed was already made up and I was relieved to see they'd gotten the chair apart and stowed properly. After sizing up the bed I realized it was much lower than I thought it would be and there wasn't anything to hold onto to, to help me sit.
Time to swallow some more of my pride and ask for help.

"You both have been great; I would have fallen for sure. I'm going to need a little more help to get situated."

The guards both nodded, one took the crutches from me and the other caught me under the arms. Once I'd explained how to unlock the braces at the knees, they eased me down without too much trouble. Before they left, I was handed my duffle and the bag from Doctor Knox.

I was curious to learn what he had thought important enough to send along. As I opened it, I smiled. He'd sent a pair of sweatpants, an undershirt, a metal urinal, a small box and an envelope that was addressed to me.

"Lieutenant Havoc-

This will be a longer trip than expected. I recommend you get out of the braces and get comfortable. I've noticed you hate sitting still. You'll find a set of meditation balls in the box. I discovered them during my surgical rotation and they work wonders. The urinal is self-explanatory. I sent along some packaged washcloths as well. Tell my father hello from me if you see him. I hope this helps.

Doctor Knox"

I set everything off to the side so I'd have room to get the braces off and change. Hopefully the guards wouldn't take it upon themselves to check on me while I had my pants off. It was going to be awkward enough handing them the urinal to empty when I needed it later.

Once I was in more comfortable clothes I stretched out as much as I could in the small bed. I'd try out the balls later, though admittedly I found the thought of it kind of funny. It'd be the first time a soldier could play with his balls on a train and not get into serious trouble. That brought a smile to my face, but right now I was exhausted. Unfortunately, I was still too anxious to sleep. I turned over, sat up and opened the curtains. Before I settled back down, I pulled the pictures Grumman had given me and looked at them. I hoped the rocking of the train and endless expanses of flat land would lull me to sleep.

No such luck, but when did I ever do things the easy way?

I piled the pillows against the wall and sat up, intent on figuring out how the small metal balls would help me relax. I'd seen them before, but never tried them. After a few false starts, dropping them in my lap and nearly losing them over the side, I had the hang of it. It took a fair amount of concentration, even though I had good dexterity from handling and maintaining fire arms. Once I got them going smoothly, I noticed that yes, I did feel calmer. I'd have to write the doctor to thank him.

My hand began cramping so I put the balls away. Thankfully my watch had been returned to me since I had no idea how long I'd been on the train. It was time to take care of the bathroom. I was relieved, literally and figuratively, that I wouldn't have to negotiate the crowded car again. At least some of my pride would be spared.

As I finished and was cleaning up there was a knock. Though startled I didn't tip over the urinal and after making sure I was decent called out, "Almost done."

I hadn't expected the general to visit while we traveled, but he came in with a box lunch and a grin. When he saw the urinal, he called over his shoulder, "Private, there's a matter that needs tending to
I flushed and stammered, "Sorry, I was just about to have one of them come in for that."

The private came in and with thinly veiled distaste removed the offending object.

"No need to be sorry. It's our fault conditions are like this. I brought some food and 'morale' support if you're up to it," he said as he patted his uniform pocket and winked. I must have brightened considerably given how he chuckled. 'Morale' in this context usually translates to 'more-ale', and I was really up for that right about now.

I moved so I was leaning against the wall to give Grumman some room, pulling my legs up and sitting a bit like Sciezka preferred. It gave me some stability when the train would rock harder than usual. Grumman sat down, handed the box to me and then cracked the window. He pulled a flask, took a belt and then passed it to me.

We ate and drank the whisky without talking much. When I'd finished my food, he reached into his pocket again and pulled out a pack of smokes. That was just what I needed. As I smoked, blowing most of it out the window he briefed me.

"You're probably noticed we're not taking the express route. We won't be in Central for at least another twelve hours. I'll have the guards wake you so you can be prepared when we arrive. Once in Central you'll likely be questioned and sent home."

"Home... really? Are you sure?"

"Feel free to be offended, but they don't feel you're capable of much. They are curious about the weapons and Sciezka's whereabouts. Incidentally, how will you explain that?"

"For once I'm not at all annoyed about being underestimated. It works to my advantage. As for their line of questioning, it's a hunting cabin and I like fire arms. We were off on holiday before the semester started and then all hell broke loose. I sent her away for her own protection. I'm fine with seeming paranoid."

"That line of reasoning works," he replied with a grin. "Don't act too confident when they inform you, but the plan is to have you under house arrest until the other inquiries are complete. You will be escorted to university and therapy. Consider it protective custody." I took a gulp of whiskey after that, it burned. But at least got to stay in school.

He frowned and said, "Considering what's already happened to Mustang's staff and others... it's justified."

I nodded. I was relieved for myself, but still anxious for the others. As much as I hated special consideration due to my injuries, this just reinforced the idea that that it was sometimes good to be underestimated.

Grumman left on that note. The liquor had taken off just enough of the edge that I was finally able to sleep.

A knock on the compartment door woke me up. For the first time in ages I'd been smiling in my sleep. I sighed. I must have been dreaming about Sciezka. I wondered if she was all right. I'd do whatever I had to, to get back to her.
"Lieutenant Havoc, we'll be pulling into the station in an hour," a voice called out from behind the door, "Let us know if you need anything."

"Will do," I replied.

Between the two of them Grumman and Knox made the trip as comfortable as possible for me. I appreciated the effort they'd made, but I never wanted to take the train again if I could help it.

The guard who'd helped right me after my fall came in with a hot towel and some water as I was putting on my braces. I scrambled to cover my legs with the blanket.

He turned around, his back to me and said stiffly, "I'm sorry I didn't knock. I thought this might help."

"Don't worry about it; it's not your fault. I should be used to the lack of privacy by now."

As I fastened the remaining buckles, I talked to fill the empty space, barely giving him time to answer, "So where's home? How old are you anyway? Is this your first trip to Central? How long have you been in?"

Turns out he was a bumpkin like me and was all of nineteen. The kid reminded me a lot of myself when I first signed up. I hope things turned out better for him.

He'd set the carafe and hot towel down, his back still facing me. I pulled my pants up to my knees and struggled to get them on the rest of the way. After I'd buttoned them, I said, "I'm decent now. Thanks for the privacy, you can turn around now."

Once I'd washed up with the hot towel and had a drink of water I asked, "What's next on the itinerary?"

While I fumbled with the buttons on my shirt he replied, "We'll be at the station by 1800 hours. I've been advised that I'm assigned to your house arrest detail."

"Thanks for the intel. You and your partner have been more than accommodating."

"General Grumman would have made an example of us if we hadn't been," he exclaimed, eyes wide with what I suspected was a mix of fear and reverence, "But I'm glad I could help."

I smirked as I replied, "I know how that goes."

He gave a shy smile, saluted and then said, "I'll be at my post if you need anything else."

The train ground to a halt and I heard a flurry of activity outside my door. It quickly quieted down and soldiers came into the compartment to get the chair and my bags.

Getting off the train was easier than getting on it. The lack of an audience helped as much as the aisles being completely clear did. Going down the stairs was less physically taxing than going up, though I'd have farther to fall if I messed up.

Jim was waiting at the foot of the stairs with my chair. I faltered when I noticed him, but quickly caught myself. He eased me into my chair and then asked, "Where to Jean?"

I looked up at my guards and asked, "I'm curious as well. What's next?"
The young soldiers snapped to attention and said in unison, "General Grumman sir!"

He must have been behind me. I sat straighter and saluted as well.

"At ease men," he said informally. "Take the lieutenant home. Make sure he's comfortable. Remember he's in protective custody pending his questioning. He is not to be considered a prisoner or flight risk. Ensure that his daily routine runs smoothly."

A black sedan pulled up. Before I got in, I made sure to ask Jim to follow us to the house.

A session, a shower and sleeping in my own bed wouldn't fix everything by a long shot, but I was falling apart at the seams. I'd need to be at my best to make things right.
Title: "Jean Havoc: A Work In Progress"

Author: havocmangawip

Editor: anat-astarte

Chapter 48: Waiting

As the sedan pulled into the drive my heart sank. The house was dark and empty looking. I'd been excited about going home where I'd be in my element and finally self-sufficient. I should have realized that without Sciezka there, it was just a big old, empty house.

I waited with Jim in the back seat while one of the guards got my chair and few belongings out of the trunk. The other guard went up to the porch with his weapon drawn, and after fumbling with my keys he managed to open the door and went inside. He came out a short time later and gave the hand sign for 'all clear.' They certainly were taking my security seriously, though perhaps they were so thorough because they thought my people might try something.

Heh... my people. The sound of it alone made my chest puff up just a little fuller. Who would have ever guessed that even now there was all this fuss over little old me?

The guard on chair duty was struggling with the pieces and I let out an exasperated sigh. Jim put a hand on my shoulder, rolled down the window and then said, "Private, could you please bring the pieces around to Lieutenant Havoc? It'll go much faster."

The private blushed as he made two trips; one for the frame and one for the wheels. He then attempted to open the door for me and quickly realized that he couldn't. The chair was in the way. After moving them off to the side he opened the door and stood there waiting expectantly. My chair was over a meter away from the door. As I looked from it, to Jim he winked, and then nodded. This was going to take a while.

"Private, thanks for your help. If you'd just get the chair a little closer to the car, I've got it from here."

Once I'd gotten it together, I transferred, got situated and then started to push myself around front. I still hadn't gotten around to having a path from the drive to the front walk paved. When I got to the ramp, I felt a presence behind me and I knew it wasn't Jim. As I pushed forward, I felt a push from behind. I was annoyed, but decided to let it go... this time.

I headed straight for the bathroom, took care of the necessaries and came back out to the living room. I'd avoided staying in the bedroom for too long.

Jim had already taken the liberty of putting down blankets on the Xingian rug in preparation for my session. The guard who'd "helped" me up the ramp stood in the center of the room, looking awkward. He couldn't have been older than twenty, with bright red hair and he was as baby faced as Feury. The other guard was on the porch again. Probably patrolling. He reminded me of a much younger Falman and was probably more uptight... if that humanly was possible.
I was reluctant to get down on the floor in front of new people and Jim just stood there, waiting. But I really needed a session. "Excuse me, private, are you hungry? I'm pretty sure the cupboard is bare, but could you check? We can send out for Xingian. I'm going to be famished after Jim and I finish with this."

"Sir, I'm sorry. No can do. I've got orders to monitor any and all outside contact so your testimony isn't corrupted." I sighed. I doubted anyone would be slipping notes into the fortune cookies or carve messages into the spare ribs but I wasn't going to argue about it now. "Ah, I see. In that case, would you please sit down? You're kind of making me nervous. There's stuff to read all over. I'm uncomfortable doing therapy in front of new people."

Jim put me through my routine twice, since there had only been so much I could do on my own and with the help of Knox's staff. Jim chattered away, trying to put me at ease and asking me questions about how I felt.

"Are you having any trouble with transfers?"

"A little. My back and shoulders are real tight. I need to swim ASAP. Oh, my hip flexors are tight too. Did you notice?"

"Yep, that's why I asked."

"Gotcha, you're always so subtle."

"I take it you're being sarcastic. I've been told I have the subtlety of a car wreck."

To finish out the session he had me flip over so he could work on my back. While he worked, he'd wince when he'd get to a particularly stubborn knot.

"You alright there? You've done wonders for me already. You can stop now if your hands are hurting you."

"I'm fine. You on the other hand are a mess. I'll be back tomorrow and every day after that until they clear you to go to the hospital for your sessions. Then you are mine every day until classes start."

"That bad?" I asked after I turned my head to look at him.

He just nodded and frowned.

"You're all finished, not much else I can do today with what I've got to work with. Want some company for dinner?"

"If it's all the same to you... no. I'm just going to scrounge something, take a bath and then sleep."

"That's a good plan. Remember to take your meds. They might help. I'll be by tomorrow in the afternoon if that's ok."

I nodded and he helped me back into my chair. The train ride had really taken it out of me.

Once I'd seen Jim off, I went outside for a cigarette and then checked out the fridge.

Someone must have tipped Julia off that I was coming home alone. She'd filled the fridge with
fruit, sandwich fixings and what looked like take-out containers. Next to the cranberry juice was a note.

"Jean,

All the casserole needs is for you to warm it up in the oven for ten minutes. There's soup as well. I trust you know what to do with that. I'll be by tomorrow.

Julia

p.s. Michael said to tell you that the casserole is great cold for breakfast"

Ready to heat and eat or not, everything but sandwiches looked like too much work. I slapped together some cheese and meat and sat in the kitchen at the table. I didn't even bother with a plate.

After I wiped up the crumbs I went outside for another cigarette. It was chilly, the first real autumn weather we'd had in Central. I shivered and then noticed the guards were sitting in the car. I went down the ramp, down the walk and then up the drive. By then they'd both gotten out of the car.

"Easy boys, I'm not trying to escape. Have you had dinner?"

They both shook their heads no.

I smiled and then replied, "Come inside and eat. You two don't intend to stay in the car the whole time, do you?"

The redhead said, "We're here to observe and protect. My CO didn't want us to be an imposition or to disrupt your routine any more than necessary."

I chuckled and then said, "If it's not against your orders, there's a guest room and a couch."

The redhead interjected, Davis was his name, "Are you sure Lieutenant Havoc?"

"I'm absolutely certain. It's chilly out here and getting colder. Besides you'll both stink to high heaven by the end of this assignment. Also, your stakeout skills are lacking. You stick out like a sore thumb. Pull the car around the block and then use the side entrance."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't mention it. When you're situated, help yourselves to anything in the icebox. I'm going to take a bath."

"Understood sir."

"It's just Jean. You can quit the 'sir' stuff. Oh, and if I'm not out of the bath in thirty minutes I've drowned. I'll leave the door ajar."

Falman's double- his name was Arkin- opened his mouth but no sound came out. Apparently at a loss for words he finally regained his composure and asked timidly, "Will you be able to manage by yourself?"

"I assure you, I can and I do. I was mostly kidding. Though I am tired enough that if I'm not careful I might fall asleep in the tub."
Davis stayed behind while Arkin moved the car. I drew a bath and while the tub filled, I turned down the bed and got out some pajama bottoms. I usually slept naked, but I had company. I wouldn't want to be caught with my pants down, literally.

"I didn't drown and I'm going to bed, just thought I'd let you know," I announced, loud enough so they could hear in the living room where they were without a doubt listening.

They called back in unison, "Thank you sir."

Davis added, "I mean Jean. Sleep well."

The bed seemed huge without Sciezka in it. I struggled to roll onto my side. She usually slept spooned with me which gave me extra stability. I put a pillow between my knees and that helped. Then I took Sciezka's pillow and clasped it tightly to my chest.

It still smelled like her. I inhaled deeply and tried to imagine her next to me.

It was barely light out when I woke up. I'd tossed the covers off sometime in the night and my hands and arms felt like ice. After sitting up I checked the alarm clock and cursed under my breath. It hadn't been a sound sleep, as it was drug induced, but it was better than none at all. It was also much better than being awake and alone in bed. I rolled over and tried to get a few more winks.

I tried to get comfortable again. Fluffed the pillows, shifted position several times, and held onto Bear... everything. It was a no go. I would be awake for the rest of the day. It all came down to the same thing. I hated waking up alone.

I hauled myself into my chair, got in and out of the bathroom and decided I needed coffee. That might make the morning marginally tolerable.

Arkin and Davis were already up and dressed, just sitting on the couch, twiddling their thumbs. Their uniforms looked like they'd slept in them. As I ran a hand through my hair, I realized I was probably a mess too. I double checked and sure shooting, I was sporting a spectacular case of bed head. I wasn't surprised, but I hadn't bothered looking at myself in the mirror that morning. Why bother?

For soldiers they sure looked surprised to see me.

"Did I startle you? You're dressed but don't look awake. I was just going to fix myself a cup of coffee. Want some? Sure, looks like you guys need it."

They both stood up clumsily, saluted and then Davis stammered, "I wouldn't want to impose sir."

"Can it with the 'sirs'. Davis, it's just Jean and I'm making some for myself anyway. I may as well make more."

"If it's not too much trouble, that would be nice," Davis replied.

Arkin added, "Will you require any assistance in the kitchen?"

I didn't bother answering and instead went into the kitchen and started the coffee. I'd need it to put up with their help.

Once I'd gotten the percolator set up, I went back into the living room and said, "You can help me
by watching the coffee so it doesn't scorch. If you want you can set the table."

He looked at me but didn't say a word.

"I'm going outside for a smoke. Please set it for three. Dishes are in the cabinet to the left of the sink. Silverware is in the next drawer over."

"About breakfast... "

I opened the front door and as I went outside called over my shoulder and said, "You do eat, right? I was thinking toast and scrambled eggs. Before you ask, yes I can cook."

Davis followed me outside, rocked back on his heels and then said, "Sorry about Arkin. He's so uptight, though I did wonder about you cooking."

I pulled out my pack, lit one up and took a few drags before replying, "It's fine. It took a lot of practice. I don't know if you noticed, but all the stuff I need in this place is where I can get to it. The train? That was an exception... well one that happens too often for my liking. But usually I can handle most anything that comes along by myself."

"That's good to hear. So, if you need help... "

"I'll ask for it, though you could help me with Arkin. He's hovering. Make him alphabetize the medicine cabinet or something."

He smiled at that, reached into his pocket and then asked, "Mind if I smoke too?"

"Not at all, have at it. Just not in the house, ok?"

He lit up, nodded and took a long drag and then heaved a sigh of relief.

I shivered, chuckled to myself and then said, "I'm gonna go inside and put on a shirt. I'm not used to having this sort of company in the morning."

"So, you live alone?"

"Nope! But she doesn't mind if I'm not formal."

I went inside before he could ask about that.

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After I pulled on a sweatshirt I got to work in the kitchen. Thankfully Davis dragged Arkin out of there saying, "You'll just be in his way. He's got it covered."

I smiled as I got to work. Sciezka would have told me to wipe the look off my face, actually.

Once we'd finished eating, I took them up on their offer to wash the dishes. It was only fair, since I'd cooked. They weren't guests.

While they were busy, I went outside for another smoke and to get the paper. I lit up and then looked around to find that the paper was nowhere to be found. Maybe Julia had held the subscription until we got back and it just hasn't started back up yet. Once I'd finished my cigarette I went inside and they were sitting at the kitchen table.
As I poured myself another cup of coffee I asked, "Davis, did you bring the paper in already?"

Arkin answered for him, "We confiscated it. I'm sorry. No outside media."

"Right... gotcha. If you checked the crossword and the funny pages first, do you think they'd give me that much intel?"

Davis smirked and replied for Arkin, "That could be arranged."

"Thank you. I'm going to get comfortable in the living room, maybe build a fire. It's chilly enough for one. Just tell me when you're sure the paper has been sterilized enough to satisfy Big Brother."

After I was finished with the paper I showered and changed into sweats, though I really felt more like moping in my pajamas all day. I decided to take my mind off what I couldn't control by immersing myself in my school work for the new quarter.

I was camped out in the big chair, books spread all over the ottoman and next to me. I'd managed a chapter in each subject and was pushing for more.

The doorbell rang and Davis sprung up to get it. I checked the clock and the mantle and figured it was probably Jim.

I was right and while Jim got set up, I organized my materials and then got down on the floor. There wasn't much point to using the chair to get where I needed to go. The rug wasn't too far away, a couple of meters tops. It took less time to just scoot. I was relieved when Davis made himself scarce saying, "I'll just sit in the kitchen. I can keep tabs on you two from there."

Jim was unusually quiet as he worked on me. He seemed to be deep in thought and finally I asked, "What's going on? Is there anything I should know about?"

He sat down on the floor next to me so he was at my level and then replied, "Everything's fine... considering. I'm trying to figure out some strength training for you to do here. While I'm wracking my brain, you can do some pushups."

I did my reps while he considered new methods of torture. When he'd finished, he'd had the look I'd come to both love and dread when it came to therapy.

"Get on your back again. We're going to try some crunches."

He positioned my feet and knees, and then held them as he instructed, "Just raise your head and chest as high as you can, as slowly as possible."

Five reps in I could feel it working and I knew I was going to be exhausted. That was a relief since I had a lot of nervous energy that needed an outlet. He stopped me at fifteen and then stretched me out again. While he worked on my back he said, "You'll feel that later, but I should have you back in decent shape by the end of the week."

"If someone took that out of context, they'd think you were talking about a jalopy or a tumbledown house."

"I hope I didn't offend... I never thought of it like that," he replied apologetically. "So, what's next on your agenda? Dinner? You are eating, right?"

"Of course I'm eating. Julia saw to that. I'm going to have something quick, shower and then try to sleep. I think tomorrow may be the big day."
"They don't waste any time," Jim quipped.

"Are you kidding? I thought they'd have done it a week ago."

"You really weren't in any kind of shape..."

"That's true and maybe they were giving me enough rope to hang myself with. I'm guessing they wanted the team from Investigations to comprise of people that none of us know well. That would take more time. My unit was pretty well connected."

"Leave it to you to draw that conclusion."

"If they'd been prepared, they would have questioned me when I was in a ... it's easier to make someone crack then."

We'd been sitting on the rug talking and Jim stood up, got my chair and after I got back in it, he folded the blankets up. He was about to put them away when I said, "Leave those behind the chair. We'll need them again tomorrow."

"Good thinking and good luck. Have your detail call me when you're finished tomorrow."

I escorted him out and sat on the porch to smoke. The sun was low in the sky, as the days were getting shorter. It was still too early for dinner and I wasn't hungry anyway. After a second cigarette I went inside to sit in the library and read.

I settled in to read a book of poetry, its cover well-worn since it had grown to be one of Sciezka's favorites. I'd have to ask Sciezka about it when she got back, because most of it was over my head. Not long after I got comfortable the doorbell rang. I let the guards get the door. I was comfortable and wasn't expecting company. It was probably a messenger anyway. Arkin came into the room and said, "There's a woman here to see you."

A woman? It was probably Julia. I closed the book and then said, "Well, let her in. Or am I not allowed visitors?"

"She says she's your housekeeper. I thought I better clear it with you. Still gotta be monitored though."

I was beyond sick of being supervised, but I'd take house arrest and monitoring over the other options any day. I faked a smile and tried to sound cheerful as I replied, "Please tell her I'll be right out and thank you."

As soon as Julia said her pleasantries and we were out of earshot she began scolding me saying, "I cannot believe you've opened your home to them. I bet you're even feeding them and turned down the beds in the guest room. What ever happened to 'giving no quarter'?"

I smiled, sighed and then replied, "They're not all that bad... decent guys actually. I've been in their shoes before and it's not fun. Twenty-four-hour details never are. Besides, they're less conspicuous this way."

She folded her arms across her chest and then asked, "You look pale and tired. Are you at least eating what I brought? No one hurt you, did they?"

We had an audience so I left out what had happened while I was at Eastern explaining away my appearance saying, "I'm just tired from the train and I'll be fine once I get some more rest."
"You're not convincing me. I came over to check on you and to make sure you were set for groceries."

After making a beeline for the kitchen and checking the icebox she offered to fix dinner.

"That's a tempting offer, but I'm still pretty beat. I'd planned to heat up some soup and let them make themselves sandwiches."

"So long as you aren't starving... you need to keep up your strength. You'd best keep it that way with them. Sandwiches are more than satisfactory and don't even think about cleaning up after them. They're not house guests."

I shook my head, chuckled and then said, "I'll try to remember that. You're too good to me and I'd hate to cross you."

She patted my shoulder as she said, "I'll be back tomorrow at the usual time. I'll let them know on my way out. Now get some rest."

"I take it that's an order?"

"It sure is. I'll see you tomorrow."

After she left, I got out a pot to fix some soup and was just too tired to bother. I went into my room, got ready for bed, took my meds and then fell into a fitful sleep.

It was still dark when someone began knocking insistently on the bedroom door. I roused, but apparently didn't respond quickly enough. The door opened and the light pouring in from the living room was blinding. I was ready to panic when Davis calmly said, " Lieutenant, you need to get ready. They'll be here at 0600. You have about an hour."

I finally replied, still exhausted even after nearly ten hours of sleep, "Thanks for the notice. Could you please put on a pot of coffee?"

Before he left, closing the door behind him he said, "I already have some brewing and good luck today."

After dragging myself out of bed I took care of the necessaries, showered and then shaved. I hadn't bothered with that in days. Once I was dressed, I double checked my kit to make sure I had extras of everything. The questioning could take a long time. While I'd been told to expect a simple interview, I knew I couldn't count on that.

Since I was retired, I didn't have to wear my dress uniform. That was a relief, since I was pretty sure transferring and the cape part wouldn't work well. I took longer than usual picking out clothes and after careful consideration chose khakis and a white dress shirt. I hoped I still looked somewhat like a soldier. Maybe I'd more respect with the officers assigned to the investigation.

There was just enough time to have a cup of coffee and a few cigarettes before the black sedan pulled into view. Two men emerged from it and approached the house, striding purposefully across the lawn. Their crisp uniforms only added to the effect, and their buttons gleamed with authority. They looked quite intimidating. Had I really looked like that before?
Getting into the car was a hassle. The officers didn't know what they were doing and didn't care to ask. I wasn't in a position to speak up. They'd figure it out eventually. In the meantime, I'd have to grit my teeth a little and bear it.

I'd heard that Central Headquarters had been designed to inspire awe and respect. Sounded like a bunch of malarkey to me and I'd never paid much attention before. As the car rolled to a stop in front of the wide marble steps I finally saw why. It was huge. Really huge. With massive ornately carved columns supporting the roof and an Amestrian flag the size of a barn waving in the breeze.

They "helped" me out of the back seat and then just stood there. Then it dawned on me, they hadn't figured out how to get me inside. I decided I'd risk speaking up and said, "Pardon me, but if you'd like I can give you some pointers. I usually use the side entrance. There are no stairs and it's close to an elevator."

Without looking at me one of them said, "Duly noted. We need to hurry. The transport took more time than expected. We're behind schedule."

Their boots clicked on the stone floors. Behind them, I was silent in comparison. I could tell we were headed to the Investigations department. Once we boarded the elevator and got off on the fourth floor, I was sure of it. I slowed down as we passed Hughes' old office. They stopped at a meeting room, opened the door and ushered me in.

Situated at the front of the room was a long table. Sitting around it were Major General Hakuro, General Grumman and Major General Armstrong and several officers I didn't recognize. Hakuro and Armstrong's expressions ranged from stern to furious. Hakuro wrung his hands and cracked his knuckles. He'd likely be the most trouble. Olivier Armstrong was most certainly a force to be reckoned with as well. She was youngest Major General in the history of the military and there was a reason she was called "The Wall of Briggs". But from what I knew of her reputation she was fair, if a bit ruthless. Grumman's expression appeared to be completely neutral - and it was the first time I'd ever seen him without a smile.

Off to the side lower ranking officers serving as a stenographer and messenger sat with thick files stacked in front of them.

I was directed to sit in the center of the room, facing the brass. I felt utterly exposed and alone, just like they wanted.

One of the younger members of the Investigations Department approached me with a finely bound copy of the Amestrian constitution and laws and had me place my hand on it. He said, "Repeat after me, I, Lieutenant Jean Havoc pledge to answer all lines of questioning honestly and completely as a citizen of Amestris, acknowledging that it is my duty to uphold and obey all laws contained herein."

I did. Everything right after that was a blur. The officials were introduced and then the interview began. I braced myself, knowing it was more like an interrogation.

Major General Hakuro started the questioning. He made a point of standing so close to me that I had to look up at him as he asked, "What is your relationship with Colonel Roy Mustang?"

That one wasn't too hard. I looked him in the eye, acutely aware of the height difference. "Colonel Mustang was my C.O. after I was transferred to his office," I answered, "I performed clerical duties and acted as his chauffeur."
"That only answers half the question- the half that is on record from your files. I shouldn't have to remind you that you are under oath."

"If I might respectfully ask, could you clarify? Your question wasn't more specific."

He put his hands behind his back and then said as he paced, "Do you still associate with Colonel Mustang and your unit since being medically retired?"

"Ah, that's an entirely different question. Yes, I do. We were a very close-knit group. The Colonel has been instrumental in arranging for my medical needs and education."

"Why do you think he's doing all that? He could just leave that up to the Veterans' Affairs department. Is he giving you preferential treatment?"

I considered my words carefully before answering, "I consider myself fortunate to have a commander who cares about his subordinates, sir. Colonel Mustang is very committed to the welfare of everyone serving under him. Additionally, I don't suppose it would be good for morale for my unit, or any other, if a soldier in my condition couldn't depend on assistance in getting proper medical intervention. I'm also fortunate that my fellow subordinates wouldn't let that happen."

"Would they go against direct orders?"

"I didn't mean to imply that at all. A good and loyal team dynamic works both ways. A good leader like Colonel Mustang knows that his soldiers will only go to hell and back for him only if he does the same for them."

"Really First Lieutenant? And tell us; just what makes you think Colonel Mustang is worth the level of loyalty you've shown him?"

"Enough," Major General Armstrong interjected, "That isn't what we are here to investigate. However, if more commanding officers had that level of rapport, integrity and loyalty, the armed forces would be better off. I have several differences of opinion with Colonel Mustang. He comes off as a womanizer and playboy, but he can't be faulted for the work ethic and loyalty he cultivates."

Hakuro sat down and said sullenly, "Well that's all I have - for now."

Major General Olivier Armstrong stood up, ramrod straight. She removed her greatcoat with a flourish. Her eyes still on me, she placed her scabbard on the table in front of her. Finally, she picked up her chair, walked around the table and audibly planted it right in front of me.

Then she down sat astride it, directly across from me, and crossed her arms against the top of the chair.

She leaned forward and eyed me up and down.

"Lieutenant Havoc, enlighten us. Where were you for nearly two weeks? Moreover," she paused dramatically and then added a pointed, "Why?"

"I'd planned a vacation for the two of us, before the new term started. It was supposed to be a quiet week in my family's hunting cabin. Getting back to nature and all..."

She narrowed her eyes and then asked, "Just who is 'we'?"
"Sorry sir..." I stammered. "Myself and Sciezka, we're engaged. It was planned that Gracia- Mrs. Hughes- and her daughter Elysia would meet up with us later in the week. I understand that they were on their way back from Elysia's grandparents' house up North."

"So why did you extend your trip by almost two weeks? I was informed that Private Meade was AWOL and that she and the Hughes' are nowhere to be found."

"When tensions started running high around Central and well, all over, my father sent word. I decided it would be safer if we waited it out."

"Why would you be in danger? You're a civilian. Let me clarify, why would you think you were in danger?"

"I suppose I was being overcautious. But I felt it was my duty to protect Brigadier General Hughes' family. And Sciezka, since she has been privy to classified documents and, I was concerned that it put her at risk."

Hakuro interjected, "That still doesn't give just cause... "

I shifted in my chair, I'd neglected to do pressure relief since the questioning started. I didn't want to look fidgety and my entire focus had been on the proceedings. Once I was comfortable again, I said, "The Brigadier General was murdered. The case, sir, is still officially unsolved. Several high-ranking officials are dead or MIA and- look at me. There's not much I can do to protect myself or my loved ones in this state. I was afraid there would be looting and rioting in the cities like in Lior." Or worse, I thought to myself.

Armstrong raised an eyebrow and her lip quirked. I could tell she was fighting a smirk. "So, you just happened to have all that fire power at the cabin?"

I smiled, playing off my response with my best good-natured grin. "I thought I could get in some target practice. It's relaxing."

General Grumman cleared his throat and then said, "Part of that is my granddaughter's fault. She thought that getting the lieutenant back into his old pastimes might help his emotional state after the accident."

I tensed. The accident. I knew what I'd said and what had been agreed upon for the reports, but hearing it now out loud I had to wonder- how much did they really know?

They continued asking questions in rapid fire, most of the time variants on the same questions.

"Where is Miss Meade?"

"I don't know. I sent her away for her own safety."

"What role did you have in the uprising?"

"None, I was at the cabin."

"Then why did you turn yourself in? Why did you have a wireless?"

"I turned myself in when requested. I had the wireless because medically it's not safe for me to be someplace that remote without a phone line and without a way to contact help."
At noon they broke for lunch. They brought a sandwich for me, but I didn't dare eat it. I wasn't hungry and I wouldn't put it past anyone to have drugged it. I was escorted to the restroom. When I returned, I tipped my chair back against the wall to take some pressure off of my back. I hoped they were satisfied that I didn't have any useful information and send me home. I couldn't take much more of this.

They came back in and I nearly fell out of my chair getting upright again.

General Grumman stood up and said, "Thank you for your cooperation Lieutenant Havoc. We've decided there are no grounds to charge you. But you understand, we needed to investigate every angle. You will continue to be a person of interest until we've gotten to the bottom of this. It shouldn't be much longer."

Hakuro stood up again and Armstrong stared him down.

"What General Grumman left out is that you will continue to have a plain-clothes protective detail 'round the clock and after Colonel Mustang's trial you'll be free to come and go as you please. In the meantime, you will be able to go to your classes and the hospital for therapy."

As relieved as I was for my own sake, I wanted to ask how Roy was... how everyone was. But now wasn't the place or time. I knew that Grumman would send word as soon as he could.

Limited freedom was better than none at all. I'd only been cooped up for two days, but I was already sick of it. Getting back into a routine would help distract me. At least I hoped it would since being apart from Sciezka was enough cruel and unusual punishment.

Hakuro had left in a huff right after Grumman announced the Investigations Department's decision. The lower ranked officers packed up their things and went back to their regularly assigned duties. Finally, the only people left in the room were Grumman and his top aide, Major General Armstrong and me.

Before he left Grumman winked at me discretely and then said in a very business-like manner, "Thank you for your patience and cooperation in this matter. My office will keep you posted."

Once the General departed only "the Wall of Briggs" and I were left and she was as stone-faced and silent as her namesake. The quiet was a relief after the inquisition. I looked towards the door wondering when my escorts would come for me.

She rose from her seat behind the table, put her top coat back on and then said, "I'll wait here for your security detail to arrive. I apologize for the oversight lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir, I hope I'm not too much of a bother. You've got better things to do than wait with a retired, barely commissioned officer. It's a nuisance."

"Protocol must be followed. They'll be here soon if they know what's good for them."

I nodded in agreement and couldn't resist smiling, since my situation was out of the ordinary and fairly absurd.

Arkin and Davis entered the room, saluted and then apologized to General Armstrong. They were shaking in their boots when she addressed them, "You should be sorry. You kept both of us waiting. I trust you won't do it again since it could compromise Lieutenant Havoc's safety."

I refrained from laughing at their reactions, since I was scared of her too.
She pivoted crisply, clicking the heels of her boots together and as she passed me remarked, "It's good to see you're up and around again."

Saluting and then smiling I replied, "Thank you Major General Armstrong, sir. I'm glad I'm doing as well as I am. Please give your brother my regards. I haven't seen him in a while."

As she opened the door she muttered, "Pah, Alex..."

I wasn't sure what she'd meant, but I wasn't about to ask, "So how do you get along with your siblings?" That would surely earn me another blade through the gut. I shivered. No thanks.

My guards got me home without delay. They'd figured out the most efficient way to get me and the chair in the car. I was relieved that I wouldn't have to wait for someone to bring my chair around. Putting it in the back seat with me saved a few steps, though it did mean that whoever sat in the front seat had less legroom. I winced. I remember what that felt like.

Julia was sweeping the porch when we pulled into the driveway. As soon as I got the chair assembled, and myself into it, I lit up a cigarette. I'd craved one, or ten, for most of the morning. She shook her head and then said, "I should disapprove, but you look like you needed one."

Once I was on the porch, she handed me an ashtray, eyeing me not to sully her freshly swept porch. She chuckled as I got more comfortable, leaning back as far as I could without tipping over, so I could stretch.

"Well that's better. You've been wound up and tired every time I've seen you. Would you like something to drink? I just made coffee, so it's fresh."

I nodded vigorously and then replied, "Thank you. I need to stay awake at least long enough to work with Jim. That reminds me, I should call him."

"You just sit tight. I'll call him and then bring out your coffee since it's a nice day. Would you like me to fix you something to eat? Are you hungry?"

I didn't feel like eating much, I'd been too anxious. Then my stomach growled, giving me away.

"Soup and sandwich coming right up and I won't take no for an answer."

She hurried inside as I lit up another cigarette and resisted the urge to say, "Yes Ma."

Before I went inside, I put out my cigarette and placed the ashtray on the railing. I had a feeling I'd be smoking more than usual.

I could smell the soup heating on the stove and there was a sandwich and a cup of coffee waiting for me at my usual spot. Julia was humming as she worked and I started eating right away. She brought a bowl to me and then sat down with her coffee to keep me company.

"So how did it go? I noticed that they're just here in the house instead of watching your every move."

"I'm cleared to go to classes and therapy and now they're here for my protection. It looks like I'm off the hook. I just hope it goes as well for the rest."

"So, when will Jim get here?" I asked, abruptly changing the subject.
She stood up and then cleared my dishes away as she answered, "In about an hour. He said he wanted to give you some time to relax."

"That was good thinking on his part. I'm going to catch a shower and change. Thanks for fixing me something to eat. You don't have to make a habit of it though."

"I know you can cook. You're even almost good at it. At least you're not a disaster waiting to happen in the kitchen like my husband. But let me help out. Save your energy for more important things."

She was right. I'd need all the energy I could get to help my friends out and get the girls home.

Jim went easy on me, spending my whole session on R.O.M. and attempting to work the knots out of my back, neck and shoulders.

"I bet your jaw is tight too, Jean."

"You'd win that bet. I have a feeling that I'm going to be this way until we head south."

"Just try and take care of yourself. Sciezka will be mad at both of us if you're a mess."

After he made up an ice pack Jim told me to stretch out on my stomach for a while. He helped himself to the couch.

I must have fallen asleep like that. A firm shake on the shoulder woke me and Jim immediately said, "Just me. Julia told me to tell you that there's a sandwich, your favorite, ready for dinner. You don't look up for anything more today. I'll see you tomorrow at the regular time."

I pushed up to rest on my forearms and nodded slowly, still bleary eyed from my nap.

"Did you get all that?"

After rolling over I sat up and replied, "Got it. See you tomorrow and food's in the icebox."

I got back into my chair after Jim brought it over and went with him to the door. Then I ate about half of the sandwich before feeling drowsy again. Once I'd put my plate in the sink I headed straight for the bedroom.

For a couple of weeks my routine was invariably just that, routine. I'd get up, get ready, go to therapy, go to class, eat, sleep and then repeat. I ate lunch with Ron and Jim a few times and tried to act like nothing was wrong. Julia worked late several nights a week and would keep me company while I ate dinner.

One night she commented, "You really have no appetite lately. Normally I'd be offended, but I know it's not my cooking."

"It's definitely not the food or the company. I'm sorry, it's just..."

She put her hand over mine and as she squeezed it said, "You'll get your life back soon. In the meantime, try to take care of yourself."

I smiled and then cleaned my plate. Julia was right. I had to be strong and become even stronger to
get through this and make a good life for us when Sciezka returned.

I was never alone, but I was always lonely. Davis and Arkin were nice enough guys and sometimes we'd talk or eat together, but they weren't my friends. They sure as hell weren't Sciezka either.

At the end of the second week General Grumman called and asked that I come to headquarters for lunch. I could only speculate about the reason why.

*Did he have news? Had they dug anything more up on me or Sciezka? Were my friends in trouble?*

My security detail brought me to the general's office and Davis said they'd be waiting in the outer sector. Grumman's secretary, a pretty blonde, let me inside and I was nearly knocked out of my chair when Breda caught me in a bear hug. When he let go Feury came out from behind him and smiled shyly.

I got myself together and then said, "It's so good to see you're both safe. What did they do to you? What about the others? Is there any news?"

Grumman put a finger to his lips and then said, "I'll get you all up to speed over lunch. We're going out. Call it a celebration, my treat."

We took the general's car to the restaurant, an upscale place that was normally closed at lunchtime and nearly impossible to get into, and were cordially escorted to the back. There was a ramp there-oh man, it even had a fancy handrail! - and the general spoke with the chef and the staff as we passed through the kitchen. We were ushered to a table in the back. It was Western food, like what Breda had grown up with. Once we were seated the sommelier brought out a bottle of wine, with a vintage from before the turn of the century, showed it to the general and he nodded in approval. After the wine was poured the general raised his glass and toasted, "To the new regime."

While we ate, he told us in hushed tones about how the hearings and investigations were going thus far. Riza and Roy were on administrative leave pending their hearings. He sounded optimistic. Breda and Feury had been cleared, but wouldn't be back to active duty until Roy's trial was over. Falman was back at Briggs tying up loose ends and would be returning to Central shortly. His temporary assignment was in the Investigations Department.

Breda, Feury and I sat in stunned silence after Grumman said, "Edward and Alphonse are recuperating in Risembul. Fullmetal will be researching solid alchemy and help Major Armstrong to rebuild the country's infrastructure. Alphonse will join him as a contracted civilian once he is strong enough."

I gasped in disbelief and then whispered, half to them and half to myself, "They really did it."

"They certainly did. Fullmetal has been very tight lipped. For whatever reason both boys seem to be experiencing some type of memory fugue and I don't think they're faking it. But yes, their quest is finished."

We went quiet while the waiter cleared away the dishes and poured more wine. When he left Grumman said, "That brings me to the next topic. I need to ask you for a few more favors Havoc. Your friends here need a place to stay while they wait to go back to active duty."

"Sure, Breda and Feury are more than welcome to stay. I'd love the company. Have you heard anything from the girls?"

He reached into his breast pocket, pulled out a postcard and handed it to me. I turned it over and the postmark was from Dublith. It was addressed to Grumman; however, the neatly looping
handwriting was unmistakably Sciezka's.

"Wish you were here. The weather's lovely, but I miss home. Please kiss Jacqueline for me."

Grumman grinned as he said, "For the record, it's not that you're unattractive, I just don't like you that way."

I chuckled and then replied, "It's fine. I'm relieved in fact. You're just not my type either and besides, I'm spoken for."

"There's one more favor. The brothers will need a place to stay in Central. Edward is adamant that they can live on their own, that they don't need a babysitter, you know him... and he's right. But I think they need someplace to call home when they're not in Risembul or on assignment and get their bearings again."

"I can't speak for Sciezka, but I think she'd approve. In fact, I think she'd be angry if I refused. They can stay in the guest room as long as they need to."

"Are you sure that's a good idea Havo? Two teenagers in the love nest?" Breda teased.

I punched him on the arm and then said, "We'll just have to keep it in the bedroom instead of the kitchen, the living room and..."

Feury flushed crimson, so I spared him the further trauma of listing every room in the house that we'd broken in.

Grumman's chauffer came in to let the general know that he was needed and we left.

When we got back to the general's office Davis was leaning on the secretary's desk, "making time" and he reminded me of myself when I was in his boots.

He escorted us outside while Arkin went to get the car. Once outside I lit up a cigarette and felt truly at ease for the first time in a long while.

I still hadn't gotten in session that day or had a swim. From the tension in my shoulders I could tell it was long overdue. Perhaps with the political climate improving they wouldn't get so tight anymore. Since I didn't have class on Fridays Jim let me come in at my leisure and would work me in if he had time. I was pretty independent now and could do calisthenics and weight training until he got to me.

When we got to the house, I gave the guys the grand tour. Julia was working and frowned when she saw "two more" as she called them. She pulled me into the kitchen to give me a talking to about letting the military walk all over me.

Thankfully Feury was in the library and Breda was making use of the couch, so they couldn't overhear. I smiled at Julia's over-protective streak and then said, "They're friends from my old unit. They're just crashing here for a little while. Just until they're back to active duty and staying in the barracks. If they make too much work for you, I'll turn them out into the street."

She smiled that and then said, "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine. You've needed company, so I'm glad they're here."
"Once they leave there may be two more, so I'm upping your pay. That is if you can still stand it around here. You signed on for a bachelor and ended up with a couple."

"I'll go strip the beds in the guestroom. You can have Davis and Arkin take the couch or the chaise in the library. Better yet, give them bedrolls and they can sleep on the floor where they belong."

"Remind me to never get on your bad side. Can you handle everyone while I go have a swim? Oh, and don't worry about dinner. I'll order takeout when I get back."

"It'll be fine and if they get out of line..."

"You have my permission to smack them around a little bit."

Swimming did me a lot of good. I didn't even mind that Davis insisted he stand guard. Though I wasn't sure how sitting on a bench reading a magazine qualified as protection. He didn't ask me if I needed help anymore and seemed genuinely interested in my therapy program. That beat gawking or pretending to ignore my situation. As we were leaving the pool area to see about working me into the therapy schedule, he mumbled something about needing to talk to a friend from basic. I didn't pry and instead said, "I'm sure Jim would be a useful resource or know someone who can help your friend."

After a few sets with the free weights Jim had time to spot me on the balance ball and then had one of his assistants stretch me out. Before I left, I went over to where Jim was working with Ron and said, "Feel free to stop by for dinner tonight, say about 1900 hours. If Laura wants to come that's great too, the more the merrier. It's nothing fancy, probably Xingian takeout."

Jim stopped what he was doing, arched an eyebrow and then asked, "You're in a better mood than I've seen in weeks. What gives?"

"I've got company; two friends from my old unit. You know 'em Jim. Ron, trust me, you'll like them."

Ron pushed up on his elbows on the mat, smiled and then said, "Thanks for the invite. Laura's out West for a few days so I was at loose ends for something to do this weekend."

"Well that settles it. Jim, what about you? Are you in?"

"That sounds like a plan. That and you all need supervision. Ron, I'll pick you up on the way."

Davis drove me home, I showered and changed. Once I was cleaned up, I went into the kitchen to get ready for dinner. Breda was asleep in the guest room and Arkin and Davis had made themselves as inconspicuous as possible, hiding out in the library. While I was getting dishes out of the lowest cupboard Feury came into the kitchen.

"Seven place settings? Who is coming over?" he asked as I carefully placed them on my lap.

"How observant of you," I teased. "I invited my friend Ron over and you remember Jim, right? I thought I should include Davis and Arkin too. They're good guys."

"What's for dinner? Can I help with anything?"

"Xingian if that's ok by you. We'll pick some stuff off of the menu to share and have it delivered. I
can cook, but I'm craving spicy beef with broccoli. It'd be great if you'd grab some serving pieces from the cupboard over the sink. Usually Sciezka and I don't get that fancy, so they're up higher. I've got the plates covered."

Feury and I finished getting the table set and I was digging around in the icebox for something to drink. I only came up with a bottle of white wine. That would be enough if it was just me and Sciezka, but I was pretty sure that Heymans could polish that off by himself. We'd need more booze.

Breda shuffled into the kitchen, wiped the sleep from his eyes and blinked a bit in the bright light.

"How was your session Havo and what's for dinner? I'm starving."

"I'm so happy you have your priorities straight buddy," I replied as I handed him the paper menu. "Xingian? Nice! They didn't have anything like that near Western headquarters."

"Well I'm glad you like it. You look malnourished. I can barely see our 'love child'. Though it is with much regret that I have to tell you," I said and then paused dramatically.

His eyes went wide, his concern evident.

My tone was dead serious when I continued, "I'm out of beer. This is a desperate situation. I may have to send Davis on a beer run."

He cuffed me on the back of the head and yelled, "Havo, you ass! Don't scare me like that. I thought it was something serious! Well... more serious than being out of beer."

I rubbed the back of my head and complained, "You never did that before."

Grinning he replied, "It was too much work to reach."

"I'm so glad my current height suits your purposes. Sheesh, you're supposed to be my best friend."

"Buddy, only your best friend can do that to you. That's what I'm here for, to keep you in check."

Feury interjected effectively stopping our argument, "Guys, focus! We need beer and food now. I'm hungry."

Davis and Arkin came into the kitchen, to investigate the noise and I had them choose something from the menu. Then I sent Arkin out with money and a list for a booze run while I phoned in our order.

Arkin arrived with the beer and there was much fanfare. He'd gotten so much that Davis had to help him carry it in from the car. When Jim and Ron arrived, Breda met them at the door with a cold bottle for each of them. Jim accepted his, pried the cap off, took a drink and then said, "That was just what I needed. Thanks."

Breda handed a beer to Ron and asked before he introduced himself, "It's Ron, right? Thanks for putting up with Havo while I was away."

"The way Jean tells it, it's the other way around. Hey... how do you know who I am?"

I poked my nose into their exchange and teased, "The chair's a dead giveaway man, though Breda has heard a lot more about you besides that. No worries. You weren't just sitting in for him either. I don't need or want two of that guy."
After he put his beer down on the side table Breda put me in a head lock and gave me a noogie, "The feeling is mutual, Havo."

"See what I mean Ron? Want to take him off of my hands?"

The doorbell rang and I was saved. When I answered it the delivery guy had so many bags, he'd had to set them on the porch. Maybe I'd ordered too much. I looked back at them. Nope, between all of us we'd make short work of this feast with no problem. I paid, tipped him well and called to the guys, "Hey, could someone help me carry all of this?"

Feury and Davis came to my aid and we put the many cartons on the table. I went back into the living room and announced, "Chow time! Come and get it."

I heard a big cheer and all my buddies burst into the room and got seated. I decided to go find Arkin and Davis. They were sitting in the living room. I asked Davis, "Aren't you hungry? You're invited if you want to eat with us."

Arkin answered for both of them, "We wouldn't want to..." "Impose?" I replied cutting him off, chuckling at the irony of having my own words thrown back at me. "You guys are just doing your jobs. Get in there, eat and have a few beers. You've both earned them. Just don't tell Julia. She'll have a fit."

That settled we joined the celebration that dinner was turning out to be. The raucous banter and jokes in questionable taste that flew across the table were a welcome change. I could tell Ron was having a good time by his smile and easy laughter. He and Jim would fit in just fine with my old friends. From the looks of things Breda and Feury would agree.

Later Breda attempted to help me clear the table but mostly got in the way. He'd always been a disaster waiting to happen in the kitchen. I designated him "activities coordinator" while Davis and I tidied up. Feury wanted to contribute, but I brushed him off saying, "Go and have a good time. You helped get ready for dinner. If you really want to help, get everyone another beer."

He got five beers out of the icebox, restocked it and then carefully carried all five of them in his arms.

As an aside to Davis I quipped, "Warm beer will be the only crisis tonight."

"I can tell you're glad they're back," he replied.

"Things just weren't the same when everyone got transferred."

We finished the dishes in silence and then joined everyone in the living room. Breda was comfortably sprawled in the armchair, his beer resting on his belly, his eyes closed. He'd lost some weight since I'd last seen him, but he was still a big guy. I pulled up next to him, opened the beer I'd had between my knees and took a swig.

Breda's eyes were closed. I thought maybe he'd already passed out. Then I saw him unbuckle his pants. "Hey, hey buddy!" I shrieked, "How much did you have to drink? John's THAT way! Not in here!"

Everyone looked content. Smiling, bellies full and ready to nap. That would have been just the thing, but our first night back together would have been cut too short and so I decided that if we
didn't do something to liven up the room, we'd all end up dozing.

"Hey Breda, did you ever find out if it's a lager or a stout?"

"I'm offended! You should know; since the way I remember it, you put it there!"

Feury put a hand to his forehead and complained, "Guys, not that argument again and not so loud... my head hurts."

He turned to Ron who was next to the couch, idly messing with some bolts on his chair... good thing they don't come undone too easily and said, "It never stops with the two of them. It's like Breda and Havoc are secretly married or something."

"You take that back!" we yelled at the same time, glaring at Feury.

He backed down, then piped up again, "But it's true!"

Jim stepped in, apparently the only sober person in the room and said, "Why don't we put your natural talent for bluffing to good use men? Jean, do you have cards and chips?"

"Sure do! Poker it is."

Ron sat out explaining, "I'm no good at poker. I always end up broke, naked or both."

"You're excused from the game. I have no desire to see your scrawny bare ass, " I teased. "What, I can't repay you for the visual? We'll it just so happens I am more modest than you anyway Jean," he retorted and then grinned.

"Point taken, I have a bony ass. In that case, you hold the buy-in money. We'll be able to catch you if you take off with it."

"I'll sit out too. Someone needs to keep you all honest," Jim said.

It didn't take too long for Breda to win a week's worth of pay from Arkin and most of the money in Davis' wallet. Feury had gotten much better while he was in the South. I about broke even. Breda handed out some cigars that he'd been saving for special occasion.

We were smoking and considering what we'd do next when I heard a knock on the door and then a key turning in the lock.

All banter ceased and my friends froze. I had my back to the entryway so I didn't have a clue. Crap! I never used to be so careless!

"Guys what's wrong? Is everything ok? Breda, did you let one rip?"

"I think we'd all be dead from the toxic fumes. But uh, you'd better have a look over there Havoc," Feury stammered.

When I turned around Julia was standing in front of me. "Hi Julia!" I said, waving.

Maybe it was that we were smoking in the house... or perhaps it was that Arkin and Davis were misbehaving along with us. Wait, wasn't this my house?

One look in her glaring eyes and I knew I'd have a lot of explaining to do anyway.

I excused myself and gestured for her to come into the living room with me. I needed to know what
she'd come back for and assure her that we wouldn't leave a mess.

She whispered, "So what exactly was that?"

"We're just playing a friendly game of poker. Don't worry; I made them use coasters and ashtrays. I promise we'll clean it up. You won't even see traces of it on Monday. Why did you come back anyway?"

She tapped her foot and glared in Arkin's direction and if he'd seen it, he would have withered under it. Finally, she said, "I came back to check the icebox. I thought I'd get some produce at the Saturday Farmer's Market. Then I find them here, drinking beer and laughing it up like they're your friends."

"Oh, Davis and Arkin? I didn't think it would be fair to exclude them. Be reasonable. They're protecting me now and not here as punishment."

That didn't seem to appease her.

"Besides, best to keep your friends close and your enemies closer...?"

That didn't work on her either.

It would take extreme measures to get back in her good graces. I looked up at her, flashing my baby blues and smiling shyly and said, "Breda's winning! He's already taken Arkin for most of his next paycheck and Davis is out a few thousand cens."

Julia still didn't look amused or like she was buying my puppy dog face. I turned up the smile and then asked, "What if we called Breda's winnings Davis and Arkin's room and board fees?"

Without saying another word to me she turned on her heel and walked into the kitchen muttering, "So that is how he gets away with it. I thought Sciezka was kidding."

Wow! It actually worked! I puffed up, feeling proud.

I waited in the living room while she surveyed the kitchen. When she came out, she said, "I see you cleaned up after yourselves. Pretty quick about it too. Good job boys. Takeout, eh? It's good I come by often. You'd be living like a bachelor if I didn't intervene for your own good."

I hung my head in shame and said, "It's true."

She smirked and then replied, "You're lucky you're cute and you know it. I'll drop the groceries off tomorrow afternoon. Try to be good."

After she left, I found the card game had dissolved into a game of "I never" and that Arkin and Feury drank a lot as a consequence. I would not have suspected either of them. Breda had gone from drinking everyone under the table, to under the table.

Jim, once again the voice of reason and sobriety, walked Ron home, saying he'd come back for his car and to help clean up in the morning. Davis and Arkin lugged/dragged Breda into bed. I headed in that direction as well. Once I'd taken care of my hygiene routine, I splashed some water on my face and brushed my teeth. Getting into bed with that much alcohol in my system was a trick, but I managed it. I wasn't in the same condition as Breda, but I wasn't much better off.
A wonderful sensation tickled my nose. Very affectionate and playful indeed.

"Mmph... Sciezka...you're back. Oh, honey not right now. I have a headache. I'm so hung over. Where did you get the idea that licking was sexy? Ok... you're right it is... feels pretty nice on my neck. I love you but please get a mint or something."

Then she licked my nose. Wait, she wasn't home. Just what the hell was in my bed?

I opened my eyes and the blur of fuzz started licking my face again. It wriggled so much I couldn't get a good look. It barked a few times and pounced, like it wanted to play.

"Feury!" I shouted at top volume.

I was completely awake now and saw that the invader was a beige mop of fur, its tail wagging madly and very happy to see that I was awake. I fought it off and sat up.

Feury came into the room and confessed, "I brought him home. Arkin and I went out to get some donuts and he was so friendly. I checked him, he doesn't have a collar. I thought... well I hoped we could take care of him until we find his owner."

"That's assuming it even has an owner. It's filthy and didn't have a collar," I replied as I grudgingly rubbed the dog's back, in an attempt to keep it from licking me.

"So, can he stay here? I promise he won't make any extra work for Julia or you. You'll hardly even notice him."

I considered his request. The little dog was just that, little, probably weighed ten pounds at the outside figure. He was about the same size as some of Elysia's stuffed toys. The fact that the only things you could really see clearly on it were chocolate brown eyes, a shiny button nose and a little pink tongue lolling as he enjoyed being petted did not help. How could I say no to that?

"What does Breda think of the idea?" I asked pointedly, attempting to sound tough.

Feury looked at his feet, then the floor boards, apparently finding them both fascinating and replied, "He's still asleep. So, he doesn't know yet."

"Well, it's my house and I doubt this little guy will bother anyone much. Maybe Breda will get over his dog problem. Let's clean the little guy up."

Feury beamed and exclaimed, "Thank you so much!"

"It's nothing, the least I can do really. If you'd take him and keep him busy while I get dressed that would be a big help."

"Would you like a cup of coffee or some donuts?"

"I'd love some coffee; the donuts don't sound good yet. I'm a little hung-over. I bet Breda will be in even sorrier shape. There are old towels in the linen closet. We'll give the little guy a bath in here, spare Breda some racket. I don't envy the headache he'll have when he wakes up."

Feury saluted out of habit and I chuckled. I was retired, but apparently an officer in an army of women, children and small dogs. I was fine with that.

Feury attempted to comb the mats out of the dog's fur. I looked for the scissors. The dog needed a haircut and some of the mats were not going to budge without extreme measures.
"It doesn't look like there is much dog under all that fur. I'm almost afraid to wash him. There might not be anything left after we wash away the dirt."

He nodded and the dog smiled, pleased with any and all attention directed at him.

I ran the taps and smiled. Feury was a true animal lover. He'd stripped down to his shorts and stood in the water with the dog. Once he had been shampooed twice, I handed Feury a bottle of Sciezka's cream rinse. She just might kill me for it too- it was her favorite, but we didn't have anything else on hand.

When he was finished Feury handed the wringing wet bundle to me and I toweled it off on my lap. Leaving him only slightly damp I gingerly set the little guy on the floor and we watched him caper around the room like a mad man. As he dried his fur got lighter and lighter. I hid Fuery and the dog in the bedroom while I went to get more coffee and to see if Breda was awake.

He wasn't. It was well past 0900 and he was still snoring loudly. I figured I should let him sleep in. I was sure glad I didn't have to break the news to him about our new housemate just yet.

Back in the bedroom the little dog was fluffing back up and was now almost snow white and playing with one of my socks. I handed my mug to Feury and got down on the floor with them.

"It looks like there was some dog left, but he's so little. Quite a fancy dog too when he's spruced up. Have you thought of a name yet?"

Feury shook his head and then said, "I didn't think I should get too attached, just in case."

I called the dog by patting the floor next to me, making kissing noises and generally making a fool of myself just the way animals seem to respond to. Feury grinned and teased, "I thought you liked dogs as a main course."

As I scratched behind the dog's ears I said softly, "No worries dog, I was only kidding that time with Hayate. You're too cute to cook."

The dog crawled into my lap and rolled over, clearly wanting its belly rubbed. "You like that boy? We can't just keep calling you 'dog' or 'boy'. You need a name."

Feury interjected, "I don't want to interrupt you two, though Sciezka might get jealous of him. What about Rex or Spike?"

I shook my head no, vigorously. Those didn't sound right at all.

"Lucky? Fido? Champ?"

I nixed all those ideas.

"What about Prince?" Feury suggested. "He's just so little and fluffy. I'm surprised a dog this tiny survived as a stray."

"I like Tiny," I replied. "Hey dog... what about Tiny?"

The little scamp wriggled in approval.

"Well Tiny it is then!" Feury exclaimed.

While Feury brushed Tiny one more time to fluff him up I went to the junk drawer for some rope. Tiny would need a leash until one was purchased for him.
Feury took Tiny to High Street to get food, a leash and collar and "the doggie necessities". I was sure those would include toys and treats. Breda was still fast asleep and it was nearly noon. I knocked on the guest room door and said, "Are you alive in there?"

The only response was a grunt. I opened the door a crack and asked, "Are you decent?"

I heard the bedsprings groan and finally Breda answered, "I'm decent. Come in if you want."

"I just wanted to see if you'd survived. Sounds like you did. Go take a shower, you'll feel better. Help yourself to whatever you find in the kitchen."

He mumbled something obscene and I left him to fend for himself. I decided it would be more productive to get comfortable on the couch with my school work than to cajole him out of bed. Besides, it would take a while for him to be presentable.

I was looking over my notes from General Lockheed's political science class when I heard Breda rooting around in the kitchen. I'd made a habit of holding the meditation balls in my left hand while reading. They reduced the need to fidget and the urge to smoke when I was studying. Since Knox's son had given them to me the ends of my pens and pencils were in much better shape.

Breda came into the living room and landed with a flop in the big chair. "Havo, remind me not to play 'I never' with Feury again. Looking at him you'd never suspect..."

"I think he uses that baby face of his to his advantage more often than we gave him credit for. He's just more experienced than we thought he was."

"The only person I know who could beat him at that game is the colonel."

I closed my notebook, set it aside and then said, "Well, given the colonel's rep one would naturally assume that there wouldn't be much that he hasn't done, but that's the Colonel's strategy- set up the image and let the other guy sweat about what's true and what he can prove about it. Though I bet he was a handful when he was younger."

"Any plans today? I don't want to interrupt your routine," Breda said, changing the subject.

"I don't have anything going on today. I was doing some poly sci work and playing with my balls."

"T.M.I. Havo! I did not need to know that. You have bizarre kinks. You should have let me know you were out of material."

"What?" I asked, completely lost.

"Girlie magazines! You are truly hard up if you're doing that to text books."

I shifted to my side so I could get a better look at him and then said, "They're meditation balls, Breda. I was definitely not playing with myself."

I didn't let on that it really wasn't of much use anyway... when Sciezka did it, it was more the idea of what she was doing, than the sensation of what she was doing.

"Phew, I thought you were losing it."

"No, not just yet," I said as I transferred to my chair and then headed for the kitchen.
He followed me and sat at the table while I made myself a sandwich. Eventually I asked if he wanted one too. At least he'd figured out that I'd ask for help if I needed it and that I had sandwich making under control.

After lunch I stretched out on the couch and went back to work. Breda read the newspaper, checked the odds on the races and then napped in the big chair. His snoring would distract me every once in a while. I wasn't annoyed. It was nice to have the company even though he was out cold. Davis was in the library; probably napping as well, as he'd had a lot to drink the night before.

Feury and Arkin came in quietly with Tiny, prancing proudly on his new leash. When Feury unfastened him, he was off like a shot. After caroming off the walls a few times as he slid on the hardwood, he returned to the living room. I patted the sliver of couch next to me and he did one better, instead leaping and landing on my stomach.

Though Tiny never barked there was enough commotion to rouse Breda from what had sounded like a sound sleep. He looked around slowly and then remarked, "Hey Feury, I'm amazed you don't look as bad as I feel."

Feury smirked and then said, "I didn't drink half of what you did, Big Guy."

"Fair enough; so, what's the plan for tonight?" he asked looking for me to an answer. Apparently, I was the social committee.

"I thought I'd make dinner, steak and potatoes, and maybe a green salad. Last night was rough. I have no intention of leaving the house. We could try for another card game- this time without the liquor."

Breda stood up and stretched.

It was then that he noticed the dog. His eyes went wide as he pointed, clearly horrified at what he saw. He hightailed it into the kitchen and Tiny followed him, eager to meet a new person. I heard his claws tap dancing on the floor and he barked enthusiastically.

Feury went in first to run damage control and I was surprised by how quickly I got there. Breda had escaped by climbing onto the counter and he still looked petrified. Tiny was kept occupied as Feury petted him, so the barking stopped. I parked next to the counter and looked up at Breda. "I know, I know," I said reassuringly, "It's a dog. But he's really sweet. If you tried, I think you'd maybe even like him."

"It could turn vicious at any moment! I don't trust those things. Who even let it in here? Feury, this has you written all over it," he said as he pointed an accusatory finger at the offender.

I shook my head, called the dog over, picked him up and put him in my lap before calmly explaining, "Feury found him, but I said he could keep him here as long as he needed to. So, if you need to, blame me."

"You're not gonna let it sleep in the house, are you?"

Feury looked to me, concern evident and pleaded, "He's too little to sleep outside."

"He could kill us in our sleep!" Breda exclaimed, still hysterical.
I set Tiny back on the floor and he went straight to Feury. He picked him up and cradled him protectively.

*Since when had I become the voice of reason? It was normally Gracia or Sciezka's job.*

"Feury, the dog can sleep inside, just not in with you. Breda, feel free to lock the door to the guest room. I'll keep the dog in with me at night. Does that sound workable?"

Breda nodded, but didn't get down from his perch. Feury smiled and then handed Tiny back to me. The little guy seemed to like my lap. It was fine by me, kept him out from under foot. Sciezka and Elysia might object when they got back, but for now it would do.

I left the kitchen, headed for my room and a nap. Before I went in, I called out, "You can come down now Breda. The vicious wild animal is properly restrained."

I heard a chuckle, probably Feury, and then Breda shouted back, "You're both assholes! I don't know why I put up with you two."

"Love you too man," I replied before finally shutting the door.

Once I was situated Tiny invited himself up on the bed. That would have been fine, if the spot he'd chosen hadn't been right on top of me. Fortunately, he followed direction well and was content to curl up against my stomach as I got comfortable on my side.

Breda didn't lose his fear of dogs, but we all worked around it and got on with our routines. When I got home from the hospital or university, I'd sometimes indulge him with a game of Shogi. He always beat me, but I was getting better.

Feury for the most part, spent his days helping Julia and playing with Tiny. He'd also taken apart most everything in the house, a habit I was sure he picked up from Winry. He always put each thing back together and usually in better working condition than before. The Victrola didn't skip so much, the wireless had clearer reception and though not a machine, he managed to fix a squeaky floor board in the entry way. I think even Sciezka would be hard pressed to deny him a dog after all that.

We were all getting restless to hear more news, but coping as well as we could.

Thursday was my day to hold office hours in the Humanities building. Open door policy between 1400 and 1700 hundred hours or 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. in civilian time, and wait for any struggling students to come in for help, or classmates to come by and just shoot the breeze a while. I heard two sets of boots echo in the hallway and they were coming my way. Both sounded heavy and authoritative, but one set was heels clicking in a staccato pattern that I had heard once before.

I started getting a real bad feeling. They sounded like they were coming closer. I looked towards the door, considering possible escape routes. There weren't any. I grabbed the nearest object on my desk, a staple remover and put it on my lap. I decided that the letter opener could be useful as well. Worst case scenario? Letter opener to the gut and staple remover clamping on the real sensitive parts. I didn't have my side arm; it had been confiscated when I surrendered, so this would have to do. I kept my ears sharp.
Officers' boots, no doubt about it. My heart sped up; I hoped they'd pass me by. No such luck. They swung the door right open and strode in.

I was shocked to see Major General Armstrong, flanked by Davis, whose expression was panicked as he stood a safe distance behind her and off to the side. He pointed insistently at the cup of coffee clenched in his other hand.

Now I had it figured out. I'd asked Davis to get me a coffee at the lobby cart and he was spotted. Whether he'd followed her or she'd dragged him didn't matter. She was here.

After gathering my wits, I backed away from the desk, turned my chair to face her and saluted.

"At ease lieutenant, I'm not here in an official capacity," she said quietly. I was still skeptical about that. I removed the papers I'd stacked on a chair and invited her to sit. Once she was seated Davis handed me my coffee.

He stammered, "M-Major G-General Armstrong, s-sir, I can go get one for you as well if you like."

She nodded curtly and replied, "I take my coffee black and there's no need to hurry. And shut the door on your way out."

Davis saluted, turned around and bolted. Lucky coward!

I waited for her to speak. I was sure my voice would crack if I spoke first. I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck and my muscles tense. The Major General wasn't here for small talk and she sure as hell wouldn't need pointers on military strategies.

She sat back, at ease. After looking me up and down she observed, "I never would have pegged you for this, but it suits you."

"Thanks," I replied. The conversation would be stilted if this was how it was going to go.

"It shouldn't surprise me so much. I saw how you took first year cadets into your tutelage. You were in your second year at the academy."

"I'm amazed you even knew who I was, let alone noticed that. You were the salutatorian that year. Your military history research paper is still read! You broke most of the records the academy had in fencing. It was three events, right? Epée, saber and foil... " I trailed off. If I hadn't thought she'd kill me I'd have attempted to make a play at her. She was two years ahead of me, untouchable, unreachable... the ideal.

"What about the valedictorian?" she replied coolly.

"But you should have been. That guy only got it because he was a guy and though the Armstrong name has clout, c'mon; his father was on the cabinet. He freaked out on the front lines in Ishbal, didn't he?"

She let down some of the wall and nearly smiled.

"Granted, if you must," she said and then sighed heavily. "You're not the type to make social calls, so please, cut to the chase. Ballsy on my part, I'd admit later, but by now my nerves were ready to snap.

"Have you experienced anything out of the ordinary?"
"Not lately sir, no," I answered as I shifted position, partly out of habit, but mostly because she was perceptive and it made me uncomfortable. Her icy stare didn't help matters.

"What about in the last year lieutenant?"

"I can't say that I have. All typical events in the line of duty."

"Really? How were you injured?"

Damn. So that's where she was going. I wondered what brought this up now. Something did for sure, and not knowing was making all my hair stand on end now.

"It's all in my report-"

"Bullshit. I want to hear it from you. The truth now."

Shit. Think fast. "We had secured a person of interest, prisoner #66 at a safe house," I said evenly, "He got away and we chased him. We ended up at the old prison. It contained a research facility, which we'd later learn was Laboratory Three. We split up to search it."

"Who is we?" she asked pointedly, arching an eyebrow.

"It was Hawkeye, Mustang and Alphonse Elric. Feury was running com ops and Breda was on a different mission."

"With Major Armstrong..."

I nodded in reply. The knock on the door was a huge relief. Questioning would end now, or so I hoped.

She cocked her head, indicating that I should answer the door, and quietly hid behind it as I moved my chair. Getting around in the small space was awkward, but I had just enough room to open the door. It was Davis with the coffee. She appeared from behind the door, almost making the poor guy jump out of his boots, and accepted the cup. She said, "Davis, patrol the corridor but be quiet about it."

He saluted, turned on his heel and left. I desperately wanted to go with him.

When he left, she leaned back in her chair, crossed her legs and took a sip of her coffee. I remained silent.

"Continue where you left off. I didn't say you could stop."

"So, we split up. I went with Mustang and Hawkeye took Alphonse."

"Was Fullmetal there?"

"He was in another part of the city. I don't know what happened to him. The whole day was a cluster fuck," I answered, immediately regretted the words.

"Continue..." she stated coolly.

And I did. The whole sordid story. Every damned detail up until I went down. My gut said I could trust her, my brain kept saying imprisonment for withholding info under oath and my heart just thumped with anxiety that I might have made a serious mistake.
Her eyes were fixed on me. "So that's all you remember?"

"I lost consciousness a few minutes after she skewered me. All of that is fuzzy. In fact, I'm not sure I know the difference between what I really remember and what I've been filled in on."

Her full lips were set in a frown. Her eyes had a flicker of what I thought was...sympathy. She'd be even more gorgeous if she wasn't so intimidating.

"Thank you for your information. I may need you again."

My eyes went wide and I tried to protest. The last thing I wanted to do was go before the committee again.

But that sinking feeling came back, and my gut was now telling me that I was screwed.
Chapter 49: The Road Home

The chess game Mustang started had played out. All we could do now was wait. Breda and Feury were on temporary assignments in the motor pool and mail room respectively. The higher-ups didn't seem to know what to do with them or find them a threat. They hadn't known what to do with me either. Thankfully it could have been much worse for us. So far luck was on our side. The way it stood we wouldn't be able to do much damage and the state would get their money's worth.

The new semester had just begun when I returned to the university. General Lockheed and Doctor K got me up to speed and I threw myself into my work. Between missing Sciezka and worrying about Roy and Riza, school was a welcome distraction. My guard detail didn't seem to mind the time spent in class and the hours in the library afterward. I hated being home without Sciezka, so I avoided it.

I pushed myself hard in therapy sessions with Jim to make up for time lost while in hiding. I'd swim most nights after dinner and school work. Jim allowed it, since I'd explained that I slept better when I was physically tired.

The guys and I would eat whatever was easy. Julia had offered to cook, but I politely declined. I didn't have much of an appetite, so sandwiches would work. She let it slide. If she noticed how much I was avoiding the house she didn't mention it. She was a life saver, keeping Tiny occupied, the house clean, the ice box stocked, and both garden and sidewalk tidy.

Tiny was a great help, filling some of the empty space in the bed and making me laugh with his antics.

I prayed that no news was good news. It went further than hoping or wishing. I wasn't religious by any means, it had been absent in mainstream Amestrian culture for centuries. Perhaps they were onto something in Ishbal and the remote towns that hadn't been assimilated yet. That would be a good topic to research for sociology.

My course load was full with introduction to writing and statistics in addition to sociology, developmental psychology and my position with the general. Jim had been concerned at first, saying that I was setting myself up to be too busy until I reminded him, "I'm not taking Espionage 202 or Subterfuge 101 this semester. If anything, this is a lighter course load."

He conceded with the condition that I eat lunch with him a few times a week, "We both have to eat and I want to be sure you're doing it. You'd be doing me a favor."

Before Mustang and Hawkeye's formal court martial proceedings began, I was summoned to appear at a deposition in front of the full tribunal. The subpoena was served during my office hours
at the university by two grave looking enlisted men. They said the investigations department sent them and I was to report immediately.

We crossed paths with General Grumman as we exited the building and as he and his escorts entered. He didn't acknowledge me, but I knew he saw me. I exhaled a short breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Three witnesses tremendously reduced the chances of disappearing without a trace. It also helped we left via a public route.

The double doors opened into the large meeting room. General Armstrong dismissed my escorts, glanced at her watch and then coolly commented, "It's nice of you to join us lieutenant."

General Grumman cleared his throat loudly and then said, "I'd like the record to reflect that Lieutenant Havoc is here to witness the proceedings and answer any further questions the tribunal may have. The record will also reflect that Lt. Havoc has been cleared of any wrongdoing and willingly reported here on short notice."

Major General Armstrong quirked her brow. Grumman made me look good, but she knew my 'willingness' had more to do with my summons and escorts than anything else.

I quickly scanned the room and saw the colonel and first lieutenant were both in uniform and seated next to military counsel. They were alive and unshackled. So far everything was going well.

"We've been waiting," she said impatiently.

"Sir, my apologies, please don't blame my escorts. There was a problem finding a way into the building and an elevator. I'm not familiar with this part of H.Q., so I wasn't any help."

"Fair enough lieutenant. The reason you have been summoned here is to obtain more information on the incident at the third lab."

My stomach had already been doing flip flops since leaving the university. I swallowed hard and nodded that I understood her question.

What else did they need? I'd told them everything I could... or at least everything in the cover story. I hadn't lied before. I had been impaled and I did lose consciousness, so I was technically off the hook for what happened at the lab after I was injured.

What did Mustang want me to say? What had he already told them? What could I say? Would the tribunal even believe it? I wouldn't have if I hadn't witnessed it myself. It all sounded outside the realm of possibility.

There was no way any reasonable person would believe that I'd been cut nearly in half by a beautiful woman's fingers. A shape-shifting sadist was even more improbable.

"Your former superior officer Colonel Mustang said you are able to personally testify to the existence of Lust and Envy," General Armstrong said as she stared me down.

*What the hell? Did I hear this right?* I looked back at her, dumfounded and shocked. *What was I supposed to do now? What would Mustang want me to say?* I resisted the urge to look at Mustang to gauge his reaction.

"Do I need to repeat the question lieutenant?" She asked, completely irritated with my delay in
responding, "It seems you left this part out of your prior sworn testimony. Need I remind you that you were, and are, under oath?" Oh, she was pissed. Not because I left anything out, but because she hadn't known exactly what I left out. And Major General Armstrong is one person who doesn't want to be left out of anything.

After a grueling set of questions about Lust and Envy the tribunal dismissed me. Davis came to drive me home. I was relieved that it was someone I knew who didn't get in the way, stare at the chair and make things more complicated than they already were.

We rode in silence. Once we were at the house Davis asked, "Sir, do you mind if I have a cigarette on the porch before we go inside?"

"Not at all, but before you light up could you go and get me a beer out of the icebox? Feel free to have one too," I answered.

"Was it that bad?"

I shifted position, my body stiff from sitting for so long. Bent forward, elbows on my knees I just nodded in reply.

Davis came out with two bottles, handed one to me and then lit the cigarette he'd pulled from behind his ear.

Halfway through the bottle I asked, "How's the dog? Is everything ok in there?"

"Tiny is fine. I'm surprised you even asked. You should know by now that Mrs. Smith keeps this place running like clockwork," Davis answered.

I sat up straighter, though it took some doing. "You're right. Thanks for the ride and the beer. I'm going to take a shower. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen if you're hungry."

My lower back and shoulders were still sore after a long hot shower, but they were better. I was getting dressed when I heard a soft but insistent scratching and thumping on the bedroom door. Tiny burst in coming right to me and sitting at my feet, looking at me expectantly. I pulled a shirt over my head and then patted my lap. He hopped up and made himself comfortable.

As I scratched behind his ears, I told him, "You're lucky you're cute."

His tail thumped the side of my chair like he agreed with me. I smiled and said, "Let's go find Feury."

Tiny jumped off my lap as soon as he saw Feury sitting on the couch. I said, "Well I see where I stand in your pack. I'm a mode of transportation."

Feury was smiling, pretending to fend Tiny off from avidly licking his face. He asked, "Havo, would you like to come on a walk with us?"

If I'd been thinking any quicker, I'd have made a comment about the walking part, but I was still a bit burned out and needed something to distract me, besides, it was a beautiful night. It had been
warm all day and had cooled just enough that I'd need a sweater. Really, anything would be better than sitting home worrying.

"That sounds perfect. Let me grab a sweater. I'll meet you and Tiny out front."

The little dog danced impatiently on the end of his leash when he saw me on the porch. Once clear of the gate Tiny settled into a bouncy trot and all but dragged Feury behind him.

We'd walked in silence for almost an hour, winding our way through the neighborhood when we doubled back and passed the cafe that Sciezka and I would frequent. Feury stopped in his tracks and I nearly ran him over, stopping just short of his heels.

"Anything wrong?" I asked.

"I'm hungry and tired. You and Tiny are relentless. Let's get something to eat."

"That sounds great. I haven't had anything since noon. As for being relentless you have got to be kidding. I was going easy on you."

I slipped scraps to Tiny while we ate on the patio. It kept him quiet and there was more food than I could manage. During dinner I learned more about the inner workings of the mail room than I'd ever wanted to know. The tube messaging system Feury was thinking up sounded promising.

He asked a lot of questions about my day. I replied, "The usual really, I went to therapy, class and then an unplanned trip to see the brass."

"That doesn't sound..."

"Feury leave it for later."

He immediately took the hint and started talking about Tiny instead.

I took care of the check. Feury had just returned to work and hadn't received his back pay yet. Soon he'd probably be losing his paycheck to Breda and Falman. This was a good thing.

When we got home, I had a cigarette while Feury took care of the dog. Breda came out with two beers and said, "I'm avoiding it. Besides, thought you might want one of these."

"Thanks man, though I know you're really just hiding out from the wild beast."

"I'm not that selfish. Davis said you had an unexpected meeting this afternoon. Care to bring me up to speed?"

"The good news is that the colonel and Hawkeye look good considering. The bad is the tribunal wanted me to corroborate what happened, on the record."

"Really, how did they take it?"

"Only a few people looked surprised that the country was controlled by monsters. How was your day?"
"I bought more beer, if that tells you anything."

"At least some things don't change. How much did you win?"

I put out my cigarette and then we went inside. Feury was on the phone, smiling and blushing.

"Move along Breda. Don't even think of teasing him," I said.

"You are no fun. You're all sensitive and stuff. A year ago, you would have messed with him with me."

"Probably," I replied, shrugging my shoulders. "But only because Mustang had probably stolen another girlfriend. I've matured. You should try it sometime. Now you, living room. Looks like Feury needs some privacy."

"But I'm out of beer!" he protested.

"I'll get some more, now march."

He did as I asked, but grumbled the whole way into the living room.

Feury was still on the phone when I went into the kitchen. I grabbed three beers from the icebox and handed one to him on my way out.

Breda was perched on the big chair, driven there by Tiny who was sitting on the floor, looking at him hopefully.

I gave Breda his beer and then picked Tiny up saying, "C'mon boy, let's sit on the couch."

Tiny hopped from my lap to the couch and waited patiently while I transferred. Once he thought I looked comfortable he reclaimed his spot on my lap.

Petting his ears kept the dog busy, but Breda still looked ill at ease. Feury came in and sat down on the vacant end of the couch.

"She says hello to everyone," he answered before anyone had the chance to ask.

"It's good to know she's safe. I knew you were worried," I replied.

Breda got a mischievous look on his face, but then thought better of it. "What's she up to anyway?"

"The usual, for Winry anyway, fixing mangled automail, throwing wrenches and helping Pinako cook. It seems that Al's appetite is as big as his brother's."

"Wait what was that Feury?" I asked, thinking I'd misunderstood him.

Davis and Arkin were in the library and though I trusted them, it was best not to go into too many details.

Feury grinned and said, "You heard me correctly Havoc. It won't be long until everything is the way it should be. I just know it."

"You can say that again. So, everything else is good too?" I asked and he pinked up a bit in the cheeks.

"Thank you for not letting Breda in the kitchen," he sheepishly answered.
"No problem. She'd kill me if I'd let him."

After a celebratory round of beers, we turned in early. We were still waiting, but it wouldn't be long now.

We all tried to maintain our routines. I kept up with physical therapy and classes kept me busy, Breda was in the motor pool doing tune ups and Feury was in the mail room reorganizing the place. Falman would be proud. We'd get home, eat, sleep and then do another day. It was tense until the verdict came back.

Mustang and Hawkeye were cleared. The deliberations had been long and behind closed doors. If there was one thing I knew about military meeting, it was that for every one 'official' meeting there were at least five that weren't. Hawkeye was "just following orders" and Mustang called in every favor he was owed. He'd also set up the paper trail brilliantly. I later learned he'd barely had to testify. Each move had been a carefully calculated risk in a high stakes chess game.

Everything had gone according to Mustang's plan. He wasn't fuehrer yet, but he wasn't in front of the firing squad either. It was a miracle that he was allowed to resume his old duties and his old staff was reassigned to him.

A new fuehrer hadn't been announced yet, that announcement would be made any day now. It was over, finally over. The coup ended and my friends were out of danger, and beyond that I wasn't interested in the news or politics. I was focused on preparing for Sciezka's return. It was time to get my life back.

Breda burst into the house, barely noticing Tiny. He rushed into the living room and asked, "Did you hear the news?" Without waiting for our answer, he exclaimed, "It's over. They're fine. We've won!"

I looked up from the papers I was grading and then replied, "I know man. Trust me, I'm excited. I just have a lot to finish before I can get Sciezka."

"Havo, Feury… Davis and Arkin too! Get in here! We're going to celebrate."

Feury joined us and said, "So where are we going, The Cavalier?"

I didn't want to put a damper on the celebration; however, I had a lot of work to do. I'd finished the assignments for my classes, but had quite a few projects for General Lockheed. I couldn't let him down. Not after he'd given me a chance. I felt like a lot of opportunities were finally about to come my way, and I had a lot of planning to do.

"Guys, I really want to come with you... "

"No excuses Havo!" Breda exclaimed. He raised his right hand, like he was swearing an oath, as he added, "We'll just have a few. I promise to have you tucked in and home by curfew."

"Fine, I'll go. I'm excited, really. Just don't expect me to match you beer for beer," I replied.

After showering quickly, I took care of the necessaries, got dressed and was about ready to leave. I
decided that even though I wouldn't be with Sciezka and didn't have to impress the guys I should make the extra effort to look good. I got enough attention as it was from the chair. Looking sloppy would just add to it.

In the bathroom I put some pomade in my hair and ruffled it with my fingers. I'd given up trying to make it lie flat, it just looked goofy. Before I splashed on some cologne, I checked myself out in the mirror. I had a five o'clock shadow, but it looked good on me. Besides, I wouldn't be kissing anyone tonight, so there was no risk of beard burn.

Finally, back in the bedroom I took one last look in the full-length mirror. White shirt, tails out and cuffs rolled, just like Sciezka likes, faded dungarees and moccasins. I'd have to remember to wear this when I came for her. It's her favorite.

The guys were sitting on the couch drinking beer, having started the celebration early. I was surprised to see that Jim was with them.

Breda grinned and then said, "I took the liberty of inviting Jim to come with us while you were primping Jacqueline."

"The more the merrier. Now I have someone to help me carry Breda home. He needs strict supervision Jim."

"We should wait outside," Feury suggested. As an aside to Jim he added, "I hope Jean and Heymans behave."

It was a tight squeeze in the cab, but we managed. Jim suggested I sit up front with the driver. His reasoning was solid; there was more room for me to transfer, even though what he said was that I knew the fastest way to get us there. But I hated feeling different, especially around my friends. He put my chair in the trunk. I was relieved I wouldn't have to talk anyone through how to manage it. That would help when we got to the Cavalier.

Breda held the door on the way into the pub and called out, "Havo, you need help with the steps?"

Feury and Jim exchanged knowing glances and Feury whispered, "Winry told me you'd be ticked if I did that. She would be too. Don't question her mechanical skills, ever."

I'd have to thank her the next time I saw her with a trip to the hardware store. The hassle I went through to get places wasn't nearly as bad with her masterpiece as it would have been with the Tank.

Jim suggested we head straight for the tables at the back so we could order food and shoot pool. I was all for that. I still didn't like sitting at the bar while everyone else stood. The view was lousy.

It was busy for a weeknight. I stuck close to Jim as he parted the crowd. Feury went to find a waitress and Breda staked out a pool table.

By the time Jim and I finally got to the table there was a pitcher of beer waiting for us and a waitress ready to take our order.

"Tonight's on me guys. All the shogi players in the motor pool still can't beat me," Breda called across the room. "Havo, would you order me my usual?"
I called back, "Bacon cheeseburger with the works and chili cheese fries?"

He grinned and signaled thumbs up.

We put in our orders and the waitress apologized, saying it would take longer than usual. None of us minded. Jim told her to take her time and to keep the beer coming.

While we played pool a few men in uniform approached the table. I tensed up reflexively, hoping there wouldn't be any trouble. Breda waved them over, calling each by name. The introductions were hard to hear over the raucous music coming from the jukebox. Since I didn't know them, I gathered they worked in the motor pool.

The teams weren't evenly matched. Jim and I played Feury and Breda. They put up a good fight, but we were creaming them. It was Jim's turn when the food came.

"I better finish this up quickly," he said, "Don't blink Jean."

I looked at the table. Just what was he planning to do? There were no easy shots. I'd made damn sure of that.

Wait.

No way.

"Cue ball's gonna slide right between the nine and eleven," Jim said, smiling as he eyed his shot, "Bank off that diamond to come up behind the eight and bring it into this side pocket."

I watched in amazement as the shot played out just as he called it.

"Good game Jim."

"Good game Jean."

We headed back to our table and I took a healthy bite of my burger. It tasted amazing. I smiled; we'd won the pool game and the fight, and now I was celebrating with a good buzz and awesome greasy chow.

It was the first meal I'd truly enjoyed in weeks. Jim and Feury seemed the same and the table was quiet except for Breda. He gestured, waving a fry for emphasis in between bites. He had our next R and R planned since we were all together again. Besides, nothing ruined Breda's appetite.

Talking about future plans reminded me that the house was pretty full and soon I'd want privacy.

"Hey Breda, can I get a word in edgewise here?" I teased.

"Sure, I figured you were busy eating. Sorry."

"It's fine. This is one of the things I've missed most about you while you were out West."

"It's good to be back," he replied sincerely.

"You and Feury are more than welcome to crash at the house as long as you need to."

"That's a relief," Feury said. "There is so much going on right now I've barely had time to apartment hunt."
Breda picked right up on that and joked, "He's not moving off base for that mutt! He just wants private time with Winry."

"Speaking of privacy, unless you want to find out the truth behind the rumors Breda, I'd start apartment hunting."

Feury was now a deeper shade of crimson than the mentions of Winry had made him.

In case Breda hadn't understood I elaborated, "I'm pretty sure you won't want to be anywhere near the kitchen, library or living room."

I paused, then added, "I'm surprised I left out the dining room. That's one of our favorites."

Jim shot me a look across the able and I winked. He grinned and then said, "It's a good thing that neither Gracia nor Sciezka are here to discipline you."

I knew Breda was still listening. I waggled my eyebrows and groped the air as I said, "I'd like that. Sciezka hasn't disciplined me in a long time."

Breda finished half his pint in one gulp and hissed, "Enough Havoc! I get it, you're getting some! I'll hurry up and move. Besides, I'd be getting away from that damned dog!"

"Don't get so upset Heymans," Feury said. "He didn't divulge too many details. Aren't you glad he's happy?"

I extended my hand to Breda, to shake and make up. He took it, shook it vigorously and teased, "It took you long enough. You're just making up for lost time now."

"Exactly, " I replied. "Speaking of time, it's late. I should head home. I've got a session with Jim at 0800."

I didn't add that I'd have to get up at 0600 to make it to the hospital in the nick of time.

Jim took the hint and agreed, "I should get out of here too."

Breda wasn't ready to go and Feury whispered in my ear, "I'll make sure he gets home in one piece. Would you let Tiny out when you get home?"

"I'll even check his food and water situation. I had the waitress bag a little bit of my burger. Can he have it?"

"I didn't figure you for such a softy."

Jim stood up, started clearing a path and I said, "I better get while the getting is good. Have a great time!"

Jim got to the door ahead of me and I called to him, "Hey, I need a lift."

"You have a little too much to drink?" he teased.

"More than is advisable, yeah. Good thing I'm in the damned chair or I'd be staggering."

He extended a hand, tugged hard and I popped a wheelie to get over the step. Once we were outside, he looked for a cab.

"If you don't mind walking, it's a nice night and it'll help me sober up."
"Sounds like a plan," he replied, then started walking.

Halfway home Jim slowed down. It was a gentrified tree lined avenue, with wide, smooth sidewalks.

"I was thinking about how we'd get to Rush Valley. I know you hate the train, but it's the fastest way. We wouldn't have to stop for the night."

"That makes sense. I don't think it will be as difficult with you along. You know what to expect and all..."

"I'm glad you agree. Other than the hospital, have you been training with the braces? You'll need them for the train and possibly at Garfiel's."

I quietly considered his question. My silence gave him his answer.

"Would it be so bad in front of Feury?" Jim asked pointedly.

"Not as bad as it would be with Breda. Hell, he's much better than he was at the lake. It's more me really... I still don't feel comfortable needing help. What if I fall? It's bad enough in front of Sciezka. It's different with her. That makes no sense at all, does it?"

"Jean, hold up and stop so I can answer that."

We were near the park and Jim sat on a low wall. I braked and leaned back so I could look him in the eye. Jim was quiet and when he finally spoke, he said, "It is what it is."

I waited for him to say something more, because there had to be something more to it.

"It is what it is?" I asked. "That isn't much of an answer."

"No, it's not. You have tools and abilities. You think too much about people's reactions. It's only a big deal if you make it one. I think that's why it doesn't bother you with me or Sciezka. You've been worse off."

"So, I should just let Breda see me and keep calm about it?"

He nodded and said, "He'll get used to it in time."

"As usual you're right. Let's go home. I'm thirsty and I need a bath. You're welcome to crash on the couch tonight."

He chuckled, stood up and started walking.

Good news and beer all in one night. I slept like a rock. Jim had politely refused my offer to stay on the couch. Ever thoughtful and prepared, he offered to let me hitch a ride to work with him.

I had a cup of coffee with Julia while I waited for him to arrive. She insisted on toast and juice as well. I wolfed it down. She smiled and commented, "I was getting worried. Sciezka wouldn't be happy if you looked starved when she came home. I can only imagine what your mother would
Toast and juice hit the spot. I gave her my best smile. "It was never your cooking and you know it. Sciezka knows that too. She'd be mad at me for not eating what you made. There's nothing to be done about Ma, she worries no matter what."

She sighed and good naturedly replied, "Excuse me for being relieved. It's nice to see you more like yourself. You sure are handsome when you smile."

I could feel my cheeks get warmer.

"You're so easy to tease! Remember, I'm a happily married woman. You'll be back to gorgeous in no time."

"Do I really look that bad?" I asked, surprised since I thought I'd been faking normal remarkably well.

"You smile for show, sure. It doesn't make it to those baby blues of yours. Don't worry; I'm sure you've fooled most people. I've just had more experience."

The doorbell rang and I pulled away from the table.

Julia handed me bag lunches. "I packed one for Jim too," she said, "You can tell him his smile didn't fool me one bit either."

Once I'd balanced the bags in my lap I saluted and said, "Yes Ma'am. Anything else?"

"At ease and have a good day. That's an order," she answered with a wink.

Jim and I ate lunch in his office after my session. I was tired and sore after standing for what seemed like forever. But I was in a great mood, and he picked up on it.

"I thought you said you were going to die if you had to stand any longer. Sadist and slave driver were only a few of the names I heard you call me," he cheerfully said.

"We're embarking on a quest to rescue fair damsels. I'm sure there has to be a rule about trials and tribulations along the way."

"Do heroes and knights errant have bag lunches packed for them?" he replied in jest.

"Maybe we were granted a fairy godmother. Even heroes have a few things going for them besides bravery and good looks. I put Julia in the fairy godmother category without hesitation."

Further fairytale speculation would have to wait, as Davis arrived to escort me to class.

I sat through composition and statistics classes without incident. Both would have been difficult if I hadn't had Sciezka's help writing papers for psychology and military history. The small amount of math I'd had to learn in officer training was paying off in statistics. Relating the problems to military paperwork made stats make much more sense.
Davis swept my office before allowing me to enter. I began filing graded papers and sent Davis to get something to drink for both of us. I had him swing by the department office to pick up my mail as well. It needed to be done, but I really just wanted a few moments alone.

I was going over the lesson plans for military history when a knock on the door startled me.

I took a deep breath before I asked, "Who is it?"

A warm and familiar voice replied, "You're certainly jumpy. I don't blame you one bit."

"General Lockheed, come in. You startled me. My office hours don't start for a while. I wasn't expecting anyone. Let me clear a place for you to sit," I said as I moved a pile of books and files from the chair next to my desk.

Before he sat down, he peered over my shoulder and remarked, "I hope I'm not overworking you. It looks like you need a vacation."

I wasn't too tired after therapy and a night out with the guys. What was he getting at? Was my work not up to par?

"Just checking to make sure everything is in order for the next few lectures. Did you have any questions about the work I've done so far?"

"Relax Jean. You're doing a great job. In fact, my secretary said to thank you. She says I'm more organized than I've ever been."

"Thank you. I'm honored that you picked me and that I'm performing in line with your expectations."

"I'm so impressed I'm granting you leave."

"That's a generous offer, but I missed so much at the beginning of the semester. That and I still have to get to Rush Valley. Jim and I are still working out the logistics."

He chuckled. He was up to something. What did he have in mind?

"Jim Bruno is employed at a military hospital if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, he is," I answered, unsure of what he was getting at.

"You are my teaching assistant and I have some pull with the university."

"Pardon me sir, but I'm having trouble following."

He grinned as he slid a thick envelope across my desk.

"Is this for me?"

He only nodded.

Once I'd opened it and spread the contents in front of me, I started to put it together.

An itinerary, copies of letters to my professors and train tickets. After checking them, they departed at noon the next day.

"General Lockheed, this is amazing. I'm overwhelmed. But I can't miss class."
He slid two more envelopes towards me as he said, "Your assignments for composition and statistics. I take it you didn't read the letters? Doctor Kohut told me he'd get you caught up when you get back."

I put my head in my hands, in an effort to find something to say.

Davis came back, cups of iced tea in hand and Lockheed took them and set them down.

"General Lockheed sir!" Davis exclaimed as he saluted.

"At ease Davis; if you would please escort Havoc home immediately. He has packing to do."

Before he stood up Lockheed shook my hand and then placed the other on my shoulder and said, "You should really thank Marjorie for this. It's her doing. She expects to see you two for dinner as soon as you've both gotten back into the routine. She's got some ideas for the wedding."

I had a cigarette while Davis pulled the car around. I needed one. Everything was happening so fast and it couldn't come soon enough.

When I got home, Julia greeted me at the door with a beer saying, "Come and eat. I made you a sandwich. Your laundry is almost dry and your bags are on the bed ready to pack."

"I'm going to assume you've already heard."

"Yes, and it's wonderful news. Don't worry about a thing while you're away. I'll take care of Tiny while Kain is at work. The house will be perfect when you get back."

"You really don't have to go to that much trouble Julia."

"It's no trouble at all. I'll be inviting your friends to stay with me if they still haven't gotten settled in Central."

"Now you're really doing too much."

"Nonsense, now eat and get ready. You have a lot to do."

I laid out enough clothes for four days and put together eight days of medication and supplies for the necessaries. If the trip took longer than expected I figured I could buy more clothes or wash them. With Jim along or not; I had no intention of breaking in a new doctor. Not if I could avoid it with proper planning.

The guys got home as I was double checking my bags. I'd packed light, which allowed me to carry my own luggage. The net under my chair held a medium sized duffle bag and I could balance a rucksack on my lap without a problem.

I was sitting with Breda and Feury at the kitchen table, drinking another beer when the phone rang. Feury sprang up to answer it.

"Hello? Hi Jim, yes, I survived. Breda had a hard time getting up, but he'll live."
Feury smiled and nodded during the pauses on his end. I was happy my friends got along so well. "We got in at 0100, so not too late. Not like we used to. We'd come in at dawn sometimes. Havoc would fix breakfast if he wasn't too hammered."

I glanced at him and he asked, "Jim, did you want to talk to Havoc?"

Feury waved me over and I took the phone. I wasn't prepared for Jim's enthusiastic greeting, "Are you ready? General Lockheed works fast! I was all but forced to take vacation time. Not that I mind, but I figured it would be a mess of red tape."

"Whoa, slow down! I'm elated, really. Still not too thrilled about the train, but it's a small sacrifice. Makes sense too. We'll get there faster."

"It won't be as bad as last time, I'm sure. Even if the only improvement is that you haven't just spent time in the brig."

"You're right, as usual. Do you have everything you need? My itinerary says we'll be boarding the train at 1100 hours for a noon departure. I think that means we'll be the first on."

"Hopefully and even if we're not, just do what you have to do. Get some sleep and no worries. I'm on logistics as well. I'm sure I've thought of everything that could happen."

"See you in the morning. I'll sleep better knowing you have it taken care of. You always are the man with the plan."

After I hung up the phone and returned to my beer Breda said, "I gather you're taking a trip? That's great news man."

"I'm excited. Life isn't the same when she's not in it. Don't get me wrong guys, I'm glad you're here. It's helped so much..."

He interrupted, "Don't go getting all mushy. Go get your girl. I won't speak for Feury, but I know I'm getting sick of your mopey mug."

"Gee, thanks Breda."

"That and I do have to get my own place. You're too neat now. I need a bachelor pad in a complex that doesn't allow pets."

"Tiny is not that hard to live with Heymans!" Feury protested.

"Cut it out, both of you. I'm going to bed. Try to keep it at a dull roar."

"Thanks Havoc. I'll take Tiny if you want. I know you've got a big day and I'm worried he'll keep you up."

"No worries. Tiny and I are buddies. He makes a great alarm clock. Take your time finding a place."

"But sleep in the barracks until I do?"
Breda answered for me, "Unless you want to know more about Havoc's sex life than you ever wanted to."

Feury shot back, "At least he's getting some!"

"I'm going to bed. Julia will be running the show while I'm away. Behave."

Tiny woke me up early and I took him outside. He did his business and explored the yard while I had a cigarette. I put on coffee then filled his bowl. After a quick cup I went back into my room to get ready.

Once I was done with the hygiene regimen, I took a long shower. I hoped it would warm up my muscles, since getting the braces on solo was almost as taxing as a physio session.

I lay on the bed to put the braces on. If I overbalanced while fastening the ankle and knee straps at least my landing would be soft. Pulling pants on over them was a trick without help, but I could do it on my own. I felt sweat beading on my brow, and by the time I was finished I was almost ready for another shower. Having the braces on felt pretty good, empowering, and I would have to practice getting them on and using them every day from now on.

I finished dressing, stowed my duffle under the chair and hung my rucksack over the backrest. I heard Jim in the living room as I was struggling to secure the crutches to the frame of the chair. I cursed under my breath when he knocked on the door and the crutches clattered to the floor.

"Don't worry about the noise, I'm fine. Come in."

"Here let me get those," he said as he picked them up and handed them to me. He set down his valise, rifled through it and pulled out two sturdy canvas straps, with buckles. I smiled. They looked like little utility belts.

"Thank you," I said as I accepted them. As I bound the crutches together and then secured them to the frame I added, "I'd never planned to use them in public before. Last train ride I had an entourage to carry my things."

"Just figure it out one thing at a time. It'll seem more manageable that way."

I smiled and then replied, "You're right. I still let small setbacks make me stray from the path."

He shrugged as he said, "It happens. As long as you return to the path as quickly as you're able to, that's all that matters. Are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be. I'm going to say a quick goodbye to Julia and the guys. After that and a cigarette I'm good to go."

So maybe it was a few cigarettes. I chain smoked until the time came to leave for the station. General Lockheed sent his driver to pick us up. The ride across town went smoothly.

My stomach did flip flops as the station came into view. Central Station was built from massive blocks of granite. As a recruit this was where my training had started. I still remember how awe
struck I’d been. The train station had been my first taste of city life. The main lobby had vaulted ceilings, covered with murals of the history of Amestris. Forty-foot-tall windows let in light that reflected off the highly polished marble floors. Row upon row of sturdy benches held throngs of people and their possessions as they prepared for a journey. Travelers bustled through, stood in queues and many like me, stood stock still attempting to take it all in. Shops and food vendors lined the walls.

Many sold things I'd only heard of and certainly never seen. The smell of new foods and unfamiliar spices wafted through the air. My favorite had been the strong Aquroyan coffee I’d ordered to wash down impossibly light puffs of fried dough, drizzled with honey and sprinkled with cinnamon. The smoke shop next door had more types of cigarettes than I knew existed. I was keenly interested in those. Central and the military was everything I was looking for. The adventure and hustle and bustle of the city was intoxicating and exhilarating.

The thought of navigating that mess in the chair made my palms sweat.

I was relieved when the driver passed the security checkpoint and parked at the service entrance in the rear. He handled our luggage while Jim and I got my chair together.

The pavement leading to the main platform was smooth. By going around back we'd avoided the crowded, cavernous main lobby and a trip in the freight elevator. It was still too early to board. The conductor must have been expecting us. He met us at the platform, introduced himself and apologized that our cabin wasn't ready yet. It was still only 1030.

He hurried off and Jim commented, "The general really had them roll out the red carpet for us."

I pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

"You've had enough of those for the day. Try and relax. It's going to be fine. You trust me, right?"

I didn't put it out, but I did stop smoking it like it was my last. "I trust you. You've never failed me. My body is another story. It's full of fun surprises."

The conductor returned and said our compartment was ready whenever we were.

After one last puff on my cigarette I replied, "Lead the way."

Jim and the driver stood on either side of me, prepared to catch me if I faltered. Gripping my crutches tightly I hauled myself to stand and then held steady. Jim had offered his hand to pull up on and I’d stubbornly refused. I could do this. It was four steps to the door. I handed my crutches off to the conductor and used the railing to handle the three stairs leading into the rail car.

Reach, push up and pull the body to follow, rebalance and repeat. It was only three stairs, but it may as well have been a flight of them. The conductor was at the top holding my crutches. I leaned against the railing for a moment, caught my breath and then said, "Thanks for the help. Which way is it?"

He gestured toward an open door a few yards away. It wouldn't be much longer. Jim was behind me, spotting me in case I fell and making small talk with the conductor. Head down and sweating, my attention was focused on my feet and the floor.

When I entered the compartment, I immediately noticed that the seats had already been pulled down and the beds made up. If I hadn't been so preoccupied with not falling, I would have complained that they weren't transporting an invalid. I wasn't sick.
I eased onto the bed and sat on the edge to regain my composure. The driver carried my chair, a porter in tow with our luggage. Once Jim was sure I was holding my own he helped them stow our gear.

Once they'd left Jim quipped, "Dibs on the top bunk."

"Hah, very funny," I groused. "They're certainly well prepared. I'm surprised they didn't send a nurse as well."

"You're in a foul mood. I'll let it slide for now. You've had a full day already and it's only just started. By the way, most people would love to have such comfortable accommodations for such a long trip."

"Sorry, that was ungrateful of me. They just wanted to help. Whoever arranged this trip was certainly thorough."

Jim sat down next to me and said, "You can blame some of the overkill on me. General Lockheed's secretary called and asked for advice."

"That explains it," I replied. "Did you tell them to have the beds turned down too? It's early."

"Think about it..."

I cut him short saying, "The constant preoccupation with my ass... I should have guessed."

"And back and legs. You know you should stretch out and shift position. I figured it would be more comfortable and that you'd have more room to work with."

"I get it and point taken. Speaking of work, could you get my rucksack for me? I brought my assignments," I said sheepishly, then added, "Thank you for helping to figure out the logistics. Avoiding the main entrance was brilliant."

"You're welcome. Don't work too hard. This will be a long trip and an even longer drive home. Rest up. I'll be reading in the top bunk if you need anything. Otherwise I'll mind my own business."

Great job Jean, way to be a pissy jerk.

I'd been working for a few hours when I checked my watch. It was just past 1500 hours and time to take care of the necessaries.

Jim was silent in the top bunk. I hoped he wasn't sleeping. If he was, I didn't want to disturb him. I also knew I had to pee. I should probably drink some water too.

"Hey Jim," I called softly.

"Yes, do you need anything?"

"I hate having to ask for this," I replied, hesitated and then continued, "I've got to cath. So, if you could just not look and then help take care of the clean-up when I'm done."

My cheeks felt hot and the back of my neck prickled.

"Need anything else?"
"A drink of water please."

"Good thinking. You don't have to be so polite either. It isn't a big deal. Remember, I work in a hospital. I'll grab some damp paper towels while you do your thing."

He climbed out of the bunk and left the compartment.

I sat up, scooted to the edge of the bed and got out the supplies. How embarrassing!

He was gone for about ten minutes and knocked before coming back in. I wiped my hands with the towels he'd given me while he rummaged in his valise.

"Aha, found it! I knew I'd brought it," he exclaimed.

"What's so exciting?"

Instead of answering he unscrewed the lid of a jelly jar and then handed it to me.

"Thanks, I think. What am I supposed to do with this?"

"I thought it would work better than paper cups. It has a lid so it won't spill on the way to the bathroom to dump it. Glass can be sanitized as well."

"That's a good idea. Do you always look in the kitchen for medical supplies or is this a new quirk?"

He chuckled and replied, "Only recently. You needed solutions that travelled well."

Jim took the disposable cup from me, poured it into the jar and then said, "I'll be back soon. Be thinking about what you want for dinner."

What I really wanted was a cigarette. The only place on the train that permitted smoking was the club car and adjacent dining car.

When he came back from the bathroom he went straight to his bunk. I stretched out again. If I slept perhaps the time would pass more quickly. Not having to think was an added bonus.

I thought he'd forgotten about dinner until he asked again, "Should I bring back a menu or do you have an idea of what you want?"

"I'll be fine, but thanks for asking," I replied.

He was silent and then my stomach growled, blowing my cover. I couldn't say I wasn't hungry now.

"Wrong answer, what's going on with you?"

I didn't want to talk about how I felt. Jim knew just about everything about me. I knew a bit about him, but it didn't feel equal.

"What's your plan for when Gracia and Elysia get back?"

Jim thought for a moment before replying, "We'll go on more dates. I hope you and Sciezka won't mind taking Elysia overnight sometimes. Gracia isn't comfortable with overnights yet. Frankly,
neither am I. Time will take care of everything."

I didn't reply immediately. I'd expected a longer answer or an argument. Then only reason he hadn't told me much about himself was because I hadn't asked. Jim Bruno was a man of few words when he wanted to be, but not secretive in the least.

"You still haven't told me what you'd like for dinner. We could go to the club car. It's not that far, just two cars. You've gone further in therapy."

Using my crutches on a moving train where I could be seen didn't sound appealing at all. But a cigarette sounded good and a change of scenery might be just what I needed.

"Let's go. It's just after 1600 now. By the time I get there we'll be just in time for an early dinner."

"That sounds more like the guy I know. I'll even buy you a drink."

For the most part the way to the dining car was trouble free. Sure, the train swayed and shook, but it was predictable. I could compensate for it. Jim followed close behind me.

I was more than ready to sit down when we got there. A waiter asked if we'd mind sharing a table with another party. I was fine with it. The sooner I could sit the better. I was too tired to keep up my end of a conversation and Jim would have a chance to socialize with other people besides me.

Our dinner partner looked to be around my age and was apparently travelling alone. They'd probably get along famously, at least for the time it took to eat a meal.

"Are you going to Rush Valley for automail too?" he asked before any introductions were made.

I'd have to fix that. "Hello, I'm Jean and this is my friend Jim and you are?"

"Sorry about that. I'm Thomas. I'm sick of the peg leg so I'm going for automail. I thought with the crutches you might be too."

I was relieved when the waiter came back to take our drink orders.

Jim wouldn't be happy, but I needed something to take the edge off. "I'll have a scotch; better make that a double, on the rocks. Could you please bring an ashtray as well?"

Jim and Thomas placed their orders as well. I hoped my ordering a double hadn't influenced Jim's decision to order water.

I'd been right; Jim took up the slack in conversation by asking Thomas about his rehab.

The drinks came; I ordered the chicken special and tried to look like I was listening to their conversation.

When there was a lull Thomas said, "So you never did answer Jean. Are you going for automail? I noticed the crutches."

"Automail is amazing. I'm friends with a very talented mechanic. Unfortunately, it won't work for me."

"You look like you're in one piece other than the crutches. You're healthy, a great candidate. What
did you do anyway?"

I took another sip of scotch before I answered; it was tempting to empty the glass. "I broke my back on a mission, I was in the military. The injury to my spinal cord was at waist level."

"You're lucky it didn't leave you wheelchair bound."

Jim's brow creased and he set down his fork, waiting for my reply.

"You're right Thomas that would be just terrible. I'd be a pretty pitiful bastard."

"Glad you came through it fine. I feel sorry for those guys when I go to the hospital for checkups."

"Yeah, they look pretty pathetic."

I nursed my drink and waited for dinner to be over.

Jim helped me up and we went back to our compartment. I got back on the bed and turned toward the window.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew Jim was getting down from his bunk. I turned over and watched as he opened his bag, pulled out pajamas and set out his shaving kit.

"Good you're awake. I'm going to get a snack from the club car and stretch my legs."

He didn't add that he'd take his time to give me some privacy so I could get ready for bed as well.

"Do you need anything? Water, snacks, towels? Anything?"

"I'm good for now. I think I'll get changed and take the braces off while you're out."

By the time he came back I'd worked my way out of my clothes. It was a challenge in such close quarters. The only good part about pissing on cue was that I didn't have to fight my way into the bathroom.

I was still thinking about what Thomas had said at dinner. Did people really pity me when they saw me? I'd begun to feel that for the most part I had things handled. I was coping well, doing the things I wanted to do. In fact, in some ways I was doing more. I could chalk it up to ignorance on Thomas' part, but maybe he had a point.

What if Sciezka had enjoyed not having to think about all the accommodations I needed daily while we were separated?

Jim came back in the knick of time. I could stop thinking about all the unpleasant things that crept in around the edges when I wasn't busy.

He handed me some wet paper towels and I washed up while he took care of the jelly jar and supplies.

When he came back, he had two glasses and ice. He handed them to me and then pulled a flask out
of his valise.

"Figured you'd have trouble sleeping and wouldn't want the drugs. I'm so wound up I could use one too."

After the nightcap I got under the covers. Hopefully the liquor and the rocking of the train would lull me to sleep.

The pain woke me up and the spasms kept me awake. Blinding bright morning sunlight streaming through the window didn't help matters. Shifting position was next to impossible. There just wasn't enough room.

I didn't want to wake Jim. With his schedule he rarely got to sleep late. I'd wait it out. The pain and spasms would pass. They'd been worse. Thinking about seeing Sciezka for the first time in over a month would take my mind off of it.

I heard rustling above me. I didn't want Jim to worry about what was going on with me so I feigned sleep.

There was more rustling and then bare feet padding across the floor. The door to the storage cubicle opened and shut.

He'd leave the compartment to clean up and get breakfast. That would be my chance to get myself together.

"Your respiration rate is too fast for you to be sound asleep. The frown is a dead giveaway as well. Stop with the charade," he said quietly.

I opened my eyes as he continued, "I noticed the spasms as well. What hurts? Maybe I can help."

"It's not as bad as it looks," I replied.

"Did you shift position at all in the night?"

"The bunk was too narrow..."

"Not that narrow! Damn it you know what could happen! I thought you were smarter than that."

"I figured one night wouldn't hurt," I countered flatly.

He held out his hand and ordered, "You're rolling over now. Skin breakdown and bed sores are the last thing you need to contend with."

I didn't comply.

Instead I scowled and looked out the window to avoid making eye contact with him.

"Take your meds," he advised, giving no reaction to my attempt at insubordination. He knew he was right as well as I did.

I didn't acknowledge him. I'd found stonewalled silence easier than speaking. I rarely spoke in the hospital unless I had to.
"Fine, don't. You just grin and bear it. It's clearly working well for you. I'm going to clean up and have some breakfast. I'll be back soon. Maybe you'll be tolerable once I've had a cup of coffee."

He came back just like he said he would. My back was still stiff, the spasms worse. I chastised myself for not accepting his help before.

"I brought you coffee and water in case you had second thoughts about the meds."

I held my tongue until I was sure I could answer him without sounding harsh. It was hard to maintain a conversational tone when it hurt this much.

Finally, I said, "As much as they'd help, I don't want to be dozy or clumsy when I have to get off the train. It's hard enough using the crutches when I'm at my best."

He smiled and then replied, "I talked to the conductor. If you take your pills now, they'll be out of your system before we get there."

"I don't want anything to mess this up. Those pills knock me out. I already need more help than I feel comfortable accepting. What if I fell and hurt myself? Then what would we do?"

"Before you turned yourself in you weren't that bad off. You could do this without my help if you had to."

"You may be right. I know I'm useless without regular physio. You and Gracia will have to come with us when we vacation."

He glared at me, sighed loudly and said, "You know your home routine and what Sciezka can help you with."

"Really? Is that all I need? I can hardly wait for the honeymoon. Adventure, new experiences, travel to exotic places and historic venues with endless flights of stairs. Just thinking about it is thrilling. Long train trips and hours in cars on bumpy roads? I can hardly contain my enthusiasm."

"You're so optimistic," he replied sarcastically.

"Speaking of fun things, I should cath."

He turned to leave so I'd have some privacy.

"I just thought of another perk. Handing Sciezka jelly jars full of pee. The gift that keeps on giving..."

As he whipped around his nostrils flared and pupils dilated.

"Like I said, take the damned pill. Let me work on your back while you work on your attitude. You have eight hours until we get there. Use them."

"There's nothing but fun times when you travel with me."

He'd turned to leave when he said quietly, "Don't let twenty-four hours ruin almost a year of progress."
"Time to wake up," Jim said quietly.

"I'm up. How far is it?"

"Did you sleep well?" he asked. "It'll be another hour until we get to Rush Valley. I thought you'd want to have plenty of time to get ready."

"Thanks for both wake up calls. I was in rare form earlier. Sorry about that. And yes, I slept well."

"No problem. It's not like you threw a bedpan at me. I've seen worse," he joked.

I smiled, but I still felt bad. "Could you please get me some coffee and water? I need to take care of some stuff that I'd rather do alone. That and my mouth feels like I licked the bottom of a bird cage."

"That's a colorful way to put it. I'll bring both. You'll need to be smiling and minty fresh when we get there. Are you excited?"

"I have a terrible case of the butterflies. What if she changed her mind? I am a lot of trouble," I answered.

"I'm pretty sure none of her other relationships have required hiding out from the government. But trouble? Other than espionage you're a model prospective husband."

"Thanks for the reassurance. This would be a nightmare without you."

Jim handed me my duffle without having to be asked and before leaving the compartment asked, "Would you like help getting into the braces when I get back?"

I nodded my reply, and on the way out he said quietly, "I'll be back in fifteen minutes and I'll knock before coming in."

When he got back, I washed my hands then downed the coffee to knock the last of the drug haze out of my head. It didn't take long to fasten the braces or hike my pants on over them since I had help. We both packed up and soon the conductor came to tell us what to expect when we got to the station.

Getting off the train was a production, but it went off without a hitch. Jim assembled my chair as soon as the porter set the pieces down on the platform.

It was a relief to sit. Once I had my bags taken care of, I moved out of the way. While Jim made arrangements for a cab, I sat next to the freight claim area and had a cigarette.

His smile when he returned told me he'd found one. He grabbed his bags and told me to follow him. He was walking pretty fast but I kept up just fine.

"I don't appreciate this thing enough. Guess it takes being stuck without it. That sounds wrong, but you probably get it," I said when he paused briefly.

He was standing at the top of a ramp used for cargo and freight, but it'd work well enough for me. Before we got going again, he said, "Never been in your situation, so I can only imagine. The train had to be irritating at the very least. I'm impressed with your patience. You never even raised your
I'd never been to Rush Valley before. The driver pointed out landmarks on the way to Garfiel's shop. Between the displays in shop windows and people on the street I saw more automail in twenty minutes than I had in my entire life. It seemed to me like automail users kept it visible on purpose. Ed always hid his. I noticed that there were curb cuts and ramps everywhere. I figured they were probably for those who hadn't had the surgery.

The cab stopped in front of a storefront that looked like the others until I saw the sign. It was very pink. A flurry of pink feathers appeared on the porch and approached the cab. From Winry's vivid description and stories I gathered that this was Garfiel.

"Greetings and salutations gentlemen, I'm so happy you're here!" he trilled in a falsetto more apropos for a stage than a shop.

Jim returned Garfiel's greeting as he paid the driver and helped him with our bags, then quickly got down to business. I'd kept my chair in the back with me, so I could get to it easily.

"Ooh, I'd recognize you anywhere dreamboat! You must be Jean."

I transferred and then offered my hand for him to shake as I said, "Is it that obvious or does my reputation precede me? I hope I live up to your expectations."

"Winry would kill me if I didn't notice her work right away. That wheelchair is one of the best designs I've seen. It could put me out of business with how well it handles. No one would want automail! Besides, who could miss those eyes of yours? You're a knockout. I thought Sciezka was prone to hyperbole, since she described you as a cross between Prince Charming and a film star," he gushed.

Sciezka really described me that way? I was flattered and stunned.

"Speaking of Sciezka, where is she?" I asked, hoping to change the subject. Being so openly admired right there on the sidewalk was a bit embarrassing.

"I sent her out to pick up a few things. You're ahead of schedule on the itinerary the general sent. He must be a dear."

"I can hardly wait to see her. I'll have to tell General Lockheed you hold him in high esteem," I replied. Martin would be either flattered or horrified that Garfiel thought he was darling.

Garfiel ushered us inside saying, "Where are my manners? Come inside and have some tea while we wait for Sciezka to get back. I want to hear all about both of you!"

He had us sit in the front room while he went into the kitchen for refreshments. It looked more like a parlor or tea room than an automail shop. Jim chose to sit on a brocade fainting couch flanked by impractically delicate tables with lace doilies topping them.

When he returned, he pushed a small cart with an elaborate tea service atop it. I was surprised he wasn't wearing an apron, but kept that thought to myself.
He poured the tea into garishly colored china cups with ornate handles, chattering the whole time, while simultaneously asking how we took our tea. There was also a plate of sandwiches like my Ma would have offered the good company.

Jim and I sipped tea and nibbled on our sandwiches as Garfiel gushed on, "Winry has told me so much about both of you. I'm so happy to finally meet you in the flesh. She said Jim was soft spoken, but Jean, I hear you're a card. You must be tired from the trip to be so quiet."

I set the saucer on my lap carefully, since my cup was still half full and then replied, "You're right. The trip really took its toll. I'm also anxious to see Sciezka. Jim is probably itching to get Gracia and Elysia."

"Where are my manners? I'm just so excited. I'll write down the directions for him so there isn't any further delay."

When he left the room Jim whispered to me, "I thought Winry was exaggerating."

"She wasn't. He's a great guy... just happier than most," I quipped back quietly.

Garfiel bustled into the room, lavender stationary in hand. I wondered if it was perfumed. I'd only gotten a few letters written on paper like that. Sciezka wasn't the type. Her stationary suited her; heavy ivory card stock with deckled edges. She said it reminded her of old books.

After handing Jim the frilly paper Garfiel finally stopped fussing about his host duties and sat down. He chose the fainting couch and perched delicately on the edge, his legs crossed at the knee.

"I'm sorry she's taking so long Jean. Don't worry though. She probably stopped at the book store on her way back."

"I'm not worried. I know she can handle herself. Thank you for letting her stay with you. I don't know what we'd have done otherwise."

"She's no trouble at all. In fact, she's a delight. So helpful," he replied.

"Sciezka does like to keep herself busy. How long did it take her to run out of reading material? That really drives her nuts."

Garfiel giggled then said, "She began cataloging my collection of journal articles the first week. When that was finished, she made an index card system of all my clients, contacts and suppliers. She also took inventory and cleaned the supply closet."

Jim commented, "She's certainly kept herself busy."

"This place has never been run so efficiently. I'll be sorry to see her go. I was going to turn her loose in my closet to organize my shoes. Gracia and Elysia have been wonderful too. Little Elysia's mother says she asks to come over to play princess constantly."

I smiled thinking of her in a closet full of pink, lavender and frills.

While it was good to hear that things had been running smoothly, I was still impatient to see for myself. I checked my watch and then excused myself for a smoke.

"There's an ashcan on the front porch. I keep it there for customers," Garfiel said and then added, "She should be here any minute now if you want to freshen up in the powder room. Just let me know."
Once outside I took out a cigarette, lit it then, leaned back and closed my eyes.

The sheer noise and force of her greeting nearly knocked me out of my chair. I dropped my cigarette in shock and stared in disbelief as she hugged me tightly and trembled.

Sciezka didn't speak; all she could do was hold and kiss me. I wanted to tell her how much I'd missed her, how happy I was to see her, but I couldn't form the words and all I could do was kiss her back.

Sciezka was all I wanted in the world. Her kisses and the look in her eyes told me the feeling was mutual. I shouldn't have worried; I no longer needed to ask if she'd want me back. I had her answer right here and now.

"She must be back!" I heard Garfiel say, "If not, Jean may need medical attention. I heard something fall."

I peeked over Sciezka's shoulder and saw Jim grinning in the doorway. I was puzzled to see Garfiel go outside with a broom and dust pan, and it was only that I noticed the fallen groceries strewn across the front walk and porch.

"Oh honey, you get back to your man," Garfiel said, tears welling up on his smiling face, "I've never seen a kiss like that outside of the theater, I just may need a hankie so I don't smear my eyes."

I took her hand and pulled Sciezka into my lap. "Our next stop is the nearest hotel," I whispered, "Know of any good ones?"

"Go start the car while I call ahead," Sciezka whispered back, "We'd better get right in our room or you're getting lucky on the reception desk."
Chapter 50: A Return to Normalcy: Back on Track

The bedding was in a sweaty tangle strewn around us. She was asleep on my chest as I cradled her in my arms. When I kissed the top of her head she didn't stir. She was as spent as I was. It felt wonderful.

The past few days had seemed more surreal than the events leading up to them, and while I held her in my arms, I smiled as it all came flooding back to me.

I remembered the night before vividly. I'd waited for so long.

*It hadn't taken long to load the jeep. I had been tempted to call a taxi, as the sooner we got settled into our hotel room, the better. I just wanted Sciezka all to myself. We'd earned the right to be a bit selfish, and I wasn't about to let the opportunity slip away.*

*If I'd had my way, I'd have made love to her right there on the front porch. Jim, Garfiel and gawkers be damned.*

We parked out front, the valet took the keys and we got checked in. Garfiel had called ahead to book the room. The bell boy took our bags and escorted us to our room. I tipped him and then immediately hung the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the knob.

Sciezka was on the bed draped against the pillows. She'd taken off her glasses and then looked at me seductively. That was all the invitation I needed. Once I'd double checked the locks on the door, I shut the drapes and hurried across the room. When I got there, I only paused to unbutton my shirt.

"*Hold on a minute,*" she'd said and I stopped undressing abruptly.

"*Is anything wrong? Wait, do you have anything special in mind? Should I stay dressed?*" I had asked, hoping she had something kinky planned.

"*You must be exhausted from the train. We've waited this long. Are you sure you wouldn't like to take a nap first?*"

I made the transfer in one fluid motion and was impressed since I still had the braces on.

"*Just give me a few minutes,*" I said once I was next to her, "*Why don't you check out the amenities in the bathroom while I get out of my clothes. I want to do everything but sleep right now.*"

"*In that case, I'll slip into something special,*" she'd said before she kissed me.

I grinned as I watched her saunter away from the bed and then said, "*That's more like it.*"

After stripping down to my boxers in record time, for me at least, I got under the covers to wait. What would she pick? Had she gotten anything new?
The bed was comfortable, like our bed at home. The pillows were fluffy, the sheets soft and heavy, feeling more like silk than cotton. It was so big. Maybe I’d just rest my eyes for a moment. It had been a long day so far. I looked towards the bathroom door, expectantly. My eyelids felt so heavy, but I wanted to see her the moment she came out.

The room was bathed in warm half-light when I came to. I held Sciezka spooned to me, her back to my belly. She'd put on a sheer number that I didn't recognize. It had been wasted on me in that state. I'd just been too tired.

Once I’d rubbed the sleep from my eyes I asked, "What time is it?"

"It's just after six. You were out cold when I came out of the bathroom," she replied.

"You should have woken me up," I complained.

"I didn't have the heart to, you looked so peaceful. Besides, I thought you might want to rest up," she said and then added suggestively, "You're going to need all your energy."

"So, what do you have planned?" I asked my interest piqued.

"Not much other than a bubble bath, followed by room service and you."

Our fingers were wrinkled by the time we were ready to get out of the tub. I slid my hands over her breasts, slippery with foam and she arched her back in response. She'd gasped when I thumbed her folds, my touch feather light.

"If we're going to eat, I should call to have them bring it up soon," she said when I got too enthusiastic.

"If you're that hungry, sure I suppose we can eat first."

She'd never postponed sex for food.

"I placed the order while you were sleeping. Trust me, you'll like it," she explained.

"I will?" I'd asked hopefully.

She didn’t answer and instead got out of the tub, letting the bubbles run off her pale skin. Clearly this was for my benefit. After toweling off slowly she wrapped one of the hotel robes around herself.

"Get over here," I directed as I pulled her closer to me with the collar of the robe. I kissed her passionately then said, "That robe is huge on you."

"They're one size fits all I guess," she said as she fiddled with the cuffs. "Do you need anything?"

I pulled at a cuff and rolled it as I replied, "Just you. A towel would be good too. Otherwise I've got it handled."

She left the room and I eased myself out of the tub. Once I was dry, I brushed my teeth and shaved. That felt much better. Maybe I was travel worn. I fought with the robe, but eventually managed it.

When I left the bathroom Sciezka was sitting at a small table by the window. The candle light flickered and cast a soft glow on her features. She stood up, handed me a glass of champagne and toasted, "To us."
"To us," I said as we touched our glasses together. She then sealed the toast with a tender kiss.

If I remember correctly, she anticipated that I wouldn't be that hungry. I wasn't sure if she'd figured I'd be exhausted or preoccupied. But creamy cheese, bread and dessert would be perfect with champagne. The chocolate covered strawberries were a sure indicator of her intentions.

"Are you ok?" Sciezka asked midway through dinner.

"I'm fine, sorry for worrying you," I replied.

"Are you sure? You seem off. Is everything going well in Central? I haven't even asked yet. I was just so happy to see you," she gushed.

I took her hand and said, "Everything is as good as it can be there. I've been keeping busy. I've missed you so much. It was easier to cope if I didn't have too much time to myself."

"So, you're just tired?" she pressed.

"Tuckered out and relieved and elated all at once," I assured her.

"Then we should head to bed," she said. "To sleep. We'll leave everything else for the morning. You'll need your energy for what I've got planned."

I was jarred back into the present when Sciezka stirred in my arms, waking slowly and sighed contentedly. She sat up, then leaned in to kiss me tenderly. "I told you it would be better in the morning. Was I right?"

"As always. So, was I worth the wait?" I replied.

"You're always worth waiting for," she replied, then kissed me again passionately for emphasis.

We dozed for a bit longer, neither of us wanting to get out of bed. Finally, Sciezka sat up and said, "It's well after noon. We should let housekeeping come in to clean. What do you want to do today? I can give you the grand tour before we go to dinner with everyone."

I pulled her closer to me as I said, "You'll have to take me sight-seeing some other time. The only attraction I'm interested in now is you."

At 1500 hours we finally left the room and stopped at the desk on the way out. The clerk smiled as he asked, "Are the accommodations suitable? Mister Garfiel said you would require the honeymoon suite."

I chuckled and then replied, "I wondered why the room was so big. It's beautiful. I hope we didn't make more work for the cleaning staff by sleeping in so late."

He smiled as he said, "We always clean that room last. It's best to let lovebirds wake up on their own schedule. It's the least we can do."

His comment made Sciezka blush and she touched my shoulder, like she was trying to hurry me along.

"Thanks for the excellent service. We're really enjoying our stay," I replied and then added, "I'll tell Garfiel you said hello,"
Then the clerk blushed at the mere mention of Garfiel's name. Wonder if they had history? If Sciezka knew she didn't let on.

Sciezka said the hotel wasn't far away from the shop and we had some time to kill. She suggested we take the scenic route through the park. The weather in Rush Valley was still warm, even at night. It was further south and more temperate than Central. Between its proximity to the mines where the ore for parts came from and mild winters it was easy to see why the area was a mecca for automail.

I'd gotten ahead of Sciezka, so I waited for her next to a park bench.

When she caught up with me, she faced me, hands on her hips, waiting. I patted the bench and teased, "Sit down and stay awhile. What's your hurry?"

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," Sciezka replied as she flopped next to me, gracelessly. "You're a man on a mission or something. You left me in the dust!"

I wrapped an arm around her, squeezed and apologized, "I've just been trying anything to keep myself distracted. I'm not used to pushing this thing slowly anymore. Ask Jim at dinner, he'll tell you all about it."

"So, you gave Jim a hard time and did extra conditioning because you missed me?"

"I went to physio every day, swimming too. I spent as much time in the library as I could get my security detail to agree to."

"I was a lot like that. I must have driven poor Garfiel up the wall. I'd organize and catalog, practice yoga, pace and cook," she replied. "The good news is that I'm no longer a disaster in the kitchen. Well, at least less forgetful."

"Wearing the carpets thin is out for me. I suppose I could try it with the braces, but it's not the same," I said glibly.

She countered, "Maybe I even felt some nostalgia for cracks like that. I only nearly burned up the kitchen a few times."

"That's good to know and I have it on good authority that Garfiel thinks you are delightful."

She flushed self-consciously and snuggled closer to me. I couldn't resist teasing her, "You're delightful and according to your descriptions, if I could walk? It would be on water."

The color in her cheeks deepened and she covered her face and exclaimed, "I can't help it if I missed you!"

"You aren't the only one who has it bad. So, we're both pathetic without each other. That just means it can never happen again," I said and then kissed her.

She deepened the kiss and I pulled her closer, until she had to sit in my lap. Once astride the chair, in full view of everyone we started a make out session, hungry and needing, like in the beginning.

It only lasted a moment before propriety got the better of her and she whispered, "People are going to see us."

I licked her earlobe as I said, "So they see us."
I looked around, we had the park to ourselves, and still I called out to anyone within earshot, "I love this woman! We're getting married!"

I was waiting for a scolding, I'd earned it. I hardly expected her to pull me back in for another kiss and then yell, "This man is insane! I love him!"

For her ears only I said, "Then we're both nuts. It's good to be crazy in love."

She kissed me again tenderly, then stood up and demurely straightened her skirt.

"We should get going. I don't want to keep everyone waiting," she said as she took my hand and tugged gently.

"We really should, it'd be impolite if we were late. That and I'm hungry. I worked up an appetite today," I replied.

"I'm famished too. You're going to love this place. It's one of Garfiel's favorites, mine too."

"So why is it his favorite? Are the waiters all male and incredibly attentive?"

"It's the food you goof," she said as she flicked my ear with her fingers. "Though the restaurant itself is kind of romantic, you'll see."

"I'll take your word on it until I see it. The sooner we eat, the sooner I can get you back into bed."

She walked ahead of me and called over her shoulder, "I'm counting on it. Now scoot."

"This view is all the encouragement I need," I called back.

Elysia bounded off the porch when she saw us round the corner.

"Mommy said that there would be a surprise!" she sang as she came to a stop. She crawled into my lap, curled up tight against my chest as she said, "I thought it might be a puppy, but you are much better."

I kissed her cheek and replied, "I'm glad that I'm better than a puppy. I missed you Princess. Were you good while I was gone?"

"I think I was. I miss school. When are we going home? Where were you?"

Sciezka stepped in to address Elysia's barrage of questions and said, "He had to go on a quest."

Elysia's eyes went wide and then she nodded and explained in her grown-up voice, "I always knew Jean was a handsome prince. Didn't I tell you that Garfiel?"

"You did and you were right," Garfiel answered as he came outside. "Shall we go?"

And leave we did. Garfiel led the way as Sciezka and I followed. Elysia was in her favorite place, my lap. Jim and Gracia brought up the rear, talking quietly and holding hands.
If Garfiel hadn't been in the lead we would have missed the entrance to the restaurant. The only indicator that there was anything behind the bright blue gate that led into the alley was a small sign that read, "Yassou". Garfiel held the gate open and said, "Follow your noses people. It is just back there."

I had my doubts, but Sciezka said she liked it. It couldn't be that bad.

The alleyway opened up into a courtyard lined with trees that had tiny lights in them. A swarthy man picked Elysia up off my lap and began dancing with her. The lively music was coming from a few men sitting in the corner. It was so catchy it even made me want to dance and shout with them.

Elysia seemed right at home in the man's arms and Gracia was smiling and clapping along with the music. When they stopped Elysia shouted, "Yassou, Dimitri!"

I looked at her and smiled. Had Elysia begun to pick up Cretan while I was away? I wouldn't be surprised with a natural curiosity and a growing intellect like hers. Gracia would certainly feel proud. Maes would too.

Garfiel had hung back behind the group. Elysia's dance partner Dimitri grabbed him in a bear hug and slapped him on the back.

"Come with me friend. When you told me they had finally come I decided a celebration was in order."

Sciezka leaned over and chided me quietly, "See, I told you it was nice. Wait until you taste the spanakopita here."

My ears perked up at that. I pulled her closer, as the next thing I said was for her ears only, "But will it be brought to me in bed by a goddess?"

Gracia asked Sciezka, "Is he behaving?"

"Him behave? Never," Sciezka replied, her eyes flickering with implied mischief.

Jim took Gracia by the hand and quipped, "He would not be the same if he behaved. Now let's eat. Elysia told me all about this place this afternoon. She says they throw plates on the ground and it's a good thing."

I looked over to Sciezka again and whispered, "He's kidding right? They don't really break plates on purpose."

"I think it's only traditional for big celebrations. Garfiel promised me this would be a low-key dinner," she replied.

I muttered, "Garfiel low key? This should be interesting."

There was already food at the table by the time Sciezka and I got to the back of the restaurant. The table was out of the way and there was a place cleared for me. Dinner was off to a good start. Elysia clearly loved the place, as she was eating purple olives off her fingers. She must have been here a few times, as she had a little bit of everything on her plate.

The wine was poured and the rest of us tucked into various appetizers. There were stuffed grape leaves, or "dolmathes" and several types of olives arranged on a plate. Next to it was pita bread that Sciezka said I should dip into a savory cucumber yogurt sauce. Tomatoes and pungent feta cheese lined a tray of something very familiar to me. It was a feast.
I was biting into my second peace of spinach pie, and oh, it was delicious, though not served naked when our host came back.

Elysia's eyes danced when she saw what he had in his hands.

He set down a plate of cheese that was bubbling and smelled wonderful. He stepped back, shouted "Opa!" and then struck a match and stepped back. With a whoosh it went up in flames! Holy shit! I almost jumped out of my seat! I probably would have if I could!

Everyone else simply cheered and started to make a toast as they admired the dish and its presentation. I didn't get it, why was no one alarmed? Even Elysia was giggling along with them.

"Sciezka, be careful! It's on fire!" I warned, ready to smother the flames myself if no one acted fast.

The flames were quickly doused when Dimitri squeezed a lemon over the top of it.

Gracia began passing the bread as if nothing had happened and Sciezka said, "Jean, that is Saganaki. I wondered how you would react. I'm glad you didn't pour your drink out on it."

Garfiel teased, "Girl you were right! He panicked when he saw it, just like you said he would."

He then portioned the dish out onto small plates, handing me the first one saying, "You get some first since we gave you a hard time. It's fun to do to people the first time they come here. Eat up, it's fantastic. Put it on the bread."

What the heck, why not try it? Everything else so far had been wonderful, and this smelled pretty good. Sciezka looked at me expectantly and after my first bite I said, "It's delicious. Should I say 'Opa'?"

Elysia chimed right in, "Do it with me Jean! Opa!"

How could I resist?

More wine was brought out. Garfiel poured everyone another glass, save for Elysia who had water in her wine glass.

I was getting full when the main course came out. We all shared platters piled high with lamb souvlaki, roast potatoes and other dishes that were delicious, but I couldn't pronounce. I just ate and enjoyed myself. The conversation was lively and it was more fun than I'd had since we'd all been at the lake.

Just when I thought I couldn't eat another bite dessert was served. Strong Cretan coffee in tiny cups, honey puffs and a diamond shaped pieces of a walnut mixture between flaky layers. Baklava, Elysia reminded me. It was a spread of all of my favorites. I'd just have to find more room to put it.

Neither Garfiel or Dimitri, the restaurant owner would have allowed us to leave without dessert anyway.

Dimitri was getting ready to bring out more coffee and Garfiel politely declined on our behalf saying, "My friends have a long journey ahead of them tomorrow. They are going back home."

"Then may I suggest a drink of ouzo for this celebration?" Dimitri said, already motioning to someone to bring it out. "It's true, one's heart always longs for home my friend," Dimitri added, "Sciezka, Gracia and little Elysia, you must come back soon, eh? Bring everyone back with you as
well."

"We sure will Dimitri!" Elysia said, her cheeks full of sweets.

On the way out of the restaurant we were a raucous group. Elysia skipped and danced with Jim and we all made conversation. Somehow or other the topic of conversation turned to just how Garfiel had found the restaurant. I was certainly curious. The man seemed well connected.

"So Garfiel, how did you discover that restaurant?"

"Oh, pshaw honey, you want me to reveal all of my secrets?" Garfiel giggled, "Let's just say I reeled in a prize fish and let him lead the way."

Thank the heavens Elysia was too young to understand that.

"You caught a fish?"

But not too young to ask questions.

"Elysia, look at this," Gracia said, pointing to something in a store window to distract her and smoothly change the subject.

We made our way back to Garfiel's quietly after that. Elysia had fallen asleep in my lap and Garfiel commented, "That is just too sweet. No wonder she adores you."

"The princess and I have spent a lot of time together this year," I said. "She's a great kid, who could resist her?"

Sciezka walked next to me, listening as Garfiel and I talked. I could tell she was tired. Hopefully she'd catch a second wind when we arrived at our room.

"She has got you wrapped around her little finger, I can see why. You're good for her. I can tell. Sciezka has told me a few tales."

"There are lots of them. I'll have to ask you which ones another time. The first few months after I got out were certainly an experience."

Garfiel was quiet until I added for clarity, "I bet no one explained how I know Gracia and Elysia so well. I lived with them right after I was released from the hospital to start outpatient rehab."

"No, Gracia didn't mention the circumstances. It worked out for the best," he replied.

"It sure did. I'd be back east living with my folks and probably wouldn't have gotten to know Sciezka," I agreed and touched Sciezka's hip in between pushes.

"When Winry first called and told me about your condition last autumn I worried for you. Now I know I shouldn't have. You have good people around you."

When the group arrived back at Garfiel's place Jim took Elysia off my lap and carried her inside. Gracia followed him. Garfiel offered to call me and Sciezka a cab.

"It'll probably be faster if we walk," I explained. "Thanks for the offer, but by the time we wait for one and break down the chair..."

Garfiel nodded and said, "That makes sense. What a bother."
"Sad but true," I quipped. "I've gotten used to it and it could be worse. Besides, I need to burn off some of dinner. I'm still stuffed. The food and company were both amazing. Thank you for your hospitality, well, for everything. I knew Sciezka would be in good hands."

"I am terrible with goodbyes," Garfiel said tearfully as he pulled out his lacy hankie. "So I will just say see you soon."

Sciezka hugged him tightly and then they kissed on both cheeks, something I'd never seen her do before. "You have to visit with us the next time you're in Central. Tell Dimitri he's welcome as well."

Garfiel dabbed at his eyes again and then said, "You two take care of each other."

"I expect to see you at the wedding Garfiel," Sciezka replied. "I'll need you to help me get ready. I don't know anyone else who could do the job as well as you do."

"Girl, I'll bring the whole makeup kit. You will be the most gorgeous bride in Central!" Garfiel exclaimed.

Then he turned to go inside and when I looked back when we got to the corner he was still waving his handkerchief at us, watching from the porch.

Sciezka was quiet most of the way. I hoped she wasn't upset or troubled.

"Garfiel is too much, but he's good people. Dimitri too. We're lucky to have such good friends."

She stopped in her tracks and said, "I don't think the description friends even begins to cover it. What about family?"

"We're not even married yet and we're building a family..."

"Is that so hard to imagine? You're still shocked when people love and accept you for who you are. You need to work on that... we need to work on it."

I clasped her hand in mine and said, "You've done a lot of thinking while we were apart. Me too. Maybe some good came out of this."

She smiled, leaned in for a kiss and then said, "Maybe, but I still haven't shown you exactly how much I yearned to be with you. Let's work on that first."

"So, this morning?" I asked, bewildered.

"Only a fraction of how much I missed you and love you. Race you to the room!" she said and then bolted down the sidewalk.

"You're on!"

We were both winded when we got to our room. Sciezka dug through her purse for the key, which was made more difficult because I was attempting to get her wrap off of her.

Once in the room Sciezka sat astride me and the chair, hiking her flowing skirt up around her hips. Her hands shook as she unbuttoned my shirt clumsily and desperately savaged my neck with kisses.
When she stopped suddenly, I was concerned and asked, "Why did you stop? What's wrong?"

"Do you need time to get ready? If I didn't stop just now, I wouldn't be able to."

I chuckled, relieved that it wasn't something serious and then pulled her closer, to resume kissing her passionately.

She wiggled on my lap, grinding against me and then asked again with more urgency, "So you're set then?"

"I took care of that at the restaurant while Garfiel and Dimitri were disagreeing on whether or not dinner was on the house. I figured they'd take a while, so I'd have plenty of time. The bathroom was huge. I think I like Rush Valley," I replied, trying to sound casual about the way things are. She shouldn't have to worry about details like that. Wouldn't have to if she was with someone else...

She nodded that she understood and finished unbuttoning my shirt. Her hands moved lightly over my chest and stomach. She nibbled at my throat, sometimes straying to my collarbones and nipping.

While she was distracted, I pushed her panties to the side. At the first touch she shuddered in surprise.

"Should we move this to the bed?" I asked flirtatiously.

I made a slow circle with my thumb, knowing it drove her wild. She covered my mouth with hers, stifling a moan. The time for talking was over for the night. Now it was time for action.

She got off my lap, slowly and carefully, allowing her underwear to fall and land around her ankles. She stepped out of them, leaving them on the floor as she strode purposefully towards the bed. She hastily turned down the crisp white sheets and sat on the edge.

I missed her so much I ached, for her playfulness, for reveling in one another, teasing, tantalizing and making it last, but now, I felt like I was starved and wanted to devour everything she offered me.

I raced to the bed, transferred quickly and sat next to her. My heart was pounding in anticipation. She stood again, faced me and worked my shirt off the rest of the way. It joined her panties. Then she knelt between my knees to stroke and knead my sides, her fingers sliding and stimulating the lowest parts of me where I could still feel the fireworks shooting through my system. I closed my eyes and moaned. I couldn't contain it. We'd barely begun and my body was already humming like an angel's plucked harp. Oh God, and it's only going to get better.

Pulling off my shoes and socks was easy and she tossed them into the pile as well. I watched with anticipation as she unbuckled my belt and unbuttoned the fly on my trousers. I pushed up on my hands to lift my hips so she could pull them off and they soon crowned the pile of the other discarded clothes. Typical Sciezka, organized even in the most spontaneous moments, but I wasn't about to distract her and say so now.

She stripped me of every stitch, leaving me as naked as the day I was born and stood up to kiss me again. I tugged at her skirt and she stepped out of it, kicking it towards the pile. Her blouse and bra went next.

When I moved to touch her, to please her, she shook her head and then said, "You first."
I loved it when she played it this way, so assertive. Clearly Sciezka had her mind made up and who was I to question it? Slowly and carefully I leaned back, propping up on my elbows so I could watch the show. I'd do my best to be patient, but I always was the type to steal a lick from a hot tasty treat.

Tender and sensual all at once she took her time. She traced the muscles of my inner arm with her tongue then she blew on the wet trail, and it was all I could do to hang on as shivers ran up my spine. She always knows what I need before I do, and for that I will forever be grateful.

She caught me biting my lip and grinned wickedly. Sounding flip, she asked, "Want me to stop?"

"God no, don't stop. Please don't," I begged as my breath hitched.

"Then get all the way on the bed. If I'm right, I don't have long," she commanded as she sized up my erection

"We're very happy to see you?" I offered, grinning in agreement.

Sciezka propped the pillows at the headboard. I followed her lead, sitting against them for support. Finally, she kneeled, my thighs between hers, allowing me a perfect vantage point.

"You said it was all about me tonight and what I want, what I need, is to feel you."

I caressed her breasts slowly until her nipples went hard. She leaned into my touch and when she was close enough, I ran my tongue around one perfect pink point and then the other. Back arching, she shuddered, then desperately ground against me.

This would be ending faster than I wanted it to, but Sciezka was as hungry for me as I as I was for her and we'd waited long enough.

I held her firmly, left hand clutching the small of her back, while my right traced the curves of her most delicate places. Her thighs trembled as I caressed and explored. Dipping a finger in tentatively caused her muscles to contract uncontrollably.

"You ready?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Kissing me hard, she answered. I took hold of my shaft to steady it as she sank onto it, taking it deep within her.

She rode me hard and fast, her breath coming in gasps. Usually she paced herself. Making love to me tenderly, almost methodically. Not tonight, her skin glistening and hair mussed, she was almost there. I was on the edge as well, lightheaded and sweating even though she was doing most of the work. Bearing down and leaning forward she kissed me, our tongues entwined. Drinking each other in like it was the last time.

Every muscle in her body snapped and went taut. Her pace slowed and her motions became more deliberate as she worked my shaft slowly within herself.

"Almost there... so close... "

Bearing down fast and hard she didn't quit until she felt my body draw tight under her and I cried out.

I fell against the pillows, limp warmth radiating through my body. She climbed off of me and curled up in the crook of my arm. We both fell asleep quickly, exhausted.
What words didn't convey... couldn't convey, this had.

I didn't want to get out of bed. Neither did Sciezka. She rolled over and groaned when I tried rousing her. That wouldn't do. It was a long way to Central and if we wanted any time to ourselves at home, we'd have to leave today.

Before I took care of the hygiene routine, I called the front desk to send up coffee and fruit. It would be ready within minutes, but I told them we'd be ready for it in an hour. By that time, I'd be ready to face the day and in need of caffeine. Hopefully a steaming cup of coffee would be enough to coax Sciezka out of bed.

Breakfast arrived as I was pulling on my t-shirt. I hurried to the door so the knocking wouldn't disturb Sciezka's last minutes of sleep and the waiter brought the tray in. Actually, he insisted upon it. I didn't argue, though I wondered if everyone got this level of service. I could have managed it on my own, but it was easier to let it go. He put it on the table, I tipped him and he left. I'd gotten used to people either ignoring me or being overly helpful. It was part of the territory.

"What time is it?" Sciezka asked groggily as I poured myself a cup of coffee.

"It's 0800. It must have been the smell of fresh coffee that woke you up. You were out cold. How did you sleep?"

"Like the dead. I didn't sleep well while we were apart. I'd stay up reading most nights."

"Want a cup?" I asked, pointing at my mug. "I can bring it to you."

She shook her head, pulled back the covers and shivered. She stood up quickly, put on a robe hurriedly and joined me at the table.

I poured her coffee while she selected some fruit from the tray. She warmed her hands around the cup, apparently still chilly.

"If it's any consolation, I slept, but not well. Most nights I did pushups until I was ready to drop to make sure I was bone weary and would sleep."

"That's all in the past. We can wake up like this every morning from now on."

"Minus the room service," I teased and then winked. "As nice as this hotel is, home is better."

She grinned, then quipped, "I get my fair share of being catered to. You spoil me too much."

"That's impossible. There is no way I could possibly lavish enough attention on you. Now kiss me and then hit the shower. Quickly please, since it's tempting to stay here another day in bed, instead of driving. Even if it's home we're headed for."

As she leaned over, I caught a tantalizing glimpse of her breasts. Kissing me slowly, playing with my hair she didn't seem eager to leave either.

"Keep that in mind while we're on the road," she said huskily after breaking the kiss.

"I wonder how fast the jeep goes."

"Pretty fast," she replied without missing a beat adding, "It starts to shimmy a little if you take it
over 110 kilometers per hour on back roads."

"Wait, Gracia had the jeep up to 110 on unimproved roads?" I asked, worried. Had Sciezka left something out? Had they been followed? What were they doing driving so fast?

She smirked as she answered, "Don't look so worried. I just wanted to see how fast I could get it to go. Gracia thought I should practice under extreme conditions, just in case. That and it was fun."

"You drove?"

"I did and I do! Garfiel is an excellent teacher."

This I had to see. There wasn't any damage to the jeep that I could recall. I probably had nothing to worry about. I didn't dare pursue it further, or question her ability. She'd kill me if she thought I'd bought into the idea that women are terrible drivers.

Truthfully, I hadn't had many opportunities to watch women behind the wheel since I did all the driving, and the only one I trust is Hawkeye given her skills handling the battalion jeep when we were under fire. I could rest easy with her at the helm any day.

Finally, I replied, "We'll split the drive. That's a relief. I can actually enjoy the view some of the time. My rear and I thank you in advance."

The drive to Central was long and uneventful. We got on the road by 1000 hours and stopped for the night at 1900 hours. Our motel was in a resort town not much bigger than where I grew up. We were lucky to find a place that I could get into. Since it was the off season there were rooms available everywhere, but only a few on the first floor with few or no steps. Forget about ramps. The one room cabin was tiny and the bathroom miniscule. Sciezka was quick on the uptake when she saw it; she knew that I would never be able to clear the doorframe. I suggested I put on the braces to get around the room, but she figured out something better. A small office chair from the desk did the trick. I could at least reach the toilet and sink to take care of the bare minimum. I'd catch a shower when we got home. As long as I could brush my teeth and pee, I considered everything to be all good.

I was dead tired and dusty from the road, Sciezka wasn't much better. She took a shower while I stretched out on the bed. Since it had been an ordeal for me to get into the room Sciezka offered to pick up dinner while I rested. She came back with sandwiches from the diner up the block. They tasted good, but when you're tired and hungry, everything tastes good.

We slept spooned, too tired to anything more than that. We awoke at first light and were back on the road an hour later.

Julia was at the house when we got home. She and Sciezka hugged while Tiny raced around the living room doing his happy dance. I picked him up when he abruptly halted in front of me and put him on my lap. I figured some peace and quiet might help Julia and Sciezka catch up.

It took a few minutes for Sciezka to notice Tiny and she let him sniff her hand as she asked, "Whose dog is this? He's cute."
"Oh, him? I forgot to tell you about him in all the excitement. This is Tiny, a stray that Feury rescued. So, I suppose he's his."

Sciezka smiled remarking, "How could a beautiful, well-tempered dog like this be a stray?"

I shook my head, as I didn't get it either before replying, "He was filthy and half-starved when Feury brought him here. With a lot of grooming and too many table scraps he's looking great."

Tiny jumped off my lap so he could further inspect Sciezka. A good sniff and a few circles later he lay down on his back and offered his belly.

"He likes you," Julia observed.

Sciezka bent over to stroke his belly and Tiny panted contentedly.

I thought it would be a good time to discuss Tiny's preferred sleeping arrangements while staying at the house. Sciezka was in a good mood and distracted by Tiny's cute factor.

"He's been sleeping in our bed while you were away. He's a perfect gentleman. Housetrained and everything. But if it bothers you for him to sleep in our bed, he has his own bed. Besides, this is only temporary. I'm sure Feury will find a pet friendly place live in any day now."

Sciezka picked Tiny up, cuddling him like a baby and then replied, "Tiny is fine. He's so sweet."

"Breda didn't think so, but by now you're familiar with his views on dogs."

"Cynophobia," Sciezka recalled instantly. "An intense fear or phobia of dogs and/or rabies."

Julia laughed as she said, "Heymans insists that Tiny will prove dangerous. I feel bad for him, but it's so funny when the dog surprises him."

"I have to get home to fix dinner. There's soup in the icebox. I bet you're both tired and hungry, so I'll give you some peace," she added after checking her watch.

I followed her to the door and said, "Thank you so much for keeping everything together while I was away."

She smiled bent over to hug me saying, "You're welcome. I can tell you're in better spirits than you've been in for a while. Glad to see you both made it home in one piece."

"You can say that again, to all of it," I replied.

"I'll see you Monday and happy homecoming. Enjoy your day off."

The phone rang as I shut the door. Sciezka called from the kitchen, "I'll get it."

Without missing a beat, she said, "Jacqueline, it's for you."

I hoped it wasn't anything urgent. Usually when anyone used codenames it wasn't good. I couldn't handle more bad news; there'd been enough of it in the last year. Sciezka handed the phone to me and a chipper sounding voice said, "Our vacation is going well. We even had lemon bars for dessert today."

I mouthed "Mustang" so Sciezka knew who I was talking to.

"I'm glad to hear that. You deserve a vacation and sound well rested. How is Elizabeth?"
"She's lovely as ever. The country air agrees with her. As much as I love small talk, the real reason for my call is that I have a favor to ask you."

This could get interesting. I turned towards Sciezka, who was listening intently.

"The Shrimp and his brother need a place to stay," Mustang said.

"No problem, we have plenty of room. The guestroom is ready any time. When should we expect them? Want me to pick them up at the station?"

Mustang hesitated and then said, "It's not that simple, they may be staying with you indefinitely. It's a long story. For someone so short, the Shrimp has a lot of explanations that go along with him."

"I take it he's not anywhere near the phone since you're calling him short," I replied, then took a deep breath before continuing. "Could you hold the line for a minute, I have to discuss this with Sciezka."

"Did you hear all that?" I asked her.

She nodded yes and then whispered, "Tell him yes, of course."

"That's great and all, but where will the stay? Two teenagers are going to get cramped pretty quickly without space of their own. I know I did at that age."

"Just finish up with Roy, we'll talk details when you get off the phone."

I figured if she didn't mind, I didn't. Maybe we were the best choice for them. Gracia had welcomed me into her home under worse circumstances without hesitation. We could do the same for someone else.

"Hey, sorry for the delay, it'll be no problem. Just keep us in the loop and enjoy the rest of your vacation."

"I knew I could count on you Jacqueline. Tell your better half thank you for me," Mustang said.

"Hey, before you go, how did you know we were home?"

"A little pink birdie told me," was his answer.

Sciezka cracked up at Mustang's description of Garfiel and started to heat up dinner.

Soup had been the perfect choice for dinner. As we ate Sciezka and I talked about the practical aspects of Ed and Al coming to live with us.

"I suppose we could put a bed in the library, redecorate a bit. Ed would like that. I know he's slept in worse places," I suggested.

"The attic will be almost as easy," Sciezka replied. "That and I won't have to part with my library. All it will take is a coat of paint and a good airing out to get the attic ready. Maybe I can get a contractor to look into putting a half bath up there. It depends on how soon they're arriving."

"We can't put them in the attic! It's a crawl space, right?"
"It's actually pretty big up there. You can see the windows from the outside, how did you figure it was so small?" she asked.

"I thought the windows were just there for looks. You know, to give the house symmetry or something. Can't say I've been up there myself," I groused. "How do you even get up there anyway?"

"There are stairs behind the shelves in the linen closet. They're just planks of wood that slide in and out. We'll just have to keep the sheets somewhere else; we've got plenty of space. That and I'll have to move the boxes from my apartment to the garage," she replied.

"I'm putting you in charge of that, if you don't mind. Let me know how I can help."

She stood up, cleared the table and stacked the dishes in the sink.

"The dishes can wait until the morning," I said and then suggested, "A hot bath followed by bed sounds good right now."

"Add a glass or two of wine to the mix and it sounds perfect," Sciezka replied. "Tiny can keep my feet warm."

I love how that woman thinks.

Sunday was spent the best way I know how. Sciezka woke up before me and made coffee. While she made breakfast, I showered and dressed. She made omelets, thoroughly cooked, but not burned, light as air with perfect presentation. I was eager to see what other recipes she'd learned while we were apart.

After breakfast we lounged on the couch with the funny papers and worked the crossword. Once we'd checked our answers and had a second cup of coffee, I did some class work while Sciezka unpacked her suitcase. We went back to bed for a nap after she finished.

Real life could start tomorrow. Today we could pretend it was just us.

Tiny enjoyed the day in too. Except the part when we closed the bedroom door after dinner. I'm an animal lover, but I think even Feury would be weirded out if his pets watched.

Fuhrer, yes Fuhrer Grumman's plans for a "return to normalcy" was just that for us as well. In our absence the provisional government appointed Lieutenant General Grumman to the post of Fuhrer. Not only was he the man with the most experience, he was well liked by the brass that remained after the coup. It made sense that he'd led the tribunal. They'd kept his appointment a secret until all the loose ends were tied up.

Sciezka wasn't disciplined for being A.W.O.L., Mustang made sure of that. He'd argued that had her supervisor known what was really going on Sciezka would have been put into protective custody. Her head was and is filled with state secrets. She was offered her old job back, with a raise as added enticement. She declined even though she was flattered.

Sciezka decided it would make the most sense to freelance and work from home whenever
possible. With her unique skill set the records department would have been fools to refuse her request. When she wasn't working, she was busy preparing space for the boys, volunteering at Elysia's school in the library and helping Gracia get her business idea off the ground.

Garfield must have influenced Gracia's decision to go ahead with what her friends had suggested for a long time. He had to have been impressed with her knowledge of herbs and plants. I was pleased she was capitalizing on her talents and what she enjoyed doing. Sciezka and I swore by her cleaning mixtures and linen sprays. They got the job done and gave our place a 'little bit of sunshine' as Ma would put it.

Our dreams of a quiet, peace filled home were becoming a reality. Even with the brothers arriving any day, I doubted things would change for the worse. We could all breathe again and spend our days pursuing happiness.

When Mustang returned to Central, he arranged to meet me for lunch at the hospital. He said he and Jim had a few details to firm up before Al came to live with us.

That concerned me and I couldn't help but ask, "Is everything all right with him? I was led to believe that The Boss really did it."

"He did. Alphonse is perfect, considering what he had to work with. But he came back emaciated. He just has to build up his strength. At this point his immune system never fully developed and he seems to have vitamin deficiencies that left him so pale. He's going to have PT so he doesn't get hurt trying to bounce back."

"That makes sense. How does Ed feel about that? More importantly, how did Al take the news? He knows, right?"

"As much as Fullmetal can be a hot-headed brat, I admire how he's handling this. He just wants Al to be happy and healthy. It was Winry who suggested you and Sciezka. Ed was determined that the barracks was no place for his brother. That and he refuses to go on missions until Al is 100 percent."

He paused and then added, "You and I both know that Al doesn't need a guardian, but he's not an adult, not yet. With Fullmetal there was a loophole, since he's a State Alchemist. But until he is 18, he can't act as his brother's guardian."

"Gotcha, I understand now," I replied. "I'm happy to do it, though I'm curious why Winry suggested us so quickly."

Mustang shifted uncomfortably in his chair, poked at the remains of his lunch with his fork and then said, "The most important reason is that you and Sciezka have a happy and stable home. Fullmetal has described you as the big brother he never wanted. But he also said that you've never treated them like children. The other reason, well, Winry said Al might be able to handle rehab better with you around. That you'd understand..."

I considered what he'd said carefully. Damn, he still tiptoed around the subject of the chair and my injuries. I wasn't going to call him out on it in public. I didn't hold him responsible and maybe someday he'd believe it. It hadn't even been a year yet, it would be soon, though not yet. I was as at peace as I could be with it, considering. I was much better now that I was home and back to my routine. Jim's wisdom and help were reinforced daily. Time and hard work helped. Knowing where
I was going and what to expect softened reality most of the time. The silence grew uncomfortable. Apparently, Mustang was lost in thought too. Finally, I said, "I have to get to class. Any more news on when they'll arrive?"

He brightened at the prospect of good news and replied, "They'll be on the 1000 from Risembul on Saturday. Hawkeye and I will pick them up. Will everything be ready for them at your place? Can I help with anything?"

"Sciezka and I have it under control. She says the attic looks great. She gets all the credit for that."

When his face fell, I wanted to take the last part back. I covered quickly saying, "She's been that happy sort of busy. Between volunteering as the book lady at Elysia's preschool, helping Gracia launch her business and this, I don't think she'll ever go back to work full time."

Mustang smiled and then said quietly, "Thank you."

I wasn't sure if it was for the Elrics, or because I was happy and healthy. Maybe it was both.

On the drive to campus I nearly missed my turn a few times. Streets had been renamed almost overnight and landmarks were missing. King Bradley Boulevard was the most changed. It didn't have anything to do with the military at all. In place of Bradley's statue, a fountain was being constructed. It was unlike anything I'd seen the government build. Change was definitely upon us; instead of a monument to a battle or heroic figure the location was becoming a symbol of beauty, complete with sprays of water streaming through the air. There were crews planting trees and flower beds. What was now Amestris Parkway would be just that, a green space with peaceful gardens in the middle of the city.

Before class I asked General Lockheed if he knew anything about the Amestris Parkway project. Who had ordered the changes?

"Fuhrer Grumman did; though I have it on good authority that a few alchemists suggested it."

"Really? Do you know their names?" I asked, genuinely curious. I only knew a few alchemists.

"Strong Arm and Fullmetal," he answered and smiled.

"The gentle giant and the kid who never acted like he was in the military, I like it. Peace, prosperity and beauty. Those are changes I can get used to."

He nodded and then said, "There will always be a place for soldiers. However, with a strong army we shouldn't have to go on the offense. The manpower the state has can be used to help the people they've always been meant to protect."

"That's a novel concept," I joked. "I like it. What will they be doing with the state alchemists?"

"That is the best part. Good men like Mustang and Armstrong never wanted to be weapons of mass destruction. The main purpose of the state alchemists will be helping the people. They'll engage in medical and agricultural research, secure clean water sources in the desert regions and improve the infrastructure."

"Alchemist be thou for the people will finally mean something again. I bet Fullmetal is ecstatic. I
"The government is running so well you can focus on that wedding. My wife was on the telephone for hours last night with that Garfiel fellow."

"They do know we want a small, simple ceremony, right? Please tell me they're not going overboard."

He patted me on the shoulder and replied, "It could be worse. Let them have their fun. Just grin and bear it."

"Easy for you to say." I grumbled, then added, "I appreciate the sentiment, really I do... but eloping might become a possibility."

"I hide in my study with a nip of bourbon when she gets like that," he said and winked.

Classes were interesting, my office hours came and went and I knocked off early to swim instead of studying in the library. I'd gotten caught up with my studies and duties, so I could afford to take a few hours off. It would feel good to swim. I wasn't sure how busy I'd be once the Elrics moved in. I also needed to talk to Jim.

Once at the hospital I headed straight for the P.T. wing. I needed to see Jim before he left for the day. I could swim afterwards.

"Just the man I was hoping to run into," I said in greeting.

Jim looked up from the file he was reading and replied, "I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. You're not usually free in the afternoon. I appreciate your company, but do you need something?"

"You're on the way to the pool. I feel like a swim. I've got the time today, so I thought I'd put it to good use."

"You're not racing home to be with Sciezka? That could count as a workout," he teased.

"She's over at Gracia's. I think they're making soap today," I replied, pretending I didn't get his meaning.

"I try to steer clear of that. Too many people in the kitchen and I'd probably be in the way. I'm good at carrying boxes once they've filled them. If I stick around too long, they turn me into a test subject."

I took off the leather gloves that I usually wear to protect my hands from the rims of the chair, then said with a purposeful ring of fun advertising, "You should try the mint and rosemary salve. These do not look like hands that push a chair or do a lick of work."

He chuckled as he replied, "I'll take that under advisement. That's quite a ringing endorsement."

"So, the reason I came here..."

"You didn't come to talk about beauty products?" he joked.

"I have some questions about Alphonse. Mustang and I had lunch today. What can I do to help him?"
"I wondered if you'd come to me about this. I've been in contact with Winry. She said that Al was completely against working with me when she suggested it. His brother wasn't much better. Al said he'd be fine in Central without help and Ed was not going to let him leave the Rockbells until he was stronger. Neither of them is willing to be separated for a moment."

"That makes sense, but what does that have to do with me?" I asked, interrupting him.

"I was getting to that. Winry pointed out to Al what therapy has done for you. He remembered how hard getting around was for you at first, and how you improved after you started sessions with me. He's agreed to at least try physio. That and Ed said you'd be able to relate on some level," he explained.

"Those are all convincing arguments. I'm glad he's accepting the help."

"Good, since you're his transportation to the hospital. His sessions are scheduled the same time as yours. Sciezka or Gracia will pick him up at lunchtime."

"You and Mustang have done a lot of planning. It sounds like this will work well for the boys. He alluded to the understanding part at lunch today."

Jim considered what I'd said carefully before replying, "Does that bother you?"

"No... well, a little. I know how Winry came to that conclusion. In a way I'm one of her patients. She knows more about my situation than Mustang does. But Roy thinking that way bothers me. I don't want him to consider me to be less than I was before the incident."

"I assure you that is definitely not the case with the Brigadier General. He is so proud of your accomplishments and thankful you're doing so well."

"Really?" I asked.

"He contacted me almost daily the entire time you were hospitalized. If he couldn't phone me himself, Riza would," Jim replied.

"I never knew that..." Honestly, I didn't know what else to say. I was stunned.

"You still don't, at least as far as he is concerned. Keep that to yourself."

"Thanks for the information. Are there specific things you can tell me on how to help Al? I don't want to mess this up. He's been through enough already."

"I'll know more after I've worked with him a few times. The best advice I have is for you to treat him how you wanted to be treated."

"I can manage that. I'm going to get in the water now," I said and then asked, "Will I see you later at Gracia's?"

"You can count on it. I'll ask her about that salve too. You've sold me."

The rest of the week flew by and soon it was Saturday morning. Sciezka was all over the house, fretting about the smallest details. I decided the best course of action was to stay out of the way. She only got more anxious as the Elric's arrival time got closer. I shut Tiny up in our room to avoid a commotion and to keep Sciezka from tripping over him. She wasn't in the kitchen so I did the
prep work for brunch. I wasn't sure if Al would be hungry, but I knew the Boss would be ravenous.

I went out onto the porch for a cigarette at 1030 and waited. As I snuffed it out a dark sedan pulled up. That had to be them.

Mustang and Hawkeye got out first. Next came Ed and Major Armstrong. He was carrying someone, wait, was that Al? I had been assured he was fine.

Hawkeye came up the walk first and before I had a chance to ask quietly said, "Don't panic Havoc. He fell asleep in the car. Is it ok if Armstrong puts him in the guestroom for now?"

"That's fine, and a relief. How can I help?"

"You're doing more than enough. You've done more than enough. I knew we could count on you," she replied warmly and then surprised me, hugging me tightly.

I went back into the house to put the finishing touches on the meal. A few minutes later Ed joined me in the kitchen.

"Hey, Havoc. Nice place."

"Thanks. Sit down and rest. You've had a long trip. Care for some coffee or juice?"

"I'm glad you didn't offer me milk. I'll have orange juice if you've got any," he replied, a small smile crossing his features.

"I'll go easy on you for now. You've stayed here before, so you know where everything is. Serve yourself."

"Thanks. The food smells delicious."

I turned the heat down on the eggs I was scrambling and then said, "Please tell everyone it's ready. There is plenty of bacon. I made extra. I know how you are."

Sciezka helped bring the food into the dining room. It was the first meal we'd all had together since our engagement party. It was good to see familiar faces assembled around the table. Al was awake and said the smell was what woke him up. His brother grinned as he poured another glass of milk for him. Al sipped it and didn't complain.

Roy was in rare form and in a good mood because he commented, "Alphonse knows what is good for him. He drinks his milk. By this time next year, he'll have another two inches on you Shortmetal."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that Colonel Bastard. It would be rude to interrupt this lovely meal by putting my fist through your face."

"That's Brigadier General Bastard to you."

"I'm just glad I'm not under your command anymore. Hello research division!"

"Got a raise too" Ed added, shooting a pointed look at Mustang.

Their quarreling stopped when Al said quietly, "Jean, this tastes amazing. I'd forgotten what bacon tasted like."

Everyone stopped talking at once and smiled. We were sitting with a miracle.
This was the first time I'd gotten a good look at him. His hair was sandy blonde, darker than his brothers and cut short. Mustang had been right, he was pale and his cheeks were gaunt. When I watched him eat, I noticed the bones in his hands and wrist protruded. But his smile and the light in his hazel eyes told me he'd recover.

As Ma would say, "Good food, rest, fresh air and sunlight will set him right."

He'd look like a different boy altogether in no time.

Al finished eating and asked politely, "Riza, where is Clementine?"

He still sounded like himself, minus the echo the hulking suit of armor created.

Roy answered for her, "She's in her carrier in the car. Would you like me to go get her?"

"What or who is a 'Clementine'?" I asked.

Sciezka interjected, "A small fruit in the citrus family."

"My kitten!" Al answered and positively beamed.

A cat? Oh boy. Introductions to Tiny will be interesting.

Riza added, "Ed found her behind the general store, in an empty orange crate."

I was happy for Al, but concerned. Relations between Tiny and Clementine could get tense. In his scheming Mustang never found out about the dog. Hopefully they would get along until Feury could take Tiny. That's when I remembered I never told Mustang about our dog. Ah well, our little group was always a good mix of all kinds and this was going to add all new kinds of excitement around here. Hopefully they would get along until Feury could take Tiny.

The whole household fell into a comfortable routine in no time. I'd wake up early to let Tiny out and have a cigarette before I started breakfast. Sciezka would often put the finishing touches on it while I got ready to go to the hospital with Al. Ed usually set the table before getting his brother up.

Tiny and Clementine had a routine of their own and would romp in the living room until they were tired and would then nap in the big chair together. They apparently didn't know they were natural enemies.

The kitchen table was covered with food and we sat elbow to elbow. Social graces went out the window as Ed, Al and I fought for the last piece of bacon, the last spoonful of eggs or toast. Oftentimes we'd talk with our mouths full. Sciezka rolled her eyes at us as she sipped her tea and ate her fruit. After a few days of big breakfasts Al commented, "You don't have to fix breakfast every day. Brother and I live here now. You shouldn't still be treating us like guests."

"Don't worry about it," I replied. "I like cooking and eating. It would be silly to just fix something for myself and it takes the same amount of time to cook for four as it does to cook for one."

Ed looked up from the fried egg he was inhaling and said, "Thanks Havoc. I haven't had home cooked meals this often since I was a kid."

Sciezka smiled as she listened to us. She had worked for Fullmetal after the First Branch of the
Central Library burned to the ground. She'd told me several times since the boys moved in how much happier Ed was now that he had his brother back.

"I've got ulterior motives," I teased. "I'm in training and so are Ed and Al. Why do you think I'm always pushing milk, eggs and meat?"

"They're all high in protein and amino acids," Sciezka informed us. I was thankful that she didn't add that I'd supplemented every recipe I could think of with butter and heavy cream to get some calories into Al.

"She hit the nail on the head, though I wasn't going to be so scientific. I need the fuel to keep going and maintain muscle mass, same as the boys."

"I think you just like bacon Jean, but perhaps I'm overlooking something," Sciezka teased.

Sciezka excused herself to work in the library and I added quietly, "Once you are 100% Al, I expect you'll want to spend time in the field with your brother and I'll get Sciezka to myself for a few days at a time."

Ed's eyes went wide and Al chuckled before replying, "That plan sounds like it will work for everyone. Brother, stop looking so scandalized. They're getting married so of course they do it!"

I hadn't expected Al to be so blunt about the nature of our relationship. Seems like the shy and quiet Elric wasn't so shy and quiet anymore. I held up my hands in mock surrender and said, "Ed, I am not the one who gave your brother the sex education lesson. I promise, so please don't hurt me."

Ed grumped off muttering under his breath, "It was probably that damned Ling."

Ah yes. Ling.

After sessions Sciezka would meet me and Al for lunch. Sometimes she'd bring lunch and sometimes we'd pick up something from the cafeteria to give Al a little diversity in his choices. One day we surprised Ed at the lab. We all went out to Pane Fresco to celebrate that Al had been cleared to go places other than the hospital.

The next day everyone would be going to an apple orchard for a hay ride and to pick apples to store for the winter. Elysia was very excited that Ed, Al, Russel and Fletcher would be coming with them. Al was especially eager to finally taste Gracia's apple pie.

Jim called that night, after dinner. Al was in the library reading with Clementine and Tiny curled up next to him on the chaise. Sciezka and I had just finished the dishes and were thinking about having a glass of wine in front of the fire.

"Hey Jean, listen, is Al around?" Jim asked

"He's in the library. Want me to go get him?" I replied.

"No, don't. I'm calling about him. His physician and I think that though he's getting better, tomorrow will be too much for him. Between how long the day will be, the sun and the fact that he still doesn't have enough body fat in reserve to not get chilled..."

I tried to think of ways to address all of those concerns. Al had already missed out on enough. I
replied, "We'll bundle him up. I'll keep an eye on him. You're coming too, it will be fine."

"Jean, be realistic. I have my doubts about you going. Rutted trails, mud and how are you going to get on the wagon?" Jim asked.

That pissed me off and I didn't reply. I didn't think I could manage to be civil. Finally, he broke the silence.

"I didn't mean for it to sound that way or for you to get upset, but yes. In my professional opinion Al should absolutely stay home. He needs someone to stay with him and you should at least look like you're trying to take it easy on the weekends."

"You have a point," I grudgingly conceded. "Do we have to stay at the house or can he run errands with me on High Street?"

"That depends on what you had in mind," Jim replied, still sounding cautious.

"I could use a haircut and I'd like to get some spring flower bulbs in the ground before it gets too cold."

"I like that idea. You won't let him get too chilled or over exert himself?" he asked.

"We'll behave. This will let him get used to the dirt and the weather gradually."

"Thank you for understanding and helping me with this."

I understood, but I wasn't going to let him off the hook that easily, "Who is going to break the news to him? You or me?"

The line was quiet and finally he answered, "I've just won his trust..."

"So, you want me to be the bad guy?" I asked pointedly.

"I think that would be best for Al."

"You so owe me a drink for this Jim. I'll do it. I don't like it, but it's in Al's best interest."

"Sciezka, could you please take the wine into the living room? I have to talk to Al about tomorrow. Pour me a tall glass; I think I'll need it."

When I entered the library, Al looked up from his book and said, "I'm excited about tomorrow. I haven't seen Fletcher in a long time. It's going to be fun."

I pulled up next to the chaise and said, "About that... I've been going over the logistics. The paths in the orchard will be uneven and muddy. That isn't even taking how I'm going to get onto the hay wagon into account. It's supposed to be nice weather, but I was thinking..."

"That I shouldn't go?" he interrupted, his voice shaking.

"I was getting to that part. Al, it's just not a good idea. They'll be outside for hours. It's too soon. Even if you were bundled up, I don't want you to have a setback."

"Jim put you up to this... that or brother," he said sounding sullen.
"Jim raised some concerns about both of us going. Your brother had nothing to do with it this time." I replied.

"So, we're both stuck in the house all day tomorrow. I should be used to that by now."

"On the contrary Al, we're going out for a bit and then coming back here to work in the yard. After that we'll go to Gracia's for dinner and pie."

"That sounds a little better. I still don't like it," he replied, but sounding less upset than before.

When I finished talking to Al I joined Sciezka on the couch. She handed me my glass once I was situated and then rubbed my neck and shoulders.

"So how did it go?"

I sighed, took a sip of wine then replied, "About as well as it could have gone. He's a lot like me about the rehab and limitations."

"I only heard bits of your conversation with Jim. Was it all about Al?" she asked tentatively.

"Nope, he had words for me too about resting and not overdoing it. He's right though. I didn't know how the hell I was going to get onto the damned hay wagon."

"Alex Louis is coming along too," she quietly informed me.

I chuckled and then said, "You know just how to make me feel better. Kiss me."

She sat on my lap, kissed me and then whispered in my ear, "I'm glad that tidbit had the desired effect."

"There's no way in hell I'd let Armstrong pick me up. It could have come to that. Al and I will have a good time and it is for the best after all."

As she nuzzled closer to me, she suggested, "Since you don't have to save so much energy for tomorrow, how 'bout we expend some?"

She didn't have to ask twice.

Breakfast the next morning was a rowdy affair. With so many people over I set up a buffet on the dining room table instead of having a sit-down meal. In addition to Gracia, Elysia and Jim we had Breda, Russel and Fletcher, Roy and Riza, Armstrong, Feury and a surprise guest, Winry.

Once everyone left for the orchard Al and I cleaned up. As he dried the dishes, I handed him he commented, "I think I am glad we are staying behind. It was too loud at breakfast. They will be more bearable after they've gotten tired. I hope."

"They are a wild bunch, though wonderful in small doses. We're done here. Are you ready to go?"

"I am. I'll bundle up too, I hate it, but Jim and the doctors are right. I get cold easily."

"I'll just have to run the heat in the jeep before you get in. We'll stop for coffee and cocoa to warm us up while we're out."
High Street did not disappoint Al. We got him a decent haircut, as Winry was more engineer than stylist. When we stopped in my favorite clothing store, I had Al try on a sweater, even though he protested.

"You should not be buying me anything Jean. Brother and I are already imposing."

"Trust me this is the softest sweater you will ever feel. I know that most things still feel rough against your skin. Gracia did the same things I'm doing for you for me. You and your brother are always talking about 'Equivalent Exchange'. Well here it is."

He finally conceded.

Our last stop was the garden store. I wanted the yard to be in full bloom by the middle of May. We'd finally set the date. On Saturday May the 20th of 1916, Sciezka and I would be married.

Al and I chose hyacinths, lily of the valley and peonies on the clerk's suggestion. Yeesh, once upon a time I would have never known any of their names. Gracia would be able to help me choose annuals in the spring.

On the way back to the jeep Al commented, "Thank you for letting me help with this. It will be nice to be outside."

"Even nicer to be able to go inside if we get cold," I teased.

"That too," he replied, grinning.

I fixed soup and sandwiches for lunch when we got home. After we finished eating, I told Al to bundle up and meet me in the yard. By the time he joined me I had the garden tools out and the mechanic's creeper he'd made for me in the summer.

We worked in silence. He'd stop every once in a while to appreciate the sun on his face and sift the soil with his fingers. The wind ruffled his hair and he looked utterly content.

When I had half the bulbs planted, I noticed he was slowing down.

"Hey Al, are you doing alright?" I asked, worried. Maybe he'd done too much.

"I'm fine, maybe a little cold," he admitted.

I took off my jacket and said, "Here, put this on and get off the ground too. Do you want to go inside and take a nap?"

He frowned and then said, "Not you too. I thought you understood."

"Believe me, I do. I also understand that your brother will break my legs if I let anything happen to you. I wouldn't feel it, but it'd still look pretty bad. Do me a favor and sit here in the sun for a while and wrap up in my jacket."

Al looked around for a place to sit. I finally suggested my chair.

"Don't worry; it's just a chair with wheels. It won't bite. I don't feel like going to the garage for a lawn chair and I don't want you doing it either."
He smiled and did as I asked without another complaint.

I planted the last bulb and we went inside. It wasn't difficult to persuade Al to take a nap on the couch. Not when Clementine and Tiny would be joining him. There were still a couple of hours to kill before everyone came back.

I followed my own advice and took a nap too.

I woke Al up from his nap a half hour before we headed over to Gracia's. I thought about driving to save Al the walk, but it was just down the street. Maybe I was being overcautious.

Al put on his new sweater and combed his hair while I changed. Before leaving we fed Tiny and Clementine. They'd behaved in the morning while we ran errands; they'd probably be fine together tonight.

Once we were on the porch, I lit a cigarette and said, "You clean up nicely Al."

"You too Havoc. Now, if I could just get brother to do the same."

As we headed down the street, I asked Al, "So are you ready for this? There are going to be a lot of people in a small space."

Al smiled as he replied, "I think I can handle it. They're all friends, so it shouldn't be too bad."

"Just let me know if the noise gets to be too much or you get tired. I can always drag you outside with me for a cigarette."

"Brother will be thrilled with that idea," he said and winked.

"But seriously if you get tired, just say the word," I told him again.

"You worry too much. It's starting to bother me..."

"It's a pain in the ass, I know. But Sciezka covers for me all the time. She knows I don't like it when I have to admit I've hit my limit. Just you watch. She'll yawn and stretch, then look at me."

"That is very sneaky of both of you," Al replied, "I like it."

Gracia's house wasn't as full as I thought it would be. Feury and Winry were playing with Elysia in the living room. Sciezka, Gracia, Jim, Riza and Fletcher were in the kitchen peeling apples for pie.

"Where is everyone else?" I asked Gracia when I returned to the kitchen.

"Jim sent the guys into the back yard so they wouldn't destroy the place roughhousing. Edward offered to take care of the leaves for me. But I think more of them are getting thrown than raked," she replied.

Riza added, "Roy and Breda got into the hard cider on the tour. We brought a few bottles back if you'd like some."

"That would be great, thanks," I replied.

She stood up to get me some and Al asked, "Is there anything I can do to help? I want to watch
how you make pie. They always looked so delicious."

Gracia beckoned him to sit next to her and when he sat down, she said to him quietly, "You look pretty sharp tonight. Did you and Jean have a good time?"

He beamed at her compliment and replied, "We had a great time. There was so much to see on the High Street. I got a haircut, when Jean had his done. He bought me this sweater. Feel how soft it is. He says you took him to that store."

Al was truly coming out of his shell. Instead of being overwhelmed by the activity he was participating in his own way. He wasn't ready for huge crowds yet or roughhousing with his brother, but he was handling more than I thought he'd be able to. In time he'd be physically indistinguishable from any other boy his age.

There wasn't much room to maneuver in the house, so I excused myself to go smoke. I hoped that they'd move the action to the front yard so I could at least watch.

I finished my cigarette and was beginning to get cold. Just as I was about to give up on waiting for them Fullmetal hopped the fence, running like a mad man.

The rest of them followed. Breda, Mustang, Russell and lastly Falman, who must have joined the group after breakfast. Breda looked like he was limping and angry.

"Hey Breda, what happened?" I shouted from the front walk.

"That little bastard transmuted my belt when I was about to intercept Russell's pass."

"Rugby is a rough sport. I thought you were working on the leaves."

Mustang came to stand next to me and remarked, "We were, until Fullmetal said I couldn't torch the leaves."

"Things went downhill from there. They began throwing the leaves," Falman commented.

Once Ed was sure that Breda wouldn't hurt him, he joined the group. Russell did as well.

I hoped they would change the subject, since I didn't play sports anymore.

Winry came outside, providing a distraction from sports talk when she demanded to see Ed's automail. As soon as she saw pulverized leaves in his knuckle joints, she dragged him inside. She called over her shoulder, "Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes. You have that long to make yourselves presentable."

"I guess she told you," I quipped.

Before she shut the door, she said, "I heard that Jean. It's your turn after dinner."

Breda teased, "I would be scared if I were you, Havo."

I shook a cigarette out of my pack, lit it and replied confidently, "I have nothing to worry about. I treat my stuff with the respect it is due."

"Or she'd kill him and he knows it," Mustang added.

"I've known Fullmetal and Winry long enough that I learned that now too," I replied. "Kind of like Roy here. Riza would have shot him years ago if he hadn't learned."
"Point to Havoc," Breda announced, then commented, "Is it me man, or have you gotten smarter?"

"It's you. Must be something wrong with you. That or you missed me," I quipped and then made kissing noises. "Love you man."

He flipped me the bird on the way into the house and Roy cocked an eyebrow and asked, "Lover's tiff?"

"You know Breda, it'll blow over. It always does," I replied.

"Like an old married couple. He's just jealous he has to share your affection," Mustang teased.

Riza came outside, stood on the porch and said, looking irritated, "Are you two coming? You're holding up dinner."

"Yes dear," Roy replied, sounding humble for once.

There wasn't enough room for everyone in the dining room. While I was outside a couple of card tables had been set up. The younger guests chose to sit there. Al sat with his brother, Russel and Fletcher. He looked like he was holding up. I figured his brother would keep an eye on him. I ate in the dining room with the adults, but probably have had more fun sitting at the kids' table. Elysia sat with Winry and Feury.

Dinner conversation centered around politics at first and gradually turned racy, courtesy of Breda and Mustang. I'm sure they had money riding on how long it would take Falman to blush. We ate beef stew and hearty bread to dip in it. It was lucky Riza didn't kill them.

After the dishes were cleared away Gracia served pie a la mode for dessert. I excused myself from the main table to eat with Al. He was scraping his plate with his spoon to make sure he got every last morsel.

Ed had watched, transfixed, his eyes carefully tracking each bite from plate to mouth.

"I told you it was the best," Ed said quietly.

Al put down his fork and said, "It was worth the wait. I'm just happy to be here with everyone."

"Did everyone get enough to eat?" I asked.

Everyone nodded and Al replied, "I'm stuffed. I couldn't eat another bite."

"So, I don't have to share my slice?" I teased.

"Not tonight."

"I'll see if I can bring some home for you to have tomorrow. If I know Gracia, she made extra just for that purpose."

Once all the dishes had been cleared away Gracia ushered us all into the living room. It felt good to be surrounded by friends and it was better than old times. We were all full of hearty stew, pie and drinks. I had consumed a large amount of hard cider and felt pretty damned good.
Roy and Riza could be open about their relationship, since she was no longer in his subordinate. Brigadier General Mustang was appointed Secretary of Defense in Fuhrer Grumman's cabinet. Captain Riza Hawkeye was now in an advisory capacity on firearms technology and instruction for the whole of the military. However, everyone thought it was wise to keep her close to Roy. They had adjoining offices in order to keep him safe and to prevent him from slacking off. He had a lot more paperwork to do now. Maybe there was an upside to my retirement. I'd always hated completing requisition forms. Breda loathed them and complained often. Falman was in his element.

Riza was twice as busy now, between her new duties and planning the wedding. It was scheduled approximately a year after the coup, partially for logistics reasons, but mainly for protocol purposes.

I could only hope that with the importance of their nuptials, ours would be small and overlooked. We'd only been planning seriously for a couple of weeks and I already dreaded what Marjorie and Garfiel had in store for us.

Ed and Al could finally enjoy being young and lead normal, if exceptional lives. I think Sciezka and I were doing a fine job ensuring that, with the help of many people. Those boys have a huge family if one thinks of it like Sciezka does.

Lieutenant Colonel Armstrong was heading up the Alchemical Infrastructure Research Division. His skills would now be used for the good of the country. His ethics would protect the people as he supervised the many State Alchemists and their studies.

Russell Tringham was hired as a civilian consultant for agricultural alchemy, developing soil remediation techniques. Fletcher was studying at the Academy until he was old enough to work with his brother. In the meantime, he'd been researching medicines made from plants with Doctor Knox in his free time.

Ed was researching bridge and aqueduct design, supervised by Alex Louis.

Now that Al was getting better Winry would be splitting her time between Garfiel's shop and her grandmother's. She was sure to stop in Central whenever she could. It was fortunate for Feury that it was "on the way". It wasn't, but she'd be around often.

Sciezka was sitting on my lap since there wasn't any place else left. That was fine by me. I wanted her as close as possible, as much as possible.

The only person missing at the gathering was Brigadier General Hughes.

He would have been so proud of everyone. His sacrifice had paved the way for this happiness. The only consolation was that Gracia was making a new life for herself and Elysia. Jim would never replace Maes; he knew that and didn't try. It was different than the life she could have had with Maes, but good all the same.

It had been over a year since his death. Everyone who knew Maes still missed him, but carried on. He would have wanted it that way.

It would soon be a year since the incident at the Third Lab. I had mixed feelings about how I would mark the anniversary. I'd figure that out when the time came.

In the meantime, I had friends to catch up with and a life to live.
It was Monday morning. To add insult to injury, it was also raining. I could hear the pitter patter against the window; I'd always loved the rain as a kid growing up back East. It made the crops grow and that meant everything to farmers. Good harvests meant good money for my folks. A good grain crop was our bread. Arms sales were just the butter. For fun I jumped in puddles, much to Ma's chagrin. But I also enjoyed watching fat drops hit my bedroom window where I was warm, dry and bundled under the covers.

In the city it was different. Instead of smelling tilled fields and fertile soil, freshly mown hay and meadow flowers after a storm you smell dirty pavement. Trash from the streets sets sail in the gutters. It was worse now with the chair. No matter what I tried, if I went out, I came back a sodden, muddy mess. That would put a damper on anyone's day.

I did not want to get up. Why would I leave a warm bed and Sciezka to go out where it was cold and grey for an appointment with Doctor Parker? There wouldn't be any more news, at least not good news. It's been almost a year now, no further progress. I can accept that. But to see it in print, delivered in medical terms? Not on a Monday and not in the rain.

I didn't tell Sciezka about the appointment. I probably should have, no, I know I should have. Why put a damper on our weekend? It was raining then too, but we stayed by the fire drinking wine. Rain is fine then.

Why go out into the storm when my whole world is right here?

The cold damp air makes my back ache, but a hot shower usually helps. The sooner I get up and get out, the sooner the examination will be over.

I'll tell her the results as soon as I get home.

Or, at least, I'd think about it.

"You have made impressive progress in the last year Mr. Havoc," Doctor Parker remarked at the start of the exam. "Everything my colleagues and I have learned is being used as a teaching model around the country in cases like yours."

"I'm glad it's helping other people," I replied. "Not to be disrespectful, but can we get on with this? A year checkup in my case is a formality at best, right?"

He sat down next to the examination table, so he could talk to me without looking down at me. Maybe he was developing a bedside manner after all.

"You're right, there has been no change. The instrumentation stabilizing your vertebrae is holding up well and hasn't shifted. Your organs and systems are working well. You aren't experiencing skin breakdown. Physical therapy has kept muscle wasting, joint contracture and bone density loss in check," he answered calmly.
"So, no news is good news this time?"

"That is my professional opinion. But the nurses on your old ward have been gossiping... "

I grinned; maybe he was human after all. "You heard right. Sciezka and I are getting married in May. Be on the lookout for an invitation."

"It will be an honor to attend. You are a success story, I hope you know that. Given the odds..."

I interrupted him, "I try to remember that on days like today, when I come in looking and feeling like a drowned rat."

"Did you have any other questions or concerns? I don't want to cut this short, but I have rounds soon," he replied sounding sincere as he stood up and shook my hand.

"With the wedding and everything..." I began tentatively. "Well everything I have going on below the belt, are children out of the question?"

He sat back down before replying. This didn't bode well.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have an answer for you. There just isn't enough research."

I nodded and then replied, "Thank you for being honest with me. At least there was some good news this visit. I'm not getting any worse. It could always be worse."

"Keep doing what you're doing. That's my recommendation."

He closed the door and left. I had improved since my last evaluation. I could get off the table without assistance. That was definitely something.

I was disappointed that he didn't have an answer about whether or not I could father children. But that could be left for later. He hadn't said it was impossible either. For now, I'd push it aside and think about the good news.

I didn't have a physio session scheduled and Sciezka was picking Al up at lunch time. It was a few hours before I had class and office hours. It was the perfect opportunity to talk to Doctor Kohut.

After I parked the jeep in the faculty lot, I made my way to the humanities building. The sky matched my mood, dark, as I cursed the puddles collecting on the sidewalk. I should have taken a cab, since I'd have less ground to cover if I got dropped off. That was something to consider for the next term. It would run winter to spring, snow and mud.

My favorite things...

I stopped at the cart in the lobby and bought a coffee. Perhaps that would improve my mood or at least warm me up. Doctor Kohut must have had the same idea. He came in out of the rain, a newspaper over his head in a failed attempt to keep dry.

He greeted me from across the lobby saying, "Beautiful weather isn't it?"

"It'd be perfect if I was a duck or a fish," I quipped.

He chuckled as he wiped the water droplets off of his coat and then ordered a cup of coffee.
While he waited for his order to be up, I asked, "Do you have some time to talk right now Doctor Kohut?"

"I don't have class for another hour. I came in to do some paperwork, but that can wait. Speak your mind Jean."

"If it's not too much trouble, could we discuss this in private? It's personal..." I replied hesitantly, trailing off.

"Sure, we can use my office and remember, it's Seth when we're not in class."

We took the elevator to the third floor where his office was located. He took off his coat, shook it out and hung it up. Once he sat down, I pushed my chair closer to his.

We were both quiet until he said, "I can tell that something is bothering you. Is everything fine with Sciezka?"

"Everything at home is going really well. The dog even gets along with the cat. It's probably a false alarm. I'm reading too much into the significance..."

"It has been a year now, hasn't it?" he asked bluntly.

"On Friday actually. I had an annual review with Doctor Parker this morning."

"How did that go?"

"He didn't find anything new, which is a relief. I'm in great health... considering. I'm doing everything right. He said something about my course of treatment and rehab becoming a teaching model."

"So why are you here? I have a hunch you're not giving me the whole story," he pressed.

"I have mixed feelings about the anniversary. Should I be proud about what I've accomplished in the last year? Or should I be mourning everything I lost that day?"

"Jean... does it have to be one or the other? What were you thinking of doing to mark the day?"

I paused for a moment before responding, "I may take the day off and spend time alone. I guess I just need some space. I opened a whole new can of worms too, like I didn't have enough on my mind."

"What else is going on?"

I shifted uneasily in my seat, pushing up on the rims to change position and finally answered his question, "I asked him if having children would be possible someday, given my condition."

He nodded and then asked, "What was his professional opinion?"

"He didn't really have an answer. He doesn't know. There isn't enough research. There aren't too many guys who have lived with this for decades... now with treatment that's a possibility. The doctors have been focused on keeping us alive, not helping us have a life."

"Not knowing must be frustrating. Are you upset about that? I'm here to talk any time."

"I'm doing alright, considering. It's better than the answer I got about walking; it's not a 'no' yet. I'm in a pretty good headspace. I feel strong."
He replied warmly, "So after thinking about it, what's your plan? Tell me if I can help in any way. I can give you a copy of my lecture notes. I don't want to see you on campus on Friday."

"Thanks Seth, it means a lot. I think I'll ask Jim to drive Al to the hospital and see if Sciezka can take the pets over to Gracia's on Friday. I'll give Julia the day off too. That way I won't have everyone feeling like they have to pussyfoot around me. After that I think takeout at home with Sciezka, a quiet night in, would be a good end to the day."

He smiled as he said, "It sounds like you're prepared. Feel free to call if you think of anything else, as a friend or a therapist. She'll be mad if this gets back to her, but I wasn't completely caught by surprise by this conversation. Riza called me last week to give me the heads up."

I shook my head in disbelief and then replied, "I would have been livid even a few months ago. It's good to know she still has my back. I don't have to face this alone. So, if she won't shoot you, could you tell her thanks for me?"

"I'll do that. Are you ready to head to class? Can I hitch a ride in the elevator with you?"

"It's the least I can do. I may as well share the perks," I replied cheerfully.

"In that case, go have a cigarette too. I know you're itching for one Jean."

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After class and office hours I went straight home. The rain hadn't let up all afternoon; in fact, it was raining harder. I was soaked to the skin by the time I got to the faculty parking lot and into the jeep.

When I got home, I had a cigarette on the porch before going inside. Thankfully the bag under the seat of my chair was weatherproofed. Wet cigarettes would have been the limit for me. It was chilly, but I was sheltered from the worst of the weather. With any luck I'd drip dry outside so I didn't make a mess of the floors.

I made a beeline for the bedroom after I got inside to take a hot bath and change into dry clothes. I had the house to myself for now. Sciezka, the boys and Tiny were nowhere to be seen. As I eased into the water I sighed. It was good to be home.

Warm clothes and a nap would put me right. Hopefully they would fortify me for the discussion I knew I had to have with Sciezka.

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I'd been asleep for about an hour when Sciezka came in to wake me. She curled up next to me on the bed and after she got comfortable remarked, "You got an early start this morning."

Shit, she'd noticed. Now I really had to come clean.

"I had an appointment at the hospital with Doctor Parker."

"Oh, I didn't know that," she said, sounding hurt. "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine; it was just a periodic evaluation. There's been no change. I haven't gained or lost any sensation or mobility."

She frowned and I quickly added, "We already knew all that. He says I'm in great shape. Jim and I
are keeping the possible related conditions in check."

"So even after the trip and being held for questioning you're fine? The interruption in your routine while we hid out didn't set you back too far?"

I pulled her closer and hugged her tightly, "You and I did pretty well keeping me together, but I did have to make up for lost time while I waited to go get you. But you're right, there's been no further muscle mass loss and my bone density is good."

She kissed me tenderly before replying, "I'm glad it was a good checkup. Did he tell you anything else?"

"You and everyone else will be relieved to hear that my butt is holding up just fine," I joked.

She laughed. "That is very good to know. So, you're sure you're feeling fine? It's not like you to nap unless you're forced to," she pressed concern shining in her eyes.

"Blame the rain. I was cold and soaked when I got home. Since no one was here I figured I'd take advantage of the quiet."

She sat up and massaged my neck and shoulders as she said, "I thought about you today while I was at Gracia's."

I cocked an eyebrow as I replied, "Oh really and did you picture me a sodden mess, trying in vain to light a wet cigarette?"

She shook her head and sighed sounding exasperated, "Yesterday by the fire was nice and we should do it again..."

"That's a plan I can get behind. What do you want for dinner?"

"I was thinking Xingian. That way neither of us has to cook or clean," she replied. "I feel bad for the poor delivery guy, dragging him out into the storm, but we'll make it up to him with a bigger tip."

Scieżka called in the order while I set the table. When she got off the phone she said, "You've got two place settings too many. The boys are over at Russell and Fletcher's place."

"And the dog?" I asked, hoping she was up to something.

"Tiny is at Gracia's. Elysia is campaigning for a puppy and Tiny is the dress rehearsal."

As I pulled her towards me for a kiss I asked quietly, "So we have the whole house to ourselves?"

She nodded, then picked up where I'd left off, kissing me passionately.

This looked quite promising.

In the morning Scieżka and I stayed in bed longer than usual, just holding each other. When I attempted to get up to start my routine she blurted out, "I know what Friday is."

I flopped back against the pillows as I replied, trying to cover my irritation, "You do? Who told you?"
"Between your appointment yesterday that you informed me about after the fact and simple arithmetic I figured it out," she stated quietly.

"I didn't want to bring it up before I'd had a cigarette and a cup or two of coffee, but you're right. I wasn't sure how to approach it really."

She took my hand, squeezed it and whispered, "Do what you have to do. I'm here for you and I love you."

Friday morning came quickly, too quickly in my opinion, though it couldn't be over fast enough. Sciezka was nearly dressed when I woke up. She sat down next to me and said, "Are you sure about this? I'll just be at Gracia's if you decide you don't want to be alone after all."

I pulled her closer to me and kissed her tenderly. Her offer was very tempting, her perfume intoxicating. I could spend the day in bed with her. Distract myself and run away from my memories and regrets. As painful as it might be, I needed to consider the events of the last year, the good, the bad, the nightmarish and the sublime.

"I will see you tonight," I replied after careful consideration. "Thank you so much for understanding, for not being hurt that this is something I have to do alone... "

She hugged me tightly, kissed me again and then as she twisted the ring on her finger said, "Try to think of the good things too."

As she left the room I said quietly, "That's the only thing that keeps me going."

I lay in bed until I heard her leave. As I showered and went about my hygiene routine, I attempted to quiet my mind. School and work could wait, so could chores and plans. I had the whole day to work through this. I'd planned for the worst and so far, I didn't feel awful.

Once I was dressed, I went into the kitchen to make coffee. I liked to drink it while I wrote in my journal. That and truthfully, I'm not human in the morning until I've had a cup or two. A cigarette helps as well. I got the percolator out and was looking for the coffee without success when I saw a note on the icebox. Underneath bread, milk and eggs was "coffee" in all capital letters.

"Well damn!" I cursed aloud even though there was no one to hear me.

I went outside for a cigarette and noticed I was low on those too. The best laid plans often go awry. Looks like I'd have to be out in the world for as long as it took to buy coffee and smokes and, if I had my way, no longer.

There were light snow flurries as I got into the jeep, but it wasn't accumulating and the roads looked fine. I didn't even need to brush off the windshield. It took no time at all to get to High Street to stop at the tobacconist and the coffee shop. They roasted their own beans and I'd never drink military coffee again if I could help it. My stomach couldn't take it anymore. I downed a small coffee before I left.

I didn't feel like going home yet. Maybe I'd drive to the outskirts of town. Driving usually cleared my head. Since it was snowing and could take a turn for the worse on short notice, I nixed that
idea. Instead I took the scenic route home, passing H.Q. via Amestris Parkway. There weren't many cars out, likely due to the weather.

It was only November but city workers were already hanging strings of white lights in the trees, decorating for the Winter Solstice. Celebrating the longest night of the year was a throwback to the ancient religion, but I still loved it. The snow flurries dusted the lights and banners as they were set in place, the frost of winter was already settling on the tips of the evergreens. The lights in the trees lining the parkway would be beautiful once it really started coming down. I started thinking about the scent of freshly baked cookies and the taste of creamy frosting. My mouth watered in anticipation for the savory aroma of days and days of holiday meals. I pictured a huge roast goose with sage dressing, mashed potatoes and all the trimmings at a table surrounded by my friends and family. A warm fire, roasted marshmallows and some cognac to mark the occasion, and at least twelve days and nights of me and my girl...

Suddenly a car sped past me on the right, and narrowly avoided clipping the rear fender of the jeep. I laid on the horn and then checked the rearview mirror. No wonder that jerk was going so fast; he had military police on his tail! Their lights and sirens were blaring and I signaled to pull over and get out of the way.

I looked over my shoulder to make sure it was safe to change lanes and I heard the squealing of tires and the crush of metal against metal. The car that passed me had broadsided a car in the intersection! There was nowhere to go that was clear. I applied the brakes but didn't have enough time to stop. I was desperate to avoid a collision. The safest thing to do was to point the jeep towards the median and hang on.

I hit the tree with a sickening crunch.
Chapter Notes


Chapter 52: Full Circle

I looked around and saw I'd done a number on the front end of the jeep. I cut the engine and sat there breathing heavily. That wasn't so bad. Once I'd patted down my legs to check for injury, I gave myself the once over. I sighed in relief. I tasted blood in my mouth, but after checking myself out in the rear-view mirror I assumed that I must have bitten my tongue. I'd seen worse, I'd be fine. I was about to pick up the bag of coffee that had spilled all over when I saw the blue and red flashing lights bearing down on me.

The next thing I knew I was upside down, hanging by my safety belt. Shards of broken glass covered everything. The passenger side door was so close to me I could touch it. Smoke filled the air and someone was screaming. I couldn't see through what remained of the windshield, now a web of cracks and caked with dirt. Even in the haze I noted there wasn't any blood on what was left of it. Someone screamed in agony close by.

"Help me! Someone please!" was all I could make out. The guy in the vehicle that had hit me was in trouble.

I tried my door, but after the rollover the jeep was pinned against something. It was instinct trying to get out and help. I didn't think things through. What could I have done to help even if I could get out?

"Hang in there man! Someone will come get you. Sit tight," I yelled, hoping he could hear me, hoping it would help him fight.

I heard more sirens, this time it sounded like an ambulance. I hoped they would get to the other guy in time. His voice seemed to be giving out. That couldn't be good.

A knock on the window startled me. I'd blacked out. There was a medic on the other side of the glass.

"Are you injured sir?" he yelled.

"The other guy sounds like he's in a bad way. I'm fine. Get him out first," I replied

"We've got medics working on pulling him out of the wreck already. I'm going to need a crowbar to get you out. I'll be right back."
I patted down my legs again to make sure I hadn't been injured. I was pretty sure I'd gotten lucky. The pieces of my chair were nearly on top of me. The frame mangled, sticking out at odd angles and the wheels hopelessly out of round with broken spokes. I was working on an inventory of cuts and bruises when the medic came back.

He'd brought help with him. Soon I could feel the chill air when they tore the door off its hinges with a crowbar.

It took a few guys to get me out. Someone cut the seatbelt as two other men pulled me carefully from the wreck. They strapped me to a backboard. Before I got my bearings one of them started firing questions at me.

"What's your name sir?"
"Jean Havoc."
"What day is it?"
"Friday."
"Good," he replied, sounding optimistic.

Once I was no longer ass over teakettle and the blood that had rushed to my head returned to where it was supposed to be, I felt dizzy. I wanted to sit up. I wanted to see the jeep. I wanted to see what had happened as the noise and chaos wasn't telling me much. I needed to be sure I wasn't bleeding out from an injury I couldn't feel. But I couldn't because they'd strapped me down. The lack of control of the situation... the inability to move on my own was making me anxious.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" the medic asked as he continued the field examination.
"Three. I'm fine. Could you get me off of this thing?" I replied.
"We'll get to that, but first I need to be sure you're ok. It's standard procedure after a wreck. You could have hurt your back or neck."

His reaction when I laughed was not what I was expecting. He probably chalked it up to stress after the crash.

He got out some equipment and took my vitals. They must have been good as he smiled. After that he used a penlight to check my pupils. It was all routine; I'd been through it before. Tall guys tend to bump their heads a lot on the obstacle course. I'd knocked myself out a few times during basic training. He went back into his bag and took out some gauze.

"What's that for?" I asked.
"You cut your forehead in the crash, it'll need stitches."
"Gotcha that's no big deal," I replied then asked again increasingly impatient, "Can you get me off this thing?"

"I still have to check a few more things out. We're going to have to take you in any way for sutures. Try to hold still."

"Fine, just hurry. I'm sure you could be of more use to the other injured. I just banged my head. The doctor is just going to patch me up and send me home."
His radio crackled to life and a woman's voice said, "Dispatch here, what have you got?"

"I have an adult male involved in the M.V.A. on Amestris Parkway. Blood pressure and heart rate are elevated but stable. He has a laceration to the forehead, pupils are normal and reactive. Patient is lucid. No signs of shock. Checking reflexes for neuro..."

He moved out of my line of vision for a moment continuing the examination. When he came back to where I could see him his expression had changed. His brow was creased and he frowned.

"Sir, can you feel this?" he asked and I saw him move again, but couldn't see what he was doing and couldn't feel it either. That wasn't anything new to me.

"What about this?" he asked again, his pitch rising. My vision had started swimming. I must have hit my head harder than I thought.

"Wiggle your toes for me," he instructed, his having gone from relaxed but efficient to urgent.

The bump to my head slowed me down, the dizziness didn't help either, but I finally figured it out. He thought I'd injured my back in the wreck.

"I'm fine really. Could you just get my chair out of the jeep? I hate being stuck to this backboard. Let me sit up!" I protested sounding much less calm than I'd hoped to.

"We have a possible spinal cord injury here," the medic said into the radio.

"Yeah, old issue. I'm fine. Get my wheelchair-"

"The patient keeps insisting he's fine, and I do see a wheelchair. Re-checking vitals, he has to be in shock. Requesting clearance to transport to the nearest hospital..."

Four medics lifted the backboard and were about to put me into the ambulance when a wave of nausea and dizziness came over me.

"Damn it let me up! I gotta puke!"

They tipped the board to the side just in time as I began to heave. Then I must have blacked out again. I could hear the sirens wail as I faded in and out.

I came to again as the medics were unloading the rig. They were met by people who I assumed were doctors, judging by the white coats. I could see ceiling tiles and overhead lights flashing by over my head. I felt sick. Finally, the stretcher stopped and they transferred the backboard onto a gurney in the middle of a green tile-lined room. The bright light coming from above me was blinding. I closed my eyes tightly so I wouldn't puke again.

After being disoriented for what seemed like forever a doctor addressed me, "You are at Central Military Hospital and we're going to take care of you."

I hadn't been able to communicate clearly with the medics. I was panicked and dizzy. I was marginally better now. I knew it was important that the doctors have as much information as possible. It was hard to put the words together but finally I said, "Please... page Jim Bruno in Rehabilitation. My name is Jean Havoc, look up my records."

I'd given up on being untied anytime soon. A better strategy was to comply and hope they could
find Jim. They'd listen to him.

The doctor, one that hadn't treated me before, took my vitals and started working me up. Midway through he said, "The medics told me you have an existing condition that requires the use of a wheelchair. Is that correct?"

I tried nodding, but with my neck immobilized that wouldn't work. The doctor waited patiently for me to answer.

"I'm paralyzed from the waist down, so the backboard isn't necessary," I replied.

"As soon as we're sure you didn't sustain additional damage to your spine and have ruled out internal injuries and broken bones below your sensation level, I can take you off."

Then the doctor and his staff sprang into action, inserting an IV which the doctor assured me was standard procedure when I objected.

He began barking orders to the staff, "Have radiology rule out skull fracture. Get a C-spine and lower extremities film as well. We're not taking any chances today."

They sent me for x-rays, after they took vial after vial of blood. After what seemed like forever, they finally unfastened the belts tying me to the backboard.

The nurses helped me sit up, then the doctor returned and said, "The good news is that you didn't break any bones and you have no internal injuries. The bad news is that you bruised a few ribs and have a concussion. After I close the cut on your forehead, I'm going have you admitted overnight for observation."

That was the last thing I wanted to hear and this was the last place I wanted to be.

"Do you really have to do that?" I pleaded. "I can take care of myself. I've spent enough time in this place."

The doctor nodded and then said, "I skimmed your medical records and there are a lot of them. You'll be admitted overnight as a precaution."

"Did you get in touch with Jim Bruno?" I asked hopefully. He'd get me out of here.

"I did," he answered. "He says he'll need time to arrange for a loaner chair and transport. He also told me to tell you he thinks you should stay put, at least for tonight."

That traitor!

"But my chair is in the jeep; can't someone just go get it?"

He shook his head, his expression grim.

"So, both the jeep and my wheelchair are totaled? Doesn't that beat all? I went out to buy a pound of coffee and a pack of cigarettes and I end up in the last place I wanted to be today."

"I'm sorry Mr. Havoc. They have a bed available on your old ward. The nurses were concerned, but I was told that they want you to bring them up to speed. You must be pretty popular," he said trying to sound upbeat. "Try to get some rest while you're there."
I was sleeping when Jim arrived. He was sitting in a chair next to the bed, reading a magazine. When he noticed I was awake he remarked, "You certainly made today memorable."

"This wasn't what I'd had in mind when I said I wanted to think things over. I definitely didn't need my memory refreshed on this place. It still smells the same and I bet the food is still lousy."

"You my friend deserve a plaque on the wall of this ward," he teased.

"What for most consecutive days admitted or frequency of admissions?" I quipped.

"Both, though I overheard the nurses in the break room and they say you're handsome as ever, even with stitches and a shiner."

"Oh goodie, that is just great. I knew about the stitches, but a black eye too? I'm glad the nurses like getting updates. In the future I think I'd prefer to just visit after a session. I'll send candy too if it keeps me out of here."

"So how are you feeling? Well enough to be a smart ass, but you are good at covering," he said, suddenly sounding serious.

"My head is spinning and throbbing worse than my first hangover. My ribs hurt, so don't crack any jokes. I'm pretty sure it hurts to laugh. I'm worried about my chair. The ER doc said it was totaled, along with the jeep... Winry is going to kill me. Two of her creations ruined in one fell swoop."

"The jeep is no more. It's at the scrap yard, gone to a better place. I got your stuff out of it and then dropped your chair off at the bike shop on my way here. The tech didn't look too hopeful. I salvaged what I could and called Winry. Even on the rush list she can't get here until Monday at the earliest. You're stuck with a loaner chair until then. She did promise not to hurt you."

"Give me some good news; there is good news, right? Did you track down Sciezka? Is she coming?"

"She's on her way here and knows you weren't critically injured so she's taking her time and bringing you supper," he replied when I started looking worried. "She knows your opinion of the cuisine here."

I sighed heavily and grimaced as it hurt to breathe deeply before saying, "Thanks Jim. The last thing I want is for her to worry."

"You're welcome. Do you need anything else before I leave?"

"Any chance you could get them to release me tonight? I don't want to sleep here tonight."

"Not a chance on that. When the pain meds wear off you can expect your ribs to hurt even more. Anything else?"

"If you can't get me out of here could you at least get me something to write with... helps me sort stuff out and some cigarettes?"

"The paper and pen I can do and I have your cigarettes on me. You can have one," he replied. "But then I expect you to rest."

I'd take Jim's advice after I had that cigarette. There was no ashtray on the bedside table and there
wasn't one in the drawer either. I'd have to use the call button to contact the nurse's station. And then lay the charm on thick. Real thick.

A few minutes after I pressed the button one of the younger nurses came in to see what I needed. I recognized her from my first stay; she was the one who had given me the infamous first sponge bath. She smiled as she asked, "How can I help you Mr. Havoc?"

I held up my lone cigarette and grinned sheepishly.

"Old habits die hard. Let me guess, you need a light and an ashtray," she replied jovially.

"Please? It would go a long way toward improving a terrible day. I haven't had one since this morning."

She was suddenly keenly interested in my chart. It didn't look promising. Maybe I could make her budge. How much would be too much in the charm department?

"I'm so glad the doctor admitted me to this ward, if I have to stay overnight. You all take such good care of me."

"That's sweet of you to say but you know it's against hospital policy to allow patients to smoke on the ward. Colonel Mustang practically moved heaven and earth last time to get the Head Nurse to allow it."

"Please?" I asked again. "By the way, what is a pretty girl like you doing working on a Friday night? You should be out on the town."

"Come on, honey you know you shouldn't smoke in here," she replied flirtatiously.

Was she using my flirting against me?

"I know I shouldn't smoke, it's a filthy habit. That's why I'm only asking for one... or could you get me out of here so I can smoke on the terrace? Please, there's gotta be something you can do."

"No."

"Pretty please? C'mon sweetheart, I'm just asking for one."

"Well Mustang did pull some strings... but that was for your last visit... I'm not making any promises, but I'll see what I can do," she said before adding, "The charge nurse was right, I have witnessed it first-hand. You are a horrible flirt, though you are one of my favorite patients. I'll be back soon."

"Thanks for trying to help me out with this."

Sciezka arrived before the nurse came back. She dropped her things in the chair and then cautiously leaned in for a kiss.

The nurse returned with an emesis basin and a book of matches as Sciezka was settling into the chair for visitors.

"Here's what you asked for Mr. Havoc," she said, a blush creeping across her cheeks.
Sciezka shook her head before teasing me saying, "I see you're up to your old tricks Jean."

"I'm behaving!" I protested preemptively.

"I hope that indulging his vices won't get you into any trouble. I'm Sciezka by the way."

After the nurse regained her composure she replied, "He can have one, no problem. I'll have to tell the girls that I'm the first to meet the future wife of our favorite patient."

"That you did," I said. "Thanks again."

She ducked out of the room quickly saying, "I'll just leave you two alone now. Let me know if you need anything else."

Sciezka began unpacking the contents of the hamper she'd brought with her and didn't comment further on the young and blushing nurse.

I asked Sciezka to pull the curtain before I lit my treasured prize, took a long drag, held it and then exhaled slowly.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you're in a good mood," Sciezka remarked.

"I'm so happy to see you and relieved that I can have a smoke. Today did not go as planned. I only went out to get coffee, just my luck, right?" I replied, trying not to complain too much.

She took my hand and her cheerful facade broke as she said, "You're lucky you aren't more seriously injured. I was so worried when Gracia finally tracked me down at the library. I couldn't believe you were fine once I saw the pictures in the paper. That was a horrific accident and here you are with barely a scratch on you... stitches and a black eye after a five-car pile-up? I had to see you to believe it."

"What I could see of it looked pretty bad. I'm sorry about worrying you with this and today..."

"I'm just relieved you're ok. I brought sandwiches. I wasn't sure you'd be up for more," she said, quickly changing the subject.

When we finished eating, she cleared away the paper our sandwiches had been wrapped in and then sat back down. I yawned and she asked, "Do you want me to leave so you can get some more rest?"

"That's the last thing I want right now, give me a minute to get situated."

I checked the IV location to be sure I wouldn't snag it or the line when I moved, then slowly and carefully scooted to the edge of the bed. Once I was sure there was room for Sciezka I patted the empty spot next to me. She gingerly sat down before curling up next to me.

I woke up to the click of boots and my eyes snapped open. I must have tensed up because it startled Sciezka and she sat up abruptly. Mustang was standing in the doorway and she scrambled off the bed.

"Sorry to impose," he said before he continued. "Could I have a few minutes alone with you Jean?"

"I'll just go get some coffee in the cafeteria. Would either of you like anything?" Sciezka asked.
"It's getting late, you should head home. I'll be fine," I replied.

She took my hand and locked eyes with me, like she was asking if I was sure. I squeezed her hand and said, "I am sure that I'm sure. I'll see you in the morning."

I pulled her in for a kiss as I didn't think she'd initiate one in front of Roy.

"I love you," I whispered once we'd broken the kiss.

He sat down as soon as Sciezka left and remarked, "I hope I wasn't interrupting a moment."

"Roy, cut the crap. You didn't come here to make small talk. Who told you I was here?" I replied, indignant that he was once again checking up on me and meddling.

"Feury heard it over the shortwave radio earlier and brought it to my attention. I had him make some calls so Breda would calm down. As soon as he heard that there was a black jeep driven by a civilian involved in the pileup he panicked," he replied evenly.

"After making that many calls you must have discovered that I'm just fine. Some bumps and bruises, all superficial wounds."

He lowered his head before speaking again, "I needed to see with my own eyes that you were alright. Seems like we're back where we started, doesn't it?"

I saw the sadness in Roy's eyes, and heard the quieting in his voice.

It hurt to sit up, but I did it anyway. "Roy, look at me," I ordered sternly.

He looked up, startled by my tone of voice, his dark eyes wide.

"The only way today was even possible is because you saved my life a year ago. The only reason you interrupted something is because I'm healthy enough to be in a relationship. The only reason I was driving around Central was because you pushed and pulled every string imaginable so I could live independently."

He opened his mouth to speak but I put up a hand to stop him saying, "I'm not done yet! This has pissed me off for long enough. I know you love to wallow in your guilt, but not about this." He balled his fists but continued listening, "I signed on for everything willingly. You saved my life and it's a great one. When you go on this guilt trip, it makes me think maybe this life is less. That you pity me... do you pity me?"

He looked shocked at the accusation and then stammered, "Jean, no... I just... if I hadn't..."

"If you hadn't done any number of things the country would be overrun with monsters. Please just let this go. I wanted to spend today alone to think and maybe wallow a bit. I lost a lot that day. Everything that I used to think was important. But if anything had happened differently, I wouldn't be with Sciezka. I hate it when you meddle and scheme, but thank you."

He turned his face away for a moment, smoothed his uniform and then said, "That was insubordinate Lieutenant Havoc."

That was more like the commanding officer I knew and had respected enough to follow.

"I'm retired. What are you going to do? Court-martial me?" I retorted.

"Point taken, though I did bring you a present," he offered.
"Hopefully not flowers or balloons, the sentiment is nice but I've had my fill of them in the last year. This room used to look like a florist's shop."

He pulled a pack of smokes out of his pocket and handed it to me.

"Thank you," I said as I took them and after lighting up said, "That's more like it."

"Anything I can do to make this stay easier on you?" he asked.

"Can you form metal using alchemy? Jim told me my chair is a mess and the earliest it'll get fixed is Monday. I detest the chairs they have here."

There he went looking uncomfortable again, "If that's my only problem after all this I'm lucky. It's probably for the best anyway. You know how bad I am at staying put and resting."

"Anything else?" he pressed.

"Do you have any information on what caused the chase?" I asked.

"I'll get Falman on that ASAP... any more requests?"

"Give Feury a noogie for me when you see him for being nosy and meddling. Please tell Breda to come to the house as soon as he gets over his hangover tomorrow. You are headed to the Cavalier next to give them your report, correct?"

"You are indeed correct," he replied. "You're almost as good as I am at predicting the next move. I'll have to remember that the next time we play chess. I'm with General Lockheed; your future is at the Academy."

He stood up to shake my hand before he left. I slapped it away playfully and said, "I think I deserve a hug at this point."

He leaned in carefully and gave me a perfunctory manly hug. I clapped him on the back and commented, "Well that's a start."

As he left, he called over his shoulder, "Any other messages to relay to the guys?"

"Tell Breda he can stop crying into his stout and that I'm well enough to give you shit!"

Roy shook his head and chuckled. I was fairly certain that maybe, just maybe he could finally stop torturing himself over what had happened to me.

Visiting hours were nearly over by the time he left. I was relieved since even though I'd been out cold half the day I was still exhausted. Hopefully I wouldn't have any more surprise visitors.

It's cold and wet. Decay, must and ozone mingle to form a sinister stench. This laboratory has been out of use for a long time. The air is thick with gunpowder. The only light comes from emergency lamps and smoldering flames. I'm on the floor. I can't move. I try to push up on my arms to see what is going on, to escape. Each time I get a few inches off the ground I collapse again. My arms quake with the effort.

Why can't I get up?
The puddle under me is becoming warmer even as I'm shivering uncontrollably on the sodden floor.

*Is that blood? Is it my blood?*

I can't breathe. It feels like someone is sitting on my chest. Each breath I take shallower. It's increasingly difficult to keep my eyes open. My eyelids are so heavy, like they're being forced shut. Someone or something is tearing me to shreds. Lust is saying something to... to him, to someone. What's she saying? I can't make sense of it.

"Enjoy watching your subordinate bleed to death. You'll be joining him soon enough."

Mustang's calling to me. He's getting louder and louder. My lips are moving but no sound comes. I can't answer.

*It hurts. Everything hurts. Oh, fuck, I failed! I'm sorry! Am I in hell?*

He's rolling me onto my back. My flak jacket is off, then my shirt. His face hovers over mine, his features blurred. "Keep breathing. This is going to hurt. I'm sorry." He places his hands on my stomach. At first it feels warm. Then I'm on fire. All I can smell is charred flesh. It is putrid.

"Hang in there Havoc! I am ordering you to live! Do not die on me! Help is coming soon!"

Then it all goes black.

Soon I hear blaring sirens. It must be an ambulance. It feels like we're going fast. Every bump is agony. I hurt all over. People are shouting, a cacophony of voices impossible to understand.  

*Could they just stop? Please make it stop.*

Finally, the sirens have stopped. The road is smoother. I see bright lights in a long corridor. The pain is lessening. Now I'm numb all over. Must be a false alarm...

*If they'd all just shut up now and let me sleep.*

"He's lost a lot of blood. Ruptured spleen, collapsed lung, multiple stab wounds... prep an OR now. His BP is in the basement. We're going to lose him if the internal bleeding isn't stopped quickly. Hang another unit."

Bleach and soap, muffled and murmuring voices and dull pain comes next. The morphine haze makes it hard to focus once I open my eyes. I take a look around. I'm not dead.

I lived but I am not alive. Not anymore. Everything I ever was is gone. I will be stuck here forever.

*Maybe this is hell.*

Someone's shaking me. I flinch at the contact and brace for an attack.

"Mr. Havoc... Mr. Havoc can you hear me?"

I try to speak but the air around me is so heavy. I can't get a deep breath. It hurts. I gasp and pant.

"Mr. Havoc, Jean, wake up! You're dreaming. Wake up," a woman's voice said again.
I tried speaking again, but nothing came out. I opened my eyes and blinked at the brightness. Someone had turned on the lights. Once I focused, I saw that the voice was coming from a woman in white. The sheets have twisted into a damp wrinkled mess. My fingers are still clutching them tightly.

When she saw that my eyes were open, she asked, "Are you all right? I was doing rounds and I heard you talking in your sleep."

I swallowed hard before asking for water. I must have been doing more than just talking in my sleep if she could hear me from the hallway.

She poured a glass for me from the pitcher next to the bed and handed it to me. I drank deeply. Once I felt less parched, I said, "Thanks for coming to check on me. I'm fine. Sorry to bother you."

She looked doubtful and then asked, "Is there anything I can get for you, a cold compress or more water? Your gown is soaked with perspiration. You didn't take a sleeping pill and you're due for a dose of pain medication."

"I don't want to trouble you..." I protest embarrassed at the attention I've drawn already.

The nurse smiled before replying, "It's not any trouble. Just tell me what will make you feel better."

"Yes ma'am," I replied, trying to be a compliant patient.

"The nurses I supervise said you are looking good. I tend to agree. Are you feeling that way for the most part?"

I considered her question carefully, more alert now before answering, "Most days are great. I get where I need and want to go. I'm busy with my girl, school and therapy... in that order. Days like today still get to me. Nothing like a hospital stay to remind me that my body is a damned full-time job... sorry for cussing ma'am."

"Today would get the best of anyone," she said. "I'll be back soon with your meds and then take your vitals so nobody disturbs you until breakfast. You need your rest. As for the language, this is a military facility. I've heard far worse."

She returned quickly, helped me into a clean gown and fluffed the pillows behind me. She gave me a pill that she said would help me sleep with more cold water to wash it down. After she checked my blood pressure, pulse and took a look at my pupils she smoothed the blankets once more. She injected something into the IV line saying, "This is for the pain." I could feel it take effect almost immediately. Warmth spread through my body and the pain washed away.

As she turned to leave, I said, "Could you leave the light on when you go? And thank you."

She notated my chart and then dimmed the lights, but left them on.

________________________________________________________________________________________

With the help of the drugs I slept through the rest of the night. I was groggy in the morning when Sciezka gently roused me. She stroked my arm as she cooed, "Wake up sleepy head. It's time to get up."

When I opened my eyes she was right there, smiling. She kissed me tenderly and asked, "Are you ready to go home?"
I nodded sleepily in reply and shut my eyes again. I wasn't quite ready to be awake and I knew there wouldn't be any coffee on my breakfast tray when it arrived.

"Did you have a rough night?" she asked, her voice wavering with concern.

That woke me up. I hated for her to worry, it was the last thing I wanted to happen.

I quickly rubbed the sleep from my eyes before answering, "I'm fine, I just didn't sleep well. I hate this place. Hard beds and scratchy sheets just don't cut it anymore and you weren't next to me."

That explanation seemed to appease her, "Well if that's all then we'll have to spring you as soon as we possibly can. Everything is ready at home to speed your recovery."

"You didn't have to do anything," I protested.

She leaned in for another kiss and said, "I didn't and no one else did either. Our schedules are clear all weekend and there are plenty of delivery menus. You aren't budging an inch from bed."

"I can deal with that, if you keep me company."

"Only if you behave..."

I was hoping Sciezka would do more "kissing it better" when a nurse arrived with my breakfast tray.

Sciezka stepped away from the bedside and stood near the doorway awkwardly.

"Doctor Knox will be in after you eat to perform a pre-release examination," the nurse announced in a clipped manner.

"Thank you," I replied. "For delivering breakfast and the good news."

Once the nurse left Sciezka sat down next to me and confessed, "I feel like I should go and sit in the corner after getting caught in the act like that."

"She was sort of frosty," I commented. "Could I join you in the corner?"

"You'd only get me into more trouble, since you can't seem to keep your hands to yourself any better than I can."

I picked at the powdered eggs and dry toast. My dream the night before had left me less than hungry. The food did the rest. When Doctor Knox came in, I said, "Sciezka, could you please go down to the cafeteria and get me a cup of coffee?"

"Of course, do you want anything else? You barely touched your breakfast..." she replied. When I shook my head no, she gave me a peck on the cheek and then left.

Doctor Knox took my vitals quickly, checked my pupils and then sat down to record his notes on my chart. He did so silently.

The suspense was killing me. Would I be released soon or not?

"So, Doctor Knox, am I in the clear? Can I go home today?" I asked tentatively.

He cleared his throat before replying sounding gruff, "I'd rather you didn't. I think you should rest here for another day or so. Your chart says you had a rough night and woke up in a considerable
amount of pain. That was just sleeping. How are you going to manage at home with a much larger
and heavier chair than you are used to? Not to mention pain management methods."

I frowned and thought about his objections for a few moments. What would I do? The last thing I
wanted was to burden Sciezka if I couldn't take care of myself. I was sure I could at least function
as well as I had when I first stayed at Gracia's. I'd just have to slow down until Winry fixed my
chair and my ribs healed.

"Well, what are your thoughts on my findings?" he asked insistently, looking cross.

"I'll just have to take it easy and rest up. If the pain gets too bad, I'll take something. I'm used to it.
As for how I slept last night, if I'd been in my own bed, I'm sure it wouldn't have been as bad."

His brow furrowed as he stroked his beard, deep in thought and then he asked, "How so if you
don't mind telling me?"

"I remembered more of what happened in the Third Lab... what it was like right after. Being here
probably didn't help," I answered quietly.

Thankfully he dropped the subject and didn't press me for the details.

"If you're dead set on going home at least let me prescribe more powerful pain medication than
you use regularly. I'll write up a slip for a stronger sedative as well, just in case. Will you require a
visiting nurse to help out with your hygiene routine and bathing?"

My expression must have changed drastically and he added, "I'll take that as a no."

"That's right, I'm fine. This is just a bump in the road. I can handle it."

"Jim Bruno offered to drop by your house when his shift is over every day, until you are better.
Will you at least make that concession?"

"I guess I'm going to have to, at least until I get the lightweight chair back. I'm not looking forward
to using the loaner, and I'll be stuck at home."

"Fair enough, I'll write up your discharge papers. I still think you're stubborn. No matter, it is
probably a good thing you are. Most other men would have given up a long time ago."

I grinned, not the reaction he'd expected, before saying, "Thanks for the compliment. I've had to be
stubborn so I can catch up."

He removed the IV and other more embarrassing tubes before he left. I was glad to get that over
with before Sciezka returned.

Soon after Doctor Knox left there was a knock at the door. Sciezka peered around the corner
asking, "All clear?"

"That depends; do you have 'the package'?" I teased.

By now she was used to my wiseass use of military jargon and replied, "I have retrieved the
package and evaded detection."

"Roger that, then the password," I prompted.

She sighed and then looking devious whispered, "I better not need one or Jacqueline is never
getting access to confidential briefs again."
Man was she ever good. Too bad I was cooped up here and still laid up.

"That's enough soldier, c'mere and kiss me."

"That's better," she said as she set two cups of coffee on the nightstand before kissing me.

I changed into the sweats she'd brought for me to wear home and was grateful she'd brought a watch cap as well. I still had blood in my hair and my clothes from the accident were filthy. Julia would probably recommend burning them.

We were drinking our coffee and I was debating the merits of sneaking a cigarette when Jim arrived. He didn't come empty handed. He was pushing a clunky, antiquated wheelchair in front of him.

"Are you ready to get out of here?" he asked cheerfully.

"I'm more than ready, but not so eager to push that monstrosity around. Whose ailing grandmother did you steal it from?"

"It was the best I could get. Winry will have you raising hell on wheels in no time. She does say it's going to cost you."

"Tell me something I don't know already? She's worth every cen," I replied.

"I'll pass that along, maybe she'll try for an earlier train," Jim said.

Sciezka added, "I bet if we had Feury call her it might speed things along."

Jim looked shocked as he said, "I didn't know you could be so underhanded Sciezka."

"I've had great teachers. C'mon, let's get out of here," she said, clearly tickled by the compliment.

Getting from the hospital bed to the chair was going to be trickier than I had remembered. It didn't help that my ribs were tender. Finally, after thinking it through I asked Jim for help. If I fell the doctors would want to keep me longer and that was not an option.

He caught me under the arms to help me get to the edge of the bed. Then he grabbed my legs, to take some of my weight and so I didn't bang them on the footrest. Sciezka gathered my belongings and we left. Jim pushed me and I wasn't in the condition to argue. On the way out we stopped at the pharmacy for the prescriptions Doctor Knox wrote. I had a feeling I'd need them.

I waited on the sidewalk smoking while Jim went to get the car. It was unseasonably cold and I shivered. It still felt good to be outside. A huge vehicle that I hadn't seen before pulled up and honked. This wasn't Jim's small sedan.

I turned to Sciezka and asked, "What is going on?"

"The trunk of Jim's car isn't big enough and Alex Louis was so kind to offer... "

I held my tongue as I had nothing nice to say. Instead I lit another cigarette off the first one and clutched the armrest with my free hand for dear life.

Sciezka placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. She could tell I was angry and that it wasn't her or anyone else, it was the circumstances.

Jim got out of the car, popped the trunk while Alex Louis held the door open for me without
fanfare. He smiled and said, "It is a relief to see you are looking well after your ordeal."

I flicked my cigarette butt away before shaking his hand and quietly saying, "Thank you for helping out."

The chair's size didn't allow me to get close enough for an easy transfer. Jim approached me cautiously, since he could now easily read my moods. My mood was dark and getting worse by the second.

"So how do we get around this Jim?" I asked.

"It looks like the safest way would be for Lieutenant Colonel Armstrong to pick you up," Jim replied.

"You're kidding, right? There has to be some other way."

Jim sighed, shook his head before finally replying, "The sidewalk is slippery from the freezing rain last night and you're still in pain from the wreck. Please, just this once. It's all I could think of given the what we have to work with."

As much as it was the last thing I wanted to do, he was right. I just had to accept it. I was relieved that between the weather and it being the weekend the hospital wasn't busy.

"Fine Jim, may as well get it over with," I said relenting.
Chapter 53: Old Acquaintances Who Are Not Forgotten

I hadn't made eye contact with anyone when Alex Louis Armstrong picked me up and carefully placed me in the back seat of the sedan. I was furious that it had come to that. However, it wasn't anyone's fault that it had come to that. At least not anyone there, so I held my tongue.

Getting out of the car was the same. Once in the chair I tried to push it up the front walk. It was difficult but doable until I got to the ramp. Armstrong came up behind me and pushed the unwieldy chair up the ramp and in the front door. He waited just inside the entryway. I thanked him and he replied, "You are very welcome, anything for a friend. I'll leave now so you can rest. If you need anything please don't hesitate to call on me."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. "If you'll please excuse me, rest sounds really good now."

I headed for the bedroom while Sciezka let him out. Jim followed me and I heard him wince when I hit the door frame with the footrest, unaccustomed to the larger chair.

"Don't say it Jim. I already know this wasn't the best idea," my tone of voice even.

"You're good, but you're not a mind reader, yet. I was going to apologize for getting Lieutenant Colonel Armstrong involved. It was the only way I could think of to get this to work. I am impressed that you allowed him to help."

"What else could I have done? I don't exactly have a choice right now. This is so frustrating. I haven't needed this much help since right after..."

"I know. Try and take it in stride, keep it in perspective. In a few days you will be back up to speed. In the meantime, rest."

"It's about all I can do. I should be better at it by now. But I'll keep that in mind when I am frustrated."

When everyone had left Sciezka joined me in the bedroom. It took her a moment to figure out the easiest way to hug me. Neither of us was used to having this much metal in our way. I melted into her touch, relaxing for the first time all morning.

She rubbed the back of my neck. "What would make you feel better?" she asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

She didn't always know what to do, but it was the way she asked that almost always made things better.

"A long hot shower to wash the antiseptic hospital stink off of me would be amazing. But I don't think that is a good idea with the stitches," I answered.

She considered my reply, clearly concentrating on the problem at hand before suggesting, "What about a bath? Once you've soaked all you like I'll wash your hair. I'll be careful and you can hold a washcloth over the cut."

"That sounds like it will work. What would I do without you?"
"You'd manage, though I don't know what I'd do without you either. I was so frightened yesterday."

Once I was clean, dry and dressed in the pajamas Sciezka had thoughtfully laid out for me I went into the living room. I knew I should be in bed resting, but I was sick of it. The couch would be a decent compromise.

My transfer from the Tank to the couch was anything but graceful but I made it. Sciezka came out of the kitchen with a tray and seemed surprised to see me. She sat down next to me, handed me half a sandwich and ordered me to eat it. I had no problem with that command. I was hungry after what they called breakfast at the hospital.

When I'd finished eating, she said, "That's better. Did you get enough?"

"That hit the spot. Thank you. I hadn't realized I was as hungry as I was. Could you do me another favor and grab my books?"

"I will, but are you sure you should be working?"

"I'm sure that I'm behind and that I'm probably going to miss half my classes next week," I replied then pointed at the Tank, "I'm not going to be going anywhere in that, even if I wanted to."

She frowned as she looked the wheelchair over before commenting, "I could tell you were livid when Alex Louis had to lift you into the car."

"I'd like to avoid repeating that at all costs..."

"Get comfortable and I'll get your class materials. The instructions the hospital sent say you should take your medication now."

"I should take it and I will. My ribs are a little tender. I'm a horrible patient, ask Jim, but I'll try my best to behave."

Before leaving the room Sciezka leaned in for a kiss and when she came back, she had my books and several pillows. She set the books on the floor next to me and then asked, "You prefer one behind you and one under your knees, right?"

"That's perfect and thanks for putting up with me. I'll make it up to you somehow, as soon as Winry fixes my chair. I'll take you for a spin around the block, since I won't be driving anywhere in the near future."

She shook her head before replying, "That was your free pass buster. I'm going to get you some water, then you're going to take your medication and study, if you insist on doing it. It's not your fault someone was driving like a maniac on a public thoroughfare."

"Yes dear," I said sullenly.

"That's better," she said as she headed to the kitchen.

The telephone rang and she talked to the caller briefly before coming back. I took the water and the pills she'd brought. She waited until after I'd swallowed to announce, "That was Roy. He'll be over shortly."

"Glad you let me swallow first or I'd be choking right now. Did you ask him why? Call him back
"and tell him no!"

"He said you'd say that, not the choking part, but the no part. He has a report from Falman and a favor to ask you."

"Well, I can't exactly stop him since he usually does whatever he wants anyway. I do want to know what happened. He said Falman would dig it up for him."

"While he's here I'm going to pick Tiny up from Gracia's. Is there anything you want me to get while I'm out?"

"I'm good for now. Tell everyone hi for me."

She put on her coat and before she left kissed me goodbye.

Shortly after Sciezka left the doorbell rang.

"We don't want any," I said loudly.

Roy let himself in and said, "Just let me give you the sales pitch."

I set aside the book I'd been reading and said, "If you want something to drink, it's in the kitchen. Help yourself since you have no problem barging in. Then have a seat."

"The door was unlocked," he replied as he shrugged off his overcoat before sitting down on the ottoman. Well, so much for security.

When he didn't say anything else right away, I asked, "So what did you find out? What started the car chase? How bad were the other injuries?"

"It was a bank robbery at the First National Bank. The M.P.'s report says that all three of the perpetrators died at the scene."

"Oh," was all I could reply with.

Roy continued, "The driver of the car they collided with is in serious but stable condition. He'll recover."

"That's good to hear. What about the officer who hit me? I couldn't see anything but he sounded bad."

Roy bowed his head and solemnly said, "The surgeons tried..."

No wonder everyone had been so relieved. I had been incredibly lucky.

He feigned sounding upbeat as he asked, "Now, about that favor."

"Anything, you know that. I owe you. Sorry I was so grouchy before. It's been one of those days."

"There is a vote taking place in the parliament soon on the budget for improving public buildings and sidewalks. Lieutenant General Armstrong wants more curb cuts, elevators and ramps built."

"That's great. I'll be happy when that passes since it would make getting around a lot easier on me."

"He wanted me to ask you to address a closed session so it can be approved. Quite a few of the old goats don't see the need..."
"So, they need to see the sympathetic dog and pony show, to garner the pity vote. No thank you," I cut in.

"Be reasonable. Think of all the people you'd be helping. You're charismatic and a veteran..."

I interrupted him again, "I want everything they're voting on, but I refuse to be the poster boy for cripples in Amestris. Find someone else."

"I hated to even ask you and I'm sorry Havoc, I am... Alex Louis says it's the only way. Could you please reconsider?"

"I'll think about it, but don't get your hopes up. Can't you get Jim to do it? He knows what is needed and is an expert in the field of rehabilitation. What if I write a letter? That could help."

The discussion ended abruptly when Tiny burst into the room. Roy stood to go and before leaving asked quietly, "Please think about it some more. Armstrong wouldn't have had me ask if he wasn't concerned that it won't get funded. I'll need to give him your answer soon."

He barely looked Sciezka in the eye when he left.

Sciezka came in to keep me company. When I wasn't talkative, she asked, "Is everything alright? Are you comfortable?"

"I'm fine right here. If I wasn't comfortable, I would have moved," I snapped.

"Just checking," she replied, sounding hurt.

"Sit with me please? I'm sorry I snapped. It's not you."

She sat at the end of the couch, put my feet in her lap and waited patiently for me to tell her what was bothering me.

"It was Roy. Armstrong has some infrastructure bill he's trying to pass that includes improved access. Curb cuts, ramps and elevators... all that stuff for state owned facilities and new construction."

She nodded and when I didn't continue asked, "How is any of that a bad thing?"

"That's what I thought at first. Roy and Armstrong are having a hard time getting a majority vote. They seem to think an emotional plea from a sympathetic case..."

"So, you said no. I understand that completely. How did Roy take it?"

"He's disappointed and probably a little hurt. I told him I wasn't going to be the National Poster Boy for Cripples."

"Ouch Jean, that was harsh," she observed.

"I would have flat out refused anyway, but Roy's timing could have been better. He asked me to reconsider. I offered to write a letter."

"They'll figure out a way."
"It's selfish of me to not help, but I don't want my achievements to be thought of as a triumph over adversity in spite of my injuries. I'm not a soft newspaper article."

"Your friends don't think like that."

"No, they don't and I know you don't. It's just everyone else. I think I'm tired. Would you please wake me up in a couple of hours? I need to stretch out."

Drained and grumpy, the last thing I wanted was to talk. I'd had it for the day. Not even Sciezka's company felt right. I curled up on my side in bed, pillows propped around me for support. As soon as I was situated Tiny joined me, likely thinking I'd built a cozy fort just for him. He was quiet, simply enjoying being near me, so I let him stay.

Between Tiny's tail thumping against the bed and the knock on the door I woke from my nap.

"May I come in?" the person behind the door asked timidly.

It was Feury, poor guy. Sciezka sent him into the lion's den to do the dirty work and wake me up.

"Sure, come on in, Tiny would love to see you. I wouldn't mind either," I answered. I scratched the dog's ears and asked, "You knew who it was didn't you boy?"

Tiny turned circles on the bed, wriggling with excitement. Clearly the dog thought the visitor was there to see him.

Once in the room Feury looked around and finally asked, "Is there anywhere to sit in here?"

There wasn't really, other than the bed or the wheelchair. The bedroom was usually reserved for activities other than conversation. "I suppose you could pull up the chair, it's not too useful for moving anyway."

He smiled shyly. "Winry told me that. Her train comes in on Monday night. I'm excited to see her."

"I'll have to bust up my wheelchair more often, since it works out so well for you," I joked.

"There has to be an easier way. Sciezka sent me in to get Tiny so Breda doesn't have a fit. Brigadier General Mustang said you wanted to see him."

"That was mostly so he'd stop worrying. He can be like an old woman sometimes. Just shows he cares."

Feury nodded and smiled. He'd worked with us long enough to know how far back Breda and I went.

"Anything new and interesting I should know about?" I asked, attempting to keep up my end of the conversation.

"I finally found an apartment and despite Breda's insistence on a pet free building, he's my neighbor," Feury replied.

"That's great. So, you can take the little guy now?"

"Well I can, but I'm not sure it would be right. He's really happy here and you and Sciezka like him
and I can tell he loves you."

"Tiny is great and I would miss him, but are you sure?"

"Like I was telling Sciezka, I wanted him to be happy, healthy and safe. He's got all of that here and more," he said. "There is someone home almost all the time. I work too much; it wouldn't be fair to him."

"If you're sure and Sciezka's sure, then I am too. Breda will be relieved that there isn't a vicious animal trying to dig through the walls to get him at night."

We sat quietly and Tiny moved to sit on Feury's lap. As he petted the dog he said, "If you're up to it, Breda and I are having a joint get together on Friday night. It will be pretty informal. Some people from the office."

"That shouldn't be a problem if Winry is finished by then. Where's your place?"

"It's on High Street, above that tobacco store you like. The location is perfect, close to everything. I even have a balcony you can smoke on."

Above the tobacconist's shop would mean that it was on the second floor, at least. Sure, the guys could take care of the chair and I could go up on my ass... if I could fight off Armstrong to avoid being carried chair and all."

"Your place sounds nice, but how am I going to get up there? You said it was above the storefront."

He smiled broadly before saying, "The entrance for the apartments is in the alley and there's an elevator."

"Perfect, let me know if Sciezka and I can bring anything."

Feury left with Tiny to save Breda from the white fluff ball of ferociously pointy teeth and evil plans.

I'd have a minute or two to shift position since Breda would wait until the dog had been dealt with. I was almost finished when he came in, shut the door and locked it behind him.

"I'd like to see the mongrel get past this!" he panted and slumped against the frame.

"Relax and have a seat. There are no dogs besides us in here," I teased as I finished arranging the pillows.

He pointed to the Tank and I nodded. He looked uneasy; lowering himself gingerly like it was a delicate antique.

"It's a relief to see you're in one-piece Havo. The shiner and the stitches aside, you look good."

"You read Falman's report, right? I'm lucky Winry and the guys back at East motor pool are engineering obsessed. Having seatbelts like in race cars looked like overkill to me, but canvas straps saved my ass."

"Any news on if they can fix the jeep?" he asked, subtly changing the subject.
"I haven't looked into it yet. Jim didn't sound optimistic. I'm not looking forward to finding another one. It was one of a kind. First I got to get out of that monstrosity you're sitting on."

He shifted in his seat and then said, "It's actually pretty comfortable."

"That's about all it's good for," I replied. "I'm sure the little old lady Jim stole it from misses it. I'll gladly return it to her."

Breda grinned and teased, "Did Jim steal her bed too? I don't think you have enough pillows. So far, I count nine. Has to be a chick thing, Sciezka's idea, right?"

"These are mostly mine, for positioning," I replied without thinking.

"Positioning? What is that?"

Great, just what I wanted to talk about with my best friend. "Never mind Breda, it's medical stuff..."

"Are you ok? Nothing else happened in the wreck, right?"

"I'm fine, quit worrying. I bruised a few ribs where the seatbelt caught me. The pillows are so I don't put too much pressure anywhere. If you were in an uncomfortable position, you'd move... or get pins and needles and then move."

He nodded to let me know he followed. I was glad I didn't have to go into more detail.

There was a knock at the door and the knob wiggled, but didn't budge. Sciezka said, "Dinner is ready and the coast is clear Heymans. The dog is barricaded in the guest room."

I chuckled and joked, "Man, you have a chick protecting you."

He smirked before retorting, "You better hope she didn't hear you call her a chick. I'll be nice and keep that between us. If she did hear I'll be a nice guy and run interference for you."

"Thanks man. If you'd let Sciezka know I'll be out in a few minutes that would be great."

"No problem. Do you need any help?"

"I've got it covered, though I'm glad you found an apartment I can get into. Did you plan that?"

"Poker night wouldn't be the same without you, you know that. Besides I need a sucker like you who can't bluff to save his life."

"That would be Brosh and you know it!"

Dinner with the guys and Sciezka was pleasantly uneventful. Breda took it easy on me, perhaps sensing I wasn't in the mindset to take a joke. He and Feury left after they helped Sciezka clear the table. She put up a good fight against them, citing they were guests. Feury countered, "Sure we're guests, but we weren't invited to dinner. We've taken advantage of your hospitality. Just let us help."

When I followed them to the door so I could smoke outside Sciezka cut me off at the pass saying, "Your friends can see themselves out. Where do you think you're going half dressed?"
"I'd like a cigarette, is that allowed warden?"

"You don't need to catch a cold on top of all this. One cigarette inside won't be too bad. Not this once."

"C'mere," I said as I patted my lap. "Have I told you how much I love you today?"

She settled on my lap, sitting sideways and kissed me then replied, "In between bouts of crabbiness yes, you have."

"I'm sorry about that..."

"Shush," she said as she held a finger to my lips. "Is it a bad thing that I'm relieved that your chair won't be fixed for a few days?"

"That depends on why."

"You wouldn't be resting this much otherwise. I'd have to tie you down or something equally drastic."

I replied lasciviously, "You say that like it's a bad thing. I think it sounds like it could be fun."

She stood up abruptly and all but ordered, "You go smoke while I change the linens. Then go straight back to bed."

I didn't argue since I was too tired. Well that and I was hoping she'd come keep me company.

The lights were low in the bedroom and Sciezka had lit the candles. I wasn't sure I was in any condition to fool around, but I'd try. When she came out of the bathroom, I expected to see her wearing naughty lingerie or better yet, nothing at all. I was surprised to see her in a modest flannel nightgown.

"So, we're just sleeping?" I asked trying not to sound disappointed.

She crossed the short distance between us and hugged me as she said, "I thought I might give you a rubdown and then we could cuddle. You aren't in the mood for more, are you?"

I chuckled before answering, "When am I not in the mood? But your plan is more sensible. Let me brush my teeth and get ready for bed. Then I'm all yours."

Once I was in bed she slowly and carefully helped me get more comfortable. She gasped when she saw the bruises striping my chest, collarbone and stomach after unbuttoning my pajamas. Then she demanded to know why I'd neglected to tell her the extent of my injuries.

"I'm a little banged up, nothing is broken. It looks a lot worse than it is."

"It looks awful. I thought the cut on your head was bad enough. That and you hid it from me in the bath. No wonder you added all those bubbles!"

"Guilty as charged, but I only did it because I knew you'd react this way. The bruises will fade and soon they'll be gone."

"They are bright purple in most spots and absolutely black in others. Are you sure these aren't
contusions? Now I know why Doctor Knox didn't want to release you.”

"There isn't anything they can do for me at the hospital. I'm better off here. In a few days I'll be fine."

"But it looks painful. What an angry looking purple... "

I interrupted joking, "Soon they'll be blue and green, then fade to yellow and brown. It'll be lovely, like watching the sun set."

"You're horrible," she scolded.

"I know, but you love it."

She went to the dresser and returned with boxers and a small tin.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked.

She tossed the boxers at me, then rolled her eyes and sighed. "No, I'm not mad at you. Perhaps a little exasperated, but you're stubborn and I'm used to it."

I struggled to get my underwear on. Her demeanor softened and she helped, pulling them up while I lifted my hips. She knew I could do it, but that it would be easier with help.

"Before you get started could you bring me my meds?"

She cocked her head in the direction of the nightstand and smiled.

"You're good," I remarked as she handed me a glass of water.

"I'm just glad you're taking it easy. I know you hate being stuck at home. Hopefully the massage helps."

I set the glass aside and moved to the middle of the bed so she'd have room to work. As she warmed what looked like a bar of soap between her palms she asked, "Did anyone do range of motion exercises at the hospital?"

"Nope..."

She stopped what she was doing, frowned and then immediately started working on my feet. I didn't bother protesting since she looked determined as she kneaded and flexed my arches.

"Your toes are like ice Jean, this can't be good for your circulation" she commented as she continued rubbing. "If you'd put up a fight, I would have called Jim."

"I know you would and that's why I'm not complaining. It could be worse so I'm being good. You still have the threat of a house call from Doctor Knox in your arsenal."

As she slowly manipulated my joints and rubbed the muscles in my legs she didn't reply. Her complete attention was on performing what she'd been taught correctly.

She finished stretching out my legs and picked up the bar again to start on the rest of me. Her long, deft fingers traced lines down each muscle. She stretched everything right down to my pinkie fingers. When she hit a knot, she'd knead it firmly, but carefully. It felt wonderful.

"Will it hurt to lie on your stomach so I can get your back?"
"I'm not sure; I think my ribs might be too tender. What is that stuff anyway?"

"Sit up," she directed. "It's better to be safe than sorry. And we're testing a new product for Gracia. Lavender oil, rose absolute and that smell I bet you can't place... that's fennel."

I paused after I propped myself up on my elbows. She extended a hand to help me the rest of the way up.

"Thanks for the lift and you never commented on my crack about the Knox threat."

She sat behind me, her legs on either side of mine and as she dug into the tight spot between my shoulder blades with her elbow said, "It's not a threat if I'd do it. It's a promise."

I leaned against her as I replied, "I'm glad you're on my side."

She kissed the back of my neck in reply.

I nodded off shortly after that and Sciezka must have tucked me in.

By Tuesday resting and staying home had nearly driven me berserk. Tiny had been good company and was perfectly willing to be petted and fussed over. I even commented about it to Sciezka, saying "I think I am his favorite piece of furniture."

"I don't think that's Tiny's opinion at all. I think he's guarding you," she replied.

"He's quite intimidating, what with the fuzz, tail wagging and offering his belly."

"You just watch. He follows you around like he's your shadow. He's always in a spot where he will wake up if you move even an inch. He looks like a temple dog... the breed was small and meant to be good companions, but also good watch dogs."

"I can see that since he certainly barks enough to alert us to 'intruders'."

She scratched him behind the ears as she said, "See Tiny, now Jean knows you're doing your job."

Jim arrived at the house in the afternoon with Winry and my wheelchair. Turns out he'd arranged for her to use the workshop at the bicycle store, and in her expert hands my ride was looking as smooth and gleaming as the day it was first made.

"It's good as new! Thank you so much," I gushed.

"Yes, thank you Winry. Jean was going stir crazy and sending me in that direction as well," Sciezka added.

She grinned before replying, "It's better than new. I switched out the tires so you'd get better traction this winter."

"That'll work really well. It's ingenious as usual. How can I thank you: Your train ticket was paid for, right?"

"Yes, it was all taken care of. I waived the rush fee, since I like coming to Central. That and unlike Ed's usual repairs this was unavoidable."
"Let me know if you need anything while you're here. Are you going to be in town for Feury's party?"

Her cheeks pinked up as she nodded.

Jim cleared his throat before he said, "I hate to break up the social hour, but Jean has a lot of physio to catch up on."

On the way to the hospital Jim took the long way so Winry could see the changes in Central. Winry and I chatted idly. She sidestepped the topic of Feury and I avoided the subject of why she'd had to fix my chair.

Our small talk ranged from the dresses for the bridesmaids, how Garfiel and Dimitri were doing, to Tiny's behavior the last few days.

Winry agreed with Sciezka and said, "Den looks after Ed when I've worked on his automail."

Jim was driving and I couldn't see his expression from the back seat, but I'm pretty sure he was rolling his eyes at the lengths we were going to not talk about what bothered us. I should have expected it when he asked, "So Jean, how are the bruises from the safety belt healing?"

"Jim, did you have to bring that up right now?" I asked testily.

Winry's eyes went wide as she looked me over, then asked, "I thought you just cut your forehead and got a black eye from where items in the vehicle hit you. Did the seatbelt hurt you? Where exactly are you bruised?"

That was not information I had wanted her to know, since my injuries were reduced by her design features.

"If you really need to see, I'll show you in the therapy room. Jim didn't need to even mention it. If I hadn't been wearing a seatbelt, I'd be a lot worse off..."

She nodded as I added, "The way you and the guys in the motor pool designed and reinforced that vehicle saved my life."

"I was going to ask Falman if I could see pictures of the wreck and read the report," she replied.

"I wouldn't recommend it. Some of the details are pretty gruesome. Maybe Jim or Feury can take you to where they towed the wreck."

Jim chimed in, "I can take Winry there when I get off work later. It'll be at 1900 though."

He must have taken time off for me. To get the chair fixed and save me the embarrassment of having Armstrong help me into the car. It would have been much easier for him if I'd met him at the hospital in the Tank.

"I can't thank both of you enough," I said quietly.

Jim replied first, "It's my job. Besides, you make my department look good."

Winry glowed from the compliment and kissed me on the cheek.
"You both don't take the recognition you are due."

"The reward is seeing you happy and doing what you want to do Jean," Winry replied.

"I thought I'd end up thinking about everything I'd lost. Instead I realized there aren't enough hours in the day to do what I can."

The rest of the ride was quiet.

My session went as expected, largely damage control and setting things back in place. Jim spent most of the time on stretches and range of motion exercises, with strict reminders about keeping up with the regimen at home.

Doctor Knox stopped by my session to remove my stitches. After he applied a couple of butterfly plasters, he sternly warned me, "Let those fall off on their own. I can't have you scarring up on my watch pretty boy."

I returned to class and my usual routine the next day. Though I was still sore it felt great to be out on my own again. Mustang had offered me the use of a motor pool car and driver, but I politely declined. He insisted that it was the military offering and not him personally. I didn't want any more ties to the state than were absolutely necessary. Taking taxis for the time being wouldn't be too much of an inconvenience. I'd find a replacement for the jeep eventually.

After class on Friday I went home and took a pre-party nap. Sciezka cuddled next to me for a few minutes before I had to start getting ready. Our bath together made me want to call and cancel, but Ed and Al were back at the house. I wouldn't be a good friend if I called at the last minute. Besides, the party would keep us in good spirits. I had plans for Sciezka when we got home.

I hadn't shaved in a week and instead of making a clean sweep I left a tidy goatee and mustache. As I checked myself out in the mirror, I decided it made me look rather roguish. I hoped Sciezka liked it as much as I did. She came into the bathroom and took her usual spot behind me to brush her hair. My new look must have taken her by surprise as she did a double take.

"What made you decide to do that?"

"I just felt like it. I haven't gone this long without shaving since I enlisted. Do you like it?"

She touched my chin before replying, "The jury is still out. First I'll have to see what it feels like to kiss you."

I chuckled and then teased, "About the same as it did ten minutes ago, but a little less hairy."

"I'll just have to kiss you as much as possible so I can render a well-informed opinion."

She leaned in to begin her study, quite intent on documenting the phenomenon.

"Hurry up and put some clothes on Havoc!" Ed shouted.

The brothers were in the living room, so the door muffled the noise. Al added loudly, but politely, "Don't mind brother! But it's getting late, should I call a cab?"
Sciezka gave me a quick peck on the cheek and then said, "The natives are getting restless. I'll see if I can appease them while you finish dressing. I think I like you clean shaven best, but I'll try this out."

The ride over to High Street went off without a hitch and the entrance to the apartment building was exactly as Feury had described it. It wasn't even a freight elevator. The carpeting, wood paneling and mirrors were a refreshing change.

Feury greeted us at the door, collected our jackets and then put them in the bedroom. Breda was playing bartender in the kitchen. There weren't too many people yet. Winry, Gracia and Jim had been the first guests to arrive. After taking off my jacket I made a beeline for the bar to grab a beer.

"It's kind of slow so far," Breda said. "I'm sure it'll pick up. It's early yet. Remind me to show you my place before it gets crazy."

I wondered how many people had been invited. I'd been under the impression that it would be a small gathering.

"What can I get you to drink Havo?"

"I'll have what you're having," I answered.

"One bottle of stout coming up!" he said. "And you gotta do a shot with me. Is whisky fine by you?"

"Line 'em up!" Maybe a couple of drinks would calm my jitters. I had a feeling Breda and Feury had invited a lot of people.

After downing a couple shots with Breda, I felt ready to stake out a remote spot in the room so I could hide from the influx of new people. Sciezka had been chatting with Gracia and Winry. She went for a glass of wine and when she returned sat in the armchair next to me.

"Are you having a good time?" she asked.

I picked at the label on my beer and nodded.

"That isn't very convincing Jean. Did the shots with Heymans help at all?"

"Sit a little closer to me, that would help more," I replied.

"Any closer and I'll be in your lap."

"Yes, that would help tremendously."

She leaned over for a quick kiss before saying, "Let's save that for later, when there's a seating shortage and I need to touch you."

The party was soon in full swing. Ed and Al were talking to Russell and Fletcher. From the wild gestures Ed was making they were probably discussing applications of alchemical theory, which knowing Ed would either result in sizable explosions or world chaos. Winry and Feury were sitting close together on the couch, both smiling and blushing. He was having more luck getting his girl to scoot in close than I was. They made a cute couple. Roy and Riza arrived. Riza joined Gracia and Jim while Roy made the rounds.
There were quite a few new faces. I sat tight, deciding to wait to be introduced. I was content to just
catch from the sidelines for the time being.

After a few minutes I started pulling at my shirt collar. The living room was getting too stuffy and
crowded. I decided a cigarette was in order. I pulled out my pack and asked Sciezka, "Care to join
me outside?"

She shook her head no and said, "Maybe later. You go ahead. I need to talk to Riza."

It was quiet on the balcony; perhaps a bit too chilly, but a nice change from inside. When I finished
the first cigarette, I lit a second off of it.

"Mind if I join you lieutenant?" a female voice asked.

I was startled and nearly dropped my cigarette. Once I was sure I had it under control I looked up to
see who had come outside and promptly dropped it again.

She picked it up, handed it back to me and teased, "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"That's because I have! Ross, you're back... that's amazing!"

She smiled and then hugged me.

"It looks like Xing treated you well. You look good. Have a seat."

"You look great. Though there is something different..."

I took a swig of beer, a drag off my cigarette and chuckled before replying, "That's right, I'm
shorter."

"I was going to say happier and more relaxed. That and someone has been picking out your clothes.
You never could pull off civvies or hang onto a girlfriend while under Mustang's command."

"A lot has changed since we smuggled you out of the country. I did have a good time, that one
time..."

"We did have a good time. It's too bad your chain of command got so tangled up with mine. Not
many dates brought flowers and the restaurant was nice. Dancing afterwards was so fun. You were
so light on your feet..."

"I'm sorry that we couldn't figure out a better way to make sure you were safe. It was the only
way."

"I'm well aware of that, and Amestris is safe now or I wouldn't be back." She took another sip of
her drink and looked down at my ashes on the porch for a while. "You and Sciezka," she finally
said, "I never would have picked that one. But you look good together. It was funny to hear her
talking about that goatee of yours."

"She hasn't made up her mind about it yet. I should probably get back to the party. That and I am
out of beer."

She handed me a bottle of my usual and smiled. I smiled back. "Thanks darling," I said quietly,
hinting back to the old days when we were of the same mind and just knew what the other was
I tapped another cigarette out of my pack and she stuck up two fingers in wordless acknowledgement, another gesture from back in our days at the local pub. I pulled another one out, lit it with mine and handed it to her.

"So," I asked, "What are you doing with yourself these days?"

"Mister Fuu set me up with a family close to the border. They were healers by trade and I learned a fair amount of Xingian medicine."

"Rentanjutsu? I didn't figure you for an alchemist," I replied.

"No, it's not alchemy at all. Besides rentanjutsu the Xingian people have herbal medicine and acupuncture."

"That sounds complicated. Are you practicing here? How are you making ends meet? You're set for a place to live and everything, right? Mustang at least arranged for that... if he didn’t, I’ll fix it."

She smirked before replying, "I'm fine Jean. I'm apprenticing with a healer in Central."

"I'll have to tell Jim about that. I'm sick to death of Amestrian medicine. Something you do has got to work for it."

She nodded and was quiet. I felt the need to fill in the space. She'd been through so much and how do you ask how coming back from the dead felt? Finally, in the awkward silence I asked, "So you and Denny seem to be friendly, is that going well?"

She smiled and blushed, the reaction I was hoping for and said, "You'd be amazed what a lack of fraternization policies will do. He's so sweet and attentive."

Good on them I thought before replying, "I'm glad. You both deserve something good. I saw how much he idolized you back in the day. I'm glad you two worked it out after everything. Though I have to say, you do have a thing for blonds, don't you?"

She smacked me on the shoulder before saying, "You're still terrible, aren't you?"

I shrugged and grinned instead of replying.

"You aren't going to keep me in suspense, are you Jean? What do you think?"

"I think that as long as you are both happy it's a good thing. I noticed how he watched you back then. I think you two are good together. How long have you been dating anyway?"

"We've been together since I got back. As soon as he found out about the whole cover up, he came and found me," she replied blushing.

"That's good for both of you. It sounds like I don't have to ask him what his intentions are after all."

She shivered and I suggested, "Why don't we go back in? You're freezing and we should both be social."

________________________________________

Once I was inside again, I went straight to the makeshift bar. The beer Maria had brought me didn't
last nearly long enough. It was a relief to see for myself that she was fine.

Brosh was at the bar and barely paid me the time of day. He ignored Maria as well. I hoped they'd be able to work it out. In the meantime, I made a beeline for Sciezka.

"Hey there, thanks for waiting. I had a few loose ends to tie up. Are you having a good time?"

"I am having a good time. Gracia, Riza and Winry and I finalized the colors for the dresses. I can tell you are thrilled," she replied.

"I am actually. I'll have the most gorgeous women in Amestris at my wedding. In fact, I'm honored."

She kissed me full on the mouth, lingering a bit more than usual and then said, "I'm glad you're having a good time too."

"I have, but it's kind of crowded in here. Let's get out of here. I'll see if Riza will make sure the boys get a cab home."

She kissed me again before replying, "I think that's a good plan. Let's go."

Once at home we went straight to the bedroom. We picked up right where our bath had left us and as usual had a wonderful time, or so I thought.

While I was holding Sciezka and we were talking she said, "You need to shave as soon as possible Jean."

"Oh?" I asked. "You don't look like you're too pink anywhere."

We'd changed into nightclothes as soon as we'd finished, since the boys would be home in the morning.

She blushed before replying and hiking up her nightgown for emphasis, "Look closer Jean. Take a good look."

Ah. Having a rash there just would not do. I'd be shaving in the morning.
Chapter Notes

Author's Note: You might try listening to the second movement "Allegretto" of Beethoven's Symphony #7 in A Major while reading this.

Chapter 54: Empathy

The idea of delivering a speech about my condition and limitations was still out of the question. I would have to think about the things I push to the back of my mind that I haven't told anyone and don't want to admit to myself; lay open my inabilities and weaknesses, identify as and own up to being a cripple. I knew I wouldn't be able to make a convincing argument the way Roy suggested. However, his request had gotten me thinking: my life is small and restricted to places I know I can easily get into and I base most of my choices on that. I'm sure others have tried and failed to be heard; but important people want to hear what I have to say. I'm not the first and certainly not the last, but I have a voice and people are listening. Still, I'm just a regular guy and not all that eloquent. There must be someone else who could do this better. It's still uncomfortable to admit that I need help in front of my friends. Right now, there are some ramps and curb cuts in Central, just not nearly enough. If I'm out alone I often go blocks out of my way just to cross the street. It pisses me off sometimes, but I usually figure it's just the way things are. I guess that's why being able to get to the party so easily was such a surprise. How can I tell a room full of strangers about it? I am not a hero, noble or inspirational. My reasons for working hard aren't to be an inspiration. I'm selfish and I want my life back.

On Monday after therapy I headed directly to Mustang's office, still wondering if I was really ready to do this. I was excited to share my ideas with him. When I reached his office, I noticed a new face in the room. Mustang finally got himself a secretary. This was a new development. Clearly Hawkeye had done the hiring as Mustang's secretary was a small, frail looking man who blinked owlishly at me when I said, "I need to see Mustang now." The Mustang I'd worked under would have taken the opportunity to hire a buxom blonde with a mini skirt that could hardly be called regulation. This guy made Falman look cool.

He paged through an appointment book hurriedly and then said, "Tell him Havoc is here to see him." If I hadn't been sitting, I was pretty sure I would have been a head taller or more than the little man. He pressed the intercom button and said, "Brigadier General, there is a man here to see you."

"Tell him Havoc is here to see him."

It felt kind of nice to be intimidating as I was pretty sure I could take this guy, even now.

It took a moment before I heard Mustang answer back, "Who is it? Tell him I'm busy."

The secretary blanched before replying, "He's fairly insistent he see you. The only thing he said
about his business was that his name was Havoc."

Mustang's voice came over the intercom and he chuckled and then said, "Why didn't you say so in the first place? Send him right in."

"To what do I owe the pleasure of a surprise visit?" Mustang said as he leaned back in his cushy leather chair.

"I thought more about your request," I replied.

He smiled and I could tell he was trying his best to not look smug. "So, you'll do it? Armstrong will be overjoyed."

"Don't get too excited just yet," I said. "Or him either. I'll help, but I'm not giving a damned speech."

"What are you proposing Havoc? Meeting with individual parliament members will not sway the majority opinion effectively."

"Oh no, I wouldn't dream of swapping places with you on that one, I know how you love those lengthy, personalized meetings. I'm offering to let a few people spend a routine day with me. I think it might give them a better perspective."

Mustang's expression brightened and he stood up and started pacing. For someone who is fond of napping instead of working, when an idea captures his interest, he is excitable. "That's a brilliant strategy! I can just picture it now," he said framing the shot with his fingers. "You and Jim can impress the bureaucrats with the effectiveness of modern rehabilitation techniques. They'll see the simple and cost-effective ways access could be better. They always think with money. Hit them in their wallets where it counts! I should get a crew to film this. It could be a propaganda newsreel for the new government!"

"Stop right there, Chief," I cut in, my voice stern.

"What's the problem? Should I arrange for a practical demonstration?" he asked sounding giddy. "Do you think Fullmetal could do something on short notice on the parade ground? An obstacle course would be perfect!"

My eye twitched. An obstacle course? I could feel my fist clenching, too.

"You're missing the point," I replied, my annoyance barely contained. "The idea I had was to avoid making a spectacle of myself. There will be no dog and pony show, or a damn obstacle course for the public's viewing pleasure. I have some conditions that you'll need to agree to."

He returned to the desk, the mania subsided and he sat down. "You are as bad as Fullmetal. He always has a list of demands... like ransom notes those lists."

I chuckled before replying, "The Boss's demands can be rather exhausting. I think you'll find mine more reasonable in comparison."

"Very well, what are they?" he asked before sighing.

"Like I was saying, a few people could observe how I get around the university campus and Central. I would rather have Jim give a tour than have anyone watch my workout."

The Chief frowned before he said, "I think demonstrating your dedication and strength could only
"Not everyone in Amestris has the resources I do or the ability to do what I do. Besides, do the suits really need to see me a sweaty mess?"

"You should be proud..." he said, then caught himself, suddenly very focused on an ornate paperweight on the desk.

"Don't go there, Chief. No guilt trips. I am proud... which is why I try to avoid people seeing that stuff."

He nodded. He was getting it.

"Also, Armstrong will need to clear this with my professors and the observers will have to be as unobtrusive as possible."

The intercom buzzed and Mustang pulled out his pocket watch. "That's probably my lunch appointment," he said and smiled.

"No need to keep her waiting," I said, remembering that 'lunch appointment' smile of his all too well. "Let me know if Armstrong likes the idea."

He chuckled before replying, "He'll be thrilled. I will make sure he stays in his office that day."

"Good, since this will be low key and he is anything but low key." Good, good man, but a bull in a china shop.

"You're welcome to join Riza and me in the mess hall."

"Thanks, but no thanks though it sounds great," I replied and then added, "The company, not the food. I have class in an hour so I have to get going."

Riza let herself in and said, "Lieutenant, you made quite an impression on the brigadier general's secretary."

"I did?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"He advised me that the situation seemed safe and under control for the time being. Then he warned me that there was a very insistent blond man sitting in here."

"Well that is an accurate description. I mostly sit," I joked.

She smiled, as much as she ever did on duty before saying, "Come visit my office next time you are at H.Q. I need an excuse to get in some target practice."

"Will do sir, though I'm shocked that you're working a desk job," I replied. "Enjoy your lunch."

After class I bought a coffee and went to my office to catch up on some work. Home and a nap would be more appealing, but, since I had already missed three days of classes I needed to buckle down. Final exams were in a few weeks and I had papers to write. I didn't even want to look at what I had to grade for General Lockheed. It didn't help that I had started the term behind. I wasn't too worried about how I would do. It would simply be a matter of pacing myself so I could get it all done.
The house was often busy with the boys and the pets. Organized chaos was the best way to describe it and I loved it. I also knew I wouldn't get any work done there. I read and outlined for a few hours, tidied the office and then called it a day.

Clementine and Tiny greeted me at the door. The dog yipped and danced while the kitten bounded after him. I took off my jacket, hung it up and then ditched my books. Something wonderful was happening in the kitchen from the smell of it. I was sure it was Sciezka's doing and wanted a sample. A kiss after a long day would be nice too.

Sciezka was stirring a pot of what looked like tomato sauce. I pulled up next to her and asked, "So what's cookin', besides you?"

She set the spoon down and turned toward me as she said, "That is a terrible pick up line."

I shrugged before replying, "Then it's a good thing I don't need them anymore."

"That's true," she said and then kissed me. "It's to your benefit that you're such a good kisser. That's why I keep you around."

After pulling her into my lap I asked, "So really, what is for dinner?"

She leaned back and I kissed the nape of her neck as I waited for an answer. Finally, she said, "Ed and Al's favorite, pasta with sauce. They are compromising. It is marinara sauce and meatballs. That way they can have as much meat as they like."

"That's a good idea, since Ed likes more meat than pasta. Do you need any help or is dinner under control?"

"Everything is ready except the pasta. If you'll let me up, I'll make it," she teased.

"I'll have to. I'm hungry and sadly, you can't live on love alone."

"That was cheesy. Speaking of which, could you get that out of the icebox and pour me a glass of wine?"

"Yes dear," I replied, only pouting a little and mostly for show.

I got out the grated cheese and set it on the table. Then I went back for the wine. I was about to call the boys down to dinner when they came in.

Sciezka shook her head and teased them saying, "You both have a perfect sense of timing when it comes to meals."

"You can call me anything but late to dinner. Ed too," Al replied grinning.

The expression on his face would never get old. He went to the icebox, got out the milk and two glasses. He poured one and was about to pour another when Ed stopped him saying, "Oh no you don't! I'll have juice. Besides, there's cheese and that's one dairy product that isn't revolting!"

The timer for the pasta went off and Sciezka said, "Boys, sit down and get out of the way."

They did as she asked and she shooed me as well.

She drained the pasta, put it in a serving bowl and carried it to the table. Ed reached for it immediately and Al swatted his hand scolding, "Brother, at least wait until Sciezka sits down!"
Ed grumbled, but did as Al asked.

Sciezka served me, then fixed a plate for herself and announced, "Have at it guys. Enjoy!"

I nudged her under the table and she smiled. She knew as well as I did that with two growing boys in the house, we’d better have what we wanted first.

We made polite conversation, with the exception of Ed whose focus was entirely on eating. Eventually the fork-to-mouth shoveling slowed down long enough for him to join in.

To get his attention I asked, "So how do you like working for Lieutenant Colonel Armstrong?"

"It's better than working for That Bastard! I get to research stuff that interests me and will help people. The lab is well equipped and my budget is huge. I'm pretty much my own boss..."

Al cut him off saying, "Brother, your budget was big enough before and Brigadier General Mustang has done a lot for us. It's not nice to call him a bastard. He helped us a lot and you know it."

Sciezka smiled at me knowingly. She'd find a way to sidetrack them soon. By now we could both predict what the brothers would bicker about and when. Their spats were heated, but over almost as soon as they began.

"So, Jean how was your day?" she asked, effectively changing the subject.

Ed took seconds of everything as I rambled on, buying time for the boys to settle down again. While he was distracted, Al winked at Sciezka.

I didn't want to get Ed going again, but I was anxious to tell Sciezka about my discussion with Roy and I wouldn't have a chance until after dinner.

"Therapy was great. I'm almost back up to speed in all respects after the crash. Jim says I just need a few more reps in each set."

"Your ribs are almost a normal color," Sciezka teased. "Just like you said they'd be."

I chuckled before replying, "I told you so. I'm just glad the bruises are done with their green period."

Ed snorted and dropped his fork saying, "The shiner is gone too. I talked to Winry and she's already working on improved hand-control designs for the new jeep."

"Brother, she beat you over the head with the blue prints and asked you to see if there was anything you could do to improve the performance with alchemy," Al interjected.

"She'd mentioned that at the party," Sciezka said and then added, "Her design ideas, not the beating."

"The party is why I stopped at H.Q. after my session. It gave me an idea."

"What did you decide?" Sciezka asked. "Details please... you aren't usually so cryptic. You usually just blurt it out."

"My friends were considerate enough to pick a place to live that I can get into. They have a real elevator and not a freight elevator or rear loading dock. I wasn't expecting that. I've gotten used to most places being a hassle to get into."
Sciezka took my hand under the table and squeezed it reassuringly.

Al commented, "Feury's apartment is really nice. I noticed how he arranged the furniture right away."

"That's it exactly Al. I'm really lucky. I realized that a lot of people in my situation don't have all the advantages I have. Mustang asked me for a favor," I said.

"What does that jerk want now?" Ed droned loudly.

"He's not a jerk, not this time anyway. Your boss and your department have a project that needs funding approval in Parliament," I explained hoping to calm him down.

"How does that have anything to do with you?" Ed asked, still sounding skeptical.

"Believe me Boss, I'm less than thrilled with the idea. But someone has to do something about getting better access and ramps."

He nodded, still looking peeved.

"So instead of giving a speech, which would be embarrassing as hell, I'm going to let a few of them follow me around one day."

His fork clattered to his plate when he dropped it midway to his mouth. "You have got to be kidding!" Ed shouted.

Sciezka covered her mouth with her napkin, shocked at his outburst.

"I'm not kidding. If it gets the job done, I'll do it. Besides, what's a few more people gawking anyway?"

He wadded up his napkin in disgust and said, "That's beside the point! That bastard's gone too far!"

"Calm down, brother," Al said quietly.

Sciezka pursed her lips, looking like she was at a loss for what to say. My announcement hadn't gone over like I thought it would. It had smothered the pleasant dinner conversation I'd been looking forward to all day.

Al finally broke the uncomfortable silence. "Jean, if you think it will help people and it doesn't bother you to do it, then you should. I think it's a good compromise."

Sciezka nodded and then added, "As long as it doesn't upset you."

"I'm fine with it. Don't worry. I'm a big boy. I can handle it."

She smiled and so did Al. Ed dialed it down a notch saying, "I still think he's out of line."

"Trust me; this isn't as bad as any of his other ideas."

"What were they?" Ed asked, looking frightening and feral.

"Maybe I'll tell you later, when it's funny. Not now."

Al grinned when he was sure his brother wouldn't see.
Sciezka started clearing the table and I helped. Al took Tiny for a walk, which they both loved. Since it was cold, I worried, but Al came in with his cheeks flushed pink. Ed slunk off after his outburst to go read.

While we washed the dishes, I told Sciezka about Roy's plan in detail. By the time I got to the part about the obstacle course she was laughing so hard she had to sit down on the kitchen floor.

Once she regained her composure she kneeled and then kissed me before she said, "Let me finish the cleanup. You go have a cigarette. If you want to, light a fire in the grate. I'll pour more wine."

"I don't mind helping you finish up," I replied.

"You deserve a break after that, and, if you don't mind, I'm going to call Riza."

I was pretty sure that any payback I wanted for Roy would be dealt in spades.

Mustang pulled strings to make the arrangements quickly, calling in favors and running his secretary ragged. It didn't seem like he'd made any outlandish plans since our meeting. At least I hoped not. I sat on the porch smoking, waiting for the military vehicles to arrive, still apprehensive and anxious three days after my meeting with him.

The only condition that he couldn't meet was the "no car service" one. I'd been insistent on taking taxis or getting places under my own power, but honestly, if that was the only snag in the plans, I could live with it. Luckily for me, I had been quick to remind him that for the safety of himself, his staff, the politicians and the civilians that would be in our midst, military security protocol had to be followed- which meant no uniforms, only civvies, to keep things low-key.

It was a relief when Hawkeye emerged from the first sedan that parked in front of the house. Maybe she would fire a warning shot if the Chief got out of hand. I rode with her and Mustang. She was wearing civvies, Mustang was too as I had requested. As soon as I was settled in the car, he handed me an itinerary for the day saying, "The delegation would like to take you to lunch to thank you. I cleared it with General Lockheed. Other than that deviation it will be your usual Thursday."

When we got to the hospital Hawkeye opened the door for Mustang and let him stride ahead. Once he was out of earshot she said, "If you would like to give a practical demonstration of your fire arms skills after your office hours at the university, I can arrange for it."

"It's highly likely that I'll take you up on that offer. Thanks for the backup."

"You are most welcome. You have taken point for me so many times, Jacqueline."

As I was getting out of the back-seat Mustang addressed the two rather stuffy looking politicians and their aides. "We will be taking a tour of the facilities with esteemed surgeon Dr. Parker while the lieutenant begins his physiotherapy session," Mustang said, in his most authoritative voice, "We will then meet with Jim Bruno, head of the rehabilitation department, and observe."

They entered the hospital with Mustang and as an aside Hawkeye said, "I suggest you have a cigarette now while you have a moment to yourself."

"Yes sir," I replied with a grin and saluted.
Jim put me through my paces like he usually did, but with fewer reps. He wanted the delegation to see as many techniques as possible and explained each type in great detail. This, for me, meant that I could still get a rigorous workout. I hoped that I could shower during the break!

Seems like someone was really looking out for me after all. My wish was granted. I quickly showered and changed back into street clothes while Jim conducted a question and answer session in his office.

They were still talking when I was finished in the locker room. I went outside and smoked another cigarette while I waited for them to wrap up. Hawkeye left first so she could alert the other driver and pull Mustang's sedan around. I wasn't used to seeing her in anything other than her uniform. Her grey suit was tailored yet feminine.

She smiled when she noticed me hiding near the bushes. The entrance to a hospital wasn't an appropriate place to smoke, but I needed one. It didn't usually stop me, but I figured I should be on my best behavior. She must have known because she said, "They'll be a few more minutes so take your time. Your workout was impressive, though you always did keep fit."

"Thanks for the compliment," I said, feeling my face get warm, "And the heads up on their ETA. You look great today. I'd love to see Sciezka in something like that."

"You're in luck then, since she suggested where I could find something like this," she teased.

"So, you two must have done a lot of talking lately with the wedding coming up and all. Luckily they haven't roped me into that yet."

"You are lucky! Grandfather has already begun the wedding insanity and ours isn't for another year."

I grinned. Roy would either love planning or hate it. I could tell Riza was humoring her grandfather. She's amazing at logistics and protocol, but a mission is nothing like a wedding. I suspect she'd rather do Fullmetal's yearly audit than pick out flowers and menus. The Boss hadn't gotten any better keeping records than he'd been when he was 12.

"Smile Riza, it's not for another year anyway. You get to laugh at what Garfiel and Marjorie have in store for me."

"Thanks, I think. You and Sciezka can at least elope if it gets too out of hand. I don't have that option. I can just see the headlines now, 'Fuhrer's Granddaughter's Nuptials Spark International Incident'."

"It'll be fine. You'll see. Besides, the best place to elope to would be Creta and I don't do so hot on sand. You're still not smiling. I'll let you in on a secret," I said and then winked.

She leaned in close as I said, "All the calisthenics I did when I worked for your beloved? That was anger management among other things."

"I'm going to get the car before you say something..."

"Charming, inappropriate, true or witty?" I suggested. "If it gets to be too much you can call me and we'll go shoot stuff."

I could tell she was amused.
She could tell I was quite serious.

Getting back in the car went off without a hitch. I had been relieved when I saw that Hawkeye was driving that morning. She knew how to handle the chair. It didn't hurt that she had a good idea of what I can and can't do. I was nervous enough without breaking in a new person. Mustang is helpful in theory, but is used to leaving the details to his staff. That's why he had us. We all had useful specialties, and worked well as a team.

I was surprised when we stopped in front of my house. "Roy, what is going on?"

The front door opened and Sciezka emerged in a new coat. She was classy looking, real sharp. Riza looked over her shoulder and smiled at me knowingly.

"Thanks, Riza for not ruining the surprise. Wow, she's a knock out," I said as Riza went about opening the car door for Sciezka.

"I'm glad you like the surprise, Jean," Roy said smugly.

"You're not off the hook yet. Enlighten me, what exactly is the surprise?" I asked, still wary.

He chuckled before he answered, "Relax it's nothing too awful. I invited Sciezka to lunch with us. I figured you might enjoy it."

Sciezka squeezed in next to me. The car was roomy, but sliding across the seat would be awkward at best for me and less than ladylike for her. She greeted Roy before kissing me hello.

"Sorry for the ambush. Riza and I didn't think you'd mind."

I kissed her again quickly, as we had company and then said, "This is the best kind of scheming. I thoroughly approve. You'll have to do it more often. You look stunning."

"Wait until you see what's under the coat. I didn't have anything other than an old uniform that was appropriate for this."

"So, Marjorie and Garfiel have rubbed off on you?"

She flushed from the attention, put a hand to the pearls I had given her and changed the subject as fast as she could. "So how did your session go?"

"The usual really, fewer reps so the delegates could see more exercises. Did anyone else have anything to add?"

Riza spoke first commenting, "I was impressed. I knew you trained hard, Jean. I can tell you have progressed so much since the summer at the lake."

"Thank you Riza, but you're going to make me blush."

She added, "I'm just giving credit where credit is due. Someone should follow your example."

Roy frowned and then said, "I agree with Riza that you have a vigorous regimen. I was tired just watching. How much can you bench press anyway?"

"I never really keep track of it. Jim loads the bars. I hope it impressed the observers."
"Oh, I assure you it did. Just be careful," he replied.

That was puzzling. "What should I be careful of?"

He smirked as he answered, "You'll end up looking like Armstrong if you keep going at the rate you're going."

I said, "Ah, no I don't think so, I don't have the advantage of the 'Armstrong family lineage' for that."

"Or the sparkles," Riza added with a smile.

"He's just jealous because we could use your abs as a washboard," Sciezka whispered in my ear as she took my hand and squeezed.

Riza pulled over, parked the car and said, "We're here!"

She popped the trunk before getting out and then opened the door for Sciezka. They brought me the pieces of my chair and Sciezka helped me put it together. I couldn't resist teasing Roy before I got out. "Don't worry about compromising your girlish figure. Maybe they have a diet plate or you could order a salad."

He checked to make sure no one was watching before he flipped me off. I laughed and then transferred to my chair.

Sciezka was standing in front of the restaurant looking perturbed. I saw what was bothering her as soon as I moved away from the car.

Roy had joined the officials and started up the five stairs leading into the restaurant. Riza went after him and quietly said, "Sir, there is a problem."

He turned around before looking at her quizzically as she patted the railing. He mouthed a curse before looking to me. "I'll go ask if there is a rear entrance. I'm sorry."

Riza stopped him before going ahead, "I'll do it. You go charm the politicos."

"Right, I'm sure we can sort this out. They picked the restaurant. I assumed the security detail would cover access in the sweep yesterday. I should have seen to it myself."

"I'm used to this, Roy," I replied. "It was an oversight, plain and simple. Go schmooze those guys so the funding goes through and this doesn't happen so often." I waited outside with Sciezka. She put a hand on my shoulder and I covered it with mine. "You're being a good sport."

"No point getting angry," I said.

Riza came out, her expression grave, "The kitchen entrance has stairs as well."

I sighed heavily. Maybe they could make my lunch to go.

Sciezka squeezed my shoulder. I looked up and could tell from her expression that she was put out on my behalf.

"Maybe Armstrong should have come along today," I joked to lighten the mood. "Tell Roy not to worry about it, unless he wants to make a ramp. But you know, today is about funding and if everyone had an alchemist with them, it would be fine. But not many people know as many
alchemists as I do. I've got my braces on and the railing looks sturdy enough. Want to give it a shot Sciezka?"

She smiled as she said, "Riza, if you get the chair, I'll get Jean."

I set the brakes and Sciezka helped me stand. I slung one arm around her shoulder and with the other hand clung to the railing for dear life. Riza picked up the chair and carried it to the landing.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been. Once I cleared the stairs it was a straight shot to our table. Roy looked relieved and then said loudly, "That is one of many reasons that you are here today observing."

I quietly thanked Riza and Sciezka and then helped Sciezka take off her coat. After I pulled her chair out for her, I pulled into the space that was cleared for me. "I hope I didn't hold the meal up. Have you ordered yet?"

"How thoughtful of you lieutenant," Mustang said. "I am sorry for the effort it took for you to join us." He continued, "You haven't been formally introduced. The gentleman seated to my right is the parliament representative from the West."

He was a stout man with a ruddy complexion. His brown tweed suit reminded me of one that Breda favors. It's kind of ugly.

"The gentleman seated to my right is the majority party leader, James Smith," Mustang continued. He was a thin, bespectacled man. His facial expressions were hard to read. His grey pinstripe suit was as bland as his demeanor.

The politician in the grey suit shifted in his seat uncomfortably as he added, "I would like to apologize on behalf of the delegation for the inconvenience."

"Thank you, sir, but really it's fine. This kind of thing happens all the time. I've never been to this restaurant, what do you recommend? I'm famished."

Sciezka stealthily touched my hand under the table, stroking my palm.

The formalities over with, we ordered and ate. I hoped the practical demonstration helped make up their minds. The inconvenience and embarrassment would be worth it. I relaxed and let Mustang run the conversation. I was not looking forward to going down the stairs.

Both Riza and Sciezka helped keep the conversation running smoothly. I gained a new appreciation for Riza's diplomatic skills. They're as sharp as her aim. She'd asked the questions that had to be asked, more for the education of all present since she and I already knew the answers to them, and because she knew that I wouldn't have volunteered to broach the subjects myself.

After dessert Sciezka helped me down the stairs. Riza stood in front of me just in case. Roy surprised me when he took care of my wheelchair without needing to be asked.

I was never keen on having an audience. At least this time it would serve a purpose.

"You are very skilled at that, Jean," Roy observed so everyone could hear.

He hadn't noticed that all I did was stand still and keep my balance. Sciezka had made sure I
cleared the step and landed properly. I just held the railing and helped lift my weight.

I paused to make sure I was well balanced and then looked up from my feet and replied, "It does come in handy."

"He likes doing dishes. It's a steady place to stand," Sciezka added quietly.

I didn't want anyone to get the wrong idea on how "easy" it was to stand so once I was sitting, I said, "Standing with braces is good exercise, but not a practical option to get around. It's slow and tiring. In the time it took to get down the stairs we could have been at the university."

"It is still impressive," the grey suited politician said. "However, I can see how a ramp would make it much easier on you."

I considered my reply carefully. "If I hadn't had friends with me, I would have been in trouble."

"What would you have done in that case?" he asked.

"I would have gone somewhere that I could get into. There are a few places in Central that I have no problems getting into."

The politician in the brown suit interjected lamely, "It must be inconvenient."

I resisted the urge to laugh at the absurdity of his statement or yell. I wasn't sure which was more appropriate.

Riza stepped in saying, "Fortunately Jean is tenacious and resourceful."

Roy checked his watch and then said, "We can discuss this later. I don't want to get behind schedule."

The politicians watched as I transferred and dealt with the chair. Once we were underway, I scoffed, "Inconvenient? How did that imbecile get elected? Kissing babies and shaking hands?"

"Certainly not for his skills as an orator," Roy said.

Sciezka said, "Perhaps there should have been another sort of demonstration. Like an obstacle course for them... that they had to complete in a wheelchair."

I liked her version better than Roy's idea.

Riza stifled a laugh and Roy said, "I think you may be right."

"We're going to the range after this," I said, "When I get home, I'll need a good stiff drink and a bath as well."

"What class do you have this afternoon?" Sciezka asked.

"I have Political Science with General Lockheed and then office hours," I replied, just realizing that my day had only started.

She smiled and her eyes sparkled the way they always do when she's up to something.

She asked sweetly, "Will your esteemed guests get to talk to Martin? Maybe I should call Marjorie."
I led the way once we got to campus. I hoped that class would be a lecture instead of a discussion. It's not that I wasn't comfortable speaking in class. I wouldn't be a teaching assistant if that was the case. Having Roy and the VIPs in the room was what unnerved me.

My usual spot was in the front row. Riza led everyone to the back. When the general arrived, he winked at me discretely. Once class started, I leaned back in the chair to stretch while I listened and took notes. I knew was going to pay later for the morning. Class was, as I hoped, a lecture.

At the end of the lecture I approached the general. "Is everything going well today?" he asked.

"It's going as well as can be expected. I just wanted to let you know my office hours are as scheduled. That is if you need anything. I would like to hear how the Intro to Military History class went without me."

He smiled before replying, "Slow down and duly noted. Would you like a coffee when I drop by?"

"That would be wonderful. I wish you could bring something stronger."

"So, it's going that well?"

I sighed before answering, "It's fine, just a long day. I'm sure Sciezka will fill your lovely wife in the next time they do wedding stuff."

"I will come by with that coffee soon."

Once the last students filed out of the room the delegation joined me. Sciezka stood close behind me, barely brushing my arm.

Roy was the last one down the stairs and asked, "Where to next?"

"I have office hours upstairs. My office is a glorified broom closet so it will be packed like a can of sardines. I'll be grading papers- nothing exciting."

"Lead the way. We can take turns if it's too stuffy."

When we got there, I went in first and transferred to my office chair. The change in positions would help prevent spasms, or at least I hoped so. I pushed my wheelchair into the corner and removed the cushion. It was Jim's mandate for sitting on hard surfaces. Sciezka followed me in and sat down in my wheelchair.

"I figured it would help save space," she whispered.

"You are the only person here I feel comfortable with sitting there."

The rest of them filed in and Riza asked me, "Is it alright if we take a few of the chairs from the
hall, Jean?"

"Sure, if they'll fit. Good luck with that."

I rolled the office chair under the desk before starting my paperwork. Something bumped the desk, a soft thud. Even with observers I needed to stretch my legs out or the spasms would get worse.

"Hey Sciezka, do you mind if I use you as a footrest?"

She'd done it enough times to know exactly what needed to be done.

I pushed away from the desk and swiveled the chair to face her. She picked up my feet carefully and rested them on her lap. After I tipped the chair back, I grabbed the essays I had to grade and started on them.

It occurred to me a few paragraphs into the first essay that the way I was sitting could come off as disrespectful. The last thing I wanted was to make a bad impression.

"Gentleman and lady," I said as I looked over to Riza, "I don't want you to think I'm ignoring you or being disrespectful with my feet up like this."

They appeared perplexed before I elaborated, "I don't know if Jim Bruno told you... it's important that I relieve pressure and shift position often. That's what I'm doing now."

"So, when you push up on the wheels of the chair you aren't fidgeting?" asked the politician in grey.

"No sir," was all I said in reply. I really didn't want to go into a detailed explanation of having a numb and motionless lower body. The possible complications were enough to still gross even me out.

There was a knock at the door before he could ask me to elaborate. I was relieved when I saw it was General Lockheed.

He had two paper cups of coffee and set one on my desk. I smiled and thanked him.

"I hope your distinguished guests aren't keeping you from your work," he said.

"It's been a jam-packed day. I'll bring these home to grade over the weekend," I replied, patting the pile of papers on my lap.

He looked to Sciezka and joked, "You won't tell my wife that Jean works on the weekends, will you?"

"Your secret is safe with me, sir," she replied cheerfully. "I think he does better stretched out on the couch with the dog."

Lockheed chuckled and then said, "I will let you get back to work. If you need me for anything, I'll be in the department office."

"Thank you," I replied.

When he left Roy commented, "No salute, Havoc? You are awfully casual with one of the most decorated generals in Amestris."

"Respectfully, I've been given a direct order to call him by his first name unless we're at the
academy in front of cadets."

Roy smirked before replying. "I like that in an officer. He is confident that he garners respect without rank or title."

"Sir, we are disrupting Havoc's routine," Hawkeye reminded.

"So we are," he observed. "My apologies, Havoc."

I had just finished the first composition when there was another knock on the doorframe.

"Come in," I called.

It was one of my Military History students. He looked around the crowded room before saying hesitantly, "Are you busy sir? I can come back."

"Don't worry about it," I replied. "Give me a couple of minutes to clear out the room."

Riza looked to me and I added, "Captain, if you'd be so good as to take our guests down to the lobby? There is a refreshment vendor."

"We'll take our leave then," Roy replied.

Without having to be asked Sciezka fished in my bag for the elevator key.

"Just remember to come back for me, or I'll be stuck here."

Once they'd left my student, Kenneth, and I discussed his final paper and questions about the last reading assignment. We talked for over half an hour. By the time we were finished my office hours had just ended. As he stood to leave, he said, "Thanks again for the help. The Battle of 1852 in the Aerugo War makes more sense now."

"No problem, I'm glad to help. You have a good grasp of the material. On your way out, could you do me a favor?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"The people who were in here when you arrived should be in the lobby. Could you let them know we've finished?"

He nodded and left.

It didn't take too long for Riza to arrive. "You've left quite an impression, Jean."

"I have... on the delegation? Good for them."

She scowled before replying, "Well them, but your student. He's very complimentary of your teaching methods."

Riza returned the chairs to the hall while I made the transfer.

"You remembered to bring the elevator key, right?"

She twirled the key ring around her index finger and smiled. "Are you ready for the firing range? I
"You too... it's been quite a day hasn't it? I would love to, but I am beat. Besides, do the suits need to know I can shoot? It'll be like an ace up Roy's sleeve."

"You're right. Why tip our hand?" Riza said, considering the idea, "So will you be an academic or a military strategist? You are skilled at both."

As we made our way to the elevator I answered, "For the time being I can focus on both. I'm not sure yet. A good background in each can only help prepare me. Besides, I still have rehabilitation to work on."

"You can do so much already..."

"But I'm still getting stronger. I still haven't hit my limit. I know that walking again is a pipe dream, but I just want to be at my best, for Sciezka. She deserves the best."

Riza looked away as she quietly said, "She already has that."

Everyone was sitting in the lobby commons area listening in rapt attention as General Lockheed spoke.

"Speak of the devil, here he is," he said loudly.

"Sir, what were you talking about so exuberantly? Your lesson on the Aerugo War was interesting but really," I quipped.

"Young Kenneth came to alert us that you were done for the day," he replied.

I chuckled, "Kenneth isn't that young. I only have a little over five years on him."

Sciezka was beaming, so whatever they'd been saying about me must have been good.

"I gather that everyone present knows about something I don't. It seems like I'm always the last one to know."

Martin got up from his chair and shook my hand before he said, "I am sorry I didn't tell you first. How would you feel about teaching at the Academy?"

I was in shock and stammered, "I'm not qualified. I haven't graduated yet."

"Don't panic. The job doesn't start until the summer. Marjorie insists I work less. You'll be instructing the Military History review class for those who didn't pass the first time around."

"I'm honored; of course, I'll do it."

Riza turned to me and said, "Congratulations, though I'm not surprised in the least."

Roy cleared his throat loudly to get the attention of the group, "On that high note, we should wrap this up so the lieutenant can celebrate his success."

What a relief. It was nearly over, good news and all. I hadn't had any down time all day. Usually if I got to campus early, I'll relax in the library or the privacy of my office.

"I hope today was informative to you in making your decision," I said to the group. "I for one am ready to go home. Thursdays are a busy day for me."
Most Thursdays I would go swim for an hour before going home for dinner. There was no way I was up for it now.

Roy's expression changed. He looked almost manic again. Shit, what was he up to? It couldn't be good. "If it's not an imposition, speaking of home... could you give our esteemed guests a quick tour of your house?"

"That would be fine," I replied hesitantly.

In the car on the way to the house he explained, "They've seen you struggle in less than ideal conditions. I would like for them to see what a few simple accommodations can do."

"Good thinking," Sciezka said. "If they aren't convinced yet, they will be when they see you in action, Jean."

"Roy, just promise me that it'll be quick? I'm wiped out. All I want to do right now is sleep." That, and I was none too keen on having a bunch of esteemed strangers into our home, my sanctuary.

Riza commented from the front seat, "If he becomes an imposition, I'll remove him by force if necessary."

She un-holstered her sidearm and held it up for emphasis.

"I love you too," Roy quipped.

Amazing what a little informality can do for love.

After the day I'd had I was so happy to be home. It was a straight shot up the ramp and in the door. Al was in the living room playing with Clementine and Tiny. Sciezka was polite enough to wait for the other car to arrive. Not me. Besides, if Ed was home, I wanted to give him a heads up.

"Welcome back! How did it go?" Al greeted brightly.

"It's not over yet, but so far, so good," I answered before asking, "Where is your brother?"

"I think he's still at work."

I grinned. I loved Ed like a brother, a younger and louder brother; though some days I was relieved he wasn't a blood relation.

Sciezka came in, entourage in tow. Roy said, "If you don't mind, I will sit the tour out. I have catching up to do with Alphonse. Captain, would you join me?"

Al smiled at them both before inviting them on a tour of their own. They hadn't seen where he and his brother were staying yet.

I figured that was my cue to begin. "Welcome to what I like to call 'Havoc Manor' gentlemen. It's not a mansion, but it's ours and it is home. If you haven't already noticed, there is a ramp integrated into the front porch and facade. If you didn't see it, that's good. It's hidden by hedges."
"I assumed your house must have a ramp; however, I could not see it from the street. I'll have to pass that idea on to the engineers and architects. It combines form and function," one of the assistants said and then added, "This design hardly impacts the appearance at all."

I replied trying to sound smart on the spot, "Right, we do take looks into account as well as how things work. Ramps would be useful in public too. So many people could use it... mothers with young children and buggies, shops with large deliveries or carry-outs... my folks own a general store out East and a ramp would be a big help."

"The dining room is to the right, there aren't any modifications in there... unless you count taking out a chair for me. Next to it is the kitchen. That has a few features."

I pointed out the lowered cabinets and counters, wider doorways and the usefulness of a large turning radius.

"I do cheat when I'm cooking something that's 'involved'. That is what the barstool in the corner is for. The stove is tall enough that if I want to really see what I'm doing, I need to sit higher. Otherwise I sit on the counter. It's useful if something is out of reach and no one is around. I don't recommend that. It still makes people nervous that I'll get hurt if they catch me. I'm well aware of my limitations. I leave boiling water and deep-fried food to the rest of the household."

My patter had the desired effect. I thought that humor might loosen them up. Everyone smiled and chuckled. At the very least I was amused and in good spirits.

I let them have a quick peek at the next rooms, the library and the guest bedroom, and showed them where the doorways were widened for ample space to maneuver.

"When the furniture was delivered after we moved in the crew leader remarked how easy it had been since the hallways and entryways are so wide."

Our guests appeared quite enthralled, and their assistants jotting down notes. I was surprised they hadn't pulled out tape measures, but I did spot one who looked like he was about to try.

"In case you're interested... all door openings throughout the house are thirty-six inches or greater. The counters for the most part split the difference at thirty-two and forty inches," I said.

The assistants continued scribbling rapidly.

"I was told that the woman this kitchen was designed for was quite petite. That's why the light switches are lower as well. Well that's what the city planner said anyway," the politician in grey commented. At least someone had done some research.

I chuckled and then said, "I wondered why the light switches were so low. It's kind of mean of me, but I get a charge out of watching people fumble for them when I don't have to stretch to reach them."

"What other modifications were made to the house," the politician in grey asked.

"The bathroom is where most of the renovations besides the ones in the kitchen were made."

I hadn't planned on giving a tour of the house but here we were. I looked to Sciezka and she smiled and nodded. That was a relief. She didn't seem nervous or hesitant to show them our private space. Perhaps she'd known ahead of time and given it a good once over. Julia keeps the house squeaky clean, but we don't usually show visitors our bathroom and bedroom.
They followed me and to their surprise they all fit in the bathroom. After they'd had a chance to look around the politician in the brown tweed suit asked, "Where are the modifications?"

The fixtures gleamed, the mirrors sparkled and our best towels were neatly stacked next to the bathtub. In each soap dish were little guest soaps and on the vanity was a vase of fresh flowers. Sciezka had outdone herself. Our bathroom looked just like a fancy hotel.

Sciezka couldn't help herself and answered for me, "The shower area has a built-in bench and reinforced tile ledges that serve as grab bars. We also use it as a shelf to store soap and other toiletries. It is the same for the wall near the commode. The platform around the bathtub is for aesthetics as well as a safer way to get in. The pedestal sink has enough clearance..."

I interrupted her and while wrapping an arm around her waist said, "The medicine cabinet is standard, larger but not lower. I'm still pretty tall."

While they were distracted, Sciezka discreetly ruffled the back of my hair and reflexively I fixed it, and then checked it out in the mirror. "It's important to be able to see what you look like."

"Handsome and preoccupied with your hair?" Sciezka asked, clearly poking fun at me.

"I'm not going to mince words. Besides the hair issue, I get my fill of being stared at. Better to avoid spinach between my teeth or bad hair," I quipped.

"Next stop, the bedroom, but nothing... to see there," I said, hoping to hurry them along. I was tired and hungry. "Bed, closet and all the standard amenities. My stuff is on the lower hang bar and shelves."

"That concludes the tour. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules," Roy said as he entered the bedroom.

I was saved. Soon they'd be gone and I would be able to shower, change and eat. A cigarette would be great too.

Sciezka and I followed them outside and waited on the porch as the sedan pulled away. Riza and Roy were just coming up the walk as I lit a cigarette. The ache in my shoulders lessened as Sciezka massaged my shoulders from behind.

Roy grinned before he said, "Well done everyone. Armstrong and I meet with them tomorrow morning. I bet they'll cough up more money than we're asking for."

"They all said the house is lovely. It was mentioned several times what a nice couple you two make," Riza said to Sciezka.

Sciezka rested her chin on my shoulder and wrapped her arms around my chest. I smiled and murmured for her ears only, "I quite agree. I'm glad you came today. I don't know what I would have done..."

"You would have figured something out," she whispered in reply and held me tighter. "I'm so proud of you for everything."

It was a shock when Ed stormed onto the porch in Fullmetal fashion demanding, "What are you still doing here, Bastard?"

"We just saw the delegation off a few minutes ago," Roy replied calmly. "Jean, I've taken up far too much of your time. Thank you for doing this."
As Ed stalked inside, he spat, "Hurry up and leave already!"

Once the storm passed over us, I said, "No problem, Chief. I got a fancy free lunch out of it. I probably won't eat there again, even if they build a ramp."

Roy looked puzzled. I answered before he even asked, "Don't get me wrong, the food was delicious, but that's the sort of place that requires a suit and tie, and that's really not my style. Also, the cuffs would wear out long before the rest of it did." I chuckled at this last part, mock spinning my wheels to demonstrate the erosion it would have caused.

"You have a point, Jean," Riza replied, nodding. "And they serve fries at the diner and the Cavalier."

"Ah yes, enjoying a meal with one's fingers would have definitely been a grand faux pas at today's establishment." I grinned. Riza and I are both suckers for a good plate of hot fries. We usually race for the ketchup too.

Sciezka felt my bicep through my sleeve as she said, "I like this better anyway. You look like quite the academic and it shows off your muscles. We'll have to get you one of those tweed sport coats with the patches on the elbows."

Riza stood closer to Roy and he discreetly took her hand in his. Before they left, he said, "I'll let you know how the meeting goes tomorrow. When, not if this passes, dinner is on me."

"I'm glad I could help," I replied.

I lit another cigarette as they got into the car. Roy sat in front next to Riza. He can drive, she's just far better at it.

"Two in a row? I don't blame you one bit," Sciezka commented as she worked on my shoulders some more.

"Just what I needed, thank you," I said as I leaned into her touch. "Promise me you'll shoot me if I ever agree to anything resembling today again."

She dug her elbow into a stubborn knot between my shoulder blades before she replied softly, "I would miss you too much. I'll ask Riza to give Roy obedience training like Hayate... I'm proud of you, you know."

"For behaving?"

"For everything," she said as she knelt before me to kiss me. She shivered. It was cold outside after the sun went down.

"For two intelligent people we don't have enough sense to come in from the cold."

She smiled into the kiss and nipped at my bottom lip before she stood up to go inside.

On the way inside she said, "I'm going to get started on dinner."

"I'm going to change and then I'll help," I replied.

She turned around and smirked.

"What's so funny, Sciezka?"
"You can help by relaxing. I don't think I need help dialing the phone. Does Xingian sound good?"

"That sounds delicious. Remember to order extra fried dumplings. I was worried Ed would stab my hand with his chopsticks last time."

She laughed at the memory. Ed takes his chow very seriously.

After taking the braces off I didn't get dressed right away. The spasms had lessened, but my lower back was killing me. I took care of my hygiene regimen and decided I needed a shower. It usually helped and I ached all over. I was bone weary. The piping hot water beating on me felt wonderful and I rested my head against the tile. I didn't stay in long since with the level of exhaustion I was feeling I could have fallen asleep right there. Being skewered didn't kill me but drowning would sure do the trick.

When I finished in the bathroom I dried off and put on sweats. Before leaving the bedroom, I took an aspirin and one of the medications for the spasms. I could take the stronger stuff when I headed to bed.

I stretched out on the couch to wait for the food to be delivered. Tiny curled up next to me to nap. Playing with Al and Clementine must have worn him out.

I must have been dozing when the doorbell rang. Tiny jumping on me and then leaping off of the back of the couch barking like a madman woke me up.

"Come and get it!" Sciezka called loudly after she put the food in the kitchen.

I could hear the boys bounding down the stairs, probably two at a time, jostling to get to the table first.

"Brother don't you dare hog all the dumplings this time!"

"You'll just have to eat faster if you want them so much, Al!"

"Unlike you, I have manners. You might try chewing your food instead of inhaling it!"

It was amazing to see Al's progress. He'd only been flesh and bone for a few months and every day he looked better. Growing like a weed and filling out too. After the winter holidays he'd be finished with physical therapy and start school with Fletcher at the Academy. Ed was finally treating his little brother like he wouldn't break. They couldn't get back their mother or their childhood, but they could be happy now and do what they can to make up for lost time.

Sitting up was an effort, I ached all over. Getting from the couch to my chair was tough. I wheeled into the kitchen slowly. Everyone was already at the table, waiting on me to get there. "I hope you saved some for me, Ed."

"We haven't even started yet," he replied, sounding cranky. He gets like that when he's hungry. The kid must be starving all the time.

Sciezka said, "Now you can eat."
I wondered if this was what feeding time at the zoo looked like as Ed dove for the package of dumplings and inspected the contents of the various cartons. There was a lot more food than we'd ever ordered for just the two of us. Cardboard cartons and waxed paper bags filled the table. So many different aromas mingled and I had a hard time deciding what to try first. Well, I knew if I wanted a fried dumpling, I'd have to be fast, so I took one of those first thing. I was pretty sure that the delivery guy must think we were feeding a small army.

At Al's suggestion, the brothers cleared the table. He washed and Ed dried. Water and automail don't mix well, soap was even worse, but it seemed like Al had thought about that too.

I considered resting in the living room and quickly nixed the idea. It was going to be about all I could manage to brush my teeth before crashing. After I finished in the bathroom I headed straight to bed. Sciezka had already turned it down. The room was dark save for a few candles.

"Get comfortable," she said.

I knew what she'd do next. Between the length of the day, the anxiety and the physical demands I needed a rub down. Before I got into bed I stripped down to my boxers.

"I'll be right back. Don't fall asleep on me yet."

"That's a tall order. I'll try my best. You must be a mind reader. What are you doing anyway?"

"Getting you the glass of water you'll ask for..." she answered before saying, "And your meds."

"Yep, you're a mind reader."

When she came back, she set the water and bottles of pills on the nightstand and said, "Watch your eyes."

She turned on the lamp so I could read the labels. It wouldn't do to take the wrong thing and I was prescribed some strong stuff for when I needed it. We both had this routine down pat. Fortunately good days outnumbered the bad.

I took one of the stronger muscle relaxers. She frowned and whispered, "That bad huh?"

I just nodded and lay back against the pillows.

The massage started with my hands and arms, like she usually does. Once I'm relaxed, she'll work on my legs. I was startled when she started kneading my sides just under the ribs and stomach muscles. She must have noticed and explained, "You use these muscles more than most people." It felt good. I hadn't realized just how sore they were since I was used to it.

She had a point. I had learned quite a bit about anatomy in the last year. Specifically, what mine couldn't do anymore and how the remaining muscles compensated. I rely heavily on the muscles in my trunk for balance and reacting to shock and motion. Jim wasn't a sadist after all.

After she finished with my legs, she had me turn over. I rearranged the pillows so I could sleep on my stomach. More likely than not, I'd be out cold by the time she was done.

"So, are you going to bed this early too?" I asked.

As she rubbed my shoulders she said, "I have some work I need to finish up for tomorrow."
"I'm sorry we kept you out for so long. I didn't know..."

She kissed the nape of my neck and I lost track of what I was going to say. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world. You did more today than most people do in a week."

"I gotta do what I gotta do," I replied groggily. The meds were starting to kick in.

"You do it well. I don't think Roy knew what it takes before..."

"Hopefully this eases his mind once and for all. It was worth it just for that even if the funding doesn't come."

She went back to the knot between my shoulder blades and was quiet. A few minutes later she said, "It will be approved. Getting where you need and want to be will get easier."

"Mm hmm," I mumbled.

She pulled the covers over me and turned out the light. As she was blowing out the candles, I asked her to wake me up when she came to bed. In addition to overdoing it I'd managed to mess up my bathroom schedule. Taking another dose of the medicines for pain and spasms would be a good idea as well. I would be due for them again in a few hours.

"I love you," she whispered in my ear as she caressed my cheek before leaving the room. "Sweet dreams," she said as she quietly closed the door.

And they were.
Chapter 55: Solstice

Finals were finished and winter break had begun. I was more than ready for a vacation after the semester I'd had. School keeps me busy enough without a coup, house arrest and a car wreck to contend with. Grades wouldn't be posted until after the New Year. I was confident I'd done well. Maybe I'd even make the Dean's list. For now, I could relax and have fun. Our place was the good kind of busy as we all readied for the longest night of the year. Sciezka was anxious about the preparations for her mother's impending visit. We'd decided to host the holiday festivities since it would be easier on me logistics wise. Our place made the most sense anyway. Between our place and Gracia's there were going to be a lot of out of town guests and our dining room is the biggest.

The only things I had to do until classes started again were physio, swimming and relaxing. Maybe I'd take target practice with Riza too. Sciezka on the other hand was busier than ever. She had freelance work booked with Armstrong's department for the foreseeable future. She was so wound up it kept her up nights. If she did sleep, she tossed and turned.

At the start of what looked like another sleepless night I assured her, "Leave it to me, ok? Julia will keep an eye on everything so I don't mess up."

Sciezka looked torn. I knew her relationship with her mother was rocky at best."

"Relax; it's going to be great. There will be so many people coming and going that she'll be too distracted to do anything but enjoy herself."

She snuggled closer to me under the covers and then said, "I feel silly for worrying. You helped plan a coup, a couple of parties and house guests should be easy."

"Well, it should be in theory, but I can't threaten to shoot our guests," I teased as I rubbed her back.

The next week was a blur of shopping for presents and decorations, baking and making sure everything was ready. Truthfully, I was as excited as Elysia was for the holiday. It was our first Winter Solstice together and the first time I'd made such an effort.

The first really heavy snowfall came the day before Sciezka's mother was due to arrive. I hoped it wouldn't delay her travel plans. Ma and Pa would come in a couple of days and I was sure the roads would be clear by then.

I wanted everything to be perfect. I needed to impress Sciezka's mother and it couldn't hurt to dazzle my parents.

Al, Ed and I had finished hanging swags of evergreens and tiny white fairy lights. I had kept them as a surprise for Sciezka and hoped she would like them. We started clearing away the snow on the front walk and ramp. Soon the snow would annoy me and be a nuisance, but for now it was crisp and fresh. I let Tiny out and he romped through drifts as deep as he was tall.

Al was running around playing chase with Tiny and then fell backwards. I panicked and got as close as I could to him with my chair. Was he having a fit? Did he faint? He was doing so well. I heaved myself out of my chair, into the snow so I could reach him.
Ed rushed over as soon as he saw Al drop and was checking his pulse. All of a sudden Al sat up and shoved a large handful of snow down Ed's jacket.

"I got you! Yes!" Al exclaimed triumphantly. "I thought I'd try making a snow angel."

"Now that I know you aren't dead you are so getting it!" Ed shouted.

The snowballs began to fly and I was already on the ground. It'd be easier to make snowballs that way. Seemed like sound logic, less distance between me and the ammo.

Ed hit me square in the face with a barrage intended for his brother and I shouted, "You are in deep shit now Boss! I still have great aim!"

It was then that I noticed a very prim looking older woman standing at the gate. She appeared lost, or at a loss. "May I help you ma'am?"

She cleared her throat before saying, "This is the address my daughter gave me, but I must be in the wrong place."

Oh hell, this had to be Sciezka's mother and here I was cussing and sitting in the snow. It didn't help that Tiny was barking like a madman announcing the new presence. He raced along the fence at top speed and made himself an utter menace.

My thoughts raced, I had to fix this. "I hope you will pardon our behavior. Are you Mrs. Meade? We didn't expect you until tomorrow."

She straightened up at the mention of her surname, nodded and said, "I am. Is my daughter here?"

"I'm afraid not. She's at work, a freelance project at the military headquarters," I replied and then said, "Ed and Al, could you please help Mrs. Meade with her bags?"

They set right to work and Al had the presence of mind to ask for my wallet so he could handle the cab fare. I got back into my chair, dusted myself off as well as I could and then quickly met them at the front gate.

Mrs. Meade's eyes went wide as saucers when she saw the wheelchair. I shook it off; it was a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. I took off my gloves, extended my hand to shake hers and said, "I apologize for the chaos. I'm Jean Havoc. I'm so glad to finally meet you."

"Likewise," she replied timidly. As Al waved the driver off, she appeared to panic. Truth be told, I would have too.

I took her valise from Ed and balanced it on my lap before saying, "Come inside. I'll show you to your room and let you get settled."

"It has been quite a journey and a long day already," she said as she straightened her hat.

Once inside I led her straight to the guest bedroom. Julia had already gotten it ready right down to a fresh set of towels placed at the end of the bed.

"The bathroom is in the hall if you need to freshen up. Would you like something hot to drink?"

Her cheeks flushed pink as she considered her response before finally replying, "I wouldn't want to trouble you."

"Nonsense, it will be no trouble at all. Would you like cocoa, coffee or tea? Are you hungry?"
Maybe I was asking too many questions. Perhaps that's what made her uncomfortable.

"Tea please if you can... erm, if you're able... " she stammered finally settling on, "Yes please."

"Coming right up; I'll serve it in the living room. Take your time."

By the time I finished setting out the refreshments Mrs. Meade looked slightly less anxious and frazzled. Al and Ed joined us in the living room. I was surprised by how polite Ed was. He sipped his cocoa and ate his sweets slowly. He even made small talk. Al was a dream and comfortably filled any silences. Mrs. Meade was keenly interested in the brothers once she learned that Ed was the famous Fullmetal Alchemist. I was relieved since this took the heat off of me. I'd talk to Sciezka later, to see how much her mother was aware of. It was Sciezka's prerogative. She must have had her reasons for what she did and didn't share.

As much as Mrs. Meade seemed interested in what the brothers had to say her eyes darted around the room. She'd look at Ed and Al when she addressed them. Instead of making direct eye contact her focus was on a spot next to me. Worse was when she looked at me head on after gawking at my legs.

After Mrs. Meade finished her tea, she stifled a yawn. Looking quite embarrassed she quickly apologized and said, "Please excuse me gentlemen. I am more fatigued than I thought I would be."

"Trains have that effect on people," Al offered politely.

She smiled warmly at him and thanked him.

I checked my watch and then said, "You have plenty of time before your daughter gets home and we have dinner. Feel free to rest."

"I think that would be wise. Thank you for your hospitality Mr. Havoc," she replied formally, appearing relieved.

I wasn't sure if she was relieved to finally rest or to be away from me. She was already fast friends with Al.

Dinner was well underway by the time Sciezka got home. I went for a no fail dinner option. Thank goodness Julia kept enough food on hand to feed an army. I didn't think Mrs. Meade would find fault with steak, salad and baked potatoes.

Sciezka looked frazzled but happy as she sat in my lap. "I have you well trained. Is it almost ready? I'm starving."

I decided that my first priority was to give her a proper kiss before I broke the news to her. I pulled her closer to me and couldn't help noticing the many pencils stuck in her haphazard bun.

"You brought some work home with you," I teased.

"Impossible! It's locked up when I'm not working on it," she replied, utterly serious.

I pulled out one of the pencils, showed it to her and then smirked. She looked surprised and then
said, "I'll kiss that look right off your smug face."

"Good!" then beat her to it, kissing her first. "You have about six more up there."

Her cheeks flushed as she patted her head to check before saying, "So that's where they all went. It's been that kind of a day."

"In that case I'm glad you made it home in one piece," I said before kissing her again. "They won't charge you for theft of government property for all those pencils, will they?"

She shook her head no as she smiled and I could tell she was beginning to relax. "They can deduct it from my pay. They're paying me enough. I'm going to be pretty busy after the first of the year."

"Does that mean I can quit school and live a life of leisure?" I teased.

After ruffling my hair, she replied, "It looks like you and the boys were busy today. I doubted you'd stay still for long, you never do. I love the fairy lights. You started dinner too. What a nice surprise. Weren't we going to order in?"

"About that..." I replied thankful she was already sitting down, "There's another surprise. She's in the guestroom."

"She didn't! No, she did! Shit!"

"Relax, she's napping. Go get cleaned up. I've got everything handled."

At least I hoped I did.

Sciezka seemed calmer after changing and fixing her hair. That or she was in shock, which was a distinct possibility. I was anxious to see how she and her mother got along. Past a physical resemblance the two seemed to have nothing in common.

I asked Sciezka to tell her mother that dinner would be ready soon. If Mrs. Meade was still asleep, I didn't want to be the one to wake her. She seemed like a nervous woman to begin with and I was sure that I made her more so. Perhaps once she got to know me, she'd like me and feel more comfortable around me.

Even Breda, my best friend, had a hard time dealing with the chair at first.

Once we were all seated in the dining room I said, "Help yourselves, Mrs. Meade, since you are a guest you get first pick."

She looked surprised and then remarked, "How very rustic. Though I suppose it should be expected. My daughter mentioned you were from the East."

Sciezka looked horrified as she stammered, "Please excuse me. I forgot the wine."

There was a bottle of white already open at the table. Perhaps she was getting more? I knew I'd need it. I was going to be polite to her mother, even if she had just called me a hick.
"Mrs. Meade, would you like some wine? This vintage is one of our favorites. We also have red if you'd prefer it," I offered.

The boys served themselves and Ed took a normal sized portion for once. I fixed a plate for Sciezka when I made mine.

Sciezka came back with a bottle of red and the corkscrew just as her mother replied, "Red is more appropriate with beef than white... however, I don't imbibe."

Well then, I suppose I'm a lush hayseed. I wouldn't be surprised if she wondered where the moonshine still was on our property.

Instead of continuing to fume inwardly at Mrs. Meade's snobbery I asked Sciezka, "Red or white, darling?"

"White please," she replied stiffly.

I pretended to be concentrating on eating when Al broke the uncomfortable silence that had fallen over the table, "How was the train ride Mrs. Meade?"

"Thank you for asking Alphonse. How kind of you. It was bumpy and crowded. I thought I'd never flag down a cab."

He nodded before replying sweetly, "I am sure Jean or Sciezka would have arranged an escort for you if they had known you were arriving earlier than expected."

I could have kissed him right then and there.

Ed had been eating slowly and quietly said between bites and after chewing, "Dinner is delicious tonight."

"Yes, it is indeed," Mrs. Meade agreed. "Sciezka, I was not aware you had learned to cook."

I busied myself refilling my wine glass and Sciezka's mother stared and then commented archly, "Far be it for me to meddle in your affairs, but is it wise for you to drink spirits with your condition Mr. Havoc?"

Ed's automail hand made a metallic ping as he snapped his fist closed.

Sciezka who had been dumbfounded finally spoke up when she retorted icily, "Mother, Jean cooked this wonderful meal. Additionally, not that it's any of your concern, he's in perfect health."

"Is anybody ready for seconds?" Al asked his tone strained.

Ed answered, the tension evident in his voice as well, "Yes please, Al. You know I can't get enough of Jean or Sciezka's cooking."

Sciezka on the other hand had barely touched her dinner. My plate was nearly clean as I'd decided to focus on the food rather than the verbal assault on everything we'd worked so hard for.

"I couldn't eat another bite," Mrs. Meade said. "Sciezka, how do you eat such rich food? You will ruin your figure if you keep eating like this."

I could tell Sciezka was ready to snap again as she wrung the napkin in her lap.

"If everyone is finished, I'll clear the table," she said as she stood up abruptly.
I didn't want to foil her plans, but I wanted her to talk with her mother. I had no desire to sit through another meal this strained.

"Let me handle it dear, you catch up with your mother."

She looked panic stricken but nodded and then said, "Mother, why don't we chat in the living room? It's quite cozy in there since there's a fire going already."

Maybe it would thaw Mrs. Meade's frigid personality.

"Would you ladies like anything to drink?" Al offered sweetly.

Sciezka smiled at him on the sly, mouthing "thank you" as Mrs. Meade replied, "Perhaps some tea to settle my stomach if it's not too much trouble."

Al nodded dutifully and then asked, "Chamomile, green or jasmine?"

"You just pick one dear boy," she replied warmly.

Maybe Sciezka could marry Al.

Ed looked almost feral as he said, "Jean, if you wash, I'll dry."

"Sounds like a plan Boss," I replied relieved to be away from that harpy.

From the kitchen, over the running taps I heard Mrs. Meade ask, "Why is he addressing Edward like that?"

"Brigadier General Mustang was Jean's commanding officer, a colonel, before he retired. Jean was a second lieutenant before the accident. General Mustang also supervised Ed, who is a major. He's outranked Jean since he was 12. Salutes and calling him 'Boss' are mostly for show. The Fullmetal Alchemist, well Ed, has never paid much attention to rank or title."

"How did he and his brother come to stay here?"

Sciezka hesitated before answering, "The general asked us for a favor. We were more than happy to oblige. They're no trouble."

I turned my attention back to the dishes. Ed was still listening intently and dropped a plate after I passed it to him. It clattered to the floor breaking into several pieces.

Sciezka calmly called from the living room, "Is everything all right in there?"

"It's fine Sciezka. Don't worry, I'll fix it," Ed called back.

"I hope that wasn't your great grandmother's serving platter that just broke. It's irreplaceable," Mrs. Meade nattered.

Sciezka huffed loud enough that I could hear her in the kitchen, "The platter is in storage for that very reason. It is fragile and irreplaceable. Why would they be washing it anyway since we didn't use it?"

Now her mother was just picking for the sake of picking.

"I just worry that one of them might have been injured. Are you sure they should be doing that?"
"I refuse to discuss this you right now, Mother..."

Mrs. Meade interrupted Sciezka mid-sentence saying, "Are you sure you want to marry this man? It is rather unconventional."

"As opposed to what, Mother... is it that we're already living together? Is it that we have two teenage orphans living with us? Or are you too cowardly to say what is really bothering you?"

"Well I never!" Mrs. Meade said shrilly as she stormed out of the room.

"Well that was awkward," Al remarked sheepishly as he entered the kitchen.

I shrugged before I replied, "I figured it would be, but not this bad."

"Take Sciezka outside for some air. She's pretty upset. Brother and I will finish cleaning up."

"Thank you, Al. Mrs. Meade really likes you," I replied. "Ed, there are plenty of leftovers if you're still hungry. That is if you haven't lost your appetite with that scene."

Ed scowled and commented, "Lucky you Al. You're the favorite."

Al gave his brother the finger and shooed me out of the kitchen.

She was pacing the living room in angry circles and when she finally noticed me stopped dead in her tracks.

"Come here," I said softly. "Let's go outside for a smoke."

Nodding slowly, she followed me onto the porch. I pulled out my pack and lit two cigarettes, not bothering to ask if she wanted one. She sat on my lap and I handed one to her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked quietly.

She shook her head no and the tears started to flow. I wrapped an arm around her waist, squeezing her tightly.

"It will be better in the morning. I love you."

Her body shook as she sobbed silently against my shoulder. I finished my cigarette, put hers out and rolled us straight to the bedroom.

I would not let anyone, even family, especially family hurt Sciezka like this in her own home ever again.

Once we were in the privacy of our bedroom I said, "Brush your teeth and wash your face. You'll feel better."

When she'd finished, she flopped on the bed. I coaxed her into her nightgown and she curled into herself on her side of the bed. I took care of my nighttime hygiene routine quickly and brought a cool compress with me. Before I got into bed, I handed it to her. She was resistant at first.

"Don't let her know she made you cry," I said softly.
She sobbed quietly into her pillow. I again vowed to myself that she'd never feel that way again.

I set the alarm for earlier than usual. After I took care of my morning hygiene routine, I started the coffee and then smoked on the porch.

The sausages were half done and I was ready to cook fried eggs to order by the time the boys got up. I figured the smell would rouse them. I counted on their racket to wake Sciezka's mother up.

She came into the kitchen looking prim and proper. I sat on the counter in my pajamas next to the stove frying Ed's second egg.

"There is fruit and yogurt in the ice box if you want something lighter than what I'm fixing. Sciezka usually does."

As if on cue Al grabbed a mug from the cupboard and poured water from the kettle for her. Ed went to the icebox and took out yogurt and fruit salad. The butter and Ma's strawberry jam were already on the table. I put two extra slices of bread in the oven to toast and that was that.

I could tell Mrs. Meade was taken by surprise. She was either struck dumb or couldn't find fault with breakfast. Just after she finished eating and went back to her room Sciezka stumbled into the kitchen in her bathrobe. I'd already started eating at the table. She was silent as she poured a cup of coffee and poured a splash of milk into it.

"That bad?" I asked, worried for her. She normally drank tea or coffee with a lot of milk and sugar.

She sat down at the table and reached for the sausage. It was very bad if she was eating hangover food.

Julia arrived just as Al and I headed for the hospital. I quickly filled her in on the events of the day before.

We waited out front for the cab to arrive. I was surprised when Sciezka joined us. She wasn't due to leave for almost an hour.

"I couldn't stand being in there another minute," she said as she stole my cigarette.

I took it back and then said, "That's not going to help and neither is hiding out at work."

"Whose side are you on anyway?"

"Yours, believe it or not... call it tough love. I'll be home at lunchtime and maybe your mother will hate me less by then. Otherwise I'll let Al here work his magic."

She nodded, still looking dubious.

Al smiled and said, "I got brother to behave, didn't I?"

She couldn't argue with that.
Sciezka rode in the cab with us as far as the hospital and then walked the rest of the way to HQ. She said it would help clear her head.

Al's session was finished at the same time as mine. In the taxi on the way home he suggested I take Mrs. Meade to lunch at Pane Fresco.

"That's a great idea, Al. Would you like to join us?"

"I thought it would give you two a chance to talk alone," he replied.

"That would probably be the most awkward meal ever. Please come with us? She needs to like or at least tolerate me before we start to hash this out."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. She adores you. Maybe she'll begin to see me as more than a cripple after watching me get around."

He smiled and nodded before he said, "Good thinking. That part of Central is easier for you to get around in. Even better, Sal really likes you and Sciezka. Hopefully Mrs. Meade will be impressed."

"You my friend are wise beyond your years. Thanks for helping me with this."

When we got home the house was unusually quiet. Tiny and Clementine were napping in a fuzzy pile on the couch. They barely acknowledged us, content to lounge in a sun beam.

I expected to find Julia as well, but she was nowhere to be found. I asked Al to do the dirty work of talking to Mrs. Meade while I changed into clean clothes.

There was a knock on the bedroom door and I called from the bathroom, "Yes, who is it?"

"It's Alphonse. I can't find Mrs. Meade."

"Did you see Julia?"

"Yes, but she doesn't know where she is either. Julia said she was out back doing the laundry and when she went to offer Mrs. Meade some tea she wasn't here!"

"Give me a minute to finish up in here. I'll start making calls. Maybe she's with Sciezka."

After I got off the phone with Sciezka I started to panic. I didn't let on that her mother was AWOL.

I called Gracia on the off chance she was there. Next, I called Mustang. His secretary said that he was out of the office. I had him patch me through to Hawkeye's office next. She wasn't available either.

I had managed to lose Mrs. Meade in less than twenty-four hours. Sure, Sciezka didn't get along with her, but she certainly didn't want to get rid of her.

My mind raced with every horrible possibility. Lost in Central in the cold, wandering about delirious; kidnapped and tied up in a trunk being held for ransom and the scenarios I was running
in my head only got worse. Shit!

"Al, please stay here while I go look for her! I can't get through to anyone at H.Q. who can help find her. I'm going there!"

I gave up on flagging down a cab after two passed me by. As much as people stared sometimes, I'd found I was usually invisible to taxi cabs. The sidewalks and streets had been shoveled and salted and I was able to get there under my own power. I was a wet and slush covered mess, but that was fine. I had arrived in one piece. My first stop was Hawkeye's office. Perhaps she had returned. She doesn't slack off as much as Roy.

She wasn't there but her secretary suggested I check the firing range. I thanked her profusely and hurried to the range.

Hawkeye was just leaving as I arrived. Once I caught my breath I blurted out, "I lost Sciezka's mother!"

"I told Roy to leave word with his staff of their location," she replied sounding annoyed.

"Wait, do you know where she is?"

"He should have planned it better, but Roy and Alex Louis took your future mother-in-law out for lunch and a tour of the city."

"How did they even know she was here already? He has someone set up on the house, doesn't he?"

She patted my shoulder in an attempt to calm me down before saying, "Sciezka is working at HQ today, remember? It is not a conspiracy to run your life, this time."

"What a relief," I replied sarcastically.

"My office is pretty slow since my staff has everything that needs to be completed until after the New Year finished. Let's shoot stuff. I like to get as much time in on the range as possible."

Hawkeye was a lifesaver in more ways than one today. Before we got started, I said, "I'm going to call Al from here first so he stops worrying, then you're on. Rifles or pistols first? I haven't taken target practice in ages."

Apparently, the firing range was a standard stop on Roy's grand tour itinerary. Perhaps he wanted to impress Mrs. Meade by introducing her to the Fuhrer's granddaughter. It was anyone's guess why he decided to show up. I was less than thrilled since I'd just started long-range tripod shots. Mrs. Meade didn't need to see me lying on my belly. Having her watch me get back into the chair was an even more unpleasant idea.

Hawkeye took point for me yet again when she offered to give Mrs. Meade a tour of the facility. That gave me ample time and privacy to get off the ground. I was waiting just outside the door smoking a cigarette when Armstrong, Hawkeye, Mustang and Mrs. Meade left.

"Where to next General Mustang?" I drawled.
He shook his head and said, "No need for formalities Havoc. Everyone here knows you are a friend as well as a valued team member."

Roy always was one to lay it on thick.

Hawkeye cut in and said, "You should have left word at the house that you would be escorting Sciezka's mother to lunch. You had Jean worried sick."

"You are right, Riza. I should have considered that. Jean, please accept my apology. After the events of the last year we have all come to expect the worst-case scenario."

"It's fine Roy... really, no harm done. I was just being overly cautious. Riza set me right as soon as I got here. I called the house so Alphonse could stop worrying. Then I got some much-needed target practice. It's been awhile."

Mrs. Meade sounded timid when she said, "I am truly sorry I worried you. I assure you it was the last thing on my mind when these fine gentlemen offered to show me Central."

"Jean and Mrs. Meade, it was the least I could do. Since Sciezka is required in my office today it would go against the Armstrong Family Tradition of Hospitality. It was a joy and a pleasure to be of service on the momentous occasion of your visit!"

Alex Louis was over the top as always but the gesture was very much appreciated.

"I don't want to pry, but Jean, why do you still practice firing weapons when you are medically retired?" Mrs. Meade asked.

Ouch, did this woman think I was completely useless?

I considered her question carefully before replying, "Ma'am, it's complicated. I'm..."

"Respectfully Mrs. Meade, that is classified information," Roy explained, cutting me off. "I can say he was the person responsible for ensuring your daughter's safety during the unrest. She is a valuable asset. However, traditional security measures would have drawn too much attention."

It was a relief when Riza excused herself to go back to work and suggested that Roy do the same. I wanted to see Sciezka and then go home whether Mrs. Meade came with me or not. Thankfully the last stop on Armstrong's tour was his office. I followed behind them since I didn't know where it was yet. He remembered to take the "scenic route" so I could use the elevator.

When we arrived, Ed was dictating a list of books he wanted reproduced to Sciezka. Normally she would look frazzled after being assigned a workload that massive. She looked more relaxed than I had seen her in days.

Her eyes went wide when she spotted her mother next to Armstrong. Sciezka looked relieved to see me until she got a good look and saw the condition my pants were in.

"Hold on Ed," she said as she stood up abruptly, nearly tipping over her chair.

She knelt in front of me, touching the cuffs of my trousers. "You're soaked to the skin. What happened?"

I didn't want to upset her further and honestly, I was embarrassed that I had misplaced her mother. I settled on telling a half truth, "I decided to go to the firing range to burn off some energy after therapy. Roy and Alex Louis were considerate enough to give your mother the grand tour."
"It was thoroughly enjoyable, Sciezka dear. The brigadier general and lieutenant colonel are perfect hosts. I had no idea you ran in circles like that. Captain Hawkeye was kind enough to show me the firing range."

I'd hadn't thought about it much, but Sciezka and I did run in a somewhat elite circle. I was sure Sciezka didn't care but her mother certainly did. Perhaps I could use this to my advantage. I'd never been one for subterfuge, well, I'd never been the brains behind it, but this could work.

As if on cue Armstrong announced, complete with sweeping gestures, "Your daughter is very busy indeed. I apologize again for occupying her time during your sojourn in this fine city. Allow me to make it up to you by showing you my department!"

It was a wonder he wasn't shirtless by this time.

Taking her by the elbow he whisked her to another part of the department. Once they were out of earshot, I asked Sciezka, "Have you eaten lunch yet?"

"Ed was thoughtful enough to bring me a sandwich from the canteen," she replied.

He grinned. Perhaps Al was rubbing off on him.

I took her hand in mine as I said, "I'm glad your day is going well. Ed thanks for looking after my girl."

She rolled her eyes at me and I kissed her hand before saying, "I am allowed to worry about you."

"So, then that means I'm allowed to worry about you? You'll catch your death of cold if you stay in those wet clothes. Your toes have got to be like ice. Have you forgotten about the frostbite and hypothermia risks? What possessed you to do that anyway? The range I can understand, but not calling a cab in this weather?"

"I guess I didn't think it through that far. I didn't get out much last winter, so this is new for me."

The conversation stopped abruptly when Russell came into the office.

"In case Ed hasn't told you yet, you and Fletcher are invited to celebrate the solstice at our place," I said.

"That sounds great, thank you. Fletcher will be excited," Russell replied.

Ed grumbled, "I was going to, Jean. I just didn't get to it yet."

"I have taken the liberty of arranging for a car to take you home!" Alex boomed when he came back from the lab, "Sciezka, you have toiled all day! Go home and be with your loved ones! I look forward to attending your celebration!"

"We look forward to seeing you," Sciezka replied. "Thank you for treating my mother so well."

"Yes, thank you for your generous hospitality," I said, silently adding, "… and for taking her off my hands for a few hours."

Mrs. Meade chattered the whole way home about how fine the food had been at lunch, what excellent manners her escorts had and how handsome Mustang looked in uniform.

Halfway home Sciezka sounded tense when she said, "I am glad you had a good time mother. I wouldn't know either of them as well if it weren't for Jean."
When we got back to the house Sciezka pulled me aside and said for my ears only, "I don't know what happened, but thank you. Now go shower and rest."

"It's not as bad as it looks," I insisted.

"I know for a fact that Jim is working you extra hard over the academic break. Whatever else went on, you're wet and dirty. Humor me and just do it."

After a shower and a nap, I felt much better. I got dressed, making doubly sure I looked sharp. I knew we'd be going out for dinner, I just didn't know where yet.

Sciezka was sitting in the living room reading. Her mother was with her, also reading. It wasn't unusual for Sciezka to get lost in a book. This looked more like hiding.

"So, what is the plan for dinner?"

She carefully marked the page and then set the book down before answering, "I figure since Mother didn't get to try Pane Fresco at lunch, we'd all go there. I invited Gracia and Jim too. Speaking of invites more came in the mail today. I put them with the others on my desk."

"That sounds great, the dinner plans. I'm honored that we got invited to so many places, but really it's a bit..."

Sciezka finished for me, "Over the top, overkill and let's not forget exhausting."

"Yes, to all of it," I said after I stole a quick kiss. "They will keep until after dinner. We have to RSVP some time."

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It would be a tight fit in Jim's car if everyone rode with him. The decision was made to send the Elrics and Elysia on ahead in a taxi. Taxis were a novelty to Elysia and Sal let her sit at the bar sipping kiddy cocktails while they waited. She felt quite grown up with her fizzy pink drink complete with cherry garnish and a little paper umbrella.

We were greeted warmly as Sal personally escorted us to an out of the way table. Before he seated everyone, he said, "Gracia and Sciezka as always, Bellissima! Who is the other stunning signorina with you?"

"Sal, this is my mother, Lillian Meade," she replied.

"I should have known immediately! So, this is where you got your good looks!"

"Sal, would you stop being so charming? She might come to her senses and leave me," I joked.

"Basta Jean, l'amore like yours? Never! I will go get the bambini from the lounge."

A waiter came with menus and we ordered. The meal and ride home went smoothly. Mrs. Meade had no complaints and raved about Sal.
Sitting in the living room in front of the fireplace we all settled in for a night cap. Sciezka's mother imbibed as well. Perhaps I had judged her too harshly.

Ed had flopped on the Xingian rug, loudly proclaiming he was stuffed. Al was subtler about it as he cuddled with Tiny and Clementine. Cliché as it sounds; it was a picture-perfect end to the day.

"Gracia and Jim are a lovely couple. How do you both know them?" Mrs. Meade asked.

Sciezka spoke first, "I worked for the late Brigadier General Hughes. He was Roy's best friend."

"How tragic," Mrs. Meade remarked. "It is fortunate that she has someone as kind as Jim. Little Elysia is adorable."

I felt more comfortable speaking freely with Sciezka's mother than I had before so I added, "I met Sciezka through Gracia. Gracia met Jim through me."

"That's interesting. How do you know Jim, Jean?"

Why did I run my mouth again? What a can of worms I'd opened.

"Jim is my physical therapist at the hospital. Gracia was, forgive the play on words... gracious enough to let me stay at her house while I built up my strength after the accident."

Mrs. Meade didn't comment further on Jim or Gracia. I wasn't sure what made her more uncomfortable about the situation.

She did however comment on our finances. "You two don't have to wine and dine me every night. I don't know how you afford it what with Jean not working. Add to that burden two teenage boys to feed and a maid."

I heard the clank of Ed's automail as he stood up and stalked off. Al politely excused himself, stretching and yawning exaggeratedly.

Sciezka looked from me to her mother and back again. Like a deer caught in the headlights she froze and then tried to bolt.

"Sit down Sciezka," I ordered, sure I sounded harsh but didn't know what else to do. "You have to face this some time and now is as good a time as any. I won't have our first holiday together ruined and I refuse to put up with this in our home a moment longer."

She sat down, looking meek and more like a little girl who had been scolded than the strong woman she is.

"Mrs. Meade, I am a very patient man, I have to be given my circumstances. However, I cannot tolerate what happens when I'm out in public in my own home. It is embarrassing and uncomfortable and I just wish people would ask the questions they are afraid to ask. More than that, it upsets Sciezka and I will not allow that to happen anymore. So, let's hash this out. What do you want to know? What about me gives you misgivings?"

Now it was Mrs. Meade's turn to look stunned and small. When she didn't speak up I did. "You seemed concerned about our budget in a way that sounded to me like you are critical of it. How do we afford all of this, what with me being a useless cripple and a burden?"

She shook her head no, but her expression spoke volumes to the contrary. After being called out on the carpet she folded her arms across her chest protectively.
"I was on duty when the accident occurred. It was unavoidable... no one's fault. My commanding officer, General Mustang... Roy made sure I had and have the best care. I was medically discharged... with honors at two pay grades above what I'd been. I can show you the medals if you like. I think they're in my sock drawer."

I paused, hoping she'd say something, anything. She didn't, instead sitting there stone-faced. I continued ranting, "This house? The title is clear, paid in full. In addition to all that is a lump sum that I'm very careful with and my monthly pension. Then there is my stipend from the university where I am a teaching assistant for a military history class."

Still nothing.

"And to top it all off, Ed is still a state alchemist. He and his brother contribute as well... "

"You are running a boarding house?" she interrupted, scandalized.

Sciezka answered for me heatedly, "We are most certainly not! We would have taken them in regardless. We would have figured out a way!"

Mrs. Meade muttered scornfully, "Freelancing to the highest bidder. It's shameful. That's where the money comes from, my daughter working her fingers to the bone... and for what?"

I gripped the wheels of my chair tightly and didn't bother breathing or thinking of something civil to say, "What's mine is hers and what Sciezka earns is hers to do with what she likes. How much of it does she send to you? You haven't gotten less since I entered the picture, have you?"

The look of shock and indignation on Mrs. Meade's face was not what I had intended. Truthfully, I didn't know what I'd intended. I pushed up to stretch and relieve pressure and think about what I would say next.

Before I had the chance Sciezka demanded, "Both of you stop!" She got up from the couch and took a few steps before pausing to say, "Jean, you have made your point. If she doesn't get it after this she never will. Mother, he didn't say anything I haven't been dying to say since you got here. Think about it really hard. I expect an answer by tomorrow at dinner time. If you can't deal with my lifestyle then I'm sure I can arrange for you to go back to Dublith post haste!"

She turned on her heel and stalked towards the bedroom. At the door she said, "Jean, are you coming?"

That didn't sound furious to me at all, at least not directed at me. It sounded like a challenge. Did her mother dare comment?

Sciezka erased any doubts I had about her intentions for me when she opened the door to the bedroom and said icily, "Goodnight Mother."

Sciezka was upset, but it was different than the night before. Instead of defeated she was determined, driven actually. Before she even got the door closed, she was straddling me.

"She'll hear us if we're not quiet."

"Good, let her. She can't expect me to still be a virgin. We are living in sin after all," she said louder than necessary as she ground against me.
As I wrapped my arms around her waist I said, "I do have to face her tomorrow..."

She froze and then said, "I'm not being fair to you, am I? You want her to like you and accept you... for her to know your intentions are honorable."

I pulled her closer and kissed her tenderly.

She whispered in my ear what she wanted me to do to her and promised to be quiet. When she put it that way, I didn't need further persuasion.

Breakfast was uneventful, if quiet. It was just Sciezka and her mother. Ed and Al left before breakfast to shop for gifts with Russel and Fletcher. Sciezka excused herself quickly so she could get ready to go to a dress fitting. The holiday was chaotic enough without wedding preparations being thrown into the mix. Since Garfiel was in Central Gracia thought it made sense. I would be watching Elysia at the house and waiting for my parents to arrive.

After the tension of the past couple of days I was looking forward to spending time with my other best girl. A tea party and reading some fairy tales would improve my mood significantly.

I was tidying the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Sciezka must have answered it because the next thing I heard was Garfiel greeting her, "Darling where is that dreamboat of yours?"

"I'm in the kitchen Garfiel, glad you could make it."

"Oooh, girl, you've got him well trained. Now the word from Gracia is that your mother is here. I can hardly wait to meet the woman who made you so I can thank her."

I snickered, safe from the spectacle in the kitchen.

Elysia burst into the kitchen and climbed right into my lap. This was my cue to enter the fray. The living room was abuzz greetings were exchanged. I almost felt sorry for Lillian. She looked quite overwhelmed.

"Jean can go fast like a race car," Elysia announced proudly upon seeing Mrs. Meade in the doorway, then asked, "Did he tell you?" Gracia patted Elysia's head and right on cue Elysia asked, "Has Sciezka's Mama met everyone before? You have to introduce people properly, you know. Nobody shook hands."

"Elysia, I have met everyone. You are so sweet to ask. Are you coming with us today?" Mrs. Meade asked smiling warmly. I was sure it was the first true smile she'd given since her arrival. She looked much more like Sciezka when she was happy.

"Mommy says I have to wait to see Sciezka's princess dress, but that's ok. I get Jean all to myself!"

Garfiel giggled before saying, "You lucky girl! I will keep an eye out for perfect princess flower girl dresses."

Elysia squirmed in anticipation at the thought. "I get to wear a crown of flowers and throw rose petals."

Gracia checked her watch before saying, "We should get going. There is a lot to do. Elysia, you'll be a good girl like last time won't you?"
"Do you watch Elysia often Jean?" Lillian interjected.

"Not as much as I'd like to. Classes keep me pretty busy," I replied, then directed my attention to Elysia, "What should we do today? Have a tea party, color or play princess, Princess?"

She didn't answer right away and sounded quite serious when she replied, "I can't decide."

I grinned. The kid never ceased to make me smile. "Before I slay any dragons for you, I should have lunch. Has the princess eaten yet?"

Elysia shook her head no, pigtails bobbing.

"Well then first thing is first. You gotta eat some lunch and drink all your milk."

She hopped off my lap and before heading into the kitchen said, "I know Jean, so I can grow up tall like Al."

"That's right," Sciezka said, looking more relaxed than she'd been in days.

"I'll be strong just like Jean," she replied before taking my hand and leading me towards the icebox.

"My lady beckons," I joked. "It looks like we've got it covered. Go have fun!"

Sciezka stood up and gave me a quick kiss and then teased, "I don't mind sharing as long as it is with Elysia."

All the excitement must have tired Elysia out. She fell asleep halfway through the first story she'd picked out. I decided to take advantage of the time. She didn't stir when I moved her from my lap to the couch and tucked her in under the afghan my Ma made.

I managed to get the braces on quickly since I wanted to show my parents how I could stand. I was excited and nervous. I would have to be careful that I wouldn't give them false hope. The wedding dress expedition party would be gone for another hour or so. Being idle was going to drive me nuts. I figured puttering around in the kitchen would calm me down.

I ended up baking for breakfast the next morning. I had no idea how many people would be at the house at that hour. As much as I enjoy cooking, playing short order cook is not my idea of a good time. Muffins, fruit and caffeinated beverages would go over well with everyone. Maybe Gracia had rubbed off on me too much. Manly or not, a breakfast buffet would be the easiest to manage and would hopefully keep my Ma out of the kitchen. Her cooking is the best, but a vacation should be a vacation.

While I stood at the sink washing the dishes someone came to the door. Since I was already up, I slowly went to answer it. The knocking grew faster and louder. "I'll be right there," I yelled, hoping the person at the door could hear me.

"It's just me, Garfiel, here to pick up Elysia."

After unlocking the door, I moved a few steps back since it's difficult to get the door while
balancing and said, "It's unlocked, come in."

Garfiel had Lillian with him and she looked surprised to see me standing. She didn't comment.

"Winry showed me the plans she had for you, but it's entirely different seeing it in the flesh. Handsome and tall? It's not fair," Garfiel complained and flirted at the same time.

I smiled, but could feel a blush spreading across my cheeks. I knew he was just being friendly. Anyone praising me that much makes me self-conscious.

"Thanks, Garfiel. The braces work well around the house and it is nice to stand again. Your apprentice is amazing."

"Speaking of Winry... ooh I almost let the cat out of the bag. I'm here for Elysia. I'd invite you to come with us, but I have been sworn to secrecy. Where is she?"

"The poor kid was tuckered out so she's on the couch. I'd invite you in for tea. I baked, but it sounds like you are busy."

"Whatever you made smells delicious. Sciezka is right, you are a catch. Too bad you don't have a brother."

There was another knock on the door. This time it was Gracia. "Garfiel, I thought you'd gotten lost. What is taking so long?"

"I got distracted by the scenery... "

Gracia laughed and then said, "Is Elysia napping? Did she behave?"

"Yes and of course," I answered. "Take some muffins with you, since I made a ton. You were gone for a long time. Did you go to every shop in the city after the fitting?"

Lillian answered for her saying, "It is quite possible. Everything was lovely."

Garfiel collected Elysia and before they left Gracia said, "Jim will be by in an hour or so for a quick session."

"Oh goody," I replied sarcastically. Gracia just grinned and left. She was well aware of my thoughts about therapy sessions on holidays.

"Sciezka said they would be back before dinner. I think I might rest," Lillian said.

"Are you hungry at all after being dragged around Central? I was just about to make some coffee," I said, hoping it was a suitable peace offering.

She considered my invitation and smiled. "A cup of tea would be lovely if it is not too much trouble."

"Not at all and after you; I'm still slow on the crutches," I said as we headed into the kitchen.

We sat at the kitchen table and were silent at first. Finally, Lillian said, "These muffins are excellent. I am surprised..." She looked flustered and then added, "I'm not surprised that you made them, but that you are such a good cook and seem to enjoy it. I just don't know that to say or if I'm
saying the wrong thing."

She was trying. I knew I needed to help her feel at ease. "I understood what you meant. I need to apologize for raising my voice last night."

"I was out of line, poking my nose where I shouldn't. Sciezka is a grown woman and I feel like I hardly know her. That is my fault."

I listened carefully, hoping I could help both Sciezka and her mother.

"Before I can be helpful or give advice on Sciezka, we should talk about us. We got off on the wrong foot. Not literally, but figuratively. Sorry, I couldn't resist. Sciezka scolds me for jokes like that."

Lillian smiled nervously before replying, "You do have a rather dry sense of humor. But you also seem to accept your lot in life. It must be hard for you."

"I would be lying if I said I've completely accepted my limitations. I try to keep a handle on it. It doesn't do anyone a lick of good."

"You have built a good life for yourself and for my daughter. She looked so happy today. Excited for the wedding..." she said, then trailed off and fiddled with her tea cup.

"Would you like more tea?"

"No, I am fine, thank you. The muffins are delicious. I would love to have the recipe."

I grinned. "It's Sciezka's recipe. I had to make some substitutions. She would love to try the recipe with the dates and figs Dublith is famous for."

"Well then dear, I'll make it a point to send you some."

"That would be wonderful. She will love it."

"So, Jim is coming soon for a session and you had therapy yesterday... are you sure you are well?"

I knew that issue would come up eventually and as uncomfortable as it was to talk about, I was relieved that she'd asked. Having everything out in the open might make her less uneasy around me.

"That worries my Ma too. It's overkill on Jim's part, but since he is a friend, I usually have a quick session if we can fit it in. I'll be missing a few scheduled sessions due to the holidays. What he does is put my legs through what are called range of motion exercises. He basically stretches the parts I can't feel or move for me. I would run into complications otherwise. I can do most of them by myself and Sciezka knows how to help too."

Lillian nodded, still looking troubled and finally asked, "So you can't feel your legs at all?"

"The injury to my spinal cord was about here," I explained and pointed to where sensation stopped. "Everything below that line was affected."

"Thank you for being candid. I had no idea your injury was so severe," she said quietly. "Sciezka never let on that it was that bad."

"I am managing, more than managing. Sciezka was right, I am in perfect health. I have the best doctors and take excellent care of myself. I do get tired faster than I used to, but I'm still getting stronger. That's why I swim and strength train as much as I do. Sciezka knows as much or more
about my condition than I do."

She looked confused so I explained further.

"When we first met, I had just gotten out of the hospital. Sciezka would come over to visit Gracia and Elysia. That little girl was a life saver back then. She didn't know me before... before the accident. She just figured that this is how I'm supposed to be. Your daughter started bringing me books to read, since I had plenty of free time."

"That sounds like her," Lillian said and then smiled. "Go on."

"Your daughter was the only person who would argue with me. Well, engage me in spirited debates. She never pitied me. Eventually, friendship wasn't enough for her. She must have read every medical text she could find..." I paused and considered my words carefully. I was not about to reveal intimate details. "She pushed me to the edge of my limits... past the limits I'd given myself. She showed me what was possible."

"I am so glad you two found each other. You both have such good friends and complement one another. Talking to Gracia today eased my mind considerably. Seeing you with Elysia, you'll be such a good father." 

I hadn't expected the conversation to get that far. I took a sip of my coffee, set the mug down and then said, "About that, children... the doctors aren't sure. There isn't enough research."

She reached across the table, covered my hand with hers and said softly, "You two will work through it, no matter what."

"Thank you, Lillian," I replied shakily.

Jim arrived just as I finished clearing the table. He had brought a portable therapy table with him and it had a large bow on it. I pointed to the bow as I asked, "What's this?"

"What does it look like? It's a table and the bow? It's a gift," he answered like it was the most natural thing in the world. "I thought you'd prefer it to the floor when I do your session here and I know my back will appreciate it."

"Makes perfect sense now that I think about it that way. You will have to wait a couple of days for your present. We can get started as soon as I change into sweats and take off the braces."

While we worked Jim kept up his usual small talk. He lowered his voice when he asked how I was getting along with my future mother-in-law.

"It's fine really," I insisted when he looked dubious. "We talked just before you came and got a lot of things out in the open. I can't blame her for being uncomfortable around me up until this point."

"Fine, but that couldn't have felt good the rest of the time," Jim observed.

I rolled my eyes as I said, "Like I don't put up with it every time I leave the house. I've learned to ignore it."

"But she's going to be family..."

"Breda is still freaked out some of the time. She'll get used to it eventually. He is a little better
every time I see him, though I bet he still won't arm wrestle me."

"He's afraid you'll win..."

"He's afraid he'll hurt me," I shot back. “Can we get back to work? My folks will be here soon and I want to be standing on the porch to greet them."

"You're right let's finish up. Make sure to have a handkerchief for your mother," Jim said as he started working again.

After Jim and I finished I changed out of my workout gear, put the braces back on and then went outside for a cigarette. My parents would arrive soon and the porch was dry enough that I would be able to stand safely to welcome them. I wondered how they would react. Jim was probably right on the money; Ma would cry.

When their truck pulled into the driveway I scooted forward in the chair, carefully set my feet in place and then used the railing to pull myself to stand. Ma and Pa were too busy collecting their luggage to notice at first. I was glad because they'd be able to get the full effect. The columns holding up the porch were perfect to help steady myself.

Halfway up the walk Pa saw me, dropped his suitcase, pointed at me and then said, "Martha, would you look at that? Our boy is standing!"

I waved with my free hand and grinned. It was the reaction I had hoped for. They rushed up the stairs, their bags forgotten. Turning to face them was slow, pivoting and re-balancing. If I didn't do it carefully, I could fall.

Ma wrapped her arms around me. She's only about chest high on me. Pa smiled and stood back. When Ma finally let go of me, he approached and then shook my hand saying, "I'm proud of you son."

It felt amazing to see eye to eye with him again.

After the excitement died down my Pa headed towards the guest room with the bags. It was then that I remembered that I had forgotten to tell my folks that they would be staying in a hotel.

I hurried to catch up to him before he barged in on Lillian. "Pa there's been a change in sleeping arrangements. I booked you and Ma a room at The Ambassador."

He set the bags down before saying, "You didn't have to go to all that trouble. The guest room is fine. Isn't The Ambassador that fancy hotel near headquarters?"

"That's the one. We have a full house. Sciezka's mother is staying in the guest bedroom. The Elric brothers are living with us. There is no room at the inn."

"Your Ma is going to have a fit. Is there anything else you're not telling us son? Your Ma had her heart set on cooking and you know how she can be..."
"No, you're up to speed with all the important events. She deserves a real vacation and so do you. Go check in and relax. We'll be eating in a couple hours. I have a feeling we'll be having takeout. I'm not about to cook for as many people as I suspect are coming."

"I'll let your mother know. She'll fuss, I'm sure of it. Your Aunt Sadie will be pea green with envy. She may have married a city slicker, but I'm fairly certain she's never stayed at The Ambassador or anywhere like it. I'll make sure your mother relaxes and enjoys the amenities."

Not long after my parents left the wedding planning committee returned with more people than they'd set out with. I would definitely be ordering Xingian if they wanted to eat!

Somehow the women had picked up Breda, Feury and Mustang. They were struggling under the weight of a massive evergreen and having an even harder time fitting it through the front door.

"I know that a tree is traditional, but what possessed you to get one that big?"

Breda answered, barely biting back the sarcasm, "Ask your decorator Garfiel. He said it would be perfect for the celebration."

They continued wrestling with it and finally got the entire tree inside and propped up in a corner of the living room. Once the entryway was clear the rest of the troops followed. Al, Ed, Russell and Fletcher had been roped into the insanity and were laden with bags and boxes. Ed looked irked. Al and Fletcher chattered excitedly about how much fun decorating the tree would be.

Russell shrugged his shoulders after setting down the bags he had been carrying before he explained, "We ran into them on High Street. Garfiel conscripted us to carry the decorations."

I grinned before I replied, "That makes perfect sense around here... a decoration draft."

The excitement didn't die down after that. Winry burst in, took my hand and all but dragged me outside.

"Granny, this is Jean," she said breathlessly, "Jean, this is my grandmother."

I extended my hand to shake hers and the tiny woman took it and squeezed hard. I hadn't noticed a family resemblance until then. Now I knew where Winry got her strength. I shook my fingers out after she let go of it. That smarted!

She took a puff of her pipe and then said, "I am happy to finally meet you. Please call me Pinako, unless you want to call me Granny. Do you mind if I take a closer look at my granddaughter's work? I may take a while. You'd better have a cigarette."

"No, not at all ma'am. Be my guest and thanks for the smoke break, I needed one," I replied before adding, "Winry has been a lifesaver."

She nodded, puffed at her pipe thoughtfully and then said, "I'd like to thank you for allowing Winry to work with you and Jim. I think it has helped her bedside manner and will make her an even better mechanic. That child has a temper that is only matched by her ingenuity. Jim has helped her learn patience."

"I'm glad I could help and if you didn't know already, she hasn't clobbered me once."
Pinako took her time as she walked around me and the chair. When she returned to where she'd started, she said, "Winry certainly explained the situation thoroughly. She did a good job."

"Your granddaughter's design makes life much easier. I don't know where I'd be without her and Jim. Well, and everyone else. My friends have been so helpful."

"Jean, you have done the lion's share of the work. Winry and Jim had their work cut out for them to be sure, but you did the rest. I can see why Sciezka is so taken with you," she said and then added with a wink, "Marjorie Lockheed's bridge club is quite taken with you too."

I hadn't expected to hear that from a sweet little old lady. Ed would complain about her sometimes, but I figured he was just being difficult. He's prone to hyperbole. Pinako threw her head back, laughed and said, "Stop blushing and accept the compliment, you've earned it, though you were born with the good looks. I'll have to see if you take after your father or your mother."

My face felt hotter, if that was possible and I tugged at my collar since it now felt impossibly tight. She clapped me on the back, like a man and teased, "Don't be embarrassed, it's true. I thought it might be Winry's pride in one of her customers. Even as an apprentice she likes a challenge and to make the best. Garfiel sang your praises too, but he is fickle. I had to see for myself and I'm not disappointed. You've lived up to your reputation."

She stopped talking when an automobile horn honked loudly. When I turned away from her to look for where it was coming from Pinako said, "It took her long enough to get it from Gracia's. I bet she was joyriding."

It was a jeep, larger than the first one. Winry left it idling, got out and said, "Hurry up and come see it!"

She pointed out the features and improvements at breakneck speed. How the hell did she pull it off?

"So, are you excited? Don't worry about the bill. It's on the military since they wrecked the first one. General Mustang had me take care of everything."

"Wow," I replied, too stunned to say much else.

"The hand controls work just the same as the last ones, though they should be easier. I had a friend in Rush Valley put in power steering. He owed me one. OH!" she exclaimed, "As you can see, it's a four door, so passengers in the back seat don't have to sit with your chair. You can stow it in the back, but they'd have to get it for you. Do you want to try it out?"

"Um, sure," I replied still overwhelmed.

"Don't you like it?" she asked looking anxious.

I smiled before replying, "Sorry Winry, you just caught me off guard. My brain is still catching up."

"My granddaughter has two speeds when she is excited. Fast and overdrive."

"So, I've noticed ma'am. Would you ladies like to take a test drive with me?" I asked, grinning like an idiot.
After a quick trip to H.Q. and back Winry and Pinako joined the rest of the party as it had indeed become a party. Garfiel had been nominated to be in charge of decorations and almost everyone pitched in. I didn't see Scieszka or her mother in the living room, though with the crowd in there I easily could have missed them. I went to look for them in the kitchen and they weren't there either. Gracia was setting out serving platters and utensils for when the food arrived. She's always thoughtful and prepared. I didn't even have to ask after them as she smiled and then whispered, "They're in the library. I don't know what happened with you and Lillian, but whatever it was it worked like a charm."

The poor delivery guy had to make two trips from his car to the door, but his tip made up for it. Xingian had been a good choice and not just because Scieszka and I didn't have to cook it. At the end of the night plans for the next day were made, the crowd thinned and eventually it was just us in front of the fire.

Scieszka sighed contentedly as she leaned against me, wine glass in hand.

"That good?" I asked.

"Best holiday in a long time and it's only going to get better from here on out."
Clicking into Place

The couch is, bar none, my favorite part of the house. Especially if she's sharing it with me. Don't get me wrong, I like having family and friends over, I just love it when they go home. Makes me think of a proverb I heard back East: *Guests and fish start to smell after three days*. My sentiments exactly.

On Solstice Day, the household roused at the crack of dawn. My first gift that morning was a spectacular headache, from all the many toasts and good cheer made the night before.

"Good morning sweetheart," I drawled, trying to steady my vision before getting out of bed, "And how is it you can walk in a straight line while my head's still spinning?"

"Because my darling," Sciezka said, poking fun at my words, "I know the art of avoiding hangovers includes taking *sips* at each toast."

Ah, my clever, clever girl.

"Now up and at 'em," she gently chided, "I'll get breakfast started."

"You could have given me five more minutes. It's a holiday," I whined.

As she turned on the taps she scolded, "You'll feel better after a shower. Stop pouting, it doesn't work. Everyone will be here soon and you know how excited Elysia is to open presents."

I watched Elysia's face scrunch up in what appeared to be a difficult decision process when Lillian asked her what the best present had been. Elysia precocious in so many ways was diplomatic when she answered, "I can wear the tutu Mr. Garfiel gave me with the cowgirl boots from Jean's mama and papa while I ride the big girl bicycle from Winry, right?"

"I'd have to take a picture of that Princess," I added. Gracia and Jim had given us a camera, the latest model, and must have cost them a pretty cens or two.

I looked at their card again. *Dear Jean and Sciezka*. One of the best parts of the day was opening presents with Sciezka that were given to *us*. Hard to believe the effect of that one little pronoun had on me, but it's one gift that was impossible to wrap and is truly priceless.

On the day we took Sciezka's mother to the station it was clear and bitter cold. The wind cut right through my jacket. My nose and ears would definitely be frost nipped. Despite the cold we waited on the platform with Lillian.

She hugged me affectionately as she said, "You have to visit as soon as you get the time. Maybe on your honeymoon."

"If the mercury stays this low for much longer, we'll be coming a lot sooner than that," I quipped. Sciezka might never admit it, but she'd gotten back her family. She was no longer virtually an orphan.
We stayed on the platform, waving to Lillian, until the train pulled away.

My folks left a few days after the Solstice. Ma made me promise to visit them back East before the wedding. "Sciezka hasn't met the family and everyone still worries for you."

Pa was more talkative than usual and looked like he might tear up. "It was good to see you son. You look good… stronger every day. You get home soon to show off your girl."

We took full advantage of the privacy the brothers being in Resembool afforded us. It was like it had been right after we moved in. Only this time it was better. The novelty of making love out in the open wasn't going to wear off any time soon. Exhibitionism was never my thing, even though I love making love with the windows open and catching the sun's light and a quick breeze on our warm skin. "It doesn't count if you know nobody will ever catch you," Sciezka grinned, "But you know what they say... never say never."

We hit her next favorite spot after that, the chaise in the library. Then mine, the dining room. After that, the kitchen, where Sciezka sat on the kitchen counter, threw her legs over my shoulders and ate a big bowl of ice cream while I got my fill of my own tasty little snack.

We had the house all to ourselves again, and we fell into a comfortable rhythm. This is what I want my mornings to be like. Cozy, quiet, and comfortable, with a choice of a long or quick roll in the hay. No waking up to cook for a small army, and no worries about leaving enough hot water for them either. Absolutely perfect.

After a quick shower I was ready to face the day and drive us both to the hospital. I'd been too critical of the food. Breakfast is passable if you don't get the eggs. Sciezka would walk with me down to P.T. and then head into work. She'd gotten a contract with Alex Louis' department and they'd hired an assistant to help with the workload.

Post morning session we planned to meet up at H.Q. for her lunch break. When Sciezka's break was over I'd return to the hospital to work on my own for an hour and then swim. I was taking full advantage of the academic recess to up my training. The slush and snow made it hard to get around on my own steam so I was driving more often than usual. It was far from ideal since I'd park at the back of the lot so no one would block the jeep in.

Afternoons were spent cleaning. If I didn't appreciate the advice to hire a housekeeper before, I did now. It wouldn't be surprised if I kissed Julia's feet when she returned to work. I'd managed one room an afternoon and that was a crunch. Sciezka saved me the trouble of making the beds. She also dusts the places where I can't reach and there are a lot of them.

Ed and Al were due back before Julia. I worked double time to make sure everything was set for them. There was so much to do. I called the grocer and the butcher after struggling to make up a list. I got lucky and as I faltered on the line I got asked if I just wanted "the usual" and when Julia would be getting back from her second honeymoon. Running a household is hard. I'd only managed it as a bachelor because I sent my laundry out and ordered in often.
After the laundry arrived, fluffed and folded and likely not up to Julia's standards, I put what I could of it away. I'd have been mangled in the wringer if I'd attempted to do it myself. Then I started on the bed. The sheets were on, though wrinkly and I'd managed to get shams on all the pillows. I'd toss them on top when I was finished. They were fine on the floor for now. I was fighting with the duvet cover when Tiny sounded the alarm. So far, the duvet cover was winning. I was tangled up inside of it as I pinned the corners so they wouldn't shift when I stuffed it in there. I imagine it'd be a difficult task for an able-bodied person. I'd never bothered with anything as fancy as a duvet before.

Tiny raced into the bedroom and landed with a bounce on the bed. "Jean, is that you or a ghost?"

It was a good thing Tiny had sounded the alarm so I wasn't startled when someone walked into the room. "Al, hey yeah, it's just me. You're back early. You should've called. I'd have picked you up. It'd be a tight squeeze though, with you and your brother."

"Ed got sent on a mission, so it's just me," Al replied, a hint of sullenness in his tone. He'd always traveled with his brother before. That's probably what was bothering him.

"Could you do me a favor and help me out of this thing? I think I got the wheels tangled up in it."

"Sure thing, no problem," he said sounding more like himself.

Once I was freed from the clutches of the duvet Al helped me make the bed. I still maintain that the bedding clearly had it out for me. "Thanks for the help Al. I'm going to start dinner now. Go unpack and rest up. It's a long journey by train."

Al frowned and then protested, "You are as bad as brother. I am not tired!"

"Al, that wasn't my intention. I promise. I've got dinner handled. But you do sound frustrated. I'm here if you want to talk about it."

"Thanks, you're right. I'm fed up with being coddled. I'll put my things away and then tell you all about the trip."

I was chopping vegetables at the kitchen table when Al came in. He seemed to be in a better mood as he handed me a brown paper wrapped package. When I set it down on the table he exclaimed impatiently, "Just open it!"

"Whoa Al, you're sounding like your brother," I replied while wiping my hands on a towel.

He pulled up a chair next to me and watched intently as I opened it. The package contained a bright blue scarf made of soft wool. As I looked it over, I said, "This is really nice. Thanks a lot, but you didn't have to bring me a souvenir."

"I made that for you! Your mother taught me how to knit. I've been practicing." He beamed with pride.

"This doesn't look like the work of a beginner. You're a prodigy at everything, aren't you?"

"If only brother would let me do something about it. He won't spar with me anymore. I was going
to fix some of Winry's tools with alchemy and he wouldn't let me do that either."

"He's worried about you. He's almost lost you a few times. Try cutting him some slack. He'll calm down soon..."

Al cut me off, "Don't take his side! He treats me like I'll break or something. Besides, I know you hate it when people do that to you."

"Easy Al, point taken," I replied. "Could you do me a favor and get me a beer out of the ice box? Have one yourself if you like."

"Really?"

I chuckled before answering, "Yes, really. You're only a year younger than your brother. Besides, it's just one. You've been in the army unofficially for years. This guardianship... is just an on-paper formality."

He smiled as he cracked one open, handed it to me and then opened one for himself. Before he sat back down, I picked up his chair and turned it around.

"So, I should sit like a man too?"

"Absolutely and cheers," I said as I knocked the neck of my bottle against his. "Now tell me more about knitting. How did my Ma sucker you into that?"

He scruffed the back of his head and his cheeks pinked up. Finally, he answered hesitantly, "She noticed I was fidgety and she asked me about it. She said she'd seen that in you, just after."

"Oh, did she now?" I asked and then took another swig of beer.

He nodded before continuing, "She'd knit and knit to pass the time. You wouldn't talk to her when you were up to it. The rest of the time you were in a lot of pain so the doctors would knock you out."

"Breda called me on that later... well at least taking my anger out on my Mom. The Ladies' Aide Society was another matter altogether. I guess I gave them a very graphic description of where they could shove it. He wishes he'd snapped a picture of their faces."

"Oh," Al replied, eyes wide.

"He's my best friend, the jerk. He's prone to embellishing a story. I'm pretty sure he gave it to me straight on that one."

Al looked stuck for words but finally said, "So about the knitting... your mother showed me the basics and I bought a book. I'm making brother automail warmers."

"That makes sense. The cold gets to him," I commented.

"They're going to be black wool with grey intarsia skulls," he said and then explained, "That's when you knit a picture into the pattern by changing the yarn color but not the stitch."

I was pretty lost by then and Al could tell.

"Russel was the one who asked for them so I'm flattered. I do not want details on why he knows that brother's automail gets cold," he said as his cheeks flushed crimson.
"It's better if you don't. I'm happy for my friends when they get some, but I don't want to hear all the nitty gritty details."

Al fiddled with the label on the bottle and drummed on the neck with his fingers.

"Have another beer if you want," I offered. He went to the ice box and came back with a bottle for each of us.

He was still quiet after the caps were off. What was still on his mind? Knitting couldn't divert all of his excess energy and frustration. He'd already opened up a lot. I decided to risk it, "Have you talked to Jim about whether or not you're cleared to spar?"

"Of course I have! I've been cleared since the beginning of December!" he replied, rolling his eyes before adding, "Jim didn't even give me too many restrictions. It's all about Ed with this. He's being a jerk!"

"What if you and Jim work something out?" I suggested. "I'd like more close contact hand to hand practice. Maybe some Cretian wrestling…"

He butt in, "I wouldn't want to hurt you!"

"You wouldn't. Who do you think started the brawl at Hawkeye's birthday?"

"No way, really?" he asked, awed.

"Really… unless head butting a guy doesn't count," I answered and winked before adding, "I think this place is missing a heavy bag and a speed bag."

He looked shocked at my answer and then grinned. "I had no idea that was what happened. It's a good thing Winry and Ed weren't there yet. I'm not sure who would have been scarier."

"Would Winry have been defending my honor or the chair? Would you have watched me get my ass kicked?"

"Of course, I wouldn't let anyone hurt you, but I would have let you try to get a few good punches in. You're level headed for the most part. When you hit a guy, he probably deserves it."

I shrugged and smiled before replying, "Sometimes you have to walk away from a challenge. It's a good policy to not say anything your fists can't back up."

"Brother sometimes gets in over his head, but not too often."

"If Fullmetal is in over his head I am scared. You were usually there to hold him back so he didn't hurt anybody. He's fun to watch when he gets wound up."

"The trouble is stopping him," he paused and then became serious, "So why don't you want me to make you an afghan? I know you get cold. Sciezka goes on and on about it."

"I admit it; I get cold even if I can't always feel it right away. I know I need to do something about it, just not that. It's prideful of me... vain. It'd draw attention to my legs. Well, that and I am not living at the Old Soldiers' Home and I refuse to look like I do. I shuddered at the thought of living there. I had been close to death and quite honestly, I'd rather die than live there."

Al looked worried but nodded along anyway. What else could he do?

I backtracked, "I'm sure Sciezka would love an afghan for the library. That'd be great. I'd love for
her to have one in there made special, by you."

He looked relieved. Crisis averted.

"You said you'd tell me the only reason why you'd ever wear a blanket out in public. What is it?"

How could I put this delicately? "I'd only ever do that to hide a small arsenal. I figure I could stash a sawed-off double barrel shotgun, a .45 caliber and a lot of ammo… maybe even a grenade or two. Oh, and some flash bangs!"

"Is that all?" he joked.

"Yeah, that's all and I'd be a massive fire hazard. That would be a buzz kill. Unofficially, I'd wear a blanket in public if that was all I had on. Don't tell your brother about that."

Al's jaw dropped as he clumsily tried to hide his beer as he stammered, "Hello Sciezka... I didn't hear you come in."

"I got out of work early. What are you two up to? If I didn't know better, I would think you were up to no good Al. I'm sure Jean is."

I turned the chair around to face her and grinned, "We were being manly. There's no shame in it. Al, stop hiding that beer. We're caught."

Sciezka put down her bag, crossed the few steps to the icebox and grabbed a beer for herself. She then turned on her heel, looked straight at Al and said, "Don't stop your discussion because of me. Go on."

He was beet red by this time. Hoping to distract Sciezka I said, "Get over here. I missed you. Let me open that beer for you."

"I'll let you both off the hook this time. You were talking out of school Jean, weren't you? It's a good thing I like you two."

"Can I have my kiss now?" I asked.

She sighed theatrically before saying, "I suppose so. I shouldn't condone your corrupting Alphonse." All I got was a peck on the cheek.

"It's about time!" Al exclaimed, fully recovered from being mortified.

Al's outburst stunned Sciezka.

"The way Ed acts about sex stuff is ridiculous! It's like he expects me to be a virgin for the rest of my life."

"Wow..." was about all I could manage before he started up again.

"Sure, I didn't have a body while brother went through puberty. I know why he was so unbearable back then. I don't think he masturbated, ever! If he did, he should have done it more often. Seriously!"

If this is what happens with beer, I was pretty glad I didn't introduce him to hard liquor.

"Well that answers a few questions… I don't need to give you the talk or pawn it off on some unsuspecting soul. Though I'd love to see Mustang give it. If it's any consolation my Ma is still
trying to convince herself she didn't see what she saw at the lake.”

My better half interjected, "I'm lucky she likes me. If our relationship ever goes south, I'm in trouble. She'd likely say I took advantage of you."

"Feeling any better now that you've gotten that off your chest?" I asked.

"Yes, I do. Thank you for asking."

"As a sophisticated man about town would you like another beer Alphonse?" Sciezka asked, sounding like a film femme fatale.

"I think I'm good with water for now," he replied.

I lifted my half empty bottle to toast him again; I was in a toasting mood. "To Al!"

Sciezka raised her bottle and clinked it against mine, "Agreed! To Al! Now, the really important question… what's for dinner?"

There was more conversation at dinner than when Ed was home. Over chicken and dumplings all caught us up on the happenings in Resembool.

"Once Mei Chang's immigration paperwork goes through, she'll study at the academy. She's still in the middle school but it will be a cultural exchange."

"That's great Alphonse," Sciezka commented. It will be nice for you and Fletcher to have another friend in Central."

He nodded enthusiastically, "I hope Clementine and Xiao Mei get along well. I'm excited about learning alkahestry, that's Xingian alchemy."

"You three will be fast friends," Sciezka said, "Anybody up for seconds?"

Al and I both were. Tiny was tap dancing under the table begging. He was doing a good job of it too. Riza would have never put up with it. Lately it was rare for there to be enough for two people to have seconds. That was another difference with Ed away. You could eat slowly, chew between bites and still get your fill.

"Lieutenant Ross was nice enough to offer to board Mei Chang and serve as her sponsor. Maybe she'll teach Mei acupuncture."

I couldn't resist teasing him any longer. He'd been singing this girl's praises for most of dinner. "Sounds like you have a girlfriend Al."

"She's 13 you pervert! We're just friends! Don't you dare suggest that to Brother! I will never hear the end of it!"

Sciezka admonished, "Behave Jean. This is your first and last warning about it. Subject closed."

"But…” Oh come on! This was just too rich and Breda would have been in on it too back in the day.

"It's not up for negotiation and for even thinking about giving Alphonse a hard time you are on KP
"Yes Ma'am." She may as well have said I was going to bed early, without dessert. I had a feeling I was one crack away from sleeping on the couch.

Our place was much quieter with Ed off on a mission. Al didn't have time to miss his brother. Preparing for the Academy kept him busy. The work load would be a cake walk for a genius like him. It was him fitting in that worried me. He hadn't been "normal" since before his mother died. I knew he could handle purchasing materials and being fitted for a uniform on his own, but he shouldn't have to. Gracia took initiative and asked if he wanted help. Al didn't want to put her out but seemed relieved to have the company.

I took the day off for Al's first day. I had preparation and studying of my own to finish so it made sense. Jim had been busting my ass all break and agreed that I'd earned time off for good behavior and someone should be home in case anything happened.

To pass the time, and because I was feeling adventurous, I dug Breda's housewarming gift out of the pantry. It wasn't too hard to install the pull up bar in the closet doorway. Now no matter how hectic life got I'd be able to fit a workout in. Sciezka would probably figure out some creative uses for it as well. I was more than willing to help her experiment.

None of us should have worried. It was silly. Al had taken care of himself and his brother for years. He brought Fletcher home with him after school. Julia had baked Al's favorite cookies, snicker doodles, and both boys washed them down with tall glasses of milk as they rehashed the day.

I helped myself to a cookie and then asked, "So how was it today Al?"

"It was good, Jean. I was nervous, but I know Fletcher and like you said, it's just school. I just worked on having a good time and getting to know people. I'm excited to get to know more people my age."

"That is great news. I knew you'd be just fine. So is Mei at school yet?" Really, I was not baiting him, though it was a nice side effect. I wouldn't end up on the couch for this one.

Al sighed loudly before he replied, "Mei is still in Resembool. I will tell you when she gets into town since you are so interested. You will be pleased to note that she likes Emperor Ling about as much as you do."

"She sounds like an excellent judge of character. No wonder she's your friend. I think your first day calls for a celebration. It's a school night, but do you want to go out to dinner? If homework is a problem, we can do it this weekend."

I didn't want to out and out say that I thought he might be tired. He took the out I'd given him and we settled on a big dinner with everyone in town on Saturday.

With Al in school I had plenty of time to myself. Too much time in fact. I was glad that my classes started soon. General Lockheed had hired me as a teacher's assistant for the semester. He wanted me to take a more active role in class sessions this term. I was assigned the task of lining up guest
lecturers.

Sciezka and Jim laughed when I brought it up with them. During a particularly sadistic session, well masochistic since I put up with it, Jim suggested, "Why don't you talk to your team? Hell, I bet your buddy Breda can think something up."

Why hadn't I been able to think of that? Jim was absolutely right. In the end I lined up Hawkeye for a lecture on firearms and ballistics and how their improvements impacted fighting styles. Feury would give a presentation on how communication and encryption technology influenced the military in war and peace. Breda would bring up the rear to tie it all up by elaborating on the strategies Feury and Hawkeye had touched on and comparing them with classical examples.

I'd have to line them up for the summer session as well. It'd be worth it just to have Hawkeye scare the material into the slackers.

My lectures would be another matter altogether. Would it be better to save them for later in the semester when students already knew me from tutoring sessions or just dive into it and face the stares right away? Should I explain my military background or let people draw their own conclusions about my area of expertise and of course, the damned chair?

Between talking to Martin and Seth I'd figure it out. Maybe I'd have Hawkeye scheduled for early on. If she asked me questions on firearms it would give me some credibility without appearing too obvious.

With a strategy mapped out for my job I worked on the logistics for my other classes. My class schedule was as daunting in reality as it looked on paper. Amestrian Civilization with Lockheed wouldn't be so bad. I have a knack for remembering history. I had Sciezka to help me with 19th Century Literature. Good thing I had a live-in tutor, I would need it. Biology scared the hell out of me, but I needed a hard science for graduation. Al had already offered to tutor me, so that was a relief. Abnormal Psychology was a given. I'd need it with planning a wedding on top of all my other obligations.

Jim decided that I would be in charge of the bulk of my strength training. He scheduled me for one hour of range of motion and stretching exercises that needed a spot every weekday morning. I had to promise to swim for at least an hour four times a week. I could handle that. The good news in all of it was that I still hadn't topped out physically yet. My attitude with my physical training is to "go big or go home". Giving anything less than my best is a waste of Jim's time and mine.

The week before classes started, I picked up my books in hopes of beating the crowds. Al had lent me a few books on biology and made me study guides. That was more than enough to keep me busy as I waited for the semester to start. Even going a week early, the campus bookstore was packed. Negotiating the narrow rows of shelves was challenging and most of my required reading was over my head… literally. I cursed under my breath and wished I'd taken the offers of help I'd had. Breda and Feury had suggested I take them on the grand tour of my fancy pants life as an academic and treat them to lunch in the staff dining room.

With strangers I'm usually either overly helped or invisible. I ended up waiting by each title and then asking for help.

"Hi, I'm Jean. While you're grabbing your text book, could you please get one down for me?"

Even better than having to ask for help was waiting in a seemingly endless line with books stacked haphazardly on my lap so I could pay for them. I'd forgotten to grab a basket on the way in. The worst part was that I'd have to come back again after classes started because half of the novels for
my lit class were on backorder. Maybe Sciezka owns them.

After paying I went back to the jeep to stash my purchases. Snow removal didn't seem high on the priority list on campus. The paths were cleared two shovel widths wide, so barely enough. Add to that slush puddles alternating with ice patches and I was in a mood. I considered packing it in and going home. Instead I went to the administration building to get elevator keys for the two buildings I'd have literature and biology in.

The buildings were in the old part of campus and weren't nearly as easy to get around in as the humanities building. Armstrong Hall, built generations ago and the oldest building on campus, had a side entrance with a plywood ramp that led directly into my lit classroom. The building had half floors due to additions. Hopefully the professor would let me in if the door was locked.

The hard sciences building had a loading dock and freight elevator. Outstanding.

I had a feeling I'd be at the firing range regularly all semester.
Monday morning, the first day of classes. I was up and at 'em, all but dared the world to bring it on. If I'd written that in an essay Sciezka would have given me a look, since I should know better than to still fall into the trap of writing clichés. Can't always help it, can't always catch myself, it's just how I am. Can't resist her either, she's so cute when she tuts and scolds like a schoolmarm. She's sexy in the library when she shushes me too. I know I'm hot for teacher in the same way I know the old adage that no one makes passes at a girl in glasses is bull.

Sciezka offered to meet me for lunch in the staff lounge. I took her up on it. Literature got out at noon and biology started at 1300. If lit went badly, I'd need a dose of morale. She blushes when I praise her talents, but she's so good at her job that she sets her own schedule most of the time.

My lit professor had to be about my Ma's age and looked enough like her. A tiny woman in a prim tweed skirt suit and wire rimmed glasses, but that was where any resemblance stopped. Her motions and manner were decisive, and the first order of business was to hand out and review the syllabus. She apologized that the books hadn't arrived on time, and instructed that in lieu of the first reading she would assign an essay detailing our experiences with literature.

I decided I was going to like her. The course load looked challenging for an introductory level class, but I was never one to back down from a challenge. Hopefully this class would help me become a better conversationalist and keep up with Sciezka. No matter what she says, I think I need all the help I can get.

Sciezka all but launched herself at me when she spotted me in the lobby of the student union. "How did it go? Do you think you'll like your new professors?"

"What, no hello?" I teased.

"Of course, hello… you are such a goofball. So, tell me everything!"

"Let's grab a table and I'll tell you all about it after we order. I only have an hour between classes."

Once we were seated in the faculty lounge, I obliged her. "Doctor B. looks to be everything a professor should be. She even wears a tweed suit and glasses."

Sciezka rolled her eyes before she replied, "That tells me nothing about her pedagogy."

"It was the first class meeting, and here's her syllabus. I think I'll like her. She apologized that all of our books aren't in yet and assigned a short essay instead."

"Writing assignments already? That doesn't seem fair…"

"She wants one page single spaced on our experiences with fiction to date. She doesn't want more than that because in her words, 'By now you all know how to pad your word counts and the more I assign, the more I have to grade.' I'm pretty sure I like her already. She's smart and gets straight to the point."

Our food arrived and we both tucked into it in earnest. Sciezka enjoyed her soup and salad thoroughly. "I'm going to meet you here for lunch as often as possible. You academic types eat
well. But looking around here seals the deal. We need to buy you a tweed sport coat."

It took me a minute to wrap my head around that. "With suede elbow patches?"

"Of course. Real nice and fancy looking ones too. Want me to walk you to class?"

"I'd like that."

Getting to the classroom in the sciences building was less than fun. I was glad that I'd done a dress rehearsal before the term started. Sciezka took her leave at the elevator. I took a deep breath before entering the classroom and was relieved that I was the first one there.

I strategically picked a spot at the front table, furthest from the door on the far side of the room. I slid the chair over and then busied myself organizing my books. I should have had a smoke before I arrived. I was nervous already.

The other students filed in shortly after I got myself situated. The classroom was unlike anything I'd seen yet. Long tables served as desks in the first third of the room and the rest was lab space. There were many scientific instruments on the countertops which from my current point of view were tall. They're meant for people to stand at. It would take some figuring out, but I was sure I'd find a way to work around it. I'd think on it after class and then call Jim. If the two of us put together couldn't work it out, Sciezka and Winry could be called in.

It came to me as one last person came in, the person I guessed was the professor from the way she closed the door and stood in front of the class. I could tackle laboratory work like I did cooking. It wouldn't be too hard to find a tall and sturdy stool. I shifted position and hunkered down to listen and learn. I wondered, could school actually be fun? My favorite classes had been recess and occasionally sports. My height, strength and quick reflexes had always been advantages. I'd always loved basketball and hockey and the occasional bout of spitball.

Her name is Doctor Jennings, a PhD from Western University. Young, nervous, and judging by her anxiety, probably would have attached a copy of her curriculum vitae and transcripts to the syllabus if she'd thought of it. She paced the room as she lectured and asked the class to hold all questions until the end of the period or make an appointment for her office hours. Either she had a lot to say or she didn't want to risk breaking her flow.

When she got to where I was sitting, she stopped short and seemed to lose her train of thought. Then she quickly moved to the other side of the room. It took a minute for me to register what had happened. Near as I could tell she hadn't caught sight of my chair before and now that she had was taken aback.

She didn't expect to see it. Not that I'm surprised at her reaction, my situation is outside of the norm so I guess it would throw her off. I didn't expect how much. I wondered, maybe she's like Sciezka and trips over her own feet when she's absorbed in the task at hand or nervous. Maybe this was her first lecture as a professor. Maybe it's like Sciezka says and she thinks I'm traffic stopping and jaw droppingly handsome. Damn I love my girl. Or maybe none of these at all.

As Doctor Jennings continued discussing the syllabus topics she continued pacing. The class would cover the basics from single cell plants all the way up to an introduction to human anatomy and physiology. "And finally, we will study humans," she added, "We are separated from most animals by opposable thumbs, and some say we are superior due to upright bipedal ambulation." She
stopped and looked at me briefly, startled again as she caught herself a second too late. "We freed up our hands and looked up and got smarter." A bit lame and a bit late, but she got a few smiles, and mine, for it nonetheless.

She paused and then detailed the body systems we would study. "We'll start with the basics, the framework… the skeletal system and the muscles that move it. From there we'll move deeper and cover the circulatory, endocrine and digestive system." After swallowing hard, she continued, her eyes glued to the back of the room, "Finally we will conclude the semester with the reproductive and central nervous systems."

I'd thought I was being paranoid before, but now I was almost certain that I made her uncomfortable. Maybe my class performance would show her otherwise, that there is more right with me than there is wrong.

She concluded the class by announcing that there would be a quiz at the beginning of each class to check comprehension and work sheets included with each reading. I stayed after dismissal to let the crowd thin. Maybe she would notice me lagging behind and take the opportunity to talk to me.

No such luck. She gave me a quick nod and bolted out herself.

Instead of going home I went to the hospital for a swim. Afterward I stopped by Jim's office to bounce my ideas on how to make lab work physically possible. Figured keeping my brain busy would take the edge off of the prof realizing my legs don't work, and put me in a better mood for my smiling girl at home.

Tuesday was unremarkable compared to Monday. I was glad. I went to therapy in the morning and then to classes with Seth and Martin. In the afternoon I put in time for my teaching assistant job, sitting in on Martin's Intro class and then holding office hours. Thinking about it now, I still can't believe I'm on the other side of the desk. Feels great though, and I'm proud.

That night I reviewed for biology and wrote my literature essay. Sciezka checked it over and didn't have me change a thing.

We had all settled into our routines and after dinner Al and I did our respective homework while Sciezka read. Al would usually finish before I did, zipping through his assignments as prodigies do, and then sit and knit. Clementine and Tiny helped. I don't think Tiny knows he's a dog. He's worse about playing with Al's yarn than the cat.

I was anxious about biology class on Wednesday. It wasn't the work at all. Al had quizzed me during breakfast and had pronounced that I would pass with flying colors. If I could impress an alchemical genius, then answering a few questions correctly wouldn't be too hard. What worried me was Doctor Jennings. Would I still freak her out? And for an educated person, what was up with that?

She seemed a little better, calling on me twice during class and praising my answers. It seemed like she was overcompensating for Monday. She still had a difficult time making eye contact. At the very least she didn't lean over to address me, instead stepping back so I didn't have to crane my neck. Still smiled too much though.
After class I decided that if things weren't better on Friday, I would make arrangements to speak with her.

The quizzes were returned to us on Friday. She handed them out while we took the next quiz. I'd gotten a perfect score and was excited. My enthusiasm waned when I saw the note paper clipped to it.

"Mr. Havoc,

Please see me after class. I have some questions for you.

Sincerely,

Dr. H. Jennings, PhD"

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't seen this coming. At least it saved me the trouble of having to initiate a conversation with her. I wondered what she wanted to talk about.

Once everyone else left the room I approached the lectern, "Doctor Jennings, you wanted a word with me?"

"Yes, that's right. Do you have time right now? We can do this in my office or if that's inconvenient for you we can meet right here," she replied, her cheeks flushed.

Her consideration was thoughtful, if unnecessary. "I'm comfortable wherever you are. Whatever is best for you."

She pulled a chair from behind her desk and sat down. Fingering the files in her lap and shuffling them appeared to command her full attention. "Your marks on the quizzes and homework are perfect so far. You have an excellent grasp on the material."

"Thank you. I was worried about how I would do in a science course so I had some tutoring sessions with a friend. But I don't think you arranged a meeting just to tell me that."

After a long pause she finally replied, "I have some concerns about your ability to complete the laboratory assignments. The work areas are all designed at a height conducive to standing. Are you sure you will be able to do it?"

"Now that's something I can appreciate ma'am, questions that dispense with beating around the bush and get right to the point."

She hurriedly added, "The last thing I wanted to do was offend you. Perhaps astronomy would be better for you? The observatory has elevator access."

"Thanks for your concern," I replied sharply, barely reigning in my temper. "Unfortunately, I will need biology if I want to proceed with psychology as my major course of study so we're stuck with one another."

"Sorry, I didn't want to start off on the wrong foot..." she stopped speaking abruptly, immediately regretting her choice of words.

"The only accommodation I'll require is a tall, sturdy stool. There's one right over there. That is if it won't put you out too much. Is there anything else you require before I leave?"
She shook her head and I got the hell out of there as fast as I could.

I was in a foul mood as I pushed through the slush in the parking lot. My anger bubbled just under the surface and I knew I would blow my top if I didn't do something with the pent-up aggression. I sat in the jeep chain smoking and stewed. I thought about swimming but that only burned off so much energy. Not nearly enough. I wanted to yell or to hit something... to take off at a full sprint and run until I puked.

What I didn't want was to misdirect my anger at some unsuspecting soul or turn it in on myself to fester.

I finally decided to go to the firing range. I had the .38 on me. I always had that on my person and at the range I had access to a rifle. Maybe I could track Hawkeye down and she'd have something with more kick. I wondered how many magazines it would take for me to calm down.

Once I was at H.Q. I headed straight for her office. There would be woe unto anyone who crossed my path until I calmed down.

The outer office was empty but her door was open. I pulled into the doorway and rapped lightly on the frame. It's unwise to startle her. She looked up and smiled, "It's nice to see you. You've been a stranger lately."

"Yeah, about that, things have been hectic. Do you have time for target practice?" I asked sheepishly.

"I do, but you know you don't need me. I did arrange privileges for you. Did the armorer give you trouble?"

"Nah, it's not like that at all..."

"Did you want to talk about something? Is everything ok?"

She always could zero in on me. Read me like a damned book. "It's been a rough week. I'm just running up against a few walls. It's frustrating."

She nodded, called the dog to heel and then said, "Let me lock up here and we'll be off."

When the elevator door slid shut, I said, "Thanks for doing this. I should be used to it by now."

"Used to what?" She asked patiently. She got off the elevator and when I was out asked again, this time more forcefully.

"Lit class is great. The prof handed our essays back and told us that it would be the only easy A we'd get all term. The rest would have to be earned by the sweat of our brow. Those were her words verbatim. I like her more every class."

I stopped talking and she just stared. She wanted me to tell the rest of the story. "Biology is the problem. Not the work. Al has been tutoring me for weeks."

"So, it's the professor?"
"I got a reminder on why well-meaning people don't always act that way. She got weird when she saw the chair during class on Monday. Today just took the cake," I answered, hanging my head.

"So now you want to blow away some paper men?" she asked as a smile crossed her features. She was scary when she looked like this. I liked it.

"I think that is an excellent plan," I answered. "She had concerns about if I'd be able to complete the practical labs." I then explained. "Listen, I'm sorry to bother you with this. Before… before all this, I'd run or box. When I was a kid hockey helped."

"I bet you made a good enforcer without even trying too hard."

"Yeah… I'm strong as an ox and thick like one too."

She smiled. It was different with her after the accident. She confided in me more, maybe even needed me. She wasn't my supervisor. That must have been the difference. Grinning she added, "I take it that bigger is better today?"

I put a finger to the end of my nose. "You wouldn't happen to have a grenade launcher or anti-tank rounds on you?"

"That good?"

I nodded vigorously.

"In that case I'll sign out extra ammo."

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Spending the weekend with Sciezka and my friends was just the thing to help me relax. On Saturday there was a wedding meeting at the house. I'm always happy to help, but I was relieved that this time I was off the hook.

Since she was having quality "girl time" I hoped it might mean a manicure for Sciezka. It is relaxing for her and something about perfectly polished nails changes her. If she's picked red polish, I know I'm in for a good time. It'd be a safe bet to say her underwear matched her nails.

Heymans and I went to the Cavalier. Since the incident we really hadn't hung out and shot the shit. Not alone at least. He'd cleaned up since I'd seen him last. Clean shaven and in the best shape I'd seen him in since boot camp. As we shot pool and drank beers, I pulled it out of him, "So what gives? You're not telling me something."

"I'm surprised you noticed. Damn, she's rubbed off on you!"

"Well, what is it? It's a dame, isn't it?"

"Guilty as charged. I don't want to jinx it though, so I'm not saying who."

"What if I sink this shot? Would you tell me then?"

"I'm shocked that you would place a wager on my budding relationship."

"Shit, you really do like her! Excellent!"

He grinned as he said, "If you don't make that shot next round is on you."
"Fair enough. If I make this, can you guarantee you won't book a donkey show for my stag party?"

"I hadn't even thought of that possibility. Thanks for the idea!"

Dick.

I hoped things with his lady friend would turn serious soon. Perhaps she'd help keep his party games sensible, or at least legal.

I hit rehab as soon as it opened on Monday for a workout. If I was lucky Jim would be able to squeeze me in for some stretching. While Jim and I worked we made small talk. I told him how excited I was for literature class and that I was already looking forward to scheduled discussions and readings. Doctor B's wit is dry, even sarcastic at times. Just how I like it. She'd even made insightful comments on my essay. Books and fiction hadn't been important to me until they were my escape when I was cooped up for all those months.

I bitched about the slush too. He teased, "Go figure. It's Central in February. If you were expecting sun, move south." 

"Hell no! If it's not one thing it's another. They have dirt roads, sand and flash floods. I'll take snow over mud any day."

"Too true my friend. You know I was just teasing. You left that one wide open."

"At least you don't have a filthy mind. I usually leave things wide open. There's no point in trying. My friends will find something crude to add. Breda especially."

Jim grinned and shook his head as I continued, "He's actually considering a donkey show for my stag party. The sad thing is that I gave the idea to him when I asked him not to do that. He's not into that by the way… at least I hope he's not."

He nodded and kept smiling. "I bet he just wants to see who turns redder, me or Feury."

"I'm afraid I won't be able to make it to your stag party. I have a prior commitment."

"They haven't even set a date for the party yet. Don't think you can pull a fast one on me. I'm paralyzed, not stupid. I resent the slush teasing too. I wasn't exactly out and about at this time last year. For a while I couldn't even get out of bed without supervision… made using the head a real show."

"Glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humor. You're especially cheerful today. Why are you even here?" he said, not letting me get a word in edgewise. "Is everything at par physically? I can fit you in again late this afternoon."

"I'm just taking precautions. One of my professors has doubts that her class is suitable for me. She has concerns."

"Go on, you've handled incarceration. This should be a cakewalk. Well, figuratively at least."

"The chair seriously weirds her out. I feel like a freak show on wheels. She's got a PhD in biology. It's not like she's ignorant. I'm not contagious or anything."

"That's rough."
"Damn right it is. Though you know, sharp objects and gimps don't mix. Sciezka put me in mortal peril today letting me use a spoon for my oatmeal at breakfast. Maybe my professor isn't the best qualified to teach human anatomy."

"Deep breaths, Jean. Come by this afternoon after class. I want a blow by blow."

"You're on. Thanks again for the session. I'd be way more nervous sitting through my class if my legs were jitterbugging."

As expected, my morning class went well. Sciezka met me for lunch at my office. Julia had packed one for each of us, but I'd been so distracted that I'd left without mine. During lunch Sciezka handed me my forgotten goods and talked. I was nervous about biology, but confident I had done everything I could about my side of the conflict. I'd left in a pissy mood on Friday but hadn't said anything truly regrettable. I wondered how Dr. Jennings felt about the meeting.

During lunch Sciezka talked a mile a minute about our plans for the weekend. "It's only Monday and you've got us booked solid. The only thing I want to think about right now is you and Julia's chocolate chip cookies."

"Garfiel and Winry are going to be in town. He wants to take you suit shopping. Before you complain you need to pick something out soon."

"Can't he just measure me and be done with it? You know I hate that stuff. He'll pick out something great. I promise to wear whatever he chooses."

"Anything?" she asked suspiciously.

"Anything within reason… it absolutely has to include pants. Chaps are not an acceptable substitute."

"Jean, be good," she said, taking my hand, clearly trying to butter me up. It always works. "He's assured me it won't take all day and then you can join us at the Winter Carnival."

"That's new. Was it Fuhrer Grumman's idea?"

"Something like that. A few of his staff members think that the citizens deserve time to celebrate now that we're not constantly at war. It's good for public relations and the economy. I think it sounds like fun."

"Great, crowds and noise… two of my favorite things. It sounds even better with an order of slush on the side."

"You're extra grouchy today. You left early this morning too. You're hiding something…"

"It's just nerves. One of my professors has doubts about whether not I can hack the workload."

"Of all the nerve! Who is it? I'll give that jerk a piece of my mind!"

"Settle down slugger. I'm a big boy. I can handle this myself. I had a preventative session with Jim. No reason I should let a little stress mess up my day."

She huffed, "Fine, but if it doesn't get better, I get first crack after you. Deal?"
My hand crept up her leg suggestively as I asked, "Will this get me out of suit shopping on Saturday?"

"Nice try buster," she said and then kissed me deeply. "Now go give 'em hell!"

I was still in a good mood when I got to class. The combination of Julia's excellent baking skills and Sciezka's endless support, except where the importance of haberdashery is concerned, were exactly what I'd needed. The hard part would be staying that way.

Dr. Jennings lectured on algae for most of the period. Algae. I couldn't believe it; we were spending most of the class time on, of all things, seaweed. But now I'm learning algae isn't seaweed. Kelp. Stuff that looks like the green bits in Xingese soup.

I took notes like my life depended on it. That took my mind off of having to talk to her. For lab on Wednesday we would be looking at slides under the microscope. She assigned lab partners which was a relief. She'd assigned one to me which meant she knew I wasn't quitting. I was especially relieved that we wouldn't be "picking partners" like we did in grade school. I'm not used to being picked last. I didn't want to start getting used to it. I've gotten used to enough. I was almost always picked first as a kid.

She handed back the Friday quizzes at the end of the period and once again there was a note clipped to mine. When class was dismissed, she approached cautiously. Hoping to put her at ease I said, "You caught me off guard last week. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

After pulling up a chair next to me she sat down and then said, "You caught me off guard too, but not for the reason you think. I was surprised to see you in a university class. The wheelchair you use came as a shock too. I've never seen one like it. My father would be able to do so much more with something that light. At least it looks light. I didn't see it until I was in back of you."

"So, your father is in a chair too?" I asked, shocked. I hadn't thought of that possibility at all.

She nodded and took a deep breath before she replied. "It was over twenty years ago during the Drachmann border skirmishes. His platoon was ambushed. During the firefight he was hit."

I nodded to show I was listening… to hopefully convey that I understood. "I misinterpreted your actions and I am sorry."

"Thank you, Mr. Havoc, but you don't have to apologize. I didn't know how to react. I was surprised…" she trailed off.

I interrupted as politely as I could, before she continued, "Please call me Jean, and surprised about what if I can be that direct?"

"Well for starters, that you are attending university at all, how well you look physically… how independent you are. I am not shocked at all that you are as intelligent as you are, just curious as to how you ended up in my classroom."

"That's a lot of questions framed as answers," I replied, finally smiling at her. "The short version, and it never is, is that I was hurt while on duty. My C.O. is stubborn and though he let me retire from active duty, he still needs me. So here I am."

"So, you're military too. The technology at the hospitals has come a long way," she said wistfully.
"I don't want to pry, but where does your father live? Maybe my surgeon and physical therapist can make a referral for him? I'm not him, but if I was in his situation I'd want to know and do as much as I could."

"You're not prying and you've actually been helpful. I told him about our discussion on Friday. He told me I should have known better, that you wouldn't be here unless you knew you could handle it."

"Sounds like your Pa and I would get along… sorry, that's my hick showing."

Doctor Jennings smiled in agreement. "Confidentially, I'm a hayseed too. Don't tell anyone."

"If you're from the west, it's wheat."

"You've absolutely right. My father does the books for the granary in town. Unlike you, he'd be lost without my Ma and her family helping out. He'll be happy for any advice your specialists have to give. Well I'm happy for it. I'll have to soft soap him some more."

"Whenever he's up to talking is good for me. Sorry I have to cut this short. I have a therapy session scheduled. This body can be a full-time job."

She nodded, her lips forming a thin line, "I don't mean to stick on a sore subject, but is there anything I can do to make Wednesday's lab easier on you?"

"Don't worry. I'm glad you asked. Please assign a station in the back corner? It'll give me a sturdier spot to pull up on. That and a tall stool should do it."

"That's all?" she asked sounding surprised.

"If you feel like swiping a cafeteria tray to put our materials on so I can carry them that would be great. I figure between lab and doing the dishes at home I can get most of my standing time out of the way."

"You are a force to be reckoned with. We'll have to talk again soon."

"I have office hours in the Humanities building on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1500 on. Feel free to drop by."

"I will if you don't mind. How do you take your coffee?"

"Extra-large, splash of milk, some sugar and yes please ma'am, I'll have some more."

She smiled. "Like I said before you are indeed a force to be reckoned with. We'll have to talk again soon." She laughed a warm, genuine, country laugh. "Oh my, I can tell that you sure don't like coffee at all. Thanks for asking after the information for my Pa."

I headed out. Looks like 'don't judge a book by its cover' is indeed a two-way street.

The therapy room was nearly empty by the time I arrived. Most patients have sessions earlier in the day. Jim was in his office updating charts. I could tell by the thick pile of file folders. He looked up when I greeted him. Smiling, he took off his reading glasses and then rubbed the bridge of his nose.
"You're just in time, Jean. How did it go?"

"It went well. Actually, it was a misunderstanding on both of our parts. I can tell you about it tomorrow at my regular session if you're busy."

"I'm busy, but I need a break. Want a full session? I know you're keeping up at home, but you may as well."

"Just let me call the house to let someone know where I am. I don't want Sciezka to worry. I think I'll swim too."

Jim was surprised as I had been as to why Dr. Jennings behavior had seemed so off. He was more than happy to help out, even if it would mean more paperwork. But Jim was a good guy, and I had it on good authority his work was gaining recognition and he would soon be asked to run trainings and give presentations on a much wider scale.

Now all I had to do was physically make it through the laboratory period.

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I woke up way before the alarm on Wednesday. Following my hygiene routine, I put the coffee on and went outside for a cigarette. Tiny was happy to come along to keep me company and answer nature's call. Once I'd fixed breakfast, I started my workout. I went long on stretching and light on calisthenics. The day's activity would probably be more than enough.

Sciezka was just up when I started the range of motion exercises I could perform unassisted. She offered to help and I accepted saying, "Fix your coffee first. I'll really need this tonight too."

"I'm not even going to ask if you're nervous. I just know you are. Don't be. You've tackled trains, stairs in front of pompous officials... a lot of more difficult things than this. You've worked out the logistics of how and have handled every variable you can think of."

Her complete faith in me amazes me. She sees me at my worst, my most vulnerable, knows my weaknesses and still loves me. She says I do the same for her. Perhaps our wedding vows should say, "In hopeless situations and absolute cluster f**ks". With what we've been through together already the hard parts after "to have and to hold" in the standard vows should be easy.

She knelt on the floor to kiss me. Her robe revealed enough of her pale thighs to be tempting. I wanted to blow off all responsibilities and take her right there on the floor. As I held her close, my hands roaming under her robe her breath hitched.

"I'm going to ask Gracia if she can feed the boys dinner tonight. Be ready for me when I get home."

With that to look forward to I was ready to tackle anything.

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The morning flew by and soon it was nearly time to head for lab. I smoked a couple cigarettes, lighting one off the other. I'd be fifteen minutes early, but I wanted to be sure everything was set up at my lab station.

I shouldn't have worried. Dr. Jennings was there early as well setting out lab materials. She greeted
me warmly saying, "I put the stool at a station in the back corner. I took your advice on the trays, for everyone. Keep your fingers crossed that they don't catch on at the dining hall. I've seen students on the quad using them as sleds, so I think we're safe."

"Thanks for your attention to detail. Every bit helps. I forwarded your father's information to Jim, my physical therapist. He says he's more than happy to help."

The rest of the students arrived and Dr. Jennings launched headlong into instructing us on lab procedures.

I'd had such a case of nerves about the physical demands that I'd forgotten to worry about how my partner would react to me. When the time came for the lab portion of the class to begin Dr. Jennings called up each pair to collect the materials. In addition to assigning partners, she'd assigned work areas.

I hadn't actually met my partner before then and I had a bad case of the jitters. As I wheeled to the front of the room, I reassured myself. I had met plenty of new people before and put them at ease. I'd done it, and I'd do it again.

My partner did not seem to be surprised by the chair at all. He introduced himself saying, "Hi, I'm Erik Fredricsson. You're in Dr. Kohut's Abnormal class. Are you a psychology major too?"

That was a relief. The only thing abnormal was the title of the class he recognized me from. "I'm actually still undecided on majors. It looks like I'll either do a double, in political science and psychology, or actually choose and minor in one of them."

He smiled at that before saying, "Both are good majors. I think studying psychology can only help any discipline."

I took the tray off the counter, balanced it on my lap and led the way to our station. He didn't ask to help. I guess he figured I had it handled.

The lab consisted of two activities. The first was a quick inventory of the instruments in our assigned and keyed cubbies. I supposed this was to familiarize us with the equipment and lab expectations. Not to mention, if you broke it, you bought it. I was surprised at how simple it was. I shouldn't have been. It's a survey course with no prerequisites.

Erik's an amiable guy and easy to work with. I don't think it was random that we were paired up by Dr. Jennings. If it was, then it was a great stroke of luck for me.

I had an easy, for me at least, time of it standing up. The stool was the right height for me to sit on and take notes at. Using the microscope required me to stand and a free hand to get a specimen into focus. I needed every bit of physio and strength training I'd done. If I'd taken this course last summer I would have dropped out for sure. The university requires one physical or procedural laboratory class for its graduation requirements. They also require one credit of physical education. I wondered if I could count bio lab twice.

On the way out of the room I grinned at Dr. Jennings. She gave a discreet thumbs up. I could hardly wait to get to the hospital to share the victory with Jim and then swim and shower.

When I got home, I let Tiny out and had a cigarette on the porch. That dog has to smell everything in the yard and would stay outside all day if we let him. Unless it's raining, then it is all we can do
to get him out the door to do his business.

After a long shower I put on boxers and nothing else. Sciezka had put me on notice to be ready for her. I had no problem complying. I stretched out on the bed and quickly fell asleep. I deserved a nap and knowing my girl, I'd need every bit of energy I had for what she had in store for me.

Sciezka woke me by kissing my neck and whispering in my ear, "It's a good thing you got your rest. There's Pane Fresco in the icebox, but that's for later."

I was most definitely awake after that. She straddled my hips wearing nothing but a silk chemise. The feel of the sheer fabric against my skin, her warmth radiating through it was almost too much to take. I needed her now.

It was still a week until Valentine's Day, and five weeks until the more crudely dubbed "Steak and Blowjob Day". It definitely wasn't my birthday yet either. Lucky, lucky me.

I was the one who had the brilliant idea to have Elysia sleep over on Friday nights in exchange for the Elrics dining with Gracia on Wednesdays. Gracia and Jim could have an overnight of their own without Elysia asking too many questions. She didn't need to see Jim in his pajamas just yet. It was still too soon. Sciezka and I both figured we were getting the better end of the deal. We'd be seeing our friends happy, spending quality time with the cutest little girl in the country and have the house to ourselves on Wednesday evenings. It's a win win situation for all involved parties.

Friday night everyone came over to our house to eat. Garfiel and Dimitri had come with Winry from Rush Valley. Feury was dining with us as well. Watching Dimitri and Garfiel cooking Cretian was a lot of fun.

Winry would share the guest bedroom with Elysia, which was a relief. Elysia is a good girl, but I worried that she'd wake up during the night and be scared and disoriented. Feury would be sleeping at home. Pinako would kill me otherwise. I did not want to get on her bad side. Garfiel and Dimitri stayed in a hotel.

We ate wonderful Cretian food, minus the saganaki. Maybe next time we'd have Roy around to extinguish the flaming cheese if it got out of control. There was more than enough to go around without it.

The night wound down and as everyone said their goodbyes Garfiel informed me that he and Dimitri would come by bright and early. "We'll be at the tailor's with bells on!"

At least he knows what he's doing so it won't take forever to find a suit. I was confident he would make the process as painless as possible. The added bonus would be that I'd look good in what he picked out. Garfiel promised that Sciezka would think I looked like 100 million cens when he was finished.

Morning sun filtered in through the curtains. From the sound of it I was the last person up. "Jean, are you awake? We made breakfast!" Elysia called through the door.
I grinned. Sciezka had let me sleep as long as possible before starting the day. "I'm still in bed, but come on in, Princess."

As the door opened Tiny squeezed through first and leapt onto the bed. Winry and Elysia followed much more sedately. I peered over the side of the bed and saw Elysia carrying my plate while Winry handled the coffee. Tiny begged at the foot of the bed as soon as the food was in my possession.

"Not a chance buddy, no matter how pitiful you look!"

Winry giggled before saying, "He's a good little actor. It's like he's saying, 'I've never eaten food ever! I'm starving to death! They don't love me!'"

"He had a bunch of my bacon!" Elysia blurted out and then quickly covered her mouth, caught. She knew she wasn't supposed to feed him from the table.

"I'll let it slide this time," I whispered and then winked. Besides, now I didn't have to share since he'd had plenty already.

"I just wanted to thank Tiny for sleeping on my bed. I want to be his favorite," she confessed.

Winry turned to leave the bedroom and said, "Let Jean finish his breakfast, Elysia." She scampered after her, Tiny hot on her heels.

I quickly finished eating and started the chore of getting dressed and ready.

Garfiel talked animatedly as Dimitri navigated the traffic on High Street. Central was nuts due to the festival. The newspaper had published maps and schedules. There were events all over the city. Amestris Parkway was closed to traffic and the picture on the front page showed the ice rink that was built on the university campus.

When we arrived at the tailor's Garfiel wrangled my chair and we went inside. A tinkling bell announced our presence. Bolt upon bolt of fabric lined the walls. There were colors I'd never considered before and a sign said, "If you don't see it here, we can order it." Two men came out of the back room, tape measures around their necks. They greeted Dimitri and Garfiel warmly, evidently, they'd met before.

They descended upon me after a quick introduction by Garfiel, "Jean Havoc, meet the Brooks brothers, Amestris' finest haberdashers for three generations."

No sooner had I said hello they started making polite, but insistent requests. "Jacket off please! The sweater too and the shirt!" Soon I was sitting in nothing but my undershirt and boxers. They talked to each other rapidly in what sounded like code.

All at once they stopped and asked me, "What sort of wedding is this anyway?"

How in the heck was I supposed to know? I gave them the date and time, barely remembering to add that it was outdoors, weather permitting.

Apparently, that was not a detailed enough answer, as they looked to Garfiel expectantly.

"After taking the bride's dress into consideration and by the way it is a dream… elegant and
understated… she's quite delicate, anything more would overwhelm her frame. The reception will go into the evening. It's going to be gorgeous! Candles at all the tables! Lanterns in the trees! Just fabulous!

The elder brother, or at least I thought he was, said, "You haven't said how formal it will be. How many guests? Is it black tie or white tie? A morning coat is right out, though a dove grey would be dashing on him. What colors has the bride chosen? Are there any dignitaries in attendance? How many guests? You told me the groom is retired military, are the groomsmen wearing dress blues?"

My head was starting to swim with all the possibilities. What had happened to our small wedding in the back yard with our close friends and family? Elop ing was looking better and better.

Dimitri looked exasperated and intervened on my behalf, "You're scaring the man. Pick a cut of suit and go from there. He'll look good in anything."

"You're so right love," Garfiel replied. "Despite the venue and the guest list, we're going less formal. Think garden party… fabulous garden party, but a three-piece suit would be the best choice. I think the groom would appreciate being able to take off his jacket and enjoy himself."

The younger of the brothers tapped his foot expectantly, "And the colors, Garfiel?"

"Oh, how silly of me. It will be a symphony in white! It will be absolutely everywhere! The linens, the canopies and tents and it will all glow in the candle light! I forgot about the lanterns and fairy lights lining the pergola. It will be magical! There will be every type of in season flower imaginable and some will be shipped in! Lily of the Valley, Forget Me Nots, Peonies, Freesia, Gardenias and so many varieties of roses that I've lost count!" By the time he'd finished he was out of breath and dabbing at his eyes with a lacy handkerchief. I appreciated the effort and his enthusiasm, but I was going to need an encyclopedia to figure out half of what he had planned.

The brothers nodded, apparently appeased. One rushed over to a rack and came back with a garment bag. "Jean, try this on... of course yours will be made to measure, but first I'd like to see the cut of the jacket."

This was taking longer than I'd expected and getting into the suit in the dressing room was going to be a bitch. At least I wouldn't be sitting around in my underwear anymore. It was getting chilly in there.

The brothers circled round me like sharks sizing me up. "Our first challenge is the pants. They need to look as good sitting as they do standing. We'll have to add two more inches to the inseam so they drape properly. Just in case, we suggest you purchase silk socks to match."

Garfiel jotted everything down in a tiny hot pink notepad. I should have known he'd carry a handbag. It suited him. At least he didn't use me as his personal pack mule. I don't mind holding onto things for Sciezka. She almost never carries a bag when we go out. Digging around in the pack under the chair gives her a good opportunity to feel me up.

They decided on light charcoal grey three season wool. The elder Brooks brother said, "I think you should go with a two-button jacket. I'll make doubly sure it doesn't ride up or gap when it's buttoned and you push your chair. I'm sure you, as many grooms are wont, will end up in your shirtsleeves at the reception. Once you have worn a dress shirt custom made for you, you will never go back."

"Oh, you are brilliant! I hadn't even thought of that! A shirt like that will emphasize his broad shoulders and chest and that narrow waist! I don't think I've ever seen a physique as nice as yours,
at least not up close. You'll make every girl in Central wish you weren't off the market!"

Garfield always manages to make me blush.

The best part about all of was that I could purchase everything I'd need for the big day right down to the shoes in one store.

Eventually everyone was satisfied. I was relieved. I'd look good for Sciezka and now I could get the hell out of there until the fitting.

I wasn't decided yet on what would be worse. Suit shopping or the winter festival? Trying on suits had been about as difficult as I'd thought it would be, but once I was into the one pair of sample pants in my size, they made appropriate notations on where they'd pinned to create a new pattern.

Trying on jackets was a cinch in comparison. Garfield spent an inordinate amount of time holding fabric swatches close to me to find the perfect color.

He finally decided that a pale charcoal grey wool suit would be just the thing. He went on and on about the fit, but the custom-tailored shirt caught my interest. If Garfield was that excited about how I'd look, then Sciezka would love it.

I did want to look as good as possible and make her proud.

We stopped for lunch before meeting up with everyone at the festival. I was worried how I'd do in the crowd. Winter sidewalk conditions are bad enough without people swarming around me. If it came to it, I could ask for help and have one of my friends push, but only as a last resort. If I focused on having fun with everyone it wouldn't be so bad. It was gorgeous weather for the winter, sunny and cold, but not bitter cold.

Dimitri dropped us off at the gate and then found a place to park. Garfield sounded excited as he explained where we were headed. The event planners had constructed an ice-skating rink on the frozen pond in front of the Humanities Building. We were meeting everyone there. I wouldn't mind sitting on the sidelines watching since it wasn't too cold outside. If the temperature got to me, I could always hide out in my office. I suspected my friends would appreciate having access to a bathroom and a place to warm up.

I parked myself and settled in to watch. Garfield brought me a cup of coffee and winked, "I fortified it with a little whisky. Enjoy!" He was practically skipping as he went to rent skates.

Gracia and Sciezka were skating with Elysia holding onto their hands. She looked like she was getting the hang of it. Sciezka waved when she saw me and then wobbled a bit, but didn't fall. I wasn't too surprised that she could skate, it's walking and not paying attention to what she's doing that makes her seem clumsy.

They took one more lap around the rink and then Sciezka came and sat on my lap. "The benches are all full, so it's a good thing you came love."

"Is that all I'm good for today?" I asked, clearly joking, but hoping she'd take the bait and reassure me anyway.

She kissed me and then we went back to watching the people skating. Elysia was on her own now and cute as a button in her pink snowsuit. She even had a knit cap with holes for her pigtails in it.
Elysia stopped to wave and called to Sciezka, "Teach me how to go backwards like you did!"

Sciezka was better than I'd expected and I said, "Backwards huh? Do you have a skimpy skating skirt you aren't telling me about? When I played hockey, I was all about showing up early to see the girls. I said it was to practice shooting, but I don't think I fooled anyone."

"I'm going to attempt to teach Elysia how to do it, but I'm not so sure about it. Any pointers hot shot?"

"You go and I'll get closer to the ice. I think between the two of us we can handle it."

We started with Sciezka skating forwards and Elysia gliding backwards so she could get used to the sensation.

"Ok Elysia, you're doing great!" I coached. "Now keep holding on to Sciezka's hands and wiggle so your skates move on the ice."

After a few tentative turns around the ice she was doing it. Sciezka sat out and Garfiel took over. Soon public ice time was over and the university hockey team began drills and performing some trick shots.

I hastily suggested we all get some cocoa and warm up in my office. I hadn't thought it would hurt so much to watch. It had been years since I'd played hockey or skated, but I missed the speed and the wind in my hair. When you really get going it's one of the closest things to flying.

When everyone had been to the bathroom and had feeling back in their toes, save for me, we went back outside.

The hockey team was coming off the ice as guys sitting on sleds came on. I craned my neck to get a better look and then said to Sciezka, "Let's get closer. I want to see this."

She cleared a path through the crowd and by the time we were where I could see they were scrimmaging. The announcer came over the PA system and said the teams would play to three goals.

"Hello folks, I hope you are having a good time at the First Annual Central Winter Carnival. Today the Eastern Eagles are playing the Northern Grizzly Bears. Sled hockey is a new sport developed in New Optain."

We watched for a while. I didn't say a word the whole time. The guys were going at one another full force, taking hits and checking. It looked brutal. I had to try it.

That night in bed after a spectacular round of love making Sciezka said, "So hockey Jean, tell me about it…"

"In the morning I promise I'll regale you with stories of hat tricks past and hopefully future."

Even with guests in town we were lazy for part of the morning on Sunday. It had become tradition, even if we skipped doing the crossword together for lack of time. Sciezka crept out of bed to get us
some coffee while I took care of my morning routine. I stole outside in my robe to smoke. Then we all but bolted the door and hung out the do not disturb sign.

As we sipped our coffee, I told Sciezka all about my glory days back home.

"Hockey was the only sport most of us could really play. In the spring, summer and fall most of us in the country were busy helping out on the farm. Winter is downtime. There are still chores with the livestock, but there is more time to play."

She smiled. She loves hearing about when I was a youngin'. Ma takes every opportunity to show her pictures.

"So back to what I was insinuating yesterday with the tiny skating skirts. There was one girl in town, Brigitte Bedard, a fiery redhead and she figure skated. We all gave her first crack at the pond and after games patched the ruts and smoothed it over for her."

"Sounds like someone had a crush."

"Maybe, I'd bring her hot cocoa and hold her coat. A couple times a winter I'd bring fresh hay bales down to the pond for her to sit on. I'd never do anything about it... she had three older brothers that made me look scrawny and they only had one full set of teeth between 'em. Cutthroat players, so I was glad they were on my team."

"You still have all your teeth. Did you ride the hay bale bench?" Sciezka teased.

"Hell no, but Ma made me wear a face mask, one of those metal cage things. Even back then she was concerned about my looks. I am an only child after all and the last male Havoc... gotta carry on the name."

Thankfully Sciezka let that drop and instead asked about sled hockey. "You are really into sled hockey, aren't you?"

"Next winter I'll get out there and if Central doesn't have a team by then I'll have to start one. I bet Ron will play with enough arm twisting. Jim probably knows enough guys."

"I'm excited for you, but between watching you and Al wrestle lately and to hear you talk, you like getting roughed up."

"Yeah, doesn't make sense to me either. I think it's a guy thing."

"I don't understand it or why I find it incredibly sexy. You up for a quickie before we face the day?" she asked mischievously.

"You should write a book, you could call it 'The Care and Feeding of the Primitive Male'."

It was mayhem in the living room and kitchen when we finally left the bedroom. I seriously considered going back to bed. Broche and Ross had joined the fray with Mei Chan and her strange little cat. Breda was over too, no sign of his new love interest other than the fact that he'd bothered shaving.

Mei was cooking Xingese for us and I looked forward to it, so long as she didn't blow up the kitchen. Dimitri was in there as well and if I we were lucky, cooler heads would prevail.
If we kept entertaining like this, we'd need a bigger place. Maybe they'd all pick somewhere else to congregate if we didn't. That worked for me.

Ed and Al put all the leaves in the dining room table and Armstrong carried the kitchen table in to make enough room for everyone. We were still sitting elbow to elbow and it was a raucous good time and it was only lunchtime.

In the afternoon the older kids were shipped off to the festival with Elysia in tow. Feury and Winry were in charge, so it'd be safe for her. The little girl was so excited he barely held still while Gracia bundled her up.

The adults who weren't held hostage by wedding preparations left too. Breda insisted that the best man's job is to give the groom a good sendoff party and then keep him from running away at the altar by any means necessary. I told him, "You're so full of it! I know you are enjoying this, if only to watch me squirm at how massive our little wedding has become."

"Sorry man, but this is the best laugh I've had in a long while. Besides, I have to book that show."

"It's not even like it'll be tough to keep me from running! I'm so getting even with you when you take the plunge!"

"I dunno about that. What I have planned already will be hard to top," he said as he pulled on his coat to leave.

"Some friend you are!" I called after him.

"The best kind!" he yelled over his shoulder causally.

He is the best kind of friend and he keeps me on my toes, at least figuratively.

It was the biggest wedding powwow so far. As we sat in the living room I was surrounded, outnumbered and outvoted.

"The ceremony will be held in the gazebo and then while photographs of the wedding party are taken in the rose garden, the guests will enjoy a cocktail hour with canapés and hors d'oeuvres in the pavilion on the far side of the venue."

Whoa, wait a minute… gazebo and rose garden? Pavilion? Where in tarnation was that going to fit in our little backyard? And since when had it been called a venue?

My confusion must have shown and then finally registered with Garfiel who soothed, "I'm sorry Jean dear, I'll bring you up to speed."

"Yes, please," I replied, gulped and then asked, "Just how much am I missing?"

"Well, due to the addition of Fuhrer Grumman to the guest list protocol dictates that we tighten security. That also ups the amount of people invited. I know you two wanted small and simple, but since General Lockheed volunteered his home, it's only polite to invite other high-ranking officials and politicians…"
Oh holy hell.

He continued, "The Emperor of Xing expressed an interest in attending as well and it would be a foreign relations nightmare if he wasn't formally invited."

How did that little pervert even know we were getting married and when? Would he peep on the honeymoon too?

"The Emperor was gracious enough to offer the finest water lilies, stock from the Imperial Palace! Can you believe it? The Forbidden City! They'll go into the reflecting pool just as soon as the risk of frost in the spring has passed."

You will not yell, absolutely not. Garfiel means well, everyone does. They've just gotten out of hand. Carried away. Breathe... be grateful...

"There will be swans swimming and it will be a vision! Absolute perfection!"

He looked ready to say more. I needed a drink and a cigarette and maybe two one-way tickets to Creta so Sciezka and I could elope. Finally, when I was sure I wouldn't explode I said, "Anything but swans. They're mean and will shit all over everything. Ladies and gentlemen, do what you have to do. I'll be in the garage if you need anything."

I couldn't get to the heavy bag fast enough. The last things I heard were: "Was that too much Dimitri?"

"Dear, there have been less elaborate royal weddings in Creta."

"Oh goodie!" Garfiel shrieked delightedly.

I was so screwed.
I was pissed. The wedding preparations were spiraling out of control. Sure, I'd left the planning session in a fit of temper. Figured I'd better leave before I said something I'd later regret. I wanted the day to be perfect for Sciezka. Hell, I wanted the day to be perfect for both of us! A wedding should be about the couple, her and me, plain and simple. Not this overdone monstrosity Garfiel was planning. Not to mention the guest list was rapidly filling up with people we don't know or like! That's the last thing we needed, to be catering to brass and diplomats at our own wedding!

Fucking Ling was coming!

My mind flooded with scenes from the little peeping Tom's last visit, and his 'curiosity' about our relations that were none of his business. He might have learned a bit more diplomacy since then, but I don't trust his dirty mind or voracious appetites one bit. I could just see it now. Ling would be ogling my girl and eating all the shrimp – and doubling my already obscene catering bill. Actually, Ling would be eating a ton of everything and waving the shrimp to taunt Ed. That would start a brawl, and then eventually a riot. Our wedding would go down as the worst diplomatic debacle in history.

The pounding in my head was growing stronger by the minute

Cue me beating the ever-loving shit out of the heavy bag in the garage. Figured once I got it all out of my system, I'd have a cigarette. I'd have to remember to do like my Pa and stash a bottle of whisky somewhere.

I was pretty sure I was going to need it.

There was a light rapping on the door. Pausing between punches, I asked, irritable, "Yeah, what do you want now?"

"The coast is clear. You can come out now. Gracia suggested that the planning move to her house, and she pulled Garfiel aside and suggested he scale the plans back a little bit."

"Thank God. Thank Gracia. Shit, I'm sorry, Sciezka. I really am. This wedding is such a big to-do. I wanted it to be simple… just our close friends and family. But if you like what he's got planned…"

She stepped inside and shut the door behind her, shivering a bit even as she pulled her coat tighter. She shrugged and sighed. "It's gotten so much bigger than I'd ever intended. I love some of their ideas, but yeah, the swans were absolutely overkill."

"So, am I supposed to be going to Gracia's? Or have I worn out my welcome?"

"Dimitri made sure Garfiel's feelings weren't hurt. Gracia explained that you are still very self-conscious…"

I sighed and then jabbed at the bag half-heartedly a few more. "That's just great. Now I look like a bitter hermit."

"Hey, don't be like that," she soothed. "Garfiel was just too excited. It's still going to be fancier than we'd wanted, but we can compromise. There aren't any hard feelings."

Reaching out, she laced her fingers in mine, bringing my hand to her lips to kiss my now sore
knuckles cupped her cheek when she let go. Smiling, she said, "I don't think anyone would blame us if we eloped, the way things are going. But let's give it another shot."

"Anything for you. Lead the way."

On the upside, the roses bloom beautifully that time of year.

I was in better spirits by the time we got to Gracia's. Perfect for enjoying her offer of tea and fresh baked apple pie, even though what I could really go for was a stiff drink or a good nap – or both. I took a bite of pie and let it flood my taste buds. I smiled as I had another epiphany. Tea and apple pie now, a stiff drink and good nap later.

Maybe I could give this compromise thing a decent shot.

The wedding Sciezka and I had envisioned would have been at our place, in the back yard. Fewer than fifty people would have been there, and that was only if all of my cousins showed. We ran as a pack back home. Pa's side of the family is huge and, from his letters, still growing. Ideally, Sal would have catered it, since Pane Fresco had been our first real date. With the settlement money from the wreck, I thought I could surprise Sciezka with a grand gesture befitting both our tastes. My idea of fancy, hers too, would have been hiring a band and renting a tent so people could dance. The flowers Al and I planted in the autumn would be in full bloom, and the faerie lights and lanterns in the trees that she loves would complete my 'artistic vision' for our wedding, as Garfiel puts it. As long as folks wore their 'go to meeting best', they'd be posh enough for us.

I thought it sounded pretty damned perfect. Our family and closest friends, a few kegs of beer and cases of wine, and we'd be golden.

What we'd be getting now was entirely different. At least we'd be eating at Pane Fresco for the rehearsal dinner. Good thing, too, as I didn't want to cancel that part of our arrangements. After all, it was this man and his menu that brought me and my girl together, and it's only right that Sal was there with all his treats and trimmings for our wedding celebrations. We hadn't decided who would cater the reception, but one thing was for sure, Sal was definitely invited to enjoy our day with us.

So far, the guest list had run to over two hundred and was still growing. The five-piece band I'd wanted to book was replaced by a full orchestra, the same one that plays at the state galas. I wasn't about to complain. At least the music would be good, though I may have to tip them a nice sum to keep things more upbeat for our wedding.

It didn't hurt that the ceremony was still going to be outdoors. General Lockheed's house, well, estate, is beautiful, and Marjorie's rose garden has earned countless prizes. Great for photos and great for us - especially for no additional fees.

Speaking of which, there was still the matter of how the hell we were going to pay for it all. Just as I started to panic again from crunching the numbers, everyone stood up. It was the Fuhrer himself. I didn't think he had it in him to look so regal, but Grumman carried himself and the office well. He waved his assistant away and said, "As you were. Don't mind me."

Once people were settled, he had the floor. "The thought occurred to me that my coming to your wedding raises the costs exponentially. Jean and Sciezka, I just don't think that's fair. Consider the excess expenses on me. A gift, if you will. This is an opportunity for my staff to have a dry run for my granddaughter's shindig."
Whoa, what? My brain stopped. Did I really just hear-? Sciezka squeezed my hand and looked at me, her eyes just as wide as mine had to be. This unexpected stroke of luck and generosity lifted a huge burden from our shoulders financially. But...it was just too much to accept. "Fuhrer Grumman, sir, permission to speak freely?"

"You're retired son, so that is unnecessary. Go ahead," he replied, sounding more like my warm-hearted grandpa than the leader of the whole damned country. Interesting though, the way his voice had such a disarming quality to it while his eyes and wit stayed so sharp.

He chuckled before replying, "Riza said you'd say that. In that case I'm afraid I'll have to make it a direct order. Indulge an old man in his folly." He smiled and leaned in. "It's one of my greatest joys to see young couples in love and happy, and for you and Sciezka I wouldn't have it any other way."

I thanked him sincerely and then clammed up. I was just going to have to grin and bear it. That, and I was stunned speechless. If there hadn't been an audience, I would have asked Sciezka to pinch me. Still might but later though, when I can also mention the uncanniness of Grumman announcing this just as I was thinking about it. Freaky, but at least this Fuhrer would use his powers for good.

I still couldn't believe it, but now Garfiel's avant-garde and lavish tastes wouldn't bankrupt us. That was a blessing and a curse all at once. I'd had visions of eating canned beans off bone china plates in a cardboard box house after we'd tied the knot. At least now we might actually have a decent honeymoon.

At long last, they'd finished - for now at least. There would be future sessions in the "war room" I was sure. Someone, probably Riza, had given Garfiel blueprints and plans for the whole of the Lockheed's place. I had visions of him as a field marshal. Maybe he'd opt for a uniform instead of a ball gown. Fat chance, but picturing him in one was pretty amusing. Disturbing, too, but quite amusing.

One quick, discreet whisper, and Sciezka giggled. She thought so too.

Everyone vamoosed for the evening. Winry was out with Feury for what I was assured was not a date. Ed, Al and Mei were spending time at Russel and Fletcher's place. Any arrangements that precluded alchemical catastrophes from occurring under my roof were fine with me. I trusted Al to be responsible and come in at a reasonable hour because it was a school night.

I was looking forward to Sciezka agreeing to take advantage of the peace and quiet with me. I took Tiny out and had a smoke while she worked on dinner. It was one beautiful, peaceful night.

Once I got Tiny inside, I took care of the necessaries in the bathroom and then camped out in the living room with my books. If I was lucky, I could bang it out and still put the moves on my girl. Talk about a cram session.

Turns out, she had similar ideas for how to spend the evening! When she set a tray of sandwiches and fruit down, she smiled and said, "Multi-tasking is needed. Eat and work fast!"

"Yes, ma'am!" I said, saluting with a grin. Oh yeah, it was going to be a good night!

My readings for literature weren't bad at all. I'd read ahead as soon as I'd gotten the anthology. Crib notes from Sciezka were a much-appreciated bonus. I felt ready for any questions Dr. B threw at me. Biology wasn't bad either. Al's painstaking outlines and flashcards would surely save my ass
all semester, and definitely shaved off an hour of my study time now.

With work done it was time for play. We sipped wine and made out on the couch like horny teenagers. As far as I'm concerned, the only difference now is that I have a few more years on me and much better technique. Helps that I still have my hair and boyish good looks too.

The kids were due back around 2200, so we left a light on and moved the fun into the bedroom. It had been a jam-packed weekend. I was tired, but I had enough energy left to blow Sciezka's mind a few times, if I do say so myself.

I woke up the next morning to the birds chirping and the sheets rustling.

"You've earned the right to sleep in, Tiger," Sciezka whispered huskily, "I'll start breakfast."

"Thanks, darlin', I truly appreciate it," I drawled with my best country charm. Good to know I'd done as well as I thought I had and wasn't just a legend in my own mind.

It's a good thing I slept in that day, as the next week seemed especially long. Life was getting incredibly hectic as the semester wore on, and the wedding date approached rapidly.

Besides fitting in as much physio and swimming as I could, I was preparing the lecture series for Martin's military history class. My friends are amazing and didn't let me down. Breda, Feury and Hawkeye asked me what readings in the syllabus I wanted to tie into their presentations. I laughed. I couldn't help it. Picturing this bunch being all academic-like was incredibly funny. But then again, they are an incredible bunch of people, and I wouldn't trade them for any other friends in the world.

This was excellent, and most definitely raised the bar for me when it was my turn to run the class discussion. I was glad I was up last. It would give me an opportunity to work out my public speaking nerves introducing everyone. By the time it came my turn, I figured students would be used to seeing the chair. Hell, maybe the chair would distract them from my 'ums' and 'ahs' during the presentation. The best advice I got from Jim and Martin about speaking jitters? 'Get over it.' At this point I'd take whatever works.

It did help to see the student evaluation surveys from the autumn semester. "In all of the surveys not one of them commented on what you're so worried about," Martin had said, and then began reading them off.

"The T.A. has an excellent understanding of the material."

"Mr. Havoc makes time for students and is approachable."

"This one should put your mind to rest for sure, 'Professor Lockheed's teaching assistant explains concepts in terms I can relate to.' So, is there anything else on your mind that's distracting you, other than the impending nuptials?"

When he put it that way I couldn't argue.

Sciezka was working a lot more, and it suited her. The downside was that she couldn't meet me for lunch as often as I'd like. Though truthfully, if I had my way, we'd never get out of bed.

Al was doing well at the Academy. With his easy smile and good looks, he was making friends
quickly. Ed was in and out of Central often. Alex Louis tasked him with being his eyes and ears in the field on the new infrastructure projects. Ed never did like sitting still, so travelling suits him just fine. I think that he's happiest on the road. It was a good thing Al was busy, so he didn't have time to miss his brother. They talked on the phone a lot. I didn't want to see the Boss' long distance call expense budget, though I was curious who would be tearing their hair out about it. Thank God it wasn't my responsibility to pay.

Julia was back with us and running the house full time. Without her, we never could have kept all the balls in the air. Of course, telling her that would sound dirtier than I'd mean it to, so I just thanked her every chance I got.

Luckily, I wasn't so busy that I couldn't help Gracia out sometimes. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I picked Elysia up from school, fed her lunch, and then either kept her with me or took her to a play date. If she did come to class, she sat quietly, coloring or "taking notes" as she called it. Jim would come to get her before my office hours started at 1500. Sometimes Al would pick her up after the Academy let out. Come to think of it, her days were just as busy as ours, and she didn't seem to mind a bit.

Gracia had a good reason to have someone help out with Elysia, a very good reason. Her toiletry and cleaning product business was growing by leaps and bounds. Five shops in Central stocked her line already, and there were inquiries coming in from all over the country. Soon she was going to have to find a manufacturing space and hire staff. Maes would have been so proud. I knew I was.

Midterms came and went in a flash. Either my classes were getting easier or I had gotten the hang of it. When I mentioned it to Sciezka, she insisted that I'd gotten good at the book smart thing. I was proud of myself, sure, but I was thrilled that Sciezka was proud of me.

Once the tests were taken and the papers handed in, I had a well-deserved break. The university types have it easy. Work ten weeks, take one off, work ten more, and then summer recess. In my opinion, they had the right idea.

I had time off, but I was still busy. I went to P.T. every day and swam, too. After zipping home for lunch and to let Tiny out, I spent afternoons at the Preparatory Academy. I wanted to observe General Lockheed's class, so I'd have a feel for it when it was my turn. If that wasn't enough, I watched Elysia in the afternoons. She has a future in Investigations. If her cuteness doesn't wear down hardened criminals, then the sheer volume of questions will.

I was having a great time.

Breda and I hung out the Saturday after midterms finished to celebrate. He said he owed me a beer. Maybe it was a premeditated move on my part to get out of wedding planning. Asshole-ish, I know, but I just wasn't any good at frilly stuff. Besides, Sciezka knows what I like, and I'll do anything to make her happy. Except wearing chaps or putting up with live swans, that goes beyond the call of duty.

Our hanging out served another purpose. Maybe, just maybe I could convince Breda that a donkey show would be more trouble than it was worth. Best case scenario, we'd all be arrested on cruelty to animals charges. The worst? Feury would have a heart attack, and the wedding would become a wake.

Knowing Breda, there would be incriminating photos too.
We hopped a cab to the Cavalier, as it might take quite a few beers to change Breda's mind. He's as stubborn as he is sly. He was also being ridiculously tight lipped about who he was dating. I had to know. I whispered to the waitress to keep the pitchers coming. With a reputation for good tips and manners, I never had to go to the bar anymore.

After forty minutes of him beating around the bush and three pints in me, the pool table was looking a bit wobbly, or maybe it was just me - or both. I finally asked, "What gives? I'm beginning to think this woman is either made up or ugly."

He gestured broadly with his pool cue before saying, "It's a good thing you're already sitting down…" Well damn, seems things were looking up! Better than expected, too. It took a while for him to get back into his old spirits for teasing me. Bonus points for finally mentioning the chair, and I get to find out who his lady is! The next round would be on me. "Cause you won't believe who it is."

"Well, who is it?" I asked impatiently as I cautiously relieved him of the pool cue.

"Captain Rebecca Catalina!" he exclaimed, a ridiculous grin on his face.

No. Fucking. Way. I had faith in my friend, but man oh man.

"You're right. If I wasn't already sitting, I'd have been floored. Congrats!"

"That's why I was holding out on you. She's as pretty as she is dangerous."

It was true. Catalina is hot as hell, with a temper to match. She's almost as dangerous as Hawkeye, probably more so because she's a loose cannon. Breda's got a thing for brunettes who know their way around a rocket launcher. Breda likes 'em feisty that way, in and out of the sack.

"Should I get you home soon? We'll have coffee first to sober you up so she's not mad."

"Nah, this way she can have her way with me. She likes that."

"T.M.I. dude. I don't want to know what goes on between the sheets." Glad it was going so well for him, though.

He looked almost dreamy for a moment before he said, "And the kitchen and the foyer…"

"Fantastic, let's toast to your newfound fortune and leave the details at that." Clink. Clearly, he was much drunker than I thought he was.

"Payback's a bitch, my friend." Or maybe he wasn't.

"So, what does Catalina think about your idea for my stag party?"

"You win. She'd kill me. She might kill you for letting it happen. Dude, she carries her gun in the most interesting places!"

Oh hell, just what I need, more visuals.

"So, are we having tea and cake instead?" This was too rich. I almost never got to put one over on him.

"The Chief says his Ma's new place will be operational by then." Wait, was Breda referring to the Madam? Oh shit, that might not be much better than the donkey show.
He must have caught my panic-stricken expression. "Relax. We won't do anything that will get you into trouble. Steaks, stogies, and scotch are the plans for your sendoff."

"I like the sound of that, but how about stout for me?"

"Done," he replied. "It's your day. May make you wear a veil though."

"Don't know about that one. One of you drunk bastards might end up trying to kiss me."

Ok, so Breda was most definitely stinking drunk, and coffee alone would not sober him up. I set him up with a glass of water and gravy fries to occupy him while I called home. Maybe he'd be presentable by dinner time. Or he'd chuck 'em all up before we were even out of the bar.

Bedsides, then I'd get to see Catalina in the flesh. I had to see her with Breda to believe it.

Sciezka didn't seem to mind that I'd come home less than sober with a drunk friend. In fact, she helped me herd him into the guest bedroom before he had a chance to embarrass himself.

I almost felt bad for him. Almost. If he pissed on the floor, I'd wrap a ribbon around a chamber pot and leave it in his room as a prank.

I was tasked with starting dinner since I had decided to be the "host with the most" as she hissed in my ear.

Maybe she was pissed. Before she went back into the living room for the remainder of the meeting, I pulled her onto my lap and whispered, "I'll make it worth your while."

"That was a given. You owe me big time," she said and then smirked. "Any messes he makes are all yours."

I'd have to be careful lest Rebecca, Riza, and Sciezka teamed up. That would be disastrous. Hot, but disastrous.

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I let Breda sleep a couple hours. Then I whipped the covers off and dragged him to the shower. Well, not literally. It was more like giving him orders and shaming him into it. Worked just as well.

He yelped as he hit the water. Cold water will do that to a man. I left him in there while I changed clothes. When he finally emerged, he looked more alert.

"I took the liberty of using your mouthwash."

"No problem. You smelled like a brewery," I replied. Then I sniffed the air and added, "You used my aftershave too. Hey, did you mess with my hair stuff?"

"You've got good taste, Havo… for a girly man."

At least he'd save face with his woman. I couldn't hang him out to dry with her.

"You ready to face them? They just got here, so they haven't been waiting long. You haven't
missed much. Sure you're not going to be sick?"

"I'm fit as a fiddle," he replied, and then asked cautiously, "Where's the damned dog?"

"Only if it's a bass fiddle," I cracked. "Wait here and I'll make sure the coast is clear. I'll put him in Al and Ed's room."

"It can't get out?"

"There will be a whole floor between you and the fluffy terror."

Roy was in the living room perusing the books on the shelf. "I'm impressed with your book collection," he said. "There are quite a few first editions."

"Most of them are Sciezka's, though I'm cracking a book more often. I'm more into mysteries and spy novels. She likes poetry and romances." I clasped my hands together and tilted my head for effect.

"I figured 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' wasn't yours," he replied wryly. "So, I hear you and Breda were slacking off and quite delinquent while the ladies were hard at work."

"I had to run some recon on what's up his sleeve for the stag party and ferret out who the Tomato was."

"Were you successful? Riza said he looked ill when you came in earlier."

"I'm disappointed Chief. You know I almost always ace my missions. I did give him a little too much truth serum."

"I never doubted you for a minute. Well done. Where is he anyway?"

"In our room… if you'll excuse me, I need to subdue the vicious beast running loose around here so he can stop cowering in the bedroom. While I'm at it, need anything to drink?"

He raised his glass to me, tinkling the ice cubes and swirling the amber liquid.

I nodded. He was good to go. Now to catch Tiny and check in with Sciezka to see what still needed doing.

Once Tiny was captured, and boy did he give me a good run for my money, I went into the kitchen. Riza was chopping vegetables with quick precision while Sciezka manned the stove. I felt bad since all I'd done to help dinner along was put the meat in to marinate and scrubbed the potatoes, but I'd make it up to my girl later.

Riza eyed me, her question boring loud and clear into my skull. I gave her the hand signal for how many drinks Breda had downed. She gave her trademark "will you ever behave?" expression … a look that I was very familiar with since I'd gotten it from her often enough. Back in the day I played it off, saying that a good game of ceiling darts with pencils is great marksmanship practice and fosters camaraderie. Must've worked like a charm, because we're all still together. Well look at that, this time she smirked!

I went to the icebox for a beer, offering Riza one, but she declined. Sciezka eyed me from where she was standing at the stove. I shrugged and attempted to explain, "Hair of the dog that bit me?"
She wasn't buying it. Shoulda said I was gonna go play ceiling darts.

"So where are you and Roy off to now?" I asked casually since Sciezka was once again trying to look busy with whatever was in the pan. That or she was pissed with me.

"After we turn Breda over to Rebecca, we'll have a night in. What are your plans?"

I thought it over for a moment before answering, "The same. Everything's been so hectic, and all I really want to do is spend time alone with Sciezka." Was it enough to get back into her good graces? I hoped so.

Just then the telephone rang. Sciezka put down the wooden spoon she'd been using and went to take the call. I couldn't decide if I was happy about the interruption. Either she was going to say something sweet and I'd know I was forgiven, or she was going to say something to give me an idea for what I was in store for later. Scratch that, I'd rather know.

I went over to the stove to take over. It was parsnips and carrots sautéed in butter and herbs, one of my favorites. She smiled at me. That was my answer. She'd been annoyed, but it would blow over. I'd have to work hard to redeem myself, so I stirred the vegetables to get a head start.

By the way she was nodding and trying not to frown and failing, the call couldn't be good.

"Oh Gracia, I'm so sorry they delivered the invitations and favors to your house. I'm sure they're taking up a ton of space. We'll have the situation under control as soon as possible," she paused for a bit, rubbing her temples and then continued, "No, no, it won't be a problem. We'll get it sorted. Thank you, thank you, you are so kind to have even signed for it. I can't believe the delivery company wouldn't drop it here instead." She smiled when she said, "Oh, Garfiel will give them an ear full. Monday is too late to fix this though. It'll be taken care of tomorrow." Sciezka finished the call saying, "I'll call you back when I know the schedule tomorrow. I don't want to spoil your whole day."

As soon as the receiver was in the cradle Sciezka let out a loud sigh and plopped down on the nearest chair. Riza looked to Sciezka askance and said, "I gather there's a problem. How can Roy and I help?"

After a quick explanation, Riza pulled out her address book and began dialing. Oh boy, I knew that look, too.

The first part of the morning would be spent retrieving the many crates of invitations and favors that had been unceremoniously dumped in Gracia's living room. The afternoon would be occupied collating, assembling, and addressing the invitations. Dinner and drinks would be on me at the Cavalier with our hastily conscripted work force.

Riza ran the task like she ran the office, with stern looks and a brandished gun, but this time, miraculously, zero shots were fired.

After collecting Breda, she and Roy said their goodbyes. In the foyer, Breda said, "Havo, it was sneaky of you to get me drunk to secure intel. But you're a good friend for sobering me up like that."

"I figured I still owed you from when you gave the cottage keys to my folks at the lake. Great birthday present," I said and then teased, "Are you dragging your feet? Don't you want to ride with Hawkeye and the Chief? Should I get the dog to hurry you up?"

He looked stunned. "How did you know? I'm sorry your folks saw your birthday suit on your
birthday. No harm done though, your Ma and Pa love Sciezka."

"Don't stay up too late. You'll likely be helping with the hard labor tomorrow," Riza commanded Breda.

Breda gulped. "Yes ma'am."

Once they were gone, I liberated Tiny, and he ran straight for the front door. I sat on the porch smoking while he played, sniffed, and finally did his thing.

The aromas wafting from the kitchen were enough to make my stomach rumble. Sciezka set a platter on the table and smiled.

"So, I'm not in trouble? Can I at least explain my rationale for getting him drunk?"

She tried to appear cross and failed, "I suppose so. This had better be a good one."

"Sorry darlin', but I had to convince him that a donkey show would *not* be appropriate entertainment for my stag night. Same goes for strippers…"

Her lips made an 'O' shape, and she didn't say anything. Shocked speechless is what it looked like.

"I know. I was shocked, too, and I was the idiot who brought it up. As a joke, you know, when I tried to make him promise to not do that. He says now that it will be a low-key shindig at Madame Christmas' new place."

She still looked like a fish out of water, only now with an eyebrow twitch. Not good. "Now, sweetheart, I've been assured that the girls will keep their hands off of me. Steaks, scotch, and cigars are the order of the night. We'll probably play poker. He has to behave. Catalina would kill him."

"Wait, why would Captain Catalina kill Heymans?"

"They're dating! I managed to pry that out of him too."

"What? I wouldn't have seen that one coming at all. Wow."

"I know right? I was shocked, too, and he's my best friend. Enough about them though. How can I make it up to you? I feel like a dick for bailing today."

"I'll get back to you on that after we eat. I made your favorite."

"Chicken fried steak?" I asked hopefully.

"Steak, minus the chicken fried part," she answered, looking a little disappointed.

"They're all my favorite, really," I reassured her, pulling her a little closer to me.

She smiled and giggled, "I know. You're happy as long as it's food. It's getting cold, and you'll need your strength."

I drew a bath for Sciezka to soak in while I took care of the dishes and tidied the kitchen. She'd just gotten out of the bath as I finished up. Wearing nothing but her robe and a smile, she stretched
languidly, arms over her head, back arched, a contented sigh escaping her lips.

That gave me an idea. She'd probably been stressed out all afternoon as they sat and planned. "Don't move, wait right there!"

I got a clean sheet and put it on the bed. It was crooked, but it'd work. I brought the lotion too. I patted the bed and said, "You deserve a massage after today. Relax and let me take care of everything."

"Massages from you almost never get finished. You get distracted."

"I promise I'll keep the massage purely therapeutic."

"All business?" she asked with a hint of a pout, obviously not liking the idea of a massage with no ulterior motives.

"First, I'll work, and then we'll play. You've taught me well."

Thankfully I redeemed myself and then some.

Being good to Sciezka is good for me, for many, many reasons besides the obvious benefit of mind-melting sex. She must have woken up first because the first thing I saw when I cracked an eye was her smile. I always thought that "watching people sleep" was a creepy, awful, trashy romance novel cliché.

It's not. There's something wonderful about observing someone who is utterly and completely relaxed, who is secure enough in your company to let all defenses drop. It's comforting to know that someone loves me that much.

"Did you sleep well?"

I nodded and mumbled a garbled reply.

"I'll take that as a yes," she teased and giggled. "It's too bad we can't sleep in today. You still tired?"

"After I have some coffee, I'll be as good as new," I replied as I sat up. My shoulders complained a bit, but I'm almost always tight in the morning. She noticed me wince, but knows it goes with the territory and leaves it be.

She took charge, saying, "I'll start the coffee. Have a smoke, and while you're at it, please let Tiny out."

So, I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed sometimes, as I usually have the first smoke of the day in my bathrobe, in fair and foul weather. The chilly morning air does a great job shocking me into wakefulness. I sucked down my cigarette, feeling the head rush of the first smoke of the day and shivering. I'd had enough, so I whistled for Tiny to come, lavishing him with attention when he raced up the stairs.

Sciezka was bustling around the kitchen, and my coffee was on the table waiting for me. Next to my mug was a small stack of photographs.

At the top of the stack was a picture of Elysia, her cheeks the same shade of rosy pink as her
snowsuit from the cold. Beneath it was one I had taken of Sciezka teaching Elysia how to skate backwards. Elysia's expression was determined. Sciezka looked like she was trying hard not to smile. Elysia is just too stinking adorable when she's hell bent on doing something.

The shot of the guys in an epic snowball fight was pretty blurry, but you could still make out that Ed was getting his ass handed to him by his little brother. Sciezka had captured Garfiel's fancy skating perfectly. He actually looked graceful gliding on one foot. I'm still glad he didn't wear a skating skirt.

Our camera must have been passed around since I didn't remember anyone catching a picture me and Sciezka sipping cocoa. She was perched on the wheel of my chair and tugging at my scarf. I think she was fussing over whether I was bundled up enough.

The next photo in the stack caught me off guard, and I set it down. Then I stared into my mug. The plates clattering as they were set on the table pulled me out of it.

I picked the photo back up and asked Sciezka pointedly, "Why did you take this picture?"

She pulled a chair right next to mine and sat down before asking, "Which one?"

I waved it at her and frowned. The hockey players in the background were blurs of speed and strength, while I sat peering intently at them, a scowl on my face.

After she studied it for a moment, she slid two photos over to me. Then she pointed at the picture of Elysia talking to a guy who I assumed was a sled hockey player, since he was in a chair and there was a sledge next to him in the snow. "I took this one before you came. Elysia had all but climbed into his lap bragging about her handsome prince. Then he explained what the sledge was for. Elysia decided that it sounded like one of the best sports ever."

"Oh," was all I could manage to counter with.

"Look at this one, that's you watching the sled hockey game. Notice your eyes and that grin? That's the look you get when you've made up your mind to do something. I think it borders on insane, cute, but crazy."

"That still doesn't tell me why you wasted film on that."

Instead of responding right away she slapped the photos down in a line, cupped my chin, her hand pulling me in for a kiss. "I took them as a preventive measure in case you tried to talk yourself out of playing next season."

I arched an eyebrow and then said, "You're right. I concede. I miss getting my clock cleaned on a regular basis."

"Good! I'm glad we agree. I didn't think I'd be strong enough to drag you to the rink by force. Now eat up quick! Everyone will be here within the hour."

I bolted breakfast and then showered up.

We sat on the couch as we waited for the conscripted muscle to arrive. I felt bad about drafting them on a weekend. We've got great friends. Sure, we'd be treating for dinner and drinks, especially draft beer, but our friends go above and beyond. Next time we'll help them move. Even
I'm good for something, well, driving and propping the door open. I might even let Feury or Winry use my chair as a dolly in a pinch.

Sciezka insisted I stretch out while I could, refilled my coffee and brought more pictures. There were a few really funny ones. The one of Ed grumpily shaking snow out of his jacket and shirt was hilarious. His comments on the snow in his pants were unrepeatable. He's found combinations of obscenity I've never heard before.

My favorite by a long shot was the one I accidently snapped of Sciezka's butt as she bent over to help Elysia with her skate laces. I swear it was an accident when I nearly dropped the camera. Albeit a happy accident since even bundled up her derrière is nice. I stashed that one before Sciezka could take it. Despite my former reputation as a breast man I have a hard time deciding on my favorite part of the female anatomy. I love 'em all.

I checked my watch and realized everyone would be arriving soon. Sure, I'm good at it, but I still hate getting into the chair in front of people if I can help it. That's another thing Sciezka knows and leaves alone. I excused myself for a cigarette and offered to put our empty mugs in the sink.

Once everyone arrived, we got right down to business. Breda and Feury took the seats out of the back of the jeep so there'd be room for what we estimated to be a few large boxes. Sciezka drove over to Gracia's, and the guys helped her load in. My duty assignment was to direct traffic at the house. I felt less than useless until the first load arrived.

"You have got to be kidding me!" I groused, teeth clenched around my cigarette.

Breda wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and said, "There are at least four more loads like this. I think you'll love the return address on most of 'em."

He pointed at the biggest wooden crate. Bright red symbols covered it, probably Xingese, and the return address was "The Imperial Palace". It was addressed to:

The Xingian Embassy

Care of Mr. Jean Havoc

Central City, Amestris

"That little fucker! Was there anything at Gracia's for us?"

Feury weighed in tentatively, "There were several large boxes from a fancy stationer, and Gracia gave me this letter for you."

"Dearest Jean,

I hope this letter finds you well. By now the save the date cards and invitations have arrived. Sciezka has the finalized list! Since you were so concerned about the event becoming too formal, I decided against a professional calligrapher handling these. Gracia has the invite list and addresses. Be sure to assemble extras for any last-minute invites.

Kisses,

Garfiel"

Son of a bitch! Elop ing was looking better every day. Maybe we'll go to Xing instead of Creta so I can give his Serene Highness my two cens.
While Feury went back to Gracia's for another load, Breda helped me get the boxes situated. The invitations went in the dining room. I'd have to ask Falman or Hawkeye to organize an assembly line to make the task less onerous. When it was down to one small crate destined for the Xingian Embassy, we got curious. Hell, it was addressed in my care. I reasoned we should investigate it to be sure it was being cared for properly. Breda put it on the kitchen table, and I watched while he opened it. Inside the outer wooden crate, there was a case covered in colorful fabric, probably silk. It looked like it was held closed with a knotted clasp.

"How do I undo the thing?" Breda asked.

"Sciezka says that's not a 'thing'. It's a frog, though search me. Looks like you slide the knot through the loop." As soon as he unfastened it the box sprung open and collapsed. That mooch bastard had booby trapped it!

"Quick catch it, Havo!"

A green bowling ball rolled across the table, off the side of it, and landed in my lap. My relief at catching it was soon replaced by a sickening lurch in my stomach.

He looked at me, relieved, saying, "Good save! I think that thing is made out of solid jade! Woulda cost a fortune to replace."

I sat there, trying not to puke. The sensation felt like taking a hit to the groin.

"You don't look so good buddy. What's wrong?"

I pointed at the heavy as a bowling ball, ridiculously expensive sphere and gasped, "Get it off me!"

As soon as he did, I doubled over.

"If I didn't know better…"

I just nodded. He smacked me on the shoulder as he said, "That's awesome!"

Once the wave of nausea passed, I drew a deep breath and sat up.

"Well that's good, isn't it?" he prodded.

Shaking my head slowly from side to side, he quickly 'got it'. "That's just wrong on so many levels."

Yep, I got all the fun of taking one to the nuts and yet still couldn't feel 'em.

He secured the ridiculous orb and then went to the icebox and brought back three bottles of beer. One for each of us, and an extra for the boys.

After he cracked two of them open using his belt buckle, a trick I taught him after boot camp, he handed me an open one and the extra for Master Havoc. I didn't think it was necessary, but funny all the same. Men get older, but bodily functions and nut shots are still hilarious. It's always funnier when they happen to someone else, though.

"I am so glad you were the only person who saw that," I said before toasting, "Let's drink to the man code."
"Agreed… but just one each. I'm in charge later. Your woman has a surprise for you."

"I don't think I'm comfortable with you knowing stuff like that."

"Dude, no! Sciezka had something planned way in advance. Becky and I are in charge of the get together after this wraps up. Hawkeye made a list."

"I wouldn't feel right about that. Thanks for the thought. You've told her about my views on being helped, right?"

"After she heard the shrimp ranting about his lack of sleep when the coffee pot was empty, she has no doubts about your abilities."

"Oh good, wait, what did he say?"

"He hadn't slept well… well, because. He broke the alchemy in the house policy, even after you renovated and added insulation and a thick rug didn't help any… "

"Just what are you getting at?"

"He soundproofed the floors!"

My mind reeled. Just how much had he heard? We're pretty quiet when there are people in the house besides us.

"Becky doesn't give a shit about T.M.I. stuff like that yanno. She only told me because I needed a good laugh."

"Gotcha, as long as she's keeping her intel to herself. You, I can deal with it. Probably."

"Finish your beer and go find your long johns and wool socks. Your woman wants you bundled up for later."

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Not a chance in hell. Becky says Sciezka intends to have fun stripping the extra layers off later."

As I backed away from the table, I warned, "Watch it or I'll set Tiny on you."

With as many friends as we had helping, we banged out the invitations in record time. Falman has a promising career in forgery if the military doesn't work out. He was able to duplicate Hawkeye's handwriting perfectly.

Her penmanship is elegant and fluid. I knew she was meticulous and precise, the neatest in the office, but I'd really only seen her printing on forms.

In only a few hours, the invitations were assembled, addressed, and had the proper postage applied.

It was time to head over to the Cavalier, but not until I changed into warmer clothes. I was itching to know what Sciezka had planned, and it wasn't from the woolen long johns I'd put on.

It was a good thing that everyone was rowdy at the pub. I could barely sit still. In fact, I was so driven to distraction with curiosity that I barely touched my burger.
About an hour into the "do" Sciezka excused herself to go to the powder room.

She had her coat on when she got back and said, "C'mon, let's go. I'm driving."

Wheeling behind her, I realized she'd changed out of her dungarees, into what I wasn't quite sure. That it was shorter than her coat was all I did know.

I was still clueless when she turned into the campus gates. She parked, grabbed a duffle bag out of the back, and then said, "Just follow me. You'll like this. Promise."

She walked briskly, and I followed, the slush on the sidewalks making it tricky to steer. She finally stopped at the ice rink that had been set up for the Winter Festival.

"So, you're going to give me a private show? Do you have a super short skirt on under there?"

Her grin was a mile wide. "I am, and I do. But you're getting out on the ice too."

As if on cue Jim and another guy came toward us carrying sledges and other gear.

I looked to Jim, then to Sciezka. Jim reads me well. "Winry says she's not building you a sled until she's sure you'll play."

"Fine, but why all the secrecy?" I asked him pointedly.

Sciezka interjected, "I didn't want you to work yourself up about it, and I thought it might be a nice surprise."

"Well, let's do it. Suit me up, and strap me in."

Someone had opened the gate to the rink where they bring the ice-cleaning machine on, so once I was in the sled, all I had to do was push myself onto the ice with my sticks.

As I got on the ice, the guy with Jim, Boris, said with a thick Drachmann accent, "Push with stick. Is a metal pick on bottom. I join you soon."

Well, so much for instructions. I dug in and poked along. How in the hell did those guys at the exhibition go so fast? And how the hell did they turn so tight? This thing wasn't much different from a kids' sled.

"Think less, move more," Boris commanded as he streaked past me.

I struggled to follow him, and he corrected my stick position firmly, "Hold at 45-degree angle. Push strong, let glide. Steer like, how you say?" He paused, then found the word, "Turn like rowing boat!"

His advice got me moving a little faster, the turns easier, but how did he lean into them so much? I caught up with him again and, panting, asked, "The turns, how are you getting them so tight? If I try that I'm going to tip this thing over."

"We move the blades closer together next time. I did not want you to... dump it," he replied with a grin.

So, that's how they did it. Winry was going to have a field day tweaking regulation sled setups.

Boris headed to the penalty box to stand with Jim. "The rheumatism, you see. Better here than Drachma, less cold."
Sciezka finally stepped out onto the ice in that tiny skirt. What a sight! Yet another perk to my usual point of view. She pushed off, gliding on one foot and doing a few looping turns before circling my sled goading, "Wanna race?"

"Nah, not yet. You'll beat me, and if you let me win…"

"It would tick you off. I know better than to do that. We still have another half hour or so of ice time."

"Let's see what this thing can do and what you can do. The ice was crowded last time. Show off a little…"

Before he left, Boris called to us, "Svetlana, my wife, is champion in Drachma. She show you to skate figures. Must have leg higher in spiral, back straighter when cross over."

"Guess I gotta earn the skirt," Sciezka said to me quietly.

I pushed closer to her, gently hooking her calf with a stick. "You will. It'll be like swimming."

Her smile was brilliant under the floodlights, sparkling brighter than the ice.

When our ice time was up, Jim ushered us off the ice. The guy who drove the Zamboni smiled and tipped his cap to us. Sciezka kissed me passionately and at the angle she was bent over, I was sure it was a view as hot as our kiss. Good thing Jim was blocking everyone else's view. The Central University team was taking the ice for practice as soon as it was clean.

With just Jim and Sciezka paying attention I didn't mind transferring out of the sled to the ground and then up into my chair. As I got situated, Jim asked, "So will you be playing next season?"

"Yes," I replied, grinning.

Jim chuckled before commenting, "Just yes… how enthusiastic."

Sciezka nudged me, and I wrapped an arm around her barely covered thigh. She yelped, but didn't stop me when my hand wandered a little. "I think Jean meant to say, 'Hell yes!'"

"I trust you two can handle it from here," Jim said. Before leaving, he added, "Sciezka, you should take Svetlana up on the skating lessons offer."

She blushed furiously, "I'm not really good, the skirt, well…"

"Svetlana is teaching Elysia, too, and if that's all Boris mentioned, you have potential."

We waved as he left, and I pulled her onto my lap. "I always did crush on the figure skating girls. Next time pants, no short skirt. I'll get jealous."

She shivered a little, and it's no wonder why. She was barely covered. I whispered, "Let's get you home and warm you up."

"I bet you need a shower after that workout," she replied.

"Warming you up is my first priority. We'll clean up after that."
Move Along

Chapter 59: Move Along

Spring had sprung in a big way. Well, it did for about a week, and then it retreated as quickly as it had come. It hung around long enough for the crocuses to come up and to trick the tulips and daffodils into sprouting. Fletcher and Russel Tringham handled that problem easily.

I was almost sad to see winter go. I'd roped Ron into playing hockey with me. Jim put the word out to his colleagues that next winter would be the Central Sled Warriors' inaugural season. The upside was that Sciezka came to watch us practice while she skated. I was so preoccupied with school, hockey, and the wedding that I barely put two and two together about why she was in even better shape than before. It wasn't until she landed a few jumps that I realized she'd been taking lessons with Svetlana. Sciezka's butt and legs were great before. Now they were amazing. Maybe she could get married in a miniskirt? The only down side to all of this was that I had to have someone able bodied around for equipment wrangling and for pushing me out onto the ice. It was a relief when Laura came out with Ron. It made Sciezka happy, too. The one time we got the girls out in sleds, I didn't hear the end of it from Sciezka for a week.

"Pushing a sled is way harder than you make it look! Even my armpits hurt!"

I tried to be good, but it's so fun to tease her sometimes, "You don't push a sled. You pull it."

"Well I pulled something!" she exclaimed, before socking me in the arm and starting a wrestling match. A win-win, but she'd been paying attention. Hockey had me sore in places I didn't know could still hurt.

The university let us store our sleds at the rink, so twice a week Jim had us meet him there before PT at the hospital. I was probably stretching myself too thin, but checking the hell out of Ron and smacking a puck into the boards as hard as it would go was a great stress reliever.

Once the streets were finally dry, the sweeper had made a few passes, and the front yard was no longer a marsh, I started spring-cleaning. I cleared off the porch, though I left the shovel out just in case. I also set out the candles and dragged a couple lawn chairs from the garage.

Turns out I didn't think out that part far enough. There was no way I was getting them up the ramp. It's too narrow. Instead of fretting about it, I propped them against the stairs.

Tiny was causing a ruckus in the house. It was a relief when I went to check and he just wanted out. I quickly grabbed a few rags and cleaning supplies so I could multitask. The dog would be able to run loose, and I'd spruce up my chair while I supervised him.

He dutifully inspected every smell and sight of his fenced perimeter. Prancing at attention, he made sure to remind everyone who passed by, loudly, that he was on duty. Once he was sure the area was secure, he proceeded to mark the fence at intervals, in case anyone needed to be reminded whose yard it was. I could just imagine him thinking, "Mine, mine, and mine. That's mine too…" each time he lifted his leg. Satisfied with his work, he found a sunny spot and settled down for a nap.

I was sitting on the porch, cussing under my breath as I scraped gunk, untangled string and, worse
than that, hair from my front casters, when Alphonse came home. He sat down on the porch like a 
kid in nursery school and watched for a bit. Finally, he cleared his throat, sounding nervous, and 
asked, "Do you have time to talk?"

"Sure, shoot … you have a captive audience until I finish cleaning this up and put it back together."

"Well, if it's not any trouble. And you don't have to answer if any of my questions make you 
uncomfortable!" he blurted out. This must be serious.

"Out with it. There aren't too many things in this world that shock me anymore, and I'm already 
sitting down."

Al fiddled with the laces of his oxfords as he spoke. "It started with the weather changing. I 
thought about how long it had been since I'd felt spring …"

I nodded for him to continue when he paused. The silence was starting to make me anxious. Where 
was he headed with this?

"It's a little overwhelming, but nice. Warm during the day, if you're in the sun, but a little chilly if 
you're in the shade or if there's a breeze. It still gets cold at night. The temperature difference is so 
big."

I still didn't know where he was headed with this, but I was patient. He'd get there at his own pace. 
I always do.

"So, while I was thinking, I realized that no one but me knows what it was like, living in the armor. 
Well, except for Barry, but …"

This time when he stopped, I said, "I feel like that sometimes. I only know one person, Ron, and 
his injury isn't as complete as mine. Well, Jim too, but he doesn't know from firsthand experience."

Al nodded as I spoke. I hadn't known why I felt so comfortable with him up on the roof when I was 
in the hospital, but now it made sense. "I couldn't feel anything, but I could move. I learned how to 
be careful handling things, so I didn't crush them or drop them. But I couldn't tell if they were hard 
or soft or heavy." He paused and then quietly added, "You're the only person who has any idea 
how that feels."

So that's what was eating him. "When you put it that way, yeah, you're right."

He didn't look me in the eye when he said, "Mei and I are going to Xing this summer to study 
alkahestry, the medical kind. Mei wants to try to heal you."

Could alkahestry really fix the damage to my spinal cord and make me able to feel and move 
again? I'd stopped hoping for a miracle, on pinning my hopes on walking. My stomach flipped and 
a lump rose in my throat.

Al was looking at me now, waiting anxiously. I didn't know how to respond. It hadn't been a 
question, but a question had been implied.

"We're not even sure we can do it yet," he stammered”. Then his words all but tumbled out, "But 
Mei needs to examine you. It wouldn't hurt. She says she needs to know for sure what will have to 
be regenerated. I wasn't sure how to ask you. I'm sorry."

I barely managed a nod in response. What could I say to that? They weren't looking for a 
Philosopher's Stone. They'd be under the Yao family's protection. Ling was at least good for that.
Al shifted uncomfortably next to me, then started to get up. I'd been quiet for too long. He probably thought I was upset, or worse. "Wait, Al, don't go. It's fine. I'm fine. It's just a lot to wrap my head around."

He settled back down, Tiny joining him as if on cue. Al worried at Tiny's ears and said, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know what to do when Mei first showed me her research. I feel horrible bringing it up since we're not even sure we'll be successful."

"Knowing you, you thought this over long and hard. I think you'd feel worse not telling me or trying. I need to talk about this with Sciezka. Tell Mei I'll get her copies of any of my medical records that she needs. Hell, if you only improved the scarring that would be amazing. Chicks dig scars, but I've got overkill."

"She'll be so excited!", his shoulders straight like he'd thrown off a burden and voice trembling with enthusiasm.

"I'm glad I can help make your girlfriend happy."

"We're just friends!" he cut in a little too quickly, turning a shade of pink I'd never seen on him before. Though his words said they weren't an item, his delivery told me that if they weren't together yet, it was only a matter of time.

"If it's ok by you, can we table any more discussion about this until after the wedding?"

Apparently recovered from his embarrassment he sagely replied, "I'll make sure Mei is discreet. You have enough to worry about with classes and the wedding."

"Sounds like a deal. I'll keep quiet about your girlfriend."

"Ugh!" he exclaimed, his cheeks turning a brighter shade than before. "You are as bad as Brother and Winry! We're just friends."

"Sure you are. But seriously, thank you for everything," I replied putting a hand on his shoulder. I smiled and he grinned back.

The first half of the semester flew by. With midterms and deadlines looming over me, I spent the better part of my time in my office at the university. More than a few times, Sciezka brought me dinner after she left work for the day. It was actually a relief that the "wedding machine" could carry on without me. Other than physical therapy, classes, and my duties at the university, all I did was eat and sleep. I was proud that I'd managed that. I had vowed that I would not overtax my body this time and get sick. I didn't have time for it. My track record had been horrible so far, finding a balance between my obligations and health, and I owed it to Sciezka to take good care of myself. She had enough to worry about with her job, two teenage boys, and the wedding from hell.

Spring cleaning coincided with readying the house for my bachelor party, Sciezka's hen night, and the rehearsal dinner. But before that, Al and Ed would have company. His teacher, Izumi Curtis, sent a letter to Mustang that was forwarded to me. Must have been an oversight on Al's part, not giving her his current address; that or Ed was trying to pull one over on her. Even Mustang checked in with his alchemy teacher until the end. What was Ed hiding? And why did Mustang think it would be hilarious to surprise him? Knowing both Flame and Fullmetal, it could lead to property damage. At least they'd fix what they broke.
Maybe Roy had changed in the time since the coup? He could be orchestrating a wonderful surprise for the boys.

Who was I kidding?

In the midst of everything, we scheduled downtime and dates. Sciezka suggested it after I took my midterm exams. We were both so busy that some days the only thing we did alone together was sleep. Most of our dates involved ordering takeout and kicking the boys out. Ed and Al were understanding and more than happy to oblige.

On one such date at the café down the street, we were both uncharacteristically quiet. When the waitress came to see if we were ready for the check, I said, "I'll have a cup of coffee and a slice of pie."

Sciezka gave me a quizzical look and then said, "I'll have coffee too."

When the waitress left, I said, "I thought we should talk about our vows. I'm nervous about writing them. I know a lot of people do, but I'm afraid I won't find the right words, or that I might choke and screw it up … I don't think a word exists that captures how much I love you."

For once, the person in the relationship who lives on words was struck speechless. It was at least a full minute later before she replied. "I was a little worried about that, too. Not you, but me. Not about forgetting what I wanted to say, but saying it too fast or becoming a sobbing mess."

"That's a relief. One less thing to worry about … a shorter ceremony, too. I don't know if I can handle a long one."

"About that - standing," she began hesitantly. "I know it's important to you, but it doesn't matter to me as long as you're happy. Would you be more comfortable if we were both sitting?"

"I want to be able to see you walk down the aisle. Everyone stands for the bride, and they'd block the view. You deserve a man who … "

She cut me off abruptly, "I have more than I deserve in you. Everything I ever wanted. We'll think of something. I want all of your energy and attention on our vows and our first kiss … "

"As man and wife," I finished for her. She took my hand across the table and squeezed it.

Our coffee and pie came. There were two forks.

I was finishing my office hours for the week when the department secretary arrived at my door, flushed, out of breath, and waving a small piece of paper.

"Sciezka says she's fine and that there's no emergency, but that you need to get to H.Q. as soon as possible for Edward. Your houseguests arrived early," she announced as she leaned against the wall, attempting to regain her composure.

The panic-stricken expression I must have been wearing quickly changed to a grin, and then all out laughter. The secretary seemed worried, either about my sanity or the situation. I reassured her,
"Try not to worry too much. Edward is the Fullmetal Alchemist. He has a bit of a temper. The houseguests are visiting him, and it was a surprise. I'm so sorry you ran all the way up here. It's likely a false alarm."

She nodded before replying, "Should I cancel your appointments, Mr. Havoc?"

"My last student just left a few minutes ago. I had a feeling Ed's reunion might go this way. I just didn't plan on it going south this early. Again, I'm sorry you were dragged all the way up here on my account."

"Don't worry, it happens all the time. Everything seems to be an emergency some days. Besides, you always have your duplication requests in earlier than necessary. This is the first I've ever had to run around for you."

I'd be sending her flowers on Monday.

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I smoked a cigarette on my way to where I was parked. Hurry or not, I figured I'd need it. Traffic was light, and it didn't take long for me to get to H.Q. and through security. Sciezka was working in Armstrong's department again. If Ed wasn't there, they'd direct me to him.

It was quiet as I approached the door to the office. Too quiet. I'd prepared myself to find broken glass, mass casualties, and upended furniture. There was nothing of the sort. Sciezka was sipping tea and chatting with a woman I'd never seen before. That was probably Mrs. Curtis. After I crossed the threshold, I saw Ed sitting glumly in the corner with an ice pack held to his head.

The only really scary sight in the place was Alex Louis Armstrong flexing his muscles with an equally huge bearded man.

Sciezka's face lit up when she saw me, "You didn't have to get here so quickly!"

"The History department secretary thought it sounded urgent, so I hurried." I grinned, taking in the room. "But the only person who looks worse for wear here is Ed!"

"That's my fault," the woman sitting with Sciezka said. "I used to be Edward and Alphonse's teacher. Edward was in need of a review session."

"Izumi, this is Jean. Jean, Izumi Curtis," Sciezka said.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you," Izumi said as she leaned forward to shake my hand. "Alphonse's letters have told me all about both you and Sciezka."

"And you didn't know where he was living?" I asked, shocked he'd talked about me and hadn't mentioned he lived with us.

She smiled broadly before replying, "Edward insists it was an error of omission. Honey, come meet Jean."

The massive man who'd been comparing his impressive physique with Alex Louis came over and shook my hand. "Sig Curtis. It's nice to finally meet you and be able to thank you for looking after the boys."

For a man who looked so intimidating, Sig was a really gentle guy. When he stood next to his wife,
huge hand resting lightly on her shoulder, it made me smile.

I wondered how Ed could be so terrified of his teacher. So far, she seemed like one of the nicest people I'd ever met. Ed's minor injury aside. Izumi seemed like a sweet lady to me. I decided I'd better ask Al. If I had to bet my money, I'd lay odds that Al was going to be thrilled to have his teacher there for his big day.

Of course, I could be wrong. I'd worked for and around alchemists most of my military career, and I still didn't understand them. Book smart and powerful, sure, but most of them don't seem to have the common sense of a goose.

There had never been anything like the Spring Festival at my school back home. Granted, it was a one room school house, but the closest thing to this would have been a barn raising or an ice cream social.

The Preparatory Academy was huge. Some of the after-school clubs had more members than there were students at my school. Each display was decorated and flashy. Serious energy, money, and time had been spent.

After a not-so-quick spin around the gym, I was ready to settle down and eat. The consensus was that we would get whatever delicacies caught our fancy outside. Al commandeered two picnic tables while we bought our food. Sciezka and I settled on pulled pork sandwiches. It was a juggling act for us to get it back to the tables, but we managed.

When everyone finished eating Al excused himself and Mei so they could prepare for their alchemy exhibition. I didn't know what they'd be doing, but I did know that Al would be using circles. He kept his ability to transmute without a circle a closely-held secret. He invited Izumi to come with them.

This part of the grounds was paved, an improvement I appreciated greatly. Pushing the chair over grass is a bit tougher.

"Elysia Hughes, come back here this instant!" Gracia shouted.

I'd never heard her raise her voice before. I frantically scanned the crowd to locate her. I spotted her and then pointed, "She's over there at that booth!"

Jim and Gracia hurried over to her and from the look of it she was getting a sound scolding. Sciezka and I headed over as quickly as the crowd allowed. Elysia was holding her mother's hand, tears streaming down her face. Gracia looked beside herself.

Sciezka offered to calm Gracia down, "We'll look after Elysia until the exhibition. Wander around a little."

"I couldn't possibly..." Gracia replied, before I cut her off.

"Nonsense, it's no trouble. If you feel the need to, you and Jim can stake out a spot in front so I can see Al and Mei do their thing, instead of Sciezka's butt."

Jim chuckled before saying, "When you put it that way, then sure."

Elysia sniffled one more time before settling on my lap. "Don't worry, Mommy. I will stay put and
be good."

When Gracia and Jim left I asked Elysia, "So just what were you after that was so important you wandered off?"

She pointed toward the game booths as she answered, "The stuffed bunny. It's as big as me!"

The booth in question was a firing range. Probably rigged, but all the dates I'd taken to the carnival always went home with a prize. I decided to give it a shot. It didn't cost much to play and it couldn't hurt to try.

I put my money down on the railing for the carnie. He looked like he was sizing me up as he said, "One hundred cens gets you one hundred rounds. I'll slow the machine down, give you a better chance."

"Thanks, but that won't be necessary," I replied politely. "Elysia, you hold Sciezka's hand while I shoot."

After hopping off my lap she addressed the carnie, "Jean is a crack shot, Mister! He'll win that bunny for me!"

"Here's a kiss for luck," Sciezka added before quickly whispering, "Wonder where she heard that one?"

The targets went down faster if you hit them dead center. They were only tin, and at a distance of three yards were easy to pick off. I'd taken them all out before I ran out of ammo. I set the pistol down before turning to Elysia, "So which bunny rabbit is it, Princess?"

The carnie got it down for her and she squeezed it tightly. It was almost as big as she was. Now we'd have to lug it around all day. I didn't think Elysia would mind that one bit.

"You still have ammunition left, sir," the carnie said. "Do you want to try for something else?"

"I think we're good for now. Elysia, do you see anything else you'd like? Sciezka, do you need a huge pink bunny as well?"

Sciezka demurred and the carnie looked relieved. I probably could have cleaned him out in a few tries if I'd wanted to. "Sir, if you don't mind me asking, where did you learn to shoot like that?"

"I'm from the boonies back East. Everyone learns to shoot once they hit double digits," I replied.

As we headed toward where Al's exhibition was Sciezka commented, "Never mind that the only sniper in the country to beat your long shot record is Riza."

"I didn't want to be a showoff," I replied quietly.

Elysia and Sciezka, who were walking ahead of me, stopped abruptly and I nearly ran them over. "What's the hold up?"

Sciezka turned around, leaned over and then kissed me quickly.

"How romantic!" Elysia exclaimed dreamily. She had to have gotten that one from Garfiel.
We'd almost gotten to the school's parade grounds when it got a lot harder to push my wheelchair. It made sense, since I was going over grass. Just the same, Elysia hitching a ride on my lap wasn't making it any easier.

"Alright Princess, this is your stop," I said. She got off my lap quickly, grinning ear to ear as she took Sciezka's hand with the hand that wasn't wrangling the massive pink bunny.

"I did good, right, Sciezka?" she asked.

"You did 'well'," Sciezka gently corrected her. "And yes, you're holding my hand just like you're supposed to."

Pleased with herself Elysia exclaimed, "Let's skip!"

I gave a big push so I could keep up and realized that my right tire was completely flat. "Whoa. ladies," I said, trying to keep the mood light. "I've got a flat. Please save me a spot with a good view."

Naturally, Sciezka being Sciezka, she looked worried. She tries not to be but she's horrible at hiding her feelings.

"It's just a flat. It happens. I've got a repair kit in my pack," I explained and then pointed at a big shade tree. "I'll be over there if you need me. It shouldn't take long."

The path across the lawn was rough going. By the time I got out of my chair the tire was completely deflated. The culprit was a thumbtack. I got a new inner tube out of my repair kit and thanked my lucky stars I hadn't put the rim out of round. I made a note to true the spokes as soon as possible, just in case.

I'd just gotten the wheel off when I saw someone in sandals standing very close to me. Before I looked up, a cup was thrust into my hands. Turns out my benefactor was Mrs. Curtis. "Thank you," I said after taking a small sip, and then a gulp. "I didn't know how thirsty I was, ma'am." The balance of tart to sweet was perfect. There's nothing better than lemonade on a hot day.

She smiled before saying, "You're welcome. Mind if I share the shade with you?"

"It'd be rude if I didn't after you were so thoughtful," I said, then paused to take another sip of my drink. Everyone's benign meddling had me suspicious of most people. I figured she might not hit me, so I asked, "So what are you really here for? Did Sciezka ask you to check on me?"

"I'll have to tell Alphonse he was right. You are wary about accepting anything, help or otherwise."

I shrugged, before prying the tire off the rim. "I'm sure Ed's told you about Mustang's machinations. That's why I stayed in Central, have the house I have, am enrolled in university and all of it after I broke my back. I'm surprised he didn't set me up with Sciezka … that was Gracia's doing."

"And the brothers living with you was Mustang's doing as well?"

I fiddled with the punctured inner tube before answering, "That's right, so who sent you? Was it Al? He should worry about his alchemy. He knows I can take care of myself."
"Jean, hear me out. I don't blame you one bit for being suspicious. That Mustang is slippery …"

"He has his reasons!" I blurted out.

She glared. I saw a flicker of what had the brothers so terrified. After she took a deep breath she said firmly, "If you had let me finish, you would know that I know he has his reasons for secrecy. He's one of the few honorable State Alchemists."

I nodded, waiting for her to continue. She didn't have to elaborate. I knew better than most just how corrupt and evil the previous regime had been.

The silence was getting unbearable, so I got back to work on the flat. If I didn't get a move on, I'd miss the whole point of coming to the festival.

"I could just fix the inner tube with alchemy," Izumi volunteered.

"Thanks for the offer. I always have a spare with me. I'll see if I can patch the hole in this one later. Waste not, want not."

She chuckled warmly. "You'd make a fine pupil. You have a good head on your shoulders."

"No offense, Ma'am, but common sense is one of the last things that come to mind when I think of alchemists, with the exception of you and Al."

"Al really admires you. He writes about you often. I'm always surprised at how much you're doing. Sled hockey sounds difficult, and he mentioned you might try basketball," she replied. "But I'll stop since you're blushing. Not many people in your position would try so hard."

"I can't take all the credit for that. I have a lot of people helping me, who kept rooting for me, even when I wanted to give up. My team, my friends … they didn't count me out. There was no other option … there is no other option."

Her brow creased, and for a moment she appeared to be deep in thought. Then she said, "I promised Alphonse I'd talk to you about his research in Xing, but now I'm not sure."

"Neither am I. I'm not against it, unless he puts himself in danger. I trust him. I just can't pin my hopes on that. I have to live with how things are now. I'm happy, really happy. Sure, I want to walk, but any improvement would be welcome."

"Thank you for hearing me out, Jean. Alphonse really wants to do this. For you, for everyone like you, and he felt bad after …"

I cut her off mid-sentence, saying sharply, "Al has nothing to feel bad about when it comes to me."

"Please, hear me out," she said insistently. I nodded for her to continue. "The boys' father, Hohenheim, he was like a living Philosopher's Stone. When I broke the taboo, I was seriously injured. Equivalent exchange … he healed me. Alphonse, he didn't know what his father was in time to help you. On the Promised Day, under the city, while we fought …"

"Stop! Please, Mrs. Curtis. I don't want to know what happened down there. If I was meant to know, the Colonel, Roy … he would have told me."

"Are you sure? Why wouldn't you?"

"If you're getting at what I think you're getting at, it won't change a thing. It's not any good to me
now, so there's no sense in it."

She didn't push the issue further, but stayed silent.

"I'm nearly finished up," I said. "I can handle this. The show's about to start, you should head over there. I wouldn't want you to miss it. Please tell Sciezka I'll be along in a few minutes," I thought I'd give her an easy out.

She stood up and walked away. Once she disappeared into the crowd, I put the wheel back on the axel. I was a little winded after hauling myself back into the chair. After I caught my breath, I drained the last of the lemonade. The cup made a satisfying crunch as I crushed it before tossing it at a nearby refuse bin. Great shot, nothing but net.

Before going back to the group, I checked my watch. The way my day was blowing up, I wasn't going to mess with bodily functions complicating matters.

Pushing through the throngs of people to get to the main building was a bitch. Without someone walking ahead of me, or next to me, I was bumped into a few times. The most memorable moment was a kid's red snow cone that got dropped on my lap, second only to the idiot who ran into me because he wasn't watching where he was going and got pink candy floss in my hair. I kept my cool, outwardly at least. I wanted to turn tail and run home. Not a strategic retreat at all. I was more than ready to raise a white flag and call my Ma.

Once at the back loading docks that led to the kitchen and freight elevator, I stopped to take a breather. Maybe a smoke would brace me for navigating the halls of the school, and for a less than private restroom. One of the cooks must have had the same idea. He nodded in recognition as I tapped a cigarette out of the pack and fished around in my shirt pocket for my lighter.

"Need a light, buddy?" he asked casually.

"Man, do I ever."

He'd seen me coming and going when I had meetings with General Lockheed. It was good to see a friendly face, especially one who wouldn't think the worst of my wet lap. I puffed faster and deeper after I checked my watch; it was going to be a tight window.

I thanked him and then high-tailed it to the restroom just off the lobby.

The can was absolutely empty. Maybe I'd get back in time to see the finale of Al and Mei's exhibition after all. They had been practicing for weeks, and had spent most of the semester scheming. I washed my hands, performed "the procedure", took care of my supplies and then washed my hands again as quickly as possible. Not that I time myself, but under ideal circumstances I can get it done in under ten minutes, less if I'm at home.

As I rolled through the empty corridor, I heard loud pops. Was it a sniper? Ishbalan separatists? Another coup? I quickened my pace, scanning for unfriendlies and a place to take cover so I could gather my wits and come up with a strategy.

My heart stopped racing when I heard the crackle and whistle of firecrackers. How dumb could I
be? I knew there would be pyrotechnics. Mei had been almost giddy at the thought of activating them via some remote alkahestry. She'd said she and Al would hold back, as Al's ability to perform alchemy without a circle was a closely guarded secret. Sure, I was safe, as was everyone else, but I'd missed the very thing I'd come for, to an overcrowded, barrier-filled logistical nightmare.

Strolling across the lush grass and gentle slopes of the grounds would have been pleasant. Rolling - well pushing and not much rolling - was not. By the time I found Sciezka at the exhibition site, I was a dirty, sweaty mess. She was easy to spot, since most people had cleared out after the finale to the fair's other attractions.

She smiled as she closed the distance between us. I stopped to rest, wiping my hands on the legs of my pants before taking the cup in her hand. She fussed with my hair, possibly trying to fix it, which wasn't going to happen … though it definitely soothed my nerves.

"One of those days?"

I just nodded my head and gulped the cold drink down.

"Head toward to front of the school. I'll let someone know we're headed out and then pick you up."

I grinned, snagged my keys and tossed them to her. "You're a lifesaver. I am seriously reconsidering the push handles idea."

Her pert nose scrunched up like she'd smelled something bad. Maybe it was me? She waited a moment before she said, "That bad?"

I slumped a little in my chair. "Yeah, I should have gotten more intel on the layout. I figured it couldn't be much worse than going through the service entry and loading docks. I was expecting some rinky-dink fair like back East."

"This is the big city, Jean," she teased. "Get moving. We'll beat them home and you will shower up and rest."

I snapped a crisper salute than I ever did during active duty, "Yes, ma'am."

She started walking, then turned. "Did you really get a snow cone and candy floss dropped on you?"

"Yes, I've got great luck. At least they match?"

It's a relief to know that no matter how rough the going is, I have great back up. We laugh, a lot.

Sciezka pulled the jeep up and got out. Before I could protest, she got the door. She looked around. "The coast is clear. I'm giving you a boost. No arguments buster."

"I surrender," I said. My shoulder complained as I put my hands up.

Even with her taking the weight of my legs, I winced as my shoulder caught while I pulled myself into the jeep.
She quickly disassembled the chair and put it in the back and said, "If you don't, I'm asking Winry about those removable push handles. Remind me to make you an ice pack for that shoulder. You can't fool me."

Next thing I knew, Sciezka was assembling the chair in our driveway.

Despite my protests, Sciezka helped me up the ramp and opened the front door. I grumbled, "I'm not an invalid you know."

She squeezed my shoulder and sighed. "Dear, I am well aware of that. However, you did overdo it, and we have guests."

"I'll give you that," I replied. "So, do you have a strategy? One that's better than toughing it out and still being a cranky, sore bastard?"

"Easy boy, you're not that bad. Shower up. I'll have the bed turned down and ice packs at the ready."

"Meds?" I asked, as she kneaded my neck and shoulders.

"Just tell me which ones," she replied.

Freshly showered I was in a much better mood. Sciezka was fluffing the pillows and remarked, "Oh good, the candy floss came out of your hair on the first wash. I thought it might stain. Pink is not your color."

I gave her a lopsided grin and quipped, "Blue wouldn't have been much better in this case."

She handed me fresh boxers and an undershirt. "I know you can do this yourself. Humor me."

Sure, I can do it myself, but with my shoulder still throbbing I knew I would have to go easy on it and accept help.

She took the weight of my legs as I transferred. I got situated while Sciezka put pillows behind me. She's done it enough times. Once she was sure I was comfortable she handed me a glass of water and two tablets. "Muscle relaxer and the small artillery of your pharmacological arsenal … drink all of that water."

I resisted the urge to reply with a smart comment and drained the glass. As soon as I handed it over, she thrust a huge glass of cranberry juice into my hand and refilled the glass of water from a carafe on the bedside table.

When I balked, she gave me the "just do it" face and then said, "You won't thank me later, there won't be anything amiss."

"You're right," I said before chugging the overly tart juice and chasing it with the water. The last thing I needed was a urinary tract infection. Ick. I'm almost as bad about cranberry juice as Ed is about milk.

"Ice pack now or later?" It wasn't a choice of if but when.

"Now, please. What would I do without you?"

"You'd manage. You'd muddle through."

"Head up and all that, yeah … this is better. How about a kiss before you tuck me in? Sure you
don't want to join me?"

A lingering kiss later, she left the room. She called over her shoulder, "I'll send Tiny in to keep you company … and I'll be in for the ice pack once your time's up."

The mattress dipped slightly when Tiny jumped on the bed. He snuffled, sniffed and then licked my face. When he didn't get the desired reaction, me petting him immediately, he snorted in puppy derision and headed for the end of the bed … quite likely on top of my legs. I must have been out cold by the time Sciezka came in to remove the ice pack.

The next I knew, I heard voices talking quietly outside the bedroom door.

"You shouldn't wake him if he isn't feeling up to dinner … not on our account. Sig and I don't want to impose or take advantage of your hospitality."

"It's fine, really. You and your husband are no trouble at all. There aren't many people who not only cook while on vacation, but bring the meat," Sciezka replied, sounding cheerful.

"Sig and I will get started on dinner, then."

I rolled over to face the door and Tiny huffed, jumped off the bed and trotted out of the room.

"I'll remember that when you're begging under the table!" I called after him.

"Well then!" Sciezka said and then giggled. Have you and Tiny been fighting over the bed again? He may only be thirteen pounds, but my money is on him."

"Ditto."

I felt a little better in body after my nap, but my stomach twisted thinking about the conversation I'd had with Izumi earlier. I knew she and Al would keep a lid on it during dinner, but I wasn't sure about Mei. She was invited along with Ross, her sponsor in Amestris, and Broche.

I needed to tell Sciezka about the slim, but existent hope I had, whether I wanted to or not. It impacted her life too. I did not want a repeat of the last time I kept her in the dark to spare her feelings. It had nearly been the end of us.

"Do you have time to talk before we eat dinner?"

She sat down next to me on the bed; concern etched on her delicate features, brows furrowed and her lips a thin line. "What's wrong? Are you in more pain than you let on about before?"

"No, no, it's not that," I said as I took her hand, pulling her closer. "I didn't want to tell you this yet. I don't know my own mind on the matter. Al and Izumi talked to me, about me getting my legs back, with alkahestry."

Her eyes went wide and she hugged me tightly, "That's wonderful news!"

I squeezed her closer to me. She was so happy. I hated to let her down. "Sciezka, they don't know how to do it yet. Al and Mei are going to Xing for the summer to study and research. They might come up with nothing …"

"Oh," was all she said, her voice soft, like she'd had the wind knocked out of her. "Why did they
even tell you about it if it wasn't definite?"

I wasn't sure if her scowl was caused by disappointment or hurt, for me not being cured or at Al for well, the same reason.

"Please don't be mad at Al. He and Mei need my medical records, and he was so excited. That's why he told me about it at all. If you're mad at anyone, make it me. I should have told you right after Al talked to me. Izumi discussed it in more depth today. She also knows a lot more about why Al feels it's his responsibility."

She just nodded.

"It's a lot to take in all at once. I know. I still can't wrap my head around it. I'm … I'm upset that I have to think about it. It's still a remote possibility. It might be impossible. I was finally … at peace with the way things are and will be."

"Why tell me now?"

"I wanted you to hear it from me first. My life is your life. There were things that happened under Central on the Promised Day. I don't want to know what happened or could have been …"

Her expression was fierce, her fists balled. She asked, "Who hid things from you? Was it Mustang?"

"Shh, shh," I soothed, rubbing small circles on her back and holding her close as she shook with either tears or rage. Likely both. "I don't know, but you have a right to know, if you want to. I know no one on my team would say or do anything to hurt me. If it's useless now, doesn't change the outcome … I think knowing would only bring me down."

She nodded and nestled closer to me. We had a little time before we had to be presentable, and I couldn't think of a better way to spend it.
The Curtis' cooking was amazing. It would have been even better if I hadn't nearly fallen asleep at the dining room table. The decision was made for me that I'd be headed straight to bed after supper. Sciezka lessened the blow and helped me bow out gracefully, suggesting that the Elrics might want time alone with their teacher. Al suggested they adjourn to the library, just in case his brother got loud.

My original plan to send Mr. and Mrs. Curtis off in style was to cook them breakfast complete with Ma's muffins. I set the alarm, woke up, and as I was exiting the bathroom was told in no uncertain terms, "As your future wife, I'm ordering you back to bed."

"But I want to do it!" I protested.

Sciezka's mouth was set in an expression I'd come to know well. She wasn't budging. "I've got it handled, Jean. Now back to bed."

"Fine, you win," I replied as I put my hands up in surrender. I must have moved wrong as my shoulder seemed to catch fire.

"I saw that. It's still bad, isn't it?"

I nodded in reply. Once I got to the bed, ready to transfer, she moved toward me. I just had to accept the help as she took the weight of my legs. "I'm calling Jim."

I didn't have it in me to protest. When she's right, she's right.

The session with Jim did wonders. Before he started my regular range of motion exercises, he examined my shoulders. "No permanent damage, but watch it. You'll need them for at least the next fifty years."

Between Jim, Winry and myself I knew we'd figure out some way to save me from wear and tear. I chuckled. My salvation was going to come down to them outvoting my own stubbornness.

We'd all sat down to dinner when the phone rang. Al hurried to get it. I was surprised when he called me to the phone. I figured it would be the Curtis’s checking in.

I excused myself from the table to take the call. It was Ron on the line.

"Jean, I'm glad you're home. Sorry to tear you away from your dinner," he started.

"Don't worry about it. It's good to hear from you. I've been ridiculously busy. How are you?"

He hesitated just a bit before answering, "Not great. Can you pencil me into your busy schedule to talk?"

His reply sounded forced. I considered my words carefully. Of course, anything for a friend, I had just the thing, "Everyone has to eat. How does lunch in the faculty lounge sound? It'll be my treat."
He chuckled before replying, "That's the best offer I've had all week. Whenever works for you…"

"Tomorrow then, for lunch?"

"It's a date."

Dinner conversation was in full swing when I returned to the table. Sciezka arched an eyebrow, her standard, "What is it this time?" look.

I helped myself to some food first. Spaghetti with meatballs, one of Ed and Al's favorites, green salad and bread too. Someone had made sure there was some left for me.

"That was Ron; no, it's not an emergency."

"That's a relief," Sciezka replied.

"My schedule has been so packed. I feel like I've been neglecting him. His schedule's as bad as mine is."

Al smiled and said, "I'm glad it was nothing serious."

"I'm sure Ron understands," Sciezka added.

Al volunteered to clear the table and do the dishes. There are almost never any leftovers to put away; two growing boys in the house made sure of that. Sciezka teases that I do my fair share.

Before Ed had the chance to offer to dry, I said to him, "I'll dry tonight."

He started to object, and then thought better of it, "Thanks a lot, my refresher course with Teacher was as bad as I'd imagined it."

Talking to Ron and the trouble I had getting around at the festival had started me thinking. I never asked about what happened from the moment I went down until I woke up in a hospital bed.

While Al filled the sink and started soaking the pots and pans, I went outside for a cigarette. It wasn't a question of whether or not I had the courage to ask Al to see my records. I wasn't sure I wanted to know how close to dying I'd been.

"You're just in time, Jean. You don't have to help. You and Sciezka do so much for us. I'm just trying to earn my keep, even though you don't expect me to. It doesn't feel equivalent otherwise."

My nerves started in again. Al's just a kid and his life was finally normal. I would be asking him to help me make sense of my medical records, which I knew were probably pretty nasty. Researching them was one thing, but explaining them (to me) in detail in a way I could understand? I started to think I was about to ask too much of him.

"I figure I can get in some vertical time and help with the chores," I said as I grabbed hold of the
counter and hauled myself up to stand. "I also have a favor to ask you, that is if you're finished with your class assignments."

"I'm ahead in all of my courses. I may do some reading after I finish up here. Mei found a great book on the medical applications of alkahestry."

I swallowed hard and then blurted out, "That's part of the favor…"

"Oh no! I'm sorry to have brought that up. You have so much to think about already! Please forget I said anything," he said, sounding dismayed.

"I went about this all wrong, Al. I was hoping you could explain some of my records to me. I've seen them, but even with biology and a medical dictionary, I wouldn't be able to make heads or tails of some of it."

He let out a breath, visibly relieved. "Jean, you had me worried. Of course, I can do that. I feel bad I didn't offer…"

"You're fine. Relax. I'm going out for another cigarette. Meet you in the library? Or do we need table space? It's a thick file from what I gather."

I'd asked, and Al obliged, so why did I feel like my guts were full of lead as I took my first puff?

I paused in the doorway and saw Al sitting in the big leather arm chair with a pile of file folders on his lap. I pushed the sliding door to the side before rolling in slowly.

"Any particular reason why we're doing this tonight?" he asked.

I pulled my chair up next to him. He motioned to the chaise and waited until I transferred. I was still favoring my shoulder and I was sure he noticed.

"So why now?" he asked again pointedly.

I busied myself arranging my legs before answering. Did he really need an answer? However, much it hurt to tell him why, he deserved to know why. "He called. It has to be something. I want to be prepared to answer any questions Ron has. I know I've blocked most of it out. I need to know sometime, right? May as well be now…"

"You're absolutely sure?"

"For Ron, yeah sure, but I want to know what we're up against too… me and Sciezka… it's only fair… and you and Mei. I want to be able to make an informed decision… and it's time. I can handle it."

Al sucked in a deep breath before starting, "You know yourself best. Stop me if you need something explained, or if you… you know, just need to take a break."

"It's a school night, but I reckon this is going to require a beer or two."

I started to transfer back to the chair and Al stood up abruptly, "I'll get them, Jean. Are you sure you're not stalling?"

Damn kid is far too perceptive. "Hand over the stack and I'll start reading. I'm a lot slower than you
are. Can't very well give Ron advice when I've avoided the truth myself. Wouldn't be right."

I already had questions by the time Al returned. "I get that I was in bad shape when they brought me in, but what is hypovolemic shock? I know that exsanguination is 'bleeding out'."

"It means not enough blood volume… hand your records over," he said. "The tachycardia was because your blood volume was so low that your heart rate went up to fix it. Not enough blood was going in, so not enough blood was going out… your heart rate increased dramatically to compensate for low stroke volume…"

I cut in, "So how did they fix it?"

He quickly read down the page before replying, "Transfusions." Then his eyebrows shot up practically disappearing into his bangs, "Three from the blood bank, one from Feury, and one from Hawkeye."

"So, I came close to dying?"

"Your heart stopped once in the emergency room and once in the operating room, the first time at least… you were medically stable for the other surgeries."

"Wait, what? I died?"

"Technically, yes. They had to perform CPR to get it going again. I heard that Hawkeye was ready to start lining up blood donors at gunpoint if they ran out of blood to hang for you until they got the internal bleeding stopped."

I attempted to crack a joke to lighten the mood, "I always donated to the vampires at HQ. I'm a universal donor which is good for everyone else but me. Did they really run out of O negative at a military hospital?"

"Just about," he replied meekly.

"At least I was in demand somewhere…"

"Are you sure you want to know what they had to do in the trauma room and the first surgery to stabilize you medically?"

"May as well, Al, maybe it will help on bad days? Even at my worst now, I'm glad to be alive."

"Just be ready," Al warned. "This is brutal… the first surgery took out part of your large intestine, not by much, but still… and sutured it back together. Your liver had a small laceration that was repaired. It's a miracle that your kidneys weren't destroyed. Your spleen was nicked, so that had to come out. I'm amazed that there wasn't more damage. Thankfully the nature of Lust's 'Ultimate Lance' spared you from more impairment. From what I observed; it came out smooth. Not like pulling out an arrow… after that, they waited until your vital signs were improved to do any more work. You still had bone shards from your vertebrae pressing on your spinal cord…"

"You were still in intensive care when they did the initial clean-up of the initial trauma."

I asked incredulously, "There was more? There were two surgeries after I was scraped off the pavement?"
"They had to. They stopped the internal bleeding and kept you under heavy sedation with medication, so you wouldn't move around. Looking at your charts, I think they hoped that removing the bone shards would take the pressure off your spinal cord and stop the swelling."

"So, looking at the x-rays…"

"It was a given that the initial injury damaged the cord at the lateral grey horns, so there was nerve damage immediately, and in the peripheral nerves too," Al stated matter of factly. "Your pain now, that's where I'm fairly sure is where the spinous processes were snapped off or chipped… the transverse processes too. So, the cord wasn't completely transected."

"It may as well have been," I replied glumly.

He solemnly nodded in reply.

"So how long was I out?" I asked, not quite wanting to know.

"You were in intensive care for two days; you were only moved due to security issues."

"Was that Hawkeye again?"

"She made sure you had the same care… there were nurses in the room around the clock, and doctors were on call as well."

"So, what then?"

"It looks like they kept you heavily sedated. Wow… the amount of morphine they gave you was massive. You spiked a fever for a while, they administered antibiotics. That was probably an infection… I'm not surprised."

I started reading again where Al had left off and then asked, "So what is this adverse reaction to medication and psych consult about?"

Al stifled a laugh and nearly choked. Once he was composed, he said, "You were hallucinating. A lot… and that was an understatement. You told Captain Hawkeye that she has really really nice boobs."

"Oh man, I really did that?"

He nodded, trying his best to not crack up.

"I think we're done here, Al. You're the best for helping me wade through all of this."

And we left it at that.

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Sciezka was reading in the big armchair when I emerged from the library. She marked her page and put down her book when she noticed me. She looked me up and down and then said, "You look ok. Are you?"

I smiled, shifted my weight in the chair, and then gestured toward the front door.

"Well then, I'll join you. Want another beer?"
"That sounds like a plan, Sciezka. I feel kind of bad. You used to be so proper and refined. Now you're drinking lager out of a bottle."

"Perish the thought," she replied, snickering as she clutched her pearls.
Chapter 61: Things Can Only Get Better

I still had a lot running through my head after I finished my cigarette. Sciezka had gone inside ahead of me. She was sitting on the couch, reading a book, her usual after dinner activity. Looking up she beckoned for me, "C'mere. Relax. That's an order."

My woman is brilliant. She'd grabbed us each another beer and a tall glass of ice water for me for later. "Stretch out, Jean, you're all sorts of wound up. I can see it in how you're holding your shoulders. You're pursing your lips too. Your face might get stuck that way if you keep it up."

After a bit of huffing and puffing in protest I transferred to the couch and let her take over. It's still hard sometimes to allow myself to accept help, to let down my guard. I took a few long pulls out of the bottle before I laid my head on her lap. I love it when she "pets my face". She says her grandmother used to do that before she went to sleep.

Having my face "petted" usually works like a charm, but I was pretty wound up. Thankfully, Sciezka is as tenacious as a terrier. She doesn't quit until the job is done. I was slightly better by the time she relented and though I was good to go to sleep.

"You're still thinking way too hard. Talk about it; or not, I'm just going to keep working on you."

When we finally headed to bed my brain was still working overtime. Maybe a shower would help. At the very least I'd feel better, and get a head start on the day.

By the time I'd finished Sciezka was fast asleep and barely stirred other than snuggling close to me once I'd settled into bed.

Thankfully I crashed faster than I'd expected.

I got up, did my home workout, and headed to the university. When I got there, Ron was in the faculty lounge as expected. I didn't have a lot of information on what was bothering him, but I knew enough to hopefully know what to expect.

His shoulders were slumped. This was definitely not going to be a social call. Ron had the look of a man who had been thinking too hard and too long.

I pulled up next to him and he startled. I'd been there, done that in the past year. "You know where my office is, right?" He nodded slowly.

I had an idea. "What sounds good to eat? We'll get it to go."

He perked right up and started to reach in his pockets. "Lunch is on me. You look like you could use some air. Meet me in front of the Humanities building."

"At the fountain?" he asked. I nodded in reply. He pushed off, and before leaving the room stopped short. "I'll have the BLT. You're a lifesaver."
Once we were in the privacy of my tiny office Ron appeared to be very busy with his sandwich.

I had a limited amount of time before my class and wanted to be absolutely sure I'd gotten the ball rolling on whatever his problem was. "Spill it, Private."

Ron gripped the rims of his chair, ostensibly to perform a pressure release. I knew that maneuver well, for practical reasons, and my "new" body language. He was stalling.

"Laura's father had business in Central, so he surprised her," he finally mumbled.

I'd been in the role of being disappointing to my prospective mate's parent. I let Ron lead the conversation. My stomach sank just thinking about it.

"So," I asked. "Where did y'all go? What did y'all do?"

"I'm so lucky that Laura picked the restaurant…" he said, and then trailed off.

"And everything else?"

He sighed before he answered, "Dinner went well enough. He invited me to the Drake, his club. I knew to dress smart, with a jacket and tie. He even waited at the foot of the stairs at the front entrance."

And I thought Sciezka's mother had been hard to win over…

"Laura's father made a show of guiding me to the back entrance, through the dining room, and finally to our table."

I interrupted him, "Good god man, I'm breaking out the reinforcements and the whiskey." I produced a bottle and two glasses from of my bottom drawer. If there was ever a time to break it out, it was now. I poured a finger for each of us.

Ron smiled wanly. Sure, I'd broken down my own barriers, but there were so many men facing the same obstacles. I should have done better. Rather than blazing a trail, I'd avoided making wake.

I could feel my blood starting to boil, and I hoped it wasn't showing too much in my face. There were still a lot of people, too many, like Laura's father. What I wanted to know, what I needed to know, was what Laura thought about everything. Then the 'click' of our glasses snapped me back into focus. What was I just thinking? This was Ron's battle to fight, to grow with the challenges, setbacks, and surprises like I did. I guess hearing all of this from Ron kicked up something in me that I thought I'd outgrown by now. Guess I have some more work to do for myself too.

I got a hold of myself and asked my questions slowly, but then I got impatient and grilled him. Ron finally gave it up. "Laura says that she is in it for the long haul." His face was a mix of relief and exhaustion, and something else creeping in that made my stomach drop.

"So, she has laid down the law with her father?"

"For now," he replied glumly. "But if it gets hard, or I have a setback…"

"Stop it, Ron! Just stop! You can't know what will happen. Worrying about it will just jinx it all."

"But…"
"But nothing! Enjoy what you have now. The present, this moment, is all you have for sure. That goes for every man, woman, and child. Maybe we're the lucky ones. We've had it scared into us. I nearly died, hell, my heart stopped in the operating theatre."

Ron just sat there, silent, and stunned.

"I can try to give you advice, or tell you what I've done, or would do… but I'd have saved myself a lot of pain and worry if I'd just known what I know now."

After that we both finished our sandwiches quickly. We'd talked the better part of an hour and my lunch break was over. Ron was headed to the hospital for physio and I had a lecture to get to.

"Besides all we have to do to get through the day, we now get to educate the public all day, every day. I always wanted to be inspirational when I'm at the bakery picking up bread on the way home to go with dinner."

Ron's mood seemed a bit lighter, and I looked forward to trying new adaptive sports with him.

I got home before Sciezka and went down for a nap with Tiny. Clementine climbed to the head of the bed and claimed the topmost pillow in the pile.

When Sciezka crawled under the duvet and spooned me I turned to face her as best I could and said, "We're doing it right."

She nipped at my ear and her hand wandered across and down my abdominal muscles, just barely past the point I could feel it. We were definitely doing it right.

Therapy with Jim in the morning was brutal and it wasn't Jim pushing me. I worked like the devil was licking at my heels. Maybe if I was stronger, faster… then maybe everything would be ok. My classes would lead to a fulfilling career, physical therapy would keep me healthy and strong for the foreseeable future. I love a woman with my mind, body, and soul. I could still have the fairy tale happy ending. I'd wanted a military career, but it had been a means to an end. If I was completely honest with myself about the full plan it was: serve Mustang, clean up the country, and make it safe for a house, wife, kids, and the picket fence.

I already had a head start minus the kids part.

The spring semester had sped by and once again it was time to prepare for final exams, papers, and projects. I had my work cut out for me.

On top of my own work load I had papers to grade and final presentations to watch in General Lockheed's class. Thankfully we had a good crop of students for the most part. The slackers that had been hoping for "easy As" had dropped the course. The general did not have a reputation for being lax in his standards. Though it bothered me, I'd stake money on at least one of those clowns assuming that the cripple TA would go easy in his grading to avoid the scrutiny of the administration. Jerks.
Sciezka insisted that I had "grown" because I didn't let it get to me, and didn't take it personally. She was right. It's their problem, not mine… a character flaw on their part, not some defect or deficit on mine. That character flaw is that they're jerks. And that they expected to be the ones to get a free ride. Well look at that, I made a pun! Chuckling to myself, I realized that my Sciezka is truly amazing.

By the grace of something I made it through the end of the semester. But that would be too simple an explanation. Everyone pitched in at home. The Elric brothers were quiet, in the good way, and it was almost like we didn't have permanent house guests. In fact, whole meals appeared like magic, and the dirty dishes disappeared. Julia, our housekeeper, had to have had a hand in that. All I had to do was go to class, go to therapy, and teach my classes.

I didn't pry, but it seemed like Sciezka cut down her hours working in the Investigations Department. At first, I was just curious, but then curiosity became concern.

Eventually needing to know why and if Sciezka was working less than she had to, I broke down and asked her. I didn't want her career to suffer on my account. It was the absolute last thing I wanted. Thankfully we had a quiet night in, and after dinner, I asked her. Her answer surprised me, "Jean, in case you've forgotten, we're getting married in under a month."

I had to give her that. "Is that really the only reason?"

"You're impossible! It's a good thing you're so handsome! I want to spend more time at home and I took your advice".

I wracked my brain and I still couldn't figure out what she meant. I can be so thick.

"The Investigations Department finally bought a Dictaphone. All the cases and documents that burned and aren't classified, I record and two assistants type them up."

Oh! The Dictaphone! I could have slapped myself on the forehead. "You're so clever! I shouldn't have had any doubts. Are you sure it's ok?"

"I'm absolutely positive. My eyes and hands feel so much better. I only handle the high clearance stuff and the rush jobs. Silly boy, you were the one who said I should value my abilities and talents in the first place."

Sciezka gave me a moment to let it sink in, and then leaned over, kissing me senseless, while she ruffled my hair.

Everyone had made it abundantly clear that my role was to eat, sleep, and study. I decided they were probably right.

With the semester finished I had a little more time to devote to physio and everything else that goes with keeping my body running.

Lunch time pick-up games of hoops with Ron became a regular thing. Jim's ears had pricked up immediately when he overheard us talking trash in the rehab room. Sciezka thought it was hilarious as I recounted the story as we washed up after supper.
"Wait, you and Ron competed to see who could do the most pull ups in under a minute?"

"Pushups too. Can't forget those. Ron gives me a pass on abdominal stuff since he's got more."

"How magnanimous of him," she teased before adding, "I'm relieved you cut yourself some slack. How mature of you both."

"You wound me!" I retorted as I covered my heart with both hands. "Sometimes I do act like a grownup." This was a bad idea considering my hands were wet and soapy and I was getting in some vertical time with the braces. I narrowly missed kissing the floor. Sciezka wrapped her hands around my waist just in time to steady me.

She rose on tip toe, planted a kiss on my cheek, and once I was standing on my own asked, "So what happened and who won?"

"I did, of course. But, to be fair, I did have a head start on Ron."

"And a ticket to the gun show even before you got hurt," she said with a wink as she checked out the goods.

"So, at any rate, Jim overheard us, and he's sending over a few more guys for pickup games. He may even join us."

She grinned, "Thank goodness! You've been ridiculously antsy since the ice rink closed for the season."

It's a fact that I'm more fun when I'm getting my clock cleaned on a regular basis. "It's great! I grabbed lunch with Jim and Ron today, and we were throwing around some ideas. If we can get more chairs, more people can play. Jim mentioned that patients with prostheses and automail could get in on the fun. He gives all the credit to Winry. Not all automailers can make it possible to do what Ed does. It started as a joke, but I bet we could get Breda to play once in a while."

If we could raise enough funds a lot more people could play sports. Jim is working on getting the hospital to put in a gymnasium when the new wing gets built. It would be so great being able to play after physio. A lot of new guys, myself included, can get intimidated by just the idea of putting themselves into public view. Fuhrer Grumman seems like a good guy and the new regime is putting their money where their mouth is with veterans' issues. But I'd believe it when I was playing in the new gym, and not a minute before.

Sciezka was beaming at this point. "So, Jim wants to get guys in rehab playing as soon as possible?"

"Bingo! Got it in one my brilliant bride!"

"Darling, I just have one worry," she said as she took my hand.

"And that is?"

She turned my hand so my palm was face up, "You're tearing up your hands. Why no gloves?"

"Messes up my ball handling. I'm going to try taping them. But that'll take time that I'd rather be playing."

"You're hopeless. I'm not even going to start on the court burn and bruises I've found on you lately."
"That'd be suicides and pick and roll drills. Plus, I can get a height advantage if my chair has less
dump. The catch? I'm not as steady as I could be and if I get too into it, I end up tipping the chair."

"And you always get into it," she said as she rolled her eyes affectionately. "Just please promise me
you'll take it easy the week of the wedding."

"I can do that."

We had two weeks to go until the wedding. In only fourteen days we'd be married. After a short
ceremony, and a killer party, Sciezka and I would be bound together within a force greater than
ourselves in the universe. Some words, and signing a piece of paper don't seem to convey the
gravity of the act, or the depth of this bond.

The university may have been on recess, but I was there every day preparing to teach General
Lockheed's Military History summer session. I spent most mornings at the hospital, either
swimming or in the P.T. gym. Jim had a brilliant idea, and instituted open gym hours so people
could use the equipment they were able to use independently Since most of his patients are former
military, it makes sense. Hell, we call exercise P.T. Or "physical training". Keeping in top
condition is part of the daily routine. I find it helpful to think of sessions with Jim like that. It's not
repairs, it's preventative maintenance.

With school out I have a little more time on my hands. I watched Elysia more often. It's a big help
to Gracia, and fun for me. I got a head start on lecture planning for the summer session. Elysia's
used to holding office hours and it keeps me on track if I don't stay home. We have coloring books,
crayons, and picture books in the bottom drawer in my office at the university. Elysia has a great
time, and so do I. She loves eating lunch in the staff lounge. Kids are so remarkably adaptable.
Maes would be so proud.

When I'd finish for the day Elysia and I would head home. While I started dinner, she'd play with
Tiny in the yard.

Sciezka definitely appreciates coming home to a clean house, with dinner on the table. One night
after we'd finished eating, she suggested we walk to the nearby ice cream parlor.

It was a balmy night so we took the long way so we could digest more dinner. The shop had just
opened, so there were streamers and balloons everywhere. Elysia was in heaven before she even
cought sight of the flavors of ice cream on offer. I'd decided to order dark chocolate in a dish even
before I could see the glass case. Just before I ordered Sciezka discreetly said, "Get a cone, I know
you prefer them."

Sciezka managed the details expertly, as if I had any doubts. She can come home and find me in
bed, with all the lights off, and just know I need to be the small spoon.
Chapter 62:

I was finishing my coffee on the porch, and smoking my first cigarette of the day when it hit me. Tonight, was my bachelor party. If I was lucky, there would be no opportunities for incriminating evidence for anyone. I had enough to do in the week leading up to the wedding without having to put out literal or figurative fires.

Pa had wisely, and tastefully bowed out of the festivities. He instead chose to take Ma to dinner, followed by the theater. Roy is so well connected that he can pretty much get any ticket or coveted reservation in town. I'd be jealous if he didn't share the wealth. He's so damn smooth. If he wasn't my friend and I didn't have Sciezka, I'd hate him.

Halfway through my second set of pull ups Ron approached me. As I lowered myself to the mats to stretch, I said, "So, what can I do for you today? You're not backing out, are you? I need someone sane there."

"I'm probably just worrying about nothing, but who checked everything out to make sure it's easy to get in and out? I know that sometimes you go in blind, and just wing it, up to and including being carried bodily... I'm not as ballsy as you are."

"You're right to worry, but I made Breda promise to have Hawkeye vet his plans."

He looked visibly relieved as soon as I mentioned Hawkeye. "Don't worry, Ron. I stopped worrying as soon as I heard her report."

"Okay, this sounds girly, but what are you wearing?", he asked. "I know for a fact that you care about that stuff and always look good."

"I definitely cheated on that one. When I got fitted for my suit, I had the Brookes Brothers make a few extra custom shirts and pairs of trousers. They cost a small fortune, but they fit so well and are seriously comfortable."

"Duly noted," he replied.

"I need to finish up fast. I'm having lunch with my Pa. So glad I booked him and my Ma in at the Excelsior. Gracia has been generous enough to take the Elrics this week. Sciezka and I have the house to ourselves all week."

Lunch with Pa was a nice change of pace. He gave me the dirt on what was going on back home and what antics my younger cousins were getting into. As it turns out, a lot. The occasion of my wedding was doing nothing to tame or deter them from taking in all that Central has to offer. I just hope none of them get arrested for disorderly conduct.

Pa promised to keep them in line for me as I dropped him off at the hotel. When I got home, I let Tiny out to do his business, and then we took a nap.
I didn't object to Roy hiring a few cars for my last night of debauchery. I wanted my friends to arrive at their destination in one piece and on time.

Breda, getting it on with Catalina assuaged many of my fears. The worst thing that would probably happen to me would be eating too much rich food, and drinking a few too many pints of lager.

Sceizka was still getting ready for her hen night when the driver arrived at the door. After she kissed me goodbye without a word I asked, attempting to sound wounded, "You aren't even going to attempt to tell me to be good?"

She flushed and finally said, "You are loyal as the day is long. I trust you."

I kissed her again passionately before replying, "You're right as ever, but I'm hurt that you think I'm tame."

As she straddled my lap she said, "You're an alpha male who knows what side his bread is buttered on."

"Just so we're clear," I replied as I held her down. "Rendezvous later? I'd rather stay in and enjoy you now."

After one last passionate kiss, she said, "Yes, definitely. It's a date."

Once I had myself situated in the backseat, and my chair handed off to the driver to stow in the trunk Breda insisted on blindfolding me. It made me a little nervous, but I decided to be a good sport about it.

The mood was jovial, nearly like old times. Breda shouted to the chauffeur, "Make the route interesting. Havoc will probably try to figure out where we are headed, blind."

An unfamiliar voice replied, "I'll be sure to take the scenic route, sir."

I estimated we'd been traveling for ten minutes when the car slowed, and finally came to a stop. I hadn't bothered trying to track where we'd gotten to. Hawkeye would be disappointed in me if I was not among friends.

When Breda removed the blindfold, we were in front of a building I'd passed a few times when I'd first arrived in Central. It had been renovated, recently at that, and looked like a safe bet. The entryway had a glistening stone facade, and bronze sconces on either side illuminated the heavy looking dark wood door. There was no sign to speak of. It was in a residential area and none of my friends live like this. It screamed money.

As we approached the entryway, I was apprehensive. Just what did Breda and Mustang have up their sleeves? That and private homes are often not accessible. I reassured myself that Hawkeye had personally vetted the venues and their plans. She'd be with Sciezka doing "lady stuff", but nevertheless had my back. Breda had made one promise, and it was that Hawkeye would vet his plans.

Breda approached the door first and pressed what appeared to be a doorbell. A speaker crackled to life, a tinny sounding voice saying, "Central Courier Service, how may I help you?"

Clearly the driver or Breda had gotten it wrong. Unfazed my best friend asked, "Is this the safe
A buzzer sounded and the massive door opened out. We entered a small room that could not possibly be our intended destination. We were clearly in the wrong place. This was a shipping office. Mustang cuffed Breda on the back of the head before approaching the cash register and pressing a few buttons. The wall slid sideways, a pocket door that I hadn't noticed in my confusion.

Roy strode confidently through the entryway into a darkened corridor. I followed; I'd followed him into much worse. At the end of the hall I was met with an opulent dining room and a bevy of beautiful women.

Perceptive for once, Breda said, "Relax, they're not here in a professional capacity. This is Madame Chris' new place. It's a gentleman's club, sure, but nothing too racy. A place for the good guys to relax, have something to eat, and pick up intel. The girls live upstairs. They still go on missions, but they're not 'for hire', at least not that way."

'So, no mule show, or strippers, or any of that?" I stammered.

"Billiards, beer, and beef. Just the way you wanted it," Roy supplied. "Bourbon for me."

Fears assuaged, I decided I would thoroughly enjoy myself.

A few games of pool and a pint later, Madame Christmas announced that dinner was served. She ushered us into another room, all dark wood and deep colors. The table was set, and salads and appetizers covered nearly every surface, along with pitchers of beer. As soon as we were all settled one of the girls came around and asked us how done we wanted our steaks.

I'd made sure that Ron sat next to me since though he'd been out with me and the guys a few times, he'd seemed quiet so far. Sure, it was "my do", but I wanted all of my friends to have a good time.

Everyone was more than ready to tuck in to dinner when the steaks came out. Mine was cooked to perfection; a good sear on the outside, and still red, and juicy on the inside. Sciezka teases that I want my meat "verbally abused or sun-burnt". She's not entirely wrong.

Breda looked over at my plate and then commented, "Is that still mooing?"

I surveyed his plate, and his steak was clearly cooked through. "Well Done?", I exclaimed. "Well Done! My Ass!" I added. "Heymans, if you asked for your meat like that at our house, I'd make you finish cooking it, well ruining it, yourself."

"Sciezka would never let you be a bad host," he shot back.

I grimaced before replying, "You're probably right."

As soon as most of us were finished eating, a few of Mustang's new guys started wondering when the show would start. Roy outwardly kept his cool, but I could tell he was gritting his teeth.

Quickly deciding to put it to a stop I said, "There is no show... I didn't want one. Word to the wise, those are your C.O.'s sisters. Have some respect."

That seemed to be enough of an explanation. I wasn't thrilled that the new guys had been invited, but since it was good for morale, I'd tolerate it. Besides, it was possible I'd be working with Roy's
office after graduation. It was in my best interest to not make any waves. I've found I've tried to be
nicer to people since my perspective has been drastically changed. Wouldn't want to lend credence
to the "bitter cripple" stereotype. My life is awesome, but I have a set list of places I frequent
simply because I'm able to get in and get out without too much trouble. That reminded me, I'd need
to talk to Martin as soon as possible to gauge the layout of his place for the wedding day.

Mustang, of all people, vetoed the idea of an informal poker tournament after dinner. Evidently it
had become a bone of contention in the office. We all agreed that more libations and billiards
would fill the void until dessert. Sciezka is right, men really are children, just bigger.

Breda suggested we try playing darts. It was the first time I'd attempted it. It turns out I'm pretty
terrible at it. For now. With practice, I'm sure I'll be back to where I was before.

The party broke up around midnight, with the younger and unattached guys going out for more
debauchery, and those of us with a steady relationship going home to "get some".

The ride home with Breda, Brosch, Mustang, and Ron passed quickly. We were all excited to hear
how Sciezka's hen night went. Breda had assured me that it was a full workup at the spa followed
by dinner and drinks. So, no virile beefcakes for my girl tonight. Well, no beefcakes who can walk
at any rate. One thing I have an advantage in is strength. At least from the waist up.

Either Ross had set the record straight with Brosch on just how far we didn't go, or he had decided
to forgive me and trust her. He was talkative most of the night, and I hoped he'd fully join our circle
of friends. Sciezka had come to enjoy Ross', well Maria's, company while planning the wedding.
Since Mei can usually be found with Alphonse, we see a lot of her guardian. It's good to have
everyone back again.

We've all played the cards we've been dealt as well as possible. But no one on Team Mustang
folded, even when the decks were stacked against us. I'd been thinking a lot about this in the build
up to the wedding.

Tiny gave me a hero's welcome at the door. I've got a feeling that he'd have made it a ticker tape
parade if he could. Here's hoping that he doesn't decide to shred the toilet paper some time he gets
bored.

"Honey, I'm home!" I called loudly. Hearing no answer other than Tiny's happy bark I made my
way to the bedroom to change into more comfortable clothes. It was a good sign that Sciezka
wasn't home yet. The girls must be having a good time.

I wanted to greet her properly when she came home, so I grabbed a beer from the ice box, and Tiny
and I set up camp on the couch to wait. Tiny was perfectly content to attempt to keep my feet warm
while I read. My feet are never warm. It's a height thing. They never were warm even before I was
paralyzed. Jim says it's something to do with circulation and my muscles not being active, now. I'd
stumbled upon a mystery series and it would be a problem during an academic term. I couldn't put
them down.

Sciezka came home shortly after I started the second chapter. She must have snuck in, as she was
kissing my cheek before I noticed her.

"I see how I rate. It must be some plot to have you that engrossed," she teased.

"It is. It makes me miss fieldwork, at least a little bit. I don't miss stakeouts, getting shot at, or even
the mess hall."

Her expression softened, but didn't shift into the pitying look I so often get from others. After a moment, her eyes sparkled.

"We'll just have to figure out a way for you to get back to the parts you miss. Has the card game started back up? Or maybe you could meet your unit at the pub for pints after work. Or you could get them in on some basketball games, in chairs... "

I shut my book, pulled her into my lap, and started to kiss her senseless. I had to do something to interrupt her runaway train of thought. I appreciate her input greatly, but I wanted to have my way with her sooner, rather than later.

Tiny decamped to his dog bed in a huff shortly after our make out session started. Sciezka was the one who suggested we take it to the bedroom. She looked great after her spa night and I could hardly wait to see it all close up.

As I wheeled us into the bedroom, Sciezka wrinkled her nose, and pointed to the bathroom. "You reek of cigar smoke, and booze. What did you get up to? You're taking a bath."

It's best to just do as she wants. She got the water running, and then went out to the living room to retrieve a small bag. I recognized the name of the spa. This was going to be good. I was not disappointed as the bubbles rose around me. They were spicy as well as sweet. As the bubbles settled around my ears, Sciezka washed my hair. Getting in and out of the tub is a huge undertaking, but it's always worth the trouble.

In the morning, I lay in bed while Sciezka showered. I'd gotten up earlier, and gone back to bed. Someone was at the door, ringing the bell insistently. Since I didn't have time to get dressed, I transferred to my chair, threw a blanket over my lap, and chanced answering the door. It was probably someone we know. If not, they probably deserve the shock they'll get, seeing as the door will be answered by a half-naked invalid.

I called out to see if Ed or Al could get the door. Hearing nothing, I remembered they had spent the night at Gracia's after watching Elysia. I poked my head out the bedroom door and shouted, "Who is it?"

"Your best man, you idiot. Answer the damned door!"

So, naked under a blanket it was. Breda richly deserved it.

I pushed across the living room huffily, and opened the door a little more roughly than necessary. "It's not even 0900 yet, and a Saturday. What's so important that it can't wait?"

"Are you going to let me in, or what, Havo? You'd better, before the neighbors catch an eyeful."

"I'm going to regret it either way," I muttered as I backed up to let him enter. "Make yourself useful and make some damned coffee while I get dressed."

"Oh, man, you are naked under that blanket, aren't you?"
"As a jaybird! You know how I feel about that shit."

He nearly doubled over before choking out, "Glad it's not hiding your double barrel, since apparently, you haven't had coffee yet, and are super pissy. You should be grateful for the sweet party I threw you."

"Heyman's, "I called over my shoulder as I retreated to the bedroom, "Fuck off."

"Love you too, cupcake. Today requires pants. Put on your conditioning gear."

He can be an asshole sometimes, but I love the guy. Just what did he have planned?

Breda didn't disappoint. When we arrived at Gracia’s Winry stood next to a structure that was covered in a sheet. Elysia was milling around the front yard excitedly. Before I could get an answer about what was going on, Winry pulled away the covering with a flourish to reveal a low slung, four wheeled, contraption. It appeared to be driven by a hand cranked set of gears. I'm pretty sure my brows shot sky high when I figured out what it was.

Well, this was interesting. No time like the present to try something new. I didn't want to hurt Winry's feelings, when she had to have worked on it a long time. Better to show enthusiasm and try it. Even if I'd never wanted to ride a bicycle again.

I let Winry help me position myself on the contraption. It was a physically awkward position, and it required my knees to be bent and my feet to be strapped in. After careful instruction on how to switch gears while propelling myself forward, I was able to move. Elysia was elated as soon as I started moving. She'd been practicing on her bicycle since the Winter Solstice, and was keen for me to chase her.

Winry cheered me on while I followed Elysia on the sidewalk, and then a well paved path, and soon enough we arrived at a clearing in the park where Sciezka had laid out a picnic.

Sciezka, as ever, thought ahead and brought extra picnic blankets so I would have room to stretch out, and wouldn't get filthy sitting on the ground. As I transferred Winry started asking me questions in rapid fire, barely able to contain her enthusiasm.

"So, what did you think? Did you like it?"

Trading one set of wheels for another wasn't ideal, but I wasn't going to ruin her excitement. I probably took too long to reply when she asked, sounding dismayed, "You hate it, don't you?"

"Hey, no, please don't be sad. It's great. I just never saw myself as the cycling type. It's a good workout, and a great invention. Just think about little ones like me who are Elysia's age, who wouldn't be able to ride a bike otherwise."

"Really? You're not just saying that to make me feel better?"

"Nope, and it'll be great at the lake on our honeymoon, especially over rougher terrain. And I can hang out with Elysia more. I'd call that a success," I replied with a grin.

Breda chimed in, "Maybe I should get a bicycle, and Havo, don't you dare make any wisecracks about my needing exercise."
"No worries. Let's eat! Sciezka, what did you pack?"

It was a very enjoyable day for everyone. We got back to Gracia's by 1500 hours. By then I was done and excused myself to go clean up and rest.

I felt slightly guilty, since Ma and Pa were in town. When I got up from my nap Ma was bustling in the kitchen, laying on an impressive spread for supper. When I apologized for not entertaining, she wouldn't hear of it. "Son, we're in Central. There's always something to get up to."

She shooed me out of the kitchen and ordered me to relax until the food was ready. I try not to argue with her, so I stretched out on the sofa with my book, and Tiny joined me.

Pa came into the living room with two bottles of beer, and sat down in the overstuffed chair after offering me one.

"You don't look too worse for wear from last night. What did y'all get up to?"

"It was a late night, but tame. My only regrettable decision was eating too much. The steaks were huge."

"Make sure you still fit into that fancy suit," he teased.

"I'll be busy all week, so I'm not too worried. Jim has me on a full schedule of P.T. and swimming when classes aren't in session."

That could have been awkward, but Pa simply replied, "Good. Glad to see you taking good care of yourself. You know, your Ma is fit to burst with pride with how well you're doing. Talks customers' ears off when they ask after you. She says 'I won't have them thinking our Jean is an invalid. Isn't right to the other young men like him."

The doorbell rang, and Pa sprung up to answer it saying, "You just got comfortable. Tiny too. He'll be put out if you get up."

I decided it was easier not to argue, it'd take me four times as long to get there if I counted transferring into my chair.

"Good, now stay put. I'll show your guests in."

Pa let the guests in, and soon Mustang was standing in front of me looking morose. Just what I needed. Hawkeye had excused herself to "help" in the kitchen.

I busied myself transferring from the couch to my chair. Once I was situated, I pivoted sharply, and then said, "Mustang, come with me."

He followed me through the bedroom, and out the back door.

Once in the garden, he stood ramrod stiff.

"What's the problem?", I drawled, in an attempt to sound casual.
He was silent. Looked the chair up and down, while trying hard not to look.

"This again? This is the last time. Seriously!"

Mustang looked ridiculously uncomfortable. Shifting from one foot to the other was no better than his previous stance.

"For the last time, she put me into this chair. You saved me from an early grave."

"But this is my fault."

"No, it isn't. Even if I didn't have Sciezka, I'd have a great life. Stop. Just stop your guilt trip."

"But…"

"Roy, just stop! Can't you see this upsets me? Really, you need to quit this."

"Marcoh had a stone, he used it, had to… at the hospital, before they could discover I was blind. I wanted them to wait…"

"I had an inkling and I chose not to dig. You had every reason to do it. What good would any of this be if you were discharged medically? Everything, even what happened to me would have been pointless. You're fixing Ishbal. You'll get to the top."

"You were supposed to get there with me."

"Who says I can't? I'll be there. Sure, it'll be different, but still great. Who knows, I may even be more useful."

"How can you forgive me so easily? I ruined your life."

"I was just doing my duty. I pledged my life to Amestris, freely, before you were my commanding officer. And my life wasn't ruined. So, stop. Please. This had better be the last time we discuss this. I'm deadly serious. I'll go into psychology instead of civics if you keep this up. I'm sure Jim could find room for me in the rehab program."

He scrubbed a hand through his hair before saying, "Are you sure you don't blame me?"

"Absolutely. Even with the new intel. Alphonse and Mei are doing research in Xing this summer. And even if that doesn't pan out, I'm good. Sciezka and I are good. We can do this. So just quit. For my sake."

He still seemed conflicted, but finally offered his hand to shake it. I took it, and gripped it firmly.

"Good. Because I bet dinner is getting cold. Don't keep my Ma waiting."

By the time we got back inside more people had arrived. Breda had brought Catalina, Feury and Winry had come separately, but that was just for show, and Elysia, Gracia, and Jim were there as well. I immediately considered banishing Ed and Russel to the non-existent kids' table. I resisted that urge. They'd be a terrible influence on Elysia with their bickering. Mei had come too, and I could tell Al was pleased. I didn't point that out, because he still blushed furiously whenever anyone mentioned her in anything other than an alchemical capacity.
I was glad I'd taken Gracia's advice to buy a large table with many leaves, and folding chairs. We were elbow to elbow as we tucked into supper. Ma had laid out the full Sunday dinner spread, and it was only Saturday. Maybe Pa was right. My suit was bespoke after all, and this was a lot of food. It was only going to get worse.

Elysia sat between Ma and me, and was adorable sitting on two telephone books so she could see over the edge of the table properly. Her mother had fussed at her when she chose her spot, saying she should close in case she needed help cutting her meat. Gracia shouldn't have worried. Even if the pieces of chicken are big in Ma's chicken and dumplings, the meat is so tender you can cut it with a fork.

Ma rounded out the meal with buttermilk cucumbers, fresh radishes and spring onions, and chocolate cake for dessert. When I asked her later where she'd found a pot big enough for all of us, she shrugged, and then said, "Consider the pot part of your wedding present. Though y'all might need one."

During dinner, the topic of conversation was how we'd keep my cousins occupied and out of trouble. Sciezka suggested the National Gallery. I was sure my aunts and female cousins would love it. There was also the not insignificant problem of the massive stone staircase to get in.

I decided to just broach the subject of accessibility. I was among friends, so maybe someone would have an idea. At some point, I'd need and want to see the museums in Central with Sceizka. It would be a great date, right up her alley, and I should get cultured. This was not the time.

Eventually, Jim came up with a great plan. My male cousins lived in the sticks. Exploring the shops on the High Street, flicks at the cinema, and pints at the Cavalier would be sufficiently novel to keep them out of trouble. At least while they were on my watch.

After dinner, we all squeezed into the living room for coffee and conversation.

Once the last guest had gone home Sciezka and I headed to the bedroom. After a quick shared shower, we hit the hay. Before I dozed off, I tucked Sciezka into my side, and asked, "Are you sure we can't elope? I bet that little pervert Ling could make spectacular arrangements for us in Xing."

I grew serious for a moment. "You know I can't give you what other men can, right? You've been off birth control since after the coup. I probably can't give you children. I can't dance with you at the wedding, or carry you over the threshold…"

She cut in, "Is this about your talk with Roy? It'd better not be. I hate it what his attitude does to you. I am with you for you. I want exactly what we have. I want something just like this. You aren't your physical abilities. I want to wake up to, and fall asleep next to, the man right next to me, right now."

"But, my physical abilities are problematic…"

"Your physical abilities are just fine. It's architecture that is the problem. And Jean, I think that maybe you do worry about it too much. Your sense of humor is very self-deprecating. Maybe try and watch that. Especially around Roy."

"I wouldn't have anything to joke about if I didn't make fun of myself."

"Get some new material, or a new writer, sweetie. You're bright. You can do it."

Well she told me.
We had just under a week before the wedding. I was tired just thinking about it. But I knew we were up to the task. What's a wedding after you've committed high treason, while taking a full summer semester course load? I was still thinking hard about buying us both train tickets and hightailing it out of Central.

I was pretty sure Sciezka wouldn't object too strenuously. After all, Garfiel was set to arrive on the 0900 train from Rush Valley on Monday.

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