This Was A Mistake.

by argentia

Summary

Through the chilly early morning rain, Edward Elric trudges through the drizzle. Goddamn, it rains here a lot. It's even worse when he has to walk to school in it.

It never used to rain in Resembool this much. He's sure Al misses the Resembool sunshine-no, Al probably misses the plain old sunshine of their world more.

Rainy days always bring back bad memories for him. And they make his ports ache. Stupid England.
There are several choice words you could use to describe winter. Half of which should not be used in polite company, and you’re muttering the other half under your breath. Snow, along with characteristic freezing temperatures and clouds, don’t agree with your delicate sensibilities and your unsocked feet. You should’ve worn those socks Puja gave to you for your fifteenth birthday. She was always the most logical one out of you two. Pragmatic gifts were her specialty.

Of all of the places for snow to settle down upon, it just had to pile up on the pavement on your route to school. This in turn slows you down (getting more snow into your boots was not an ambition of yours) and frustrates you (you’ll be late if you don’t speed up, but speeding up had two consequences, both ending in suffering for your party of one.).

Even if you’re late to the announcements, who cares? Everyone sleeps during them. You won’t be missing anything too terribly important. Maybe Belinda Wheatley’s snores would be lonely without someone to complain about them, but that’s about the only negative you can come up with.

However, there’s at least one other repercussion for skipping the boring announcements: the Wrath of Ol’ Patty.

Ol’ Patty, who usually goes by the much more formal alias Mrs. Jackson, is the extremely intimidating and quick-tempered office secretary. Ol’ Patty seems to take great enjoyment in punishing students and watching them squirm. Her joy at being able to discipline a student bordered on the sadistic. Her notorious cruelty gave her the infamy of being described as ‘the real Dolores Umbridge’, though without the toad-face and having more of a resemblance to a colourless rat.

The finish line edges nearer. The school’s doors are blanketed in frost that still hasn’t melted in the nearly nonexistent 9 A.M. sun.

You welcome the warm rush of air as you step into the school building, but as your eyes meet a pair of squinty grey ones in the office, adrenaline begins to run through your veins. Your vision tunnels towards your goal, the auditorium entrance.

You can practically hear ‘O Fortuna’ playing in the background as everything slows.

Ol’ Patty’s chair creaks as she brings herself to her feet. Your squeaks accompany your mad dash to the door like some sort of convoluted cheering squad. The second your butt crosses the threshold to the auditorium, the bell rings to announce the beginning of the day.

Ol’ Patty sinks back into her seat. The Great Evil has been avoided for one more day.

You see a hand making a ‘come hither’ motion from the sixth row, and gathering that the owner of the hand is Puja, you quietly make your way to the empty seat next to her, apologising to trodden
feet along the way.

“Late again, I see,” Puja whispers into your ear.

“My alarm was set for seven-fifteen,” You retort, side-eyeing her smug face.

“Invest in a new alarm clock, then. Seems like this one doesn’t work.” Puja smirks.

“Shut up,” You scowl. Puja snickers acerbically.

The buzz of conversation hushes as Mr. Greene, the Year 10 Humanities teacher, scales the creaky steps up to the auditorium stage. His hair is mussed as usual, its brown strands stuck out every which way, so that he could give you directions to the restroom with only the cowlicks and wild tresses to aid him. (Yes, head the way the north-easterly one is pointing, then follow the one above my forehead until you get to the brown door on the left.)

His high, reedy voice echoes almost painfully throughout the auditorium. “Good morning, students! Headmaster Stevens couldn’t be here today…” He catches a paper floating out of his stack, mid-air. “…so I’m filling in. Announcements.”

“It’s nine-oh-one A.M. on this frightfully cold eleventh of January, the start of a new week! Isn’t everyone excited?”

The auditorium remains so silent that you could swear you can hear crickets.

He coughs uncomfortably, to reign in a semblance of dignity, and resumes.

“We have no after school activities today, and Ms. Warner would like to remind all Lower Sixth students that their English exam is going to be on Thursday of next week. Remember to study!”

A quiet, collective groan rushes through the Lower Sixth students. Somewhere in the back, a boy mutters, ‘to hell with it, I’ll work at McDonald’s.’

Puja snickers and stabs a thumb at her chest. “Same here, kid,” She whispers, more to you than anyone else.

“We have several new students, so please stand up when I call your name, please! We want to celebrate your arrival at our school.”

Someone in the front row scoffs, but covers it with a very fake-sounding cough after realising just how loud it was.

“So… Adelaide, hello Adelaide…”

A girl with mousy brown ringlets and a rumpled uniform jacket stands, somewhere in the middle. She casts an uncomfortable glance around the auditorium at the sea of faces staring right at her.

“Benjamin! My boy!”

A round boy with hair in badly need of a trim winces somewhere to your left. His rises to his full, unimpressive height.

“Elizabeth…Eli-zabeth? Was I right the first time?”

You turn to see a very tall blond girl stand in the back, nodding tightly. A close look at her feet from in-between the auditorium seats shows you that she’s wearing shoes as tall as the school uniform will allow.
“Edward, how’s it going? How’s the city faring with you, then?”

“‘Edward’?” You hiss into Puja’s ear. “What is this, the nineteen-tens?”

“Shut it!” Puja tries to smother a smile, shaking her head.

You cock your head to the side. In the penultimate row to the stage, a golden-blond boy shrugs. He doesn’t seem to be too tall. Weirdly enough, his hair’s long enough to be pulled back into a fairly long ponytail.

“Correction,” you say. “What is this, the sixteen-hundreds?”

“Oi!” Puja smacks your arm. “He’s new, leave him be.”

“Yeah, yeah.” You roll eyes and return the punch.

Mr. Greene’s voice cuts through your conversation. “And that rounds up our announcements. Have a good day!”

Scattered applause sounds through the auditorium. The buzz of conversation heightens, and soon a battalion of students are streaming out of the auditorium doors.

“See you later, Puja!” You call. She stomps up to the doorway, a grimace on her face. She has English first block, almost every day. It doesn’t help that punctuation rules are Greek to her until at least ten A.M., and Ms. Abbott has quite a liking for pop quizzes.

You take your sweet time going up the aisle. Maths is just a few doors away, and the late bell rings at 9:05. That’s plenty of time to loiter about and harass Puja via text.

As you pull out your mobile, mismatched footsteps race up the aisle behind you. After one, heavy footfall, comes a slightly heavier-sounding thunk. They get closer and closer until the owner rushes past you, bumping into your arm in the process. You scramble to catch your mobile, falling dramatically through the air.

“Oi! Watch where you’re going!” You shout indignantly, clutching your mobile to your chest. It came so close to death, and you can feel the last dregs of adrenaline finally ebbing away.

They shout something over their shoulder that you can’t make out.


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At twelve thirty, which is a stupidly late time to have lunch, the bell rings to dismiss Year Elevens to lunch. The canteen has an appetising selection of ‘food’, ranging from grey blocks of rubber, brown blocks of rubber, and grey, wilted vegetables. In Year Ten, a rumour went around that Gaz* Clarke had food poisoning from a bad batch of whatever-the-heck it was supposed to be, and had to stay home for a week. No one believed him when he said he went to Spain, but his suntan said differently.

Rude Kid sticks out as a single golden head in the mass of blondes, browns, blacks, reds, and the odd neon coloured heads. Instead of being tipped up to talk to other people, like the others, his head is tipped downwards, towards a thick book. You can’t see the cover, but based on the diagrams, it has to do something with Chemistry.
“Don’t run into anything,” Puja calls from somewhere behind you. She appears at your side not long after your declaration.

Rude Kid’s head perks up and twists around to stare right back at you two.

You blink.

Are his eyes… golden?

You rub at your eyes a little, and narrow them at him.

There’s no doubt about it. His eyes are a rich shade of, unmistakably, gold. They aren’t hazel, or a yellow-brown, they are most definitely gold.

You’ve never seen that color on a real person before. How odd.

Puja seems to have noticed too, judging by her quirked eyebrow.

“Verzeihung?” He says, looking thoroughly annoyed that he had been interrupted.

“Pardon?” He asks shortly.

You discreetly pinch Puja’s arm. “Er, sorry. There’s just a lot of people walking about. I didn’t want you to run into someone, reading a book and walking…um.”

Her voice trails off. Rude Kid huffs a short breath through his nose and resumes reading. He disappears into the doorway of the canteen, just as you and Puja lock eyes.

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“Golden eyes, huh?” Puja yawns. "Not too common a colour, I'll agree. Why are you freaking out?"
She stretches her arms behind her and yawns.

"I'm not freaking out. This is just a weird coincidence-"

"You read too much fanfiction. Some people look like fictional characters, understand? Coincidences do happen, despite the yearning of your little weeaboo heart." She replies apathetically.

"I'm not a weeaboo." Puja snorts. "That was Year Nine, Puja! Anyway, I agree, but still...!" You argue.

"Oh, come on. If I indulge you, will you shush?" Puja says exasperatedly. "Will that quiet your little weeaboo heart? You're freaking out over nothing."

"I'm not a weeaboo anymore," Puja rolls her eyes. "But sure. Yes. Please indulge me."

Puja reluctantly puts down her fork, and abandons her shukto. "I'll go introduce myself. How does that sound?"

You pretend to swoon. "Oh, thank you, Sir Puja! You are a knight in shining armor for this poor weeaboo maiden!" You smirk.

"See, you admit it!" She chuckles. You let out a noise of protest, but she waves her long hand. "I'll be back."

You watch as she traipses to his table, where he sits alone. She smiles and says something, holding
out her hand. He grins awkwardly, and replies. She gives him a nervous smile and shakes his hand, then walks back to your table.

Puja collapses onto the hard plastic chair next to you. She steeps her brown fingers together, and leans toward you.

She whispers in your ear. "His surname is Elric."

Chapter End Notes

Yay! The first chapter is finally done! This was fun to write. (also wow the formatting got messed up on the last part. does anyone know how to fix that?)

Criticism, feedback, compliments, suggestions, etc., please!

**Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov**

**Verziehen**- pardon, forgive, excuse

Sorry if people got out of character, especially Puja, or if everyone has personalities like a piece of soggy cardboard. Tell me if it gets like that, and I'll try to fix it. Thank you for reading!

*edit, 24/05/2016. So, I rewrote this. There's a tad more detail, and you're not as much of a weeaboo. Hooray! I hope you've enjoyed it so far. Good luck.
Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s two in the bloody morning on a freezing Tuesday, all notions of sleep have been abandoned since midnight, and you’re staring up at the ceiling with blank eyes.

Your mobile has stopped lighting up long since Puja fell asleep over her phone, which was around one, if the nonsensical strings of letters were any clue. As ten o’clock turned into eleven, and eleven into twelve, Puja’s messages grew progressively desperate and misspelled until she texted “Myabe hEs just frekaing coin ciddence like creepily coi n cidenncee kdi!” and you suggested she go to sleep. The next step in that steady downward spiral was not an elegant one.

You blindly grope for your mobile in the dark, and find its smooth shape charging on your bedside table. You press the ‘on’ button, and are suddenly blinded by the light of the sun itself filling your room.

Blinking and eyes streaming, you turn the brightness down to a bearable level and unlock your mobile. Your home screen, along with wallpaper featuring the Milky Way, greets you. You tap on the messages app to review Puja’s desperate rambling.

Nine-forty-five p.m. ‘Are you sure you didn’t mishear his last name?’

Puja replied at ten exactly. ‘I’m quite sure, but there is a possibility. ‘Elric’ isn’t too common a surname, yeah? ‘

‘He could be Russian. Lots of surnames end with ‘ic’ in Russian or Eastern Europe.’

Ten-ten p.m. Puja responded with an affirmative, and offered up this: ‘Golden eyes, though?’

You had got distracted by a long-lost comic book you had found under your bed, and replied at ten-forty p.m. ‘Coloured contacts.’

‘True…His hairs a bit long for a boy’

‘I wouldn’t put it past someone who wears golden coloured contacts and just so happens to be named Edward to grow their hair out like that. He could be wearing a watch and a wrist brace. Maybe he sprained it, and that’s why his hand is hard. Maybe he’s just a really hardcore fan or something like that, don’t you think?’

‘Yeah maybe. Wonder how it happened.’ A few seconds later, ‘must be quite an obsession to go through all that work just to look like your favourite character in polite company’

You sent a message at eleven, starting a discussion that had stretched on until the wee hours of the morning. ‘But do you think there’s even a possibility that he could be more than just a hardcore fan?’

‘what do you m ean’

’How cool would it be if he really was Ed?’

Puja didn’t reply for half an hour, and then her message was somewhat garbled. ‘okat fine lets talk
about something impossibly. how would that even begin to be possible.’
‘C’momnnn. Speculate with me.’
‘Lets disregard that its almost impossible. Think about it, why this school why now why not 1915’
‘Give me your conclusion, Oh Great Philosopher of All Things Impossible.’
‘donnt be a arse’
‘C’mon Puja.’
‘okay let’s think about this…MAYBE . we have bearely anyevidence so MAYBE .for now lets regard
him as just a normal kid i doubt that he is we could get him to fix thigns for us…and youd fulfil your
fantasiesfrom yearr eighth’

Her silence extended until twelve a.m., where she sent her barely intelligible text that made you think
this was probably not healthy for her.
‘Myabe hEs just frekaing coin ciddence like creepiy coi n cidennce kdi!’
‘Puja, you need to go to sleep like right now’

At one, ‘ash ahgulkz 934fl.. 2@ €’ told you that Puja was dead asleep on her still-on mobile screen. You
grimace in sympathy. Her mobile would be dead in the morning, and her face would sport a
rather unsightly line across her cheek from the edge of her screen.

That was where your conversation ended. You stare at the last text bubble until your eyes unfocus
and the screen dims. You groan and switch it off, fumbling around to put it back onto the place it had
recently vacated.

You can tell that Puja didn’t believe your theory. You aren’t too surprised. Puja likes things to be
clear-cut and logical, and her philosophies on things like this hadn’t failed her yet.

Bigfoot? “A guy in an apesuit.”

Alien conspiracies? “Do you live on the same planet as me? This place is a mess. No alien in their
right mind would come here for a holiday.”

Urban legends? “Made up by people with too much time on their hands and nothing to do.”

Puja’s too much of a sceptic to believe anything like other worlds exist. You didn’t honestly believe
yourself, really, but it was fun to think about. How cool would it be if the kid in your year was
actually a fictional character?

You have no idea why Puja reacted so weirdly to Edward’s last name. Maybe the initial shock just…
made her hear what she wanted to hear? Yeah, you’ll go with that.

It’d be too much of a coincidence if that Edward kid’s last name was Elric. Like you said, lots of
Russian surnames end with –ik or –ic. You aren’t going to pretend that you know very much about
Russian naming customs, but he could have a Russian surname. ‘Edik’ is a Russian surname, right?
Or is it West Asian? You don’t remember. It sounds rather similar to ‘Elric’, and can be easily
misheard through that weird lilting accent that Edward kid has.

‘Edward Edik’. Sounds alright. Like hell you’re going to ask him what his last name was. He doesn’t
even know your name, and the only interaction you’ve had with him was just outside the canteen,
and you’re not exactly the most suave person out there. Edward Edik it is. He can correct you anytime he wants.

At two-fifteen, sleep begins to weigh down your eyelids, and a tiny thought goes unnoticed as you slip into dreamland.

Wouldn’t it be funny if he had a younger brother?

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When you wake up the next morning much later than you usually allot for getting ready and messing around in the bathroom, it takes a few seconds for the time to register to your sleep-dampened mind’s gears.

‘8:23’

You blink a little and squint.

‘Tuesday, 12 January’

The gears begin to turn, creaking and sloughing off the rust and dirt from sleeping.

‘Missed Alarm: 7:15 AM.’

Realisation strikes you like a mallet to the head.

You rip the covers off and the rest of your morning is spent in a frenzied haze of rushing, and ending up, more than once, with a shoe flying across the room as a deadly projectile.

On the hurry to school, snow finds a new, no longer warm home in said shoes.

You don’t even try to decipher your timetable that morning, and instead depend on following Belinda Wheatley to nearly every one of your lessons. She’s always in a majority of them, except for German.

You halt in following Belinda down the Languages corridor. That’s the class you haven’t attended yet. Belinda Wheatley has a lesson in French instead of German. You’re not completely sure that the change from ‘Ich bin Herr Auttenberg’ to ‘Je suis Madam Durand’ would register to your tired mind anyway.

You make a sharp turn into the German classroom, your ears suddenly assaulted with the noise of a dozen conversations that you’ve long been accustomed to. A few out-of-context snippets are snatched out of the buzz by your ears, ranging from the mundane (“So, he tells me to get it myself-“) to the nonsensically bizarre (“Ha ha ha- ‘Jeth, with her curly jair, wearing a joker-’- oh my god.”).

A few kids struggle with German pronunciation in the front corner by Mr. Auttenberg’s filing cabinet, huddling over a pronunciation guide with confused looks on their faces. Some are contorting their mouths into weird shapes in an attempt to mimic the words, but failing. The girl with dark red hair, who seems to be the one struggling the most, tosses her paper into the air and shouts an exclamation of frustration.

The paper floats to the feet of a person standing right in front of Mr. Auttenberg’s desk. They seem to halt in speaking, and lean over to snatch the paper off the tile with gloved hands.

Gloves? Aren’t you in an indoor, climate-controlled classroom?
They begin speaking again as they rise again, addressing Mr. Auttenberg in German, of all things. No student you know uses German outside of this class, and certainly not in casual conversation.

That voice. You know that voice.

You trail the paper up blazer-clad arms and look right into a pair of golden eyes.

“Ah, crap.” You just can’t catch a break.

“Oi, get a move on. Can’t exactly bust through a wall, can I?” An irritated boy says from behind you, peeking through the obstructed doorway and into the chaotic classroom beyond.

“Oh, sorry,” You budge over a bit to allow him through, catching a few miffed mutters on the way through.

Of course the kid you stressed over is in your German lesson. You could have done with a few more days of thinking to yourself without having to face him, but oh well. You’ll just have to deal with it.

“I don’t belong at this level! Whose genius idea was it to put jemanden who’s fließend in a Anfängerkurs?”

You can catch most of those words, but even with the missing ones, it’s enough for you to notice that his pronunciation is most definitely not the way Mr. Auttenberg teaches it.

It’s not exactly...incorrect, but it’s just...off. His consonants are too soft, his vowels too long, and the lilting manner of multi-syllable words are a tad more exaggerated. The `a’s are long and almost English-like. It sounds foreign, yet familiar, and before you can comment you’re shoved forward by kids herded to their seat by the ringing of the bell.

“If you have such an issue with your Unterricht-“ No, you know that word, that’s German for ‘lesson’. “-then I suggest you take it up with the head teacher.” Mr. Auttenberg finishes in English.

Mr. Auttenberg gives Edward a look that clearly says he’s dismissed, and stands up once Edward departs for his seat, muttering an impressive collection of swears under his breath.

“Good afternoon, class.” Mr. Auttenberg greets crisply.

“Good afternoon, Mister Auttenberg.” The class replies dully. You let yourself sink into the depths of boredom and let the world fade out around you. This was never a very interesting class, and yes, you picked up a sizeable amount of German from nearly two and a half years learning from Mr. Auttenberg, his methods for trying to keep students interested weren’t exactly stellar. Or effective.

Your focus, instead of blurring out the lesson for the next hour, shifts to the empty desk next to you. The empty desk which just so happens to be the last open seat in the room.

Your line of sight to its cracked plastic seat is interrupted by a uniform-trousers-clad butt settling itself and its owner into the slight dip of the chair. The owner of the butt flicks his gloved hand at you in a short wave, leans forward, and like every other student in Mr. Auttenberg’s class, zones out. To an inexperienced observer, he would seem to be staring at the whiteboard, but there’s nary a single secondary school student who doesn’t recognize that glazed-over look in his eyes.

You return his wave half-heartedly. This wave goes barely acknowledged.

“We will be reviewing direct and indirect object usage in grammar today…” Mr. Auttenberg drones. You see him write the two phrases on the board, and begin to scrawl words underneath in his
Maybe I should take notes, you think, glancing down at your German journal, peeking out a corner from your rucksack. Just as you reach down, something terrible happens.

“Mx. in the back, would you use jemanden/jemand or jemandem in this sentence?”

Shit!

“Erm, er,” You stammer, glancing around for help, any help. *Come on, Annalise, you know I can see you seeing me pleading with my eyes.*

Wait a minute.

A single phrase echoes through your memory, in a familiar scratchy tenor. ‘...genius idea was it to put jemanden who’s...’

*The phrase on the board- it’s structured kind of in the same way. You hope this is correct.*

“Jemanden.” You call, crossing your fingers under your desk.

“Correct.” Mr. Auttenberg turns back to the board. You breathe a heavy, relieved sigh, and place your head on your desk.

As Mr. Auttenberg’s dull voice drones in the background, you become increasingly aware that someone is watching you. It couldn’t be someone behind you, because you sit in front of an empty chair, and it couldn’t be someone to your right, because you’re right next to a wall. Gaz Clarke is most likely asleep. You have only one person diagonal from you and they watch Mr. Auttenberg’s lessons with rapt attention, so that leaves one direction: left. That rude Ed kid sits to your left. Why would he be watching you exalt in your academic victory?

You sneak a single glance, and sure enough, two curious golden eyes are staring right at the lowered back of your head.

You give in to a mixture of curiosity and boredom and decide to talk to him. It’s his first day, so you might as well become his acquaintance. You of all people should know how hard it is to come to a new school and have no friends whatsoever.

“Alright?” You begin. Good. Start off with something noncommittal, something you can back out of quickly.

“Yes.” He nods. You blink a little at the strange reply. Did he think you said something else? “Is he dull always?”

Now you know he’s definitely not a native English speaker. His accent is too thick and grammar to awkward to have spoken this language from birth. You remember his amazing fluency a few minutes ago, and conclude that that must be where he’s from. Germany. You hear they have great sausages.

“Oh, yeah. Always.” You answer, nodding at everyone around you. At least sixty percent of them are sleeping or very close to it. “I hear some older students take this just for the opportunity for a kip. It’s become a tradition.”

“Ah.” He replies. You can tell he feels a bit uncomfortable with this whole situation, and you decide to pick up his slack.
“So, where did you come here from?”

It takes him a few seconds, almost like he had forgot. “Germany.” The words sound awkward on his tongue, but practised. He doesn’t say them very often.

“Really? This must be easy for you.” You motion around the room. “You’ll zip through the exams.”

“I hope I do,” He answers, a slight hint of a smile in his voice. “It would be good to not have one more lesson more to worry of.”

“I can’t imagine having to do all of your schoolwork in a different language.”

“It is not hard, as you will think.” He waves a hand at the ceiling, grinning a cheeky smile. “I have a good handle on it.”

Seems a bit cocky, but he seems like a good kid. You nod inwardly. I could give him a chance. I don’t know how Puja will react to a new addition, but I’ll deal with it when it comes around.

“Mister [Edik],” Mr. Auttenberg interrupts. Again, his slight accent makes it hard to fully understand Edward’s surname, so you substitute Edik in its place. “Do you have an answer to this question?”

“I did not hear,” Edward answered, not the least bit abashed.

“Clearly,” Mr. Auttenberg deadpans. “Next time you come, I expect you pay attention to learning, and not work on your popularity. Put in at least a little bit of consideration for your classmates.” A low chuckle comes from the front row, but is quickly silenced by a stern glare. Ed’s eyebrows and mouth pull downward into a scowl.

“Abuse of Autorität,” Ed mutters to himself. He clenches his jaw and sighs deeply.

Ed doesn’t speak for the rest of the lesson. When the bell rings loud and shrill to send all of the students back to their respective homes, you gather up your belongings and extend your hand only a few centimetres from his chest.

He stares down at it for a few seconds before realising just what you’re offering. He takes your hand in his left and shakes.

“My name is Edward Edik.”

You introduce yourself. You let go after a few seconds. “It’s nice to meet you, Edward.”

“It is nice to meet you, too.” Again, the oddness of his accent strikes you. You’ve never heard anything like it before.

You smile nervously and bid him farewell. As you walk home through the snow, you puzzle over the mystery of the new student Edward Edik, and ignore Puja’s prods to get her some cold medicine from the chemist.

You finish your homework, do your chores, and your day concludes without another thought of Edward Edik.

Chapter End Notes
Hello! This is still very fun to write.
I hope Ed isn't too OOC. Please tell me if he gets that way, and can someone give me tips to keep him in character?

**Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov**

*Did you know? The German letter β is pronounced 'ss'.*

I rewrote this! Two chapters down, about seven more to go. Wish me luck.

Thank you for reading this. And I'm sure we all know what accent he has.
(CoughcoughAmestriancoughcough)
A loud vibrating noise slowly rises you out of the fog of sleep, and given the fact it is in fact 1 A.M. and you are not in the mood to be awoken, you are immediately filled with rage. Tired, sloppy rage that you wouldn’t be able to do anything with, but rage nonetheless.

You feels a bit like one of those powerful dragons in fairy tales, in a sort of ‘Who dares interrupt my slumber?’ kind of way, as you grope at your bedside table for your mobile, which vibrates two more times before going dark. You finally get a hold of it and press the ‘on’ button. After your blinding experience two weeks ago, you had made it a habit to turn the screen brightness down before bed. Your retinas once again thank your past self for keeping up.

‘Mum: 5:45 P.M.’

Uh oh.

‘Mum: 5:45 P.M.: Emergency at the office. Won’t be home until very late. Take care.’

‘Mum: 9:03 P.M.: Unexpected hold-up. Marie is going to the hospital.’

‘Mum: 9:12 P.M.: How are you doing?’

‘Mum: 12:49 A.M.: Coming home.’

‘Mum: 12:51 A.M.: Still alive?’


Her last message’s tone sends chills down your spine. You better be asleep or look like you’re asleep or you won’t have any method of communication with the outside world for days.

Right on time, the front door begins to click and rattle. You plow your face into your pillow and begin to fake-snore as realistically as you can. A thin wedge of light beams into your room and glows across your face, as your mum peers in to check on you. The light thins and vanishes after a moment or two. Her footsteps thump down to the sitting room, and strangely, stop in the middle of the room. A window screeches open, and she shouts out the window. What is she doing?

“Kid, (mmmph bymmph) alright?” Just who is she shouting at?

You decide that this is a good time to lurch into the living room, subtly hinting that you were dead asleep only moments before by your well-timed yawn and rubbing your eyes not too hard, but not too gently either.

“Mum, what are you yelling at?” And, finish with a yawn- yes! Add a slow blink, and you’ve played your part perfectly. Oh no, that was way too slow. Too dramatic. She knows now. She always knows.

“There’s this kid outside, wandering around. I asked if he was alright.” Mum still hasn’t looked away from the window.

“Lemme see,” You say, a little too eagerly. She gives you a strange look, but scoots over on the
windowsill to make room. Approaching the window, you peer down onto the street below. It’s dark and creepy-looking at night, even when the occasional car whizzes by. Underneath a yellowy-orange streetlight, stands Edward Edik, map in hand.

“Ed!!” You exclaim, leaning towards the open window.

“You know him?” Your mum asks. “Is he in your class? Why is he out at 1 A.M.?”

“Let me ask, Mum.” Your next sentence is shouted out the window across the street. “Ed! Why are you out at 1 A.M.!”

“What?” He shouts back.

“Why are you out at 1 A.M.!”

“For no reason!”

“You do realise that school starts at nine?”

“Yes, I have grasped!”

You glance down at the map clutched in his hands, and his face, flushed from cold and maybe embarrassment. You grin. Oh, this will be fun. “...are you lost?”

“NO! I am not! I am well! I do not need any help!” He yells back. He is definitely, undeniably, hopelessly lost.

“Are you sure?” He tightens a little at your words, and then lets all of his frustration out in one shrill, indignant yell that made all of the neighbour’s annoying dogs begin to bark in unison.

“ABSOLUT!” ‘Absolutely’. You didn’t know what’s funnier, his facial expression or the fact that every syllable is spat out with so much intensity that you’re reminded of a young child insisting that he’s a grown-up, he’s fine, he can do this all on his own.

“Whatever you say!” You call. Your voice is measured and even. The moment you close your window, however, you can’t hold it in any longer and the giggles come spewing out of you, despite your attempts to control it. Laughter wracks your frame.

You attempt to gain control of yourself by unfolding into a somewhat straight position, but upon making eye contact with Ed, looking affronted and offended, laughter bursts out once more. Your mum shouts an order to be quiet, the neighbours are banging on their ceiling.

He sends you one last scowl and turns the corner, out of sight.

You have no idea what he was doing out at this late hour, but it really isn’t your place to pry. Even after your mum forces you to go to bed, the warm feeling from laughing remains, and your dreams are tinted with yellow.

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When you enter the auditorium the next morning, you immediately notice a lack of a messy brown-haired head on the stage, and instead a balding, wispy-haired head has taken its place. You know which teacher that unremarkable head belongs to. Everyone knows who that boring head belongs to.

Headmaster Stevens.
Headmaster Stevens is the most dull, average, unremarkable, lacklustre, uninteresting, one-note, stale, flat, bland, dry, and whatever synonym you could come up with for ‘boring’ person under the sun. If his personality was a colour, it would be a dull brown or a dreary grey. He is the completely average age of fifty-two, he is an average height, he is a slightly above average weight, and his dressing style is monochrome: ugly suits. To top this off, he has the most monotonous voice known to man. He would drone even if he was witnessing the alien invasion of Earth.

The only reason he was given the responsibility of doing the announcements is because he’s been the headmaster for the past twenty years, when even mobiles were considered new and ace.

When he begins to speak, you can already feel the drowsiness begin to set in.

“Good morning, students,” He begins. Immediately, one girl in the front breaks out a sleep mask and pulls it over her eyes. A boy two rows behind her is already snoring loudly. “It is nine-oh-two on this Friday morning, the fifteenth of January. We have no new students today. Mister Auttenberg is out sick, so Miss Greene will be filling in…”

That Edward kid snores in the front row, and you don’t blame him, how late he stayed out. Puja dozes quietly, her mouth falling open slightly as her eyes glaze over. As usual, just behind you with her knees braces on the back of your seat, Belinda Wheatley snuffles in her sleep.

The announcements end at 9:05 every day on the dot. That gives you about three minutes until this low-intensity torture ends.

Somehow, your train of thought redirects to that Edward kid in the front row. He seems normal enough, but with these uncanny similarities to a certain someone, you can’t help but get the feeling he might be hiding a whole lot of weeaboo under that pleasant exterior.

_I mean, he’s got the height part covered_, You laugh a little to yourself.

Ed twitches in the front row.

“That wraps up our announcements for today, students. Have a pleasant day.” Headmaster Stevens finishes, then waddles off the stage and out the auditorium.

The volume in the auditorium slowly increases as people are being woken from their slumber and roused from the deepest of bored stupors.

“Get up, [Your Name],” Puja nags, poking you in the arm. She readies to poke again before you stop her with an ‘I surrender’ gesture.

“I’m going, I’m going, give me a minute.”

Not even seconds after your statement, you hear another, new voice say, “You do have a lesson.”

“Leave me alone! Can’t you see I’m recovering?” You exclaim, your eyes flying open to make direct contact with a golden pair.

_Great job, [Your Name]. What a nice impression on the new potential friend. This is why you have one._

“Sorry,” You wince.

“It is good.” He answers, then clumps up the aisle and out of sight. You exit your row soon after him, right in front of an interesting conversation.
“Did you talk to that new kid? The fit blond one?” Says a feminine voice behind you. You slow just a bit to eavesdrop.

“Which one, Clary? I’m bi, have you forgot?” A slightly hoarser feminine voice says.

“The bloke, duh.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot that you’re my straight friend.” The other feminine voice answers. “Yeah, I talked to him.”

“What did you talk about?” Clary giggles.

“Well. mostly about where he’s from. You noticed his accent, right? It’s a bit thick.”

“Yes! It’s so cool!” Clary squeals.

“Remember our talk about being calm?”

“Yes.” Clary takes a deep breath, holds it for five seconds exactly, and then spews, “Where is he from?”

“He said Germany. Some little village out in the sticks called Rauhenbronn.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“Neith-“

The bell rings the absolute worst time. All three of you swear simultaneously, and you split off into two directions: Clary (a short, white redhead) to the Year 10 Biology room, and Kim (an average height, Korean girl with dark hair) and you towards the Year 11 Chemistry room.

You slink into Chemistry in a huff and slam your books onto your desk. Just as you settle in your seat, you feel eyes on your back, and you whip around to glare at whoever is staring at you. For the second time in a row, you’re glaring at Edward with no provocation to speak of. Just great.

“Well, damn, did I do wrong?” Ed asks.

“No, sorry.” You answer. “I’m just being a-”

“Arschloch.” Ed supplies helpfully.

You laugh a little. “Yeah.”

Then he does something wonderful. He does something terrible.

He makes a pun.

“Did you hear of oxygen that went on one date with the potassium?” He grins.

“No?” You answer, immediately wary of whatever was going to come out of this kid’s mouth.

“It went OK.”

It takes you way too long to glance over to the Periodic table poster over your shoulder and finally understand what he means, the turn around with a deep, tired groan.

“That was good.” Edward says, drawing himself up like a proud bird. You cover your eyes with one
hand and make a resigned gesture with the other.

“T’Ill give you that one,” You answer, a genius idea sprouting. “But, do you know why the noble gas cried?”

“I do not, why?” His eyes are narrowed and expectant.

“He cried because all of his friends argon.”

There isn’t an immediate reaction like you expected, but on second thought, translating puns into other languages is pure hell, and you speak from experience. There is a full thirty seconds of dead, contemplative silence from Edward until you see understanding dawning in his eyes. His face then switches from conflicted humour and mild annoyance at your clever retaliation.

Before you know it, you feel a loud snigger building up in your chest, and you bubble your cheeks out to attempt to keep it in. A faint ‘hee hee’ comes out, despite all your efforts, and you cover your mouth with your hand once more.

Subsequently, Edward’s cheeks begin to flush and he gives a rather undignified, quiet snort.

“Do you know sodium jokes?”

Oh, you know this answer. You know it well. “NA.”

And that’s the last straw. You and Ed burst into loud laughter over something only mildly funny for no apparent reason than you shouldn’t be talking and puns are the worst thing in the world.

Your loud laughter peters off when you see the entire class and the Chemistry teacher staring at you, the Chemistry teacher with a little more annoyance than you think is safe for your Chemistry marks. You hiss at Ed to get him to shush, and then poke him in the shoulder to get him to shut up.

“Ou-ah!” Ed hisses at you.

“Quiet. Down.” You whisper.

The teacher sends one last warning glare your way and turns back to the board, resuming her drone on the Bohr model of the atom.

“It was not funny,” Ed whispers, pretending to take notes in (that was definitely German. Why would he have a Russian surname if he’s from Germany?) his clearly cheap notebook. Doodles of what look like circular Mandalas crowd the margins in several colours of ink.

“You were the one who laughed first,” You answer back.

“No, I was not.”

“Yes, you were.”

You catch the teacher’s sidelong glance once more, and upon deliberating whether winning this argument is worth it, you choose to not be sent to the headmaster’s for being disruptive.

Ed scratches down his notes in awkward, thin handwriting and doodles Mandalas the entire lesson block.
At lunchtime, Puja seems especially evil today. You don’t know if her Maths teacher had done anything more malevolent than on usual days, but whatever happened, Puja is in a mood. This was not good news.

“He got me into trouble in Chemistry, Puja. Because of some stupid pun. It was terrible, and I still laughed. I want to, but I just can’t hate this kid, no matter how cocky or short-tempered he is.” You gripe, eyeing Puja’s chорchorи. It’s steaming and golden, and Gaz Clarke tries to reach over her head to snag a piece, only to be violently rebutted by Puja’s long, thin hand. Puja’s dad is the best cook you had ever met, and with Puja’s outright refusal to share her food with anyone you always feel like you’re missing out on something wonderful.

“We both know why you don’t-” Puja once again deflects an attempt to pick at her chорchorи with a forceful backhand of the guilty person’s arm. She swats at the air behind her until she’s satisfied that they’re gone. “-I think you want to be friends with him.”

“Why? How is he special from, say, Belinda Wheatley?”

“Well, that’s simple. He’s new. He’s interesting. He’s got a really nice face.” Puja says, her words toned an irritating matter-of-fact kind of smugness.

“I agree with the first two, but a nice face?” You ask, looking down at your greyish-brown meal. Puja’s meal did look better in comparison. Warmer, less gummy, less likely to come up a few hours from now.

“Don’t tell me you’re blind as well as dense,” Puja remarks. “All the girls’ve noticed, and the only thing keeping them back is the fact that he’s not exactly the most approachable boy ever.”

There’s a strange blooming of something in your chest when you hear her words. It’s unpleasant, but you can’t tell what it is. “Fine, next time I have a lesson with him I’ll stare at his face without blinking for minutes on end.”

“Why wait?” Puja smirks. Oh no. Oh no no no, what is she planning. This can’t be good.

“OI! EDWARD!”

I swear- “Scream it to India, will you!!” You hiss in her ear.

Ed looks up from his chemistry textbook, rises from his seat with metal soup thermos held in his hand kind of awkwardly, and begins to walk over to your table.

When he sits, you can tell the conversation that will follow will be one of the most awkward you will ever experience.

“Alright?” Puja asks.

“Yes.”

You can see Puja glance at you out of the corner of your eye.

His level of English comprehension may also be an obstacle.

Chapter End Notes
I rewrote this from its clunky, awkward, slightly OOC previous self, and now look at it! It’s a slightly more polished rubbish bin! (Though I’m still sure Ed’s a bit OOC. Sorry!)

Original Author’s Note:

Why do all of the dramatic things happen at lunch?

Also, I feel like Ed's getting out of character. Sorry about that, but I can't find that amazing reference for him that I used a few months ago. I'm trying very hard.

Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov-

Bitte- Please

I wrote this chapter a long time ago please forgive me (the quality is... ehhhhhh)

Thank you for reading so far, I appreciate you!
Chapter Four

On the twenty-second of January, you wake up to see flat, grey skies and that persistent blanket of snow still on the ground.

You groan loudly and collapse back onto your bed. You snuggle back under your blankets, ready to ride out another cold winter morning in the sleepy warm cave of your bed, but at that moment, your mobile’s 7:30 alarm goes off.

“Eerrrrrrghhhh.”

Your mum left for work at least a half hour ago, you chastise yourself, so if you don’t get up right now you will miss lessons and your mother will kill you if she finds out.

Your mobile keeps playing the sound of old-fashioned churchbells. In your tired state, you slap at your bedside table with clumsy aiming. This sends your mobile sailing to the floor, a vulgar swear about someone’s mother out of your mouth, and Mrs Gallagher’s broom into the the wall next door at least three times.

You wince at Miss Gallagher’s muffled lecturing. Hopefully, there isn’t a tenant meeting tonight and Miss Gallagher can’t go tattle on you to your mother. She’d always had it out for you since a toy that was supposed to fly (but didn’t, those advertisements lied and you’re still bitter about it) was thrown straight into the potted rosebush on her terrace. Long story short, gravity and terra-cotta don’t mix.

You throw yourself around your room for the next few minutes, buttoning your blazer in all the wrong holes, forgetting your thick socks yet again in the haze of early-morning drowsiness. You skip your breakfast, and instead decide to gulp down some mango-peach yoghurt your mother had bought a fortnight ago and hadn’t yet eaten. It tastes like refrigerator.

Outside of your block of flats, your navy school blazer does little to provide warmth against the cold. The cold air embraces you and wraps around every uncovered part of you with all of the pleasantness of being shoved into a walk-in freezer.

Just as you go past a flat, the curtains twitch aside, and a pair of eyes are looking right at you with profound interest. You're too far away to note their colour or even the face they’re a part of. A few forward movements and the eyes have disappeared behind their grey-green drapes. You squint past a small gap between them into the dark flat beyond, hoping to catch a glimpse of whoever was staring.

At the exact moment you’ve almost craned your head upside down and to the left at a 45-degree angle, the flat’s front door opens and a person steps out. You start, wrenching your head away from the window, apologies readying to be spouted on your tongue and excuses being formed at breakneck speed. This is all brought to a grinding halt by one look at the person who had emerged from the mysterious flat.

Edward Edik is staring at you with widened golden eyes, frozen in the middle of pulling a rucksack onto his back, a piece of toast in his mouth. His hair is loose and damp around his face. It’s probably going to freeze in his commute to school.

You only realise you’ve been staring when Edward clears his throat and takes the toast out of his mouth to speak.
“You were staring into my window?” It’s really more of a question than a statement.

“Er.” C’mon, think, you’ve done this before. “Er, I, thought there was a… was someone staring at me through your window. I was trying to get a look.” You narrow your eyes at him in what you hope is an appraising expression. “Were you staring at me through your front window?”

For some odd reason, Edward glances back at the doorway behind him with a raised eyebrow, before pulling the door shut. He takes a few seconds to comprehend what you have said. “No, you are seeing...maybe you are seeing things.”

A few full seconds of awkward silence precedes your next statement. “I didn’t know you lived this close to me.”

“I do?” Edward blinks and peers around the corner. “I do. Your flat is with the dead rosebush, yes?”

“I suppose you could use my flat as a reference point next time you get lost.”

His ears redden until they resemble tomatoes rather than ears. He sputters, “N-no! I am fine without your location! I can find my own way, thank you very much!”

You hide your smile with a hand. “Oh, really.”

“Yes, oh really!” Edward fumes. “I am capable of navigating!”

Edward is scowling as you raise an eyebrow sceptically. You then laugh and wave your hand in a dismissive gesture. “Sure, Edward. Do you want to go to school together?”

Edward shrugs. “Yes.”

You two spend the next minute or so in silence, Edward’s uneven footsteps rhythmically pounding on next to you. Edward must have a leg that’s shorter than the other, or something, because only a platform nailed onto the bottom of his shoe could make one footstep sound heavier than the other.

“So,” You say, trying to initiate a conversation. “Where did you live in Germany?”

“Rauhenbronn. It is a village in the south. It is in Bavaria.” This is much smoother than his other sentences. They have a practised air about them.

“That’s geography. I mean, tell me about the town itself.” You nudge him with your elbow.

“Huh. Can you tell me about it?”

Edward screws up his eyes in concentration, taking a cord off his wrist and tying his hair up with it. “Well, it is in…Bavaria. There are mountains. It is in Schwaben region… Augsburg is very north.”

“That’s geography. I mean, tell me about the town itself.” You nudge him with your elbow.

Edward makes a ‘hmmph’ noise, but continues all the same. “The houses are far apart in the hills.
Lots of trees. The city centre has a market during the harvest seasons. Farming is important. We do not have very many people."

“The mountains in Germany to a crowded city in England? That must be a big change.” You might be being just a tad rude. But, curiosity had overpowered your etiquette in this situation.

Edward snorts and shakes his head. “The scenery is different, and there are more people, but people are still the same. People are always the same.”

You mull over this piece of wisdom for a bit.

“It is strange, though, English food. I ate something the other day that was not enjoyable.”

“Oh? What was that?”

“Sew-shy?”

A few seconds of staring at Edward uncomprehendingly.

“Wait, you mean sushi?”

Edward nods. “It has fish. And strange green...strips. Around it.”

“Edward, that’s Japanese food. The green is seaweed.”

You can see comprehension dawn on his face like a sunrise. He hastens to hide this. “I knew that.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Sarcasm is written in every line on your face.

“I did!”

“Right.”

An awkward silence follows this. Thankfully, you can see the school’s front doors fast approaching.

Once inside, Edward waves goodbye to you, to go settle in his usual seat in the assembly hall.

“See you at lunch, Edward!”

He flicks his hand in a small salute.

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Puja’s food looks delicious as usual. Ed’s food raises an eyebrow.

You eye it with either disgust or interest; it’s a brown broth, still steaming, inside of a Styrofoam bowl. Two large, greyish-yellow lumps can be seen. It’s most likely German, but he has a West Asian name, so it might be some Caucasian or Russian meal you hadn’t heard of. You’re not sure you want to know what is.

“Edward, just a question,” Puja says, around a mouthful of stew-soaked naan. “What, exactly, is that concoction you have there?”

Leave it to Puja to ask exactly what you don’t want to ask.

“Leberknödelsuppe.” Ed replies, and does this odd full-body flinch. He spears one of the greyish-yellow lumps on his fork and shoves it in his mouth. The lumps are spherical, you note.
“Gesundheit.” Puja says, with a dark eyebrow rising into hairline territory.

“Puja,” You say. Puja dips another slice of naan into her stew. “I think *Leberknödelsuppe-*” (“Gesundheit squared, wow, the sniffles must be going around-” Puja interjects) ”-shut it- I think that means the lumps he’s got in there are filled with liver.”

“Wait, German people actually eat liver?”

“*Chorchori* is made with liver, think.”

Puja squints, drops her fork, and spreads her hands wide on the table, staring somewhere into the middle distance. “Maybe- I’ve never seen my *Dida* or my cousin use liver? How many times have I seen them cook…”

Puja continues staring into the middle distance. She’s counting something on her fingers, and it’s getting into the double digits at an alarming rate.

“Edward, when exactly did you have the time to make that?”

“I did not. There is a market just outside school. I walk by when the woman at the desk turns, and I may sneak into-”

The bell’s klaxon ringing interrupts Edward’s retelling of his school-day escapades. He bolts down the rest of his *Leberknödelsuppe* with a speed you’re not sure is entirely human, and is out of the canteen before you can say ‘goodbye’.

“Somewhere to be?” You ask, to no one but yourself.

Puja is still counting; somewhere in the thirties by now.

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“On 21 November 1878, the Battle of Ali Masjid began, and with it the Second Anglo-Afghan War. Lieutenant-General Browne led the British forces into the Ali Masjid fortress…”

Pens are scratching on notebooks at a languid pace. The owners of these pens each have a glazed look in their eye, each to different degree. Belinda Wheatley is one of the least bored ones, while Gaz Clarke looks like he’s sleeping his eyes open. You put yourself somewhere in the middle of these two extremes.

“Ghulam Haider Khan…”

Is this even a major war?

“…Indian forces were involved, under command of the Lieutenant-General…”

Wasn’t John Watson a veteran of this war?

“…British victory led to an almost completely open northern approach to Kabul…”

That’s a Sherlock Holmes novel on your teacher’s desk, funnily enough.

“…Russian aid…”

Out of nowhere, a muffled ‘bang’ comes from the corridor, startling the class out of their bored stupor. Belinda Wheatley is the first to the door. The class follows soon after, your teacher at their
A throng of excited students is mingling outside the Chemistry classroom.

“I heard it too! You think it was an explosion? Maybe someone brought in a firecracker or something like that-”

“That’s ridiculous! You’d have to light it, and where would they get one in the first place?”

“You can buy anything if you have money and confidence, Kim!”

The Chemistry classroom’s door clanks, rattles, and then opens as a roomful of students files out, coughing. The smell billowing out of the room is at the same time chemical and bitter. The students all emit a collective ‘errgh!’ and step back to allow their fellow students to escape.

Edward is the last person to file out. He has a rather suspicious expression on his face; it looks like someone who is a bit pleased with himself but also a touch guilty. But mostly pleased.

Edward instinctively gravitates to your side. You can see the smile he’s trying smother under his right hand at this distance.

“Tell me you didn’t do what I think you did.”

Edward’s grin is definitely present now. “Yes, I will not tell you.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did.”

Before you can fully grasp the extent of what Ed has done, the Chemistry teacher bursts into the corridor with her scarlet blazer pulled up over her nose.

“Sorry, sorry!” She exclaims. “A mishap with the chemicals! Everything is alright! Carry on!”

She begins to herd her students back into her classroom with a threat only those near to her can hear: “If I find who did this, I will make sure they’ll have detention every night for months. We’ll talk about this inside. I’ll have to open all the windows, it’s freezing outside-”

“Do you realise how dangerous that was?” You say to Edward. His grin is still very pronounced.

“I was doing well. Nothing very dangerous could happen.” He counters. “I think I made this afternoon interesting.”

You squint at him. You’re just about to ask how, exactly, he was sure that he wouldn’t injure anyone, those are chemicals he’s dealing with, when your teacher calls your class inside.

Ed parts with a wave and a snigger.

Compared with the excitement of earlier, returning to taking notes on the second Anglo-Afghan war is unbearably dull. You, and the rest of the class, let your minds wander. Only Yvette Kingsley is still attempting to write down what battles happened when, which long-named general commanded what, etc.

Belinda Wheatley is making origami frogs by the company. You spend a few minutes watching her dexterous fingers fold them.
Yvette Kingsley is doodling her initials and someone else’s in a heart written in red pen.

Gaz Clarke is texting.

One of the new kids—Benji, was it? Or Benjamin? He’s reading some book with a dark-haired boy on the front cover, wielding a sword in the midst of churning waves. It looks interesting, from the speed at which Benji/jamin is turning pages.

The girl in the front row had a pencil out. She was… currently scraping the paint off of the wood at a methodical rate. Odd, but boredom makes people do strange things.

Pencil Girl used to have brightly coloured blue hair, you remember. It was now a dark, cocoa brown. Note to self, dark brown looks good on navy blue clothes.

Back at Belinda Wheatley’s desk, she’s almost got an entire battalion of origami frogs. There’s a section made up of miniscule lined-paper ones. How she folded those so small is beyond you.

Gaz Clarke is having a heated debate via text message.

Belinda Wheatley is now moving onto origami cranes. This seems to be a little more difficult than the frogs, but judging by her quick and precise folding, she’s an old hand at this too. She folds a particularly pretty one in crumpled lilac stationary she found in the bottom of her striped rucksack.

The bell interrupts your teacher in the middle of a sentence. You thank whatever or whoever controls the bells with almost indecent gratefulness.

Gathering your things into your rucksack, which is looking a little worse for wear if you were being honest, you start fantasising about your snack stash at home. Your stomach gives an agreeing grumble, and Belinda Wheatley slaps her hand down on your desk. You start and look up at her. Her dark eyes have an odd glint to them—akin to curiosity, possibly, or determination.

“Hello,[Y/N].” Her way of saying your name serves as a strong reminder of how extremely Scottish Belinda Wheatley is.

“Hello, Belinda,” You echo, a little apprehensively. She’s never really spoken to you before.

She waves, and with a little polite smile on her face, asks, “That bloke you were talking to, is he new here?”

There is a strong stream of people going out the door. You feel a little wistful and yearning, what with the snacks just waiting for you at home. “Er, yeah. His name’s Edward.”

“Haven’t seen him around until now. He’s from somewhere abroad?”

The students have all exited. Your teacher is giving you two a ‘look.’ “Germany, down in the Alps.”

She nods thoughtfully, and with a vague wave goodbye, leaves. Her eyes are cast downwards in thought.

You blink. Every small interaction with Belinda Wheatley has always left you rather discombobulated after its conclusion. You theorise it’s her to-the-point way of socialising with anyone and everyone, from strangers to her closest friends. She doesn’t pad her conversations with small talk and instead gets the answers she needs as quickly as possible, then leaves. You shake your head and bid a short goodbye to your teacher. That cupboard full of food at home is calling your name. Home, sweet home: T-minus 10 minutes.
Even though Edward has a 2-minute head start, you find yourself a few paces behind him on the way home. He’s muttering something to himself and looking all around at the slushy, discoloured snow on the pavement and piled up at the street kerbs.

Your mobile dings in the front pocket of your rucksack. It’s either Puja or your mother messaging you, and both aren’t people you’re willing to risk a slip on the icy pavement for, so you ignore it. Distracted by this train of thought, you nearly miss an important event involving Ed, gravity, and the ground.

“Oof!” Thump. You look up to see Edward prostrate on a snow pile, getting a faceful of snow.

You can barely hold back a snigger. Instead, what comes out is a half-laughing, half-choking noise that sounds quite derisive. Realising this, you hasten over to his side in hopes of making up for it.

“Edward?” You ask. Edward hasn’t moved since his spectacular dive.

Edward lets out a stream of muffled, rapid-fire German into the snow.

“Edward, I can’t understand you. Are you alright?” It’s getting harder and harder not to snicker. He’s completely spread-eagle and facedown in the middle of the pavement, who can blame you?

Ed lifts his head off the ground to say in a halting English-German mix, “Snow does not...feel as nice... as it looks.”

You eye the greyish-white hills with a sceptical gaze, and unsuccessfully try to bite back a laugh. “I could’ve told you that. Need any help up?”

He shakes his head and clambers to his feet. He leans back to stretch out his back (you can hear each and every pop), and brush snow off his now-wet navy school blazer. He grimaces down at the massive dark patches all down his front with distaste.

You suggest the next thing without thinking. “I have a tumble-dryer at my flat, if you need to use it.” Shit, shit, shit, what a thing to say to a person you’ve just met! Invite them over to your house, you don’t even know him that-

Ed shrugs. “I will.”

Huh?

“I do not have a… tumble-dryer at my home. Will you have food?”

‘Will you have food?’ is one of the least accented sentences you’ve ever heard him speak. His response has taken you aback so much that it takes a few moments for you to reply.

“Y-yes, good. I mean. I do have food.” You make a beckoning motion and make your way to your flat. “C’mon, the longer we stay out here the colder that spot’ll get.”

You have just invited a virtual stranger to your home for tea. Sorry, mum.

Chapter End Notes

Gasp. Xbox achievement: Friendship Zone.
Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov-
Sheiße- Shit

*I'm trying to keep this as inclusive as possible to readers with darker skin, because
darker skin really doesn't show blushing as much. I've noticed this with other reader
inserts: They only cater to girls with lighter skin, and non-Afro textured hair. I'm going to
keep that from happening in this fanfiction. Please tell me if I mess something up
because I am whiter than a saltine cracker.

((edit)) I rewrote this!! Also, note: Leberknödelsuppe is Liver dumpling soup! It's made
with beef liver dumplings, and in Bavaria where the Schwaben region is, they're served
in beef stock/soup. No, I didn't get this from Wikipedia (yes i did)
You have a complete stranger on your sofa, in your sitting-room. On your sofa.

In your room of sitting.

On your sofa.

You bump your forehead into the wall at regular intervals, while telling yourself, “breathe, breathe,” with each soft **thunk**. He’s just a kid, he could’ve been some random bloke off the street at least. You’ve had a conversation with him - or did that even count as a conversation?

“What do you have?”

This startles you out of your reverie. You poke your head out of the kitchen and look around to see Edward sprawled out on your sofa. His shoes have been flung halfway across the room. Didn’t waste any time getting comfortable. You can respect that. “What’d you say?”

He repeats himself, with a slightly lighter accent this time.

“Er,” You cast a cursory glance around the kitchen. There’s a mosaic array of teabags strewn across the worktop, and a dusty box of biscuits could possibly be edible - does he want beans and toast? Do German people eat beans and toast? “Tea?”

“...well, hopefully.”

“I mean,” You scramble for the rest of your sentence. “There’s a rather lot of types.”

Edward makes a grunting noise you hope accompanies an impartial shrug.

Midway through preparing two cups of tea and preparing the biscuits, your mobile dings in your pocket. You fish it out to see an annoyed message from Puja.

‘**Chorchori is only mixed vegetables, arsehole. >:||**’

You quickly tap out a reply. ‘\_(ツ)/~’

Your mobile dings yet again, and while you’re holding two cups, no less.

‘**Git. What are you doing right now?**’

You set down a rather garish porcelain mug, and answer: ‘**entertainign company**’

Not a second later: ‘**Who?**’
You’re about to answer, but a sudden, slightly creepy idea springs into fruition. You bite your lip, and glance around the kitchen, debating with yourself.

You lose the debate.

In the space of two seconds, you crane your phone around the archway of your kitchen, and snap a photo of the back of Edward’s head. The camera shutter sounds, and Ed turns around - not before you’ve dived back into the kitchen.

The photo is a little blurry, but you can clearly see Edward lounging on your sofa, his blond ponytail spilling over the back and past his shoulders. The hand he has flung over the side of the sofa is still gloved, and blends in a little with the white of his dress shirt.

The second the “delivered” turns to “read”, Puja sends a long string of exclamation points and confused emojis. A selfie of her squinting into the camera follows soon after. She’s lying on her blue-striped sheets, her hair spilling everywhere.

‘I just invited him over Puja’

‘WHY!’

‘...etiquette?’

Puja is typing, but you shove your mobile back into your pocket before she can respond and bring the tray of mugs and stale biscuits into the sitting-room.

“Sustenance,” You say, and slap the tray onto the coffee table. Edward’s face brightens. He seizes a biscuit, and after appraising it from all angles, shoves it into his mouth with a crunch.

You blink as he chews. “Er,”

He gulps and nods. “Good,”

“Erm, I’ll...I’ll take that as a thank you,” You say. You curl a hand around your baby-blue mug and get comfortable. You nestle the cup to your chest, relishing in the warmth that spreads into your bones. “So-”

Your mobile dings. You bring it out of your pocket and see that Puja has written an essay (complete with sources) at least two paragraphs long in the span of five minutes.

You shake your head and set it face-down on the table. Edward’s hand has frozen around the handle of his mug. His eyes follow your mobile, his brows tugging down.

“What’s wrong?”

“Âh!” He jolts and looks up. “It is all right. All is well.”

You raise a sceptical eyebrow, but take a sip.

Edward does the same .

There’s an awkward silence as you both drink.

“So,” You say, swirling the tea around in the cup. “Do you, er, have any hobbies?” Hobbies! Hobbies! Honestly! This is why you have one friend!
“Well, I-” Edward hesitates. His eyes flick up to your face and back down again. He raises a hand to
scratch at the back of his neck.

“What’s that?”

“I read, I suppose.”

“What kinds of books?” You sip to fill the silence.

“Teaching books.”

You remain silent, to encourage him to elaborate.

“Ah...sciences. English. History?”

You blink. “You revise in your spare-” A sudden memory of this afternoon flashes. “Actually, that
makes sense.”

“Explain.”

You shake yourself. “I mean, there’s no hiding that you made that explode. It sounds like something
someone who constantly revises would do for fun.”

Edward shrugs.

An awkward silence.

“Do you want to know how I did it?”

“God, yes.”

Edward sets down his cup and rubs his gloved hands together, a mischievous grin splitting across his
face. As you begin to regret your decision, he begins before you can stop him. “In the room, there is
a cupboard of bottles, yes? So, I look at the bottles, and I think-”

You hear of the exact mixture of chemicals he used, how he made himself look innocent, the
Chemistry teacher’s efforts to get the smell and the smoke (?) out of the class, using the fans,
windows, and copious amounts of air freshener.

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After two hours of conversation, a full quarter of one in which you were sidelined from the intensity
of your laughter, you sigh and look out the window. Your stomach still hurts from a particularly
involved story Ed told about his experiences out and about in a British town. An outsider’s
perspective on British behaviour, mixed with a little bit of Ed’s sarcasm and foreign culture, brought
it from a funny story to a hilarious story.

The sun is bleeding an orange burn across the horizon, splotching the grey winter clouds a
watercolour citrus. The orange’s brightness blends into soft tickle-me-pink, then a cold violet, and
eventually a dark winter-cloud grey. You think about Puja’s watercolour sketchbook, and her love of
just experimenting with colour. She’d love to paint this, you think, and as you take out your mobile
to tell her to do so, you see the time.

‘5:45 PM, Friday 22 January’

It’s almost the time when your mother finishes up at the office, and there isn’t a single ‘see you soon’
or ‘bringing home dinner’ message to be seen. A selfie of you and Puja, grinning so widely it looks
painful, glows up from the screen. Puja’s face was splashed with powdered paint, her white t-shirt ruined beyond repair with a rainbow explosion. You remember that photo- it was from the Colour Run from two years ago. Puja was exhausted afterwards, and slept for 14 hours only to get up for food.

Ed sniffs in his sleep. He’s completely spread eagle on your sofa, button-up shirt untucked from his uniform trousers and uniform blazer rumpled underneath him. His stomach is out in the open air, probably freezing cold. He fell asleep right after you two finished a whole box of stale biscuits, which took a surprisingly long amount of time. You two were talking more than eating; those biscuits took quite a bit of chewing, to be fair.

You go over to him to tug his shirt back down (to save him from a cold, duh!). But, just as you grasp the cotton in your fingers, you see something on his stomach. You lift his shirt- just a centimetre!- and see a huge scar on his side. It’s round, and about the size of a tea saucer. You gulp and tug the shirt back down.

What kind of thing could create a scar like that? How could a fifteen-year-old boy even get a scar like that?

You shake yourself. Nosiness, again, is something that you just can’t help but fall victim to. Whatever kinds of scars are on Ed’s body is his business, not yours.

There’s a jingling and clinking at your front door, and you recognise the sound of your mother struggling to get the keys in the lock. Then, you realise you’re standing not even half a foot away from a strange boy, who’s never been in your flat, has not met your mother, and has not even been mentioned to your mother before.

Shit.

In the three seconds between your mother unlocking the front door and opening it, you launch yourself across the room and position yourself in a way that appears casual, trying to find a place to put your hands.

“Hellooooo…...mum.”

Your mother raises an eyebrow while toeing off her court shoes. “Hello, child?” She hangs up her peacoat and handbag on a coat hook in the foyer. “Sorry I didn’t text today, I ordered- er, who’s this?”

“Erm,” You stare at Ed, floundering for an explanation. “Just…a friend I had over for tea, and nearly dinner.”

Your mum winces. “Sorry, sweetie. I called out some food from the Indian place down the road.”

“It’s fine, mum. I was going to boot him out before you came in, anyway.”

“It’s alright if you want him to stay over, stay for dinner-”

You stick your hands out and shake them. “No, no, no, no, that’s fine, everything’s fine, I’ll just wake him up. He’s, er, lazy. Just gimme a mo’.”

“Okay, dear. Who is he, anyway?”

Ed is furiously scratching his ear in his sleep.
“His name’s Ed. He’s an exchange student.”

Your mum raises her eyebrows while taking off her blazer. “Really?”

“Mmm-hmm. Germany.”

“Interesting. Well, invite him over again sometime, alright? I’m going to go put on the BBC. Tell me if the doorbell rings.”

“Okay,” You watch your mum walk down to her bedroom, walking gingerly where her feet ache from wearing court shoes all day.

As soon as her bedroom door closes, you hiss at Ed, “Pssst, get up! Ed!”

Ed groans and rubs his eyes.

“Eddie!”

His eyes snap open. “Do not name me Eddie.”

“Edward. Get off the sofa, or I’ll drag you off myself.”

Ed grumbles and sits up. His back cracks in the process, and he stretches like a drowsy cat. “Awake, awake.”

“I’m kicking you out,”

He pretends to be offended for about half a second. “Your mother is home?”

“Yes, and we both agree you’re leaving our flat.”

“I never said that! Don’t bring me into this!” Your mother calls from the back room.

“I enjoy her.” Ed grins.

You roll your eyes. “You should. She’s brilliant.”

Ed is tugging on his shoes and straightening his creased blazer. As soon as he tightens the last knot on his dress shoes, you subtly guide him to the door.

“Sorry about shoving you out this abruptly. It was fun having tea, though.”

Ed shrugs and flaps a hand at you. “It is well. I will see you at school.”

You wave goodbye, he waves back, and the door shuts. Then, you hear a little huff of laughter behind you. You stiffen, and whip around.

“Just a friend?” Your mum says, smiling.

Your face burns. “Yes, mum!”

She still has a sceptical eyebrow creeping up. Your scowl deepens.

She chuckles and shakes her head. “Go do your homework.”

You have never been so welcome to the suggestion.
The friendship escalates.

I feel like Ed's personality is getting more in character. Practise makes perfect.

Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov
Sicher- Sure

I hope you're enjoying this! Be sure to follow and vote if you do. But only if you want to. Not going to pressure anyone.

Have a lovely day/night/morning/afternoon!

17/5/17

I rewrote this! And about time, too. The original chapter was… rough. :/
February holiday is finally here, and you have nothing planned. Puja's going to Wales with her family, and you honestly do not have any more friends. Other than Ed, that is. Doing something with him is completely out of the question.

You thought.

"Puja, aren't you going to Wales? Whatever will we do without you?" Ed says, with mock sadness. He opens the school door; a burst of freezing air slams you in the face.

"I know. What will you do? How will you function? I'm the cool friend- how will you have fun without me?" Puja laughs. "Honestly though, Mum won't let me stay here. All we're going to do is walk around a creaky hotel for five days. I wouldn't miss anything. Mum insists it's family time."

"I'll text you," You say. "Will that help?"

"Yes." Puja whispers intensely.

So... Puja's going to Wales. What am I going to do the entire holiday? Sit at home? I don't know if I could do something with Ed. Maybe he's got plans too.

"So, that means..." Puja continues. "You two will have to spend time together without me. I shudder at the thought." She jokes.

Ed rolls his eyes, but your face warms* at her implications.

"Shhhh!" You hiss. Puja laughs.

"Embarrassed, are we?"

You shoot a death glare at her.

"Well, anyway, I'll see you two the Monday after next." Puja smiles. "Will you miss me?"

"Yes, Puja." You grin. You envelop her in a warm hug. "I'll text you tonight."

Puja flashes you and Ed a thumbs up after you let her go. "Bye!" She races to her family's car, and hops in. You and Ed wave until the car is completely gone from sight.

Ed stretches. "Are we going to sit in our flats, being unproductive people for seven days?"

"Your call," You say. "I guess we'll find some way to keep ourselves entertained without Puja planning every outing." You begin to [speed-walk/speed-roll], and Ed clunks next to you.
"She plans it all?"

"Yeah. She's a surrogate mum-friend."

Comfortable silence fills the air between you two as you walk.

"I've known you two for a month and a half and I didn't ever learn this?"

"Surprise!" You exclaim sarcastically. Chuckling, you continue. "I've already come up with an idea. What about going to that park near here? We could get fish and chips across the street afterwards."

"You want me break the world record for 'times consecutively fallen' while on ice?"

"Absolutely."

"There was a promise of food." He says.

"Saturday, then?"

Ed nods.

You smile and wave before entering your flat.

You notice (with your heart sinking into your stomach) that your smile is much wider and your cheeks are much warmer than usual.

You slam the door with much more force than necessary.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know this is an itty bitty teeny tiny chapter, but I seriously needed to update. Sorry for the size! The next one will be longer to make up for it, I promise.

*Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov*

*Mädchen*- Girl

Ä/ä- sounds like the ay in hay.

To make this ULTRA REALISTIC, I'm taking the romantic stuff very slowly. Friendship first, then romantic stuff. I'm also taking to slowly because demiromantic/demisexual Ed is so canon it hurts.

All of you lovely readers have a good day/night/afternoon/evening/ morning, okay? I'll try to update soon.
You're standing outside Ed's flat, bundled up from head to toe. Despite the multiple layers you have on, your nose and ears are ice cold to the touch.

You raise your numb knuckles to rap smartly on the door. "It's nine-forty-five, Ed!" You call out. "Ed! Oi! Park! Come on!"

After a minute or two of progressively louder knocking, the door quietly creaks open. "Ed? Are you all right?" Feeling slightly concerned, you push the door open wider and go inside.

A pair of dim, soft chrysoberyl brown eyes are staring at you from the shadows of the stairway directly across from the door. You freeze in your tracks.

A hand reaches out from the shadows. Its purple veins and sharp, nearly starved-looking knuckles catch the cold morning light. As the hand slowly reaches for you, the owner's face begins to tip forward into illumination-

Ed steps right in front of you, zipping up a scarlet down jacket. "Well, you come on in, then." He jokes.

You glance at him for an infinitesimal second, before looking back at the shady stairway. The person is gone.

"Do...do you have someone here? In your flat with you?"

"No," He frowns. "I tell you. I live alone."

"But- I saw-"

"We need to go."

You decide to not press any further, and fall silent. You are shooed out the door, onto his front step.

He shuts the door and turns to look at you, his face scrunched with bemusement. "Going to stand there and stare at me all day?"

"Yes," You whisper jokingly. You widen your eyes and stare at him more intensely. He chuckles and shoves you towards the pavement.

Deciding to get a head start while he locks the door, you begin to [pushyourself/speedwalk] down the pavement.

"So, how far is it?" He asks, speeding up to catch up with you.

"Somewhat near."

"Exactly how near?" He presses.

"Not far." You hold in a wicked snigger as he slaps his left hand into his forehead into an expression of indignation.
"You love doing this, don't you?" He groans.

"Whatever are you speaking of, sir?" This time, a tiny snort escapes your nose.

"Come on!" He throws his hands into the air, and this time you muffle a cackle with your mitten. "Oh, you cackle now, but wait until you find an ice cube trailing down your shirt later." He grins smugly and crosses his arms as a look of horror flickers across your face.

"You wouldn't." You say in a hushed whisper.

"I would." He insists.

You press a hand delicately to your collarbone in mock scandal.

The iron-wrought archway entrance to the park inches into view from behind several somewhat overgrown, dead bushes. As you both fully gain sight of the state of the park, twin grimaces creep onto your faces.

The park, though pretty, is shining with a pearly sheen something that is unmistakably ice. Navigating the ice-coated pavement was going to be quite a chore.

Ed narrows his eyes and smirks smugly. "Are you a coward?"

"Hell, no." You set your face into an expression you hope looks somewhat determined."Bet I can beat you the centre fountain, unless you're too slow, hmm?"

Ed scowls. He sets an unsure foot onto the icy path, and so begins a slippery, sliding descent into the slick park paths.

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Several minutes later, Ed is spread-eagle, face-down on the ice, while you lay above him on the lip of the stone fountain, basking in your victory.

"Not fair," He grumbles. "My boots have tread. They are meant to keep me from sliding."

"Grumble all you want, you big baby. Excuses won't change the fact that I beat you." You grin, drawing yourself up with crossed arms, like a proud bird. Ed gives you a strange look at the gesture, which you return by sticking your tongue out.

He flips over and exhales a puff of breath into the cool air.

In the several seconds of silence, a pair of hijabi girls fall spectacularly a few metres away.

The girl in a striped headscarf gasps out something in Arabic that makes the other burst into peals of uncontrollable laughter. They collapse onto each other, giggling girlishly.

"Maybe you could do the opposite of that-" You nod towards the girls, "and help me up, huh?" With plenty of grumbling and groaning about his sore ass, he stands up to do so.

But, as he grasps your hand in his thickly gloved right, some random universal force causes the traction under his boot to ever-so-slightly slightly slip. This force, which is complained about by all during the winter, is also known as 'a patch of ice'.

Before you know it, a sharp yank nearly rips your arm out of its socket, your nose is slamming into Ed's chest at neck-breaking speeds, and hard ground is rushing up to meet the flat red-coated plane of
Ed's back.

Thump.

You can almost feel Ed's breath get knocked out of him, to which you grimace in empathy.

"Oof." He grunted.

"Same here."

Several seconds pass in stunned silence, with both of you nursing sprouting bruises. Several more seconds pass before you realize your face is still pressed into Ed's chest. He smells a bit more pleasant than you would've originally guessed (he is a teenage boy, after all)- a little bit of a metallic smell, some motor oil maybe, and a heavy scent that smells distinctly male and fits him quite well.

"Get off, I am being crushed." Ed huffs. You purposely plant your elbow into the soft spot in between his ribs (which incites an uncomfortable 'umph' from Ed), and push off it to roll over.

"Thanks for cushioning my fall. You're much more useful as a cushion-" You pause. Clutched in your right hand is a black glove- Ed's black glove.

You head snaps over to his bare right hand, which is currently scratching its owner's stomach lazily.

You try to bite back a sharp gasp, but a small intake of breath betrays your wishes. Ed quirks an eyebrow at your sudden silence, but noticing your gaze isn't directed towards him, he slowly follows it to his exposed- metal- right hand. His eyes widen ever so slightly-

Ed sits up abruptly and snatches the glove from your hand, shoving it onto his hand with unnecessary force. He turns away and clutches his knees to his chest in a protective fetal stance.

He's unsettlingly quiet for much longer than you would've liked, so you prop your body up on your elbows and begin to make an ill-advised comment.

"What-"

"Are you afraid?" He spits.

This question and his hostility catch you slightly off-guard. "Afraid? Why would I be afraid of a hunk of metal?" You growl. "Do you really think that I would be afraid of my own friend, just because one of his limbs is made of something other than flesh and bone? Are you serious?!"

His mouth pulls into a slight scowl as he turns to look you in the eyes with two very angry golden ones. All cockamamie courage you had during your spiel melts away, replaced with the wobbly, uncertain set of your mouth and horrible anxiousness for what he might say.

He doesn't say anything, surprisingly. You decide, against logic, to continue.

"W-why would...a metal limb isn't scary, dip-shit! It's cool- that means you're a...cyborg." Is there a German word for 'cyborg'? you wonder. His face twists into a look of pure 'what?'.

"What the hell is a... zy-baurg?" You try not to smile at the thickly German pronunciation of 'cyborg'.

"Doesn't matter. It's something wicked, that's all you need to know." Ed grins. At least he knows what 'wicked' means. To be truthful, in real life, his prosthetic does look wicked, but you'd never admit that you think so.
With the creaking and quiet clanking of his metal leg, he stands. He cracks his neck in no less than seven places before looking down at you, sprawled on the ground. Oh, how the tables have turned.

"Do you need help?" He offers both of his hands to yours, which you gladly accept. He pulls you up onto the lip of the fountain, allowing you recollect yourself.

"Are you completely done with the park as well?" You ask. He groans and nods. "You wanna go to that little café I told you about?"

"Food is there, yes?" He asks.

"Well, yeah, idiot. I can hear your stomach growling from over here. I'm not going to suffer you and your hunger complaints ever again." You quip. Ed glares daggers at your smug-ass grin.

"If it's that one place I see everyday coming home, then I swear to honest God that I will abandon you there. I saw the chef through the kitchen window sneezing into some poor guy's bangers and mash- and he ate it all! It was absolutely disgusting..." Ed launches into a long and detailed tale of the said chef, with you nodding and snorting every so often.

But, just as you both reach the gates of the park and exit the 'Park of Pain', as Ed just now dubs it, you interrupt.

"How did it happen?" This... might be a betrayal of his trust. You already know how, of course, but this could show exactly how much he trusts you. Not too high on the moral ladder, sure, you'll admit that.

"How did what-oh." He takes a deep breath, and stays silent for so long you're beginning to think you offended him.

"I...I made a stupid mistake. It hurt people." Ed says. "I do not think I... should tell all of it now."

You nod."I'm glad you trust me enough to tell me that much, at least."

He shrugs. "Let us go get some food. My... stomach?" He looks at you for help.

"...is 'stomach' the word you're looking for?" You ask, amused.

"Yes! My... 'stomach' is eating itself."

"You must be patient, my young padawan."

"Padavon? What is it with you and nonsense words?"

"Er, you see..."

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Later that afternoon, you and Ed stumble into the tiny restaurant across from the park.

You both collapse into a booth, smiling and warming your noses with your mittens.

A waitress saunters over. She chirps, "Hello, welcome to Wheatley's, can I take your order?"

You look up to see Belinda Wheatley in a waitress uniform, with her wand curls pulled back into a shoulder-length ponytail.
"Belinda! I didn't know that you worked here." You smile awkwardly.

"Yeah," she says. "I work after school and on holidays. I've got to earn some income, and my dad owns this restaurant, so I decided to use that opportunity." She scratches her head with her pencil. "What'll it be?"

"Er... two platters of fish and chips, please." You say.

"It'll be out in a bit." She says. She walks away. Before she enters the kitchen, she glances at Ed, gives you a thumbs up, winks, and mouths 'nice catch'. You shoot a confused look at her. She winks again before shutting the kitchen door.

"Who was that?" Ed asks.

"Erm... a girl who sits in front of me in Humanities."

"Hmm." Ed shrugs. He leans his head against the back of the booth's seat and yawns. "What did she say?"

"'Nice Catch'." You snigger.

Ed nods slowly with an exaggerated solemn look on his face. You both fall completely silent. That is, until Ed's eyes widen, and he groans loudly and plants his forehead on the grubby table. Took him long enough to realize.

You burst out laughing.

The laughter is so obnoxiously loud, it causes a very confused Belinda Wheatley to poke her head out of the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

I made you guys wait too long I'm such a slothful person

Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov

Pferd- Horse

** Belinda Wheatley is black. This picture (https://em.wattpad.com/c0cdda7d746dddb32d31f7ab85b9551e85c7c1443/68747470733a2f2f692e79 s=fit&h=360&w=720&q=80) is kind of what I imagine her wand curls to look like. On that note, Puja is Indian; Bengali to be exact. She is not white, either.

I realised something. I have basically no other men in this story. I'll fix that soon, but remember- having lots of female/non binary characters and not a lot of male characters is the opposite of a problem. We've got too many dude characters as it is.

Also- Ed's all jokey and a bit of a class clown, I know. I have a feeling if he didn't have
all these life or death situations weighing down on him, he'd be like that with his friends. Or maybe he's just out of character. Please tell me in the comments.

Have a good morning/day/afternoon/evening/night!
Chapter Eight

Spring mid-term break began three days ago, and you’ve barely got anything done. It’s awful. All you’ve done is think and procrastinate on homework.

It’s unbelievable how unproductive you are.

You guess you went to the park with Edward Edik a few days ago. Does being social count as productive? You know that your mother thinks it does. She’s excited that you’ve made a friend other than Puja.

‘I can’t wait to actually meet him!’ She had said to you. ‘Rather than saying hello, and kicking him out. Germany! It’s interesting.’

Speaking of interesting, your life right now is not. It’s only 9 AM, and you’re bored out of your mind. You’ve done the washing-up, the laundry, eaten way too many crackers, and now you’re sitting next to your desk, staring at the ceiling.

You groan loudly and thump your head into the wall. You would rather do anything than that homework judging you from your desk. It’s a centimetre and a half high, too.

You scowl at it.

You’re stuck.

And in the most appropriate weather change you’ve ever witnessed, the U.K.’s ever-present winter sheet of grey clouds breaks, and rain comes drizzling down. It’s not even hard, proper rain. Just sad, grey, weak rain. The windows fog up a little. When you press your hand to the window to wipe the fog off, a shock zaps up your hand, and a purple spark flashes.

“Ow!” You exclaim, ripping your hand away from the window. “Bloody hell!”

You massage your hand and wallow in self-pity. The postman, late for some reason, drops post into your front postbox. You can hear the thunk from your bedroom.

Deciding that getting the post was at least more entertaining than being in physical pain, you head towards your front step. You can feel the cold drizzle in your hands and the rain bouncing off the hedges by your front door. While flipping through each envelope (bill, bill, junk-which is going to go straight into the bin,-bill, postcard from the orthodontist…), almost ready to tear your hair out from boredom, something on your wall catches your eye.

It looks like some kid had graffitied your wall, to be honest.

God, don’t they have anything better to do? You clutch the post in one hand as you move onto the grass to get a better look at whatever some kid had spray-painted onto your wall.

It’s circular, and filled with weird designs. A gang tag, maybe?

You wipe at the red paint, and out of nowhere, your ears pop. A woman murmurs something directly
into your right ear.

You screech and whip around, ready to punch some lady that did not understand the concept of personal space.

There is… no one there.

Your breathing slows. You shake yourself, and dig a finger deep into your ear, trying to see if any earwax had morphed a clap of thunder into a woman’s whisper. While rubbing your ear, you use the hand still clutching the post to continue rubbing at the paint, to see if it could just flake off.

This time, the same woman says, very clearly, but in German of all things: “It’s fixed! Look!”

You scream even louder, and fling the post in every direction.

“What the hell!” You shout, heart pounding. Either some creepy woman was very fast or you were being haunted by creepy spirits. This was not good either way.

You quickly gather up the post and begin to make your way inside. Just before you shut the door, you reach out to the graffiti to rub at it once more.

“Stars and sun above, did you hear that? Did one of you scream?”

That was the last straw. You rush inside your flat, yelling, and slam the door shut behind you. You lock it every single way you can dream of, and go into the kitchen to stress eat some more crackers. Your afternoon is spent Googling the symptoms of having a haunted flat and scaring yourself with the ‘Paranormal & Supernatural’ section of Netflix.

You forget all about the graffiti on the front of your flat in the wake of poltergeists and spirits.

Chapter End Notes

The plot thickens.

Okay wow it's finally done. This was hard, because the better written chapter had an-*clears throat*- accident. Sorry for the terrible-ness/

Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov
'Eu', in German, is pronounced 'oi'.

Have a lovely month, sorry for the filler and delay!

(edit) I completely rewrote this, and chopped down what was once a huge plot point into a little, bite-sized piece. :D
"This is MY ARM!"

stop

"Equivalent exchange! I'll give you half of-"

stop

"Winry-"

stop

"We can no longer-"

stop

"You're his son-"

stop

"The homunculi-"

STOP

"I-"

"He-"

"Where-"

"STOP!!"

He shouts. Back in the white space. It flickers. Yellow. The door is black. It flickers. Grey. Gold, crimson, black, white, silver- **RUST**

**MAGNUM OPUS**

The space flickers again. His hair is rich gold. Flicker. His hair is longer, golden blonde. He is taller. Back at the Truth. White figure. Smile. Laugh. Stupid boy, here yet again?

Flicker.
No, you're a man, now, aren't you?

Flicker.

Oh, what have you done to your soul now? What have you done to cause this?

Flicker.


Flicker.

Flesh arm. Older boy. Eyes confused. Not the same boy. But also the same boy.

Truth. White figure. Laugh.

Your hubris, is it? No.

The gate is calling your soul, yes. That's it. Wonder why?

Flicker.

Find that out for me, will you?

Flicker.

Yellow space door opening hands grabbing purple eyes jet black children dragging

Flicker

white space door opening only black hands a huge eye staring at

Flicker

dead eyed boy screaming no no no

Flicker

man being pulled shouting a vicious oath

Flicker.

Flicker.

Slam

——

The doors shut. Truth stands up and smiles widely.

"Oh, won't this be fun to observe? Two of them? One soul? One body? I have been bored lately."

************************************************

frozen fingers disorganised thoughts confusion where am I there was truth

gate gate gate
did I go through the gate
where am I

SLAM SLAM SLAM

doors shutting


What language was that?

I can't understand.

How did I get here?

Where am I?

His hair freezes in strands about his face, damp with sweat. Blood, maybe?

Twitch.


Twitch.

Taller. Paler hair. Eyes burn from exhaustion Some blood. Lots on head. Landed on a hard surface.

Twitch.

Twitch.

Where am I?

"Oi, kid, you all right?"

What did he say? What does that mean?

"Wo bin ich?! Wo bin ich!"

"Shit. Martha, we got another one."

Confused confused what are they saying what does it mean where am I

"Language?"

"Er... German, I think."

"'Kay. SIEGHILD! German one! Over here!"

first person man second person Martha
"See, Martha? Our nightly searchings turned up at least one."

"Oh, shut your trap. Translate."

woman dark haired olive skin leaning over hair close to nose

"Hey, kid. You okay?"

"Where am? Who you? Language speaking?"

"Martha, he's near delirious. Get some first aid, too. This looks like blood." Woman gestures to head bleeding

"Okay, what's your name?"

"E."

Twitch.

Pant. Pant. Pant.

dying pain dying

"Holy fuck!" woman screams

Twitch.

"Martha, code section G."

brunette leans over eyes wide "Oh my god. PHILLIP! EVERYONE! CODE SECTION G. GET THE SPECIALS IN NOW."

"Kid, what was that? What's your name? What happened to you?"

"E-ed."

"Can you focus on me?"

Look up woman scared eyes concerned

sieghild

"Okay, kid. Give me your full name."

"Edward Elric."

The woman gulps

"Where were you a few minutes ago?"

"Gate..."

"Gate?"

"The Gate..."
"How did you do that twitch thing?"

Blink.

"Hmm. Where do you live?"

"Amestr--Amestris."

Woman covers mouth with hand.

Shiver. Why is it so cold. Cold. I can see my breath.


Martha stares. "Is that even possible?"

"Call it!"

"I need proof before I can call something that ludicrous."

"Look at his arm, then, Martha."

Brunette grabs side. Flips me over.

"Oh my god it's- it's metal."

"Call it!"

"Who is he?"

"Later! Call it!"

Brunette opens mouth. Blinks.

"REVISION. CODE SECTION Y, PART 3."

People gasp behind me. A scream.

"Is that even possible?"

"Go! Go! Go!"

Rustling. Jabbering in unknown language

Twitch.

bleeding seeping

"Martha, look!"

"Is this what Captain warned us about section Y's?"

"Yes. But right now, he needs medical attention."

"The other doesn't!"
"This body could die if this one doesn't get treatment."

"What's going on?"

Twitch.

"Sieghild, he said something."

Woman leans over again. Kneels.

"Say it again?"

"What's happening?"

"Kid..."

Woman sighs.

"You're a long, long ways from home."

**********************************************************************

His eyes snap open.

Sieghild didn't notice it before, but they're golden too, like his hair. Well, both of his hairs.

That's confusing.

"The earth is vibrating."

He seems from a pre-flight age- probably shouldn't tell him what a helicopter is.

"What's with the flapping noise?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I'm not fucking stupid. Why is the ground shaking?"

Hostile, much?

"Aren't you around seventeen?"

"Sixteen. Where are you taking me?"

"How do you know we're transporting you?"

"I use context clues. Where are you taking me?"

It's been a long time since she's been sassed by a sixteen-year-old. In fact, the last time she remembers a sassy sixteen-year-old, it was herself. That was what, fourteen years ago?

"We're taking you someplace safe."

He groans.

"What, you've got a problem with safety?"
"I have a problem with condescending adults. Where. Am. I.” He glares and grits his teeth. Even with that head injury, he feels well enough to be an ass. Wonderful.

"You really wanna know?"

"Yes?"

"Through 'The Gate'."

His head whips around and his golden eyes meet Sieghild's olive ones.

His mouth is open wide.

"No."

Twitch. Richer hair, torso injury. His eyes look unbelievably old for sixteen.

"No. This... can't be."

Twitch.

"I'm not supposed to be-"

"I'm not..."

"...supposed to be...here."

Twitch.

His eyes dull.

Sieghild furrows her eyebrows.

She places two fingertips underneath the corner of his jaw, feeling for a pulse.

A weak beat pumps beneath her fingers.

"Ha." She nervously says. "He fainted."

Who is this 'Ed' and where did he come from? How did he get here?

Sieghild's mind races with theories as somewhere, in the back of Edward Elric's head, something splits in two.

Chapter End Notes

**Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov**

Wo bin ich? - Where am I?

This was just for a break from the usual stuff, and yes, it's supposed to be this disjointed.

Have a lovely morning/day/afternoon/evening/night!
"What happened to this kid, Sieghild?" A masculine voice says. As Sieghild enters the sterile, white containment room, an aging man with round glasses taps the right hand of the boy laying on the bed.

"Come again, Doctor Gerson?" Sieghild asks.

"What happened to this kid? The most pressing problem is that he is effectively two people, but that's to be investigated another time. They're both missing their right arm and left leg. One of him had a fatal wound and another one looked like he'd been through a battle. I found rust in a bloody hole in his left arm. Some kind of rusted building component was in there at some time, and he must have wrenched it out himself."

Sieghild winces.

"He's- they're? Yeah, they're both in terrible shape." Dr. Gerson evaluated. He sighed. "Is there any way you can explain this to me? He's- they're conked out."

"Sir, I haven't been able to speak to him much. I'll have an opportunity when he wakes up from being-" She looks at the IV drip next to his bed. "-'conked out'. I can tell you what I've heard so far, though."

Dr. Gerson nodded at the secure steel door to the room. "Outside. He needs to rest."

As he turns to go to the door, Sieghild twists her face to look incredulous. He's on an anaesthetic drip. I really doubt he'd wake up from a conversation, but okay.

Dr. Gerson waves his hand at two steel chairs bolted to the floor, facing an observation window to the sterile room.

"Tell me," He says, rustling to get comfortable in the chair. "Who is he?"

Sieghild clears her throat and leans back in the uncomfortable, ultramodern chair.

Where should she start? Finding a heavily injured teenage boy in the middle of a park in September, even when they weren't looking for one of them, was almost unfathomable. She still doesn't even know where in hell he came from.

"From what I've gleaned, it's a long story. Stories, more like."

******************************
ETCF Bureau of Southern England
Case File-Code Section Y, Part 3

File No 3402
File Section: E9
Importance: Severe-Extreme
Hazardous: Unknown
Subject: Humanoid/Human
Filer: Sieghild Yoxall
Found/Discovered: 15th September, ~1100 hours, small park near [street name] Boulevard

Name: Elric, Edward [M Name not given]
Place of Origin: Claims to be someplace called Resembool, Amestris
Age: Sixteen
Gender (not required): female/male/other: (elaborate)
Date of Birth: February 3rd, 1899 (transported in time?)
Occupation: 'State Alchemist', something to do with the military in 'Amestris'.
Education: not specified
Language: extremely similar to Earth German, but with several noticeable differences. Able to communicate.
Intelligence: n/a, human intelligence
Physical State: heavily injured, but obviously above average when healthy
Family: mother (deceased, Trisha Elric), father (unknown, Van Hohenheim, dubbed 'bastard' by subject, not married to mother), younger brother (separately from, Alphonse Elric)
Description: Gold hair, eyes, European descent. Metal prosthetics [right arm and left leg], highly advanced. Covered in scars. Lean and muscular. May be slightly lower than average in height, around 166 centimetres standing
Irregular traits: Twitches, which somehow causes him to be slightly different physically and personality-wise. Unknown cause and execution.
Skills: something called alchemy. Seems to be weaker here than back home, he claims.
Code Section Status: Confirmed. *
Comments: extensive research shows his physical appearance and backstory is extremely similar to a fictional character in a Japanese manga called "Full-metal Alchemist.", therefore filed Code Section Y. Though this seems improbable at best, certain tests have confirmed that his prosthetic appendage is distinctly not earthen*. Currently being looked into. Another '07 Greenwich incident is to be avoided at all costs.

... Bit of an ass.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Sieghild finishes her report with a yawn. Gleaning all this information required a lot of interrogating a very drugged and somewhat pissed off teenage boy.

It was already 2 am. There was no way this report had taken so long- oh, yeah. She'd taken a three and a half hour nap from ten to one thirty.

She'd also been assigned to learn more about this boy- read: watch cartoons for work purposes. Sieghild had groaned inwardly when she had heard this, because 1) she was never an anime kind of person, 2) she's thirty-year-old woman, for god's sakes, and 3) how in the living hell had they actually taken her drunken suggestion to file him as a code Y seriously. From what she'd heard, the 'other universe' this Edward character came from was basically a kid's show.

What kind of children's show character has this many scars, though?

Sieghild pushes that thought to the back of her mind and looks at the clock.

2:03 a.m. 17th September

She has the total of 2 cartoon series (or 115 episodes) to watch for... 'work'. Sieghild groans and plants her head on her desk. Good thing she doesn't have work for the next three days.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
2:11 a.m.

Sieghild stares at the telly screen in absolute horror. Her giant bucket of popcorn lays, forgot, on her lap, cooling.

It's only the first episode- the first part of it, too!- and the eleven-year-old main character and his brother (?) have already gone through something extremely traumatic.

She was shocked and disgusted- until she noticed something.

*An eleven year old who just had his limb ripped off- shouldn't he be going into shock?

Then right back to being horrified.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

After 72 hours with no sleep, twelve cups of coffee, and possibly the murder of the postman who decided it was a good idea to noisily drop a parcel outside her flat at five am., Sieghild was back at work. Her mind is stuffed full of information, and her hands with notes over an anime, of all things. If she had someone to vent to violently right now, she would jump at the opportunity.

"Hi, Sieghild. Good morning!" exclaims Sarah Quincy, looking blasphemously well-rested. She hops up from her secretary desk, wearing a dress that vaguely resembles an over-sized doily.

Sieghild slides dead-tired, dull olive eyes over to meet Sarah's bright, light green ones. She grunts and takes a huge swig of coffee.

"Oh, you don't look too good, Sieghild! Do you need to take a sick day?" chirps Sarah, looking at her concernedly as Sieghild shuffles over to Sarah's desk to dispose of her coffee cup in the dinky pink trash can beside it.

The lobby area is starting to fill up as people come into start their day. They file into something resembling lines in front of their respective lifts (research laboratories, filing offices, infirmary, etc.), laughing and having conversations as they wait for the lifts to open.

"Oh, I'm fine, Sarah. I just feel like I've been hit by a bus and forced to go through finals week three times over." Sieghild grumbles, rubbing her eyes with stiff fingers.

"Oh, you!" Sarah titters. She frowns lightly before sitting down. "That reminds me. Dr. Gerson told me he needed you as soon as possible when you get here. Something very important."

Sieghild's eyes widen, and she is suddenly more awake than she has been all morning. She plants her hands onto Sarah's pink-slathered mahogany desk, her wide eyes looking very odd paired with the dark shadows under them.

"What did he say the important thing was? Did he mention anything?"

Sarah blinks at Sieghild's sudden alertness. "He said something about a boy named Edward but really, I think you should ask him about it, not the secretary-"

Sieghild dashes into the lift to go to Dr. Gerson's level before Sarah can finish. Her heart is beating in her ears as the lift clatters downwards.

What could it be now?

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
Hello!
I feel like this chapter is a little more well-written and flowing than the other chapters-probably because I actually sat down and wrote it in one sitting.

**Daily German Lesson with Vhahov**

- Kuh - cow
- Kaffee - Coffee

*poking around in ed’s poor metal arm counts as a test right*

I hope you enjoyed that chapter! Please review in the comments, and keep reading, it's only up (or down?) from here. The next chapter will be released in the next few days.

Have a lovely week!
Sieghild expects to walk into a scene of chaos and activity when she opens the door to Infirmary Section XYZ, but she's surprised to see that it's empty.

The main area of the infirmary is completely empty, which is unusual. Even though the ETCF Bureau rarely gets any Section Y's, at least a few nurses are sitting in the main area, twiddling their thumbs.

All Sieghild is greeted with is pure silence. As she blinks in confusion at the silent area, an observational room door near her creaks open.

Dr. Gerson sticks his head out from the door-way, and whispers, "Yoxall. Come'ere."

"Yes, sir. But what-?" Sieghild replies, before Dr. Gerson's 'shhhhh'ing gesture silences her.

As she walks into the small room, Dr. Gerson settles down into one of the two steel chairs, and says, "We don't want him to know we're here."

Sieghild turns her head to look at the observational window.

Ed's awake.

************************************************

"So we're sitting here, studying him like a lab rat? Can't he see us?" Sieghild asks.

"Not like a lab rat, no. We want to see his behaviour when he's alone. Or, thinks he's alone." Dr. Gerson states. "Also, this is a one-way mirror."

"...why are we observing his behaviour, exactly? He's just sitting on his bed."

"Just watch," Dr. Gerson replies.

Sieghild falls silent, and leans back against the chair.

Five minutes later, just as Sieghild begins to doze, Dr. Gerson sharply whispers, "Psst, Sieghild!"

"Hmmm?" Sieghild slurs.

"Look." Sieghild's eyes snap open.

Edward is pacing around his room, muttering. He instinctively is grabbing his right shoulder, presumably where his mechanical arm is attached to his shoulder.

"Can you hear him?" Dr. Gerson whispers.

Sieghild leans in as close as she can to the observational window.

"Goddammit goddammit goddammit goddammit where the fuck am I-"

"Where the FUCK is my brother- where am I?! Why am I all bandaged?! Who in the fu-"
"Translate."

"He's wondering where he is, where his brother is, why he's been treated."

Ed abruptly stops muttering in German and looks up at the observational window/two-way mirror. For a moment, Sieghild makes eye contact with him. Just as her olive eyes lock with his gold ones, he twitches. As in, full-body twitch. More of a flinch, really.

"We've got him stabilised, so his changes are less frequent, but take this opportunity." Dr. Gerson whispers. "Make observations." Sieghild's training immediately kicks in, quickly cataloguing each difference of pre-twitch Ed and post-twitch Ed.

"Darker eyes, richer hair, less muscular, dissimilar movement mannerisms, face shape is slightly different, nose is smaller, eyebrows thicker, rounder cheeks, definitely in worse shape." Sieghild churns out. "Also, this is a less factual observation, but his eyes look so much-"


Sieghild nods. "So he really is both of them."

Dr. Gerson sighed. "Yes. We had some-complications during this one's surgery."

"But... How did you save him? Last I saw, he had a literal hole in his chest."

"The ETCF Bureau isn't a normal government bureau, as you very well know, Sieghild. We have access to things other people don't. You can fill in the blanks."

Dr. Gerson shifts in his chair as Edward resumes muttering again. This time, it's much quieter, until out of nowhere, Edward loudly screams,

"GOD FUCKING DAMMIT!"

He rams his metal fist into the wall.

CLANG.

"Yoxall, go talk to him." Dr. Gerson commands.

"Sir, he just punched a solid steel wall, do you really think it's the time-?"

"I have a son. I know when he needs someone to talk to. This boy is no different." Dr. Gerson settles back in his chair. Clearly, his mind is made up. Sieghild groans and heaves herself up from her chair.

"Fine."

As she lightly pushes the door open, her eyes meet fiery gold ones...

**************************************************************************

An olive-skinned woman with olive-green eyes pushes open a section of the white wall, the one with the out-of-place industrial-strength lock and handle.

"Hello." She says, as the door clicks closed behind her. Ed's brow creased. He didn't expect her to be speaking Amestrian. "Edward, I know you're confused, but that's really no reason to." She halts as Ed's head begins to move.

Ed looks up at her with burning gold eyes, studying her.
Dark black hair pulled to the nape of her neck in a rather sloppy bun. Deep under-eye circles. Black turtle-neck, light grey pencil skirt, simple black shoes, sheer black stockings, thick enough to provide some warmth, but not much. Slightly muscular body, good posture. Uncalloused hands- an office worker? Yet, she held her weight solidly. Probably had more muscle than was currently visible

"Edward, I'm-" She clears her throat.

"Where am I." Ed says. It's not a question- it's a statement. A command. A phrase so infused with anger that it comes out monotonous and flat and numb- but with a note hidden somewhere in-between that hints at the violence Ed is capable of right now.

Despite this boy being half her age, something about him seems to be off-putting to the woman. She gulps and composes herself.

"You're in the Y Section of the ETCF Bureau of Southern England's infirmary, based in the United Kingdom." She answers.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. This place has technology I've never seen before in my life. Where am I?"

"I told you a few nights ago." She sniffs.

"Well, then. I don't seem to recall. It seems you'll have to remind me." Ed spits.

"I..." She glances at her wrist, where her watch is obviously missing. "Earth. The Other Side of the Gate. Whatever you call it."

Ed freezes and collapses on the bed. He hunches on the bed over his knees for several minutes, as the woman uncomfortably shifts her weight from foot to foot.

"How do you know my name?" He rasps quietly.

"During the time that you forgot, we interviewed you. You were extremely-. Er. We know quite a bit of information on you now." She answers.

"Why have you taken me here?" Twitch. He loosens his grip, breaths becoming deeper with the absence of pain, but the anger seems to have numbed the excruciating pain in his midsection.

"You were heavily injured. This Bureau's main purpose is keeping track of, filing, and taking care of cases like yours- as well as giving medical care to said subjects when needed." She continues.

Ed looks up at her, the fire rekindling in his eyes. "Cases like mine? Have you taken in people like me? A boy in a suit of armour? Maybe a just boy with short, burnt-blonde-" Twitch "soft, light brown hair? He'd be somewhere around fifteen?"

The woman swallows, and blinks. "No, Edward, I'm sorry. We haven't."

Ed's face falls, and his eyes darken. "When are you letting me out of here?"

"As soon as you're healed." Now isn't the best time to tell him about the whole 'two-people' thing. He doesn't seem to be conscious of it.

"Let me out! I'm fine! I need to get back- I need to help Al-" Ed begins to shout.

"Edward, please calm down! This isn't helping anything." She says sternly. She exhales. "I'm going to leave you now. If you need anything, or have a question, tell the next doctor that comes in here
that you need to talk to Sieghild Yoxall. I'll see you later today."

*Ed jumps up from the bed as she begins to re-open the door. "H-hey! Where are you going? You can't leave me here! Oi!"

*Tap.

As the door shuts behind her, Sieghild sighs. This was going to be very, very difficult.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, two chapters within days of each other!

This chapter seems a bit like filler, I know. I'm sorry!

**Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov**

Hallo, mein Name ist... - Hello, my name is...

We'll resume our regular programme around chapter 17. Thank you for reading!

Have a lovely day/night/morning/afternoon/evening!
Waking up in a pure-white room you have no memory of entering is not exactly the best way to wake up, especially if you’ve been having nightmares about a pure-white expanse for years.

To make matters worse, 'Sieghild Yoxall' wasn't all that helpful. She made it a bit more confusing, actually.

Being locked up in this boring prison isn't the most pleasant experience, to sum it up. The only glimpses he gets of the area outside of this room is when a doctor comes in to check on his wound and ask invasive questions (in terrible Amestrian) and leaves the door open too long. Once, a nurse kept the exterior door open for about 30 seconds, giving him a glimpse past the smaller room outside his cell to the main area just outside.


Well, as much as you could have in an office-like area while still being efficient, of course. The nurse had held the door open until the doctor yelled at him to close it. The nurse obeyed, but not without an older-brotherly wink in his direction. The doctor had grumbled about it afterwards, but it was in the same language she had snapped at the nurse in a few seconds earlier.

It was quite a strange language. The sound of it when spoken isn't similar to anything he's heard before, and seeing it on paper is just as strange. Though it sounds very dissimilar, the alphabet system used is almost exactly the same, save for a few missing letters.

From what he's grasped from the doctors and nurses, he's in some sort of infirmary/office conglomerate of sorts. And, every so often, after his twitches, the world melts into a sea of murkiness and pain and nurses and doctors and (shudder)needles...

He would drink milk to have some paper and a pen right now. Mentally cataloguing all of these observations is getting a bit tedious.

One of the worst things about these living conditions is that there is no private bathroom. Just a white toilet, attached to the wall to the right of his usual seat: the bed.

He’s figured out quite quickly that the mirror set into the deep indention in the front wall was a mirror that, somehow, someone could sit behind and see through without him seeing them.

Whenever he had the urge to -ahem- ‘go’, he made sure to bang on the mirror and clearly imply that he was going to use the toilet. It'd probably saved the people behind it (and himself) quite a few uncomfortable moments. Who wouldn't get uncomfortable watching a random 16-year-old boy take a leak or shit or whatever?

The door hisses open. He looks up, ready to see a doctor or another nurse, ready to invade his privacy, but he sat up a little straighter when he realises that it's none other than Miss Sieghild Yoxall (now dubbed, in his mind, as 'Asshole lady'). He recrosses his legs and raises his eyebrows as she comes into the room.

"Are you letting me out, yet?" He asks, snidely.

She ignores him.
“Edward, we found something you may want to see.” She gulps. He raises his head off of his hand where it was perched, and furrows his brow. She's normally so composed.

Sieghild appears to be studying him. She clears her throat, then says, "Actually, never mind that, you may not want to see-"

"You mentioned it." He hops off the bed, and stretches his metal arm across his torso, adding a yawn for effect. "If it means getting out of this room I've pretty much been kept prisoner in for- what? Five days?"

She nods. "We kept you in here to guarantee his safety and recovery." 'Safety and Recovery'. Sure. More like 'Poke Around In Your Automail A Bit More'.

"I'd love to go see this something." He says.

"Come on," She waves her hand in a 'follow me' motion and flashes a white card to the metal box next to the door. It makes a loud, annoying beeping noise.
Sieghild sucks in a breath. She pauses momentarily, before opening the door to the observational room.

"If you try anything funny, kid..." Her voice trails off, letting the implications do the job for her, before opening the door to the main area.

It's quite a bit less busy than the last time he saw it. Though about twenty percent of the people are no longer there, the area is still bustling with activity. As soon as everyone registers that he is walking out of his cell of a room, they all slow down to look at him.
The main area is actually quite similar to a bunker. It's long and dark grey, and the ceiling curves downwards to meet the walls, which are impressively high for what he assumes to be an underground area.

"Where are we going?" He asks, as she leads him down rows and rows of cluttered desks, complicated machines, plain doors, windows to rooms that look like empty surgery rooms…

"You'll find out soon enough." She leads him deeper into the main area, and the surroundings start to become more empty, and more like a hospital than an office. "Also, just so you know, your bathroom situation was intentional. We don't want you out of our sight."

"What? What are you implying?"

"In here, Edward." Sieghild says. She points to a nondescript, black door. He gives her a suspicious look, before resting his metal hand on the door handle and pushing the door inward.

The room inside is nearly identical to the observational room outside of his own cell/room, but the window in this room is obviously just a window. He sits down on one of the two simple steel chairs, crossing his legs (What? It's comfortable) and leaning back.

"Who's in there?" He asks, feigning disinterest. Sieghild is completely silent, settling in the chair next to him. Doctors in white coats and nurses in grey and aqua scrubs are crowding around what looks like a medical bed. The bed is in the centre of the room on the other side of the window. This room is smaller than his room, and grey. The ceilings are much lower than his room/cell.

A female nurse in aqua scrubs shifts a bit to her right, while saying something to another nurse, the sound muted by the glass and cement between him and the group of people. She taps a clipboard aggressively, and checks the level of liquid in the IV stand next to the bed.
As the nurse shifts, he catches a glimpse of the person on the bed. Honestly, he doesn't recognise them, but-

**Twitch.**

"Are you fucking with me?" he gasps. Bleary, chrysoberyl brown eyes slide around the room, unfocused and confused. The person's short, light brown hair, which is normally carefully styled to the left, is soaked with sweat and pushed back by a nurse's gloved hand.

"Al?!" He chokes. He jumps to his feet, trying to push past Sieghild (who is presently standing in his way) to the entrance to the room. His shock and need to see his brother right now, this instant, dulls the horrid, sharp pain he feels building in the centre of his chest.

"Edward, he can't, he's in very volatile condition, the doctors need to help him!"

"I've been separated from him and dropped off in a different universe and my brother somehow turns up here? Do he really expect me to not want to talk to him?!" His knees wobble and grow weak under his weight.

How in the hell did he get his body back? He thinks, desperately, as the corners of his vision begin to darken.

"Edward, calm down. Look. Do you see what condition he's in? Do you really think-" Sieghild stops abruptly in her lecture. He looks down at her, trying to find the cause of her silence. He follows her line of sight to his brother on the bed.

Flicker. His hair grows long, his eyes and hair become more golden, his body emaciated.

His twitch as the same time as his flicker.

Flicker-twitch. He's back to brown hair, brown eyes…

"Oh my god." Sieghild whispers, looking back and forth between the two, as Alphonse's eyes become more alert.

He sees Al’s eyes lock on him, and Al mouths, "Brother?"

Chapter End Notes

*DRAMATIC HARMONICA*

Wow, you're Ed in this chapter. Big change, huh?

How about that twist??? Did you expect it all? You probably did. I'm a literary potato.

Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov

Bruder- Brother

To know what chrysoberyl brown looks like, imagine a warm, smoky light brown.
There, you got 03 Alphonse's eye colour. Woo!

If you didn't know by now, though, Sieghild is of Native American descent. She was raised for half of her childhood in Germany, and then in England. And then in Germany. And then in England.

...

She moved around a lot.

Thank you all for reading. Please have a lovely day/night/afternoon/evening!
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

This is torture.

All Ed can do is sit and wait. And wait. And wait.

"He needs more time to heal," "He's not ready yet," "He's sleeping,"... All of these damn excuses!

His brother, whom he was separated from by an entire dimension, is now just on the other side of the glass, and he can't reach him.

Waiting. So much fucking waiting.

Is this what Winry felt like?

Why does he even need to heal before he see him? It's not like he's going to crush him in a hug or anything. No, even he can see he's too frail for that.

However, the other Alphonse-TWITCH-his Alphonse- looks perfectly healthy. Kind of suspicious. Didn't he have to pay a toll or something like that to get here? He obviously already knows what he look like at this age, so memories couldn't be a toll...

The other Alphonse worries him, though. He's emaciated, dehydrated, atrophied- and blonde. A golden blonde, similar to his shade, but not quite. His eyes would probably be a clear golden-brown if they weren't hazed over and dazed by medications most of the time.

He looks like his brother, but not quite.

TWITCH.

The brown-haired one looks like his brother, if he was healthy, but not quite.

They're both his brother, but not quite.

**********************

Ed was staring listlessly up at the ceiling when Asshole Lady walked in. Her under-eye circles were less dark and deep than before, but something in her eyes told him that something was very, very wrong.

"It's Alphonse." She had said, glancing at his metal fist, as it had clenched in on itself.

And so here he is now, standing just a few metres from his brother, but still barred from speaking to him.

Do they like doing this? Bringing him so close, then refusing contact?

"Edward, there's something I need to tell you before you go in there-" Sieghild begins to say, but he interrupts her.

"Let me see my brother, dammit!" He shouts. She grimaces, glances around, and opens the door,
making sure his IV of assorted pain medication clears the slight bump in the tile floor.

Despite his anger from before, his footsteps approaching Alphonse's bed are quiet. The boy appears to be sleeping, or at least turned away so he can't hear him.

He hesitates. Ed left him all alone for at least several months. (What month did the nurse say it was? Oktober?) He must've thought Ed was dead- he... he did see him get stabbed, didn't he.

Ed gulps. Does he hate him?

"Alphonse?" He doesn't react. His bronze-haired head still faces away from him, so Ed rests his metal hand on his shoulder. He starts abruptly and turns to look at him.

Ed pulls back slightly at the tired, melancholy look in his brown eyes, but they widen and shine when he realises who's standing in front of him.

"Brother?" He says disbelievingly. Ed smiles. "Brother!"

He jumps forward into Ed's arms and squeezes the breath out of him.

"I saw-" He begins.

Ed's smile fades. "I know. I'm sorry. I-"

"I saw you get stabbed, brother! How are you here? What happened? Where are we?" Alphonse questions, the happy light gone from his eyes.

"I don't know yet, Al. As for our location- I don't think you'd believe me." Ed replies, mouth set into a grim line.

"Brother, I can't hear you, can you speak up? You're talking a little quietly." Alphonse says, face marred with confusion.

He pauses. His inner eyebrows pull upwards- oh, shit no. Ice curdles in his stomach and blooms in his veins like the worst kind of adrenaline.

"Alphonse, if you can hear me saying this, nod your head." Ed states monotonously, quickly. Al blinks at him, unknowing.

He can feel his heart sinking.

"Al. "He mouths. "You passed through the gate, didn't you?" He makes sure to mouth each syllable clearly and slowly.

"You have to pay a toll, Alphonse." Ed whispers. Alphonse takes a moment to think about what he said, before his mouth falls slightly open and tears shine in his eyes.

He gently pulls away from him and quietly settles back onto the bed, pressing his palms to his ears.

****************************************************************

"He's been in there for a while." Sieghild observes. She steps quietly into the observational room outside the other boy's infirmary chamber, settling next to a doctor in a modern chair.

"It's his brother. Why wouldn't he be there for a while? From what I've seen, they've been separated a long, long time." The doctor sucks in a breath. "I don't think we're going to get Blondie to leave."
Sieghild chuckles humourlessly. "Which blondie?" Sarah's eternally smiling and giggling face flashes in her mind.

The doctor glances at Sieghild and smirks. "Nice, Yoxall. Speaking of which, do you really expect me to not notice the- 'changing'?

"Well, with the smaller one, you can't really miss it, can you?" Sieghild nods her head at the short-haired boy.

"Hmm." the doctor answers. "They look somewhat similar, don't they? Except the other-"

"Looks like he's been sitting somewhere with no food for months." Sieghild sighs, roughly rubbing her eyes with the back of her hands. "Can you give me a report on the paler-haired one's health?"

"We're calling that one 'Skelly' for short." the doctor smirks.

"Doctor Majid, 'Skelly'?" Sieghild chortles. "Do you not know his name?"

"No, frankly, we don't, because someone forgot to finish their case file report." Doctor Majid narrows her eyes at Sieghild.

"Oh, come on, Majid, it's not like I've been up past four A.M. most of this week." Sieghild replies scathingly.

"Just get it to me, Yoxall. I really don't want the nurses to call him Skelly to his face." Majid leans her head back to rest on the back edge of the chair. "Anyway, Mister Skels here didn't have a good time. He's been sleeping for days now- he probably didn't sleep very much where he was before he came here. Obviously, he's been extremely hungry for a long, long stretch of time, based on his emaciation- and his muscles are incredibly atrophied. Must've been sitting still for quite a while. He'll recover, though, in time."

"What about the other one?" Sieghild inquires.

"Oh, there's nothing physically weak or abnormal about him, except..." Doctor Majid affirms.

Sieghild raises her dark eyebrows questioningly.

"He's completely deaf."

Sieghild's eyebrows shoot to her hairline. Her mouth falls open slightly, but she regains her composure and clears her throat.

"His toll, then." She mutters. Poor kid, that must've been his toll. He'll never hear his brother's voice again. Or the birds chirping, or someone singing...

"Pardon?" the doctor asks.

"Nothing." Sieghild says. She waves her hand at Majid dismissively. Sieghild stares at the observational window, her eyes laser-focused on the two brothers' backs. The taller raises a hand to place on the smaller's back in a comforting gesture.

"Huh," Doctor Majid continues. "Well, obviously, this kid has gone deaf recently, or at least wasn't born deaf. He knows how to communicate verbally, and based on that reaction right now-" she points at the boy, still holding his hands over his ears. "He wasn't aware of the fact he lost his hearing until now."
Sieghild makes a small noise of acknowledgement. "And the other boy?"

"He switches too, doesn't he?"

Sieghild nods. The boys were sitting completely still now, except for the slight shaking of the bronze-haired one's shoulders, and the movement of the golden-haired one's hand, rubbing his back.

"It's a lot more dangerous for him, though. The other part of him has a mortal impalement wound. It's incredibly hard and unhealthy for that one to leave bed- or move around at all. It'll take weeks to heal." Sieghild explains.

"Is he aware that he 'switches'?" Doctor Majid asks.

"I don't think so. The physical differences are much more subtle, except for the insignificant little healing mortal wound there in the centre of his chest. It's almost always covered by bandages and/or clothing." Sieghild shrugs. "Personally, I think he-"

The taller boy twitches. Sieghild's attention snaps to him, and she bolts up from her chair.

"That isn't good-" Doctor Majid starts.

The boy pulls away from his brother. His sides heave with laboured breaths. A visible sweat has broken out on his skin.

The younger boy turns so Sieghild catches a glimpse of his face. His face is twisted into an expression of confusion and fear- eyebrows turned upwards, eyes wide. He frantically tries to speak to the elder, but the elder ignores him.

"Shit," Sieghild curses under her breath. Sieghild slams open the door, a loud bang echoing through the room. The younger boy doesn't react.

"Doctor Majid-" Sieghild exclaims, rushing to the elder boy's side.

"On it!" Doctor Majid answers. She runs to the corridor, and shouts a few orders at several ruffled nurses.

The boy is in obvious pain. He hunches over slowly, grimace widening.

"Ed? Ed! Answer me! Can you hear me?!" Sieghild exclaims, shaking him as gently as possible.

He groans. "Fuck, my chest..."

Sieghild hears Alphonse ask a frantic question.

"Al, he's hurt- badly- we need to get him somewhere!" Dammit, I shouldn't have let him come down here without something just in case this happened!

Somewhere in the next several chaotic minutes, Edward Elric became extremely aware that something was extremely wrong with his body.

Chapter End Notes

Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov
Bruder - Brother

I hope you enjoyed.
Sieghild has been coming more and more, and the doctors, less and less.

Ed can sense it. It's in the air. The franticness and business has dwindled down to next to nothing

They've finally finished treating him. It's time to leave.

The thought frightens him, though Ed would rather not admit it.

What's out there? How different is this world from his? How will he adjust? How will his brother adjust? Is he well enough to leave?

He hadn't realised he'd said the last question out loud, until Sieghild's voice replies, "Yes, he is."

He grumble quietly. "Skinny as a rod."

"He'll gain it all back in a few months." He turns his head to glare at her, standing at her usual post near the doorway. She'd never gone farther into his room than there.

"Do you want to see him?" She asks.

Ed rolls his head forward and exhales. "Yeah," he says.

Ed brushes the loose blonde hair away from his temples and stand. He begins to walk towards the door, but Sieghild places her hand in front of him. "Ah... I would take that." She points towards the small sack containing what he's designated his belongings.

He blinks at her. Taking that sack would mean that they were leaving- permanently.

Despite this prospect, he obliges, and she leads him out the door. It wooshes quietly shut. Horridly finalizing.

He hated that place, but it was the only place he was familiar with in this new world. Leaving it meant leaving the expected, the secure.

It wasn't like you had a problem leaving that when you were younger, a voice in the back of his mind remarks scathingly. The corner of his mouth twitches downward.

The rather empty office area echoes Sieghild's high-heeled footsteps.

Clack, clack, clack, clack...

The desks lay empty, the faces of the strange boxes that are on every other desk are dark, the phones lay silent, and not a single file cabinet drawer slamming could be heard. It's all quintessence of abandonment.

Sieghild shoots him a rare, afflicted smile. Her eyes didn't crinkle up at the corners, and her mouth didn't stretch nearly as far as it should. "He's ready." She states simply.

She grips the doorknob with a white-knuckled hand, and pushes it open. Just inside the next door,
there sits Al.

He doesn't look healthy, at all. His ribs are pushing ridges through his shirt- a shirt that is unusually bright in color. His golden-blonde hair is neatly cropped, though it falls in stringy, washed-out strands that look more like a dingy blondeish colour. His cheeks are sunken, just like his eyes, and the sharp angles of his joints and fingers look like they could injure someone.

But, Ed has to admit, he is much healthier than when Ed first saw him.

Ed smiles in greeting as he opens the door. "Hey, Al! How's it going?"

Al's eyes brighten when he sees him. "Hey, brother!"

Ed speaks deliberately and slowly as he replies, "Do you think you're up to walking a bit?" Al smiles blankly for a minute, interpreting his mouth's movements, before nodding.

He laces his hand across Al's thin back, the hills of his spine digging into the fleshy side of his arm. Ed grunts, and hefts him up, leaning most of his insubstantial weight on his side. Ed half-draggs him to the wheelchair (his atrophied muscles couldn't carry him very far on their own) a small distance away from his seat.

Al plops onto the chair, and asks, "Where are we going today? The far end? Or maybe that desk near the water cooler? Oooh, maybe we could go all the way to the spot where there's a brick that's slightly different from the rest."

Ed flicks him lightly in the back of the head. He leans over to eye level, and grin, "Wow, are you being snarky?"

Al sits up straighter, in an exaggerated fashion, like a proud bird. "Maybe I am," he jokes.

He scoffs good-naturedly, and step behind the chair to push him out to the office area, but not before he puts his bag in the small space beneath the chair, and snatch Al's bag off of his night-stand.

"Hey, kid." Sieghild says to Al. "You ready?" She draws herself up, the image of professionalism. She'd become softer to the two somewhere along. Neither of them knew why, but they didn't complain. A Sieghild in a good, well-rested mood was a safe Sieghild to be around.

"Where're we going?" Al inquires. Sieghild opens her mouth and makes a small noise that indicates she was about to say something, but she snaps her mouth shut.

"You'll see," She answers cryptically.

"What?"

Ed leans over, and repeats what she said slowly and deliberately.

Al raises his sparse, pale eyebrows a tiny amount. The group was approaching the rickety lift, the only exit.

"Miss Sieghild, are we leaving?" Al questions. Sieghild remains silent.

Ed lightly squeezes his shoulder. He looks at him from the corner of his eye, and Ed nods. Al's eyes widen to the size of dinner plates.

A myriad of clicks and beeps sound from the lift, as the group approaches. Sieghild presses a long fingertip to a small grey box off to the side. The steel doors creak open, and Sieghild ushers them in.
As the doors begin to close them into the confined space, Sieghild begins to speak.

"We're going out onto the surface, and it'll be brighter than what you're used to. You two will be staying with me until we think you're ready to live on your own. We'll be teaching you the language of this area..." She kept talking, until they finally processed what she had just said.

"Wait, live on our own? Who's 'we'?” Ed interjects. Sieghild pauses.

"You need to learn how to live in this world. After you gain intermediate English skills, and a few other things, you'll get to have your own flat. You'll have to go to school, too, and we've got a few looking to accept new students..."

Al turns to Ed with a mixture of fear and anticipation in his eyes.

"We're not going home?" Ed asks.

Sieghild opens her mouth to speak, reconsiders, and closes it. Then, she says, "There's nothing we can do. Even with our advanced tech, we have limitations."

Al looks up at Ed, but he stares right at Sieghild.

Ed was going to find a way back. At that moment, he immediately vowed to himself that he would. But, this time, his determined statement is tinged with just the slightest waver of doubt.

Chapter End Notes

This one wasn't that good, I now realise.

Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov

Aufzug - lift
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Siegild awakens to the soft pattering of rain. The dull drumming of raindrops against the glass of her window slowly pulls her out of the deep depths of sleep- although at an unholy hour of the morning. The dusky grey light of the time just before dawn, along with the overcast clouds, told Siegild that today was not going to be a very agreeable day for her.

The plain alarm clock blinks its red numbers at her bleary, sleep-ridden eyes, still adjusting to the unexpected source of unnatural light.

5:06 A.M., 5 Oct, Saturday

Siegild groans softly and flings her arm over her eyes. Definitely not going to be a good day.

With a deep and resigned sigh, Siegild pulls her quilt off of her legs. The chilly air of her somewhat climate-controlled room (read: identical temperature as the outside) slaps her skin. She grits her teeth and decides, no, this was not a good beginning to any day.

The slight creaking of old wood floors is the only sound that announces her arrival in her sitting room. The creaks barely go noticed among the sounds of a person breathing deeply in sleep- wait, where's Edward?

There was a very noticeable absence of at least one sleeping body in her sitting room, which was indicated by her very empty love-seat and a very oblivious Alphonse, who had not one, not two, but three threadbare pillows stacked underneath his head. She grimaced at the sharp angles of his joints, probably digging into the flesh of his legs and his cheek, where one elbow was planted in a not-very-comfortable-looking position.

Her short, fat, arch-shaped windows leave just enough room on the chipped, cool green-painted sill for one human butt and several assorted potted plants. Soft, cold light from the rain clouds outside stream into her cramped flat, sending Alphonse's sharply planed face into harsh relief. The light, however, fails to illuminate* her on where Edward was.

A few more steps into her sitting room only rewards her with loud creaks from underneath her feet. The windowsill just across from her front door to her left is, surprisingly, occupied.

There he is.

Edward sits with his knees pulled up to his chest, and both flesh and metal arms clasped around them. He's barefoot and bare-armed, revealing both metal limbs.

She can only see the side of his face, turned away from her to face the window, though his hair is loose and slightly tousled, and his eyes are glassy and surrounded by dark grey circles. He must've not slept well. It is 5 am, after all.

She leans back into the shelter of the hallway's shadows, glancing away as Ed's eyes shine with an emotion too personal for her to witness.
The first Ed noticed when he came to Sieghild's flat last night was that he smelled.

He didn't simply smell, though. He reeked. His first guess why he vaguely stank of Resembool's manure pits was that the nurses had forgot to put him in the weird-ass thing they called a 'sanitization machine'.

In reality, he was half-right. The two on-duty nurses were too...occupied to notice that their patient smelled more like a cow pen in summer heat than a human. One nurse was too enveloped in her pence-a-pop shopping centre clearance rack romance novel, and second nurse just simply didn't have a sense of smell. Being in your late sixties will do that to you. That and the nurse's high blood pressure medications.

He welcomed the luxury of a hot shower, though he grumbled a bit when he emerged smelling 'Hawaiian Blossom Breeze'. What the hell is a 'Hawaiian'? 'Blossom Breeze' isn't even a real scent!

Back at home, you had two soap scents: fresh and flowery. None of this fancy 'Blossom Breeze' shit. Wow. he never thought that he would find himself grumbling about fancy-ass soap scents, but here he is.

Soap scents. What great depths he has sunk to.

Even with his body clean and Alphonse sleeping peacefully on the sofa pull-out bed beside him, Ed just couldn't sleep.

The sudden, violent twitches were probably at fault. Every other time, they were accompanied by a searing ache in the centre of his chest, thankfully dulled by the morphine drip in his arm. It likely isn't morphine anymore, though. If he still needed morphine, he doubts that he would be allowed to leave that weird white infirmary.

He had given up somewhere around 4 A.M. and decided to vegetate on the wide windowsill and stare listlessly out the window. He'll at least get to witness his first sunrise in a different world, which was a first for anyone.

As the sky lights up with hazy pinks and yellows to the east, and darkens with a brewing rainstorm, Ed wonders how in all hell he ended up here.

The blues of the quickly lightening sky seem... off. And cold. Unlike the stark, warm blues of the skies of Amestris. The blues bring a feeling of strange Déjà Vu, although Ed is absolutely sure he's never seen this sky before. That doesn't keep him from stretching out his hand to the sky in an instinctual gesture that felt oddly familiar.**

****************************************************************************************************

Alphonse didn't know it at first. He thought that, maybe, the room he was in was just soundproof, or the hospital that he was obviously in just wasn't busy outside. Maybe the nurses were just oddly quiet in communicating.

He had to stop hoping that the voice in the back of his mind whispering a horrible truth was wrong when his brother visited him, lips moving, but the familiar rich, scratchy sound of his voice was absent.

He couldn't deny the absolute truth.

Equivalent Exchange. Truth had taken something from him, yet again.
But, out of all of the things to disturb him- the weird technology, his deafness, how sometimes his brother looked different enough to disconcert him, but he couldn't place how- the switching had to be the creepiest thing.

One moment, he was perfectly healthy, able to walk, and then the next, he could feel every joint grind together; he could see every bone under his skin, and the slightest, smallest movement was exhausting.

Alphonse didn't like to curse, but the weirdness of it all made him want to swear like a sailor.

Great, Brother's been rubbing off on him again.

The item that topped Al's mental 'just odd' list was the fact that they sent them to Miss Sieghild's flat when he was emaciated half the time.

Wow, that was strange to think about. Emaciated sometimes, healthy others.

Shouldn't he be in a hospital? At least for longer than he was? He did seem to be recuperating faster than was normal (he expected his emaciated body to be at its current point of recovery three months from now, not reaching it in a little over two weeks.), but why this woman's flat of all places? Was she overseeing their recovery?

Speaking of recovery, Brother seemed off. Every so often, he'd twitch slightly, hiss, and press the button on the steel contraption the doctors called an 'Intravenös Djrep', or that's what it sounded like. What Al gathered was that it gave Ed a medicine called 'Morphium', or as Ed called it most of the time, 'Godsend'. When the numbers on the button-pressing-square quit going up, Ed liked to call it 'Worthless Modern Medicine is a Fucking Waste of My Time and My Attention and I Am in Pain And I Need This Fucking Machine to Work.'

Brother was always very... colourful.

Breakfast later that morning was quiet.

Sieghild made some round, flat brown things that she said were 'Pancakes'. Brother muttered darkly that 'pancakes' was a stupid name for things that were obviously 'Flip-Rundens', why should he call them anything different?

That was the only thing he said for most of the morning. Alphonse and Sieghild did most of the (awkward) talking, until Ed asked a question that had been in the back of Al's mind as well.

"Why are we here?" He deadpans.

Sieghild busies herself with a 'pancake', and turns her face away, but keeps it at just the right angle for the movements of her mouth to be visible. "Alphonse had deemed ready to discharge, but he would need to be supervised, someone to change his meds and all that. You two obviously can't have someplace to go home to, Ed is still on powerful painkillers, which could mess with distributing Al's meds. I'm something like a caseworker, and I've got an extra bed. It was an easy choice."

Ed scoffs. "Why you? You obviously seem more like the 'leave them to fend for themselves' kind of-

Sieghild slams the pan into worktop with a sharp crack. Ed starts violently, and Alphonse is able to do little more than a hard blink at all the sudden movements.
She turns to look at Ed with very ticked-off olive eyes, and snaps, "I'm done with this. I'm not going to be a doormat. I excused your behaviour when you were in pain, but now you have morphine. Either you get used to dealing with me and fix this shitty attitude you have, or you get sent back to that cell of a room. I could have easily left you there for several more months and let you deal with having no language skills on your own, but I decided I was a better person than that. Learn to be grateful, you little brat. This is better than nothing."

Ed looks completely flabbergasted and a little scared for a iota of a second, but then looks away and scowls, muttering incoherently about 'not being little'.

Sieghild's expression turns back into one of pleasant indifference, and continues in a much less harsh tone. "Al, you and your brother are going to be staying with me for a few months, until we register you as citizens and you get your own flat. I'll set up a makeshift bedroom in my office room. The government will help pay for your own flat during the school year. You two will be classified as 'emancipated'. You'll be staying with me until Al can move a little on his own, and you both can speak intermediate English. Based on the intelligence you've exhibited so far-" She begins scrubbing the pan with a damp blue washcloth, "I bet that'll be somewhere around early January. So, until then, Carpe Diem."

Alphonse and Edward meet each other's eyes, and nod. They turn to look at the expectant Sieghild, leaning against the worktop with both eyebrows raised.

"Carpe Diem,**" they affirm.

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**Chapter End Notes**

**Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov**

Pfannkuchen- the actual word for Pancakes, not the Amestrian name for it, which literally translates to 'Flip-Rounds'. Stupid, I know. It sounds like a Girl Scout cookie.

Also, yeSSs I love Ed being dragged

*I think this is something like wordplay bc I love things like this

** [finger-guns at the last scene of the last episode of FMA 2003]

*** Let's just assume Amestrians use 'Carpe Diem' too

Don't worry, we'll get back to You, ( aka The Reader, Most Amazing Person Ever, etc.) very, very soon. Thank you for supporting my stories! Until next time...

(To my Archive of Our Own Readers: With this chapter, you're completely caught up with the Wattpad version! All of these new chapters should keep you entertained for a while :P. I have three huge tests this week, so updating will be much slower. Even slower, at least. A completely new fic will come out sometime later this month. Until then... Carpe Diem.)
The first English word Ed ever learnt was 'Shit'.

Sieghild had quite an affinity for using it when she dropped things, which was often. It was only a matter of time before Ed, always infamous for his intelligence and dirty mouth, picked up on an assortment of English swears.

The next step in advancing Ed's English repertoire was learning words that were useful in other situations than when one dropped a pan on their foot.

"Translate 'My name is Edward,'" the tutor prompts. The tutor in question was someone that Edward had prejudged to be an ass based only on the fact that he didn't let Ed laze the day away.

"Shithole," Ed drawls, the syllables still heavily accented.

The tutor sighs deeply and nods his hand over his eyes. "If you don't learn this, you'll be completely lost in school. They only teach in English here."

Ed scoffs. "I could very easily teach myself, you know."

"Well, obviously Miss Yoxall doesn't think so. Now, translate 'My name is Edward'," The tutor continues.

As Ed grumbles out an Amestrian insult and an English statement, on the other side of the dining room table, a very different affair is taking place.

Unlike his brother, Alphonse has actually acquainted himself with and bothered to learn the name of his tutor.

This side of the table is mostly quiet, though the quiet is punctuated at random intervals by smooth Amestrian sentences.

"Homework," The tutor mouths, accompanied by a rapid hand motion. Al attempts to copy the hand motion, but only ends up with reversed directions and confused fingers. The tutor chuckles, and grasps Al's right hand in their smooth, brown own, guiding his bony hand through the motions of the word 'homework'.

"Ah!" Alphonse gasps, triumphant. His hand slowly performs the short, swooping motions. He looks up, delighted. The tutor smiles at him.

"What about a sentence, hmm?" They clap their hands together when Alphonse nods enthusiastically.

Down the hallway, and behind a chipped wooden door, Sieghild gazes at her open laptop with no real intention to work on anything.

Thank God her job was lenient in giving time off. She isn't sure she would be able to handle 'adopting' two teenage boys, both of which were in terrible medical shape, and go to work everyday with the threat of her house being blown up or one of them dying hanging over her head like a dark
cloud.

Through her job she had tapped a invaluable resource: English tutors. Ed desperately needed to learn other words than extremely colorful and, Sieghild would admit, extremely creative swears for a person with a vocabulary limited to ten English words, nine of which were curses. The tenth word was 'Food'. If that didn't say it all about Ed's character.

Alphonse was a different story. He had basic manners, though his hearing, or lack thereof, was quite an obstacle. Sieghild had to find a German and English-speaking English sign language teacher who could work in someone's home, because 1) Al wouldn't be able to very easily orally speak English if he can't hear the way to pronounce or even say the words in the first place, and 2) Al wouldn't be able to be moved until he could support his weight for longer than twenty seconds.

Her, as her coworkers jokingly called it, 'Maternal Leave' allowed her the time to do all this and more. She had finished both of the boy's case files, arranged a flat for them, found a school for them to attend, and reported on their medical care.

The only thing she had left now was basic government busywork, explaining the rusty red stain on the pavement of the park where they had originally found Ed, and sorting out payment for the two tutors.

Alexander Thomas was a relatively easy find, but Emerson Adler was quite a diamond in the rough. Amongst scams and plain untrustworthy characters, they shone out like a beacon of hope. German-speaking and willing to come to someone's flat, a positive background check, and willing to work odd hours? It was almost too good to be true. In fact, it was such a good deal that Sieghild entertained the notion for a while that Emerson was some sort of spy sent in to report to rival governments about the secret affairs of the UK's ETCF Bureaus.

A contract swearing secrecy had to be signed by both tutors, and before departing their homes, they had to make sure they weren't being followed. This had raised both Alexander's and Emerson's eyebrows, but they didn't question it. That was possibly their most attractive attribute at the time—the tutors knew when to question something and when to leave it be.

Sieghild sighs and closes her computer. She smothers her face in the multicoloured quilt of her bed, before deciding to check up on the lessons.

Her entrance is greeted by a fanfare of soft 'hello!'s, and a small wave from Alphonse, who was trying to work out a long series of hand movements with an focused look on his face.

She settles herself into a chunky white chair on the opposite end of the table, making sure to give a pointed look at Ed's feet propped up on the wooden surface.

"How's it coming along?" She asks. Al's tutor smiles and remarks 'good!'. while, of course, Ed's tutor rolls his eyes up to the ceiling and sighs deeply.

"It takes a few swears every time, but we're getting somewhere. He doesn't pronounce his 's's like 'z's anymore, and he knows how to say a few sentences in the appropriate context." Alexander drones. Ed peeks over his shoulder, completely lost to the subject of their English conversation.

'Appropriate context'. Well, that was good. A few days ago, Ed had asked to use the 'asphalt' when he meant that he just wanted to know where the plates in the kitchen were. He had learned quite quickly that 'Use asphalt', unlike how he had previously translated it, did not mean 'I want to use the dishes'.
"Can you tell me your age and name?" Sieghild inquires. Ed rolls his eyes spectacularly, but slogs through a still heavily German-sounding English introduction.

"My name is Ed, sixteen years old."

"Hold it. No shortcuts."

Ed looks at his tutor beseechingly. "What's English for 'I am' again?"

Alexander shrugs just to spite him. "I don't know, maybe you should've written that down when I told you earlier, hmm?"

Ed groans. "Ah, I... I is sixteen years old?"

"Other one."

"I am?"

"There you go."

Ed pumps his fist and cheers, "Yes!"

Sieghild can't help the slight smile spreading across her face.

It's only the twelfth of October. At this rate, Ed and Al would be intermediate in English and English Sign Language by early January. Sieghild could only hope their futures would be bright. She could only help them so much.

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Alphonse was recuperating at a relatively fast rate, while his brother was a little concerning. Whatever had stabbed Ed had nicked his heart, torn one of his lungs, and nearly halved his stomach. Ed's ribs would need reconstructive surgery to look typical, though nothing could be done about the massive scar he was going to have.

Sieghild was grateful that the weapon had hit much lower than she had previously expected. Otherwise, Ed would have a hole instead of a heart and there would be one more occupied grave in a John Doe's cemetery.

He seemed to be improving, despite all odds. His morphine drip wasn't set to max all of the time now. It hovered somewhere around seven, a number that told Sieghild he was still in a lot of pain, but a manageable amount of pain.

She had no idea how anyone could survive having a spike driven through their torso, but Ed seems to be made of harder stuff than the average person.

Even the toughest person can't mask nightmares.

She could hear him, even from her bedroom, muttering and turning in his sleep. She could swear that she heard him cry or scream at least once. Whatever the subject of his nightmares were, she didn't want to know. He'd gone through more at age sixteen than she had at thirty.

From far away, the ghosts of Alphonse and Edward Elric's past called out in hushed, sorrowful voices for the return of their sons.
Chapter End Notes

This one did have a point, despite what it seems like.

Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov

Englisch - English

The next chapter will be the last chapter about Sieghild and the boys for a while. I hope you won't miss her too much (haha). It'll be a while before you see her again. Until then, she'll be sitting back on the shelf, gathering dust.

The story's about to enter its rising action soon, so brace yourselves for some Grade-A angst hell!

Good luck. Have a good day/night!
Alexander Thomas had nearly wept with joy when Ed had done three things: 1) introduced himself and told his ‘backstory’ with a minimal amount of cursing, 2) used English without coercion or threats, and 3) called Alexander by his proper name. Despite this breakthrough, major improvements have to be made to accent (“What do you mean through and threw are pronounced the same?”) and… word choice (“Don’t use ‘pompous ass’ to describe people? That’s some Grade-A bullshit right there. What if it’s true?”), but other than that, Ed was getting along just fine in English. He now had the English vocabulary of an obscene seven-year-old.

Alphonse, always the more diplomatic of the two, had got along with his tutor so well that they proclaimed him almost intermediate in mid-December, while Ed on the other hand was learning several different English phrases from his tutor to use to express exasperation.

As Sieghild tacks on English labels on every single object in her flat (‘Chair’…’cabinet’…’Al’s path of destruction via his crutches’…), she mulls over their housing situation.

Sieghild had been given permission to come back to her job, which caused the entire house to exhale with relief. It had begun to get a bit crowded, with two tutors, two teenage boys that were ready to eat her out of house and home, and a very sleep-deprived, annoyed adult woman with no personal space.

The tutors acted like makeshift babysitters during the day, and seemed to handle quite well the emergencies of having a boy recovering from a fatal wound appearing in the place of a healthy one every now and then. Alexander Thomas seemed the most affected by Ed’s slight shift in attitude, mostly in the way of ‘He’s not sassing off every ten seconds? What the hell!’.

A tin of oatmeal becomes the home of a new label named ‘Oatmeal’, just as Ed walks in, yawning wide enough to make a lion a run for its money.

“What are doing?” Ed questions, the syllables slurred by sleep.

“I’m labelling items in the house to help you learn to…”, ‘Coffee Mug’ found a nice perch on a green ceramic cup, “…read and write English a little bit better.” Sieghild states.

“I can write perfectly well.”

“You spelt ‘chair’ with an umlaut.” Sieghild side-eyes his scowling face.

Ed scoffs and retreats to the bathroom, where seconds later, an incredulous yell reverberates from behind the door.

“YOU LABELLED THE DAMN TOILET PAPER?!”

Sieghild lets a string of snickers escape her.

‘Spoon…plates…refrigerator…’

She still had six pages of labels left. This was a good idea in theory, but not in practise.
After placing down ‘window’ and throwing away the leftover paper scraps, Sieghild collapses on the sofa.

It would have been a much easier task if the two tutors were there helping her, but Saturdays are universally agreed on to be rest days, except for in Russian schools.

Sieghild never did like Russian schools.

“Miss Sieghild, Brother wants to know-“

“Where are my FUCKING TROUSERS?”

“Brother, you’ve got perfectly good-“  

“Borrowed ones!”

Sieghild makes sure her loud groan could be heard over the bickering boys in the back room. She never gets any rest, now does she? Is there a sensor on her butt that alerts them the exact second she sits down?
She prepares herself for whatever disaster waits for her behind the door to her previous office, now makeshift bedroom. “What is it this time?”

The drawers of the dressers are cleaned out, the contents strewn across the floor and on Alphonse, like some kind of multicolored, rumpled snow.

“Brother wants to know where his tacky leather pants are.” Al signs, giving Sieghild the Look.

“They’re not tacky, they’re badass!” Ed protests, elbow-deep in his dresser drawers.

Sieghild lets out a long, long sigh.

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Sieghild had been passing by the boy’s bedroom when she overhears a rare exchanging of English sentences. Neither voice lilts their speech with a German pronunciation, nor are they even vaguely similar to Ed and Al’s voices.

A quick peek reveals that the voices were Emerson’s and Alexander’s, sneaking a conversation between lessons in the relative privacy of Ed and Al’s ‘room’. Emerson stretches back against the wall, staring at the ceiling as they listen to Alexander speak.

“His eyes are too old.” Alexander notes. “He acts like he’s got it all under control with a snarky statement or two, but… they look like they belong on a sixty-year-old war veteran’s face, not a sixteen-year-old boy’s.”

“I think he’s seen a bit too much.” Emerson sighs, closing their eyes. “Kids his age go through unspeakable hardships all over the world. He’s being protected by the government, too. Don’t you think that shows that something important happened to him?”

“I do, but do you ever wonder… what happened to this kid?”

Emerson meets Alexander’s chocolate-brown eyes with their darker ones.

“When I was a kid-“ Alexander exhales a short laugh through his nose, earning himself a pointed look from Emerson. “When I was a kid, I had to walk home through a bit of a rougher neighbourhood after school. One day-"
Emerson gulps and takes a deep breath. “A news report later that day was talking about the discovery of a woman’s corpse in the neighbourhood I walked through. They said she had died around the time I walked home from school. My mum never let me walk through that neighbourhood again.”

The thing is, there were kids who lived in that neighbourhood. Kids who had to go home every day to that neighbourhood, try to sleep in a junky old flat in that neighbourhood, live in that neighbourhood. They didn’t have the luxury of just avoiding walking through it. That was their home, murder or not. And, well, kids all over the world have it rough. We have no way of knowing what Ed and Al have gone through. There’s just too many possibilities, and prying wouldn’t be good for anyone. All we have is speculation and the hope that they’re safe from whatever hurt them.”

Sieghild casts her eyes downward and presses her back against the wall. The tutors were much more perceptive than she had thought, and Emerson just proved what she’s been trying to avoid.

They’d figure it out somehow, and Sieghild telling them the truth would be better than another method.

She chooses the moment of stunned silence after Emerson’s spiel to make herself known. Emerson’s eyes widen at her arrival, while Alexander sits up straight as a pin.

“Relax,” She chuckles. Her smile melts away into a grim line as she shuts the door. “I need to tell you something, but you need to promise me not to talk to the boys about it.”

As she tells the tutors Ed and Al’s history, Alexander’s face twists from befuddlement to sympathy and into horrified nausea. Emerson’s normally open and curious face closes and becomes unreadable.

“There’s no way that’s possible. Other dimensions don’t exist! That’s- that’s science fiction, there’s nothing to those stories, right?” Alexander flounders, bracing his hand against the wall. His skin has gone a grey-green colour of disbelief and horror.

“Just how is it possible that two people can inhabit the same body?” Emerson’s question is dampened by numb monotone.

Sieghild shakes her head. “Don’t ask me.”

Emerson seems to wait for elaboration, but none comes. They pitch forward abruptly. Sieghild hadn’t been able to see their face behind Alexander, but now their face is ashy and tightened.

“Is that why Al’s hair and eyes change? He told me it was just the light.”

“Is that what your work is? These things?”

The tutor’s questions come at the same time. Their words layer over each other and catch Sieghild slightly off guard.

She nods stiffly. “But, you don’t know this. I never told you.” She raises her eyebrows at the horror-stricken tutors, who nod in acknowledgement.

Sieghild quietly opens the door and steps out.

“Eleven fucking years old-‘” One of them begins to swear, but the door shutting with a soft click cuts off the astonished curse mid-sentence.

They’ll be gone the second of January, Sieghild thinks. Her footsteps away from the door are
Thick snow is just beginning to fall outside the window when Ed and Al step out of Sieghild’s flat for the first and last time.

Shielded on either side by their respective tutors, Ed and Al hover uncertainly in front of the open door. Sieghild’s knuckles tighten around her dented doorknob, waiting for farewells to come. After they left, she could only protect them so much.

“Ed, Al,” She doesn’t know what to say. What do you say to your charges when they leave for the last time? She doesn’t exactly have much experience in these matters. “Just… stay safe. Don’t go looking for trouble.”

She fixes a wistful smile on her face, her olive eyes travelling up to meet one gold and one brown pair. “Make some friends. And-“

“Remember that sometimes people just want to protect you. Let them do that.”

The parties stay still for several moments until Sieghild envelops them both in a gentle hug.

She pulls back, wistful smile still in place as she taps a casual, yet neat, salute to her brow. The brothers acknowledge the salute with waves and matching grins.

As the brothers walk away, Ed is suddenly reminded of a woman with a matching salute, but clothed in Amestrian blues and a head full of blonde, not black, hair. He whips his head around to may steal one last glimpse, to see if maybe, just maybe, they really were that similar, but Sieghild’s door has already shut.

He can feel a metaphorical door closing as well.

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy this one was long in comparison.

Daily German Lessons With Vhahnov

Auf Wiedersehen- Goodbye

(If you listen closely, you can hear approaching footsteps and dramatic music.

The muffled music slowly grows louder and louder until a big door opens with a resounding bang.

A figure hops into the scene, hands on their hips, chest thrown out dramatically.

Who is this? Whoever could this impressive figure be?

Why, it’s the Reader! Back and better than ever for their amazing return in the next
chapter!

Auf Wiedersehen, have a good day/night!
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(The curtains part. Cheers, wolf whistles, and applause erupt from the audience. The Reader jumps onto the stage amid enthusiastic cheers.

The Reader has returned. Let the Rising Action begin.)

*** *** ***

You haven’t slept since Tuesday afternoon.

It’s Thursday morning.

Your thoughts had been occupied by crackpot theories and guesses about that design on the side of your building. The runes you had seen were definitely not English, and that was all you could discern. The nature of the design had thoroughly freaked you out, and this was coming from a person who could eat one of those lollies with a bug embedded in them with little consequence.

You fling an arm across your eyes, groaning. The two sleepless nights had taken quite a toll on you, what with the stress and your case of mistaking a bottle of glue for deodorant. That was a fun morning.

The bright cheeriness of the morning light outside your window seems almost blasphemous to your tired eyes.

With several quiet swears, you go to the window and snap your drapes soundly shut. Their light green colour does little to mask the bright mid-morning sunlight glaring through your window. You decide, instead, to take shelter in the darkest corner of your room in hopes for the slightest bit of sleep.

A group of rowdy teenagers, excited for the rest of the holiday, choose that exact moment to screech just outside your window.

“Agh!” You shout, your voice cracking just the slightest bit in the middle. You throw your arms in the air. What use is this? You haven’t slept in God knows how many hours; another hour without rest won’t kill you. You’ve got about… eight more hours until sound starts to get distorted. Another twenty before your begonia bush starts to look an awful lot like a pink sheep with wheels. Another thirty-two until nothing seems real and that second storey window to a sea-full of something squishy and bright-coloured seems a good place to jump out of.

Yeah, this probably wasn’t good for your brain.

Dragging yourself into your corridor, resembling a cave more than a flat, you squint at the thick scratches on the narrow walls. That one had been interesting to explain to your mother. A bit of late-night stress eating (what? It helps you think) had been the cause, as well as not being very careful with where you were going.

A dirty coffee cup is the only evidence your mother was here hours before. She had left for work around six-thirty, and her shift started at 7:00. That was about, what, two hours ago?

Hell if you knew. It could be the Armageddon just outside and it’d take you at least an hour to
process that it had happened.

You loop a finger around the handle of the mug and carry it to the sink. Slowly scrubbing it with a scouring pad, you mull over every theory you’d come up with.

One, you had a dream. Not yet disproven.

Two, some kid had run up and drawn it just to be a hooligan. You let a weak smile slit your face, imagining yourself shaking a fist at the kids like a grumpy old man. This had been disproven by whatever the heck that grey blur was. Any kid that looked like that probably needed to get that checked out. Also, being able to draw transdimensional-transporting-whatever-the-hecks was not a normal child’s skill.

Three, you wouldn’t be able to understand it just thinking about it. The strange change in atmosphere and the weird voices you heard were probably linked, and there was no way to completely figure out what it was and how it got there without a field test.

The mug clinks into the sink. You give the tightly shut drapes a wilting look. Doing a ‘field test’ would also require going outside into the bright rays of sun, which wasn’t good news for your eyes.

One thing at a time. First, going outside in pyjamas: not normal. It’d be a good idea not to raise any suspicions.

Twenty minutes later, you’re standing right at your front door. Your hands rest gently on the knob. You ready yourself before yanking it open.

“BURNING-!” You screech, shielding your eyes with your hand.

A few minutes pass while you get used to the feeling of Satan himself glaring right into your corneas. You depart from your doorway, psyching yourself up for whatever the heck you were about to do. Not to self, don’t allow yourself to make decisions on negative hours of sleep.

The red design stares innocently from the brick. You give it a disgusted look. You sure remembered what it did to you last time.

This was exhausting. You were exhausted. Everything’s exhausting.

The lines, somehow, seemed duller than usual. You peer at them with raised eyebrows. Your fingers brush them, but nothing happens. Your street remains around you, no pressure pops around your ears. What happened?

You firmly press your hands to the design. Nothing happens.

A few streets away, a car alarm sounds off. A cat yowls. Someone honks their horn outside the ice-cream shop across the street.

“Hmm,” You say, leaning back. Was is really just a hallucination? You had no idea still how it got here, or how did that, but apparently you just used up what little ‘power’ it had. Great.

“Least I don’t have to worry about that anymore,” you mutter to yourself, stretching. You decide to dismiss this entire incident as your tired mind playing tricks on you. You’d need to, if you even want a wink of sleep.

In your flat, you stretch out on the sofa and stare at the ceiling. You’d already used up six whole
days of your mid-term break, and on Monday, school started back up, if only for one more month. You had got little done, in the way of both homework and trying to figure out all the crazy stuff that had happened to you.

Speaking of homework, you had better get to it.

In five minutes, you promise yourself. Five minutes, and you’ll get up and work on it.

Five minutes later, you’re snoring loudly on your sofa, dead to the world.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god, a month. It’s been a month. Holy crap. I’m so sorry! This chapter must be really disappointing after a month wait. I’m horrible with deadlines. Jesus.

From now on, I’m going to have an ‘at least 1500 words’ criterion on all of the chapters in ‘This Was A Mistake’. Just to make sure I don’t do this to you again.

Even worse, this is basically a filler chapter. Ugh. I’m really, really sorry, wow, I’m a hypocrite.

Info!- Three chapters per month. That is, Chapter 19- early march, Chapter 20- mid-march, etc. That should make it feel like it’s moving a bit faster.

Daily (more like monthly) German Lesson With Vhahnov

There are three ‘the’s in German, based on the femininity, masculinity, or neither of the object. ‘Die’ is feminine, ‘Der’ is masculine, and ‘Das’ is neutral.


I’ll be writing Nineteen and rewriting One during the time I have given myself, so be sure to check out chapter one again after I publish Nineteen!

Also, eighteen chapters until something. ;)

Until then!
Those doors.

Those damn doors.

You give the glass doors your vilest look of contempt. They stare back, their glass faces showing just what waits inside.

You can see scuff marks on the cheap linoleum floor just inside the foyer. Parts of it are covered up by threadbare mats, probably masking stains that the janitors just couldn’t get out.

You have never hated a pair of doors so much.

“Oi!” Puja calls. You turn around, your face lighting up.

“Puja!” You exclaim. Puja rushes over and crushes you in a tight hug. You laugh into her shoulder, clothed now in her Spring jacket, instead of a heavy Winter coat.

She pulls back. “You have no idea how much I missed you,” She grins.

“Same here,” You chuckle. “Did you do much of anything, other than what you texted me?”

She taps a finger to her chin in mock thought. “No, not really, other than bombing an entire wall.”

You gasp. “No way! Why didn’t you tell me? How did it look? How did you sneak in your spray paint? Where was it?”

“Woah, woah, calm. Calm.” She quietly says her next words. “Well, it was the back of a shop. I got really bored, and you know I only do when I know I’m not going to hurt anything. Anyway, it was some winter trees and a girl in a blue dress. Really, it was in an alleyway, so I really don’t think it’ll be cleared any time soon.”

“But, your spray paint? Are you sure no one saw you?”

“I’m sure of it. Here, look.” Puja pulls out her mobile and flicks through a few holiday photos. She stops at a badly lit one of a brick wall, and a rather large one at that.

You squint at the dark picture, making out a dim painting. A few black skeletons of trees were at the edges of the space, with white snow swirling between the branches. Above a discolored brick, as if she was standing on it, an outline of a girl with jet-black hair and a blue dress is painted in sketchy strokes, reaching up towards the ‘sky’.

“Oh, Puja, it’s amazing.” You breathe. She really had got better since the last time she had shown you one of her pieces. She didn’t graffiti walls often, something about being a ‘law-abiding citizen’, but when she did, she made sure it was her best work. When Puja put her heart and soul into a piece, you could safely bet that whatever wall she had chosen was going to much prettier than it had first been.

Puja grins. “Thanks, I think it’s one of my best!” She had always been proud of her work, and with good reason.
Puja reclaims her mobile and shoves it deep into her pocket. “Now, change of topic. How’d your little date go?”

It takes you a second to process what she had just implied. Your face burns like the fire of a thousand suns. “It wasn’t a date!” You hiss.

Puja’s only reply is a pair of coldly raised eyebrows and a smirk.

“Nothing happened and it was just a bit of platonic bonding between friends,” You growl.

“Yeah, sure, denial’s a good way to start.”

“The hell do you mean!”

“Anger. No, wait, that’s the stages of grief. Sorry.”

You stab a finger at her chest, garnering a suppressed chortle. “Year Nine. I repeat, Year Nine.”

Puja shrugs and brushes your hand off. “Whatever you say.”

“Hmmmph.” You glare at her. For several seconds, you both stare at each other, completely different emotions behind your eyes. With Puja, pure gloating shines, and with you, ire blazes. Puja breaks eye contact to wave at someone near the back of the crowd of students. “Well, speak of the devil!”

“Oh no,” You groan. “Puja, don’t you dare-“

“Too late,” She says, in a mocking sing-song tone. “Ed! How’ve you been!”

Ed only grins in response. He and Puja bump fists, a gesture that seems very familiar for some reason. He waves at you, still glaring holes into Puja’s unsuspecting back.

“Why is everyone waiting?” He says.

“They still haven’t opened the doors,” Puja answers. “It’s nearly nine. Ol’ Patty must be having a cow.”

“What do you mean?” You scoff. “It’s probably like Christmas to that old bird. So many late slips to hand out!”

Puja snorts. “Probably.”

Ed looks slightly lost. A few seconds of silence from him, and a look of comprehension dawns on his face. “Oh, the secretary!” He grimaces. “Like a drowned rat?”

You and Puja exchange glances. Puja shrugs. “He’s right. I swear, it's the nose-”

A loud, raucous cheer rises up from the throngs of students. The crowds bottleneck at the narrow door opening. The teachers make a feeble attempt to control the chaos, but after failing to get their students’ attention several times, they fade into the background. Puja makes a wild grab at both yours and Ed’s arms to avoid getting either of you trampled. Puja’s tall frame makes a good shield and splitter of the crowds.

Ed’s face twists a bit at the unexpected contact. Rather than verbally expressing his distaste at being grabbed out of nowhere, Ed settles with wiggling his arm out of Puja’s iron grip.
“Suit yourself,” Puja says. You can barely hear her over the loud buzz of conversation. “I won’t mourn you when you get trampled by a bunch of gremlins. Those Year Ten kids have no mercy.”

“I am sure they don’t,” Ed drawls, but he still shoots a wary glance at a wild crowd of a noticeably shorter group of students. He gives them a once-over before they’re blocked from his sight by the doorframe.

Your approaching of the doorframe also separates you and Puja from him. At his quickly retreating golden head, you shout, “Don’t get trampled! It’s easy to!”

You can barely hear an angered yell above all the others, and though the words are indistinct, you can recognize a short rant when you hear one.

“He’s got rather chummy with us, hasn’t he?” Puja says. You raise an eyebrow, and turn to look at her face. Instead of being in a wide smile like it was moments before, her mouth is set in a thin line. Her dark eyes are trained back to where Ed’s head had disappeared. “I think there’s something you need to tell me.”

Puja cuts off your ‘what?’ with “Come on.”, and yanks you into a much quieter corridor. Looking around for anyone, and finding the janitor a few doors down not a threat, she begins to whisper. “(Your Name), I’ve noticed something. About Ed.”

You roll your eyes spectacularly. “Oh, come on, not this again-“

“That’s not it. For now, let’s assume we both believe Ed is the actual Ed, fictional character that shouldn’t exist in any way-“

“He has something that looks like automail. I saw it.”

Puja goes quiet for at least half a minute while staring at you with widened eyes. “Ah.”

“Really, it’s amazing! I didn’t get a good look at it, but I can tell that whoever built it is amazing at what they do, I mean, it looks exactly like it does in the…”

Your voice trails off as Puja slides to the floor. “(Your Name), I didn’t think he was seriously… seriously him. I just thought it was some sort of really, really creepy coincidence, I don’t know. The name, the eyes… Do you understand what this means?”

You’re a little scared to ask. “What does it mean?”

“Something that scientists have been researching for at least thirty years. Inter-dimensional travel. Other dimensions exist. This could mean that there’s a universe where the apocalypse is happening, or-Jesus Christ.” Puja groans.

“What now?” The reality of this entire situation is beginning to catch up with you, and until now, you hadn’t fully comprehended what it would mean if your Ed was really the Ed. Your logical worldview is beginning to crumble right in front of your eyes.

“I was indulging you because you get caught up in fantasy worlds, and it’s endearing. But all of this? Hair, eyes, name, language…now his arm? This is too much to be a coincidence.” You nod nod, while she talks. You knew that your obsession with fantasy worlds were a tad unhealthy, but you never really took it extremely seriously. Apparently, you had maybe uncovered something with your obsessions that wouldn’t be a remotely normal possibility to the logical workings of someone else’s mind. “But, if Ed is here, what else can cross the dimensions?”
“The Gate of Truth,” you mutter. Puja looks up from her knees. “There could be a Gate of Truth. Holy shit, I’ve never really thought what could happen if this was actually Ed. I was too caught up in.” Your sentence cuts off as you see Puja smile knowingly at you. “No! No! Nuh uh! Year Nine! I’m over it! I’m over that! I’m over hi- them!”

Puja gives you a look, as if to say, ’suuuuure’. “There’s one more thing- exactly how did he get here? If it is him?”

“Wait, alchemy isn’t possible here, and we have no means of knowing how to cross dimensions, unless Doctor Who is actually a real thing too. No, ignore that. I’ve got too much to think about already. I don’t need more things to stress about.” You say. “Ed’s stuck here, if he even is Ed.” Several seconds of silence pass while you and Puja stare each other right in the eyes.

“Well,” Puja cracks her knuckles. “If there’s one thing this dimension has to its advantage, it’s the Internet. Let’s get crackin’.”

** ** ** ** **

The first day after a holiday, the school gives Year Elevens and up a free period. Usually, students use this period to catch up on homework or sleep, though some of them go to snog or have a fight in an abandoned corridor. Those are the rare few. Rarely ever do students spend their free period researching someone's identity, of all things.

There’s a first time for everything.

“All I’ve got are American conspiracy websites!” Puja groans. “Just give me one scientific study on inter-dimensional travel, or something! That’s all I’m asking!”

Her exclamation is quickly followed by one of your own. “Okay, Earth prosthetics that look exactly like automail are either nonexistent or…nonexistent. Ed’s prosthetic is definitely not from Earth. Well, great!”

Genealogy websites: nothing. Very few families in any census are named Elric (and even then, it’s a given name, not a surname), and the only other non-Fullmetal Alchemist result that pulls up are references to some obscure fantasy saga. There goes another fact that would’ve disproved your theory.

Inter dimensional travel: impossible except for in science fiction. Science says that Earth is millennia away from inter-dimensional travel, if it’s even possible. Cross off that one.

Near the end of your researching binge, you and Puja (with Puja laying on the floor) stare up at the ceiling listlessly.

“Why did I ever think we could find the answer in an hour?” Puja sighs.

“I… Puja!” You exclaim.

“How?”

“Records! If we can find a record of someone named Edward Elric born in Germany, then we’d know that this Ed definitely isn’t the Ed!” You grin.

“(Your Name), I can’t believe I didn’t think of that!” Her matching grin fades a bit. “Those would be government records. We don’t have access to those. Even if we did, it would be illegal for us to look at them.”
“Oh.” Your mood darkens once again. “And to get into a school at all, he’d have to have records. Records can be easily forged.”

“Brilliant. Now we’re back to square one.” Puja slaps a hand over her eyes. Suddenly, she sits straight up, her head nearly slamming into the edge of the table. “You know, we could just ask him if he’s from somewhere other than Earth.”

“You really think Ed ‘Secretive Little Shit’ Elric would tell someone he had barely befriended only a month ago about an entirely different world? He would wonder how we even had the idea that he wouldn’t be from Earth and that would lead to the discovery that he was a character in something for our entertainment, and you know how that would go down. How would you feel if you discovered that your entire dark past was broadcasted for other people’s entertainment?”

Puja shrugs. “How would you feel if you discovered that you were a book character in another dimension?”

You consider that for a bit. “Yeah, let’s not do that.”

“There is one more way to know if he really is him.” Puja states. “You still have that box of screwdrivers?”

Your eyebrows lower in confusion, and stay there until realisation dawns on you. “Oh my god, Puja. I’m not rooting around in his prosthetic arm.”

“Oh come on, we’ve practically exhausted every other way to finally figure out if it really is the Ed or not.”

“Puja, automail is complicated machinery, and I’m not a mechanic! If I tried looking about, I’d probably irreparably damage something! Besides, how would I get the opportunity to do so in the first place? ‘Hey, Ed, can I open up your metal arm even though we’ve practically just met and I’ll probably break something inside if I tried?’!” You shout, incredulously.

“Shush!” Puja hushes you. “Do we really have any other option? Just… find an opportunity to open it up. You don’t have to mess with anything, just see if it has wires or something. Normal prosthetics have very different inner mechanics than automail. You’re closer to him than I am. We’ve got to know.”

There’s just no winning an argument with her. She’s just too experienced.

You make sure to draw out your sigh as long as you possibly can. “Fine.”

Puja cheers quietly.

***

Whenever you see Ed in German, near to the end of the day, you can’t quite meet his eyes. He flicks a casual wave at you, still slightly miffed at your comment earlier. All you can manage in response is a weak smile. If he notices the difference, he doesn’t comment.

As the student’s conversations die down, Mr. Auttenberg stands. He rubs at the sides of his hawk-like nose with a forefinger and thumb, and sighs.

“Kids,” Mr. Auttenberg says. “I’m exhausted. I’m sure you are too.” A murmur of assent courses through the room. “I like to call this slump ‘being burned out’. It usually happens during the middle of the term, and the only cure is a short break. What do you say we take a free day? At least until we
need to start preparing for GCSEs.” At the mention of the exams, a collective shudder goes through all of you, excluding Ed. Several students nod at his suggestion.

“Alright. Remember, you’re children, not wild animals. Don’t go burning anything down, and we’ll be fine.” Mr. Auttenberg’s eyes glance towards Ed for half a second.

The buzz of conversation slowly returns to the room. Ed, casting a glance around and finding no other ally, turns to you.

“What is a GCSE?” He asks. You suppress an involuntary shudder.

“Hell.”

“Oh, interacting with you?”

“Shut up!” You exclaim. You punch him in the shoulder, and none too lightly. He flicks you in the nose with his metal hand.

Rubbing your nose with your hand, you continue. “They’re really important exams at the end of the summer term. The kind that universities look at.”

“Ah,” He leans back into the chair, and mutters something in Amestrian that sounds suspiciously like, ‘didn’t have to deal with this shit back home’.

“What, you don’t have exams in Berlin? I find that hard to believe.” You smirk. He looks surprised that you heard, and shrugs.

“Had not taken them yet.”

“Good luck. Puja’s cousin says they’re a monster, and it can’t be very easy for someone who doesn’t speak English natively.”

“I am smarter than I appear,” Ed insists, poking you in the side for emphasis.

“You know, for some reason, I find that hard to believe.” This time, it’s your turn to get punched in the shoulder.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

Though nature had been in your good graces since the snow melted, it decided to punish you one last time.

Deep thunder rumbles overhead, much louder than the traffic you passed on the street. The skyline is a deep, livid blue with the promise of a storm. The clouds just above are fat and heavy with rain.

Right next to you, ears still bright red, Ed fumes. His fists are clenched at his sides, while muttering under his breath in Amestrian.

Just a few minutes before, the English teacher had pulled him out of the corridor to discuss “academic things”. You had listened at the door. Ed, apparently, was having trouble with English spellings, and the teacher had suggested extra help. Ed of course had a flippant remark to respond with, and upon his exit of the classroom and seeing you snickering derisively, had descended into a quiet brood session.

Another grumbling roll of thunder resounds overhead. You finally begin to worry if you’ll make it home before the rain starts, when Ed twitches.
Violently.

You immediately stop and turn around to stare him right in the eye. “Ed, what was that?”

Ed shrugs. “Nothing?”

“No matter how dense you are,” Ed shouts something about you not being much better, “There’s no way you can miss what you just did.”

The first raindrop of the storm plops onto your head, and its brethren begin to speckle the pavement around you.

You stare at Ed until you’re forced to take shelter under a coffee shop awning. There seems to be something strange about him, but you can’t seem to quite place it.

Chapter End Notes

Wow this one was long. Holy crap?!

I was using a program without a word count, which is the only reason it’s this long.

**Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov**

Austrians, who also speak German, trill their ‘r’s.

Regen- rain

I’m worried that Ed and company are getting out character. Given that I’m the author of whatever the heck this is supposed to be, I can’t exactly observe this objectively. I’d really appreciate if you people could tell me when, and I’m sure it’s happened, Ed and company get out of character. I want to fix that!

Thank you so much for reading this. Just as a general warning, it’s not going to be light and fluffy for much longer. Good luck!

Until next time! (~seventeen chapters)
Chapter Twenty

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been raining for the past two weeks. Mother Nature never seemed to let up on the torrential downpour of water, and so for the remaining days of March, the sky was a uniform, dull grey. The street gutters were filled with water, umbrellas that had been discovered to be useless during the raining season were sitting on kerbs next to rubbish bins, and the only people who seemed to be walking outside were the people who absolutely had to.

You and Ed, as always, are in that small demographic.

His hair hangs in limp blond strings, becoming limper and wetter as the rain pounds down on your bowed heads. His eyes are trained directly ahead, though his eyebrows are sinking lower and lower as wet minutes drag past.

He raises a hand as if to rub his shoulder, but glancing at you slogging alongside him, he seems to reconsider and replaces it at his side.

A few more seconds pass before he groans and stares up at the sky. He throws his arms into the air, stretching his navy uniform jacket sleeves, and bellows at the sky, “Stop! I am too damn soaked for this!”

“The stupid clouds can’t hear you,” You grumble. “Wish they did.”

Distant thunder rumbles, as if to acknowledge your statement just to spite you. Ed mutters a few colourful Amestrian swears, just to add to the miserable atmosphere surrounding you. The rain was fun until the city streets resembled the Thames rather than roads.

Right after this thought, you hear the beginning of a new deluge. Brilliant. More rain.

“We’re going to be wetter than the Pacific Ocean, c’mon,” You say, yanking Ed’s sleeve with you under yet another awning. Sure enough, the rain begins to come down in sheets, only centimetres from your toes. Ed doesn’t resist the temptation to rub his shoulder this time. He gives a small noise of discomfort, while rubbing right above his clavicle, where you assume his prosthetic meets skin. You’d forgot that his residual limbs hurt when it rains.

“I hate the rain,” He says, mostly to himself. You don’t answer, and instead nod. His eyes are still focused on the rain. They search the sheets of water as if looking for something.

“Does it hurt when it rains?”

Ed blinks. “What hurts?”

“Your…arm.”

Ed steals a glance at his right hand, hanging loosely at his side. “Yes. Something about atmospheric pressure. I think that it just wants to punish me more, though.”

You manage a light snort at that. “What, the rain has it in for you? Don’t go picking fights with weather phenomenons, now.”
“Who says I can’t?” Ed scowls. “You can punch water. It is just hard to do.”

When he turns back to you, an incredulous look graces your face. Is this kid serious?

“Do you honestly want to pick a fight with rain?”

“Theoretically.”

Quiet follows this, though it isn’t quiet for long, as thunder rumbles again once more.

Ed grumbles. “This is not going to let up any time soon, is it.”

“Nope.”

“Well, shit. I can promise I am not standing out in the rain for the next hour.”

You can see his characteristic shit-eating grin begin to split across his face, as he leans right into your field of vision.

“Your flat’s only a few buildings away, right?” That stupid grin grows wider.

“Like hell I’m letting you into my house after the Milk Incident.” You snap, scowl deepening.

“That shit’s nasty! It’s not my fault!” Ed exclaims. “Anyway, who leaves their friend out to virtually become a puddle in the rain, huh? An asshole, that’s who.”

You hesitate before answering. That was the first time he’d called you his friend.

“I’m a person who leaves you out in the rain.” You shoot back. “I’m in the presence of a bigger arsehole, though! Do you realise how hard that was to clean up?!”

Ed ‘harrumph’s, and stares you right in the eye.

“Is that a challenge?”

He doesn’t answer, but continues staring. Fine, he wants to challenge you, he’ll get his challenge.

You return his stare with an even more powerful glare.

At least half a minute passes by before your eye twitches.


Ed’s too busy exalting his victory to the orange-and-plum heavens to respond.

Two very wet minutes later, you and Ed are leaning against the wall in your foyer, chests heaving. That was the fastest you had ever sped in your entire life, and the short distance was misleading. You’re sure you’ve never been this out of breath before.

As you catch your breath, you hear Ed begin to snicker. A perfectly joyful, happy snicker shakes his shoulders and screws up his eyes.

You simply look until the sight of him shuddering with laughter emits a short snort from your nose. The snorts come in quick succession, then sniggers, then full-blown laughter.

For several seconds, your foyer echoes with Ed’s loud laughter, and your equally noisy guffaws.
How funny you two must look, dripping wet in your foyer, laughing at nothing but yourselves. But, you don’t care about that. This simple, happy moment is all you need right now. If it lasted forever, you wouldn’t protest.

As Ed’s laughter slowly peters out into giggles (real, honest giggles), you sneak a peek at his face. Though flushed and dripping wet, his eyes screwed up so not even a sliver of gold can be seen, your own laughs slow down much faster than his. On your side of the foyer, awed silence replaces your snickers.

Sitting in the middle of your foyer, with a storm raging outside and water puddling at your feet, you realise that Puja might just be right.

And then the moment’s gone.

“Shit!” Ed seems to be back to his normal, foul-mouthed self. Your happy moment pops like a soap bubble. He picks at his thoroughly soaked jacket sleeve, attempting to peel it off the metal. “It is going to be hell to…” He searches for a word. “…take off the metal.”

“You have a five-swear limit in this flat per day,” You inform Ed, going over to assess the cloth-on-metal situation. You groan despite yourself. Parts of the sleeve are caught in the wrist joint you can see just under his glove, and with experience, the uniform jackets are oddly sticky when wet. Add metal to that equation, and you’ve got the recipe for a very fun few hours. “Need some help with that?”

“I’ve got it!” Ed exclaims, fingers scrabbling at the navy fabric nearly melded to his arm. You allow him to struggle with his sleeve for at least ten minutes, observing from the sidelines with an amused eyebrow raised, before tugging him into your sitting room to help.

“You’ll just tear it.” You command. He collapses onto the sofa in a huff, glowering at his caught sleeve like it had just insulted his mother.

You retrieve a beat-up, torn towel from your mother’s cleaning pursuits, a pair of tweezers, and as an afterthought, your mother’s set of screwdrivers. Just in case.

You come into your sitting room to see Ed doing the exactly what you told him not to do.

“What did I say!” You snap, tossing the towel in Ed’s face. He pauses mid-attempt to free his sleeve. The towel drifts onto his lap, revealing a very annoyed face. “Five-swear. Remember.”

You peer over the wrist joint. The sleeve seems to be caught somewhere in the ball-and-socket joint.

“You can extend your wrist for me?” You ask. Somewhere in the corner of your eye, Ed makes a face, but your focus is tuned only to his metal arm’s exposed wrist joint. He does as you, slackening the sleeve just enough for you to start painstakingly prising it out of the inner workings with a pair of tweezers.

Ed sighs in relief once the fabric slips free of the metal, and you share the sentiment. You discard the tweezers onto your already crowded coffee table.

“Ed…” You begin, narrowing your eyes at the soaked metal. “Isn’t that supposed to stay dry?”

Ed groans and motions for the towel, crumpled in a pile at your feet. You toss it right to him, and turn away, picking at your screwdriver set.

“I cannot let it rust.” Ed says, shuddering. He mutters something in Amestrian that sounds like ‘she-
demon’.

“Speaking of your arm…” You begin. Ed looks up from his arm, an inquisitive eyebrow raised. You hold up a single screwdriver. “May I?”

“W-What? Like hell! I’m not letting anyone else root around in my arm after the Incident-“ Ed shouts.

"Oh, come on, I just wanna see! I’ve never seen a prosthetic that looks like this, and the craftsmanship of your arm is masterful!” You plead. “Please, Ed? It’ll only be a few minutes, I swear.”

Ed scowls for a few seconds, grunts a few words you’re sure are complaints and insults, and plunks his arm onto the arm of the sofa. You cheer enthusiastically, and remind yourself to stay under control. If his arm looks cool on the outside, you wonder what it’ll look like on the inside. If it really is just a prosthetic with an outward appearance that mimics automail, this whole mess will be cleared up in a snap. If it is automail, well, you don’t know what you’d do then.

Just as you resurface from your reverie, Ed finishes rolling up the sleeve of his button-up shirt. His uniform jacket with its noticeably longer right sleeve lays limp over the back of the sofa. You note a few oil stains around the inside of the sleeve rolled up around his shoulder.

“Get on with it, I know you won’t leave me alone until you do.”

“Oh, shut up. I graciously accepted you into my home.”

“Ow!”

Giving him a glare that clearly tells him to keep still, you press the screwdriver into a screw on the forearm plate and begin to turn. Strangely, the forearm plate looks like both the original automail model and the Northern-style automail model forearm plate. You have little time to ponder this, because only a few seconds are needed for each screw, and soon the forearm plate pops off and is placed next to its screws on the coffee table.

As you turn back, your breath catches in your throat. You freeze, screwdriver in hand.

Wires. Inner casings that look nothing like normal prosthetic casings.

Wires. A much more sophisticated skeletal frame.

Oh dear god.

“Edward, lift your arm.” You whisper. Not waiting for him to oblige, you lift his arm as far up as his tightly wrapped sleeve will allow, and gaze into his shoulder socket.

Thin strips of circular metal, thicker black wires, gears, a buffer to protect the wires from the elements…

This isn’t a simple prosthetic. This is automail, and that means-

Your screwdriver nearly clatters out of your hand as you slowly look up to meet his vaguely bored eyes.

Golden eyes. Golden hair. A temper. Automail prosthetic. All of those mannerisms, tics, personality quirks- it’s hard to fake that.
All of the blood in your face rushes away. It takes all the muscle power in your jaw to prevent your teeth from chattering. *This isn’t happening. This. Isn’t. True. Tell me it isn’t true.*

Edward Elric, the Fullmetal Alchemist, is truly here in my sitting room.

*Then* the screwdriver drops out of your hands.

_000_

After a hasty apology and explanation, and the reattaching of Ed’s automail forearm plate, you go into your room and blankly stare at your wall. The one with the Fullmetal Alchemist posters. Two of them.

Both with Ed and Al, one from the original and the other Brotherhood. Both were just stories to you only an hour ago.

You grab the edges of the posters and rip them unceremoniously from your wall. They drift to your feet like feathers from a legend’s melting wax wings. Like Icarus down to Earth.

Your lucid, logical, set-in-stone worldview crashes down around your ears.

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy you weren’t ready for that.

**Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov**

bestürzen- dismay, shock, upset, shake, fill with consternation

It’s finally picking up!! Holy crap!! It begins! From here, it only gets faster and faster. Yes, this actually has a plot.

Happy 116th Birthday to the Golden Ray of Sunshine also known as Alphonse Elric. (June 7th)

I had fun studying automail diagrams for this chapter. Something in this chapter might be important later, just so you know. Also, we finally hit the twenty-chapter mark! We’re getting there! (I made a few references to a fanfic I discovered a few weeks back called 'Rewriting Fiction" when Karmyn discovers that Ed is Ed. I mainly did this because there were a lot of similarities between the two, and I thought that was kind of funny. I didn't even realise that it existed until May, so all of these similarities are completely coincidental! I suggest you check that fic out- it's pretty amazing!)

Have a good day/night!
Chapter Twenty-One

As March drew to a wet, rainy close, the air warmed, if almost imperceptibly. This was good news for Puja’s stubborn cold and resulting irritability. She often remarked that she could ‘almost feel the bogies clearing’, which would earn a disgusted scoff and sharp smack to the arm from you.

The changes in the air didn’t pass your notice. Every time you came out your door, you took a few seconds to process that you weren’t being frozen to the bone. Being only chilly was a much pleasanter sensation than feeling as if icicles were forming in your nostrils.

“I swear, Puja, if this pavement ices over again after thawing, I’m putting in a complaint to the forces of nature,” You complain. Puja scoffs beside you and kicks you in the ankle.

“If you have such a problem with the weather, just move to Majorca.” Puja counters. She waves up at the sky, patches of blue beginning to clear through the grey. “Don’t need to complain to me. I don’t make the weather.”

“It’ll be just my luck if it snows again.” You mumble. Suddenly, a flash of movement across the street catches your eye, and halts you in continuing your sentence. You yank Puja’s sleeve to pull her into the shadows of a narrow lane along with you.

“Look,” You hiss into Puja’s ear.

“Look where-?” begins Puja, silenced by your hand clapping to her mouth. You point an answering finger to the lane across the street, where a rather curious event is happening.

The side door of a shop creaks open, and a woman with olive-brown skin sticks her head out. She looks both ways, her dark ponytail swinging like a pendulum. She turns and motions to an unseen person, and says something you can’t make out.

“What’s-“ You hush Puja in the middle of her question, again earning a kick in the ankle and a scoff.

A booted foot emerges from the doorframe, followed by a person in a black-and-white windbreaker. The hood is turned up so you can’t see their face, hidden deep in shadow, but the tips of light-brown hair poke out from underneath. They reach out to grab the woman’s hand (revealing a Dartmouth green blazer sleeve), who smiles at them and says something. The hooded head bobs in agreement.

The two set off down the steps to the pavement on the other side of the lane. The slightly shorter figure stoops slightly, and has an odd, loping gait. Strange black braces encircle their ankles and stretch up into the leg of their light brown trousers, where you assume they meet the knees.

The two slowly shrink out of sight and turn a corner, and you turn to Puja, still very confused about what had just happened.

“What was that all about?” Puja asks, leaning against the wall and craning her neck to get one last glimpse of the odd pair.

“I don’t know,” You answer, eyes narrowed at their point of exit. Not five seconds after you say this, the red door opens again.
A familiar golden-haired head pokes out this time.

You can’t help the sharp gasp that escapes you. Deep in your abdomen, your gut lurches sickeningly. “Ed?”

Ed exhibits the same behaviour the two people before did: looking both ways, then exiting the shop. This time, he goes the opposite way out of the lane, and turns onto the pavement across the street from you.

“I’ll ask again,” Puja’s voice shoots through your focus on Ed’s progress past the shops on the other side of the street. “What was that all about?”

Reluctantly, you turn to face her. “Puja, remember why I told you to walk to school with me today?”

“You had something to tell me.” No look of comprehension dawns on her face.

“Well, I think we just saw our next clue.” You grin nervously, jerking your head at the lane across from yours. You depart from the alleyway as soon as you’re sure you’re out of Ed’s range of sight.

“Clue for what? Oi! What clue! Tell me what you were going to say!”

“If you hurry up and catch up with me, maybe I will.”

“You’re cruel. You know that, right?”

“So I’ve been told.”

_000_

“Puja, you may want to sit down for this.”

...

“Well? What was it you wanted to tell me? Spit it out.”

...

“Puja…”

...

“Yeah?”

...

“I can’t- Puja- I…”

...

“Oh, come on. You’ve got me sitting down, with your undivided attention, don’t you?”

...

“It’s him.”

...

“No.”
“I…know. I’m in shock myself.”

“No. No, no, no, no, this isn’t real, that’s just a story -“

“Puja! Breathe!”

“No, no, no no no no no, that’s not possible-“

Several hours have passed since Puja had left you alone in the library, normally brown skin a shade of wan grey. She isn’t answering your texts and calls, which number into the teens, and you’re becoming more and more concerned for her wellbeing.

After your fifteenth call, which, like all the others, ends with Puja’s pre-recorded voice droning on about ringing back later, you hang up and throw your phone onto your bed. You collapse next to it, hands spread-eagle, and stare at the ceiling. You blow a deep breath out through your nose and close your eyes, trying to make sense of this confusing situation.

There is no way in hell, no matter how you look at it, that this can be possible. Fictional characters don’t just pop up in the middle of another universe, in a completely different time period, oh-so-conveniently enrolled at your own school. That just doesn’t happen.

So why did it happen? And why to you, of all people?

A series of images flash through your mind: golden eyes, a scowl, and a very automail-like arm, along with a red down jacket, a shouting mouth, and the slight nodding of someone’s head as they smile widely. The drawn equivalents rush by alongside these until you’re sure there isn’t any blood left in your face.

With cold, clammy hands, you slap your cheeks to bring yourself back to the present. Thinking about that any more than you need to isn’t going to be good for your cardiovascular health. Your heart seems ready to beat right out of your chest.

“Stop it, stop it, stop it!” You mutter to yourself. The only reason you survived today was because Ed, in the only lesson you two shared together, was called out to the office for a reason that you couldn’t be sure of. You owed your life to whoever called him out of German right on time.

At these memories, one pokes out above the rest. The pair of people exiting the shop replay over and over in your head, ending with Ed leaving-

Ed.

You jolt upwards.

Short hair. Leg braces.

“Alphonse.” You curl inwards on yourself, head in hands. Not another one, no way-

Wait. That other figure’s hair was light brown. Al’s hair is the same color as his brother’s, if your Ed really is from the universe that follows the manga’s storyline (Why does the manga exist if Ed is a real person? You wonder. You decide to leave that train of thought for another time.).

You shake your head. You’re just being silly. Paranoid. Jumping to conclusions. He could have been one of Ed’s friends that attended a different school, maybe.
And you forget about him.

Despite the increasing pleasantness of the temperature, the clouds above were a dark, stormy blue-grey with the promise of rain. Ed shot a glare out his bedroom window at the early-morning sky, rubbing his shoulder port, a mannerism he had developed long ago. Damn, it rains in England a lot.

Al’s heavy clumping footsteps retreat into the bathroom for a few minutes, and water rushes through the pipes for a few seconds, accompanied by loud, off-key singing.

Ed must have dozed off to Al’s singing, because he was woken what felt like only seconds later to Al banging on his door, shouting at Ed to get up in that odd, stilted way of his. Ed shouted a reply out of habit more than anything else. He knew Al couldn’t hear him.

Al tromped down the stairs a few seconds later, leaving Ed to listen to sounds of his brother busying himself in the kitchen while staring up at his ceiling. This felt almost normal. He could imagine kids across the city experiencing mornings like this, but with mothers rapping at their bedroom doors instead of their younger brother. They’d get up and use technology that Ed couldn’t comprehend, and maybe take a bath in one of the weird, sleek shower/bath combinations that Ed’s bathroom came with (whoever thought of combining the two had Ed’s appreciation). They’d have breakfast with their family, who would be whole, with all limbs, bodies, and parental figures relatively intact. Then they’d leave for another school day, filled with trivial adolescent problems and homework, with nothing more to worry about than that exam that was next week. Of course, Ed was sure he had a few little details wrong with what an average home in this world looked like, because government money only went so far and apparently a home that was wider than a matchbox was too much to ask, and the flat he and his brother resided in only accommodated two single adults. A few strange things sat here and there on a high dusty shelf, such as his state alchemist pocket watch, and a small canvas painting of a circular design Al had made during his physical therapy. Ed would admit that his brother would be quite the talented artist if he had more access to art supplies and less-hulking fingers throughout the years he was in armor.

Al shouted something indistinct up the stairs, sounding very much like the nagging mother Ed never really had.

Ed groaned as theatrically as was possible. He slung his legs over the side of his bed, one hitting the ground much louder than the other, and stood.

Fifteen minutes later, Ed clumped down the stairs while tugging a hairbrush through wet, tangled hair. Sieghild had bought the two of them hygiene supplies, most of which Ed couldn’t make heads nor tails of. The packaging was unusually bright, and Ed was sure he hadn’t heard of ‘plastic’ before. Based on how Sieghild used the word, Ed would hazard a guess at it being a type of futuristic material.

“Brother, you realise that staring at a hairbrush like it just insulted our mother won’t get your breakfast eaten, right?” Al’s halting voice brought Ed back to reality, pulled from scientific musings over the chemical components of plastic.

Ed made sure to reply slowly, signing whatever English signs he had picked up from Al along the way. ‘Yeah, yeah. What’d you make today? I’m starving.’

Al sighed, but his face lit up soon after. His hands motioned wildly to his words. “The bread comes already sliced! Isn’t that cool! And there’s so many pans, I don’t think I’ll ever use them all. Seems like a bit of a waste to use a pan to toast bread, though.”
'Al, I think that's what that thing is for.' Ed motioned towards a scuffed white box on the counter, topped with two slots. He remembered Sieghild calling it a 'toaster'.

"Oh, that makes sense. I was wondering what I was supposed to do with that." Al answered, crunching a piece of toast in thought, leaving his right hand free to gesture. Ed lunged across the table to snag a few pieces, along with a strikingly dark red apple.

Ed gave the apple a contemplative once-over before biting down with gusto. Around the ball of fruit in his mouth, he asked, “Isn’t it barely Spring? Why can we have apples?”

Al shrugged and began his second piece of toast. “Remind me to ask Miss Sieghild.” Al sat up abruptly, as if shocked with something. “That reminds me! We have to visit her today.”


“Well, you know how we’re not supposed to go to the same school so we don’t raise suspicion? And, well, that other thing-“ Ed averted his eyes to the linoleum floor. “-well, Sieghild thought I could attend a school for other d-deaf-“

‘What! That’s today?’

“Yes, brother. If you actually paid attention to what she was saying every once in a while then maybe you would know these things.”

Ed scoffed, a noise that wasn’t lost to his brother. His facial expression communicated his attitude clearly. 'Raise suspicion, like hell. As if two kids who happen to have the same name attending the same school would ‘raise suspicions’-’

Al slapped at Ed’s hands, stopping them mid-sign. “Brother, you know she cares about us. She’s not doing this to make it difficult for us, and she told us there were certain circumstances that couldn’t allow us to attend the same school-“

‘And it seems she hasn’t told us those ‘certain circumstances’ yet. For all I know, you could be carted off someplace-'

Al once again smacked Ed’s hands. “Brother! You know full well going to a school where they prioritise Hearing ease of communication over my type of communication wouldn’t be very beneficial to either of us.” Al’s accompanied signing had become so rapid that Ed could barely keep up, and instead settled for a slightly overwhelmed stare.

“Besides, Brother, Sieghild told me there’s an entire subculture around this language! They pride themselves in their identity, and I think…” Al smiled. “I think being around people like me can make this a bit easier.”

A silence settled around the kitchen while Ed absorbed Al’s words.

This.

It finally sunk in. This. They were so far away. The other side of the Gate. Everyone they knew, even the stars they had grown up with and cast light over many a sleepless night, was separated from them by an impregnable barrier.

The Gate.

“Al.” Ed sighed. “I understand. The least we can do is try to live here as well as we can, until we
find some way to return, alright?”

Al’s smile faded slightly. “Yeah.”

Ed clapped Al’s hand to his metal one, and grinned widely. 'Now, let’s set off. Can’t be late on your first day, can we?’

Al smiled back, even if it was a little hesitant. “Alright. Come on, Brother.”

And Al left the house for the first time since January. They were silhouetted against the morning light coming through the doorway, finally close to the same height. Flesh to metal ratio greatly improved, the brothers exited together.

The door shut on an empty, lonely flat.

Clack.

Chapter End Notes

That took way too long to write. Oops?

Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov

Kühl- cold (as in the temperature)

Ahhh! Al finally gets to come into the story. Don’t worry, I’ll clear up a few things later on. From here, the plot goes sharply uphill in about ~5 chapters. A few bad things are gonna happen, but I’m sorry. It’s all been planned out since April, so blame April me, not June me.

Exams are coming for you in-story and me, so it’s going to be a tad harder to write. After that, Summer holiday is coming, so woo! More chapters!

Sieghild met them at a shop of sorts, and then they went to school separately for reasons that will be explained later, which, along with the whole ‘being a popular fictional character’ thing, prevents Ed from totally going out and uncovering his automail and hanging around with his brother in public and such.

I’m going to be rewriting Chapter Two in the space of time between Chapter Twenty-One and Twenty-Two (wow! We finally hit the 20-chapter mark! Can I get a boo-yah?), so check that out in a few days!

Fact- Al’s going to have lots of friends. He’s just a people person.

On that note, have a good night!
One cool early April morning, Ed finally came to terms with the fact that his friends were avoiding him. He had suspected this all week, after Puja had pointedly ignored his request to pass the salt at lunch on Monday. [Your Name] had been uncharacteristically quiet, and even when Ed had unleashed his secret weapon, a bad chemistry pun, you didn’t even manage a snort.

There was something very fishy going on.

‘What’s wrong, brother?’ Al signs. With Al’s incessant prodding to improve his sign language. Ed had begrudgingly accepted to revert to almost exclusively hand gestures, no matter how inept his skill level was. Al, in return, promised keep practicing oral speaking just for his own benefit.

‘Nothing.’ Ed replies.

‘I’ve known you for all of my fifteen years, and I know that expression. Something is wrong.’ Al snarks back. He makes sure to add in narrowed eyes for added effect. Ed acknowledges and appreciates the subtlety.

“Yeah, and?” Ed says out loud, forgetting for a moment about signing. Al seems to understand his statement perfectly well, judging by the increased degree of eye-narrowing.

‘Something is bothering you and I want to know about it.’ Al insists, poking Ed in the side with a toothpaste-laden toothbrush.

Ed makes a small noise of annoyance, but finally agrees to answer once Al’s toothbrush-poking escalates to a slightly painful level. Ed swats both the incoming toothbrush away and his brother.

‘Fine, fine, quit poking me.’ Ed flaps his hand at Al, who side-eyes him and shoves the bright green toothbrush in his mouth.

Ed sighs and tries to shield his dignity from the blow that’s about to come. ‘My friends are avoiding me.’ He lets this out in a rush to spare his bruised ego and waits for Al’s wisecrare advice about friendship and how ‘punching people in the jaw for commenting on your height isn’t a good way to make or keep friends, brother’.

‘What did you do this time?’

‘What? What? Why is it my fault?!”

‘It was a perfectly natural assumption.’

‘Natural assumption! Why do you assume I’m at fault here?’

Al spat his toothpaste into the kitchen sink and began to rinse it off. ‘Because I’ve seen you interact with people. Remember when you told Mei she shouldn’t want to be a bird, because she’d poop constantly and have a brain the size of a pea?’

“It was true!” Ed replied, snatchning an orange.

‘I’m just trying to say that you aren’t the most tactful person to ever exist, brother.’
Ed tossed the orange into the air and caught it mid-arc. ‘Maybe, but the funny thing is, they really only started avoiding me after my friend took a look-’

Ed’s reflexes falter for half a second, the orange falls, and smacks Ed right in the face before rolling to the floor. No, it couldn’t be. Ed shakes his head.

‘After they did what?’ Al seems casually intrigued, leaning against the worktop with a single eyebrow raised. When Ed doesn’t reply, he continues.

‘See, you should ask them what you did. That’s an acceptable response to this kind of thing.’ Al advises.

Like hell Ed would. Thought he won’t ever admit it, his ego is too bloated to take that kind of hit. ‘Oh, really. Fine, Mister Tact, tell me just what you would do in this situation.’ Ed rummages around in his rucksack at the foot of his chair. Textbook, a paper origami star from Puja, notebook...pencil!

‘Well, brother, I would try to- hey!’ Al dodges a flying pencil, which then clatters into the window and falls into the sink. ‘What was that for?’

‘For being a smartass.’

_000_

After bidding Al goodbye at their street corner, Ed clumps down the street among throngs of people in the exact opposite direction. He makes a note that the majority of pedestrians have shed their heavy winter coats in favour of lighter jackets. He can already tell that they’re welcoming the warming weather, but Ed is one of the few who doesn’t. Once the thermometer hits the 12 degree mark, Ed won’t have an excuse to wear his gloves and long sleeves. Freestyling his excuses isn’t one of Ed’s talents.

“Though my intellect makes up for it,” Ed chuckles to himself, all over-exaggerated narcissism, placing a hand on his chest in a way that would remind a random onlooker of a prim, cocky bird.

Ed’s walk is suddenly interrupted by a solid object colliding with his stomach. Temporarily knocked off balance, Ed stumbles backwards to get a good look at whatever ran into him. Rather than a pole or mailbox or something of that sort, Ed is surprised to meet the eyes of a curious second-year girl.

She’s quite short, which explains why the colliding sensation was localised to his chest and below, and as thin as a twig. Her oversized navy uniform jacket hangs off of her, dwarfing her further, and the length of her uniform skirt shows her knobbly knees and sagging kneesocks.

Ed realises that the school crest on her breast pocket matches his jacket exactly, and in the background of his inner monologue and constant bad-pun-making, his older brother instinct kicks in.

“Do you know the school is that way, right? Are you lost?” He says, stepping back a bit. She had stepped forward to get a closer look at him, peering at him with some sort of strange curiosity.

“No, I was heading that way myself.” She answers in a dismissive tone, squinting her magnified green eyes behind her thick glasses. “I wanted to get a closer look at you.”

“A closer… look at me?” Ed asks. He’s completely befuddled now. Why was this tiny girl staring at him like he was a fascinating museum exhibit?

“I could swear I’ve seen you before,” She mutters, probably more to herself than anyone else. They’re both blocking the way of foot traffic now, but she doesn’t show a single sign of moving
until she figures out just who she reminds him of. “Strange accent though, where’re you from? France?”

France? What the ever-loving-hell is France? “No?”

“No, sounds a tad bit German. I’m right, aren’t I?” She glances down at her hand, wrapped around the leather strap of her satchel. “Eight-forty-five. Good. Gives me… ten minutes. Now, who are you?”

“Um, I am-“ For the second time in less than five minutes, Ed is suddenly jerked out of a situation, but this time bodily. A hand reaches out of nowhere and snatches him from the girl’s sight. He’s dragged away, despite the girl’s protests, inside the school and far away from her.

Ed cranes his head around to see you staring ahead and dragging him behind you. Ed feels a bit like a child being dragged by the ear to the headmaster’s office for having a fight in the schoolyard.

“Oi, what are-” You pull him around yet another corner and cut off his protests by yanking his head way too close to said corner.

You and Puja had pledged to each other not to talk to him about the… thing until both of you were ready, and by saving him from that third year, you had broken all of Puja’s laws and guidelines for Ignoring Edward Elric. You hope she’ll understand once you casually mention that the third year had several Fullmetal Alchemist pins and keychains hanging from her leather satchel. A girl in the deepest depths of her weeaboo phase wouldn’t be so easily convinced that her recognition of Ed’s face was just a simple case of mistaken identity. You know this from experience. Your weeaboo phase is still fresh in your memory.

With a shudder and a cringe, you’re brought back to reality, where you have dragged Edward Elric himself, not Edward Edik or any other similar name, to the deserted Humanities corridor.

The first inklings of anxiety begin to drip into your bloodstream.

“You’re-” Your voice cracks in the middle of your word. You clear your throat and continue your sentence with much less false bravado. “You’re welcome.”

Ed pulls his hand out of your vicelike grip and crosses his arms. He looks somewhat annoyed, and you brace yourself for one of Ed’s infamous rants. For some strange reason, you fight the urge to giggle at the thought. Look at you, interacting with Edward Elric. If only your twelve-year-old self could see you now.

To your surprise, he doesn’t say anything. He glances at all the possible exits, fidgets from foot to foot, and refuses to make eye contact. Well, this is now sufficiently awkward.

“I know you’re probably confused and angry.” You begin, halting and half wishing Puja was here to back you up. She always won confrontations with cool logic. You could use that force right now. “But, we have a reason for, er… avoiding…you. It’s not anything you did! I promise. Er.”

You’re all out of words. It was a good, valiant, and pathetic effort. Oh well. Let’s go find a nice place to mourn the end of a blossoming friendship because of your untimely discovery.

Just as you pass him, cursing your absolute tactfulness, this boy actually reaches out and grabs your shoulder. Immediately, butterflies decide to have a wild rave in your stomach.

“Er-” He starts. A silence stretches out after this, so long that you begin to question if he’ll follow up with an explanation. He still hasn’t let go of your shoulder, and your breathing is starting to come a
You send what you hope is an easy-looking smile his way, though it looks more like a grimace.

“Sit with us at lunch today.” You say. “Puja’s made me swear not to tell you, so I can only reassure you that she’ll be somewhat civil.”

Ed only nods. He turns to you, and makes eye contact for three tense seconds, and clumps off to his first lesson.

Only once you’re sure that Ed is completely gone do you let yourself melt into a puddle of nervous giggling and fear of Puja’s wrath. You can only hope he isn’t completely cross with you.

The bell rings about five minutes into your nervous breakdown, and you hasten to class with adrenaline shaking your hands.

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The first five minutes of lunch are tense and quiet. You had told Puja of your little conversation with Ed, and after the expected angry rant, Puja had agreed to be a semblance of polite.

“Pass the salt,” Ed stated, looking directly at Puja. A second passed, Puja glanced up from her worn paperback, and handed him the plastic salt shaker. It didn’t seem like much to an outsider, but this was a huge improvement from before.

That lunch was filled with furtive glances and quiet yes or no questions.

The lunch after that had short, quiet conversations, cautious and prodding.

The lunch after that marked the longest group conversation since you and Puja found out the truth.

The lunch after that was almost back to normal.

Almost.

“How do you eat this?” You ask, unable to contain your snickers.

“‘It was groundbreaking.’” Puja interrupts, completely deadpan, staring you straight in the eye over her half-finished alu posto. Ed, always the appreciator of bad comedy, can’t hold in a sharp snort.

Puja launches into a story about a terrible stand-up comedian show she went to last year, saying that his show was filled with jokes like yours. She says she hates them, but you know that secretly she loves terrible jokes and puns.

In the middle of Puja’s animated retelling of a broom joke, Ed pulls off his right glove. He doesn’t notice that Puja’s sentence cuts off in the middle, and you freeze in the middle of raising a bite of food into your mouth. Your eyes are locked onto the movements of his gleaming metal as he pokes the strangely jiggly piece of meat with a disgusted look on his face.

“The food was never this disgusting back in Germany,” he mutters to himself. He puts his glove back on and it’s like a spell was lifted. You and Puja snap back to the present and busy yourselves with something, anything.

“How do you eat this?” He asks, prodding the meat with a fork. “It tastes alike shoe.”
“We have a fondness for a mixture of dirt, rubber, foot sweat, and general grottiness.” You blurt.

“I did not know they had your personality in meat,” Ed sniggered.

“Oi!” You reach over and slap his arm with all the force you can muster. He barely even flinches, preoccupied with laughing so hard that people are staring.

As your hand makes contact, something bizarre happens. His face... twitches a bit. You’re not sure if it’s because he’s laughing, but once again, something seems off.

His eyes open, still scrunched, and he lets out a long, breathy ‘wheew’. They’re too sharp. The corners of his eyes are sharper? No, facial features don’t change when someone laughs. Then again, Edward Elric, a fictional character, is having lunch with you, so you’re not completely sure what’s possible anymore.

“Ed, look at me.” You say. Ed blinks, but complies. You twist your head at several different angles, but you still can’t pinpoint what looks different.

“Hm?”

“Oh, nothing.”

And you forgot about the incident.

You laid in bed later that night, staring at your ceiling, and could only thank the universe that you had been given another chance to salvage your friendship. Ed was once again making conversation, Puja wasn’t silent, and you couldn’t be happier.

You should’ve known it was too good to last.

Chapter End Notes

Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov

*Pech*- bad luck/ tough luck

I have no excuse this time. None at all. Go ahead, I deserve it.

My only consolation for this is that I’m probably going to be posting a bunch of chapters
in the next few days. I’ll be working extra hard to get us caught up with the storyline I have planned! On another note, I rewrote Chapter Two. Go check it out.

From now on, we have an update schedule. Every week, on Saturday, I’m going to try and update. That’s so you have a regular update, and I won’t be lazy and procrastinate. I have another fanfiction I’m working on, so this might be a bit hard to upkeep, what with school starting in a bit.

Look out for a standalone FMA story later on this week!

[Hey, readers! Sound off in the comments/reviews! What have you enjoyed in this fanfic? What do I need to work on? What do you think is going to happen? What would you like to see more of? Anything you want to comment on? I want to hear what you think!]

Until next time!
“Ow, my mouth hurts,” Ed whines to no one in particular, rubbing at his cheek with his left hand. The remaining limbs are spread-eagle across your bedroom floor, intersecting a pile of papers and a wadded blanket. “Like hell.”

“Everything in our body is constructed to sustain and protect a mass of flesh in our skull,” Puja breathes, staring at the ceiling, spread-eagle just like Ed. “Our bodies aren’t ‘us’. That grey piece of meat is everything we are.”

You stare down at both of your friends from your perch at the end of your bed. One of them is vacant-eyed with an existential discovery she’d rather she hadn’t figured out, and the other is occupied with a much more worldly train of thought. You groan and flop over onto your back.

“What do you think is wrong with my mouth?” Ed asks, just as Puja whispers with almost fearful awe, ‘I am just a brain’. He makes another uncomfortable little noise.

“I don’t know, Ed.” You sigh. Wow, this is dull. Puja’s out of commission, Ed is complaining, and you have nothing better to do than stare at your ceiling.

“I am going to go check them.”

“You do that.”

Ed clumps out of the room. You listen to his uneven footsteps thump down the corridor and up to the bathroom, where they cease.

He pokes his head into the room a few minutes later, with some interesting news and his tongue prodding at the inside of his cheek. “There are white lumps at the back of my mouth.”

“Those are probably your wisdom teeth.”

Puja groans and covers her eyes with her hands.

“Wisdom teeth?”

“The teeth you get when you’re older.” You heave yourself up into a sitting position. “If they’re hurting like that, you need to go to the dentist and see if you need them removed.”

Ed’s hand immediately flew up to his cheek. You couldn’t hold in a snigger as a shadow of unadulterated horror crossed his face. Ah, the wonders of modern dentistry.

“They… they remove my teeth?” Ed’s frame wobbles a bit.

“Are you actually nauseated by the idea of your teeth being taken out of your head? How did you survive the ages of six to eight?” You drawl. You had never really thought about Ed having ‘normal people problems’. He never was a real person to you. In Year eight, you had romanticised this boy so much that now, even with him standing right in front of you with irrefutable evidence that this was him, it was hard to imagine Ed getting the occasional pimple, or growing wisdom teeth. Weird.

“That is absolutely disgusting,” He shudders. Ed slides down the wall to the floor, still thoughtfully
rubbing the side of his face.

“And also,” You continue, your evil smile widening, “They have to inject you with something to keep your gums numb while they cut out your teeth.“Our eyes go from moderately disgusted baseballs to petrified dinner plates, framed by white skin and two hands raised into a prayer-like position. “You’re not serious.”

“Oh, I am.” You have no idea if they actually do that. “Don’t worry, they put you under first. You’re asleep the entire time.”

Puja gives a well-timed groan and sits up, rubbing her head. She turns to look at both of you. Her eyes are exhausted. Obviously this new discovery of hers has taken quite a toll.

“You’ve pulled through? Is the existentialism done for today?”

Noncommittal grunt. “I’d say, yeah.” She shakes her mussed dark hair like a dog’s while stretching her back, so that every single crack in her vertebrae are audible, and quite loud. You flinch a little in empathy.

“What were you two doing?” Puja yawns. She runs her fingers through her hair to try and plait it. “Ed’s getting his wisdom teeth in.” You return the yawn.

“I still do not know how I feel of this.” Ed’s yawn is the third and last. Puja swears after failing to plait her hair for the second time.

“Damn it- Ed, you’ll be so out of it if you need to get them taken out.” She folds her legs back up into a cross-legged position and flips her long curtain of hair over her shoulder to try and braid her hair for the third time.

“How so?” Ed counters. His eyes are fixed on Puja’s experienced hands, not looking too experienced at the moment, fumbling through her strands.

“The drugs they use to put you under make you so woozy and confused, you’ll have some kind of… my cousin described it as being high. He doodled a full page of these weird frogs and frogs on unicycles after coming out of surgery and didn’t remember it after.”

After her fourth failed attempt to plait her hair, Ed scoots over and motions for her hair tie, looking thoughtful while he considers her words. They have a short, hushed argument, after which Ed ends up with the hair tie and Puja with a sour mood.

Ed deftly plaits her hair faster than you have ever thought possible, all while translating his thoughts from Amestrian to English, uncoding modern phrases, and dealing with the idea of needles in his mouth. Puja reaches back to feel the neat, smooth loops. “They... inebriate me?” Ed asks, his hands still occupied with tying the end of her hair. He flicks it around her shoulder, where the tail flips around her neck, smacking her in the eye. Puja makes an indignant noise and slaps his leg.

“What did he say?” Puja is still fingering his handiwork. Her dark eyebrows are rising dangerously high into hairline territory.

“He thinks they’re going to ‘inebriate’ him,” You answer.

“Yeah,” Puja tells Ed. “You’ll be a sort of floaty, mildly hallucinating drunk.”
“Well, that makes me excited,” Ed deadpans. This exchange between Puja and Ed could be an exchange between a modern person and a person from the early 1900s in a time travelling novel, and for some reason, this fascinates you.

“What, Ed, you haven’t heard of the side effects of anaesthesia?” You interject.

“Not much. I only know,” Ed says. He cranes his head back to the ceiling, searching for some English word. “Lachgas, I think that is ‘laughing gas’. Äther, ‘ether’, Chloroform, I guess. I have not had many surgeries in London, so I would not know.”

“That are some rather outdated anaesthesia methods, Ed.” Puja seems genuinely concerned.

Ed shrugs. “They work.”

“They were also used a long time ago,” You chime in. “Are you telling me that in Germany, a developed European country, they still use 1890s anaesthesia?”

Ed glares at you sidelong. “Do not-”

“Or can Ed not admit he’s not as book-smart as he thinks?”

Puja joins you on the bed to help discredit and tease Ed. This is a fun daily tradition. You had done this so often to him that you had ‘Edward’s Degrees of Frustration’ down to a science.

First Degree: The Mild Glare™.

“Doesn’t anaesthesia have to do with chemistry?” Puja asks, placing a finger on her chin in mock thought.

Degree one accomplished.

Second Degree: The Moderate Glare™.

“Ed likes chemistry, right?”

“Oh, yes, he does. He blew up the chemistry classroom because he was bored and he knew how.”

“So, yes, then.”

Degree two has been reached.

Third Degree: The Severe Glare, often paired with Characteristic Scowl.

“Don’t you think such a chemistry nut would know what certain chemicals would do to the human body?”

“Yes, he couldn’t name any, could he?”

And… there it is.

Fourth Degree: ‘High Pitched Indignant Yelling’.

“Maybe he just-”

“I am perfectly intelligent, thank you very much, and explosions are great, leave me alone!”

Was that sufficiently high-pitched and indignant? Yes. Yes it was. Oh, look, it’s paired with a nicely
deep scowl.

You and Puja burst into giggles at his frustration. It was almost as good as the telly, sometimes. Though after one ‘experiment’, Ed didn’t speak to either of you until you coaxed him out of his annoyed, ranty shell with the offer of food.

After you had calmed down, though you’re still shuddering a few minutes later, Puja decides to get to business.

“The GCSEs-”

Your next shudder was not of laughter. You could feel the tension inside of the room heighten.

“C’mon, please, give me something.” Puja pleads with you. “The GCSEs are at the end of the summer term, and that’s about to start. Do you think we should start preparing?”

“That’s ages away!”

“The summer term starts on the fifteenth of April,” She continues.

“It’s the twelfth, Puja, let us relax for a bit,” You counter.

“That’s two days, not counting today. You do realise that when we go back to school they’re going to crack down on us until the GCSEs? The next three months will be terrible.”

“Which is exactly why we should relax for now.”

Puja’s gaze is strong and focused directly on you. After a few seconds of intense scrutiny, you begin to squirm. She lets up with a heavy sigh. “On your own head be it. I’m going to be revising tonight.”

“Fine,” You concede. “But let us three do one more fun thing before it all falls apart.”

“What’s this, then?”

“I say we all have a film night before the first day of term. We each choose one from the shop, and we watch them all in a row. It’d be nice to de-stress.” You’re quite proud of yourself for this idea, actually.

“That’s actually a good idea.”

“Thanks- what’s that supposed to mean!”

“That’d be nice, [Your Name]. Ed, what do you think?”

Both you and Puja turn to look at Ed- to find that he had fallen asleep. He snores quietly, slumped against your wall with his neck twisted at an uncomfortable angle. Somehow, using some sort of Ed Magic, he had managed to pull not only his red hooded jumper up from his stomach but also his black vest* in his sleep. His stomach was completely unmarked, though that might change soon.

“Of course he’s asleep.” Puja sighs. “He even does the stomach thing.”

That’s an interesting fact, but you’re more occupied with something else now.

“Puja, please go get me a marking pen.”
*In American English, a vest looks like something you wear under a suitcoat, but I’m referring to an undershirt here!

**Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov**

böse- Evil

Thanks for all of your reviews! I’m sorry this chapter was just talking, but I wanted to show the evolution of your friendship. From polite teasing to pranks on each other. At least i think it evolved(??).

I know I’ve been saying it for a few chapters now, but really, there’s going to be a plot a coming.

Have a good day/night!
April the thirteenth dawns bright and cool, and when Puja shows up at your flat with a runny nose and an armful of films, you usher her in and shut the door immediately after. Your sofa is piled with blankets and the odd quilt, along with every single pillow in your house and an Ed. Puja leaves her jacket on the chair in the foyer, along with her teal-and-white chevron wellies, and collapses on this over-padded sofa next to dozing Ed.

She spreads her movie collection across an end table by the sofa to display. You pick each one up and nod in approval, until you get to the third.

“‘Star Wars: Episode 4’? Do you really think he’ll be able to follow along?”

“That’s exactly why they’re all increasing in year. The Wizard of Oz, Citizen Kane, the Sound of Music, Star Wars.”

“And The Exorcist.” You deadpan, picking up said film and giving it a once-over. “He’s from 1915, Puja.”

“And he’s not a wuss. He can handle himself.” Puja answered, unstacking Monty Python, E.T., and Home Alone and replacing the Exorcist in its row.

You burst into laughter. “‘Edward Scissorhands’!”

“My mother has an extensive American movie collection, and I appreciate puns,” Puja mutters. “I brought ‘The Matrix’ just so I can confuse the ever-loving-shit out of him.”

“He probably hasn’t even seen a television before this, Puja. He’s already going to be sufficiently confused.”

“‘Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone’… wow, Puja, just drive it home, won’t you?”
Puja makes a broad, sweeping motion with one arm and declares, “Why the hell not?”

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Inception, and Gravity finish off Puja’s sizable stack of DVDs. Just as Puja leans back into the sofa to unwind and warm up a little, a loud, ear-splitting beep begins to screech from the kitchen, over and over again. Only now do you recognise the strange smell in the air.

“Shit, the popcorn!”

Puja lays a hand on her clavicle and sends you a look as though personally offended by your carelessness with her food. She leaps off her seat and into the kitchen. You can hear Puja trying to salvage the burned remains in the cramped space. A few not-so-hushed swears come out of the doorway, just as the strong burning smell intensifies.

Ed sleeps through all this. He snores a great, bear-like snore, partially waking himself and the rest of the flat complex.

“Gggrph?”

“Go to sleep, Ed.”

“Gggrph.”

Something rattles on the worktop in the kitchen, then falls to the floor and smashes. Puja swears in accented Bengali- the only word she knows.

“I got it!”

“You better pray my mum doesn’t notice!” You shout in her general direction.

“Shut up,” Ed groans.

You elbow him in the head and shove him over. “No, you shut-” Something just outside the window catches your eye. At further observation, the something turns out to be an unremarkable brunette
woman in a black pencil skirt-blazer affair sporting a camera around her neck. Upon meeting her eyes, or what you hope are her eyes based on the resting place of her sunglasses, she reaches down to the camera around her neck and snaps a picture.

You crane your neck down to see a gelato stand set up below your window, as well as a mime (which you, strangely, hadn’t noticed until now) at the base of your flat complex. Ah, that explains it. American tourists are constantly taking photos.

The woman fishes a cell phone from a pocket inside of her jacket, and moves out of your line of sight.

“I was able to save at least three quarters of- what’re you staring at?” Puja asks. She crunches a mouthful of overdone popcorn with her tongue.

“There was this… nevermind.” You turn to see Puja clutching an honest-to-god pail in her arms. It was the worn-out black plastic one your mum uses to bleach dirty clothes in. “Puja, you know that’s a pail, right?”

She shrugs. “Irony.” She shoves Ed’s sleeping head onto your lower arm and settles onto the sofa, completing your awkwardly positioned sofa trio. Ed sniffs and mumbles something in his sleep against your arm. Your embarrassed grimace slowly deepens until you look up to beseech Puja with every fibre of your being.

Puja rolls her eyes with unnecessary dramatics and sighs, “Fine.” You and Puja shuffle around the boy in the middle to switch places.

“Now you can be movie DJ.” You say, prodding her with your finger.

“I’m sure there’s an actual word for that,” Puja mutters. She brushes your finger away with a beat-up copy of Star Wars.

“Shut,” Ed grumbles. Puja responds by shaking her shoulder, throwing his head this way and that, until he concedes defeat and finally opens his eyes.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty,” Puja snickers. Ed shoves her onto your lap. The bowl of popcorn flies out of her hands and lands upside-down on the sofa arm. Puja responds by keeping him at leg-
distance with a single socked foot planted into the middle of his chest, while Ed smacks at it with little to no effort.

You contemplate forcefully separating them. Puja makes the decision for you by kicking Ed off of the sofa and onto the floor. She then stretches out to be certain Ed doesn’t have anywhere to sit. Ed then collapses right onto her stomach.

Puja makes an interesting wheezing noise, like the air being let out of a balloon. Her eyes look ready to pop right out of her head as she practically punches Ed in the side to get him off of her chest. For the second time in less than a minute, Ed falls to the floor.

Between gasps, Puja manages a weak “are you a damn elephant” and curls up into herself. This gives Ed room to plop his smug little arse right in between you two.

“So,” He says, still smirking. “Films?”

You snort, Puja glares, and Ed’s smile spreads wider.

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Ed’s initial wonder at the invention of the DVD player didn’t compare to his obvious shock at the technological advances of ‘The Wizard of Oz’, and even that was a small reaction to when the image became filled with vibrant colours. He was just able to contain an audible gasp. He tried to cover it up with an awkward cough.

Citizen Kane went about the same way (though you stopped it right in the middle for lunch and didn’t resume it for sake of time), and so did the Sound of Music (“I am confused, where is this taking place?” “Austria.” “Oh. Yes. Austria. That place.”), but when you reach Star Wars, Harry Potter, and the Matrix, Ed’s eyes have glazed over like a prize Christmas ham. Inception, in hindsight was not a good choice, and the same could be said for Gravity.

Puja yawns and stretches. Her arms shove Ed out of the way as she toddles into the kitchen to root through your cupboard for any sort of snack.

“Oh, Y/N, do you have any sort of meal in here?”
You groan as Ed shifts to lean his back against your arm, gazing blankly at your ceiling. “There’s probably some instant noodles in there.”

“Ah-hah! You sure have some delicacies.” A clatter of plates and cupboards closing. “How’re you holding up in there, Ed?”

“I did not know people could go to space,” Ed’s voice, this close to you, makes you start. The vibrations conduct through his back and into your arm.

“Sounds about right.” Puja sticks her head into the sitting room, and grins this nasty, knowing sort of grin at Ed’s position.


“So I’ve been told,” Ed says.

Clank.

“Are you ready to go back to school tomorrow?”

Both you and Ed voice passionate annoyance at her undesirable change of subject, but stop as soon as she comes into the room with arms laden with food. Even instant noodles look good at this stage in your shared hunger.

“If we don’t face this right now, we’ll be up for a rude awakening in about…” Puja checks her plastic wristwatch, still chewing. “…twelve hours.”

You grimace and stuff another bite of instant into your mouth.

“Professor-” Ed begins.
Puja snorts. “Who, Dumbledore?” You ram a warning elbow directly into her side. She wheezes and coughs into her instant noodles.

“Mister Bradshaw says our Musical Composition exam is going have a practical section, and as you very well know,” Ed raises his right hand and grimly wiggles his fingers. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep this on throughout the entire exam.”

“Why is it so important that you do?” You jab another warning elbow into Puja’s side, but this time she ignores it in exchange for curiosity bordering on rudeness.

“Puja-” You hiss into her ear.

“Ah, well, how would you react to seeing one of your classmates have a... tsy-baurg arm? My fine motor skills leave a little to be desired, too.” Ed admits. He stirs the noodles with the base of his fork.

“Give us a little credit, Ed. If anyone messed with you for something as stupid as that, I’m not sure they’d want to ever face you again. The great and fearsome Ed, cower at his anger.” You laugh.

“Oooh, scary, a kid ten centimetres shorter-”

“Go find a sharp, broken flowerpot and-”

“Oi, oi, you two-”

They stop once you have a hand planted in Ed’s chest and one on Puja’s cheek.

“We are going to continue this discussion in a calm, civilised manner, alright?” You say slowly. Once Puja and Ed nod, you take your hands off of them and flick your eyes back and forth between them.

“You think just playing the piano for a few minutes is hard? Try filling up an entire sketchbook with drawings and perspective studies. A minimum of fifty pages!”
“You have to only draw.”

“What did I say.” You deadpan.

Puja groans. “Fine, Ed. You have a point.”

“Unlike your drawings.”

You can’t hold in a forceful snort at that comment, and eventually give in to the giggles.

“Clever.”

“I’m an intellectual. Of course it was clever.”

“‘Intellectual.’” Puja does air quotes. “Wow, you must have people just swarming all over you.”

“I have manliness oozing from my pores!”

“I’m quite sure that’s just body odour.”

Ed growls and throws his hands (hand?) up in the air in total resignation.

Puja immediately cries out in mock disgust and pushes her hands out in front of her, squeezing her eyes shut. “No! Please spare me, O God of Stink!”

You’re gasping and collapsed like a rag doll on someone’s lap, you can’t tell who. At this point you’re more focused on maintaining a normal breathing rhythm.

“My nose hairs! They’re shrivelling!”
Ed’s scowl is even deeper now, and as he leans forward to shove Puja off the couch or something similar to it, you notice that the lap you’re collapsed against pitches forward as well. You’re on Ed’s lap. Your head is pressed into Ed’s thighs.

You suddenly sit up, and your cranium makes hard contact with Ed’s chin with a sickening crack. You both cry out in pain, and now Puja’s the one with the giggles, practically rolling around on your floor, clutching her abdomen.

“Shit shit shit, ow-ah, Y/N!”

“I’m sorry! You scared the hell out of me-“

Puja laughs something in French, something like “Arretee lou flir elmond!” and you silence her with a throw pillow to the face.

The three of you spend the next several minutes nursing your respective wounds: Ed with his bruised chin, Puja with her bruised arse, and you with your bruised head and pride. Still, even though you’re in pain, Ed is cursing your name, and Puja is laughing at you, this feels nice. Your friends are happy, and Ed is finally acting like a normal kid.

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You guide your friends out the door, along with a few new inside jokes and jabs. Ed waves, Puja hugs, and you all go your separate ways.

Even though it’s getting dark, you see Ed’s eyes flicker to the side of your building. His eyes narrow, then widen, but then his head turns towards the front, and you can’t see any more. He fidgets with something in his pocket, turns the corner, and is gone.

Puja takes her phone out and texts someone. You watch her go until she turns the corner at the other end of your street.

You smile, and shut the door.
Chapter End Notes

*old woman voice* it's been 84 years….

The last time I updated was in August. August! I have no excuses. I’m just so lazy and I’m a serial procrastinator. You guys deserve better than this.

To make up for lost time, I’m trying to write 25 and 26 too and try to publish it this weekend. I don’t really have anything special planned for Halloween, but I could start publishing a little ficlet of one-shots for your casual reading pleasure during waits between chapters. Give me some suggestions in the comments!

According to my plot planner, we’re only a few places from a very important plot point. I know I’ve been saying this for a long while, but the plot is coming! Plotless fluff and friendship and teenage shenanigans don’t last long in the fiction world. Kill your darlings indeed.

Have a good day/night, and be happy, because we’re back on track!
hey kiddos!! there is some joking about death in this chapter as well as some description of scars! just a heads up

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Puja, please.” You whine, thunking a heavy Chemistry text onto your face. “I can only think in chemicals right now, we at least deserve a snack.”

Ed had given up with the mental acrobatics of English soon after he mistranslated an entire passage in his Musical Composition notebook, and then mistranslated it once more, and then continued on to mistranslate it three more times and give up on English for the day. Plenty of high-pitched, indignant yelling was involved. “I agree, my stomach is rumbling.”

“I don’t understand what he just said, but I’m going to go with ‘no’ as a response. If you want food, go get it yourself.” Puja interjected. “Oi, [Y/N], do you understand this bit?” She shifted an assignment over so you could read a question, marked with bright pink highlighter.

You read the question over once. Twice. Three times. All with different stresses on different words, all synonyms considered, and only then did you realise a crucial bit of information. “Puja, this is in French.”

“Oh.” She frowned. “I didn’t even notice.”

You sighed deeply, took pause, and slammed the book onto the ground. “That’s it, we need a revising snack.”

“Get it yourself.”

“I was planning on it, Puja.”

Ed shouts something indistinct about fruit after you leave the room, and Puja gives a loud grunt in agreement.

Dr. Thakur has her feet propped up on the dining-room table and a thick esoteric text in her lap. She waves to you with a pen clutched in her hand.

You trek back to Puja’s bedroom with the fruit of your labours in your possession: a bag of crackers, a few oranges, and some weird vegetable health drink Puja’s brother always seemed to chug like it was water. Ed didn’t appreciate the citrus fruit that was launched at his face, but ate it anyway.

“So—” Puja says around a mouthful of crackers. “What next? I think we’ve all exhausted our revising willpower for today.”

Ed shrugs, and does a grabby motion at the bottle of vege-slush. (His metal hand gleams a bit in the light, and you have to make a conscious effort not to stare or to think too much along that track) You squint your eyes in a ‘really?’ kind of expression. Ed responds by intensifying his grabbing motion, soon finding the bottle sailing towards his face.
Puja ignores Ed’s grunt of pain. “Do you want to go get some gelato?”

“We have provisions.”

“But we don’t have the literal frozen tears of angels,” Puja counters. “We’ve got some stale crackers, oranges, and that nasty shit my broth-”

Ed makes a choking noise, and you both turn to stare at him. The ‘nasty shit’, AKA vege-slush, is slopped all down his front and on his blue jumper. “This tastes of...anus.” He gags out.

Puja snorts something that sounds like ‘snerk’ and buries her face into her knees, shoulders shaking with mirth, hair falling in dark curtains around her head. “...There’s...” -laughter- “-some extra shirts in my brother’s laundry-” - more laughter.

Ed exits. He picks at his shirt with ungloved thumb and forefinger, looking all the while like he’s on the verge of gagging. “Hey, Dr. Thakur-” The door swings shut behind him.

“Why does this always happen to him, poor kid,” You shake your head, smiling. Puja is continuing to produce ‘snerk’-ing noises.

“It’s his fault for wearing a long jumper in the middle of May,” Puja answers, once she’s got a hold of herself. “Besides, who drinks that in the first place? It’s vomit-green and the consistency of gravy.”

“Your brother does.” Puja sighs and nods. “He probably thought it was some weird future-food or something.”

“That must be strange, being surrounded by all this futuristic stuff and having to figure it all out real-time.” Puja glances at her French book, frowns, and shoves it under her bookshelf.

“...hiding the great educational evil won’t make it disappear.”

“Thanks, Jedi Master [Y/N].”

“May the force be with you, Puja.”

You and Puja make eye contact and immediately turn to look at the toy lightsabers her brother had shoved into her closet.

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Ten minutes later, a dramatic lightsaber duel concludes. Darth Puja dies a dramatic death via fake impalement on Jedi Master [Y/N]’s saber. Complete with sound effects.

“Okay, okay, get up, Puja.”

Puja keeps her eyes closed and hand thrown over her forehead in some sort of theatrical death pose. “I can’t, I’m dead.”

“I’m not reviving-” You stop in the middle your sentence, reconsider your choice of words, and continue. “Stay dead, then, Darth Puja, but I’m checking on Ed. He’s taking a long time to just change his shirt.”

“You do that. I’ll have fun being dead.”

You roll your eyes and toss the saber onto the floor next to her. Puja’s loud ‘bleehhhhh’ is cut off as the door shuts, but she gets louder just so you can hear her all the way down to the kitchen.
“Mrs. Thakur, have you seen Ed?” You peek your head around the doorjamb into the kitchen. Dr. Thakur is still reading the same book.

“Mmm-hmm, he’s still in Randy’s room. From what I heard he had a bit of trouble finding something that would fit.”

You wince, remembering Ed’s colourful vocabulary. “Okay, thanks.”

“Tell Darth Puja she needs to finish the washing up!”

You round the bend to Puja’s brother’s room. The setup of Puja’s flat makes it so a visitor can’t see past the living-room into the bedrooms beyond; this gives Puja’s family extra privacy, but anyone unfamiliar with the location of certain areas can get lost easily in the cramped maze of a floorplan.

As someone steps from the dining-room and kitchen, they enter the living-room, but only part of it, as a bathroom splits it almost entirely in half. There’s a small corridor connecting the first half to the second half, and then you walk into what Dr. Thakur and Mr. Thakur use as a makeshift office/television room. Various bedrooms are scattered about the flat at odd intervals that suggests other, smaller flats had been annexed into Puja’s over the 80-odd years it had existed. This is supplemented by the fact that Puja’s flat has a strange, spiralling corridor design and two front doors. Her front garden is also double the width of her neighbour’s. It’s still no bigger than a matchbox, but that’s what comes with living in an urban area.

You shake yourself back to the present. Somehow you had spent half a minute musing over floor plans while staring blankly at a stretch of wall.

“Ed?” You call, knocking on Randy’s door. Its surface is littered with Star Wars posters from the phase he had when he was thirteen and had yet to take down. “You’ve been in there ten minutes now, what are you doing, sewing it yourself?”

You chuckle to yourself at your (unfunny) joke. The door is already a quarter of the way open, so you begin to push it open without any sort of invitation.

“W-wait, [Y/N]-!”

The door creaks open, unaided. You hand hovers in midair- your back has stiffened, your breath has caught in your throat. Ed scrambles to pull the sides of a button-up shirt tight across each other, but you had already seen.

Raised pink scars trail from where you assumed his automail port is. They’re a little faded, but still visible from this distance.

There, in the lower centre of his chest, is a massive irregular scar, somewhat circular. It’s pinkish grey, dimpled and thick with scar tissue. It’s also about the size of a tea saucer. In this state of shock, your brain rather uselessly supplies the term ‘hypertrophic scar’. It has to be the largest and most serious scar you’ve ever seen.

“I…”

Only once Ed breathes in sharply do you realise you’ve been staring. You blink, shake your head, and look at Ed.

His limbs are all pulled into himself in a sort of protective position. He’s completely avoiding your gaze.

“I’m- I’m so sorry, I just came in.”
Ed doesn’t reply. He instead twitches his finger at the buttons he had yet to push through.

“Er, we’ve…taken a break, so you can come back when you’re, er, dressed. I apologise, again.” You clear your throat a bit awkwardly, and hesitate in the doorway just a moment too long before leaving. He doesn’t meet your eyes the whole time.

Brilliant, you think. I’ve just ruined everything. Barge in, won’t you? Don’t even wait for an invitation, and this is what you’re going to get, you great, big-

Immersed in this tirade of self-admonishment, you don’t notice Puja until you bump into her.

“Watch it,” She gasps, cradling a hot cup of tea in her hands.

“Hell-” You say, as molten hot tea drips on your hands, before you can stop yourself. “Sorry, Dr. Thakur!”

“I’ve gone temporarily deaf and haven’t any idea what you said,” Dr. Thakur replies from the kitchen. “What have I told you about tea in the bedrooms, Puja!”

“I’m not going to spill it, mum. It’s not my fault my room’s the coldest!”

“Come in the kitchen and do the washing-up, it’s warm in here.”

Puja rolls her head up to sigh at the ceiling, but heads towards the kitchen anyway, sipping hot tea quite mutinously. You follow close behind. What else have you got to do?

Dr. Thakur has a sleek silver laptop out on the dining room table and the same thick book. She marks a crowded page with a strip of yellow paper. A veritable explosion of note pages surround her workstation at the table. “Get started. They’re all in the sink.”

Puja frowns, plunging her hands into the sink. The small kitchen is soon filled clinking and clacking of glass bowls and stainless steel silverware. You settle yourself across from Dr. Thakur and resist the impulse to hide your face in your hands.

“So,” Dr. Thakur begins, tone casual and nonchalant. “How’s school going?”

Puja drops the bowl she was holding back into the sink, where it lands with a crash.

Dr. Thakur laughs, a tinkling, warm laugh. “Thought so. It’s GCSE season, is it? I didn’t think they’d start preparing you this early in the year. When are they?”

Puja shakes her head and tries to regain her composure. “Our head teacher said they were the last week of June.”

Dr. Thakur raises her eyes from her notes. “Really? How much more off time does that give you lot?”

“’Bout four days or so.” Puja supplies. “Last year it wasn’t until July that we finished. Whether or not it’s a good thing to hold off is debatable.”

Their conversation fades into the background as you retreat into your thoughts. You had known Ed would be scarred. Come on, he was Edward Elric (still not used to this bit, it makes you dizzy every time you think about it), the Edward Elric of several battles and an impalement via steel beam. You just didn’t expect...that.

Uneven footsteps start down the corridor just out of your view and enter the kitchen. You tense up
instinctively, certain that Ed is angry with you, but he sits down next to you. This catches you rather off-guard.

He then nudges you with his right elbow, and you look up, expecting to see a face with knitted brows and a scowl. Instead, there’s a forced smile that doesn’t meet his eyes.

“How are you feeling about the GCSEs?” Ed asks. You blink uncomprehendingly for a few seconds, unsure if he had actually spoken to you.

“U-uh, all right, I suppose,” You stutter out. Puja utters a soft chuckle, and you send a sharp glare her way. “What about you?”

Ed shrugs and rolls his head back to the ceiling, arms crossed. The baby-blue button-up is a bit too large for him, but you do have to admit it looks nice with his hair. “I do not think it will be too difficult. The music exam is going to be…” He clicks his fingers, searching for the word. “Ahhh. I will go with ‘easy’.”

“Honestly!” Puja scoffs. “A fortnight ago you were whingeing about your dexterity problems.”

“I am a fast learner, obviously. Practise makes perfect.” Ed smiles. But- it’s tight. A little less forced, but you can see that his eyes can’t carry the impishness his speech is trying to emulate.

Puja makes a noise that you can interpret as her orally rolling her eyes. “Ah, yes, our very own intellectual, Edward ‘Ponytail’ Edik.”

You squint your eyes at that. Ed leans forward and says, “What is wrong with my ponytail! I think my ponytail is great and charming- wait. [Y/N], did she call me ‘Edik’?” You jump, both from your sudden forcible shoehorning into the conversation and the sudden jump from English to guttural Amestrian/German.

“Er, yes. Your name is... Elric, yeah? You know, it’s an educated guess. Never really saw your last name on paper. Edik. Yeah.” This was first time in a few weeks that you had confronted this issue head-on. The memories of Ed’s prosthetic were still terribly fresh in your mind.

“Edward Elric, the one and only, famous intellectual extraordinaire.”

“‘Famous’ is a word I’m not sure describes you.”

“Oh, so you don’t disagree with ‘intellectual’ and ‘extraordinaire’? I’m flattered, really-” That stupid, shit-eating grin-

“Oi, people, French student here.” Puja waves her hand, obviously a little miffed. “Ed, though your hair is, admittedly, golden and glorious-” (“HA!” Ed gloats)”-shut it, first of all. The school’s uniform code clearly states boys’ hair is to be ‘neat and trimmed’.”

Ed’s hand flies up to the back of his head. For half a second, his expression isn’t guarded and his face is lined with concern. This is before it switches to an expression resembling challenge. “Can you prove it? Why should I be inclined to believe this?”

You’re content with watching them bicker light-heartedly for a few minutes, chuckling in all the right places. They fight like a brother and a sister, if you’re honest with yourself. Ed is a little more abrasive and louder and brasher than Randy, but the similarities are there, and you can see why Puja took such a liking to him, despite her initial impression of him.

“[Y/N]? Dr. Thakur says, somewhere to your left.
Ed exclaims something that makes you jump a little. His eyes are narrowed in concentration. You blink and shake your head. “Sorry. What’d you need?”

Dr. Thakur raises an eyebrow, but continues. “I was just thinking, you and Ed have a remarkable-astonishing, grasp on the German language.”

You nod, a little apprehensive.

“I was wondering why that was. Certainly they don’t teach you at that level in Year Eleven?”

“Well,” you smile a little. “I’m definitely not fluent. Four years of German and I can’t even understand it when I’m listening to it all that well.”

Dr. Thakur makes a motion for you to continue.

“Ed, when he came here, wasn’t all that skilled with English. So, when we were talking, we’d switch between speaking German for a bit and speaking English for a bit. It helped both of us-on our German practise exam the other day, me, Ed, and Yvette Kingsley got the highest marks on the verbal section.”

Dr. Thakur shakes her head in a sort of disbelieving way. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you and Ed were fluent by June.”

You’re about to reply when a spoon goes flying past your face and clatters into the wall behind you. Puja is poised with a fork in her other hand. Its tines are pointed right at Ed.

“I told you I would miss, Ed. You’re halfway across the kitchen, mate, and a spoon is a delicate instrument. Wind direction, speed, air pressure-”

“The shape could counteract that! Think about the bowl shape of the spoon, if you throw it the right way-”

“That could skew the direction of the toss even more! Neither of us are in Physics, or any kind of thing like it, thank god for that, but that means neither of us could know how any of this affects the exact trajectory of a spoon.”

You clear your throat, and their gazes both snap to you. “Did you just make my life flash before my eyes for a Physics debate?”

“Yes,” They both respond. You sigh and rub your temples with your fingers. The incident with Ed earlier seems to be forgotten.

“Wouldn’t...” You say. “Wouldn’t the fork be a tad more accurate?”

Saying that is a mistake. They both launch into a new discussion, complete with hand gestures and a fork flying past, but this time much closer to Ed’s face. Ed insists the tines might carve the air differently, and Puja says it will help with accuracy.

“If you are seriously considering this!” You exclaim over their steadily intensifying voices, “Ask Belinda Wheatley! She’s in nearly every Science and Maths class offered at school!”

They stop, and Puja settles onto a more comfortable position on her kitchen worktop. Dr. Thakur has gone back to her work and is blessedly oblivious to the events taking place.

“That’s an idea,” Puja says.
Ed looks thoughtful until comprehension dawns on his face. “Belinda Wheatley... you told me about her. You said she was in your Humanities class.”

A beat.

“Wait, was she the one who-”

“That’s the one.”

Ed turns seven vibrant shades of glorious, glorious scarlet and suddenly stands up, coughing. He tugs on the hem of his borrowed button-up, which you note that he hasn’t tucked into his trousers.

Puja is sniggering. Puja had better stop sniggering.

Puja is not stopping. You glare at her and will her to stop with your mighty telepathic powers- oh. Huh. She did stop. Only after she checked the time, but that’s not important.

“Well, it’s been fun, but it’s also six o’clock in the evening. I’m kicking you out. I have revising to do and dinner to eat.” She drains the sink, snatches a package of crackers out of Ed’s hands, and motions for you to get your shoes. “Your mum’s probably worried, [Y/N]. Ed, godaaaaaa....” She trails off before she swears, sending an apprehensive look her mother’s way, and then continues. “Dang it, Ed, eat your own crackers. No, don’t eat those biscuits, my Great-Aunt Heera brought those from France- I told you to stop, boy!”

Five minutes later, shoes on the right feet, books in bags, and a molasses biscuit shoved in Ed’s trousers pocket, you all are standing in Puja’s foyer. The light, but warm-ish, drizzle outside colours the sky a dreary grey.

Puja gazes out her front window. “I don’t envy you, but it could be worse.”

She straightens your shirt’s front. “Sorry for kicking you both out all of the sudden, but your mum gets home at seven, yes? And Ed, I don’t want you hooligans to go out walking alone. Strength in numbers.”

“Strength.” You repeat, in an attempted deadpan. “Who would be frightened of two secondary school students, one who looks like he’s-”

“I have grown! I have grown five centimetres in the past months!” Ed exclaims. Puja is now attempting to tuck his shirttails in, but gives up on the second try.

“I wasn’t going to say anything about your height, numb-skull!” You say, failing at smothering laughter at his indignation.

“Sod off, you two. Bring back that shirt, Ed.” Puja says, and shoves you both with little fanfare out onto the pavement and right into the drizzle.

Ed takes a minute to gather his bearings. He straightens his baggy shirt and leads the way down the street, a spot of gold and blue amongst dull stormcloud grey and flat gunmetal brick.

“Wait up, idiot!”

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Puja watches you both go through her front window.
“Big trouble,” Dr. Thakur chuckles, from the kitchen.

Puja grins and follows Ed’s golden head around the corner until he disappears, with you at his side and his head thrown back in a laugh. You’re grinning up at him, before unmistakably snorting at his antics. “You don’t know the half of it.”

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You and Ed arrive at the street where you separate. Ed smiles, and pats your shoulder.

“Well, I will see you tomorrow!” Ed calls. He flicks two fingers in a small salute and jogs off in the other direction, a hand shoved in his pocket.

You groan and remember the piles of homework still yearning to be finished at home. “Yeah! Don’t do anything stupid!”

“Hey!”

You laugh, but then remember something. “Oi, and Ed?”

“Yeah?”

Shit, he’s too far away to not say this at an above-average volume. “I’m...sorry. Really, I am. I should’ve-”

Ed’s walked forwards a bit. “No, it is… it is fine. I…” He doesn’t seem to find the right word, in either Amestrian or English. He averts his eyes and shrugs, hands in his pockets.

You nod. A small silence stretches on, for a few seconds, before you break it with, “Anyway. See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” His wave is more subdued this time. You watch his back as he leaves.

Maybe he was taller.

Chapter End Notes

this is almost 3500 can i get a jfc

Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov
der Bahnhof - train station

Did you know? Nouns can be masculine, feminine, or neuter, and this affects which 'the' you use with the word!

(I said i was working on it all Halloween weekend- I was. But I was working on Smaller Mistakes- which you can go check out! It's part of a series now. It's just a little companion fic with fluff that doesn't exactly match up with the timeline of this fic, but you know! It's all for fun! Anyway, have a wonderful day!!)
As May draws to a close, the pressure on you and your peers begins to heighten. Though it isn’t at its June level yet, the cumulative stress and tension hanging over your year could be felt by all students near to someone in your class. A younger student would be wise to steer clear of a fifth year with a heavy stack of books in hand and a brow furrowed in exhaustion.

Though not as stressed as the fifth and upper-sixth form students, the other students were too showing signs of strain. A particularly sensitive girl from one of the lower years burst into tears in the library and couldn’t be consoled by anyone, soon having to be escorted from the library to the nurse by a concerned older student.

The sheer workload had also got so much heavier that even Ed, self-proclaimed genius, was beginning to feel a slight strain.

“It’s ridiculous!” He protests, slamming a book shut and crossing his arm(s?). “I have no time for anything else!”

Puja scoffs, propping herself up on her elbow. She sinks a little into your quilt. “What, exactly, do you do in your spare time?”

Ed opens his mouth with a lecturing glint in his eye, and then pauses. His hand twitches in midair. He averts his gaze towards the floor.

“That’s what I thought.”

You keep squinting at a confusing string of numbers in your maths book during this conversation. “Shut it, I’m trying to figure this out.” You switch your chin from resting in your left hand to your right- your elbow was going a little numb from the surface of your desk. You jiggle it to return feeling.

“You’ve been on the same page for twenty minutes.”

“Thinking takes time, Puja!”

Ed cuts off Puja’s incredulous ‘mmm-hmm’ with “Piano!”

You both turn to look at him. Another thick text is open in his lap. “What?” You both say.

“I do piano in my spare time.”

Puja chimes in with a deadpan “is that all?”, while you raise your eyebrows and say, “wait, really?”

Ed draws himself up in a vain sort of way. “And I am very good at it, if I do say so myself.” “I thought you just played that to prepare for the music exam.” Puja carries on the conversation in the background as you re-immerse yourself into the hell of numbers in front of you.

Thirty minutes later, the sun was getting lower in the sky, and Ed was debating with Puja over whether or not they were going to his flat to check out his piano and see Ed show off his so-called Beethoven-level piano skills.
“I’ll prove it to you-”

“We’ve been revising for an hour and a half, you berk. What’re we supposed to do, lug all these books to your flat? We don’t even know where you live!”

 “[Y/N] knows-”

You stiffen at your sudden injection into the conversation, holding your hands up in surrender. “Let’s just go, if you two’ll stop bickering.”

“But, revising-”

You cut her off. “I know for a bloody fact the sole reason you’ve been squabbling with Ed for the last half hour is because you want to procrastinate on Geography.”

Puja looks a bit offended for a second, but then shrugs. “Fair point.”

“At least you’ve got French done, so you can focus on Geography-”

“I get all the mountain ranges confused.”

“Revising could help that.”

Puja scowls and gestures flippantly. “Later.”

“It’s in four days!” You exclaim.

“Piano, let’s go,” Ed urges, rather unhelpfully.

It was a lucky break on your part that it was a balmy 13 degrees outside, because not only with Ed’s impatience to get moving, Puja had forgot her coat in your foyer, and refused to go back for it.

“I still cannot believe that this is warm for you,” Ed huffs. “Warm is when you can parade around in a short-sleeved shirt. This is for jumpers. I’m freezing my arse off.”

“This is for short-sleeved shirts,” Puja says. That wasn’t exactly fair, though, because Puja had always had very hot blood. “And my arse is perfectly fine.”

“For eis Gnomen, maybe.” Ed counters.

You falter and squint at him. “Did you just use the phrase ‘ice gnomes?’”

“Yes,” He says.

“What the hell are-”

“You know, mountain gnomes, they live up in the mountains and cause avalanches? Mountain gnomes but with ice. Icy mountains.”

Your squinting intensifies.

“The children’s story? Are you telling me your mother didn’t tell you stories about mountain gnomes?”

Puja interjects, “Neither of us grew up in...Germany, Ed.” You register the hesitation, and you two share a significant glance.
“Weird.” Ed says, shaking his head. He mutters something under his breath about not having a childhood.

As you approach his front door (a fresh shade of blue, you realise. He must’ve painted it since you’ve been here, but that doesn’t seem like something he’d do. And certainly not that shade of blue.), he fishes around in his trousers pocket for his keys. A few coins jingle and ding against the cloth-covered metal of his hand.

“It’s in my living-room,” He says, jamming the key into the lock and twisting it rather roughly. “Beat-up, but it works. For this, I guess.”

“Fine,” Puja says. “Let’s go. You don’t get to boast unless you prove it.”

“I accept.” Ed steps inside, and tells Puja to shut the door behind her. You head in, Puja following and complying with her foot. The door bangs shut.

You look around at your surroundings. The last time you’d been in Ed’s house was in the dead of winter, and it had lasted for a few seconds, maybe. He had pushed you out onto the payment almost immediately after a cursory glance into his foyer and stairwell. You remember seeing a pair of eyes looking out at you, you hadn’t given them much thought since then. You think it might’ve been something reflective shining from the stairwell, and your eyes somehow interpreted it into eyes… or something.

The stairwell is lit this time. A steep pair of darkwood stairs climbs up into an upper level, which an archway is currently obstructing from your sight. Just off the foyer and cramped stairwell is the kitchen, a checkered-linoleum, broom-closet thing of a room with a second-hand table and worn cupboards. The whole flat is tight and confined, but has a warm, homey feeling written into each scratch on the floor and dirty dish in the sink.

Ed tosses his jacket onto a chair right next to another archway, across from the kitchen. He motions for you and Puja to follow him.

This room is the largest you’ve seen yet. A small sofa, second-hand like everything else and looking like it belonged to a crotchety old woman, was shoved against a wall. Several high stacks of books dot the floor, not all of them in English, and an old upright piano sits in the centre of the room. Though it was pastel green at some point, the paint was chipping off in huge chunks to reveal a white coat underneath. The ivories were slightly yellowed, and the pedals gleamed dully under a layer of tarnish and scratches, but when Ed plunks a random key it comes out sounding rich and deep.

Ed drops his rucksack on the ground near the piano bench and drops his behind into said bench just as heavily. “Behold,” He says, rather loftily, and after making sure you and Puja are paying close attention, begins to play Beethoven’s Ode To Joy.

Puja’s eyebrows shoot up into her hairline. She leans forward from her sitting position on Ed’s sofa, and exchanges an amazed glance with you, before looking back at Ed’s fingers. He doesn’t play at a professional’s level, but he was rather good. Thinking about, it, his skill does make sense. You’ve heard about amputees practising motor skills to better their control over their prosthetic limbs, and you guess piano is one of them.

Ed cuts off about a minute in, and turns around with the smuggest expression on his face that you’d ever seen on a human being. “Eh?”

Puja’s eyebrows are still high when she makes a conceding gesture. Ed looks cockier than you’ve
ever seen him as he turns to you, with an enquiring smirk.

You ignore the smirk and roll your eyes, still smiling. “If you’re done showing off, Puja would like a snack.” You jab your thumb at her, and she pats her rumbling stomach.

Ed shrugs and motions towards the kitchen, twitch-shudders a little, and turns back to the piano. Puja thrusts herself off the sofa as Ed begins a familiar tune you can’t put a name to- and the front door opens.

All three of you stiffen. Ed’s fingers over the piano keys.

A tenor voice calls out in odd German- no, Amestrian- “I’m home, the dishes had better be- nope. Alright.”

The closet door opens and shuts. Someone toes off their shoes in the foyer and flicks on the light, casting a golden glow into the darkening living-room and its occupants.

“They’ve been in the sink for a week, it’s your turn-oh.”

The person steps halfway into the living room with a finger poised right under the light switch.

None of you have moved. The four people in Ed’s flat are frozen in time, and you find yourself staring at none other than Alphonse Elric.

Something heavy drops into the pit of your stomach.

If his widened eyes are any clue, he’s just as surprised to see you.

Alphonse Elric is the first person to unfreeze. “Äh...who’s this?”

Ed answers, not verbally, but with a series of rapid hand gestures you completely fail to comprehend. Al responds in kind, and they have a very short conversation that leaves both you and Puja lost. Middle of the Sahara, weeks in the Amazon jungle, months in the mountains of Tibet kind of lost.

“Er,” Is all that comes out your mouth.

Alphonse blinks and turns to you, eyes wide. He shakes himself and smiles apologetically.

It then strikes you that Alphonse Elric is a very pretty person, and not in the way his brother is a pretty person. While Ed shares Alphonse’s sharp jaw and warm eyes, Alphonse’s eyes have a rounder, softer shape. Al’s face is a bit broader, his hair is trimmed short, and his eyebrows aren’t in a perpetual downward slant. In short, Ed is rather intimidating, despite his height, and Alphonse looks...kind.

Alphonse glances over at his brother for help, and Ed stares right back.

He shakes his head at his brother and mutters something under his breath, before turning to you and extending his hand. He then says, in very awkward and almost glacial English, “I am Alphonse Elric. It is nice to meet you.”

You blink at it for a few seconds, then take it. “[Y/N] [L/N]. It’s nice to meet you too.”

He smiles and repeats your name, and then turns to Puja. He says hello in the same awkward, slothful English. Puja answers, her eyes never leaving his face.

Your eyes follow him as he turns to his brother and has a silent conversation with his hands.
Ed looks ready to slap something. When Alphonse steps over and slaps at his hands, Ed makes the universal gesture for “FINE” and stands up.

“This is my brother, Alphonse.”

Alphonse is a few centimetres taller than Ed.

“You never mentioned having a brother.” Puja says.

Ed flails a little and replies with, “Åh.”

You lean in a little bit and squint at him. “Yeah,”

An awkward silence fills the room.

During this long, awkward silence, you make a few observations between the two of them.

Alphonse’s hair is sandy brown, and his eyes warm light brown you haven’t seen on a person before. He’s wearing a completely different school uniform from his brother, whose outfit was almost entirely navy, with a black tie. Alphonse’s school blazer is Dartmouth green, his trousers a cool grey-brown, and the crest on his breast pocket is bronze.

And like you noticed earlier, Alphonse is a bit taller.

Wait a minute, Dartmouth green? You’ve seen that shade of Dartmouth green before, but you can’t place it-

“Do any of them speak Queen’s tongue?” Alphonse says, to his brother. Or, at least, you think he said ‘Queen’s tongue’. Ed sweeps his hands towards you.

Alphonse waves to you, and goes right back to glaring at his brother. “How, exactly, am I to communicate with...Puja?” Alphonse says Puja’s ‘j’ with a ‘yuh’, instead of a ‘juh’ noise.

Puja looks rather alarmed at her inclusion in the conversation.

Ed shrugs. “Does she use hand language?”

“First of all, Brother, it’s called sign language, and second of all, I get the feeling you never told them about me-”

“Why should I? Sieghild told us not to.”

“Like you’ve ever done what Miss Sieghild told you to.”

They were now communicating in both guttural Amestrian and sign language. Alphonse’s eyes were focused on his brother’s mouth the entire time. Even after you clear your throat, three times, Ed is the only one to react. Alphonse only turns to you after Ed’s face turns away.

“Er,” You’re a little uncomfortable at the stares of two pairs of Elric eyes. “Erm, Puja has a Deaf cousin, and, er, I think she can use sign language. A little, at least.”

The dots are beginning to connect. Between his different uniform, awkward English, and lack of reactions to noises, you’re beginning to come to a confusing conclusion.

“Puja, show them.”
Puja makes a ‘???’ expression.

“The sign language.”

“I haven’t visited Chandra in eight months.”

“You’ve got to know some of it.” Hell, if this isn’t a translation convention. How many languages are you up to now? Three? Three different languages have been used in this room the space of the last five minutes.

“I can try,” She says. There’s a few seconds of silence, then Puja screws up her face in concentration, and makes a series of slow gestures with her hands. Alphonse sighs in relief and nudges Ed with his shoulder.

Alphonse replies, Puja answers, albeit in a cumbersome way, and so on. They’re having a conversation that you can’t follow, and Ed looks bewildered.

“I did not know Puja had a Deaf cousin,” Ed says, more to himself than anyone else.

“I found out in December,” You answer. “She doesn’t really talk about her family.”

Puja has reached the extent of her sign language knowledge, and yanks a piece of paper out of her back pocket to write on. Alphonse begins to write, smiling and shaking his head.

“Speaking of not talking about their family...Ed?” You pivot around to Ed, who is now sitting on the arm of the couch, watching Puja and Alphonse’s conversation.

Ed grimaces. And starts to lie through his teeth. “Well, um, you see, when you come over from a different country as a minor, and, have to—”

“Give me a real answer.”

Ed scowls, but continues. “We have someone who helps us get on our feet after coming here. Her name is Sieghild, and she told us not to tell other people about the other. I don’t know why.”

You narrow your eyes at him for a moment. You shrug after taking it all in. “‘Sieghild’, huh?”

Ed nods.

“Does she, by any chance, have dark hair and wear polo-necks?”

Ed nods again. “How did you know?”

You were right all along. The kid in the leg braces was Alphonse. “Lucky guess.”

An hour of awkward conversation between the four of you follows. With all the communication roadblocks, you’re pleasantly surprised that Puja and Alphonse hit it off so well. By the end of the night, Alphonse is teaching Puja sign-language jokes.

The sun is setting, and your mum will be calling you home soon.

You don’t want to go, not yet. Puja is sniggering, Alphonse’s face is glowing in the deep sun, and Ed is looking at them both with a dusky warmth in his eyes.
His eyes switch over to you. This does make you jump a little.

In the half of his face that is lit by the red burn of the sun, you can see the corner of his mouth twitch up.

Chapter End Notes

Wow! Exams are stressful to even write about, jeez.

**Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov**

der Bleistift- pencil

alphonse is legit my favourite character im so ready for this

to any Deaf readers: please, please, please if you see any inaccuracies/offensive things in alphonse's portrayal, point them out! i would love to hear your input on this!

Have a good day/night/afternoon!
Unlike previous lunchtimes, the dull roar of conversation has been replaced with soft murmurs and rustling pages. Mid-afternoon sunlight drifts down to the tiled floor in lazy, warm strands. A few come to rest on the hunched backs of students bent over textbooks the size of cinderblocks.

Puja mutters the names of historical artists, along with their time period, under her breath in a rhythmic mantra. Ed has a history textbook plopped open on his lap. His fork is halfway to his mouth and still hovering in midair. Your Chemistry notebook has blurred into an indistinct mass of white paper and blue ink. Your eyes burn.

Then, the bell rings. Your eyes snap into focus as several students jump up. They’re all balancing canvases of varying size in their arms. All of them are art students- you can see the ink and paint smeared on their fingers.

Puja swears and scrambles for the massive canvas resting against her chair, all the while shoving miscellaneous pens into her bag.

“Good luck!” You call after her. Her hair whips around a corner, and she’s gone.

With all the art students gone for their GCSE, the rest of the canteen packs up much slower, and begins to drift to their assigned classrooms. You and Ed pass by classrooms full of younger and older students, some doing their final exams, and some relaxing. The three art classrooms are packed full. A general anxious hubbub is taking place inside.

Down in the library, where most of your year is assigned, you smell the microwave popcorn someone has brought back from lunch. You’re almost tempted to forsake Mr. Auttenberg’s classroom for that, but Ed makes sure to guide you away.

As you pass by the office, you notice that it’s deserted. Except for a man in dark glasses and a crisp suit, his hair parted neatly to the side, it’s quiet. Well, not including that one third year you saw punching a wall once because it ‘made a funny noise’.

Odd kid.

Ed pulls off his glove with his teeth, and holds it between them while scribbling a chemical formula on his hand in permanent marker.

You only realise you’ve been staring when Ed snaps his freshly-gloved fingers not a millimetre from your nose.

“[Y/N]!”

“Ah! Sorry!” You snap your head forward and cover your mouth with a hand.

“Are you alright?” He sounds apprehensive.

“I’m fine. Fine. Very fine. Good.”

He squints at you, a mannerism you notice he’s picked up from you and Puja.
“Mr. Elric? Ms./Mr./Mx. [L/N]?” A voice calls after you.

Mr. Auttenberg is poking his head out of his classroom, hawk-like eyebrows pulled together and a frown tugging at his mouth. “Where are you going?”

Your mouth gapes, and flounders wordlessly as you struggle for an answer. Had you really been so occupied that you’d overshot your destination?

Mr. Auttenberg makes a sharp ‘come here’ and pops his head back into the doorway. Ed muttered something in Amestrian about being summoned like a dog.

Mr. Auttenberg’s classroom is drowsy at best. His windows are cracked to let in a soft, cool breeze., the lights are dimmed- in fact, there’s Ayaz Davies, snoring on the futon in the back. His twin sister is draped over him with several stacks of Maths books in her lap and at her feet. A few other people are scattered at desks all over, dozing, revising, and there are clusters of silent friend groups here and there. They all have tight, drawn expressions and an inner deadness in their eyes no other time of year can produce.

Ed all but collapses into a chair. He makes a soft groaning noise, and rubs at his temples with his fingers. “I have Kopfschmerzen.” He mutters.

You lean forward into a desk and close your eyes against the faint light in the classroom. You, too, can feel a stress headache begin to throb above your eye socket. The dull pounding would make any sort of extra revising practically impossible.

After a good minute of complete silence between the both of you, Ed groans out an Amestrian swear. You hear him get to his feet.

“Where’re you going?” You open a single eye to look up at him from your desk.

“Come with me,” He says, and does a strange beckoning gesture, with his palm pointed towards the ground rather than upwards.

You make sure that he hears your long, unhappy groan, but follow him anyway. Ed has a short conversation in rapid-fire German with Mr. Auttenberg, ending with a nod and being waved away.

As you pass by the door, you see a girl with bouncy red hair run a shameless, appraising gaze up and down Ed. once you catch her eye, she immediately looks away, face colouring. Your fists loosen.

The door clicks shut after you, and you hurry to catch up to Ed. His uneven footsteps echo up and door the corridor.

“So, where are we going?” You ask, a little out of breath.

“There’s some sheet music I need from the music room,” He says, craning his head around the corner.

“And I need to be here- oi!-“ a younger student nearly runs into you, and immediately begins apologising. “- don’t worry, it’s alright—I need to be here, why?”

He hesitates, before grinning like a Cheshire cat. “You were comfortable.”

You think about that for half a second. “Oh my god, you bloody-“

Ed’s face scrunches up in a fit of mirth, left foot clunking more than normal.
“Shhh-“ You see classroom upon classroom of students taking exams, and you’re sure they won’t appreciate it if their exams were interrupted by Ed’s snorting laughter. “-you can’t laugh- laugh later, shut it!”

Ed lets out one last, long ‘wheeew’.

You look around at your surroundings and notice that you recognise none of it. The walls are even a more seafoam-blue shade of off-white. The posters are much less faded than the cheesy motivational posters tacked up in the corridor by Mr. Auttenberg’s classroom.

You scan the numbers by the classroom doors. “668…670… and there’s kids in there. We’re using classrooms in the 600s?”

“…no. Obviously not.”

You scowl and elbow him in the arm. This is a mistake.

Ed makes a dramatic gesture towards a set of double doors, and you, nursing your left elbow, go through.

You’ve been in the music room a grand total of once, and that was probably four years ago, now. A few things have changed- mainly the students, posters on the walls, and instruments, but the high ceiling and soundproofed walls have not. Two of the practise rooms on the far side are dark and unoccupied, but one girl with wickedly short hair is pounding away at a piano in Practise Room C.

Ed makes a beeline across the room with rehearsed ease. He stops at a bookshelf full of music books and scans through a neat row of labelled boxes, before stopping and shoving his hands into a striped one with his name on.

While Ed is digging around, you cast a glance around the room. There’s a multitude of plastic chairs arranged in haphazard arcs that might have been neat crescents once. One student has pulled three together to make a makeshift bed, plopped a yellowing ‘Brauchmann’s Violin Music Library: 1986 Edition’ over their face, and gone to sleep. A glossy grand piano has been shoved off to the side to make way for a sluggish game of cards on the linoleum floor.

“Go fish, Katie.” One kid says, rubbing his pointed face with his free hand.

“We’re playing blackjack, you git.” A girl with cropped brown hair and glasses replies scathingly.

“I thought we were playing poker,” A dark-haired boy interjects.

A boy with a friendly, round face emerges from behind a fan of Pokemon cards. “Er,”

“The König geküsst me!” Ed exclaims. He holds up a sheaf of curling sheet music like he’s gone through a great battle to get it, and turns to you with a glowing grin on his face.

You leave as the group of four begins to squabble about nothing (“Hank, my main man, did she or did she not say we were playing Go Fish-“ “There are Pokemon cards in my hands, do I really look like the person to ask-“) and you run a glance down Ed’s sheet music.

You blink.

It’s all handwritten. This amalgamation of cluttered notes, high-speed arpeggios, and double-handed, octave-stretching chords sailing into harmonious duets, was written by Ed. He wrote this.
“Pretty great, huh?” Ed sounds cocky, but you can’t seem to bring yourself to glare at him. “That, there, is the beautiful product of Edward James Elric’s blood, sweat, tears—well, maybe not tears—“

“Holy crap, Ed!” You gape, but that snaps shut and widens into a grin. “You’re going to get great marks with this! Is it homework? Is this the final composition for your GCSE?”

Ed smiles a smug, affirmative little smile. He lifts the curling paper from your hands, and rolls it into a neat scroll.

The man in the dark glasses is still in the office. He’s still waiting, standing stiff as a board. As you and Ed pass by, Ed still looking like a puffed-up bird, he looks like he’s watching you go. You can’t be sure, with those glasses on, but he gives you the creeps.

Ed waves a hand in front of your face.

You smack it out of the air and scoff. “I’m fine, you git,”

“You stare off more and more,”

“And you… you…”

“I what?” He says, curling his lips in to smother a grin.

“Shut up,” You say, shoving him with your shoulder.

“I am not shutting up. Did you know that the only elements that are liquid at room temperature are bromine and mercury—”

“Oh my god, ED!”

Ed continued, louder. “THE HUMAN BODY HAS ENOUGH CARBON TO CREATE LEAD FOR NINE THOUSAND PENCILS—”

You’re unable to send nervous glances at the classrooms around you, preoccupied with Ed’s fact-shouting as you are, and a few curious first years poke their heads out of an open door.

Ed’s voice stops. Then, in a decidedly cooler tone, “What are you looking at?”

The first years squeak and pop back into their classroom, which was already noisy to begin with. Ed’s eyes light up again. “Gallium melts in your hand. DNA is flame retardant. Hydrogen, helium, lithium, beryllium, boron, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, neon, sodium, magnesium, aluminium, silicon, phosphorus—”

“Holy- stop, I get it, god—”

“Stormaktium, titanium, vanadium, chromium, manganese—”

Stormaktium?

“Zinc, gallium, amestrium, arsenic, selenium, bromium, krypton—”

“Ed, we’re here, stop.”

“Yttrium, niobium, molybdenum, ruthenium, rhodium, palladium, silver, cadmium, indium—”
“What are you trying to prove?”

Ed only side-eyes you. “Xenon, cesium, barium, lanthanum, cerium, praseodymium, neodymium, samarium—”

“Please,”

“Cretanium—”

You close your eyes and roll your neck back to the ceiling, and Ed plops into a chair right beside you, muttering the same elements under his breath. You had done nothing to deserve this.

“-platinum, gold, mercury, thallium, lead, bismuth, polonium, radon—”

You have no clue what the people around you are thinking. Ed is muttering German gibberish under his breath, and- yep, he’s narrowed his eyes at the ceiling in concentration. He looks like he’s summoning a demon. A chemistry demon.

“-thorium, und uranium.”

You notice the finality of his final word.

“Wow,” you deadpan. “Think you missed a few?”

“No,” He answers, just as deadpan. “My recitation was flawless.”

“Sure it was.”

Ed taps the side of his head with his finger like he’s an intellectual or something, and closes his eyes. You dig around in your bag for your Chemistry notes - Ed had reminded you that you do not, in fact, have any confidence in Chemistry. Your mum would kill you if you came home with another…sub-par grade in science, after fourth year. You shudder to think of the consequences.

Even as you’re forcing yourself to stare at long strings of near-incomprehensible letters and subscripts, your mind wanders. Puja’s jitters had apparently affected you, with none of her pragmatism to keep it in check.

How was she doing? Were they judging her piece? Was she on the written exam yet?

Ed jiggles his foot to the cadence of your internal questions. As the minutes drag on and stress turns into bored revision, his leg stills. A low snore grumbles out of his throat.

God, this is dull.

A louder snore comes from Ed. You turn your head to glare at him and at the sheer ease at which he fell asleep, but as you do so, something in his rucksack catches your eye.

You pinch the paper between a forefinger and thumb. Pulling it out reveals a piece of lined paper so creased it had become limp. You can’t see a single part of the paper not covered in these weirdly intricate mandalas. They’re all smudged by graphite and the litter that gathers in the bottom of a teenage boy’s rucksack that it’s difficult to discern the circular structure.

Ed snuffles. In a moment of blind panic, you shove the paper into his rucksack.

He’s not awake.
You roll your eyes up to the ceiling and force yourself to go back to revision.

Another hour of mind-numbingly dull revision, a row with Ed about his fashion choices, and a loud bang from one of the neighbouring classrooms later, Puja trudges into Mr. Auttenberg’s classroom and immediately collapses into a desk right in front of Ed.

“There’s only one year of this,” She says, and then turns to look up at the ceiling as if beseeching some higher power to strike her down right where she sits. “Should I even do school anymore?”

“How’d you do? What did they say? What was it like?”

“Woah, woah, calm. I don’t know, not much, and stressful. And boring.”

“I don’t think it can be stressful, and boring, at the same time.”

Puja affixes Ed with a sharp-eyed stare. “Writing a long, but simple song on your last few pages of sheet music in ink that runs.”

Ed makes a series of incomprehensible noises, freezes, and sits back in his chair, pouting. He crosses his arms and stares out the window. A slight breeze blows his hair into his frowning face.

“Mmm-hmm,” Puja gloats.

You nudge Puja with your elbow. “Well? What did they say?”

“Told you, not much.”

“Explain.”

Puja rolls her eyes, a smile ghosting across her face. “‘Good composition, and colour palette. Work on anatomy.’”

“What about your sketchbook?”

“‘Messy. Creative. Good shading on hair.’ Then I had to go to the written exam.”

You absorb her words. “That’s good, isn’t it?”

“I really don’t know. You tell me.”

“It’s good!”


Ed choses this moment to lean forward and poke her with his metal hand. “Drawing hands.”

Puja gasps dramatically, and slaps a hand to her chest. “How dare you?” She stage-whispers.

“Ed, how do you know-“ You begin, but Ed beats you to your question.

"My brother draws. I hear him cursing the existence of hands always.”

A moment of silence.

“Your brother,” Puja says, tilting her head at the floor. “What’s, er, what’s he doing?”
“Education,” Ed says, drumming his fingers on the table. “Animal shelter. Now, he’s doing school. Like a normal person.”

Puja narrows her eyes. “Somehow, I feel like that was an insulting jab but I can’t figure out what you’re jabbing at—”

The speaker crackles to life above the red-headed-girl-from-earlier’s head before Puja can work out Ed’s ‘insult.’

“THIS IS…erm… GELOS INCORPORATED, HERE TO BRIGHTEN YOUR EXAM FILLED DAY- HANK LOCK THAT DOOR- WE DECIDED AS AN INTELLECTUAL COLLECTIVE THAT YOU ALL NEEDED A PICK ME UP AFTER THE AWFULNESS YOU ALL EXPERIENCED- KEI-BABE, NO, COME HERE- AND HERE IT IS:-”

A loud rustling and background shouting. Then, a slightly lower, male voice says at a more controlled volume: “What do you call a fly with no wings?”

A pause, where you can hear wild, loud banging and laughing in the background. “A walk.”

A few people laugh, mainly out of the sheer ridiculousness of this situation, but Puja and a few others contribute the Pun Groan. The intercom continues to pick up shouting, until the original voice says: “THANK YOU, THANK YOU, WE’LL BE HERE ALL WEEK. HOPEFULLY. WORK HARD, YOU LOT. OVER AND OUT.”

There’s a creak, and a bang, then a girl says, “It’s been fun working with you gentlemen.” The sound cuts out.

The whole class is silent. Mr. Auttenberg looks positively affronted by the intercom.

A few titters rise from the corners of the classroom. A group of girls breaks into a fit of stifled giggles.

Ed’s eyes are as big as dinner saucers. “What… just happened?”

“Anarchy, Mister Elric.” Puja says.

The bell rings to punctuate the end of her sentence.

A sea of students spills out into the corridor, talking and laughing. You hear a loud shout erupt from a group of boys with their uniform blazers tied around their waists.

“Have a good day, you three,” Mr. Auttenberg says, sounding absolutely knackered. He leans back in his chair and rubs at his eyes.

Puja waves over her shoulder, before the door shuts behind her.

“I need a kip. When I get home, you two aren’t hearing from me for hours,” Puja says, tugging her hair up into a long, swinging dark ponytail.

Ed peels off his uniform blazer and whips it around so it hangs over one shoulder and over his rucksack. He also tugs at the end of his braid, so his hair comes loose in crimped waves over his shoulders and chest.

“Wait, wait, you’ve got your English and your history exams in, what, three days, is it?” You say.

Puja blows a chunk of dark hair out of her eyes. “And maths, but I do not care in the slightest.”
“But-“

“Two months ago, weren’t you pushing us to relax before exam season?”

“Two months ago! When it was far away! You were pushing us to start right then!”

Ed nudges Puja, who then frowns at him. He jerks his head towards the windows looking into the headmaster’s office.

In there is none other than the four card players in the music room earlier. It doesn’t take long for you make the connection between the announcement earlier and this mismatched four-man band.

The kid with the pointed face is glowing with accomplishment, the dark-haired boy leaning on his shoulder and staring into space, the smallest of smiles on his face. The boy with a friendly, round face is twiddling his thumbs nervously, and glancing around. The girl with massive glasses has her fingers steepled and an expression of one deep in thought.

The headmaster himself is in the main office, pinching the bridge of his nose as Ol’ Patty recounts the legendary accomplishments of the foursome waiting in his office.

You already know that this stunt will become the thing of school legend in the years to come.

“Admirable effort,” Puja mutters, shaking her head. “Bad escape plan.”

Ed gives a thumbs-up to the pointed-face kid, who does it right back.

You three keep going through the foyer, but out of nowhere you jolt to a stop, and this forces Ed and Puja to backtrack a full step.

“Did you short-circuit?” Puja asks, frowning. (Ed mutters “short-circuit?” under his breath.)

“Oh my god, the announcement microphone is in the headmaster’s office,” You whisper. You whip around.

Ed is the first to make the connection, whooping with laughter.

In the headmaster’s office, a small white hand reaches out and clicks the button on the base of the microphone. The speakers above you squeal to life.

The girl’s voice comes from every direction at once: “I just lost an electron.”

Crowds of students around you slow down to listen.

“Looks like I better keep an ion them.”*

Mild laughter.

The headmaster bursts into his office and snatches the microphone from her hands (louder laughter), eliciting a sharp whine from the speakers. Everyone shouts out in pain.

He begins to lecture them as passionately as someone duller than the personification of drying paint can possibly do. All of them look amused rather than guilty or ashamed. Once it becomes clear that nothing else interesting is going to happen, the students pick up speed again.

It’s warm and sunny outside. The sun warms the sidewalks and brightens the wide blue patches in the clouds. Kids walk by you, pulling off their uniform blazers and basking in the sun. You can smell
summer in the air.

Okay, no, that’s a rubbish bin, but the breezes smell like summer. When they do come.

Chapter End Notes

So, uh, hi. how’re you doing?

It’s April. Four months. To make up for this, because !wow!!, 28 is going to be out in the next year! Woo!

Just kidding. But, really, I’m going to speed up my writing process on this next chapter. You guys are too supportive and nice to only have an update every few months! (on the plus side… how many words is this? 3000? and that’s with one really long scene cut out.)

Just to explain, football/soccer season did start for me, and school has certainly taken its toll. Thank you all for being so patient! Back to our regularly scheduled programme.

**Daily German Lesson With Vhahnov**

der Sommer- the Summer  
der Frühling- the Spring  
der Herbst- the Fall  
der Winter- the Winter

*this is some really subtle world building! Amestris really wouldn’t have any German sayings, so “The King kissed me!” is kind of like “yes!/found it!/did it!” and “The King has kissed you!” would be like “…and Bob’s your uncle!”. I have this theory that the saying is based in the monarchical history of Amestris, where being kissed/noticed/given gifts by the king is an overwhelmingly positive thing? i don’t really know. I’m a nerd for world building.

**I stole this pun from (i think) justbadpuns on tumblr. the other joke is a classic little kid joke.**

Thank you, and have a wonderful day/night!
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sieghild Yoxall woke up one warm June morning with a migraine, knee pain, and a very short fuse. Every bright light, high-pitched noise, and sudden jolt sent a spear of pain through her head and lights dancing across her vision.

So, excuse her if she wasn’t all ‘Top of the mornin’ to ya, gov’na, Cheerio!’ that morning.

“Morning, Sieghild!” Sarah chirped, a sudden, high noise invading Sieghild’s sensitive ears. Her blond curls were immaculately sculpted, as usual.

“Mornin’,” She grunted.

“There’s a coffee on your desk. The new intern brought it by,”

Sieghild paused in her automatic nodding. It took a few seconds for the words to register. “We take interns?”


Sieghild’s mouth twisted downward, as she shook herself. Some distant, faint bell was ringing in the back of her head, but she couldn’t quite place which one. Not this early in the morning.

Sarah called out a loud “Goodbye!” on Sieghild’s way to the lift. Sieghild made a jerk of her head that could’ve been taken as a nod.

Sieghild abandoned all higher trains of thought until she could get to her office, where coffee, and therefore wakefulness, awaited. Hopefully the intern had some competence and brought black instead of that watered-down shit the girls down in Records called coffee. ‘Coffee’. More like beige milk.

The lift dinged on Subterranean Level 3, her office’s floor. She plodded off the lift and stumbled into another worker, wearing a boxy burgundy suit.

Now that she thought about it more, Sieghild had never heard about taking in interns. More commonly, people were ‘reassigned’ from other government offices, but everyone knew they were stolen from the offices for their skills.

There was a rope of exhaustion dragging her thinking skills down. Something about the intern’s description was reminding her of something. It was right there, on the tip of her tongue.

In the main hall of Case-Filing, row after row of glossy mahogany desks lined the centre of the room. Office workers in sharp suits busied themselves by and between the desks like little worker bees.

Sieghild was one of the lucky few who had got their own office off the main hall. She trudged into the open maw of her dark office. She switched on the light, and shut the door.

There was an instant deadening of the hubbub outside.

Sieghild groaned and collapsed into her chair. She tugged off her navy blazer and hung it over the back of her chair, revealing her ivory polo-neck below. She arched her back, stretched out her legs,
and toed off her court shoes. One of the great pleasure of having your own office is being able to do whatever the hell you want, she reasoned. Being barefoot is one of these things.

The coffee was cooling at the edge of her desk. It was a deep, rich chocolate. The scent steaming off it was thick and strong. She seized the mug and revelled in the sharp taste that spread over her tongue. Black coffee- so the intern was competent. Good.

A day of dull busywork was ahead of her; the assignments she did have were piled in her ‘in’ box: translations, covering a meteor crash in the Grampians, and dealing with yet another civilian conspiracy photo leak, which were ten a penny these days. She would rather carve her eyes out with a rusty spoon than do any of that today.

Sieghild found her eyes being pulled to a single red folder in a file box under her desk.

No, she shook herself. They’re fine. Don’t waste your work time doing things that have already been taken care of.

Before she set her mug back down onto her desk, she saw a little slip of paper that she hadn’t noticed until then. It must’ve been folded under her mug. She pressed it flat with her unoccupied hand, and read:

COMPROMISED. FILE 3402. CODE BLUE.

She blinked.

She swore.

Sieghild slammed her mug onto the desk, shredded the paper through her paper shredder, and thrust her hands into the file under her desk. She ripped up a false bottom on a drawer full of tissue packs and spare Kirby grips, stuffed the file under, and slammed it back under. She scrambled to dial a number she had long since memorised, listening to the dial tone, and the frantic pounding of her heart.

Sieghild stopped before her finger hit the ‘dial’ button. Her eyes creeped upwards, to the glass window next to her office door. Two people in dark suits were strutting between the rows of desks, straight towards her office. She slowly set down the phone.

When the knock came at her door, she pretended to busy herself with a translation file before calling out, “Come in.”

The door swung inwards and in came the people, crisply dressed. One was a man with striking features and a neat head-full of auburn hair, and a woman with brown skin, and brown-black hair.

“Good morning,” Sieghild said, her smile not quite meeting her eyes. She extended a hand, and both people shook, expressions of polite benevolence on their faces. “Sieghild Yoxall, how may I help you? Please, sit.”

She gestured to the two wooden chairs in front of her desk. As the two sat, Sarah and a ginger kid popped into view.

Sarah looked hassled and frightened. Her immaculate hair was sticking out into different directions, the curls frazzled from tugging. The kid looked to be about mid-twenties, with short ginger hair, and sharp, panicked brown eyes.

Sarah mouthed, “I tried to stop them.”
With a sharp jolt like a gunshot, recognition sparked. The ginger hair- this was Sieghild’s informant, her lookout-

Oh, damn, this was so much worse than she thought.

Then, the door shut. Sieghild took a moment to still her hands, before sitting.

“So!” She said, a little too cheery. She toned it down a bit. “What can I do for you?”

The woman took off her glasses and peered at Sieghild with green eyes. “We’re under the impression that back in October, you personally took in a special kind of case.”

“We were curious about this case,” The man said. His voice was deep, reassuring.

Shit. “Er. I think you’re looking for, for social work. The only case I took in last October was some kids off the street- just some miscommunication, some misunderstanding. Not my division- they were just runaways. I sent them to social work as soon as I could.”

“One was severely injured.”

“Ah, yes. Well, you know how gangs on the street are. Can get a bit rough out there, can’t it?” Oh, she was in trouble. If she was starting to imitate Sarah’s speech pattern, something had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

The man and the woman looked at each other, and the woman pulled a single manila folder out of the briefcase at her feet.

“What’s this?” Sieghild said, even though she had a fairly good idea of what it was.

The woman opened the folder, and out spilled photos, documents, photocopied files- wait. Sieghild reached one hand out and picked up a photo. It was of her, helping Al along an alleyway. The red smear of Dr. Gerson’s, niece’s, clinic’s door lit up in the background. Ed’s golden hair and deep blue blazer was an indistinct mass of colour splashed upon the dreary grey of the street beyond.

There were dozens of Ed and Al - Al laughing while on a school day trip with a girl that she remembered was “Melinda”; she recognized the freckles that he had described to her. One had Ed polishing his prosthetic arm with his flat’s window open (oh come on, Ed!), and scores of photos of Ed with a kid she didn’t recognize.

She noticed the older ones still had snow on the ground. A photo blurred by heavy rain showed Ed and the kid huddled together under a colourful awning, laughing. Ed and the kid in an unfamiliar sitting room. The kid dragging Ed across a street by the arm. Ed and the kid walking together. Ed and the kid laying on an icy pavement in front of a fountain, staring up at the sky. Ed’s cheeks and nose were pink, either from cold or exertion, Sieghild didn’t know. Yet another photo had Ed and the kid in conversation on a sunny street. The kid was looking at Ed in such a way that it almost embarrassed Sieghild to look at.

There were a few a more, mostly of Ed, as Alphonse stayed at home until mid-March, to ensure his full, healthful recovery. Before she could ponder this identity of the unknown kid, the woman uncovered some documents that made Sieghild’s breath catch in her throat.

‘Subject 1A/File 3402/Observations/Profile’

‘Subject 1B/File 3403/Observations/Profile’
A blurry picture of Ed was paperclipped to the corner of his typed report. He furrowed his brow at the camera, looking out at her in confusion. The report was missing a few key parts, like ‘Surname’, ‘Origin’, and ‘Public Safety Threat Level’. God, they had their address.

“We have reason to suspect they are a little more than runaways,” The woman said.

The man said, “Besides being taken under the wing of an upper-ranking ETCF agent, they are also veiled under secrecy. Your tutors wouldn’t say anything. The school doesn’t release the information of students without court order. The have no official records, no family other than each other. The shorter one’s prosthetic seems to not be earthen.”

“A… it’s a prosthetic modelled after-”

“It’s a highly advanced prosthetic, Ms. Yoxall. Something far beyond our capabilities as of now.”

Sieghild’s breath was coming shorter. “If you’re so sure about this, why don’t you go to them? You know where they live.”

“Our job is to investigate for the people who gather. They’re concerned they might pose a danger to the public. They’re also interested in the biology of these…”

“Non-humans.”

Sieghild flew to her feet. “Non-humans! It- I’m- It’s not your right to decide who and who isn’t human!”

“Their eyes are golden, Ms. Yoxall! Have you ever seen a human being with golden eyes?”

The man immediately followed the woman’s exclamation. “They have technology hundreds of years more advanced than ours, and they’re protected by the ETCF Bureau, of all places.”

Sieghild stammered. “I- I see how that could be suspect, but they aren’t dangerous! What do you want with them? How could you logically think that they’re dangerous?”

“But that’s the thing, Ms. Yoxall. We don’t know if they’re dangerous or not. As some say, better safe than sorry. We’re keeping the citizen’s safety in mind. And that secondary-school student that’s always around them- we’re trying to keep them safe too. We’re just doing our job.”

“It’s been months. Don’t you think they would’ve done-”

“We know nothing about them. A human-centric frame of mind would assume they’re human, that their biology is human, that their brains are human. We need to know this, for the good of the people.”

A deep exhaustion came over her bones. Sieghild sank into her chair, covering her face with her hands. They weren’t going to leave the brothers alone, no matter how much resistance and refusal they received from her side. Despite their good intentions, they couldn’t see those two boys as anything other than… Other. “Why do you need me for this? What can I possibly do to help you? You know their address, their school- what more could you need?”

“Where are they from, Ms. Yoxall? How dangerous are they?”

The woman finished, “Who are they?”

She lifted her face to stare at them with a glass-sharp gaze, challenging. “They’re teenage boys.”
The woman shook her head. “But do you know?”

She almost said yes. She knew they were. A sort of deeply bitter voice in her head told her that more protesting it wouldn't help. Come on, Sieghild, she thought. Use those problem-solving skills you were hired for. Think!

Then, the man took out a recorder, and placed it on her desk, and pressed ‘record’.

“Extra-terrestrial threat case, 64. Sieghild Yoxall. Start at the beginning.”

White lies never hurt anyone.

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As soon as the pair left, Sieghild almost started to cry. She cleared her throat and stared upward at the ceiling, blinking hard and fast.

‘Force required to apprehend’, ‘study non-human biology’, ‘possibly dangerous’, her arse! She needed to do something before Ed and Al were reduced to test subjects for the safety of Britain.

She could see where they were coming from. Everyone is afraid of things they don’t understand.

It came to her in a flash. Some way to keep them- and that poor kid, who was probably going to be interrogated in the same fashion as she was- safe. It wasn’t permanent, and it wasn’t perfect, but it’d have to work.

She picked up the phone and dialled a number she had memorised a long time ago.

“John?” She asked. “It’s Sieghild. I need a way out.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello, plot, welcome back!

Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov

German has a lot of nominative pronouns. In no particular order: ich (I), du (informal, singular you), er (he), sie (she), es (it), wir (we), ihr (informal, plural you), sie (they), and finally, Sie (formal you, both plural and singular).

(dramatic harmonica intensifies)
The moment you finish your History of British Warfare GCSE, you begin the long and relaxing task of erasing every bit of information you had learnt in that class from your mind. Names of generals, dates of battles, and outcomes of wars fade from your memory as you prepare for the intellectual void of summer holiday.

The same goes for your Maths GCSE, your English GCSE, and your Geography GCSE. Where’s Liechtenstein? Who cares! You won’t have to for at least a month and a half.

And now, here it was. The moment of truth. The very last question, on the very last GCSE.

Make it good.

‘What is the metallurgical process in which a metal is obtained in a fused state?’

Your answer: Smelting.

Just as you set down your pencil, the examiner calls out from his seat at the back of the room, “Time’s up!”

A few students who had finished early breathe sighs of relief, and a few others frantically scribble their last few answers before the booklets can be ripped out of their hands.

Yours disappears, and with it, you can feel all GCSE stress melt off your shoulders.

You hear uneven footsteps clunk their way over to you, and Ed’s voice comes: “Do you want to go get lunch?”

You twist your head around to look at him. “Is your mind always on food?”

He scoffs. “I just spent two hours writing about chemicals! The brain needs fuel!”

You roll your eyes. “I could make a joke about you not needing much brain fuel, but I’m nice, so I won’t. Yet.”

“Oi!”

“Come on, you git.” You beckon and leave the classroom, while the examiner is still organising test packets.

Puja meets you two outside the canteen, a shopping bag full of steaming containers and a barely contained grin on her face. “Guess what I brought today,”

Both you and Ed say, “What?”

“Well, not yet, that would ruin the surprise, wouldn’t it? Come along, let’s sit down.”

Puja settles into her usual chair at your table, ignoring the sleeping first-year across from her. The boy snuffles in his sleep and scratches at his nose, mumbling about fractions.

“I’ve had to fend off attacks on my food for months, so…” Puja pulled out an almost 3-course meal’s
worth of covered plastic dishes, sides fogged up from steam. She popped off one of the lids, and upon opening, a warm, spiced smell wafted out in a delicious puff of hot air.

You make an odd whooping noise, and snatch a fork from the pile scattered by the dishes.

“You two need to thank my Dida for giving us her the leftovers from the last time she had a guest over.” Puja said, spearing a vegetable onto her fork. “She was rather keen to hold onto these.” You spot a heavy bowl of Bengali pickles, a small bowl of chutney, stuffed Luchi, and an unidentified curry.

“All in favour of granting Puja’s Dida full sainthood, say ‘aye’,” You say, tucking into a sweet-and-spicy Bengali pickle. “Aye.”

Ed makes a sound that might have been agreement but with an entire stuffed Luchi in his mouth, it’s hard to tell.

“On the behalf of my grandmother, I’m flattered.” Puja says, swallowing a spoonful of curry. “But you have my cousin Chandra to thank for the pickles.”

You check your mobile’s clock- 1:30 P.M. The graduating class hasn’t yet unleashed their muck-up day fury, and based on last year’s near-circus chaos, you’re a little scared of what they could have up their collective sleeves.

“I know,” Puja says, nodding at your phone. “Last year they’d already let the pigs loose by 11:00. Maybe it’s outdoors.”

Ed stuffs another whole Luchi in his mouth and begins to chew with cheeks like a chipmunk’s.

“Don’t jinx it,” You grin, elbowing her in the arm. “Do you wanna have to get around parked cars to get out of the canteen again?”

“I don’t know, do you?” Puja counters, popping a slice of Bengali pickle into her mouth.

“It’s fun in recollection,” You say, “But not when it’s happening.”

“Wisdom to live by,” Puja says, trying and failing to sound wise. She reaches for another Luchi, but stops. She nudges you, and points towards the canteen’s doors, where a few Year Nines have trudged through, wet, sudsy, and covered in… shaving foam?

“Oh no.” You wince.

“What?” Ed grunts, but with his mouth full of food, it sounded more like, “Wuh?”

Puja clicks the lid back onto the empty container of Luchi. “I guess we have something to look forward to in an hour and a half.”

Ed, unwitting, reaches for another spoonful of curry.

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Mr Auttenberg lets his students out the moment the clock strikes three. With a mad dash out the door and the sloppy finishing of gel-pen signatures in yearbooks, Summer holiday has officially begun. Belinda Wheatley’s blond friend unbuttons her blazer and whips it around over her head like a helicopter blade, sprinting after Belinda, her empty satchel bouncing against her hip.

Your mismatched trio, heading down corridors in a sea of teenagers, has yet to witness the carnage
of the graduating class. A few steps ahead, you can see the group of kids who hijacked the announcement system a few weeks ago, laughing and whooping among themselves. This time, a girl with huge amounts of coily, silver-dyed hair is giggling with the round-faced boy—‘Hank’, wasn’t it? The dark-haired boy is holding hands with the kid with the pointy face, and the girl with gigantic glasses has a mobile held five inches from her face.

Then the screams start.

Through the front doors is a scene of pure mayhem. Water balloons and shaving foam balloons rain from the heavens like a biblical plague, exploding indiscriminately on every surface—heads, pavement, hedges. As if that weren’t enough, soap bubbles are being showered in soft, puffy rain and floating everywhere. The foot traffic across the street has come to a complete stop to gawk at the commotion.

The two boys holding hands in front of you are forcefully separated by a water balloon, dropped from the roof with deadly accuracy. The boy with the pointed face shrieks and lets go of the dark-haired boy’s hand. The dark-haired boy’s fringe is plastered to his forehead with water, and as another balloon explodes on his head, shaving foam.

The boy with the pointed face lets out a loud “HA!” and stabs a finger at the other boy’s face. He curls over with laughter. The dark-haired boy then scoops up a massive wad of shaving foam, aims, and lobbs it at his boyfriend. It splatters on his face.

If this were a film, the next few seconds would’ve been in slow motion. A Gregorian choir would chant ominously in the background as the pointy-faced boy makes eye contact with the dark-haired boy, his eyes filled with betrayal. Then, he fumbles for one water balloon that had survived the fall, and chucks it with all the force his skinny arms can muster.

It bursts open onto the dark-haired boy’s blazer in a rush of water and shreds of latex.

This all happens in the span of seven-and-a-half seconds.

The gutsier older students, seeing the two boys hurl their projectiles at each other, think it’s a neat idea, and begin something resembling a cross between a snowball and a food fight. It became a battleground of shaving foam and water.

The three of you have been standing there for 9 seconds, at the most.

“No, no, no, I cannot walk through that.” Puja grimaces, looking at the balloons still raining down from above and teenage boys smashing water balloons into others’ faces. “Though I…can’t say I’m terribly surprised.”

Then, someone rushes past you, running into Ed and nearly sending him out the door into the carnage. Ed swears at them, but continues at a lower volume once he sees who it is.

Headmaster Stevens charges into the crowd of students, parting them like the Red Sea, his face beetroot purple from anger. Foam and bubble projectiles are held, dripping, in kids’ hands. He turns to face the graduating class, perched on the roof of the foyer.

He turns on the bullhorn in his hands, and with the more passion in his voice than you have heard in the five years of knowing him, he shouts into the bullhorn: “Stop this right now, or you will be punished to the fullest extent of the school’s ability!”

“Huh, an exclamation,” Puja mutters into your ear.
You don’t see it happen, but you see the aftermath.

A student drops a balloon full of shaving foam right onto Headmaster Steven’s face.

A wild scream and cheer erupts from the student body. If this were a film, the kids would begin throwing the foam and bubbles at Headmaster Stevens. He would slump off, shamed by a group of secondary-schoolers. But this isn’t a film. Instead, Headmaster Stevens calls school security, which is just a very old man in a security uniform, and the graduating class are escorted away from their last hurrah by a balding man in a tweed suit and a bald man in faded uniform.

Puja and Ed tread carefully through the slippery remains of the battle, picking their way through clusters of students wringing out blazers, hair, and rucksacks. The two boys from earlier, still splattered with foam, are flapping their blazers to aid in drying. The pointy-faced boy gets a mischievous glint in his eye. He grasps his blazer between his hands, and wrings out all the water over his boyfriend’s head.

“Oi!” The boy shouts, shaking his head like a dog. The pointy-face boy smothers a snort.

There’s a scraping noise, Ed disappears from your view, and then comes a dull thunk.

“AUTSCH! Shit! Shit! Shit!”

You and Puja look down to see Ed lying supine on the ground, jacket soaking through and hair covered in bubbles.

“What, did you slip?” You ask.

“No, I decided this was a comfortable place for a rest.” Ed extends a hand, and massages the back of his head. “Help me.”

Puja tugs him up. You look at his back, to see that his entire arse is covered in shaving foam.

“Your behind’s looking a little foamy, Ed.” You say, sniggering.

Ed twists around to see, and then groans. “Pleasant.”

Ed spends the entire walk home with his backside wet, foamy, and stinging. He makes it very explicit that he is miserable, to the point that Puja threatens him with a backhand. He grumbles quietly the rest of the way.

The three of you continue talking and laughing along the sun-warmed street. Ed’s blazer is tied around his waist with a loose knot. His ponytail is falling out and swinging against his back. Puja has let her hair down from her French plait, and it hangs down in tightly crimped waves.

“Wow, Ed, your hair’s grown so much!” You say, rubbing the ends between your fingers.

“What?”

“Look, it’s nearly to your waist,” You chop your hand at the part of his back his hair reaches.

Ed brings it around to his shoulder to frown at it. “I suppose. I haven’t got it cut in a while.”
Puja grins and pokes at him. “It can almost rival mine, Eddie-boy.” She snorts. “Rapunzel.” Apparently, there is no cultural disconnect there, or Amestris has a story like Rapunzel’s, because Ed immediately says, “No. Also, my hair is better than hers.”

“Is it, now?”

“Yes, mine didn’t get cut off.”

“Fair point.”

Ed grins at Puja, smugness written into every feature. “My hair isn’t the only thing that grew.”

Your stupid, dirty mind immediately goes somewhere that it shouldn’t, and your face burns. “Er.”

“That’s disgusting, [Y/N].” Puja says.

“It’s not my fault! Ed, elaborate.”

Ed flattens out a hand, and lines it up with the crest of his head. He extends it out to touch the top of Puja’s head- holy shit.

Puja immediately stops and holds Ed still as she stands straight up, pressed against Ed’s back. “[Y/N], measure us, measure it, this can’t be true.”

You put yourself directly in the middle, gazing at the tops of their heads. You squint, move your head around to see it from different angles, to see if this is just a trick of perspective- but it isn’t.

“Holy shit.” You say, aghast. “Ed is taller than Puja.”

Puja whispers a weak, ‘no!’, and Ed whoops at the sky. He begins some sort of chant, the words somewhere along the lines of ‘I’m tall, I’m tall, who’s tall? I’m tall, I’m tall, I’m the man, I’m tall-’

Puja is groaning at the sky, posture slumped and facial expression sour. Ed is doing a weird little dance.

You blink in disbelief. Puja is about 176 centimetres tall, and Ed is about 1-and-a-half centimetres taller. That makes Ed about… 177.5 centimetres.

“How tall were you when you started school, Ed?”

“70-” Ed says some random unit of measurement that does not translate at all.

“He was 167 centimetres.” Puja says, staring at the ground. “I checked.”

“How-”

“Don’t ask.”

You shake your head, and then say to Ed- “You grew ten centimetres.”
“Hell yeah I did.”

Puja shudders. “Let’s just…let’s just keep walking.”

She leaves you and Ed at an intersection a few blocks from her flat. She waves, and calls out, “Message me! We’re all going out for gelato tomorrow whether you like it or not!”

“Sounds good!” You shout out, waving. She smiles and turns to continue walking.

Then, it’s just you and Ed going down the street together. Ed, trying and failing to mimic Puja’s French plait, and you, watching him with a smile on your face.

“How does that woman do it!” He cries out, dropping his hair and letting it flow free. “I swear, it is gymnastics for fingers.”

“Ask someone to do it for you,”

“I refuse.”

You roll your eyes. “Then have your hair in a plain plait forever.”

Ed crosses his arms and frowns. “No. I will learn it if it kills me.”

“Whatever you say,”

You and Ed part ways at the T-junction right beside your flat. His back is still a little damp from his fall twenty minutes earlier.

As soon as you get into your bedroom, having no homework for the next two months, you take a long, dreamless rest.

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Your mother gets home long after the sun sets. She shakes you awake with the promise of food. You can smell whatever she’s brought home, and your stomach grumbles with anticipation.

Over a hot dinner of lo mein and wontons, your mother interrogates you about the GCSEs (“How do you think you did?” “Should I be worried about your marks?” “Which one was the hardest?”), your last day of school (“Was it busy?” “How did the muck-up day go? What did they do?”), and your plans for tomorrow (“When are you going out?” “Who’s going?” “Where are you going?”). She slurps up the last of the noodles from her bowl, clinks the chopsticks across the brim, and smiles at you.

“Summertime!” She says. “Make the most of it. But right now, I’m going to bed. Goodnight, love.”

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Coming home from the gelato shop the next evening with a full stomach and a cold mouth, you were half-dozing as you opened your front door with a dopey smile on your face.
“[Y/N]? Your mother’s voice calls.

“Yes, mum?”

“Can you come here, please?”

“I’m coming, I’m coming.” You say, tugging off your shoes and placing them under the chair by the door. “Is there something wrong?”

You round the corner to see your mother sitting on the sofa across from a woman you didn’t recognise. The tea set sits on the table between them, the tin kettle you never use nearly full to the brim with Oolong.

The woman’s dark hair is pulled back into a bun resembling a bird’s tail. She’s wearing an olive green polo-neck, loose, cropped jeans, and worn ballet flats. Her green eyes have deep under-eye circles, and her mouth is drawn into a tight line.

“Erm, hello.”

The woman nodded in your direction. “Hello, [Y/N]. I was just speaking to your mother about the school trip coming up in a few days.”

You blink. “Wh-” Something in the woman’s eyes makes you stop in the middle of your questioning. You hadn’t heard of such a school trip.

“I’ve already signed the permission slip. I just wish you had told me earlier than this, dear, rather than making Ms Prince come here to collect it.” Your mother says, a light scold disguised in her words. She takes a sip of Oolong.

“Oh, it’s no bother, really. I appreciate the hospitality” The woman turns to you. “I understand there’s two students living nearby, who’s in the same class as you? I believe Edward and Alphonse are their names?”

There’s a jolt of recognition and memory. This was the same woman who had helped Alphonse down that alleyway a few months ago. Somehow, you manage to force words out through your mouth.

“Erm, yes. Ed’s walking down the street right now. If you hurry you could catch him.”

The woman’s eyes widen for half a second. She stands up, and shakes your mother’s hand. “Thank you for your tea and kindness, ma’am. I’m sorry for the sudden exit.”

“Oh, you’re welcome-and, er, that’s alright. I understand you’re busy.”

The woman says goodbye to your mother, and makes significant eye contact with you as she bids you goodbye as well. The door shuts behind her.

“[Y/N][L/N].” Your mother says, standing, her voice no longer pleasantly hospitable. You wince. “Why am I just now hearing about this? You’d better be damn well thankful that this trip is school-funded or you wouldn’t be going at all. Did you even know you were leaving in two days.”
“Erm,” You say, struggling to meet her eyes. “And I’m going… where, again?”

“Europe. For three weeks. Something with the Foreign Language classes. Don’t tell me you forgot all about it.”

“I...must’ve. In the excitement of school, er, ending.”

“God, I’ll probably find a months-old permission slip in the bottom of your schoolbag, too. You were one of the last ones to not have a signed slip!” Your mother sounds positively scandalised. “Don’t let this happen again, or you won’t go at all.” She sighs and massages her nose. “I need some more tea.”

“Sorry, mum.” You begin.

“It’ll be OK.” She says to herself. She sits back down onto the sofa again.

You carefully make your way to your bedroom, puzzling over the woman and her message.

Ten minutes later, a loud knock comes from the front door. You hear your mother get up to answer the door, and say: “Oh, hello, boys. Ed, are you here for [Y/N]?”

Ed answers, and then more than one pair of footsteps are coming down the corridor to your room. Your door opens, and there’s Edward Elric, eyes sharp and face bloodless, peering into your room. Alphonse Elric appears over his shoulder.

Ed asks in German, “Can your mother speak Queen’s tongue?”

“Er, no.”

“Good.” He and Alphonse come in. Alphonse’s arms are clutched tight to his chest. The door shuts quietly, and Ed says: “We’re in danger.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello! It has been...over a month…………….

**Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov**

*toll*- great, fantastic, super, smashing

This is ~3300 words mate, pal, friend, buddy, pare,

Have a wonderful day/night!!
Ed’s face is anxious and tight as he explains. His Amestrian is rapid, the words flat and wavering. He paces through your room, scraping his ungloved hand through his hair. Alphonse is sitting at the foot of your bed, hands clasped together so tightly his knuckles are white, bouncing his leg.

“They’ve been photographing us - how, when, I don’t know, but- hell, there’s ones of you-”


“They know everything. Addresses, my arm, why we don’t- fucking hell-”

“Edward Elric!”

Ed’s head snaps up. He turns to stare at you, golden-coin eyes boring into you, wide and scared and childlike. You see the child soldier that he was behind those eyes. His survival instincts are back and in full gear.

His eyes search your face and then, seeing your facial expression, force a shaky curtain of calm over themselves.

“I could not understand half of what you said. Slow down. Explain. What is going on? Who is ‘they’?”

He scrubs a hand over his face, inhales deeply, and sits down in the chair across from your bed. His face is hardened when he looks back up at you. “I don’t know exactly who ‘they’ are. They’re... I don’t know. Sieghild didn’t explain who they were, exactly. She was in a rush.”

Alphonse chooses that moment to speak up, in slightly slurred Amestrian, “I don’t know where you are in this conversation, but we need to leave in less than two days. Miss Sieghild says that’s all she can get us.”

“Who is Sieghild?” You say, steadily.

Al takes a moment to reply, squinting. “She’s our case worker.”

“Case worker? For what? What is going on?” You throw your hands outward. “You two are not telling me anything!”

There is a short silence.

Ed makes a soft chocking noise in the back of his throat. He opens his mouth to reply, but no sound comes out. He shuts it with a ‘clack’. His eyes slide over to Alphonse, giving him a long, significant look. Something passes between them, and Alphonse covers his face, waving his hand at Ed.

Ed gulps. “We’re not from...here. Earth.”

Your mouth parts.

“One moment I was- ah, well, and- I was here. I don’t know if-” He eyes Alphonse, then shakes himself, and continues. “When I came here, I was alone and injured. You saw the aftermath of that.”
You glance down at the centre of his chest and nod.

“Through some huge coincidence, Sieghild’s organisation, company, whatever the hell she works for, found us. And the things they do, the things they work with, are a little unordinary. Two teenagers, slipping under the radar and seemingly normal in comparison to the other jobs her organisation takes care of piqued the interest of another organisation. They think we’re dangerous, and here we are.” He ends, much less grandly that you have grown to expect.

There’s a long silence between you and Ed. Alphonse’s eyes dart between you two, humming in the back of his throat, jiggling his knee harder.

You swallow, hunching your tense shoulders.

“I have known for a while.” Your speech is quick and shaky.

Ed’s head jerks towards you. His mouth hangs open, his face white. His tightly crossed arms go limp.

Alphonse hums again, and begins to sign furiously at his brother, face intense.

Ed takes a few moments to reply, but when he does, Alphonse’s features immediately contort into a mask of shock. He lurches upwards and goes to stand by his brother, his eyes trained on you and pupils shrunk to pinpoints.

Ed stutters, “How do you know? H...how long?”

You gulp. “Your arm.” Ed blinks and stares down at his right arm. You motion sharply for it, and although he extends it, you see him hesitate for the slightest moment. You roll up his sleeve, and scratch your fingers along the metal plating. “We have nothing like this. Our... erm, what is the word- prosthetic technology is improving, but users have nowhere near the amount of....erm. Control you two do. If I am not mistaken, these wires in here-” you tap a nail against the metal, a hollow “clink clink” ringing out- “-connect to your nerves. That just... I was gobsmacked the first time I saw it. This is not earth technology.”

You yank his sleeve back down and let go of his arm.

“But... that’s months ago.” Ed says, motioning with his hand, making it easier for Alphonse to understand what was going on. “Is that why you and Puja were acting so strangely?”

“Yes,” You stop, clenching your fingers together to stop their shaking. “Is Puja being told this? Why do I have to come with you?”

Alphonse answers this time. His hands are shoved in his pockets as he leans against the wall. “One, I don’t think so. Miss Sieghild didn’t mention any pictures of her. I hope she’s safe, anyway. And two, if they’re looking for us- Miss Sieghild says she, ah, doesn’t know how far they’ll go to protect people. You’re in so many photographs with us, if we disappear, you’ll be one of the first they’ll find. And... yes. Safety.”

You sigh, and lay your head in your clammy hands. Before you know it, your eyes are stinging, and you feel that familiar wobbliness in your chin. A soft sob shudders out of your chest, quiet enough that only you hear it, but Ed notices the motion.

“[Y/N]?”

Hearing that familiar voice say your name reminds you who is with you at the moment. Your cheeks
burn with embarrassment, hot tears finally spilling out and dripping down your chin.

The bed creaks and shifts beside you. You jerk up to see Alphonse, his eyebrows pulled up and eyes concerned. He holds out his arms, and you immediately lean into him, the comfort relaxing your shoulders a tad.

You turn your head so he can see your face. “I- I just.” You sniffle. Wetly. (Disgusting). “I have never had to deal with anything like this before. I am… I am scared.”

You can’t see it from the angle your face is at, but Al gazes up at his brother, expression neutral. Ed meets his eyes for half a second before looking at the ground.

The other side of the bed sinks. You hear Ed’s voice, not even a foot from you, quietly say, “Woah woah woah, there, why’re you crying? We’re going to be fine. I promise.” There’s a slight smile in his voice when he adds, louder, “If we aren’t, I’ll let you pay me back.”

You sniffle and laugh a little bit into Alphonse’s arm. “Okay.”

You sit up and try to wipe the tracks off your face. Alphonse lets go, but keeps a hand on your upper back. “I cannot promise I would go easy on you, Eddie-boy.”

Ed scowls. “Don’t call me Eddie-boy.”

“What is another witty, slightly condescending nickname I could use, though?”

Al’s voice comes out of nowhere. “Our mom called him little man. And ‘my rabbit’.”

You let out a little gasp, turning to grin mischievously at Ed. “That is fucking adorable.”

You see Ed glare over your shoulder at his brother, and then make a few gestures in ‘sign language’ that did not need translating.

Alphonse makes an annoyed noise and reaches around you to shove his brother off the bed by his shoulder. Ed stumbles to his feet and folds his arms once he regains his footing.

You smile slowly flattens. “Do either of you know where we’re going?”

Ed and Al shake their heads in unison.

You massage the bridge of your nose, grumbling. “Unclear destination, reason, transportation to destination, and all sorts of suspicious things…”

Alphonse interrupts your string of thoughts by nudging your shoulder, a nervous smile on his face. “You seem to be taking this other-world thing rather well. It’s admirable.”

Rather than sirens, a little fire alarm goes off in your head. They know that you know but they don’t know that you know. (That’s confusing). Either a half-truth or a flat-out lie- go!

“I am a British teenager living in London in the 21st century- it takes a bit more than aliens to surprise me.” Not bad. Commendable effort, and not entirely a lie.

You look over at Ed.

There’s a strange look on his face- a sort of vacant stare into the distance. His eyes are glazed over, his lip pulled into his mouth.
“Ed?”

Ed jumps a little. His eyes refocus back onto you. “What?”

“Nothing, you just looked a little...er....shit. Spaced out.”

He shakes himself. “I’m fine. Just thinking.”

He goes back to thinking, and doesn’t offer much to the conversation until three hours later, when he and Al leave, saying goodbyes with caution hidden just under the words.

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Your last day goes by in a flash. You can’t stop staring at your mum, wondering if this is the last time you’ll see her, to the point that she asks you if you’re feeling well.

“I’m fine, mum, just a little tired.” You say, rubbing your eyes for emphasis.

“Hmm.” She says, not entirely convinced. “Well, I hope you can get some rest before leaving. You need the energy to be out and about all day.”

You nod and go back to your bedroom, and instead of sleeping, stare at the ceiling for an hour and a half, thinking. You check the contents of your musty hold-all at least half a dozen times.

Before you know it, it’s 7:15 AM the next morning. Your mum is lugging your hold-all to the boot of Miss Sieghild’s black car, with you inside, sandwiched between Ed and Al. Your mum and Miss Sieghild have a short chat, you hug your mum over Ed’s lap one last time, and then you’re pulling away and watching her shrink into the distance. She disappears around a corner.

You have nearly an hour and a half of driving ahead of you. Part of that is playing road trip games, talking with Ed and Al, and witnessing the full extent of the architectural mongrel that is London. You drive over the green-brown expanse of the River Thames, and soon after, you’re buzzing through flat English countryside, passing through blink-and-you-miss-it towns of stone houses and emerald patchwork fields.

“Looks familiar, doesn’t it?” Alphonse says to his brother.

Ed shakes his head. “No,” He smiles, a little sadly. You recognise the sign for ‘no’, and feel so proud of yourself you almost miss the second part of his- verbal - sentence. “There’s not enough hills.”

“Or sheep,” Alphonse adds.

“What are you two talking about? There’s a herd up here.”

The car zips past a herd of sheep, a big, shaggy dog bounding by, barking after its owner- a man in plaid.

“Believe me, this is nothing. Replace half the grain crops we’ve seen with livestock and you’ve got home.”

“Why do you lot have so many sheep?” You ask, incredulous.

Ed and Al shrug in unison.

As this conversation is taking place in the back seat, up front, the woman who you now know as
Miss Sieghild has been trying to merge into a different lane for the past five minutes. A man in a beat-up blue car suddenly cuts her off, and Miss Sieghild jerks the steering wheel to the left.

Both you and Ed shout, Ed grabbing onto the handle attached to the ceiling. Alphonse looks up in alarm and starts signing to his brother.

Miss Sieghild slams the horn, rolls down her window, and shouts some creative swears. The driver ahead of her makes a rude gesture out his driver’s side window and speeds up.

“Ugh!” Sieghild exclaims, rolling her window up again. “Awful driving, appalling that they’re even allowed on the roads, sons of.” The rest of her muttered swearing was under her breath, sparing your pure, virginal ears of this verbal depravity.

There’s ten minutes of silence, save for the sound of the wheels on the road below. Sieghild finally pulls into the other lane, looking a little smug as she pulls past the man in the blue car.

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“I spy, with my eye,” Ed says, craning his head around to look out the windows.
“Something…green."

“Trees.”

“Yeah, it was trees. Your turn, Al.”

Al rubs his hands together and looks out the window. “I spy with my little eye, something blue.”

“The sky.” You deadpan.

“Yes.”

“Okay, this is getting very boring.” You say.

“You’re in luck, then.” Miss Sieghild’s voice comes from the front. You jump a little- she hasn’t spoken throughout this entire trip, the sole exception being the Traffic Incident half an hour ago. “We’re nearly there.”

“Wait, where?”

“The Eurotunnel.”

A beat.

“We are actually going to Europe?! I thought that was just… a cover or something!”

Miss Sieghild’s olive-green eyes cast a glance over her shoulder. “Where did you think we were going, by heading this far south?”

“I… I do not know, a bunker in Hastings? A safehouse in Brighton?”

Miss Sieghild shakes her head. “Europe is as far away as I can get you. It’s easily travelled to, and more safe than other places without taking you all the way to the Caucasus. Besides, you need to communicate. I’m sure none of you speak Georgian or Russian?”
“Well, I do not-“

“Exactly. German is a widely spoken language.” Sieghild slows the car, pulling into a tollbooth.

“Good morning,” The woman in the booth says, looking like her morning had been anything but. “The next train to Calais departs at 8:45. Forty-nine pounds for car transport. Passports, please.”

Passports? You wonder. Oh no, mine’s in my suitcase- I mean, at least my mom told me to pack it so that I have it, but do I need to get it? It’s all the way in the boot-

A unmarked, white lorry pulls up a lane to the car’s right. For some reason, Miss Sieghild side-eyes it, and promptly rushes for her handbag. She hands the woman four passports, a wad of bills, and a handkerchief, which she grabs back.

The woman takes her time inspecting the four passports (did Miss Sieghild bring fake passports?), and all the while, you see Miss Sieghild getting progressively antsier. When she finally hands back the passports, Miss Sieghild snatches them and shoves them in her handbag.

She watches the rear-view mirror all the way to the terminal, muttering: “You can’t be too safe. You can’t be too safe.”

Ed and Al play a spirited game of rock-paper-scissors over your legs.

Miss Sieghild drives through a maze of roads, terminals, and checkpoints. She idles in a long queue of cars, waiting to secure a spot in the train car up ahead. She taps her fingers on the steering wheel, and adjusts the rear-view mirror at exact intervals.

She pulls into the brightly lit train car. Soon after, the car doors shut, and you see the tension melt from her shoulders. She blows a strand of hair out of her eyes.

“Okay, children, listen up.”

Al watches her lips, then raises a humourous eyebrow.

“Al, watch either your brother or me.”

Al snickers, and complies.

“You lot are going to have to hide. I don’t mean find a nice, comfy hotel, I mean hide in the seedy little bed-and-breakfasts on the sides of roads. Cut your hair. Avoid cameras, using technology that can access your location, and always use these fake papers I have here for you. Do not speak to strangers unless absolutely necessary. It’s better to be an arsehole and safe than polite and in interrogation.” She reaches into her handbag, and pulls out three scarlet passports, emblazoned with an elaborate golden coat of arms.

You open yours to your I.D. page, where a picture of you stares out, next to the name “Alex Taylor”, who was born the fourteenth of May, in Cambridge, England.

You sneak a peek at Ed and Al’s (Theo and Erik Mueller, ninth of December and thirtieth of April, and Munich, Germany, respectively.) before Miss Sieghild starts talking again.

“I have a bag in here for you. There’s a confidential contact number only to be used for emergencies, enough money to sustain a family of four for a month, and train tickets from Calais to Brussels, Brussels to Koln, and Koln to Berlin. In Berlin, there is a safehouse I’ve set up. The address is in the bag, and the code phrase is, ‘Heart of Gold’. I will be contacted when you get there.” Miss Sieghild frowns. “I wish I could come with you, and make sure you get there safe, but I
need to stay here and clean up the absolute catastrophe your grand exodus is going to cause. The lie I’ve cooked up won’t hold up if I disappear with you.”

“[Y/N], do you have a mobile?” Miss Sieghild asks.

“Yes.”

“Destroy it.”

“What-”

“Either destroy it, or turn it all the way off. I don’t know if they can track mobiles but I wouldn’t chance it.”

“Er, okay.” You pat your pockets for your mobile. “…it’s in my hold-all.”

“Great.” Miss Sieghild says, opening her door and nearly hitting a group of people, standing outside their cars, having a chat. You hear the boot open, some rustling, and then the boot slams closed. Sieghild rushes back into the car. “Back to business.”

She turns to look at each of you, right in the eyes, in turn. “These people will not hesitate. Ed, Al, you are dangers to society in their eyes. They aren’t children’s book villains- sure, they’re just doing their job, but their job is neutralising a threat and bringing it in for questioning. You are not human. You are things that can damage society and harm innocent people. I do not know what the extent of their power is. In their eyes, if it becomes necessary, they will not hesitate to kill you.”

Out of the corner of your eye, you see Al knit his brow, his face whitening.

“[Y/N]. They don’t want you for the same reasons they want Ed and Al. You aren’t dangerous- but you are a mine of information. You know them. Ed and Al trust you. If they can’t get Ed or Al, you are the next best thing. You are an innocent civilian caught in the crossfire, so they will not kill you, ever, but they will take any means necessary to bring you into custody for interrogation.”

The backseat of the car is filled with silence and tension so thick you could cut it with a knife. Ed knits his hands tightly together. Alphonse clutches his arms to his chest.

“If you see anyone that even barely triggers your suspicion, you three run. You run so far. You leave everything behind, and you head for the hills. Better safe than in custody or filled with lead.” Miss Sieghild finishes. Her mouth is set into a thin line, eyes grim and eyebrows low. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” You, Ed, and Al say in unison.

She sighs, and turns back around to face the back of the car in front. “On a lighter note, how did your exams go?”

You and Ed look at each other.

“Well,”

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Miss Sieghild wheezes from her seat, head laid against the steering wheel. Her shoulders are shuddering, hands slipping from their hooks, and her face is a ruddy, laughing mess.
“And…” she gasps. Combining yours and Ed’s comedic timing and shared exam experience has reduced this put-together, model-of-professionalism down to a tear-streaked, guffawing opposite of the woman she was ten minutes earlier. “Who… who was this again?”

“Two kids in Ed’s music class. I think they’re a year above us. They always have the funniest conversations- in fact, their whole friend group does. I… erm… overhear?”

“Overhear.” Ed supplies.

“Thank you. I overhear the most bizarre things walking by them in the corridors. In fact, there was this one time... “ You trail off, trying to remember.

“The dark-haired one is Keith.”

You look at Ed.

“What? I know because he’s got a fantastic sense of style.”

“Ed, he accessorises like you if someone gave you a five-hundred pound gift card and full access to Hot Topic.”

“What the hell is Hot Topic?”

“It’d probably be your favourite store.”

“Hmm.” He says, squinting at you. “Well, the point is, he’s memorable because of his fashion sense.”

“I do not trust any sort of clothing that you consider ‘fashionable’.”

“That’s an insult to the sturdy, beautiful versatility of leather and red wool.”

“Mixing wool and leather is a perfect way to get a bright red Ed.”

“If you’ve got to sacrifice comfort for badassery, then so be it.”

“Edward- Alphonse what’s his middle name?”

“Al don’t you do it-”

“James. Sorry, Brother. I’m with [Y/N] on this one.”

“You traitor- your own blood!”

“Edward James Elric, not only does that make you look like a wannabe Christopher Eccleston in the middle of his edge phase, that’s a surefire way to get heatstroke. It’s July.”

“I didn’t say I’d wear wool in July. I said wool sometimes. In summer I’d switch to a cotton blend for airiness. See, intellectualism.”

“Sensible.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Brother, I’ve known you for fifteen years and never have I seen you actually be sensible.”
“HA!”

“I’m perfectly sensible! You’re just playing devil’s advocate!”

“Oh, really, now? Name one instance- not the time you bought a suitcase instead of a trunk even though the trunk looked cooler. That was common sense.”

“Damn it.”

“You can’t, can you?”

“Give me a minute to think, will you!”

Ed didn’t have a minute to think, because Miss Sieghild pulls out of the train car and out into a terminal. You passports are checked again, and you drive up a few more maze-like roads right into a car park.

“Woah,” Al says, looking up at the high, stone facades of old buildings, red-tiled roofs bright in the morning sunlight. Miss Sieghild drives through a neat grid of streets, lined by tall buildings, bird cherry trees, and silver birch. People on motorbikes and bicycles zip by at stoplights. You roll down the window, and all you hear is traffic noise, seabirds, and French, French, French. You can’t understand a word.

Miss Sieghild drives over the canal into the main part of the city, passing a massive dockyard, full with giant, creaking cargo ships. The streets are narrow, and combined with the height of the buildings, it feels confined. Not claustrophobic in any way, but certainly small. Tall windows, flat roofs, and not a break in the buildings can be seen. Restaurants and cafes have their doors open, wafting out rich smells as the car passes by.

“Okay,” She says, digging a small sack out of her handbag. “The Calais-Brussels tickets are in here. You’ll have to dig around a bit, but there’s one in there for all of you.”

Ed nods, and takes the bag, to distribute tickets to everyone.

“I’m not going in with you, so make sure you find your train alright, okay? I don’t know what I would do if I was back in London and you three were stranded in a tiny train station in Calais, France.” Miss Sieghild warns. “I won’t see you for a while, so this is goodbye. Hopefully not for forever.”

A silence fills the car.

“Everybody out. I’ve got goodbyes to do.”

She exits, along with Ed and Al. She helps you out, and then promptly hugs you.

“I’ve not known you for long, but you seem like a good kid. Take care of them, and yourself, will you? Keep Ed in line.” She holds you at arms-length, looking you in the eye. “I will take you home when this is all over. You will be safe.”

You blink, and then smile, squeezing the hand she has on your shoulder. Her face lightens, she pats you on the shoulder and moves on to Ed.

His goodbyes take longer, and at the end, Ed is biting his lip. He nods, Miss Sieghild hugs him, and starts to bid Al farewell.
Halfway through, Al hugs her, and buries his face in her shoulder. Miss Sieghild smiles a little, but keeps talking.

Al’s eyes are red when he lifts his face from her shoulder. He wipes them, covering his face.

Miss Sieghild says one more thing, and both Ed and Al’s eyes widen. She gives them a rather casual salute, and turns away with one more wave. She nods and smiles at you, climbs in her car, and then she’s gone.

“[Y/N]?"

“I’m fine, come on, let’s go.”

You barely make it to your train in time. Just as you stow your luggage above your seats and settle into your chairs, an announcement in French comes on over the speaker.

None of you can understand a word, but seeing the other passengers immediately begin to buckle their seatbelts gives you a clue.

Click.

The train starts off, slowly gaining speed until it leaves the trainyard and Calais behind.

It rockets into the countryside.

Flat, forest-dotted French countryside whizzes past the windows. Ed and Al stare out in astonishment, mouths agape at the sheer speed. Hamlets and villages go by in a blink.

Ed turns and grins, all teeth, at his brother. Al returns the smile.

You can only hope for the best.

Chapter End Notes

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Hello!!

Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov

Der Bahnhof- the train station

Would you believe that this plot point was a lot later in the story than here? I planned for Al and Ed and the Squad to have bit more bonding time, but that would slow it down even more than it was.

I hope you all are enjoying reading this as I am writing this!
Have a good day/night!!

(this has nearly 4300 words holy crap)
A quarter of the way through the journey to Brussels, you decide that while this isn’t the most bored you’ve ever been, it’s certainly up there. Ed has his arms crossed, leaning back against the padded seat, his eyebrows furrowed and eyes closed. You can’t tell if he looks angry even when he’s sleeping or if he’s just thinking very deeply. Al yawns while doodling on a scrap of paper he had foraged from the depths of his hold-all, ink smearing when he puts his hand back down.

Al realises what he’s done, and quickly goes to rub it on his brother’s trousers.

You stare it him.

He looks back up.

“Ah...it...blends in, you see? Black on black?” He says.

“Whatever you say, Al.”

He shrugs, and goes back to drawing.

Ed’s arms have loosened, his face slackening. His head bobs a little in his sleep.

This feels… familiar. You’re on a train, green countryside blurring by, Ed is asleep, Al is keeping himself busy- oh.

You’re experiencing some major deja vu. Ed is in a red hoody, black tee shirt, black trousers, and worn, chunky boots, his white gloves present, as always. His braid is thrown over his shoulder, his bag in the seat beside him. Alphonse rubs at the ink spot on the grey sleeve of his raglan tee-shirt, oblivious to the other ink droplets on his dark-wash jeans.

The universe is a creative painter. You’ve seen this scene way too many times - though Ed’s jacket is longer, Al is a suit of armour, and the train isn’t brightly lit by overhead lights.

That raises the question- if Ed and Al are actual people, which of course they are, then why do you remember those scenes? Why do those scenes even exist?

Maybe Hiromu Arakawa hails from the same weird circumstances as Ed and Al, but instead of a hundred years in the future, she was sent to the 1990s- no, that’s ridiculous. There’s too much evidence against it. It’s obvious that she was born and raised in Hokkaido, not anywhere else.

Then… how in the hell did she have such a good understanding of their world?

The train zips under an overpass, and the speakers throughout the car buzz to life. A woman says, measured and professional, “Bienvenue en Belgique!”

Why did Ed and Al even come a hundred years into the future? Why not the 1920s, like in the movie? Are the events in the stories even accurate?

This makes absolutely no sense. You’ve nothing to work with, no theories, nothing. Why do you even need to worry about this? Is this what is truly important right now?
Wait. The scratchings on your wall. The voices in your ears.

Ugh! There’s got to be a link between that and Ed and Al! There has to be! There’s a connection between all these weird events and their arrival in a world they don’t belong in.

“[Y/N]?” Al says.

You jump, turning to him. “What?”

“Are you alright? You had an odd look on your face.”

You quickly shake your head. “No, no, I’m fine. I am just...tired.”

“Maybe you should sleep.”

“I think I will.”

Come to think of it, you really are tired. Waking up at 7:15 in the morning isn’t pleasant for anyone, ever.

You lean back in your seat, smile at Al, and close your eyes.

Immediately you fall asleep.

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Edward wakes up not twenty minutes after you succumb to exhaustion. He doesn’t jerk awake, but instead slowly slides his eyes open. He yawns, and stretches his arms above his head. A series of rapid-fire cracks go down his spine.

He gazes out the window at the almost alarmingly bright green scenery flying past the train. A thick line of trees is dark in the distance, and he can see a slight rise in the land where it was only flat before. Where there was farmland, there’s now fields lined with barbed-wire fences.

Add some more hills, and this could almost be the spitting image of Resembool.

“Sleep well?” Al’s voice says softly, signing.

“Huh?” Ed paused. ‘Oh, yeah, I did.’

“Look.” Al whispers, an ink-stained finger to his lips. He pokes his thumb in [Y/N]’s direction, where they’re slumped over in the seat. Their mouth is slightly parted, and expression completely relaxed.

“Oh.” Ed breathes. He hadn’t ever actually seen them asleep before. It was kind of weird, or maybe a better word was ‘disconcerting’, to see them so vulnerable. ‘How long have they been asleep?’

Al shrugs. “Thirty minutes? They fell asleep right after you.”

“Hmm.”

They snuffle in their sleep. Ed’s mouth quirks up a bit, and turns to look at the paper Al has clutched in his hands.
‘What’s that you’ve got there?’

“Oh, I’ve been doodling. Wiped some ink on your trousers, too.”

Ed looks down at his jeans, and squawks as quietly as he can. Sure, it blends in a little bit, but he can tell there’s a streak of black down his thigh.

‘Al! These are my only other black trousers!’ Ed signs, jerky and flamboyant. ‘You’ve- you’ve- my personal style! What am I supposed to do now?!’

“Maybe you could, I don’t know, wear something other than red and black? Something that actually looks good together?”

‘On the behalf of the Drachman military summer uniforms, every person with great colour choices, and that one kid at my school with the fantastic hair, I am insulted.’ Ed makes a scoffing expression-if that’s even a thing- and slumps back in his chair.

“You can’t even notice it.” Al mumbles.

‘Say whatever you need to say to make yourself feel better.’ Ed thinks this is suitably dramatic for the situation, but Al smiles and shakes his head, and continues drawing.

Ed absently rubs at the ink stain while looking out the window. The view out the window was still the same, with only a tiny blink-and-you-miss-it village at the end of a bridge the train zips under.

Soft conversations in a language he can’t recognise fill the air in the train car. They’re all of different genders and ages (he can hear a very small child whispering to, presumably, their mother). It sounds smooth, and lilting, and kind of like it’s only made of vowels.

‘Al?’ Ed says.

“What?”

‘Do you have any idea where the hell we are?’

“Ah…..no. But I do have this!” Al reaches into the rucksack at his feet, and pulls out European Travel - German Language Edition. “Miss Sieghild didn’t really tell us where we were going, just away, so I… kind of stole a bunch of travel books from the library.”

Ed takes the book from Al, a smirk on his face. ‘Oh, Al, you big rulebreaker, you.’

“Don’t tease me, Brother, I actually felt bad about it. As I should.”

Ed flips to the maps section at the end of the book. He doesn’t know where any of the nations are in relation to where they were. He sees the Caucasus mountains, and “Russland”, and if he flips back three pages, “Frankreich” and “Belgien”.

‘What was the name of the train station we left?’

Al frowns. “Ah…. hm. ‘Gare’…. ‘Gare di Calay Fille?’”

Ed remembers that the train was positioned at the mouth of a dark tunnel when they and Miss Sieghild had boarded back in England. He never saw any daylight through the panes of glass set into the train doors, so the tunnel hadn’t stopped until they arrived at Gare di Calay Fille.

He notices a small, dotted line, labelled “Eurotunnel”, stretching from the southeastern coast of
England, across the Englisch-Kanal, and stopping in the middle of a town in Frankreich called Calais. He traces the border of Frankreich and Belgien with one finger, thinking.

Ed fishes his train ticket out of his pocket. The departure point is “Calais, France”, and the destination is “Bruxelles, Belgique”. Using his fantastic deduction skills (if he does say so himself), Belgien is Belgique, and the announcement that woke him up halfway earlier was saying that the train had entered Belgien.

‘We’re in B-E-L-G-I-E-N, heading towards Brüssel.’

“Good to know.” Al says, scratching a circle onto the back of his paper. “After that, we’re going to Keulen. Where’s that?”

Ed refrains from making an ‘I don’t know’ sound, and opens the map pages, yet again.

Twenty minutes of fruitless searching later, Ed snaps the book shut in frustration, muttering curses under his breath.

Sieghild’s voice rings in the back of his head, oddly accented Amestrian saying directions, cities, instructions.

Ed freezes. ‘Al, is it… is the city called ‘Koln’?’

“Ah…” Al pauses. “I think so?”

‘Well, don’t you think you could’ve reminded me of this twenty minutes ago!’ His whisper-shout, accompanying his furious signing, comes out a little louder than he would’ve liked. You stir in your sleep, groaning softly.

Al affixes a sharp glare on Ed, who mimics zipping his mouth tight. Al nods, and returns to the novel he had had stowed away in the rucksack under his seat.

The scenery outside the window has flattened yet again, into plains of bright green, flowered grass. Everything is just as green, though the trees have grown into big, round things instead of the skinny-bottomed, bristly trees of an hour earlier. The roads the train is passing over are small motorways rather than dusty country roads.

Occasional villages become occasional towns. Small roads become larger motorways. Treelines thin. At one point, the train zips through an actual town on the banks of a slow river. Quaint, brick townhouses all smooshed together into big blocks line the streets. From the amount of time it takes to get out of the town, Ed can guess it was of small, but respectable size.

Buildings start to pop up closer together. The same slow-moving river drifts underneath the train tracks more and more often, and soon it’s right along the edge. At one point, the train enters a town and the town doesn’t stop. Buildings grow taller, and more modern. Skyscrapers, covered in glass and on the shorter side, emerge from behind a hill.

The cool, professional female voice from earlier fizzes to life above him, speaking in that same smooth language Ed hears.

“Bienvenue à Bruxelles! Nous arrivons en quatre minutes.”

You jolt awake. Hair flat on one side and eyes droopy, you let out an elegant “mmmuurgh?”, and sit up. Your face has left a small print on the window. Grimacing, you wrap your sleeve in your hand and rub at it until it smears away.
Brussels is made up of innumerable medium-sized, brick townhouses, clustered together with traditional-looking architecture, skyscrapers, big, blocky office buildings, and the occasional cathedral. The streets are neat, wide roads criss-crossed with narrow alleys and brick pedestrian walkways. You can see the spikes of an old cathedral in the distance, and a far-away borough punctuating the skyline with high rises. Even in the middle of a city you can see small, green dots of trees planted into the sidewalk.

“We are already here?”

Ed grins. “You slept almost the whole way.”

“Thank god I did. I do not think I would have survived having to listen to you complain for two hours.”

“I resent that!”

Al giggles.

You both look at him.

“What?” Al says, the picture of innocence.

His hands are splotched and lined with ink all the way to his wrist. How he got ink all the way up there, you don’t know, but he’s going to scratch his chin with a black fingertip.

You catch his hand and flip it over into his field of vision.

“Look what you have done to yourself.”

A few moments pass. “Art has a price.”

The view of Brussels suddenly dips into a worm’s eye view, and concrete walls rise up around the tracks. The ever-present rattling grows louder, and the train plunges into a dimly lit tunnel. Neon graffiti blurs into great, colourful smears outside - reminding you of Puja.

She’s probably still sleeping, knowing her. You smile, thinking about her, halfway off her bed, unknowing that her friends have crossed two international borders and committed what you think is identity fraud, all in one morning.

You never did tell her that you were leaving this morning, or that you were leaving at all.

You frown, but your thoughts are interrupted by the loudspeakers buzzing to life.

“Bonjour! Arrivée en deux minutes. Veuillez collecter tous les bagages.”

You think ‘bagages’ means bags? Puja made you quiz her on French several times- you should remember some of it. You look around. A small child across the aisle from earlier is stuffing an unclosed bag of cereal into his rucksack, and his mother is putting her mobile into her purse.

While checking around your feet for the pencil that had gone missing from your front pocket somehow, you see Edward’s pant legs have ridden up a little, to expose the tops of his boots. They must be too short- this dork is wearing socks patterned with Van Gogh’s “Starry Night”. Does he even know what “Starry Night” is?

The dim lights in the tunnel transition to bright, fluorescent overhead lamps, bathing the tunnel in unnaturally white light. The cracks, stains, and particularly daring graffiti not even a metre from the
side of the train car are thrown into harsh relief.

Sharp, quick rattling slows into clacks, and eventually the graffiti on the wall can be seen clearly from the train window. It blares from the drab concrete like shatteringly loud EDM in a law library.

Bright light edges further and further into your field of vision provided by the window. The train slows even more, to a creeping pace. Then, with a jerk and hiss, it stops at a train platform.

The loudspeaker crackles to life, and the same woman speaks: “Bienvenue à Bruxelles-Central! Merci de voyager avec TGV. Bonne journée!”

The train platform merges into a low-ceilinged, tiled atrium. All of the crowds, heading to trains departing or getting off trains arriving, are funnelled through a wide, gently sloped, charcoal staircase. You can hear the soft echoing buzz of conversation around you and above you, mixed French and Dutch.

Up the staircase is a much larger atrium with ceilings far above you. Skylights let in the bright midday sun, shining on the glossy taupe walls and white floor tiles. A screen shows the arrival and departure times of trains in scrolling green text, in French and Dutch. A set of doors off to the left lead out into the streets of Brussels.

“One down, two more to go,” Ed mutters, more to himself than anything.

Alphonse digs through his bag for his ticket to Koln, scrutinising it. “We’ve got a one-hour gap between now and the next train. What now?”

You immediately pipe up. “Lunch. I am starving.”

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Being on the streets of Brussels, you soon find out, is much different than viewing it from a train window. Buildings tower overhead. Gentle heat warms your back. The people, once small enough that they were invisible, surround you on all sides, jabbering in French, Dutch, Arabic, and every so often, you catch a snippet of German. The sounds of traffic are everywhere. You can’t turn a corner without seeing a tree. You pass multiple street performers, some of which are normal, like dancers or bands. Others are more impressive. One man had a full-sized grand piano, just sitting there on the pavement!

He was talented, though; you had to give him that. You enjoyed his rendition of that one Justin Timberlake song, that name of which escapes you now.

You were still humming it when Edward saw a crowd of people sitting at picnic tables outside some sort of shop. He flings his arm out to stop the both of you, and makes a beeline for the shop. You and Al look at each other, shrug, and follow close behind.

The shop isn’t the kind that you go into to order. It’s more of a window, with a server halfway hanging out so they can hear you over the din inside. The window is framed by blue-and-yellow wood, and above it is a menu and sign that you can’t read. The server, who you can barely see from here through the crowd of people in matching “CTHS Class of 2006 Reunion Trip” t-shirts, is leaning out at a precarious angle.

Once you get closer, you realise the server is a woman, probably barely in her twenties, her small face surrounded by a huge, curly cloud of brown hair. Her face is freckled, her eyes hazel, and she has the sharpest, most perfect cat-eye eyeliner you have ever seen on a human being.
The CTHS Class of 2006 clears away from the window to stand and wait, all jabbering in New England-accented English. The girl turns to the three of you, a cordial, ruby-red smile curling her lips. Out of the corner of your eye, you see Alphonse reach up to run a hand through his hair, and straighten his shirt collar.

“Bonjour! Voici le menu. Que désirez-vous?”

Oh, no. You hadn’t thought of this roadblock.

“Erm…”

The girls’ smile doesn’t falter, and she switches to Dutch. “Goedemiddag. Kan ik u helpen?”

She is met with blank faces. Her brightness falters a little bit then, as she thinks of another language to try. Before she can say something else though, you remember one phrase—only one—from helping Puja study French for literal years.

“Parlez-vous anglais?” You’re sure your pronunciation is abhorrent, and your voice awkward, but the girls’ face immediately brightens. You can see Ed looking at you, a little shocked, out of the corner of your eye.

“Yes!” She says, her speech accented. “Good afternoon. The menu is right above me.” She taps it with one small finger. “Please tell me how I can help!”

A man shouts in French, near the back of the tiny, broom-closet like shop. You can see all the steam rising, and guess it must be rather hot in there. No less than seven fans are set up along different work surfaces, blowing in all directions.

The girl turns around and shouts right back, gathering full trays into her hands and sliding them down the counter outside the window. She calls out a string of numbers in Dutch, and whips back around, her hair splaying in a great, curly fan.

Being the little shit that you are, you turn around to look at Alphonse, a wry smile on your face. Al’s cheekbones and ears are carnation pink, his mouth a thin line. You nudge his brother sharply with your elbow, and when Ed’s head jerks down from the menu to exclaim, you nod your head at his brother. Fifteen years of being brothers means that Ed immediately makes the connection, and his face warps into a sly grin even worse than your own.

Al coughs into his fist, rubs the back of his neck, and looks up at the menu, oblivious to his two friends grinning at him like two cats that caught the canary.

He eventually does notice, and looks down. “What?” He says, face still a little flushed.

Ed’s smirk, if possible, widens. “I sense someone has a type.”

Alphonse’s face explodes into brilliant, adorable colour. He stammers and stutters, and then shuts his mouth so tightly that you can hear his teeth click. “I-”

“It’s alright, no judging, little brother.” Ed says and signs, raising his hands in a surrendering gesture, but his face is anything but kindly.

Al stammers for a few seconds, then stops, and says, “Hypocrite.”

You glance between them. Ed glances at you, then back at his brother, and at the girl in the shop. “What?”
“I tell it like it is, dearest Brother.”

The girl pops out of the window again, and chirps, “Are you ready?”

You jump in. “A few more minutes, please.”

She nods, and puts her head back into the shop. You can read her nametag now- ‘Elsje Phạm-Wouters’. She shoves more trays out on the counter for the Class of 2006.

Al is focusing too hard on the menu to not be overcompensating. Ed keeps reaching around you to poke at his brother’s side, expression innocent as his shoulder moves. Al grabs Ed’s hand, lifts it away, and returns it to his brother’s side.

Ten minutes later, the three of you are digging into what appears to be Belgian comfort food- a kind of thick soup with chicken and lots of veggies. It’s one of the best things you’ve ever tasted- salty, savoury, and hot - and you’re almost on the verge of tears. Bless spices, bless Belgian food, god this is amazing.

More French yelling happens, and then the server woman is leaving the shop through a backdoor, and walking past your table. Al is bent over his soup bowl, but you can see his eyes follow her through his overhanging fringe.

The girl’s hair is a little longer than her shoulders, trailing down in ringlets messy from working hard in the shop. She’s wearing cropped denim overalls and a striped yellow-and-white sleeveless top. She stops at an unoccupied table to take her mobile out of her handbag and send a text. As she does so, another woman pulls up next to her, riding some sort of motorbike-scooter hybrid, the engine rumbling. The other woman has two blonde, waist-length braids, and is wearing a leather jacket dotted with rainbow patches, but you can’t see anything else past her motorcycle helmet.

The server girl’s face lights up, and she practically skips over the other woman, kissing the top of her motorcycle helmet, and settling behind her on the motorbike. She puts on a spare helmet, laces her arms around the other woman’s waist, and the motorbike buzzes off into the Brussels streets.

You giggle a little, looking over at Alphonse, whose shoulders have slumped a little. He despondently stirs his soup.

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The day so far had been a lot quieter than you expected. With the running from some unknown government agency through international borders, you expected daring escapes, close calls, and maybe a standoff. Perhaps not all in the same day, but you had though something would happen.

But, here you are. Riding in a train car filled with snoring old people, to a stop-over in Cologne. It’s quite peaceful, you won’t complain. The emerald-green Belgian countryside flies by, broken up by small towns and a few larger ones. It’s calming to the point of sameness. Field after field, green and brown and khaki. Clumps of deep green trees, rustling softly in an unfelt breeze. Town after town of red roofs and brick. Little country roads, winding deep into forest and under bridges, break up the monotony every so often. The train does pass over a river, green-blue and curving through the large town built around it.

It starts to rain a little. You are a little taken aback by the first droplet hitting the window, but once it settles into a soft, steady drizzle, you relax back in your seat and gaze at the off-grey sky.

Alphonse sighs in his sleep. His pen has fallen out of his hand onto his lap. There’s a slight crease between his eyebrows as he dreams.
Edward has his arms crossed, leaning back in the seat. In his lap is some novel, wide open and pages covered with dog-eared creases. The cover is very worn, or as much as you can see of it, and the corners rounded out from incessant rubbing. Ed had put his hair up into a thick bun to keep it out of his way as he read earlier, and you had tried, and failed, to ignore the catch in your throat as he did so.

Bloody hell, you’d thought you’d got over this silly thing, but apparently not. Fuck the universe. Fuck your brain.

Ed’s eyes are half lidded as he looks down at the pages. He continues to rub one corner between forefinger and thumb, a vacant ghost of a smile on his face.

You cough a little and draw your arms closer to your body. You harden your gaze and stare out the window again.

You don’t see it, but Ed looks up at you and Al. His gaze flickers over, and the ghost of a smile becomes a light smile. It’s so fond that if Ed could see his face, he would most likely snap the smile off his face and turn right back to his book. He doesn’t, so his golden eyes stay affixed on you and his brother, glowing with warmth.

The rain is coming harder now.

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290 miles away, holed up in her room with her laptop open onto a paused YouTube makeup tutorial, Puja Thakur sends her fourth text that day to “<3 pigeonscreamer the great”. Her eyeliner is half-finished, but she pays no mind, her brow creased with concern.

Usually [Y/N] replies in, at the most, two hours. She texted you at 9:00 that morning, and now it’s 1:30. They’re probably busy, or their connection cut out again and they’ve been separated from civilisation for literal hours, or something like that. It’s not like they’ve been kidnapped or are on the run from the law, or anything like that. The most illegal thing [Y/N] has done is steal a packet of fruit Polos from the corner store in year 4. But even then, they were so ashamed that they returned it, unopened, weeping openly.

Puja shrugs, and turns off her phone. Time to look like a goddamn goddess.

Chapter End Notes

Hi all!!!

Daily German Lesson with Vhahnov

Braun- brown
Grün- green
Blau- blue
I’m so sorry for the two-month gap this time! School started for me, and it was a sudden kick to the crotch for the updating ‘schedule’ I have. I found time this weekend to finish this, and here you go! (And in no way will there be a four-month gap like last year again, my goodness)

This chapter was really fun to write, but I hope my waxing poetic about European countryside wasn’t too boring! I love to describe, and I get a little carried away.

Elsje was a very minor side character that didn’t even have a name for the majority of writing this chapter. After I sketched her character design, however, I fell in love with her, and she’s probably going to appear in the background of a few more chapters after this.

Thank you for all your continued support and readership! I truly appreciate it. After this, we only have ~19 chapters left. Without your feedback, we wouldn’t have got this far.

Have a good day/night!

((Chapter was finished on September 30, but was published on Oct 1, so happy first day of Halloween, all!!))

(also, i can guarantee the French in this chapter is not correct. i am terrible at french, so please point out any and all mistakes you see and i’ll fix it.)
Rain spatters the windows, acting as a calming and almost rhythmic background to the low conversations being held in the train. Al is being lulled to sleep by it and the rocking of the train car, and shakes himself violently to prevent that and spilling more ink on his trousers. Ed continues to read, his legs loosely crossed as usual, with two more weathered paperbacks laying in his lap for later on. You are still looking out the window. The way the trees outside become blurry and indistinct while flying past the window in the rain is almost entrancing.

Across the aisle, a young boy with short, curly hair is watching you three with a keen look in his eye. He has the ‘almost-there’ expression on his face- that is, he looks like he can almost, but not quite recognise you. His eyes are narrowed, glancing between Ed and Al, and his mouth is parted. His rucksack is at his feet. You don’t see any obvious pins that scream ‘i watch Fullmetal Alchemist!!’, but he has the look that the girl from school did. And that was an encounter that avoided disaster by a hair’s breadth.


Ed flips a page.

“Ed. Eddie.”

His head jerks up and golden eyes bore into you, an inquisitive eyebrow raised. You ignore the rush of butterflies that comes when he makes eye contact. “Oh, so you don’t respond to Ed, but you respond to Eddie.”

Ed scoffs and snaps his book shut. “I responded to Eddie because Eddie is a shitty nickname, and I needed to defend my honour.”

You roll your eyes and look out the window, trying to project an air of nonchalance. “When we get into Cologne, you probably need to put your hood up or something. You’re getting recognised.”

“What? Why would they recognise me?”

Shit. “Er...maybe they put out a ‘Missing Persons’ report or something? With your pictures?”


“What do you mean, what about me?”

“I mean, they would have put yours out as well.”

“I’m a lot less recognisable than a boy with long hair and golden eyes. Boys with golden hair and eyes.”
“Al doesn’t have-”

Al twitches a little, and shudders. He scratches at his arms while muttering something in Amestrian.

“He does, though.”

Ed jerks his thumb at Al. Al blinks at this gesture. “Look at my brother, [Y/N].”

“What’s going on?” Al says. You squint at him. For some reason, you distinctly remember Al’s hair looking gold in the light of the car earlier this morning. Now, his hair was a soft, fawny tan, and his eyes chrysoberyl brown.

“Nothing.” You reply, slowly and concisely. “We are having an argument over the colour of your hair.”

Al takes a moment to decipher what you said, and then looks at his brother, an emotion you can only describe as ‘seriously?’ written on every feature.

 “[Y/N] told me it was blond, like mine.”

Al rolls his eyes at his brother. “And you’re arguing with them over this?”

“It’s important.”

“It really isn’t, brother.”

You snigger at their antics. They are so definitely related it’s not even funny. It was odd, though. Ed has a scar on his stomach, about the size of a tea saucer, and it was probably from being impaled with that crossbeam in Amestris. But, that was the Brotherhood storyline (goodness, is it strange to think about the shows when the main character is sitting right in front of you), and Al had golden hair in that one. Oh, whatever. It doesn’t matter, and the universe is a strange place.

“Let’s just compromise and say it’s golden brown.” Al says, signing along with his words with inkstained hands.

“What? No, it’s brown! There’s not a single strand of blond in there!”

“You’ve got enough golden hair for the both of us.”

“That I can’t argue with, but-”

“So, I win?”

“No, I’m older, so I win by default.”

Al shakes his head and sighs. “Whatever you say, brother.”

Ed smirks and draws himself up like a proud rooster. “Mm-hmm.”

Behind the both of them, you’re sniggering even harder.

“What?” They say in unison.

“Nothing, nothing. You two are just funny.”

Ed grins at Al, who is trying to hold back a smile. “See, this arguing got us somewhere.”
Al doesn’t say anything in Amestrian to reply. All he replies with is a short series of signs that makes Ed’s face explode into every shade of scarlet under the sun. He might have blown a vein in his face or something with how red it is. It can safely cook an egg. “I swear to god, Al-“

“Oh, so I’m right?”

“NO- you’re like this EVERY TIME-“

“Shush!” You say, looking around at the other passengers around you, who are peering curiously at the three of you because of the loud stage-whispering.

Ed doesn’t stop talking to his brother, but continues at a lower volume, Amestrian speech and signing so rapid that you can’t even begin to follow. You catch ‘the’, and a few other words you’re very familiar with, like ‘you’ and ‘fuck’ and ‘hell’ and “I am”, but other than those, you’re lost. You realise that Ed (and perhaps Al, too) has probably been speaking at a slower pace around you, just to keep you in the know, and that makes you feel a little warm on the inside, but also panicky for just how quickly German speakers in Germany are going to speak.

Ed finishes with: “-and that’s why I always wore red!”

“...what the hell just happened?”

Ed freezes. He turns to look at you, eyes widened. “Er...nothing. Everything is fine.”

“Ed, you are a very shitty liar.”

“It doesn’t matter. And I am not a shitty liar.”

“Are.”

“No.”

“Are.”

“No.”

“Listen.” Al says. “I can’t tell what either of you are saying, but I can tell you need to stop.”

“Your brother is right.” You say.

“Of course you side with him.” Ed grumbles, leaning back in his seat and staring pointedly out the window.

The rest of the journey continues in amicable silence. A little while after passing a tiny Belgian town, only snippets of which you caught through the constant wall of trees, the speakers buzz to life. This time, a male, German, voice speaks.

“Willkommen in Deutschland!” The man says. ‘Welcome to Germany.’ Well, you guess you’re at least halfway there. There isn’t any sort of visual indication that you’ve crossed an international border, other than Ed relaxing in his seat at the familiar language in his ear.

Emerald trees still fly past in great, green smears, dark against the storm-grey sky. You hear the rattle of the train tracks, the slight hiss of an old kerosene lamp, along with the smell-

Kerosene?
You look up at the definitely light-bulb powered lights overhead. They’re buzzing quietly, not hissing. Rubbing at your nose immediately makes the kerosene-smell disappear, leaving you to wonder if it was ever there in the first place.

“It is getting dark, kleine Maus.” A woman coos, not a millimetre from you. You very nearly jump out of your skin, and turn to see no woman there.

The voice doesn’t come back. You’re convinced some bird doesn’t know the meaning of personal space and brush it off for the rest of the train ride.

_000_

Your ragtag gang exits the train station onto a neat, industrial plaza complex, floored by smooth, polished stone, now being drilled by the rainstorm from above. Other passengers duck out from under the high, glass awning under a diverse array of umbrellas, hunched against the cool summer rain or darting through it on quick feet. Bicyclists pass often, shoulders and backs soaking wet, legs flying over the pedals. The car lane is abuzz with cream-coloured taxis and squat little cars. Over your shoulder, over the top of Cologne Central Station, you can see the tall, Gothic spires of Cologne Cathedral.

“What now?” Al says, ducking away from a stray droplet of rain.

“I can tell you that I’m going to sleep.” Ed says, thoroughly exhausted from the 2 straight hours of sitting down and staying still he just did.

“No,” You say, elbowing him in the side. He wheezes and clutches his side, scowling at you. “My old German teacher is from Koln. We are seeing the Cathedral, no ifs, ands, or buts.”

Ed and Al blink at you. Al shrugs, content with this, but Ed crosses his arms and grumbles, spiteful, but follows the two of you out of the plaza, eyes wistfully following a fragrant currywurst stand. Al pulls the hood up on his rainjacket and zips it up to his neck. Ed pulls his from around his waist to put on, but seeing you flinch from rain hitting you in the face, offers it to you.

Your eyes widen at the army green material thrust into your arms, and look up to meet Ed’s eyes, practically glowing in the rain.


“Thanks, Ed.”

Ed shrugs again, and you pull the jacket over your arms, still warm from being tied around his waist. It smells a little like him.

Upon realising that this is possibly the most unintentionally romantic thing Ed has ever done for you, you reach up and tightly cinch the hood around your face to hide the flush you know is there now.

“Woah,” Al breathes, as you round yet another blocky, brick building. You uncinch the hood and crane your head up to see the spires of Cologne Cathedral looming high above you. Its stone is wet and grey from the constant rain, and the high, Gothic windows are dark. You expect that usually this place is crowded with people, but as it is storming and it is the middle of the working day, the only people you see are some elderly Brits and a class of German schoolchildren, along with their waterlogged teacher.

You can’t even begin to describe it. Its massive stone face is spiked with Gothic elements, stained glass windows, rose windows, lancets, pointed arches, buttresses, flying buttresses, tympanums, and
pinnacles all tapering up to a point in the shape of two iconic cathedral spires. It’s almost too much to take in.

Far to your right are the green triple arches of the Hohenzollern Bridge, its industrial design completely the opposite of the ancient cathedral adjacent to it. The bridge spans the great, grey stretch of the Rhine, its slow, patient current dappled and rippling as the rain hits it.

Ed lets out a low, quiet whistle. You watch his eyes slowly track up the cathedral wall up to the tallest spire, mouth slightly agape. He smiles in awe, and you quickly look away from the brightness overtaking his face.

“What’s that, on the bridge?” You hear one of the boys say.

“What?” You reply, completely instinctively.

You get closer look at the fencing separating the walkway from the train tracks spanning the length of the bridge. “Oh. *Those are the* lovelocks.”

“Lovelocks?” Ed questions, a single eyebrow raised.

“*Come along, come see.*” You beckon with your finger, prompting them to follow you onto the bridge a few hundred metres away.

Just like the Cologne Cathedral, it’s bigger up close. You run your hands along wet, rusted green bridge supports. The water drips off your hand when you take it away. All along the walkway, the fences separating walkers from the great Rhine and the train tracks are covered with padlocks, latched onto the metal lattice. They cover almost every spare bit of space. You see colourful locks, decorated locks, special types of locks, custom locks, and most of all, plain old metal padlocks.

Al is squinting at the locks, mouth moving as he reads the inscriptions on every one of them.

“*Couples carve their names on these and lock them here. Then they throw the key in the Rhine river. It is supposed to symbolise their eternal love… or something.*”

Once Ed finishes signing for Al, you see Al’s face go all soft. His eyes are warm as he looks at each one, sometimes rubbing the inscription on some of the less professional ones. He stops and stares at one. “*This one is scratched out.*”

“Oh, yeah. Sometimes the relationship does not work out, and they cannot take them off, because the key has been…er.”

“Swept away?” Ed supplies.

“Yes. Swept away by the current, so they just…scratch out the names.”

Al frowns, looking away from you and his brother. “*Wow. That’s… sad.*”

You shrug. “*It is just life.*”

Al nods pensively, still staring at the lock with the names scratched out.

Ed slaps at his brother on the arm, gesturing at a gunmetal grey padlock, smiling a little. “*Al, Al, look!*”
“What?”

“Abraham and Calvin. 2. 4. 2013.”

Al’s frown disappears and in its place come a slight smile. He lifts a white padlock, while saying, “Elfriede and Rachel, 3 December 2015.”

“Elsje and Camille, 31 July 2016. That’s today.”

“Nicolaus and Roland, 26 . 2. 2010.”

They continue listing off names and eventually have to move further along the bridge to find more. Their voices slowly fade into the background, along with the sound of the Rhine rushing below. You take a padlock into your hand, rubbing the bronze metal with your thumb. The front is scarred and unreadable.

You watch the brothers walk farther down, Ed’s ponytail a golden spot in the grey. It’s starting to get weighed down by rain, the strands turning darker, and little baby hairs around Ed’s face are starting to curl from the cool humidity. You can’t see the back of Al’s head through his black rain jacket hood, but you can see him signing and laughing. A sharp pain clutches at your chest.

It’s only been a few hours, but you’re 600 kilometres from home and your mother is alone and Puja doesn’t know where you are and you can barely speak the language here and you’re already homesick.

Your mobile is in your pocket.

What could one message hurt?

_000_

_Ding_

Some twenty-something intern put in charge of monitoring communications starts from his mid-afternoon rest time- he would insist he was just resting his eyes, but he wasn’t, and everyone knows it, Richard.

Richard sluggishly opens the window display that made the noise. It’s the one with the tracker on …. Subject C78’s mobile phone. It sent a text message to some mobile number two minutes ago in Cologne, Germany.

He goes to dial the number he had memorised years ago.

“Yeah, hello, Dodds. Listen, I got a notification that C78 sent a text two minutes ago...oh, Cologne, Germany. Yeah. I’ll send you the coordinates. What else’ll you need me to do?....Hello? Dodds? Hello?”

_000_

In a small cafe in central London, Alexander Thomas and Emerson Adler sit across from each other at a tiny, high-set table. Cups of half-empty iced coffee sit in front of them, gathering sweat beads and dripping on the table. The drizzle outside is muffled into a pleasant drone on the roof of the cafe.

Alexander Thomas says something, and Emerson Adler laughs quietly, trying to stifle it with a thin,
brown hand, the freshly-dyed blue mop atop their head bouncing with mirth. Alexander watches, face tender and cheeks aglow with pride.

Emerson’s hand separates from their face and lays on Alex’s hand, which had been sitting, relaxed on the table. Alex’s face colours slightly.

“You really are funny.” Emerson smiles, black-brown eyes twinkling, one partially obscured by one long, blue curl.

Alex feels his face burn. Suddenly, he is lacing a hand through the blue curls on the back of Emerson’s head, hesitating for just long enough, and kissing them softly. It’s a gentle press, barely lasting three seconds and barely qualifying as more than a peck, but when Alex pulls back, he can feel the heat radiating from Emerson’s cheeks.

“Oh.” Emerson breathes, face slack.

He shouldn’t have done that. Oh, bloody hell, he shouldn’t have done that, he’s gone and fucked everything over. Alex starts to let go of the back of Emerson’s head.

Emerson kisses him again.

He laughs into it, and soon so does Emerson. They giggle together, nestled into the corner of a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop, faces flushed and smiles bright.

Puja Thakur continues to perfect her dramatic cat-eye eyeliner. She pulls back from the mirror, eyes half-lidded as she checks out her work.

“Pia?” Her mum calls from the kitchen.

“Eh!” She shouts in acknowledgement.

No reply.

“What d’you need, mum?” She shouts again.

No reply.

Puja groans loudly and gets up from her bed, eyeliner containers and eyebrow pencils rolling to fill the depression she had left in the mattress. She opens her door, and shouts down the hallway. “What d’you need, mum!”

“Your aunties are coming later today! Come help me clean!”

Puja sighs and lays her head against the doorjamb.

“Chandra and your dida are coming, too.”

Puja stops her long, dragging sigh and bounds down the stairs. “Okay! What first!” She calls down to the kitchen. She hears her mother’s soft laughter echo through the house.

You turn your mobile off before you disembark on the train to Berlin. Last train ride, you assure yourself, blowing out a long breath and adjusting your hold-all on your shoulder. You crane your
head back to take in the vaulted, lattice skylight ceilings of Cologne central station, the buzz of German conversation and the hiss of trains arriving and departing all around you. The sky is still grey through the rain-dappled glass. You can hear distant thunder rumble softly through the sky.

Ed’s fingers tighten on the strap of his bags. The woman in front of his trio is giving him a strange feeling. She’s speaking to a small device (which Ed has learnt is a telephone that can be carried around with you) in heavily accented Amestrian about some business deal, all while rooting around in the handbag at her side. Trailing down her back is a huge, wavy-curly mass of dark hair, familiar in the way it moves as she moves. Her skin is a light olive, her eyes naturally heavy-lidded and a striking golden-brown colour. The person on the other end of the line says something. A scarlet-lipped smile brightens the woman’s face.

She keeps ringing a bell that Ed can’t place, and he eventually gives up. He decides the feeling is inconsequential.

Al watches his brother and [Y/N] with a careful, calculating eye. Ed is staring holes into the back of a business-woman’s head, mouth tight and eyes narrow. He knows what Ed is thinking -this woman looks familiar- but Al knows exactly who this woman resembles. Her skin is darker, her eyes human, and her smile genuine, but this woman looks like a relative of Lust. He can see this, but her nose is too long, her eyebrows heavier, her face shape more square, and her… feel too human to have any connection.

Al sees [Y/N] staring up at the glass ceiling and the rainclouds low in the sky. Iron-grey is reflected in their [E/C] eyes, making them cold and distant. He can feel the heavy trains’ movement vibrate the tile under his feet and a sea of people passing him on all sides.

He pats at his jacket pockets for the short knife Ed had bestowed upon him.

Just in case.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE READ THE AUTHOR’S NOTE!!

Hey guys!! It’s been awhile, I know! I’m sorry. I really do try to keep up a decent update schedule, believe it or not, but school has really been kicking my butt :( Please stay til the end of the author’s note, as I have some very crucial information to share.

Daily German Lesson with Argentia/Vhahnov

Köln - Cologne
durch- through
ohne - without

IMPORTANT INFORMATION:

People, I am currently based in America. As much as I hate thinking about this because it gives me anxiety, if net neutrality laws are repealed, I will no longer be updating or even be able to update. I will try my very hardest - and I mean that with all of my heart-to try and get in as many updates before December 14. If Congress doesn’t block the FCC vote, I will try to finish this fic to the best of my ability before everything is
repealed. I will go on a writing spree for you guys. In fact, right after I publish this, I am starting chapter thirty-three.

I know a lot of you guys are still very young. I am too! But this affects us all. I know you’re probably tired of hearing this, but please find some way to raise awareness or contact your reps if you are American. I implore you all, don’t let this happen. It will affect every single one of you. I know this is really stressful- believe me, I have not stopped thinking about it since the 24th of November, but this is crucial.

I don’t know how to end all that other than, thank you all so much for your continued support through these last two years (wow!). If we aren’t be able to interact after this, I wish you all so much love and success in the years to come, and most of all, I wish you all a wonderful morning/day/night!

Resist.
Sitting outside a conference room on an increasingly uncomfortable bench, Puja Thakur contemplates exactly why she is in her school building during summer holiday. She can feel the negative energy coming from every corner of this damned building.

She hears the muffled voices of her mother and the interviewer coming through the solid oak door at her side. The interviewer says something, and her mother replies, laughter tinging her words. They share an Interview Laugh, in which Puja can tell her mother is carefully measuring and manipulating how her laugh sounds. It sounds birdlike and polite, but her mother’s true laugh is loud and uninhibited and sounds like how hot chocolate tastes.

While enveloped in the speculation of how long ‘just a minute’ is in mum time, someone sits down next to her. Puja’s head jerks to see a petite girl settle down as comfortably as she can on the wooden bench next to her. A thick, curly cloud of black hair obscures her face for moment. The girl brushes errant curls out of her face and waves at Puja.

“Hello, Puja Thakur.”

Puja finds herself looking right into the sharp brown eyes of Belinda Wheatley, an analysing glint shining behind their piercing surface. “Hi, Belinda.”

Belinda’s mouth twitches a little in response to the awkward smile on Puja’s face. She then takes in a deep breath, sighs deeply, and leans against the wall, eyes tracking up to the ceiling. “Your mother is here for guest speaker interviews, too, right?”

Puja only nods.

“My ma is here too. She might be doing the culinary lessons.”

Puja hums, her eyes closing.

“I hear they might be bringing back houses in the autumn.”

Puja’s eyes open right back up, snapping up to meet Belinda’s. “What, really? After what happened a few years ago?”

“Mm-hmm. Strange, right? I believe it’s just ‘cause they feel the students are ‘missing out’ or something of that sort.” Belinda smooths the creases in her soft, ecru skirt with petite brown hands. “I’m certainly ready for some healthy competition, though.”

Puja laughs a little. She brings a hand up to tug on the end of one of her plaits, looking askance. “I hear you on that.”

Belinda giggles in acknowledgement, tucking a curl behind her ear. “You know that we’re both going to be here for the next hour?”

“Oh, do I,” Puja groans. “I’d just resigned myself to boredom before you sat down next to me.”

“I suppose it’s good I sat down, then.” Belinda says. Her eyes gain a mischievious glint, and her
smile curls wider, looking like a cat that had caught the canary. “Question.”

“What’s that?”

“You ever been on the roof?”

Three and a half hours into the longest train ride on today’s journey, you start to question your sanity. Okay, okay, not really. You’re being dramatic. But in all seriousness, you’re so bored it’s not even funny.

Staring out the rain-soaked windows proved boring only half an hour into this train ride. In between tiny, waterlogged towns, there is only impressively flat countryside and fields. A good portion of the ride was spent rushing through tiny smatterings of forest and past isolated farmhouses, white facades bright against the constant background smear of green.

The train rattles slowly through a town of respectable size, houses and businesses lining the streets surrounding the tracks. You catch glimpses of the people in the cars just outside. Through a blurry veneer of rain, you see a woman in a pantsuit softly singing along to the radio, an empty carseat in the back. In a tiny, red Volkswagen Beetle, a group of friends, too tightly crammed in for it to be safe, are laughing and shouting and joking with each other. A man sitting in a beat-up, blue sedan is enthusiastically playing the maracas to some unheard beat. You do a double-take at the maracas, but faster than he appeared, the mythical Maracas Man is gone. You mourn the loss of this sight before you could take a picture.

Ed is sitting right next to you, as usual. His legs are tightly crossed, as usual. His eyes are focused on a book, as usual.

You decide to annoy him.

You rip off a tiny piece off the notepad in your rucksack, ball it up, and aim for the eyes. With one precise flick, the ball of paper sails across the gap between your train seats and hits Ed directly in the temple. Ed’s head jerks up to see what had hit him in the face, but you’re already looking out the window, as innocent as you can be.

You wait a few seconds, and Ed turns back to his book. You, again, rip off a corner, ball it up, and toss it. This time, it hits him right at his hairline. Ed’s head jerks up even faster this time, almost catching you in the act.

You wash, rinse, and repeat once more. As the tiny wad of paper strikes underneath his right eye, you see Ed’s whole body twitch. He shuts his book, lays it down next to him, and calmly opens the notebook he had stashed away in the mess of his rucksack.

Then he’s ripping out an entire page, crumpling it, and throwing it right in your face.

You can’t hold back the little, giggling wheeze that comes out of you at the impact. Ed smirks, eyes bright and laughter warming his features.

“Two can play this game.” Ed says, not breaking eye contact, wadding up another sheet of notebook paper. “Do you even realise how adept Al and I are at annoying each other on long train rides?”

“Oh, I have an inkling.” You reply, grin just as mischievous.
Ed’s paper flies through the air, and you narrowly dodge it, head moving to the side to let the projectile strike the window, rather than your face. Ed looks somewhat disappointed at this, but his face brightens at your giddy chuckling. Al looks on, incredulous, brow pulled flat and low.

Ed stops throwing paper at you for the rest of the ride. He doesn’t stop pestering you, though: every so often, a kick finds the bottom of your chair, a nudge finds your shoulder, or a pinch finds your arm. You jab him right back every time. This childish game continues for the next twenty-five minutes, Al looking on with a sort of world-weariness in his eyes.

The clouds in the sky continue to darken while you travel through Hanover, a city that, at your first impression, is very red. Vermillion roofs, crimson masonry, cherry cars, brick streets, scarlet billboards, you name it. The brightness of these colours are dimmed by the rain and the sun slowly sinking, behind the grey sheet of storm clouds. What little shadows there are, are lengthening as the sky begins to hint at dusk. It’ll be a few more hours before the sun truly begins to set.

“Look,” Al says, gently. He points out the window at Hanover, beginning to fall behind as the train climbs into the hills. The streets are a chaotic grid, bustling with cars and people under umbrellas. Little splotches of light decorate the skyline like Christmas baubles. They twinkle in the half-light, half-darkness.

You, Ed, and Al watch Hanover disappear. Its vibrant buildings slowly darken into a silhouette, shrink, and then disappear past the horizon.

Ed signs something to Al. Al replies, still looking out the window past the hills.

You all sit in companionable silence for the remainder of the train ride. Ed even dozes off. Once towns and villages start cropping up at more frequent intervals, and the sun stains the overcast sky deep rose, the loudspeaker fizzes to life. A cool, measured man’s voice begins to speak at a relatively slow pace.

“Good evening, passengers. We have reached the greater Berlin metropolitan area. We arrive in Berlin Central Station in thirty minutes. Thank you.”

Oh, thank god. You have had quite enough of trains for the rest of the summer holiday. You’re so used to the rattle of train tracks and constant whoosh of wind that it’s just background noise at this point.

Al still peers out the window with his round, brown eyes narrowed in thought. With his chin perched in his hand and arm propped on the window sill, his profile cuts a sharp contrast against the royal-blue train seat.

Like every German town you’ve seen so far, the streets are wide, oftentimes cobbled, and lined on each side by tightly packed terraced houses. These people really enjoy stone, don’t they?

If you squint, you think you can see the lights of Berlin in the distance. Right now, they’re multicoloured pinpricks of colour, blinking far off on the quickly darkening horizon. With every passing minute, the cast of warm hues on the storm clouds above darkens into crimson. Soon the color will fade to a deep, velvety black.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

You start a little, and turn to Alphonse. He peers at you with a gently inquisitive look in his eye.

You nod, catching another glimpse of Berlin’s indistinct, far-off skyline.
“I think I’m done with trains for the next week.”

You let yourself laugh at that, clapping a hand over your smiling mouth. You separate it to say, “I hear you on that. I think my bum is numb.”

“I think I’ve gained my sealegs from the rocking.”

“I think I have learnt the art of sleeping through anything.”

“I think I’ve put an indentation on my elbow from the window-sill.”

Al keeps laughing quietly, eyes alight with the same warmth his brother shares. He smiles, sighs, and collects himself, leaning back in his train seat, tugging on his raglan sleeves.

“I’m worried about him.”

It takes you an embarrassingly long amount of time to figure out that he’s talking about Ed, dozing next to you, slumped against the armrest. He reaches up and scratches his ear in his sleep.

“How so?”

Al shrugs, still looking at his brother. “I suppose that...hm.”

“It is alright. You can tell me.”

Al bites his lip, taking a moment to decipher what you said and think of a response. “I...being away from home is hard, but when you’re an entire world away it...it gets even harder. I know how I’m dealing with this, but... you know my brother. You can’t get him to talk to you about anything if he thinks you’ll worry.”

You snort, nodding.

“I can tell he gets so homesick sometimes that he can’t think about anything else. You see it in his eyes. Stuff like farm towns, hearing Amestrian, seeing people who look like ones we knew- they all give him this look in his eye. Like he’s aching inside.”

Ed frowns in his sleep, then relaxes. It’s strange to see him without fire in his eyes and a crease between his brows. With his face this open as he sleeps, you can tell he doesn’t look as naturally intimidating as you initially thought. He really is just sixteen.

“It hurts me, too. I miss our hometown, the mountains, and-” He lets out this soft, bittersweet laugh. “And apple pie.”

You sit there with your arms crossed. Listening to Al talk about Amestris, you can hear the melancholy and thinly veiled pain in his voice.

“Do you want to go home?”

“What?”

You repeat yourself, Al watching closely.

“Ha, do you even need to ask?”

“How are you going to go home?”
Al blinks. He looks so taken aback by this question that you’re wondering if you had crossed a line. Of course, Ed chooses that exact minute to wake up.

“Wassizlous?” He slurs.

“Those aren’t words,” Al says, packing his notebook into his rucksack at his feet. “Say that again.”

“What’s happening?” He rubs his mouth with the back of his hand. He must have been drooling. Or something. Like a little kid.

...huh. Gross.

“Absolutely nothing,” Al says.

“Mm-hmm.” You agree, Ed casts a glance over you two, shrugs, and reaches a hand up to his hair. His fringe is sticking up in all kinds of directions on one side. He feels this, groans loudly, and begins to comb through it with his fingers.

“Arrival in fifteen minutes. Please begin to pack up your luggage and prepare for exit at Berlin Central Station.”

Before you know it, the train has stopped at Berlin Central Station, your little group is exiting amongst a massive stream of people, and the train leaves.

The Berlin Central Station looks like a shopping centre. The ceilings are vaulted, glass skylights, bright overhead lights shining down onto the atrium, two storeys below. Trains depart at platforms at the top storey. Every wall is made entirely of windows. You have a 360 degree view of the nighttime skyline of Berlin. Lights of every colour form little starbursts in the silhouette of the buildings. You can see the tall, red spire of the Fernsehturm in the center of the city. Streetlights make the streets and buildings glow white and yellow. Low hills rise far in the distance, rain blurring their edges into the sunset-lit sky.

The atrium is floored with mirror-like stone. Shops and buildings fill the storeys below. Even at nearly eight o’clock, the atrium is bustling with people. The hiss of trains and blaring voices of departure times blend together into one chaotic buzz of noise. Silver escalators trail down to the ground floor.

“Woah,” You breathe, staring straight down over the barrier between you and certain death.

Ed crouches against the glass, digging in his rucksack. He roots around, picking out a single slip of paper and squinting at it. He reads off some random address in the Mitte borough of Berlin.

“Great.” He says, crumpling it and putting it in his trouser pocket. “And how are we supposed to get there, Sieghild? Fat lot of help, handing us a piece of-”

You smack him on the head and point at the line of taxis idling on the street, three storeys below. “We’re taking a cab, dunderhead.”

“Oh. I knew that.”

“Yeah, mm-hmm. C’mon.” You grab Ed’s wrist and beckon Alphonse to follow you into one of the elevators, across the atrium, and out the front doors. Ten minutes later, your pockets are lighter and you’re standing on some unfamiliar street corner. The cream-coloured cab speeds away with a slight
squeal of rubber. The exhaust plumes out and consumes the three of you in a cloud of smoke. Coughing and retching, the three of you stumble down the street towards the general direction of the address sitting in Edward’s pocket.

More and more streetlights are clicking on the longer your trio wanders through the little section of Mitte the cab driver had dropped you off in. Lamps are turning on in the windows of the old-style stone buildings crowding the winding streets. Though this area isn’t as affluent as the other areas of Mitte, you can at least be thankful you aren’t being housed somewhere deep in the east of Berlin. That is, from what you’ve heard about the deep east, you feel like you should be thankful.

Out of nowhere, Ed tenses up. He seizes Al’s arm and drags him into an alleyway. After a moment’s hesitation, you follow Ed into the dark, narrow alley between two townhouses.

“What?!” You hiss, nose curling at the smell of the compost bins further down in the darkness of the alleyway.

“There’s a car, and two people,” Ed says, head craning around the side of the building.

“So? Why are we in this alley?”

“Sieghild told us to be careful. They’re right outside the address Sieghild gave us, and they don’t look friendly.”

“I’m sure they’re not much of a threat, Ed. Can we get out of this alley? That compost really smells.”

“Just trust me, I know when people mean trouble. And they mean trouble.”

Al stares at his brother with his lips pulled thin and tight. He sees you talking to him, looking rather disgusted with the stench coming from the end of the alleyway, and like you’d very much like to be somewhere else. Ed has his right hand pulled back behind him in a familiar defensive stance, fingers twitching in a tight fist.

Ed subtly claps his hands together, then touches on the top of his metal arm and swipes downwards. He immediately looks down, taken aback by the absence of the light of an alchemical reaction, and his face freezes. A wide array of emotions crosses Al’s brother’s face in half a second before it settles on a blank stare, eyes practically dead.

Al reaches across the alleyway and takes his brother’s flesh hand. Ed’s eyes slid up to meet Al’s.

‘Tell me what’s going on. Who is down there? What are they doing?’ Al signs, slowly.

Ed takes a moment to reply. You watch on with confusion so apparent Al wouldn’t be surprised if your eyebrows were stuck in a V-shape, permanently.

‘Their car is unmarked. They’re showing something like photographs to the woman at the door. The woman looks nervous. She keeps looking down the street. There’s a telephone in her hand. The people are a man and a woman in suits and dark glasses.’ Ed signs back, staring at the yellow-painted townhouse adjacent to the alleyway.

Out of nowhere, Ed whispers, “Fuck!” and pulls you and Al to the end of the alleyway, behind the squat compost bins. Before you can ask what he’s doing, you’re consumed by shadow and much too close to the compost bins for your olfactory comfort. You hear three voices having a heated discussion in rapid German, then a door slam, and retreating footsteps. The footsteps grow closer to the alleyway, then stop.
Right at the opening of the alleyway stands a man and a woman. They’re wearing matching suits, the woman in a well-tailored pencil skirt and stockings. She sheafs through a file in her hands, frowning.

“I suppose we should post a watch on the house,” The man says, in English, adjusting his tie. “They’re bound to come by soon.”

The woman nods, still frowning at the papers in the file. She flips over a paper, and you have to hold back a gasp at the sight of a full-page spread of a photograph of Ed. He was frowning at the camera, image slightly blurry, suggesting it had been taken from afar.

“I hate this job,” She says, snapping the file folder shut.

“At least we’ve got a lead, unlike Greenwich.”

“God, you said wouldn’t bring up Greenwich. Like it’s our fault some high-tech scifi convention-”

Ed had been staring down the two people with eyes like a hawk’s, body moved slightly in front of you, completely still. He had been clenching his hands into fists. This extreme force on his metal knuckles causes the joints to creak with the amount of pressure exerted upon it. The creak is horribly loud. So loud, in fact, that the woman stops speaking and turns to look curiously into the alleyway behind her. If hadn’t been so dark, the woman would be looking you right in the eyes.

“Found my keys,” The man says, walking out of view, hopefully to their dark car.

The woman peers down the alley for a moment more, before walking away. They keep speaking until two car doors slam shut, an engine roars to life, and a car peels away. Ed doesn’t move until he hears no tracs of the echo of the engine off the townhouses down the street.

He then turns to you and Al. He gulps, eyes wide, searching.

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After getting Al caught up on what the hell had just happened, you, Ed, and Al are gathered around a payphone booth right outside a Berlin U-Bahn station. Ed is rooting through the tiny bag Sieghild had given to you, looking for any euro coin he could find.

“I’m telling you, Ed, that we can just use my mobile. You don’t have to pay, or anything-”

“No. Seighild said it can be tracked.”

With a fleeting flash of guilt, you think back to the one text you sent a few hours ago. At least that was in Cologne, and your phone was off now. Hopefully they still couldn’t track it.

Ed crows and pulls out a round, twenty euro-cent coin, and shoves it in the slot. After dialling the number Sieghild had given to you for emergencies, he leans against the clear plexiglas partition, tapping his foot and clenching and unclenching his fists. Sieghild picks up, and Ed’s head jerks up.

She gives a garbled greeting, and Ed replies. He then goes on a rapid German tirade that you’re too exhausted to translate, his eyes flicking from pedestrian to pedestrian as they pass.

He pauses for a good twenty seconds. He tugs an ink pen from the pocket of his trousers and begins to scribble something on his hand, phone receiver tucked between his ear and shoulder. Nodding, he puts the pen back in his pocket and puts the phone back on the hook.

“There’s one more place we can go.” He says solemnly, flagging down another cab.
Ten minutes later, pockets eight euros lighter and patience thoroughly tested, your group of three frazzled, nervous teenagers is once again dropped off in a strange, unfamiliar borough of Berlin.

Unlike Mitte, Marzahn was not ‘nice’ in any sense of the word. Marzahn was deep in the east side of Berlin, where the Soviets had resided for decades before the reunification of Germany.* You can see this in the blocky, Soviet-style buildings, their near identical, stucco faces organized in exact, calculated grids. The street lights flickering on around you aren’t the bright, white lights of west Berlin, but rather deep, dingy yellow lamps, that do little to illuminate the streets through a thick cover of trees. The entire area has an air of being slightly run-down and low-end.

The streets are empty. Save for the odd characters who walk with a quick pace and squared shoulders, eyes challenging anyone to try and mess with them, the area feels deserted. While on the way to whatever address Ed had clutched in his hand, you make prolonged eye contact with an old woman smoking a cigarette on her veranda. She has a curious glint in her eye as she watches the three of you pass. Suddenly, you are very aware of Al’s friendly, young face, your extreme lack ability to intimidate, and Ed’s….well, Ed might be fine. He could blend right in if he embraced his natural scowl and menacing glare.

“Here.” Ed says, stopping immediately. You and Al nearly run into him. You look up to see a small, brick building, much shorter than the blocky buildings surrounding it. The little building is sandwiched between two behemoths. Most windows are dark, save for a few on the top floor, and one on the bottom. Ed walks up to the front door and raps on it with his metal hand.

You hear a woman shout something indistinct. Another woman replies, and they engage in a shouting match before one woman groans loudly, and the door swings open.

Standing in a rectangle of light is a tall, rather severe-looking woman, probably somewhere in her mid-to-late thirties. Her dark hair, shot through with a few streaks of silver, is loose and limp around her face and shoulders. Her face is long and tan, a natural frown gracing her features. Thick eyebrows furrow above a pair of bright, brown eyes at the sight of three dishevelled teenagers standing at her doorstep.

“Hello?” The woman says. “Who are you? What do you need?”

Oh, bloody hell, she said that quickly.

Ed simply replies, “Goldheart.”

A massive change comes over the woman’s face. Her eyebrows unfurrow, her mouth relaxes, and her eyes widen. She turns her head to the side, still looking Ed right in the eyes, and shouts, “Mila!”

A rough, raspy female voice replies, rather coarsely, “Who’s at the door? I’m not getting my ass out of this chair.”

“Mila, get over here.”

“C’mon, I said-”

“Now!”

“Fine!”

The other woman- Mila- grumbles and groans, but comes into view nonetheless. Mila is a shorter
woman, probably in her early twenties. Her face is round and pale, graced by a short nose, full mouth, and framed by ear-length blond hair, the roots starting to grow in brown.

“Who’s this?”

“Sieghild sent them.”

Mila blinks. “Wait, you mean your-”

“Yes. Get them a room. We need to talk.”

The austere-looking woman waves you inside, slamming the door shut behind you. You find yourself in a dimly lit, narrow corridor. Scratched hardwood creaks as she walks into the next room, waving for you to follow her.

The walls are painted warm, earthy tones. The paint is chipping off in some places where things like chairs and feet have struck the walls over the years to reveal garish, dated, flowery wallpaper. Paired with the slouchy, second-hand furniture and weird statue of a rooster staring you down from the corner, this place could be mistaken for some old grandma’s house that had seen much better days.

“Sit.” The woman says, pointing at a lumpy, striped sofa. Your trio immediately obeys. She leaves the room with purpose in her step.

With her absence, tense silence fills the room. You exchange nervous glances. Who is this woman? Why does she have such a creepy statue of a rooster?

The woman comes back, this time with a tray of black coffee in her hands. She sets it down on the coffee table, seizes a cup, and settles into a squashy armchair across from your uncomfortable sofa.

She takes a sip, running an appraising glance over the three of you in turn. She takes in Ed’s long hair, fierce golden eyes, and proud jaw, Al’s kinder features, warm golden eyes, and nervously tapping feet, your hunched shoulders, bitten bottom lip, and fidgeting fingers, and seems to come to a decision.

She sets down the cup much harder than she needed to, and looks right at you with a piercing gaze. “You said ‘goldheart’. Explain.”

When Ed begins to sign for Alphonse, her gaze locks on his hands. “Which one of you is Deaf?”

Al takes a moment, then nervously raises his hand.

She nods, then speaks much more slowly than she had been. “Now, explain.”

“...how.” Ed says, leaning back against the sofa with arms tightly crossed. “What, exactly, do you want us to explain? I was under the impression that-”

“Don’t get snippy with me, young man.”

Ed’s mouth shuts so quickly that you can hear his teeth click.

“Explain to me why you’re here, who you are, what your intentions are, and where you’re from, because, my, you have a bizarre accent.” She takes another sip of her black coffee. “The coffee isn’t poisoned, you know.”

You, Ed, and Al hesitate before taking three of the mugs of coffee. Ed pouts about being shut down
that coldly and concisely, holding the cup close to his chest.

“We’re in danger, I’m Ed, he’s Al, they’re [Y/N], we just want somewhere to sleep, and I don’t know.” Ed says. “Does that help?”

The woman hums, swirling the coffee in her mug. “How old are you three? Fourteen? Thirteen?”

“Sixteen and fifteen.” Al says.

She doesn’t answer for a long time. Ed breaks the silence, saying, “We don’t even know your name.”

“Ikumi Brunner. Does that help?” She deadpans, looking Ed dead in the eyes. You see Al’s mouth part out of the corner of your eye, his shoulders untensing as he tilts his head to the side.

Mila chooses that time to shout from a room off the corridor. You can’t understand a single word she says, but Ikumi replies just fine, in sharp, loud German. Ikumi takes one last, long drink from her cup, composes herself, and stands.

“You’re lucky you have Sieghild Yoxall to depend upon. In any other situation I would’ve turned you away from my doorstep. We’re overcrowded as it is.”

“Overcrowded?” You say, the first thing you have ever said in this woman’s presence.

She looks right at you. You almost have to fight back a shiver.

“Yes, overcrowded. This place is a bit of an.....unlisted hostel. Cheapest lodgings in Marzahn. But that means you three will have to deal with being packed into a single room. It’s down the corridor, second to the left.” She gestures down the corridor with one arm. “Sleep well. Be out of here every morning by ten o’clock. Nighttime curfew is midnight. Make good choices or I will not hesitate to put you on our dish duty.”

“Yes ma’am,” Al says, and judging by his confused blink, he did so out of pure instinct.

She nods and leaves you three in the parlour with little fanfare. The room feels empty without her commanding presence.

“Huh.” Ed mutters.

“Does she remind you of who she reminds me of?” Al asks, reaching around you to poke his brother in the shoulder.

Ed shakes his head and laughs himself. “Oh, definitely.”

There’s a pause, and then Ikumi is shouting, “Get off my sofa and get your dirty shoes off my rug!”

, and you, Ed, and Al are quickly exiting the parlour, tray with four cups of coffee left behind.

Chapter End Notes

*hey, get yourself some learning in with your fanfiction, lol. All of this is very true. In fact, when looking at aerial photos of Berlin, you can actually tell where the separation was between West and East Berlin because of the differences in the colors of the
streetlights. West Berlin has these really light, white streetlights, and East Berlin has these dark, old-fashioned yellow ones. The blocky buildings of Marzahn are Soviet constructs, built during the period between World War II and reunification in 1990. Eastern Berlin is still kind of struggling, as it is much less affluent than its western neighbour. Unfortunately, in the past, Marzahn was known for having a lot of neo-Nazis populating it. Anyways. I spend too much time on wikipedia.

Hey, all! You guys get a chapter two weeks after the last one! How cool is that! I really loved writing this one, as you’ve finally got to Berlin after literal chapters of travelling. Also, this chapter is 4900 words- is it just me or they getting longer and longer?

**Daily German with Vhahnov/Argentia**

*Unser-* *our*
*Dein-* your, familiar singular
*Mein-* mine
*Sein-* his, its
*Ihr-* hers, its

I really hope you all are enjoying this so far! I’m happy the plot is picking up, so I can see your reactions in real time, lol. Please tell me how you feel in the comments! I love seeing feedback from you.

(Extremely unrelated side note, but I’m honestly curious: how old do you all think I am?)

Have a wonderful day/night!
Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The morning after you collapsed onto one of the beds shoved into your tiny broom-cupboard of a room, you began to realise that Ikumi describing this place as an “unlisted hostel” was probably sugarcoating. The people lodging here had hungry, lean looks about them, like they’d seen a whole lot more than you had in your short teenage life. One man, tall and at least an Ed-and-Al across, had a sharp glint in his eye as he stared the three of you down the first morning of your stay. He analysed every bit of your appearance, and turned back to his newspaper and black coffee.

Ikumi watched you three from the kitchen, at a worn and scratched dining table. This made breakfast (which was just rolls, marmalade, and cold cheese) a little awkward under her sharp eye.

You all made sure you were out of the building by 8 o’clock that morning. It was just as rainy as yesterday, perhaps a little lighter, but much warmer. Ed shed his jacket to wear around his waist, unbothered by the rain splashing on him, but definitely bothered by the pain it was causing him. You don’t think he stopped rubbing his shoulder port the whole walk to the closest U-Bahn station in Marzahn.

You three settle into seats right next to each other, very wet and very disgruntled by the early morning. Morning commuters surround you and swarm the car. Some stand, holding on the yellow poles running the length of the car, and some sit, ignoring everyone around them. The ride is awkward. Sandwiched between Ed and Al and some businessman flipping through photos on his mobile, it goes without saying that you feel cramped.

Twenty minutes later, you’ve arrived at your destination: a low, plain-looking barbershop housed in the ground floor of a flat complex. The storefront was headed by a blue sign, advertising low prices at high quality in a cramped, large white font. It’s much too early for you to try and puzzle out the rest of it. So you don’t.

Miss Ikumi had told you three the address of the barbershop in a very pointed way, looking at Ed’s ponytail, and the brown hair touching the tips of Al’s ears. She had taken a long, loud sip of her coffee, and ignored any questions. Joke’s on her, though, because you had been planning to take your own pair of scissors to Ed’s ponytail after the alleyway incident.

You stand under the awning to get shelter from the rain while Ed tries to reconcile the upcoming loss of his hair with himself. His hand keeps coming up to run through the long, golden strands of his hair, which are slightly wet. Little baby hairs around his face are curling up with the humidity of the morning. Early-morning sunlight makes them glow white, a curly halo around his face.

What? Are you a Renaissance poet, now? Shut up.

“Five years of growth.” Ed moans. “Five years, all for naught.”

“Do you three need something?” A gravelly, male voice says. Two heads jerk over to look at the barbershop owner poking his head outside of the doorway. The third head, Alphonse’s, takes a moment to notice him.

“Yes!” You respond for Ed, jabbing him in the side with your elbow. “This boy needs his ponytail cut.”
The main raises one unruly, salt-and-pepper eyebrow at the sheer length of Ed’s ponytail. “Clearly. Come in.” His German is rough and distinctly Northeastern, the strange Berlin pronunciation you had come to notice all around you ringing in his vowels. The German Mr Auttenberg had taught at school was not Berlin German, as you have so falsely assumed, but High German, which you have deduced is about the same as using RP back home. You likely sound like a pretentious wanker.

The shop door shuts right behind him. You can hear the jingle of a bell attached to the door through the front window.

You press a twenty-euro note into Ed’s hand and push him towards the door. He sends one last nervous glance over his shoulder at you and his brother, and disappears.

That leaves you and Al alone under the awning.

Al scuffs at the ground with his boot, the brown leather scratched and dull from years of walking. His rucksack hangs, half-way full, from broad shoulders. You imagine it would be much more full had Ed not gotten into an argument with Al this morning about his chronic overpacking tendencies.

“Ed hasn’t had his hair short since we were children,” Al says, his voice splitting the awkward silence.

“At least it is a change,” You respond, shrugging.

“I suppose so,” Al counters. “But it’ll be like he’s...bald. He’s going to look naked.”

You snort. “Naked?”

“Yes,” Al laughs. “I haven’t seen the back of his neck since I was ten.”

Some annoying part of you supplies the thought ‘he nakey’ before you shake yourself out of it.

“What are you going to do? There is not much we can change.”

“I could dye it,” Alphonse says, pulling a chunk of tawny hair between two fingers. “I haven’t been dark-haired, ever.”

You consider the possibility of a chocolate-haired Alphonse. “Glasses?”

Alphonse raises an eyebrow. “Say that again?”

You mime round spectacles.

You see Alphonse consider this. “Maybe.”

The morning fog is starting to dissipate as the sun gets higher in the sky. The runners and bikers that had been on the streets earlier were now exchanged for businesspeople and university students.

The barber’s door creaks open.

“Well, that didn’t take very long,” Alphonse remarks, turning.

You peer around Alphonse, and have to hold in a slight gasp. Oh, no, this isn’t going to go well for you and your weak little pining heart.

Ed’s ponytail is gone. In its place is a cropped, short hairdo somewhat reminiscent of his childhood style, but much, much shorter. His fringe is trimmed somewhere above his ears, the wave in it now much more pronounced without the extra weight.
You weren't aware of how much the long hair had aged him until it was gone. Now, paired with the army-green jacket and blue jeans, he looks like he could be any teenage boy you can find loitering on any given streetcorner, not a Victorian/Edwardian protagonist. The slight childish roundness in his face, though dwindling, is much more apparent without the longer fringe to slim his cheekbones. It looks so foreign - and not bad. At all. Oh no.

“Of course it didn’t take long, that guy just went up and hacked my hair off like it was some garden weed. No warning or anything!” Ed huffs, ungloved left hand going up to feel at the back of his head. “My head feels so light. Five years’ of my hair is sitting on some barber’s floor.”

“You look eleven, brother.”

“I do not, Al.”

“Woah.”

Ed stops talking and turns to you. Blood rushes out of your face. You had not meant for that “woah” to escape you.

“It looks rather strange. Seeing you. Without hair.” You attempt to explain.

“I’m not bald!” Ed protests, left hand combing through his newly short fringe.

“Anyone else?” The barber looks thoroughly unimpressed at the three arguing teenagers on his doorstep, gesturing towards the dark, dry interior of his shop.

“Me,” Alphonse raises a hand, winks behind him, and disappears into the shop.

You and Ed sit in surprised silence.

“Why did he wink?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“How do you not know, he’s your brother.”

“My brother is a person with very strange motivations who I encourage you to ignore,” Ed grumbles, rubbing his gloved hand over a suspiciously reddened face.

The wait is much longer this time. By time that you can feel the dampness of the rain start to penetrate your t-shirt, it’s been quite a while since Al had entered the shop. This wasn’t unexpected, though, as all the barber had to do to Ed was take a pair of garden shears to his scalp, but it was becoming rather apparent by now that waiting and waiting and waiting was the bane of your existence.

“We should get you some glasses,” You say, running a glance up and down his familiar, sharp profile.

Those stern eyes flick over to you, eyebrows furrowed. “Why? I can see perfectly well.”

“You’re still recognisable, even bald.”

“I’m! Not! BALD!” Ed exclaims, throwing his hands into the air. “Here, feel!”
Ed snatches your hand in his own (you gulp, because fuck you, that’s why) and brings it to the back of his head. He slaps it against his head and forcibly rubs it up and down. It appears the bottom part of his hair is much shorter, and grows longer as it reaches the top of his head.

Al chooses that time to exit the barber shop. He freezes in the doorway and you all stare at each other for an awkward three seconds, your hand still on Ed’s head, Ed hunched over and sticking his neck out like a chicken, and Al, looking very weird with newly-dyed walnut-brown hair.

Ed drops your hand (you sigh in relief, because fuck you, that’s why) and grabs Al’s head. “Brown! Woah, you look even more like M-”

Both Ed and Al freeze. Al’s golden eyes stare, widened, into Ed’s eyes, which had dropped from the short strands threaded through his fingers to stare right into his brother’s. There is a short moment of silence, and then Ed is sighing, hand dropping to his side, shoulders sagging.

Ed smiles a little bitterly.

Al nods, a mirror image of Ed’s smile crossing his face.

You clear your throat, feeling very awkward and out of place all of the sudden.

Ed starts a little and turns to you, looking sheepish at best and downright flustered at worst. “So,” He begins, gloved hand rubbing the back of his newly sheared head, “Glasses?”

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You have to stifle a loud snort by slapping your hand to your face. The iced coffee clutched in your other hand nearly spills out all over the pavement at your feet as your shoulders shake with mirth.

Ed gestures flamboyantly again, nearly slapping his brother in the nose. The cheap black frames he’s wearing are slipping halfway down his nose, making him look like a wild-eyed librarian.

“And then, you know what I find myself face-to-face with?”

“What?” You wheeze. You can barely see where you’re going with your eyes screwed so tightly shut from laughter.

Al makes direct eye contact with you, as as his brother says his next two words, mouths concurrently:

“Sheep butt!”

‘Sheep bum’ shouldn’t make you laugh, but it does. You’re a disgrace.

“Somehow I had fallen into the sheep pen-”

“You’ve told this hundreds of times, brother.”

“It’s a classic! Sheep festival antics!” Ed counters, pushing up the frames, the lenses slightly fogged from the humidity.

“I have every word of it memorised,” Al teases, slapping his brother on the forehead. “Time to move on.”

“Fine. Wheat festival it is then.”
“Wait, no-”

Ed slaps Al’s hands and immediately goes off onto a rambling tangent eerily similar to the one had just been forced to cut short. His eyes lock on you, their gold bright with suppressed laughter, and he grins. The brightness makes their depths practically glow out of his face.

Your heart thuds in your chest. Uh-oh.

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You find yourself, hours later, resting on a cement staircase leading down into the hostel’s back garden - if it could even be called a back garden. It’s more of a tiny, dry patch of grass behind the hostel, where the recycle bins and trash cans are kept. There is about 10 meters’ worth of grass before pavement eventually rises up from the soil and claims the rest of the garden for the street.

Ed and Al lay adjacent to each other, sprawled out flat against the damp dirt, chests heaving and faces bright red with exertion. Ed’s short fringe is flopping off his face in a sweaty, blond tangle of hair, damp with drizzle. His and Al’s trousers are pushed up past their knees, wet and slightly muddy up to the ankle. Ed’s new (fake) corner-store glasses are clutched in your hand, the thick black plastic digging into the fleshy part of your palm.

They (read: Ed) had decided to spar as soon as they returned to the hostel, for some god-knows-what reason, and what followed as soon as they returned to the back garden was in equal parts impressive and hilarious. There was nothing funnier than seeing an out-of-practice expert fall on his arse and swear so violently that a woman in a neighbouring flat complex lobbed a half-empty box of angelhair pasta with surprising accuracy at his head, annoyed German trailing its deadly path out the window.

“I really-” Ed pants, running his fingers through his hair. “I really thought I could make that butterfly kick.”

Al doesn’t reply, of course, his eyes screwed shut and the soggy angelhair pasta box clutched in his hands, the cardboard still dented from Ed’s head.

“You did not,” You say, a teasing grin splitting across your rain-damp face.

“I know that! D’you think I can’t feel how bad my fucking butt-“

The back door behind you slams open with such force and volume that you nearly fall off the narrow stone step.

“What in God’s name is going on out here?” Says the clipped, contralto voice of Ikumi Brunner. Ed sits up, ramrod-straight, and scrambles to his feet, failing miserably to hide the great splotches of brown on his feet and legs.

Ikumi Brunner stands silhouetted against the bright light in the doorway, a mop held tight in strong, calloused hands, her dark hair pulled up into a high, sloppy ponytail. She raises a quizzical eyebrow at the still-slumped form of Al (Ed kicks Al in the shin, making him yelp a full octave higher than his usual range) and the thick covering of mud on the soles of Ed’s feet.

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“Are you...mud wrestling?” Ikumi says, completely perplexed. The ever-present crease between her brows has become a canyon by now.

“No,” You say, crossing your arms over your chest and narrowing your eyes at the two boys in front
Ikumi looks at you. “You. The English one. I like you. You two- you’re not setting foot into this house until you resemble human boys rather than pig pens.”

Ed squawks at this, motioning at the the muddy garden around him and the complete lack of material to clean up with, but Ikumi waves a hand at him and ushers you inside. “Spick and span.” She commands, and the door shuts behind her with a final click.

You can hear Ed grumbling through the wood of the back door.

“What were they doing?” Ikumi asks, leaning her shoulder up against the wall of the narrow corridor you currently reside in. Her mop handle droops at her side.

“Sparring. Do not ask me why, they are a strange pair,” You shrug, manoeuvring around her.

“Hmm. My sister told me to look out for them, but I suppose this doesn’t count. They can take care of themselves.”

“Sister?” You ask, stopping at the end of the corridor.

“Adopted sister, but that makes no difference. Sieghild Yoxall is too cautious of a woman.”

Though there isn’t any biological relation between them, Ikumi Brunner and Sieghild Yoxall share the same unimpressed facial expression - the twist of her left eyebrow and corners of her mouth are identical to Miss Sieghild’s to a T. Even the way she moves her hands and the fiery, do-no-harm-but-take-no-shit look in her eyes are eerily similar.

“I guess I’d understand a healthy sibling rivalry like theirs,” Ikumi says, more to herself than you. She stares off into space, crease between her brow deepening again, and you take that as your cue to go.

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Ed and Al make their way back to the room half an hour after you left them in the back garden. You hear them before you see them, Ed’s rough tenor jabbering about starting research on something or other.

Al comes through the doorway first, only in a thin white vest he had been wearing under his T-shirt, which is held tight in Ed’s hands, the soft grey stained with mud. Ed’s feet are completely clean and Al is looking rather disgruntled and dishevelled, as though the shirt had been forcibly taken off of him. His signing is jerky and curt, his face twisted like he had just taken a great whiff of a pile of manure.

Al collapses on the camp bed right next to where you are perched. Ed continues talking and signing to him, taking no heed of his brother’s increasingly annoyed expression.

“What I’m saying is that we’ve got a city’s worth of information right at our fingertips, a train ride away! I know you saw that map-”

Al signs something, and Ed pauses before continuing the rest of his sentence entirely in sign.

You watch Al stare, deadpan, at his brother, eyelids pulled halfway over golden eyes in a completely impassive expression. He twitches, blinks, and refocuses his brown eyes on his brother.
Wait.

Brown?

Al’s unimpressed expression is a little more mild as he replies. Ed flops down onto the camp bed next to him, hair splaying in all different directions. Something about his face looks off—maybe it’s just the haircut? No, his face looks... more square, if that makes sense...

In a display of surprising cleverness, all of the dots connect.

You sit up straight on the bed as though electrified, face blanching. You can’t tear your eyes away from the two boys, still having a conversation and completely unaware of their friend’s slight panic.

A hand comes to rest on your chest and stomach. They rub the places where you can feel the ghost of another’s large scars as if they were your own.

It all makes sense.

_000_

1,700 kilometres away, several hours later, a bearded man nurses a glass of ale at a half-empty, hole-in-the-wall pub. His attention is drawn to the television hanging just above the morose barkeep scrubbing the formica-topped tables.

Some news show plays on mute. Blocky subtitles scroll at the bottom of the screen.

A SEARCH FOR TWO MISSING BOYS HAS BEGUN IN LONDON. WE HAVE HEARD FROM SEVERAL SOURCES THAT THEO AND ERIK ELRIC, ALONG WITH ANOTHER STUDENT-

The man raises an eyebrow at the names, adjusting his wire-frame glasses. He’s hunched over the bar, hand clutching at something unseen on his stomach, face covered with a thin sheen of sweat. His neck is corded with effort or strain, and upon further inspection, you would find his hands tremble, white-knuckled, around the glass of ale.

The boys’ pictures pop up on screen, and the man chokes on air.

They’re formal portraits, no doubt—probably taken for school. The one above ‘Erik Elric’ has a challenging glint in his familiar, golden eyes, a long blond ponytail spilling over the shoulders of a navy-blue blazer. A long fringe frames his cocksure smirk and angular jaw. The boy called ‘Theo Elric’ shares the other boy’s angular jaw and straight nose, but his face is softer, and his eyes are rounder, and a smokey, light brown colour. A head full of tawny brown hair barely brushes the tips of his ears.

His hand tightens inside the folds of his coat. He stares, eyes wide and glassy, at the television screen, eyes affixed onto features so like his own.

“They’re here,” He whispers, a world’s worth of weight behind those two simple words. His weakening heartbeat beats a scarlet tattoo in the injury to his torso.

“You all right, mate?” A thick Scottish brogue belonging to the barkeep rips his eyes away from the television screen. He finds himself staring into the muddy-brown eyes of the barkeep, a sheaf of electric green hair half-obscuring one quirked eyebrow.

The man raises his hand from his stomach to wave the barkeep away. He realises too late what he has done, as he sees the barkeep’s face blanch. His palm is saturated with deep, crimson blood.
“OI! JACK!” The barkeep shouts, stumbling away from him to retreat into the back room of the pub. “Some cunt’s out here bleedin’ to death!”

“What!” Jack replies.

“Ring an ambulance, or-”

The man takes that as his cue to leave. His hand finds its place on his injury again, and he limps out the door into the back alleys of Glasgow. The barrel of the pistol in his coat pocket is still hot. As every minute passes, more and more of his vision splotches to black.

He falls against a wall, half held up by his shoulder. Shallow, shuddering breaths punch through him. Violet, lifeless eyes stare at him every time he blinks, the last echoes of their owner’s voice ringing in his head.

“I’m sorry.”

He slides down the wall, shoulders trembling.

It’s a terrible day for rain.

Chapter End Notes

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I’m so sorry that this chapter was so boring/awkward!! It’s been really difficult to write for this fic lately and you lot deserve so much better alksdgjkhksgd

The pacing is SO OFF omfg like?? 4 pages for a haircut?? What am i doing lmao

Keep in mind though that the chapters after this are gonna get darker and longer b/c after this we have what, fifteen more? And there’s a lot of plot points going into those. I can’t believe it took 35 chapters to actually Get Going. Goodness.

**Daily german lesson with vhahnov/argentia**

*der Kampfsport* - martial arts

Have a good day/night!
This rain is getting ridiculous.

The streets of Berlin were streaming with miniature rivers of rainwater. Passing taxis and bicyclists had an annoying tendency to spray up massive fountains onto the pavement pedestrians, to the chagrin of everyone who didn’t want to be dirtied by the water in kerb gutters.

You moodily chomp a flavourful bite of stewed, spiced carrot. Usually, you would be content in your relative solitude, but cowering under a shop awning in the drizzling, humid rain, eating some admittedly very good but lukewarm Turkish food, you weren’t too happy to be left out on the street.

Ed and Al were down the street a ways, probably having the time of their lives in the Berlin Scientific Library doing whatever the hell they were doing. You’d been instructed to wait outside about...(you check your mobile clock)...two hours ago. In the meantime, you’d made friends with: a suspiciously well-groomed stray cat, a seven-year-old Turkish kid who had the pockets of his cargo-shorts stuffed to the brim with toy cars and had insisted on showing you each and every one, and an old woman who was bursting to tell someone about her granddaughter, who had gotten married just this summer, and look at her wife, aren’t they the cutest thing?

You hear a very familiar groan behind you and whip around to see Ed and Al walking towards you, Ed with his head dramatically thrown back towards the sky, letting out the most dramatic, cinematic groan to ever come out of a human’s throat.

“Well?” You ask once they come within speaking distance. “What did you find?”

“NOTHING!” Ed groaned louder, running a hand through his short hair. “We found nothing of consequence.”

“What were you researching?”

Al jumps in after a slight hesitation for translation. “Nothing. We’ll tell you later. Let’s go find something to eat. Ed’s been complaining about how hungry he is for the past fifteen minutes.”

You blink a little at the sharp rebuttal, but shrug, and hand the unknown Turkish food to Ed.

“What’s this?” Ed asks, spinning the cardboard container in his hands. You search his face, taking in the sharp corners of his eyes, and how his expressions look just a little too off.

“A surprise.” You answer, turning to follow Al down the street. You catch a glimpse of sheer bewilderment gracing his face, before he starts, and follows his brother and friend down rainy German pavements.

_Sieghild Yoxall is having a very good lunch at her desk when it is interrupted by her phone ringing. She fumbles with her fork for a few moments before slamming it down on her desk and snatching her telephone from the receiver._

“Sieghild Yoxall, social services division, how may I help you?”
“Sieghild?” A familiar woman’s voice came, slightly raspy from cigarette use and weighted with a heavy Northern German accent.

“Ikumi? You know you’ve called my work phone, right?”

“I know!” Ikumi exclaimed. A hitch of breath came from her side, crackling through the hundreds of kilometres of distance between the two women. “There is no time. I have an emergency. I know what to do not.”

“I’m going to need more-”

“Dummkopf, I will explain! Quickly.” Ikumi said, the raspiness of her voice escalating to a growl. “There are people here. Suits. Badges. Many questions. They want to know of Ed and Al. Ah, and the English child you pushed on me.”

“I didn’t- they what?”

Ikumi groaned. “There are government agents here, and they’re asking about our charges. They seem very on edge. Mila is keeping them occupied, but I don’t know how long she can do it. I don’t have any way of contacting the children.”

“Shit,” Sieghild swears. “Give me a moment, I’ll be right back.”

She hesitates before hanging up.

Sieghild bows her head and drags her fingers through dishevelled, dark hair. “God help me.”

For the hundredth time that week, she picks up the phone.

_000_

Your mobile was switched off before lunchtime.

Otherwise, you would have noticed the 17 missed calls from an unknown number.

_000_

There’s a kind of quiet to the Marzahn streets as you, Ed, and Al return to the hostel after lunch. The after-rain hush was split by taxis rushing down wet roads, barking dogs, and distant police sirens. The courtyard in the back garden of the hostel is as muddy and swampy as ever, and you look at the sea of mud around the edges with a feeling akin to affection now.

Ed and Al are having a very spirited conversation in sign language when a loud ‘bang’ comes from inside the hostel. You and Ed’s heads jerk up to stare at the back window of the hostel - coincidentally, the only window that can see into your boarding room from the street.

“What’s going on?” Al asks in Amestrian once he notices the sudden stalling of Ed’s hands.

Unfamiliar voices are speaking inside your room, and silhouetted figures cross the window.

“What the fuck?” Ed whispers, scuttling to hide below the window with some kind of deep-seated instinct. Once he notices that you two have not followed him, he does a ‘what the hell are you doing?!’ gesture, and flaps his hand, motioning for you two to follow him to crouch below the window-sill.

“What is going on?!” Al asks again, starting to sound much less confused and more angry.
“They’re speaking English very quickly, I can’t tell what they’re saying,” Ed rasps. “[Y/N], your time to shine.”

As Ed begins to sign for Al, you tilt your head up to the window and strain to hear the voices inside.

“There are two people, a man and a woman…” You hesitate. There’s more murmuring from the window, and the sound of footsteps on the creaking wood floor. “No, there are three men and one woman. Another woman just came in...that is Miss Brunner. And Mila. They are all in our room.”

You go silent for a few moments, trying to get a hold on their conversation. “They picked up some kind of tip, I guess...off of my phone…” You hear one of the men say something that makes your blood run cold. “They are here for us.”

“All of our belongings are in there,” Al groans, threading his fingers through his hair.

Ed frowns, eyes flicking back and forth between the window, the brick, and the courtyard. You can practically see the gears turning in his head.

“Okay, I’m going to do something stupid,” Ed says, peeking up over the window sill. “If this works, I want you two to salvage as much of our shit and get out of here as fast as you can. I’ll try and meet you at that train station we arrived in.”

“Wait, brother, what-”

With one smooth motion, Ed discards the fake black frames and tugs his hood up over his short hair.

“Bye, motherfuckers,” Ed says, grinning crookedly, a two-fingered salute at his brow. Then the flings up the windowpane and bodily heaves himself into the room.

Your breath catches as the voices go silent.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” Comes Ed’s accented English, saccharinely sweet.

There’s a long, long second of silence, and then a cacophony of English shouting.

“Ed, what-” Miss Brunner begins, before she is cut off by a man much closer to the window than you expected.

“Listen, kid, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. Hands in the air.” A man says, his English thickly Yorkshire-accented.

“Hm,” Ed says, playing up the theatrics to the highest degree. “Well, I guess it’s a good thing I’ve spent my entire adolescent life disobeying orders from people with guns.”

Ed then says something vulgar about where the four people inside could stick their firearms, and with a wild laugh, sprints out of the room. The four people run after him, shouting to each other, and then, quiet. The chase spills out onto the other side of the street, where you catch a glimpse of Ed’s gold hair through a gap between the hostel and the neighbouring buildings.

You and Al stare where his brother had disappeared, dumbstruck by the sheer stupidity of Ed’s actions.

“Are they out?” Al asks. You nod silently.

Al shakes himself. “I’ll go get the luggage.”
He braces his arms on the windowsill, and with one smooth motion, catapults himself into the room.

“Good afternoon, Miss Brunner, Miss Mila.” Ed’s rucksack and holdall are lowered onto your lap. “Thank you very much for your hospitality.”

Al jumps out of the window, shoulders laden with the other two holdalls, and beckons for you to follow him.

Miss Brunner and Miss Mila crowd the window, looking rather dumbfounded as you and Al round the corner, weighed down by baggage and heads bowed to the rain.

“Good luck, Elric brothers and friend,” Mila mutters, barely a whisper, unheard by anyone except Miss Brunner.

“Elric?” Ikumi asks, turning to Mila with a single dark eyebrow arched.

“That’s their last name, isn’t it?”

“We were never told their surnames.”

“Oh,” Mila frowns, rubbing the long, swirling tattoo on her neck. “Guess it just felt right.”

_Puja Thakur painstakingly scrubs red lipstick from her cheek. Her hair is tousled and dishevelled, great lengths of it falling from the French plait that she had thrown it into this morning._

“Pia?” Her Dida calls from the kitchen, her footsteps growing closer. Puja frantically seizes the band from the end of her braid and shakes her hair loose from its confines.

“Yes, Dida?” Puja forces a grin, whipping around from the mirror to face her Dida, hoping she doesn’t look as guilty as she feels.

“Come here, there are people on the news,” Her Dida commands in Bangla/Bengali, motioning for Puja to follow her to the sitting-room.

“What kind of people?” Puja replies, following her through their flat, hands combing through her hair in an attempt to tame its waves.

Didima stops in front of the telly, pointing a finger at the screen. “Aren’t those your school friends?”

Puja freezes. Glaring from the screen are the school portraits of Ed, Al, and [Y/N], but Ed and Al’s names aren’t displayed under their pictures. Rather, ‘Theo Elric’ and ‘Erik Elric’ are emblazoned below each of their faces. “Yeah, they are.”

“Why are they on the news? The newscaster’s Scottish, I can’t understand a word she says.” Dida says, crossing her arms and frowning at the television as though it’s offended her.

“They’ve...gone missing, Didima.”

_After an hour’s trek through East Berlin, the U-Bahn, and West Berlin, you and Al sulk on a bench in front of the Berlin Central Station._

The rain is at a near stop now, the drizzle almost imperceptible while at a standstill. The heat of the
day begins to permeate the humid air, warmth gripping you by the neck and arms as the cool of the rain dies away. You’ve long since stopped trying to decipher the conversations of passersby, their German too quick and too complex to attempt comprehension.

Al has been a warm constant at your side for the past half-hour of sulking. You can feel him lean against you slightly, the shoulders of his short-sleeved, grey-green T-shirt damp from humidity and sweat. His nut-brown hair has gained curl and frizz as the hot hours go by, rumpled by the repeated travels of fingers through sheaves of hair. His hands are braced on his jumping knees, no doubt a symptom of his anxiety for his brother, a worry you also share.

You can’t take the silence.

“Oi, Al,” You say. You only realise your mistake after Al doesn’t reply. You nudge him with your elbow.

“Hm?” Al hums, still focused on the cracked pavement in front of him.

You nudge him harder until he turns to you.

“What’s wrong?”

“Can you tell me something?”

“Mmhmm.” Al waves for you to go on.

“What were you and Ed researching earlier?”

Al pauses, his eyes widening slightly before he shaking his head. “Sorry, I really don’t think Ed would want me to tell-”

"Why?" You ask. You feel a little rude for pushing the subject, but come on. What harm would telling you do?

Al stops, before breathing a little, soft laugh. “You make a compelling point."

He takes in a deep breath. “This isn’t our world. And, well... we have to go home at some point.”

Something in your chest jolts painfully with realisation.

“You see, there’s this principle back home - we seem to operate on different rules of science than Earth does - called alchemy. We think the alchemy that got us here might get us out. Ed’s been thinking about this since September...”

You don’t hear the rest of Al’s sentence. It made sense, their desire to go home, and you knew that the day would come when they’d have to leave- but you never thought it would come this quickly. But, based on Ed’s frustration that morning, they aren’t getting very far. Some deep down, selfish impulse was happy about this. You quickly scold yourself for it.

Al has gone quiet in his pensiveness.

“Hi,” Ed’s scratchy tenor comes from above you. You look up and bite your lip to stifle the relieved grin spreading across your face at his sudden appearance.

“So, it went well?” You ask, taking in how frazzled he looks. His chest is heaving with exertion, his cheeks flushed. His hair is windblown, a streak of dirt smudged along his cheekbone, and the elbow of his hoodie is stained a deep crimson. His eyes are a little wild and a little too bright, darting
between pedestrians as they cross the edges of his peripheral vision.

“*That’s a word for it.*” Ed groans, grabbing his brother’s hand and heaving him to his feet. “*We’ve got to get out of here. I shook them off for a little bit, but they’ll make a connection. [Y/N], do you have those specs?*”

You fish them out of your trouser pocket, stuff them in Ed’s waiting palm, and turn around to stare at the shining glass face of Berlin Central Station.

“*What do you mean, get out of here? Get out of Berlin?*”

“Yes,” Ed says, rubbing a sleeve over the useless lenses of his glasses.

“*Where to?*” Al interjects.

You look between the two boys, before shrugging and saying, “*I’ve never been to Bavaria. How about Munich?*”

_000_

Minutes later, you're watching the skyline of Berlin retreat into the distance from a train window.

The heat rises in steaming waves on the horizon, green German countryside stretching out to bask in the late afternoon sun. Foreign conversation surrounds you on all sides, the sharp sound of the other passengers' words strange to you, after weeks of exposure to only the round, somewhat Latin sound of Amestrian.

Ed sits across from you, his short fringe shuddering with the movement of the train. His profile cuts a sharp contrast against the navy-blue train seats, his brow knitted severely, gold eyes staring out at the blurring hills. There's an exceptional sharpness to his gaze and jawline, made obvious by a kind of unfamiliarity weaved into your new perception of him. Which boy was this? Which Ed?

You haven't had much time to mull over last night's discovery, much less to pinpoint the much subtler differences between Ed and his counterpart. Al was easy - he twitches, and his eyes darken, in both the metaphorical and colour sense. Ed was an enigma.

This is unfair to both of them, you scold yourself, talking about them like they're strangers. You're likely friends with both sets of boys. Their ability to seamlessly transition from each state of being suggests the change is unconscious and has little impact on their perception.

"What are you looking at?" Ed says, snapping you out of your zone.

You blink, staring right into golden eyes for a single moment, before bashfulness takes over, and you glance out the window to save your dignity. "Nothing."

Ed holds his gaze for just a moment longer.

_000_

"*Are they out?*"

"I know not."

"*What do you mean you don't know? Certainly they came by the hostel? I couldn't contact anyone!*"

"They are gone. I know where they are not. Do not yell at me. They went off. Alphonse and the
English child are going to be fine. Ed, maybe not."

"...thank you, Ikumi."

"Mm. Goodbye, Sieghild."

_000_

Chapter End Notes

better late than never

**Daily German Lesson with Argentia**

*unregelmäßig* - irregular

*einzigartig* - unique

playlist for this fic
There’s something sickly in the air.

Dry heat pounds down onto your head from the summer sun above, the thick-mouthed sounds of Bavarian German battering your ears. You’ve long since surpassed your ability to understand the most accented of speakers, but you’re still able to puzzle out snippets of conversation in passing.

“Oh, my god, did you hear about what happened at that McDonald’s?”

“And I said to him, ‘No, that makes no sense, why would someone put peanuts on a pizza?’ Schmarrn!”

“Pfiat di! See you in Vienna! Love you, little mouse!”

Ed sits next to you on the bench outside some family-owned shop called Rottmanns Bäckerei, the sweet smell of baking bread and cooking meat trailing out into the summer street and coaxing in passersby. Ed’s leg is jumping. He scans the pedestrians in front of him with a hard eye and pursed mouth.

You lay a hand on his shoulder, and he starts. “Relax, Edward.”

He sighs, smiles at you, and stops jiggling his leg, but you can see that same cold, analytical look in his eye as he stares at the cobblestones at his feet.

Your stomach growls. You haven’t yet had any breakfast, and Al has been taking forever in that little shop. From what you can see in the doorway, there’s a counter, and a waiting area that can fit a line of customers two deep at the most. A tiny bistro table with rickety metal chairs is shoved into a corner under a window to the back alley, half-underneath a spiral staircase leading to the living area above. Two women sit under it, holding hands next to their morning coffees and sandwiches. The taller woman has her long, blond hair tied up in two plaits, while the shorter woman has her gigantic mass of curly brown hair let out to blow in the breeze coming through the shop.

Al appears, lit by the morning sun as he emerges like an angel bearing the feast of the gods. He clutches a paper bag and three cups of iced jet-black coffee, grinning.

“Godsend!” Ed cries, jumping up to seize no less than five packets of sugar, a cup of coffee, and notably, no creamer. (‘Godsend’ probably wasn’t the direct translation of whatever Amestrian word Ed had said, but he had said it enough by this point that you can guess its intended meaning by context.)

“Hold on, hold on,” Al laughs, jerking the cups away from him. “They should get theirs first. Guests first.”

“Am I a guest?” You ask, reaching up to grasp the cup Ed begrudgingly hands you.

Al shrugs. “You have priority over my brother.”

“Oi, oi, you shouldn’t talk about your elders like that!”
“They’re also my elder, Brother.”

“Whatever. Don’t jerk me around.” Ed takes a long sip of whatever ungodly sugar bean water concoction he had created.

The three of you sit in silence, drinking coffee and eating ‘Semme’ (you learnt that word this morning!), enjoying the warmth of the Bavarian summer morning. Munich bustles around you, businessmen and schoolchildren and college students, crowding the mopeds and cars out of the cobbled streets on their daily commute. The half-timbered buildings and tall Baroque structures crowding above make the already tiny streets seem narrower and the sky seem smaller. Above their reddish roofs is a stark blue summer sky, nearly cloudless.

“So,” You drag out the word, taking in the solitary cloud floating above you. The sun is beginning to make you sweat a little. “Any updates on the research situation?”

Ed chokes, a little piece of bread flying out of his mouth as he coughs (gross, Ed), and whirls to glare at his brother. Al pointedly ignores him.

“They were going to find out, ‘brother dear.’”

Edward sighs, blowing strands of hair out of his eyes. He looks at you, golden eyes burning molten gold in the light of the early morning.

“Fine,” Ed groans out. “We’ve got nothing. The last time anyone did any alchemy research on this side of the Gate - ähm, this dimension- was, atsch, five hundred years ago.”

“To summarize, we’re up Snowfeather peak with a cookbook and a mackerel.” Al snorts derisively, taking an angry sip of coffee.

You freeze while tipping the black coffee to your mouth. “Y-you….huh?”

Al blinks at you, blankly, then exclaims, “Ah! That must be an Amestrian one, then.”

“I...I think I understand what you were trying to say.”

Ed snorts into his liquid monstrosity. “I think the English equivalent would be ‘halfway up shit creek without a paddle.’ Though, as I’ve heard, it sounds rather American.”

Al takes a moment before throwing his head back and quite literally cackling up a storm. He slaps at Ed’s left arm, captured in the unforgiving throes of mirth.

“I knew that would make him laugh,” Ed mutters to you, leaning heart-poundingly close to your ear. “You might not guess it, but he loves vulgarity. Thinks it’s hilarious when unexpected.”

You’re too flustered to respond without a voice crack, so you just nod, and try to cool your warm cheeks with your iced coffee. Al continues to cackle as Ed gazes out onto the street, warm and content. He groans and outstretches his legs into the flow of pedestrian traffic. Al slaps his knee in scolding.

The three of you pass the morning in relative quiet. Despite the veneer of peace that settles around you like a shawl during winter, you worry over the rumblings of a storm ahead.

There’s little things you’ve noticed while spending these last few weeks with the boys. They’ve each got their own little quirks that humanize them, demystify the Fullmetal Alchemist and his formidable,
adorable brother.

Al can’t ever have his food touching. When the three of you stopped for lunch in a little restaurant in Leipzig, his mashed potatoes cross-contaminated his Schweineschnitzel and he cut off the bit that had touched tubers, curling his lip.

Ed plays with, or used to play with, his hair while he thinks. He’d twist it into plaits, knots, curls, bows, anything. Now, his hair is short, and out of the corner of your eye you often see him abort curling motions in dead air where his hair might have been.

Al loves anything to do with cats - but you knew that already. It doesn’t make it any less cute when he spots a stray and his eyes light up with a kind of childish wonder that his brother tends to lack. He’ll crouch down to the cat’s level, click his tongue, beckon it closer, heedless to dirt on his trousers and glances of passersby.

Ed loves kids. Loves them to death. It’s got to be the big-brother instinct kicking in as he makes faces at toddlers on public transport and smiles at shy children who cower behind their parents’ legs, curious eyes trained on his metallic right hand.

Sometimes, you remember that they’re going to be leaving you soon, if they have any say in it. You find yourself clinging more and more desperately to these wisps of the brothers as they draw further and further away.

Your days in Munich pass in a haze of wake up, eat, study, eat, and sleep. You avoid main streets, security cameras, anything with the slightest risk of an eagle-eyed onlooker recognizing you. Needless to say, the luster of old-town Munich has worn off by now.

You spend your late mornings and afternoons in the sprawl of scientific libraries scattered throughout the cities. Sometimes, the brothers send you on coffee and lunch runs. You complain, just so you have something to complain about, but you go anyways. The evenings are quiet. Sometimes you and Ed go on walks through the back streets and alleys, and you try to ignore the gleam in his eye if he sees a street corner or building he recognise. Al takes you on tours of the hostel you’re staying at and the surrounding area, led by outdated guidebooks from the 90s stolen from the library.

This particular morning feels different from the others. You woke up too early, startled awake by a clap of thunder. The barest hint of dawn is coming through the drawn curtains. You can hear Al snoring on the bed above you. Ed, however, is sitting up in bed, arms drawn around his knees and staring listlessly into the dark. You fall back asleep before you can think about it.

The day stays dark and cloudy. Even at noon, the library’s large windows let in just a trickle of light, so the fluorescents above hum all afternoon, bleaching everything they touch just the slightest bit green.

You’re sitting alone with Ed at a study table just before the library closes. Al is reading a thick, leather-bound tome a few rooms away, completely engrossed in it. The door to the study room is closed, cutting off the sound of the other library patrons outside. It’s silent, except for the whine of the lights, the turning of pages, scratching of pencils, and the creak of Ed’s metal joints.

You watch him read. He creases his brow when he concentrates. He’s going to have lines between his eyebrows when he gets older, at this rate. His hair shifts as he runs his hands through it, silky strands catching between seams and joints.

Ed’s smart. Al’s smart. They’ll figure out what they need to do to go home, they’ll do it, and you’ll
be alone. It’s selfish, it’s so selfish, but you don’t want them to go. Not yet. Puja will miss them, Belinda Wheatley will miss them, your mum will miss them, you’ll miss them. They’re your friends, now, and any friend leaving is enough to make someone sad. There is the fact, though, that you can’t be pen pals once they move away. They’ll be gone, and they’ll be gone for good.

“Ed?” You mutter, before you can stop yourself.

Ed blinks as he is brought out of his zone. He looks at you, raising a quizzical eyebrow. “Hm?”


“You made me stop reading for it. It’s obviously a little important.”

You snort a little, and rub the back of your neck. “I just...are you...you want to go home, right? Definitely?”

Something unfamiliar crosses his face. “Well, yeah.”

“Erm...I’m just going to miss you. You know?”

Ed smiles in a way that is very familiar.

“You’ve been reading since noon, don’t you think it’s time for a break?”

Ed shakes his head. “The library closes in fifteen minutes, I’ll take a break then.”

“Come on, Ed,” You nag. “Your eyes are going to bleed. What’s fifteen minutes? If we leave now, we can catch the seven-thirty train back to the hostel.”

“I’ve got to make the most of the time I’ve got in here while I’m at it.”

That should be innocent, but the tenseness in his voice while he says it gives you pause. You decide it’s not a big deal, and continue to nag him. “I’m sure Al would agree with me.”

“Oh, would he?” Ed gives you The Look, and reopens his book. “He’s going to benefit from my over-studying, anyways. Up at the crack of dawn, down at the rise of the moon, Häschen.”

You try to ignore the fact that he basically called you ‘bunny/sweetheart,’ and focus on the alarming
admission that he was up early that morning, still reading. Still studying. “You were up at the crack of dawn studying? Ed the sun rises at...five-thirty, here. You’ve been studying for over twelve hours, now. That can’t be healthy.”

Ed shrugs. “Gets the job done.”

Blinking, you stutter. “Ed, come on, you know that it’s not good for you. I know you go to bed later than I do. How many hours of sleep do you get a night?”

“...Four?”

“Four?” You repeat, in German, for emphasis.

“On a good day.”

“What’s a ‘good day’?”

“Not today.”

“...how many hours of sleep did you get last night, Edward?”

Ed rubs the corner of the book between his fingers and stares unseeingly at the words in front of him. “I didn’t.”

“What?”

“I didn’t sleep. Last night.”

“Ed...”

“Damn, sorry, didn’t know that me trying to fix my mistakes and do right by my brother was a bad thing.”

“Don’t snap at me, Ed, you know very well that starving your body of the things it needs is more counterproductive to your goals than taking care of yourself properly,” You sigh, stacking the books next to you in neat piles. “Does Al know about this?”

Ed’s flesh knuckles go white on the book cover.

“Ed...you’re...you’re a kid. You need to have someone to lean on in this, you can’t just forge ahead all on your own and expect to carry your loved ones on your shoulders-”

Something explosive flashes in Ed’s eye, and he surges to his feet, slamming the heavy book onto the desk. His nostrils flare. “I’m not a fucking kid!”

His scratchy tenor shakes with something that isn’t quite rage. He is silhouetted by pale fluorescent lights that wash him out to a sickly grey-green, cheeks florid, shoulders shaking with barely contained emotion. His eyes shine with unshed tears.

You blink at him.

He’s never been this angry.

He’s been annoyed at Puja’s antics. He’s been miffed at Al’s teasing. He’s yelled. But this is something totally different. His fists are clenched so hard you can hear the metal one creak and screech.
A long moment of silence passes as you curl away from him, drawing away from his shadow on the table. He notices this wilting, and something breaks in his eyes.

He deflates almost as quickly as he exploded, collapsing on the desk chair, head in hands, sighing like an old man.

“I’m sorry,” Ed mutters. His hair spills through curled fingers. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t yell at you, I shouldn’t take this out on you.”

You can hear his breathing even out in the silence that stretches between you.

“I’m sorry.”

You shut the book that lies in front of you, delicately, as if you expect the slightest noise to set him off. You take a deep breath through your nose, and reach out for Edward’s elbow. He tenses before you touch him, but he does not pull away.

“Edward Elric, take what out on me?”

He raises his face from his hands and looks at you with such a deep, bone-set exhaustion that it startles you. He combs his fringe back with his unoccupied hand, leaving his fingers threaded through the greenish-cast sheafs as he stares through you. Ed closes his eyes, and with the arm you’re holding, grabs your hand, and holds it so tightly it hurts.

“I…” He starts, then gulps. “I’m not myself.”

You rub your thumb over his knuckle soothingly and hum.

Golden eyes snap open and bore into you with a desperate sort of intensity. “I get...I get these flashes of memories sometimes, you know? They’re mine, somehow, but I don’t remember getting them, I don’t remember...ihm...they’re horrible. Bloody, and scary, and, and-”

His metal hand drifts from his loose hair to cover his eyes. “I used to be able to tell when they switched. It was pretty clear. It’s hard to explain how it feels, like you become a new person, but it’s still you, and the you that you were becomes the ‘new person’...I guess the only person who would understand would be Al. You’ve seen him change, right? Right?”

He peeks through his metal fingers to watch you nod.

“But, but now it’s so smooth that I don’t even know if they’re separate now. Even Al, like- there’s the blonde Al, and the one with darker hair. Before he dyed his hair brown, I noticed that...it was blending. The colours. His natural hair colour is dirty blonde, now. You know that?” Ed’s breath is coming faster. “His eyes aren’t even- god, what was my Al’s eye colour? I can’t even remember, God fucking damnit, they’re both conglomerated in my head, fucking hell.”

“I’m Edward James Elric, I was born in 1899 in Resembool, Ost-Bereich, Amestris, and I don’t know who I am.” He wheezes and rubs at his chest. “I got stabbed. I died. I know that was both me and not me. Can you even tell anymore? Could you tell in the first place? Wait, shit, did you know there were two of us?”

“I figured it out.” You murmur, lacing your fingers together.

“Could you tell us apart?”
You consider this question. “It was more obvious at first, when I didn’t know. I can’t really explain it. Your demeanours were sort of different, your eyes had sharper corners, different scars, things like that.”

“Our scars are the same now.” Ed chokes out. “I’ve got that horrible one in the middle of my chest from—” He gulps. “—And that one from rebar and the one where the fox got me but a fox never got me and Envy wasn’t ever—”

He cuts himself off, practically vibrating from anxiety.

“Ed, come here.”

He doesn’t balk at your outstretched arms, rounds the table, and crushes you in a steel-armed hug. You feel him shake.

“I’m too weak. I can’t get us home without losing another one of my fucking limbs.”

You tighten your grip around him. “You will succeed, Ed. I know it.”

Edward Elric, the Fullmetal Alchemist, trembles in your arms, sniffing back the tears that sting at his eyes, and in the silence of the study room, you hear him mutter something in Amestrian.

“I’ve got so much blood on my hands.”

“Ed,” You hiss, biting the inside of your cheek to keep yourself from crying.

He pulls back, still in your arms, and stares at you dead in the eye. “Look at me. Look me in the eyes and tell me they belong to a child.”

Set into a face with a mishmash of familiar features, the eyes of a teenage boy responsible for the Liore massacre, the murder of a godlike monster, his own death, and the failed resurrection of his mother stare out at you. They’re dark and tired and haunted. Your own eyes start to sting, and without thinking, you lay a soft kiss on his forehead, gathering him up in your arms.

You sit there in silence until the librarian comes by to tell you that your time has run out.

Your nightly trip with Al is quieter this time. If he notices, he doesn’t comment on it. He points out every stray cat on the way, grinning at you in that sunshiney way of his.

You let your eyes drag over his profile as he clicks at a fat calico cat lounging on a windowsill. He’s been through a lot, hasn’t he?

The warm summer air drags its fingers through his hair, and he leans into it, content.

He hasn’t got his hearing because of me. He’s alone and sad because I dragged him here. I’d give blood-price for just an inkling of his happiness. I’d give anything, anything, for him to smile under the light of an Amestrian sunrise again.

When I look at my hands, all I see is rusty stains and knives and godless abomination, and goddamn Truth, am I tired of it. I made the wrong choice with white gloves all those years ago. Yeah, yeah, you edgy twelve-year-old fuck, Magnum Opus colors and all that, but white stains like nobody’s business.

I’m so tired.
I’m alive, though barely. I apologise for the lack of actual events in this chapter, but i just. Needed to get this out there, for you all. Hallo wieder.
hey this was supposed to be a fluffy chapter but:

WARNINGS FOR BLOOD, A PANIC ATTACK, AND INJURY

there's a nice surprise in this chapter too! :-D

Ed is jumpy around you for the next week. His ego twinges like a poked bruise every time you smile at him in that sad, knowing way -- no pity, not from you, but empathy, understanding. It’s great. It’s awful. Ed wishes he’d never told you anything, and he wishes he’d told you everything.

He seeks out your hand now, brushing it during breakfast, pinching your knuckles after a bad pun, wiping rainwater off of your palms. Never with his metal hand. He hates it; he hates this vulnerability you drug up kicking and screaming from the depths of his mind where it cowered next to guilt and nightmares and stunted childhood. He hides it, but he ignores how bad of a job he’s doing when your cheeks stretch around little bitter smiles and it’s so obvious you can see past his veneer, deep, deep down.

He has to almost physically stop himself from rambling to you, because he knows you’d listen. You always listen. But you shouldn’t, not to him, not to the things he wants to say.

After all this, it comes to him at dawn on one warm August morning, sunlight setting dust motes ablaze as they float in the air of your shared hostel room. Two strangers snore on the bunks opposite his and Al’s. Ed can hear Al’s soft, huffing breaths and murmured Amestrian as he dreams. You snore, mouth agape. You’re probably drooling a bit. Gross.

A pillar of burning gold stripes across your curled form. Your nose twitches as dust floats in your face. You snuffle in your sleep.

Ed startles. There’s a small, soft smile on his face as he watches you sleep, like some kind of...creepazoid.

The admission tastes like ash in his mouth. Al was right.
Ah, shit.

Ed and Al are waiting outside a kitschy souvenir shop in the warm summer sun when Al realises. You’ve gone in for something or other -- a bag pin or patch, something of that nature-- and Al watches how Ed’s eyes follow you into the doorway.

Ed freezes once he hears the little scoff to his left. He stares into the middle distance, wishing his hoody was large enough to swallow him.

“*Oh?*” Al says, dragging it out like poisoned honey. He jams his arm into Ed’s. “*Care to share what’s got you blushing like the Goddess of Feather Mountain?*”

Ed scowls and draws his shoulders up around his reddening ears. “*Dick.*”

Al smiles pleasantly. "*Arsehole.*"
Ed sputters for a cutting response, and can only come up with, “You’re one to talk, after getting all-moony eyed at that librarian this morning.”

“What?”

“You know. The one with the maenad curls. Blue sweater.”

“Which one?”

“There were two of him?!”

Al shrugs in feigned disinterest. “What can I say.”

Ed waits for him to continue, but when no explanation comes, he shoves his whole body weight into his brother, making him stumble over cobblestones to regain his balance. “Arsehole.”

“Dick.”
Al continues to scroll through Twitter like a middle-aged mother (phone in death grip, opposite forefinger used like a baton). Ed peers over his shoulder, and when Al turns to give him the stink eye, he feigns unconvincing disinterest.

‘Are you…’twitting?’’ Ed signs.

Al blinks. ‘What?’

‘Twitting.’ Ed signs again.

An incredulous pause. ‘How old are you?’

You choose that exact moment to make your reappearance. Al’s face lights up and he pushes off the wall to greet you. The beginning of a glowing grin makes itself known on Ed’s mouth before he mercilessly strangles it back under his skin.

‘Whaddja get?’ Al asks, craning his neck to see inside the paper bag you’re clutching.

Ed sees the gears turning in your head as you process Al’s slangy Amestrian. A switch flips, and you smile. ‘I got a pin to put on my rucksack, and an iron-on patch for Puja’s jacket... oh! Al, there were some Munich-themed sketchbooks, I got you one with the twin clock towers. And Ed...hm...hold on...”

You dig elbow-deep into the bag, whoop with victory, and pull out a sturdy chain necklace, a blue-and-white Bavaria checker pendant dangling and glittering in the sun. ‘It seems like something you’d wear, if a bit... kitschy.’

Ed grasps it in his left hand and holds it up to the air.

“Sorry, it’s kind of stupid. You don’t have to wear it.”

“No, I’ll wear it. I like it. Shove off.” Ed says, latching it around his throat.
You hold up a placating hand. “Alright, alright. Point taken. Let’s go get some lunch.”

Ed catches Al’s gaze out of the corner of his eye as he goes to follow you. Al signs something that could be translated as ‘whipped,’ and Ed responds in kind with the universal gesture for ‘I do not appreciate you.’

If Ed has to read the word ‘thermodynamics’ one more time, he’s going to lose it. Mass conservation and energy expenditure and nuclear electron whatever, Truth, he misses when alchemy was 5 grams of potassium and some water and BOOM, job done. This was much simpler on the other side. You just had to have a couple fingers to spare, some chalk, and Bob’s your uncle.

You know, Ed tried to do some alchemy, back when he was holed up in that bunker hospital and Sieghild’s flat. He clapped his hands together, slapped them to the ground - and nothing. It felt like he was slapping the floor. There was no air shift, no sudden scent of ozone, no zapping electricity in his bones as he felt the power deep in the earth fuel the shifting floor beneath him, nothing. The ground felt dead. It was like getting a tooth knocked out, and for weeks afterward having your tongue run over the empty gum where it once was.

Ed didn’t say anything to Al, but he was losing hope that there was any way to use alchemy on this side of the gate. He knew Al was having his doubts, too, but Ed’s younger brother wasn’t as jaded and pessimistic as Ed.

Their biggest obstacle was even finding out if there was an opening to the other side. Ed couldn’t very well donkey kick the Gate of Truth open like some common bedroom door (his go-to move with locked doors and gates and things of that ilk.) There’s gotta be a gap for alchemy to stick its fingers in and heave open. Maybe the Gate was one of those doors that was a push on one side, and wouldn’t open the other way. Yikes.

Ed blinks his eyes back into focus. The page in front of him sharpens - some book in Drachman/Russian on parallelism. He sighs and snaps it shut.

“Oi,” He says, in English. You look up from the notebook you’re scribbling in. “Can I talk at you for a second?”

You nod solemnly. “Ah, yes, rubber ducking. Go ahead.”

He understands the words ‘rubber’ and ‘duck’ but not mashed together like that. Oh, well. You look
at him expectantly, eyes shining.

“Well, to begin-” Ed starts, his hushed voice staying between the stacks of books that cram you, Ed, and Al into the confines of a too-small reading desk. He yammers on about nothing and everything, trying to piece together the fragments of chemistry, alchemy, and physics drifting around in his brain.

Al keeps shooting glances at the prettyboy librarian that is shuffling around in the stacks beyond your table. A noisy, squeaky book cart creaks as he tiptoes on its lowest rung to face reference books. Al tilts his head at the way his dark curls twist against his ears. Ed makes a personal note to tease him mercilessly later on.

Ed prattles and prattles, and notices you’ve put a hand up to stop him once you pinch his flesh shoulder. He stutters off in surprise. Your hand is warm. Ed feels like an egg in a microwave. Hydrogen, helium, lithium, beryllium, boron, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, fluorine, neon-

“Okay, Ed, listen, you sound all tangled up and confused. Why don’t we take a walk, clear your head, huh?” You say, motioning towards the windows and the bright Munich afternoon bleeding sunrays over bookshelves and hardwood floors.

Ed nods dumbly, and lets himself be led by his hand outside. He shoots a glance behind him, to see Al fluttering his fingers goodbye and smiling that particular squint-eyed grin. Ed scowls, and jerks his head at the prettyboy librarian, deep in Linguistics at this point. Al goes a little pink around the edges.

Summer sunlight is warm. A breeze ruffles Ed’s hair. He spits and splutters while fishing the hair out of his mouth. Snorting and muffled snuffling comes from somewhere to his left, and he turns to see you trying and failing to not laugh at him.

“What’s so funny?” Ed says, elbowing you in the shoulder. “Got something on my face? You got a problem with me?”

He’s half-joking, and a little embarrassed.

“No, no problem at all. Do you need a hair clip?”

“What-”
You’re already reaching up and running your fingers through his hair to secure his fringe with a few Kirby grips. You lean back and appraise your work, nodding. “Come along.”

Ed isn’t punch-drunk, necessarily, but at least punch-tipsy. He follows like a lost puppy, as you lead the way around the library building in the shade. Your eyes are bright and your grin brighter. Holy hell, he needs solid punch to the face, or even better, a emotion-disabling pill. This is unbearable.

“Okay. Here’s what’s going to happen,” You poke him in the chest. “I want to help. You guys obviously know more about...alchemy, but it’s good to have an outside voice somewhere in there. It’s so easy to get trapped in an echo chamber. You are going to tell me everything, right now, and I am going to do my damnedest to get shit done, verstehst du?”

Oh, okay. This is fine.

Ed picks at a blemish at the back of his neck and sucks on his teeth. “I dunno, it’s a pretty long-”

“I’ve all the time in the world, Edward.”

Ed stops. And stares. Afternoon sunlight plays on your skin in yellows and golds, staining it vibrant and lovely. It catches your eyes in some places. You glow with life and summertime, and Ed doesn’t know what to do other than say ‘yes.’

“Oh,” Ed says. He knows his ears are red, he can feel it. Damn the Elric flush. Is he a schoolgirl?! Get it together, Fullmetal Alchemist! You’ve been punched, kicked, beaten, stabbed, dismembered, and killed a little, goddammit! “Okay. Get comfortable, arsehole.”

“I’m comfortable, git.”

He tells you everything.

Carriage #3 rattles along the tracks of the Piccadilly line. Puja Thakur and Belinda Wheatley sway with the movement of the carriage, drowsy, the fluorescent lights of the tunnel flashing across their faces in regular intervals. The carriage is near-empty, which is odd considering the time of day, but Belinda pays it no mind, choosing instead to doze on Puja’s shoulder.
A pair of Korean tourists are having a hushed conversation at the end of the carriage, hunched over their phones, trying to make sense of their map of the London underground. A businessman is resting his eyes after a big lunch. A woman in full-out punk clothing bobs her head to Rachiminooff, her arm snaking around the pole to Puja’s right.

The brakes squeal, and everyone pitches to the side as the train hisses to a stop.

*Ding.* Two posh voices speak.

“*MIND THE GAP BETWEEN THE TRAIN AND THE PLATFORM.*” A man says, followed by a woman saying, “This is Russell Square. The next stop is King’s Cross St. Pancras. This is a Piccadilly Line train via Heathrow.”

“You know,” Came Belinda’s voice, rough from sleep. “They use a male and a female voice from a reason.”

Puja starts a little, then smiles down at her. “What’s that?”

“They found out people listen to warnings from authoritative male voices more, and listen to information from a calm female voice more.” Belinda yawns. “Something gendered.”

Puja frowns. “That’s a little…sexist, innit?”

“Yeah.” Belinda says, yawning and stretching. She just misses brushing Punk Woman’s tattooed elbow. “Well, it works, so we can deliberate on the sexist implications of such a system after people decide to listen to people who know what they’re doing.”

Puja huffs out a soft laugh, and leans into her girlfriend. A trio of tourist girls board the train. Puja takes one glance at their socks, Birkenstocks, and Nike athletic shorts, and concludes that they are soft-spoken Americans.

Belinda switches to French for a moment to whisper in Puja’s ear. “*Look, those girls are so beautiful. Especially the one with the red hair, do you see her?”*
“Yes,” Puja says. She spots the red-haired girl’s long, shiny braid, and smiles wryly down at Belinda. “Do you have a type?”

“Ack!” Belinda exclaims, pinching Puja’s elbow.

Puja holds in a guffaw as the train starts up again.

The Korean couple, clad head to toe in Adidas, gathers up their belongings as the train approaches King’s Cross. The businessman blinks awake at his watch alarm. The punk woman disentangles herself from the pole, Beethoven’s 9th leaking from her headphones like it was being played by the world’s tiniest orchestra.

Belinda braces herself for the upcoming stop. Puja glances at her London Underground app, which tells her they have two more stops until their destination.

The train rattles rhythmically through the twisting, weaving tunnels of the London Underground. Puja looks over Belinda’s shoulder as she scrolls through twitter, passing fanart of anime Puja doesn’t recognize and replays of Euro 2016. Belinda laughs at a tweet her thumb is obscuring, and lifts it to show Puja, as the train begins to shudder to a stop at King’s Cross.

The station looks...barren, at first. Puja doesn’t register that until the posh man’s voice comes on above them, and the doors open to a unobscured opening. No American tourists trying to shove their way in without letting the passengers out first, no chattering children, no harried businesspeople in suits carrying attache briefcases.

The other passengers on the train, who were for all appearances readying to disembark, do not disembark. They stand there as a posh woman’s voice reads off the tourist attractions available on the street above. The American girls are none the wiser. The Korean people keep digging through their matching Adidas backpacks.

A tall, tall woman, dressed in austere black and severe stiletto pumps, boards the train and blocks the doors from closing.

“PLEASE CLEAR THE DOORS.”

“Puja Thakur.” She says. She’s not from London. She’s not from anywhere in England, either, or Scotland, or Ireland, or even America. She is...broadly European. As accentless as accentless can be. “I’ve come to collect you.”
Belinda’s hand freezes. Her Pikachu and Clefairy phone charms clatter together.

“It’s government business. We have arrest warrants from the City of London Magistrate’s Court if you do not comply.”

The American girls have their headphones in. The Korean couple is preoccupied. The businessman and the punk woman are looking straight at Puja. Only now does Puja see that the businessman’s watch alarm was never set. In fact, he isn’t even wearing a watch. The punk woman has her half-shaved head pulled up into a clean updo. She’s standing right between Puja and the other exit on the carriage.

“PLEASE CLEAR THE DOORS.”

“I...I’m not supposed to go with strangers,” Puja says. Stupid! Stupid! What are you, five?

The American girls start to look up at the unexpected delay.

“You know why we’re here, Ms. Thakur. It won’t be long.”

Golden eyes and sanguine linen. Hollow steel and golden eyes.

“PLEASE CLEAR THE DOORS.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Puja takes a deep breath, extricates herself from Belinda’s embrace, and leaves the train carriage, dwarfed by the woman at her side. The punk woman and the businessman follow.

The doors close. All the remaining passengers in the carriage pitch to the side as the train picks up speed towards Caledonian Road Station. Belinda sits alone, phone dangling from her hand. Pikachu and Clefairy sway in tandem as the train shoots into the tunnel, away from King’s Cross.
“...So,” Ed sighs, wrapping his story to a close as he settles into the chair across from his brother. The prettyboy librarian casts a coolly annoyed glance at his volume. Pretty face, cute bum, bad attitude. Huh, he and Ed have a few things in common. “We’ve first got to figure out if there’s even a gap to be had. And that’s proving very difficult.”

You hum. Ed watches as a litany of emotions flash across your face. He can almost see you think.

“What would...that look like?”

“Hm?”

“How would an interdimensional gap such as that present itself?”

Ed considers this for a moment, picking at a hangnail on his flesh hand. “Strange occurrences, I s’pose. Blurring between reality and dreams, the voices of the distant…”

He trails off as he sees you shudder, and seized with the older-brotherly urge to be an absolute bastard, jerks towards you to make you jump. You slap his shoulder, and he shakes with suppressed laughter when you wince at hard flesh-to-metal contact.

“Voices of the distant?” You ask, once you’re finished with failing to discipline him.

“Yeah, ahm, if I heard people speaking Amestrian when no one was there. Something like that. Given that I hadn’t developed male hysteria and started hallucinating.”

Your eyes go big. “Oh!”

Ed raises an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“I, er…” You do that thing you do when you’re embarrassed; you run your thumbnail over your eyebrow and back again, and again, and again. A self-comforting gesture, Ed thinks. You don’t even realise you do it. Why does Ed realise you do it? “I…do that.”

“I’m not a Priestess of Vaticinia, you’re going to have to…” It clicks. Ed’s whole jaw goes slack. He
slaps his brother’s arm with an unwarranted amount of force. Al squawks, with good reason, until he notices Ed’s frantic signing. They have a short conversation, which, put into text form, would consist of:

AKLDFJSFJ??!

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

LSKDJFLAL????!!LJA??????

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Al gapes at you, and presses his hand to his chest like an old Southern American woman.

“Tell him, tell him!” Ed nudges you.

“I...I heard Amestrian voices, talking about alchemy, a few months back…” You stammer in Amestrian, and cut off when Al makes an odd choking noise and throws his hands in the air by his head. Ed nods with a disturbing amount of enthusiasm. His smile has a touch of mania.

“You’ve been WHAT?”

“Why didn’t you tell us?!”

You have the decency to look abashed. “I didn’t want you two...to think...that I was...crazy…”

“Crazy?” Ed gapes. “Crazy? Have you met us? You hearing weird shit is the least crazy thing to happen in our lives in the past year.”

Ed seizes you by the shoulders, so taken with this victory that he doesn’t see the way your eyes widen at his contact. “Do you have any idea what this means?”

“Yes, I believe I’ve pieced this together.” You say, picking his fingers from the sleeves of your T-shirt. “You have a starting point now. Take that and jump off, kid geniuses.”
Ed translates for Al, and they both salute at you, whispering twin ‘aye-ayes.’

You go back to your book, and Ed catches a glimpse of a soft warmth in your eyes. He cracks open that Drachman book on parallelism, buzzing with victory-induced dopamine.

The prettyboy librarian peeks over his circulation desk to stare at the back of Al’s head.

Your trio of teenagers wander their way back to the hostel once the prettyboy librarian shoos you out for the night. You, Ed and Al chatter in English and Amestrian, hands flying and laughter given freely. The street is quiet, which isn’t strange for the evening in this part of Munich. The pleasant cobbled streets and warm light streaming through open windows is familiar to Ed in a way that he hasn’t been able to place for the last few weeks. It’s an itch he can’t scratch; why he never gets lost here, or how he knows where to look for the oldest businesses, or why the building across the street from the scientific library the three of you have holed yourself up in always makes him a particular type of sad when he sees it.

The sun hasn’t set yet. The shadows are growing longer, but the sun is still well above the horizon, making windows opaque in shades of light yellow and deep blue.

Ed is mid-joke --the one about the Cretan milkmaid and the Amestrian farmer’s boy, you know the one -- when he enters the cramped foyer of the hostel. The kid at the front desk, who couldn’t be older than nineteen or twenty, glances up at them and glances down at his feet. A bad attempt to feign nonchalance. Ed goes into dog-of-the-military mode.

Since he was eleven, Ed has been both blessed and cursed with situational hypervigilance. More than one time, he’s been too safe and been sorry about it. But he’s not dead, not yet, so suck on that, Colonel.

That is to say, Ed knows when someone’s lying. He’s been in a situation before where something nasty is hiding up in a rented room, or a rented hayloft, or down in the house cellar. The look on the hostel attendant’s face -- that’s the look of someone who gave directions to someone dangerous.

Al, ever the perceptive one, notices Ed’s change in demeanour as if Ed had shouted it at him. He rests a hand on your shoulder, and you make a questioning noise as you’re drawn away.

Not this again, Ed groans inwardly. We were finally getting comfortable. Where are we supposed to go now? France? I didn’t even like Creta!
Ed saunters up to the counter and tries to play up whatever height advantage he has on this harmless uni student. “Hi there.”

The student looks like he’s trying to swallow his cheeks. No luck to be had here. Ed slaps the counter and pulls away. He doesn’t miss how hard the counter attendant flinches.

Ed gives Al a long look, and sets up the stairs, as quietly as someone with a metal leg can climb. He hears Al speaking to you in Amestrian, trying to convince your mule-stubborn arse to go anywhere but here.

The dormitory where the three of you had been sleeping is on the fourth storey, right across from the lift. Six beds, one empty. One window. Three chairs, a table. Shared bathroom, no exits. The strangers had one holdall each, and one carried a hiker-style rucksack. Each person in Ed’s party carries a rucksack and a holdall. Each person has their rucksack on them, but their holdalls are in the private lockers at the front of the dormitory.

Ed rattles off these details in quick succession as he pulls up his hood and tugs off his glove. He sticks close to the wall, where stairs are less likely to creak when walked upon. There are no voices as he approaches the dormitory. Either there is no one in there, or they’re getting smarter.

He crouches by the closed doorway. In the punch card slots by the door, the strangers’ punch cards are missing. Instead, the punch cards of Theo Mueller, Erik Mueller, and Alex Taylor sit in full view. The door is unlocked.

Out of pure muscle memory, Ed claps his hands together and presses his left to his fluted transradial forearm plate.

Nothing. Tongue over empty gum. Dead ground.

Ed stares dead-eyed at it for a second or two that he can’t afford. He can’t fight anyone with this fuckin’ thing. Roll up the sleeve of his hoody, and you’ll see this worn out old thing is tarnished to hell, and rickety as all get out. A few months back, he was trying to move a sofa in his and Al’s sitting room, and something popped. Ever since, when he moves his wrist a little too hard, something rattles in the ball-and-socket joint. He can feel it jostle the nerve wires. It’s been so long without maintenance that sometimes he gets little electrical shocks at the port socket site. Either the wires are on the fritz, or the rubber buffer is being worn away. No one on this side of the gate works on automail. Even if they could, they’re too scared to. He’s stuck with topical maintenance and WD-40.
Shit, he misses that grease monkey.

Ed shakes himself. You can’t ruminate here, you daft idiot. Knock knock, back to Earth.

Ed presses his ear to the door to listen for any kind of life. His hearing’s been out of sorts since joining the Amestrian military -- explosions and gunfire and trains and all that -- but he still strains through the plasticine ‘wood’ for an out-of-place creak or breath.

He pulls a skinny 10-centimeter switchblade out of his back pocket and unhooks it from his silver pocket watch chain. The click as it disengages from the safety lock and flicks open into the late afternoon sun is deafening. He holds it in his good hand, keeping his bad arm out for balance.

There aren’t any breaks in the sunlight that streams under the dormitory door. Ed takes his own advice for once and stands, rears his foot back, and slams his Converse-clad metal leg into the doorknob. The metal shrieks and snaps, wrenching the strike plate from blue wood and clattering onto the floor. The door was unlocked, Ed just likes to make an entrance. Inconveniencing people who sell him out to unknown government entities was an additional plus.

There’s nobody in the room. They didn’t sell out the room number, they sold out their schedule.

Ed wastes no time wrenching open their private lockers and loading his shoulders with three full holdalls. On his way out the door, he rips the punch cards from their slots and shoves them in his underpants.

He sprints down the stairs, past the attendant in a middle-fingered blur, and out onto the street. You and Al are nowhere to be seen. Ed hears a click behind him, and makes use of those precious seconds to take off like a bat out of hell.


Ed skids around corners and down alleyways. The shoes follow.

“Aren’t you bored of this by now?” Ed shouts behind him. “Don’t your mothers miss you?”
A whistle comes from an alley to the left. Some English birdcall. Ed repeats it and takes off in the other direction.

Houses and streets whiz by. Blue, brown, yellow, white -- there are no buildings, just colors and shapes and Ed’s ragged breath.

Ed hears a crack and feels heat. Stinging. He ignores it.

He snatches the rail of a fire escape and hurls himself up the steps. Whirling blindly, he aims a kick at the steps below him with his metal leg. It connects with someone. Ed clambers up the metal steps. He reaches the top, grips the topmost ladder, and rips it free from the stripped screws holding it in place.

A man dressed in a navy blue suit shouts in alarm, and slams into the level below, crushing another well-dressed man underneath him. It won’t hold them long, but it’ll give him time.

Ed reels, half-nauseous, eyes snapping from exit point to exit point. Doorlocked, edge deadly, garden cover -- wait.

Ed sprints towards the edge of the building, and jumps.

For one long, long moment, he flies. Dingy, borrowed hold-alls arc around his shoulders, looking like Icarus’s off-blue, polyester wings.

He hits the corrugated metal roof hard. Three storeys between the edge and this rooftop garden, and he feels it. Something flesh pops, and something metal squeals. Another something snaps. Hot, wet something drips down his neck. He tumbles down the roof like a sack of potatoes dropped down a hill, and falls one more height. Insult to injury.

Terra-cotta shatters.

Ed has crash-landed in someone’s back garden. An older woman, kneeling by the remains of potted geraniums, cries out in alarm and fury as Ed crushes a number of plants under him.

“Ach! Stupid kid! You landed in my tomatoes!” She says, with the same amount of scandal that
news of a neighbour’s unfaithful husband would garner. She whacks him on the head with a dirty trowel.

Ed gasps and wheezes, trying to refocus his eyes on the scowling face hovering over him. Something hit something, and something is broken.

She dumps a watering can full of dirty, cold water on his face. Ed jolts awake.

“Dammit, lady, I don’t care about your tomatoes, I’m running from Interpol!” Ed scrambles to get out of the nest of fruit (vegetables?) he has found himself in.

She shakes her trowel at him. “You’re not special, haven’t we all?! Get out of my garden!”

“Burnt dinner rolls to you, too!” Ed jumps up and vaults over the edge, onto a dumpster (his metal knee twinges,) and takes off down the street. He barely hears the woman’s confused ‘what does that mean?!’ before he collides with Al, coming down the opposite way.

“Where’s-” He starts, frantic, but cuts off when he sees you come up beside Al, chest heaving.


The three of you stand and wheeze at each other for a good ten seconds. Al shouts.

“Oh, dear God, Ed, what did you do?”

“What?” Ed replies, taking stock of his limbs. Nothing’s twisted the wrong way, he’s still standing, and nothing obvious is missing, so-

Al reaches and runs his hand down Ed’s neck. It comes back red.

Ed stares. “Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘oh,’ you’re missing-”
Shouts from above. The three of you look at each other and take off again.

Ed takes stock of your condition, the amount of blood on Al’s hand, and decides hiding would be a good option indeed. At the first abandoned business he sees, he stops dead in his tracks and puts his metal elbow through the door’s window pane. He unlocks it, glass ripping at his sleeve, and ushers the two of you inside.

He slams the door shut.

Complete silence. Ed leans against the door and slides down until his arse hits the dusty floor, and he sits there, panting. He takes in as much stale air as he can manage without coughing. The hot, wet dripping down his neck is not stopping.

You cover your face with your hands and curl up by an overturned table, and mutter something about wanting to go home. Al stares at Ed, grimacing, eyes wide.

“Something on my face?” Ed jokes weakly. His fingers twitch with leftover adrenaline.

“It’s all-” Al signs, at a loss for words.

“Red? Yeah, I landed in some hag’s tomatoes.”

“Brother,” He hisses in Amestrian. His voice is sharper than either you or Ed have heard it, and the both of you look up. You gasp, a hand flying up to your ear.

Ed copies you, and lifts his flesh hand to his right ear.


A little sick flash of understanding.
Ed fumbles for what’s left of his ear, blood staining his hands, heart picking up a staccato drumbeat again.

“E-Ed...st-stop...stop. Stop. Stop! STOP! STOP IT!” Al shouts, grabbing his brother’s hands and yanking them away. A toddler playing with mud in the house.

Breath whistles through Ed’s gritted teeth. He goggle at his brother, all caged animal and panic.

“*It’s not gone, it’s not gone. It’s not gone, it’s not, I promise, you didn’t lose your ear, it’s not gone.*” Al says. His voice is shaking. He can probably feel it. “It feels like it, but it’s not gone. There’s a big chunk missing, but once we get it all cleaned up you’ll see it. It’s not gone, too. It’s not gone, too.”

Ed’s bloody hands grab his brother’s, and he pulls them apart to take stock of his brother’s health. Skinned knees, scraped cheekbone… he’s fine. Just scared. Al’s fine.

“I’m fine, I promise, stop it. I’m fine. You’re bleeding.”

“It’s a head wound, they bleed a lot.” Ed rasps. His voice sounds weird and throaty, like he’s been smoking five packs a day for thirty years. He gulps down the shaking, and tastes iron. “Hey. You.”

You look up from where you had been staring at your hands.

“Are you okay?”

You freeze for half a second, and then scoff. “I…”

You look fine, but you don’t feel fine, if that gleam in your eyes is anything to go by. Ed knows that gleam.

*Creak.*

Ed pauses. You all turn your attention to Ed’s arm, which screams as he twists it around to roll up his
tattered sleeve. The faint scent of burning rubber fills the room, the metal gives one last rasping cough, and his elbow joint goes limp.

“...of course.” Ed sighs. He leans his head back to hit the door.

Al slumps. He scrubs his clean hand over his face. “Ed, let’s go clea-”

“I’ve got it.” Ed sighs like an old man and rises to his feet. He hides his wince as his ankle twinges, and he limps to the back room of the condemned restaurant you’re holed up in.

Ed enters the restroom labelled ‘Frauen’, because no one’s around to give a shit, and leans against the stained sink, white-knuckling yellowed porcelain. He catches a flash of scarlet in the tarnished copper taps, and cringes. There aren’t any towels. Ed runs a trickle of water into his cupped hands, and splashes it in his face.

He looks up.

Edward Elric does not look back at him. A tall, skinny boy with short, golden hair stares at him with the same type of exhaustion that only old men have. Sick imitations of the Elric eyes gleam dully under heavy brows and dirt. All across the side of his neck is dark, crusty crimson, wet in some places and flaky in others. He braces himself, and turns his head.

The top half of his ear is gone. A jagged, sort of circular hole sits in place of where his helix piercing had once been. Thick, red blood flows down the curl of his ear, and drips off his earlobe, onto his collarbone and hoody.

Al appears behind him, old T-shirt in hand. He looks just as exhausted, if not more so. Ed doesn’t know which of his brothers are looking at him right now -- or if they’re even separate any more -- but he discovers he doesn’t care. He takes the T-shirt with his good hand, wets it, and begins to rub at the red on the side of his neck. Alphonse takes to ripping up the toilet tissue and wrapping it around his ear.

“So, real bullets now.”

Ed hums. “I don’t think they were trying to kill me, though.”
“Brother.”

“No, really.” Ed says. “We’ve got something they want. Information. Somebody missed. If you want a reliable way of taking someone down, you go for the center mass of the body. The head is a tiny target, and incredibly difficult to hit when moving. It’s pure shit luck that they got my ear.”

Al looks at him in the mirror. Beyond the door, you stare at the two of them. You look like you’re about to cry.

“I’m,” Ed sighs. “I’m sorry.”

Al shakes his head and rather roughly ties off the toilet tissue, which is already turning red. You hum the birdcall from earlier.

“You know what comes next.”

Al is gathering more toilet tissue, and does not see him speak. Your reflection nods. Ed gives you a sad little smile.

“Where to next, Mx. Travel Guide?”

You don’t even take a second to think. “Vienna.”

“Where’s that?”

“The mountains. Austria.”

Ed nods.

Silence takes over the bathroom. Voices trail past the broken window in the main dining room.
“*Can you talk to Austrians?*” Ed asks.

“*Oh, god, no.*” You scoff.

Ed breaks out in full-chested laughter. Al starts, and slaps his back, knocking the wind out of him.

“*I’m sorry, Al, sorry.*”

It’s quiet again. Ed takes one long look at himself in the mirror, tomato-splattered, bloody, dirty, and sweaty. Amestrian automail peeks out under the sleeve of a tattered 90% cotton, 10% spandex blend hoody from Primark. The red dye is synthetic. His black jeans came all torn up like that, and no, no one has asked him if he’d like to get those patched down the street. His stretchy crew socks have Scotty dogs embroidered on them, and his hand-me-down Converse wouldn’t last a week in the Ishval desert.

He does not belong here. Neither does Al, all Amestrian sensibility and Xerxian gold.

“*Alphonse,*” Ed signs in the mirror. Al glances up. “*We’re gonna do this, right?*”

“*Edward James Elric,*” Al grins, with a feral gleam in his eye, “*Do you think this is amateur hour?*”

Ed smiles something fierce and kind of broken. “*Wouldn’t dream of it.*”

Chapter End Notes

Ed’s perspective is SO fun to write in, you have no idea. It was difficult to sound like a pining disaster from a male perspective tho since my usual gay bastard thoughts are just the word ‘girls’ or smth repeated over and over again in increasingly incorrect spellings and grammar. also, it was great to write someone with a backstory that isn’t vague, and a personality that is extremely well-defined. that is, protectiveness, adolescent assholery, and intelligence.

**Daily German Lesson with Argentia**

Verstehst du? - Do you (familiar) understand?
My second love, coming in very close behind art and writing, is urban design and mass public transportation. I had so, so, so much fun writing about the London Underground. Like, an indecent amount of fun. What can I say, I like trains. (Did you know that the trains currently used in the Piccadilly Line on the London Underground are 1973 stock trains, and they originally had wooden floors? They are eye-burningingly blue travesties of time capsules and I love them. They might be gone by 2025, so I’ll treasure them while they exist)

Also, to my Chem teacher(s), I am so sorry that I had to look up a periodic table for the first two periods of elements I promise I know them.

It’s 1:44 a.m. here, so, good morning. Hope you enjoyed those SIX THOUSAND+ words.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://i.imgur.com/9rxFKcs.jpg) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!