But Not Buried This Time

by Tierfal

Summary

Once Ed decides that he is categorically not going to rot on the Drachman tundra, dragging his ass out of the jaws of death is actually pretty easy. ...except when it's not. At all.

Which is most of the time.

(AU from end of Brotherhood.)

Notes

This fic started because inkdropsfox sent me a cosplay accessory. Complete with a PILE OF ANGST.

Now, Sam and I have the kind of relationship where we can do that kind of thing to each other without warning (also, this kind of thing), but a lot of people were understandably SOMewhat SCANDALIZED. :'D One of them was mthatyr, who is my other half. So we were talking about it one time, and they were like "THIS IS NOT OKAY?", and I was like, "I've been thinking about writing a fix-it; I'll throw a quick one together for you."

Seven and a half months and seventy-some-thousand words later… here we are. >___>

This fic also owes a lot – including the title – to a little ditty by Florence + the Machine that reminded me of Ed, for reasons which are painfully obvious; and then I jacked it up on the obvious Woodkid every time it got stuck. Writing this whole thing involved a lot of dragging myself along one word at a time, so… method fic. Sort… of. :'D It's likely to be dull in places, which is either bad writing or the whole point or both.

Also: I'm not quite done with the more-epiloguey-than-ending shit, but I'm getting there.
I'm hoping to update pretty consistently, but next weekend is going to be an RL shitshow, so I can't make too many promises there. And this weekend, I'm at a con! :D

**As to that violence warning above: it's not especially much more than canonical levels of blood and guts, but since I don't usually go into detail about that sort of thing, I wanted to flag it just in case. ♥
Chapter 1

And I'm getting tired
Of crawling all the way

— “Which Witch” – Florence + the Machine

As light seeps in under Ed’s eyelids and pries them upward a crack, the first thing he realizes is that there’s too much blood in his mouth for him to hiss out every last expletive he’s ever learned. Which is fine. Sort of. Since none of them would be remotely fucking adequate.

He winches his eyes open a fraction further and watches stupidly for a second as the black and gold stars dance like fireflies. He tries to focus on them hard. He can’t pass out—if he passes out, he bleeds out, and he dies, and he’s fucked. He can’t fucking die. Miles to go, and promises, and...

And he thought this was going to be it, didn’t he? But if it’s not, well—fuck that shit. Fuck dying. The Gate can’t have him yet.

He’s starting to be able to make out individual grains of dirt in front of his face. There’s one particularly stubborn little fucker stuck on one of his eyelashes—glued to it with dried blood, probably; dying is a nasty-ass fucking business and no mistake. He needs to be coherent to get this right—needs to have his shit together enough for a transmutation to knit up the bullet wounds and seal his guts inside his body where they belong. Might be too late, but if he’s conscious, then…maybe. And maybe’s a start.

His breathing sounds all wet and fucking ragged even to his own ears. The pain’s too ambient and too fucking huge to categorize—he can’t tell if one of the bullets punctured a lung or what. That’d be a bitch. Will be a bitch. Gotta think future tense. Gotta think, for starters.

He tries to sift back through the rubble in his shaken-to-shit little brain—it takes a second, and then concrete images of events start surfacing from the mire of memories, and he remembers...

He remembers yanking on his dog tag until the chain snapped, and tossing it to Jon, and contorting his mouth into a grin and saying “If I don’t make it, tell Al it didn’t hurt. And tell Mustang I’m sorry about the paperwork. Actually, tell him ‘Tough shit, you’re not the one who’s dead, asshole.’”

He remembers Jon doing a real cute combination laugh-cry thing, which would’ve been sort of touching if there’d been time for that kind of shit.

He remembers running like his life depended on it, because it was more than that—their lives depended on it, and they’d never done anything to deserve this shit; they’d never even stood a chance, and it wasn’t right, and he was damn sure gonna go down fighting for them like they were his own flesh and blood, because they might as well have been; they were his responsibility, and if this was the last thing he could do for them, then—

He remembers the impact, like a fucking freight train right to the chest, and thinking—in a shock way, in stark black and white, as the breath burst out of him and disappeared—This almost counts to settle up the scales.
It’s all kind of fucked up and fragmented after that—scratched out badly, like somebody went at the whole sequence in his head with a blunt black pen.

Doesn’t matter; he’s got more important shit to worry about just now—how to get through this is a hell of a lot more pressing than how he got here.

Speaking of pressing, he’s figured out the source of the prickle underneath his cheek, and of the spiderwebby white winding through the dirt: it’s snow. Which explains why there’s a distant ache mewing tirelessly beneath the howl of the hurricane pain. And why his shoulder’s numb at the automail join; also explains why he hasn’t bled to death, probably. Must’ve slowed it, or something. Clotting. Funny how ice burns deeper sometimes. “Tundra” is such a weird-ass fucking word; he used to love it—he used to think it was fascinating and strange and evocative. Now it sounds like earth packed too tight and frozen too solid to dig out graves, and corpses that frost over so fast they barely need them.

He’s lying on his right side, with the automail arm half-folded underneath him—probably his instinct was to wrap it around himself when the first bullet hit. Does he remember…? It’s all in bits and fucking pieces; moth wings at the edges of his understanding that keep flickering out of reach. He thinks he remembers—sparks. Maybe that was wishful thinking; maybe that was a last-ditch leap for sanctuary when he thought his time was up. Maybe that was his final failing effort to feel warm again before the whole thing… stopped.

Or maybe the arm took one of the bullets meant for another part of him, and that’s why he’s still alive.

Pity Winry’s going to kill him even if he makes it, but at least that leases him a little bit of borrowed time.

His eyelids sink over and over, and again and again he forces them back open even though his head throbs like a motherfucking bitch. He’s not stupid—hemorrhaging and concussion and the snow? No fucking way is he going to sleep; no fucking way until he knows he’s somewhere he can wake back up again. The tiny white crystals strewn among the grit swim in and out of focus as he lies as still as he can manage and tries to take stock.

The worst of the obliterative pain is emanating from a point on his right side not far above his hip. Either the frostbite or the weight of his left leg has made the right completely numb, but he’s relatively confident it still exists, so that’s something. He shifts the left just slightly, and the agony fucking radiates—and there it is; there’s the stiffness to his coat in the back, scraping on the screaming of his nerves. He’s got an exit wound, and the blood froze in the fabric.

Over the din of the sheer fucking sensation he can make out a similar spread on the center of his chest, too, but it’s—different. It stings like all fucking hell over there, but with none of the urgent enormity of the trajectory cut through his side. Shrapnel? Is that what happened? The bullet hit the automail, and—what? Maybe Winry’ll let him thank her before she murders him.

He needs to fix this fucker up. It’s a pretty typical pile of bullshit that it was the right side—it couldn’t’ve just carved a new trail right back through the old one; the vital organs on that side are practiced at this shit; they would’ve just sidestepped the fucking bullet and shrugged. Nah, matching scars on both sides; more fucked up kidney and liver shit—that’s what he needs.

Not that that in any way compromises the fucking miracle that he’s alive.

He’ll have to summon up some manual dexterity for this, and a couple of brain cells if there are any of those still clinging to his battered skull. He wouldn’t blame them if they’d jumped ship by
now; he doesn’t take very good care of them. Then again—is it really his fault he gets the everloving shit beaten out of him a lot?


Al gives him these looks that settle just short of outright pity, ’cause he knows—he knows it’s the universe, honestly; it’s not Ed, or at least not consciously, and even if it was, it’s what he deserves, so he’ll take his licks with his head down when he has to, as long as no one else’s safety is at stake.

Roy’s looks are unreadable, because Roy’s a shitty asshole bastard. Roy holds his face like the polished marble of a monument and grazes his fingertips so light over the bruises that even though Ed’s blood beats faster, they don’t start to hurt. Roy said once You should take better care of yourself, and then, slowly, like he was in a trance, like a dream, like he was reciting something written somewhere he could barely see—You’ve always lived like your life doesn’t matter, but it does—to many more people than I think you know. And we’d like for you to be around for a long time.

It’s funny, the shit you think about when you’re lying on the tundra with a bullet hole through your fucking abs. Your brain makes different connections while it wavers on the verge of winking out.

Connections like Maybe that bastard takes obsessive care of me ’cause he knows I’d never do it on my own, but he thinks I’m somehow worthy to be cared for.

Or like Maybe he talks about the future all the fucking time because he wants me to believe I have one.

Or I think he’s in love with me.

Or Fuck my life, I think I love him, too.

Ed blinks at the little blots of snow for a few more seconds. After accounting more or less mathematically for the expected tipping of his vision from the vertigo, the world does not seem to be tilting off its axis, and he hasn’t felt a single tremor that he’d call an earthquake. There are exactly zero noticeable jets of fire or hailstorms slinging flaming stones. So—apparently—all available evidence stands to indicate that the Apocalypse is not especially nigh.

Interesting.

He’ll chalk that up as one more reason to survive. If only so he can give the great Roy Mustang some shit about falling for a dumbass, bullet-punctured cripple and whatever shit.

Well, that’s that, then.

He sets his jaw, grits his teeth for good measure, and rolls a quarter-turn—enough to summon spearheads of ferocious pain spiking outwards from the wound; and enough to jar a shimmer of fainter lightning down the length of his left arm that makes his brain shudder and his fingers twitch.

They can’t take that away. No matter how much mud and pitch and fucking sickness they drag him through, no matter how many lives they make him ruin, no matter how much of the world gets fucked up in his name—he’s the Fullmetal Alchemist. He’s the boy in the blood-red coat with a score to settle and a serpent’s cross hung from his shoulders; he’s the smallest, swiftest shadow flitting out of smoke and ozone, counting points towards a redemption that he knows that he won’t reach; he’s the only man in the military naïve enough to believe in peace and justice. He’s snarled and tangled and fought and lied and contorted himself through every loophole he can find in this
hellhole, and they haven’t crushed him yet.

They can’t take that away.

Fullmetal wouldn’t die here. Fullmetal doesn’t understand defeat.

Fullmetal’s going to go out in a blaze of glory with a trail of fire, escorted by an entourage of flaming dragon skulls, howling his triumph to the spiteful fucking heavens—not in a pit of mud and blood and patchy snow, curled up and whimpering over his wounds. Maybe there’s no such thing as destiny, but you get as good as you give, and he’s not finished yet. Not by a longshot.

He raises his hand. He’s a circle—a ring, a loop; he’s feedback; he’s energy; he is matter and material; he is raw possibility; he is parts and whole, deconstruction and creation; he is the embodiment of alchemy, and his soul is an untapped well of pulsing potential; it is photons shivering in place—

He pins the lines down in his mind and draws a ragged breath and presses the palm of his left hand to the limp steel weight of the right.

The crackle of bright blue light and the tang of ozone feels like a balm; like a blessing; like coming home; like being complete, like being **completed**; and he drinks it fucking in.

He’s the Philosopher’s Stone. That’s the part so many people fail to understand; a single human being’s absolute uniqueness in the universe has more power than a thousand-thousand churning mills—more than volcanoes, more than forest fires, more than storms that torment ships and dash them into shards of lumber on the shore. Human beings are dynamos. They’re irreplaceable. They can’t be built; they can’t be bought; they can’t be measured.

But they can be harnessed. They can be harvested. They can be used.

And he’s got desperation left for this.

This is the first and oldest and greatest kind of power he’s ever had, ever **known**, ever understood to own, to use, to channel towards ideas; the only means he’s ever had to justify the ends hanging just out of reach—the only recourse; the only thing that’s ever made him whole—

Literally, sometimes. Like now.

It’s the only thing that’s ever rescued him from meaninglessness.

He lies still, listening to the wet wheeze of his own fucking breath, letting the sheer sweet energy of it course through him—letting it cycle, letting it run; letting it sing down every nerve; he’s the circle; a human being is a soul and a heartbeat and the single most complex array—

It’s humming in his ears now, louder than the shiver of his blood; louder than any gunshot, louder than an avalanche; louder than the roaring silence in the white place where this **really** began—

He peels his left hand free from the right and slaps it to the center of his chest.

The rush—

The pressure—

The **heat**—

Like drowning in the bright blue at the center of a flame—
And his veins are alive with it; lightning searing underneath each centimeter of his skin; his blood is starlight singing through the ether; he’s a concept; he’s *unmade*—

The Gate can’t hold him; nothing can.

The light whips around and around and across the lines sketched out in his head; it slingshots off the angles and suffuses every sigil, melts them, *swells*—

And the wave crests and crashes and smothers him, slamming down with breathtaking force, like a freight train, like a box truck, like the right kiss—

He blinks the constellations from his eyes, gasping like a beached fish; his body *burns* all over, with the strongest sear radiating from the newly-patched hole in the meat of his back. Gradually the sky cinches into focus, and he successfully twitches his right foot.

Still here. Still fucking kickin’.

He drags in the deepest breath he can manage; the cold air feels like a wad of knives down his throat and into his lungs, but he can practically taste the oxygen, and *that*—that never gets old.

He won’t either, if he keeps going at this fucking rate.

But that’s an existential crisis he can have another time, in front of a fireside under a blanket with a mug of cocoa in one hand and a book in the other. The blanket’s gonna be red plaid. There’ll be marshmallows bobbing on the surface of the hot chocolate—*good* ones; the big, fluffy kind. And he’ll have his feet out towards the fireplace grate so that the heat seeps all the way up the metal, and that alone will make his current plight more than worth the fucking trouble.


His right arm isn’t responding yet—Winry’s gonna lose her *shit* if there’s a bullet buried in it somewhere; dying at her hands would make this whole experience look like a walk in the fucking park—but he manages to leverage the left underneath himself and prop up his own weight a little. His head, helpfully, spins like nobody’s goddamn business for a second, all flashes of light and pinwheeling colors like a fucking kaleidoscope.

He lifts himself a few inches higher and tries to raise his gaze enough to assess the damned environment—for all he knows, some Drachman sniper’s been waiting for him to finish that snazzy little alchemical display before putting a fucking hollowpoint through his forehead. The tiny lights swarm him like—wasps? Bees? Definitely wasps; they’re obviously not friendly; they shudder in the air around him, winking like they’re in on some kind of cosmic joke. Can’t pass out now, either. Can’t afford it.

He breathes as deep as he can bear. It hurts like a brand-new stabbing in his maybe-slightly-punctured now-rush-repaired lung on the left side, but the half-frozen oxygen seeps in all the same, and as it bolsters his blood, he can *feel* himself taking strength from it. Fancy that. He might just make it out of here alive.

When the constellations stop spinning around his face, he swallows, coughs something reddish and highly unappealing into his sleeve, swallows again, and tries to shift his feet underneath him to take some of his weight. The left one responds without much of any trouble—maybe a little bit of a creak; maybe a twinge of unhappy nerve connections, but nothing like the outright sit-down protest that his arm’s started staging. He better get through this so Winry can beat the shit out of him. He owes her that much. He owes her a lot more than that.
He takes it agonizingly fucking slow—people used to accuse him of recklessness; Roy still does, but he’s not stupid, is the thing. If he tried to jump up onto his feet like a jack-in-the-box right now, he’d be faceplanting in the snow again faster than you could say “traumatic shock from major blood loss”, and that wouldn’t do jackshit for anyone. Odds are he’d freeze to death, which is starting to sound progressively more nice and peaceful, which—

Yeah. Getting the fuck out of here.

He maneuvers his knees under himself first, and then wraps his left arm around his thigh and starts hauling until he’s dragged it up and planted his foot in the snow. That’s one. The other’s a little easier, even though his skin’s prickling everywhere with the fucking cold. That’s two feet on the ground; a man can do anything from here with enough stubborn fucking gumption. And if there’s one thing Ed’s never been accused of, it’s an insufficient quantity of sheer pigheadedness.

Settles that.

He spreads his left hand in the snow for balance and cautiously starts shifting his weight onto his feet, extending his knees as he goes. Easy fuckin’ does it; tilt the balance a little bit at a time—his head starts to swim, and he hesitates until the world stops teetering. He’s halfway upright, which is the hard shit, actually; he has to lift up his hand and lose that stabilization before he can stand up the rest of the way; this is going to be a right bitch, but nobody ever got a medal for giving up halfway through—

Shitfuck—

The vertigo basically slaps him across the face, and he instinctively puts his left arm out for balance, but—

He’s up.

Reeling, so lightheaded it’s kind of impressive that his skull hasn’t floated off into the ice-blue Drachman sky, but—


Ain’t that just the story of his fucking life?

He bares his teeth in a grin up at the weak pinprick glow of the sun sinking towards the mountainside. That’s one more time it’s gone down before him—one more day that he’s outlasted; one more round he’s won. They don’t give medals just for breathing, either, but some days they should.

Gravity drags his head down, and his gaze goes with it. What the fuck happened here, again? There was—they were the bait. They were shark chum, as far as the brass was concerned; they were meat one way or another, might as well be dead, if they could distract the hordes of Drachman demons from the bulk of the troops and save the motherland. Ed doesn’t blame them for the sacrifice—that’s how you play chess, unless you want to get your ass kicked and handed back to you bloody as hell. What he blames them for is sticking a bunch of kids under his command—good kids, nice kids, kids who didn’t know that they’d signed up to be served up to the gory fangs of the war machine.

He wasn’t about to bring those kids here to die with him. Not a chance.

The worst thing is, they probably knew it—Hakuro and Storch, in their shitty-ass tent with their rattling gas heaters and their serious expressions and their fucking lies. They knew he’d send the
others back and take this on alone. They knew he could—knew he’d probably make it happen, even if he didn’t make it out alive. They knew the worst-case scenario was being rid of their greatest asset and their biggest inconvenience—the mosquito-voiced machine gun who could’ve ended this shit a month ago, if he was rotted at the core like them. They knew they’d either shut him up forever; or he’d scrape through, and they’d get what they wanted and keep him under their oily fucking thumbs.

He’s got to get through this—he’s got to live long enough to watch Roy thrash those motherfuckers at the polls, in the pit, twisting their own game around their heads until they can’t see anything but checkered board and fallen pawns.

Like the thousand pawns the Drachmans sent, who are lying in the wall of rock and snow that Ed brought down almost before they had him in their sights.

This was a valley before—had a name, too; Cezopek. You’re supposed to do a funny thing where you curl your tongue. Now it’s a… pile. Of rock. With corpses underneath.

Let nobody ever say he didn’t do his fucking duty to the state.

Let nobody ever say he wanted to.

He tries to roll his right shoulder, and he gets a little bit of a rotation out of it, but the rest of the arm still won’t listen to his brain. What a little shit. It’s probably doing it on purpose.

He starts out walking slow, towards the mess of death and rubble and nightmares that he made—it’d be best if he could find an officer, but the Drachmans tend to lead from the ba…

Well, hello. Here’s one with the nice collar and the accented hat—or it looks like it; hard to tell with all the blood. He didn’t get buried in the snow, which is a plus, although the head wound from the rolling boulders did a number on the fur that lines his coat.

Wouldn’t be the first time Ed’s had another person’s blood smeared on his face. Probably won’t be the last.

Fighting a body out of a coat with one hand and reduced physical stamina is significantly harder than Ed thinks he’ll ever admit. If somebody decides to ask, he’ll just… shrug. With his one remaining shoulder, at this rate.

What the hell do they feed these guys, anyway? Must be more than the Amestrian rations; fuck’s sake, the guy weighs a ton. Ed has to haul with everything he’s got fuckin’ left on one sleeve to try to roll the body out—blood spills on the snow from the jagged-edged dent in the guy’s head, and it doesn’t even matter how many times you’ve seen that fucking shit; Ed’s stomach turns, and he can feel the bile climbing up his throat—

Don’t do it. Don’t do it, Elric; don’t you fucking dare; you can’t afford to lose the calories, and you can’t stop now.

He stands as still as he can, tilting his head back and breathing slow and deep. There’s a tiny cirrus cloud loitering around way up over head—there’s something reluctant about it. Like it didn’t get the clear sky memo today and showed up anyway, and now it’s the only one here, but it was already dressed, so it can’t just leave, right, but maybe if it makes itself small enough in the corner, nobody’ll notice, and…

He swallows, laboriously, and looks down at the splattered snow again. He’s okay. He’s gonna be okay. He doesn’t have a choice. Dead men tell no tales, and they can’t fucking hurt you anymore.
So—really—corpses are the safest people to hang out with, if you think about it. They’re the only ones who can’t fuck you up, one way or another, whether it’s intentional or not. Whether or not it’s just the sheer potential skimming on your skin, so sharp it cuts you open, and the only thing that can stitch it up is finding out what might be there, but needles are so fucking *freaky* that it might be better not to know—to just keep bleeding quietly and never figure out what all that static electricity amounts to, right—?

Fuckin’ *hell*, this guy’s so heavy—heavy like all the shit that’s left unsaid, sitting like stone on the back of your tongue while the lightning darts around you.

Ed grits his teeth and yanks hard on the sleeve, pulling upward, and—

The lifeless arm slips out of the sleeve, and then the center of gravity of the whole corpse is shifting towards the chest that used to rise and fall and rise again not too many hours fucking previous, and isn’t that a *bitch*—?

The body pitches forward into a roll, and Ed keeps pulling back and up on the coat, and the other arm falls out of the other sleeve, and the whole wrong-angled pile of meat tumbles to the snow. Blood seeps out of the head wound. Ed swallows, swallows, and spits off to the side. Nasty fucking habit, but sometimes you don’t have a choice; sometimes there’s no other *way* to get the sick-taste out of your mouth before it chases back down your throat and hits your stomach and—

It’s a pain in the ass getting his own coat off with his right arm just hanging like that, but he’s got some practice maneuvering clothes off with only one hand, and…

Clothes off. Funny little wisp of a thought; funny little fragment. Funny little botched stitch sticking up in the fabric of the ordered internal monologue that was just flicking by, and it catches, and…

Roy’d been touching him so fucking much in the weeks before… before. Just little stuff—just brushes of the shoulder and grazes with elbows and… stuff. Stuff that could be accidental, and maybe that’s why he wrote it off; maybe that’s why he didn’t pay it any fuckin’ heed and didn’t keep a tally, but he *should* have. He should have remembered that Roy fucking Mustang doesn’t do a damn thing by accident. Roy fucking Mustang is always in control.

He almost registered the other one—the clothes thing. Roy used to coax him over to the Bastard Den all the time for a drink and a research argument (he usually said “discussions”, but he doesn’t call himself a diplomat for nothing), and he’d always… take Ed’s coat and his scarf and—whatever. Just—shoulder-touching. Real light, like it doesn’t count if you barely feel it.

How did Ed fail to notice a behavioral pattern changing like that?

Nah. He knows the answer to that. The brain is fucking powerful—and susceptible to its own fucking power. Even an iron-skulledly logical intellect like his—even a mind stuffed with all the education that all the endless teeming texts can offer (and all the scraps and wisps and shadows and the sick and ragged edges that the leering white face crammed between the lines)—can convince itself of all kinds of small untruths.

He talked himself into believing that it was only him.

He talked himself into believing that Roy couldn’t possibly have an ulterior motive, because the only explanation was—unthinkable. Not just implausible; *unimaginable*. To be wanted—to exist in the capacity of another man’s temptation—
No. Not him.

He’s never gotten anything he wanted—or not the way he wanted it—except for Al. He burned up a lifetime of the exchange for Al, seared the scales and dragged them down and thrashed their makings, and he won, but he used it up. Not again. Never again. That’s all right; that’s fine, but —

It rules out Roy.

Or he thought it did.

But it’s flipped, now, in the brisk frigid cold of this stretch of unmourned graves. Logic is—the logical thing is—

Roy’s fingertips on the nape of his neck, so fucking gentle, Let me get that—please, come in—I bought a new mix for cocoa; won’t you try it?

The bastard. The fucking bastard. How could he make it so fucking unequivocal—unarguable—and still so fucking obfuscated that Ed went all this time—?

What if he’d fucking died? What if he’d died and never—?

Roy should’ve—

Said something, should’ve…

What?

Gotten him to stay? Saved him from this whole wreck of misery—this unending agony of spilled blood and spread guts and sleepless fucking fear?

‘Saved’ him. As if he can be saved.

…but it’s a nice thought, isn’t it? A nice, warm thought in a place like this. A nice, warm little fantasy where maybe somebody gives a goddamn shit when he wakes up sweating, choking back the echoes of the unvoiced scream. A nice, warm little shred of a hope of a dream where maybe the gentle pressure of someone’s hands can draw some of the fucking poison out, and maybe—maybe somefucking day—

Well.

He can indulge the stupid, childish little daydreams later. Right now he’s got a corpse to loot.

He peels his coat off the rest of the way and piles it, semi-waterproofed outside down on the snow; and holy fucking hell it’s cold. Fucking—frostbite-level shit; all the time; gloves on, half a billion shirts, and it’s still so cold it stings all over.

He threads his limp-ass automail into the dead man’s empty sleeve and shoulders the whole thing on; it’s still… warm. A little. Warmer than the snow.

His gloved hand is clumsy as shit, but he’s more used to fabric-swathed fingers than most, and he rummages in the corpse’s pockets, then through the little snapped-down compartments on the belt. Coins; a few crumbs of rations; half a dozen bullets; and a scrap of paper. Gloved fucking fingertips slipping helplessly, he forces it to unfold—

Oh. Oh. This whole God thing is way overwrought, but—
Sometimes—

Sometimes the exchange just—

Sometimes coincidences aren’t cruel; sometimes—

Sometimes the paper you turn up is the map of outpost safehouses that you’d have been praying
for if you’d thought it would’ve mattered in the least.

He sends a mental word in an existential direction, though it’s less a prayer of thanks than a Yeah,
fuck you, too lobbed vaguely towards the Gate.

He memorizes the layout to the best of his ability before he folds it again and shoves it into the
inner breast pocket of his uniform. It’s all a bit wishy-washy regardless—just fucking Xs dotted
around the abstract shapes of the important pieces of topography—but it’s a hell of a fucking lot
better than nothing, which is what he had before.

A glance back at the horizon confirms that there’s no time for amateur theology hour anyway—if
he doesn’t drag his sorry ass to one of these places before the sun goes down, his sorry ass is also
going to be a dead ass. Which would be a pain in the ass. Although not for him specifically, since
he’d be dead, but—still. No point provoking a bunch of headaches and a pile of paperwork.
Besides, flowers are expensive, and Al’s got tuition and shit to pay for. Better to just—make it.
Better all around.

There’s another soldier with his torso protruding from the snow, so Ed checks his belt, too, and the
small leather pack strapped to him. Fucking bingo—two kinds of jerky and some hard tack, and
it’s too cold for maggots here, so the stuff lasts forever; this’ll sustain him for days if the hunting’s
bad, which it probably is this far from anything. It’d be great if it didn’t come to the brink of
starvation and all that, but given the general the worst thing that can happen is pretty much a
guaranfuckingtee trajectory of his entire life…

Right. Getting the fuck out of here.

He crams his own coat into the bag as best as he can and buckles the pack’s straps through the
shoulder bars to hold it off the ground, so that at least it won’t drag in the snow too bad. It
probably looks like a really confused sort of cape in the way it’s hanging down, but—well, first of
all, who fucking cares when survival’s on the line; and second, there’s no one to see it anyway, so
there’s nobody to give a shit.

Funny how quiet it is—funny how quiet it can be. There’s always a special sort of silence with
snowfall, like it’s buried the fucking soundwaves with the rest of the world—and then there’s
always a special sort of silence with the dead. So in that way, it sort of makes sense. Absolute
fucking emptiness. A void. Voiceless, soundless, white.

…better not to keep thinking that way.

He threads his useless right arm through one of the straps of the pack and fits the other one over his
left shoulder, hauling on the slack until he pulls it tight. When it’s settled against his shoulder-
blades, he takes one more look at the silhouetted peaks drowning the sun—no time. No time, no
second chances. Not out here.

He turns his back to the sunset—facing due east—and starts walking.

As long as he’s moving, he’s alive.
As long as he’s alive, there’s hope.

Seems awful simple when you lay it out like that.

The uniformity of the darkening snow starts to wear on him after—what? An hour? Half of that? He’s clutching his compass in his operable hand; he’s not completely sure he could unclench his fingers long enough to check his watch. Besides, the time doesn’t fucking matter; time is meaningless out here. All he’s got is the wind and the white and the feeble little candle flame of forcing himself to believe that there’s an outpost here somewhere—somewhere down the valley, somewhere between him and the midnight cold that’ll freeze his blood and fell him where he stands.

Nothing’s touched the snow—it’s just one big smothering blanket from here to forever; from here to eternity, to the ends of the world, the ends of imagination. The animals are too fucking smart to be out now; the ones that aren’t hibernating have learned better than to leave prints anywhere near this war. Probably smart. He’d pull an Izumi and take on a bear if the opportunity arose—he’s so fucking hungry, and wasn’t that what guns were meant for, at the start—? Isn’t that the only thing —?

The cold is eating him alive. It starts at your toes and your fingertips; it numbs your extremities so you can’t feel its teeth, and then it gnaws them down to nothing one by one.

On the sort-of-an-upside, it’s practically filling in for painkillers where his back’s concerned. That’s what Al would say. Al knows the bright side like the back of his hand. Both hands. Al has both hands. Al has both hands, and that’s the only thing that matters; that’s the only thing he ever really wanted to do—the only thing he had to fix to set it right; the only thing he ever would’ve died for without looking back. So if he does die here—if he stumbles, and the snow swallows him whole—it’s not the worst thing. It’s not the end. Al goes on; Al has both hands and a beating heart; Al has a smile he’ll show again.

That’s a nice thought. It’s all right. It’s all right if he doesn’t make it out. Not that it wouldn’t be great to go on living, preferably with all five fingers and all his toes, but—if he doesn’t, he isn’t failing anyone.

Except—

Except.

How the fuck did he not know before now?

They’d threatened him with progressively direr fates until he let them jam him into a halffassedly-tailored uniform. The whole gig was incredibly fucking stupid, in retrospect—nothing they could’ve done to him was worse than where he was going when he put that on. Ooh, dis-fucking-honorable discharge—he’s watched a bayonet blade drive through the throat of a sixteen-year-old boy. It stuck in the spine at first, and then there was this crack as the bone gave way.

He’d put the stupid fucking blues on, and he’d shifted around trying to tug the parts that didn’t fit, and he’d pulled a face and shit, but—he knew. He knew the combat uniforms were jazzed-up burial shrouds. They all did.

Roy put a hand on his left shoulder—one heavy hand, curled too tight—and looked him in the eyes and said, “I’m proud of you, Ed.”

Ed said, “Bullshit.”
Roy said, “True.” Then he said, “Promise me that you’ll come back.”

The rustling was so faint that anybody less furiously mad and less fucking tense and less generally paranoid than Ed never would’ve heard it, which meant he was probably the only one in the room who knew that Riza had reacted with her equivalent of an outright gasp.

“All right,” Ed said. “If you get some fucking work done while I’m gone.”

Admittedly—

Admittedly, the odds of Roy having actually finished any paperwork during Ed’s six-week stint in this icy hell are fairly low, because the odds of Roy accomplishing anything in a remotely efficient manner always are.

But—

Just in case—

Well, shit.

Ed tries to roll both shoulders and only earns a little motion from the left. It’s getting fucking impossible to see with the blue-black dragging the shadows wider as the seconds pass. He had a flashlight at some point, but the thing about stealth missions and inducing avalanches and getting shot and shit is that you tend to lose track of what objects are still on your person.

Besides—it’s probably not worth the two or three minutes of standing still and fumbling leaden-fingered through his thousand pockets, trying to turn up a tube of cold metal that may or may not currently function, whether or not it still exists.

Roy always used to talk about risk and reward for fucking hours every time Ed was indirectly-sort-of-kind-of responsible for a building getting demolished not-exactly-on-schedule, and Ed always used to tune him out in favor of balancing chemical equations in his head, but—

That’s just an exchange, too, isn’t it?

Funny.

Funny, all the shit that comes clear in the frozen dark.

Hell, if Ed had known that almost-dying again would spark his brain this much, he would’ve done it sooner.

But it’s the “almost” part that’s critical, right? What’s the point in being a moribund genius if you don’t live long enough to share any of your revelations? Intellect is a social thing. It’s fucking meaningless to be brilliant if you can’t broadcast it somehow.

Damn it. It all just circles back to the same old conclusion—Ed better figure out a way to live.

He’s been walking east for about forever by now, hasn’t he? Maybe the map lied. Maybe he misunderstood it. Maybe the marks were old battlefields the Drachmans would know the features of, not safehouses at all. Maybe they’re minefields. Maybe he should start sizing up the snowbanks and dig himself a fucking hole and learn how to pray or some shit.

Maybe he should’ve dug some of the bodies out of the rubble and lit ’em on fire for warmth and just stayed there. Maybe he should’ve headed back towards their old camp in case Jon or any of
the others had hung around. Maybe he should’ve \textit{let} himself bleed out before any of this nonsense started to wind up and wind up, like a child’s toy pulling the wires taut, loading the spring; what the hell is he thinking, expecting something good to come of it when somebody turns the crank too far, and the whole thing just—?

Shiftfuckhelldamn. His snap decision-making is not at its finest when he’s recently rush-sealed a bullet wound, is it?

Too late now. Isn’t that the summary of his whole damn existence?

Well—the alternative summary is the good old \textit{You won’t get anywhere if you don’t keep moving}. Better to die trying—better to drop from exhaustion than to lie down and wait. He’s shit at waiting anyway. Al inherited all the patience. And all the people skills. And all the good looks. Although Ed fucked himself over on that one on his own more than Hohenheim’s genes ever did, so it’s hard to complain.

Except—

Holy fucking \textit{hell}, it’s weird—the things that keep coming back; there’s a blizzard in his head to match the one hanging heavy in the clouds that have gathered overhead. It was all just snowfall, before—single flakes pirouetting gently; he could catch them on his tongue or let them drift away; they couldn’t do him any harm, and the dampness of them melting barely registered.

But when you put enough of those together—

When you start to view them as a whole—

Every time he’d come out with something off-the-cuff and vaguely disparaging about himself, about the scars tracking every which way across his skin, or about the automail, or his father’s jaw, or how great it was that Al had gotten all of the pretty phenotypes between the two of them, because he just would’ve fucked ‘em up anyway—

\textit{At every} little comment, Roy would get this—look. Just for a second, blink-and-you-miss-it brief—he’d get this rueful little smile, and his eyes would go tight, and he’d murmur \textit{I don’t think that’s true, Edward}, and then it would be gone.

What a fucking \textit{bastard}.

What a stupid, shitty, lousy, lying, piece of \textit{crap} excuse for a man—

Why didn’t he ever just—say something?

Why did he have to go around implying so damn subtly that Ed had to rattle his thick-ass skull with the impact of a fucking \textit{gunshot} before it would sink in?

Why did he have to waste the time they could’ve had until it came to \textit{this}?

Motherfucker. At least the anger’s going to help to keep Ed warm.

Maybe that was Roy Mustang’s dumbass fucking game all along. Ed wouldn’t put it past him—nudge, and nudge, and never push, and wait until Ed had way too much time for thinking about shit, and let him figure it out, and let it fire him up so much that he’d \textit{refuse} to die, and then—

And then—what?
What might he be coming back to?

What the fuck is he supposed to say? *Yo, Mustang, are you in love with me, or what?*

…actually, that’d get the job done pretty well.

But—then what? Are they gonna be—what? Is Roy even going to—

He’s got so much to deal with—Roy does. He’s got so much shit to do; so much to rebuild, so much to tear the bottom out of, so much to turn upside-down and shake and remake around a better frame.

Maybe that’s why—why he never brought it up, called it out, put it into words. Roy’s so fucking good with words; he can twist them into silken ropes or iron chains or tongues of flame or ribbons in a thousand colors—it wasn’t that he *couldn’t* say it. He didn’t want to. Something held him back.

Maybe he just doesn’t have the time.

Maybe he thinks Ed’s into chicks, based off the girlfriend sample size of *fucking zero* and the noncommittal muttering every time Havoc elbows him in the ribs and says “She’s a looker, in’t she?”

Or maybe he knows (as much as Roy knows anything—maybe he suspects, believes, concludes, *supposes*), from his vast wealth of prior practical experience, that it’ll crash and fucking burn.

Maybe he just doesn’t think it’s worth it.

Roy has so damn much to lose, and he’s a strategist; what in the hell would he stand to gain from cramming Ed’s awkward-ass angles into the ordered arrangement of his life and knocking all the chess pieces to the board and—?

That’d explain it, wouldn’t it? The radio silence from a man who loves nothing on the planet more than the sound of his own voice. That’d explain why he’s holding it back—holding it all back, keeping all his cards face-down, in the hopes that the numbers will change while he’s not looking.

Well, fuck that. Fuck him. If they both got dealt this stupid hand, then Ed’s gonna make him *look* at it if it’s the last damn thing he does.

Except—

Fuck that fucking word, but—

It’s probably for the best, isn’t it?

Ed’d probably trip over every last damn convention of what it’s supposed to be, *who* he’s supposed to be, how it’s supposed to feel and work and all that shit. He’d get tangled in it and try to right himself and drag them both down flailing with it knotted all around their feet. That’s what he does—he fucks shit up. Even the smoothest bastard ever to walk the streets of Central City can’t change that—or fix it, or fight it, or set it right. Ed’s broken on the inside—at the core. Too deep to touch without tearing his heart out first to clear the way.

And that’s fine—fine and fucking dandy. It’s easier for everyone if they don’t even start; if they don’t start, Ed can’t screw it up.
Good. Great. Fucking fantastic. He doesn’t want it anyway; he doesn’t want to know what it’d be like—he already knows; it’d be a fucking disaster; it’d be a house burning down in slow motion with your brother inside when you’re too far away to touch it, and the dreamscape keeps solidifying into a transparent solid around your feet, and you can’t move, you can’t run—

Why the fuck would he willingly hurl himself on that pyre?

It’s better if they just—don’t. Don’t prod it through the bars; don’t ever dignify it with so much as a single word of speech. It’s better if Ed never gets the chance to scramble up Roy’s stupid life, trash all his feelings, muddy his house, muck up his grand masterplan to save this place—just by being there, by being profoundly in the way. For someone so… demographically normal-sized, he has an incredible fucking knack for being in the wrong place all the time, and he’d interfere somehow. He’d ruin it. He’d ruin all of it—Roy’s whole fucking life. That’s what he does; he takes the lives of people who give a shit about him, and he throttles them when he tries to hold them tight.

It’s better if he never gets the chance. It’s better if he never finds out how Roy’s fingertips feel on his left hand, on his cheek, his jaw, his throat, his collarbones, his—

Fuck.

Well, at least he’s—warmer—now.

It’s better if they don’t. It’s better if he doesn’t even think about it; it’s better if he doesn’t imagine, ’cause if he does, he’ll crack—at the edges first, little fissures, tiny furrows, lines like gashes spreading open. And then he’ll split down the fucking middle, and he can’t afford to; he doesn’t have time. Roy can’t afford it either. Ed’s an anvil on a chain, and if Roy puts that fucking manacle on his wrist and tries to drag Ed with him for five minutes, he’ll just never catch his breath, and then—

And then that’ll be arcing towards the top of the current Shit Ed Fucked Up list, and Ed’ll have to allocate a considerable portion of his guilty conscience towards it, and…

Just…

There isn’t time. It isn’t worth it. He isn’t worth it. And that’s fine. He’s fine. Who fucking cares? One more missed connection—one more tiny, squandered opportunity; one more gasp of untapped potential—in a world of tragic misery. Who gives a shit?

He doesn’t. Roy won’t either, as soon as he comes to his senses and remembers there are people whose coats he can take who won’t fling their shitty-ass baggage all over his life the second their hands are free.

He doesn’t care.

He doesn’t care.

He doesn’t c—

Is that the outline of a structure on the blurry-dark horizon, or are his eyes playing asshole tricks?

Is it—

Please—
He’s too fucking tired and too fucking anemic to run; he’d probably trip and fall on his face and die there, five hundred feet from either miraculous sanctuary or some kind of blizzard mirage.

Holy hell; is it—? Is it really—? Good shit doesn’t happen to him; he doesn’t know if he can trust… There’ll probably be, like, a bear inside. Or an entire contingent of Drachman soldiers, bristling with armaments, and they’ll test his Drachman to see if he’s one of them, and he’ll stagger through most of a sentence and then give himself away with a wrong inflection, and they’ll gut him slow so he can see it—

No smoke from the chimney; no light seeping out around the edges of the faint, faint outline of a door.

Oh, shit. Oh, shit. There’s no such thing as luck; there’s only the coincidence—the intersection of entwining lives, the mathematical probability of every outcome based on the precedent actions and reactions, but if—if this is—if he really—

Well, then he’ll be having a mathematically kickass day after all, won’t he, if he pulls out of this?

Not much for it except fervent fucking hope and one damn foot in front of the other. Forget the fucking pain shooting upwards through his left thigh, spearing outward with every rhythmic pressure on the port; forget the fucking burn of the wound on his back, twinging when he takes a step; forget the chafing frozen bloodstains stiffening his uniform; forget the dead men’s faces he’ll envision every time his eyes close for the rest of his damn life—

He has to get out of this, because he has to get home—because he has to know that there’s a fucking home to go to. He has to prove it to himself. He owes it to the ones who won’t ever see theirs again.

His breath mists, fast and ragged, spark-hot against his cracked lips for just a second before it dissipates.

He inches closer to the shape solidifying in the dimness; this has to be real; the ache in every fucking muscle is deeper and sharper and fuller than he could imagine if he was hallucinating, so —

He just has to keep moving; he just has to drag his right leg and then the left; one goddamn fucking step at a goddamn fucking time, and eventually—it’s just physics; just laws of motion and shit; eventually—

It’s just a matter of time. Time and sheer fucking stubbornness. Sounds like the story of his life again.

The cold is so deep when the sun goes down—so complete, so fucking penetrative; it digs through your skin and burrows in your bones and rattles through your every fucking capillary; all the marrow in your skeleton freezes crystal-cold, and then you breathe it back out, and the iciness burns your throat on the way up.

He can’t feel his toes, or his fingertips. He can see them; they still exist—his boot stays full, keeps dragging through the thick white worse-than-mud clinging to him; his gloved hand looks like a falcon’s claw clutching at the compass, like some fucking rigor mortis shit.

Maybe that’s the trick.

Maybe he’s already dead; maybe it takes a while to notice, and your brain just goes on trying.
But death’s got to be light—got to be an ascension. Not because of any of that heaven bullshit or whatever—but because that’s what almost dying is like. Swanning back and forth from the Gate, swimming in and out of consciousness, more-than-blinding pain—those are light things. You come unmoored from your body and start to float, start to separate, start to… rise.

He can’t be dying, because he’s never in his life felt fucking heavier than he does right now.

Every goddamn fucking step—

He’s forcing individual muscles to contract now; he’s thinking about what it takes to walk. Your balance goes to shit when you start to do that—analyze the instinctual shit. Kinda funny. He’d laugh, but—the breathing thing. Underneath the frigid scrape of it out of his lungs and along his esophagus, right before it slaps the roof of his mouth and stings his tongue, every breath makes his back throb three or four times as it jars the new and newly-repaired wound further down there. Sometimes the body’s interconnectivity is really a pain in the ass. Or a pain in the back, apparently. Well. A pain everywhere, right this second.

Fuck this shit; are parts of his brain matter freezing, now?

Just keep walking. Just keep fucking walking; keep it together.

He’s just over a hundred feet away, and even the thick blanket of frost on the tiny windowpanes wouldn’t completely conceal a candle or some shit inside; it must be empty.

He is going to wear down this last fucking stretch of snow if he has to crawl it, centimeter by centimeter, with the compass in his hand and his breath freezing solid in front of his face.

He’s got less than a hundred feet left—probably. Everything except the angry throb in his back is fucking numb; no more tingles, no more pins and goddamn needles; no more sensation anywhere. Bad sign. It’s all a bad sign. His life’s one long-ass roadway of them; what does he expect?

Just means he has to get there, though—no doubt, no hesitation, no two damn ways about it. He has to get in there before the dark deepens any further; he has to make it to sanctuary-salvation. He doesn’t know if he could take it—losing more. The other hand, the other foot. He doesn’t know if he could fucking bear it; sure, he’d try; sure, he’d doggedly go on, but…

Other thing is—would he even make it back to Winry without them?

Doesn’t matter. Because he’s not going to die. Because he’s put Al through enough indescribable shit over the years. And this last bit of it—the leaving; the waiting; the staticky phone calls; the letters full of fucking lies—and Al must know, because he’s Al, and because he’s not stupid, and Ed’s a shitty liar, and even an idiot wouldn’t believe Well it’s whatever, I barely see any combat, mostly more pushing paper around just like if I was at home, it just alternates between mind-numbingly boring and hand-numbingly boring, really, I guess they know I’d be shit at killing people so they just haven’t asked—

And sure, his pension would probably keep Al afloat for ages; and Pinako could have some of it, and some could go into Winry’s down payments on the new workshop space; and his bank account is still overflowing a little bit from the good old days of fully-reimbursed missions and pretty much nothing to spend money on. They’d be okay without him.

But to go and die—at all that—to leave Al with nothing but the shitty memory of a clumsy hug at the train station and his stupid fucking mutter of “I gotta go” and—

No.
No fucking way.

Fifty more feet. He can see a gleam of the fucking doorknob in the dark.

Funny, isn’t it? Same shit, different day—different year, at this point. He’s gonna do this, and he’s gonna do it for Al. Al should be crying over… girls, cats he can’t adopt, too much schoolwork—that kind of shit. Not over his dumbass older brother dying in Drachma for somebody else’s war. That’s the point. That’s what Ed almost died for last time, every time—for Al’s life, his normal life, his one shot at regular old happiness after all the shit Ed brought down on their heads.

Like hell is he gonna give up on that now.

Twenty feet. That’s—twenty fucking steps; he could crawl that far with one leg, with the other one hacked off, hanging, bleeding on the floor; if he had to—

Fifteen.

His heart’s too big for his ribcage, and isn’t that a fucking laugh?

The ache keeps—swelling, building, bludgeoning, fucking sledgehammer shit with every beat of—

The bulk of his expanding heart keeps squeezing at his lungs—fucking—breathe, it’s not fucking rocket science; people do it all the fucking time—

What the hell is this? Some sort of delayed reaction crap? Head wound? Head wounds are fucked; you just never know. Seems fair enough; heads are fucked in their own right. People’s heads. People.

His hand froze a thousand years ago, didn’t it? Fuck that. He needs it right now; needs the one that he’s got left. The right arm’s dead, but that’s why he’s got two.

The compass clacks against the doorknob; he’d forgotten that he had his fingers fixed around it. Fuck. Is it on a chain, or something? He can’t remember, and he sure as hell can’t see; starlight’s so fucking unreliable, for all that it’s mesmerizing. He doesn’t want to drop the damn thing, but—

Is there any goddamn movement in his right hand? Anything? Winry made this thing better than that; he must’ve fucked it over good if it won’t respond to him at all.

He wedges the ball of his curled left hand under the forearm of his right arm, all puffed-up by the insulation of the dead guy’s coat, limp like beached fish right when they stop thrashing. Maybe there’s life left in it, maybe—maybe just a touch—

He levers it up and stumbles one more step and drops his right-hand fingers on the knob.

One sharp spark of pain spears up through the port into his shoulder, darting towards his spine.

Nerves. He’s got some fuckin’ nerve. He’s heard that before.

Closing his eyes is dangerous—in the cold like this, and the dark, when he’s teetering on the edge of unconsciousness, and it’s pretty much just willpower keeping him safe—but the only way to do this shit is trust. Automail’s a tricky fucking thing—nerves and wires are close, sure, but they’re not quite the same. You can’t motivate a wire; you can’t talk it into anything. You just have to send it the signal and let it do its job.
He thinks about fingertips—about contracting his, about gripping shit, about holding the stupid bright blue rubber motor skills therapy ball in the center of his palm. He thinks about turning the doorknob, and he—

Hears—

the—

click.

He’s so fucking happy he could cry, except his tears would probably freeze, which would be a pain in the ass, and besides—

He’s—

Got better shit to do, like staggering over the threshold in one clumsy-ass tangle of numb, battered limbs and actually tumbling to the fucking floor hard enough to knock the frigid breath out of his tortured lungs.

He lies there half-wheezing, feebly fighting off the stabs of panic, forcing himself to think—this shit’s temporary; getting the wind jarred right the fuck out of your chest barely even registers on the pain scale as far as he’s concerned, and it’ll pass in a second; he’s just got to stop freaking out, is all, because that makes it worse—

He wriggles around just enough to kick the door shut.

Maybe he’ll just… lie here. For a second. Just… rest. He deserves a rest, doesn’t he? Fuckin’… sleep… sounds amazing. Maybe he’ll just separate slowly from this crap-ass, fucking broken corporeal form and drift around as a little cloud of consciousness for a while.

Well. A big, huge, intimidating cloud of consciousness. Obviously.

Except—

It’s fractionally warmer in here—or maybe that’s just a trick of the floorboards he buried his face in like they were a down pillow just now—but it’s still cold enough to freeze to death.

He can’t abandon this piece of shit body just yet. He still needs it for later—to hug Al, over and over. To kick Roy’s ass. And maybe—well. Other shit. Which may or may not involve Roy’s ass. He hasn’t even seen enough signage to know if that bridge really exists, let alone whether it’s structurally sound enough for crossing, so he’s planning to worry about that later, if Roy’s ass is still in this country once he’s done kicking it in the first place.

He wants to count out thirty seconds for himself, but that’s too long—dangerous. He’s already been collapsed here for the better part of a minute anyway; that oughta count. He’ll give himself five more seconds. Just five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

Go time.

Slinging his compass-clutching left arm out and rolling his weight onto it hurts more than getting
kneed in the guts, but less than reconnecting automail. It also hurts less than dying from a gunshot wound, which is sort of the point of this whole endeavor, so who the fuck is he to complain?

His left thigh is sharp-tingling where the metal of the port contracted—superior alloy or no—and started to dig into the flesh, and his right knee’s doing an interesting burn-ache thing where it meets the floor. But he’s up onto his hand and knees. He’s up, and the rest is details.

Standing sounds like a proper pain in the ass right now, and he suspects it might make the hazy tides of vertigo washing back and forth across his brain solidify into a single wave. But that’s fine. That’s cool. He knows this part.

After a few seconds of staring at it as angrily as possible, he convinces his left hand to open, and the compass clatters to the floor. Done. He plants his palm on the boards and starts the crawl.

The right arm shudders with some kind of—fucking feedback or something; he doesn’t know; something in the depth of the forearm straight-up rebels, and electricity jolts back into his shoulder in a single spear like lightning—flame-edged plasma, starkly too-bright—

Fuck that. He can take it. He can take a lot more.

One advantage of the whole little hovel-cottage model of safehouses like this one is that this place is tiny—which means he doesn’t have to drag his stupid body too far to get it to the fireplace, where he lets it collapse again.

They’ve got to have matches here. The Drachmans aren’t into alchemy—they’re not opposed, like so many of the cultures between here and Xing, who hate it semi-instinctively like there’s a shade of Xerxes draped across their memories—but it’s more of a myth than anything up here, so they would never count on it for starting a fire or whatever shit. They must have some kind of backup plan.

With his luck, the matches’ll be on the top shelf of the cabinet over there. Or way up on the fucking mantel, which might as well be a mountain peak right now.

Motherfucking motherfucker.

One of the uncomfortable solid objects he’s lying on might be his flashlight. Or it might be a stretch of large intestine that he displaced repairing all the other shit.

Fuck. Okay. The thing is—everybody thinks he’s famous for the steel arm and the fat mouth and the less-than-average stature, right? Everybody thinks it’s the red coat and the freaky-ass too-yellow Hohenheim hair; everybody thinks it’s the trappings and the actions that kept him alive through all of the improbable shit; they think it’s what he did that got him here.

But it’s not. It’s the cleverness.

Sure, it’s what dragged him to the depths of the pit in the first place—an overabundance of it, and too much confidence in it, and the consequent arrogant fucking belief that he could rewrite both the rules and the fabric of the universe as a kid and get away with it—but it’s also what he built his ladder from, rung by fucking rung. It’s what allowed to survive time and time again when other people didn’t, or wouldn’t have. Sometimes it’s the only thing he’s got.

He’s smart. Which doesn’t mean he doesn’t do stupid shit, like, all the time. Those two things aren’t mutually exclusive in the least. But the bottom line is that his brain makes better, faster connections than the average human being’s, and that puts him at an advantage, and that’s the most important thing about him, really.
So he just has to use that. One more time.

He rolls onto his right side again, gritting his teeth against the slivers of nerve pain searing through his chest. Feels like he’s gonna have char marks on his collarbones—black ash outlines around all of his ribs.

It’s so fucking dark in here he can barely tell that he’s raised his left hand, but he’s pretty sure. He’s just gonna have to trust in the one thing that’s only let him down the once.

He drags his fingertip through the thick coating of dust and dirt and grit on the floor. Convenient, kinda. Something.

It’s actually sort of a stupid array—an old one, too; maybe the first he ever… The point isn’t what it was, though; the point is that it’s slow, because it has to gather a crap-ton of the miscellaneous detritus on the floor up and then warp it in amongst the floorboards and rework the whole mishmash of material into a little figure of a horse. And the array itself is simple enough that when he smacks his hand down on it, the process of the reconstruction takes time.

Time Ed spends rolling onto his back, gasping at the renewed ferocity of the pain, grinding his teeth so hard there’s a shudder of an ache in his jaw, and reaching down with his left hand to fumble the knife out of his boot. Damn thing’s filthy as hell and dull in places, but it doesn’t matter—any scrap of steel will do.

In the slowly-fading blue light of his solidifying toy, he scratches out the flame array, slaps his left palm down on it, focuses a slender stream of purified oxygen to point towards the fireplace, and strikes the knife against his right hand.

Fuck, no dice, and definitely no—

He brings it down again, harder, right on the curve up over the back of his thumb—it’s nicked enough that Winry’ll probably have his head, but for once, that’s a fucking blessing, because the knife blade almost-sticks in one of the notches, and—

The flicker of yellow ignites the path of the oxygen, which bursts into a bed of orange when it hits the kindling in the hearth, and Ed doesn’t think he’s ever fucking seen something so beautiful before.

One of the bigger logs catches as the little flames lick at everything in reach, and the heat starts radiating outward, spilling like a fucking balm over his face and his outstretched arm.

He lets his own weight drag him back down, flat on his back on the floor—which makes the new wound send quivers of hurt up his side, but at least doesn’t cut him any new ones. He takes a few deep breaths—slowly, testing the limits of his lungs, listening to the rasping of the air in and out of his mouth. It’s possible he escaped any long-term pulmonary damage. That’d be nice.

It’s funny.

So many things are funny when you’re so fucking wrecked that the world’s blurring to black at the edges, and every movement feels like tipping sickly on a tossing ship—like wading through molasses with gauze over your eyes. In your eyes. Scratchy and obstructive, and the bile just sort of settles halfway up your throat and stays there, sloshing with the angle of the deck.

But it’s funny just how fucking obvious…

He should’ve known.
The week before he was due to get shipped up here to the frozen fucking wastes, he and Roy had one of their little research talks—it was like this, kind of, almost. It was in front of the fire. Roy had—has, has, will still have when Ed gets back and knocks some sense into that fucking bastard with the metal fist—the kind of living room Ed used to dream about; and maybe that should’ve been a sign, too, come to think of it. Just… cozy. Welcoming. Always full of books. And there was almost always a fire burning low behind the grate, and sometimes Ed would surface from a page of text and see that Roy was—staring. Half the time it was at the fire; half the time, it was at him.

That last night, they planned it for a little earlier than usual—in a casual sort of way, fake-thoughtful, Oh, hey, you want me to swing by at six instead of seven tonight?, and Why don’t we make it five-thirty, if that works for you?, and nobody had to say We aren’t going to be able to do this for a while, because you’ll be getting your blood splattered out all over the snow. If you die, we’ll never get to do it again. So he turned up on Roy’s doorstep right on time, and Roy did the usual come-in-come-in-let-me-take-your-coat shit, and Ed’s shoulder-blades kind of—tingled. Like a premonition kind of tingle; like a message. Like a yearning. Like goodbye.

And then they went in, and Roy was talking about an article he’d read, and he’d already changed from the uniform into slacks with his white shirt, and Ed noticed that it wasn’t tucked in, which was weird—not the state of it, but the fact that Ed noticed. At the time he figured it was just sort of a fluke of his attention distribution because he was still kind of cold from outside, and also because the article Roy was talking about wasn’t really that interesting, and he already knew how he was going to debunk all of it, so his brain latched on to other things.

Roy crouched down and drew one of his gloves out of his pocket and slipped it on and lit the fire (and that was never going to get old, was it? The elegance of it; the absolute finesse; the simple magnificence of that small array enhanced and perfected by such expert technique) and then went… silent.

Then he turned to Ed with his eyes too dark to flee from, and he said “Would you like to learn how this is done?”

And it wasn’t like Ed hadn’t figured out what the array meant, obviously, and how it was constructed, and why Hawkeye senior had chosen the components that he did—but there was a hell of a lot more to it, and Ed, with his life in his hands and knowledge before him, had always been in danger of letting go and reaching forward.

And after, when his head was spinning with the formulas and the little dots of flame, Roy said, so softly, “Perhaps it’s better if it dies with us, but I… trust you.” He smiled, just a little, wistful and almost bitter, eyes fixed on the firelight, and Ed’s heart—seized up, stuttered, wobbled like a top. “I trust you with it. I trust you not to use it—or, I should say, to understand when using it is anything other than a crime.” He glanced up from the fire at Ed—just for a fraction of a second before he looked back. “If it saves you out there, that will justify my living long enough to share it.”

And Ed had been about to tear the fuck right into him—what the hell was that about? Mustang wasn’t like that, or he wasn’t supposed to be; none of that too-personal, totally defeatist shit—except that Roy had stood up and brushed imaginary wrinkles out of his slacks and said “Can I interest you in something to eat?”

And Ed was nothing if not a stupid fucking sucker, right?

The ceiling of this crappy little safehouse cabin keeps fading in and out of the darkness as the firelight plays.
He should have known. Somebody like Roy, somebody who holds his cards so close to the chest that you don’t even know he’s part of the game until he fans them out on the table, and they’re a handful of aces and a king—

He should have known that the word “trust” is almost harder for a man like that to say than the one he must have meant.

They’re probably the same thing.

Why couldn’t the bastard just—?

Damn it.

Ed could sleep now. Couldn’t he? How long would the wood in the hearth last? Hours? The night? Hell.

One more deep breath dragged in and shudderingly released, and then he rolls back onto his right side long enough to fight the pack off of his back. After a quantity of wriggling that leaves his whole body throbbing all over again, he manages to wrangle it loose of his automail and lay it to the side; this accomplishment deserves a few more seconds of lying there panting as a reward. Patting himself on the back would hurt a hell of a lot more than it was worth, at any rate.

That done, he reaches over with his left hand and digs through the contents of the bag until his gloved hand recognizes something that feels about the same shape as the packets of jerky that he jammed into it.

He convinces his knuckles to bend and his fingers to grip and all that good shit—isn’t it fucking weird how much you take for granted when everything’s just sort of working, and none of the tiny tasks tied into existence have swelled up into a huge freaking pain?—and drags the jerky out of the bag. If only he could stop right there or… something. Sleep. Sleep sounds like a miracle the likes of which he’s never had, hardly ever dreamed of, barely even brushed his fingertips against… Surely…

Nah. His body needs calories to knit itself back up. It needs all the help he can give it. Sure, eating sounds like a fucking chore right this second—more than it has in a while, and that’s saying something; more than it has with the sickness hot in his throat and the visions sharp in his head; more than it has when he stares into a bowl of grayish lumps of flour and possibly a vegetable floating in a pool of maybe-snot and thinks This is sort of what crushed brain matter looks like when it’s spreading on the snow. A lot of things start to look like that. A lot of things start to look like death, like bleakness, like surrender.

But not him.

Not yet.

All he has to do is raise his hand and take a couple bites. Then he can sleep. That’s it. On an ordinary day, he could do that while running to the library; wouldn’t even have to wait for a stoplight, wouldn’t even have to slow down. It’s fucked up, how your memory changes after the fact. So many of his recollections of Central are so—warm, now. Split through with sunbeams; the colors are too bright. Like it’s a fairy tale story about somebody else. Like it was some sort of gift, but he knows—concretely, logically, he knows—

Then again, anything would be better than this.

All he has to do is contract his arm and… take a damn bite. Simple. His jaw still works, doesn’t
it? It fuckin’ better. He’s sure as hell not drinking his food through a straw for the rest of his life after all this work to make it.

He gets the jerky to his mouth without incident, only then to discover—somewhat hazily; all sensations seem kind of dull against the buzzing backdrop of the pain and the slow defrosting of his miserable body—that it’s wrapped in some kind of wax paper. That seems like a fucking waste. Sure, maybe it’s marginally more bacterially sound or whatever, but—well, shit, who’s got time to care about germs around here? Fucking Drachmans. Foiling him with *foil*. That’s just like them, isn’t it?

Sad thing is—he tries to get the end of the jerky stick-strip-frozen-thing between his teeth for leverage; gripping an edge of the paper is proving imfuckingpossible with these gloves on, but he can’t afford to take them off—you start out joking about that sort of thing. *Fucking Drachmans and their fucking wax paper, don’t they know there’s a war on?* But so many of these guys believe it. They’ve internalized some kind of—concept—that Amestrians are better, or cleaner, or smarter, or nobler. More deserving of life, of space, of territory. All that shit.

The sad thing is he almost can’t blame them anymore.

It’s a coping mechanism. It’s a disassociation thing—distancing. Because if you have to kill one, two, ten, three-dozen, ten-thousand *people*—people like you, people with families and psyches, people with thoughts and lives and dreams, people who were going to start that novel next week, who forget to water their plants, whose handwriting is so calligraphic it could take your breath away—you’re gonna lose your shit.

But if you’re cutting down *Drachmans*—if you’ve convinced yourself that they’re not really people anymore—well, then who the hell actually cares? The guilt runs off like water on feathers, and you shake your wings and call yourself an angel—not a vulture, not a killer, not a crow. You can’t be a murderer if they’re not men.

Fuck the Drachmans and their wax paper. Maybe that’s not standard at all—maybe these aren’t rations. Maybe this is the last of the food that that soldier’s wife packed for him when he left. Maybe she mailed it to the front. Maybe he was saving it—as long as he could stand, because the hunger wasn’t quite as bad as missing her, because it was the last damn thing he had that made him different from the next rain-gray coat blending in with the shadows on the snow. Maybe he’d take it out sometimes, imagine her fingers on it, imagine her whispering messages like it’d carry them to him, like he could touch his lips to where her fingertips had pressed it, and he’d hear.

Al’s gonna cry like a child if Ed doesn’t make it back before that telegram.

He bites right through the paper, works his tongue around it, turns his head, and spits it out. The last owner of this thing died so he wouldn’t have to, in a cosmic sort of way. Not because there’s anybody up there; not because there’s any grand damn plan. Fuck’s sake, for all that he knows, this was the guy who fired the bullet that almost put him in the ground. *Quid pro fucking quo*. Equivalent exchange. All’s one, and Ed’s still here.

He chokes down the whole thing and almost enjoys the salt on his lips towards the end.

He gives it a few seconds to settle—thirty, to be precise; he doesn’t trust himself to lie there any longer than that without passing out, and there just isn’t *time* yet. Weird to think about—that there’s a limited amount of time in the entire universe, whether or not it’s a larger quantity than the human brain can really conceive of; that every single person’s allotment is laid out on a giant grid according to their arbitrary lifespan, stretching over chessboard squares and stopping short where coincidence just cuts them off.
He rolls carefully onto his left side, wedging his arm underneath him, gritting his teeth at the radiating shudders of pain all over as it quivers, wobbles, and then takes his weight. He probably looks like a baby fucking deer trying to gather himself up and get off of the ground. Better than a dead deer, though. Which is what he would’ve looked like when they—if they—found his dumbass corpse lying in a frozen puddle of blood out there in the snow.

He’s up. Somehow. Doesn’t really matter how; he makes it; he’s upright; he’s dizzy but not collapsing just yet. He staggers over to the door and raises his left hand, despite its numerous protests, to start feeling for the locks. Amestrian outposts always have a deadbolt or three. And that’s the thing, really. All outposts do. Because they’re all the goddamn same, really, at the base of things. Hearts all look the same once you take them out of their cages. Blood spills identically.

And door locks aren’t too different—they’ve got one slide-bolt and one deadbolt, and he slams both fuckers home. That should help. Won’t stop a bear; will slow down any one-man invasion that tries to take his sanctuary.

He turns around, leaning heavily on the doorframe, and considers the fireplace. His little kindling construction is already starting to dwindle; the fuel lying on the hearth must have been mostly spent when he arrived. There are a couple good-sized split logs lying off to the side, though, and if those aren’t enough, he can always toss the chair in. Burning shit you’re not supposed to is kind of satisfying anyway.

He just has to make sure his legs hold out for the trip back across the room—that’s the kicker, appropriately enough. He’s acclimated to the well of agony in his left thigh so much now that it’s only vaguely distracting, but he can feel a distinctly unsteady twinge running through the right. Well—fine. If he falls on his face, he’ll get back up and try it again. That’s all it is. That’s all it ever is.

The possibly-future-kindling chair can serve another purpose in the meantime—he reaches out for the edge of the windowsill, testing its sturdiness by hauling down on it before he lets it support any significant portion of his weight. So far, so good. Leaning on it, he inches along to where he can just touch the corner of the low cabinet they stuck in—for booze or food or guns or whatever; the slight curiosity about its contents melts to nothing next to the heat of his desperately single-minded goal. From the cabinet, he can brace himself on the back of the chair, and that he can slide.

Let nobody ever say being limbless doesn’t teach you any useful shit.

…if anybody’s ever said that, they’re an idiot, and he’s going to detach his arm and use it to smack them up the side of the head.

The chair creaks—either out of impotent rage at the indignity, or as a warning of imminent collapse, but either way, it’s not like he can change his course—as he skids it through the dust until he hits the far wall by the fireplace. Fuckin’ bingo. He should get a prize.

He sort of does, if firewood and a lifted likelihood of surviving the night counts.

He doesn’t figure his knees are going to be too amenable to crouching down—or if they are, sure as hell not for getting back up again—so he tries to do an awkward lean-bend thing from the waist to grab a couple of logs, but the flare of pain in his back stops that in its tracks. Motherfucker. He’s so fucking broken right now. Sure, he’s had worse, here and there, but… hell. Doesn’t make this shit any less colossally fucking inconvenient.

Cautiously, he tries lowering himself into the chair without attempting to bend his stupid fucking knees. That works a little better, although sitting makes him consider giving up the project and
going instantly to sleep. From here, though, he can just get his fingers around the end of one of the butts of firewood, and that’s all he needs—this shit doesn’t have to be fancy, so he drags it across the floor and rolls it up into the hearth, grabbing his right wrist with his left and using his metal hand like a fire poker to give it a final shove, tipping it over the last lip of stone into the flame.

One or two more oughta do it, and then he can sleep. Then he can sleep as long as he fucking wants; nobody’s gonna find him here. And then when he’s slept as much as he could possibly fucking need, he’s going to get back out there, and he’s going to walk to some little village called Stevastipol that he saw on his stupid map. There he’s going to figure out how to get back into Amestris, and then he’s going to call Al, call HQ, and raise hell—in that order. They think he was a loud-mouthed punk when he was a kid—they ain’t seen nothin’ yet.

He manhandles another chunk of wood into the fire—maybe he won’t mention to Winry where the smudges of ash on the automail came from, since he doesn’t figure she’ll smile on the idea that he used it as a crude maneuvering tool even after he’d busted the shit out of it.

On second thought, maybe he won’t say anything at all about the automail in general: the tank techs commandeered his machine oil on, like, day five. Not that it matters, since everything’s so fucking frozen; he doesn’t think it would’ve worked for long anyway. But—still. It is her masterpiece. He always wants to treat it with respect and stuff. It’s saved his ass more times than he can number—it’s a debt he’ll never repay; the least he can do is strive not to forget. Or strive not to beat the crap out of it. Same difference.

But that can wait. All of it can wait until he’s slept off the worst of this. All of it can wait until he’s made it home, thrown however many working arms he’s got around Al’s shoulders, and chugged all of the decent coffee Central City can offer. Maybe not all at once; spilling coffee on Al would be poor thanks for all the miracles he’s enacted over the years—chief among them, putting up with Ed’s shit.

Anyway, he can put the contemplation of his imminent death at Winry’s more-than-capable hands on hold for now. He’s got other fish to fry and gut and pick clean down to the spindly little bones. First, he needs to drag that crappy-ass cot against the wall over here, nearer to the fire, so he can drop facedown onto it without any risk of hypothermia.

The unpleasantness of levering his ass out of the chair to put his weight on his feet again defies description. They need to invent a whole new language for this kind of shit—one that’s eighty percent composed of swear words alone.

Shaking right through all the merry damn fucking way, he staggers around to grip the chair back again. The legs scrape the floor with a nails-on-chalkboard sound at the first shove, but the novelty of goosebumps caused by something other than the cold almost registers as interesting right about now.

He tries to force his hazy brain to focus on the logistics of the task ahead as he pushes his faithful chair inch by inch across the floorboards. The cot must be sturdier than it looks, because the average Drachman soldier stands… marginally higher than Ed, perhaps a noticeable amount; and clearly this place has seen use before. Speaking of which, if there are bugs in the bedding—

Well. That is one advantage of this frozen shithole—he doesn’t think he’s seen a bug since they got past the wall. Cockroaches hang out in the basement-level at Briggs especially—the mechanical rooms, the machine shops, the insulated spaces where friction builds up heat—but he doesn’t figure anything enterprising and thirsty for human fluids can survive out here.

Besides, it’s not like even the confirmed presence of flesh-eating whatnots would stop him from
getting into that bed. He can worry about mites at his fucking leisure when he gets back; right this minute, all he wants is for this impossible fucking day to end.

He pushes the chair right up to the edge of the cot, and there’s a satisfying clack of one wood frame on another when they collide. Then it occurs to him that trying to push the cot and the chair at the same time would be stupid, and would probably end in a tangle of furniture legs tipping to the floor and taking him with it, so he needs to revise that plan in a damn jiffy. He hesitates for a second, considering his options, and then moves around the back of the cot, supporting himself with his left hand planted on the edge of it. The blankets dimple under his palm, and no stream of tiny bugs comes rushing out, so that’s promising, at least.

Once he’s made it to the far side of the stupid cot, he reaches over it to catch the back of the chair, trying to haul it sideways to fling it out of the way. He should’ve done that first and then used the cot to hold himself up. He’s an idiot. This is the sort of shit they should revoke your State Alchemist certification for, just on the grounds that you’re a moron and shouldn’t have any institutional power to back you up.

Then again, if they started on that, they’d have kicked every last asshole out of the program inside of a week. Including Roy. Especially Roy. Roy’s a dumbass.

Point is—with his arm strength failing, his knees quaking, his head spinning all lopsided like it’s weighted wrong—Ed drags himself back around the head of the cot and pulls the chair out of his intended path. He doesn’t want to leave it too far away, though; damn thing came in seriously useful.

Then he sets his hip against the side of the bed, grips the edge with his one working hand, and shoves it step by step across this crappy little room, planning to grind to a halt a few feet in front of the fireplace. Last thing he wants is for a spark to pop and catch the blankets and cocoon him in fucking flame so that he burns to death after all of this effort to keep himself alive. That’d be some bullshit.

Funny, though, in the way all these fucking things are currently ‘funny’ in his fragmented brain—how easy it is to destroy the human body. How many opportunities there are every day to ruin something—even just one system, just one organ, and the whole thing goes kaput.

The bed doesn’t seem to want to move any more than he does; maybe it was sleeping off some shit of its own. It skids an inch, two inches, two and a half at a time—little jerking jumps, reluctantly, but at least it doesn’t screech on the floor like the chair did and almost stop his fucking heart all over again.

When he’s—hopefully—at the sweet spot just inside aura of radiating warmth but before reaching significant danger of combustion, he halts, righting himself against the cot. One more thing. One more fucking thing, and then he’s done; then he’ll let the darkness cradle him for twelve or thirteen or fuck knows how many hours; then he’ll give his tortured fucking body time to knit up and regroup.

He pries off the dripping, muddied, scratched and snow-splattered boots, then peels the Drachman’s coat off and lays it on top of the cot blankets. He stumps around—one last time, one last time—and bends himself carefully over to fight his own uniform coat out of the straps of the bag so he can spread that on top of the other.

What else?

Gloves off. The automail clings to the cold worse without them, but they’re soaked and filthy; his
body heat will warm it up all right if he stays under this pile of layers. He attempts the feat of motor skills that is his belt buckle twice before giving up, and then he draws his side-arm, checks the safety, and wedges it halfway underneath the mattress, adjusting it until the grip protrudes, but the barrel’s pointing down.

That’s enough. Fuck’s sake, that’ll have to be enough; he’s too damn tired to figure out what else should come out of his pockets or off of his body. He could probably sleep on a piece of plywood stuck with rusty nails right now and count himself lucky.

He pushes the mountain of fabric back, climbs up, draws the mountain back up over himself, and fucking finally lets his eyes slide shut. Sleep’s almost never sounded so damn good. Almost never seemed so fucking blissful, like a gift from the universe, wrapped up in ribbon with his name on a little silver tag, with…

Maybe he shouldn’t think about silver tags.

Maybe…

Shit. Later. So, so much later. There’s time.
Chapter Notes

After several comments begging me to continue this thing, a very kind reader mentioned that the fic had been marked as "complete"... because I'd forgotten to check the multiple chapters button in my hurry to post the first part. Which had been boggling the fuck out of my mind, because I'd mentioned sideways in the A/N that there was more to come, only everyone kept asking like it was a question! :'D

tl;dr MEA CULPA. To be fair to myself, RL has been an ongoing shitshow composed of a series of very unamusing scenes lately, and I am not at my brainiest right now.

tl;dr 2: Yes, there is more! Like, another 50K and counting after this piece – I'm still finishing up the very end, but I'm getting close! And so are the boys. Because it's smutty. Eyyyyyyyy—

I'm afraid I have no idea what the update schedule is going to look like, though, because (a) shitshow; (b) more shitshow; (c) writing this fic was such a slog in a lot of places that I left tons of little gaps that I still have to fill in. And when I know those are there, I get really lazy and drag my feet and generally act like a dumbass about them. XD So... I will do my best, but please be patient with me! You are all wonderful, and I appreciate you more than I can say. ♥

When his eyelids part again, it’s to the winking embers of the fire and the trailing wisps of a fading dream. His sleep was thick and flat and heavy—except for just the tail end of it, just the last few half-curled ribbons, slithering away. Just—Roy, of fucking course. Roy, all fingertips, all lips and deep-dark eyes, all chocolate voice and white sugar promises; just the last trace of hot honey mouth on Ed’s skin, dragging slow, and cinder scars unfurling in its wake—

Fucking Mustang. Figures he can be a pain in Ed’s ass even when he’s miles and miles away.

Even when he probably thinks Ed’s dead and buried underneath the snow.

As the lingering shreds of slumber slough away, the pain sets in—and takes no fucking prisoners. Funny—well, y’know, not, but whatever—how the instinct never goes away; how as soon as the world’s too bright, too much, too great a height of agony to bear, every human being he’s ever met recoils into the fetal position like it’ll stave off the cruelty of the universe somehow. Like it’s possible to go back to the warmth, the insulation—to unconsciousness, to dependence, to twinned heartbeats and total safety. Like it’s possible to unwrite your own existence if you make yourself small enough—

And it must be a brain memory—in the psyche, not somatic. Al used to do it—wrap himself up as little as he could go. Try to minimize the ball of armor trembling with a rattle like the chatter of the guns.

The throbbing settles to a lower baseline after a couple... minutes? seconds? hours? of Ed clutching the one working arm around his knees, gritting his teeth together until he can almost feel the nerves jolt in his jaw.
He cracks his eyes open again. Who the hell knows what time it is—what day it is? And who cares? His watch is buried somewhere in his clothes, under half a thousand folds of wool, interred in some pocket that may well be lost to mankind forever.

There’s a faint glow of light past the frost-webbed windowpanes, so it must be some part of the day. Damn. It’d be stupid to set out any later than… well, dawn, really; he can’t risk much more wandering around in the dark. Last night was a grand exception born of pure fucking desperation. He’s gotta have to have a lot fewer of those from now on if he wants to celebrate his next birthday—which he doesn’t, really, because birthdays are stupid, but he’s not going to turn down cake. Or survival. Both would be great.

Point is—he either needs to find the fucking watch after all or figure out what time it is some other way. Not exactly negotiable at this point.

His watch is probably frozen. When was the last time he fished it out and wound the fucking thing?

Fuck and double fuck. He doesn’t really have any choice except to drag his tormented fucking mortal vessel upright and out of this beautiful, beautiful slab of wood masquerading as a bed—masquerading fairly successfully, really, given that it’s the most wonderful one he’s ever crashed out on.

He swings the flesh leg out of the bed first to get some momentum going—that’s one bit of his weight; he can force the rest to follow. Autowail leg next, and fuck, there’s the critical mass; he gets his left arm underneath himself enough to raise his torso, and—

There—

Feet on the ground, breath in his lungs, only a few stars sparkling brightly in his vision. That’s a damn good start compared to the last time he awoke.

He’s gotta have his stupid watch in here somewhere. First, though, he’d be wise to figure out where the fuck the next lovely improvised vacation home is likely to be—if he can’t make it to Stevastipol in a single day’s travel, he’s going to have to do some stupid zigzagging through this fucking snowy-ass wasteland that wants to kill him before he can get anywhere near a phone.

He’s trying not to think about the not-unrealistic possibility that Stevastipol doesn’t have telephones. This far out from the Drachman capital, it’s not a stretch to suppose that they might be utterly disconnected from the rest of their whole civilization. From the few bits of research he could glean that didn’t seem so patriotically biased as to be completely fucking useless, it sounded like they sometimes treat the citizens on the tundra and in the shadows of the mountains with about as much affection and respect as Amestris shows the Ishvalans.

That’d be a fucking lark—staggering in there at long last only for it to turn out to be a brand-new dead end. But at least they’ll probably be so distant from the political zeitgeist that they won’t give a fuck about his broken Drachman—they’ll feed him and house him and send him on his way to the next little hamlet, and maybe the next, until somebody has an oxcart that’ll carry him back across the border in the course of trade or business. This is the countryside, or close enough. Country folks are like that. Until their own roofs start to burn, and their own boys start to die, the war’s not real to them—and even then, a starving man is starving no matter what word he says for “help”.

To put it another way, the spirit of charity that killed the Rockbells is probably going to save his life.
He digs the map up first. Looks like there’s another little safehouse-hovel-sanctuary just about halfway between here and there.

Statistically speaking, stuff kind of has to work in his favor sometimes. Right? Eventually, the dice have to come up doubles when he’s down and out.

Hard to tell how long it’ll take to walk there with his bum-ass arm and the ache-burn in his thigh and the rush-sealed bullet wound making him regret every stretch of a muscle in his back—he has a vague idea that it shouldn’t be more than a day based on where he thinks he started from the battlefield in order to get here, but so much of that was stumbled feverishly in the dark...

Well. Won’t know ’til he gives it all he’s fucking got. Ain’t that the game every single time?

He doesn’t really know how long he slept. It feels like a hell of a lot more than he’s had in months, but all of the barely-dozing with one eye open—on the frozen ground beneath the scratchy woolen blankets; or, when fortune smiled, a tarp; once even a tent—for the few hours he could scrounge up at any given time hardly counted as rest.

He suspects they do it deliberately—refuse to let the troops get any fucking shuteye, that is. It makes them scared and jumpy and suggestible and angry that they’re stuck out here like this. And they take it all out on the enemy.

He tries to clear a little bit of frost from the nearest windowpane by swiping at it with his sleeve, then with his warm fist, but no such fucking luck—it’s well and truly snowed over; no telling what time of day it is. He’s going to have to risk the door.

Probably there’s no one out there. Probably there’s no one a-fucking-live for twenty miles, maybe twice that, maybe more. Probably the safest place on the planet right now, for him, anyway, is on or inside that threshold. Even if he had been followed, somehow; even if someone had turned up trying to take shelter here—nobody could have lasted through the night out there. Not a fucking chance.

So the only way there could be a Drachman waiting with a readied bayonet is if somebody found him between dawn and... now.

Good odds. By his standards, he should play the lottery first chance he gets.

Well—nothing for it except to place his bets and watch the numbers coming up.

He tugs his sidearm loose from where he’d tucked it in between the mattress and the frame, switches the safety off, limps over to the door, and undoes the bolts one at a time. He draws a breath.

Then he wraps the unresponsive metal fingers tight around the grip of the gun, grabs the door handle with his left, flings it open, and slings that hand underneath the right to raise it, and his finger finds the trigger to point the barrel at—

Silence. Snowfall. The soundless sweep of white.

His heart’s banging like a fucking drum. Kind of nice, in a way—kind of nice to know he’s still alive. Kind of nice to know he still can feel fear. They haven’t peeled off every tatter of his humanity just yet.

He lowers the pistol but doesn’t holster it yet. Left hand’s good enough; worse comes to worst, he can brace it on his right wrist.
The sun’s still low on the horizon. Must be early enough to make a start, at least as far as the tiny
gasp of daylight that they get here goes.

That decides fuckin’ that, then.

He shuts the door—not that it’s much of any good; the cold’s already seeped in and made itself at
home; it’s under his clothes and his skin and his skeleton, and the fire’s guttering—and makes his
ungainly way back to the pile of clothes and shit that he left by the bed. Boots on, gloves on, coats
on; he manhandles the pack around his shoulders again after that, and then…

Nothing left to do but move.

________________________________________________________________________

The best and worst part of the walk is…

Okay. The worst part is the magnificent combination of the pain and the fucking cold.

But almost as bad is the solitude.

There was no fucking privacy at camp. There was no privacy with his unit. Wars are won by
population density, after all—by the weight of sheer fucking numbers more than any of that act-of-
heroism shit. Brilliant strategy crap is all good and well when you’re playing little games in
cityscapes, but out here—on a battlefield—

The bigger army wins. So why not pack the boys in blue so tight they can’t breathe without
smelling someone else’s sweat? Besides—if they can’t hear their own thoughts over the muddle
and the rabble and the others’ hearts, they can hardly start to think for themselves.

It’s bullshit. It’s all bullshit, and Ed’s going to do his damnedest to make sure somebody knows.

Meantime, though, he can’t figure out whether it’s good or bad to be so utterly alone with the too-
long-tangled threads unwinding in his mind. It’s kind of a relief. It’s kind of like a deep damn
breath of clean air after ages in the sewers or the slums; it’s kind of like the whole world’s coming
into focus brand-new after blurring around him all these days, weeks, months; it’s like waking
from a dream.

But sometimes—

Sometimes it’s safer to be dreaming.

Dreams can be crueler than shit, sure—but they’re usually not coherent. They’re not specific;
they’re not targeted; they don’t track him with the same tireless, slavering hunger that his thoughts
do. The contours of nameless horrors and the sharp spikes of adrenaline are better than this chase.
He can’t win; he can’t ever win. He can barely stay one step ahead, and at times like these—when
he’s alone—without the ambient noise of other people, other things; without the chatter of other
voices and the hum of current obligations—

Well. There’s never anywhere to hide.

No one’s going to want you, his mind says, and he can hear it in his own voice, resounding back
towards him off the snow. No one with their head on right—no one who didn’t owe you anything
would have wanted you before, and now your life floats on other men’s blood, and your eyes are
dead, ’cause you are dead, or close enough—’cause you died with them, didn’t you, when you cut
them down and sent them off to meet their makers, whoever the fuck they are. You killed boys who
still have mothers—you took their intricate little lives in both your hands and squeezed until they
stopped writhing; you tore them from this timeline and smothered them forever. You killed boys
who would have gone home to rolling hills and farmland, to the girls they've loved since
childhood, to their worried mothers and their fathers and their little brothers waiting, having
climbed up halfway on the fence—just staring at the road, at the horizon, like it’s possible to will
them to come back—

You murdered children who came to this place for the same reasons you did, all those years ago—
for resources, for money, to keep their families safe and fed. You destroyed them. You turned
them from hearts and minds and souls just to bodies—to corpses. You transmuted them into so
much graveyard soil.

Who’s going to want to touch your skin with that damnation weighing on your shoulders and their
blood spread across your hands?

Except—

Logically speaking—

No one in the world is going to understand this quite as well as Roy.

No one else in the world has done—committed—a string of deeds so absolutely parallel to the one
he’s been unrolling in one long barbed-wire line.

Scar tried damned hard to make sure no one ever would again.

Maybe it would’ve been better if he’d splattered Ed across the pavement while he had the chance.

Roy is the last human being alive who’s ever had the power in the core of him twisted—
weaponized—in just this way.

There was never meant to be another war. This wasn’t supposed to happen. That’s what Roy’s
been fighting for, all these years, underneath the masks and all the images, past the playboy and
the procrastinator, at the bottom of the thousands of façades. He was becoming indispensable to
the men with the power so that he could steal it from their pockets and their shoulder marks, until
he had enough collected to stop the ouroboros of atrocity once and for all. Until he had the
strength to cut the head off of the snake.

But he wasn’t fast enough.

More’s the fucking pity, right?

But he’ll—get it. Because of that. Won’t he?

Roy Mustang is a liar when it suits him and a cheater when the chips are down, but he’s never
been a hypocrite.

If you don’t know where or how or when to look, it’s possible to miss it; it only comes in little
flashes—shadows, undertones. But he wouldn’t be a bastard over anything that mattered, and
this… does. This matters. This will matter to him.

Roy’s fundamentally all right. He’s decent under all the slippy masks and misleadings; the core of
him is so fucking different from what Ed used to think when he was young and dumb enough to let the surface shit deceive him…

And Ed knows a thing or two, now, about the sort of shit you have to hide to get by in a place like this—in a world like this. The sort of shit you have to bury in the deepest confines of the center of your soul so no one else can spot it and chop it out and take it from you, because they will, here, if you give them just a fucking whiff of vulnerability and the time to draw their blades. They’ll cut out everything you’ve got.

Fuck ‘em. Fuck ‘em all. They can’t have him; they never will; he’s never going to roll over and let them clip that last collar on; he’s never going to do their bidding with a fucking smile. They’re never going to own him. They can draft and blackmail and order and coerce all they fucking want, but he’ll never be their goddamn dog. He’s still his own fucking man; they can’t take that away from him until the day that he gives it up—until the day that he stops thinking, stops caring, stops reading in between the lines of every missive they put out. He’s a soldier by profession. It’s not who he is, not now, not ever. They can’t reduce his soul to that. They can’t slice the independence out of him and replace it with their vision for the country, for the world, unless he stops running long enough for them to get their knife tips in.

He doesn’t plan on stopping.

Pertinently, he also doesn’t plan on stopping this miserable-ass fucking stroll across the snow until the end of time, but he’d make it a hell of a lot easier for himself if he didn’t have his dead right arm swinging everywhere, fucking up his momentum and shit.

It’s worth halting his breakneck (or breakeverything, more like) pace for long enough to clap and transmute a long scrap of his Amestrian coat into a sling he can fit on top of all the clothes. In what he thinks is a flash of genius—which Al would probably call a crime against fashion and human retinas—he coopts the coat’s belt to make an adjustable strap, so that the whole contraption will still work if he later dares to take a couple of the layers off. And if he embellishes the buckle just slightly—with some flames and a dragon skull, for example, speaking purely theoretically—who the hell can blame him? Slings aren’t regulation to start with, and out here, it’s not like the quartermaster’s gonna slap his wrist. It’s not like he’d feel it if they did.

He spots the single dark square on the horizon sooner than he expected—either he’s making seriously good time, or this map isn’t exactly what even a generous cartographer would call “scaled even close to properly, for fuck’s sake”.

The sun—for all the damn good it’s doing all the way up there—hangs almost directly overhead. The map would have him believe that this safehouse is just about halfway in between the last one and Stevastipol—which would make it worth it to keep moving, since he could probably make the town by sunset, if he maintained this rate.

No way to know but to find the fuck out. Sounds familiar. Sounds like just about every untested uncertainty in his entire life—every single problem he’s ever beaten his head against. The truest and trustiest weapons in the world are stubbornness and ingenuity. Most days, that’s about all he’s got.

He sets his shoulders—or at least the one that’s cooperating—and his jaw and takes one more step, and then the next. Every epic fucking odyssey is built of single steps. The first one’s the hardest; with all the others, you have the laws of physics on your side—objects in motion carry on. The moment you’re an object, you’re playing by the universe’s rules.

And then it’s simple.
Just keep moving.

Just go.

The map is not to scale.

It’s well after dark when he finally spots the flickering glow of feeble lights, nestled down in a shallow valley hemmed on both sides with evergreens. It is fucking incredible how far the human eye can see distinctly—it feels like another half-dozen miles between spotting the fading-ember aspect of the place and actually arriving at the outskirts, such as they are. A settlement this small hardly has fringes in the way he’s used to in Central—this one brings back Resembool in all its pastoral glory. There simply aren’t enough people in it for any of them to get relegated to the outer edges in disgrace.

There’s also no one fucking awake.

The snow-speckled narrow streets are empty. They don’t have streetlamps. This is like some dimmed-down, shadow-straﬁed never-world; some smudged and twisted alternate imagination of a place he might have known, if he’d lived closer to another arrow on the compass. If just one thing along the winding cobblestone-chopped path of his own history had been different from the start.

The lights are all in upper windows—higher floors; sleeping quarters; and he couldn’t barge into a store, or a home, or… He has to find an inn or something. A hotel. A place that will have to take him if his money spends.

…money. Right. That would have been a nice thing to have acquired for occasions like this. He’s got about enough for a single phone call in his pocket—some pocket, somewhere. It’d also have been nice to have accumulated a signiﬁcantly larger vocabulary in Drachman, considering that he’s going to have to explain equivalent exchange on the fly—but there’d just been so little time in all the lead-up, the build-up, the swift and terrifying swell of a seed of impossibility into branched reality, and then his head was so damn muddled with the existential questions that there wasn’t time for more than a few glances at the phrase books Al had shoved into his bag—

The longest-shortest train ride of his life, and then…

And then cities made of tents and horrors made of men and nightmares rimmed with ice were all he knew—and all he knew for sure. Who’s to say there was anything before this? Who’s to say that all he thinks that he remembers might not be the dream?

Except he’s got a silver watch topped with a chimera burning deep down in his pocket, pressed against his thigh. Except he’s got the shape of a blood seal inked into his forearm, with a tiny sliver of a gap in the circumference of the circle and a single annotated line to render it completely harmless even if his ﬁngertips should brush it—which they did, when the weather was less brutal; which they did, every fucking night, every goddamn morning, to prove to himself, to force himself to remember and believe—

Except he’s got a letter in his breast pocket from one General Roy Mustang that drips with overwrought imagery of the rampant lion dragging down a bear: a page that drags with platitudes about the home front, and blood shed bravely, and the immortality of noble causes… on the surface, anyway. If a man knows how to parse the code, it says something different. It says No
matter what they make you do, you are yourself. They can drain you dry, but they can’t break you, Edward. No one can. Dare them to do their worst and show them that you’re steel underneath. It won’t last forever—nothing does; nothing can. And nothing can destroy you—think of all that’s tried. Endure this. Stagger through. Hold on to who you know you are, to who you were—you’ll find him again; I promise you. Come home. The rest we’ll sort out then.

He thinks the last part is a lie. But it’s a nice lie. It’s a lie worth telling.

There’s a carved wooden sign above his head, chained to a pole sticking out from the face of a building that’s three stories tall. It’s hard to identify the letters with the way it’s swaying slightly in the wind; it’s hard to think about the syllables they’d make with the way the chain is creaking gently; and it’s fucking dark despite the firelight in the window—but he thinks that that’s the word for a lodging place.

He sure as hell hopes so. He’s about to get a pretty shitty lesson in Drachman reading comprehension if it’s not.

He sucks in a deep breath, chokes on the frost that follows it into the bottoms of his lungs, and lets it out shuddering and slow. No time like the present to find out what the future’s got up its filthy fucking sleeve.

The light in the window’s a good sign, but he tries the handle cautiously, just in case—barging into someone’s home in the dead of night would be a great way to introduce himself; they’d probably celebrate him right off the bat. Shower him with love and trophies. Maybe a parade.

Door’s not locked. He puts his shoulder into it gently; damn thing’s heavier than a lumberjack’s load. Makes sense, probably, up here—anything you can do to keep the cold out and the animals at bay.

Does he count as an animal?

He tries to ease the door shut behind him, but it’s kind of fucking impossible with just one arm, so it hits the frame with a nice, resounding thud despite his attempt to affect its momentum.

It’s fucking warm in here, or at least as warm as he’s been in… as long as his nerves can remember; a world without snow sounds too damn good to be true. The fire in the grate’s banked high and hot, and there are worn armchairs set out around it. The rug’s so thin he could probably wear through it if he tried pacing back and forth, and the swords above the mantel are clearly ornamental, but—hell. This is the nicest place he’s been in months, and it looks like fucking paradise.

There’s a tall desk right before him, topped with a thick ledger, the nub of a pencil, and a little brass bell.

He reaches out, and then he hesitates—he’d feel shitty dragging someone out of their warm bed about now. But at the same time, his basic Drachman held, and this is definitely an inn, so it must be their job, and if he doesn’t get them out of their bed, he’ll never get into one, and right about now that sounds like a fate nearly tantamount to death.

He grits his teeth, stifles a sigh, picks up the bell, and rings it—loud and bright over the crackle of the flames.

And then—

Nothing.
Followed by… more nothing.

Followed by—

Just the creak of footsteps in the dimness, proceeding slowly down from the shadowy staircase at the end of the hall.

Fuck, why didn’t he think to hide his gun? The hot prickle of a bead of sweat on his hairline is practically refreshing; he shoves at the loops on the holster until he’s shifted it as far back around his belt as he can get it to go. The coat’ll cover it, mostly. He hopes. Shit, he probably looks like a serial killer; he’s wearing a dead man’s coat, and there’s dried blood all over his gloves—

The woman that steps out of the darkness is tiny and ancient and reminds him of Pinako a little bit. He wants to relax, but there are a hell of a lot of wrench marks left imprinted on his skull—he knows better than to take face value as reassurance of anything at all.

Also, the woman is wearing a bear pelt turned into a dressing gown.

She pauses at the doorway to the hall and squints at him through thick round spectacles, and he does his damnedest to look innocuous, which… well. Obviously he’s a soldier, but if she thinks he’s the good kind—

And even his bad Drachman might not sink him, right? The country’s huge; there must be different dialects; it’s perfectly plausible that he’s just got a thick-ass accent from the other end of the place, and that’s why he doesn’t sound normal to her; maybe, just this once, coincidence will take his side—

She says something that he thinks might just be “Good evening.”

He opens his mouth.

And…

Draws a fucking blank.

What should he say, anyway? “Hi, my name’s Ed, I probably killed your third cousin, but I need a place to stay before I freeze my dumb ass off out there”? That’s a little advanced for his skills—well, his gaping lack thereof.

“He lost,” he manages after a pause long enough that her eyes start to narrow—but that’s a start, right? Phrasebook, page one. If only they’d included I promise you that I am not the enemy, except in the most literal definition of the word. “I… need…” He gestures around himself with his one good hand, which is probably not as helpful as he’d like. The word, or what he thinks is the word, slithers into his brain, late and sheepish. “Room.”

He can’t remember if that’s room-as-in-general-conceptualization-of-space or room-as-in-specific-location-in-a-lodging-edifice. Are they different words in Drachman? Is there any chance she’ll just—get the point? They are standing in a hotel, after all, and he is asking for… things.

Something, anyway.

It’s impossible to gauge whether the wary neutrality of her expression has tipped closer to hostility since he opened his fat mouth. Roy ought to take poker face lessons from this lady; over the years, Ed’s slowly sorted out all of his tells, and the incomprehensible General Bastard is a hell of a long way from bulletproof now.
Well—they all are, in a manner of speaking.

Maybe he should scrounge up some more words. Maybe—

Nah, she’s moving—shuffling, he should say; gradual, maybe kind of reluctant progress across the room, sweeping wide to keep two of the arm chairs in between them on her way over to the desk. She arrives, and then she looks at him, laser-sharp, and applies the tip of the pencil to the ledger page.

She asks a question ending in a word he recognizes—“money”.

Awkward. This is going to take a little bit of basic lingual acrobatics.

It’s kind of funny, too—normally his problem isn’t the lack of *vocabulary*; it’s this pathological fucking inability to slot the words that he knows into an order that’ll make sense to other people and convey the complexity of his stupid thoughts. People like Roy and Al could make themselves understood with half the words in their arsenals, because they get how people think, and they do more than just talk—they *communicate*.

It’s even funnier because Al’s always telling him he’s perfectly cogent as soon as he starts off on science and shit. Apparently facts and concepts are no problem—it’s only when it comes to himself that he gets tangled up and tongue-tied, and all of the words he used to have at his disposal go scuttling off into the undergrowth, never to be seen again.

This time, though, he legitimately just… doesn’t know any of this shit.

“No,” he says, trying for a rueful smile and a sheepish sort of half-shrug with his good arm. “But—” Shitfuck, what’s the—? *There* it is; a flare in the dark of his consciousness; sweet fucking tiny revelations like this are one of the best reasons to keep on living— “Fix. I—fix.” Hastily, he scours the room. One of the armchairs is tilting over to the left side because it’s missing a foot. He sympathizes.

“Look,” he says, or maybe it’s *see* or *watch*; either way, it’s almost definitely not the correct conjugation for an imperative, but—well, hell. He’s never even had to speak Drachman aloud before; even just getting a couple identifiable words out is kind of an accomplishment.

He crosses over to the table and crouches down—he’s not sure he can convince the automail leg to kneel right now; he might tip right the hell over. There’s a little block of wood propped underneath the missing chair leg, fringed with splinters and sized wrong, which doesn’t really fill the space.

“I fix,” he says again, which would be embarrassing if he could afford to be embarrassed right now. Fortunately, there’s no damn time; he has to do his magic trick and get going, so he contorts his left hand until he can slide it in around the angle of his arm in the sling—he touches the palm of the left to the palm of the right, and then he presses his fingertips to the chunk of raw wood and lets the energy flow right in—just enough to twist it, to reshape it, to reconfigure the existing mass into more suitable proportions—

He smooths it out while he’s at it. Anything worth doing is worth doing well, right? He manages to refrain from adding a skull or any flames or anything, even though it would look pretty fucking cool to have in miniature. He could change them all to claw feet if she wanted, which would be *sweet*, but he has no idea how to ask what her aesthetic preferences are in Drachman.

All the same, not bad, and he turns to look up at her, sorting through the dozen or so words in his head to see if he can figure out how to ask her if she likes i—
There’s a gun barrel in his face.

He blinks.

She cocks it.

Motherfucker.

He’s only got one hand to raise, and he does it as slow as he can manage with his enervated-ass, frozen-to-shit muscles straining all the way.

He doesn’t know the words in Drachman, but maybe—maybe tone of voice is universal enough to save his sorry ass.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he says, as slow and soft and soothing as he can. All these fucking things he learned from Roy over the years; all this shit he absorbed by osmosis without even noticing—‘I’m your friend, okay? Alchemy’s not bad. Not by itself. Some people make it bad, but I’m trying—holy hell, I’m trying—not to be one of them.”

She shakes the gun at him, and he swears his heart squeezes so hard it drops two beats. She mutters something that sounds angry—but Drachman always sounds a little bit angry; is it angry-angry or just a function of the combinations of sounds that…?

Silently he begs his ears to pick out individual words for him to latch onto. Dying here—staring down the barrel of an antique fucking pistol clenched tight in the liver-spotted hand of a Drachman lady who ought to be force-feeding potato dumplings to her grandkids, after all this—and not even fucking knowing what her reasons were—

“I’m harmless,” he says, gently, when she pauses for a long, long, rattling breath. “I promise. I just wanna go home. I just wanna get out of your hair. Okay? I fixed your chair. I can fix all your chairs. I can fix your roof, if you want. Bedframes—I can fix those. Doors. I can fix loose mortar in your walls, fix your insulation. I can fix your—” Crap. “…extremely… antique… gun… that’ll probably misfire even if you do have the guts to pull the trigger—and trust me, Grandma; it’s a hell of a lot harder than you think.”

She doesn’t look impressed. In fact, the slow scowl she gives him has a distinct tenor of Shut the fuck up and let me figure out what I’m going to do about this to it.

He’s getting too old for this begging-for-his-life shit; it’s hell on the knees, and the extended crouch has set one of the muscles in the back of right thigh to shaking hard enough that it’s possible she can see it. Maybe she’ll think he’s quivering in fear. That might be a good thing.

If he’s not just so strung out with the cold and the weariness and the effort of sustaining the adrenaline rush that his powers of perception have failed, however, maybe—just fuckin’ maybe—the wide-eyed pleading thing is working a little bit. The lines of her face seem to have softened just slightly—maybe he lucked right the fuck out. Maybe he reminds her even just a tiny bit of one of her kids. Can he press the advantage without spooking her into blowing his face the fuck off?

It’s harder to do it this close—he knows that. It’s harder to do it from two feet away, when you can see their eyes, and you know you’re going to have to watch the light go out of them. It’s harder when you could reach out and touch the human being whose life you’re holding in your hands. It’s harder when they’ve got scars and freckles and eyelashes—when they’re real, and this is real, and…

What words does he know in Drachman that he hasn’t tried yet?
“I,” he says, cautiously, watching her eyes. “I—go home. I want—go home.” He licks his lips, and then tries good old Amestrian and his most pitiable tone of voice. “Come on, lady, please.”

The left corner of her mouth draws down. Every time his gaze darts to the little ring of prospective oblivion pointed at the middle of his forehead, he feels another discrete fucking drop of sweat slither down his spine. A gun can turn anybody into a fucking god—at least in that second; at least in that instant of absolute control over the fate of another human being.

Surely there’s a universal language, underneath all the cultural trappings and the petty histories. Surely there’s something fundamentally human, tied to no speech, fixed in no costume, weighted with no echoing memory of a bygone war—

Surely she can cease to see him as a ranging Amestrian soldier long enough to recognize him as nothing more or less than a lost, lost, lost little boy.

Surely that’s what the muscle tightening in her jaw must mean—

The tilt of the gun barrel as her hand shifts, just slightly—

The way her right shoulder sags—

Surely—

She lowers the gun, stepping back, and assesses him, carefully.

Holy fucking shit, Al’s right: puppy eyes really can get you anything.

She mutters something he doesn’t understand—which is a pity, since there’s a good chance that it’s a string of curses, which is the segment of the Drachman dictionary that he’s most inclined to learn.

She gestures—with the gun, still cradled in the crook of her fingers, perfectly accessible if he tries anything—towards the fireplace.

Or, perhaps, to the rug before it.

“Stay,” she says in Drachman, very slowly and distinctly, watching him closely for a sign of comprehension. “But—” She raises the pistol, pointing at it meaningfully.

Ed’s never been a man for taking hints, but this one’s pretty unmistakable.

“Gotcha,” he says in Amestrian. Nodding profusely knows no tongue, so he accentuates with some of that.

She gives him another lengthy searching look, and then she retreats slowly backwards towards the hall with the stairs.

Well, that’s that, then, apparently. Ed’s slept a shit-ton of worse places in his day. He’s slept a lot of worse places in the last ten.

He feels like jacking one of the armchair cushions for a pillow would be sort of uncouth—not just because she didn’t offer, but also because he’s so fucking filthy. He’d probably leave a layer of dried blood and flakes of dirt all over her upholstery, which would be a piss-poor way to thank her for sparing his life.

Besides, it’s all right—it’s warm enough in here to roll up the extra coat for a pillow, securing his
sidearm in the folds of it once he’s checked the safety half a dozen times. It’d be a hell of a fucking shame to blow his own brains out after weeks on weeks of dodging other people’s attempts to do it for him.

Here in front of the roaring fire, even with the tatters of the rug doing precious few favors for his shoulders where they’re laid out on the hardwood, the soft, rolling heat is lulling him to sleep so fast he probably wouldn’t need any accoutrements at all.

Well, hell. If she murders him in his sleep, there won’t be any pain, and at least it wouldn’t be his own fault, and… Al will already have the military telegram anyway. It’s not like he’ll have the opportunity to be disappointed.

Hopefully she won’t, though. Hopefully he’ll wake up one more time, for one more chance at one more day. Hopefully he’ll get a tomorrow to start down the road back to Al and Roy and all the what-ifs that he hasn’t wandered yet.

He drifts off to the faint throb of an ache in his back and his shoulder and the hazy comfort of that thought—*hopefully*…

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When he surfaces from the viscous pool of sleep who knows how many hours later, the first thing he notices is that the fire’s burnt low; the second is that there’s an unfamiliar thick wool blanket catching on the stubble on his jaw. He grits his teeth through the groanings and gripings of his miserable body and forces himself to sit up, pushing with his left arm to support his torso.

He fingers the edge of the blanket for a moment when he’s made it upright—there’s good news and bad news to be gleaned here. It’s great that she’s categorized him as something other than alchemically-minded Amestrian scum, or that she deems him so harmless that it doesn’t matter. But if he was sleeping so soundly that she could drape this over him without even shaking one of the blood-murky dreams he’d been wading through, it would have been distressingly easy to wipe him out with no one the wiser.

Al’s always telling him there’s no point dwelling on the past, and even less in dwelling on a past that didn’t even happen—that hypothetical imaginings are a waste of his intellect, and that untrod hypotheticals are even more useless. She didn’t murder him in his sleep—that’s what matters. All that’s left to him is to acknowledge that and move on from here.

After a few slow, deep breaths that dredge up twinges from his spine and his ribs and all kinds of new and exciting places, he plants his left hand on the floor and levers himself carefully up to his feet. He’s folding the blanket when he hears footsteps in the hall.

His charitable hostess pauses in the doorway. She has a heavy shawl on today instead of the bearskin, but that looks less like a style choice than it does a more practical method for openly carrying her gun, since it’s slung in one of the draping parts, where he can’t fail to see it.

She looks at him. He looks back.

He lifts the edge of the blanket and wows her with one of the few Drachman phrases he *does* know for sure: “Thank you.”

She does not look especially impressed—but then, at the rate they were going yesterday, he’s not
sure she’s capable.

“Hey,” he says, not exactly in Drachman, but he’s hoping that one’s pretty self-evident. “I…”
What the hell are the words? “…go…”

Fuck. Al quizzed him on this; he remembers—remembers the moment, anyway; remembers the way Al squeezed his eyes shut and screwed his mouth up like he wanted to scream or cry or both together when Ed said It doesn’t matter; if I get close enough to talk to one of them about the fucking trains, I’ll probably be dead.

The word, though? That’s long gone. Damn his stupid brain to a dozen hells a shit-load colder than this.

“…hang on,” he says, which is also not particularly native, but she hasn’t shot him for his insolence just yet.

He rummages through his coat pockets until he turns up the map, and then he drags it open one-handed and crushes the corner in his palm, supporting it long enough for him to extend his fingertip towards the larger dot labeled Petrovich, from which there unwinds a double-line marked with intermittent hatches—and which he remembers from the briefings is the start of the Drachman freight train route. It’ll be targeted by his people and guarded by theirs, but it’s the fastest way across the border—it curves around the base of some famous mountain, wide enough to graze the Amestrian border, and there’s an outpost just across that critical imaginary line. All he has to do is get that far.

She eyes him for a long, long moment, and the paper starts to droop.

Then she shouts a word—a name?—so loud he thinks the floorboards shake; at the very least, he practicaly startles right the fuck out of his skin.

His heart’s still bouncing around the walls of his skull and flirting with his eardrums when a new set of footfalls comes galloping down the stairs, and the flicker of a shadow is filled by a boy just about his age—slightly taller, but all the Drachmans are; that’s a statistical fact; and with short hair a much paler blond than his, but…

Not so different. Not so different at all.

Ed’s surrogate grandmother-slash-savior figure gives the wide-eyed newcomer a series of instructions, and half of the words almost sound recognizable. It’s a funny thing—familiar sounds that resonate inside his mind but resolutely stay meaningless.

Once she’s delivered what must be several sentences, the boy (and shit, isn’t that a good joke? People his age who don’t have blood crusted in their fingerprints and death underscoring their eyes look like boys) nods several times and then replies. In the course of speaking, the kid shoots an appraising look at Ed before turning back to the woman—who must be his grandmother; squinting, Ed can see the outline of his own posture and Pinako’s cane-shaking reprimands in their shadows on the wall—and then nods one more time. She gestures, and the boy crosses over, cautiously.

“Hello,” he says in Amestrian, each syllable painstakingly deliberate. He touches a finger to his own sternum—or to the several layers of clothing currently on top of it, at any rate. “Name is Vladimir.”

Ed could drop to the floor in relief, but he knows by now that it’s not the greatest place to sleep, and they really need to blow this joint in any case. “Nice to meet you,” he says. “You have no
idea how nice.” He flattens his left hand on his chest. “I’m Ed.”

“Ed,” Vladimir says slowly.

Ed motions to Bear-Killing Grandma of Doom, who’s watching this whole exchange so critically you’d think it was a play that she’d written herself. “Can you tell her ‘thank you’?” he asks. He shoves his hand as deep as he can into his pocket, and his fingertips graze some metal, and another teeth-gritted inch of reaching draws out a couple of coins. “I wanted t—”

Grandma comes out with something vehement in Drachman, which is so startling Ed almost drops the shit.

Vladimir gives him a slightly wry look. “She say ‘Keep. You will need.’”

“Nothing ominous about that,” Ed says.

It’s kind of unlikely that that word’s in Vlad’s vocabulary, but he nods amiably and then holds up a hand.

“Stay,” he says. “Five minute.”

“Sure,” Ed says. Like he has a fucking choice when it comes to the only interpreter in a hundred miles who wouldn’t shoot him on sight.

Vladimir heads back towards Grandma and then jogs up the stairs. She gives Ed another hard look, but he’s starting to think that’s just how she looks at everybody. Maybe when this kind of a place—the snow, the cold, the endless silent white—is what you call home, everything crystallizes, over time.

After a several-moment eternity, she graces him with a single nod.

A few more eternities come and go, and then Vladimir returns, clomping down the stairs with an enormous pile of rabbit furs slung over one shoulder—dozens of them strapped together tight. He’s added several layers of coats and scarves and whatnot to his ensemble, too.

Before Ed can sort out which of his designated sheepish gestures he thinks are going to translate best, Vladimir dumps the entire mound of hare skins into his one available arm.

“Please hold,” he says, and the part of Ed’s brain that just gives up and embraces the absurdity of existence thinks He sounds exactly like the operators at the switchboard. Only Drachman, and slightly less sick of my shit.

The end result is that Ed stands there laden down with pelts—which smell faintly of blood and animal and the peculiar crispness of snow; he’s so sick of the lattermost that the iron tang is almost a relief—while Vladimir disappears down the hall again. Grandma shakes her head once and mutters something, and Ed says “Sorry, what?” before he remembers that that’s useless as hell, and then she raises her eyebrows at him—he thinks, anyway; she’s got a lot of wrinkles, and she’s still sort of lurking in the shadows by the staircase, so it’s hard to tell.

At that point, the awkwardness sets in thick, and Ed just… It’s fucking hilarious, isn’t it? It’s fucking hilarious that he can go from bleeding out on the snow with survival as his solitary priority to an awkward social situation in a matter of not-too-many hours at all. He’s having to cling to some random-ass Drachman kid’s rabbit pelts so they don’t spill all over the dirty floor less than two days after bringing a mountain down on a hundred of this guy’s distant cousins and killing them on the spot.
The universe is cruel and arbitrary and utterly bizarre.

And the bottom line is that he’s glad he’s got another crack at it.

Momentarily, Vladimir’s back with his arms full of beaver pelts—at least, Ed thinks they’re beavers; he sort of gave up on the memorizing the phylogenetic tree thing when Mom died, and he found more pertinent uses for his research time—and a sort of resigned set to his jaw. He’s now wearing an extremely funny-looking hat with giant earflaps and a little white pom-pom on the top. Ed has to swallow three times in a row and think seriously about what a fucked-up, sad excuse for a human being he is to keep himself from busting a gut laughing.

Vladimir, of course, looks dead fucking serious. There’s a distinct possibility that Drachman culture doesn’t believe in a sense of humor. Then again, given Ed’s experience with a hell of a lot of tough crowds all over the map, it’s more likely they have a great one—it’s just that he hasn’t tapped into it yet, and maybe never will.

“We go,” Vladimir says, perfectly solemnly despite the fact that he’s wearing the headgear equivalent of googly eye glasses, the prohibition of which in Central Command Ed had nothing to do with. Vlad turns to his grandmother and adds a few more words in Drachman, which miraculously manage to sound sort of sweet despite the general spikiness of the whole language. Then he leads the way to the front door, shouldering through it with his enormous load of furs.

Ed follows him around the corner of the building to an unpaved side-street, where there’s a very shaggy and serene-looking donkey waiting, hitched to a small cart. Vladimir heaves his furs into the body of it and indicates that Ed should do the same—which would be a lot easier with two damned arms, thank you.

“Petrovich—one day,” Vlad says, holding up a single gloved finger for emphasis. With all the massive furs laid out, Ed can see now that the guy is wearing a small pack. Hopefully, unlike Ed’s, it contains more food than ammunition. He points to the back of the cart. “You sit.” He then points to the makeshift sling. “You are—how say—broken.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time I’d heard that,” Ed says, but he climbs up on the stupid cart and snuggles in with the skins of the dead forest animals all the same.

If only Teacher could see him now. She’d either be reluctantly impressed or lose her shit laughing —so it’d be worth it whichever way.

Ed loses track of time almost immediately—every stretch of snowy road looks identical once you’ve rattled down enough of them; he remembers the narrow lanes of the town they left behind, but their progress on the main road melts into a blur of his weary body jostling against the unforgiving wood of the cart, watching endless spans of gravel slip away over the horizon line. Vladimir, perched up at the head of the cart holding the donkey’s reins, whistles for a grand total of about three minutes, Ed thinks; it’s hard to gauge. Inviting cold air into one’s mouth must be torment, so Ed doesn’t blame him for giving up. They’re probably both in more danger of frostbite now than he’s been since the first night in damp tents with fires that wouldn’t catch—fucking military was glad they had the Fullmetal Alchemist when he waterproofed all their shit with a couple claps and a slow-burn glower at the general who’d left his men to this.
Movement keeps your blood flowing, though, and with the pair of them sitting, they’re at the mercy of the cold.

All the same—all the same, this is the safest he’s felt in so long that the warm curl of relief in the pit of his stomach registers more like nostalgia than something real. It’s heady, though—dizzying; it lifts him like a buoy on the water, seeping up from underneath, and in a matter of minutes (perhaps?), it lulls him right the fuck to sleep.

A touch—

to his left shoulder, and he’s upright, arm out, crooked to push his elbow towards the opponent’s throat, hand flat and poised, ready to strike or tighten into a fist depending on the angle of the first atta—

Vladimir looks at him with something like… pity, possibly. It’s hard to say.

The sky around Vladimir’s head has darkened to a wash of shadow picked with stars. Ed’s whole body feels—numb, heavy, like it isn’t quite attached to him; like it’s all automail, and if you think too hard about the nerves, they leave you in the lurch.

“Shit,” he says, tongue like lead, clanging off his teeth. “Sorry.”

“It is no sorry,” Vlad says, with a flicker of a smile as Ed fights to fold his arm in against himself again. “It is only—we arrive.”

Half the furs are still draped over Ed’s legs—which is probably the reason he made it here alive. Vlad’s tied the strings on his hat to hold the earflaps down; he wedges one gloved finger under the right one to itch at his cheek while Ed struggles free of the cocoon of borrowed warmth.

Petrovich it is—the train station might have phones, and even if it doesn’t, as long as it has a fucking train—

It’s hard to wrap his brain around the concept that he’s through the worst of it—that he slept through the worst of it. He can almost taste the fucking mashed potatoes and cereal and meat—so much damn meat; there’ll be worry-lectures about protein for the duration of the cooking time—that Al’ll be force-feeding him the second he gets back. There’ll be chives in the potatoes—and butter, God, how fucking long has it been since he tasted—?

He has to focus; his head’s spinning from the lack of any kind of food. What’s he had in the last few days? Jerky? That’s about the sum of it; no wonder he’s loopy as shit.

Vlad offers him a hand up out of the bed of the cart and then reads his damn mind—he blinks, and there’s a slab of thick, dense bread folded around a strip of something that might be the rabbit being pressed into his hand. Vlad smiles.

“You slept lunch,” he says.

Ed thinks—

Ed thinks that all of this shit is so wrong that it just about stops his heart; his breath sticks in his
throat and practically explodes there—like a mine, like a mortar, like a tiny grenade; it’s just so—

They bludgeoned it into every soldier they could get their paws on, could sink their claws into, that the Drachmans were a bunch of fucking barbarians—beasts, monsters, murderers; that they’d cut you down as soon as look at you.

And he fought it; he never believed it; he never let himself internalize any of that poison, never let the lies sink into his blood and his brain and his bones, but—

It’s sick. It’s sick. And there are boys out there, children, still dying in the snow with that hate in their hearts. Really thinking that that’s all it is—us and them, good and bad; better destroy them before they invade our land, burn down our houses, stick their necks out for us for nothing and feed us fucking sandwiches because we slept through lunch—

The avalanche made him lose track of how many men he’s killed. Before that, it was twenty-six—eight in close quarters; four of them with the automail. Winry will never forgive him if she figures it out. Maybe it’s a good thing—that he bled all over it; that he almost died with it crumpled up beneath him, insensible to the firing of his nerves. He can tell her he’s the only one whose life is crusted in the plates she laid with love.

“Thanks,” he says, choking on it, because Vlad’s still waiting for an answer.

He staggers slightly to regain his balance—figures that his feet won’t work either; they were about all he had left—and clings to the precious food as well as he can. He’ll want that as soon as he can convince his brain that his body needs it whether he deserves it or not.

Vlad gestures with one hand towards the faintly-glowing lights of a substantially larger town than the one they left behind. The gravel road splits into two smaller paths right ahead of where they stand. “I do not—how you say. You need train, yes? Station is west side.”

“Yeah?” Ed asks, like he has any fucking clue which way is west right now. His head wobbles—or feels like it—as he tries to plant both feet firmly on the frozen ground. These fucking standard-issue military boots don’t help. Roy, at least, always thought he wore his own entirely to be a little shit—and that was a lot of it, sure, but there’s also the small fact that the grips on those bad boys unabashedly beat the crap out of the sad excuse for traction you get with these. Being able to brace himself was a matter of life and death on a near-daily basis, back then. He couldn’t have afforded this kind of dumbassery in those days. “I’ll—I can get there. I can handle it from here.”

Vlad raises his eyebrows. “West side,” he says again, pointing this time, and if there was paperwork you could fill to nominate someone to receive their due in the exchange, Ed would’ve done it no matter how many forms they slung his way.

“Hey,” he says. He tucks the sandwich tight into the sling so he can hold out his left hand.

“You’ve been a lifesaver, all right? I mean—fucking literally. You’ve saved my life. There isn’t a thank-you in any kinda language for this, y’know?”

Vladimir clasps his hand tightly, offering another smile. He must understand parts of it, or at least the tenor and the tone.

“I am glad,” he says. “I am glad to do. I am glad to—how you… help. I am glad to help. I am glad to help my friend.”

Fuck. Ed really needs that food. A part of him wants to cry, and another part wants to throw up, and he doesn’t have time for either of those things right now.


“I’m glad you did,” he says instead. “I’d be dead, man. I’d be dead, and there are no fucking gravestones in the snow.” He tries at a smile back, gripping Vlad’s hand tighter like that’ll summon up the words. “I’m gonna remember this. And I’m gonna tell people about you. I’m gonna tell everybody I can get my fucking hands on that I’m alive because you gave a shit, and this war didn’t fuck up who you are.”

At least he’s getting to teach this guy a couple of the most useful Amestrian words.

“Thank you,” he says. “The world needs less people like me and a hell of a lot more that’re like you.”

“I am glad,” Vladimir says. Their grips part at last, and he claps his gloved palm gently against Ed’s shoulder. “You have care. Yes?”

Probably he means take care, but it’s almost better this way.

“Yeah,” Ed says. “Yes. You, too. And keep an eye on your grandma, will you? She’s pretty cool.”

Vlad nods, then extends his arm towards the town again.

“West,” he says.

“You’re what I believe in,” Ed says. He can’t stop himself; the words are just tumbling the fuck out of his dumbass mouth. “You know that? You. People like you; people being like you. The capacity. That’s about all there is.” He retrieves his beautiful sandwich, makes sure he’s holding onto it tight, and raises it as he takes the first steps towards the lights. “Thanks, Vlad.”

Vlad waves, and the donkey twitches its ears, and then the dark swallows them both as they start out the other way.

Ed’s going to tear Central Command apart at the fucking seams if he has to; he’s going to rip out the baseboards if they won’t hear him; he—

Can’t. He can’t treat his power like a given, like a weapon, like a toy.

That’s when you turn into one of them.

He draws a breath, then takes a bite. Whatever this is, it ain’t chicken; that’s for sure. It also tastes like sheer fucking bliss; the bread’s so fucking dense, and there’s so much flavor in it, and it’s not stale at all—

A man could really get used to this whole eating-real-food-instead-of-frozen-rations thing.

And despite the fact that it’s not physiologically possible for the calories to have hit him yet, it’s helping—his legs feel steadier; the deep, soupy, snow-bound fog in his brain is clearing up.

He’s going to make it. Holy shit, he’s going to make it; he’s going to be okay. Al’s gonna have to quit crying into his pillow and adopting hordes and hordes of consolatory cats, because Ed is coming back.

He squares his shoulders and digs into the sandwich and heads right for those lights.
The station, as it turns out, is pretty damn easy to find.

So are the posters with a sketch of his face blazoned on them, stained around the edges from the lithograph print.

His written Drachman is marginally stronger than his speaking and listening and all the real-time shit—he can parse the word *Dangerous* at the top right off the bat. And there’s something that must be *killer* or something underneath; he recognizes that word as a verb. Next it says something about alchemy, and then something about… *shoot on sight*?

Oh, fucking *good*.

He can *see* the pay phone—but then, he might not have enough money in his pathetic little pocket to make an international call, if the lines even go that far; if the wires would even take his voice to Al. There’s a goddamn war on, after all—maybe they used to let transmissions go through, but at this point—

Shit.

There’s a flyer plastered on every pillar, every post, and every freaking wall. If he tries to ask the station attendant snoozing in the booth for the lowdown on the train times, he’s going to out himself as an Amestrian and garner some suspicion immediately, and then there are instructions to put a bullet in him on the window directly next to the guy’s face.

He lingers under the iron archway leading from the street onto the platform, hanging close to the tin siding of the warehouse just beside of the entrance, where the shadow and his upturned collar will conceal his face. There are no fewer than four fucking Drachman soldiers on that platform, and unlike the guy at the ticket window, they are definitely not asleep.

Ed weighs his options. His hair’s so filthy that any description of him being blond shouldn’t help, and he may have lost enough weight by now that his face’ll be so narrowed it’ll take more than just an image of how he looked before to make the call—but how many not-especially-tall yellow-eyed Amestrians are going to be wandering around unattended in the far fucking North?

He retreats a little further into the dark and fishes the map out of his pocket again. It doesn’t matter where the trains are headed, does it? All he needs is one going south. There’s only one line—one only track, and only one trajectory. Any train headed southward will sweep close enough to the border for him to bail and find that blessed fucking outpost full of people who will help him to get home—all he has to do is get on a train, any train, and he’ll practically be smelling the enveloping cloud of Al’s overpowering vanilla shampoo.

That makes the choice pretty easy. He needs two things—shelter, for the night; and a train to hitch a ride on. He can probably fell both those birds if he stays somewhere close enough to hear the wheels and the whistle, and he’s currently leaning up against a warehouse wall.

Maybe his luck is finally turning around.

He glances upward at the corrugated metal behind him—there’s a small window set another foot up. Bingo: target sighted; plan in place. All he has to do is get through it without the fucking soldiers noticing his Ling-inspired ass.

…God, he’s getting *stupid* from the lack of food and sleep and warmth—and from the ongoing, endless, dully-throbbing pain. He doesn’t have to break in *right in front* of the fucking military
men; there has to be at least one more entrance to this place, and it’d be ideal to pick one where he can see if anybody’s inside before he hurls his dumb ass through it.

He risks another direct glance at the soldiers pacing the platform. One raises a hand, and then all three of the others cluster around him, and they start talking in low voices—too low to rouse the station attendant, but probably loud enough to cover a soft zing of alchemy if he’s quick, and the street’s still quiet—

Which it is.

He circles to the front of the warehouse, scanning the shadows at the mouths of the alleys just in case. The main door has a rusty padlock and a foggy window. There’s no light coming through the latter, and when he presses his ear to it, not a single fucking sound.

Maybe—

He shouldn’t even think it, but maybe his damn luck—

Well.

He fits his left palm in against the immobile plane of the right and then touches his fingertips to the padlock; the metal shears smoothly, and the lock gapes open; he pries it loose from the hole and then draws gently on the door, trying not to let the hinges—

Creak like a fucking banshee in the stillness of the night.

He cringes so hard he actually feels a jolt of pain up his jaw, which is twice as extraordinary given how much ambient hurt it has to stab through to register at all.

After a long, long second of silence—for the duration of which he keeps his body more rigid than some statues that he’s seen—he pulls the door open another sliver, then another. It goes smoother this time, and he slips his body through the gap and makes a quick assessment of the silhouetted features of the room—no noticeable murderers or policemen, and he’s not sure which are worse. Honestly, he has more experience with the first.

Looks clear of both for now, though. He shuts the behind him and shoves the heavy deadbolt home. It’s a damn good thing they didn’t lock that before he got here—maybe, just maybe, coincidence is on his side.

There’s a panel of switches on the wall to his right—is it worth risking the light streaming out of the window on the far wall? If the military men notice that, the jig’s probably right the fuck up; it’s pretty obvious nobody’s supposed to be here at this hour. That’s actually a good sign: if the shipping warehouses sit untouched and empty overnight, they must not run the trains this late; he ought to have time for a nap before he has to be on high alert for his.

Here he is, then: no flashlight, probably; no compass, probably; maybe some jerky in the bottom of the bag; surrounded by the shapes of crates stacked almost to the steel skeleton of the ceiling.

It’s the best he’s been doing in a while.

He follows the main aisle between the towers of crates and pallets all the way to the back wall, so he can check out the window spilling a patch of silver on the dusty floor. It’s set pretty high, but he could shove a crate beneath it and have easy access out—it looks like the whole left pane swings open, and even with the pack and the coat on, he’ll fit through. At that point, it’d just be a matter of darting across the platform and onto the train without getting either caught or perforated with a
ton of bullets. He’s not sure how the odds are on that front; it’ll depend on a lot of things—how many military men they have scouring the platform in daylight; how many other people mill around for cover; whether the military men care about collateral damage or not. It’s about thirty feet from where he stands to where the train would pull up to the platform edge, but thirty feet can be a long fucking way when you’re fighting for your life.

It’d be smartest to wait until the train was leaving—until it was halfway gone, steam pouring, wheels turning, gaining momentum too fast for them to stop if someone else snagged a hand on the back rail of the caboose and ducked under their aim. That’s his best bet.

Settles that, then. He’ll wait for the whistle and then get ready to blast through this window before anyone’s the wiser.

Speaking of which—

In the interests of efficiency, he’s going to need a… place to stand. A bit of leverage. A method of easing the transition between the floor and that window way up on the wall.

Definitely not a makeshift stepladder, which would not be required for an individual of more significant stature. But—something.

He examines a few of the crates sitting in the stretch of moonlight. He can’t read much of any of the text stenciled on them, but pushing at a few of them with the flat of his hand quickly makes it evident which ones are heavy and which aren’t. He steps around one that feels moveable, puts his good shoulder against it, and starts shoving, guiding it up against the wall one skidding, labored step at a time. He can hike himself up on top of this sucker in the time it’d take to blink, whereas scaling the wall unaided, with just the one arm to work with, would be another can of worms—and they might be carnivorous.

Speaking of things that are edible if you’re hungry enough, maybe there’s something around here that he can eat.

He doesn’t want to crack open any crates he doesn’t have to—first off, there’s that whole issue with the one arm and the no crowbar and whatnot; second, this place unwittingly saved his ass by offering him shelter with their crap security, and it’d be sort of assholish to pay that forward by breaking all their shit for no good reason.

Maybe he can remember and recognize some basic Drachman in poor lighting, while squinting and shaking from exhaustion. Surely that should be the way they test this shit in school. Scrape past death by exposure three or four times, then refuse your body any substantial amount of calories for a few days at a stretch, then hang out in the dark in an unfamiliar location to take your vocabulary test.

He, for one, probably would’ve done a hell of a lot better in school if it’d had some horrific survivalist elements instead of all of that regurgitate what I told you last week in exactly the way I want to hear bullshit.

Does that say “apples”? Surely that’s the most basic fucking introductory word on the face of the planet, and it accordingly stuck; he couldn’t possibly mess that up, could he?

He leans in and tries to get a whiff from the crack between two of the boards that make up the side. It’s too damn cold for much of anything to be detectable, but he thinks those are sort of round, fruit-like shapes, and it’s not inconceivable that apples’d survive in this climate, although he doesn’t know how plausible it is that they’d get stored in a place like this. They’d have to have
arrived here from someplace further south; maybe there’s some sort of customs thing, or…

Well, speculation’s bullshit; he’s got two hands for a reason. Well. One usable hand, but the point stands.

He slides his left palm against the right again and then lays it on the side of the crate, rearranging the material just enough to make an approximately fist-sized hole, through which he fishes out…

Two points—well, two points to Al—for the Drachman lessons on the fly, following him around the house with the book while he packed and ranted and threw together huge pots of Mom’s soup to try to de-stress them both.

It’s almost a pity the apple tastes like bliss despite being practically frostbitten, and there aren’t any worms in it; he could use the protein. He’ll take it, though. He’ll take just about anything.

He tears through two more, probably splattering all kinds of juice on his dead man’s coat, and then seals the crate back up so he won’t be tempted to keep eating until he makes himself sick. An excavation of the pack unearths one more stick of jerky, so he eats that, too; sure, he might regret it later, but when’s he going to need more concentrated energy than when he’s trying to sprint across a train platform for his life? If he doesn’t make it, he won’t exactly wish he’d eaten less.

The sugar hits him so hard he’s dizzy with it for a couple minutes, so he sits down and jimmys a bent nail out of the base of his ladder-crate. Another quick transmutation drags the floor up into a little bowl of cement; he cracks off a chunk of ice and melts it with another touch of his fingertips, and then he chips a few flakes of iron off the nail and waits, watching, while they…

Align. North to south. Not that he doesn’t know what side of town he’s on; not that he doesn’t know which way he and Vlad came from; it’s not about that—not about directions. It’s about… orienting himself. With the universe, really, not the town. No matter what happens tomorrow, the sun’s gonna rise in the west and shine on Al’s face through his window, and his cat’ll stretch, and the world will turn.

Ed sits there for another minute, cradling his right arm to his chest, and watches the filaments trembling in the unseen currents of the tiny pool. If that’s not a metaphor for life, Ed doesn’t fuckin’ know what is.

It’s all right. It’s all going to be all right.

He claps his left palm against the right again and seals the floor up tight—the alchemy marks barely show anymore; he’s been finessing that over the last few years, trying to make them invisible. Trying to leave no trace. He twists the ounce or two of water up into a little spiraling spring shape, returning it to ice, and sets it aside. Better not to leave it there lest he slip on it and break his neck tomorrow.

Tomorrow—what a thought. What a gift; what a fucking blessing. Time was he used to dread the morning; time was he resented waking up to another shot at his shitty-ass existence.

But times change. And people change. And sometimes—once in a great while, when the scales balance, and the principle of equivalency proves true—things work out for the better.

He curls up under his coats next to one of the crates and lets the drowsiness drown him slow.
Chapter Notes

There will probably be no update next weekend because I'm getting married and shit. :’D I may try to update again this Sunday to make up for it, but don't hold me to that! I think the next chapter is where things get seriously incoherent, so there's a lot of fixing up to do... Welcome to Poor Planning 101 with Tierfal. XD

Morning greets him with a creak of hinges and a shrill scream from a train whistle in immediate succession, and he startles awake so hard he tips his own weight and manages to crush his face into the cement of the warehouse floor.

The hinge sound—that, his stumbling brain recognizes, is bad. That’s almost certainly an indication that someone just arrived to their workplace only to discover that the door lock mysteriously went missing over the course of the night, and the someone in question might have a quick trigger finger for trespassers in particular.

The train sound is, upon a split-second’s reflection, even worse.

He’s fucked. What else is new?

He draws himself up into a crouch, willing feeling back into his tingling extremities, and tries to listen closely over the thunder of his heartbeat and the dulled sounds of commotion on the platform. There’s a soft swish—the door falling shut? Then—footsteps. Cautious, measured, heavy, and completely unambiguous. Thank the stars or somebody’s deity or the Gatekeeper or whoever the fuck in history invented them for the undisguisable weight of steel-toed boots.

There’s shouting out on the platform—Ed’s Drachman gets even more muddled with volume changes and a lack of enunciation, but the tone for All aboard is pretty standard no matter how you make the words. He can hear the steam chuffing, the doors slamming—

But there’s no way to know where it’s headed, and once he tops that crate and hits the window, he’ll have a target on his back. Fifty-fifty, and he’s just going to have to risk it—no going back from here, unless it’s in a bodybag, and odds are that strangers on a foreign frontier wouldn’t even take the time for that. Either he hops onto that train, or he winds up in a ditch.

That makes it pretty simple, at least.

He’s almost warmed up enough to sweat as the footfalls track slowly down along the main aisle—no futzing around at the outer edges, more’s the pity; he’s going to have one fucking shot, and so is whoever just walked through that door.

He casts his eyes across the floor, willing the eleventh hour panic to metamorphose into inspiration, and—

The bent nail he scraped for shavings to build his makeshift compass lies just within arm’s reach.

No sudden movements; no slipping or leaning or extending a single fucking finger past the crate concealing him from view. Slowly, gently, he picks it up between his finger and his thumb and
cages it with his fingers, curling the contours of the iron in against the meat of his glove-swaddled hand.

No second guesses. No second chances. Life’s short; death’s swift; but sometimes—

Sometimes—

He gauges the angle out of the corner of his eye, and then he flings the nail at the wall behind him so that it ricochets and clatters back against the line of crates.

The footsteps pause.

Ed listens to his heart slam once, twice; it pulses in his throat, bangs against his sternum, trembles in his fingertips.

A soft crunch—boot treads grinding on dirt and dust, turning, maybe, but which way—?

Clothing rustles, and then the footsteps move—slowly, cautiously, but unmistakably—off through a break in the crates towards the wall where the nail tumbled to the floor.

It’s an instant’s distraction, but an instant’s all he needs.

He hurls himself upward out of the crouch and throws himself at the crate under the window with all of the momentum he can find—hooks his good arm over the top for leverage and slings his weight to the right; his boot gains purchase; he hikes himself up—

A hoarse yell behind him, but who gives a fuck? His palms meet; the glass dissolves under his fingertips as he slaps his left hand to it; the hole widens just fast enough for him to fit his body through—

Even now the sharpness of the cold shocks him as the air hits the bottoms of his lungs—he vaults off of the windowsill and hopes to hell the people underneath move their asses out of the way—

He’s had longer falls, but the impact with the concrete jolts his knees so hard it jars his spine, and black spots spatter all over his vision like ink; if they swell, he’s fucked; he’ll pass out on the spot, and he’s fucked—

Someone screams—stark and clear, the sound vibrating like a singer hitting a high note—and his knees unbend, and the force propels him forward, and the train wheels turn—

Black smoke billows across the platform; metal glimmers in the glare of the light off the snow; someone barks an order behind him, but he’s already booking it for his fucking life towards the edge of the platform, the deck of the caboose—he can see them where the grayish crowd of milling people parts before him; feet skitter backward, fabric swirls aside—

Ten steps to the edge of the concrete platform—eight at a run, and he is fucking running—

Five, six, sev—

Someone reaches to fist their hand in the back of his coat; the air gasps as they miss—the train chuffs out along the track, dragging its bulk too fast; the railing on the back of the caboose jitters as the whole iron beast rattles further out—

Eight, and he has to push off hard, or he’ll never—

Something—fingertips?—catches in the heavy wool of his coat the goddamn fucking second his
right foot leaves the platform.

He can feel his own momentum changing even as he flings his left arm out towards the railing on the last—*car*—

And his body twists—

His momentum—his *trajectory*—tilts, tips, swings—

*Fuck*—no, not—

The weight behind him hauls back hard, and they both go crashing to the platform; Ed’s head smacks against somebody’s unforgivingly solid ribcage and rings like a brass bell; everything shimmers, wavers, sparks—

With the yellow lights still dancing, he shoves himself up on his one arm (cold hand even colder on the concrete even through the glove; *hip screaming* one long note of relentless hurt where it took the impact on the pavement—) and swivels into a crouch, knees bent, body up, heart banging hard. The only weapon he’s got left that he trusts—that he can reach, that he can operate at speed—is the knife in the back of his belt.

It’s no longer in his belt—it’s clenched in his hand, blade gleaming in the anemic light of morning—almost before he’s finished the thought.

He’s a survivor. He always has been. And he won’t go down without one *hell* of a fight.

The soldier who grabbed him is still laid out on the cement, fumbling to get his arms beneath himself; he groans, and his fucking *voice* hasn’t even dropped; this is a *kid*, he’s a *kid*—

Shouting from down the platform makes it painfully clear that the existential crisis—like its several thousand brethren over the course of this fucking deployment—will just have to fucking wait.

The defensive stance makes for a smooth segue to his feet, and Ed’s feet know their business—they turn and fucking *run*.

Just enough bystanders to make for some good duck-and-weave shit; a possibly-stupid hope that the Drachmans will do their damndest to reduce the collateral damage bubbles in his throat and sticks there, which is shit for breathing but probably a good sign for the condition of his soul. He dodges behind a young couple clinging to each other, bundled up from head to foot; an open stretch of cement yawns out in front of him; hesitation’s killed better men—

He *must* not have imagined it from the brief reconnaissance last night; he wouldn’t torture himself so fucking *creatively*—

He makes a break for it with everything that he’s got left. Live by force or die trying.

Bullets slice the air; by all rights, his ass should be riddled the fuck through—

Nine more steps between him and a brick wall—and, beside it, two feet of chain-link fence between the corner of the last station building and the first store on the street, separating the platform and the road.

A weird puncture noise—a bullet cutting through the tails of his coat—? It’s hard to aim in gloves; he knows that—thank fucking *hell* it is; that it’s hard to sight, hard to target, hard to fire—
Another soldier sweeps into the space just as he balances his weight instinctively over the flesh knee to start the leap towards the fence—but Izumi didn’t train some chump, and his body’s smarter than his mind when it comes down to it; he dips clear of the first heavy punch so smoothly it feels like moving in a dream. Shock registers in the stark blue eyes fixed on him—no time for that; he shifts back, rotating his rear foot, and the next blow stirs nothing but the frosted air.

That’s when the gun comes out.

The guy’s a quick draw, but Envy would’ve wrapped the narrow-barreled revolver around Ed’s head by now. Ed forged ahead, sure—but he didn’t forget. He cut his teeth on men and monsters ten times faster and stronger and smarter than this.

He brings his hand up—one sharp line, knuckles first, fingers still clenched around the knife handle, blade pointed right—and applies the base of his fist directly to the bottom of the soldier’s wrist.

If the force alone hadn’t made him drop the pistol to the concrete, the threat of the knife would have coaxed his fingers open; Ed kicks the gun from the grip side to send it skittering off the platform, spinning into the snow. Time’s ticking the fuck on by while the gears turn in this guy’s head; he processes the series of swift maneuvers and the pain in his arm—

And throws himself at Ed, growling deep in his chest like something feral and possessed, which—

Is exactly—

What Ed intended—

Because ducking to tilt his metal shoulder into the guy’s gut and then pushing himself upright just as the momentum tilts lets him catapult the weight right over his back. The soldier sprawls him out on the cement—winded as shit and staring at the sky, probably—and leaves Ed poised on his feet and ready to bolt towards his last-chance egress before the rain of bullets starts to pour.

He’s probably got three and a half seconds—give or take a split or two—before he’s a corpse full of copper casing scraps.

He jumps the last step and grabs onto anything his hand’ll take—jams one boot toe into the first hole in the chain link that’ll fit it, and he’s ready to say it now, even if it’s never aloud, even if it’s never again, even if he dies here, and no one writes it on his grave—

It’s a fucking miracle he’s so small.

He has to bounce his weight to climb with one hand and two feet—his right knee aches; the left one squeals; even though the gloves, his fingers protest the bite of the wire and the weight of his body hauling back.

The knife’s in his belt again, stowed somehow—instinct’s like magic, in a way; like sleight-of-hand and an empty mind.

Scaling fences is simple shit except when your lungs are heaving out air so frigid it scrapes your throat, and your heart’s banging fit to burst every last vessel underneath your skin—when you’re doing it one-handed, wearing gloves and ten layers of thick, heavy clothes, with a pack hanging and your eyes stinging and the ice trying to force your hands to slide away from every twining diamond-side of metal that you try to grip—

The only recourse he can think of—though “think” is probably a generous word—to counteract the
pull of his own weight is to swing his arm up to reach for the highest handhold possible every
time, then drag himself in as close to the fence as possible before he lets go again, hiking himself
up in fits and starts and—

They’re going to kill him six inches from salvation.

Aren’t they?

Incredible how much desperate strength a single silver thread of fear can inspire—his head’s light,
his body’s lighter, his toes fumble and slip and then catch into the gaps, and there’s a sudden surge
of fucking power in his arm, and—

One more segment of wire digging into his palm; his fingers burn, burn, sting and smolder—

He kicks his right leg up wide and jams his boot into one of the diamonds, and then that’s—

*Enough*—

He tightens his grip and hitches himself over the top, and—

Pain blooms volcanic at the outside of his arm; the spurt of red startles him so much it takes his
brain a precious quarter-second to understand—more bullets, and one missed his chest and clipped
his bicep; it must’ve had a hell of a time digging through the layers to his skin.

And then the quarter-second’s gone, and he remembers—that he’s alive, for now, and the rest is
fucking *details*; that’s all.

And the train—

The fucking *train*—

Breath scrabbling in his lungs, he runs for it.

Half a mile south of the station, the town peters out towards a cliff face that overlooks the tracks.
The mountains rear so high and so rough and so steep, and the track curves so sharply, that the
trains must have to wind through *real* slow.

He can make it.

Or if he can’t—

Fuck that. He *will*.

Cobblestones and storefronts—faint impressions; smears of gray. People leap out of his way when
they hear his boots slamming on the treacherous paving; his own ragged breathing sounds
deafening to his ears. Not much farther. Not much farther, then—

Some general store; barrels of wares in the walkway; a woman with a cart of fruit *directly* in his
path—

He plants one hand on the nearer side, and the wood starts to give under his weight like it’ll
splinter, but he vaults over the mound of apples and lands on the cobblestones again before the
owner has a chance to scream.

Out, on, *forward*—the straining misery wailing through his whole body just has to wait—
He darts between the blurry shapes of other people, veers around the corner of the red-brick bank—

And the cross-street stretches into aimless pavement dwindling outward, an unwalled alley that sprawls out along the top of the cliff—

And he can see the steam billowing upwards from the train engine as he pelts for the end, the edge, the open air—

His body registers more than several overdue protests—his knees wobble, his breath sticks, his head spins—the shouts behind him echo louder as their makers draw nearer, more than ready to unmake his weary ass once and for all—

Not like this.

He’s got ten more strides left in him: ten more and a leap towards oblivion. He’s been there before, and the truest nothingness spat him right the fuck back out. This gaping imitation wall of white doesn’t stand a chance.

The gravel grinds under his boot treads; the pack slams against his too-tormented spine; the wicked cold stabs the bottoms of his lungs with every ragged breath, but—

The edge—

Can’t evade him forfuckingever, and he can see past the crumbled, snow-spotted border of the cliff; the train rattles underneath—just three fucking cars left, and—

His toes touch the tip of the precipice and—

He—

Pushes off into empty frigid air—

And the extraordinary beauty of it doesn’t escape him; the molecules around him shiver with the cold and jitter gently past him, parting for his weight as gravity grabs his body and drags him towards the earth’s embrace.

He falls—flings—plummets—

Wrenches the knife out of his belt again and fixes his hand as tight around the handle as he can bear—

And—

The roof comes closer so fast there’s no time to grit his teeth or brace himself or regret the fucking idiocy of jumping at a moving—

Train—

Iron greets him with bone-splintering force, clawing the last scrap of breath from his lungs; stars flicker dark-bright before his eyes, and the impact numbs his whole hand on contact, but—

The knife blade—

—holds.
He’s hanging off the side of the damn train, dangling like a tree ornament from where the knife’s lodged in the metal of the roof, buried to the hilt.

But the motion of the chugging train rocks him back and forth so violently that it could slip loose any second—if the soldiers don’t risk their own civilians and open fire, that is; if his wrist doesn’t break, and his fingers don’t fail; if his weight doesn’t rip the side of the gash down along the roofing until the blade pulls free—

Somehow he has to swing himself over to the rear balcony platform of the caboose—somewhere he can put his feet down; someplace he can count on a modicum of fucking stability while he figures out his next damn move.

Al would laugh if he could see Ed now—laugh and say something about An incorrigible habit of reckless self-endangerment.

And then cry.

Ed doesn’t have a spare second for either, which is probably a good thing—he tries to launch his weight sideways, like a kid on the playground, and scrabbles for purchase against the frame of the broad window with his boots.

No purchase is granted to him by the physics gods. *Fuck.*

He scuffs his foot against the rickety boards that make up the siding of the caboose, shoving with his toes like it’s the fence all over again, and—slowly, softening at the pressure—a rotted section of the wood gives way, and he wedges his boot into the gap.

No damn leverage except for that solitary foothold, but—

He’s had worse.

Hasn’t he?

Shit.

Instinctively he shoved his left boot into the crevice, which means he’s got the right leg free. Surely he can… defy the laws of physics one more goddamn time. He’s bent the rules before.

He drags in as deep a breath as he can stand with his whole left arm screaming out at the force, the weight, the sting of the wind, the pressure on his fingers and the strain on his wrist. And then he kicks his right leg up as high as he can manage and slams his toe in against the side of the train, hoping to replicate the prior stroke of dumbass luck.

And he—

Bangs his fucking foot as hard as he can against the siding and bounces off.

Well, shit. Fan-fucking-tastic; now he’s spread-eagled partway on top of a train roof with one foot dangling and one buried in the wall of the car, clinging to a single handhold that he can’t shift without sacrificing all of his balance to the merciless pull of gravity and heading straight for the snow—that is, if he’s lucky. If it’s not just his skull making quick and short-lived contact with the tracks.

Motherfucking—
Think. Think; think; he’s supposed to be a genius, isn’t he? There’s got to be—physics. Think physics. Think—engineering, think friction and traction and angles and trajectory and how to make them help him—

That’s what he’s always done, isn’t it? That’s what he gets celebrated for, really—his nerve, sure; his fearlessness, yeah; but mostly his singular fucking ability to take the facts and features of the world around him and craft them into precisely what he needs at any given time. His talent for reshaping the universe into contours of his choice. That’s what everybody wants, isn’t it? The power to change things. That’s what Roy wants; it’s just that he’s got to transmute people and institutions and ideas, and those are a lot more fucking complicated than metal and rock.

The trick is that a lot of them miss the basic principle of it, which is that the shit you end up with is still the same shit from when you started out. There’s nothing mystical about it. It’s just making a ladder out of lumber instead of trying to reach from standing on top of the pile.

Not that he’d know anything about that.

This is not—to understate matters slightly—the best place in the world for a contemplative brainstorming session. The wind is fucking tearing at every square centimeter of exposed skin; it’s like being pelleted with tiny icicles every second, and it’s hauling on his clothes so hard he can hear the tails of his fucking coat breaking the sound barrier like a goddamn whip. He’s never going to be able to listen to one of those shitty winter carols about the cold nipping at your nose ever again. Radios are probably gonna get beaten to shit and scraps of wire; he is not going to sit through one of those stupid fucking things for the rest of his miserable life.

They don’t know. None of them fucking know what cold even feels like. His teeth would probably be chattering halfway out of his head if he wasn’t hugging this train so tight that his jaw’s pressed to the bitterly frigid expanses of the corrugated tin roof. Is there enough moisture left in his cheeks for him to get stuck? Motherfucking… Maybe he should just let go and drop to the fucking tracks. Maybe he could walk the rest of the way; at least he’d be generating enough body heat t…

Tracks.

Huh.

There’s a thought.

One last push. Right? Just one more; always one more; it’s always the last one; he has to believe it; he has to try.

He hauls hard with his left hand, pushing against the leverage of his left foot embedded in the wall, pointing his elbow outward opposite his weight hanging from the knife, until he’s eked high enough to risk—

Releasing his grip and slinging his arm around the knife handle in as close to one motion as he can—

The impact of his whole weight jerking back on his shoulder almost dislocates it; his forearm succumbs to a violent assault of pins and needles, and the bruise forming inside his elbow’s going to be a fucking wonder to behold, but—

With his elbow hooked around the knife handle, he can just barely reach to touch the fingertips of his left hand to the ones of his right.

Barely’s enough. Barely turns the cramped, awkward, quasi-ring of his arms into a conduit for the
electricity seething in his brain; for the shifting, twining, unfurling lines of the array he’s building in his mind and channeling towards the palm of his left hand with every beat of his blood—

“Fucker,” he whispers, and the wind rips the syllables right off his lips, well before he figures out who or what he’s referring to.

Himself, probably. He’s the sturdiest fuck he knows.

He slaps his hand down on the roof of the car without relinquishing the clench of his elbow around the knife.

Contorting his arm probably kind of smarts, but the pain doesn’t even register. Apparently he’s maxed right the fuck out. This is as much as his poor fucking nerves can take. If there was time, he’d probably be having flashbacks to the automail surgery and shit; that was the last time he remembers—well, vaguely, hazily, spots-of-red remembers—peaking on the pain high like this.

For the moment, though—

Tracks.

Specifically, a single track—a little metal valley snaking away from the hole he stabbed into the roof of the train car, arcing downward and over the side, then down along the overhang at the back of the caboose, ridges rising on either side to slow the passage of the knife blade through.

Gravity hauls at him again, and this time, he kicks his left foot free of the dent in the wall and lets it win.

It’s not the best ride he’s ever been on, but to be fair, he’s never engineered this exact kind of shit before. The blade’s edges summon a horrendous fucking screech as they scrape against the tin on both sides, and apparently he didn’t smooth it properly on the inner walls, because the knife shudders hard all the way down, but—

It works.

It fucking works.

And then he’s hanging like an awkward fucking pendulum from the knife where it’s fixed in bottom edge of the roof—like the worst damn clock in the world.

He gauges the distance and estimates the math. The train blocks the worst of the wind back here; the momentum alone won’t carry him over the fucking rail, and there’s only about two dozen inches between the soles of his feet and the floorboards of the platform of the caboose.

But what if—

But there is no what if. There’s just the fucking facts. If he can’t count on science, he’s honestly not all that committed to going on living anyway.

He lets go.

He lands.

His knees give right the fuck out, and he crumples, but he’s here; he’s safe—he’s a pathetic pile of alchemist writhing on the floor of the tail end of a speeding train in a foreign country, but he’s alive. That’s a hell of a start, right?
He counts out fifteen slow, deep breaths and allows himself to lie there while he savors them, cold as they fucking are. At least it’s not nearly as bad back here; gasping for air feels like chugging glacier water, but it’s not like getting your lungs inundated with ice chips anymore. His left thigh is starting to seize up with the pain again, and his right knee’s throbbing. Time to drag himself upright and move on. Story of his damn life.

It takes some fumbling to get his good arm braced against the boards, and then he rolls partway over to put it underneath him. He levers himself up slowly until he’s distributed his weight over both knees and his good elbow; everything fucking aches; and the cold seeps through from underneath; and damn, when he gets back, he’s never going to leave the fireside again.

It’d be too generous to call the forearm-sliding scoot-scrabble-thing he does “crawling”, but it takes him over to the corner of the railing all the same, and then he latches on and pulls himself up—getting to his knees, then forcing one foot under him, then the other, then segueing from that awkward-ass squat to standing at fucking last. It’s sort of more of a hunched-over huddle than anything most people would recognize as standing, but close enough. He’s shaky all over, and his entire body fucking hurts—with urgency and an edge of agony where the previous bullet tore through, with a special line of throbbing sting on his arm from the more recent one—but he made it. His fucked-up, special kind of luck’s still holding out.

It doesn’t carry forward far enough for him to be able to reach the knife to retrieve it, though, which sounds about right. Izumi’d be pissed that he’s giving up so easy—and probably also that he didn’t have to fight a bear one-armed and haul it around the whole country over his shoulder and shit—but Izumi’s not here right now, and he’s tired. He claps his working palm to the chilly metal of the unresponsive one and then touches it to the wall; the track seals up, and the knife wriggles loose. He steps out of the way and lets it clutter to the flooring, then slams his foot down on it before it can skitter off the side from the constant rattling and the slow sway as the train rounds a curve past another snow-swept mountain.

With it back in his belt, and his coat on straight, and his head more or less likewise, he tugs his sleeve down over his hand—which is significantly easier than he would like—and rubs with it and his glove at the tiny glass window on the door into the caboose. He figures that even the ongoing noise of the train’s motion wouldn’t have masked the sound of him belly-flopping onto the fucking roof; and if someone somehow managed to attribute that to natural causes, the ear-splitting journey of his knife along it would’ve clued them in that something was up; so presumably there’s no one inside. When it comes to things like the remote possibility of Drachmans with guns, however, it’s generally a good idea to check.

Best-laid plans and all that shit, though—he can’t see a damn thing through the impermeable layer of frost on the glass.

He draws the deepest breath he can bear—his back twinges; probably a bad sign; he wonders what this particular post would say; Danger, proportionately colossal stupidity?—and draws his handgun. He tests the door handle gingerly with the heel of his hand—it doesn’t give, which means the thing is fucking locked, which means…

More alchemy. Somewhere about a billion miles to the south, squarely centered in a climate that actively wants to kill him in a different way, Izumi Curtis is probably feeling an unexplained shiver and glancing up from the meat counter, narrowing her eyes. She senses that somebody’s disobeying her precepts; she just doesn’t know who or how yet.

He keeps his grip on the gun, nudges his knuckles against his metal hand, and touches them carefully to the metal of the lock mechanism. He shifts the bolt aside and then flattens out the
contours of the keyhole for good measure. Maybe he’ll put it back later. But probably he won’t.

Damn it. He’s getting real friggin’ tired of shouldering his way through doors with a gun drawn, training it on shadow-enemies while he scans the shapes and silhouettes for motion—ready to put a fucking bullet through somebody before they do likewise; and who the hell knows what quest they’re on that he’s cutting violently short—?

A dart of light and a soft clank—

From the lantern hung on the far wall, gas flame flickering. Is that safe? Is that regulation? He can’t remember. He can’t remember much of any of the minutiae that apply to real life, to regular life. He’s hoping they’ll come back if—when—he has time to slow down and search for them.

Looks like this is just cargo. None of it’s stacked too high; none of the towers of crates rise tall enough to hide a human being. If somebody ducked down specifically to hide from him, then—yes. So he can’t drop his guard, and he can’t lower the gun, but—maybe this damn train car is clear. It’s about time, right? It’s about time his luck changed; it’s about time coincidence mathematics had his back; it’s about time probability flipped in his favor.

One slow, careful step at a time—’cause if the train rockets around a turn here, he’s going all the way down, flat on his face, in a second, given how damn shaky his knees are—he makes a circuit of the whole caboose, pointing the gun barrel into every deep slice of shadow cast in the wake of the swinging lantern; every corner; every last damn hiding space. One slow, careful step at a time, he makes it all the way back to the door he came through.

He’s alone.

Thank fucking whoever.

It’s warm enough in here that he won’t die of hypothermia if he falls asleep, which is always a plus. Pretty balmy all around—which unfortunately means the observation windows are fogged to shit, which fucks his plan for watching when they get close to the river near the border so that he knows when to jump ship. Jump train. Whatever.

Cautiously he eases himself down onto one of the crates; there’s a part of him that fears, profoundly, that the second he stops moving, he’ll never be able to get back up—literally, right now; and in an existential way, as far as the trajectory of his whole life.

Damn. Everything aches. His skeleton feels like it’s turning to marble as he settles; it’s all so heavy…

He lets the dense stone of his head tip itself back and looks up at the ceiling. You can barely even tell where he stabbed through it and then sealed up his pathway down. That’s some pretty fucking good detail work considering the pain and the inclement weather he was dealing with. He should make a gallery showing or something. *Alchemy I Improvised to Save My Dumb Ass While I Was Bleeding Out and/or Collapsing and Shit*. He could sell tickets. Maybe that can be his new career plan.

When the train starts to slow down as it comes to the next station, he’ll hightail it the fuck off of this thing. They shouldn’t be too far from the Amestrian border at that point; what’s one more endless fucking slog through the awful fucking snow? It’s practically old hat now; he can just about do it in his sleep. He probably will—for years on out. Dreams upon dreams upon dreams of white upon white upon white.
For the moment, though, maybe he can—rest. Just a little. Just... lightly. Light enough that he'll hear if someone comes banging through that door, in time to get his ass under cover and...

He’s going to regret this.

He shifts over and plucks his ass down on the cold floor, half-hidden by the closest crates, where he’ll be slightly harder to shoot at, if it comes to that.

He knows he shouldn’t let himself close his eyes—not even for a second; not even just to give his eyelids a break from all the strain; not even so his retinas reacclimate to something other than the endless miles of pale, pale snow; not even...

Well, fuck it.

He startles awake to the same ambient rattling sounds he dozed off to—the rhythmic, cyclic, huffing growl of the wheels turning; the bouncing of the individual grains of dirt and gravel jarred around all over the floor by the motion; the shivering of the contents of all of the crates.

What *are* the contents of all of the crates? Surely there’s some food in here somewhere.

Shit, he hopes he didn’t miss the river and shit—but he’s bogged down by way too much fucking numb-fingered, clay-faced grogginess to have been drowsing long; they can’t have gotten far. Maybe, just this once, he caught a fucking break.

He won’t really know ’til the next station, will he?

The cold’s buried itself so deep in his fucking bone marrow now that it feels like he’s shattering icicles in his own limbs as he forces them to unfold underneath himself. After bracing one arm on the nearest box, he manages to lever himself up enough to steady his knees, and then...


He hobbles around trying to squint at the labels painted on the sides of the crates. Something about... pigs? There was a chapter in one of the books Al gave him about farm animals. Could that mean pork? But raw pork’d kill him about now; is it packed in ice to get shipped around the country, or is it cooked and salted so it’ll be good for about a thousand years? He’d risk the possibility of dehydration for the latter; protein would be such a fucking *blessing* right now—

He pries one of the slats loose—good damn thing these gloves are too thick for splinters to stand a chance of puncturing his skin—before remembering that the alchemy strategy was much more seamless last time. Oh, well. He’s hungry, damn it. He’s approaching Yock-Island-levels of absolute bottomed-out *emptiness*-appetite, and it muddles his thinking all over the place.

The next layer underneath the shards of cedar is a shit-ton of butcher paper—which is promising, right? Promising, and just about impossible to breach with his fingertips swathed in fucking gloves; how do people function in a place this cold?

He weighs his options. Again with the brain fog—or brain snow; brain *blizzard*; there’s just a swirling howl of white where his intellect should be. He could either drag the glove off of his hand with his teeth and start using his fingernails, or... alchemy.
So maybe that should be the question—how do non-alchemists even survive up here?

He wonders if the alchemy’s draining him more than he realizes. Maybe it’s a slow thing—slow and inevitable, like the cold; inching in towards your vitals one millimeter at a time—cell by cell, freezing the water in you, sucking out the heat of the energy that keeps you moving. There ought to be consequences—right? That’d only be equivalent, wouldn’t it? The universe gives you this incomprehensibly open-ended kind of power, an ability to shape the whole damn world into your own image—it must ask for something in return.

Maybe that’s why they’re all so fucking unlucky. Maybe misery is the trade. Maybe the flip-side of every searing-bright array is that it’s only guiding you closer to the same old revelation—that you’re a weapon. You’re a knife blade; you’re a spearhead; you’re a bullet in the barrel, and human nature is sick and sad and always basically the same. Someone’s going to use you for destruction. Someone’s going to force your all-too-talented hands. Someone with a different sort of power’s going to transmute you into the same kind of monster that used to keep you up at night. You become the thing you meant to overcome. And the more you thrash against it, the deeper you sink, and the faster you start to drown.

Anyway.

Under all the paper, this looks like more damn jerky, which is a fucking godsend to say the least.

He peels a strip off of the stack, sniffs it—not that he’s got any fucking olfactory nerves left that aren’t either frozen numb or shot to shit with rot and gunsmoke—and braves a testing touch to the end of it with his tongue.

Tastes like… salt. And preserved meat. Maybe-meat. Could be that this is dog food, which would be appropriate on so many levels he doesn’t even want to think about it—and which would also be fine and fucking dandy, as far as he’s concerned; the dogs up here are the size of small bears or medium-sized horses, so they must get fed pretty fucking well, really.

He takes a bite—tears a bite, to be more accurate. It’s almost as tough as what they ended up with the first time after Mom died that he tried to cook for him and Al. It’s almost as tough as he is.

But not fuckin’ quite.

Between the heavy salt and the intended desiccation and the gristle and the ice, gnawing through a whole strip might cost more calories than he gleans from it, but he’s probably so fucking anemic at this point that he needs it anyway. And it tastes pretty fucking great after a while, sort of. Probably that’s just the fact that, with a few notable but minor exceptions, he hasn’t consumed anything an ungenerous judge would classify as food in fucking weeks. When he gets back—soon, soon, for fuck’s sake, he can almost taste the smog-edged air in Central—he’s going to sit his ass down in the nicest fucking restaurant they’ll let him into and buy the nicest fucking steak they’ve got. And fries. The big, thick-cut ones; none of those flimsy little straw-things—fucking potato wedges fried in oil, crispy on the outside and fluffy underneath, so hot you burn the roof of your mouth on the first bite and just keep going ’cause they’re so damn good. And then he’s going to drink orange soda until he either vomits, vibrates out of the visible spectrum, or burps up a major organ—whatever comes first.

The trick is that you can’t think about it too much—the fact that those things still exist; the fact that those things’ve been existing all this time that you’ve spent dropping right the fuck out of any universe that makes sense. Life just… goes on. Clocks keep ticking, and people go to stupid jobs they hate, and cats shed on the furniture and stare at walls, and orange soda gets drunk in inadvisable quantities, and… The world doesn’t care. The world doesn’t care about you not being
there to see it. The world doesn’t care if you die facedown in a snowbank and never really
decompose because it’s too fucking cold for that.

That’s why you have to have people. Because people care. And—really, in the so-called-grand
scheme of things—people are all there is.

People are the historians—people are the record, and the record becomes reality if you leave it
uncorrected long enough. Specifically what you did doesn’t really matter as much as who you
were to people. Not in the long run, anyway. Not when the chips are down, and the cards are
dealt, and the dark is closing in.

…duh. He could’ve checked the position of the sun and shit to figure out about what time it is.
Who knows how long the trip is, but the way little towns get scattered up here—could be half a
day. Not that “day” means much here; daytime and daylight are two totally different fucking
concepts that sort of incidentally overlap, and…

And he puts his head out the door he forcibly unlocked on his way in and squints out at the white
in an upward direction.

There’s a spot of light above them that looks vaguely sort of sun-ish. Must not be too late yet.
That leaves him with a hell of a lot more waiting to do.

He hates waiting. Not—like most people seem to assume, because people are assholes, and all that
—because his temperament makes him childishly impatient or some shit.

He hates waiting because it gives him too much time to think.

And not concentrated thinking—not the good kind. Not burrowing through a problem with a drill
of logic; not focused thoughts, channeled thoughts, thoughts with a direction.

When his thinking doesn’t have a purpose, his brain doesn’t wander in an aimless, harmless sort of
way, like Al’s does—it makes a fucking beeline for the backalleys and the mudpits and starts
dredging up the worst shit it can find.

They’re going to know.

Aren’t they?

They’re going to smell it on him—other people’s blood. The stench of death; the slow decay—his
own, on the inside. The putrefaction.

But maybe—

Maybe there’s a chance—a snowball’s chance in hell, so to speak; given that this is hell, and there’s
more than enough fuckin’ powder—

Maybe Al will want to forgive him.

It’s not something that can be forgiven; it’s not something it’s possible to assuage or absolve or
unmake. But the intention counts. The intention matters. If Al hasn’t forsaken him no matter how
much he deserves to be locked up and lost—

And maybe—

Maybe Roy will understand.
Maybe Roy will understand the stomach-churning desperation, the panicked fucking urgency of trying to reconcile the honest truth that it was never what he wanted with the fact that he did it anyway; with the fact of the rust-red stain ground into every line of his left hand, oiling the joints of the automail; with the impression of it on him everywhere like a spiderweb of severed veins—

Maybe Roy won’t think he’s too monstrous to touch.

Maybe Roy will want to—maybe Roy will be relieved that after all these years of naïve bullshit couched as honor or nobility or whatever shit—

That Ed’s really here now.

In the world.

Aware of what it is and what it does and what it turns you into, if you last long enough.

Maybe Roy’ll finally find some fucking solace in that—maybe Ed, under all the scars and stolen days, can be the solace; maybe the newer, deeper, darker bags will fade just a little underneath his eyes; maybe he’ll remember what a smile looks like when you really mean it; maybe he’ll run his hands along Ed’s jaw and down his throat, and Ed’ll let him, because it’ll finally be safe to have his vitals bared to another human being, because someone with the proven power to silence them and end him just won’t—

Stupid.

Stupid, because Roy’s too smart.

Stupid, because there are hundreds on hundreds of people in this country who’ve sighted a man’s eyes down the barrel of a gun and squeezed the trigger and watched the light go out. Stupid, because if that’s what Roy needs, he could have any of them. Stupid, because that’s probably all fucking backwards anyway, like he usually is—dark feeds dark, and inkstains spread by plain old fucking diffusion, and probably what Roy needs is someone bright, someone charming, someone clean and kind and sweet and pleasing. Someone who’ll remind him of all the shit that’s good in the world; someone who’ll help him remember that some things can be beautiful. Someone innocent. Someone with two soft hands. Someone who’ll hold him in the middle of the night, instead of waking up right fucking next to him with their sweat running just as cold.

Someone whole. Someone wholesome. Someone pure.

That’s all right. Ed’s made it this far on his own; he’s got Al, and Winry, and Ling still writes sometimes, although Ed forgot to tell him about this whole shitshow, so His Royally Obnoxious Emperorship is probably wondering if Ed died or something, ’cause he hasn’t sent anything back in months. Ling’ll tell him he’s a moron and ask why he didn’t just say “no”—why he didn’t just put his foot down and enforce his will and refuse to do anything that didn’t benefit him. But Ling’s a greedy bastard who’s had power all his life, and precious fucking little else to lose.

And Ed did it for Roy—kind of.

They were threatening to liquidate his bank account alongside the dishonorable discharge if he didn’t shut his mouth. Roy promised to fight for him—to the death, to the ends of the damn planet; I wish it was surprising that they’ve somehow forgotten who you are—but they both knew he didn’t have the resources or the time.

And they both knew Roy was going to need him after—if there was an after, anyway. They both knew Roy was going to need every hand on deck, no matter the precise composition of the hands in
question; they both knew Roy was going to need all the not-outright-shitty press that he could wrangle out of the reporters.

Roy will have heard by now—Al will have heard first.

They both think he’s dead.

They both think that this time, his ass-backwards, shitty fucking luck finally, finally ran out.

Maybe he should’ve tried to find the army’s camp when he woke up, instead of just… fucking off towards home.

But he’d been getting the sense—more and more often, more and more strongly—that his days in the military are pretty fucking numbered. He’s too loud, too critical, too independent, too dissenting—a dog still half-feral, lingering at the edge of the orderly pack. They can put him in a cage, or they can drag him on a leash; but they can’t risk taking the muzzle off.

Dogs like that get put down after a while.

And out here, who’s to say it wasn’t just exposure—just the rations, or pneumonia, or the cold? Who’s going to argue about what angle the bullet came from when there might be more left in the gun?

Fuck. No point fucking dwelling on it. He’s going to get back, is the important thing—alive and more or less intact—and then the rest is fucking gravy. He’s going to get back, hug Al for about four hours, and then make sure Roy doesn’t throw his whole fucking life and career and master-plan bastard-genius endgame away over anything stupid.

There. Direction. That’s the right kind of thinking.

He pries another piece of jerky free and sticks the end into his mouth. If he just sort of lets his saliva suffuse it for a while, maybe it’ll get easier to eat.

The slat of wood he ripped the hell off isn’t going to fit back into place any time soon. He picks it up and cautiously sits on one of the as-yet-unmangled crates again. The slat’s just thick enough that when he jams it in between two boards on the top of the next crate over, it sticks in place and stands up.

He stares at it for a long second, and then he fixes the array in his head—hydrogen, oxygen; even angles, and then the curve of a tongue of flame and an amphibian twisting, and—

The crux of the alchemy isn’t the fire at all—it’s the air itself; it’s creating the potential for flammability, a pathway of sheer possibility towards a target; and then the spark is secondary. The spark is a means to an end. The air—manipulating the air, parting its atoms—is the art.

He tugs one rusted nail up until an inch of it protrudes from the crate, then draws another one completely free to strike it against the first.

No spark. Probably he needs a cleaner, sharper metal edge. But like hell is he going to bang rusted nails against his automail; Winry’d sense it from here and kill him later. She’s psychically attuned to the condition of this hunk of metal just like he’s psychically attuned to Al. Except that it’s cute and touching and meaningful to have a transcendental emotional connection to your brother, and it’s creepy to have one with somebody else’s freakin’ arm.

He glances around and weighs his options, but no particular bouts of brilliance seem to be
forthcoming, and there aren’t any convenient crowbars or anything lying around. He tries the nail again, smacking it harder this time, and—

A flicker of orange ignites through the tremulous duct of concentrated oxygen he’s been holding there with the array, engulfing the scrap of wood in an instant.

It’s a tiny torch, if it counts as one at all, but Ed raises the palm of his hand to the glow of it anyway. Even through the glove, he can feel the difference.

He drew that line in his head—that he was never going to use this to end a life.

But that’s the trick of the exchange, isn’t it? He survived at a cost—because others didn’t.

He gets it now. He gets that this is too much—too much power; too much to carry. The emblem of too many sins, and the harbinger of too many ghosts.

You can say that of all alchemy, obviously—that it’s a tool like any other; that you can use it to build or to break or to murder; that it’s more responsibility than a human being should have. That it drives you fucking crazy with your own damn potential; that even if you start out prepared to wield it, no feeble mortal brain is gonna hold out long. Nobody’s meant to be capable of these kinds of things. Nobody’s strong enough to control them, or wise enough to understand how. It’s a long gravel road leading straight fucking down.

Flame alchemy’s special, though. Someone who can really use this—someone who knows it inside-out and backwards; someone who can shift their hand and summon a wink of blue-white plasma or a bonfire the size of a city block—falls into an entirely different category of ‘too powerful’. Someone who can bend this to their will can level buildings like an afterthought. This is the ultimate game-changer—the war-winner, the silver bullet, the secret weapon. More explosive force than a landmine, unlimited artillery dwarfing any siege machine, in the hands of an individual subject to orders—to words.

He hadn’t thought about it until now, or at least not more than just in passing. He figured Roy stayed in Central because he’s a bigshot fucking general now, and everybody knows that generals lead from the back—purportedly so that you don’t have to promote somebody to replace them, rather than because they’re a bunch of weaselly fucking cowards who can’t even comprehend the thought of putting their own necks on the line.

But Roy probably had to fight to keep from being mobilized. He probably had to win a thousand little wars in stuffy-ass meeting rooms, in front of panels upon panels of fucking chickens who wanted to him to walk up here and snap his fingers and finish this. He probably had to cash in all his hard-earned fucking favors and play every single card left up his sleeves to get them to leave him out of this—to get them to leave Drachma with a hope in hell; to get them to leave his battered fucking soul in no worse condition than they found it.

In the sickly yellow storming light of that, compared to what this could have been—

Ed getting his ass stuck here and almost dying all those times seems like… nothing. Even the hell he wrought with these two fucking hands is so much less than what Roy would have dealt in days, or hours, if they’d beaten him and brought him here.

Ed touches the fingertips of his left hand to the limp digits of the right and kills the flow of flammable gas around the wood to smother the flame in an instant. Doesn’t matter. They can dwell on the unknowable and wax poetic about what-ifs for as long as they want; it doesn’t change anything. All he’s got is this life at this moment. Even if it’s sort of generally shitty and seriously
Coldness notwithstanding, though, it’s all relative, right? He’s still on his feet—figuratively speaking—and capable of moving. He’s not in any immediate danger of succumbing to the elements or to an infected wound or to his own purported comrades and commanders. All things considered, he’s in good shape—figuratively speaking.

He nudges at the bottom of his little makeshift firebrand until it splinters and comes loose, and then he tosses it to the floor. The jerky’s easier to chew on now, although it’s hard to tell whether his jaw’s aching, or it’s just sort of a pulse point in the overarching everything-hurts problem. It’s like somebody shaking your shoulders during an earthquake.

Point is—food. Point is living. Point is carrying the fuck on, no matter how heavy this gets, no matter how long he feels the ice in the core of him, no matter how much the snow creeps in at the edges of his vision when he’s alone. Point is waiting—which is a pain in the ass, often literally, when you’re sitting on crates and train floors and fuck knows what else—and dragging himself back home.

Point is, he survived.

Everything else is details.

The ongoing ambient rattle of the train almost lulls him to sleep again, and he spends a couple hours drifting back and forth across the hazy barrier between dozing and awake. No fucking surprise, when he does slip far enough across to start to dream, it’s about being warm. Warm—things. Warm places. Hearths and beds and… people. Warm people. Warm arms. Fuck, at least the flush heats up his skin a little.

He’s annoyed at himself for being affected; it’s not like he can help what his stupid brain cooks up while it’s half shut down and heedlessly stumbling through the halls of his memory, knocking on the doors to all the secrets, before it jerks him back into consciousness. The sleeping brain is an asshole; he knows that. The worst part is that it’s only ever trying to help—it spends most of its time making up scenarios it thinks he’ll have to deal with later, so he can practice his reaction. Only problem is that it doesn’t know shit about what’s actually going on, and it always dredges up the worst stuff and flings it in his face, and…

Anyway.

He’s so busy with the irritation that he almost doesn’t notice the subtle, subtle slowing of the train.

Shit. That means they’re closing in on the next little Drachman hamlet, where the platform is sure to be teeming with soldiers, all of them with their rifles raised, waiting at every single door. And even if the message hasn’t made it yet, the sooner he gets the fuck off of this train car, the closer he’ll be to the Amestrian border, where…

Well, who the fuck knows. Theoretically, he’ll get a literally-warm welcome and an escort to the nearest telephone, but he knows better than to expect his stupid life to go according to plan.

Instinct instructs him to yank one last piece of jerky loose and jam it into his capacious pocket, and then he dodges crates all the way down to the end of the car, barrels through the door, and—
Skids to a stop, clinging to the railing, which he almost tips right the fuck over from his momentum.

Extra momentum is exactly what he does not want to add to a freefalling leap off of a moving train.

He forces himself to stand still for a full second, and then he vaults over the railing, and—

One gasp in the air, feeling like he’s suspended from a tiny thread, hung like a baby’s mobile, frozen before gravity grips his heels—

Then a faceful of snow.

Because of course he lands in a deep-ass fucking drift shoved up on the side of the tracks by the train’s snowplow; because of course his left knee gives out on the landing to make sure that he plummets face-first into the fucking flakes instead of alighting safely on them; because of course the freshest snowfall bursts up into spray at the impact and slaps him right across the cheeks.

He’d swear on his grave to have a word with Mother Nature, but he’s said that before, and it really only ever seems to end with him in situations like this. If there’s any semi-sentient power out there, it’s vengeful, and it’s listening, and it knows exactly how to get him soaking wet at all the worst possible times.

Hopefully the border’s closer than he thought.

He knows he’s headed pretty much due south—what he doesn’t know is whether he’s going to make it, with snow melting into icewater and dripping down from the back of his collar. Based on the angle of the sun, he’s probably got two hours of light left, maybe three. How fast does he walk on his bum-ass fucking frozen metal knee, anyway? How far is it possible to get?

Doesn’t make a difference, though. The only choice he’s got is to give it a fucking try.

So here he is again—dragging himself upright, slogging on ahead.

Can’t be too far. Can’t be too far, because there’s no damn way he’s going to quit before he gets there, and that’s all “too far” really means. It’s not a measure of distance; it’s a measure of determination.

No fucking way he’s going to let it beat him now.

Ed will never eat a snow cone ever a-fucking-gain.

Ed will never let ice be added to his beverages ever a-fucking-gain, either.
Ed’s finished with anything that doesn’t involve curling up under a down blanket in front of a roaring fire for pretty much the rest of his life, actually.

If his tear ducts weren’t frozen shut at the ends, he might be tempted to fucking cry when he gets the first glimpse of blue and gold under a white camouflage coat.

He starts to wave his arm, but they spot him so quick it’s not even really necessary.

He swallows with as much spit as he has left that hasn’t turned to ice, and tries to shout “Hey!” He ends up with kind of a strangled wheeze-whine noise that straggles up his throat and dies about two inches from his mouth, but—

It’s not like greetings are all that important when you’ve got four guys charging up a slope and pointing their rifles directly at your face.

He repurposes the hand he was going to use for attention-getting and holds it up in surrender instead—palm out, trying hard to relax his shoulders and look as non-threatening as possible.

Fuck, he’s still wearing a Drachman coat.  Fuck.  He knew he was forgetting something.

It’s probably a good thing he can’t get any coherent noises out of his vocal chords, though, because one of the guys shouts “Freeze!” and the soundless laugh shakes his ribcage so hard he can’t fucking breathe, but they probably wouldn’t find it nearly so damn funny.

He practically has to cough up an internal organ in order to clear his throat, which is kind of worrying, given that the ones he’s got probably can’t sustain much more damage at this point.


The soldier leading the little brigade lowers his gun just enough for a really impressive stink-eye.  To be fair, Ed knows no less than three anecdotal stories about Drachman spies with borrowed backstories and really convincing accents.  One of them might even be true.


It’s probably so shot through with ice that you can’t even distinguish the color anymore.

He gets nothing but blank fucking stares—well, more hostile than blank, actually, which is a crock of shit.

“You wanna see my watch?” he asks.  “Somebody’s gonna have to get in my pocket.  One of my pockets.  There are a lot.”

“Get both hands where I can see ’em,” the leader says, leveling his gun at Ed’s forehead again.

“I can’t,” Ed says.  He tries to gesture without lowering the left one.  “My fucking arm’s busted.  It’s automail.  I think there’s a bullet in it somewhere.  My mechanic’s gonna kill me.”
He doesn’t add *If you don’t*. Seems like tempting fate. Normally, he takes that as a challenge, of course, but right now he doesn’t want anything to jeopardize his chances of getting home.

“I’ve heard of that guy,” one of the other soldiers says, and the stock of his rifle sinks as he speaks until it’s angled down at the snow. “The Fullmetal Alchemist. I heard he got stationed out here. They said you’ll know him ’cause he’s got a metal arm and yellow hair and eyes and stuff, and he’s really short.”

Hopefully he hasn’t heard about the exploding-into-a-howling-rage-at-being-told-as-much part of the height problem, because Ed is honestly just too fucking tired for that shit right now.

“That’s me,” he says. “If you don’t believe me, call General Armstrong, and she’ll back me up. Actually, call Captain Miles; General Armstrong’d probably just tell you to shoot me.”

He hopes that’s not really true, but another thing Roy’s taught him is that sometimes the casual name-drop is every bit as effective as it is totally fucking douchey.

By the way the lead guy’s eyes narrow, he’s not buying what Ed’s selling. That’s only fair; anybody could play that card.

But the other guy—does he have a faint Eastern twang?—is still staring at Ed in a hopeful kind of way.

“I heard he can do alchemy without a—circle thing,” he says. “Without an… array. Isn’t that what they’re called? Like, he can just—do it.”

“I’m happy to demonstrate,” Ed says, “if everybody promises not to open fire.”

He gets a seriously impressive glare from the commander for that, followed by a very slow nod.

“Go on,” the guy says. “Show me.”

Ed takes a deep breath, forces himself to let it out slow and normal instead of as an exasperated sigh, and then—carefully, no sudden movements, nothing that’ll look anything like reaching for a weapon when these guys have their fingers on the triggers and his skull in their sights—touches his left hand to his right.

He warps the array in his head a few times, altering the details; it’s not like the craftsmanship will matter to a bunch of soldiers who kind of want to shoot him full of bleeding holes, but he takes pride in his work. Sort of. Sometimes. Whatever.

He forces his banged-up, beat-down, utterly exhausted body to kneel so that he can lay his left palm out flat on the snow.

In retrospect, creating an elaborate snow sculpture that rises up behind him to loom over the whole lot of them, swathed in crackling alchemical energy and spraying snow as it shifts into its designated form, was perhaps not the best thing to show to a bunch of nervous border guards with guns in their hands. But at least Ed revisited his original idea of a huge arrow and block letters spelling out *TOTALLY LEGIT* in favor of a big-ass Amestrian chimera. That’s much more convincing.

Right?

Well, too late now.
To leader guy’s credit, while he takes two hasty steps back, he does it only after throwing an arm out in front of Ed’s favorite soldier, drawing that guy out of snow-spatter range with him.


It takes almost all of Ed’s remaining willpower to resist the obvious pun. “Thanks.”

The leader keeps on eyeing him, but in a way that might look marginally more favorable now. “Drachmans don’t do alchemy, do they?” he asks one of the others.

The heretofore silent soldier looks anxious about being put on the spot. “I don’t… think so, sir. No?”

The last dregs of Ed’s willpower go towards resisting the urge to grit his teeth.

“It’s the Xingese that have something like it,” Ed’s favorite soldier says. He looks like he’s two seconds away from tugging on the leader’s sleeve. “C’mon, look at his eyes. I really think he’s the Fullmetal Alchemist. Can’t we at least take him back to the outpost and see if they’ve got an old newspaper or something? He used to be in them all the time.”

Would proposing marriage to a soldier whose name he doesn’t know be a little bit premature?

Probably that’s the jerky talking.

Still tempting, though.

In lieu of coming out with something completely stupid like Gosh, yeah, why don’t you listen to that dude and, y’know, trust that I’m who I say I am and take me back to civilization so I can go the fuck home?, however, it’s about all he can do to keep biting his chapped-ass lip and hoping to hell that this guy’s enthusiasm for has-been State Alchemists wins out.

The leader looks at the shining eyes of Ed’s advocate, then back at Ed, then at his other fellows.

“Could be worth a try,” he says slowly. “Myers, Peyton—” This to the others, who salute. “Stay here. Oscar, with me. You—” This to Ed. “In front of us. Nothing funny, you understand?”

“Don’t worry,” Ed says, bending his good arm so that his hand’s behind his head as he tromps out ahead of them. “Been doin’ this shit since I was twelve. I know nobody around here’s got a sense of humor.”

“Move,” leader guy says.

Praise probability and—probably for the first and last time in his life—Amestrian military regulations: they don’t walk far; only to a tiny subterranean base with a camouflaged vehicle stashed in a snowbank beside it.

The ride to the local border outpost is sort of inherently hilarious—or it would be, if the sense of humor thing wasn’t all too true. The design of the snow jeep thing, once Leader Guy and Oscar dig it out from under the tarp while trying not to take their eyes off of Ed, is for four passengers total. Leader Guy drives; Ed sits in the passenger seat with his hand behind his head (which is starting to make his arm ache like hell); and Oscar sits in back with his rifle propped up on the edge
of Ed’s seat, pointed at his head, and delightedly asks him all kinds of questions about the good old
days.

Leader Guy almost stifles what sounds like a snort at one of Ed’s stories about a mishap in Altheim
that 
might have ended with a building exploding, bringing down a whole block in an incredible
chain reaction and teaching everyone a fine lesson on the importance of seismic safeguards in
construction—depending on who you ask, that is, because obviously nobody could prove anything,
and all of those buildings are exactly the way they were before Ed got there. Except maybe with
an extra gargoyle or two, but that could’ve been anyone.

Fortunately for Ed’s dry-ass throat, empty-ass stomach, and sore-ass ass, it’s not a long trip, and
they rattle their way into the outskirts of Cinderblock City right as the last shreds of sunlight are
winking out over the white horizon.

“So once we clear my identity and shit,” Ed says, “can I borrow a phone?”

“Let’s take this one step at a time,” Leader Guy says, at the same moment that Oscar says, “Sure!”

Ed’s going to have to put in a good word for Warrant Officer Oscar before he quits. Or maybe he’ll
ask Hawkeye to do it, since then people will actually care.

The outpost doesn’t look like much, but they’ve got a tiny records room, and they’ve even got a
specific curator for it—she reminds Ed an awful lot of Sheska, in the best possible way. She blinks
a lot at him, then at the as-yet nameless leader guy, then says, “…well, he certainly looks like…
well, here—follow me.”

Either he’s a slightly less-minor celebrity than he thought, or he just happened across both of the
grand total of two people in the north of Amestris who think that he’s awesome within a single day.

Sheska’s long-lost cousin leads them two rows down and one across, and then she skims her
fingertips—her bare fingertips, because it’s actually warm enough in here to breathe without seeing
it—across half a dozen spines before she pulls out a narrow volume with a brown cover.

“Major Elric?” she asks. “Did you ever read this?”

She holds it out towards him, which causes Leader Guy to leap in front of him before he’s even
lowered his arm from where he’s been resting it on his shoulder since the muscles started to burn a
couple minutes ago.

Leader Guy flips the cover open, stares at the first page, and then stares over at Ed.

“Oh,” he says.

“What is it?” Oscar asks, and if puppies could speak—

“It’s a biography,” not-Sheska says. “Of him.”

Leader Guy’s hands seem to shake just a tiny bit—or maybe it’s the cold—as he shoves the book at
Oscar and then pulls his heels together sharply, snapping a salute. “Major Elric, sir.”

“Oh,” Ed says. “At ease.” He realizes that this probably also applies to himself now that he’s
legitimized and all that crap, so he drops his arm. Damn, that almost hurts enough to distract him
from the other shit. “Most of that stuff’s probably not true. Or at least not proven. What are they
accusing me of?”
Not-Sheska blinks at him. “It’s… a biography,” she says again. Which is hugely unilluminating. “They’re not accusing you of anything; it’s just… about your life, I guess.”

Ed finds it hard to believe that they wouldn’t try to blame him for a bunch of the shit that was not even remotely his fault, but that’s a problem for another time. “Okay. Cool. Hey, can I use your phone?”

“You’re the highest-ranked officer on site, Major Elric,” not-Sheska says, sounding just the tiniest bit smug about it. “You can use whatever you want.”

Finally, his fucking luck sunk so far that it circled back around.

…well, halfway around, maybe. The only phone connected to the main grid rather than just the comm lines is in a fucking booth outside.

Good news is, Ed’s got just enough residual anger left to keep him warm.

One thing he’s going to take up with the fucking government—well, with Roy, to make him take it up with the government—is goddamn long-distance extensions. With his hands shaking from the cold and the anticipation both, it takes three tries and two whole minutes to dial in the most important number in the fucking world.

The line rings. He starts to lean his head against the metal wall and let his eyes slip shut, but then he changes his mind about tempting fate quite that directly—it’d be just like him to get his face stuck to the wall of a fucking phonebooth after all of this.

The line rings again.

Then it clicks.

“Hello?” the best voice that ever resonated airwaves says. There’s a new note in it—a weariness; a tightness; a strain.

“Hey, Al,” Ed says.

Silence.

And then the voice again, and it trembles softly, and he hasn’t sounded this—young, this fragile, since…

“Brother?”

Since the last time he spoke that same word into the darkness, with no idea where the path would lead, knowing it was his only option all the same. Following blind, because he trusted—because he believed in something, someone, more than he ever had in any deity.

Ed can’t stop himself from grinning so broadly that his chapped lip splits in three places—three that he can feel, anyway. “Who the fuck else?”

Al breathes—in, out, in, out.
“Then there’s a thud loud enough that Ed startles, followed by a faint “Ow.”

Ed blinks. “Did you just hit yourself with the phone to make sure you weren’t dreaming?”


“I know,” Ed says.

“I dreamed it so many times; I dreamed—things. Other things, bad things, such bad things—”

“I know.”

There’s a ragged tone to Al’s voice now—harsh and sharp at the edges, and it grates like sandpaper on the surface of Ed’s fucking soul. “You don’t know, Ed, because it’s always—you. It’s always you out there; it’s always you with your feet in the fire, and it’s always the rest of us wondering if you’re ever going to make it back, and it's always us getting the letter and the tag and feeling like this time it must be—”

“I’m okay, Al,” Ed says softly. “I’m fine.” That’s a bit generous. “Everything’s going to be fine.” That is, too, but he’s working on it. “And this is for real, okay? If you aren’t sure tomorrow, call back here, and ask for Private Isabel Woods. She’s really nice; you’d like her. I’ll telegram you the number when I get back in.”

There’s a pause.

“You’re outside?” Al asks.

“Yeah,” Ed says. “For the last time in pretty much the rest of my life, if I get anything to say about it. Hey. So they told you I was dead, right?”

The wetness of the sudden intake of breath surprises him. “Don’t—Brother, don’t—” Al breathes again, slowly, and even on this shitty line, Ed can hear it wobble before it evens out. “Yes. They did.”

Maybe he should bail out of the whole fucking conversation before he makes it worse, but this is important. “So they made you custodian of all my shit, right? Like I told ’em?”

Al’s silent for a moment. “They—did. Yes. Like a will, Brother? You mean to tell me that before they dragged you off to that, they made you write a wi—”

“Sorta,” Ed says. Best not to get Al started on the injustices and the inhumanity and so on; Isabel lent him a ton of coins to jam into the phone, but he doesn’t know how long they’ll hold out when the call has to go this far. “Did you move money out of my account yet?”

“What?” Al asks. “I—no, I hadn’t even… Ed, we’re still grieving over you. Over thinking we lost you.”

The pang that goes through Ed just about jars his ribcage right out of his body—and the really shitty part is, for once, this isn’t even his doing. It’s like his guilty conscience doesn’t even fucking care about that anymore; he instantly feels like the worst creature who ever crawled the fucking planet—like he should’ve died if he was going to cause someone like Al all this fucking unnecessary pain—

“I—sorry,” he gets out. “I’m sorry, Al, I—I mean, I just—I fucking tried, but this was the fastest I could—I mean, I thought I was gonna end up dead; I… I gotta tell you about the using-your-own-
soul thing in case you ever need it, okay? I just—I was in fucking nowhere in Drachma, and I
dunno if they even had phones there, but I guess I should’ve checked, only nobody really spoke
any Amestrian, and then there were these soldiers who kept trying to kill me and shit, an—”

“Brother, slow down,” Al says, and he sounds alarmed, and Ed’s a horrible fucking person for that,
too, probably. “I didn’t mean that it was your fault. It’s the military’s fault. I just—meant that I
hadn’t done anything like… that… yet. That’s all.”

That’s… why. That’s why I need you to move all my shit. Because they can’t do this shit to
people—they can’t do this shit to people and get away with it; they just can’t. And when I get
back there, I’m gonna raise hell like they have never fucking seen, and they’re gonna come after
me for that.” He draws a breath and lets it mist out slow. “So I need you to take everything—
everything I’ve got, every last fucking cen of it. So that it’s all in a civilian account, and they can’t
touch us.”

He can hear Al’s grin almost before the words begin. “That’s more like it, Brother.” He takes a
shaky breath. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Better than ever,” Ed says, and—with Al’s voice in his ear, it’s almost true.

“Like heck,” Al says. “You’re coming home?”

Ed wills the money to last—to keep this damn line open between them. “Next train they’ll let me
on.”

“I’m going to tell Winry, and Granny,” Al says. “And—General Mustang.”

Ed’s heart beats once, twice, three times, four.

“How—um.” Aw, shit. “How is he?”

Silence for a second, and Ed’s heart speeds the fuck up again; his grip on the receiver tightens; the
call can’t have dropped now—there’s no dial tone, so—

Al sighs. “He… didn’t… take it… well.”

Ed can’t help grimacing, which also isn’t kind on his beat-to-shit-and-broken lip.

He remembers—well, he remembers pieces, and he assembled most of the rest from asking the
right questions when he had the chance.

“And we’re talking the too many shots at my premature funeral and passing out on a floral
arrangement kind of ‘not taking it well’?” he asks. “Or are we talking… stopped eating and maybe
sleeping and there’s a terrifying sort of coldness to him because he’s probably getting obsessed
with the prospect of revenge?”

Al’s quiet for a second, and then he says only: “Oh, dear.”

“Tell him I’m coming back,” Ed says. “And tell him I’m going to kick his fucking ass from here
to Creta if he isn’t acting stable when I get there.”

“I’ll paraphrase that,” Al says.

“Good enough,” Ed says.
There are floodlights across the yard, and there are two figures trekking through the unnatural brightness towards him. They’re shaped a lot like Isabel and Oscar.


“I’m going to pretend I don’t know what you’re implying,” Al says. “I’m also going to pretend I don’t know what that probably means about your automail.”

“Oh, yeah,” Ed says. “Could you do me a favor and start apologizing now on my behalf?”

“No way,” Al says.

Then there’s uncanny silence again, and then there’s—

Crying.

“Fuck,” Ed says. “Al—hey, come on, don’t—what the hell’s wrong?”

“N-nothing,” Al gets out. He tries for a deep breath and gets one of those shuddering pieces of crap that barely even oxygenates your lungs. “I j-just—I’m so—it’s r-really you. You’re n-never this e-e-e-effusive in my d-dreams. I’m s-so h-happy; I… I thought… I really did. I d-didn’t want to, but—”

“It’s okay,” Ed says softly. “Hey—it’s all good. All of it’s all good. We’re gonna be fine, you hear me? I’ll see you soon. I swear it.”

“Y-yeah,” Al says. He manages a steadier breath this time. “Yeah. Gosh.” It’s a damp impression of a laugh, but damn, it’s beautiful. “S-sorry. I just—will you call me from some of the stations? Just—leave a message if I’m not here or something.”

“Sure thing, Al,” Ed says, which really just means Anything.


Ed grins. “All right, all right. Hang in there, kid.”

“You, too, Brother. I love you.”

“God, Al. I love you, too.”
Isabel and Oscar wait at a respectful distance while he hangs up the phone.

“I’m afraid the nearest automail mechanic is at Briggs,” Isabel says when he steps out of the booth, “and it’d take him a few days to get here. But the medic’s ready for you.”

“Thanks,” he says—and that’s not enough, but it’s not really his fault there’s no pithy way to say You don’t even understand what it feels like to be alone that long and then have somebody suddenly have your back.

Both of them beam at him, though.

So that’s something.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much more than I can say for the kind messages last time. ♥ I honestly meant to reply to them all – all I have is shitty-ass excuses for why I didn't, but that's about par for the course for me lately, so… There we are. Sorry. :___;

Also sorry for the delay, but it's partly because I was making a push to actually finish *this stupid fic* – which I finally did! You'll have to judge the """"success"""" of that when you read some of the later crap, but at least it exists now… >___>

Of the medic, Isabel told Ed in a hushed tone that they’re the best in the whole region. Ed would ask what the hell they’re doing all the way up here if that’s the case, except that he knows a thing or two about what happens even to the best—especially to the best—if they don’t sing the praises of the right fucking peacocks.

Probably better not to go into that, though, so he just nods acknowledgement as he follows her and Oscar back inside.

The medic is wearing an orange scarf mistakable for a large, fluffy cat—or maybe it’s the other way around; Ed’s not sure if he just saw it move—and a pair of glasses with one of those magnifiers attached to the side of one lens with a hinge, so that you can draw it down and scowl at tiny things more easily. Ed shouldn’t even have thought that; the universe’ll make him the butt of that joke in three—two—

The mechanism squeals as the medic flicks the magnifier down and peers at Ed. They frown silently for a second, and then they lick their thumb and—before he can stagger back far enough to get out of range without colliding with Isabel and Oscar—apply it not especially gently to his cheek.

“I can’t tell what’s dirt and what’s bruise,” the medic says, giving Isabel a faintly reprimanding look. “If he’s not in imminent peril, can you get him cleaned up first?”

“Uh,” Ed says. “I mean, ‘imminent’ is probably a strong word.”

“He’s a major,” Oscar says in a hushed voice.

“And I’m a doctor,” the medic says. “And I get paid for treating people, not bathing them.”

Ed thinks he likes this person. They remind him of Knox.

“Cool,” he says. He turns to Isabel, since she seems to know the lay of the land better than Oscar does—no surprise, if his contingent gets stuck with fucking border duty all the time. “So where are the showers? I think I’d pass out and die if I took a bath.”

Oscar’s eyes are so wide you could probably fit more than one saucer in them, at this rate. “You—what? That sounds like imminent danger to me.”

“Nah,” Ed says. “Just because of the sustained heat and shit. And I’m expecting my knee to give
out any second now, since I haven’t oiled it in… however long I’ve been up in this hellhole.” …
the hellhole that all of these people live in. “I mean—you know. Uh. No offense.”

Isabel smiles, sort of grimly. “Don’t worry about it. Come on, I’ll show you.”

There has never been a better shower in Ed’s entire fucking life—even accounting for the fact that
the hot water goes out while he has suds in his hair, because he has to wash it twice before the
water stops running reddish-brown. Even accounting for the searing fucking pain of water on the
new wounds; even accounting for the way his uncertain automail knee keeps locking, and his foot
slides on the crappy tile, and he almost does a header every time he moves. He can’t even bring
himself to care about any of that shit; this shower room is about an eighth the size of the one in
Central Command, so the steam fills the whole damn place in a matter of moments, and this is the
warmest he’s been in what feels like fucking years.

Oscar’s waiting when Ed emerges from his stall with a towel around his waist—waiting, and
holding out a pile of folded fabric.

“I couldn’t find anything quite in your size,” Oscar says, and the poor kid is so lucky Ed’s so
fucking tired; he barely even has the energy left to grit his teeth. The lousy piece of crap standing
in for a soldier’s eyes light up after that, which makes it even harder to be annoyed at him. “But
you can fix it with alchemy, right?”

“Oh,” Ed says. This isn’t the single weirdest conversation he’s ever had while naked—not by a
longshot—but it’s definitely on the list. “Yeah, I guess so.” He glances down at his still-senseless
right arm, which he juryrigged a sling for out of the fascinatingly filthy shirt he’d had on, and then
over at one of the little benches off by the lockers. “Here, you wanna…?”

It occurs to him, as he gestures for the clothes, that Oscar’s seriously misplaced hero worship or
celebrity shock or whatever it is might have proceeded so far that he’s hoping to help Ed dress so
he can start getting the lowdown on the origins of individual scars.

Blessedly, Oscar has the grace to flush slightly and shove the clothes at him. “Yeah! Of course,
yeah, sorry—”

There’s a word for that, isn’t there? ‘Starstruck’?

A part of Ed just wants to tell him that he’s got it all wrong—the Fullmetal Alchemist is a black
fucking hole. The Amestrian military is an empty night, and nobody ever makes it out of here still
shining.

Ed’s just going to assume this guy is not actively staring at him while he puts his pants on, because
the alternative is for this to get real awkward real fast, and he honestly doesn’t have the internal
fucking fortitude to handle that kind of shit right now. He’s just not going to think about where this
pair of boxer shorts came from; or who wore it last; or how many times it’s been washed in its
miserable, threadbare cotton little life; or what kind of lice it’s possible to get in various places; or
whether any nasty-ass viral and/or bacterial diseases are transferrable in fabric; or the odds of any
of that shit surviving in a storage room in this climate; or whether that prickle on his skin really is
Oscar’s gaze, or if he’s just imagining it; or…

He suits up, and—no fucking surprise—finds that everything drapes in a way that’s hilarious
instead of dramatic. He probably looks like a fucking kid playing dress-up, rather than a shitty-ass excuse for a man who’s cut down more than he can count to pave his own way home.

It’d almost be a relief, when you look at it that way, except that nobody ever takes you seriously when they remember that you’re young.

Besides, especially if Oscar wasn’t watching him dress after all, the kid deserves a little bit of a show.

With any luck, the medic’ll have one of those fancy-pants slings with elastic and padding and adjustable straps and shit, so he forgoes that for now—the better to nudge the heel of his left hand against the limp steel hanging from his right shoulder and then flatten his palm over his stomach, since that’s about the epicenter of all of the oversized clothing hanging off of his frame.

As transmutations go, it’s really not that fucking impressive, but Oscar actually gasps aloud, so…

Well, it’s not like military types get out much. And it’s not like there’s anything to get out to around here.

“Right,” Ed says, tightening the belt a little now that there’s less stupid, unnecessary fabric in the way. He redistributed all of the excess so that it would add a layer of lining to every piece, which he thinks is massively clever, and which Oscar probably hasn’t even noticed, because most people don’t dedicate even a fraction of a waking hour daily to contemplating the law of conservation of mass.

“Here,” Oscar says, holding out a pair of boots he’s apparently had stashed behind his back this entire time. As far as either seriously belated or startlingly early birthday presents go, he could do a lot worse. “I hope these are about right.”

Ed wouldn’t exactly bitch about it if he had to try to stretch a third pair of wool socks around the two he’s already got on to make enough padding to fill these, but they actually look… pretty promising.

“Damn,” Ed says, fitting his left foot in first. “You’re awesome. Thank you.”

Is he going to get in trouble if Oscar explodes from sheer delight or some shit?

As he shoves his right foot into the other boot, it also occurs to him—way too late to do anything—that he’s been using Oscar as this guy’s first name in his head, which is backwards. Unless his name’s Oscar Oscar, which is fairly unlikely, not least because no kid with that name ever would’ve made it through grade school, let alone military hazing and shit.

Oh, well. Oscar it is.

“Private Woods has another coat for you, if you want it,” Oscar-by-default says brightly.

“What do you mean, ‘if’?” Ed asks, doing the best he can to tuck the laces in sort-of-securely—that shit is hard enough even with a second hand that doesn’t get much traction—and then starting for the door. There’s a question he’s not sure he should be asking, but it’s been nagging at him so long now that he can’t help himself: “So who the hell runs this place, if you guys just get to… follow losers like me around, and whatever shit?”

If Ed wasn’t planning to leave the military forever and possibly destroy as much of its shitty-ass fucking structure as he can on his way out, he might just ask to be transferred up here. Their whole complex is interconnected, and all of the hallways are heavily heated, so he doesn’t even have to
forge out into the snow and get his wet hair turned all to icicles as they go.

Then again, he’s sworn off cold and snow and shit, and _never_ going outside would probably be a challenge.


Ed can’t help glancing over at him. There are ominous, hedging kind of answers, and then there are ominous, hedging kind of answers so frigging obvious in their ominous hedginess that it’s sort of mandatory to react.

“Thing is,” Oscar says, “Colonel Yvris… caught pneumonia, and… he passed away last week. And they were supposed to send up a new commander, only they…”

“Forgot?” Ed hazards.

“I don’t know what happened,” Oscar says. “But nobody came. So Second Lieutenant Keck—who you met; he’s my C.O.—has been doing the best he can keeping on with the border patrols, and as far as this place… I mean, Private Woods basically keeps it running.”

Damn it. He’s not going to be able to quit in a fiery rage until after he’s written up recommendation letters for all of these kids.

“Gosh,” Ed says. “Imagine that. Command fucking abandoning a strategically critical outpost ’cause they’re too busy pulling out their rulers to see who’s got the biggest color bar on their fucking chest.”

Oscar laughs nervously. “I mean—I’m sure it was just—an honest mistake, you know—”

“Or somebody _wants_ this war to go bad,” Ed says. “Somebody who’s got a vested interest in industry, and in losing men to prove his own fucking point about how vulnerable we are, so that shit looks desperate enough to bring in the big guns—and, y’know, the big alchemists. And then they do the dirty work, first off, and the public sees that; and if something happens to them out here, with the snow and the cliffs and the Drachmans, well—what a damn shame. What a sad little story about martyrs for the cause; and look at that wide, clear path towards the Führership.”

Oscar stops short, staring at him. “You—you don’t—”

“You can pretend you didn’t hear it,” Ed says, “but you can’t pretend that you don’t know.”

Well—maybe Oscar didn’t know until now. Not everyone’s had as long to sit in a freezing fucking tent, or stagger through the fucking snowbanks for hours on end, with no company but a long, slow analysis of all the shadows shifting at the edges of Hakuro’s silhouette. Not everyone knows the hours Roy’s been working just trying to keep his reputation mostly clean and his whole fucking quest afloat. Not everyone has the context, or the knowledge, or the nightmares about Roy behind a podium, and the air going solid just when Ed sees the gunman in the crowd.

Oscar’s silent for a long second as he starts down the hall again—slower this time. “I mean, I… I know they—left us. I know everybody here’s thinking it. And we still get supplies, and you just tried the phone, but it does—it feels like—”

“You’re cut off?” Ed asks.

Oscar grimaces.
“You want my advice?” Ed asks. “The real shit?”

Oscar hesitates again, and then he nods.

“Get the fuck out,” Ed says. “Get out of this shit while you still can. You’ve got a good heart. They’re either gonna kill it, or they’re gonna use it to kill you. They’ll rip you right the fuck open as soon as look at you if you try to hang on to who you are. And who you are’s important, all right? Don’t let those fuckers grind it out. Don’t let them wear you down. Don’t let them trap you here.”

Oscar smiles, just slightly, more than a little bitter. “That’s—that’s a little funny to hear from a hero.”

“Fuck that,” Ed says. “I’m just some kid, okay? I’m a kid who was trying to do the right thing at the start, and they tore me down and built me up into somebody else.”

The smile sort of changes, but it doesn’t go away. “Why does that stop you from being a hero?”

“Doing the wrong shit for good reasons doesn’t change what you did,” Ed says. If there is a single sentence that encapsulates his entire life… well, he probably just spoke it. “I got blood and dirt and more fuckups than I can even start to tell you about on my hands, just like anybody else. The fact that I can change the way the world’s shaped doesn’t make me anything except a regular old dumbass with a skill.”


Figures that this punk’s never heard of equivalency. “Count with who?”

Oscar shrugs, but he’s still sort of smiling—which is nice, because Ed’d feel kind of bad if he legitimately pissed him off. Even though he’s objectively incorrect. That happens a lot—both the incorrectness, and Ed ending up feeling guilty if he calls it out and shit.

This is why socializing with other human beings who aren’t Al is severely overrated.

Oscar opens the door at the end of this hall, however, which lets them back into the medical center, where Isabel’s waiting with a fur-collared northern standard coat that looks absolutely fucking divine, especially given that Ed’s hair is still soaking wet.

“You guys are the best,” he says, letting her help him shoulder it on. “I’m gonna make sure you all get raises, or at least a fucking bonus, o—”

“Take that off,” the medic says, glancing up from a clipboard and then gesturing sharply with it to indicate one of those cute little fucking slab-of-wood-with-dry-sheets hospital cot numbers. “Sit down. Roll up your sleeve.”

Ed follows the first imperative reluctantly, the second resentfully, and the third…

…but not at all. Because it’s just about physically fucking impossible to roll up your own sleeve with the same hand.

“How much blood have you lost?” the medic goes on.

“A lot,” he says. “Can somebody…?”

Oscar is instantly at the bedside the medic’s not occupying, flipping the fabric back.
The medic makes what looks like a check mark without glancing up. “Any prevalent injuries?”

Ed grits his teeth into a grin. “Well, I think I staved off all the internal bleeding when I sealed up the bullet wound, but there’s usually some lasting damage with that kind of thing.”

At least that earns him a flicker of attention. “Quite,” the medic says after a moment of watching him, possibly to try to gauge whether or not he’s serious. “I’m going to put you on a saline drip. Private Woods is going to go find you the most nutritionally inspiring meal it’s possible to whip up around here, since she tends to be able to spirit such things out of nowhere.”

“You just have to ask nicely,” Isabel says. “I’ll be right back.”

She leaves Ed’s forbidden coat folded nicely on the table—within reach, bless her lovely fucking heart.

The medic pushes a glass into Ed’s hands before he has time to consider making a dive for the coat. “Drink—slowly. You’re only getting started.” They reach for—aw, shit. The rolling stand, and the little container of fluid, and the— “Do you have a problem with needles?”

They’re doing the fucking flicking-the-hypodermic thing. Anyone in their right fucking mind would have a problem with that.

The thudding of his heart is a bad sign. It feels like it’s shaking his whole fucking chest, and he knows it’s only going to get worse; it always does.

“Yes,” Ed says instead of launching into the whole editorial. “Isn’t—can’t I just—drink more water, or—?”

That earns him a dark look. And some even more emphatic hypodermic-flicking.

“Jeez,” Ed says. “Okay. Fuck.” His heart’s starting to pick up the pace, which—considering the general problems with the blood loss and the ongoing everywhere-pain, compounded by a long stint under hot water and a little stroll back and forth through the compound—is making his head feel so light that he’s not completely sure it’s attached to his neck anymore. Realistically speaking, his continued existence would be physiologically implausible if it wasn’t, but it’s going all faint and floaty, and he can hear his heartbeat echoing in his ears and then reverberating hollowly in his skull, and he can’t seem to get his eyes to unglue from the tip of that fucking needle in the medic’s hand.

“Major Elric?” Oscar asks. His voice sounds kind of—distant.

Shit. Motherfucking shit.

Ed really wants to stay fucking awake so he can lay the coat out over himself and warm up a little, and he was seriously looking forward to actual fucking food.

But the white- and yellow-edged spots are flashing around the fringes of his vision, and it feels like his grip on the whole universe—his perception of everything; his physical ability to sense and feel and touch and see; his capacity for coherent thought—is…

…and slipping…

…and fast.

Damn it.
He wakes up with the fucking thing stuck in his arm, of course.

At least it’s taped down, so he can’t see the spot where the tip of the metal’s wedged in under his fucking skin. There’s just—something. Something about it. Fucking heebie-jeebie shit; fucking… nightmare contours to what he logically knows is a perfectly normal component of modern medicine and all that shit.

Doesn’t change the way his whole body and his whole brain just—freeze. Freeze, and then panic, and then unravel.

He eyes the little tube winding up from his forearm to the bag hanging by the side of the bed. He assesses the bed itself next: at least they piled a bunch of fucking blankets on top of him after he passed out; he’s cozy as fuck. That was a feeling he’d just about forgotten, except for the occasional wild fucking fantasy dream.

“Shit,” is the first cogent word that makes its way out of his mouth, which is… sort of appropriate, really, since it makes for a pretty good summary of everything that’s preceded it.

“Actually,” the medic’s deader-than-deadpan voice says from somewhere outside his hazy range of vision, and he almost jumps out of his fucking skin—which would at least jar the IV loose, probably. Is it legal in this country to sue someone if they give you a fucking heart attack while they’re supposedly trying to heal you? “You’re extremely lucky.”

“Luck’s got shit to do with it,” Ed manages. His tongue feels heavier than leaden weights and ship anchors or some shit.

“I suppose that’s true,” the medic says, coming into view and—eugh, lifting the edge of the gauze taped down across the stupid fucking needle; Ed glances away, but it’s too late to stop his stomach from turning a little bit. “You did a fairly neat job on the exit wound in particular.”


The medic catches up a covered tray that’s been sitting—unnoticed, since parts of Ed’s psyche are still swanning around the fucked-up-brain-place you have to swim through for a couple minutes after you’ve been unconscious for a while—on the side table next to his coat. They take the lid off, and glory fucking hallelujah—

“Pace yourself,” the medic says, setting the huge, gorgeous fucking dinner-looking feast on his lap. “And eat the vegetables. You need the vitamins.”

“I need iron,” Ed says. Well. “Probably?”

“You need rest,” they say. “I don’t have the slightest idea what kind of damage you’ve done internally, without even touching the exhaustion and the exposure and so on and so forth. About a week of staying off your feet and avoiding stress, under observation to make sure everything’s knitting up properly, would probably be ideal.” They shuffle their paper and shoot him a sardonic look. “My guess is you’ll be out of here tomorrow morning whether I sanction it or not.”

It’s usually a bad idea to provoke the people with the tranquilizers, but Ed can’t help unleashing a wide wolfish grin.
“Alchemists,” the medic mutters. They sigh. “All right. I’ll shut up and work; you shut up and eat. Let me know if you feel faint again.”

“Sure,” Ed says. “Let me know if you’re gonna stab me again.”

He almost gets a smile with that one. “Didn’t your physician instruct you to shut up?”

“I’m the highest-ranking officer in this establishment,” Ed says in his best snooty-ass fucking general voice. “I am under no obligations to take orders from the likes of—”

“I’ve got a whole drawer full of needles,” the medic says. “Would you like to revisit that statement?”

Laughing would probably be unwise given how much damage he’s done to his ribcage and shit. “You’re good.”

“That’s why they pay me my pittance,” the medic says.

“You should move to Central,” Ed says. “I know some people you’d get along with.”

“Central doesn’t agree with me,” they say, adding a slip of paper to the clipboard at the foot of his bed. “Which is fine, because I don’t agree with Central.”

“Things are gonna change,” Ed says. “For the better. Although they might get worse first, if certain assholes I’ve already talked shit about today get things their way.”

The medic raises their eyebrows at him. The magnifying lens on the glasses makes the effect a little bit uncanny, because one eyebrow looks way bigger than the other.

“You really believe that,” they say, and it’s not inflected like a question. “That’s interesting.”

“Yeah,” Ed says. “Been a long damn time since I believed in much of anything, but sometimes you gotta pick a horse and hope like hell they know how to run.”

One of the eyebrows drops, and one stays lifted. A person this smart must be paying attention, and by that reaction, they know exactly what he means. “I’m not much for betting.”

“Me neither,” Ed says. “Making an exception this time, ’cause I’ve seen what this one can do.”

“I’ll remember that,” the medic says. They gesture towards the tray that’s been sitting on his lap all this time. It must’ve gone cold, and he must be cold, because he can’t really smell any of it, which is why he keeps forgetting it’s there. “I’ve never had to tell anyone in your demographic to stuff his face before.”

“Yeah,” Ed says. “Shit. No one’s ever said it to me, either. I must be real fucked up.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” they say.

Ed jams a fat pile of potatoes onto his fork. “Still leaving tomorrow, though.”

The medic takes their glasses off to polish them on a clean spot on their coat. “I expected nothing less.”
The food’s fine. It’s funny—Ed expected it to taste better than anything else in the entire fucking universe has ever tasted, with the possible exception of Yock Island burnt-roasted fish. It could be that his sinuses are totally jacked up from all the cold air; it could be that they’re out of anything fresh up here, and they’re strapped for seasoning; it could be that he’s just so damned ready to leave that he can’t spare any cellular energy for giving a fuck about food.

Leader Guy from before comes in right as he’s mopping his plate with the hunk of bread they gave him—because even if it’s not amazing, he’s not a moron, and he’s had enough train station sandwiches over the years to know that those aren’t gonna be a gustatory inspiration either.

“Yo,” Ed says, or starts to say—it’s a little slower articulating syllables when your mouth is crammed full, so he really only gets through part of it before he trails off at the way the dude’s face pinches up as he whips out a crisp salute. Swallowing kind of hurts—here’s hoping that’s just the general disuse of his throat and whatever shit, rather than a sign he’s coming down with something—but Ed does it anyway. “Uh, at ease, and… shit.”

The medic snorts audibly.

Ed chooses to ignore that. If the world doesn’t grant you any dignity, sometimes you just have to make your own.

Or bullshit your way through without it. That tends to be his default.

“So what’s up?” he asks as Leader Guy lowers his hand, obviously not glancing over in the medic’s direction, because that would mean acknowledging that something has occurred worth reacting to.

“Nothing to report, sir.” Wait, this guy has a name after all, doesn’t he? Keck or something? He has also mastered the art of delivering an answer that sounds like a non-sequitur despite the fact that it’s a completely legitimate response to the question What’s up. “I… wanted to—apologize.”

Ed stares at him.

Keck shifts his weight, and his eyes dart towards the door. “For—not believing that you were who you said.”

Ed puts his fork down. Easier to give somebody a good, solid What the actual fuck kind of a look when you don’t have any distractions.

“For trying to protect your country from unknown trespassers wandering around in the snow, you mean?” he asks. “Which is your fucking job? I should be apologizing to you, if anybody’s gotta throw some sorries around. Thanks for not putting a bullet in my fucking skull, which you kind of would’ve been within your rights to do.”

Keck blinks.

Ed scowls at him.

“Yes, sir,” Keck says.

“Listen,” Ed says. “If you call me ‘sir’ one more time, I am gonna give you something to be sorry about.”
“Yes, s—” Keck swallows. “…yes. Copy that.”

Ed can’t fucking wait to quit.

The morning dawns bright and fucking freezing, like just about all of the ones before it… except the ones that were overcast, anyway. And since actual dawn isn’t for several hours after what Ed’s come to consider the start of the day, feeling like he’s been run down and reversed over by a supply truck isn’t going to keep him in that sad excuse for a bed with a fucking metal demon-fang jammed into one of his veins.

There’s something simultaneously extremely comforting and indescribably bizarre about the sendoff—his ragtag trio of supporters ushers him all the way to the garage, despite the fact that there’s literally only one truck idling in the whole damn outpost, so it’s not like he could possibly board the wrong vehicle here.

Funny enough, said truck’s arrival last night brought neither a new commanding officer for the compound nor any of the supplies they sent in forms for. It just… came. Empty. The driver lifted off his hat, lifted off the knitted skullcap he had underneath that, scratched his head, and shrugged. *Nothing to deliver, but this is the route, so here I am, I guess.*

Ed’s going to have a few words for a few people down south. And maybe a few gestures, and probably a choice finger.

Isabel’s and Oscar’s good spirits remain staunchly undulled, however; and Ed’s not sure the medic really *does* excitement, but they don’t seem especially downcast, so odds are this place is just going to keep on keeping on.

Just as Ed’s turning to climb up into the canvas-covered supply section of the damn truck and finally, *finally* start the last leg of this ungodly fucking stagger towards home, he gets a glimpse of Isabel’s face, and she looks like she might just be liable to explode. He pauses.

The hesitation is exactly what she was waiting for, apparently, because she flings herself at him and hugs him tight enough to make his tortured spine twinge a bit. He can’t even wriggle away, because they packed him a little rucksack with some food and all of the shit they’d dug up from his pockets—which, praise be to the caprices of coincidence, still includes his watch—and his right arm’s bound up in a sling again. It’s a genuine, medically-sound, nicely-balanced construction this time, though, instead of something bastardized out of his own clothes, so that’s a plus.

It kind of doubles as a straightjacket when someone’s hugging the hell out of you, though.

“Ow,” he says. “Thanks. For everything. You guys are really something.”

“Take care,” Isabel says, drawing back with maybe more pink in her cheeks than the kiss of the cold should warrant.

“If you’re capable,” the medic says.

Ed wants to wave his hand, but, again—too damn encumbered. “Once I quit, I’m gonna have tons of time to cultivate new talents.”
That gets him a thin smile and a short, approbatory nod.

Oscar claps him on the left shoulder, then steps back, smacks his heels together, and sharply salutes.

“Safe travels, sir,” he says.

“At fucking ease already,” Ed says. “Remember what I said.”

Oscar smiles. “Always will, sir.”

“And don’t fucking call me that,” Ed says.

Oscar smiles wider. “Sure thing, sir.”

Ed rolls his eyes. The driver’s probably rolling his eyes even more; if Ed’s not mistaken over the sound of the engine, he’s clearing his throat meaningfully.

“Oh!” Isabel says. “One more thing!” She digs through the pockets of her enormous coat—at least Ed’s not the only one who doesn’t always quite exactly fit the average regulation sizes, right? —and drags out…

…the stupid book that more or less saved his ass.

She’s full-on, full-face blushing now. “Can you, um—sign this? Just—it’d be really nifty. And it’d—I mean, no one’s going to believe I actually met you.”

He opens his mouth, shuts it, sorts through the marginally more appropriate options in his assorted thoughts, and then opens it again. “My condolences about that, by the way. That you met me, I mean. Uh… you got a pen?”

“Darn,” Isabel says.

Maybe Ed should try to convince her to come back with him. She and Al could get fucking married and have twelve little oath-mincing children.

The medic sighs quietly, reaches under their fur-lined uniform coat for the pocket of their lab coat, and hands Isabel a ballpoint.

“Sorry about my handwriting,” Ed says—or starts to say, and then forgets to finish when Isabel reaches for a place to set the book, and Oscar immediately volunteers his back.

“Why?” Isabel says. “That’s…the point.”

“Well—” Shit. What the hell is he supposed to say? “Just…it used to be way nicer.” Thanks to all of you for saving my ass. Visit sometime. If you can’t find where I live just listen for Al shouting “Brother, no!!!!” —Edward Elric. “When I was training my left hand for motor skills and shit, I was way more interested in being able to draw arrays again than in writing legibly and stuff, so I sort of… yeah.” He hands the pen back. “Thanks.”

“Thank you,” Isabel says. At least if she glows any brighter, they can use her to power this place if Hakuro tries to cut that off, too.

“Sure,” Ed says. “All right, they’re gonna leave without me in a second. See you guys.”

He gets a round of waves, and then he really does have to turn around and jump up into the
personnel-slash-supply car, under the ongoing glare of the driver. He drops into the first seat—obviously there’s nobody else planning to hop on all the fucking way up here—and cranes his neck to peek out the tiny window in the cargo loading door. Isabel’s hugging the book to her chest.

Funny how just about every person he’s met up here fits into one of two very distinct fucking camps—either they tried to kill him in cold blood, or they stuck their neck out doing their absolute damnedest to help him get back home.

He figures—as he settles in and slouches on the seat, making sure the coat lies in a way that’ll warm up his legs—that that suits him fine. He was planning to get there and make the best of it anyway, so he can rub it in the face of the first group and chalk it up as credit to the second.

In the meantime, this might be a good occasion for a fucking nap. It never fails to blow his goddamn mind how weirdly boring the aftermath always is. You run and run and fight like hell for your fucking life—tooth and nail, skin and bones and blood and pure fucking adrenaline so hot it scalds you from the inside out—and then you claw your way through the lowest circles of the darkest pit and come out battered to shit but still determinedly breathing on the other side, and then…

…you wait.

The anticlimax always makes Ed itch to tear his fucking hair out a little bit. Sure, relief is all good and fucking well; safety’s grand, but coming off of the high is one thing. Careening from the zenith down to some kind of pit of idleness—which usually involves an unholy quantity of hours spent numbing your ass on a truck or a train—is in a whole different category, and it’s one he’d skip if he had the option.

He’s bad with that boredom—any boredom. Doesn’t take a genius to figure that one out; probably everyone who’s ever known him is painfully aware. He should’ve asked Isabel to pack him a book. Twelve books. Even just a fucking newspaper—that wouldn’t hold him for more than about an hour, and probably the only ones they have up here are frighteningly outdated, but at least he could’ve gotten a vague impression of what’s been going on in the real world all this time.

That’s a scarier thought than he’d like to address, actually. Who the fuck knows what’s happened in the rest of the country? How fast are they recruiting future corpses to the front lines? What are they saying about how it’s going—exactly what lies are they trying to sell this time? It’s not big enough for them to be implementing rations or any of that shit for the rest of the populace yet, is it? They didn’t during Ishval—not even in the East—and that was worse than this; that was a hundred times worse than this; that was…

There’s something simultaneously very bleak and completely unsurprising about the realization that he doesn’t really give a shit what happens as long as Al stays safe. This whole damn country could burn to the ground; if Al doesn’t get singed, if Al doesn’t have to choke on the acrid smoke, then…?

But that makes sense, doesn’t it? From an evolutionary standpoint. You have to prioritize the people close to you who are going to carry on your own fucking genetic information—it’s only logical. Sometimes you extend that to some people who don’t have your blood, exactly, but they do share your priorities, or you owe them, or whatever. Which is why he feels a ferocious beat of protectiveness for the Rockbells, too.

And—Roy.

Past benefactors; present, permanent soul-sharer; and… what? Future well of untapped potential?
There’s a “tap that” joke here. Which Ed is not going to sink to. Or follow through with. Because he had this discussion with himself; he did that, and fuck rehashing it. Fuck second thoughts. He’s leaving Roy alone. There’s more important shit that Roy’s got to do than… well, him.

Damn it; he just told himself he wasn’t going to go there. The problem is that once you start joking about a thing—once it’s safe enough to ridicule, once you can hold it up and laugh at it, once you’ve looked at it straight on and started twisting it for humor—you’ve acknowledged it as real, and you can’t run from it anymore. If there’s enough of a possibility here to joke about, then there’s enough to act on, and that’s the last fucking thing he wants.

He has to crush it down and rule it out, or it’ll just fucking explode all over both of them. He has to leave all the fucking shrapnel in the snow; he can’t carry this shit home with him, or it’ll follow him forever. There are other ways to get warm. He’s strong enough to get through. He always has been; he’s always had to be.

There’s a loose piece of strapping hanging from the roof, with a buckle that keeps clacking against the side; and the engine’s louder than he expected even back here, but all the same…

All the same, he’s no stranger to the fact that trauma—especially the kind that comes with major blood loss as a party favor—takes it right the fuck out of you. So it’s not exactly the shock of the century when the rocking of the seat and the rumble all around him lulls him slowly back to sleep.

He’s sitting on the foot of a bed—buck fucking naked, and it’s cold, but he can’t seem to pull the blankets up enough to cover any of his all-too-exposed skin; either they’re stuck, or he’s sitting on them, or they just don’t reach that far, and it’s frustrating as hell.

Roy’s there. Is it Roy’s bed? He doesn’t remember; he accidentally glanced in through the doorway once when he went along while Roy was fetching something from the spare room, but he can’t bring up an image of what it looked like. He senses that it is, though. He’s fairly confident about it, to tell the truth, which is sort of funny, given that he’s aware at the same time that he doesn’t know for sure; but the human brain is weird, so… whatever.

Point is, Roy’s there, turning something over and over in his hands—a ball or a paperweight or something. Probably from all of the paperwork he’s not doing right now. Ed can’t quite see, but he’s not really worried about it.

What he’s worried about is the strip of skin exposed where Roy’s shirt hangs open because the buttons are all undone. Ed can see the inner edges of his collarbones, and the angle of the intersection of his ribs, and his navel, and the fact that the fly of his pants isn’t done up, either. A deep, hot, hard, ine-fucking-luctable throbbing starts low between Ed’s hips, and the contrast of that warmth and the freezing air is completely bizarre.

He realizes—way too fucking late, with a jolt like licking a live wire—that they were gearing up for reunion sex, only Roy’s procrastinating.

Fucking typical.

Ed hauls as firmly as he can on the nearest fold of the sheet, but it doesn’t budge. In glaring at it, he notices that there’s rust running in thick, dark lines all down the automail.
Maybe it’s not rust. Maybe it’s blood.

Maybe that’s why Roy won’t touch him. The damage was bad enough—nothing sexy about scars and oil and cold, cold fucking steel. And with the truth of what he’s done laid out in one long smear of untold stories right on top of it—

The disappointment hits him like a sledgehammer to the fucking sternum, and he almost doubles over.

Nobody is ever going to want him. Not now. Not like this. Not anymore.

“I don’t know,” Roy says, and his hands keep shifting so fast— “I don’t suppose I really know anything. That’s the cruel thing, for us—for alchemists—isn’t it? We believe at the beginning that we’re the only ones who understand the structure of the universe, and it’s only as time goes on that we realize how impossibly little we comprehend at all.”

Ed’s hair keeps falling in his face no matter how many times he pushes it back. “That’s ’cause we’re all a bunch of arrogant little shits.”

“Arrogant normal-sized shits, surely,” Roy says, and something kind of like a laugh scrapes up Ed’s throat, and—

Roy’s hands part. The thing he’s been playing with is a frag grenade.

He hooks his index finger into the pin, jerks it out, drops the little curl of steel to the carpet, and tosses the body of the bomb to Ed.

“Catch,” he says.

Ed fumbles and tries to twist out of the way, but then it’s cradled in his right palm, clanking softly on the steel—that fucking hand just never knows what’s good for it; some part of him likes following orders, doesn’t it? It just makes it so much easier to find someone to blame.

“Shit,” he whispers.

Two—one—

The thing is, you can never hear the sound of shrapnel tearing through the skin, because the explosion itself is too deafeningly loud; and you can’t see through the burst of white.

But you can feel it.

You can feel the shards like teeth digging into your flesh and dragging back, ripping holes and gashes, and the heat melts your skin and cooks the meat of you all in one fucking instant—

Over the roar of the fucking air shattering around the impact—a spitting rattle of machinegun fire, and isn’t this Central? Is that what it’s fucking come to in the time that he was—?

Where the fuck is Al?

Where—

He jerks awake with a scream clawing its way up his throat, left arm half-extended with the impulse to reach for—

The empty supply car, gravel grinding underneath the tires and pinging off the chassis loud enough
to sound like bullet shells.

The cry feels like a knot of fucking brambles and razorblades as he chokes it down and swallows it whole. His breath shudders out of him in sticky fragments; it feels like there’s a cord around his fucking neck. He stares at the wall, stares up at the swinging canvas strap overhead, and forces his muscles to relax—one by one; one part of his stupid, shitty, broken body at a time. Neck—shoulders—back. Hell, that still hurts.

He looks down at his left hand and slowly curls his gloved fingers in towards his palm. There. That works. That’s a start. He’s in control of those.

He counts out five-second inhales and seven-second exhales as the truck slows; gravel practically fucking squeals under the tires now. His heart’s banging so hard he doesn’t know how he’s breathing around it; it’s knocking at his ribs and jumping for his throat, and he just has to slow down—

Not real. None of that was real. He’s fine. Roy’s fine. They’re both safe, at least for the moment.

He tilts his head back against the too-cold metal frame holding up the wall of this thing and closes his eyes for a second. Deep fucking breaths; steady fucking heart. He’s fine. Everybody he cares about is—

The truck lurches to a stop, and all of Ed’s organs practically leap the fuck out of his body; he gets a nice case of what feels like whiplash for good measure, and only his instinctual grab for the edge of his seat keeps him from ending up sprawled out on the floor, expectorating his own teeth.

What a nice, warm welcome back to civilization.

He waits until the driver kills the engine before he chances standing up. His knees wobble, but then they hold. That’s something. He manages to hang the pack straps from his right arm, which frees his left hand; that’s something, too.

Mostly the floor stays still, but his ankles aren’t entirely with the program, so he ends up staggering a little bit on his way to the door. His vision keeps—tilting a little; he blinks the stars out and focuses on breathing. It’s fine. He watches his hand reach for the door handle; it’s all fi—

It swings open, and he stumbles back, fumbling for his sidearm, which—

Isn’t there, obviously, because he stripped off all the weapons back at the base; and which he doesn’t need anyway, because it’s the fucking driver who just opened the door.

The fucking driver, who is staring at him like he’s got little coded messages for eyeballs right about now.

“Are you okay?” the guy asks.


The guy looks at him for another second and then backs out of the way so he can jump down. His knees are still functioning. He’ll take it.

From the shoulder of the road where they just parked, he can see the train station—well, what passes for a train station this far out. Really it’s just a concrete platform above the tracks; a sad, square little cinderblock building sits off to the side, with a solitary a ticket window on one wall.
The train’s already hissing steam, and a cluster of people has started to funnel themselves up into
the first car to board.

“Shit,” Ed says. “They holding it for us?”

“For you,” the driver says. “I’ve got a pickup. They know you’re coming.”

The train whistle screeches, loud and way too high.

“I think,” the driver says.

“Fuck and double-fuck,” Ed says, and then he runs.

At least he doesn’t have to fling himself at this one by jumping off of a fucking cliff.

He just has to hurl himself in through the last door on the last car right before it passes the edge of
the platform, at which point he tumbles into the aisle, and his pack swings up and smacks him in
the face.

He wheezes.

He coughs.

He pries his cheek off of the floorboards, levers his left arm underneath himself, and sits upright.

There’s a family with two small kids huddled in the back row of seats, eyes fixed on him like
they’ve never seen somebody launch himself into a train at the last second before. Apparently it’s
just stare-at-Ed day or something. Would’ve been courteous of Mustang to let Ed know he’d
instated that holiday after all.

When he’s stably upright, he pushes his hair back out of his face, then holds his hand up and
waves.

“Hey,” he says. “Would you believe it’s not the first time I’ve done that?”

“Yeah,” the older kid—who’s probably twelve or thirteen—says. “You timed it just right.”

“Shh,” the mother says, gripping the shoulder of his coat.

Ed can’t help grinning just a little as he grabs on to the side of the nearest bench of seats and hauls
himself up. “Practice makes perfect. Or at least surviving. Practice makes surviving.”

“It was pretty cool,” the kid says.

“Alan,” the mom whispers, pulling him backwards a half-step.

“Sorry,” Ed says, trying to wave his hand in a reassuring sort of way—which is the kind of thing
that is easy for people with communicative instincts, and basically impossible for people like him.
“And don’t worry about me. Didn’t mean to barge in. I’m harmless.” He fishes in the pack for
his watch, which he hooked around one of the buckles on the straps so that he’d have easier access
to it. The whole family stares at the raised chimera as it turns slowly on the chain. “Well—I’m on
your side, anyway.”

The dad tries to usher the mom into the window seat—furthest from Ed, that is—and she gathers
their little girl up onto her lap. The dad then takes over the duty of pulling on Alan’s coat, which
gets harder as the kid takes a step forward, eyes huge.
“You’re a State Alchemist?” he asks. “What’s your specialty?”

Fucking up everything jumps to the tip of Ed’s tongue, and he has to clear his throat to cough it down. The train rattles meaningfully, shuddering hard as they pass over a strip of less-than-awesome track, so he sits down on the edge of the bench seat that he’s been bracing himself on. “Eh… kind of whatever.”

The kid keeps on gazing at him like he’s not a fucking moron, though, and it’s—sick. It’s sick that this country has convinced people—children—that its mangiest fucking mongrel dogs, the greediest, hungriest quick-draw mercenaries it can catch with a choke-collar, are worthy to be idolized. Death hangs on Ed’s every fucking movement; he can smell the iron of the blood and the stench of the rot on every last inch of his own skin; and here he is, drenched in destruction, crawling out of the wreckage that he made—with a wide-eyed kid looking up to him like he’s someone important.

At least he never fell for that—not when he was that age; not ever. Roy was flashy and impressive and—well, shit, infuriatingly hot—but Ed never believed any of the bullshit. He knew what alchemy could do by then. He knew how the playing-god game always ended. He knew what happened to people who put on blue jackets, and he knew what happened to good people who went out into wars.

But it’s so easy to get suckered into the dramatic photographs and the happy little lies. When they print that shit as fact and shout it at you from every direction—

It’s not Alan’s fault he’s internalized it.

The dad is trying to get Alan to sit down. In an act of half-defiant obedience, Alan shakes his father’s grip off and perches right on the edge of the seat on the other side of the aisle from where his parents are huddling.

Ed remembers the unholy inspirations he used to get from that particular combination of emotions. It was a good one. He swore he saw actual steam coming out of Roy’s ears one time when he took his orders agonizingly literally.

“I thought all State Alchemists had something they were good at,” Alan says. “And you have a title, too, right?”

A side-portion of Ed’s brain has been wondering why the parents are so damn wary of him when their kid’s enamored of everything military.

The side-portion duly realizes that they live in a border down, and they’ve bundled their entire family onto a train going south. There’s probably a pile of their luggage in one of the carriage cars. They’ve probably figured out that the military might very well be planning to cut them off and leave them for dead if shit starts to go sour in this war—to sacrifice everybody north of a front line they can hold better, or one that suits their plans politically. If their boys in blue aren’t going to protect their homes from a conflict the asshats (also in blue) sitting pretty in Central started, who the hell is? The constant, blaring propaganda about the unspeakable monstrosity of the Drachmans has sunk in, but the film of patriotic faith is wearing thin. They’ve got every reason to fear the enemy, and no reason to trust their troops to help them.

But Alan’s young enough to believe the shit he’s told.

“Eh,” Ed says. “It’s boring. I’m boring. My brother’s great, though. He’s an alchemist, too, but he’s using it for medicine. He’s gonna work at Central Hospital once he gets his degree and save a
whole bunch of people’s lives.” He disentangles the pack straps from around his right wrist and sets it aside so he can hold the automail up with his left hand. “My best friend made this. She saves people, too.”

“Wow,” Alan breathes. It mists in front of his face. They need to turn up the fucking heat in here if they want anybody to be able to get where they’re going.

It’s started to snow outside; the flakes turn into white streaks past the windows, so that it looks like they’re flying through a cloud.

“But—you save people, too,” Alan says. He bites his lip. There’s the rub. The rest is history. “Don’t you?”

Ed’s smile is probably so grotesque it deserves its own exhibit in the ongoing fucking freak show of his life. “I try. I really try. But sometimes I don’t do so well.”

“Trying matters,” Alan says. “That’s what everybody says. You know—’It’s the thought that counts.’”


Alan smiles at him, sort of hopefully, and he does his damnedest to give the kid a decent smile back.

“Don’t bother him,” the mom whispers just loud enough for Ed to hear, plucking at her husband’s sleeve like it’ll compel him to reach out and grab Alan’s. “He’s probably very busy.”

Not too long ago, Ed would’ve pointedly looked at his empty hands and said something like Yeah, fucking swamped.

But she’s just trying to take care of her own, here. She’s just trying to keep her babies safe. And there’s no fucking reason to antagonize her for that.

That’s one of the things that’s really settled with him over the years—how much it changes everything that everybody does when you look at their actions from the point of view of what they want, rather than dropping right into the defensive and assuming that every movement and every conversation is meant as an attack. People say and do a lot of stupid shit, but usually it’s because they’re scared, and desperate, and all they want is to make shit in their own lives all right.

Ed can respect that. Ed can respect that a lot.

“No problem,” he says. “Nice talking to you, kid.”

Alan smiles again, and Ed twists around to face forward in his seat and pretend he’s occupied. Maybe he should write up a fake report. Or a real telegram. Attn: Gen. Mustang stop. Contrary to celebratory missives you probably received am not dead stop. Get your shit together before I get back or so help me I will get it together for you and you are not gonna like it stop.

The possibilities are endless.

Just like this fucking train ride.

How far is Fomsbach, exactly?

Shit.
By his calculation—taking calculation to mean extremely frequent glances at the face of his now-carefully-wound watch in between bouts of halfhearted doodling in his notebook—it takes them just about forty-five minutes from one platform to the other. He’s not sure if that’s standard, or if they were chugging along slower than normal because of the snow. These are new tracks, too—he can’t remember whether they laid them after the official war declaration, or just before. That’d be an interesting factoid to find out, wouldn’t it?

It’s going to be another forty or fifty miles to Riedbach, and he’s finally hydrated enough to need to pee—which is probably the best thing that’s happened to his health in weeks. That’s a nice, clean little reminder of how fucked his life has been lately. He doesn’t glance back to see how Alan’s family reacts as he hops off with his pack in tow—probably they’re relieved, and the kid is disappointed. He’ll get back onto another car; there must be a warmer one.

When he returns from the facilities—speaking of fucking freezing—the engineer and a station official are having what looks like an animated argument about the snowplow on the front of the engine, so Ed goes and buys the biggest cup of tea they’ll sell him at the tiny kiosk.

Fortunately, even though the girl working looks to be wearing two pairs of gloves on top of each other to go with her enormous muffler-scarf, she manages to fit a little plastic lid on the top for him, so he can wander around sipping it without any snowflakes falling in. He’s glad he pretended not to be able to hear the price she was giving and dropped half again as much into her palm.

He tries to blow on his tea through the tiny little hole in the lid so that he won’t singe the receiving end of every nerve in his mouth when he sips, and then he meanders over to the intense debate going on at the front of the train.

“To hell with your schedule,” the engineer is saying, and Ed can see a vein standing out in his temple. It’s actually a little disconcerting, because the guy’s beard is so thick you shouldn’t be able to see anything through his sideburns, so he must be on the verge of popping the fucking thing. “Do you know how many kids there are on this train?”

“No,” the station guy says. “But I know that their parents paid for tickets, and a ticket’s supposed to guarantee that they get somewhere on time. Besides—if you’re not off this track in the next half-hour, what do you think’s going to happen to those kids when the northbound comes in at fifty miles an hour?”

The engineer grits his teeth. “I think you better find me somebody who can reattach sheared bolts inside of half an hour. Don’t you?”

“No,” the station guy says. “But I know that their parents paid for tickets, and a ticket’s supposed to guarantee that they get somewhere on time. Besides—if you’re not off this track in the next half-hour, what do you think’s going to happen to those kids when the northbound comes in at fifty miles an hour?”

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“Wait,” Ed says, and they both look like they hurt their necks whirling around to look at him. Oops. “The snowplow’s busted? That’s the problem?”

“The plow itself is fine,” the engineer says slowly. “It’s just that the last curve on this track’s too close to the platform, and it caught the edge and jarred it just right to snap one of the bolts clean off.” He glares over at the station guy. “And I’m not about to drive this train with a snowplow that ain’t secure, when there are children—”

“I’ll fix it,” Ed says. He sips the tea and burns his tongue. “Ow. Shit. You mind if I weld it right on? I can always take it off again once we get far enough south not to need it. It’d be much faster,
if he’s worried about timetables and shit.”

The engineer starts to smile, which is a hilarious slapsticky kind of contrast to the way the station officer’s jaw drops.

“Who the hell are you?” he asks.

“Major Edward Elric,” Ed says. He sips again. The burnt part of his tongue tingles forlornly.

“The Fullmetal Alchemist.” He turns to the engineer. “So what do you think?”

The man tugs on his beard a little while he looks over the front of the train. “Is it going to damage anything permanently if you weld it, or can you alchemy it right off after?”

“There’ll be a couple marks,” Ed says. Probably he’s asking because he’d have to pay to fix it if it did, and it’s not like his salary’s got much wiggle room for that kind of shit. “But if I do it right, none of the metal’s gonna mix or anything.”

“If?” the officer says.

The engineer evil-eyes him. “It’s better’n anything you’ve got.”

The officer opens his mouth and then shuts it and uses it to scowl.

“Why the hell not?” the engineer says to Ed, gesturing towards the plow. “Give it a try.”

Ed does his best to examine the empty bolt space from this angle, but it’s sort of a lost cause.

“Could you hold this?” he asks the station officer, who—with the kind of bewildered cooperativeness Ed counts on sometimes—takes his tea. Hand free, he shrugs his pack off, sets it down, and turns to the engineer. “Could you hold the back of my coat?”

He earns a weird look, but this guy’s already with him, because Ed took his side first. People are funny that way. “Sure, I guess…”

Ed hands him the tail of the coat, says “Tight?”, and then steps up to the edge of the platform and starts leaning.

Humans are weird. Humans are weird and kind of stupid, and the implicit trust beating in the middle of his chest is so damn bizarre. He doesn’t even know this man’s name, and he just tossed his life—or at least the intactness of his face and most of his skeleton—pretty literally into the dude’s hands.

Apparently it wasn’t as dumb a gamble as it could’ve been, though, because the guy gets the gist of it right away—he steps forward and keeps a firm grip on the damn coat, shifting carefully so Ed can use his own weight to tip himself down in the open air until he’s level with the problem part of the snowplow.

“Do you have the pieces of the bolt or anything?” he asks.

“No,” the engineer says.

“All righty, then,” Ed says. He peers into the hole where the theoretical bolt’s hypothetically supposed to go—there’s nothing but smooth iron directly on the other side, which must mean the track it was originally set into is a little higher, so that it would lift the plow up a bit. Which makes a fuckton of sense, given that a snowplow scraping on the tracks all the way would be stupid.
“Pull me back?” he says, and the engineer immediately obliges in one smooth motion, and he really likes this guy.

He’d do the unnecessary brushing-your-hands-together thing to indicate how easy this is, but he’s only got the one hand to work with, and also he’s only a jerk about fifty percent of the time these days.

“Okay,” he says, moving over to the furthest corner of the platform to get a better angle for squinting at the way the plow’s hanging. As he’d figured, it’s slightly lopsided, leaning towards the side where the bolt broke. “Yeah. It didn’t fall too far, right?”

“Just a little,” the engineer says. “But given the extra weight on the other bolts, and the fact that I don’t know how much strain they took when it made contact…”

“Yeah,” Ed says. Easy shit, which is why he’s worried. The world doesn’t do easy shit—not really. Not for him. It does terrible shit masquerading as easy shit so that he’ll get his hopes up, and then it’ll all come crashing down. “Got it,” he says, doubling back to the closest part of the platform to the plow itself. He gestures to his coat again. “You mind…?”

The guy’s got such a solid grip Ed practically feels like he could jump right the fuck off this thing and trust that he wouldn’t fall. Probably better not to try it, though.

He pulls his glove off with his teeth, jams it deep into the pocket of his coat, and leans out again, trying to focus on anything other than the furiously-tingling pre-numbing sting of the cold on his bare fingers. He shifts forward—just a touch further, slowly—and curls his protesting hand to rap his knuckles against the surface of the plow. Then he reaches up to spread his fingertips on the nearest part of the engine itself.

“Iron,” he says. “With a lot of lead in the paint? And the plow’s steel.”

“I…” the engineer says. “Yes. Yeah. Can you—”

“Metal’s no problem,” Ed says. That’s the kind of famous-last-word shit that tempts the fuck out of fate. “ Mostly, anyway.”

He bends his left arm to touch his hand to the icy plates of the automail. He was thinking about holding that position for a second while he worked on the array, but he’d probably get his fucking fingers stuck.

He compensates by closing his eyes and shutting it out—all of it, all of the rest; the tumult of his interior thoughts; the ambient hubbub of other humans, other conversations, other lives. Like a lightswitch. Flipped and gone, all the details plunging into nothing; dark and silence, and—

A light. Lines lit from underneath, from deep within, from the center of the universe, drawn along the edges of the only laws that matter. Human rules are arbitrary. These are real.

He opens his eyes and flattens his palm on the surface of the snowplow.

The station officer makes an alarmed sort of Gahh noise at the vast crackle of electricity, and ozone billows out around Ed’s hand—there’s a couple stray molecules of pure fucking oxygen, too; for a brief, gorgeous second, he’s high as hell on that intake of breath. The engineer doesn’t even waver, though—just holds on tight; Ed’s position doesn’t shift a centimeter as the static hisses, and the metal melts, slithers, seethes, remolds, reforms—

And it’s not the cleanest weld job Winry’s ever seen, probably, but it’ll get the fucking job done
“All right,” he says when the last pop of wayward lightning’s shuddered out of his hair. “Reel me in—”

He’s upright on his feet on the platform before he knows it, with the engineer dusting snow off the back of his coat.

“That’s really something,” the guy’s saying. “That’s—are you on this train? I’m upgrading your ticket to first class.”

“Oh,” he says. “You don’t have to do th—”

The guy’s reprimanding look speaks volumes.

“…okay, then,” he says. “Thanks.” He reaches out to get his tea back from the station officer, who somehow manages to recoil away and shove it at him at the same time. “Uh—thanks for… holding that.”

“Sure,” the officer says in a tiny voice. He clears his throat, then looks pointedly at his watch. “You have fifteen minutes left to clear this track before the northbound needs it.”

Ed turns to the engineer, who shrugs.

And then says: “Get your ass on the train, Major Elric.”


He picks up his pack, though, and follows the instructions to the letter.

The first-class car is a weird fucking place. The chairs have fucking cushions and shit, and they’re clean, and the paint’s all nice, and the windows are clear, and… wow.

Also, it’s full—well, only about a quarter full—of snobby-, rich-looking people who are openly staring at him as he boards.

This is fucked up, is what it is—not the staring; that he’s used to, and he greets it with a wave and a “Yo” before he drops himself down onto one of the freakily fancy seats. It’s fucked up that so many people are leaving—leaving the North.

There aren’t that many residents of this region to start with, which means there’s got to be a not-insignificant proportion of the local population on this train. They know. They know they’re being abandoned. And the ones who can afford it are trying to escape.

This isn’t the country his father died for. Somebody’s got to fucking do something, and—shit. Why does it always come down to this? Why is he always in the middle of it?

The whistle sounds, and the wheels grind, and then they’re off. The scenery streaks by, marred by the snow, as they pick up speed. Apparently the plow is working fine. That’s a relief. It’d probably be possible for Ed to tie a rope around his waist and dangle himself down from the roof to make adjustments while they were moving, but it doesn’t sound especially appealing—between the wind chill and his bum-ass automail, it might just be more than he could handle right about now.

This—the fixing of this, of the country, of this whole fucking situation—is probably a job for Roy.
Which is good, actually, since the bastard usually spends half his time coming up with new and creative ways to make statuary out of office supplies instead of doing his current one. This is a bigger thing than a couple complex arrays or even a series of steel knuckle sandwiches can solve. This is institutional. This is something built into the fucking framework of this government—any government, maybe, but none that Ed’s gonna fucking roll over and beg for, if it throws its people to the wolves like this.

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slow, then follows it up with a long draught of the tea—figures that it’s already fuckin’ cold. You really can’t win with thermodynamics some days.

This one’s past him, probably—out of his hands, out of his league, beyond his capacity. His lifelong quest gig is over. Roy’s is just beginning.

But goddamn, if he’s not going to fight for it with everything he does have. Roy’s going to need people. He’s going to need protection. And every diplomat out there could benefit from a guard dog—from a pair of teeth they’ve got control over, that they can command, but everybody who gets too close sees the ropes of spit curling off the canines and starts to reconsider their approach.

Funny how you can run to the ends of the fucking planet, but you can’t ever leave.

Fuck Roy for helping him and Al so much back then—for looking out for them, for caring like he did, under all the snarky-bastard shit. Fuck Roy for setting up an exchange that he’ll never be able to repay. Fuck Roy for mattering. Fuck Roy for forcing him to get invested. Fuck Roy for loving this miserable excuse for a country so much that he’ll die trying to fix it.

Fuck Ed for being such a damn sucker for any lost cause.

He takes a few more sips of the tea in the hopes that he might dredge up a lukewarm mouthful when he gets to the bottom of it, but apparently the tea’s not any more impressed with him than he is with himself, since it doesn’t yield up anything worth swallowing. At least he’s drinking something, though. He drains the cup anyway, so he can set it on the fancy-ass cushion—for fancy asses, no less—on the seat beside him without having to worry if it’ll spill. Probably they have fancy-ass wastebaskets in here somewhere, but he can’t spot any from here, so this’ll have to do.

The snow’s swirling thicker now—must be practically impossible to see anything even from the front of the train; for the first time in a while, Ed’s not envious of somebody else’s job. He sure hopes that fucking snow plow holds up. The engineer was right; there are a damn lot of people huddled up in this hunk of metal, and if something happens—

Well. He better not think it, or something will.

He slouches down in his seat until he’s as horizontal as you can get on one of these things. It’s still surprisingly comfortable—although maybe he’s not the best person to ask, when you really think about it, given how many times he managed to doze off with his head resting on Al’s metal thigh.

Could just be that he’s one tired motherfucker, and he always has been.

That sounds about right.

An hour and a half to Riedbach, and eight or nine more between that and Central. He’ll probably have to transfer or some shit, knowing his luck. He hopes Al told Mustang not to let on to the brass that he was coming. Not that Roy would, but it’s important to let him know that Ed thinks he’s a dumbass. Just to keep him humble and shit. Just to keep him in line, and out of reach.
It’s as good a time as any to try to make up some of the sleep debt, so Ed leans his head back on the cushion and wraps his arm around himself. As far as places he’s snatched some shuteye go, this isn’t bad at all.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I have no idea how I'm going to divvy up the rest of this shit. It's going to be an adventure. And by "adventure", I mean "We'll find out whether or not I'm too lazy to cut any of the 15,000 words of porn."

#mylifecontinuestobeashambles

He wakes up the split-second before he slams into the seat in front of him.

Some combination of the reflex training Teacher ground in and a flash of pure survival instinct made him raise his left arm in front of his face even while he was asleep and in the air—which is the only reason he’s still got all his fucking teeth. He banged his arm so hard on the back of the seat that he can feel the bruise spreading, and his elbow’s violently pins-and-needles numb, but at least he’s probably not concussed for once, and that makes it a hell of a lot easier to jump up to his feet.

They’ve stopped. What the fuck happened?

His plow broke.

That’s got to be it; it must’ve come loose, and dropped off, and blocked the track, and it went partway under the train and mucked up all the mechanisms and practically overturned them and probably injured a shit-ton of people throwing them out of their seats on impact, and fuck—

He turns around to assess the fucking damage. There’s something warm and kind of tickly on his chin; he swipes at it with his sleeve as he glances over the groaning, head-holding assembled company. Everybody seems to be moving; nobody’s crying or any of that shit. Nobody’s shaking their kid or their friend or their sibling and begging them to wake up.

“Everybody okay?” he calls for good measure. “Anybody need medical attention or anything?”

The dozen passengers who forked it up for first class have apparently all decided to stare at him like he’s a fucking alien.

“I’ll take that as a no,” he says, which is fine—it frees him to go to the door of the car and pry it open and stumble out into the snow.

The drifts are seriously fucking thick here—deep and wet and heavy, and he’s sinking so fast he can’t fucking help it. What he was hoping was going to be a run turns into a damp slog with his coat trailing over the surface as the weight of his boots drags him in up to the knees.

The snow isn’t coming down quite as vigorously anymore, but there are enough flakes twirling through the air, with smoke from the engine billowing through them, that it takes him a second to sort out what he’s actually seeing through all the obstructions.

The plow’s still attached to the train.
It’s just crumpled like a ball of tinfoil where it struck what looks like a giant fucking barricade of piled-up scrap metal and jagged rock.

The engineer’s clambering down out of the cab of the engine, holding a hand to an oozing cut on his forehead that keeps sending droplets chasing each other down along his eyebrows.

“Where are we?” Ed asks, since What the fuck happened? is a little too obvious, even for him.

“Based on the travel time,” the engineer says, dabbing with his glove and glaring at it as it stains, “I’d say we just came around the curve up towards the Frozen Barrier. Can’t say for sure—though I can tell you that shit wasn’t there yester—”

He falls backwards at the same instant as a sound like the crack of mounting thunder shatters the frozen air.

Ed’s heart pounds once, twice.

The blood splashed instantly out across the snow in a flaring shape—a scalene triangle, too-bright-red. The engineer doesn’t move. His eyes stay open.

Ed drops into a crouch, and the next bullet misses the top of his head by two inches.

Fuck. Whoever’s sniping at them clearly knows what they’re fucking doing—but if they took the engineer out first, they must be more interested in stranding the train than anything else, and they probably don’t know who Ed is. That narrows the suspects down a little even if he never gets to see what color the coat is.

Train schedules are predictable. For once—for once—this might be an act of war from the Drachman side, without any assistance or encouragement from the commanders theoretically behind him. He’s seen a lot of sick shapes in the shadows these days, but this one might be exactly what it looks like from here.

More pertinently, he needs to get out of getting-his-head-blown-off range before it ceases to fucking matter.

The snow’s poor cover, but the puffiness of these particular drifts might—miraculously enough—be shielding him from view. Something must be impeding the aim of the gunman, at any rate; Ed’s heart’s banged at least eight times, and it’s still going. There haven’t even been any other test shots to smoke him out, so either they’re real low on bullets, or they can’t see him.

He eyeballs the distance back to the train. He has no idea what the engine room looks like—whether it’d be a halfway decent place to take cover and scope this shit out, or whether it’d make him a sitting duck. Are there explosive things in there? Fuck knows; his only resource on the topic is dead and bleeding out in the snow.

And he’s pissed. Because this guy—this guy was cool; this guy was decent and smart and gave him more than just the time of day. This guy gave him a fucking chance. This guy judged him based off the merits of his actions alone.

This guy probably has a family somewhere down along this train track—people who are expecting him to come home. People who expect it every day, whose whole worlds are going to flip when somebody has to answer to them about why he didn’t make it back this time. This is supposed to be a safe job. This is supposed to be the kind of thing you build your life around; this is supposed to be—
Well. Nobody ever gets old and says *I got exactly what I bargained for, and it all made sense.*

And a lot of people never get old in the first place.

Ed’s gonna be one of them if he doesn’t move his ass.

So—the engine room’s out. He’s going to make a break for the door to the first-class car, and then he’s going to try to get a better vantage on this whole shitty-ass situation from there.

His heart’s so loud and so fast he can’t tell how much time is passing. How long’s he been out here, fucking ducked down behind the snow, giving whoever’s up on the ridge plenty of time to sight his fucking skull?

No time like the present to open his whole back as a target instead. He takes a breath, holds it, lets it out, takes another, rises to his knees, and—

—runs.

A bullet slams into the side of the train; another whizzes into the snow; another grazes the back of his coat, but he barely hears it over the impossibly loud drumming of his heartbeat in his ears—

And another buries itself in the painted wood of the doorframe as he hurls himself up through it and into the car—toppling with his own momentum and tumbling like a fucking snowball, making a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree roll on the floorboards before the weight of the automail leg takes issue with the rotation and slams him down flat.

He has time for one labored gasp of breath before bullets spray the wall, splintering the wood and raining jagged chips and shards of glass all over the abandoned bank of seats. Several of the passengers huddled in the back corner—kudos to whoever’s suggestion that was; they’re all out of range of anything but shrapnel, or maybe an especially brutal ricochet—raise a faint wail of a scream at the assault, but the noise peters out as the hail of bullets stops abruptly.

Glass tinkles. The cold air seethes in. Ed swallows, then carefully plants his hand in a clear space on the floor to lever himself up just enough to glance over at the cluster of humanity at the far end of the car.

“Everybody okay?” he asks.

A woman near the front half-turns and starts touching people—patting their shoulders, or their hair.

“Everyone’s all right?” she asks. “Nobody’s hurt?”

A little girl starts to cry quietly, so the woman sweeps her up and tries to soothe her, but other than that, no protests, so maybe just this once…

Well, he doesn’t have a whole lot of time to take it as anything other than a yes anyway.

It’s good, actually, that they blew the fucking windows out—other than the chunks and slivers that are probably embedded in the wool of his coat, ready and waiting to slice his fingers open the first chance they get, that is. It’s good because it clears his line of sight up to the target.

He shifts up onto his ass and scoots back carefully until he’s leaning against the side of the bank of seats. They’re thick enough, with those fancy-ass cushions and the decorative swirls on the armrests, to block any further volleys—or, at least, he sure fuckin’ hopes so. You never know with the Amestrian train system; they make a hell of a lot of promises they can’t keep.
He eyeballs the quantity of ambient glass and then picks up a piece. Nice and clear—good quality. Pure and shit. *Man*, these first-class cars are something. He kicks together a small pile of shards and nudges it closer to him, listening hard for any indications from outside. Are they going to charge the fucking train? Are they planning to blow it up, or is this a hostage thing? Whatever their damn goal is, what are they waiting for, a signed invitation? Sure, they saw him get away, but why aren’t they strafing the other cars, or descending the slope to try to track him down, or…?

He shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth when he’s expecting it to bite and it hasn’t, should he?

He reaches in to touch his left hand to his right, then lays it—as gingerly as fucking possible—on the little collection of glass that he gathered up.

Somebody gasps in what’s probably terror—it sort of just sounds like they’re scandalized, funny enough—as a broad, flat mirror slithers up from the floor, angled towards the top of the slope. Hopefully there’s enough crackling blue light beaming out of the broken windows to give the Drachmans pause.

The hinges he made out of the frame of one of the chairs could do with an oiling, but he forgives himself for fucking up the details; he was kind of in a rush. It’s times like this he really misses the automail; reaching up to tilt the surface of the mirror with a hand that would definitely *not* deflect a fucking bullet doesn’t exactly make him feel secure. With any luck, the Drachmans’ scopes aren’t clean enough for them to differentiate between an ordinary shadow and the movement of his hand.

The risk pays off, though—he wishes sometimes that they didn’t. He wishes sometimes that his whole fucking life wasn’t constantly encouraging him to put his neck on the line, because plain persistence never works, but recklessness always does.

He can see the shapes of three men and a gatling gun at the top of the hill above them.

He draws a breath, drops his hand, and uses it instead to fumble in his pockets for the lighter he swiped from the medic’s supply cabinet.

It’s the only plan he can conjure that’ll take them out at this range without any Amestrian casualties.

He sets the lighter down on the floor, drags his glove off with his teeth, and snatches it up again, running the pad of his thumb slowly over the spark wheel.

He doesn’t want to do this.

He doesn’t want to incinerate any human beings—no matter what they’ve done; no matter what they *would* do if they had him in their hands.

This is the part where the line gets blurry. This is the part where there’s no way out with half a hope at salvation.

This is the reason alchemists don’t even get the privilege of going to hell.

Nobody should have this kind of power. Nobody should have the chance to bend the whole damn world like this. Nobody should be arrogant enough to think they’re qualified to do it in any way that’s *right*.

There’s a reason he’s famous for avoiding bloodshed. Lots of people—lots of alchemists, even—call themselves pacifists, but when the chips are down, and dozens of human lives are on the line, what it comes to is how determined you can be. What it comes to is having the right combination
of brains and guts to find another way out of the muddle.

Would the people on this train—you could call them *innocent* people, but that’s hardly just; how are the conscripted kids from Drachma any more to blame?—make it out of here if he offed himself trying to be a fucking hero?

He’s just going to have to hope that luck’s on his side for once.

When has that ever failed him before, right?

He lays the lighter back down on the floor, where the metal gleams dully next to the glittering of the scattered slivers of glass. He looks into the mirror, calculating as fast as he can make his mind spin through the numbers, and touches his left hand to his right.

It’s a sharp thing—all angles. Hydrogen and oxygen and absolute finesse. Funny how smooth and artistic the end result is given the aggressiveness of the shape behind it. It *looks* like an evil thing, if you know what you’re looking for. It looks violent, even though there’s not a single damn moral inherent in a single damn array. They’re all just tools. They’re all just objects. It’s what you do with them that counts.

He unwinds a long, long, *long* fucking thread of concentrated oxygen up from the place he’s sitting to the zenith of that ridge where the little shadow-figures move. It’s delicately narrow all the way up, and then it fans out when it gets there to surround them.

Now or never. All or nothing. Whatever other cliché shit.

He catches up the lighter and flicks it to life.

The flame sparks blue-white and then ignites along the trail, searing up the side of the mountain like an impossibly fast fuse, too fucking eager for anyone up there to anticipate, let alone avoid—

And all the snow around them erupts into steam—

And the gatling gun melts in on itself and devolves into a molten metal blob.

He shoves the lighter into his coat pocket and scrambles for the door. Couple of seconds while they’re reeling from the startlement and the billow of heat—a couple of seconds is all he’s got.

He practically fucking decapitates himself on the doorway—right as he slings his body weight around the corner, his right foot slips on a wet patch, and he sails out into the snow sideways like a fucking boomerang, missing the frame of the door with his chin by a matter of about two inches.

There isn’t even time to curse—partly because he doesn’t have the breath for it anyway; partly because he eats snow on impact; partly because his couple of seconds are almost fucking up.

He needs—ground. Bedrock. It’s granite here; it’s all granite underneath. The fucking snow’s shallower right along the tracks; the plow must’ve done its job just fine right up until it fought a solid fucking barricade and lost by a landslide.

Funny phrase. Ed winning by a landslide is how all this started, and it didn’t feel like winning at all.

He drags himself up onto his knees, flinging handfuls of snow aside with the one good arm—and fuck his dumb ass for leaving the glove in the fucking train; the coldness *burns*—
Dirt.

He smacks the left hand against the right and glances up as he slaps it down, trying to gauge—

The indescribable rumbling roar of the mountain shifting practically fucking deafens him on the spot—maybe that’ll help distract those bastards before they can aim—

He sends the current up, and up, and out—the physicalization of his fucking impetus; the only power he’s ever had and ever held on to.

He can’t hear the shouts over the splitting of the rock, but based on the flailing arms and other silhouetted signs of panic, he’d bet his remaining hand that they’re flipping their shit.

He would be, too, probably, if some asshole alchemist was encasing him inside a giant rock turret made from the mountain they were standing on safely a second ago.

When the walls look high enough, he sits back, panting harder than he’d like to admit. Getting too old for the flashy stuff—for the alchemy so monumental it reshapes the fucking topography and shit. Takes it right the fuck out of him these days. Or maybe that’s the malnourishment and the borderline hypothermia and the months and months of ongoing, unrelenting traumatic stress talking.

In any case—this is fine. This is fine, because if they’ve got a radio in there, they can call somebody with a damn rope and be out of there in the time it takes to pop over from the other side of the border. And if they don’t, they’ll just have to get as creative about saving their asses as he did. He didn’t make the thing unscalable—he didn’t make it a death trap. No more of that. Not today.

He counts down from thirty—half a minute; that’ll have to do. That’s more of a grace period than anyone this profoundly graceless should deserve.

Then he wrenches one knee under himself, follows it with the other, and plants his numb hand in the snow to lever himself upright again.

The engineer’s body sprawls in the snow six feet away, empty eyes staring skyward. Ed’s heart aches hard enough that he can actually feel it through the rest of this shit.

At the rate he’s going, he’s not sure he’d be able to get up again if he sat down, so he crouches instead, one-hand-claps, and melts a pocket of snow to dip the corner of his sleeve in. He wipes the trail of blood off of the man’s forehead, sweeping his hand further back to try to rub it out of the guy’s hair. His fingertips are so fucking numb it takes him three tries to guide the eyelids closed.

He forces himself back up to his feet and starts back towards the train—fortunately, people are starting to peek out and step down, most of them gaping at his handiwork up on the hill. The family he met when he first hopped on moves as a single arm-linked cluster, slowly like they’re dazed. When the kid Alan stares up at the portion of the mountain Ed just remade, his eyes light up.

Ed waves his good arm, which is getting harder and fucking harder as this godforsaken day goes on.

“Hey,” he calls. “I need a couple people to help me get this guy wrapped up so we can take him back to his family.”
Apparently they were too preoccupied with the fancy-ass alchemy display to notice the dead dude—someone screams, and several people gasp, and a number of them stagger backwards a whole step, like it’s some kind of weird synchronized muscle spasm.

Is that an advantage? In this case, probably not.

Well, fuck it; Ed’s going to press it anyway.

“I also need somebody,” he says, “who knows how to drive a friggin’ train.”

The whole assembly of passengers can’t be more than forty people. He’s probably shit out of luck. He’s probably going to have to climb up in there and figure out how the dials and the levers and whatever shit all work. Damn, he wishes Winry was here—not really, because she’d be torn up as hell about the engineer, and the rest of it wouldn’t be especially easy on her, either. But at least she’d be able to take one look at the control panel and more or less fi—

A girl who’s probably seventeen or so steps out of the mass and holds her hand up tentatively.

“My, um—” she says. “My father used to… I went with him a lot of times, but… I mean, I don’t know if—”

“Close enough,” Ed says.

Judging by the meaningful fucking silence from everybody else, it’s going to have to be.

Evident, too, is the fact that nobody else has the fucking guts to step towards him and deal with the corpse.

“Right,” Ed says. “You—” Some guy with broad shoulders and a hat. “—you—” Younger guy with equally broad shoulders and a scared sort of expression. “—and you.” Some other guy, with an extremely cozy-looking coat on, which Ed is obviously not envious of at all, thanks. “Help me the hell out, here.” He raises his voice. “ Everybody else, get back to your seats, okay? We’re gonna take this thing home if it… well, it won’t.”

This is why he always leaves the pep talks to somebody else.

His three not-so-eager not-so-volunteers linger as the others file back into the cars, and he turns his attention back to the girl.

“You know about how to get this thing started again?” he asks.

“Probably,” she says, which is more than he’d dared to hope for, to be honest. “But, um…”

She gestures, rather eloquently, at the fucking abomination smashed all over their snowplow.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’m working on it.”

The guy with the hat clears his throat, trying to point at the engineer without looking directly at a dead body. “Do you want… Is there a blanket or something that we could use?”

“I’m putting you in charge of finding one,” Ed says. “A tarp or something would probably do if you get stuck—I’m not gonna ask anybody to give up their coat in a climate like this. Try the freight cars.”

Hat-guy leads the charge—well, the slog—off down along the train, and the other two trail him like a pair of reprimanded kids. Ed’s just going to have to trust them to get this thing done
somehow.

As it is, he’d have his hands full even if he had both of them accessible.

He places the operable one on the associated hip as he assesses the largest physical obstacle to their progress.

The problem is that it really is a big-ass fucking pile of rocks and scrap metal and fuck-knows-what. He doesn’t even know how they moved this thing so goddamn fast—it would’ve taken a hell of a lot more men than just the handful that were firing on them from the hill to have accomplished this in the brief window between the last train’s departure and this one’s arrival, which…

Spells force. Is all. Which makes him nervous on top of fucking annoyed. This was planned the fuck out, which could mean reinforcements will turn up way faster than he bargained for.

“Are you okay?” the girl asks him uncertainly.

“Yeah,” he says. “I think.” He swipes his arm across his forehead—remembering way too late that he’s still got the other guy’s blood on his sleeve, so he might be transferring some of that to his own face. “Been a long…” Week. Year. Life. “…trip.”

She shoves a hand into one of her coat pockets and retrieves a small foil package. She holds it out. “You want a chocolate bar?”

His mouth would be flooding with drool if it wasn’t freezing in his salivary glands en route. “I—couldn’t—”


It always blows his fucking mind that a single world with a finite number of atoms can contain people like this as well as people like Hakuro. The spectrum of humanity just—

Incredible. He has to remember that—he has to remember that the universe is vast and incomprehensibly beautiful even at the worst of times.

He takes the chocolate.

Then he realizes he’s only got one hand—which is just about frozen fucking solid—and he can’t undo the wrapper.

“Oops,” the girl says, grinning slightly sheepishly. “Here—”

The second the sugar hits his tongue, he feels the gears of his brain starting to turn a hell of a lot faster.

“Thank you,” he says through the first bite. “Fuckin’ seriously—thank you.” She might be blushing, or it might be the cold. He turns to their sizable problem and nibbles through a little more precious fucking brain fuel. “Okay. Stand back. Like, way back.”

She blinks at him, then shuffles a little bit away.

“Triple that,” he says.

She obliges.
“Little more,” he says.

She pauses, then takes two more large backwards strides.

“All right,” he says. He faces the barricade again. The chocolate has almost fucking disappeared already—funny how when you go without shit for too long, you get so desensitized to the feelings that you forget how to gauge the severity of your own needs. That’s the human body for you: actively trying to fuck you over half the time you’re trying to preserve it. “All… right.”

He crams the empty wrapper into his pocket and tucks his hand inside his coat to try to defrost it just a little. Homestretch. Ain’t over yet, but it’s damn close.

He tries not to think about how long he’s been saying that now.

When there’s a prickle of feeling in his fingertips again, he withdraws his hand and touches it to the stupidly cold steel of the automail again.

He crosses to the giant pile of miscellaneous shit and lays his left hand flat against the closest part of it.

They didn’t know who they were dealing with, obviously—that is, an alchemist who’s always been especially fucking good with rock and stone and metal and whatever’s underneath his feet. The rubble solidifies into a single unit, and ribbons of its more malleable components stream upwards and around the whole bulk of the thing, then constrict to compress it all into as much of a unified object as he can make.

Then it splits right down the middle—one clean fucking line.

The two halves sit teetering on the tracks for just a moment before a breath of wind grazes past them, and they topple to each side, slamming down into the snow.

Ed stepped back just far enough to avoid getting crushed to a bloody pulp, which is always a plus with a major alchemical renovation project.

He only left himself about two feet of leeway, though, as it turned out. He wasn’t even trying to be showoffy for once, but based on the flabbergasted expression on the girl’s face, certain death whooshing past him at less than arm’s-length looked seriously impressive.

He shoves his hand back in under his coat for a second as he contemplates the newly-revealed damage to the damn snowplow. He’d wonder if a snowplow has ever caused this much fucking trouble on a single train ride, but he’s pretty sure the answer would be You have no idea, kid.

He draws in a deep breath and blows it out as mist. He’s never in his life been so fucking excited to be far enough south for that to stop—the novelty wore off so fast it almost gave him whiplash; it only took hours of being in this forsaken fucking place. The ambient psychological horror was just so heavy that no spot of childlike wonder could hold out.

Good news is, it looks like the snowplow’s mostly just bent out of shape. If he was feeling charitable—another thing he thinks the North might just have crushed right the fuck out of him this time—he might venture to say that his rush welding job actually saved the fucking thing by securing it on so tight. The other bolts have snapped off like the first one, but his work’s kept the bulk of the plow hanging more or less in place.

Too bad it’s too cold to roll up his sleeves. Not that he could, with one hand. But he’s really lost his old knack for shameless showmanship.
Maybe it’s just the situation. Maybe any unending frozen bloodbath will do that for you.

He wonders how long it took Roy to enjoy alchemy again after Ishval.

Upshot is, in a countable few fucking hours, he’s planning to ask.

When he can feel a fragment of sensation in his fingertips again, and the wool of the inside of his coat is starting to resolve into a distinguishable weave with threads and texture, he withdraws his hand, applies it to the closest available patch of the automail to close the circle, and then climbs across the ice-sealed drifts to flatten it against the plow.

It’s weird to think—what would have happened to these people if he’d caught the next train, or the one before?

Would there have been more blood in the snow without him?

People talk about being in the right place at the right time—which is an absurd concept, really; it’s predicated on luck. It assumes a role played deliberately by some kind of underlying actor—on a personification of fortune, one way or another; on a sentient force that takes sides.

None of that shit exists.

It’s just where you end up, and what you do with it.

He steps clear as the plow re-forms, all its angles sharpening again, all the planes smoothing out, the dents bubbling up to align with the rest of the shape. He considers giving it a kick, but it’s not like that would offer an accurate representation of its structural integrity in any way. He’s just going to have to trust his recollections of all those times Winry was dragging them around other people’s properties, rambling about how farming vehicles work and the functions of their designs.

Like anybody should trust him for anything, least of all himself—after what he knows. After what he’s done.

The trio of men he conscripted as the staff of his makeshift morgue are carrying a blanket-wrapped bundle towards the back of the train. Ed’s never been big on ceremony, but this…

No time. No time when they’re mere miles from enemy territory, and he needs to get these people down those tracks before they all end up like that.

He turns to the girl, who’s waiting there watching him like he just tore the pillars of the world apart. Maybe, as far as her world goes, he kind of did.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“Katia,” she says.

“Ed,” he says. “What do you say we get the fuck out of here?”

She attempts at a smile. “Worth a try.”

He follows her up into the cab of the engine—less because he thinks he’ll be any damn help than because he figures moral support can’t hurt.

When she sees the control board, her shoulders drop in a way that looks more like relief than an articulation of Shitfuck, we’re all doomed, so that’s a start.
“This is a lot like the one my father drove,” she says, running a gloved hand lightly over a lever, then tapping the glass over an arrow gauge. “As long as nothing internal got damaged in the crash, we should be fine.”

…she had to say it, didn’t she?

Ed puts on the sincerest grin he can muster. “You’re gonna do great,” he says. “I’m gonna see if they’ve got a phone, okay?”

His brain’s tossing all kinds of shit at him—first, burnt-edged flashbacks to another train; to a man weighed down by a desperate snarl and the first automail Ed had ever seen that looked like a weapon.

And then back to the way that station douchebag said *What do you think’s going to happen when the northbound comes in?* He’s not sure what the fuck they’d be able to do if there *is* another train barreling towards them on the same track, but it would be helpful to know whether or not he’s going to need that contingency plan.

“Hang on,” Katia says. She pulls open a little cabinet next to the panel of controls, rummages, and makes a faint noise of satisfaction before she hands him a slip of paper from inside. “Station numbers. It’s what my dad would’ve done.”

“I think your dad’s my hero,” Ed says, taking it.

Katia smiles. “He was mine, too.”

He knows that feeling. He half-salutes with the sheet and forges through the door to the next car in search of…

Sure enough, the phone booth’s almost identical to the one he remembers from that other train. Apparently there’s one thing the Amestrian rail system can do right.

He should really get his ass over to the first-class car and find his fucking glove—his fingertip’s shaking so much it’s hard to draw it down the page of alphabetized city names until he reaches *R*. Hitting the damn numbers to dial is even worse.

But what he wants can wait. He’s used to that.

“Riedbach Station,” someone who sounds seriously tired says when the crackling dies down enough for him to hear the click. “Can I help you?”

“I sure freakin’ hope so,” Ed says.

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Maybe he’s finally paid his dues. Maybe he’s finally piled up enough bullshit on one side of the scales.

Or maybe it’s sheer coincidence like everything before—just one that works out in his favor this time.

Whatever it is, he’s not complaining about the fact that they make it the rest of the way to Riedbach without incident. That’s practically a first in his life, isn’t it?
The place erupts into moderate chaos when they arrive—not, like, Führer’s-train-off-a-cliff level chaos, or anything, but a pretty respectable hubbub of train officials and military police and medical staff running around like ants on the scent of some butterscotch. As far as Ed can tell from brief interrogations of everybody he can stop long enough for questioning, nobody got too badly hurt, and someone’s going to deal with the engineer’s family, and for some reason somebody just gave him a shock blanket.

He’s not exactly going to complain, though, since he still hasn’t found his fucking glove. He’s been resorting to the clenched-shut-sleeve-end-in-pocket method the whole way here, which is less than ideal all around.

Alan’s family from the last car shuffles past him, huddled together, looking shaken but sort of resolute. Ed doesn’t have time to hail them—a mother with a wailing toddler in her arm comes next; the kid’s got a gash in her forehead two inches wide and sluggishly bleeding, and Ed darts over to the closest medic to grab the guy’s arm and point.

When the crush starts to die down as people funnel out of the station—whence from there, he has no friggin’ clue—he starts to stumble towards the gate himself, trying to dredge up enough functioning brain cells to figure out what he should do. A medic catches his sleeve this time—the right one, so it takes him a minute to notice; it’s not until he tries to take the next step and gets yanked back that he understands what’s going on.

“Are you all right?” she asks.

The temptation to launch into the semantics rant about how the world is not and could never be all right dissolves somewhere between his stomach acid and his saliva, which is probably a good thing.

“I think so,” he says. He hands her the blanket, since he’d probably lose it otherwise. “S’there someplace here with food?” Wait. Priorities. “And a phone?”

Following her directions down a couple of snow-slicked cobblestone streets lands him at a two-story building helpfully labeled Cornerstone Inn—right on the wall, in paint, in fact; no sign to speak of. Mindful of his last experience with such a building—there should be a book of adages that includes important ones like Sometimes firelit windows conceal handgun-wielding grannies; it’s nice and fucking metaphorical, right?—he pushes the door open with more than a touch of trepidation and steps inside.

“Oh,” the motherly woman at the nearby desk says, “hello.”

There’s a fantastically awkward pause while she literally looks him up and down. He doesn’t blame her—one of his arms is bound up; there’s blood on his other sleeve; he probably looks like death warmed over after all of that massive alchemy drained the last dregs of his energy reserves bone-fuckin’-dry.

“Afternoon,” he says. It is, isn’t it? He sure hopes so. “Sorry, I, uh…”

“You came off the train!” the woman says.

He blinks. He nods.

“My neighbor Rosalie was just by,” the woman says, and somehow even just getting up from a desk qualifies as bustling when it’s done by a person like this. She crosses to a shelf and sorts through the little keys, then comes back to the desk, talking all the while: “Said it was a big mess
down at the station; said they had all kinds of people; said they told her nobody was hurt, but she saw the front of the engine, see, and she saw the people hushing their children; said they told her it wasn’t Drachma, but sometimes what they say and what’s the truth… well.” She flips the ledger open so abruptly that the front cover thumps down on the desk and raises a small cloud of dust. “How’s room number six? Is six okay with you?”

Ed has no idea why someone would have a problem with a specific numeral, but he expects there might be a two-hour answer to that question. Rosalie has probably offered opinions about that, too. “Six is great. Um—do you have a phone I could use?”

The woman ducks beneath the desk, pulls up a black rotary dial base and a matching receiver, and thumps them down, too. More dust. Ed’s nose tickles. “Here you go, dear.”

“Real good service here,” Ed says, trying for a smile that’ll make him look less like some kind of escaped murderer that fled the scene of the crime, rather than more. “Thanks.”

He must be doing something right, because the lady beams at him.

And…

Doesn’t…

Leave.

Well, shit. That’ll change the content of this phone call a little bit.

He picks up the receiver and cradles it with his shoulder while he dials. Before he officially checks in, he should probably go buy another glove somewhere before he gets frostbite.

The phone rings once, twice…

“How’s room number six? Is six okay with you?” Al’s voice says.

Just like that, Ed’s muscles start to un-tense all at once. “Hey, kid.”

“I’m barely younger than you,” Al says, “and I’m significantly more mature.”

“Arguable,” Ed says.

“Not really,” Al says.

“Whatsoever,” Ed says. “Hey, I—just wanted to let you know there was a… problem. With the train. So I’m in Riedbach, and I’ll have to get on the next one tomorrow morning. Should actually be back after that.”

Al’s so damn smart. Al’s so damn smart it’s sort of mind-blowing that he sticks around with the likes of Ed.

He’s quiet for a long second, and then he asks, slowly, “The kind of ‘problem’ that has casualties?”

“Only one,” Ed says.

“Are you okay?” Al asks.

Al goes silent for another second. “Let me guess—not a secure line or a secluded location?”

Ed manages not to glance over at his shamelessly eavesdropping hostess. Hopefully she can’t hear Al’s side of the conversation as anything more than a mumble. “Not so much.”

“Ah,” Al says. “Well. I guess it’ll be like a game, then. Is whoever’s listening dangerous?”

“Nah,” Ed says. He swallows down …I fuckin’ hope.

“Just extraordinarily nosy?”

“Seems like.”

“Hmm. But you’re safe for now?”

“Think so,” Ed says. If this place starts to give him the creeps, he can always go find another—but so far, the lady mostly just comes off as vaguely overbearing; he’s not getting a bad feeling off of her yet. “It’s just for tonight. Train tomorrow’s at ten.”

Al’s quiet for a second. “What happened to the train—does this have anything to do with what you’ve been speculating about?”

In other words, Do you think Hakuro staged that, too?

“Not sure,” Ed says. “I’ll have a better idea when I find out how they spin it. Save a couple of newspapers for me. Honestly, given how little ended up happening—compared to what could’ve—I’m not sure they’ll report on it at all.”

“Which would say something in and of itself,” Al says.

“Maybe,” Ed says. “Maybe not.”

Al sighs. “I think you’ve been spending too much time with him.”

They both know who he means.

“C’mon,” Ed says. “Give me some credit. I was always sort of obnoxious and cryptic without any of his help.”

“You’re not obnoxious,” Al says. “And time was, no one could bludgeon the concept of ‘subtlety’ into your skull with a crowbar.”

“Nobody tried a crowbar,” Ed says. “That might’ve worked.” He fights the urge to hesitate. “You get a chance to talk to him?”

“I called,” Al says. He’s such a fucking angel; Ed’s never done anything to deserve him. “He… took some convincing. That you were alive, I mean. But after I insisted a few times that I was of sound mind and had actually spoken to you, he went very silent and then said ‘Is he coming back?’, and when I said of course you were, you weren’t going to stay up there, certainly not when it’s so darn cold, he said he meant to Central, and to the military.” Al pauses, meaningfully. “Presumably—to him.”

Ed swallows hard and tries to keep his voice light. “I ever tell you you’re way too smart for your own good?”

Ed takes a breath. “Thing is—you can’t go back to something you never had.”

Al clicks his tongue. “Just because you didn’t put a name on it doesn’t mean it wasn’t there.”

Ed feels the smile tugging at his mouth. “Too smart by half.”

“Takes one to know one,” Al says. “How’s the arm?”

“It’s still attached,” Ed says. “And it’s all in one piece. Which—I mean, considering the circumstances, that’s more impressive than it sounds.”

Al winces audibly, which is really saying something. “I’ll… find a way to say that to Winry that’ll hopefully stem the barrage of wrenches aimed at your face.”

“Thanks,” Ed says.

“In the meantime,” Al says, “please try to take care of yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Ed says.

“No getting into fights while your arm’s busted, either, okay?”

“I’m never the one who starts it.”

“Of course not,” Al says in the glib way that means he finds what Ed just said utterly hilarious but feels it would be rude to point out that his beloved big brother is a total idiot. “Well—I should let you go. You’ll probably be in on… what? The five o’-clock?”

“Hope so,” Ed says. “I’ll call you from North City if I have time with the transfer.”

“Perfect,” Al says.

“I get that a lot,” Ed says.

Al’s not fast enough to be glib this time: he just snorts.

Which makes Ed grin so wide he almost breaks his face.

“Oh, gosh,” Al says. “You know I don’t—I mean, I do think you’re perfect. It’s just… Ed, you have no idea. You have no idea how happy I’m going to be when I actually see you, and I know for sure that you’re…”

“Okay?” Ed asks. “At least until Winry gets to me?”

“Alive,” Al says.

“Right,” Ed says. “I promise I’m that, too.”

“You sure as heck better be,” Al says. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow, then?”

“Yup,” Ed says. “’Bye for now.” He lowers his voice—not because he’s ashamed to let the hostess lady hear it, but because it’s important enough for a different tone of voice no matter what. “Love you, kid.”

“You, too, Brother,” Al says. “See you soon.”

Maybe a little bit reluctantly, Ed hangs up the phone.
Apparently the hostess was holding her fucking breath waiting to strike.

“Girlfriend worried about you?” she asks brightly. “Not that I blame her, mind—I’d be worried sick about you, dear.”

He isn’t even entirely sure what that’s supposed to mean. “Um—thanks. My brother, actually.”

If anything, she looks even more touched. “What a sweet boy you are—if you don’t mind me saying.” Not that she exactly gave him a choice, but… “Here, now”—She twists the ledger around for him to add his name under the previous guests. “Just need you to print for me, sign for me, and let me know how you’re paying, dear.”

He’d picked up the pen, but he puts it back down before he writes anything, since she might change her mind about letting him stay here after she sees—

“This is all I’ve got,” he says, holding up the pocketwatch. “I could… I mean, I could take it to the bank if there’s one here that’s open, or maybe first thing tomorrow m—are you okay?”

The general sort of beatific amazement at his supposed sweetness transitioned abruptly into a gobsmacked stare.

“You’re a State Alchemist?” she says in—awe? Terror? Ass-kicking rage?

“Uh,” he says. “I—”

She reaches forward, and he flinches away—but she was going for the ledger to slam it shut.

“State Alchemists don’t pay,” she says. “I’ll get you in our best room—all right? Let me get you something to eat first, love; what do you like best? I can clean the room up a little extra while you’re finishing up some lunch.”

Ed blinks about eight times, but it doesn’t do much for the bewilderment. “Um—I mean, you really don’t have to—”

“I sure do,” she says, planting her hands on her hips. “Any boy can be a soldier—”

That’s not true.

“—but you’re the ones who win the wars. You’re the ones who make this country—this world—a better place.”

Neither’s that.

“Like that General Mustang,” she says, relinquishing the aggressive akimbo stance to clasp her hands in front of her instead.

This… can’t be happening. Can it? This is too surreal. Even by the rigorous standards for absurdity iterated by Ed’s existence, this is completely off the charts.

“He’s so dreamy,” the lady says. “I love it when they put him in the newspaper, and we get a nice, big photograph—or sometimes they have him on the radio. He’s got a voice like chocolate; have you ever heard him?”

“Uh,” Ed says, feeling slightly intimidated by the sheer gooeyness of her eyes right now, “yeah. He’s my boss.”
She looks like he just announced that he’s going to give out free money. And a pony with every transaction.

Well. Maybe a mustang.

“You don’t say,” she says.

Another highly enlightening “Uh” is the most that Ed can manage.

“Why don’t you sit down right there,” she says, gesturing to the cushiest armchair in the foyer, “and I’ll light us a little fire and get you a cup of soup, and you can tell me all about him?”

Roy is going to be so fucking delighted that the debonair gentleman persona is having the exact desired effect on its intended audience. The man should go into fucking theater, not politics.

“There’s not much to tell,” Ed says as the latest victim of Roy’s roguish charm ushers him towards the fireplace—he quick-steps to stay just ahead of her hands and sits down in the indicated chair before she can shove him into it. “He’s…” Pretty great. Kind of gorgeous. Decent at the core, swathed in layers upon layers of complications. A huge pain in the ass. Perpetually ready with some supremely annoying commentary when you’re trying to get shit done. “…all right, I guess.”

That’s not bad, really—to take the measure of a man and come up with a little bit of good to spare.

Roy wouldn’t see it that way. Which is part of what makes it true. Roy thinks he’s rotten underneath—all the way to the heart; especially there. Roy thinks he’s ruined—Roy thinks he has been for years.

But he keeps trying anyway. And that’s the point.

Somehow—Ed really just needs to stop trying to make sense of the loosely-interconnecting occurrences that make up his life—he ends up shoveling down some really excellent chicken soup in between relating hastily-edited stories about Roy. The one about breaking up the smuggling ring just whets her appetite, so he follows up with the time he and Roy ended up alone on the hunt for the Whetstone Alchemist after the bastard went rogue. He leaves out all the parts that involved stupid bantery arguments and awkward elbow-brushes and weird, extended eye contact and shit—all the stuff Al later identified as “electric sexual tension” so cavalierly that Ed spat coffee all over the kitchen, widely enough that it took him the better part of an hour to mop up.

She doesn’t seem to notice anything missing, though, despite the fact that she hangs on every word like it’s the last crag on a cliff face.

She shoves him into a posh-ass room about ten times bigger and nicer than he needs—which is not because he takes up less space than the average member of his overall demographic, thank you; it’s because the room is fucking huge, and all he’s really craving is a flat surface to crash on. Just a couple of square feet of carpet would do. Hardwood would work, really.

When he tells her that, she looks scandalized.

“You’re the ones who change things,” she says. “You’re the ones who keep us safe and remake the world in a better image.” She pauses. “Especially that General Mustang.”

Ed would be beyond stoked to tell Roy that he’s completely hooked the soppy, romantic, sucker-for-pretty-boys, middle-aged, working-class female demographic, except that he knows exactly what Roy would say: Can you imagine how many votes that is—how many votes, furthermore, that Hakuro won’t even reach for, because he honestly believes that the only people who matter are
“Yeah,” he says for now. “Mustang’s all right.”

He’s really going to have to ask for a raise—or he would, if he wasn’t quitting. Maybe he should anyway; get better severance or some shit. The point is that PR campaigning for an election that isn’t even going to happen for a couple more years was never even in the same neighborhood as his original job description, and Roy fucking owes him one.

The other point is that he’s somehow landed in a gigantic, obscenely comfortable fucking hotel room, and he’s just this side of too fucking tired to fight against the fact that he hasn’t earned it.

Eventually, it seems like he must have satisfied her Mustang-worshipping tendencies—because of course Mustang and Roy are two different people, when you think about it; or at least two facets of the same one so critically different that they’re unmistakably distinct—because she instructs him to holler if he needs anything and then leaves him to it.

He’s not sure what “it” is at this point. He’s been trying to fire on all cylinders while running on fumes for so long now that it’s sort of—strange. It’s strange to have time to breathe in a safe place—a place where the chances of him waking up to a gun barrel kissing his forehead are less than ten percent for the first time in… a while.

The pack they put together for him at the border compound disappeared into the ether on the train—probably ended up in the same place as his glove; if he ever winds up there, he’ll expect to find a lot of socks that vanished in the laundry cozied up with them. Fortunately, or whatever, he got bored enough on the first leg of the ride to shift his belongings around and store all of the important shit on his person. You never know when they’re going to need it to identify your body, after all—especially if you’re the kind of idiot who goes around throwing your dog tags to people as some sort of dramatic farewell shit, and they’re not going to have those to go on.

He pries off his boots, lies down on the fucking enormous bed, and considers the ceiling. It’s a little cracked, and there are a couple of cobwebs, and that’s sort of a relief. People everywhere have the same damn problems, right? It’s just that some people have a metric shit-ton of extra ones piled on top of the stuff they’ve all got in common.

After getting another real fucking meal in him, he’s not about to turn down more fucking sleep—hot food followed by warm bed is about the best combination he can dream of lately, and it’s probably going to be damn good for his body as far as self-repair and shit go. All that blood he’s still missing. The malnutrition. Whatever else.

There’s a little adjoining bathroom in this joint, with a tub that he could drown in, complete with antique-looking little bronze claw-feet. People should really go all the way with that shit—shape the porcelain so that it looks like a hunting gryphon or something. It’d be fucking sweet. He’d sure as hell buy one.

He should make use of what he’s got here, though, for now. He’s accumulated a pretty significant amount of filth today, and it’s only going to get worse tomorrow when he parks his ass on a train for another couple of hours. He doesn’t want to turn up and throw his arms around Al if he smells like a charnel house and a snowball fight wrapped up in tundra mud.

He drags his weary ass up off of the beautiful bed and convinces his good hand to start undoing the clasps on all his clothes. They should bottle that shit—sell it as novelty perfume so noxious that people buy it to give as a joke to their friends. *Eau de War-to-Prove-a-Point.*
This room’s so damn ritzy—by his standards, anyway; most of the generals he knows would probably pick a different word—that it’s even got a coatrack by the door. He feels snooty as hell hanging his up, but it’s better than tossing it on the bedspread and grinding a little more dirt and blood into the fabric, right? Roy’s new best friend downstairs at the desk would probably have to scrub it out.

Shit, he hopes there’s hot water here. Shit, he better not use it all; that’d be rude as hell. Shit, how long is it reasonable to wait for the tap to get warm before you give up? Shit, his hand is cold. He’s so acclimated to the under-the-skin tingle-burn of the cold that he can’t really differentiate this—wouldn’t it be hilarious if his nerves were freezing for good this time, after all that?

Well. “Hilarious”. He’s planning to use those damn nerves later, actually.

Shit and double-shit. No. No, he’s not. Well—to hug the fuck out of Al, yes. But not—for—not for…

Roy.

Not for Roy.

Because Roy is off-fucking-limits.

Because Roy is out of his league.

Because what Roy has to do is more important than what he wants to do.

Or—who.

Peeling off the last of his clothes—even in a closed room, even in the accumulated not-frigidness of this safe space—is an exercise in willpower.

He sinks into the steaming heat of the bath until the water laps at his collarbones, and then he hunkers down and wraps his arm around himself.

He’s going to have to go see the bastard. Roy won’t be convinced that he’s alive until he shows up in the flesh; Roy’s stubborn like that. Roy’s like him like that.

Ed’s going to have to go see him and look him in the eyes and tell him that there’s nothing but ditches and dead ends and gravel down the road he wishes they were walking.

He sighs out a breath, and little ripples chase the current of it across the surface of the water. It’s all right. Everybody’s going to be all right.

And his hair’ll even be clean, more or less.

His hostess sends him off with a huge breakfast, effusive well-wishes, and a few more choice words about how devastatingly attractive Roy is when the photographers catch him “properly”. Ed is so stuffed full of beautiful carbs and protein that he just sort of nods, which she seems to be pleased about.

She won’t accept any promises of monetary remuneration, so he pretends to give in—and then
memorizes her street address when he steps outside, so he can mail it to her later. Maybe he’ll send her a couple pictures of Roy, too, while he’s at it. Or if he’s feeling really generous, maybe he’ll blackmail Roy into writing her a note thanking her for her support, or…

Well. There’ll be time for that later. For right now, he’s got a train to catch.

No damn first class this time. He doesn’t think he’s ever going to want to step into a first-class car again.

He watches out the windows as they make their chugging, smoke-streaming way south through the silence of the snow on every side.

It’d be nice if he had something to do—something else to think about. The quiet’s making his skin crawl; the words keep creeping around and around the circumference of his skull, shuffling themselves into different combinations, reordering themselves into half a thousand possibilities. Five hundred ways he could spit it out. Five hundred separate versions of I’d be the worst thing that ever happened to you; don’t you get that?

And it’s funny, how the more you tell yourself not to want something, the more it just eats at you from the inside. The more it owns you. The more it resonates in the rhythm of your blood.

But he’s stronger than that.

His head beats his heart ten times out of ten; his will is stronger than the wanting. Doesn’t matter how insidious it gets. He knows better. He is better. He won’t drag Roy down with him.

So that’s that.

They rumble on into North City just after two o’clock—right on schedule, leaving Ed a round ten minutes to jump up from his seat and out the door of the car, digging through his pockets for change as he scrambles to be the first one from his train to reach the bank of pay phones.

At least this is a serious fucking station again—the kind with more than one telephone line; the kind with more than one platform; the kind that’ll set you on the way to somewhere you actually want to get to.

The phone line that he’s on is the only one that matters, though. He dials, and it rings, and he breathes deeply. The air’s just a little bit less fucking icy here—the difference is subtle, but he can taste it.

“Hello?” Al says.

“Jeez,” Ed says. “Aren’t you ever in class?”

“Well,” Al says, and his voice twists delicate, verging on prickly, “I was taking a couple days of bereavement leave.” It slingshots right back into cheerfulness. “Which actually worked out to be
“pretty convenient, don’t you think?”

“I think the Drachmans never stood a chance,” Ed says, leaning his forehead against the frigidly cold metal of the telephone frame, “cause you’re gonna be the death of me, Al.”

“That’s really not very funny,” Al says.

“Neither was yours,” Ed says.

“Fair enough,” Al says. “Are you in North City, then?”

“Yeah,” Ed says. “For about five more minutes.”

“And you wasted part of it complaining about what I said?” Al asked. “You should eat something, Brother.”

“Maybe they’ll have a cart on the train,” Ed says. “Since I’m getting close to civilization again.”

The lady dialing on the next phone turns so sharply to stare at him that it catches his attention, but he refuses to look. She can judge all she wants; it doesn’t mean he’s wrong.

“You’re terrible,” Al says. “By that reckoning, we’re a pair of barbarians, given where we grew up.”

“When did I ever say that wasn’t true?” Ed asks.

“Eugh,” Al says. “Brother, go catch your train. You’re getting in at five?”

“Yup,” Ed says.

“Okay,” Al says. “I’ll see you soon. Travel safe.”

“I will,” Ed says.

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Al says.

“I wasn’t done with my sentence,” Ed says. “I was gonna say ‘I’ll try’.”

“Uh huh,” Al says.

“Love you,” Ed says.

“You, too,” Al says.

Ed hangs up the phone and squares his shoulders.

He’s got a train to catch.

He’s got a life to live.

He’s got a world to conquer.

It starts with a step, and with Al waiting to stand behind him, he already knows for a fact that there’s nothing he can’t do.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Sorry for two things: one, that this leaves off in the middle of shit; and two, that it's so late. The former is because there wasn't really a good stopping place, because I write like organization has already gone out of style; the latter is because my life is, as ever, a fucking shambles.

Next time, though, PORN! FOR REAL! FOREVER!

He snags a newspaper on his way across the platform to the southbound, which is a godsend, as it turns out—in addition to answering the question Did they report on the train ambush? with a resounding Nope, it gives him something to preoccupy his mind with for the last two-and-a-bit-hour stretch. Getting angry at the stupid, lying, piece of shit crossword puzzle is significantly better, for instance, than dwelling on how wounded Al must have been when he got that fucking letter. Or thinking incessantly about what he’s going to say to Roy.

This paper’s word jumble is also a piece of shit. So is their trivia quiz. And their weather section isn’t even worth skimming, since it’s just snow; and there’s nothing in the news except scaremongering about the war, and…

Still better than planning and re-planning all the stupid words.

It’s no surprise that he feels like every last damn second is dragging at his skin, struggling desperately to hold him back, by the time the hills are flattening out into slums and then suburbs—and then the city starts to flicker by. So close. How can he have spent so fucking long away, and now be here, just a few more miles away from reappearing in a world that makes sense?

Everything’s been so fucking fast and wild and heart-poundingly sudden that it seems impossible for him to be moving in slow-motion like slogging through some kind of swamp-molasses dream—

He realizes that he’s bouncing his right leg when he looks around for the source of a quiet jingling and discovers that it’s an undone buckle on his boot. It’s probably too late to stand up and apologize to everyone in the car; he has no idea how long he’s been doing it.

The cinderblock buildings shifting by out past the windows look familiar. Warehouse district. That levels out into the back side of the reservoir, which transitions into a lot more blank walls—the backs of businesses; there are shopfronts, and streets, and sidewalks, and people on the other side—

Fuck. People. He’s going to have to walk through crowds of human beings who think about the war as a newspaper headline, not a frigid fucking reality—as a concept; as a tidbit; as an abstraction. People who don’t know; people who couldn’t ever understand.

He doesn’t resent them—not really. He didn’t know either, a couple months ago. He spent a lot of time imagining—and between the sheer power of his intellect and the shit he’s waded through over the years, he probably hazarded better than most—but he didn’t know.
And that’s the way it’s supposed to be—isn’t it? A few people go out and suffer and die so that the others don’t have to. That’s the point. That’s what soldiers are for—to be the scapegoats; the lightning rods; the martyrs. Repositories of the bullshit that the rest of the world’s just not ready for. That’s the corruption he gets to carry—the rot. The carrion smell wafting up to his senses from his own fucking core.

Roy must know that way too well.

Roy doesn’t need another fucking corpse clinging to him. He doesn’t need another obliterated soul wrapping bloody shreds and tendrils around his ankles while he tries to move the fuck on from his own damn punishment; he doesn’t need—

Ed.

Is the thing.

He doesn’t need Ed.

He doesn’t need distractions. He doesn’t need somebody else’s selfish fucking pain. He’s got his own hurdles to jump and his own damn mountain to climb; the last thing he needs is a fucking half-steel weight hanging off of him while he tries to take them.

Ed tips his head back until he can bang it—very gently—against the edge of the seat. No time for this dumbass self-pity shit. No time for the wallowing. He got his time—wandering around in the snow, mind winding down all the avenues. He spent that, and now he’s done. Time to get the fuck up and keep going.

Hedges.

A few more backs of buildings.

And then a silhouette of a station-house against the fading light, and a strip of concrete on either side resolving into a platform, and—

And shit.

That’s all it is, isn’t it?

If you just keep unrolling the ribbon for long enough—

You run out.

And you end up where you started.

He sees the tuft of gold hair above the dimmer contours of the crowd well before the train’s stopped—and God, the way his fucking heart leaps—

He’s out the door before the damn train’s finished shuddering to a halt.

He’s only got the one elbow to work with for wedging into the gaps between people, but nothing—not a goddamn thing in the fucking world—could keep him from shoving through anyway, dodging shoulders and slipping around sharp angles, to get to his goal—

And slam into Al so hard they stumble two steps backwards together, ankles almost tangling, and only the obnoxious natural grace that settled in as Al’s body solidified keeps them from tumbling to the ground.
Ed doesn’t really care. Ed doesn’t really care about anything except grinding his face a little harder in against Al’s collarbone and tightening the grip of his fingers in the back of Al’s coat. It’s the little things—the thick knit of the fabric; the ache of his knuckles; the soft half-gasp, half-sob noise Al makes; the way he hugs too tight back, and pain radiates in breath-stealing shivers down Ed’s spine—that convince him that this time, it’s happening for real.

“Brother,” Al says, and his voice hitches, and fuck, Ed is not gonna cry, not gonna—not fucking gonna—

“Hey,” Ed says, reaching up—further up than he’d like, actually—to tug gently on the ridiculously soft hair at the nape of Al’s neck. “I’m here. Okay? I’m here. That’s the important thing, right?”

“That’s the only important thing,” Al says. He pulls—equally gently—on Ed’s ponytail, and then he touches his closed fist to the center of Ed’s chest as they draw apart.

“Not for long, though,” Ed says. He gestures towards the automail. “Cause Winry’s gonna kill me.”

Al looks at it solemnly. “She mentioned that on the phone. And that was just when I told her you were alive; I didn’t even mention the masterpiece.”

Ed shakes his head. “It’s her own fault, really. Trusting me with this shit. She should stick her best work on somebody who doesn’t do anything, so they can keep it safe and polished and show it off all day.”

Al tugs slightly on one of the adjustable straps of the sling that’s been coming loose for the past who-the-fuck-knows-how-many hours. “Dare I ask...?”

“Got shot,” Ed says.

Al stares.

Ed shrugs.

“Later,” Al says. “Tell me later. For now—well, gosh, what’s the first thing you want to eat?”

Not crying suddenly gets a lot fucking harder. Partly because Al’s just the softest, sweetest, most thoughtful fucking precious little human being that the world has ever made, which is worth weeping over by itself—and partly because he knows. Partly because he knows exactly what it’s fucking like not to feel a damn thing, not to have a damn thing, for far too long—to lose all of your senses in the wash; to have to dedicate every last iota just to staying alive—and then to come out of the armor and wind up in the world again.

“Don’t care,” Ed says. “Don’t fucking care. Just wanted to see you, and I did. So now all that’s left is going home.”

Al slings an arm around his shoulders and squeezes—careful of the automail, like it’s gonna twinge or something.

“Then let’s go home,” he says.

Ed’s got a bramble or some shit in his eye. And one in his throat. And a warm, warm strangling vine twisting up around his heart.
Ed is never going to hate on the wallpaper in their crappy apartment ever again: it’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. He’s fucking delighted to be staring at its overstated floral monstrosity as he dials on their phone in the hall.

He’s slightly less delighted about the prospect of the conversation he’s about to have. He runs his tongue along the back of his teeth as the line rings… rings… and catches.

“Atelier Garfiel.”

Ed tries for a cavalier grin. “Uh… Hey, Wi—”

“You little shit.”

“Fuck you,” Ed says. “I’m huge.”

“A huge damn idiot!”


“Sorry! Sorry,” Winry says—not to him, obviously; to someone in the workshop, by the sound of it. She lowers her voice to an impressively menacing hiss. “I am going to tear you limb from limb, Ed.”


“Of course you fucking did,” she says. And then, again, slightly muffled— “Oh—sorry!”

There’s a bit of static, and then she says “Hang on”—possibly even to him this time—and then there’s some scuffling, and then he hears a banging noise that echoes with a faint chime.

His guess is that she just dragged the phone into another room and slammed the receiver base down on whatever surface was unlucky enough to be found in the new location and subjected to her wrath.

“There’s not that bad,” he says, cautiously. “I mean—it’s still got all the pieces this time. It’s just that it stopped working, ’cause it’s also got a bullet in it somewhere—I think, anyway; if it went through, it didn’t go through me, so… I mean, really, it saved my ass. So—thanks.”

She’s quiet for a disconcertingly long time—but he can hear her breathing in a measured, fighting-to-stay-calm kind of way, so he knows he’s not off the hook.

“I’m not even mad about that,” she says. “Well—okay. I am a little, but—what I’m pissed about is—”

One of the many reasons they’ve never killed each other even though they’ve had ample opportunities—and, probably as far as she’s concerned, more than sufficient motive—is that their priorities mostly match up when it comes to the important things.

Things like:

“—Al.”

Ed glances down the hall to where he can see flickers of Al’s movement through the kitchen. Al
bought him kebabs from his favorite vendor on the way back from the train station and wouldn’t
let go of the sleeve of his coat. The second they got home, Al sat him down on the couch and
wrapped him in this fleecy-ass blanket and ordered him to stay still and then immediately went to
go make him cocoa and “the largest sandwich you have ever eaten, with lots of green things,
because you’re probably vastly deprived of all of your vitamins, but I know how you feel about
salad”, and…

“The first couple days after that letter,” Winry says, and her voice starts to shake, and the wince
that rattles up through Ed’s ribcage and contorts his face isn’t an expression so much as an emotion
all on its own, “he kept calling—just—I mean, partly just to talk to somebody, I think; and he
would tell me about all the times before that everyone had thought you’d died, but you hadn’t, and
how he’d been asking Second Lieutenant Falman about the statistics of faulty casualty reporting,
and how he wasn’t going to believe it until he saw your body, because he believed in you, and it’d
be a betrayal of who you are to believe them instead.”

Ed wishes he had not had those kebabs, because that sauce is really going to burn in his esophagus
if he throws up.

“And the day before you called him,” Winry says, forcing her way through the syllables even
though it sounds like she’s probably on the verge of either bursting into tears or smashing the
phone to pieces, “I said—I said, ‘Al, it’s been a while, it’s bad up there, it’s so bad; just in case, and
to be ready, if it did go bad for him, don’t you think maybe you should consider the possibility’,
and he—cried. He cried for an hour and a half, Ed. A hour and a half, non-fucking-stop, because
he thought you were gone, and you don’t even know what that did to him—"

Ed leans his forehead against the wall and shuts his eyes. “I do, Win. I do.”

But he remembers—

The thing that Al said.

A ghostly little fucking mantra spinning in his skull:

It’s always you.

Only that’s not the whole story, is it? Sure, he used to be a reckless little shit, because he set the
value of his life a hell of a lot lower than that of anyone around him, because he thought it was
tainted to begin with. And he still kind of feels that way, now that he knows for a fact that it’s
tainted for good.

But it’s not like he asked for this. It’s not like this was another Well, we could’ve waited for the
military police, but they have to fill out paperwork before they can even turn up late and
understaffed, and besides, they don’t know shit about alchemy rattled off off-the-record to
Mustang. It’s not like this was an overestimation of his own capacities combined with the usual
undervaluation of his own existence. It’s not like this was something he leapt into without looking,
because he wanted to, or felt inclined, or didn’t care. It’s not like he ever signed up for any part of
this without being fucking coerced.

Maybe it looks like the last in a long line of stupid escapades to them—for now, anyway. When
the leftover panic adrenaline fades out, they’ll probably start to think about it.

Because it’s not.

He’s here—with a bullet caged up in the steel, and more blood than he can quantify stained on his
hands, and a couple years’ deposit for the snarl of rush-knitted flesh on the small of his back—so that other people didn’t have to be.

So that Roy could keep on fighting for this place. So that Lieutenant-Colonel Armstrong wouldn’t have to lie to his family about going back to a therapist. So that they wouldn’t start reaching further, spreading nets, dragging people in to blackmail and exploit.

So they wouldn’t ask for Teacher. So they wouldn’t look for Al.

“Well—” Maybe she heard a little of it in his voice. “Whatever. Does the military know you’re back?”

“Sort of,” Ed says, because if he says Roy knows, but he’s too damn smart to tell anybody, she’ll dig her teeth in and worry at him like a dog with a rope toy.

“What the hell does ‘sort of’ mean?” she asks. So much for subtlety and all that shit. “Is it safe for you to come up here, or do I have to make a housecall?”

On the one hand, he can’t hand the bill off anymore. On the other hand, he doesn’t want to get on a train again for as long as he can avoid it.

“You’ve probably got appointments and shit,” he says. “You’d have to move ’em all. It’s not that important. I mean, it probably won’t get worse. I’ll just—wait ’til I’m headed out that way, or until you have some other reason to come down, or—”

“While I appreciate that Al’s been trying to teach you how to manipulate people,” Winry says, “you’re crap at it.”

“You do not have a single stanza of poetry in your soul,” he says.

“Whoa,” Winry says. “Who the hell did you steal that from?”

“Mustang,” he says. It’s the truth.

“You should spend more time with him,” Winry says.

Ed keeps his voice as calm as he can despite the way his heart zings up into his throat and sucker-punches his tonsils. “No shit.”

“Yeah,” Winry says. “He’s smart enough in the same way that you are that you’ll get along, but smart enough in other ways that you’ll learn something.”

“You think so?” Ed asks, clinging to the fake-casual tone like a fucking lifeline.

“I also think,” Winry says, “that you should get your ass back over to wherever Al is and stay there. And I’ll catch a train to Central as soon as I can, and in the meantime, you better make sure he knows you’re sorry.”

Al—bless him, bless and preserve his beautiful fucking heart—doesn’t even know what it means. Not the way Ed does. Not the depth; not the obliteratorive abjection. Not what it feels like when you’ve torn the world to pieces, and sorry is all you’ve got.

“All right,” Ed says. “If I do, can I get a discount?”

“Hell, no,” Winry says. “Actually, I think I’m going to charge extra for sass. And emotional distress. So all in all, it’ll probably come out t—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Winry says, which means *I will* and *You, too.*

He sets the phone back down on the cradle, feeling the gaze on him. Sure enough, Al’s watching him from the kitchen—leaning one hip against the table, where he’s laid out more than even Ed can eat in a sitting.

“I guess she’s handling it well,” Al says.

Ed goes over to join him, and Al pulls their two chairs out—closer to each other than usual.

“I think it’s a Rockbell thing,” Ed says. “Nothing’s impossible or some shit. Take it all in stride.”

“I suspect she also had more time to get used to it,” Al says. “The likelihood of one of us never coming home, I mean. Because it’s different when you’re the one out there; and it was always different for us because we had each other. And we were protecting each other, most of the time—as well as we could, anyway. So it felt like we had at least a little bit of control over it.” He sighs, softly. “But she never did. Which probably made it easier to accept this time.”

“I’m sorry,” Ed says.

“I don’t need you to be sorry,” Al says. “I need you to be here. And you are.” He pushes a plate closer and punches Ed’s shoulder very gently. “Now eat.”

“Yes, sir,” Ed says, and puts his mouth where his money is by taking about the biggest bite in the recorded history of the noble sandwich.

“Save the ‘sir’ stuff for General Mustang,” Al says. “Who you’re going to go see as soon as you’re done here.”

Ed chokes so hard Al has to pound on his back until he manages to cough a chunk of bread back up from halfway down his throat. “I—th—fuck?”

“He needs the closure just as much as I do,” Al says, turning the tail end of the pounding into a consolatory little pat. “Possibly more. He’s not as acclimated to it.”

“To what?” Ed gets out.

“Loving you,” Al says.

Ed chokes again.

On the same fucking piece of bread.

“Maybe I should make you some soup,” Al says when Ed’s gasped a few molecules of oxygen back into his lungs and scrubbed some of the water from his eyes. “You’re especially accident-prone tonight.”

“No,” Ed says, “you’re saying—crazy shit.”

“I’m only saying what’s true,” Al says. “The fact that you choose to deny it doesn’t make it ‘crazy’. Actually, that’s kind of offe—”

“He’s not in love with me,” Ed says, staring very intently at the circumference of his plate.
“Ah,” Al says, “I have substantial evi—”

“Well, he shouldn’t be,” Ed says. “And he won’t be after I’m done talking his dumb ass the fuck out of it.”

“I don’t believe that’s how it works,” Al says.

“I don’t believe I give a shit,” Ed says.

He risks tearing off a huge bite of sandwich so he can chew it aggressively while he glowers.

Al, of course, sits there completely fucking calmly, blithely biding his time until Ed swallows, and it’s safe to speak.

“Why are you so adamantly opposed even to the idea?” he asks before Ed can get another bite in. “I mean, I know emotional vulnerability is not your forte—”

“Rude,” Ed says.

“Sorry,” Al says, utterly insincerely. “But—”

“It’s the worst possible fucking thing I could do to him,” Ed says.

Al’s eyes narrow slightly.

“Brother,” he says in the single most serious of the many, many voices he reserves for lecturing Ed, “please, for his sake and yours, don’t write this one off.”

Ed has to try really fucking hard to keep tasting the sandwich, which is a fucking shame, because it’s great, and he’s starving.

“Better not to start than to fuck it up later,” he says, “when everybody’s all invested and shit.”

“Why are you so sure it’d end like that?” Al asks. “I mean—gosh, Brother.” Under the familiar tenor of Ed, you’re a moron, there’s a sliver of something… frail. “Honestly, I think you’re way overdue for something good to happen.” He’s eyeing Ed sideways—trying to make this sound as nonchalant as he’s able, even though it matters a lot to him. “Looking at it as a matter of equivalencies, I mean, after… this.” He gestures to the coat, the arm, the whole shebang. “All of—this.”

Ed puts the sandwich down and pushes the plate halfway across the table, so that he can lay his arm out on the tabletop and put his head down on it and… laugh. Maybe a tiny bit hysterically.

“Ed,” Al says quietly.

“You got it backwards,” Ed says, tilting his face enough to look up and watch the consternation flit across Al’s features—not because he enjoys it; just because he’s walking a fine fucking line here, between assuaging the confusion and making all of it worse. “Al, just—the shit I saw out there—the shit I did, the shit I did to people, the shit no fucking lifetime of nicey-nice crap could ever take back—”

Al’s jaw tightens; he swallows; he touches Ed’s shoulder.

“Brother,” he says, “those were things they made you do.”

“Nobody makes anybody do anything,” Ed says. He runs his fingertip along the woodgrain on the
“You can influence people, sure, but nobody holds your wrist and points the gun.”

“You were blackmailed,” Al says, voice starting to tremble now, “and practically dragged onto a train, and made responsible for the lives of others so that you’d feel obligated to play by the rules for their sake. In what way is it your fault if your forced participation in a war resulted in casualties?”

Ed puts his head down again, burying his face in his forearm. “They’re not ‘casualties’ when it’s your goddamn bullet. I know it’s just—numbers, down here. This far away, it’s just fucking statistics. That’s what they want; that’s how they get away with it every fucking time. But when it’s you, Al—when it’s you, you fucking murdered someone.”

“Brother,” Al says softly.

“I didn’t mean to start this shit with you so early,” Ed says into his sleeve. “I really didn’t; it’s just—it’s fucked, Al. It’s all fucked, and I didn’t want to bring you into it, but I can’t… change it. Can’t change that that’s in me, now, you know? That is me.”

“It’s a part of you,” Al says, “but it’s not all you are.”

Ed turns just far enough to look at him.

“It’s going to be,” he says. “Because it’s going to eat and kill and poison everything else.” Fuck. “Maybe not in that order.”

Al smiles slightly. “Maybe not at all. Maybe it won’t be as bad as you think, Ed.”

“Maybe when pigs fly,” Ed says.

Al pats his shoulder. “There’s been a lot of progress in chimeric alchemy recently.”

Ed musters a strangled kind of a laugh-noise-thing. “Anybody ever tell you you’re too good for your own good?”

“Yes,” Al says. “You.”

“As long as someone has,” Ed says.

“I’m just doing the best I can,” Al says. “Same as you are.” He squeezes Ed’s shoulder gently and then stands. “Now eat, so you can go see General Mustang and get this whole thing resolved one way or another.”

Ed wants to argue more, but he’s also fucking hungry.

Besides—he’s got all the time in the goddamn world to argue with Al now. All the time he could ever fucking want.

It’s impossible to be ungrateful in the face of that.

The gratitude fades somewhat when he tries to do a nice, dramatic collapse on the couch as he digests, and Al stands over him with both arms folded and a reprimanding expression.
“Brother,” Al says, ever so faintly menacingly.

“Nope,” Ed says.

“Yes,” Al says.

“He should take lessons from you,” Ed says. “On ruling with an iron fucking fist.”

“You should take lessons from me,” Al says, “on not being a silly procrastinator.”

“Jeez!” Ed says. “I got in from the ass-end of nowhere three hours ago, and you already want me tyin’ up every single loose damn end I left?”

“Well,” Al says, “when you put it that way, it sounds—”

“Tyrannical?” Ed says.

“Staggeringly reasonable,” Al says.

Ed makes a point of groaning and burying his face in the couch cushion.

“If you are honestly too exhausted,” Al says, sitting down on the tiny spot of couch left open next to Ed’s torso, “I’m not going to harangue you about it any more. But… I didn’t believe it until I heard your voice—and even then, I thought maybe I’d hallucinated that, you know? Maybe it was the grief talking. Maybe you’d always been the glue holding me together, and I was starting to come apart.”

No crying. No crying. No crying. If Ed says it to himself enough, he can force it to be true.

Al, psychic demon asshole-angel that he is, senses it instantly and gently pats Ed’s back.

“But if you can bear it,” he says, “you should get it done. Winry’ll be down soon, and then she’ll be monopolizing your time, and… And I think he’ll need to see it in your eyes that you forgive him.”

“For what?” Ed asks. “For being stupid enough to let this get all mushy in the first place, or for not just fucking telling me about it before I left?”

“For not being able to save you,” Al says.

Ed’s glad he’s looking intently at a mostly unimpressive throw pillow, such that Al can’t see his face.

“Not his damn fault,” he says.

“Isn’t it?” Al says.

“No,” Ed says. He twists enough to look over his shoulder, which makes the gunshot wound twinge like a bitch, which makes him hiss like a cat. “Fuck. And—what the fuck, Al?”

Al’s—

Smiling.

What a dick.
“That’s what I mean,” he says. “He needs that—and he needs it from you. He’s not going to believe anybody else.”

“Fuck this shit,” Ed says, dropping his head down into the shadow of the uninspiring pillow again. “We haven’t even started—we haven’t done jackshit—and he’s already clingy as hell.”

“I imagine the word he would prefer is ‘devoted’,” Al says.

“I imagine he can shove that up his ass,” Ed says.

Al opens his mouth.

He shuts it.

He stands up.

“I am not going to go there,” he says. “You, however, should go see him. Do you need some coffee?”

Ed eyes him. “Why would I need coffee?”

“Because you’re probably going to be up half the night,” Al says, heading for the kitchen. “If not… because of… things, then because you two have a lot to talk about, what with your new quest to subvert the corrupt powers in the government and whatnot.”

Ed rolls over onto his back so he can put his hand over his face for a second. “You are going way too fucking fast for me right now, Al.”

“Sorry,” Al says. “How about tea?”


It’s funny how you can almost hear it when Al grins.

Al is such a slave-driver. That, or Ed’s a sucker. Or maybe it’s just… necessary. Maybe it just has to happen like this.

Funny, too—funny like sickening—how his whole fucking chest heats up as he starts on the walkway up to the front door. It’s not the house, either, is it? It’s not the walls; it’s not the paint; it’s not the fucking shingles, or the porch, or the steps. That’s not what makes a sanctuary. The safety’s on the inside.

None of the lights are on in the front couple of rooms. Probably nobody’s home. He should just fucking leave—only Al’ll kill him.

He supposes he could knock.

Or he could touch his left hand to the right and then tap a fingertip on the lock to make the tumblers shift, and then turn the handle and step inside.

Worst-case scenario, he can leave a note or some shit. Roy’s got a stupid grocery list notepad
pinned up on the wall in the kitchen, because Roy is a loser; he can just—

The soft scuffle from down the hall makes every fucking muscle in his body tense, and he drops into a crouch with his good arm bent outward—defensive if he needs it; ready to clap against the right hand if there’s time.

Remnants of a fire smolder in the hearth in the living room, casting flickers of light down the hall, and the shadow at the edge of the doorframe—

Resolves into a sliver of white sliced with red.

Roy steps smoothly out into the hallway, arm crooked, fingers poised, eyes so intense that Ed’s breath quits halfway up his throat and just sort of sticks there.

Roy drops his hand.

Ed only has time to open his mouth before Roy’s whole weight hits him like a freight train—like a ton of fucking bricks, like a stranglehold—

It’s a good damn thing he got his mouth open, actually, because he can just barely eke some air in around where Roy’s collarbone is digging into his throat, and… since when were Roy’s clavicles so fucking prominent that…?

Roy says nothing, and Ed can’t fault him; Ed can’t think of a damn thing worth speech. All the words he planned and arranged and rearranged and practiced on the stupid fucking trains have fled his lousy skull and escaped into the night. It’s just too—much. It’s too much, that Roy’s arms around him are everything he kept sensing at the edges of those dreams; everything he’d think of, vague-soft and tentative, in the depths of the mudded fucking slush. It’s everything he would have hoped for, if he’d dared—everything he wanted to believe in, everything…


He was right. Wasn’t he? Holy fuck, he was right, and Roy feels it, too—

This shit’s not platonic. This shit hasn’t been platonic in a long damn time. This is not a good to see you; this is—

This is Thank gods I don’t believe in that you made it; this is They told me you were gone forever, like words could hold the thought; this is I thought I’d never get to tell you all the things I hadn’t said, and the weight of them was crushing me to death.

Roy takes a shuddering breath, and Ed can feel it in every fucking rib. The relief is like a tangible thing, like a physical fucking layer of soft warmth laced with the heat of Roy’s heartbeat against his own damn chest—like a blanket wrapped almost too tight, and he could collapse here. Couldn’t he? He could crumble, and Roy would pick him up off the floor, one piece at a time, and put him back together, and kiss the cracks—

Roy’s grip on him just keeps tightening, like he’s liable to disappear. He is liable to suffocate, in another minute. And it’s… weird. It’s fucking weird—the ragged tremble on every exhale, the desperation in it. Roy doesn’t do desperation; Roy does survival instincts. Roy does ingenuity. Roy does cornered-animal-brilliant, and you never miss the gleam of teeth.

This is a different Roy than the one he’s used to. This is a Roy who’s weakened and weakened underneath the strain. This is a Roy who could break.
And then they’d both be fucked.

Ed lifts his left hand and pushes gently at Roy’s shoulder to get him to release his grip.

“Oi, Mustang,” he says. “Can I resign right this fucking second, or is there shit I have to sign?”

Roy draws back but doesn’t let go—not quite. He keeps his hands on Ed’s shoulders for a second, and then his fingertips drift down Ed’s biceps, almost—reverently. In awe. In wonder.

“You’re officially tendering your verbal resignation?” he asks.

“Nothing fucking tender about it,” Ed says.

Roy just looks at him. Unblinking, unwavering—hot-dark eyes and the slow curl of a devastating smile, and this is everything Ed ever fucking flirted with in the darkest corners of his guilty brain, and holy fuck, it’s too much to take. Blood rushes to his face, and adrenaline spikes in his brain, and God, God, he’s so… alive. He’s so fucking alive.

He tries to clear his throat. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

“Fraternization laws,” Roy says.

The Pointed Non Sequitur Game is one of Roy’s favorites. Ed’s gonna murder him. Later. “What the fuck about ’em?”

“They don’t apply if you’ve resigned,” Roy says.

The Endless Riddles Game is Roy’s other preferred pastime. Ed narrows his eyes a little. “So the fuck wh—”

Roy’s hands—one silkily gloved, one wholly bare—rise to cup his face so fucking gently, and then—

His mouth—

On Ed’s—

It’s every single thing he was stupid enough to hope for, to dream of, to outline in his imagination—and he never should have; it’s like he made this moment possible by dignifying it with the contents of his thoughts, and this wasn’t—

He was—

What he was—what he wanted; what he resolved—is curling into flakes of ash like a scrap of parchment held to a candle flame; like tissue paper catching fire.

What he was holds nothing against what he is right now.

He is—

Engulfed, enflamed, encompassed—the heat runs through him, past him, dancing down widening veins and sparking through gasped-in breath, suffusing his skin, filling every centimeter of his being—

Roy’s mouth fits against his so fucking perfectly that it should be a crime—it is, actually; it’s fucking criminal, and they should lock him up for what he’s doing with his tongue—
And it’s not even just the tongue; it’s the whole damn thing—the press of his lips, the graze of his teeth; the nudge of his nose across Ed’s cheekbone; shouldn’t that be weird? The pad of his uncovered thumb smoothing down along Ed’s jaw; the warmth of his chest pinning Ed’s sling-bound automail in between them, closer and closer like he doesn’t even care—

Is it always like this? Is kissing always a—pull? A draw, a falling—an envelopment; nip and twine and give and take and a faint tang of something starkly alcoholic; a glory and a godsend and a surrender?

Roy draws back, panting softly, and stares at Ed for a long second—and there’s something fucking urgent in the depths of it—before he presses their foreheads together. He tugs the glove off and tosses it to the floor somewhere, and then both hands lift, and one flattens itself along each side of Ed’s neck.

He closes his eyes, and Ed watches the lashes flicker down, casting long shadows on the bruise-colored rings beneath them.

Roy swallows. This close, it’s loud enough to hear.

“I couldn’t believe it,” he says softly. “I couldn’t let myself believe it—when Alphonse called. Because if he was wrong, somehow—I couldn’t do it twice.” His eyelids rise, and there’s a liquid gleam in the darkness now. “But you’re back.”

Ed’s throat’s dry—and his mouth. Fuck’s sake. He swipes his tongue over his lip. “Bad fuckin’ penny, Mustang.”

“No,” Roy says, thumbs moving across Ed’s cheeks. “Not a penny.” He guides Ed’s bangs back—gently, gently—with just his fingertips. “Copper’s cheap.”

He can’t—

He just can’t.

He can’t be fucking serious.

He can’t go around saying shit like—that.

He can’t. It’s not allowed. It’s not fucking permissible. There should be laws about this kind of shit.

“There’s—” Ed’s throat sticks; he clears it. “Don’t get too excited. There’s a lot of—” His hand curls itself into his shirtfront, right over his heart. “There’s a lot of lead underneath.”

“That,” Roy says, and the slight curve of his smile feels like fucking absolution, “I don’t believe for a second.”

Ed manages to tilt one right back at him. “Maybe you should bite the edges to be sure.”

The flare of fucking heat in Roy’s eyes makes Ed’s guts tighten up until he feels the force of it trembling out through the tips of his fingers—how is that possible?

He’s leaning up, and Roy’s leaning down, and God, it was just—it’s just fucking inevitable; it’s gravity and magnetics and equal and opposite forces; and he’d be stupid to try to pick a fight with physics.
Roy’s mouth seals over his again, and if this is the point—the warmth and the safety and the all-over-tingles of pleasure coalescing into thicker lines like lightning—if this is what people are looking for—

It all makes so much fucking sense.

He just wants more; he just wants to melt right into this, dissolve—deliquesce; he was iced over, frozen through, but Roy’s skin thaws him down to the blood and bones everywhere it touches his, everywhere they bridge the endless space of the universe and meet and—

Except—

Wait—

Wait.

He twists away, just far enough to look Roy in the face—the bastard’s mouth is so fucking red, red and kind of swollen and shiny-wet; his eyes are huge, and his expression settles somewhere between inquisitiveness and smug fucking satisfaction.

Ed tries for words. “Th—” His voice fucking splits down the middle, the fucking traitor. He clears his throat and tries again. “That’s not—how it was supposed to go.”

Roy’s eyes are completely fucking—open. Just for a second there, before the walls go up again. Open and endlessly deep, like the whole fucking universe laid out—tunnels full of stars.

“How was it supposed to go?” he asks, in the low-honey voice, and Ed could kill him for being so fucking gorgeous and so fucking dumb.

“I was gonna—” Ed’s voice quavers again, and he swallows to stave off the next bout of bullshit. “Walk in here to prove I didn’t fucking die or whatever, and then tell you whatever thing we—might’ve, or could’ve—done—had—was just… not. Not gonna happen. ‘Cause—”

Here he fucking goes again, like there’s a cat running its claws down his vocal chords.

“’Cause I’m no fucking good, Mustang,” he says. “Not for you, or for anybody, and you’ve got so much shit you gotta do, and I’m no good, okay? I’m no f-fucking good; I’m not; and you gotta push me out that f-fucking d-door, Roy, ’cause I’ll t-take you d-down with me, and you d-deserve —”

Roy kisses him again, and he chokes on the strangling tightness in his throat, but he can’t stop, and he doesn’t care.

Roy pulls away and meets his eyes, both hands sifting gently through his hair now.

“You are,” he says, softly. “You are.”

Ed wrangles his voice more or less back under control. “What-the-fuck-ever, Mustang.”

“It changed you,” Roy says, and Ed can’t look at him anymore, and Roy’s damp mouth brushes across his cheekbones, then higher—grazing over the deep, deep, dug-in circles underscoring Ed’s eyes. “But it didn’t kill you. Anything less is surmountable—you taught me that.”

“I didn’t teach you shit, Mustang,” Ed says.

“Yes, you did,” Roy says, and he’s kissing all over Ed’s fucking face now, feather-light, and Ed
hates him; he’s such an asshole; what right does he have to offer Ed’s trashed-ass fucking soul all this stupid fucking affection out of the blue— “From day one, Ed. And every day since then. This isn’t going to break you.”

Ed tries to lean forward to bury his face in the bastard’s chest, but Roy won’t let him duck his head. “I can’t—”

“You can,” Roy says. “You are so much more. You have so much left.”

Ed wracks out something dry that sounds a little like a laugh.

“Edward,” Roy says. “I have done a thousand things a thousand times worse, and you have never given up on me.”

Ed closes his eyes. “It’s diff—”

“It is different,” Roy says. “Because you have done less—in a war, Ed; against soldiers, not civilians. Not people who were helpless and unarmed, begging for mercy. If you think I’m redeemable, you’re already saved.”

Ed stares up at the ceiling instead this time. “But—”

“Edward,” Roy says again, and that word resonates through him like aftershocks from an earthquake—like soundwaves from an aria; and the curled, compressed heat of it unfurls right through him.

“Quit fuckin’ saying that,” he manages to mumble, and this time he does succeed in tilting his head down—hopefully before stupid fucking Roy sees the stupid fucking blood rushing into his cheeks. Bastard can probably feel it, though.

“Saying what?” Roy asks, and he totally fucking knows; he sweeps the pads of his thumbs across Ed’s face so lightly you could almost pretend it’s unrelated.

“Say—” Roy grinds his teeth. “My name,” Ed grits out, risking looking up enough to glare at him, “like it’s a fucking—”

Roy’s smirk chokes the words right out of him. “Benediction?”

Ed bares his teeth on instinct, but then the choking smoke from the fucking magma in him makes him dizzy, and he can’t help himself.

“Would you?” he asks.

Roy blinks down at him. What the fuck right does he have to keep eyelashes that fucking gorgeous on his stupid face, anyway? “Would I what?”
The chemical steam has its own voice, and it’s burned the shyness right out of Ed’s body, and he doesn’t care. It’s so fucking warm here. All he wants is never to be cold again.

“Fuck me,” he says. “Would you?”

He knows the answer in the instant Roy’s eyes widen, and his hands go still along either side of Ed’s jaw.

Ed is not making this up.

Ed didn’t make any of this up.

Roy—Roy fucking Mustang, a man who looks like that, a man with more power over people than Ed could ever dream of, a man who could make the whole world think that whatever or whoever he wanted had been its idea all along—is looking at him like he’s the one who’s some kind of marvel.

“I would,” Roy says, and his eyes flick back and forth, like he’s trying to read some kind of message in the crinkled lines on Ed’s forehead—which are dug at this point from Ed’s struggle not to fucking react. “I would, if…”

There it is.

Ed did make up part of it—the part where it works.

“If what?” he says, fighting to hold his face steady, not to let it scowl or snarl or twist enough to give him away, because Roy fucking owes it to him to say it—If you weren’t so broken, If you weren’t so tarnished, If you weren’t so fucking pathetic that you’d stand here and beg—

“If it wasn’t your first,” Roy says.

Ed—

—stares at him—

—and waits for the universe to stop buckling at impossible angles and settle back into a recognizable configuration.

He’s still waiting a good five fucking heartbeats later, so apparently all that’s left to do is clear his throat and force it to channel speech: “What the fuck makes you think—”

“That was the first time someone’s ever kissed you,” Roy says, and the pad of his thumb shifts lightly back, up Ed’s temple, smoothing through his hair. “Or at least the first time you’ve kissed back.”

I would—if…

Fuck him.

Fuck him—fuck his sanctimonious fucking assumptions and his talented fucking mouth and his experience fetish and his way-too-beautiful eyes and his gentle fucking hands and all of it—

Fuck him, and fuck the fucking humiliation surging up from the darkest, softest, safest places in Ed’s stupid fucking soul—searing hot, billowing upward through him, seething underneath his skin, prickling everywhere as his guts drop and his heart crumples like fucking wax paper when it’s served its use.
“Fine,” he says, ironing out the shake in himself, the tremor of the returning fucking cold and the echo of the sudden emptiness; the hot shame ripples outward, and the blood beneath his skin blazes with it, but he isn’t going to hurt—not for Roy. Not for this. He steps back, darting out of reach of those deft fucking fingers, and turns on his heel, and starts for the door. “Well, I’m back. Not dead. G’night.”

He makes it four steps down the hall before Roy’s voice catches him like a fucking whip snapping the sound barrier and coiling around his neck.

“Ed.”

He isn’t quite sure exactly what he did to the fucking lock on his way in, so he has to stop and examine it for a second anyway. “Don’t wear it out.”

“That is not,” Roy says, and you can hear him measuring the words out and releasing them one by one, “what I meant.” Silence, but not for long enough for Ed to still his spinning head. “And I’m sorry if I misled you.”

No, you’re not, Ed thinks so hard he almost believes it more than that mellifluous tone in Roy’s stupid fucking manipulative asshole voice. You’re relieved you found an easy way out—got to try a sample, decided you didn’t like it, now it’s over with. Nice and quick.

He’s so, so fucking tired; and so, so fucking cold. He chances a look over his shoulder. “What the fuck did you mean, then?”

Roy takes one step towards him, then another, then pauses as Ed tenses up. He keeps his hands low—loose at his sides. Fucking textbook non-threatening. Like Ed’s a trapped fucking animal. Maybe he is. All this shit, these last few months—it’s all just been survival. No advanced fucking intellect; no overarching cause; no contemplation. Just instinct and spitting out the blood and crawling as far as it’d take him. Just sinking as low as he fucking had to in order to stay alive. Primal shit. Instincts. Nothing human about it. Nothing human about him.

“It has significance,” Roy says, and the concern flashes briefly over his deliberately calm expression when Ed startles at the sound of his voice. “Ideally—and I don’t have to tell you how little in this world’s ideal, but ideally—it should be shared with someone. On your terms. Someone you trust.”

Ed breathes in slow, then lets it out even slower.

He’s acting like a dog—like a dog that knows it’s wounded, and there’s nowhere else to run.

He’s not anymore. He is no one’s fucking dog now; that’s the point. He’s never going to let them put a fucking leash on him again.

“I do,” he says. “I do trust you. I wouldn’t’ve said that shit if I hadn’t meant it.”

Roy—

—smiles.

Faintly, in a wobbly kind of way, but it’s genuine as fuck, and it’s there.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, and is that some kind of fucking record? Twice in two minutes? Twice in a day? “I’d somehow managed to forget how absolutely real you are.”
Bastard’s making no fucking sense, so at least there’s some order in the universe right now. “As opposed to what?”

Roy takes one more step forward, then another still. Ed turns enough to eye him properly.

“As opposed to nearly everyone else in the world,” Roy says, “who operate by rules very different from the ones that govern you.”

He’s awful close now. And the really awful thing is that it’s not awful at all.

Ed frowns up at him. “The sweet-talk shit works better when it’s not smarmy fucking gibberish.”

“Pardon me,” Roy says. He smiles again, in a way that might qualify as tentative on somebody else, and lifts his hand and brushes Ed’s hair back so fucking gently it feels like it’s just the wind.

“Shall I make this very plain?”

“If you’re capable,” Ed says.

“I’ll try,” Roy says.

His fingertips ghost down Ed’s cheek and settle on his shoulder—lightly, still, like the air between them’s fragile, and a sharp movement could shatter it all.

Ed swallows, then swallows again, then grinds out: “Well?”

“I love you,” Roy says, “for your honesty; and for your bluntness; and for your brilliance; and for a great deal more besides.”

The incomprehensibly large, sticky, spiky, strangling thing in Ed’s throat seems to be his heart. That can’t be fucking healthy.

“So you gonna fuck me,” he chokes out, “or what?”

Roy’s fingertips flutter against his jaw. “If you’re sure that’s what y—” Ed’s glare registers. “All right, all right—yes. Yes. Although it’s ‘and what’, not ‘or what’, I believe.”

Ed swallows. He has to play this shit cool, or Roy’s going to think he’s in over his head and retract the whole offer for what the Bastard Council of One had defined as ‘his own good’ or whatever crap.

“Okay, then,” he says. “So why the fuck are we still standing here talking?”

“A fine question,” Roy says, and before Ed can tell him he just completely missed the point, he threads his fingers into Ed’s hair right at the base of his skull and starts kissing him again, and that… sorta makes up for it. For now, anyway.

Roy clearly knows how to do this shit—obviously Ed had been figuring on that, of course, but it’s becoming increasingly evident that he’s good at the whole process, not just the insert-this-into-that part of the shit. He slides one hand down over Ed’s shoulder and then down and around to kind of cup his hip with it, and he keeps the other hand kneading at Ed’s scalp, and he uses that leverage to start drawing Ed slowly down the hall towards the living room.

On second thought, maybe fucking Mustang doesn’t know what he’s doing—the bed’s apparently not mandatory, or anything, but surely it’s easier, right? Just as a matter of relative angles and surface area and consistency of comfort and that sort of thing; and statistically speaking if so many
people prefer it—

“You’re thinking,” Roy murmurs against Ed’s mouth.

Ed pulls back just enough for him to see the scowl. “Yeah, I do that. Fuckin’ hobby of mine. You should try it sometime.”

“I’d hate for you to be thinking,” Roy says, scraping his nails up the back of Ed’s head so smoothly it’s like a whole fucking massage, “when you could be feeling instead.” He reaches the elastic band tying Ed’s hair up—which Al had to put there for him; the last one was so tangled-in they had to cut it out before he left—and tugs on it gently. “May I?”

“Knock yourself out,” Ed says—and if he’s being extra prickly and shit to distract suave-ass, professional-at-this fucking Roy from noticing that his heart won’t stop fucking pounding too-fast and too-light in his chest—

Well—

Well, maybe if Roy’s so fucking experienced, he already knows that, and he’ll understand.

Meanwhile, the bastard of the hour gets this fucking beatific look on his face as he looses the tie from Ed’s ponytail, and hair floods fucking everywhere.

“You’re going to regret that when you start getting it in your mouth,” Ed says.

“No,” Roy says blissfully, “I’m not.”

They’re just sort of—hovering in the doorway to the living room while Roy teases his fingers through every fucking inch of Ed’s hair, and the firelight plays on the side of the bastard’s face. The angles of it look sharper with the shadows licking them like that—deeper, starker, clearer. If this didn’t feel so damn good, Ed’d probably… something. Probably something. Probably do things, or say things—anything except just standing here sort of sagging against the doorframe as the little rhythmic tugs draw beautiful fucking tingles out of every square centimeter of his scalp, which are short-circuiting every fucking nerve in his body and making him just sort of…wobbly all over.

“I daresay you like that,” Roy says, sounding smug as a fucking cat with a bird caged in both paws.

“Almost as much as you fuckin’ do,” Ed says—which is pretty coherent, considering.

Roy… laughs.

And somehow that just fucking—changes it. Somehow that shakes out the worst knot of tension in Ed’s chest, and—well, shit, sure, he has no fucking clue what he’s supposed to do, but this is Roy, after all. Dumbass, dorky fucking Roy, who’s hot as hell and twice as smart and also stupid, and stupidly nice underneath it. This is Roy, who wants this—and wants him to want it. Wants him to like it, and feel good, and…

Loves him. This is Roy, who loves him.

He’s safe here.

He is finally, finally fucking safe.

It doesn’t fucking matter what he does or doesn’t know; it doesn’t fucking matter if he’s vulnerable
this way—if he’s offering up more than Roy really realizes yet. It doesn’t fucking matter if he’s scared.

He’s safe. He’s safe, because Roy has long since wrangled the trust right out of him with a hundred-thousand tiny little moments where he offered gentleness instead of judgment—where he bared his throat right back. A hundred-thousand tiny little moments where he met Ed’s insecurities with softness instead of spite.

So Ed wrangles out a few more words for him: “You just gonna pet me all night long, or what? You know cats are easier to feed, right?”

“A pack of wolves would be easier to feed,” Roy says.

“You could pet them, too,” Ed says.

“I think I’ll pass,” Roy says.

“Guess you’ll have to settle for my shit, then,” Ed says.

And the look Roy gives him—

Fuck, fuck, this is too much already; his heart’s too big and too flighty and too violent for his ribcage, and his mouth just went so fucking dry that his next breath rattles as it crosses his tongue.

“You have a fascinating idea of what ‘settle’ means,” Roy says.

Ed’s brain is…

…somewhere near the front door, probably, ten feet away.

“You have a fascinating face,” he says.

Roy’s beaming grin makes the ongoing problems in his chest cavity significantly worse.

“I would say ‘Likewise’,” he says, “but I feel that would be understating matters rather cruelly.”

Ed wrinkles his nose. “You gotta work on your lines, Mustang.”

“I suppose I do,” Roy says, flattening one hand on Ed’s shoulder-blade and cupping the other around the curve of his jaw, and it tingles—having another person’s fingertips on your face; it’s like fucking electricity everywhere their skin touches yours. “May I practice on you?”

Ed wants to pantomime barfing, but he’s preoccupied with remembering how to breathe. “I guess you’re gonna have to, at the rate you’re going.”

Roy, eyelids low, leans in close enough to sigh so fucking softly against his mouth—just a hot brush of air, and Ed can almost taste his lips; he starts to shift forward to chase them, and—

Roy moves backwards, light on the balls of his feet like a fucking dancer, and does he figure Ed’s gonna fucking waltz on halfway-frozen automail, or—?

Except that both of Roy’s palms slide down Ed’s arm to clasp his one operable hand between them, and then the bastard starts tugging gently, and it’s not a decision Ed’s brain makes to let himself be drawn into the room, across the carpet, over towards the fire.

The spread of the heat bathes them head to toe, and it’s pulling on him again—like there’s an iron
cord between Roy’s chest and his; like they’re meant to meet, and the synchronicity’s inevitable. Ed curls his hand in Roy’s shirtfront, and the way Roy’s eyes darken as he looks down through his lashes just—

Ed grabs onto Roy’s collar for fucking leverage—just to keep from drifting off and away into some kind of soft-warm oblivion with cushioned floors and embers around the edges. His hand, fumbling distractedly while he tries to watch the slow rise of Roy’s eyelashes, encounters a chain.

No, not a chain—two chains, twisted up together. There’s a single dog tag dangling from each.

One’s Roy’s, and one’s his.

The bastard. The absolute fucking—

“Well, you don’t need this anymore,” Ed forces out before his traitor of a throat tries to stop him, fighting to free the tag with his damn name on it from the other one.

Roy’s hand closes around his to still it, then draws both of the chains off over his head. His hair does a flutter-thing. Ed hates him. Roy leans over to set the tangle of clicking metal on the edge of the coffee table.

“I suppose I don’t,” he says softly. “Not anymore.”

Ed tries so fucking hard to smile, and he can see in Roy’s reciprocation that the bastard knows—and appreciates the effort even if it’s more or less a failure.

And then the silence—

—changes.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Roy asks, in the lowest and smoothest of his syrup-voices—that one that’d drown all the inhibitions in a honeyed tide if they existed at all.

“About as sure as I’ve ever been about anything,” Ed says.

He doesn’t specify exactly how much that is.

Roy raises an eyebrow, and his smile curves on the right side first—lopsided, uneven, fucking adorable as shit; and that’s not even fair—

“Are you sure you want to do this with me?” Roy asks, and he nudges his nose up along Ed’s temple like an affectionate dog or something, and that’s also way too fucking much.

“Yes, dumbass,” Ed says.

Roy blinks at him, trying very hard to look offended.

“Well,” Roy says, slowly, “I’ve had less-ringing endorsements, although not especially many, to be—”

Ed grabs his shirt collar and hauls him in and down—maybe harder than he should’ve, since their teeth kind of knock together, and then Roy possibly-accidentally bites down on Ed’s lip hard enough that he hears himself make a faint sort of gasping kind of noise.

An answering sound—choked-off, thick, deep, edged with a growl—emanates from the back of Roy’s throat, and then his tongue grazes the roof of Ed’s mouth again, and several fingers curl into
Ed’s chaotically liberated hair and twist gently, and—

Ed’s knees just—

Fucking quit.

To be fair to them—to the joint he grew himself, and to the one Winry made for him—they held out through all of the important shit and kept him upright when he really needed it.

Additionally, Roy is a hell of a fucking kisser.

Apparently Ed’s survival instincts haven’t finally up and fucking burned out yet—his left arm jackknifes back up so that he can clench his hand in Roy’s shirtfront as his weight hauls him down—

But Roy’s arm’s already around his waist, and Roy’s already sinking to the floor with him—slowing his fall so that it’s practically a leisurely fucking descent, rather than the sudden drop it would’ve been.

Ed’s dumbass fucking heart keeps pounding like it really was the latter.

“Easy,” Roy says.

“Was that a comment or a suggestion?” Ed asks.

Roy’s grin reemerges in all of its unbearable glory, and his other hand rises, and his knuckles graze along Ed’s cheek. “You are many things, Edward, but easy isn’t one of them.”

Ed wrinkles his nose. “…thanks?”

Roy pauses in grinning like an asshole piece of shit long enough to kiss him again, though, which—

It’s a different kiss, too—deeper, fuller, fucking meaningful; like a whole fucking story with footnotes and an extensive appendix—like a poem, or a promise, or all the goddamn shitty lyrical bullshit’s actually true—

Like it always has been; you just have to tap the fuck into it—turn yourself into a conduit by completing a circuit with another human being.

*Love* alchemy: how the fuck about that?

And the next thing Ed knows, he’s clenching his good fist in Roy’s hair, and Roy’s arm around his back is easing him down onto the carpet, and the heat of the fire washes over them thick and slow—a wave of pure fucking rapture, and the energy just keeps pouring through him, cycling between them, and he can’t believe he doesn’t taste ozone on Roy’s gorgeous tongue.

Roy’s hand pushes Ed’s hair back from his face, and then it’s curling in against his scalp, tugging gently—and how the hell does that coax a shiver out of him again? Is it situational? Is this some kind of anticipation-based reaction—a knee-jerk physical response necessitated by the circumstances?

Or is it just—Roy?

It’s just Roy, isn’t it?
It’s the simple fact that it *is* Roy—that it’s the specific human being Ed’s been waiting for, contemplating, literally fucking dreaming about all this goddamn time—amplified by the admittedly fucking incredible dexterity of those damnably talented hands.

“You think so loudly it verges on deafening,” Roy murmurs against his mouth, and the heat of it—the damp breath *and* the tone—drags another jitter up from the base of Ed’s spine.

“You talk like a motherfucking dictionary,” Ed manages. “Not exactly a fuckin’ turn-on.”

Roy draws back just enough to give him a dangerously amused little fucking onceover. “No?” One of those fucking hands ranges down his chest, and he can’t help arching up into it—“That’s very disappointing.” The fucking hand in question continues, undaunted, and Ed’s breath sticks in his throat and won’t come loose when Roy’s fingers fix on his belt, thumb smoothing back and forth across the buckle. “I always thought I saw a gleam of reluctant fascination in your eyes when I started to speak in a lower register.”

Ed musters up a scowl even though his heart is fucking fluttering like this is some kind of romance-novel-themed fucking joke. “Explains why everything you say is so damn stupid, if you’re staring at my eyeballs instead of thinkin’ all the time.”

Roy pauses in scratching the other set of terrible, terrible, tantalizing fingernails along Ed’s scalp, following the curve at the base of his skull, and if there is some kind of fucking heaven-place, it probably feels a lot like this.

“Not *all* the time,” Roy says. “At a maximum, only sixty percent of the time that you’re actually in the room. The other forty is dedicated entirely to backhanded compliments that make implications about your height.”

Ed smacks his arm.

But not very hard.

“Bastard,” he says.

The self-satisfaction in Roy’s expression just—

Cracks—

And the whole thing fractures down along the break, and then Roy’s leaning his forehead in against Ed’s and closing his eyes, burying both hands in Ed’s hair just by his temples, the tips of his thumbs sliding back and forth along Ed’s cheekbones slowly.

“I don’t know that I can describe to you,” Roy says without opening his eyes, “how much I missed hearing you say that.”

Ed swallows against the sudden and probably physiologically damaging appearance of a ball of knives inside his throat. “S’all right. I’ve got an idea.”

Roy smiles, and his eyelashes lift slowly. “I’m sure you do.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

SORRY THIS IS LATE! I’ve been in cosplay hell. I’ll be emerging from cosplay hell to go to [SVCC next weekend](http://example.com), so drop me a line if you’re going to be there!

Also sorry that this chapter cuts off in an even worse place than the previous… >___>'
But I promise I'll finish it up for good in the next chapter, which will finally be the last. XD

The flitting of the—what? Urgency? Desperation? Pure fucking heat?—in Ed’s stomach won’t stop, and it won’t subside, and he really fucking hopes this shit is normal.

Something about the way his shoulders tighten up must telegraph some sort of message to Roy, though, because the fucker’s kissing him again—a kiss like the whole world falling, and Ed would know—

And then they’re stretched out on the floor—or Ed’s stretched out on the floor, and Roy’s kneeling over him, one arm under his back, so he arches it to keep his weight from cutting off Roy’s stupid circulation, and—

When his hips hit Roy’s, it’s like being [electrocuted](http://example.com), and the breath he’d been trying to gasp in practically crackles as it evaporates.

Just like that—just like lightning from a clear fucking sky; like the inevitable fucking transfer of energy; like mutable fucking plasma straight through—he’s so damn hard he can’t resist the impulse to arc his spine a little higher and grind his hips on Roy’s, and—

Well, shit, he’s not the only one fucking eager for it, unless all the tactile nerves in his pelvic region have suddenly taken up deliberate deception as a side job.

It’s a fucking relief, honestly—that Roy’s every bit as primed and fucking ready; that Central’s resident smooth fucking bastard makes a faint noise in the back of his throat and starts panting like a dog into the side of Ed’s neck, fingers tightening in his hair. It’d be fucking humiliating to be the only one who wanted this so much he can’t even fucking help himself.

“Sorry,” Roy says, which makes about zero fucking sense. “It’s—it’s been—a while, and—I may have—contemplated this situation—previously—in some detail—”

“…the fuck?” Ed chokes out, partly just to shut him up. “Are you—apologizing?”

Roy pauses, and his hot breath rippling across Ed’s throat goes to battle with the immense fucking awkwardness, resulting in a bizarre, halfway-totally-fucking-turned-on impasse.

“Yes,” Roy says. “Sor—”

“You’re—” This is the dumbest word known to man, but his brain just keeps fucking spinning, and he can’t think of another. “You’re seducing me, and you’re—apologizing for—enjoying it?”
Roy’s eyelashes brush his cheek as the dumbass asshole piece of shit blinks four times in a row. “Well—no. I was apologizing for being horny as hell when you only just scraped through another canyon of catastrophe, and you’re probably injured far more than you’re letting on, a—”

“Your priorities are fucked, Mustang,” Ed says.

Roy draws back enough to grin at him—wearily, but there’s a glimmer of real delight in those endless fucking eyes. “I don’t think I can argue with that.”

“That’s a first,” Ed says. He glowers. With significance. “You know what else oughta be fucked?”

“My dear Edward,” Roy says, and the glimmer’s gone rogue comet again, and it’s slicing through the atmosphere, melting with the heat and the fucking friction, and its trajectory is unmistakable. “Whatever do you mean?”

Ed grits his teeth to stop himself from grinning back. “Could you do me a huge fucking favor and shut the fuck up and fuck me already?”

Roy laughs, which is not especially encouraging, actually. “Are you sure you want to? I think you could have concentrated a few more iterations of the word ‘fuck’ into that sentence, which would have been much more convincing as far as your intentions g—”

Ed reaches for him—somewhat indiscriminately—and ends up grabbing his ear as a handhold to drag him in and kiss him again, biting his bottom lip hard this time.

The way a shaky moan shivers up from the center of Roy’s chest, resonating up his throat and then outward through the both of them, ignites something in the pit of Ed’s stomach, and his heart just keeps trilling like it’s sounding an alarm. Maybe it is. Maybe this is what he’s been trying to talk himself out of all along, in some weirdly prescient kind of way—this particular vulnerability; this exchange of power. Maybe some part of him always realized that once he let it start, it’d be way the fuck over, and he wouldn’t stand a chance.

Roy peels off his fucking coat, and the sling gets all tangled, and the bastard starts apologizing again, and then he looks positively fucking tickled when Ed glares at him some more. The dizzying rattle of Ed’s heart makes it impossible for him to keep track of time; maybe it really does take a million years for Roy to draw the sleeve off of him, helping lift him off the floor and holding him a little tighter when his weight shifts and makes him wobble; maybe it really is impossibly slow as Roy drags the heavy woolen fabric down his back.

Ed’s heart jitters up into his throat and just—hangs there, practically fucking vibrating.

Roy’s mouth traces up the side of his neck to his ear, and then there’s another warm breath ghosting across his skin, and he shivers, and shivers again, but it’s not cold, and that’s weird as shit.

“Are you all right?” Roy whispers right into the shell of his fucking ear, so soft but so honey-voiced that it’s agonizing.

And Ed—

He is. He knows he is; he knows he’s going to be fine; it’s just that if he lets this happen to him instead of participating—instead of being in control of it—he can tell it’s going to drown him.

“Shit,” he forces out around the throbbing weight of his heart, and the throbbing pull of his guts
and his groin. “‘All right’? Settin’ a pretty low standard, Mustang.”

Roy draws back enough to make sure Ed sees that the concerned look hasn’t been assuaged by his latest brilliant fucking sally, and Ed rides that shift in power—he flattens his hand on Roy’s chest and pushes to part them just enough that he can get his fingers working on the buttons of Roy’s shirt.

His hand’s shaking. *Fuck* this shit. He can do it; he knows he fucking can; it’s not a big *deal*—Roy’s mouth travels up his neck again, feather-light, and the tickle sends another tremble through him.

“All right?” Roy says, soft-low and fucking devastating.

“If you’ll fucking excuse me,” Ed says, fighting a particularly stubborn buttonhole to wrench the stupid little fucking pearlescent disc free of its fucking confines, like they all deserve to be; “I’m trying to undress you here.”

“All right?” Roy says again, and his hands lift, and his fingertips skate across Ed’s cheekbones, settling on his temples, smoothing back his hair; and it’s the fucking gentleness in all of it that makes Ed’s traitorous fucking hands stop once and for all, and Ed looks up at him and scowls with everything he’s got.

It’s not much. It’s not much because he doesn’t have a whole lot left.

“All right?” Roy says, because apparently the third time’s the fucking charm; his voice just keeps —*deepening*, thickening, like hot syrup. Like fucking—cordial. Wine. Intoxicating as hell and a dozen times more dangerous than Ed knows how to deal with, because this is an uncharted playing field, and *fuck* knows how the game’s supposed to go.

“What?” Ed says.

Roy cups his face in both hands and waits until Ed stops squirming, looking right the fuck into his eyes.

“Trust me,” he says.

“I fucking do,” Ed says—blurs out, really; *say* has this connotation like he intends to speak, like he thought it through, like he knows what’s going to emerge from the tragic depths of his fucking brain when he opens his stupid mouth. “You know I do. I always have.” Well. “…almost. I almost-always have.” Roy’s eyebrow is rising at the same time as his arm guides Ed’s torso down onto the carpet again, which is a really confusing opposition further complicated by the way Ed’s heart keeps fucking *banging* at his ribs. “I mean—at least—eighty percent of the time. Eight out of ten’s not bad. That’s a passing gra—*ahh*, holy *fuck*—”

“That’s more like it,” Roy murmurs, kissing softly at the teeth marks he just fucking left on the side of Ed’s neck.

“You *are* a fuckin’ dog,” Ed says, and his heart’s beating even fucking faster, but—lighter, less intensely, less urgently, less like panic and more like—

More like a chemical high. More like adrenaline. More like the fight of his life—the *best* fight of his life.

“Mm,” Roy says, breathing across his throat, dragging his tongue, and fuck—
“Or a cannibal,” Ed chokes out.

Roy’s eyes are fucking live coals as he looks up through his eyelashes. “I won’t consume anything you’re not happy to part with.”

Ed hears a weird, wet sort of noise and then realizes—way too fucking late—that he just made it trying to gasp in enough breath to whimper with.

He’s the Fullmetal Alchemist. He doesn’t fucking whimper—not at the immortal monsters or the souls bound to sword-wielding armor or the crushing weight of the whole fucking world or someone else’s bloodbath of a war or the fucking apocalypse—and he’s not going to do it for Roy goddamn Musta—

One of Roy’s hands is still tangled up in his hair, and the other one just closed around his dick and started massaging meaningfully.

At least Ed’s moved on from whimpers to groans. That’s much more appropriate. Or—something. Or—fuck, that bastard is so fucking good at this it’s like a miracle-disaster—

Roy grinds the heel of his hand inward just hard enough that it hurts in a way that’s fucking transcendent.

Ed tries to tell him so and ends up with another guttural noise, but based on the way Roy laughs softly and nips at Ed’s left collarbone, apparently it gets the message across.

Well, two can play at that fucking game, and two basically have to, or else this is gonna be sort of fucked up and weird, right?

He bucks his hips up as hard as he can, aiming right for Roy’s to press the bastard’s hand in between their bodies—and God, that feels even better than he fucking thought—

And it’s wild, because he never had the slightest idea how fucking heady it is, coaxing noises like that—noises like the ones Roy’s making, low and shameless and shivery; noises like the ones that keep tearing their way up and out of his throat no matter how hard he tries to swallow them for the sake of something like fucking dignity—out of a person like Roy.

A person like Roy Mustang, who’s so fucking cool and collected and commanding at the worst of times—who plays poker in his sleep and chess with his eyes closed and never gives a single fucking article of his plans away—

Affecting him like this is dizzyingly good and hot as fucking hell.

That’s what Ed wants. That’s just about all he wants right this second—the heat. The heat of his own blood; of the fire; of the room; of Roy’s skin and eyes and mouth and hands and fingertips, and the choked-off hiss he makes when Ed scrabbles for a grip on the shirt he was halfway through undoing and hitches his body up to savor the unmistakable, undeniable, indescribable outline of Roy’s erection pushing at his pants—

And if it’s slutty to let his head fall back and his eyes fall shut and rut hard against that pressure with his own needy, aching fucking dick, then that’s a stake he’ll burn at—all the way to ash. Nobody who’s ever felt like this would blame him; nobody who’s ever gripped the fabric of another person’s clothes and given over to a cresting tide of pleasure so immense that it defies description altogether—

“Hell,” Roy whispers, fighting to catch his breath, and Ed’s heart skips another several beats,
because he did that—he’s responsible for Roy Mustang struggling to get the oxygen for the blood that’s filling up his dick. “Have I told you in so many words that you’re so beautiful I can’t believe you’re real?”

“Save it for some theater date,” Ed gets out.

“Are you volunteering—” Roy’s hands should be fucking illegal; the graze of them up Ed’s sides might as well be a fucking drug. “—to accompany me to—” He drags in a breath so shaky that Ed understands the joy of smirking all at once. “—the theater?”

“Depends,” Ed says. To be fair, it takes him a full five seconds to muster up some spare saliva for the rest. “Show have sword fights?”

Roy’s whole body undulates against his—sinuous and still-too-hot and so fucking perfect there just aren’t adequate descriptors in this language, or probably in any other that Ed’s ever heard. “I’d—wager I can manage that.”

In the interests of discovering—nearly fucking impossible fucking thought—if this shit can get even better, Ed starts hauling one-handed at the buttons on Roy’s shirt again. “And you gotta buy me dinner.”

Roy grins against his throat, then drags his teeth across the skin again, and grins a little wider at the way Ed squirms. “If I can afford it.”

“Don’t t-tell me—fuck—”

Politely, Roy waits for him to continue.

Less politely, Roy keeps sucking on Ed’s collarbone while he waits.

At least Ed won’t have to explain this to Al, because Al already knows exactly what—well, who—the fuck he’s doing right now.

The inevitable checkup with Winry’s gonna be interesting, though.

Ed wrestles about three-quarters of a real breath into his lungs. “Don’t f-fuckin’ tell me they don’t pay you enough to take a kid out to dinner once or twice.”

Roy’s hands are parting Ed’s shirt much more efficiently than Ed was managing the other way around—the better for the bastard’s tongue to skate down his sternum, apparently; the heat of Roy’s breath on the damp trail coaxes another groan out of Ed’s well-attended throat. “How about once or twice a week—until either you get bored of it, or the money runs out?”

The throb of Ed’s insatiable dick is distracting as hell. “D’you like this shirt?” he asks.

Roy pauses in his progress down Ed’s chest just long enough to smirk up at him.

“Not especially,” he says, fixing both hands on Ed’s hips and shifting up—making sure their hips brush—so that Ed will have more leverage to abuse it. “Go ahead.”

Ed has to twist his whole torso to reach over to his right arm where it’s splayed out on the carpet, with the sling still tangled around the wrist, so he can smack his palms together and then press the left one to the goddamn stupid shirt unjustly hiding Roy’s chest from him.

Blue light flares, and the shirt goes all to ribbons, and the ribbons slither off of Roy’s skin and coil
up on the carpet in a pile.

If Ed’s not mistaken—and hell, on a hormone high like this, he probably wouldn’t notice if the roof caved in, so he could certainly be wrong—Roy’s eyes just darkened a little bit.

Ed might not be the only guy in the room who finds the judicious application of skillful alchemy unreasonably hot.

Ed tilts his head towards the shirt he just stripped off in a painfully literal sense of the word. “I can fix it later.”

The gleam in Roy’s eyes liquefies what’s left of the organs in his abdomen. “I don’t give a fuck.”

Ed swallows, which is a bit dangerous, since he doesn’t know where his spit’s going to end up now that he doesn’t have organs anymore. His hand’s getting unsteady again, but it’s the sheer force of the fucking eagerness this time, and drawing his fingertips down Roy’s chest assuages the worst of it right off the bat. “You better give at least one.”

“Don’t worry,” Roy says, and he runs the tip of his tongue along the edge of his teeth as he starts to grin with volcanic fucking heat. “I’m holding several in reserve for you.”

Ed wants to say something seriously fucking witty.

What comes out is “Fuck.”

Roy’s hands are roving all over his body yet again, and there is no greater torment in the fucking world, so he shuts his eyes and lets everything go limp to focus on enjoying it. “What’s the magic word?”

Ed cracks an eye open to target the snarl. “Now,” he says.

The glimmer turns to a twinkle while Roy laughs, which is not the fucking point, so Ed curls his fingers around the fly of the bastard’s slacks and sweeps one inside the waistband of Roy’s underwear—just far enough to graze his dick, and the way the surrounding muscles jump all at once, and the laugh strangles right into a moan—

“Point taken,” Roy gasps out as Ed tries to figure out whether it’s easier to undo the button or just shove his hand inside.

Ed’s so rarely been accused of trepidation that the shove-the-whole-hand-in strategy was probably the only option all along. “You always spend this much time talking when you fuck?”

It’s—weird, sort of. Having another dude’s throbbing, straining, searingly hot cock in your hand. But when he gently starts stroking, Roy’s eyes widen and then squeeze shut—and then he hangs his head and makes a faint noise like he’s dying, but he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“God, yes,” Roy grits out. “Right—the fuck—like that.”

This is a quick-draw fucking high-stakes game that Ed’s never played before, but he’ll be damned if anybody ever calls him a slow learner.

The trailing automail arm makes it sort of a pain, but he can still arch his back up enough to breathe out into the shell of Roy’s ear.

“Yes, sir,” he says.
Roy—

groans loudly, grins recklessly, laughs breathlessly, half-turns to smear a damp kiss on Ed’s cheek, and then plants one hand on the carpet to support himself while he unfastens his slacks in the time it takes Ed to blink and then shoves them down to his knees.

“You are,” Roy says, panting more than just a little now, “too damn extraordinary by half.”

Ed tunnels his fingers the way he usually likes it and starts pumping Roy’s dick real slow. “Which half?”

“A conceptual half,” Roy says, and the coherency of it is sort of belied by the sheen of sweat on his forehead and the tremble of his elbow where he’s holding himself up. “Half again on top of your whole. That must be—” A low, uneven groan that quickens Ed’s blood—and thickens it, with such violent fucking suddenness that he almost can’t see for a second. “Must—be—the explanation for your—size—”

Ed stops ministering to the goddamn motherfucking traitor he’d been planning to sleep with until just now. “My what?”

And Roy is laughing again, like this is the best fucking thing that’s ever happened to him, and all he wants it to aim that smug-ass fucking shit-eating grin at Ed and wait for the fireworks for the rest of his life.

“If you were bigger,” Roy says, “the universe just wouldn’t be able to hold you.”

Ed’s body’s so fucking confused. Between the sex and the rage, he’s not even sure what the heat burgeoning everywhere is coming from anymore.

“You better be the best fucking lay in Central by a long shot,” he says, “or I am gonna do things I don’t even wanna talk about to your balls.”

Roy clicks his tongue and shakes his head, and if Ed couldn’t see the pulse pounding desperately in his throat, it’d be ass-kicking time. “Communication is key to a healthy relationship, Edward.”

“How about this?” Ed asks, hooking his right leg around Roy’s hips to drag his criminally unattended groin all the way up Roy’s thighs and then against his cock before letting his own weight draw him back down. “Fuck me right this goddamn second, or I’m moving to Xing.”

“Surely,” Roy says, and there’s the purr again, and the fucking eyelashes, and that shouldn’t fucking work, but suddenly Ed can’t even hope to breathe; “after all this waiting, you’re hungry enough for an appetizer before we get to the main course?”

Ed scowls as darkly as he’s capable of, but his hand’s got a mind of its fucking own, and it’s tracing one fingertip real slow around the edge of Roy’s huge fucking cauterized-impalement scar in a way that probably qualifies as “loving” no matter what expression’s on his face.

“I didn’t order a fucking appetizer,” he says. “’Cause sometimes that just slows ’em d—”

Ed’s fast, sure—everybody knows it. It’s the reason he’s alive; basically always has been.

But Roy Mustang is a legend.

And he’s got Ed’s pants down around his thighs and a hot, hot, so fucking hot mouth around Ed’s dick in a matter of a second and a half, and—
Fucking hell—

Practically all that Ed can see through the fucking sunburst is silky dark hair trailing over skin—his skin, his hipbones; and those incredible fucking hands spread themselves on one thigh each and pin him to the carpet as the sheer fucking power of it tears on through him, and his spine tries to curl back to let it out—

Oh, God, he likes the way it feels trying to writhe and knowing Roy will hold him down.

And Roy knows he knows it, because he makes a sound like sobbing, and his hips strain hard for freedom, and Roy’s grip only tightens, and those fingers start to dig into his ass—

And it is absolutely fucking unreal how fucking sublime it feels—Roy’s mouth around him, too-hot and so wet and close; the press of his tongue is staggering, and if Ed had any nerves left to electrify, they’d be quitting their day jobs to get in on this—

And Roy shifts in closer—takes him deeper—and swipes his tongue slowly against the base of Ed’s cock, then up along the whole length of it to flick just the tip of it just gently at the head, then down again—so fucking far down, enveloping him completely, sucking softly at first and then harder, and swallowing so that the rings of muscle in his throat just fucking ripple all around Ed’s skin, and—

Too late he notices that his hand’s clenched in Roy’s hair, probably too tight, but the bastard hasn’t quit or complained yet, so maybe—?

Roy swallows, swallows, bobs his head, jacks the pressure up from magnificent to perfect-unbearable with the inward-upward motion of his tongue—

“Fuck,” Ed gasps out, and he doesn’t even recognize the sound of his own damn voice—who the fuck is this kid all faint and reedy like he’s never even talked before? “Fuck—Roy—God, Roy—I—”

They should ban him from sex forever for even thinking about uttering such a fucking cliché.

To be fair, though, it’s not exactly like he had any brain cells left to think about it.

And Roy—

Just—

Looks up at him through the ragged curtain of gorgeous dark hair, and his eyes are so fucking hot and bright and deadly with a challenge and an unformed grin that Ed just can’t—

Not—

Come so hard he blacks out, then whites out, then wakes up gasping on the floor with sharply-burning tears digging into the corners of his eyes.

Roy’s sitting up, one hand smoothing gently up and down Ed’s left thigh, like he doesn’t even fucking see the automail, and why does that make the half-formed tears sting even worse?

It’s a good damn thing Roy looks so fucking self-satisfied that Ed forgets to be upset about anything.

“The fuck did you learn how to do that?” Ed coughs up, because it seems like somebody ought to
say something before Roy just eye-smolders them both out of existence. He’s not even sure what interrogative word’s supposed to go at the front of the question, but since pretty much all of them are relevant, it doesn’t matter much.

“Academy,” Roy says, which answers the when and the where, at least. His tongue darts out to run along his upper lip. Ed can’t tell if he’s actually getting anything, but it’s hot as hell just contemplating the reality that Roy fucking Mustang just licked cum off of his dick. And liked it.

“You think they’d open a spot if I tried to enroll?” Ed asks.

Roy’s thumbs trace simultaneously down along the creases where his thighs meet his hips.

“I think you should be home-schooled,” he says.

It’s sort of a pity Ed doesn’t have much breath left to laugh—but on the other hand, Roy’s ego doesn’t need the help.

“Mm,” Roy murmurs, leaning down to drag his mouth along the inside of Ed’s nerve-loaded knee, tugging Ed’s pants down a little further while he’s there; “I’ve been thinking of a lot of lesson plans.”

Ed can’t tell whether his body’s trying to shiver or to contort itself closer to Roy. It’d be hard to argue with either one. “Y—yeah? I’m into—practical demonstrations. H-hands-on learning and all that—” The tip of Roy’s tongue traces an aimless wavy line along the inside of his thigh, and his back arches, and the breath tears out of him in a single gasp. “—sh-shit. All that shit. Mustang.”

“Present and accounted for,” Roy says into his skin.

“Y’know,” Ed says, “I think I would’ve liked school a lot more if it—”

“If everyone got private tutoring,” Roy says, “it wouldn’t be special anymore.” He looks up slowly, and it’s funny that he’s so famous for his hands when his eyes are just as dangerous. “Are you ready for more?”

The thought that it might get better than this makes the pit of Ed’s stomach start to warm again—just like fucking that. “You bet your obnoxiously fine ass.”

“Mm,” Roy says, because he’s an asshole bastard piece of shit who seems to understand that every time he makes that noise, it’s worse; “that ought to be my line.”

“No more lines from you, remember?” Ed says. “You’re on line probati—fuck—”

Roy just folded Ed’s right knee up against his chest and started mouthing damply down the back of his thigh, which feels so fucking good Ed thinks he’s entitled to forget the rest of that sentence as his brain shorts out.

“I assumed you were moments away,” Roy says, and he nips, and Ed—hears a faint, high howl that clearly came from someone else— “From suggesting that I kiss your ass. So I thought I should oblige.”

Most of Ed’s vitals must be functioning, or he wouldn’t be able to feel the blood starting to beat with that specific kind of urgency again—light and faint, at first; a pattering, a fluttering, and then a
“They give awards for biggest smartass at academy, too?” he manages to ask—which, he’d like the record to show, is really rather impressive when you’ve got Roy fucking Mustang smirking at you from between your legs.

“Several that were unofficial,” Roy says, and the smirk parts for a gleam of teeth, and the lining of Ed’s stomach catches fire again. “I won them all.”

“Shock of my fucking life,” Ed says.

Roy wraps one hand around each of Ed’s thighs and gazes at the way his fingertips dimple the flesh as he gradually tightens his grip. He looks like he just won an all-expenses-paid ticket to Paradise, and there’s no round-trip.

“Much as there is nowhere on this planet that I’d rather be,” he says, and Ed’s chest does a funny kind of clenching thing, “I did not plan this quite as far ahead as perhaps I should have, and I need to retrieve a couple things.”

Ed always knew he should’ve read one or two of those shitty romance books that Al likes. Maybe then he’d know how you’re supposed to sprawl seductively in a situation like this. The only kind of sprawling he’s got practice with is the kind that deliberately takes up as much of the bed as possible.

He takes a stab at an educated guess by stretching his arm up over his head, arching his spine, and twisting his hips—which feels great on top of probably looking okay, right up until a bit of cartilage in his shoulder pops louder than the fucking fire.

“Shit,” he manages, feeling his face heat up in the really-not-good kind of way. “Real sexy.”

Roy’s eyes don’t dull a fucking fraction, and they don’t waver from where they’re fixed on Ed’s.

“You’re damn right,” he says. He heaves a more-than-slightly-histrionic sigh, kisses Ed’s hipbone softly, and gets up, starting for the doorway. “Excuse me, my dear.”

“You’re welcome to try,” Roy says, voice trailing down the hall, and…

And shit. He—Edward Elric, career fuckup, renowned life-destroyer, sinner extraordinaire—is lying half-naked on the carpet in Roy Mustang’s living room, basking in both the heat of the fireplace and the increasing likelihood that he’s about to get fucked into next week.

It’s almost good enough to blot out all the shit that got him here.

His hair’s already tangling like a motherfucker, but that’s a problem that can wait; he shoves it back out of his face and then hikes himself up on his one operable elbow.

This is the best place for them to do this shit after all, isn’t it? Damn Roy, realizing that right off the bat—realizing that this is where it started, in all the ways that count.

And he must know what he does to people—someone like Roy, whose whole long-game master-
plan relies on his uncanny ability to read everyone around him and guide them in the direction that he wants. He must know what he does—what he’s capable of. He must have known that Ed would turn to putty in his fucking hands.

He must not mind.

He must be fucking serious.

Hopefully there’ll be some serious fucking, too.

Footsteps proceed back down the hall at a fairly precipitous rate, but then they pause in the doorway. Ed tries to make his cautious glance upward—to see how fucking stupid Roy thinks he is—look casual. Isn’t confidence supposed to be the kicker, or something?

Roy doesn’t look disgusted at all, though, unless he’s gotten way fucking better at acting since Ed left.

“You,” Roy says, “are so damn gorgeous it’s enormously inconvenient.”

“I dunno about this ‘gorgeous’ shit,” Ed says, “but I’ve been telling you I’m enormous for years.”

It is so fucking unfair how much hell that goddamn grin wreaks on Ed’s every last damn system. Roy Mustang ought to come with one of those fucking warning labels about how consumption poses a significant risk to all of your vitals and shit.

“Sorry about that,” Roy says, sauntering over. He catches up a red blanket and two of the throw pillows from the couch en route to where Ed is still valiantly attempting at a sexy sprawl. “I couldn’t hear you all the way down there.”

The roaring white silence is probably a bad sign. Did Ed just slip past the Gate for a second there?

“I can’t believe this,” a remnant of his voice remarks. “I’m gonna kill you and go to jail for murder before I ever get to lose my virginity.”

Roy crouches down next to Ed, head tilting as he grins again. “Can’t we multitask?”

“Hey, look at that,” Ed says, nodding to him. “Dead man talking.”

Roy shifts down onto one of his knees, bracing the hand not dragging half of the couch next to Ed’s head and leaning in to kiss him. Probably Ed should, like, bite the bastard’s lip for vengeance or something, but honestly it just feels too fucking nice.

“I think perhaps we should take care of your pressing virginity problem before any homicides occur,” Roy says.

“I think your problem’s more pressing right now,” Ed says, rolling far enough to cup his left hand around Roy’s groin, and—sure enough—the bastard’s still hard as hell, and his eyelids flutter as Ed squeezes gently.

“Mmmm,” Roy says. The fucker. “Touché.” He pushes his hips forward into Ed’s grip and then drops to both knees, which gives him better leverage to run one hand slowly down Ed’s side. “Hell. Didn’t even strip you properly; that’s a damn shame.” He draws the bottom of the paltry shirt currently protecting Ed’s torso from the unthinkable cold up slowly, kissing at the skin underneath. “To be fair, I was in a bit of a hurry.”
“Fuck,” Ed manages, which is about the best he’s probably going to be able to do between the heat of Roy’s dick in his hand and the heat of Roy’s mouth on his stomach.

The fabric rustles, swishing softly against his piqued fucking nerves, and Roy’s wet tongue makes him startle in the best way, and then—

A pause.

Silence.

“This is new,” Roy says, brushing just his fingertips along the edge of the scarring shit around the bullethole.

“Oh, yeah,” Ed says. “Funny story about that.”

Roy gives him a dark look. “Ah, yes. Getting shot is hilarious.”

“Shit happens,” Ed says.

Roy’s forehead furrows as he trails his index finger across the snarl of brand-new worm-white scar tissue with its shiny dead-rose-pink circumference. “Did you—when did this happen? Did you fix this?”

“That’s what you got the letter for,” Ed says. His guts start to cool down, and twist up, and—shit. “Can you—maybe give me grief about it later?”

Roy looks at him for a long, long moment, and Ed can almost feel the pages flipping underneath his fingers—several chapters of the volumes that the bastard doesn’t speak.

“Only if you promise you’ll sit still while I finally harangue you,” Roy says at last.

“I will if you feed me,” Ed says.

Roy smiles, and the shadow in his eyes recedes a little. “Deal.”

“Has to be good food, though,” Ed says. “What with the quitting and shit, I don’t get paid to listen to your stupid lectures anymore, s—oh, God—”

Roy has been doing that damn obnoxious thing he always does—that is, half-listening with an ever-so-slightly smug little smile, and then plotting and enacting his attack while his opponent waits in expectation of a rejoinder.

Well—if ducking down and nibbling at one of Ed’s hips counts as an “attack”, anyway. Ed doesn’t have the vocabulary for this shit.

He also can’t help fucking squirming as Roy shoves his shirt up practically to his shoulders and starts tracking up his chest—nipping and licking and lathing and just… lavishing every last fucking inch of his skin, savoring every muscle, and what the hell—?

He writhes a little harder, trying to get some traction to… well, shit—to something; Roy’s doing all the damn work. That’s not how it’s supposed to go, is it? It can’t be, the way people talk; so—

One of Roy’s hands closes around his wrist, pinning it over his head, and his breath catches so hard that he chokes on it.

Dredging a few words up from the fucking magma in the pit of his stomach is nearly impossible,
but that’s sort of his trademark by now. “Would you just let m—”

“No,” Roy says, the tip of his tongue feather-light on one of Ed’s ribs, which is unfair, thank you very goddamn much. “You elected me as the curator of your education in the fine art of sex, and I intend to follow through.”

“Guess it’s good,” Ed chokes out as Roy’s mouth descends onto his skin again—stark-bright sparks of gorgeous pain from the teeth soothed instantly by the damp breath and the soft mouth, and if this is what it’s supposed to be like, how does anybody go around doing anything fucking else? “That you’ve got a—f-fuck—an—election fetish—”

Roy laughs, and the shiver of the air across Ed’s skin actually makes it worse, and his back arches, and the way Roy’s grip on his wrist tightens to hold him down—

Fuck.

“May I use that on my campaign posters?” Roy asks.

“You might get my vote that way,” Ed manages. “M-meant to tell you—ran into a lady in Riedbach w-who thinks you’re hot—” Roy’s tongue flicks over his nipple, and his hips jerk so hard it’s a wonder he doesn’t fucking break anything. “—shit.”

“I am hot shit,” Roy says. He starts peeling the shirt off, carefully guiding it past Ed’s chin and over his head—and then leaves it as a muddle of fabric tangled around Ed’s arms, one of which he can’t even lift. “I am offended by the implication that her opinion of me was somehow exaggerated.”

Ed wants to laugh, but his breath is doing a funny thing where it just turns into steam the second it enters his lungs. “W-who’s implyin’ that?”

“Certainly not you, I hope,” Roy says, teeth grazing over his collarbone and then up his throat. “Or I might have to teach you some manners.”

The shiver that runs through Ed’s whole fucking body, head to toe—including the metal ones—is entirely involuntary, which surely means it shouldn’t count.

“Yeah?” he manages. “I mean—maybe you should—do that anyway.”

Roy’s eyes flick up to fix on his, and the hand not pinning his wrist to the carpet drags slowly down his side, fingertips roving.

“Do you think so?” he asks, in a voice like velvet-wrapped titanium.

Ed grits his teeth—you can’t not answer, when he talks like that; but it’s all a fucking power game, isn’t it? Trying to get Ed to admit to wanting something that he really shouldn’t but can’t help craving, and—?

Except then Roy ducks to kiss—with just a hint of a bite—at the side of his neck, right under his ear, body undulating upward over Ed’s as he levies his weight on pinning Ed’s arm.

“Next time?” he whispers.

And that—that pulses in his veins all the fucking harder, all the fucking faster; that’s a call to arms dissolved right into his very fucking blood.
Because that sounds like a promise.

And Roy doesn’t make those idly.

Roy doesn’t do anything idly.

Except dapple his fingertips along the edge of Ed’s hipbone, apparently.

“That was absolutely delightful,” Roy says, sounding ever so fucking faintly surprised.

Ed’s brain has long since shorted the fuck out.

No, wait—it—fizzled. Fritzed. Not ‘shorted’; God fucking forbid—

“What?” he manages.

“I just watched your pupils dilate when I said that,” Roy says. “It was absolutely sublime.”

Ed can’t help fucking groaning, and if it’s only sixty percent exasperation because it’s forty percent… something else… then…

Well, it’s not his fucking fault Roy’s like this—like a sunbeam and a slap to the face and a wet dream and a fucking revelation.

“Would you shut up?” he asks.

“Probably not,” Roy says, mouth gliding down his sternum again, and then down, and down—

“Are you asking as a hypothetical because you’re planning to offer a bribe?”

“Some of us—” Ed has to pause to gasp for air as Roy’s fucking tongue ghosts down his inner thigh again. “—aren’t in—the fucking—military—for the kickbacks—”

“Just for the ass-kicking,” Roy says.

“Y-yeah,” Ed says. The ceiling in here is really—well, actually, it’s not really anything in particular. It’s a fucking ceiling. Dark wood beams and maybe some kind of stucco or something. He keeps swallowing, but his heart keeps bobbing back up into his throat and beating there, intently, as Roy’s breath sighs against the all-too-tender, still-too-sensitive skin.

Ed drags in a labored breath and lets it out slow and shuddering as Roy’s mouth hovers there—just the whisper of his tongue, like the slither of silk, favoring Ed’s thigh for another fraction of a second before it draws away.

Ed wins the fight for words this time: “You gotta stop that.”

“Stop what?” Roy murmurs, because he is the biggest, evilest, worst fucking bastard in the entire extended history of terrible bastards dating back to the dawn of man.

“Teasing me,” Ed grinds out, “you fucking—aah—”

He’d fully intended to finish that with something pithy and cutting and brilliant—right up until the point where the flat of Roy’s tongue glides slowly and deliberately up the underside of his dick.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” Roy asks, and his voice is still like hot fucking butter, and Ed can’t bear it— “It looks like you’re enjoying it.”
“You’re not giving me much of a fucking—” His back arches off the floor, and the breath sears out of his lungs. “—-choice, much of a fucking—choice—”

Roy’s sigh is soft and weirdly sweet, and there’s a tenor of a laugh beneath it.

“I’m sorry,” he says, sounding like he really means it, even; like it’s true. “It’s just that you’re so—it’s such a privilege touching you at all.”

“Shut it,” Ed says. The effort of wedging his one working elbow underneath himself and lifting his torso enough to see the bastard’s face is, at least, distracting his attention from Roy’s mouth enough that he can almost think straight.

Roy, newly visible—
—grins.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” he asks. “I suppose I can still do quite a lot of damage with it closed.”

Ed lets his shoulders drop to the carpet and his head fall with them. He knows the cascade of his stupid hair will just about give Roy a heart attack, so that’s something. “Can’t believe I agreed to this.”

“Still time—” And there’s that fucking tongue again, light and delicate against the far-too-secret skin between his asshole and his dick, and holy—shit—“—to change your mind.”

It takes Ed a full two-second span to realize that he’s scraping both heels on the carpet like a feverish fucking animal, writhing with the effort of trying to pour some of the overwhelming heat inside him out.

“Fuck,” he says, faintly, and it sounds surprised even to his own ears.

“Getting there,” Roy says. “Patience, Edward.”

Bastard. Bastard knows, doesn’t he? Knows how many years Ed’s been dreaming of that voice, his name, firelight and a slow burn under every centimeter of his skin.

He makes some kind of a noise that averages the worst parts of an Oh and an Augh, and then his hips are rising from the floor again; he just can’t help it; can’t stop it; can’t make real words come.

Funny thing is, the time he accidentally learned what rimming was in the cafeteria, he thought it sounded like some special kind of fucking torture—miserable as shit for both parties, and disgusting and unsanitary to boot, and sure, he blushed redder than a fucking stoplight at sunset, and Havoc almost choked to death laughing at his expression, which at least was great insofar as it diverted everyone’s attention from Ed’s embarrassment, but—

But the thing is—

This feels like fucking heaven.

Well—

Damper, maybe; heaven’s supposed to have—clouds and shit, right? But this—

Just—
God—

The slick trajectory of Roy’s incomparable fucking tongue—just—dipping, sliding, probing, mapping—gently—either all the nerves in his body suddenly concentrated in that one fucking spot, or his whole system’s rapidly going haywire, and either way, it’s just so fucking good—

The absolutely fucking delicious torment abates for a second, and Roy’s voice rumbles, and Ed tries to blink the fucking stars out of his eyes long enough to listen.

“All right?” Roy asks.

“Again,” Ed pants out, “with the low fuckin’ standards, Mustang. You know who you are?”

“Most of the time,” Roy murmurs. “It’s a bit harder without you.”

“Well, now,” Ed says, fighting to sit up again so he can glare a little better, “it can be a bit harder with me, if you get my drift.”

Roy smiles at him, and one eyebrow arches slowly. “Is that your way of cordially requesting that I save the sappy declarations for another time and pay attention to the task at hand?”

Ed tries to focus on the sound of his breath hissing in and out past his teeth instead of on the excruciating throb in his guts, in his blood, in his groin.

“You ever seen me cordially request a fucking thing?” he asks.

“Aptly put,” Roy says.

Ed rolls his hips, which doesn’t do a whole lot for the boiling heat beneath his skin, but something’s gotta give.

“If you don’t want to—keep doing that,” he gets out, “tell me what the fuck you want me to do, okay?”

“I want you to keep lying there,” Roy says, running both tantalizingly warm open palms up and down Ed’s thighs, with another goddamn slowly-unfurling radiant fucking grin, “looking like you’re about to throttle me if I don’t hurry it up.”

“You say that—” Ed starts trying to wriggle free of all the stupid fucking clothes tangled up around his wrist; the automail’s like a hunk of lead, and the weight of it keeps trapping his other arm. “—like you think I’m above it.”

Roy pauses, and Ed can just see him considering the best way to phrase the joke.

Time for the heavy fucking artillery. Ed jerks his left arm free and lashes out with it before Roy can do the stupid fucking coy drawing-away bit again—and gets all five fingers curled in the silky black hair just behind his ear to make sure he can’t do it any time soon.

He leans in as close as he can without going cross-eyed staring at the bastard’s way-too-gorgeous, way-too-smug fucking face, and then he breathes against that talented mouth as softly as he dares.

“Would you just fuck me?” he says.

Roy’s knuckles graze along his cheek, down his neck—and settle on his inoperable metal shoulder.

“Is it hurting you?” he asks.
It’s really fucking difficult to take him seriously when he’s gazing at you through his eyelashes like that, but it’s sort of an important question, probably. Not as important as the one that Ed just asked, obviously, but he has to admit it’s sort of a nice thought. “Nah. Just getting in the way.”

He can’t quite see what Roy’s fingers are doing, and he can’t quite feel it, which is a totally bizarre set of circumstances, because somehow he knows from Roy’s face that there’s some adulatory fingertip-designs or some shit going on.

Roy’s eyes also dart towards the automail and then back up as he thinks real fucking hard about what he wants to say before he shares it with the class:

“Would it help to take it off?”

You know a picture lasts longer dies on Ed’s tongue and disintegrates. For the record, it tastes like crap. That’s probably what he gets for talking shit.

He swallows, which is extremely unpleasant, and then tries to search the nooks and crannies of Roy’s endless fucking stare for some kind of… something. A hint, a clue, the judgment, the rationale.

Roy gives him nothing to go on except a very slight, very soft little smile.

Bastard.

Ed makes a strong effort to clear his throat. “I—dunno. I mean, it’s sort of…” What? Scary? Humiliating? Disabling? Fuck. “…I guess it’d… get in the way less if it wasn’t… on.”

Oh, good. Now he sounds like a fucking moron on top of everything else. Who wouldn’t aspire to sitting ass-naked on Roy Mustang’s living room carpet, spouting stupid nonsense in answer to a perfectly reasonable question?

Well—relatively reasonable. It’d be a stretch to think Roy has ever been perfectly reasonable in his entire life.

But this time, he’s right, isn’t he? Wearing a sling and nothing else would be absolutely fucking ridiculous, and since it’s not like life is going to spark the fuck back into his arm and allow him any use of it, the most practical solution—especially since he doesn’t want to damage it any further, and he was really only wearing it this long so that he didn’t lose it—is to remove the fucking thing.

“Winry’ll need to work on it anyway,” he says, slowly, still watching Roy’s eyes for some kind of a sign. “So—I mean—”

“If it would make you uncomfortable,” Roy says, “forget I ever mentioned it.”

Ed eyes him. “Okay, sure. I’m real good at forgetting shit, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Roy has a special little laugh-sigh number just for him. It’s sort of cute. “The thought occurred to me.”

Ed steels himself, pun fully fucking intended, albeit tragically undelivered. “Look, just—yeah. Lemme just—”

It’s kind of tricky to do anything this close-up without elbowing Roy in the fucking nose, but he tries to shift and fumbles to get a grip on the latch for the shoulder—a maneuver complicated somewhat by the helpful fact that his stupid fucking hand just started shaking again, which is
embarrassing, which—

“Edward,” Roy says softly, and the fingers curling around Ed’s are even softer.

He looks over at the fire—which is easier, for starters; and might help hide the worst of the fucking blood rushing to his cheeks, for bonus points.

“Ed,” Roy says this time—still gentle, but a summons, not the sex act, and Ed slants his eyes sideways just enough to answer it.

Roy cups Ed’s hand in his two, lifts it to his mouth, and kisses the knuckles. He keeps one hand wrapped around it and reaches out to touch the automail with the other.

“May I?” he asks.

Ed takes one breath, and then another.

It’s not like Roy doesn’t know. It’s not like Roy doesn’t know better—truer—than most people. It’s not like Roy hasn’t seen the real fucking thing, at the very beginning, the first time their eyes ever met—the absence; the hacked-off emptiness of the reality of what isn’t there. Not just the replacement. Not just the ingenious contraption that helps even him to forget, sometimes, what he really lost. What he really is, and what he really isn’t.

It’s not like Roy didn’t put both hands on the wreck of a fucking kid in a wheelchair, held together with a couple stitches and an echo of the grief beneath the whirlwind of guilt. It’s not like Roy hasn’t seen him sprawled on wet pavement surrounded by the fragments of his own fucking ruin, looking up at death and wondering if it might be kinder. It’s not like Roy doesn’t know where he’s been, and what he’s done, and what he looks like when the crutches and the elegant prosthetics all fall away.

He swallows.

“Yeah,” he says. “Go ahead.”

Roy looks at him for a long, long moment more, long enough for Ed to know that he heard it; that he gets it—he understands that it’s all part of this same fucking game Ed’s been playing his whole stupid life, where the shallow end is the only place he ever starts to drown. When this is moving fast enough—when what he feels is overpowering the feelings—he can handle it, and it’s great, actually; he likes it. Roy’s been paying attention—he noticed that, just now; he’s Roy; he’ll have figured it the fuck out.

Sure enough, all he says is “All right,” and it’s in about the softest version Ed’s ever heard of his fucking voice.

And then he ducks down and presses his mouth right in against Ed’s pulse point, almost too hard and with a hint of an edge of teeth, and right as Ed tilts his head back, both of those deft fucking hands dart up and flicker over the fastenings, and—

Ed closes his eyes and clenches his teeth; and gorgeous, tingling good-pain blooms outwards from where Roy nips gently at his skin; and then his right shoulder rises as the weight hauling on it disappears, and his spine shifts, and for a second he almost tips sideways out of the sheer force of the compensatory habit.

Fabric whispers past his all-too-fucking naked skin, and he chances a glance. Roy’s shifted partway across him in order to lean over, the lifeless steel cradled in both hands, and set Ed’s arm
carefully on the coffee table.

Roy pauses a second, like he expects it to animate out of the blue and wriggle its fingers and jump
down onto the carpet, and then he turns to Ed.

Roy’s hands ought to have their own fucking section in code of law. They need checks and fucking
balances. The shit they do to Ed’s heart and guts and hips and skin just by existing ought to be
illegal.

They’re currently chafing gently down both sides of his neck again, and then one’s cupping around
the side of the port, and he’s trying not to think that.

He always feels—feeble, without it. Like a cat without claws; like a dog without teeth.

But Roy’s not looking at him like he’s prey.

Roy’s looking at him like he’s precious.

“Still with me?” Roy asks.

Ed swallows the not-inconsiderable collection of dreck and shit built up in his throat. “You got a
rhetorical question fetish, too?”

“I’m not sure,” Roy says, mouth gliding along Ed’s jaw. “Do I?”

Maybe the bubble of a laugh in Ed’s throat is a tiny bit desperate, but it’s progress all the same.

“Shut up,” he says, and Roy pauses in mouthing at the borders of his face long enough to display
the thousandth of the smug-ass grins, and Ed gets a fistful of the bastard’s hair again and drags him
in to kiss that twice-damned expression right the fuck off of him.

Like he figured—like he knew; like Roy must have, too—it’s a hell of a lot easier after that, once
they get back into it. Once they get moving, and there’s no damn time to sit there wallowing in the
swamp of stupid thoughts about vulnerability and brokenness and all that shit.

It’s easier, and it’s good—Roy’s mouth on his bite-bruised neck, on his collarbones, down his
chest; grazing one hip and then the other; tracking once again along the insides of his thighs, and
then there’s a growl resonating up out of Roy’s throat at the way Ed’s spine arches up off of the
carpet—

Ed manages to pry his fingers loose from Roy’s hair, because he’s going to yank it all out in
another second, and even Roy probably couldn’t pull off bald. He can barely fucking control his
hand when he’s so busy folding his body at all fucking angles trying to get his skin closer to Roy’s
tongue.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ THIS, FRIENDS!! ♥

You'll notice – if you haven't already – that I wrote this like I was setting up for a sequel, because that is how it wanted to be written, and no amount of dragging my feet would shut Ed up about it. XD

But here's the thing: I started this fic in mid-May of last year, which means that it took over ten months to write, edit, and post it in its entirety. And I really, really don't know have another ten months of this thing in me. XD On top of that, the sequel it set itself up for is one that would take me way out of my comfort zone, so I'm not sure I'd manage to write anything worth reading even if I tried.

tl;dr summary: I know it sounds like sequel time, but I am probably off the bridge and into the water before that actually happens. XD I'm sorry to everyone who was looking forward to that! If it helps at all, the upshot is that I'm back to work on Loud and Clear, and there's another 100K or so of that sucker that should hopefully be ready to share relatively soon.

So, uh……… *jazz hands*

In all seriousness, though, thank you guys. ♥ I know I'm the actual WORST at responding to comments, but to everyone who left one, or reblogged on Tumblr, or left kudos or likes – that is the reason I do this. You are the reason I do this. Thank you, so much, from the bottom of my icy little heart. ♥

“Hold on,” Roy murmurs, and Ed pauses with his arm drawn halfway back, trying to convince his eyes to see straight enough to figure out what the fuck Roy’s feeling; did he do something wrong, or—?

He must fucking have, because Roy’s got one arm under Ed’s shoulders and the other hand splayed on his sternum, laying him back down on the rug and then—

Catching up one of the pillows to set it under Ed’s head—and following it with the second, which winds up wedged beneath his hips.

And his heart starts pounding twice as hard, just like that—fucking instinct is a trip.

There’s a little silver foil packet in Roy’s clever hands next, and the bastard raises it to his mouth and gets the corner in his teeth to tear it open, and—

Shit, that shouldn’t be anywhere near as hot as it turns out it is.
“If I don’t do this now,” Roy says, like somebody’s going to ask him to explain himself when he’s *that fucking hot*, “I’m afraid I might forget.”

Ed’s almost oxygen-deprived enough to ask “*Do what?*”, but he figures it out in a fucking hurry when Roy holds a disc of latex up in front of his mouth and blows into it with a delicacy that would be hilarious if Ed had any energy to spare for amusement after the fucking flood of *heat*.

It’s funny, too—distantly; a ripple of a laugh in his dragged-in, trembling breath—that he’s heard the guys whine and fucking moan about condoms and shit, but the way Roy holds the edge of it between his lips to free both hands for calmly unbuttoning his pants again is just about the hottest fucking thing that Ed has ever *seen*.

Maybe that’s just Roy. God, maybe that’s just what he *does* to people; maybe it’s just the trademark Mustang suaveness felling another fucking casualty. Maybe Ed’s just weak for this—for *him*, for the way his gorgeous hands move, for the focus of his incredible eyes.

The latter slip mostly shut as Roy lifts his dick out of his pants and smoothes one hand along the underside. He tilts his head back; snatches the condom out of his mouth with the other hand; and softly, so softly, starts to moan—

This isn’t fucking fair.

Do other people have to deal with this shit? The beat of Ed’s blood between his hips is shaking him so hard he thinks he’s going to shatter; it’s gone from vicious to fucking violent, and his dick aches, and his guts are liquid—

“Roy,” he gets out, and the rough catch of his own voice is almost startling. Words belong to other people; words are for feelings small enough to fit into capsulated syllables; this is so much *more*.

“Roy—I need—I need you to fuck me; I—”

That pulls a sharp gasp off of Roy’s lips, and it cuts right through him and burrows into his bone marrow, and it’s all he can do to cling to consciousness as Roy abandons every last pretense of collectedness and fumbles to roll the condom onto himself—

And *fuck*, Ed’s never really stopped to think that a particular dick could be appealing, exactly; they’re just sort of—they’re *there*, right; they’re a nerve center, evolution, whatever shit—but fuck if Roy’s isn’t goddamn gorgeous just like all of him; fucking thick and straight and straining, and Ed’s mouth waters and goes dry in the same instant somehow—

“You know,” Roy says, and the faintness of it—the breathlessness, the hoarse note, the tightness—stops Ed’s throat and twists his spine; “I’ve been telling people for years that you were going to be the death of me.”

“Mustang,” Ed grinds out despite the banging of his heart against the walls of his esophagus. “Is there some part of ‘fuck me’ that’s fucking *unclear*?”

Roy laughs—raggedly, which Ed guesses is a start, but—

And then leans down, all pure fucking heat and silken hair and far too persuasive mouth; all brain-obliterating kiss and gentle hands on Ed’s knee, his thighs, his hips; one curls around his dick and then slips down to cup his balls and then glides lower, and the surge of blood to Ed’s groin legitimately fucking leaves him reeling.

“Bear with me,” Roy says, and the sensation of his fingertip sliding in is—indescribably fucking weird, but not bad-weird, just… “I promise you it gets better.”
“Like I fucking care right now?” Ed gasp-says. He just wants—he just wants to be close, closer, as close as it’s possible to fucking get; wants to be full and fucking overflowing; wants to be melting at the edges and running down Roy’s fucking skin; wants to taste every part of him—

“I don’t want to surprise you,” Roy says, so low Ed feels it resonating against his throat almost more than he hears it; “except with the good parts.”

“All your fucking parts are good parts,” Ed manages. “Stop talking and fucking do someth—”

Roy’s finger delves in deeper, and the feeling is so fucking bizarre Ed just—squirms, and lets the breath leave him in a completely different configuration than he’d intended. “Ahh—”

Roy’s mouth moves up under Ed’s ear, then across the shell—hot-wet breath and a whisper of warmth as Roy’s lips part, and then he nips the curve of Ed’s ear gently, and somehow he’s fucking multitasking enough to be fussing around with both hands at the same time.

His fingertip presses back in—slick this time, and cooler, drenched in something, and the slide of it against the tingling nerves is transcendent and fucking torturous, and Ed wants so much more.

Since words seem to have lost the slightest semblance of meaning in his brain, he tries to communicate that by rocking his hips down hard against Roy’s hand—and gets himself a fucking choked-off noise from Roy’s mouth, and the finger buried up to the bottom knuckle, and God, that’s good—weird-good, but good—

Language returns triumphantly, and several words pop like tiny little pearlescent bubbles in his brain: Roy Mustang is finger-fucking him. That’s what this is. That’s what it’s called.

Shit. Just acknowledging the simple fact of that shouldn’t be hot either, but it damn well fucking is.

“Lord,” Roy says, almost under his breath, and he leans his forehead against Ed’s and opens his eyes just a sliver, and he’s biting his lip so hard it’s going white.

Ed swallows again in an ultimately doomed attempt to get his throat to clear—it’s hard to do much of anything with even a remote level of fucking competence with Roy’s finger up his ass, shifting slowly, dragging all these unprecedented fucking flares and tingles out of his unsuspecting nerves.

And the thing is—

He just fucking craves—

“More,” he says.

His voice sounds fucking strangled to his own ears, but Roy’s next breath catches so hard that he must be doing something really, really right regardless.

Maybe it’s just something about the humidity of the room or some shit, because it takes Roy three tries to swallow before he can get out a sentence: “Are you sure?”

Ed grits his teeth and rolls his hips against Roy’s hand—which, on the upside, gets his point across; and which, on the downside, almost fucking kills them both.

“Yes,” he says, “I am fucking sure, Roy; would—you just—”

Roy’s hand withdraws, and Ed hears his traitor of a voice fucking whimper at the loss of the heat and the fullness and the friction.
Roy distracts him with a long trail of wet kisses back and forth across his ribs, which sustains the frenetic rhythm of his breath and the arc of his ever-tightening spine; and then—

Two of those fucking fingers, pressed in slow, and it burns, and God, Ed can’t fucking get enough—

“Yes,” he gets out on a dry-mouthed rasp of an exhale. “Roy—fuck me, come on—”

Roy’s answering breath has a hell of a lot more laugh in it than he’d like. “In good fucking time, dear heart.”

He sounds good—swearing. He swears well. Why is that hot?

God, Ed’s so fucking doomed.

“You,” he says, “are the biggest procrastinator on the planet.”

Roy’s mouth curves against his hip, right near the edge of the newest well of scars. “I have stamina,” he says.

“What you have,” Ed says, fighting the urge to squirm when Roy’s tongue flicks against his skin, “is a death wish.”

Roy pulls his fingers almost free and pushes them back in agonizingly fucking slow.

“Only a little death,” he says.

Ed knew that was coming. Or he would have, if there was a single fucking operable brain cell left in his skull.

Roy apparently takes the silence as encouragement better than he took the actual encouragement, which is pretty fucking typical Roy, actually, all told—but he’s still moving so slowly that Ed thinks his heart’s going to burst into cardiac dreck and confetti, fuck—

Roy drives in just a fraction harder the next time, and Ed can hear him panting softly, which is also so fucking hot that Ed’s head spins like a dervish, whipping the rest of him into the frenzy—he hooks his one arm around the back of Roy’s neck and tries to haul him in, tries to drag him nearer, tries to get closer than the impossible closeness of this—

“All right,” Roy says, so softly it barely registers over the machine-gun rhythm of Ed’s own heart and the choking smoke-seethe of his breath. “Hold on.”

“I am,” Ed says, tugging with his arm for good measure. It’s not even close to conscious—it’s just the mindless, knee-jerk, automatic argument. He really is just that fucking contrary.

And Roy buries that perfect face in Ed’s neck and laughs again, like Ed’s shitty-ass personality is the best damn thing he’s ever seen.

There wouldn’t be much time to mull over how dumb Ed is even if he wanted to, though, because on the next inward thrust Roy slides a third finger in with the first two, and Ed’s going to die, but it’ll be so fucking great; it’ll be a death of gasping, groaning, overwhelming pleasure drowning him in shuddering waves, and does it get much fucking better than that?

Every other conversation in the fucking cafeteria was about this shit—which is why Ed eventually started ranging out across the street to quiet little sandwich shops where he could diagram arrays
and chug some distinctly non-radioactive definitely-coffee-and-not-sludge and clear his mind. So how is it that nobody ever mentioned how fucking weird it is?

But it’s weird in a—not-weird way. Weird when you try to get the whirling cogs of your mind to catch and stick; weird when you think about it instead of just setting your fucking body free.

Weird because it isn’t weird when you let go, and the instincts float your brain so high and so fast that you’re dizzy with it, and your nerves just fucking sing—like struck metal, like plucked strings, like joyful fucking birds first thing in the goddamn morning, when the sun summons them awake.

Nobody ever mentioned how wet it is—lube and shit aside; the sweat and the spit and the myriad other fucking fluids; his hairline’s drenched; his forehead’s dripping; there are tiny fucking sauna-pools clinging to the inside of his elbow and the small of his back and the back of his knee. And that should be gross, shouldn’t it? That should be disgusting. But it’s not; it just feels—validating. Grounding. Like he’s really fucking here; like this is undeniable, and his skittering heartbeat will keep a transcript of Morse code bruises on the inside of his skin—

Nobody ever mentioned how fucking honest it is—how absolutely fucking bare you are no matter who’s still got his stupid, now-extremely-damp slacks still half-on around his knees. Because it’s not the speaking kind of honesty, or the skin-shown kind of naked.

It’s that you can’t lie to somebody this close. It’s that it’s past seeing, or learning, or any kind of sensorily-processed intuition. It’s that you can feel the fucking truth of somebody this close. You can feel what they are, who they are, what it means. And you can’t bullshit with your hips and your shoulders and your ribs and your fingertips the way you can when it’s the words alone.

Not even Roy could fucking fool somebody here.

So there’s no point even trying not to fucking scream when the next push of Roy’s fingers grazes something that jolts Ed’s spine with straight-up fucking magic kinds of sparks that shimmer to the end of every single fucking neuron.

“God,” Roy whispers, and he’s smiling; you can hear it. “Ed—”

“Shut up,” Ed says, because the physical sensations alone are going to shred him, and if Roy goes back to the rumbly-seduction voice thing, he may not fucking survive.

“No,” Roy says. The bastard. He kisses under Ed’s chin, then down his chest; his hand withdraws—“You are so, so, so damn beautiful.”

He’s not. He’s not, and he wants to say it, but it can’t be a fucking lie. Not here. Not like this. Which means that Roy, at least, legitimately believes it, and—

That’s not fair.

It’s the dumbest fucking phrase in the language, but that’s not fair—

“Relax,” Roy says, softly, coaxing again; and the fucked up part is that Ed wants to give him all of it—especially the shit he hasn’t even asked for; all of it, for as long as he’ll keep taking. “Can you? Just—release the tension, just—”

“Easy for you to say,” Ed manages.

The worst part is, his fragmented brain just figured out why Roy’s asking that of him, and—shit. Shit, this is for real; it’s not like there’s been any going back for about an hour now, but—still—
“I know,” Roy says. “I’ve been there.”

That’s a fucking thought—and one that deepens the eternally-burgeoning heat in Ed’s guts instead of relieving it; he has to curl his fucking toes to divert some fucking fraction of it outward.

“No kidding,” he manages.

“Long story,” Roy says, in the gentle voice. His fingertips keep gliding up and down Ed’s side—stroking, some kind of soothing thing, and the worst part is it’s working. “I can tell you all the gory details one of these days, if you like.”

He’s trying to give Ed something else to pay attention to. It’d be an asshole move not even to try to accept that generosity, so Ed does his fucking damnedest to fixate on the words and convince his tensed-up muscles to un-squeeze.

“How gory are we talking?” he says. “If there wasn’t some hugely humiliating shit on your part, I dunno if I’m interested.”


Ed’d follow that up with about eight more questions involving the specific levels and varieties of embarrassment endured by the apocryphal (and possibly mythical) younger Roy, except that the current model just started pouring lube on his dick and smoothing it down the shaft with one cupped hand, and droplets of coherent thought keep evaporating before Ed can reach them.

It’s bizarre, though, imagining Roy not being a fucking control freak about everything in the vast universe that falls under the remotest semblance of his little kingdom. Then again, if the raunchy cafeteria conversation is to be believed—which, so far, experience indicates it’s not, but maybe there are some grains of truth-like material in amongst the chaff—apparently you can control the fuck out of this shit from the receiving end if you go about it right.

…but he’s not expected to control the fuck out of this, is he?

Nah. That’s not Roy’s style. And that’s not Roy’s intention, which is sort of the whole fucking point—the whole fucking reason he’s still here, sprawled out on the goddamn carpet, down an arm and up an aching fucking erection and an uncontrollably hot throbbing desire centered right around his ass.

This is something Roy’s sharing with him—bestowing, to a certain fucking extent. Which isn’t to say he’s not getting his fucking exchange and then some; just that Roy’s obviously in the driver’s seat here, which is probably exactly how he likes it.

Ed’s done a fuckton too much driving in his own damn life lately, and he’s pretty sure this is exactly how he likes it, too.

Hard to complain regardless when Roy’s sinking his teeth into his bottom lip and hissing through them at the intensity of his own fucking hand as he finishes with the fucking lube. The pulse in Ed’s body keeps deepening—like his blood’s turned to paint; like his skin’s just a fucking palette for Roy’s hands, his mouth, sensation—

Ed half-sits up and reaches out to curl his hand around the back of Roy’s neck—an advantageous position for yanking the bastard back down halfway on top of him, which is the best way to get him close enough to try to lick his tonsils. He’s just too fucking—him. He’s just too fucking Roy, and Ed can’t ignore it, and he can’t leave it alone. If somebody’s going to go around—or kneel around his own living room, currently, but whatever—looking like that, it’d take a stronger
fucking will than Ed’s to resist the urge to get that gorgeous mouth on his own damn skin at any cost.

“Come on,” he says into the kiss. “Come on, come on—”

Roy draws back for breath; his eyelashes are a fucking marvel as they flick up. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Ed says.

Depending on how you look at it, that’s simultaneously a big fat fucking lie and absolutely true.

It’d be a pity Roy’s so goddamn smart if it wasn’t half of what Ed loves him for. You can see it all in his eyes sometimes—the oldness that comes from it. The exhaustion. How tired you get from having to know what people really are.

Except he doesn’t look tired right now.

He looks happy.

He looks warm.

The flicker of comprehension gets replaced, though, by a darker gleam of something—hungry.

“Mm,” Roy says, leaning in to graze his teeth up Ed’s neck. “Good point. I can think of a few ways we might both enjoy.”

Ed’s brain burns out. It was only a matter of fucking time.

“Oh,” he says.

“I think you mean—” Roy’s tongue caresses the individual ridges of his throat. “’Ohh—h—’”

Ed’s throat aches with the impulse to answer that with an equally pornographic noise. “Uh—yeah. Yeah, that’s—sure.”

He’d say more—he’s on a streak, here, after all, of painfully articulate fucking wit—except that Roy’s fingertips graze his asshole, and the spark of contact sears up his nerves again, jolting his spine all fucking over again.

“Relax,” Roy says.

“I fucking heard you the fucking first time,” Ed grinds out, trying to force his body to stop tensing in anticipation—which, come to think of it, is probably not helping at all.

“I know you did,” Roy says in a voice Al would call doting—not that Ed ever wants to think about Al in a situation like this ever again for as long as he fucking lives. “And if I expected you to follow my instructions without questioning them, I would deserve what I got.”

“Which would be a swift kick in the ass,” Ed says.

“At the very least,” Roy says.

They look at each other for another second, and Ed swallows, listening to the bang of his own heartbeat.
“Sorry,” he says.

Roy blinks. “What in the world are you sorry for?”

“This is taking fucking forever,” Ed says, pretending hard that he doesn’t feel the hot rush of the blood flooding his face, “because I’m such a fucking amateur.”

Roy’s eyes narrow slightly, and then he arches an eyebrow.

And then he plants one hand on Ed’s collarbones, pinning him to the floor, and starts kissing down his chest slowly.

“You,” he says, “are fucking wonderful.”

Something jumps in the base of Ed’s stomach at the F-bomb flicking off of those lips. It’s gorgeous. This is a disaster.

“Yeah fuckin’ right,” he says.

“I know I am,” Roy says, and then he starts kissing up the side of Ed’s dick, which is totally fucking cheating, because Ed instantaneously forgets how to argue. He’ll be the first to admit that that’s really fucking saying something.

Ed lets his head fall back and tries to drag breath all the way into the bottoms of his lungs—tries to think about capillaries and alveoli; tries to imagine molecules of oxygen dissolving in his veins. He tries to focus on the swell of that peculiar pleasure-good; on the tickle of Roy’s silken hair against his skin; on the gentle slide of Roy’s free hand’s fingertips up and down his thigh, flirting with the angry band of scar tissue snarling upward from the edge of the automail port.

Feels—nice. All of it feels nice. And the fire’s nice; and he’s so fucking safe here; he’ll never get tired of not having to watch his fucking back every goddamn second. It’s beautiful. He wants this. This is all he wants. To be safe; to be wanted; to be loved—

“There you go,” Roy breathes, dream-soft against his skin; a damp kiss on his inner thigh; one more gently-probing press of fingers, then—

Roy sits up, shifts back, clasps one hand around each of his hips—

Ed can’t help the urge to tip his hips higher up, even though he has no fucking clue whether that’ll help as far as the relative angles are concerned. Roy’s right hand shifts, smoothes down Ed’s thigh again, and then grasps his own dick and guides it towards—

OhfuckohGodoh—

The fit is too fucking tight—isn’t it? Can’t be fucking possible; can’t—

The way Roy’s face scrunches up is the cutest fucking thing Ed’s ever seen, which actually distracts him from the too-hot push and the first sting of the stretch, and—fuck—

The pain fucking sears right through him, straight up his spine, and he clenches his jaw and squeezes his eyes shut, trying to fixate on the thrillingly harsh note underscoring Roy’s breathing—the slow, gratified groan that the pleasure wrings out of him, long and loud and slow—

And Ed wants it—wants the pain and the too-much and the sweltering heat of Roy’s body crammed in against his, pressing hard, overwhelmingly fucking invasive and so good—
The last gasp of space between them vanishes as Roy’s fucking dick slides deeper in his ass, and even more fucking impossible than that is the way the slap of Roy’s flesh on his makes him *tremble*.

He thinks he’s probably spent most of the last hour with his back arced like a fucking bridge. Whether or not he’s gonna feel that tomorrow probably depends on whether he survives tonight. And that depends on whether Roy lets him, at the rate they’re going.

Roy spreads his hand under the small of Ed’s back—fingertips still damp with lube and shit, ever so slightly sticky, and the cool prickle where they meet Ed’s sweat makes him shiver.

Roy’s forehead knocks gently against his again, and there’s more sweat mixing all over the fucking place here, and that should be nasty, shouldn’t it? But it’s not.

“This,” Roy says, eyes pressed shut, cords of muscle standing out in his neck—they’re so fucking gorgeous Ed’s fingers settle over them without his permission; “may be rather sh…” He opens his eyes and blinks them twice. “…brief.”

The curl in Ed’s stomach is pure fucking magma; it yearns to manifest as either a groan or a slow laugh. By sheer force of will, he twists it into a feeble impression of a growl.

“Thin ice, Mustang,” he manages. “I would fuckin’ know.”

“You would fucking *snow*, you mean,” Roy says calmly.

The really weird thing is that laughing ever-so-slightly hysterically while you’re clutching on to another person who’s currently in the process of fucking you makes all of the sensations even more intense.

Is sex supposed to be this damn funny?

At least it finally fucking took his mind off of the background pulse of the low-scale pain.

He twists up enough to kiss the very smugly-grinning bastard over him again, biting down hard on Roy’s lip for good measure. He garners a soft gasp and a less-soft shift of Roy’s hips against his, which—

Fucking purgatory; it’s so damn *big* and so damn *good*—

Roy was probably right, too, although a team of wild horses—of Mustangs, *ha*—couldn’t drag saying so out of Ed, right now or ever. This isn’t going to take long. They’ve both been so fucking fired-up for the last, what, hour? Waves shot through with electricity keep cresting in the core of Ed’s body, breaking hard and hissing outward to every last extremity, and they’re only getting taller as time ticks on, and Roy hasn’t had any damn relief since they started—

Roy’s right hand slides down to cup Ed’s ass, and the left wraps itself underneath his right thigh, drawing slowly down until the dapple of fingertips against the back of his knee starts to tickle. Just as he tenses to pull away, Roy starts guiding the bend of his leg—folding it up against his chest, then smoothing that way-too-fucking-talented hand all the way up the back of his thigh to his calf, extending it so that all of the muscles stretch right as Roy rolls his hips, and… *Fuck*.

It’s no longer any wonder that everybody talks about this like they do. Ed would talk about it like that right this fucking second if he hadn’t just about given up on breathing.
“Is that all right?” Roy murmurs, mouth on his chest, fingers chasing goosebumps up and down his skin. The left hand curls around his ankle, and the fingertips of the right start digging gently into the flesh of his ass, which simultaneously tingles like a motherfucker and feels great.

Presumably he’s asking about the angle Ed’s leg is at; Ed’s pretty sure the ass-grab thing fulfills an extremely longstanding fantasy, and he’d have to pry that hand off of his cheek if he didn’t like it. Which he does. A lot.

“Yeah,” he gets out. Everyone always talks about ‘communication’ in relationships, right? That probably applies to this part, too.

Plus it’s true. The whole thing feels fucking nice, bizarrely enough; he hasn’t stretched properly in a long time, and the cold mostly made him cramp up everywhere—but his joints might as well have melted into jelly by this point, so by and large Roy’s basically doing him a favor, limbering him up like this. It doesn’t even pull on any of the new scar tissue too bad.

Roy—in the apparently typical, schmoopy-as-shit Roy fashion—dots feather-light kisses slowly all the way up the inside of Ed’s leg. In the equally typical, too-smart-bastard fashion, he starts rocking his hips against Ed’s in such a gorgeously smooth fucking rhythm that Ed can’t give voice to any complaints about the stupid part.

“Good so far?” Roy asks, speaking into the side of Ed’s neck this time.

“Yes,” Ed says, because it’s important to make sure he fucking knows that before launching into: “Do you ever shut up?”

“You wouldn’t recognize me if I did,” Roy says.

He’s probably right.

“Besides,” Roy says, which he doesn’t seem to notice further proves the point, “I intend to keep telling you how exquisitely delicious you are until you finally cave and believe me.”

Ed writhes, but that only makes the impact of Roy’s flesh on his even better. “Not a f-fucking dessert, Mustang.”

“We could change that,” Roy says, and the tongue is out again, and tracking up his jugular. “Add some whipped cream, some chocolate sauce—”

“Sticky,” Ed says.

“It’s sticky anyway,” Roy says.

The painstakingly slow press of Roy’s hips against his is boiling his blood, and the steam bathing his brain makes it fucking impossible to think. “If you’re so damn hungry, go eat something.”

“I am hungry,” Roy says, “for one thing, and one thing only.”

Ed swallows, and Roy’s tongue chases the movement of his throat. “Gonna guess you don’t mean steak.”

“Not quite.”

He summons some sad little portion of something like a laugh. “So why the fuck are you talking about it, then?”
“To make it last longer,” Roy says.

Ed lets his head drop back—which he has to admit is easier with the pillow there, supporting his neck and shit—as Roy keeps shifting in… and back.

“I’m gonna make you dead in a minute,” he says.

“Mm,” Roy says, and then there’s a hand tangling itself into his hair, and a mouth hovering just over his. “May I turn you over?”

Breathing is getting to be a fucking challenge again. Something about Roy’s lips; something about the unfathomable depth and immeasurable intensity of those fucking eyes. “You’re the one who knows what you’re doing.”

“I’m doing you,” Roy says, lips grazing his as the words move them, “last time I checked.”

Ed tries to growl, and Roy starts to laugh, but then the hand in his hair starts to shift just as Roy’s free one pulls on his hip, and it’s the work of a gasp and an instinctual twist to flip his body, and then—

Roy starts kissing down his back, so fucking slow—

Until he gets to Ed’s ass and kisses even slower.

And this is kind of the fucking ultimate in fucking trust, isn’t it? He’s willingly given up his right arm and his best weapon; he’s laid himself out barer than he’s ever been; and now he can’t even watch what Roy’s doing.

But God, if that mouth on his skin doesn’t feel like fucking absolution.

Both of Roy’s hands shift underneath his chest, lifting gently until he’s up on his knees, and he automatically sweeps his left arm in and props his weight on his elbow. Roy’s voice washes over him from the base of his spine, pouring up towards his ears again, and how is it that the low purr under every syllable still isn’t getting old? “Is that okay?”

Doesn’t mean he has to say anything about it, though. “Stop fucking asking.”

“I will keep fucking asking,” Roy says, punctuating every damn sound of it with another deliberate kiss, “until I am satisfied that this is as staggeringly wonderful for you as it is f—”

“Fuck me,” Ed says.

The slightly strangled noise that chokes off into a long pause is pretty damn vindicating.


At least it’s Ed’s turn to laugh in the middle of more important fucking business for once. He lets it metamorphose into a groan partway over the rise of his tongue as Roy strokes both hands along the outsides of his thighs and then grips his hips and shifts forward and—

Fuck—there it is—

And this time—

No fucking around with the fucking; no damn bones about the boning; no… Ed’ll work on that list later. Point is, this time around, Roy gets right to the point.
He sinks in all the way to the fucking hilt and bends forward, aligning his torso with Ed’s back—and the weight on him, over him, all over him—that feeling of being surrounded—is so dizzyingly good that Ed’s breath sticks, and catches, and won’t shiver free even as he twists his hips back and upward to rub them against Roy’s, which earns him a long, throaty moan breathed hot against the back of his neck.

Yeah, this isn’t gonna take too long.

“God,” Roy says, and it’s fucking extraordinary—all the muscles in his stomach and his thighs are tensing where they’re pressed against Ed’s skin; sweat gathers slickly between their bodies, and there’s nothing quite like this, is there? This particular fucking nasty-weird-gorgeous closeness; this merging of flesh—

Roy’s right hand slips underneath him and curls around his dick.

And then Roy’s hips retreat just far enough for the cold air to flicker through the space between them, and then he drives in again, and—

The core of Ed’s body ignites so fucking bright that it sears straight through every last cell—tidal wave and pouring rain and gale-force winds and sheer fucking explosive force; a cavalcade of cataclysms all at once—

He’d scream if he could breathe; if he wasn’t just stark blue flame straight through—

He’s never fucking come like this, and he’s not sure he ever will again, and that’s probably good, ’cause he might not live through a second round of this shit.

He blinks sparks and haze and whatever other shit out of his eyes after a couple seconds of focusing on breathing. When the miscellaneous obstructive shit clears, he finds himself half-craddled in Roy’s arms, and half-still sprawled out on the carpet, generously splattered in cum.

That’d be real fucking embarrassing if he had any energy left for that kind of shit.

“Shit,” he says, and even though he seems to have rediscovered his breath in the interim, his voice sounds pretty faint.

Roy strokes his hair back off of his forehead—fuck how goddamn soothing that is; fuck how intoxicatingly comforting it feels.

“I hope that was a good ‘shit’,” Roy says.

“Shut up,” Ed says. He should’ve been keeping a tally for how many times he spoke those words tonight.

Roy leans down and kisses the bridge of his nose, which is disgusting, so Ed makes a noise of protest and tries to wriggle away, which—

Hits his tortured spine right in the agony zone.

“Oh okay,” he manages when the spear of pain through the center of his chest mostly subsides, and the bubbles bursting in his vision dissipate. “I need—a shower, and some painkillers, and some sleep.”

“All of that can be arranged,” Roy says, and by the softness of it, he didn’t miss any of the raucous fucking party half of Ed’s nerves just threw. “Hang on.”
The warmth supporting Ed’s head and shoulders shifts around a lot, and then Roy’s clever hands are using paper tissues to mop up the worst of the spilt fluids, and if there’s an iota more surreality in store, Ed’s not sure he’s gonna make it.

“Can you stand?” Roy asks, although he doesn’t really wait for an answer before he tugs the red blanket between them and bunches one edge around Ed’s shoulders. “Or shall I carry you?”

“Nobody fucking carries the Fullmetal Alchemist,” Ed says, which is categorically untrue but still sort of necessary to invoke. After a brief struggle, he gets his left arm underneath himself and props himself up enough to try his knees. They fucking wobble, because they’re a pair of bastard asshole traitors that he hates.

Also, his ass hurts. And it’s dripping. And this whole thing should be way more gross than it is, instead of weirdly kind of hot because of how the very grossness of it makes it sort of—intimate, and that’s—

Shit. Shower and mild opioids and sleep first; he can tackle the rest later.

He glares at his knees until they cooperate, which fortunately only takes a second or two, since that’d start to look real stupid if he had to sit there any longer. Maybe it’s a good thing he got so much practice dragging himself upright from the very fucking precipice of death over the last couple weeks; it sure is coming in handy.

Roy hovers at Ed’s left shoulder, but since he pretends he’s just adjusting the blanket to keep it from falling, Ed lets him live.

“I’m afraid the shower is upstairs,” Roy says, fussing with the blanket, so Ed just grabs the end to stop it from slipping off. “The offer to carry you is still o—”

“I should call Al first anyway,” Ed says, starting into the hall again. Roy trails him. Again with the puppy thing. “Just so nobody can accuse him of hallucinating or something.”

“I’ll start the water for you,” Roy says. “And should I select a regular dose of the painkillers, or would you like me to leave you the bottle?”

“Bottle,” Ed says. He turns enough to look the bastard in the eyes, so Roy’ll know he means it. Maybe Roy’ll even get an inkling of how much bigger it is than just: “Thanks.”

Roy smiles, and then he touches his knuckles to Ed’s cheek, which is gross-awful and horrifically sweet. “You’re very welcome.” He pauses. “First, how about if I put on some pants?”

A grin sabotages Ed’s attempt towards solemnity in a fucking instant. “Eh. Overrated.”

Roy’s roguish grin returns to bolster his. “You are absolutely right.”

If Ed lets himself get distracted by Roy’s current state of pantslessness, there’s no telling what could happen to Al’s psyche, so he doggedly averts his eyes and fixes them on the phone. “I usually am. Not my fault if you don’t know it.”

“I’ve been told I’m…” Roy pauses for dramatic effect, and Ed chances a glance—shit-eating grin confirmed. “…shortsighted.”

Ed relinquishes his grip on the precious blanket in order to give the bastard the finger.

Roy fakes offended. “I happen to think I’m hilarious.”
“I noticed,” Ed says.

Roy sighs like he’s been gravely wounded. “No one appreciates art in its own time.”

“‘Art’,,” Ed says slowly. “Yeah. ‘Art’.”

Roy shakes his head mournfully and trudges back towards the living room.

Ed picks up the phone on the hall table and dials.

The phone only rings once before the line catches. “Hello?”

“It’s me,” Ed says.

“You should stay the night,” Al says. “It’s rude not to. Or—well—did you—?”

“Jeez, Al,” Ed hisses, trying to cover the receiver just in case Mustang starts eavesdropping. It’d be just like him. “I just—are you sure you’re okay over there? It’d be no big deal to come back; I could get a cab and shit. I don’t wanna leave you by y—”

“I’m sure,” Al says. “Really, Brother. I want you to stay and have a nice time and get some closure and all of that stuff.”


“Stuff,” Al says. “The stuff is important. I’m fine. Okay? I mean it. I’m fine as long as you’re alive, Ed.”

The unfairest exchange the universe has ever allowed was giving someone like Al to the likes of him. “Okay, okay, okay.”

“Just do one thing for me,” Al says.

“Anything,” Ed says.

“If he takes you out for breakfast,” Al says, “will you bring me a waffle?”

Too bad Ed doesn’t have a spare hand to use to cover up his giant dumbass grin. “Fuck, yeah, I will.”

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His body is not fucking pleased about the trek up the stairs—he can’t tell whether the bullet hole or the one he just used for sex is hurting worse right now, but the bottom line is that if Roy’s going to keep going around fucking wounded soldiers, he needs to get a goddamn elevator.

After a few really obnoxious steps, Ed figures out a sort of upward-shuffle maneuver that doesn’t exacerbate anything overmuch. When he tops the staircase in triumph, however, Roy does not miraculously appear in order to fete him graciously for his monumental feat. Ed follows the sound of running water, though, and nudges the bathroom door open with his port-shoulder.

Roy is… fluffing the towels.
Do people actually do that?

…well, apparently they do.

That, or he’s been stalling while Ed’s been on the phone, and it seemed like the sort of thing people ought to do, so he took it up in desperation when he heard Ed’s footsteps in the hall.

Winry may or may not have had a point that one time she told Ed that he’s gotten significantly more invested in creating conspiracy theories since he started working for Roy.

“Everything all right?” Roy asks upon fake-noticing him in the doorway.

“Yeah,” Ed says. He steps in and pushes the door shut behind him to try to conserve the heat from the shower steam. “Al says I should stick around for the Stuff.”

Roy blinks, though he doesn’t stop adjusting the edges of the towel on the rack. “I… see. Did he specify what that… entails?”

“I dunno,” Ed says. “He said I should stay the night and—” It’s really hard to do air quotes and hold a blanket at the same time with only one hand. “—‘get closure’.”

One of Roy’s eyebrows arches. He has damn nice eyebrows. Pity Ed’d be lying if he said he’d never thought about that before tonight.

“Ah,” Roy says. “I’ll… see what I can do.”

The glint of a golden opportunity is not lost on Edward Elric. “He said you should take me to breakfast.”

Roy appears to be fighting a grin. “Did he? That’s a fine suggestion.” He steps forward, then past Ed, gently touching his shoulders while shifting around him. “Why don’t I leave you to your shower, and then we can work on what kind of breakfast is ideally suited for closure acquisition?”

Ed makes a face at him. “I think I probably agree with whatever the hell you just said.”

Roy beams at him, says “Excellent,” and slips out the door.

Bastard.

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Seems like Roy’s trying to be as minimally bastardly as possible, though, in his own way—he left both a super-fuzzy bathrobe and a pair of worn blue flannel pajamas. On the bastardly side, the pants legs are so long that Ed has to weigh the question of whether it’s a serious dick move to use alchemy for resizing borrowed clothes.

In the end, he struggles stupidly to roll them up three times with his solitary hand, the only upshot of which is that there’s no one watching him fumbling like a fucking moron.

Stupid Roy.

Even stupider is the suspicious immediacy with which stupid Roy emerges from the bedroom the instant that Ed pads out into the hall, and then puts his stupid arm around Ed’s shoulders and draws
them back into said bedroom together.

To be fair, Ed’s also getting to the pretty-stupid stage of the night, which is why he opens his mouth and blurts out: “Al says I snore.”

Roy pauses. “Alphonse says a lot of things.”

“No,” Ed says. “I mean that you probably want to put me up in another room. ’Cause I’ll fuck up your sleep.”

The corners of Roy’s eyes crinkle up as he smiles, but there’s something a little bit sad underneath. “I think I’m just as likely to fuck up yours. If you’re game to try it anyway, so am I.”

Ed tries to pick out any of the other telltales. He’s gotten about a billion times better at reading the cues, but sometimes Roy’s basic emotions are so multifaceted that it’s impossible to tell them apart. It just figures that the man can’t pick one fucking feeling and run with it. “Is that supposed to be part of the Stuff?”

“The Stuff is whatever you want it to be,” Roy says. He tries to run his fingers through Ed’s wet hair—which probably still has rivers of suds in it, because washing it with one hand is fucking difficult, okay—and gets his hand trapped in a tangle. “I found you a toothbrush.”

“Oh,” Ed says. Roy is still tugging trying to get his hand free. Ed can’t really see what’s going on in the rat’s nest, and he suspects that adding his own fingers to the mix would just make it worse, so it’s better to leave it alone. “Cool.”

There’s a last little jerk, and then Roy’s hand smoothes down his back like the whole thing was intentional.

“Right,” Mr. Fucking Suave-as-Shit says calmly, shepherding them over towards the master bath. He even manages to keep most of the giddy delight out of his voice as he adds, “May I brush your hair?”

Ed’s feeling generous. Or post-orgasm content. Or tired and warm and clean.

Something.

“I guess,” he says.

Roy’s grin is practically blinding.

Ed’s eyelids snap shut like his lashes are made of lead the instant his face touches a pillowcase.

“Is your bed really made outta fuckin’ clouds and cotton balls and lamb-wool dreams?” he asks, and if he slurs it a little—well—whatever. “Or does it just feel like it right now ’cause it’s the first real bed in fuckin’ ages?”

“‘Lamb-wool dreams’?” Roy says, sounding both too awake and too amused.

“Shut the fuck up,” Ed mumbles.
“But I haven’t answered your question,” Roy says, stroking at his hair again.

“Changed my mind,” Ed says. “Don’t fuckin’ care about the reason.”

“Goodnight,” Roy says.

“Mmnh,” Ed says.

And he’s out.

There are too many of them.

There are too many, and they’re coming too fast—a wool-gray wave pouring down the mountainside; rows upon rows of humanity blurring into a single mass, rifle barrels like black spines jutting towards the sky—

And the rock faces here are treacherous—maybe he could bring it down again; maybe he could topple the topography to his own benefit one more time, but—

The automail’s gone, and his left arm’s—

Broken?

He can’t—

They can’t; they won’t win this; and he turns to Jon to tell him to stage the retreat, to fucking book it, to run—

But it’s not Jon. It’s Al.

It’s Al looking smart as hell in the snow-gear uniform—impeccable down to the white spats; down to the last breeze-buffeted curl of wheat-gold hair.

Al could do it.

Al could wreck this place and bury those thousand gunmen in the work of a fucking instant.

Al wouldn’t even break a sweat.

But Ed can’t ask it of him.

Even to save their fucking lives, Ed can’t—

Can’t make him like this.

Can’t let him choose it; can’t let it happen; just—

Can’t.

“Al,” he says, and his throat tries to stop up and hold the words, but he won’t fucking let it; not now. “Al—get out, c’mon, fuckin’—” He tries to grab for Al’s shoulder, but his fucking arm won’t move; it’s just a limp line of simmering pain. “—let’s go—”
“Brother—” Al says.

“Come on,” Ed says, ramming his shoulder against Al’s chest to make the fucking point, and Al blinks but then turns to follow him as he starts running—slow at first to make sure that Al’s gonna follow—

And the snow’s so goddamn heavy, thick and wet and cloying around his feet, dragging at his ankles; his lungs feel too big for his chest, and how the hell could he expect his swollen heart to fit between them?

He can hear the rasp of Al’s breath behind him, but what if—well, shit—

He still can’t help twisting around to look—can’t help checking over his shoulder to make sure Al’s still there.

Thank… fucking whate—

His foot snags, and his balance swings, and he goes tumbling face-first into the snow.

“Brother!” Al says, and the snow won’t fucking clear from Ed’s face, and he can’t raise his arm to wipe it out of his eyes. Al’s hands pull at his coat. “Are you okay?”

“Sure,” Ed says, which is actually pretty stupid, given the circumstances, but too late now. “Wh —”

He realizes that the painful thing digging into his back is the edge of a long strip of iron.

They’re on the railroad tracks.

It’s then that he hears the screeching whistle and the growing roar.

He manages to blink through the frigid flakes and bring Al’s face into focus, but he still can’t get his fucking arm to move enough to let him reach up and hold on.

“Al,” he says, and his voice barely functions; Al hovers over him, clutching his collar; why doesn’t he get it? “We gotta mo—”

The first bullet punches through the side of Al’s face right underneath the cheekbone—a tiny red-rimmed divot for the entry; a broader hole like a mashed-up crimson flower where it tore out on the other side.

Ed breathes—once, twice.

Al’s eyes stay locked on his. The lashes tremble. His bottom lip starts to wobble, and then he coughs, and his whole body convulses, and there’s a narrow trail of blood winding downward from the corner of his mouth.

“No,” Ed hears his voice say. “No, no, no, no, no—”

The second bullet travels directly from one temple to the other.

The light in Al’s eyes goes out—in an instant, they glaze over, like windowpanes under fast-moving frost.

He crumples forward onto Ed.
The blood’s hot, and the train whistle’s deafening, and he can’t breathe, can’t speak, can’t cry, can’t move—

He wrangles in a desperate streak of oxygen and screams and screams and—

“Ed,” the low-soft voice says, and hands press at the edges of the hurricane, but Ed can’t see, can’t—

“No,” jumps out of his contracting throat again. “No, no, no—”

“Ed,” Roy—it’s Roy, it’s—

Breathe, breathe, breathe; everything’s red; everything’s red and dark, and the fingertips brushing at his face feel too much like the splattering of blood, and he flinches away—“Where’s Al?”

Fragments of his surroundings filter back in—it’s not a snowbank; it’s a tangle of blankets twisted around his legs. He’s sitting halfway-upright, hunched over with his left hand lifted to cover his eyes.

“He’s at home,” Roy’s voice says, and the hands stop fluttering near his face—one settles on his forearm, light but solid. Unobtrusive but fucking real, and that’s—something, right? “You talked to him a few hours ago. We could call him again. Do you want to call him?”

Ed wants to check the clock. There must be one in here, but he’d probably have to look at Roy before he found it. “…time s’it?”

“A little after two,” Roy says, softly. “But I know he’d rather that you called. It’s no trouble for anyone. Do you want to call him?”

“No,” Ed says. He swallows, and then he releases the word slithering up in his throat: “Yes.”

“Then let’s call him,” Roy says. He touches the back of Ed’s hand. “Do you want me to go down and get him on the line?”

“I don’t want you knowin’ his number,” Ed says, trying to convince his hand to lower itself out of the way. It takes a couple breaths, but he coaxes it down far enough to make out the shadowy contours of the room. He’s definitely here, at least—in Roy Mustang’s fucking bedroom. Not on any damn mountain; not on any damn battlefield.

Or at least not on one where he’s alone. Not anymore.

“Ah,” Roy says. “Well, that’s awkward.”

Ed musters the energy to eye him. “Cause you already know fuckin’ everything.”

“Not everything,” Roy says. “But perhaps a bit more about you than you’d like.”

“I like how you say fuckin’ ‘perhaps’,” Ed mutters. “Like there’s any damn doubt.”

Another breath, then another. He can do this. The edge of the bed isn’t that far away, and he’s here, and Al’s fine. He’s fine; he’s probably gonna be pissed Ed woke him up. Goddamn, Ed’s missed Al getting pissed at him. He’s missed everything.

He scoots his ass over to the side of the mattress and carefully puts his feet down. As he stands, a swell of vertigo swings his skull back and forth and back again—maybe it’s just psychosomatic or something; he ate a shit-ton of real calories and whatnot yesterday, didn’t he? Maybe it’s just the
relief. Maybe it’s just the fact that it’s finally fucking safe for his body to quit firing on all cylinders at once.

“Do you need a hand?” Roy asks, quiet-gentle, from close by.

“Har har,” Ed says.

“I meant figuratively,” Roy says, “although I’m happy to take credit for the pun.”

Ed tilts his head back and draws in another lungful of oxygen. “Nah. I got it.”

“All right,” Roy says.

Bastard follows Ed like an oversized fucking puppy all the way down the stairs into the hall—but he does sit down on the bottom step of the staircase instead of hanging right by Ed’s shoulder to eavesdrop, so that’s something.

Ed’s stomach is doing a funny sort of flippy thing now, too, since apparently his stupid brain needed some company in the jacked-up department. There’s a remote possibility that stuffing himself with rich food the instant he could get his hands on it wasn’t the single brightest idea he’s ever had.

Whatever. He needs to talk to Al; he needs to hear Al’s voice and know, because otherwise he’s never going to shake the fucking crystal-clear remembrance of the little tracks of blood cutting down that expression of surprise—

He dials.

The line rings once, which is fine, because obviously it’s two in the fucking morning, and Al’s asleep and shit—probably dreaming about kittens with bows around their necks, bounding around batting at little pink balls of yarn or some shit. That’s an Al kind of dream. That’s the kind he should keep having.

The line rings again, which is still fine, because all of the previous is still true, and the phone’s in the kitchen, and Al’s bedroom’s down the hall.

The line rings again, and it’s not—possible. Ed knows it’s not possible. He knows his sick, tormented fucking mind cooked this shit up; he knows nothing like that has ever happened, and it’d never happen here, and here’s where he is, after all; he isn’t there anymore; the fear doesn’t fucking own him this far south—

The line rings again, and he hears his own breath quickening, and thickening, and getting sort of jagged at the edges; and out of the corner of his eye, he sees Roy cautiously standing up.

It’s gonna go to the message machine in a second; where is that kid? Surely he can hear it from the bedroom; surely—what if—?

“H’lo?” Al says.

If Ed sounds weak—

Well, he fucking is. For Al he is. For Al, he always has been.

“Hey,” he says. “Sorry I woke you up.”

“S’okay,” Al says—sounding like Ed didn’t, in fact, wake him up at all, because he’s still seventy-
five percent asleep.

“Just wanted to... y’know,” Ed says. He tries really hard to sound calm, but it’s a hell of a fucking challenge when his heart’s beating this fast. “Make sure you weren’t... out... partying with some bad-influence friends or... something.”

“Nah,” Al says. “Tonight’s the night I stay in and do opium, remember?”

“You are such a shit,” Ed says.

“Learned from the best,” Al says.

“And don’t you forget it,” Ed says.

If there was one thing that was good about the armor—and it’s kind of a stretch to think it—it’s that Ed can still kind of *hear* it when Al smiles.

“Are you okay, Brother?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Ed says.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“You need me to come get you?”

“You don’t have a car.”

“I could steal one.”

“I’m quitting the military,” Ed says. “Can’t get you out of misdemeanors for free anymore.”

“Darn,” Al says. “You’re okay, though?”

“Yeah,” Ed says again. Funny how he hasn’t resented a single iteration of it. “You?”

“Am now,” Al says.

“All right,” Ed says. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then, okay?”

“Yup,” Al says. “Don’t forget my waffle.”

Ed’s going to cash in some of those savings to buy the best fucking waffle iron Central has to offer. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Where’d this sudden waffle fetish come from? Actually, don’t answer that. G’night, Al.”


“You, too,” he says, and hangs up before he drags it out all over Roy’s phone bill any worse.

Roy’s got his arms folded on the banister and one ankle kicked back behind the other, head tilted slightly—which means that he’s somehow managed to turn an ordinary tired-of-standing position into a figure worthy of a fucking portrait. He’d be dashing as *fuck* if he wasn’t wearing such dorky-ass flannel pajamas.

“Do you want to try for a little more sleep?” Roy asks.
It’s sort of fucking uncanny, isn’t it?

How nice he can get.

How much he fucking understands.

And a part of Ed—a big, solid, cogent fucking part—is absolutely certain that if he said *I’m way too fucking wired; can we just stay up?*, Roy would put the coffee on and find him a book he hasn’t read yet.

But “Worth a shot” is what he says instead.

The instant he puts his right foot on the first stair, however, he remembers two things:

Firstly, that going up was agonizing as shit last time; secondly, that somehow, miraculously, he was so distracted just now that he didn’t notice if the descent was anywhere near as painful.

Apparently his attempts to keep the dread out of his expression are wholly fucking unsuccessful.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to carry you?” Roy asks. “I swear to you I wouldn’t tell a soul.”

“I will die first,” Ed says, making an abrupt about-face by turning on his heel—which also hurts, but not as much. “In the meantime, I’m gonna sleep on your couch.”

“May I join you?” Roy asks.

“If you bring blankets,” Ed says.

“Done,” Roy says.

Ed drags his lousy fucking body over into the living room again, where the fire’s burnt itself down to embers. For an impressively stupid half-second, he considers crouching; fortunately his better judgment intervenes fast enough to remind him to set his ass down gently on the end of the couch.

The dog tags have disappeared from the tabletop. Probably that schmoopy fucking bastard is wearing them again. Ed’s going to kill him.

…later. Ed’s going to kill him later. Right now he’s gonna sleep.

Settling on the couch brought him close enough to touch his left hand to his shoulder port to complete the circle, at which point he starts to purify little trails of oxygen inside the fireplace grate. He crafts a few into little spirals as Roy’s footsteps pad into the room and pause beside him.

“I’m going to need your help,” Ed says, without looking away from the flickering orange coils.

“Then you’ll have it,” Roy says—like it’s that fucking simple.

Ed glances up at him, then back down at the smoldering wood inside the grate. “This shit was never supposed to happen again.”

“No,” Roy says softly. “It wasn’t.”

“Somebody’s gotta do something,” Ed says. “Might as well be us.”

Roy drops a pile of blankets onto the couch cushions in order to touch his palms together, and a new swirl of flame joins Ed’s latest little spring. They twist around each other for a fraction of a
second before the fuel’s gone, and they both wink out.

“I don’t think we’re such a bad choice,” Roy says.

Ed grabs one of the blankets. It’s going to be a bit of a squeeze fitting both their asses on this couch, but that sounds like the good kind of challenge.

“Me neither,” he says.

Works inspired by this one: But Not Buried This Time PODFIC by SoU2019

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