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**What Are the Chances**

by MadMissMim

**Summary**

Roy and Ed both attend Central University, are both part of the Science Department, and even conduct their research in the same building, and yet somehow had never once met . . . until one day, they did. And what happens to them when troubles from the past return to trouble them in the present?

**Notes**

Author’s Note: Ok, so they’re a little out of character. I toned them down a little, because frankly if somebody was as much of a jerk to me as Roy typically is to Ed, there would be no romance, just my bony fist in his face. I included the automail, but not the alchemy, and I enjoy seeing them in a modern setting so that’s where they are. There is some romance there, but there’s also a plot. I promise, it’s there, and you don’t even have to squint . . . much. I also shortened the age gap just a smidge. Basically, I took a lot of liberties and offer a thousand sincere apologies for it. But, hey, this my first fanfic so hopefully my foibles will be forgiven.

Disclaimer: I am not cool enough to own FMA or any of its characters (curse the cruel fates *grumble, grumble*). But that doesn’t mean I can’t write a lovely (eh?) little (nOOooot so little) fic that shamelessly uses the characters and remolds them according to my own evil whims...
mwahahahahahaaaa!!
Meetings, Coincidences, and Kismet

Chapter 1

Meetings, Coincidences, and Kismet

Roy Mustang stood leaning against the wall, breathing the fresh fall air for the first time in what felt like days. Actually, it probably really had been days. There was no way to be sure, since the labs had no windows and the battery in the wall clock had been dead for nearly a year. They'd been so close to a breakthrough earlier in the week, but before they could even get excited about it they'd discovered a flaw in the data that had forced them to wipe out everything they'd done that week and start from scratch. Frustrating wasn't the word for it – more like infuriating.

He reached up and brushed straight black hair out of obsidian almond-shaped eyes and realized with a grimace that however long he had been in the lab was however long he'd gone without a shower. For that matter when was the last time he'd eaten something that didn't come out of the vending machine? Really, he figured that if it had been long enough ago that he couldn't remember then it had been too damn long.

With a heavy sigh, he decided that it was past time to send everybody home for a day of rest and real food – and, heaven willing, a hot shower. He turned and pulled the door open, but at the same time he was pulling the door someone else was pushing it from the other side. Before he knew it, Roy was getting a chest-full of short blonde as the other person ran into him. His first thought, given the height and the long golden hair pulled back into a scruffy braid, was that he'd collided with a girl, but when the victim in question took a hasty step back he had to correct himself. Instantly he was caught by the most mesmerizing honey gold eyes set within a pale gold face and framed by messy golden bangs and stray wisps of hair. He was like a living embodiment of the sun, and although he wasn't a girl, he was at least the prettiest man Roy had ever seen. Realizing that he was staring like an idiot, Roy quickly reined in his wandering thoughts and sputtered something vaguely apology-like.

"Nah. No problem. It's cool. We ran into each other," said the shorter man with a dismissive wave of his hand. His tone was cavalier, but there was a sort of nervousness in his eyes.

"You don't look familiar. Are you new to the lab? Or is it possible you're just here to visit a student?" asked Roy, because frankly the guy didn't even look legal. "I would say undergrad, but you don't look old enough." It was a measure of how tired he was that he didn't realize his mistake until it was too late.

"Get some glasses, ass hat! I'm twenty-fucking-two and a PhD candidate, not that it's any of your fucking business. I've been in this lab for three damn years, since I was an undergrad student," snarled the blonde, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"Sorry, it's just, your height makes you look younger," said Roy, realizing in the next instant that he'd stepped on another landmine. The shorter man's face darkened further even as gold eyes burned with a promise of violence. Roy tensed, preparing for whatever might come next. But he may as well not have bothered. The blonde just let out a wordless growl and brushed past him, his shoulder hitting Roy in passing and knocking him out of the way. Shaking his head to himself, Roy returned to his lab as he'd originally planned.

The whole team was still right where he'd left them – Heymans Breda crunching data at the computer, Fuery trying futilely to repair one of the handheld testing instruments, Vato Falman standing at the whiteboard going over their faulty calculations to identify where they went wrong,
and Sheska Douglas their lab assistant reading through recent research notes. They greeted him listlessly, all but Fuery who was passed out at his desk with his head on his arms, his glasses pushed up onto the top of his head like a nerdy headband. Breda was staring at the computer monitor, leaning close and squinting blearily as he watched the numbers slowly creeping upwards as the data continued to collate.

"What's up Roy? You look sort of . . . grrr, I guess," said Sheska, the mousy bookworm whose photographic memory had been the team's saving grace. She had dark auburn hair, kept mostly short, and wore glasses that made her fit neatly into the bookworm stereotype. It didn't help that she was so small and shy – her image fit her disposition eerily well. She wasn't actually a part of their department, but she worked with them part-time when she wasn't working at the library. Her main job was to keep the records of their experiments and findings reasonably organized. Her help had ended the reign of chaos that had been their previous record-keeping efforts.

"Oh, it's nothing, I just had an unpleasant encounter outside," replied Roy dismissively.

"Hard to imagine somebody that the great Roy Mustang couldn't charm," snickered Breda and Roy threw a scowl at his old friend. "So, who was this Mustang-hater? Guy whose girl you stole? Girl whose guy you stole? One of the guys or girls that were stolen?"

"Now you sound like Jean," muttered Roy, and Breda batted his eyelashes innocently. Breda was a heavyset guy who looked like he'd be more at home on a football field than in a thermodynamics lab. His red hair was darker at the roots, and with it cut so short on the sides and at the back, he looked like he'd dyed the top red. "And anyway, he wasn't anybody I know. He says he works in a lab in this building, but he looks like a high schooler, and I've never seen him before."

"You say he was just a kid, eh? What did he look like?" asked Falman, his eyes narrowing. Since his eyes were already so narrow in his stark-boned, perpetually serious face, the effect was a little disturbing – the prematurely gray hair hanging in his face only made the seriousness of his expression more pronounced. Roy would have expected Breda to be curious – he had a thing for secrets and gossip – but he never would have expected it of Falman. Usually, Falman wasn't interested in anything but facts and data. He'd never shown much interest in Roy's many flings or in the gossip surrounding him. It was one of the reasons Roy liked having him around.

"He has long golden-blonde hair with eyes that are almost the same color, and he's about as short as his temper," described Roy, caught for a moment in his memory of those eyes. Those golden orbs held all the fascination of a cobra's eyes, and were probably just as dangerous.

"Holy shit!" spat Falman, and everybody whipped around to look at him in blatant shock. Falman never cursed. Fuery even lifted his head, his eyes wide though still sleepy, and the quickness with which he'd sat up caused his glasses to fall back onto his face crookedly. "That was Edward Elric."

"And . . . that's important why exactly?" said Roy, gesturing for him to explain because it wasn't a name Roy recognized. Breda seemed to recognize the name though, and he was quick enough to rattle off what information he had.

"Edward Elric is one of two brothers, both prodigies. Edward, the older brother, has been going here since he was sixteen and already has two degrees. He's currently working on his doctorate. From what I've heard he's antisocial, but totally brilliant. He's supposedly one of the, like, smartest people alive. His little brother, Alphonse, is almost on the same level, started here at seventeen, but after he finished his Masters he headed off to another school to study medicine. The both of them are known for the breakthroughs they've made in the fields of physics, medicine, biomechanical research – you know, like automail and stuff – and biochemistry. Nobody knows what they're working on now, but everybody's got ears perked in their direction just in case they come up with something else that's
groundbreaking." Breda paused and made a face to show a moment of distaste. "I get the impression that nobody likes the older Elric much. He's pretty wrapped up in his studies and doesn't like people getting close, so he's rude to just about everybody including professors. He teaches some classes here, and as a teacher he's both popular and super scary. Everybody loves his classes, but they're terrified of his assignments and his tests are merciless. Plus, all of his students know not to bother trying to approach him outside of office hours or class because he reverts to being uber rude and standoffish. He made a bit of a name for himself a couple years back when he cussed out the dean in front of everybody in the parking lot. I heard he's got a pretty face though. Almost prettier than most girls, is what I was told, but I've only seen one picture of him in a magazine and it didn't show much of his face. Some of the girls say he never lets anybody take pictures of his face."

"Um, actually," interjected Sheska shyly. "We went to the same high school, so I used to know him and his brother . . . a little bit, at least. Al is really sweet and friendly, but Ed kept to himself a lot, and I think he got bullied a bit – you know, because he was so young and skipped grades. He spent most of his time in the library, and that's where I met him. We'd talk about books sometimes, and we'd tell each other when we spotted something good. But that's it. We never talked outside of the library or hung out or anything. But, if I'd known he was in one of the labs here, I would have said hello already. He seems really rough, but he's actually really nice. You just have get past the foul language and bad temper. Mostly, just don't mention his height or his age."

"Oops," said Roy and Sheska let out a little gasp then gave him a pitying shake of her head. "I sort of hit a two-for on sore spots I guess."

"Honestly, you're lucky he didn't break your jaw," she said, clicking her tongue at him. "Ed and Al may be nice, but they're both really scary in a fight. I saw them fight once, and I hope I never see it again. They took apart half of the football team, just the two of them. It was nuts."

Their conversation was interrupted when they heard a loud voice further down the hall. That the one doing the shouting happened to be none other than the topic of the conversation was nothing short of kismet. "Winry, move your ass damn it! We're going to be late!"

A pretty blonde girl dressed in daisy dukes over a pair capri tights with a tight black tank top and denim jacket barreled down the hallway from the direction of the front door. "Don't give me any shit Mr. Refuses-to-Drive-Himself-Anywhere," she shot back. "I'll only be a minute!"

"It better be less than that or we'll miss the fucking bus!" he shouted back, his voice getting closer. He paused in the hallway just in view of the section of glass wall facing the corridor that let in extra light and kept the lab from feeling like the tomb it was.

"That's him," muttered Roy, covering his mouth with one hand and trying to surreptitiously point with the other one. The other members of his team tried their best, each in their own way, to get a good look at the guy in the hallway without looking like they were staring. Unfortunately, Sheska ruined it by calling out his name.

"Edward! Long time no see!" she cried happily. Edward looked around for a minute, trying to find who had called him, and when his eyes finally fell on Sheska, his face brightened in a grin that softened his features into something downright angelic. In anger he was breathtaking, but in simple joy he was devastating. Edward entered the lab a little ways and offered Sheska an awkward sort of hug.

"I didn't know you were planning on going into science," said Edward warmly. "I'd have thought you'd be more interested in linguistics or something. I mean, think of how many more books you could read if you could read more languages, right?"
"I've picked up a few languages here and there, but that's just for fun," said Sheska, ducking her head as her cheeks flared bright red. "And I'm not really studying science either. I just help out different departments with keeping their records and stuff. Oh, and I do a couple shifts in the library too!"

"I haven't seen you there. How long have you been there?" asked Edward, frowning a bit as if in thought.

"I only started working there last semester," said Sheska with a soft giggle. "I was working at a bookstore before that, but they fired me for spending too much time reading the books." Edward let out a full-bellied laugh that absolutely banished all the gloom and fatigue from the room and its occupants. Never had such a carefree, uplifting sound been heard in their dismal cell. Heavenly choirs couldn't have been a more welcome sound.

"That's so like you! But they don't know what they're missing out on," Edward reassured her with conviction. "There's nobody who knows more about books than you, and I'm sure the place went to hell the day after you left. I bet if we walked in there now, it would look like a war zone or something."

Sheska giggled again, and Edward grinned at her. "Well, Roy got me the job at the library just in time to save me from getting evicted," said Sheska pointing to Roy who raised a hand with a somewhat sheepish expression.

"Oh," said Edward, his expression instantly darkening.

"Ed! Shit! I think we already missed the bus!" called the voice of "Winry" from further down the hall.

"Shit!" Spat Edward, jumping back out into the hallway. "You can't be serious! Do you have enough cash for a cab?"

"Doesn't matter, it wouldn't get here in time," she called back, both of them sounding panicked.

"Well, I was just about to send everybody home for a couple days' rest, I could give you a ride," offered Roy, shocked by his own audacity. The guy already hated him and was apparently a notably dangerous character. Did Roy really want such a bad-tempered potentially homicidal guy sitting less than a foot away from him in an enclosed space?

"Are you sure you would want to be seen with me in your car? Aren't you worried people would think you're a fucking pedophile?" asked Edward nastily. Then something metallic flashed through the air, connecting with Edward's head hard enough that he curled forward, lurching a couple involuntary steps into the lab. "What the actual fuck?! Why always the wrenches?!"

"Edward Elric! You're being a dick!" retorted Winry while everybody in the lab could only stare, frozen in blatant shock. Winry came into view again, planting a hand on the back of Edward's neck and marching him further into the lab, looking like she was carrying an angry cat by the scruff. She forced Edward to bow. "He's sorry for being a dick, whoever it was that made the kind offer of a ride. We'd be really grateful for the help."

"Get off of me, gorilla!" shouted Edward hotly.

"Shut your pie hole nerd boy!" she shrieked just as hotly.

"Fuck off machine junkie!"
"Obsessive science freak!" She gave Edward a hard shake, eliciting an angry squawk.

"Winry! Leg! Leg damn it!" protested Edward, sounding pained

"Oh hush, you big baby," said Winry, her words entirely contradicting the concern that flashed briefly in her eyes.

"Well then, I guess we should get going," said Roy, pocketing his wallet and cell phone. He gave Winry a charming, if tired, smile and gestured gallantly toward the door. Turning back to his team, he told them, "Just save what you've got for when we come back. We're just spinning our wheels right now anyway. Get some sleep."

"Hey, Mustang, I'll call you later and maybe we can all go pick up some food that doesn't come in a convenient carry-pouch," suggested Breda, and Roy laughed and waved, neither confirming nor denying. In all honesty, he wasn't sure which one he wanted first – sleep, shower, or food. Maybe all three?

"I'm Winry Rockbell, by the way," said girl cheerfully as they walked down the hallway toward the door. She turned back a little to offer him her hand, and when he took it, a soft blush colored her cheeks.

"Roy Mustang," offered Roy in return. It didn't look like Edward was going to say anything, but Winry pulled a wrench out of nowhere and held it up with a threatening gleam in her eye. Edward held up his hands in surrender.

"It's not like he couldn't hear you harpy-shriek my name earlier, jeez!" countered Edward but then he sighed and offered his left hand. "Ed Elric." Roy shook his hand with a wry lift to his smile and was surprised that Edward's cheeks actually flared bright red. "Yo! Phil! Coming through," called Edward amicably as they approached the security desk and the metal detectors that were meant to keep people from sneaking off with the equipment.

The security guard waved to Edward then flipped a switch under his desk, holding a hand out to keep back Winry and Roy until Edward had passed through one of the two metal detectors. Edward gave him an "all clear" sort of wave and a smile of gratitude, and the security guard once again flipped the switch then waited patiently for Winry and Roy to empty their pockets. Edward made idle conversation with the man while Winry emptied a frightening number of tools, all of which just seemed to materialize from nowhere (where in those tight-ass clothes was she keeping all that?).

After they'd passed through the detectors and collected their belongings, the three of them headed out to Mustang's crappy little ancient Buick. She wasn't much, but as long Roy took care of her, she'd outlive even the cockroaches. Edward seemed to hesitate before getting into the car then he took a deep breath, as if steeling himself, and all but dove into the back of the car to sit among the empty paper coffee cups and the discarded fast food bags. Roy wouldn't have put it past the guy to comment on the state of his car, but he seemed too lost in his own thoughts to even notice.

"So, where are headed?" asked Roy as he started the car.

"We need to go to the Expo Hall on 9th," replied Winry, throwing a quick worried frown over her shoulder at her friend in the backseat. "Ed, you going to make it, or would you rather just skip?"

"No chance! Izumi would fucking kill me!" answered Ed quickly. "I'm fine, Win." He sank further down in his seat and pulled up the hood of his red zip-up hoodie. "Have you heard from Al yet? He said he'd meet us there, but he wasn't sure if he was going to be late."
"He texted me around lunchtime," answered Winry. "He said it looks like he'll make it just in time."

"Oh good," said Edward distractedly.

"So, what's going on at Expo Hall? Anything interesting?" asked Roy conversationally, trying to catch Ed's eyes in the rearview mirror. However, the kid was looking distinctly pale and his gaze was turned downward to his hands which were clenched in his lap.

"Don't bother asking him. Getting him to tell you anything is like pulling teeth," said Winry with an exasperated sigh. "There's some kind of Science Exhibition for kids going on all week. Izumi, Ed and Al's foster mom, is going to have a booth today and tomorrow. She was sort of the boy's mentor, and she was the one who homeschooled them until high school, so they owe her a lot. That's how she roped them into helping with the booth. I'm just going to play gopher and help with the rugrat wrangling."

"It's supposed to get kids interested in science," muttered Ed from the backseat. Roy looked up at Ed's reflection. The diminutive scientist was looking a little green now and had his hands fisted in the legs of his pants. "Plus it tells kids who already have interest where to get more info."

"Do you think it would be all right if I came in and took a quick look around?" asked Roy. He wasn't always all that comfortable with kids – the exception being his best friend's daughter who he'd known since her birth – but he thought the exhibition sounded intriguing. Ed finally looked up and locked gazes with Roy in the mirror, the young man's eyes narrowing skeptically. "My best friend has a little girl. I want to see if there's anything she might think is cool. She's only five, but she's pretty smart, like her dad."

"They've got a scaled down model of the first space shuttle. All the kids dig that thing because they can climb in it and play with the controls," offered Edward grudgingly. "And they have a lot of interactive displays too. I think they said something about movie screenings, but I don't know which movies."

"What's your foster mom's booth about?" asked Roy, trying to keep the conversation rolling until they could roll right into more friendly territory. Roy would prefer not to make an enemy of somebody with Ed's reputation.

"It's about the history of science, starting with Rome and up through alchemy and on down the line," explained Edward, but when they hit a sudden bump in the road he let out a tiny whimper and clammed up.

"We're almost there Ed," Winry reassured him gently. "Sorry, Roy, Ed really hates riding in cars. He usually takes the bus or walks when he has to go somewhere. To tell the truth, if the Expo Hall wasn't so close to the school we'd have been screwed. He couldn't have handled a longer trip."

"I told you I'm fine," growled Edward, but the speed bump they hit upon entering the parking lot of the Expo Hall destroyed all pretense of bravado. The poor guy was actually panting now, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. Roy didn't waste time parking, he pulled up to the door so Edward could get out as soon as possible. Ed all but flew out of the car almost before it had fully stopped. He huffed in several deep breaths before turning back and bending down to look at Roy through the open passenger door. It seemed as if he knew why Roy had stopped at the door and was offering silent gratitude in acknowledgement. "We'll leave a free pass at the door for you . . . you know, as thanks or whatever . . . for the ride." With that he turned and hurried away.
Chapter 2

Are Those Stockings?

As Roy drove around in search of a parking space, he found himself grinning for no reason he could name. If he really had to put a name to it, he would call this feeling "triumph". Getting the adorable and tetchy Edward Elric to acknowledge him as anything other than a pest to be ignored and/or exterminated felt like a huge victory. Now, if only he could find a way to make the younger man smile at him . . . now that would be a true victory.

Still wearing a (slightly) smug smile, he approached the ticket-taker at the door – a lovely brunette woman whose eyes sparkled at his approach – and told her that Ed had left a pass for him. She gave him a dreamy nod, her eyes still looking deeply into his with a vaguely hungry expression even as she handed over the little orange "Guest Pass" in its plastic sheath dangling from a white lanyard. He pulled the lanyard over his neck and headed into the exhibition.

The booths were actually a lot more elaborate than he'd been imagining. It was like every nerdy kid's ultimate paradise. Everywhere he looked were eye-catching demonstrations and interactive displays representing nearly every imaginable field of science. Even his own precious thermodynamics was giving its all, and it captured and held Roy's attention for an embarrassingly long time. He felt a sharp tap on his shoulder, and, startled, he spun around wondering if security was waiting to throw him out for being a creepy old guy. He almost let out a loud sigh of relief when saw it was just Winry. She was wearing a black, turn-of-the-century dress and had her blonde hair done up in a Victorian style bun atop her head.

"Hey! Having fun?" she asked him with a bright smile, her vivid blue eyes sparkling with secret laughter.

"Actually, yeah," replied Roy honestly with a sheepish little chuckle. "What can I say? I'm a big geeky kid at heart." Winry laughed aloud this time and wrapped a hand around his elbow, dragging him away from the thermodynamics booth.

"We spotted you from our booth, and Al sent me over to bring you by to see what we've got – and to thank you for giving us a ride," she said as she pulled him a little ways down the aisle to a booth titled The Dawn of Science. It had posters cut and pasted in such a way that the images of long-dead scientists looked almost 3D, the same effect displaying the scientists' names in big block letters. Two young men and one woman in her late forties manned three tables, one at each side of the booth offering information and explanations about science's humble beginnings and most memorable moments. They even had replicas of historical apparatus that had once been used for scientific measurements and a chalkboard showing abbreviations of history's most famous mathematical breakthroughs.

One of the young men manning the booth was Edward, and he was dressed in a long chocolate brown waistcoat, a white cravat around the high neck of his white shirt and long black coat with embellished, folded-back cuffs. His pants were knee length, and he actually had stockings on with them and even the shoes were fitting for the period. The most amusing part – not that the stockings didn't make Roy want to giggle plenty all on their own – was that Edward's wonderful blonde main
was tucked into a big white wavy wig.

The other young man managed to avoid wearing a wig, but he wound up with a weird sort of turban instead and was dressed in many-layered robes like something out of Ancient Greece or Rome. He also had to suffer through a fake beard, but he still managed to smile to the children as if he was having as much fun as they were, his grayish green eyes twinkling. Even Edward, despite the tights, managed to look like he was enjoying himself. The older woman was in an early 19th century dress, complete with corset and a bonnet over her dark hair. She wore no make-up, but she had the sort of smooth light olive skin that would never need it. Her dark brown eyes were easily as shrewd and sharp as Edward's, making Roy think that she had be the foster mother and perhaps Edward had learned his scowl from her.

"We're all dressed like famous scientists," Winry informed him as they entered the booth. "I'm Marie Curie, one of the most famous female scientists, ever. Izumi is Mary Somerville who ignored her father's wishes and studied math, physics, astronomy, and chemistry back in the early 1800's when women just didn't do that sort of thing. Ed is Isaac Newton because Izumi thought it would be funny to put him in a wig – and plus we needed an outfit that would hide his arms and legs so he wouldn't die of embarrassment – instead he's just maimed by embarrassment. Al is Pythagoras, and anybody who knows anything about math knows who that is. Come on. Let's go say hi to Al."

Ed noticed Roy making his way through the booth, and a bright blush suddenly painted his cheeks, making the little girl he was talking to giggle at him. Roy could only give him an apologetic shrug and jerk his head toward Winry who was still gripping his arm tightly. Edward seemed to get it and offered an apology of his own with his eyes and a nod of solidarity. Apparently, he'd been dragged around by Winry enough himself to empathize with anybody in a similar predicament, even if that anybody happened to be Roy.

"Hey, you must be Roy," said the "bearded" young man in the layered toga. "My name's Alphonse Elric, Ed's younger brother. Winry told me you saved them at the last minute when they missed the bus. I really appreciate it. I don't think I could have done anything this embarrassing without Ed and Winry for moral support."

"No problem, I sort of owed Ed for offending him anyway," Roy told him with a friendly smile. It took Al a moment to untangle his hand from his robes, but once it was free he gave Roy a firm handshake and a rueful chuckle.

"Yeah, well, offending Ed is too easy to do to require reparation every single time," said Alphonse, mischief sparking in his eyes in contrast to his mild expression. "You'd spend most of your time owing him." An apple flew through the air from Ed's direction, and Alphonse just barely managed to catch it rather than get hit by it.

"Hungry?" asked Edward with a wolfish smile.

"Thank you, Brother," replied Alphonse, and though his smile seemed sweet there was the bite of steel in it. These brothers were really something else. "So, Roy, how do you like our booth?" asked Alphonse with a gesture toward the displays and costumes. "I wish we could have been here to help Izumi set up this morning, but Brother had two classes today and work on his research all afternoon – really, between working, attending classes, teaching classes, and lab time I don't think he's been home in three or four days. I also had a class to TA this morning, and I was attending classes for the rest of the day."

"Alphonse, quit slacking," said Izumi, her rich voice snapping out with whip-crack sharpness.

"Sorry Teacher," replied Alphonse with a wave. "I was telling Ed's new friend about the booth."
"Ed's friend? Did I hear you right, kid?" asked Izumi, her eyes widening in surprise. Ed groaned and promptly face-palmed. "Oh, well, in that case, Winry, bring him here. I've got to meet this saint." Now even Roy was embarrassed. He could hardly call himself "Ed's friend". He'd only met him about an hour ago, and he'd hate to misrepresent himself. However, he had the feeling that there was nothing he would be able to say at this point that would convince them of their false conclusion without making trouble.

Winry dragged him over to Izumi, and Roy cast another apologetic look to Ed who just shook his head to let him know it was okay – and also perhaps to offer condolences. "So, where did you meet our Edward?" snapped Izumi. Roy had the feeling that every word she said was spoken with that same severe passion. "I'm Izumi Curtis, just so you know. I raised these two hellions, for my sins."

"My name is Roy Mustang. Ed and I work in different labs in the same building," replied Roy simply, not wanting to dig himself any deeper by expanding on the lie.

"So, another scientist huh? What field?" she demanded, looking thoughtful – or maybe skeptical, it was hard to tell.

"Physics ma'am, specifically thermodynamics," answered Roy and Izumi gave a thoughtful (skeptical?) nod.

"You should come back tomorrow morning then. Edward is giving a little presentation about the Arrow of Time. As a physicist, you might enjoy it," said Izumi. "It's nice to meet you, Mustang. Ed may be a bit rough around the edges, but he's a good kid. It's nice to see him finally making friends."

As soon as she was done speaking, Roy couldn't help but feel like he'd just been dismissed. Not one to question somebody as drill sergeant tough as Izumi, Roy turned and went to speak to Ed.

"So, Edward, from what your brother told me, you've probably been living off of vending machine food and lab coffee for the last few days too. Want to go get some real food with me and the other lab geeks after this?" asked Roy boldly. Ed thought about it, his eyes narrowing almost the same exact way Izumi's had.

"You buying?" asked Ed, seemingly suspicious of the offer.

"Sure," said Roy with a shrug. "You can bring your brother and friend too if you want to. It's up to you."

"Nah, they probably have plans. You know, together," said Ed, and his emphasis and expression made his meaning obvious. Roy snickered like a school boy in health class, and Ed waggled his eyebrows with an impish little smile. "But I'm already dying of starvation here. If I didn't think Izumi would club me to death, I'd start eating these apples."


"Right now, anything that was grown in the ground or was birthed by parents looks tasty to me," he told Roy honestly. Then he lowered his voice and leaned in a little, "I'd even eat these children with enough gravy."

"I'm with you there. I suggest that chunky one over there. I don't think he can run very fast," suggested Roy archly.

"Good, because neither can I in these tights," muttered Ed, squirming.

Roy let out an involuntarily loud laugh but quickly stifled it with both hands. "Well, what time will you be done do you think?" he asked when he had regained control. "I could come pick you up here,
or you could meet me there. Whatever's easiest."

"We're supposed to wrap up at 8:00. I'll want to . . . you know . . . shower after this, so I'll meet you there. Where are we going?" asked Ed, and Roy secretly thrilled that he had, despite being sleep-deprived and probably smelling distinctly unwashed, somehow managed to blunder into a date with a gorgeous, feisty prodigy. It was all he could do to keep a grin from creeping onto his face.

"Well, are you a meat and potatoes kind of guy, or more of a chicken and veggies guy?" asked Roy and Ed laughed, that wondrous sound sending pleasant shivers up and down Roy's spine.

"All of the above," he answered. "If it's not moving, I'll eat it. But after the week I've had, red meat would be seriously awesome."

"Agreed," said Roy emphatically. After the mess in the lab, he could definitely go for something carnivore-worthy and possibly still bleeding. "How about O'Hannigans on Washington? They've got a killer porterhouse that even Gandhi wouldn't be able to resist. Have you ever been?"

"Yeah, they're one of Sig's customers," said Ed, smiling excitedly. "Sig's Izumi's husband. He has a butcher shop. Best meat anywhere. Any restaurant that buys their meat from Sig is guaranteed to be awesome, no question."

"You've got the hookup with a butcher shop? Dude, you're my new best friend!" enthused Roy, and Ed let out another of his delightful laughs. "Then I'll see you there around . . . 9:00?" Ed agreed and Roy left with a last wave for Izumi, Al, and Winry.

By 9:00, Roy was a bundle of nerves. He didn't really mind the nervousness though, since it kept him from falling asleep. His long-awaited shower was like heaven, as was the sandwich he ate to tide him over until dinner. He'd had to hit the grocery store first to stock his fridge again, but that wonderful sandwich had been well worth the extra effort. He'd also taken the time to call his lab team to tell them they were on for dinner, after which he put in a call to his two closest friends to let them know he was still alive since they hadn't seen Roy in days and would be worried.

When Roy got to the restaurant at a little before 9:00, Breda and Fuery were already there and had already shoved tables together, gathering enough chairs for everybody. Sheska was the next to show up, her messenger bag over her shoulder instead of the more typical purse most girls would carry. Falman arrived soon after, so the only one missing was Edward. By ten after 9:00, Roy began to worry that the blonde wasn't going to make it. The fact that Roy didn't have a phone number or any other way to reach the younger man didn't help.

Then the whole world fell away as Edward finally walked through the door. His cheeks were lightly pink from exertion and his lips were slightly parted as he panted. Ed had replaced the baggy jeans and loose red sweater with black jeans that fit him deliciously well and a long-sleeved button-up the color of drying blood tucked into the waistband, held in place by a studded leather belt. He still wore the old boots he'd been wearing when they'd first met, but they added a certain devil-may-care quality to his outfit, and the thin black leather gloves added an air of mystery. Instead of the loose braid of earlier, his hair was gathered in a high ponytail that fell like a glittering cascade of melted gold. To say he cleaned up well would be a tragic injustice to his stunning transformation.

"Wow, you look great Ed!" exclaimed Sheska, all but squealing. Ed blushed, ducking his head bashfully.

"I'm so glad you could make it," said Roy, pulling out a chair for Ed to sit. "I was starting to worry you'd opted for sleep instead. I won't lie, I almost did that myself."
Ed chuckled softly. "I was seriously tempted. It's been a long fucking week, no lie. But then I remembered there was steak involved and I said, 'What the hell! I can sleep when I'm dead!'"

"Here, here!" said Breda as everybody laughed and lifted their beverages to toast zombified starving students everywhere.

"We're scientists. Caffeine isn't an option, it's a way of life," declared Ed and they all laughed again in hearty agreement.

"I've definitely spent a lot of years worshipping at the altar of coffee," put in Roy, and Ed nodded sagely.

"When I was an undergrad student, I got bored as fuck one weekend and built a coffee machine that looks like it came off the set of Star Trek and it does everything but have your babies," Ed told them, pausing to order from the waitress who greeted him familiarly. Once she'd left, he continued. "It has an attached roaster and grinder and can be hooked up to a waterline so you never have to pour water in it. Plus, it has interchangeable attachments that let you do cappuccinos and espressos. I mean, for real, I want to fucking marry this thing. I wanted to bring it to the lab, but I'm afraid the engineering students would steal it. They like to steal shit I build when my back is turned. They just want to take it apart and figure out what I did, the grabby fuckers." Ed suddenly stopped, his face redder than ever. "Yeah, sorry for rambling. I guess I had a little too much caffeine."

"It's all right," said Fuery cheerfully. "I hate to say it, but hearing about your coffee machine, I wouldn't mind seeing how it's built myself. I know I'm in physics, but I still like to fiddle with electronics and computers."

"Nothing wrong with hobbies," said Ed with a little wave of his hand. "I mean, come on, I'm a biochemist right? But I've also done a ton of other shit like engineering and particle physics and all this other shit. Those were my hobbies – still are. My brother said I need to get dumber hobbies – like he's got room to talk. So, I took up coffee snobbery as my hobby. Now he says I need a hobby that doesn't end in him having to peel me off the fucking ceiling with a spatula. So I told him he needs a hobby besides nagging his older brother about his life choices."

"Maybe try knitting or something," suggested Breda and Ed laughed along with everybody around the table.

"I actually tried it," said Ed, still chuckling. "Al says to me, 'Brother, you're not allowed to pick a hobby that puts anything sharp and pointy in your hands. One temper tantrum and I'd be bringing you books in prison.' I'm not a fucking nutjob or anything, but I could see myself feeling stabby when my students start whining too fucking much, so I gave up. Al tried it too, but he started looking like he was going to poke his eye out – or mine – so I took the needles away."

"Let me introduce you around," said Roy laughing, and Ed turned an inquisitive look toward him that was ridiculously adorable. Roy went around the table, pointing to each person as he named them then formally introduced Ed to them. After the initial intros, Roy elaborated a little, "Me, Breda, and Fuery have known each since high school. Falman joined our little group when we started college, and Sheska's been assisting us for over a year. The rest of our little group from high school are at Central University too, but they're in different departments.""Yeah, they're studying law, the poor bastards," said Breda with a pitying shake of his head. "Well, except for Havoc. He's got a sports scholarship, and I don't think he's ever going to settle on a major."

"So, I know you're, like, a prodigy or whatever, but how does that whole super-genius thing work?"
asked Breda, and abruptly Edward's expression shut down. It was like he had suddenly stepped behind iron gates and slammed those gates in their faces. They could only blink at him in shock at the change. "No offense dude! It's nothing bad. I'm curious, is all. Just, I have to really struggle through most of my classes, and you always hear all this crap about how prodigies don't really have to work as hard. But I look at you and your eyebags are just as scary as ours. We all look like a bunch of pandas. So, I was wondering what the difference was. Do you just pick stuff up faster or is it, like, a bigger memory thing or what?"

"Is this a trick question?" asked Edward dryly, but then he let out a soft sigh and smirked. "It's like this . . . so think of each person's brain like its own little computer, all right? Each one is a different brand – they have different combinations of different brands of components, all of them with different kinds of wear and tear and varying quality of parts. Some of them have faster processing speed, some have more memory – or less – and some are just shitty right from the start and no matter how many parts you switch out will never be able to run more than Pong. You with me so far?" he asked, looking around the table until everybody nodded. "So, me and Al have the equivalent of high-end processors, state of the art motherboards, and a few terabytes worth of memory. It's still a computer, just like everybody else has got, but it's faster and holds a fuck-ton more information for a longer period of time before the memory degrades." Ed shrugged, blushing a little. "It's a shitty analogy, but it's really hard to explain. I mean, it's not something you do, it's something you are. You know? It's not just how you see yourself, it's how you see everything. You look at the table and see wood and a place to put your beer. I look at the table and see the chemical composition of the finish, the age of the table based on its rate of deterioration, the methods and tools used for fitting the pieces of wood together, the germs and bacteria that might possibly be crawling around on it, and its exact dimensions down to the centimeter. In the time we've been here, I've already calculated the most efficient placement of the tables to optimize convenience and make the most of available space and maximize the number of available seating for customers while still remaining within the parameters of fire safety and health regulations and HIPPA guidelines. So yeah . . ." Flashing gold eyes turned to Roy as if assessing him, gauging his reaction. "I mean, we still had to read a lot of books to get where we are now. Sheska can tell you. I spent what little time I was in high school hiding out in the library, reading. When other kids were hanging out or going to movies, I was reading through the text books, working ahead. Teacher forced us to go high school in the first place, but she promised that I only had to put up with that shit long enough to graduate. She didn't say I had to put up with four years . . . so, I didn't. I still did four years' worth of work though. I just did it in less time. The effort is the same, but the timeline was compressed."

"It must be hard to sleep with all that going on in your head all the time," commented Roy grimly. "I can't imagine how you manage to stay focused on any one thing at a time."

"I guess sleeping is harder for me than Al, but he's a more laid back sort of guy and that makes a difference. And we each have ways of making our heads quiet down before bed. Al reads super trashy fiction. I play solitaire – lots and lots of solitaire," said Ed with a shrug. "And I'm actually a little too good at focusing. Al says a bomb could go off next to me while I'm reading, and I wouldn't notice. He's probably right. Once I start concentrating, I'm there and nowhere else."

They're food arrived, and it was every bit as good as they had thought it would be. After a week of stale, pre-packaged food and coffee that came with its own primordial ooze, the steak was divine. It took a few bites for them to finally awaken from the foodgasm enough to resume conversation, but once they got the ball rolling, it didn't take much to keep it going. Ed kept trying to bow out of talking, seemingly content to sit quietly and let their talk flow around him. It was only when Falman asked Ed about his most recent paper that he came out of his shell again.

When it came to science, he spoke animatedly about his favorite fields of study, telling them some of his pet theories and expounding on the theories of others as easily as others would discuss a ball
game. His passion for science made his whole face light up, and they were all enjoying that light so much that they shamelessly kept him going long after they would have normally changed the subject. He was even able to immediately understand their own research and, unlike so many other people who would have been yawning three words in, he listened attentively, just as fascinated as a kid listening to his favorite adventure story. For Ed, science was an adventure and probably always would be.

"Ed!" called a man jovially from across the dining room. "How you been, kid?"

"I've told you, don't call me kid," snarled Ed. "Do I need to break your nose again Denny?"

"Ah, come on, last time I saw you, you weren't even legal yet, Ed," said the man as he approached the table and stopped right by Ed's shoulder. He was dressed in a basic chef's uniform, but with a backwards ball cap instead of one of the silly chef's hats. "Take it easy on me."

"So, what do you want, besides to harass me?" demanded Ed and the man chuckled, taking Ed's tone in stride as if he was used to it.

"No, I pretty much just came to harass you," said Denny, and Ed scowled at him. "Melissa told me that you were here with actual people. And nobody was screaming. Or bleeding. I was stunned. Then she said Al wasn't even here to translate or hold you back. I had to come see for myself." Ed held a fist up in front of the man's face, slowly flexing his fingers to make every joint pop loudly. "Ah, but see, if you give me a pass today, I'll comp part of the meal. I am the owner, after all." Ed grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him down so that they were almost nose to nose, his gold eyes blazing.

"How much is part?" asked Ed coldly.

"Name your price kid. You know the drill," replied the man, a little strained but relatively unruffled.

"So, given the menu price of each item and current food costs, charged at bulk rates, and not counting labor, you can recoup the cost of producing the meal by charging us approximately 52% of the meal total after tax," replied Ed, looking up at the ceiling for a moment then nodding to confirm. "Yeah, 52%, so fork over the check and let's see the damage." Ed released the man with an indifferent gesture. As if he'd been prepared for exactly this, the man pulled out the check and handed it to Ed with a pen. Ed looked at the total cost of the meal after tax and wrote a corrected price right under it before handing it to Roy.

"You little shit! You're not even paying!" protested the man, and Ed's eyes blazed anew.

"Who're you calling little?" Ed grabbed the man by the shirtfront again, quicker than thought.

"I'll throw in dessert," choked out the restaurant owner, and Ed released him. "You're such a bully."

"Only to fucktards who can't keep their fucking mouths shut. One more comment outta you and I'll tell Izumi you said she has crow's feet," threatened Edward as he gazed down at the dessert menu. "Or worse, I'll tell Sig."

"Jeez kid, you don't know the meaning of fighting fair, do you?" said Denny with a little cough as he straightened out his shirt.

"Den, there's no such thing as fair in any fight," explained Ed distractedly. "Somebody is always going to get hurt and somebody is always going to do the hurting. It's all about taking advantage of weaknesses and coming out on top. There's never anything fair about it."
"My Aunt Chris used to say something similar. She said there's no such thing as a fair fight. The only rule is to not be the guy on the ground when it's over," put in Roy, and Ed looked up, his eyes meeting Roy's with that inquisitive look, and a moment later he smiled slightly, his eyes the mellow gold of warm honey. He winked then returned his attention to the dessert menu.

"Anybody else want free dessert?" asked Denny, shaking his head with a quiet chuckle. "Just because he got it by extortion, doesn't mean the offer's not genuine."

"And you have got to try the chocolate cake! It's his wife Maria's recipe. It's so good you have to pinch yourself to make sure you're not dreaming," enthused Ed and Denny laughed more fully. "But I think this time I want the turtle cake – no whipped cream, no cherries, and don't skimp on the caramel, skinflint."

"Yes, dear," replied Denny with mock-exasperation.

"Well, I guess since it earned such a ringing endorsement, I'll try the chocolate cake," said Roy and when Ed grinned at him, his heart stuttered in his chest. Having a smile like that was just plain cheating, no two ways about it.

"I'm kinda full, but what girl can turn down chocolate chip cookie dough cheesecake," ventured Sheska shyly.

"I'm always down for dessert!" said Breda happily. "Put me down for a piece of that chocolate cake – and is there any chance of adding a little of that caramel to it?"

"Man after my own heart!" said Ed, laughing, he and Breda fist-bumping in salute of good taste.

"Actually, that sounds really good," said Kain with a groan, and he opted to get the same thing.

"I guess I'll dare to be different. Give me the brownie sundaes," said Falman boldly. It was strange because he wasn't usually the bold type – ever. Maybe it was because of Ed's presence. Roy had discovered during dinner that something about Ed just drew them all out. He was so real, so there, living each moment with so much intensity, that it was impossible not to enjoy the moment too. Dessert was just as fantastic as dinner, and they all enjoyed the lively chatter. However, exhaustion was a harsh taskmistress – and rude too – so they were all yawning before much longer and decided to call it a night. Outside, Roy waited for Ed to exit and drew him aside. "This was a lot of fun," said Roy sincerely. "You should join us more often. We'd be happy to have you."

"Um... sure," said Ed, all at once unsure. "Well, I gotta head out. It's a long walk from here, and I ain't waiting the hour-plus for the next bus."

"I could give you a ride," offered Roy tentatively, remembering after the words were already out of his mouth how badly Ed reacted to being in cars.

Ed fidgeted unhappily, scuffing his toe against the sidewalk. "Nah, it's better if I walk. But thanks. Guess I'll see you around." With that he turned on his heel and walked away, his stride devouring the ground without looking like he was rushing. Roy just shook his head to himself and got into his car. Tomorrow was another day, and hopefully he would have as much time as he needed to coax out answers to the many mysteries of Ed Elric.

Chapter End Notes
Another chapter down, heaven only knows how many to go. But progress is seriously bullet-train fast so far, so hopefully I'll be entirely done before much longer. In the meantime, I'll keep posting the chapters as soon as I'm done editing them. Admittedly, the editing is a bit rushed, so if there are still typos and stuff, I humbly apologize. If it makes you feel any better, I am doing a penance of sorts - though I fail to see the equivalency in paying for a rush job by being stuck in a room that reeks of cheap tacos (yes, you read that right, tacos).
Caution: Wet Floor

Chapter 3

Caution: Wet Floor

By Monday they were all back in the lab, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and ready to return to the battle. The day after their little group dinner, Roy had kept his promise and showed up to see Ed's little presentation. Roy had even brought his crazy best friend Maes and Maes's little girl Elysia to enjoy the exhibition. Maes had wondered what could have prompted Roy to even find the event, but after he'd caught Roy mooning over the pretty blonde scientist, he hadn't needed to ask any further. Roy always had been a sucker for a nice . . . ahem face.

After the first five hours in the lab, a lot of the bright-eyed and bushy-tailed had left the team, and they had to take turns walking around to restore circulation in sleeping legs. When it came time for Roy's turn, he decided to explore the building, hoping to find wherever Ed's lab might be hiding. Down the hall and around the corner he was spotted by Winry in the biomechanical engineering lab, and he stopped to chat with her briefly.

"You know," she said slyly, after pleasantries. "If you're looking for Ed, he's on the second floor. It's the last door on the right. Just remember to turn off your cell phone before you go in. The professor in charge of the projects up there is totally anal about it and will implant it somewhere unpleasant."

Roy shared a conspiratorial smile with her as he turned off his cell phone before sliding it back into his pocket and heading for the elevator. On the second floor he discovered that there were only four labs, and they were each enormous compared to the labs downstairs. Three of the four were bustling with students and professors, like little scieny ant farms crawling with little nerdy ants in lab coats. The last lab on the right was the only exception. Somebody had put up blinds over the glass walls, and they were all closed. The desk and stainless steel tables were cluttered with notes, instruments, machinery, tools, beakers, and racks of vials. Where Roy's lab had one white board, this lab had three huge whiteboards, all filled with equations and diagrams in four different colors of ink. One machine in particular took up almost an entire wall on its own. It had a sort of pieced together look to it, like somebody had gone grave-robbing in the junkyard to create Frankenstein's Transformer. The lab door was open, but it didn't appear that anybody was in the lab, not even Ed. At least, Roy thought that until he looked down.

"Hi," said Ed offhandedly.

"Um, Ed, what are you doing?" asked Roy, looked down at him. Seeing Ed laid out like that was forming a funny knot of warmth in the pit of Roy's stomach.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" asked Ed, puzzled by the question.

"Lying on the floor."

"Well, there you go," replied Ed.

"But, why are you lying on the floor?" asked Roy, amused but getting a little worried.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time?" answered (asked?) Ed. "There's condensation." He pointed toward the huge machine, at the base of which water had dripped on the floor. "I hadn't changed the towels yet." He pointed again at the machine but aimed more at the floor. Towels were bunched up
around the base of the machine, but they were so super-saturated that they weren't doing their jobs anymore. "Not all awake . . . I got here fucking early, you know . . . and I didn't see, 'cause I was reading . . . and you know, they say 'the bigger they are, the harder they fall', but that's not true. I can prove it. It's 'the heavier you are, the harder you fall'."

"Shit, did you hit your head? How long have you been on the floor?" asked Roy with a surge of panic.

"I've been hit harder. Been down here a little while though," replied Ed with a sigh. "Time to get up I guess. Al would laugh at me if he could see me now. Winry definitely would." Roy hovered close, torn between wanting to help the kid stand and telling him to stay down until they could check for a concussion. In the end, he settled for helping Ed up. He almost dropped him though when he felt metal instead of a soft fleshy right arm. Until that moment, Roy hadn't even noticed that Ed had automail. He wanted badly to ask about it – innate curiosity was a curse like that – but he knew better. "Thanks," said Ed, wobbling a little as he straightened. "Maybe I ought to go talk to the dorks in the medical lab. I don't think I feel so good."

"Probably a good idea," agreed Roy dryly.

Roy helped Ed stagger along, and was relieved that they only had to go across the hall. "Professor! Oh no! Did you slip in the water again?" called one of the female students and suddenly every student in the lab stopped what they were doing to scramble toward the woozy genius. "One of these days you're going to really crack your head open."

"I'm working on the cooling problem, but . . . 's complicated, you know?"

"Look at me, Professor Elric," said the girl, pulling out a penlight and shining it in each of Ed's eyes. "Pupils are equal. You're slurring a bit, though. Are you nauseous? Did you lose consciousness at all? Are you in any pain?"

He looked at her a beat, then finally untangled the barrage of questions, answering, "Yes, no, yes. I'm fine. Mild concussion at worst. Nothing worth worrying about."

"Sir, maybe you should go home for today," suggested one of the other students. "You're not in any state to handle anything delicate."

"Yeah, yeah, maybe," said Ed with a heavy sigh. "Come on Mustang, back to the lab we go. I gotta shut all my shit down."

They left to a chorus of good-byes and sympathy and headed back across the hall to Ed's lab. Once inside, Ed sat behind his desk and typed something into his open laptop before closing it and dropping it into a laptop bag that was hanging from the back of his chair. "Could you flip the big switch on the side of Big Bertha over there? But you have to push the three green buttons first, top then middle then bottom." Roy looked over at the giant machine he assumed was "Big Bertha" until he found a huge switch like the kind one would expect to use for electric chairs and next to it were three unmarked glowing green buttons. As he pushed each button its light changed to red, and when the last one was red he pulled the creepy executioner's switch. A hum Roy hadn't even noticed before suddenly stopped. "All right, now turn off the centrifuge, but don't open it. I'll have to run those fucking cultures from scratch in the morning I guess."

One piece at a time, Ed walked Roy through turning off the equipment in his ridiculously oversized lab then finally Ed got up, shouldered his laptop bag, and shooed him out the door, pulling out a little bungee keychain with a keycard and four keys on it. He locked his lab and typed in a number on the keypad next to the door, arming the alarm. Only the labs with the most sensitive material had alarms
on them. Roy was a little impressed that Ed's lab was one of those places.

When they got to the first floor, Ed pulled an ancient cell phone out of his pocket and turned it on, stopping to lean against the wall a minute while he dialed. Apparently, walking and dialing at that same time wasn't a possibility at that moment. "Come on, you can sit in my lab and make your call," Roy told him, guiding him down the hall and into the lab, waving off the curious stares of his team. He guided Ed into the nearest empty chair then released him to make his phone call.

"Edward hit his head pretty hard," Roy explained simply, leaving out the part that it was because of his own clumsiness. He figured Ed would appreciate the omission – and when Ed turned his blushing but grateful face to Roy, he knew he'd chosen right.

"Shit, Al's in class," muttered Ed, closing his phone. "I think . . . fuck, what time is it? Bus runs by East Campus Drive in the morning at 4:00, 5:30, 8:15, and 10:45 then 12:15, 2:00, 3:30, and 5:00 for evening. I think it does . . . that could be West 7th. Fuck, it's all mixed up. I haven't had enough coffee for this shit."

"Do you want me to give you a ride home?" asked Roy carefully.

"Oh fuck no," said Ed, shaking his head vehemently then regretting it just as vehemently. "Unless you want your dashboard repainted, I'd say it's a bad idea."

"We'll roll down the window and bring a bucket," said Roy, firm but gentle. Ed groaned but gave in and got to his feet again. "You guys hold down the fort. I'll be back in a bit. Want me to bring back take-out?"

"Hell yeah!" called Breda, followed by general agreement from the rest.

"Agree on a place then text me what you want," he tells them. He dumped out their "Take-out Collection" jar – a giant plastic jar-shaped tub that had once held hockey-puck-like pretzels but now held their collective food fund – and pocketed the money so he wouldn't have to pay entirely out of his own pocket. He also grabbed one of the small trash cans and dumped its contents into one of the other trash cans (he'd been serious about the bucket).

"Fuck my life," moaned Ed under his breath, his cheeks scarlet and even his ears turning pink.

As soon as they got in the car, Ed paled and his entire body became so tense he was all but trembling. They placed the "bucket" on the floorboard between his feet and rolled the window all the way down, just to be on the safe side. "Do we have to go far?" asked Roy, worry creasing his brow. Ed shook his head, his mouth clenched as tightly shut as his eyes. "Good lord, you really hate cars."

"Yeah, ya think?" asked Ed caustically, his voice strained.

"Um, was it an accident or something?" asked Roy, marveling at his own complete lack of tact. Usually he was a lot better at talking to people than this, but Ed never failed to throw him off his game. "I ask because I noticed the automail when I was helping you up."

"Y-yeah, t-there was an accident," said Ed, forcing himself to lean back in the seat, his left hand clamped around the seatbelt like a lifeline. He used his right hand to indicate turns with vague, shaky gestures. "I was nine and Al was eight. Fuckhead drunk driver t-boned us. His stupid fucking truck c-crushed our car like an empty fucking can. My side of the car got the worst of it. But there's no way mom and Al were coming out of that all right either. Mom was killed pretty much instantly. Al wound up with head trauma and was in a coma for two years. I lost my right arm and left leg."

"Wow, I'm so sorry. I really can't imagine going through all that. It must have been hell," said Roy,
hoping Ed would hear his earnestness. His heart truly did go out to him. "I lost my parents when I was young too, but I was so little I don't even remember them. I went to live with my Aunt Chris and that's the only home I've never known, so I guess it was never really a big deal for me. Is Izumi a relative or something? She doesn't look like either of you, so I wouldn't think so, but stranger things have happened."

Ed gave a shaky laugh, momentarily distracted from his misery. "Yeah, I think Izumi would freak the fuck out if somebody tried to accuse her of being kin to us. Izumi was sort of our tutor when we were kids. Mom noticed pretty quick that we were too advanced for normal classes, so she decided to homeschool us. Izumi volunteered to handle that duty, since she was a friend of our absentee fuck-up of a father. After the accident, with dad still MIA and mom gone, we went to live with Izumi and her husband. They're tough, but they've been good to us. We wouldn't be half as good at what we do if not for them." Ed pointed out an apartment building that was all but dilapidated, indicating they'd reached their destination, then added, "If Izumi hadn't taken us in the Rockbells would have. Winry lives with her granny, Pinako. The Rockbells have been in the automail business since the technology was introduced, so they've got a rep as the best in the business. That's who hooked me up with my arm and leg."

Ed got out of the car, and Roy followed suit, not yet trusting the younger man to be entirely able to walk on his own – and secretly hoping to see where the tetchy prodigy lived (which definitely did not make him a stalker . . . okay, maybe a little). Really, he was just curious about what kind of magpie's nest a super-genius would call home. Was he still living with Izumi and her husband while he finished school? Or did he have a place of his own? He imagined the place would be at least as cluttered as Ed's lab, but hopefully not as grimy as the stairwell they ascended to the apartment building's third floor. Eventually, Ed opened up one of the apartment doors and stepped inside, pausing to hold the door open. "Coming in Mustang? I'll make you a cup of coffee to take back with you."

"You don't have to go to the trouble," said Roy, though he stepped into the apartment anyway. "You're injured. It wouldn't be fair to force you to make me coffee."

Edward laughed, throwing his head back as if to more fully release the rich sound into the air. "It's not any trouble," he said, closing the door behind Roy. "Come look and I'll show you. Remember that coffee machine I told you about the other night?" Ed pointed to the left of the door where the worn carpet gave way to ancient linoleum, signaling the entrance of a tiny capsule of a kitchen.

Just past the start of the tile was a small table, on which sat what was either the world's scariest coffee machine or some sort of small-scale industrial machinery. Given the carafe and hooded spigot, he'd go with coffee machine as the likelier answer. It was just barely smaller than a microwave and made entirely of stainless steel, welded neatly at the joints. "This is my baby," said Ed, proud as any papa. He lifted a section of the top, which turned out to be a hinged lid, and gestured for Roy to look into the machine. "See, the coffee beans go in there," he pointed inside then closed the lid. "And you just turn the dial on the front to tell it many cups to make, hit the button, and walk away. If it needs to be roasted first, there's a dial on the side to tell it how dark to roast it, and a flick of a switch dispenses it into the chamber for grinding which then dumps into the filter basket for brewing. If it doesn't have enough coffee, it'll cut itself off partway through the brewing cycle. There are sensors and timers to tell it how much coffee is enough or not enough for how much you want to make. There're also sensors to tell it which attachments are hooked in so it knows whether it's doing coffee, cappuccino, or espresso. When it does cappuccino, there's a pipe that can be attached to make foam. I added that bit for Al. I don't do cappuccino personally, but Al loves it."

"It's noisy, but damn if it isn't a work of art," said Roy, just barely holding back the urge to hug the thing. "You're amazing." Ed's whole face turned bright red. "I mean, seriously, if you patented this,
"Nah, I'm not interested in money," said Ed with a small shake of his head. "Besides, it's mostly built out of spare parts from other coffee machines. Some of the parts and the casing I had to machine myself over at Granny Pinako's, but even the sensors, circuit boards, and heating elements were scavenged and repurposed. I don't have any schematics for it or anything. I just sort of . . . put it together." Roy tried not to gawk, really he did, but he just couldn't help it. His eyes were round and his mouth hanging open, and no amount of wishing could make him look anything but thunderstruck. *Who just puts together complex machines in their spare time?* He thought wildly. "I guess if I took it apart, I might be able to retrace my steps. But she's perfect as it is, so I don't want to tempt fate by screwing around with her too much."

"I will pay you to let us put this in the lab during finals," said Roy, finally rediscovering his composure. "We can hide it from the engineering kids for you. Then you'd have easy access to it too, since it'd be right downstairs."

"Well, we'll revisit these negotiations when we get closer to finals," said Ed with a sly little smile that put fresh cracks in Roy's composure. Ed went to the cupboard and pulled down a travel mug and its lid, sitting them on the kitchen counter. "What do you like in your coffee?"

"Just milk and sugar," answered Roy with a shrug, and Ed shuddered dramatically. "What's wrong with milk and sugar?"

"There's just something fundamentally wrong with milk, *period,*" said Ed, making a face. "I hate that shit." Roy almost said, *No wonder you're so short,* but liked living a little too much to let it slip. And worst of all, Ed was watching him as if he expected exactly that comment and was deciding what dangerous kitchen ammunition would most effectively maim him. When no comment was forthcoming, Ed relaxed, temporarily mollified by Roy's silence. "It'll be a few minutes, plus the machine's really loud when you're standing right next to it. Go ahead and have a seat on the couch or look around or whatever."

The machine was just as loud as he said, so Roy retreated to the living room, opting to look around since he had tacit permission to snoop a bit. Ed just set down his laptop bag then disappeared into a short hallway opposite the kitchen capsule. The living room was probably smaller than Roy's bedroom, and every available wall had cheap bookcases shoved against it, every shelf overloaded with books and notepads and binders. The couch was ancient and lumpy and actually had little patches sewn neatly onto the arms and a few places along the front, the original upholstery an ugly burnt orange color that hadn't been popular since the 70's. A matching armchair sat cattycorner to the couch and was in a similar state of loving repair. They had a TV that was probably almost as old as Edward, and it was sitting on a wooden crate they'd painted dark red. The apartment was disappointingly tidy, but there were indications of mess just waiting to ensue. It was like chaos and order were silently duking it out, vying for dominance of the space.

Roy had just moved to the short hallway to examine the pictures hanging on the wall when Ed emerged from one of the three doors at the end of the hall – the doors presumably belonging to two bedrooms and a bathroom. "So, do you live here alone?" asked Roy.

"No, it's just me an Al. I figure eventually him and Winry will move in together, but for now it's still me and him," answered Ed with a shrug. He indicated one of the pictures hanging on the wall. "See, that's me, Al, Izumi, Sig, Granny, and Winry." The Granny in question was even shorter than Ed, wearing a severe look on her face which had cracked into a smile. Sig turned out to be a huge mountain of a man with an intimidating demeanor, complete with dark beard and thick black hair, but with kind eyes despite all that. "It was Al's 21st birthday. That's why we're all holding beers." He
pointed to another picture that showed a very young Ed and Al, grinning on either side of a pretty young woman with a sweet smile and eyes just like Al's. "That our mom. Al really looks just like her. He even has her same exact smile." Ed lightly brushed his fingers over the picture with a sad little smile. "At least one of us came out all right."

Roy noticed that a whole section of the wall was dedicated to framed newspaper and magazine articles all about the two prodigies' accomplishments. "Al puts those up. I kept telling him to either throw them away or shove them in a box, but he's stubborn about it, so I just let him do what he wants if it makes him happy," Ed explained to him, color rising in his cheeks. How could somebody so amazing be so humble? Was that even legal? Roy looked more closely at the pictures attached to the articles, noticing that none of the newspaper or magazine photographers had managed to capture a straight shot of Ed. It was always a candid shot of him working, usually with his head mostly turned away from the camera or wearing safety goggles so that his face was more or less obscured. Was he just shy? "I'm not in this for the acclaim, any more than I'm in it for the money. What's important is the discoveries and what they can do to help people. You know?"

"Yeah," said Roy, a slow smile curling his lips as he thought about Ed's words and decided he liked the feel of them. Roy wasn't conducting his experiments to get money or fame either, though he'd gladly accept both if they were offered. He was in it for the science, for the sake of discovering more about the world and how it could be changed for the better. "You know, that's actually why I changed from being a political science major to being a physics major. I got into politics because I wanted to make the world a better place, and I thought that was best way to do it. But the government is too corrupt to save so easily. I decided that instead of changing the way we govern the world, I'd change the way we view it and start from there."

"Hmm, sounds like a good plan to me," said Ed, looking up at him with the warmest, softest smile Roy had seen on the prodigy. It made him seem to glow with the warm amber light of a fire on a cold winter night, and Roy could have basked in that glow forever without a single regret.

Unfortunately, that's when the door burst open, letting in a huffing, panting Al into the apartment, panic written all over his face. "Brother! Are you all right? I saw where you called, and then Winry texted me right after and told me that you had to be helped out the door. I was so worried!" Al rushed over and took his brother's face in both hands, forcing the shorter-yet-older brother to meet his eyes.

"I'm all right, Al," said Ed fondly. "I hit my head and got a bit dizzy. I even let the med students have a look. Mustang gave me a ride home so I wouldn't have to wait for the bus."

"Do we need to clean out his car?" asked Al frankly with a grimace. Ed let out an impatient sigh and scowled.

"No, the car is fine," he grumbled then he pushed past both of them and went to the coffee machine which had finally grown quiet.

"Thanks so much for helping out again," said Al, offering him a kind smile that was indeed an exact replica of the woman in the picture. "You seem to be a handy guy to have around. You even talked him into going out to dinner with you, which I know probably wasn't easy. He's such a mole."

"It was more of a lab geek convention than an actual date," dismissed Roy, giving the young man a friendly smile in return. "Though, you know Edward, we can fix that if you'd like to. I wouldn't mind a chance to take you out properly. I'm a fan of good food, so I know a lot of good places to eat. Care to join me?"

"Smooth," whispered Al with a soft snicker. Hopefully, Ed hadn't heard his brother from the kitchen.
Roy just gave Al a dry half-smirk and rolled his eyes before heading into the kitchen to join Ed.

"Since the lab is closed Saturday, we could go Friday night," suggested Roy. Ed didn’t look up from the coffee he was pouring. His face was tomato red and his slightly upturned little nose wrinkled in a way that made Roy's heart twitch. Had Roy read him wrong? Was he not interested? Anything was possible with Ed. He was proving to be a bit unpredictable.

"Um, I'm in the lab all night Friday," he mumbled, barely audible. "But maybe Saturday. I work at the diner Saturday morning, but maybe Saturday night?"

"Perfect. How about 6:00?" asked Roy and Ed nodded, his ears coloring to match his face. It was so adorable Roy wanted to hug him to pieces. "Excellent. I'll pick you up here at 6:00 then."

"Here, fix your coffee so you can get back to work," muttered Ed, carrying the other two cups out of the kitchen. "I don't want you slacking off on my account."

Roy laughed and did as he was told. Ed had even set out the milk for him, though even touching the carton had put a look of revulsion on the younger man's face. Roy put the lid on then took a first sip and sighed with contentment. "Now that's bliss."

"Yeah, Ed's picky about coffee," Al told him, already sipping from his own cup as he dropped into the ugly orange chair. "I guess it's from years of drinking nasty lab coffee."

"I'm pretty sure no actual coffee was hurt in the making of that tar," growled Ed, and Al and Roy both laughed.

"Well, here's my number," said Roy, pulling out the cards Maes made for him when Roy had been tutoring that past summer. Roy handed Ed the card, Edward looking at it carefully as if searching for some hidden truth in the simple black-and-white card. "Call me in the morning if you still don't feel up to catching the bus. I don't mind coming to get you. It's on my way, and yes, I'll keep the bucket handy. See you tomorrow."

"Thanks again," called Al as Roy finally stepped out the door. He waited until he got all the way back to the lab parking lot before finally indulging in a loud fit of cheering. *Holy shit! I've got a date with an angel!* He thought with a flush of pride and wonder. The world couldn't be more fantastic right then if it tried.
All right, so the plot has made its appearance at last. Yay! I promise it gets deeper from here. Also, I went a little more into the construction and attachment of the automail, but my knowledge of anatomy and physiology is limited to the what I overheard from the classroom behind my old office (and what I could manage to dig up with my own research, of course). I know even less about electronics and engineering, with the exception of computers and basic design of complex structures (long story how I learned that last bit). Anyway, I hope everybody enjoys the chapter anyway, foibles and all (I'm hoping that, like a fluffy kitten, it's more lovable for its flaws).

Chapter 4

An Engineering Masterpiece

Roy woke to the sound of his phone ringing on the bedside table. He lifted his head just enough to crack one eye open and glare at the digital clock only to flip the thing down onto its face a second later so he wouldn't have to witness the tragedy of the ungodly hour. With a groan he picked up the phone to see who would dare call so stupidly early. He didn't recognize the number, but he answered it anyway, even if only to tell the rude bastard to go die.

"Yeah," said Roy vaguely, voice still muffled by the pillow.

"Hello? Is this Roy?" asked the apologetic voice of Alphonse Elric. "This is Alphonse, Edward's brother."

"Hey, what's up?" asked Roy blearily, lifting his head again.

"Well, you see, brother messed up his leg a little yesterday when he fell – you know, the automail one – and he really shouldn't take the bus today. I wondered if you might be willing to pick him up so he's not late for his 8 o'clock class," requested Alphonse, the epitome of polite sincerity and brotherly worry.

"Sure, no problem. I'll be there in 30," replied Roy before the words had even fully sunk in. It wasn't until he hung up that he realized what he'd agreed to and cursed emphatically into his pillow. "Well, too late to get upset now," he muttered to himself.

He managed to get his act together and make it to the Elrics' apartment in the promised 30 minutes and was met outside by a nervous, distinctly annoyed Edward. Ed got into the car, his face just as bleary and discontented about the hour as Roy's – it gave Roy a little bit of petty satisfaction that he wasn't the only one suffering. However, Edward also held out a peace offering. "I even put milk in it," said Ed, grimacing as he handed over the travel mug. "Don't know how you can stand that nasty crap, but whatever." Surprisingly, the coffee was prepared almost exactly the way Roy usually fixed it. He was both touched and in awe of the discovery, his heart squeezing in response – like it was giving itself a hug to show how happy it was.
"You really are an angel, you know that?" said Roy contentedly.

"No such thing as a fucking angel, and especially not one with a mouth like mine," grumbled Ed, blushing at the unintended innuendo. Roy just smiled to himself and pulled away from the curb into light morning traffic.

"So, are you teaching class or attending class today?" asked Roy conversationally. He'd discovered yesterday that distracting Ed helped make the car ride easier for Ed.

"Attending then teaching," replied Ed around his own travel mug. "Then I've got office hours after that, a couple hours in the lab to re-run those cultures, class again then four hours at the diner, study for a bit, and sleep. Ain't I just a party animal?"

"Is your schedule always that heavy?" asked Roy, disconcerted.

"Pretty much," answered Ed with a shrug. "Just because me and Al are full-time college students doesn't mean we don't still have to work to keep the lights on. Now that we're over eighteen, we don't get money from the state anymore, and the Curtises couldn't afford to keep supporting us forever. Al's got a scholarship to help him finish his medical degree, and the last of the insurance money has been paying for my PhD since I lost my scholarship. But we have to eat and keep a roof over our heads and pay for books and materials and shit. I won't let Al work. He's got too much on his plate as it is. He tutors on the weekends, but that's it. I get paid a little for teaching a few classes here at the university, plus I do some tutoring and work part-time at the diner in between."

"But then you also attend classes and have to work on your thesis and spend time in the lab," added Roy and Ed nodded. "Good lord, Ed, you're not just burning the candle at both ends. You lit it in the middle too. I'll be very surprised if you don't drop dead from an aneurysm before you hit twenty-five. Actually, at the rate you're going, you'll be completely bald before the year is out. How have you not gotten an ulcer by now?"

"What can I say? I've got the devil's luck," answered Ed with broad sarcasm. "Which is funny because I don't believe in either one."

"And there's no way to squeeze the government or the school for more money?" asked Roy, feeling a bit incredulous about the whole thing. "Hell, with your brain, they should be paying you for the privilege of having their name attached to your credentials. They're getting a huge jump in prestige just by having you here, not to mention the grant money you bring in for vital research. They deserve to have to work a little harder to keep you."

"You and I both know that, but try telling that to the dean sometime," snorted Ed bitterly. "To be honest, I think the man sincerely hates me now. He grabbed my ass once – I guess he thought I was a girl or something – so I fucking popped him in the jaw and made sure that everybody within a hundred miles could hear me calling him a fucking perv." Really, Roy could sympathize with anybody who had a fascination with Ed's ass – it was worth being fascinated by. However, that didn't mean they had the right to grab it without permission, especially somebody like the dean who should have known better than to sexually harass a student like that. Or maybe . . . no, that couldn't possibly be it.

"He may have done that because he thought you wouldn't say anything, maybe for fear of losing your scholarship or funding," suggested Roy. "And I bet he's done it before to other students, but the others didn't have the guts to turn him down."

"Fuck!" spat Ed, his eyes growing wider. "You're probably fucking right! That sonuvabitch! Just wait until I tell Izumi about this! She'll kill him!"
"You know, let me talk to my friend Maes – that weird guy with the camera that was with me at the exhibition," said Roy, thinking out loud. "He may look goofy and a little throwed off, but he may very well have been trained by Batman or at least be part ninja. If there's a secret to be known in this school, he'll know it or know how to find it. If we can get proof that the dean is a sleaze, we might be able to get your scholarship back."

"Do you really think so?" asked Ed, looking skeptical but with a faint spark of hope in his eyes.

"Just leave it to me," said Roy, feeling like he'd just saved a busload of orphans and their fuzzy puppies. "I can't promise anything, but the least I can do is try."

When Roy pulled onto the private streets that wove between the campus buildings, Ed pointed out the building his class would be in, and Roy pulled up as close he could. "You keep helping me out," said Ed wonderingly, looking at Roy like he might actually be an alien. "I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm totally grateful. It's just . . . I'm not used to people being helpful. Mostly people who give you something do it because they want something in return."

"I'm hoping if I impress you enough with my charm, I might eventually get laid," quipped Roy. Really, he half-expected Ed to get offended, but he was banking on Ed being just the right mixture of mischievous and irreverent that he might at least be a little amused. He was not wrong. Ed tipped his head back to unleash his marvelous laughter, his eyes dancing with his mirth. Roy was more than happy to laugh with him. "But seriously though," said Roy when some of the laughter died down. "I don't like leaving people in a lurch. If somebody I know needs a hand and I can offer it, I do. That's just how I was raised. I watch out for my own."

"Yeah, well, me too," said Ed, his tone still tingling with the last bubbling breaths of laughter. Roy smiled to himself and waited while Ed gathered his stuff from the back of the car. When he bent down to reach into the car from the open car door, Roy thought he was just grabbing his coffee, but instead he left a soft kiss on Roy's cheek and gave him a rakish grin. "Thanks. For everything."

"No problem," said Roy on autopilot – his brain, meanwhile, was completely short-circuited. Ed giggled at him as he closed the car door, his cheeks lit with a soft blush and his delighted smile enchanting. It took a full minute for Roy's mind to finish rebooting so that he was able to drive away, and he wouldn't put it past Edward to be chortling at him all the way to class.

Roy drove over to the labs, already pulling out his phone to call Maes. His friend wouldn't have class until later that day, but if he could talk to Maes early enough they might be able to have a confab over lunch to discuss Ed's situation. Roy laid it out for Maes with what little he knew from Ed's brief story, and although he'd sounded half-asleep, Maes had asked enough questions to indicate that he'd understood what Roy wanted from him.

And, as might be expected of the Great Maes Hughes, by lunchtime he already had a plethora of juicy tidbits to share. "Does this mean I get to meet your little blonde – without the old guy wig this time?" asked Maes his green eyes twinkling as he waggled his eyebrows. Roy rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Only if we can find him," replied Roy with a shrug.

"Well, that's easy," said Maes as if the answer should be obvious. He pulled out his smart phone and used it to log in to the campus website. "You said he had to teach a class today right? With office hours after that?" Roy nodded. "So, we pull up the office hours schedule for Professor Edward Elric. And . . . look at that," he turned his phone to show Roy. "Now we even know where his office is, and if we hurry we can catch him before he goes to lunch. Let's go!" Roy could only sigh again and follow along since there was no stopping Maes once he'd decided to something.
Unsurprisingly, they ended up at the science building just down the path from the labs. Ed’s office door was open when they approached, but Roy knocked anyway and waited until Ed looked up from what he was doing before speaking. To Roy’s confused amusement, Edward was wearing round wire-framed reading glasses perched halfway down his nose, the silver frames contrasting nicely with his burnished gold eyes. It was easily the cutest thing Roy had ever seen, but when he saw the vein all but bursting in Ed's temple, he wisely refrained from mentioning it. Ed was clearly already pissed about something, and Roy figured it was best not to become that something. "Hey, Ed, remember I told you about my friend this morning? The nosy weirdo with the photo fetish?" Ed nodded slowly, and Roy could see the corners of younger man's mouth twitch. "Well, this is my creepy childhood friend Maes. Maes Hughes, meet Edward Elric, our resident super-genius. Maes found some stuff out, and we wanted to talk you about it over lunch. But if you already have plans for lunch, we can do it another time."

"I have to go to the gym for lunch," replied Ed, rolling his eyes to show he'd rather be doing anything else. "Winry fixed up my leg, but now we have to test it and make sure it doesn't need any more calibrating. You can come with, if you want. It's not like I can't multitask."

Ed grabbed a duffle bag from under his desk and threw it over his shoulder then led the way to the school's gym. The main gym was bisected by a dividing wall, half taken up by the basketball court and the other half by the slightly smaller volleyball court. The building just behind it held only exercise machines and weight benches. Winry met them at the entrance to that second building, an orange plastic case in one hand and a toolbox in the other. She greeted Roy and was introduced to Maes – who promptly showered her with a barrage of whatever pictures of his wife and daughter he had stored on his phone.

"Win, I haven't got long, so I'm gonna go get changed," said Ed, interrupting. "Right, let's do this!" said Winry chasing after him, thereby deftly avoiding the rest of the photographic deluge. As Maes and Roy started to follow them in, Roy took a second to smack his friend in the back of the head on his way by.

"I can see what all the fuss is about now," said Maes archly, fixing his dark hair where Roy had hit him. "He's a looker, that's for sure. And when it comes to smarts, he's the real deal. Did you know that the he had his first patent by the age of 8? His first paper was published when he was 11. He's made a habit of systematically turning the scientific community on its ear since he was barely out of training pants. Now, Roy, I know you're brilliant too, but are you sure you're up for this sort of challenge?"

"Maes, look, just because he's a super-genius doesn't mean he's not also a person," Roy told him. "He may have a lot going on upstairs, but he still has all the same wants and needs of people everywhere."

"Yeah, yeah, nerds are people too," said Maes, waving him off. "I get it. Now hop to, or you'll be the one not getting it." His tone and emphasis made the inference plane.

"Ha, ha, very funny," drawled Roy. "Careful you don't cut yourself with that razor wit of yours."

"Meh, it's not quite good enough to shave with," countered Maes.

"Which is why you've had that godawful stubble since . . . you know, actually I think you may have been born with that stubble! I'll have to confirm it with your mom of course," continued Roy as they moved into the exercise room and joined Winry where she was setting up some sort of equipment next to a treadmill. "Need any help with that?" Roy asked her.
"Nope, all done," she said proudly. "Actually, I may need help getting Ed out of his shirt – not that I
think you'll mind that part. At least, not until the first time he throws you. That's when the minding
starts."

"Don't tell me he's thrown you before," said Maes, frowning in blatant disapproval.

"Of course I did," said Ed without the least shred of remorse as he entered from the locker room. He
was wearing a pair of close-fitting black sweat pants and a long-sleeved black t-shirt. Barefoot and
without his gloves, it was easy to see the automail hand and foot, all sleek glinting steel built into an
incredibly close proximity of human appendages. The joints of fingers, toes, wrists, and ankles were
all fully articulated so that they moved almost exactly the same as normal limbs. On top of that they
weren't bulky, the limbs having been carefully crafted to be almost the same size as Ed's natural
limbs. "When somebody is beating you with a wrench, you have three choices: punch, kick, or
throw. If she was a fighter, I'd have punched or kicked her – her gender wouldn't have made a
difference. My Teacher, who taught me and my brother martial arts, is a woman, after all. But, Winry
isn't a fighter, just a violent gorilla who happens to be a childhood friend. So I bruised her pride to
save myself the concussion. She's used to it by now. With all the pain she's caused me over the years,
it's the least she deserves."

"Oh hush, you big baby, you know we'd put you to sleep through that part if we could," said Winry,
and her teasing smile had just a hint of sadness to it. "Now, am I going to have these nice gentlemen
wrestle you out of your shirt or are you going to behave for once?"

"I don't know," said Ed, walking up to Roy and giving him a dangerously sultry little smirk. "The
wrestling might not be all bad." He winked then continued past Roy to the treadmill as Roy felt his
face heat like an oven blast. "Sadly, I have no time for it. I've got a lot of work to do today. Let's get
this over with." He paused for a second with his hands on the hem of his shirt then cast a last wary
glance back at Roy and Maes. Finally, he sighed as if defeated and yanked off his shirt. Immediately
Roy's breath caught in his throat.

Ed's upper body was a work of art. He was lithe and lean, with cleanly muscled shoulders and back
and a perfectly outlined set of abs all wrapped in that marvelous pale gold skin. However, his torso –
from back to front – was covered in scars of every description from negligible to horrific. The
prosthesis replacing his right arm, surrounded by its own nest of scars, covered his entire right
shoulder, part of his right collar bone, and part of his right pectoral muscle. The plates anchoring the
metal arm were almost elegant with their smoothly curving lines giving way to the metal mock-up of
human sinew, bone, and nerve pathways. For some reason, the scars and the automail didn't make
him look flawed. Instead, they made him seem complete, like a sword that had not only been forged
in fire but fought with in battle and made more perfect by the history of its imperfections. Edward
was the perfect blending of the achievements of both God and man. Ed wasn't so much perfect as
perfected – a masterpiece after its completion.

Edward got up on the treadmill then stood patiently while Winry attached little sensors to his chest,
back, and head. He then had to roll up his left pants leg so she could remove the leg's outer shell to
reveal a far more intricate and ingenious bit of engineering prowess hidden beneath the armor like
surface. She carefully stuck yet more sensors in between the muscle-like collection of metal rods and
wires of the automail leg, making the spectators wince.

" Doesn't that hurt?" asked Maes, still wincing.

"Nope," answered Edward with a shrug. "As long as you don't jack up the ports or the nerve
receptors, I don't feel anything in those limbs. I can sense pressure to a certain degree, but otherwise
have no sense of touch or pain. But that means that I had to train myself to gauge how much pressure
is too much. In the beginning I broke a lot of coffee cups and couldn't even be trusted with cutlery. Now I could hold a kitten in that hand without hurting a hair on its head. I still can't write though, which sucks 'cause I'm right handed. But we're working on that. It gets better with every upgrade."

"Yep, that's all we can do, just keep improving. There's no such thing as perfect to a true engineer. You can always improve on what's there," said Winry proudly as she connected the last of the sensor wires to the machine contained in the orange box. "All right Ed, we're good."

Ed hit the button on the control panel of the treadmill then started off at a light jog, telling Roy and Maes, "Talk to me guys. What'd you find out about Grabby McSleezeball?"

Both men choked at the nickname, Roy containing his laughter with a hand over his mouth and Maes covering it with a cough. "Well, our friend . . . ahem, Mr. Grabby, has been a very busy boy for a fairly long time. I don't think it'll be possible to bring him up on charges yet, but at the very least we've got leverage enough to scare him into doing the right thing and keeping his hands safely in his own pockets." Ed picked up his running pace, frowning as if concentrating on something. "It's not ideal, but it's the best we can do until we can get more witnesses to confirm his bad behavior. With enough sworn testimony, we can at least get him fired and brought up on charges of sexual harassment. Would you be willing to go on the list of possible witnesses?"

"Maybe," said Ed after a minute – how was the guy not the least bit out of breath yet. "As close as I am to a breakthrough, I don't want to risk making waves unless I have to. If you can't find enough witnesses, I'll do it. Otherwise, it'd probably be better if I didn't. Besides, my credibility isn't great because pretty much everybody – faculty, staff, and students alike – think I'm just a loud-mouth punk. They're not wrong, so I don't correct them."

"Hey! I won't let you talk shit about my best friend like that!" protested Winry angrily, brandishing her wrench. Ed ducked just in time to avoid the swing, and Winry puffed out her cheeks to show her annoyance at his escape. "I'll have you know that there are a ton of people on this campus who like you. Even you're A &P, Pharmacology, and Intro to Physics students – who call you the Devil Incarnate – still think you're awesome. It's just the tests and assignments they hate. I mean, look how crowded your classes are. Every class you teach has to be booked in the biggest halls because so many students sign up. Really, Ed, you're way too hard on yourself."

"Keep telling yourself that," muttered Edward with a soft sigh. "How are we looking over there, Win? I don't want to end up getting all sweaty. It's gonna be a while before I can get to a shower."

"All right," gave in Winry. "We can move on to the balance check."

All of the sensors were detached, but Ed's pants leg got rolled up still further so a different type of sensor could be applied to the automail leg, the new sensors entirely wireless. Roy was a little surprised to discover exactly high up the automail went. The port was attached mid-thigh, so, in essence, Ed had lost almost the entire leg. Roy could only imagine how ghastly the accident had to have been to cost him so much.

"Okay, Ed, let's see what you've got," said Winry stepping back so that Ed could step off the treadmill and move over to an open bit of floor covered in matts. "Whenever you're ready, we'll start with the right leg."

Ed nodded and took up a loose fighting stance. Despite his size, with that iron-hard glint in his eyes and the easy professional quality of his stance, Ed looked remarkably intimidating – especially after he started moving. He executed a series of lightning fast kicks with his right leg, even jumping incredibly high for some sort of insane kick Roy didn't even know the name for. Ed was like a character out of a fighting game. As he landed for the last time with incredible poise, Roy could swear he could hear a melodramatic video game voice say "K-O". 


"How does it feel?" Winry asked him, frowning at her laptop. She had sat down on the floor, using the orange box to prop up her laptop so she could work.

"There was a twinge when I landed the second time," answered Ed honestly. "It was really mild compared to twinges in the past, but still. I don't think it's a calibration issue. I think one of the connectors has come a little bit loose and is jiggling."

"Hm, but you say it's not too bad?" asked Winry looking up to level a severe glare at Edward, daring him to try lying to her.

"Yeah, it's not too bad. As long as I'm just walking around normally it should be fine," replied Ed with a shrug. "It can wait until Sunday at least. I don't have work Sunday, and I only have the one class on Monday."

"I'll come over around 10:00 on Sunday," promised Winry as she locked the shell in place on Ed's leg. Ed nodded then left to go change. Winry sighed heavily as she packed her stuff away.

"I've heard from reliable sources that automail surgery is incredibly painful," said Maes, his tone idle but the look in his eyes as shrewd as always. "I've heard it said that it hurts worse than the amputation itself."

"It can," admitted Winry, her eyes somewhat haunted as she looked toward the doorway through which Edward had gone. "To anchor the automail and evenly distribute the weight of the limb, we have to anchor it to bone. For Ed, who lost the arm up to the shoulder, we drilled holes into his collar bone, ribs, and scapula then used metal plates and bone grafts to strengthen load-bearing bones. We can use a general anesthetic for that part of the procedure at least, but the patient definitely feels it when they wake up. And that's just the beginning. It's a multi-step procedure, you see. The patient is given a few weeks between each step because the pain of the procedure is extreme and doing too much at once puts too much stress on the body, and also because of the risk of rejection or possible infection. The hardest part is when we attach the nerve connectors to the receptors that have been grafted to the existing nerve pathways. You have to be awake for that. Even the hardest war vet ends up crying and begging like a baby. But not Ed . . . he just grits his teeth and bears it. You can tell it's excruciating, but he never screams, never cries, never begs. He just says 'I have to be strong. Al needs me to be strong.' The worst part is that, since he got the automail as a child, he's outgrown the ports twice, and had to go through that surgery all over again to replace them. And just to put the cherry on top, every single time we detach and reattach his limbs, the nerve pain is just as awful as the first time. Honestly, I don't know how he does it. But one day . . . one day I'll perfect the procedure so that I never have to see that look on his face again."

"I'm sure someone as brilliant as you will figure out a way," said Maes in a surprisingly gentle voice, both comforting and reassuring – a father's voice.

Ed emerged from the locker room once again wearing his usual jeans and red hoodie, but his hair was down and he looked faintly disgruntled. "Win, do you have another hair tie? Mine broke again," he inquired, holding up the offending object.

"I might have an alternative," offered Roy, gesturing for Ed to approach then meeting him halfway. He pulled a small paperclip out of his pocket and straightened it out then held it between his teeth to free up his hands as Ed turned around. It felt like an immense privilege to be able to run his fingers through those silken gold strands while he attempted to draw the shimmering mass into a neat tail. As his finger brushed along Edward's scalp he felt Ed shiver a little and filed away the reaction for later exploration. Using the paperclip like a twist-tie, Roy finally secured the ponytail in place, releasing Ed's hair with a light twinge of regret. "It's not the most secure in the world, but it should get you through the day at least."
"You're making habit of coming to my rescue," said Ed, looking up at him through his thick eyelashes with a coy little smile. "I gotta say, I don't hate it." He grinned and tapped Roy once on the end of his nose with his index finger then sauntered away to help Winry.

"Okay, Ed, just be careful at work tonight. Let Paninya know what's going on, and I'm sure she'll go easy on you tonight," said Winry as the four of them left the gym.

"What diner do you work at anyway?" asked Roy, and Ed looked back at him over his shoulder.

"Dante's," he answered. "It's a hole-in-the-wall, but it's walking distance from here and right next to the bus stop, so I can't complain too much - not for fucking lack of wanting to. Plus they pretty much let me make my own schedule since my manager is an automailer too and an engineering student. She understands the bullshit I have to juggle. She's pretty cool, just crazy as fuck and way too fascinated with my fucking prosthetics. She actually tried stealing my arm once. Winry thought it was hilarious - you evil gorilla, don't think I can't see you over there fucking grinning. You know, I heard when apes smile it's actually a sign of aggression."

Roy tried not to laugh - really he did - but when Maes started making that choked sound that meant he was secretly snickering, Roy couldn't hold it back anymore. It only got worse when Winry dropped the toolbox, brandished a wrench with a flourish like a magician and started chasing Ed with it. Edward just laughed and nimbly side-stepped her again and again, all but dancing around her, and occasionally using Roy and Maes as shields. Eventually, Winry gave up - gorilla or not, she just didn't have stamina that Ed did.

Once Winry parted ways with them, Ed pulled Roy and Maes into his office and closed the door, locking it behind them. "So, what exactly are we supposed to do with this information of yours? Because I've got this bad fucking feeling that if he sees a connection between me and these accusations . . . just, trust me, there's a whole lot of fucking ways shit can go sideways for me. I need to complete my research. And I really need this fucking job."

"I get it, Ed, I do," said Maes, dropping into one of the two chairs in front of Ed's cluttered desk. "I won't lie. I had hoped we could just do this in the most straightforward way possible - which would be extorting him for good behavior. It'd throw him off balance and keep him from paying attention to the side approaches where the next attacks will be coming from. Is there anything you can tell me that might help us find another approach?"

"Maybe," said Ed pensively. He reached into his desk drawer and fumbled around until he came out with a manila envelope. "In here are the terms and requirements for keeping my scholarships, dating back to the first scholarships I received when I started out. I also have the terms for the appropriation and use of funds for my research and the terms for the intellectual property rights for my discoveries. I think the money might be another angle to try. I mean, I'm not getting my scholarship money, obviously. But I haven't violated the terms or missed a single fucking requirement. So either he lied to the board to get my scholarship yanked, or he's still getting the money and it's just not reaching me. So, either he's guilty of fraud or he's guilty of embezzlement."

"He--y," said Maes with a slow villainous grin. "Now you're talking! That's something we can definitely sink our teeth into. What about your research funding? Does that come to you directly or does it come through the school?"

"It comes through the school and is applied to whatever I need to spend it on. I give them invoices or supply lists and they request the money to pay for it all out of my research budget," explained Ed with a little shrug. He closed his eyes and said, as if reciting, "'Which includes, but is not limited to, all items meeting the aforementioned criteria stipulated in section 3c of the contract. Should additional items or services be required, the above terms will be revisited so that all changes may be
decided upon by a budgetary board consisting of no less than three presiding members from the board of directors, which may include’ blah, blah, blah . . . anyway, it goes on for a bit after that. The contract is in there, though. There's a confidentiality clause in there, but it's pretty generalized and only refers to the specifics of my research. For instance, I can tell you what it's about, but I can't give you any of the equations or formulae or schematics for project-specific equipment that I created – Big Bertha, for instance, which I built just for this. I mean, once it's all said and done, I'll still own the patent on Big Bertha, but anything I created with her for these people is nobody's fucking business but mine and my pharma sugar daddies. And before you ask, they already know I call them that. Their CEO cracks up every single time. That old fart's a riot, I swear. Sometimes I think he picked me just for my fucked up personality."

"Actually, do you think that CEO is sweet enough on you to hand over a list of expenditures so we can see if there're any discrepancies?" asked Maes and Ed shrugged.

"If not, I have my ways," he said cryptically.

"And do you keep any sort of record of what you actually spend and what you spend it on?" Ed nodded slowly again. "Good deal! Then let's see what we can do with this," Maes's smile fell then, and he gave Ed a very serious look. "Now, look, I don't think I need to tell you to keep this to yourself. You're the last person who wants this getting around. But it might be a good idea to make sure Winry knows too. Also, if you start asking questions, try to be as careful as you can or all the discretion in the world won't make a damn bit of difference. If you need to find something out, but you think it'd be noticed if you're the one looking into it, just let me know. I'm pretty good at this sort of thing. I don't want this ass hole to see us coming so he won't be able to defend himself when it finally bites him in the ass."

"Fuck, I'm glad it's not me on your bad side," said Ed with a short laugh.

"Well, Roy has my number if you need me," said Maes as he got to his feet. Ed nodded simply and grabbed a business card out of the top drawer of his desk. He scribbled something on the back of it.

"Here, Hughes," said Ed, holding out the card. "The number for my lab and office are on the front, my cell number is on the back. Call if anything changes that I need to know about. If I'm about to get caught up in a shit storm, I want time to batten down the fucking hatches."

"Gotcha," said Maes, understanding completely. He nodded to Ed and waved to Roy then left, not bothering to close the door behind him.

"I didn't think this was going to turn into such a big fucking deal," said Ed, puffing out a loud breath as sprawled out in his chair.

"You know, if you don't want to have to deal with all this, you don't have to," said Roy. He didn't think Ed would back out, but he wanted him to know he had the option. "You don't owe anybody anything, and you have a lot to lose if it goes wrong."

"No," said Ed, shaking his head and closing his eyes. "I can't help but wonder how many others are out there, the poor bastards getting fucked out of their education because they didn't want to get groped by this jackhole. And how many have been cornered into giving in to him? I mean, fucking hell, that's almost worse than just rape. You can't even tell yourself you fought back. That'd make you feel even shittier and more helpless, wouldn't it? No, I have the ability to do something, so I will. It's just that easy. I'll take on the burden of the consequences, and I'll see this through to the end."

"I thought you'd say that," said Roy, smiling, and Ed immediately blushed. "I'll see you at the lab," Roy told him, getting to his feet. A couple steps put him on the other side of the desk and he left a
kiss on Ed's cheek, just like Ed had done that morning. "You did good," Roy told him softly. As Roy walked down the hall, the memory of the endearing scarlet of Ed's face put an extra spring in his step.

Chapter End Notes

Since this is my very first fanfic, I've been surprised and delighted by how well my work's been received so. Really, I was expecting torches and pitchforks, at the very least, and the lack of angry villagers demanding my head on a stick stunned me. So a huge thank you to everybody who has been reading this little bit of insanity and I hope the results continue to justify your interest. I really did a little happy dance when I saw my first review. Embarrassing, yes, but worth mentioning regardless.
The Temple of Ed

Chapter Notes

Ok, I feel there is a need for mea cuplas here. This chapter is fairly fluffy, plus there's this weird sort of pseudo-smut at the end (I call it that because I couldn't write smut if I tried, so I don't try. I go with what I'm good at - which is being a sap). But I feel like, since I'm a little mean to the boys in the next chapter, now might be a good time to stop and feel the fluff. So, for all those that are getting antsy about the slow-dragging plot, I promise you will not be disappointed in Ch 6, but please enjoy Ch 5 in the meantime! Think of it like getting stuck on hold, but having actually cool hold music to listen to (our IT dept had the Jurassic Park theme music. I nearly died laughing).

Also of note, is that the good reviews keep cropping up, and honestly I got so happy I feared imminent head explosion. I can't thank you guys enough, sincerely. I couldn't ask for better encouragement! You guys rock!!!

Chapter 5

The Temple of Ed

It was Friday and Roy's focus was completely shot. Ed had been so busy over the last couple days that he'd hardly said two words to Roy – though, Roy comforted himself with the fact that Ed had actually made the effort to speak to him in the first place. It was obvious that Ed wasn't specifically being antisocial. He was just swamped, a state Roy was all too familiar with.

Roy was just reading the same line of data for the third time when he was startled out of his useless attempt to work by the phone on his desk ringing. All of the labs had a landline phone so that they'd have access to the intercom in case of emergencies and also so the cell phone free zones could still be reached by the outside world. But, since Roy's lab wasn't a cell phone free zone, they never used to landline and on the rare occasions that it actually rang, it invariably startled the crap out of them.

"Mustang," Roy answered, forcing his pounding heart to slow down.

"Hey," said Ed, his voice oddly echoing a bit. "Um, I know you guys are probably busy or whatever, but does anybody in there have a free pair of hands? I mean, I hate to ask, and if nobody's available, that's totally fine."

"Don't worry about it. It's fine," said Roy, amused and a little pleased that Ed had actually taken the initiative to call Roy. Usually it was Al or Winry that tagged in Roy, while Ed refused to even admit he needed help in the first place. "Fuery's basically just twiddling his thumbs right now. I'll send him up."

"Thanks! You're a saint! You know that? A sai – ow, god damn it!" The phone hung up abruptly and Roy chuckled to himself.

"Hey, Kain, Ed just called. He says he needs a free pair of hands. Interested?" Not only was Fuery interested, his eyes lit up as soon as the question was out of Roy's mouth. Fuery really did think Ed hung the moon. "He's on the second floor, last door on the right. When you get up there, let him
know we're ordering pizza in a couple hours. If he wants some we can order him one too."

"Will do!" said Fuery cheerfully as he all but jumped up and dashed off toward the elevator. When the time came to order the pizza, it was Fuery that answered Ed's phone.

"Does Ed want pizza?" asked Roy.

"Yo, Ed, you want pizza?" called Fuery.

"Do whores want condoms? Hells yeah I want pizza!" Roy heard in the background and both he and Fuery laughed. "Where's it coming from?"

"Tell him it's Jimmy's down the road," replied Roy before Fuery had a chance to repeat the question.

"Ask them for an Elric special. They'll know what to do," Ed called out once Fuery had conveyed the information.

After Fuery hung up, Roy called the pizza place. Jimmy's was a favorite of the Central University students, because the pizza was cheap but tasty and it was one of the few places that delivered to the dorms and labs. The only catch was that if pizza was ordered for the labs, somebody had to go out front to wait for it, because only those with clearance and a lab ID were allowed past the security desk – which, of course, did not include pizza delivery drivers.

While Roy was on the phone with Jimmy's, he had to fight hard not to chortle at the pizza girl who was taking his order. When he'd asked for an "Elric Special", she'd immediately begun to sound a little stressed and actually let out a couple baby swear words. He could even hear some cursing in the background, as if other employees had heard her repeating the order and had begun to worry. It was actually kind of cute listening to the poor flustered girl try to continue being polite while shushing her coworkers.

"Hey, miss, out of curiosity, what's on the Elric Special?" asked Roy, and he swore he could hear the girl shudder.

"Sir, I don't know all of it. Only the manager knows. But I can tell you there's at least all of the meats including anchovies plus onions, mushrooms, black olives and green olives, every type pepper – are those pickles? OMG I think I'm gonna barf – and something I think might be ranch dressing mixed with hot sauce, but I can't say for sure," she told him tiredly, and Roy winced in sympathy. He could feel a hole burning straight through his stomach just listening to the description. "Oh, and D.J. said there's some kind of garlic lime sauce, but I didn't even know we had limes."

"I think I've heard enough to traumatize me already," said Roy, offering her the benefit of his sympathy. He finished giving her his order and hung up, shaking his head to himself. Ed was really such an odd character.

As soon as the pizza arrived, Roy carried Ed's ER-visit-in-a-box upstairs to him, along with Fuery's much more modest pizza. When he got to the lab, however, he saw no sign of Ed – he even checked the floor this time. "Where's Ed?" Roy asked Fuery, but his friend just giggled and pointed toward the machine.

No sooner had Fuery pointed, when Ed's voice carried to them from within the machine. "Do I smell pizza?" Suddenly a panel on the top of the machine opened, revealing Ed's tousled head poking out. He had sweat on his brow and grease smudged on one cheek and across his nose, his golden hair a tangled lion's main around his head. He had never been more adorable. "Hey, give me a second. I'll be right out." The panel closed, and Roy half expected to see Ed climb out of the top panel
somehow. So, when Ed's feet suddenly poked out of another panel at the bottom front of the machine, Roy was a little startled. Ed slid out as smoothly as an eel then flipped up to his feet. Roy held his box of instant stomach ulcer out to him, and Ed took it with eyes glittering in anticipation. "I'll have to make sure to save some for Al or he'll be so jealous. I wouldn't put it past that evil little shit to withhold breakfast for revenge. And I can't go through a whole fucking day without Al's pancakes. I might actually die."

"How you don't weigh 500lbs is a mystery for the ages," said Roy, deeply disturbed when he finally saw the mysterious pizza. However, Ed's lilting groan of pleasure when he took his first bite made it well worth witnessing the horror hidden in the pizza box. That sound was downright pornographic. "I'm also pretty sure we should put crime scene tape around that pizza – and maybe call in a Hazmat team or the CDC or something."

Ed just made a mocking face at him, wrinkling his nose. "You don't know what you're missing, and I'm not sharing so you'll just have to keep on missing it." He pulled out his wallet with his free hand and handed Roy enough money to cover the horrendous pizza plus a little of the tip. Roy tried to wave him off, but Ed insisted.

"So, when I heard you talking from inside the machine, I started flashing back to the third Terminator movie and possibly Maximum Overdrive. I wondered if that huge monster had eaten you," said Roy, hitching one hip up on Ed's desk and stealing a piece of Fuery's pizza – it's not like he was going to finish it anyway. "What on Earth were you doing in there?"

"I finally got the parts I was waiting for," said Ed around his most recent bite. "I should be able to solve the cooling system issue now, so the stupid fucking beast won't piss condensation all over my floor nonstop."

"I'm glad. That means I won't have to come in and find you lying on the floor anymore," said Roy, genuinely relieved. "I seriously worry that I'll come up here one day and find you with blood pouring out of your cracked skull."

Ed looked at him for a long moment, his head cocked to the side as if analyzing something strange. "You know, nice people worry me, exactly because they're fucking nice," he said offhandedly. "Most people who are nice are either working an angle or are doomed to get hurt."

"Yeah, but you already know I'm working an angle, remember?" pointed out Roy cavalierly. "I'm still trudging the long and weary road toward getting into your pants." Fuery promptly choked on his pizza, and Ed let out a wonderful belly laugh. "Speaking of which, any idea where you might like to go tomorrow evening? I do have a place I'd like to take you, but if there's somewhere else you'd rather go, I'm fine with that too."

"You mentioned a restaurant, so we can do that first, but afterwards, I have some place I wouldn't mind taking you," said Ed with a return of that sly, sultry smile.

"Sounds good," said Roy, unable to keep the grin from his face. "I'll be around for a while tonight, so if you need anything, call."

"Speaking of needing something," said Ed, picking up another piece of pizza. "Fuery tells me you guys are having issues with an equation or something. He said something about a flaw, and now you guys have to backtrack and start from scratch because you can't find the flaw. But, you know, if you want, I mean you don't have to because, you know, it's none of my business, but I could, you know, um, come take a look . . . maybe. I wouldn't mind really. It'll give me a chance to stretch my legs."

"Actually, that would be fantastic!" said Roy with enthusiasm. "I really, really, really don't want to
have to start all over again. In fact, I was dreading it. We all were. Like, about-to-pour-lemon-juice-on-a-gaping-chest-wound dreading."

"No kidding," snorted Fuery.

"But I know how busy you are, so if it looks like it'll take too long to get it figured out, don't worry about it," admonished Roy. "I don't want to throw your work off schedule because ours hit a snag."

"Nah, it's not that often I get to put this big fucking brain to use helping out people directly," said Ed, all at once shy. "In high school, people thought me and Al were looking down on them when we tried to help, or they'd get jealous or resentful. The worst was when they tried to cozy up to us just to use us. Very not cool. A lot of the fights I got into in school were because of bullshit like that. Al was too fucking trusting. He wanted to see the good in people. It's fucking admirable as hell, but it makes protecting him from assholes a whole lot fucking harder. He's learned some caution since then, and so have I. But, my gut tells me you guys are all right, so I'll help out if I can. Just promise me one thing."

"Sure, anything," said Roy, deeply touched by the admission of trust.

"Just . . . even if I end up helping out, don't credit me for it," said Ed with a sort of wince. "If you put my name anywhere near it, people will try to give me all the credit. That's not right and I don't like it. So, yeah . . . that's it, just promise me to keep my name out."

"No problem," said Roy, taken aback by the request. In typical Ed fashion, it wasn't at all what he'd expected. "Mums the word. Really, I think we'd sell our first born for a solution at this point. You could have asked for the moon, and we'd throw it a box with a bow on it."

Ed chuckled and got to his feet, brushing off his hands then grabbing what looked like a moist towelette out of his pocket. He used it to clean away as much of the grease as he could, but since he couldn't see what was on his face, Roy made sure to stop him. He took the little wet-nap from Ed and gently removed the smudges from the blonde's nose and cheek then handed it back and just as gently smoothed his hair. "Better," said Roy, satisfied – especially since it made Ed blush so fetchingly.

Ed blew into Roy's lab like a summer storm. He said little, just looking at the white board quizzically for a moment then looking around until he found the printout of the data on Roy's desk. Ed's eyes scanned all that data incredibly fast then returned to the white board. Ed erased several lines and a few smaller sections and wrote in corrections. Roy and his team could only stare, entirely awestruck. It was astonishing. A problem an entire team couldn't solve after two weeks of toil, Ed figured out in a matter of minutes.

"All right, the problem is with the original algorithm as much as the equations," he announced when he was done. "The changes in the order of the sequences of equations should produce cleaner data, but you'll have to run it to be sure. Also, I would expand on this algorithm a bit, if I were you. See if we add another expression here at the end . . ." He flipped the white board and began writing on the blank side. "Then you can include several variables that weren't being accounted for. Think of it as a safety net." He gave them broad a grin and a cheerful wave. "If you have any questions you know where to find me."

"I have a question," interjected Breda before Ed could quite make it out the door. Ed stopped and turned to look at him. "Where can we build our temple to you, and how big would you like it? I'm thinking Parthenon style, but I'm flexible."

Ed laughed, the musical sound filling the room and swelling their hearts. "No temple necessary, but I
do accept offerings of good coffee and sweets when available."

"Good coffee. Sweets. Roger that boss," said Breda and Ed laughed again before vanishing back to his lab. Truly like a summer storm, blustering in, changing the landscape as it pleased then disappearing before anyone even realized they'd been soaked.

"You know, since he just saved us a months of work, I think we should go get the man some good coffee and sweets," declared Roy and there was a cheer all around. Sheska volunteered to run and they all pitched in for it. So, the next time Fuery called Ed out of his machine it was to find a box of fresh pastries, a very large espresso, and a thank you note signed by the whole team.

Saturday night, Roy put on something simple but just a little bit dressy – nice jeans, a white button-up with the top two buttons left strategically open, and a black jacket – and made sure his raven hair was arranged to fall perfectly. When he went to pick up Ed, he discovered that the younger man had also taken special care with his appearance. He wore a predawn blue shirt with dark brown pants and a matching brown waistcoat that hugged the shape of his slim waist in the most tempting way possible. Rather than a braid, Ed had actually left his hair down so that it flowed down his back, a king's ransom in golden strands. Unfortunately, he also looked rather tired, but he was nonetheless delighted to see Roy, so Roy let it go.

The restaurant Roy took Ed to had a very relaxed atmosphere that he knew Ed would appreciate. It also helped that their food was excellent and the service was just as good as the food. The pair ate amid conversation that seemed to flow naturally from topic to topic, a phenomena that Roy didn't often get to experience with his dates. Usually, one mention of science was enough to have his date yawning. Ed, on the other hand, all but glowed as they discussed theories and research and new discoveries. Science was Ed's passion, after all, just as much as it was Roy's.

To Roy's further wonder, he discovered new and interesting details about Ed, some of which he never would have imagined. For instance, Ed and his brother studied the forgotten art of alchemy as a hobby, just for the thrill of shining a new light on science and nature itself. He and his brother had also actually competed in martial arts before the accident. They had several trophies, all of which resided with the Curtises. The most surprising tidbit was that Ed wasn't actually from Central City – which explained the slight country accent Roy heard in his voice from time to time. The brothers were actually from a small town in the east, right on the border. They'd grown up among apple orchards and rolling hills, and had only moved in order to attend college.

In return, Roy told Edward all about his own early years as a science-nerd-turned-football-player-turned-debate-team-captain. He told him about how he'd met his current circle of close friends and about some of the shenanigans they'd pulled together. He even told Ed about his Aunt Chris, who was his foster mother. He told him about Christmas, his Aunt's bar which was a front for a brothel. He explained about learning how to tend bar as a teenager and about narrowly avoiding being dragged off by more than one drunken customer. Ed listened to all of Roy's stories with the same rapt focus he gave to all things science, and Roy got the sense that in this way Ed was displaying exactly how much Roy mattered to him. He was making a conscious effort to absorb all the pieces of Roy's past, good and bad, without judgement or pity.

After they left the restaurant, it was Ed's turn to drag Roy off somewhere. They were on foot, just as Roy had promised they would be, since he didn't want to ruin a perfectly lovely evening by making his date feel nauseous and panicky. Getting to Ed's chosen destination was a bit more of a walk than Roy had been expecting, but he didn't have the heart to complain. It was a gorgeous fall evening and he was in good company and good spirits. Who could possibly complain about that?

Eventually, they arrived at a park that butted against the river, but the park wasn't precisely where Ed
intended to take him. They walked through the park until they got to the edge of the river that bisected Central City. A railing separated the walking path from the river to prevent people from accidentally falling into the icy, polluted water below. They walked along the railing until they encountered a clump of tall rocks that stood as the base of some historical monument Roy couldn’t identify and didn’t particularly care about. It was here that Ed stepped off the path rather than follow it where it edged around the monument.

"Now, I'm going to tell you a little story," said Ed as he showed Roy an easy way to climb up the rocks to stand beside the monument. When he spoke again, he covered Roy's eyes from behind and carefully turned him around. "Where I grew up I used to look up at the stars every night. Since there were so few lights from the town and scattered houses, you could lie on a hill and see whole galaxies spread out across the sky as far as the eye could see. When I was sixteen, I had to move here by myself and stay with a guy named Mason, a friend of Izumi. Al wanted to finish out high school with his friends, so I would have to go solo for a couple years. But the most heartbreaking thing was that when I looked up, I realized I couldn't see the stars anymore. For the first few months I was pretty miserable and really lonely. Then one day I found this place and changed my perspective. I couldn't see the stars by looking up, but . . ." Ed removed his hands and pointed past Roy's shoulder at the river. From the angle they were standing, they could see the city lights reflecting perfectly in the rippling surface of the river like a million glittering stars. It was breathtaking. "I realized that I didn't have to look at the sky to see stars. I just had to be willing to look at what was right in front of me."

"I've lived here all my life, but I've never once seen this," said Roy in a soft reverent tone. He turned to Edward who grinned, a light blush rising in his cheeks. "Thank you for bringing me here. It's almost as amazing as you."

Before Ed could protest the compliment, Roy captured his lips and was surprised and delighted when the kiss was returned with equal fervor and no little desire. Just as he'd been longing to do since the first time he'd caught sight of those captivating golden eyes, Roy wrapped his arms around Edward's slender frame, reveling in the texture of the muscles rippling beneath Ed's clothes. When they separated, they were both breathless, and Roy wanted to etch in his memory forever the image of Ed looking up at him from beneath thick eyelashes veiling half-lidded amber pools, panting through slightly parted lips, and pink lightly dusting his golden cheeks.

"You know, Al's at Winry's tonight. The apartment is empty until tomorrow at 10," said Ed, his tone quiet but suggestive – a whispered promise. "Care to keep me company."

"It would be rude to leave you all alone," said Roy, his heart pounding hard enough to break his ribs – but for this man, he wouldn't mind being broken.

By the time they reached Ed's apartment building they were all but boiling with pent up want, and as they climbed the stairs they were already making progress toward devouring each other. Their hands grasped at each other desperately, their kisses wanton and unworried about who might see them. Getting into the apartment in their current state proved to be a bit of a challenge, but once inside they were already stripping each other all the way to the bedroom, leaving clothes wherever they happened to land. All that mattered was their need for contact, the feel of skin as it was revealed to the contrast of cool air and warm hands. All other concerns could go hang.

Upon reaching the bed, Roy froze a moment, unable to resist savoring the sight of Ed laid out beneath him on the white sheets, the younger man looking like golden sunlight on fresh snow. He could have been a young god, carved of gold and silver, and it almost felt like a sin to lay his hands on such an ineffable work of art. But lay his hands on him he did, because, frankly, not even a saint could resist such a vision. The Edward he saw every day was a joy to look at, but the Edward that was glittering with a faint sheen of sweat and arching up off the bed at every caress was magnificent.
Roy delighted in the feel of the soft skin beneath his hands as he explored every inch of the angel writhing on the bed. He used his hands, lips, and tongue to draw out gasps of pleasure and deep moans. And he wasn't the only explorer. Ed returned the favor in kind, dedicating all of his attention to learning every last bit of Roy's body until they were both groaning.

They touched and tempted and teased until they couldn't take it anymore and finally, *finally* joined together. However, for all that he was drowning in the pleasure, Roy made sure to keep his head above water enough that he was able to treat Ed's body with care. If he wanted to be invited back a second time, he would need to make sure to treasure the younger man and be mindful not to hurt him. The moment they reached their climax was an explosion of almost unbearable bliss, leaving the both of them too spent to do more than simply lay entwined in each other's arms, gulping air as they struggled to catch their breath.

Edward, who had been tired before, was starting to look extremely sleepy now. So, Roy gently cleaned him up then hunted down both of their boxers. Once he was at least a little modestly covered, Roy went out into the apartment and gathered all of their clothes then returned to Ed's room with them, dropping them in a pile beside the bed. "Stay here tonight," mumbled Ed, already mostly asleep.

"Of course, it would be rude of me to leave you all alone," replied Roy, feeling a bit sleepy himself. He lay down beside Ed and wrapped his arm around the smaller man's waist, breathing in the scent of coffee and clean sweat that lingered in his hair. Ed had his back to him, so Roy was able to fold himself around him with ease, and it was only a matter of minutes before both of them fell into the contented slumber of the comfortably sated.
The Stubbornness to Endure

Chapter Notes

All right, so this chapter gets a little angsty, but at least the plot manages to stick its ugly head in for a bit. Fair warning though, the next chapter is even more emotionally wrought. Just thought you should know. I'm so mean to Ed in this chapter. It feels a little bit like kicking a puppy. But at least it's not as bad as next chapter, so yeah . . . (yep, I'm so going to hell for this). Apologies for any inaccuracy with the automail. I did what I could, but like I said before, I only have limited knowledge, and I had even less time for research this go round - that and my hands are about to fall off from typing so much.

Lastly, this is me sending out loves and hugs to all those who have been loving my work so much! I would never have been able to get through this so quickly without your awesome encouragement. Thanks to all the love I've been getting, I've been super hyped and absolutely flying through these chapters (which in no way means I blame you for my hands falling off. My sudden lack of appendages in no way diminishes my outpouring of loves! One can still hug without hands!!!) Thanks everybody!!! You're seriously the best EVER!

Chapter 6

The Stubbornness to Endure

Roy woke the next morning to the feeling of Ed trying to squirm free of his grip. Not wanting to let go, he tightened his hold and mumbled something he thought sounded vaguely like, "Where are you going?"

"I have to get in the shower before Al and Winry get here," said Ed, somehow rolling over in his arms so he was facing Roy. Seeing those bright golden orbs first thing in morning filled Roy's chest with a pleasant warmth that instantly brought a smile to his face. "We have to work on my leg today," said Ed with a grimace. "Not my idea of fun, but it is what it is."

"Want to me to stick around for moral support?" asked Roy, giving in to the urge to press a soft kiss to Ed's forehead. He heard Ed let out happy little humming sound before he buried his face in Roy's chest and breathed deeply for a moment, as if trying to inhale him.

"You don't have to," said Ed finally, lifting his head. "I'm sure you have better things to do today."

"Honestly, I can't imagine anything better than spending the day with you," said Roy, and though it was sappy as hell it was no less true. Ed gave him that searching, inquisitive look and Roy figured Ed was trying to see if he was full of it. "Usually I spend Sundays alternately sleeping and watching Netflix. So to answer your questions strictly factually, no I have nothing better to do with my day. You are at least more important than Netflix and naptime."

"Oh, at the very least," said Ed with heavy sarcasm and they both laughed, Ed hitting his arm playfully. "Well, I still have to get in the shower either way. Winry is going to be way too close to parts that smell entirely too much like sex right now."
"Yeesh," said Roy, wincing. "I would say we could shower together, but I don't really have anything clean to change into."

"Actually, I still have some of Mason's old clothes. Those should fit you," said Ed, that devastating sultry look on his face again. "Head into the bathroom – the door directly to the right of mine – and I'll bring in towels and clothes."

Since the bath tub was one those old claw-foot tubs, there was more than enough space to get quick round in before the introduction of quickly chilling water forced them to hurry through the actual washing. Afterwards, they lounged on the couch, Roy's back bolstered against the arm of the couch and Ed nestled between Roy's legs, his back pressed against Roy's chest. It was mystifying how small Ed could make himself – he was incredibly flexible. Roy was sure that he had never felt so at peace in his life than in that moment, relaxing on Sunday morning with a warm ball of Edward in his arms talking about nothing in particular.

"Okay, so let me ask you a weird question," began Roy. "Why did you put on two pairs of underwear today? I noticed, and I wasn't going to say anything, but the curiosity is killing me." After their shower, Ed had donned a pair of boxer briefs and a pair of boxers, and for the life of him Roy couldn't figure out why. It served no purpose except to make it harder to get into Ed's underwear – or get Ed out of them – so of course this was something Roy couldn't help but dedicate a lot of thought to.

Ed laughed softly. "There's actually a good reason for it. When Winry works on my leg, I have to sit around in boxers, but boxers aren't great for . . . privacy, if you catch my meaning. So, since I don't want to give her a show, I take precautions."

"So, basically, you're going to be lying around in your underwear all day?" asked Roy then he grinned. "I knew there was a reason I should stick around today." Ed laughed at him again and snuggled closer, leaning up to give him a kiss too gentle for the thought-drowning passion of their kisses the night before. This wasn't an invitation for sex; this was an invitation to comfort. It was soft and sweet and yet more glorious for that.

The front door burst open at that moment, startling the hell out of both of them, and Alphonse stepped into the apartment, shouting, "Brother, you two better be showered and dressed already. I don't need any surprises." Ed let out a wordless snarl and sat up to glare at his brother over the back of the couch. "There's my favorite resting bitch face," said Al, patting his brother on the head like a puppy as he sailed on by. Roy sat up too so he could cover the amused smile he didn't want to Ed to see, but was treated to a pat on the head too. "Good morning Roy." Al wore a smile so sweet butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, but the evil glint in his eye put the lie to that smile. "Did you children behave last night?"


"She's picking up a few things on the way," said Al as he set down plastic bags of Styrofoam containers on the scarred coffee table. "But I figured we could have breakfast while we wait for her. You'll need pain medication later, Brother, and you don't want to take that on an empty stomach."

"Ugh, yeah, that always ends badly," replied Ed, paling. "What'd you get?"

"I went by Dante's so I could use your discount and brought home three different flavors of pancakes plus eggs, bacon, sausage, and wheat toast," announced Al, and Ed looked at the layout like he'd just seen God.

"Another good reason to work at Dante's is that they have the best blueberry pancakes anywhere,
and they're bread isn't the mass produced bread you buy in the supermarket," Ed explained to Roy. In one swift motion, Ed managed to jump over the back of the couch to land neatly behind it. Roy just wished he had a scorecard to hold up, because he'd definitely give Ed a perfect 10 for that move. Ed winked at him over one shoulder then dashed into the kitchen, returning with plates, forks, and syrup. He handed them off to Al then returned to the kitchen to grab the coffee pot and a mug of coffee for his brother. After refilling his and Roy's coffee, he returned the pot to its home then sat down on the couch to finish what he was saying. "They have a deal with the bakery across the street, so all the bread comes from there."

"Speaking of deals, have you called your science pimp back yet?" asked Al, and only sheer luck saved Roy from a spit-take.

"That's what Al calls that CEO I told you about," said Ed, chortling at Roy's shock – but also gently wiping away the little bit of coffee that had splattered on his chin. "I haven't called him yet. Grumman likes to sleep in on Sundays, so I figure I'll call him later in the day."

"Come on Brother, enough procrastinating," scolded the younger Elric with a rather severe frown for his older brother. "Your pride is no excuse. I know you don't want to talk to him, but you know that you have to tell him what's going on. He specified calling him at his house for a reason. If you end up putting it off until tomorrow, you'll have no choice but to talk to him at the office, and that would be counterproductive. If you want this conversation to stay off the record, you have to call him on his personal line."

"All right! All right! I'll fucking call him after breakfast!" surrendered Ed hotly.

"No, Edward, you'll call him now," stated Al, his tone implying dire consequences for disobedience. "You won't be in any state of mind to call anybody later. The food will still be here when you're done."

Ed shot a baleful glare at his brother and got up, stomping off into the bedroom and returning with his laptop and his cell phone. He moved the food cartons out of the way and set up his laptop on the coffee table. While it was booting, he went through the contacts on his cheap ancient little cell phone then hit the call button. After a few seconds, it became apparent that the right person answered – at least, Roy really hoped it was the right person considering Ed's greeting.

"Hey Old Fart," said Ed, not even trying to sound respectful – or even polite. "I don't give a shit. You told me to fucking call you, so here's me calling you. Get off your decrepit ass and go to the computer. I need you to log into my secure server so I can give you this file." He balanced the phone between his flesh shoulder and his ear while he waited for the man on the other end to do as he was asked. Meanwhile, Ed was busily searching through the files on his laptop then typing furiously to fill in a monstrously long password. Eventually, a little bar popped up with the word "uploading" above it. "Yeah, it should be there in just a second. While we're waiting, I'll give you the skinny. It's like this . . . " It was at this point that Ed began to fidget, as if nervous about sharing his little story. He hadn't seemed the least bit shy about it before, so it made Roy wonder what would prompt the shift now. "So, you remember I told you that my boss was a fucking perv right?" He listened a moment then laughed without humor. "Yeah, the ass-grabbing incident. Well, somebody suggested to me that the old perv might have a grudge and that the grudge may be the real reason I lost my scholarship. I also thought he might be the reason for the budgeting issues I've been having and the un-fucking-believable amount of time it takes me to get parts and equipment. I mean, shit, your R&D dweebs are giving me plenty of fucking money to get the fucking job done. There should be no reason for me to be struggling this fucking hard. So I took a look at the expense reports – first at the one's I turned in and then at the ones the university turned over to your company. I found discrepancies.
"I suspect that bastard might be pocketing my scholarship money and the missing funding for the project. The problem is I don't think it's possible for him to do it alone. He'd have to have help, either within the school or within your company. That's why I wanted to be so careful about how secure this little discussion of ours is." Ed clicked on the file he'd just uploaded and told the man on the phone, "All right, open up the spreadsheet. The one on the right is the one I submitted. I keep careful god damn records so you guys know every fucking dime I spend and what I spend it on. You know I've been burned before for not doing that, and I'll never make that fucking mistake again. On the left, you'll see the expense report submitted to your company by the university." He listened for a second then let out a sigh that was more of a growl. "You're just fucking lazy, period, Sunday or not. It's lines 13, 32, 34, 67, and 70. Anyway, I was only able to compare last month's reports. Me and my brother had to wrestle with a fuck of a bear to get that shit." Ed listened a second then let out an evil little laugh. "But 'hacking' is such an ugly word. We call it 'exploratory computing'." Ed laughed a little more fully. "Yeah, Grumman, thanks. I'll be careful. And yes, I'll call if I have any more problems from him. Just don't be surprised if I submit my expense report to you before you get it from the University. You can compare them yourself and come out squeaky fucking clean." Ed laughed one more time then hung up, letting out a heavy sigh.

"Wow, you guys work fast," said Roy with an approving nod. "Remind me never to piss you off."

"Speaking of which, I feel it is my brotherly duty to inform you that if you ever hurt my brother, you'll have good reason to find out exactly how fast I can work," said Al, and this time there was no secret to the menace in that supposedly sweet smile. It was enough to send a chill trailing down Roy's spine. "Sorry, we don't have parents to threaten dates on our behalf, so we do it for each other. You should have seen the look on my prom date's face when she walked into the living room and saw Ed sharpening a machete, his automail showing and everything. She tried to escape to the kitchen, but Izumi and Sig were cutting giant slabs of meat with huge cleavers. The poor girl was in tears by the time we left."

"I didn't like her," sniffed Ed, unrepentant.

"You're not fooling anybody Brother," said Al, finally surrendering a plate of food to Ed. "You didn't like anybody that hit on me. You didn't even like anybody that hit on you, if you even noticed they were hitting on you in the first place. You're so oblivious."

"Fuck off," snapped Ed. "Just eat your food and quit being a pain in my ass."

"No, I think that's R-"

"I will end you," deadpanned Ed, his fork held threateningly close to Alphonse's eye (when had he moved?).

"So, changing the subject, what did your sugar daddy, the Science Pimp, have to say about all this?" asked Roy to prevent further argument – and further violence. He was gratified when both boys snickered at his use of their nicknames for the CEO.

"He said he'll quietly drop some hints with the accounting department so they can start looking into the discrepancy. I'm going to hand-deliver him this month's expense report before giving the same report to the university. I also spoke to the financial aid department and got hard copy evidence that the school is still receiving my scholarship money, so now my next hurdle is showing proof that either it isn't being applied to my education or that I'm paying out of pocket for something that's already supposed to be paid for by the scholarship," Ed explained to him as he ate. Ed wasn't big on table manners most of the time, so he had no compunction about talking with his mouth full. Roy didn't really mind. For some reason he actually thought it was kind of cute, and he enjoyed the shocked and annoyed stares of those who didn't share that opinion. It might be a little twisted, but
people's reactions to Ed's rough manners and rougher language amused him. It was part of what made hanging out with Ed so much fun, being a spectator to the chaos he stirred all around him.

But people didn't only react by recoiling. Taking Ed anywhere was like dropping a flashlight among cavemen. As expected, some would be afraid of the obviously foreign object, but others would be naturally drawn to its light. When they were in public together, Roy could see quite a few people fall victim to the magnetism of Ed's presence. If Ed was in a room then it was impossible not to acknowledge him, because the sheer force of his personality filled every room he stood in, brutally crowding out all other lesser personalities. Nuclear explosions couldn't match the force of one stare from Edward's luminous eyes. No doubt it was a primary cause for Ed being bullied and sexually harassed – the strength of his charisma elicited equally strong reactions in return. It wasn't his fault. His charisma was simply another force of nature, and as with all forces of nature, the only recourse was to wait for it to hit then get ready for damage control. Roy figured, after a lifetime spent with Ed, Al's crisis management skills were probably top notch. No doubt he'd be just fine in the bomb squad and would find it soothing after so many years of Ed fallout.

"You do realize that smirk makes you look like a total bastard, right?" commented Ed with a sideways glare at Roy. But then he shrugged and kissed Roy on the cheek to take the sting out, a little bit of syrup residue on his lips making the kiss sticky – which made it very hard not to turn his head enjoy a more thorough sticky, syrup-flavored kiss . . . but he resisted out of respect for Al. "But that's all right. I've already figured out that 'bastard' is your default setting and have decided to roll with it. Aren't I fucking charitable? But don't think it means I won't break your teeth for you if you're too fucking much of a bastard."

"I would prefer not. I think I'd look silly with dentures," said Roy with a comical wince, and Ed grinned at him.

"Ah, come on," said Ed, smiling in such a way that made his nose wrinkle (ridiculously cute). "We could just knock out the eye-teeth. Then we could get you some vampire dentures, throw some glitter on you and the ladies will eat you alive."

"I refuse to sparkle," said Roy adamantly. "Altho~ugh . . . I do know this one guy who kinda seems to sparkle on his own but he's just . . . hm, let's just say he's a unique individual. I'd say we could give him vampire fangs, but he's disturbing enough already."

"Now I almost kinda wanna meet this guy," said Ed, laughing along with his brother.

Winry arrived then, with the three men deciding who would be most creepy as a sparkly vampire – throwing in various balding or overweight professors and a few famous personages – but because she was Winry, she just took the weird conversation in stride. She was toting her tool box and dragging a huge plastic suitcase strapped to a dolly. "Hey Roy! I didn't know if you'd still be here," she said after greeting Al with a kiss – to which Ed made a little "bleh" face. "I would've thought you'd have gone home by now." She gave him a strange, almost assessing look as if trying to determine something.

"Don't worry, I already gave him the shovel speech," said Al with a bright smile, and that seemed to let Winry know she could relax her guard a little.

"So, have the boys told you what's going to happen today?" she asked Roy. "If you're sticking around, you should be made aware."

"You explained a little bit before," Roy reminded her and she nodded. Ed tensed where he sat, but said nothing.
"Detaching the leg won't be a big deal, but Ed gets a bit . . . cranky when he's without it. I can't blame him. He hasn't had to use a crutch all that much so he's not good at it. Basically, he's stuck not being able to get around well, but he's a brat who hates asking for help – even when he really should," the last part was said with a wrench in her hand pointed threateningly at Ed who stuck his tongue out at her but still ducked, just in case. "Anyway, at least today it probably won't be for long. So yeah, detachment won't be an issue. Reattachment, on the other hand, will be a big issue. It's extremely painful. Ed's tough and can take it, but afterwards he'll be pretty exhausted and won't be able to move around at all for a while. That means the rest of us need to make sure he eats something and gets plenty of fluids and pain meds. It'll be a day or two before he's completely back to normal. Nerve pain is no joke."

"I'll stick around to help out until he's back on his feet, if nobody minds me being here," volunteered Roy without hesitation. Ed blushed from chin to eyebrows, suddenly very interested in stacking the breakfast dishes and Styrofoam containers. "I'll just need to go home at some point for a proper change of clothes. I only have a couple classes tomorrow, so it's no big deal." Ed suddenly stopped and turned, all but pouncing and wrapping his arms around Roy's waist. He didn't say a word, but Roy caught the "thank you" loud and clear. He wrapped his arms around Ed in return and kissed the top of his head to acknowledge the unspoken gratitude.

"All right you two, I would say get a room, but there's no time for hanky panky," scolded Winry teasingly, her eyes dancing with good humor. "You ready Ed?" Ed sighed but released Roy and nodded, getting to his feet. Roy got up too, ready to do whatever was needed. The first thing they did was clear away the breakfast debris then they stood the coffee table up against one of the book cases – since there was no wall to stand it up against – and pushed the couch and chair out of the way.

Al dragged out what looked like a portable massage table and set it up while Winry went to get a set of sheets out of the cupboard. The sheets were old and tattered and covered in old stains that looked an awful lot like blood and . . . was that motor oil? They were also ripped in places in such a way that Roy was fairly sure that Ed's automail hand had been the culprit. Once the sheets were folded in half then spread neatly over the massage table, Winry opened the big suitcase and pulled out a sort of collapsible rolling stool which she set aside for Alphonse to assemble. She also pulled out a small stainless steel tray which she sat atop a collapsible stand on castors. There were surgical instruments inside the case, kept in sterile packages, but she left those alone. What she did set out on the table was allen wrenches, spanners, screwdrivers, and other mechanic's tools, so that it looked like she was about to perform surgery on somebody's car. She even set out a couple squeeze bottles full of what looked like oil.

Edward was calm through the whole set up, helping Winry prepare her tools and reasonably sterilize her working environment. When the time came to take off his pants, however, Roy could see his hands trembling slightly on the waistband of his sweats, and he knew it wasn't because Edward was body shy. Ed hopped up onto the table, and Al put a pillow under his head, making sure he was as comfortable as possible. That Alphonse looked almost more nervous than Ed didn't help Roy's nerves one little bit. Watching Winry dawn surgical mask and safety goggles, somehow made it worse.

Roy and Al were banished to the couch to wait so they wouldn't be in Winry's light, so all they could do was watch as Winry carefully started to detach the metal leg from its port. Ed let out a soft gasp as the leg began pulling out of the port, and Winry looked up, apparently surprised. "I think I was right about the loose connection because it just twinged like a bitch," Ed told her, and she nodded.

With a sound like a vacuum seal releasing, the leg came free, and Winry stood it up in front of her, looking down into the top of it. She attached a little magnifying glass to the safety goggles then examined the leg more closely. "You're right. I'm not seeing anything wrong with it. I was worried
that I might have to replace a connector or something. But let me check the port just to be sure." She leaned in to examine the port just as closely as she had the leg, and Roy could understand why Ed had been so insistent on a shower and an extra pair of underwear. She was less than a foot from his more private bits. "There's a little bit of irritation, but I think that's just because you walked around with the loose connection for too long. I'm going to hit it with the anti-inflammatory just to be on the safe side then we can go ahead and reattach." Winry reached into the suitcase again and pulled out surgical gloves and a needle so long it even made Roy nauseous, and he wasn't even the intended victim. Ed shuddered at the sight of the needle and grabbed the sides of the table, the knuckles of his flesh hand white with the strength of his grip. "You boys need to come hold him down."

"Come on Roy, it'll take both of us," said Al, sounding resigned. "I'll get his arms and other leg. You get his shoulders." Al showed him how best to grip Ed's shoulders to seal his movements without hurting him – or getting hurt. Al all but laid across his brother's stomach, gripping Ed's wrists with his hands while using his full body weight to keep his upper arms from moving and throwing one leg on the table to pin Ed's flesh leg. "Brother hates needles, and things like this are the reason why."

Winry looked at Ed with something like sympathy and regret, but when Ed gave her a short nod, she slowly inserted the long needle into the automail port. Ed's entire body became instantly taut, and if it weren't for Al and Roy, Edward would have all but jumped off the table. The muscles in his neck stood out sharply as he gritted his teeth, eyes clenched tightly shut as his face turned dark red from the strain of holding back a scream. Winry pulled out the needle and Edward's body went limp once more. "Now, breathe for a second Ed. Let me know when you're ready," said Winry as she set the leg on the table, getting it into position. She pushed it into the port, three loud clicks sounding as if it was locking in place. She inserted her largest allen wrench into some socket that Roy couldn't see from his angle, and she paused as if waiting.

"Do it," said Ed breathlessly, sweat glistening brightly on his furrowed brow.

"Brace yourself boys, now comes the hard part," said Winry unhappily. She turned the wrench hard, and not even Ed's clenched teeth could completely hold back the scream. Roy had thought it couldn't get much worse than the injection, but he was so wrong. The tension in Ed's body was such that he couldn't even clench his fists. Instead his hands were stretched out, splayed as far as they could go. Every singled muscle in his body was so rigid that every overstretched sinew beneath his skin stood out. It took all of Roy and Al's weight to hold him down, and it seemed to go on for an eternity. Roy was almost in tears with the strength of the sympathy he felt for young blonde's suffering. Al didn't look much better off, because though he didn't let his tears fall, they glittered wetly on his eyelashes. Neither of them dared cry for the young man on the table, but both had reached a silent accord because in this they were in complete agreement. Ed may be holding back, trying to be strong so he didn't upset the rest of them, but those for whom he was being strong were trying just as hard to be strong for him.

When the tension finally left Ed's body, Roy and Al released him and stepped back a little. To Roy's surprise, Ed grabbed his hand weakly and gave it a tiny squeeze, as if he was trying to comfort Roy. Roy squeezed back, offering the young man as fond a smile as he could. With the level of Ed's pride, he would never tolerate pity, so Roy made sure to scrub all signs of any such thing from his face. Winry added oil to the artificial joints and gently polished the steel. When she was done, she said, "Let's put him on the couch and clean this up."

Roy and Al moved the pillow to the couch and fetched blankets from Ed's bed. With the couch transformed into a comfy nest, Roy did the honors of carrying Ed over to it. It wasn't as easy as he'd thought it would be. He'd thought since Ed was fairly small, he wouldn't weigh much, but the automail weighed a ton, not to mention the fact that Ed was solid muscle and muscle weighed more than fat. And Roy had to also be really careful because even lifting Ed made the younger man cringe.
"It's his nerves," explained Al miserably. "This always makes all of his nerves more sensitive. The worst of the sensitivity will pass in a couple hours though, and he usually sleeps through it. After that it'll just be the leg that's sensitive." Al crouched beside the couch, laying a loving hand on his brother's tangled hair. "This is so hard on him. It just kills me every single time."

"I'm fine Al," said Edward hoarsely, his eyes still closed. "No worries little brother."

"I'll get you some water," said Al, getting up and hurrying away before anybody but Roy could see the tear that finally escaped his control.

Not knowing what else to do with himself, Roy sat on the floor in front of the couch next to Ed's head and used the softest touch to brush away the hair from where it had stuck to the sweat on Ed's brow. Against all expectations, and despite the incredible pain he was in, the light that was entirely Ed's hadn't diminished one iota. He seemed oddly vulnerable, but at the same time still magnificent. And the fact that he was trusting Roy to see him while he was at his most vulnerable, gave Roy a huge swell of pride. How was it possible to have become so deeply entwined with this man so easily? Roy hadn't even noticed it happening. He supposed that was the danger of going with the flow. Sometimes the flow could carry you along to unexpected places if you let it. But, as he tried to comfort the miserable young man, Roy decided that, although the place he found himself was not at all where he thought he'd end up, he really didn't mind.
Chapter Notes

I warned everybody last chapter that this chapter was going to get pretty angsty. I did not lie. But the plot hangs out for a longer visit this time. Yay plot! Also, bear in mind that I know little about police procedures, but I did at least make an effort to get it right. So, let's hear it for effort . . . or maybe not. I also did not lie about the whole typing so much my hands are falling off. I've literally killed the battery on my wireless keyboard haha (my keyboard is less amused, poor thing). Is it sad that I feel a little proud of having killed my keyboard through overworking it? Anyway, things are about to start getting exciting at last. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 7

Rude Awakening

Sunday night – or possibly Monday morning since it was late enough that there was no telling which – Roy woke to an annoying beeping sound coming from, of all places, the laundry hamper. It took him a moment to remember that he was sleeping in Ed's room, which would certainly explain the warm body he was spooning with at that moment. However, the more important question seemed to be, what the hell was making that obnoxious beeping?

Edward was still pretty tired, despite the fact that he had spent the rest of Sunday drowsing off and on as he recovered from the reattachment of his automail. Eventually, he'd let Roy onto the couch with him, and the four of them – Roy and Ed, Al and Winry – had settled in to watch movies together. For dinner, Roy volunteered to cook, but Winry and Al were the ones to buy the ingredients. Overall, it had been a wonderful way to spend a Sunday evening. After all was said and done, Roy carried Ed to bed. Edward had huffed and looked annoyed about it, but he didn't complain except to say, "Don't come crying to me when you put your back out."

Roy was just about to extract himself from Ed to find the source of the beeping, when Ed suddenly sat up, blinking owlishly into the dark room. "Shit!" he hissed. He bent down over the edge of the bed to dig around in the hamper until he had pulled out a small device that looked like a pager. "Shit!"

"What is it?" asked Roy, sounding more awake than he felt.

"It's the alarm on my lab," replied Ed fuzzily. That was enough to drive the sleepy from Roy's mind. "Shit!" he hissed. He bent down over the edge of the bed to dig around in the hamper until he had pulled out a small device that looked like a pager. "Shit!"

"What is it?" asked Roy, sounding more awake than he felt.

"It's the alarm on my lab," replied Ed fuzzily. That was enough to drive the sleepy from Roy's mind. "Shit!" muttered Edward again, desperately trying to rub the sleep from his eyes. "Where the fuck did I put those fucking crutches?"

"Let one of us go to the lab for you," said Roy, sitting up.

"Can't," said Ed, shaking his head. "I could get sued for giving out the alarm code. I've got enough shit on my plate right now without trying to explain why I broke security protocols because I didn't feel like getting off my dead ass when the alarm went off." One good thing about Ed's room being so small was that he could reach nearly everything without ever getting out of bed. His dresser was his
nightstand, so all he had to do was turn and dig around to grab something to put on. It was the getting dressed part that was difficult. When Ed stood pull his pants up, it was obvious that his leg was still in a lot of pain. Roy put on his own clothes fairly quickly by comparison. "Can you please wake up Al? Just knock on his door and tell him I need him. He'll wake right up when he hears my name. Just don't be too shocked by the bedhead."

"I've seen your bedhead. Somehow, I think his might pale by comparison," quipped Roy, but he made sure he was halfway out the door before he said it. He shouldn't have been so overconfident, though, because Alphonse's bedhead was ten times worse than Edward's. It was so stunningly bad that Roy had to not only do a double-take but also take a full minute to kick his brain to mouth connection back into place. "The alarm is going off on Edward's lab," Roy finally explained. Al – who rarely cursed – actually hissed a few swear words then disappeared back into his room. The brothers both tumbled out of their rooms at about the same time, Edward trying wrestle with crutches while clutching a brush, and Alphonse trying to put on his jacket and smooth down his impressive bedhead.

"I just hope this isn't another door fault alarm?" mumbled Al, still not sounding all that coherent. The brothers each poured a cup of the cold coffee from the day before and slugged it back like they were doing shots. Roy would have done the same, but he didn't think he was up for quite that much adventure just yet. If nothing else, he could grab a cup of coffee at the lab. "Brother, do you have your wallet? Lab keys? Lab ID?"

"Yeah," replied Ed, pausing to pat his pockets then nodding.

"We'll take the van. You're not well enough yet for anything smaller," announced Alphonse, and just like that, all three of them were out the door. They went downstairs to the apartment building's parking lot where Al opened up a huge dingy old van that looked like it had once belonged to a church or a retirement home. "I know. She's ugly. Ed and Winry call her Vanzilla. But we needed to have as large a vehicle as possible. You may have noticed, but Ed's not very comfortable in cars. He has no problem with buses and larger vehicles though – well, less of a problem anyway. He's much less likely to get sick, and it's not nearly as stressful. We got this thing cheap and had Winry help fix her up. The bonus is that we can also haul heavy equipment and fit things like crutches in here easily. And we rigged an extra seatbelt so that we can belt somebody in who's laying down. Which is exactly what I want you doing right now, Ed. Get in the back."

"Yes sir, jeez," grumbled Ed as he carefully climbed into the back of the van. There were two long bench seats in the back with space behind the second bench seat left open for cargo. The van was very tidy, probably because Ed didn't spend much time in it. Roy was learning that Ed tended to introduce a high degree of chaos into every space he occupied for longer than a few minutes.

Al pulled out a couple pillows that had apparently been hidden in the back cargo space and pretty much threw them at Ed while he was trying to get settled. "Al gets grumpy when he hasn't had enough sleep," Ed warned Roy just loud enough for him to hear but not loud enough for Al to overhear. "Just, you know, heads up."

"Got it," said Roy, casting a wary look toward the younger – and apparently grumpier – Elric brother as he walked around the van to the driver's side. Roy helped Ed get settled comfortably then jumped in on the passenger side.

Al drove as quickly as he could, but he still drove with extreme caution so as not to perturb Edward. Admittedly, Ed seemed less strained than he usually was in a car, but he was still rather jittery. Knowing how Ed had lost his limbs, his mother, and almost his brother too, Roy could hardly blame him for his general dislike of vehicles. If it had happened to Roy, he'd probably be just as freaked
out. It was like somebody who had been stabbed becoming frightened of knives forever after. It wasn't good, by any stretch, but it was totally understandable.

When they reached the lab, they could already hear the wail of the alarm as they approached the building. Once they'd entered, the first thing Roy noticed was that there was no security guard behind the desk. There was always a security guard. Those who worked out of the university labs kept strange hours, so there was no telling when any of the students or professors might wander in to do some work. It didn't matter that the lab was supposed to be closed on Sunday. That hadn't stopped anybody from stopping in before. That's why, day or night, the lights were always on and there was always security 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Disconcerted by the absence of the guard, Roy entered the corridor cautiously looking around for anything that might look out of place. Al passed him and easily jumped over the desk to bypass the metal detector then flipped the switch to turn it off so his brother could enter without setting it off. While Al was still behind the desk, he hunched forward to look down at the security monitors. After a moment of watching the screens, he let out a little sound of alarm and took off running down the hall. Ed and Roy followed more slowly since Ed really couldn't move any faster than he already was, and Roy wasn't leaving Ed alone in a possibly dangerous situation. Ed might not be entirely defenseless at that moment, but he wasn't exactly at the top of his game either, and Roy would rather be safe than sorry.

Upon finally reaching the second floor, they found what had so startled Alphonse. The security guard was lying on the floor, a small pool of blood under his head. "He has a moderate to severe concussion," Al told them as they neared him. He had to practically yell to be heard over the alarm so close to the banshee wail's source. "Pupillary response is uneven, but breathing and pulse are steady. The blood is from the contusion. It looks like blunt force trauma. I've already called 9-1-1. Ed, please, don't freak out when you get over here." Al looked up at his brother with overflowing sympathy then cast a quick glance at the lab's open door then back at his brother. "I know this is going to be upsetting, but I want you to try to stay calm, okay?"

Ed hobbled forward a little faster, and when he got to the open door, the crutches fell from suddenly limp hands. He swayed on his feet a little, almost as if he was about to faint. Ed's expression was one of pure shock, but it wasn't long before his stunned expression was shoved aside violently in favor of pure, unadulterated rage. "What the actual fuck?! Why the fuck would . . .?! Don't they know what the fuck I'm trying to fucking do here?! Who the fuck would do this shit?! What the fuck?!!" Ed limped forward into the lab, abandoning the crutches altogether. Roy rushed over and froze in the doorway, just as shocked as Ed.

To say that the lab had been trashed would be a grave injustice to the actual damage done to it. The desk was overturned and every piece of equipment not nailed down was smashed. All of the notes that had covered the tables and desk were gone. The machine that Ed had built with his own two hands and ample application of his pure brilliance was completely gutted, panels and parts strewn all over the room. The whiteboards with all of their scribbled theorems, formulae, and diagrams were erased, their surface scratched to hell. "Years of fucking work . . . years of work . . . gone. All of it's fucking gone! I was so close! So fucking close! But now . . . what the fuck am I supposed to do now?"

The despair mixing in with the fury in Ed's voice was heartbreaking to hear. Roy could truly understand Ed's pain. If it had been Roy's lab, he would be feeling just as lost, just as hurt and enraged. Those like Ed and Roy and the other students in the labs poured their souls into their work. They gave up sleep, skipped meals and showers, missed out on spending time with family and friends, put their whole lives on hold in the quest for that elusive breakthrough. They sacrificed everything to reach their goals. To be so close to that goal and have it torn away for no good reason
would be like...well, like losing a limb.

Almost instinctively, Roy gathered Ed into his arms. He almost expected the younger man to push him away or fight his hold, but Ed was in such a sorry state that he practically collapsed into Roy's arms. He grabbed the front of Roy's shirt in his fists, his whole body shaking with raw emotion. He didn't produce a single tear, but somehow it still felt as though he was weeping. After a moment, Al joined them, rubbing soothing circles across Ed's back with one hand. That's all they could do for him for now, just comfort him until he could find his feet on his own.

"Brother, I'll go wait for the ambulance and police so I can let them in," said Al quietly. Ed didn't indicate that he'd heard, but Roy nodded to let him know he would continue taking care of Ed in the younger brother's absence.

"Come on, Ed, we'll go down to my lab so we can sit down. Standing here isn't going to do any good," said Roy tentatively. After a long moment Ed finally nodded, and Roy turned so that they could walk side-by-side with Ed tucked under his arm, one of Ed's arms around Roy's waist for support. They paused by the door for Ed to finally type the alarm code into the keypad, shutting off the hideous wail, then the pair made their slow way down to the ground floor. Downstairs, Roy opened his lab and turned on the lights then settled Ed in the nearest chair. "Do you want me to go get you some coffee? Tasting that sludge is nothing if not distracting."

Ed's eyes, usually so bright and full of fire, were now dull and lifeless. His expressive face had become little more than a mask, showing no emotion at all anymore, as if he had reverted to a state of shock. He gave Roy a slow minimal nod, and Roy hurried over to the kitchen, returning with two Styrofoam cups full of sludge – Roy's cup mixed liberally with sugar and creamer. After the first sip, both men grimaced. Not much else needed to be said about the vaguely coffee-flavored tar – at least, not much that hadn't already been said a thousand times before.

"I...I need to call the old man...fuck," muttered Ed miserably, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. He dialed and waited while it rang a few times. There apparently wasn't an answer so Ed tried again, and seemed relieved when someone picked up. "Hey old man, this is Ed," said Edward, sounding as if he was making an effort to come across as calm but couldn't quite make it work. "Um, I'm sorry...I know it's late, but there's been a serious problem..." He stopped as if he was listening to something then sighed. "No, I'm fine and Al's fine too. But the lab...there's been a major security breech...fuck, those motherfuckers trashed everything and it looks they got all my fucking notes and the machine is in a couple thousand fucking pieces...I just...I just thought you should know." The level of hysteria in his voice rose and fell in waves throughout his broken explanation and when he was done he listened for a little while, occasionally responding with a simple "yes" or "no". "I wouldn't be so sure about that. I wish I was here. If I had been here, I could have kicked the motherfucker's ass and sent 'em packing before they could lay their grubby fucking hands on my god-damn machine!" He sighed again, closing his eyes and forcing a deep breath in then out very slowly. "Look, I know I have fucking back-ups. And I have back-ups for my back-ups. But there were more than just notes for this project in that book. I never just work on one thing. Some of that shit was irre-fucking-placeable. I've had that fucking journal for 6 fucking years, old man! I've been building and perfecting that time-eating, patience-burning, soul-sucking, brain-gnawing fucking machine for the last two fucking years! That bastard was my fucking life for the last two fucking years! I want my two goddamn years back! How are you going to fucking replace that? Huh? You fucking tell me that! I can't pay for another two years of school just so I can fix this! I can't! I don't have enough funding left to rebuild that fucking thing from scratch! And what am I supposed to do about my fucking thesis?! My thesis advisor is already threatening me as it is! If I don't have some results soon, I could lose my spot and with it a good portion of my income and my future income too! You can't just wave a magic fucking money wand and make this go away you old geezer!"
"Edward, give me the phone," said Alphonse calmly, and Roy turned to see Al standing in the door. Blue and red lights could be seen reflecting on the satin finish walls of the corridor, and paramedics were already striding toward the elevator wheeling a gurney. Police entered right behind the paramedics, stopping to look expectantly at the occupants of the lab. With a wordless growl Ed handed the phone to his brother who walked away already talking to the old CEO in a much calmer tone.

"Are you Edward Elric?" asked one of the police officers, looking at Roy.

"I am," corrected Edward, sounding defeated and weary.

"Sir, if you could show us to the scene of the break in, please," requested the officer in that polite but authoritative tone unique to law enforcement. Ed nodded slowly then looked to Roy in silent entreaty. He didn't have to say a word. Roy understood. He moved in closer and helped Ed stand then supported him as he limped along. "Are you injured too, sir?"

"No," said Ed flatly. "Automail malfunction." The police officer's face did a funny sort of transformation, first shifting to annoyance at the terse answer then flipping to understanding before finally settling on discomfort. Most people just didn't know how to deal with those who weren't "whole". No doubt Ed was used to dealing with such reactions, and from the set of his jaw, wasn't a fan.

Roy couldn't see why people would get so uptight about automail. Too many people still considered those who wore automail to be "crippled" or "disabled", but nothing could be further from the truth. Edward had four perfectly fine working limbs. Two of them just happened to be made of metal. It's true there were precautions to consider and maintenance to keep up, but the same could be said of flesh and blood limbs. It's just the procedures that were different. Skin used lotions to keep its shine, automail used polish. Real limbs used pills to treat stiff joints, automail used oil. When a real limb was injured you called a doctor, and when automail broke down you called a mechanic. It's true the weight could be prohibitive, but physical therapy took care of that. In general, automailers were a more determined more diligent group of people if only because having automail required it of them. Moreover, the strength differential was unreal. Edward could feasibly stop a bullet with his automail arm and get nothing more than a dent while a real limb would be just so much hamburger. So, if anything, automailers were more able-bodied than those who had all their natural limbs. It hardly seemed fair to persecute them because they happened to have the rotten luck to lose what they were born with and yet had the guts to find a way to take it back. If anything, such people should be admired – for their moxy if nothing else.

They reached the lab, and Roy could see the sight of it hit Edward like a punch in the gut all over again. The police officer drew even with them. "Are these your crutches sir?" he asked, pointing down with his pen.

"Yeah, I used them to get here," answered Edward absently, his eyes still trained on the wreckage. "I dropped them when I saw . . ." Ed gestured vaguely at the mess. "My brother was already checking on the security guard, Howard Kessler."

"And what brought you up here so late at night?" asked the officer.

"I have this," said Ed, forcing himself to look away from the lab as he pulled the little pager-like device from its clip at his waistband. "It notifies me when the alarm on my lab goes off. The project I was working on was confidential. Amestris Pharmaceuticals is funding my research, and they want it kept under wraps until I'm ready to publish my findings."

"And what exactly is it you're researching?" asked the officer.
"You'll have to ask the pharma bigwigs. I'm contractually obligated to keep my big fucking mouth shut," replied Ed with a heavy sigh. "But I can tell you this, there's nearly half a million dollars' worth of equipment and man hours in that lab and now . . . it's just a big ass pile of shit I have to haul out to the dumpster."

"Can you at least give me a rough idea of what the research is about? It doesn't have to be anything specific, but we'll need to know as a point of reference for the investigation," persisted the officer.

"Yeah, my contract says I can tell you that much at least," said Ed with second heavy sigh in as many minutes. He looked so tired.

"I hate to interrupt, but maybe we should sit down first. It's the middle of the night and this has been an understandably stressful situation after a fairly difficult day. I'm sure this would go easier for all of us if we could make ourselves a bit more comfortable," suggested Roy smoothly. They went into the lab and the first thing Roy did was right Edward's overturned chair, rolling it over for Ed to sit on. He then found a couple of metal rolling stools and cranked up the height of the seats a little so the three of them were all more or less eye level, after which Roy and the officer sat down as well.

"Now, Mr. Elric, could you please continue?"

"Yeah, I'm researching something that I found that has the potential to stop, if not reverse, bone and tissue loss caused by degenerative diseases," explained Edward with a pained look. His eyes darted around the ruined lab, his face becoming pinched. "I could have done so much good . . . that's all I've ever wanted to do. That's what she always wanted us to do. She said that not everybody has the power to change the world, but those who do have an obligation do so. She believed that my brother and I could do serious good in the world, and we promised her we would. We've worked very hard to never break that promise."

"Who's this 'she'?" asked the police officer, but Roy didn't need to ask. He knew. It was the reverence of his tone, the grief-tinged love in his eyes, the apology in his slumped shoulders.

"Our mom," replied Ed, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Does she live in Central?" asked the officer, but Roy could see in his eyes that he'd already figured out the woman was deceased but needed to have it confirmed.

"She doesn't live anywhere," answered Ed impatiently.

"And what about your father? Does he live in Central?"

"What does that bastard have to do with my wrecked lab?" growled Ed, a threat whispering through his eyes and tensed body.

"Sabotage of this nature, and especially on this scale, can often have personal motivations," explained the officer apologetically. "Is your father also deceased perhaps?"

"I wish," muttered Ed. "But no, that asshole's still kicking as far as I know, but fuck only knows where. I can tell you this though, he couldn't have anything to do with this. He'd have to actually be willing to be in the same fucking city as us – fuck, the same fucking country!"

"How long have you been estranged?"

"He fucked off to hell-knows-where when we were little – age three for me, age two for my brother – and we haven't seen that bastard since," replied Edward angrily. "He didn't even come back for our mom's funeral. You'd think the least that worthless asshole could do was come check on his sons in
"And your brother . . . you said he was the one who checked on the downed security guard, correct? Did you come here together?"

Edward tensed even more at hearing the subtle hint of veiled accusation. Without waiting for anything more overt, Ed moved to dispel the officer's doubt. "His name is Alphonse Elric. We live together. The three of us were sleeping at mine and Al's apartment when the alarm went off. Al drove us here," Ed explained, his tone even but making obvious his ire.

"And you are, sir?" asked the officer, turning to Roy.

"Roy Mustang," replied Roy simply. The best way to deal with law enforcement was to answer only the questions they asked, and elaborate only when it was necessary to steer the conversation. Although it was rarely a good idea to try to steer such a conversation, sometimes it had to be done – for instance, when protecting secrets or avoiding misconceptions.

"How do you know the Elrics?" asked the officer.

Roy cast a quick look to Edward for permission, and Ed nodded with his third heavy sigh. "I have a research lab downstairs. I'm working on my doctoral thesis as well. Edward and I became acquainted recently, and even more recently began seeing each other."

The cop's flinch was nearly imperceptible, but to someone like Roy who read people like books, it was obvious as a neon sign in an Amish village. "So, is that reason you were at their apartment with them this evening, for a date?"

"No, I was there as moral support," answered Roy, letting a little of his annoyance at the increasingly intrusive questions show through. In the same terse tone Edward had used before, he said, "Like he said, automail malfunction."

"I hate to ask," began the officer uncomfortably. "What was the nature of this malfunction?"

"A couple days ago I slipped and fell. It knocked one of the connectors loose from the receptor that's grafted directly onto the nerve endings in what's left of my leg. When the connectors get loose like that, I can feel it all the way up the nerve pathway like a jolt of electricity and it sucks," explained Ed impatiently. "Look, I could give you the whole breakdown of Automail 101, but it would take way too fucking long. The upshot is that my mechanic had to pull the leg off to fix the damn thing and putting it back on sucks harder than the loose fucking connector did. My current state of misery is the end result."

"I see," said the officer, making another note in his little notepad before turning back to Roy. "You say you work out of one of the labs here. What field do you study?"

"I'm in physics focusing in the area of thermodynamics," replied Roy, also losing his patience, but hiding it better.

"Mr. Elric, does anybody work in this lab with you? An assistant maybe, or any fellow students?"

"No, I don't like other people getting underfoot," sniffed Edward.

"Do you have any rivals researching anything similar? Was there maybe anybody up for the same funding you received or maybe bidding for the same project?"

"No chance," snorted Ed. "This discovery was mine in the first place. The theory that came out of
the discovery was mine too. The research has been entirely structured by nobody but me. The only people who even know what the fuck I'm doing here are the corporate jackals I report my expenses to, the dean of the University, and my thesis advisor. What I've got going... what I had going was revolutionary, something nobody's figured out before or since. I fucking checked before I told my thesis advisor. Amestris approached me, not the other way around. They've been hounding me to do a project for them ever since my last big discovery. When I needed funding for this, I told them what I'd found, and they begged me to let them in."

"Could there maybe be any enemies you made during previous research projects, rivals who were angry at your success, or maybe somebody who wanted to be a part of your projects that felt slighted or left out?" asked the officer, and he was starting to get a look on his face like maybe he was getting more than a little anxious to get away. Having been subjected to Ed's burning hostility himself, even if it was just once, Roy could almost sympathize with the man's need to escape.

"There's no telling," said Ed with a disdainful shrug. "Look, I'm not exactly Miss Congeniality. A lot of people don't like me. But I'm not doing this shit to impress anybody. I don't care if they like me as long as they leave me the fuck alone to keep working. Mostly, I just keep to myself. I have a few close friends, and my foster parents, but that's pretty much it. I spend 90% of my day either in this lab or in the science building. The other 10% I'm at work or trying to catch up on lost sleep. I don't have time to piss anybody off enough to do shit like this. My research is my life."

"You say 'work', where is it that you work?"

"I teach a few classes here, I work part-time at Dante's – a diner up the road – and I tutor off and on when rent's tight. The student outreach people set up the tutoring gigs," replied Ed, sounding tired again. "And before you ask, it's not possible that I could have pissed off anybody at the diner enough for this kind of shit. And none of the kids I've tutored would have a reason to do this shit either."

"Sorry for interrupting," said Al shyly from the doorway. "Mr. Grumman is here, Brother. He wants to see the lab."

"Sure," said Ed, closing his eyes and letting out yet another heavy sigh. The old man that entered the doorway and froze just like the rest of them had was decidedly an odd individual. He had gray hair, thin on the top but trimmed neatly on the sides, a strangely pointy mustache, and a pair of round-framed glasses. He was dressed in a set of blue PJ's with little teddy bears on them and a pair of fuzzy teddy bear slippers with a long expensive-looking brown overcoat.

"Good God Edward, whose Wheaties did you have to piss in for this mess?" asked the man, awed.

"Well, I fucking well told you at the start that I'm a damn bad luck magnet. It's your own fucking fault if you didn't believe me," countered Ed hotly. "And what the fuck happened to your state of the art security system? It did fuck all to stop this jerk-off from trashing my work!"

"I'm sorry sir, but I can't let you enter an active crime scene," said the officer, getting to his feet to stop the old man at the door.

"It's all right. He's the man who's paying for this glorious fucking waste of my fucking time," said Ed with sarcasm bordering on hysteria.

"Seriously, Edward, are you all right? Thank God this happened on a Sunday night," said the man, brushing right past the well-meaning officer and going straight to Ed's side. He laid a hand on Ed's shoulder, looking for all the world like a doting grandfather trying to comfort his favorite grandson. "Any other night and you would have been here. You could have been hurt or worse."
"I'd like to see the fuckwad that could beat me down," snorted Ed, lifting his head defiantly as his spine straightened. The gleam in his eyes was nothing short of indomitable, and more than a little dangerous. "I'm Edward mother-fucking Elric. The man who can beat me in a fight ain't even been fucking born. You've seen my trophies. There ain't a single second or third place in there. And that was before the automail. Now I have a right hook like a fucking freight train. I dare those bastards to try me."

"And yet you still can't beat your teacher," pointed out the old man, clearly teasing.

"I said 'no man'. Teacher's not a man," stated Ed bluntly. "I kinda wonder if she's even human."

"Maybe you'll beat her one day," said Mr. Grumman, looking at Ed from the corner of his eye. "Probably not until you're taller though. I hear men don't stop growing until they're thirty, so there might still be hope for you."

"WHO ARE YOU CALLING SO SHORT HE HAS TO LOOK UP AT A MICROORGANISM?!" exploded Ed, and Mr. Grumman laughed loudly.

"Well, now, that's more like it," said Mr. Grumman with a knowing smile. "It gave me the heebie jeebies to see you looking so down. It's just not like you. I bet on you in the first place because you're a spitfire and you never back down. What do you intend to do now?"

"I don't know yet," said Ed, deflating again as his eyes once more scanned the debris. "I guess I'll have to give the cops a few days to go over everything. After that I can go through and see what can be salvaged and what'll have to be replaced. I can . . . I can rebuild the machine, but . . . old man, I'm running out of time. I can do the work. But, most of the parts for that machine I had to machine myself and that takes time, materials, resources. In the meantime, what am I supposed to do about my fucking thesis?"

"Look, you'll have a few days to figure things out while the police search for evidence. Talk to your thesis advisor tomorrow, and I'll have a little word with your dean about this situation. For now, I don't want you alone with that man, so leave dealing with him to me. I'll also have a word with the board tomorrow, and hopefully we can find a way through this. You just stick to our deal," said the old man, and Edward nodded. "You stick to the science stuff, and I'll make sure you can keep doing the science."

"Sir, you're in charge of the funding for this project?" asked the officer turning his focus to the old man who looked to him as if only just realizing he was there.

"Yes, young man, I do believe that's what Elric told you," replied the old man. Roy had to do a double-take because he had just heard the slickest bit of double-talk in the history of the sport – not confirming anything nor denying anything, and said so smoothly the officer didn't even realize the old man had dodged the question. As if realizing Roy had spotted the comment for what it was, Grumman looked at Roy out of the corner of his eye and actually gave him a subtle wink. "Matthew Grumman, CEO of Amestris Pharmaceuticals. Mr. Elric has been of particular interest to us since his work with implant rejection . . . wasn't that four years ago?"

"Something like that," said Ed with a shrug. The officer looked to Edward as if he was about to ask for clarification, but Ed held up a hand to forestall him. "I created a drug that exponentially reduces the risk of implant rejection, whether it's organ transplants or automail ports. It works by inhibiting immuno-response to the foreign . . . You know what? Never mind. If I explain, you'll be snoring in no time. Which, to be perfectly fucking honest, is what I'd like to be doing. Automail reattachment is exhausting. I am exhausted. How much longer before I can go home and lick my wounds?"
"It won't be much longer Mr. Elric. But, bear in mind, we may also need you to come down to the station to make a full statement and provide a list of everything that was stolen or damaged," said the officer and Ed nodded and dropped his head onto Roy's shoulder. Roy wrapped his arm around Ed's shoulders in return and gave him a comforting squeeze.

"How about I take you for pancakes after this?" suggested Grumman fondly. "You always feel better on a full stomach, and I know how much you love pancakes."

"Sure, and I wouldn't mind some real fucking coffee too," said Ed around a yawn.

"And, of course, you're welcome to join us," he said to Roy with a smile like a mother wondering if she was about to be a mother-in-law. It was actually a little disturbing.

"Just ignore the old man – not about breakfast, 'cause free food is always fucking awesome," said Edward sounding almost as groggy as if he'd just woken up.

"Just rest for now, Edward. I'll take care of the rest of this for you," promised the old man and Ed gave him a sleepy nod. Grumman looked at the cop and asked, "Do you have any more questions for Edward that need to be answered immediately?"

"Just one," said the officer. "Who has access to this lab?"

"Nobody but me," replied Ed irately. "The only time other people are allowed in my lab is when I'm present. If I'm working on something that I don't want other people to see, I lock the door. When I'm not here, I lock the door and set the alarm. The only one with a code is me, and only my thesis advisor and I have keys to this door." Suddenly Ed sat bolt upright. "Shit! My office! I keep notes in there too. In a safe."

"Do you think somebody may have tried to hit your office too?" asked Roy, suddenly worried for a whole new reason.

"If this is about my research, maybe. But they also could have thought they'd got everything when they hit the lab," said Ed, rubbing one temple. "If it's a personal thing then they'd definitely hit my office, especially if it's a student. If it's one of the fucking students, they would have hit the office first and lab second. It's student logic, right? Where do you look for a professor? In their office."

"What kind of safe are your notes in?" asked the officer after speaking into the radio at his shoulder. "Where is your office?"

"It's in the main science building, first floor, second to last door on the left," answered Ed, all but buzzing with restored anxiety. "The safe is just one of those stupid fireproof things. It's fucking portable. If they really wanted my fucking notes they could've just taken the fucking safe with them."

"Where will it be if it's still there?" asked the officer.

"Bottom drawer of the filing cabinet," answered Ed simply. The officer spoke into the radio again, sending one of the other officers over to the science building, and after that, all they could do was wait. Al approached them while Grumman took the officer aside and began speaking to him quietly.

"I'll talk to Mr. Grumman, Brother. He knows we don't have any secrets between us, so it should be fine if I help you rebuild your machine," said Alphonse, laying a comforting hand on his brother's head. "That should shorten the time it takes to rebuild. And I'm sure Winry will help build the parts, and Pinako too. You don't have to do this all alone Ed."

"No, Al, don't worry about it," said Ed, seeming to gather himself together. He looked up at Al with
a smile that was as much pride in his little brother as love for him. But there was also a hint of his old fire and the bite of steel in that smile, a show of Ed's determination to reassure Al, to be the strong big brother. "You have your own work to be worrying about, and so does Winry and Pinako. I can handle this. Come on! Who do you think I am?"

"Seriously, Brother, you don't always have to take on everything by yourself," said Al, fretting more instead of less. "I know you don't want anybody to worry about you, and I know you don't like letting other people take care of you. But we want to help you. You just have to let us do it."

"Believe me, Al, you guys are helping me, every day," Ed told him gently. "I can't ask for anything more than you're already doing. That wouldn't be equivalent. That's not how we do things."

"Never take more than you can repay,'" the boys chorused softly and Ed nodded, grinning.

"No worries, Al. I'll fix things just like I always do," said Ed, and he got slowly to his feet. He stood staring at the room, his hands on his hips. "Come on, this is your big brother we're talking about. Nothing gets in my way that I can't break down."

"Ed, I had a thought," said Al, his voice dropping to a whisper. "What if this is that dean of yours getting revenge? What if he figured out that you're onto him?"

"I've already thought of that, and it's probable but not likely," said Ed, growing pensive. "Think about it. If it was the dean, he wouldn't do anything to effect the reputation of the school. And he wouldn't have been strong enough to hit the guard hard enough to knock him out. He's a geezer. Howard could have easily overpowered him. Maybe the perv could have gotten somebody to do it for him, I guess . . . anyway, it's obvious the timing is a little too perfect for him not to be involved. But I think there's more going on than some pervert trying to save his own ass. If anything he would try to lay low, not do something that'll get cops involved."

"Well, when we get away from all these law enforcement people I can make a few phone calls and see if we can get a handle on what else the dean might be involved in, if anything," promised Roy and the brothers both nodded, still lost in thought.

"Brother, do you think . . . do you think it could be him?" asked Al, all at once more than just worried. He looked like he was genuinely afraid.

"I doubt it," said Ed, his own fear showing only for a microsecond before his expression shut down, becoming a blank mask marred only by the determined set of his jaw. "But we'll keep the possibility in mind. This does look like the sort of shit he'd do if it meant getting what he wants out of us."

Whoever this mystery man was, the boys were undoubtedly afraid of him. Could it be their father? Or maybe it was somebody who had tried to force the two prodigies to work for them before? From what tiny hints they'd dropped that sounded entirely too likely. Maybe some corporate headhunter guy had approached the boys and been sent packing, but wouldn't take no for an answer. Roy had actually seen that sort of thing happen before. Big corporations on the cutting edge of science sometimes had to use unscrupulous means to remain on the cutting edge and keep the competition from nipping at their heels. For that matter, the whole incident could just be a case of corporate espionage in the first place, some rival of Amestris Pharmaceuticals trying to get a leg up by cutting the hamstrings of the up-and-coming researcher. At this point, there were too many possibilities and not enough data to whittle them down. Definitive conclusions required supporting data. It was science's most basic of basics.

Grumman and the police officer rejoined them, and the officer cast a nervous look to Edward who flinched then visibly steeled himself for whatever he was about to hear. "I'm sorry to tell you this Mr.
Elric, but they got to your office too," said the officer. Ed stood unnaturally still for what seemed like entirely too long as they all held their breath. "I'll escort you there now, if you like," offered the poor officer nervously.

Ed let out his breath in a low hiss and nodded very slowly. Al handed him his crutches, but Ed just shook his head. He was in no condition to be walking on his own, but he was clearly dead set on doing so anyway. Whether it was stubbornness or pure temper that kept him moving was anybody's guess, but whatever it was, it carried him all the way to the office under his own steam. When he got there, he stood in the doorway a long moment, his blazing eyes taking in the sight. "Fuck my life!" he shouted at last, startling everybody. His automail fist smashed into the doorframe, splintering the wood and leaving a fist shaped indent from the force of the impact.

Ed went into the office, having to step over the broken chair and around the scattered books and papers. Just like in the lab, his desk was overturned, all of the drawers yanked out and thrown around along with their contents. Ed went straight to the book cases and scanned the titles of the few books left there. He was looking over the titles of the books as if intently searching for something. After a couple tense seconds, he seemed to find what he was looking for, grabbing one book in particular off the shelf and clutching it to his chest with obvious relief. The cops looked like they wanted to protest, but Ed's glare dared them to even try to say one word. Ed carried the book over to his brother and when Alphonse saw it, he breathed his own loud sigh of relief.

"It was rifled through, like the rest of them, but they wouldn't have known the book's secret," said Al, and Ed nodded. Al let out a little giggle and added, "They probably thought you had it for sentimental reasons."

"Fuck that," snorted Ed. "Like I'd ever keep anything of that bastard's for sentimental reasons."

Roy was close enough to see the book now. It was a copy of *Universal Parallels* by Van Hohenheim. "I know that book," murmured Roy, remembering having read the book when he first started studying for his Masters.

Al opened the book to the back jacket which showed a picture of the author. "Doesn't he look familiar?" asked Al, snickering as he held the picture up next to his brother's face without Ed noticing. Roy looked more closely and gasped at the uncanny similarity. The author looked like an aged up version of Edward, from the gold coin eyes to the smooth honey gold hair. And when Roy thought back, he recalled the sight of Edward in his reading glasses, and it made the resemblance to the picture of the author with his own round spectacles even more uncanny. "Yeah, that's our father – or 'that worthless bastard' as Ed calls him. He even dedicated the book to us, though he doesn't mention us by name."

Al flipped to the page just before the preface, and, typed in neat italics, were the words, "*Dedicated to my sons. Perhaps one day we can meet again once we 'accomplish the miracle of the One Thing. '*" "If you're thinking it's sweet, think again," said Ed bitterly. "He put that there for his own selfish fucking reasons, and it had nothing to do with wanting to reach out to us. The quote is from the *Emerald Tablet* of Hermes Trismegistus who was an early alchemist, among other things. He was also the founder of Hermeticism, and author of the *Hermetica*. The *Emerald Tablet* is a tract from the *Hermetica*. The whole quote says, 'That which is Below corresponds to that which is Above, and that which is Above corresponds to that which is Below, to accomplish the miracle of the One Thing.' Our useless piece of shit sperm donor had two loves in life: physics and alchemy."

"Sir, I know it's a little hard to tell right now, but does it look like anything is missing?" asked the officer, and Ed looked around again with a sigh.

"Just my fucking safe," replied Ed, looking heavenward even as he closed his eyes. "Fuck my life.
"We'll need a list of broken and missing items in your office in addition to the list for your lab as soon as possible," said the officer, his face showing sympathy. "We'll make sure there's an officer here and also guarding the lab while they're still considered open crime scenes. Whenever you're ready to inventory your property, just make sure to have valid ID on you and let the officer know that's what you're there for. Here's my card in case you have any questions or remember anything pertinent to the case." He handed over a business card which Ed took and shoved into his pocket. "If there's anything you need from here, now would be the time to grab it."

Ed nodded and looked around. "Shit, the papers . . ." he groaned and pointed at the papers that were scattered on the floor. There hadn't been any paper on the floor of the lab because the vandals had taken all of the notes. But the office was pretty much carpeted in paper. Roy crouched down to pick up the nearest sheet, since it was unlikely that Ed could do so. The header marked it as an assignment belonging to a student of "Professor Elric", and the assignment had yet to be graded. "I have to grade all these fucking papers. And there are exams in there too I bet. They're graded but not recorded in the computer yet. Then there's the lesson plans for the week and the rubrics for the upcoming finals. Shit, this fucking sucks so hard. You don't even know."

"It's all right, Brother. We'll gather all these," Al reassured him, already crouching next to Roy. "Would it be possible to only take the things that are absolutely necessary?" pleaded the officer and Ed let out an impatient growl. The officer flinched but continued doggedly. "There could be fingerprints or other evidence left behind, and we don't want to take the chance of missing anything."

"All right, look, I'll make you a deal," said Ed, taking a deep breath then letting it out slowly. "I'll give you until Tuesday afternoon to get what fingerprints and shit you can off of these papers. Take as long as you need with everything else, but those papers need to be back in my hands by Tuesday afternoon. I can wing it for my Monday class – it's Physics for Dummies, those knuckleheads won't give a shit if we play Hangman all fucking day – and I can redo the homework for the classes I have to attend on Tuesday morning. But I have an obligation to my students, and I won't let some dickhead with a hard on for ruining my fucking life fuck up things for my students too. I'll make a list with dates for when I need each set of papers back. It won't take a minute. But I expect those papers back by those dates or I'll make sure you all get really well fucking acquainted with the name Elric. You dig?"

"I understand, sir," said the officer, actually gulping and taking an involuntary step back. Ed snatched the notepad out of the officer's hand, and the officer was still so dazed that he didn't say a word about it. Ed flipped to a blank page and quickly scrawled the list on it before handing notepad and pen back to the officer. "Um, there is one more thing." Ed turned his crackling gaze back to the officer, and Roy could swear the man let out a tiny "eep" sound. "Since we don't know yet who did this or why, it's probably best if you stay with a friend until we can be sure that there's no threat to your safety. After all, they hit both your office and your lab, and if they still haven't found what they're looking for they could possibly go next to your apartment."

"Can this fucking night get any fucking worse?!" demanded Ed of no one in particular.

"Can we at least go home and get our stuff?" asked Al, sounding almost as exasperated as his brother. "Don't worry, Brother. It's not like we can't go stay at Winry's or even Izumi's."

"Yes, sir, though it might be best to take an officer with you for your own safety. Also, we would like to be informed of where you'll be relocating to so that we can contact you regarding your case," explained the officer very carefully.
"No, I'm not going to be uprooted," declared Ed, his determination forged of iron. "We know how to protect ourselves. We know how to set traps and fight. It wouldn't be the first time we've turned that rat trap apartment into a fortress and hunkered down."

"But Brother, we hated living like that. It was miserable and inconvenient and exhausting," argued Al quietly.

"And how miserable, inconvenient, and exhausting is it going to be to live with Winry or Izumi?" demanded Ed, quiet too but vehement. "Because getting hit by a wrench several times a day sounds like so much fucking fun to me. And we'd get hit by a lot worse than that at Izumi's. Plus Izumi already converted our bedroom into storage. We'd be sleeping on the floor. My back can't take it, especially not this close to winter."

"How about an alternative," said Roy, ruthlessly butting in. "You know, Ed, I don't think I ever told you why I'm going specifically to Central University when I could have gotten in somewhere nicer. It's because I have a house here. I inherited it from my parents, and started living there after I turned eighteen. It has guest rooms, fireplaces in every room, and its own library. Also, I just stocked the fridge. You guys can stay there for as long as you need to. Hell, there's so much damn space there, we could spend the whole weekend there together and still probably never see each other once, so it's not like it'll be inconvenient, or like we'll have no privacy. I might also suggest packing up whatever you would definitely not want destroyed if these dicks show up at your apartment – family photos and keepsakes, that sort of thing. You can store it in your van or in the house. Whichever."

The boys stared at him, entirely thunderstruck, as if not sure what they'd just heard. They continued staring long enough to make Roy fidget then they finally closed their gaping mouths and turned to each other, exchanging a speaking glance. They started talking back and forth softly, and, from what little Roy could hear, it wasn't in English. German maybe? But after they had reached their decision, they both turned to look at Roy at the same time. "All right, here's how it is. Elrics don't take something for nothing," began Ed.

"It all has to be symmetrical," put in Al and Ed nodded. "All gains in life come with an equivalent price. That's how we do things. We maintain a balance between what's given and what's returned."

"So there has to be a fair trade. We don't even accept birthday presents without giving a birthday gift of equivalent value later down the line," continued Ed. "Since you don't pay for rent or house payments, letting us stay there won't cost you anything, monetarily speaking, but there is a certain cost of inconvenience and groceries."

"And that grocery bill is nothing to sneeze at. Ed eats twice his weight when he's home," said Al, rolling his eyes. "It's because of the strain of the automail, but it's still a little insane. And speaking of the automail, your floor will take a beating. Also not his fault, but a metal foot is not kind to floors."

"So, to balance all that, we'll take care of grocery shopping," concluded Ed.

"And also cooking and cleaning. Ed's going to do the cooking. I can only do pancakes, but he does everything else," continued Al. "But he also couldn't keep anything clean if he had an instruction manual and a map to the trash can. So I'll be doing the cleaning."

"Plus, we're bringing the coffee machine," said Ed with a grin.

"Of course, because leaving it behind is a deal breaker," said Roy with mock-severity. "That should have been obvious."

"It was," sniffed Ed haughtily but then he laughed.
"Then I guess we have a deal," said Roy and the three of them shook on it. "Now, that we've got that settled, I guess we should go pack your stuff or we'll never get back to bed."

Ed swung a once more crackling gaze to the poor police officer and asked coolly, "Can we leave now?"

"W-we need contact information, f-for all three of you please," answered the officer reluctantly. Roy didn't know whether to laugh or feel sorry for the guy. They all obligingly gave over their information, and the police officer happily closed his notepad and hurried away.

"Old man," called Ed, looking over at Grumman. "You owe me pancakes. Hustle your wrinkled ass out the door before they find some other way to piss me off."

Chapter End Notes

Hmm, for some reason the ch 1 note randomly appeared at the end of ch 7. I'm not at all sure why, since I hadn't even checked the box to add a note at the end, but such is life. I've learned to just smile and nod to such things and accept that life is random by nature. I figure I can drop a random note of my own thereby forcing the previous note out of it's new nesting place. It's not like the silly thing is homeless now. It still has a place to live, just not at the end of ch 7. It's not like I'm discriminating against it or anything . . . ok, maybe I am a little.
Chapter 8

Living with the Elric brothers was a bit more . . . interesting than Roy had bargained for. It wasn't bad interesting, but it was definitely odd. For starters, having Ed around was like keeping an overgrown cat. One moment he was languorous and seemingly lazy, lying on any available furniture or floor space in such a way that he seemed to take up twice the amount of space as should have been physically possible. In the next moment, Ed had his hackles up and was ignoring or snapping (more like hissing and growling) at any and everyone who tried to approach him. There were times he was playful - like when they wound up having a water fight while doing dishes, or when the brothers threw leaves at each other while raking the lawn. Then there were moments of intense focus, like when he was reading or working, giving the impression of a cat intently stalking its prey even though he didn't move an inch. For that matter, the fact that he could read a book for hours at a time without moving a single inch was a little unnerving. There were even times when Ed wanted to be close, and, like any self-respecting cat, he would drape himself over Roy irrespective of where in the house they happened to be or what Roy happened to be doing at the time. Sometimes, Ed would slowly creep closer until Roy would look down and find he had a curled up Ed in his lap, with no idea how he had gotten there or when. But since "cuddly" was Roy's favorite of Ed's many moods, Roy never complained about it. He had a feeling that if he even dared mention it, he could kiss those cuddles goodbye.

On the other hand, Al more closely resembled a rather cheerful squirrel, or maybe a hamster – definitely something cute and cuddly . . . and hyper. To be fair, Al was rarely home, but when he was there he was constantly moving. Either he was cleaning, doing laundry, studying, or sparring with his brother in the backyard – a sight to behold all on its own. Despite his constant motion, Roy got the feeling that the friendlier of the two Elrics was trying to keep to the background as much as possible.

Actually, both brothers were very careful to intrude as little as possible. They did nothing that might disrupt Roy's schedule, nor did they complain if he wasn't able to make it back in time to eat. Ed simply wrapped up a plate for him and left in the fridge with badly scrawled reheating instructions. There was no sign of the customary messes Ed would normally leave in his wake, and even when something was left out of place, Al would swoop in and fix it fairly quickly. As might be expected, Ed had been sleeping in Roy's bed, but he was very insistent on keeping all of his stuff in the spare room Al slept in. The most telling sign of their uncertainty was the simple fact that neither brother had unpacked. They were living entirely out of their duffle bags and suitcases.

Roy had to admit that a lot of the more unusual behaviors could likely be chalked up to the situation. With Ed unable to access his lab or office while at the same time having to try to continue teaching and working on his thesis, the young man was understandably tense. Added to that was the stress of being in an unfamiliar environment during a time when only familiarity felt safe. In such a tenuous position, it was only natural Ed would have trouble settling in. Roy tried to do what he could for him. It was only little things mostly, like shoulder massages and brushing Ed's hair – which seemed to relax him immensely – but even such little things really seemed to help, for which Roy was pleased. Al seemed to be pleased about it too, in his own quiet way. Though Al wasn't often there, little signs
of his worry were everywhere, but they were diminishing as the elder Elric became more at ease.

Generally speaking, though, the boys worked almost constantly. Once they decided that something had to be done, they kept at it, setting all other concerns aside, until they finished. They never let up, not even for a minute, unless somebody stepped in and forced them to take a break. Sunday was the only exception to the boys’ hectic schedules. It was the only day they both had off. Al had explained that, no matter what was going on, no matter what odd jobs Ed did or what Al's testing or assignment schedule looked like, they always made sure to have Sunday off. That was the day they spent together, simply hanging out or doing whatever frivolous activity had caught their fancy for the day. They'd explained it to him, sure, but Roy didn't really get it until Sunday rolled around.

On Sunday, Roy came home from his morning run – "morning" being a relative term to someone who worked in a windowless lab until the wee hours of the night – and was immediately startled to hear music coming from the kitchen. And not just any music, but swing music. Confused, he left his tennis shoes at the door and headed toward the kitchen. When he got there, he could only stand in the doorway, stunned at first, but in the next moment thoroughly charmed.

Edward and Alphonse were making breakfast while keeping time to Glenn Miller's version of In the Mood, the pair dancing along while they worked. When they spotted Roy, they grinned so happily Roy found himself unable to do anything but grin back. Al grabbed his hand and spun him to the music until Roy landed in a chair at the kitchen table with a thump. Still keeping time with the infectious beat, Ed flipped a plate through the air to be caught by Al who set it neatly on the table, followed by two more plates. Ed then flipped the spatula up, spun while it was in the air then caught it behind his back and flipped a pancake up to catch on top of the already precarious pile of pancakes. By the time the song was done, breakfast had been entirely served in that same impressive manner, and Roy could only applaud.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen! We'll be here all week," said Al as the boys took a bow. "You think that was good, you should have seen . . ." Al stopped because a brotherly hand had fallen on the back of his neck, and though Ed was smiling, the fires of hell were in his eyes.

"The next words out of your mouth had better be 'Dancing with the Stars' or the next phone call I make will be to Winry to tell her you think she's gaining weight," said Ed sweetly, and Al gulped and put a hand over his head, as if to protect it from an incoming wrench. "Good boy."

"There's nothing wrong with knowing how to dance," said Roy with a lightly admonishing smile.

"Well, I guess I can understand Brother's reluctance," said Al with a sigh. "Our mom taught us how to dance when we were kids – you know, mostly just playing around. Then after Ed got the automail and was going through physical therapy, Pinako thought it would be good for him to take it up again, so he made Ed and Winry take ballroom dancing and swing classes together. I think the last straw was when Winry forced Ed to go to Sadie Hawkins with her and made him dance in front of the whole school. As reclusive as brother is . . . well, let's just say, he wasn't pleased." Al gave his brother a rueful little smile, a retroactive apology for his girlfriend's behavior. "But Ed and I both have a lot of happy memories tied to old music – like old jazz and stuff from the fifties and sixties, because mom was always playing music in the house."

"You know, I actually have an old console record player up in the attic and boxes and boxes of old vinyl. Most of them were my grandmother's. Maybe later we could go see what's up there," suggested Roy and the boys' eyes lit up. He may as well have promised them a brand new car, excited as they were. They spent the rest of the morning in discussions of music and dancing, and it was probably the first conversation the three scientists had ever had with each other that hadn't involved science.
After they'd washed the dishes to the lively sounds of Benny Goodman and his orchestra playing *Sing, Sing, Sing*, they all but ran up to the attic. It took a little while to find the boxes they were looking for, and even longer to figure out how to get the record player down. It was huge and easily weighed as much as the three of them put together. In the end, science won out, and the three of them rigged a pulley system and a ramp. Getting it down the stairs to the first floor was a little more complicated and involved rugs, fireplace logs, and a number of household items Roy hadn't even been aware of owning.

With a lot of grunting and groaning and practical applications of the basic principles of physics, they finally managed to get the record player into the parlor, shoving around the existing furniture a bit to make space for it. While the brothers worked on getting the record player cleaned up and operational, Roy got started putting together sandwiches for the three of them for lunch. He was interrupted by a knock at the door, and since Ed and Al had their hands full, Roy went to answer it. When he opened the door, he was greeted by his old friend's fond yet somewhat demented smile. "Hey Maes, what brings you to my neck of the woods?" asked Roy, crouching down as Maes's daughter Elyisia ran at him. Roy stood up with the girl in his arms, squeezing her just enough to make her giggle. "Hey there, Princess. And hello, Gracia, you're lovely as always."

"And you're just as smooth as always," said Gracia warmly, hugging Roy and stealing Elysia as she stepped away.

"When my beautiful girls heard about Ed and Al's situation, they insisted on bringing them something to cheer them up," said Maes jovially, holding out an apple pie.

That's when he once again heard the sound of Benny Goodman doing *Sing, Sing, Sing* fill the house again, followed by triumphant whoops from the brothers. There was something to be said about the difference between the sound of music on electronic media and the crackly earthy quality of good old fashioned vinyl. And when you're playing swing music, it made all the difference in the world. Roy and his guests went into the living room and found the boys already dancing. "And just in time!" said Ed, and he dropped to one knee in front of Elysia and intoned, "My lady, may I have this dance?"

"You may," she said with all of her six-year-old dignity, putting her hand in his. She squealed with delight as he swept her up, balancing her on his hip as he held her hand with his free hand and danced her around the room with all the energy and bounce the song called for.

"My lady, would you care to dance?" Al asked Gracia with mischief twinkling in his eyes.

"I'd be delighted," she said with a curtsy, blushing and laughing as Al led her into the dance.

Maes set down the pie, looked at Roy and said, "Shall we?"

"I'd be delighted," said Roy with mock dignity. He curtsied to his friend and the two of them joined in the fun. By the end of the song everybody but the two Elrics was entirely breathless, but they were all laughing.

"Oh my, that's the most fun I've had in years," said Gracia, still trying to catch her breath. "My husband never told me that you two were also accomplished dancers."

"One does what one can," said Al with a humble bow.

"Are you Uncle Ed?" Elysia asked Ed solemnly, and Ed looked a little startled at first but then gave her an equally solemn nod. "Daddy says you have to live with Uncle Roy now because bad people broke your stuff. Is it true? Did bad people break all your stuff?"
"Yes, it's true," Ed told her honestly, crouching down so he could speak to her face-to-face. Then Elysia did the last thing any of them expected and suddenly jumped forward, throwing her arms around Ed's neck.

"I'm sorry. Don't be sad," she said as if trying to comfort him. Ed just smiled and put his arms around her. "When people break my toys, it makes me sad. But when mommy gives me hugs it makes me feel better. Do you feel better now?"

"I do, thank you. Your hugs were just what I needed," Ed told her, and Elysia released him and gave him a shy smile.

"We brought pie too!" she announced then ran off and returned carrying the pie with the utmost care. Ed got to his feet and hurried over to her, taking the pie in his hands.

"Let's go cut this up so we can have some with lunch," he suggested and the pair of them walked off into the kitchen. The rest of them found places to sit and made themselves comfortable, Roy fetching bottles of water for them.

"He seems like such a sweet boy," said Gracia and the three men in the room all choked as one.

"Well, he does, no matter what you think."

"No, it's not that – well, it's that too – but, Ed's not a 'boy'. He's 22," Al told her apologetically, keeping his voice low so that his brother didn't overhear.

"Oh my," said Gracia, eyebrows lifting in surprise. "I never would have guessed."

"We haven't been formally introduced," said Al politely. "I'm Alphonse, and that's my older brother Edward. I thought maybe I should let you know who is who. Ed gets... um, displeased when people mistake me for him because I'm taller. Believe it or not, it happens all the time."

"Honestly, I should have recognized Edward right away when I saw him with Elysia," said Gracia, still a bit dismayed. "Older siblings tend to have a knack for taking care of those younger than themselves. His attitude toward Elysia is very much that of an older brother."

"Well, Ed's been caring for me like a parent since I was seven, so I'm not surprised that he has protective instincts to spare," said Al fondly.

"So, Maes, I know you didn't just come over to bring pie," said Roy, leveling a piercing stare on his enigmatic friend. "Have you found out something?"

"I have, but it should wait until after pie," said Maes, returning his friend's stare with a rather pointed look of his own. Roy went into the kitchen and helped them finish the sandwich construction that the Hughes' arrival had interrupted. When they were done, they carried the plates out to everybody still sitting in the parlor. They spent a pleasant hour after that simply eating and chatting, with Elysia telling them all about her adventures – expansive stories with rocket ships, robots, princesses, and dragons. Edward listened to her as intently as if she were telling him the secrets of the universe, as if every word she said was important, and Elysia responded with abundant enthusiasm. She was just about to tell them about her defeat of the robot overlord when she spotted something shiny – actually, they all spotted it and they all held their breath as they waited to see her reaction. She paused in her storytelling and looked closer at Ed's arm where a small space had appeared between the glove and the sleeve.

"Oh no, Uncle Ed! Did the robots get to you?" she asked, alarmed. Ed stiffened at first but then he snickered while Al covered his mouth with both hands, his eyes dancing.
"I'm afraid so," said Ed gravely, pushing back his sleeve so she could see more of the automail. He managed to keep a straight face, but the corners of his mouth were still twining. "But I escaped while our hero, the great Princess Elysia, was beating up their overlord. So that makes you my hero too, Princess."

"Oh, well, that's all right then," she declared, mollified. "Did they give you lasers? They give lasers to all the robots. So they should've given you lasers." And that's all the other adults could take. They all covered it as best they could – Gracia with the old standby of holding her hands over her mouth, Maes by turning and hiding his face in the back of the couch, Roy by holding a throw pillow over his face, and Al by pulling the front of his shirt up to hide his face.

"Ignore them, Princess," said Edward in haughty dismissal. "They're in shock. But what they don't realize is that Uncle Ed is fully capable of building his own lasers and would no doubt have very good aim." Roy and Al sobered, exchanging a look – they knew it wasn't a bluff. Ed really could feasibly build a laser, and all he'd need is to scavenge materials from the labs. Maes and Gracia took a little bit longer to calm down, since they didn't fully appreciate the danger of the combination of Ed's overlarge brain and sudden surfeit of free time. Then again, they had yet to wake up to the air raid siren sound of alarm clocks that had mysteriously become exponentially louder and no longer had working snooze buttons. Roy and Al were now very wary of incurring the wrath of Edward.

Once Elysia's story wound down, Gracia decided that it was time to take her home so they could start dinner. Maes opted to stay behind, and promised to be home in time to eat dinner with his beloved family. Elysia gave hugs to Al and Roy then gave the biggest hug and a kiss to her daddy. The last person she hugged was Ed, and she seemed to put her whole heart into the hug and gave him a kiss on his cheek, saying, "Don't worry Uncle Ed, Princess Elysia will protect you forever. Okay?"

"Thank you, Princess, I'm sure I will be very safe from now on," said Ed kindly with a warm smile. In the background Maes whined something about Elysia being too young to be kissing boys, but Roy threw a pillow at him to shut him up.

"She certainly warmed up to you quickly," pouted Maes once the girls had left.

"Animals and small children always seem to like Ed, but I think it's because he's basically just a big kid himself," explained Al with a snicker, and Ed stuck his tongue out at his brother as if to prove Al right.

"So, Maes, what is it that really brought you here?" asked Roy bluntly. He'd shoved his curiosity aside for the last hour or so, but now that the bystanders were gone there was just no holding it back anymore. It would have its say, one way or another.

"Well, to start with, Ed, you were spot on about the dean," said Maes, his eyes sharply focused on the young blonde. "It looks like he's been doing his extortion and embezzlement scheme for a long time, but it was never really enough for anybody to notice, just taking little chunks. And, of course, none of the witnesses have dared to come forward. One girl tried, a couple years back, but soon after going to the police, there was a fire at her house. Shortly after that, she recanted her testimony and all but disappeared off the face of the Earth. It was around that time that Mr. Grabby upped his game."

"It sounds to me like, when the girl stepped forward, the dean went looking for help to shut her up and maybe got in bed with somebody with an eye for a bigger picture," said Ed, not really looking at anything in particular, as if not really seeing what was in front of him. It was almost as if he was looking at something only he could see, patterns unfolding behind his eyes that the rest of them could only guess at. "He probably tied himself to a partner who had a bigger stake in this game, somebody for whom the money was just the icing on the cake – or maybe a necessary evil. This partner would
have been the one enabling the dean to steal larger chunks of change by falsifying documents and hiding their activities from regulatory agencies. It might be possible to track how much money has been going to the dean and from where if I can get his financial records, but that will screw up the chain of evidence and we'd never be able to convict him without that."

"Listen to you! You talk like a criminal investigator," enthused Maes, laughing. "Damn, kid, are you sure you don't want to switch into the law department? You'd make a killer FBI agent."

"No thanks," snorted Ed, coming back to himself with a little shake of his head. "Haven't you heard? I've got problems with authority. And don't call me 'kid'!"

"Ms. Hawkeye leant us some books on investigative procedures and criminal law," Al told them. It was news to Roy. He'd brought Riza Hawkeye – the perpetually calm-and-collected blonde who was his second oldest friend – over to the house to talk to the boys about the case, but he wasn't aware that they'd continued communicating beyond that first meeting. Like Maes, she was also a law student and was top of her class, so Roy had figured she'd be the best person to help them decide how to proceed. She'd seemed to really like the boys when she met them, and as she was leaving had made sure Roy knew that Ed had gotten her seal of approval. Considering how many of Roy's partners Riza hadn't approved of, receiving her nod was no small thing.

"I was able to come to the same conclusion that you did," said Maes with a long sigh, leaning back into the corner of the couch. "And my sources were able to give me a name for this mysterious partner. Apparently, this partner works for a big corporation who dabbles in a little bit of everything. Considering how many pies they've stuck their fingers in, it's not surprising that they would also have a division that specializes in pharmaceuticals and medical research. It's a bit of a reach, though, for a company who started out with weapons development, so they haven't been able to make many significant breakthroughs in that field, but that doesn't stop them from using barely legal methods to get their hands on people who might give them the leg up they need."

"Wait, you said . . ." Ed stopped and locked eyes with his brother for a long moment before continuing. "You said they started out in weapons, right?"

"Yeah, they've been in business since back in WWII, doing back-room deals with the military," replied Maes, eyes narrowing at the silent communication between the Elric brothers. "They didn't start diversifying until the 50's or so."

"Ouroboros," hissed Alphonse and both boys went rigid, their bodies all but trembling from the sudden tension. "Brother, we should tell them about the book."

"No, we can't get other people involved," protested Edward firmly. "I don't want to see anybody else get hurt because we couldn't keep our mouths shut," he ground out between clenched teeth, and the old grief and fear in his eyes was like a razor blade on Roy's heart. He hated seeing the brave, brash, and proud Edward Elric laid low by anything, let alone by the burdens of the past. Al said something to Ed that was in the same language they had used before when they had tried to keep their argument private in Ed's office. From the tone, it sounded like they were arguing again.

"What is that? German?" asked Maes, shamelessly interrupting.

"Um, yeah," said Ed, ducking his head and looking off to the side as if trying to avoid eye contact with anybody in the room.

"Our father was originally from Germany. We read all the books he left behind, and a few of them were in German, so mom taught it to us," Al told them, looking only at his brother, as if waiting for his reaction. "Not many people around here speak it, so it gives us a way to talk to each other
without others understanding what they overhear. It's safer that way."

Edward slumped in his seat, closing his eyes and letting out a very long, very unhappy sigh. "Go get the books," he growled. Al didn't hesitate. He immediately jumped up and ran up to the spare room he'd been occupying. He returned with three books. One was the book by Hohenheim – their father. The second was a copy of *Hermetica* translated by Brian P. Copenhaver. The last was a leather-bound notebook similar to the one that had been stolen along with Ed's notes.

"Where do we even start?" asked Al, looking to his older brother for direction.

"Where the bad shit always seems to start," said Edward bitterly, opening his eyes at last. And as simply as that they were all caught in his gaze, his eyes molten gold and filled with heat enough to rival volcanoes. There was years of rage and hatred in those eyes, and beneath it all an underlying sadness that was all but smothered under the weight of the anger. "With him. Our father."

Chapter End Notes

Just for future reference, the Sadie Hawkins thing is a mostly true story. The difference is it wasn't my high school. A friend conned me into going to his military ball with him and made me swing dance with him in front of everybody. It wasn't completely terrible, but social situations aren't my gig, so the whole thing was incredibly embarrassing. I think my face stayed red the whole rest of the night. But I was listening to swing music when I was troubleshooting my computer day before yesterday (it helps me stay awake while interpreting code and slogging through error messages - besides messing with computers while listening to Jazz/Swing gives me a whole Fallout vibe, ya know?), and I remembered that incident. Thus the beginning of Ch 8 was born, my own little trip down Amnesia Lane. The breakfast scenario can be blamed on the fact that I usually listen to music while I cook, and I end up doing things along to the beat (chopping veggies, flipping food, stirring pots, etc.) and singing along too. It's all part of my Secret Art of Living: "Make everyday tasks fun, so you can look forward to everything you do." But the beginning of this chapter was a lot of fun to write, so I hope it was just as much fun to read!
Chapter Notes

For those who are wondering where our beloved Riza has vanished to, I promise she's on her way. For now let's consider her stuck in traffic or something. She gets a little more of a mention in this chapter, but still no spotlight. And there's no sign of her in chapter 10, but she's going to be all over chapter 11, so no worries. I'm pretty sure Havoc is popping up in chapter 11 too. But there's a lot of Maes in this chapter and in the last one too, so for those who love him to death (and who doesn't love that lunatic?) consider this my gift to you. I think he's going to be in chapter 11 too, but I haven't decided yet. It's still in flux right now (actually, ch 11 is giving me conniptions, but it's slowly coming along). Well, enjoy this newest installment! Keep an eye out for chapter 10 in the next couple days, and wish me luck with 11! I'm gonna need it! ^.^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 9

"Difference Between Father and Dad"

"Have you ever wondered why, despite the obvious fact that I love physics, I've only ever published one paper in that field?" asked Edward, regarding Roy frankly.

"I did think it was odd, but you tend to hop around academically, so I didn't pay much attention to it," admitted Roy.

"Well, there's a really good reason for it," began Edward, and now it was his turn to go upstairs and fetch something. Roy could hear him opening and closing the library door. He returned to the parlor with his laptop in hand and set it on his knees so he could type. When he turned the laptop around, there was a PDF file open showing a title page. The author's name beneath the title was quite a shock, all things considered. The author was listed as Edward Hohenheim. "After this paper was initially published, we were approached by somebody who claimed to know our father. He said he knew how to find him. I wasn't exactly thrilled at the idea of meeting him, but we were orphans without him. We knew that it was only a matter of time before social services caught up with us, and we didn't want to end up lost in the system and separated. So, like it or not, I agreed to listen to the man's proposal. According to him, my father had been working with his company, Ouroboros, but suddenly gave up his research and vanished."

"Now, keep in mind, this man had just told us that he knew where our father was but then he said a little while later that our father had vanished," interjected Al. "This fact alone hurt his credibility with us."

"So, long story short, this douchebag wanted me to continue my father's research – despite my age and lack of practical education. He thought I would be able to pick up where my father left off. But we'd caught him in too many lies during our conversation, so we told him to fuck off," continued Ed, and the look he gave his brother was one of old regret. "He was . . . persistent. Al and I had been living in our old house still, with Teacher and Sig staying a mile down the road from us. We were out in the country, so nobody really cared that we were out there on our own with minimal
supervision. We took care of ourselves just fine. After this guy started pestering us, it wasn't safe for us to stay in that house anymore. We had to move in with Teacher. Then our house was broken into and completely trashed – just like my lab and my office. We knew it had to be that corporate douchebag. It seemed to us like he was looking for something, but fuck if we knew what. That's when our father finally contacted us."

"He didn't say much," said Al, picking up the story. "He told us that he was sorry we had gotten caught up in his troubles. He told us that he'd written a book and hidden his research notes in its pages. He'd used a special code, you see – a code that only the three of us would understand. The primary key to the code was his old copy of Hermetica. The dedication in his book was a hint to tell us where to find the key, and nobody else would have known what the hint meant. Even if they knew enough to recognize the quote, they wouldn't have known to look specifically in that printing of that translation. He said we had to make sure that Ouroboros never got their hands on his research. They had already used it once, and he never wanted to see it used again."

"So, we went in the middle of the night and salvaged what we could from the house," said Ed, his voice growing quiet, both boys lowering their gazes to the floor. "Then we burned the house to the foundations. We had already dug out all of our father's secret caches of notes and memorized all of them, so while the house was still burning, we made sure to throw every last scrap of paper he'd ever scribbled on into the fire. The only things we kept were photo albums, family portraits, and those two fucking books. Everything else burned."

"After that, we changed our last name over to our mother's maiden name," put in Al, making sure that his brother caught the overwhelming love and forgiveness in his eyes. How it must burn in Ed's gut, the feeling that everything that had happened was his fault. Given his overprotectiveness of family and friends and his overblown sense of responsibility, Roy had no doubt in his mind that Ed blamed himself for all the trouble that had found the boys, probably feeling that it had all resulted from him writing that paper. As if in penance, he never again studied in the field that he loved best of all the sciences. It was his way of balancing the scales – and keeping those he loved safe. "Teacher and Sig found a place in another small town where they knew most of the people. Ed grew his hair out, and I cut mine. We taught ourselves how to speak without an accent. We stayed there quietly until Ed finished high school at 16 and moved to Central City. When I finished high school at 17, I joined him here. Unfortunately, strange people like us . . . stand out. Ed's been really careful not to let the media catch any pictures of his face, and we've tried to stay under the radar whenever possible. But it's not like we changed our names all that much. We had drawn the line there and wouldn't budge. So it was only a matter of time before we were found, I guess."

"So, the other day, when you said you didn't want to end up getting the credit for any of our work, this was the reason?" asked Roy. Ed only nodded, his jaw tightening. "You couldn't take the chance of having your name attached to anything in the field of physics, even incidentally."

"Really, I shouldn't have stuck my nose in to begin with," said Ed, his cheeks flaring bright red. "If it had been anybody else, I wouldn't have. But it was you, and I knew if I asked you to keep my involvement on the down low, you'd do it. You'd be shocked how much trust I put in you when I helped you and your team out. I really wanted to help you guys out, but that one moment of weakness could have cost us everything." Ed was right. Roy was shocked. If he or any of his team had let slip who had helped them, there was no telling what could have happened. "Not that it matters since it's looking like all the years of care and caution were for nothing. Even if they don't know my real name now, they will soon enough."

"So, you really think the guy we're dealing with now is the guy from back then," stated Maes, more serious than Roy could remember seeing him.
"We do," confirmed Edward, and they could see in his face – hell, in his body language – how badly he wished it wasn't true. It made Roy wonder what the guy had done to the boys all those years ago. They had said the man was persistent, but he would have had to be quite a bit worse than that to prompt the boys to not only change their names but to also burn down their family home. Whatever it was he had done, Roy was determined to make sure that history didn't repeat itself.

"What about your dad? Have you heard from him at all since then?" asked Maes and Ed scowled at him hard enough that Maes twitched.

"Don't call him that," growled Ed.

"Call who what?" asked Maes, just as confused as Roy. Al, however, seemed to know exactly what Ed meant, and the answer saddened him.

"Don't ever call that rotten asshole 'dad'," answered Ed coldly. "There's a huge difference between a dad and a father. A dad is somebody who carries you home when you've skinned your knee, checks your closet and under your bed for monsters, reads you bedtime stories, and makes sure you always feel safe. A father is some asshole who knocks up your mom then leaves her flat to raise two kids on her own." Ed let out a soft wordless snarl. "So, no, I will never call that waste of space 'dad'. He's fucking lucky I'll call him 'father'."

"I suppose I can understand that," said Maes, probably because he was a dad, so he too could see the difference. "Do you have a name for the man from Ouroboros, by any chance?" asked Maes, changing the subject quickly. Ed nodded slowly. He typed something into his laptop then handed it to Maes.

"We have digital dossiers on everybody that might pose a threat," Ed told Maes, showing no signs of being the least bit ashamed of the level of paranoia he was admitting to. Then again, considering what they'd already been through, the boys might be entitled to a higher than usual level of wariness. "His name is Frank Archer. He even looks like a creeper, and he's always fucking smiling. He can pretend to be a nice guy, and since he's always smiling, you want to believe his act. But there's just something subtly . . . off about him. It's like none of his expressions make it to his eyes, and you can't quite shake the feeling he's looking down on you or playing some freaky game that only he knows the rules for."

"Once we started looking into his background, we found out that he has a criminal record," added Al, picking up the thread of the explanation. "He was in a war zone as a representative of the company. When the area he was in was attacked, he . . . killed a whole bunch of people . . . on both sides. Nobody could ever entirely prove what he'd done, but they did manage to charge him with a few petty crimes at least, and put him away for five years. When he got out, he went right back to the company as if nothing had changed. They knew what he'd done. It was their lawyers that got the murder charges dropped. They knew perfectly well what that man was capable of, but they welcomed him back with open arms, and continue to use him to do their dirty work."

"We've got the transcript from his trial, and a few other records that aren't usually available to the public, including his sealed military record," Ed told them then he shuddered. "Yeah, that military record will seriously keep you up at night."

"You kids are like the CIA or Mission: Impossible or something. You're seriously super spies! Who else do you have profiles on?" asked Maes, his eyes still captivated by the wealth of information on the screen.

"Like I said, it's all people that might pose a threat to us in one form or another," replied Ed with a shrug. "I hadn't bothered to start one on the dean until all this shit started, so I haven't got much in his
profile yet. And some of the people in there never actually did anything after the initial threat. Mostly, when we were kids, we didn't know what to watch out for yet. We had more to be worried about back then too. The last thing we wanted was to end up stuck in the foster care system and maybe end up separated, so some of the profiles in there are on nosy-ass well-meaning fucking authority figures – teachers, social workers, counselors, coaches, that sort of thing. Others are about bullies, their parents, the bullies’ friends, the bullies’ friends’ parents, and so on and so on. ‘Know your enemy’ and all that. We never half-ass when it comes to research, whether it's science or people, so when we looked into each of these people, we were very fucking thorough. We had to be."

"Surviving isn't just about making it through each day, it's about being ready for what might come at you tomorrow," said Al with a spark of the same determination that showed in his brother's eyes. "We did what we had to do to watch out for each other and survive."

"What about this teacher of yours? What did she have to say about all this?" asked Maes, and this time the brothers exchanged a look and snickered to each other.

"She's the one who taught us," Al told him with a too-wise sort of smile. "Teacher didn't just teach us science and math and martial arts. She also taught us how to survive on our own, whether we're living in the woods or out on the streets. She taught us how to make traps and early-warning systems. She showed us how to read people so we could tell the difference between predators and prey. She even taught us how to use found objects to replace things we don't have – like, filtering dirty water so it's clean to drink, making clothes out of stuff you wouldn’t normally think of wearing, making things like needles and thread from bones and tree bark, and all sorts of other weird skills."

"That's why we call her Teacher but never mother," said Ed dryly. "She's always finding something else to teach us, and every bad situation is another opportunity for a lesson. It's seriously fucking tedious. If I came home from school with a black eye, she'd say, 'Some punk hit you, Ed? Well, now you know to duck next time.' Or like when this one bitch accused Al of cheating even though he didn't, Teacher said, 'Now you know to watch out for that woman.' That's just the way she is."

"Is there any way you can send me some of these profiles or print them for me or something?" asked Maes. He was obviously going into transports over everything he was reading.

"I'll create a secure virtual server for you to access, and I can dump copies of all these files on there for you," said Ed as if it was the easiest thing in the world. "I'll have Roy text you the access information when I'm done."

"You could always just text it yourself," said Maes, quirking his eyebrow at Ed.

"I hate texting," said Ed making a face. "If I had one of those fancy new phones, it might be different. But my phone's a dinosaur, and I'm not allowed to have anything newer because they all have fucking touch screens. And, of course, I can't use touch screen because I always have gloves on – and I tend to scratch or crack the screens every fucking time. I'm right-handed, and I don't always remember not to try to do things with my right hand. Touch screens and automail are not friends."

"All right, I get it," said Maes, surrendering the fight. "Do I even want to know how much of this information was obtained by illegal means?"

"All of it," answered the boys in chorus.

"Never trust a super-genius," muttered Maes to himself, and the boys and Roy giggled at him. "I guess I should just count myself lucky neither of you have turned into super villains. I'd hate to have to be the super hero that goes head-to-head with you. Well, let's go ahead and call Riza over and see how much of this we can validate by more legal means so that we can use it to help you out of your
"current crisis."

"Not today," said the boys, again in perfect sync. "It's Sunday."

"We don't work on Sunday," sniffed Edward.

"All work is done Monday through Saturday, and anything that comes up on Sunday has to wait for Monday," elaborated Al.

"But if you want to call Hawkeye over for coffee, that's totally fine," said Ed, and Al nodded to corroborate.

"Then, you know what, that's just what we're going to do," declared Roy decisively. "We can call the whole gang, and we can spend the rest of the day going through the record collection. I might even be persuaded to pull the grill out of the garage. It's at least warm enough outside to barbecue. And we have some meat in the freezer I'm sure we can do something with. What do you say?"

Ed, whose mood had been steadily darkening since the start of the conversation, slowly began to brighten once again. It wasn't as firecracker bright as it had been when they were dancing or listening to Elysia's nonsensical stories, but it was a good start. "Maybe we could go to the store?" suggested Ed, tentative and shy. "We could get some better meat, ya know? Maybe some other stuff to go with it."

"Oh! And dessert too!" put in Al excitedly and that was the last push in the right direction that his brother's mood had needed. Let it never be said that the way to Edward Elric's heart wasn't through his stomach.

Roy let out a contented sigh as Edward snuggled against his side, the younger man letting out his own soft sound of contentment. "Today was a pretty good day," said Ed, his voice a little rough from their final activity of the evening. "I don't usually like being around that many people at once, but everybody was sort of chill. It was pretty cool hanging out with everybody."

"And I know everybody was absolutely charmed by you," said Roy, grinning down at his younger lover with all the pride that was swelling in his chest. No man living could count themselves half as lucky as Roy felt in that moment. Ed leaned up and looked down at Roy with that expression that meant he was once again wondering if Roy were some sort of alien lifeform. Roy was beginning to notice that Ed most often did that when Roy paid him a complement. "What? Believe it or not, Ed, you're remarkably charming – especially because you don't mean to be and don't even know you are. People like being around you because you don't try to be something you're not. You do things your own way without being a pretentious asshole about it. On top of that, you're gorgeous, and your looks draw people to you and keep them there long enough to figure out how wonderful you really are. Laugh it off if you want, but that won't make it untrue."

Ed opened his mouth to argue, but closed it again when his phone started singing the chorus of Paul Simon's You Can Call Me Al. Predictably, it was Al's ringtone. Trading matching perplexed frowns, Roy and Ed looked around the floor until they found Ed's pants and dug out the cell phone. Ed opened it, put it on speaker, and immediately asked, "Al, you're down the hall. Why the hell are you calling?"

"Because I wasn't about to knock at this time of night, Ed," said Al, sounding exasperated. "There are some things you can't unsee Brother."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," said Ed, rolling his eyes as he pulled on his boxers. "What do you want?"
"Granny Pinako called me a few minutes ago," Al told him and Ed froze, his t-shirt halfway on.
"Now, before you flip out, she's fine. Winry's fine. Everybody's fine." Edward visibly relaxed, but
Roy took advantage of the moment of distraction to get the shirt back off over his head. Ed gave him
a slightly disgruntled look that entirely melted when Roy's lips found the sensitive spot where his
neck met his always-tense shoulders. Ed bit his lip to hold back a moan. "Ew! I don't want to unhear
things either, guys! Edward Elric could you please focus?!"

"It's not all my fault," said Ed, his voice a bit breathy. "Didn't they teach you that in that . . . fancy
medical school? It takes two to have sex."

"Ew! Ew! Ew! I'm not hearing this! Oh my God, I want to scrub my brain out with vinegar!"
protested Al and Edward chuckled. "Look, Pinako just said she gave your phone number to
somebody she swears is trustworthy. She didn't tell me who, but she said to expect a call soon. I'm
just telling you. Okay, bye!" Al hung up abruptly, and Ed and Roy started laughing hard, all but
doubling over. Then suddenly Ed stopped, jerking upward with the look of a startled deer.

"Wait, did he say Pinako gave my fucking phone number away?" he asked rhetorically. He closed
his phone then opened it again, thumb already pressing the keys to dial a phone number only to have
it start singing out his default ringtone halfway through dialing. Edward's hand shook a little as he
put a finger to his lips to signal silence then hit the answer button and put it on speaker. "Hello."

"Edward, it's been so long," said the voice on the other end and Ed put a trembling hand over his
mouth. "I'm sorry I've been out of touch for so long, but I'm sure-"

"You god damn worthless SONUVABITCH!" yelled Ed, startling Roy.

"Now, Edward-"

"Don't 'now, Edward' me you piece of shit! Do you have any fucking idea of the fucking shit storm
that's been our fucking life?! Do you even fucking care?!"

"Edward, please, I-"

"NO! You know what? Fuck it! I was just about to get laid, and since you feel absolutely no fucking
need whatsoever to interrupt your life for us, I don't particularly feel like extending the favor to you!
Oh, and just so that I am being poignantly clear, I am, in fact in bed with a man. That's right, you
useless monomaniacal fuckwit, your precious eldest fucking son bats for the other team!
Enthusiastically! Suck on that and twist!" Edward closed his phone and went to open the bedroom
door where Alphonse all but fell into the room as soon as the door opened. Thankfully, Ed and Roy
were at least both in their underwear, otherwise they'd have further scarred poor Al who had hastily
thrown a hand up over his eyes, just in case. Ed didn't seem to be in the mood to care.

"Brother, was that dad?" asked Alphonse very slowly.

"What was your first hint?" snarled Ed, shoving his phone at his brother.

"Um, the strident tones and excessive insults made it obvious," answered Al deadpan. "I could even
hear you in my room, so I came to find out for sure. Brother, couldn't you at least have let him tell
you why he was calling?"

"No," said Ed flatly. "Now, out. He'll probably call back in a minute, and I don't even want to hear
his voice." As soon as Ed had shoved Al out the door, he closed it and leaned back against it. "I'm so
buying a new phone tomorrow. And I'm changing my number for my office and lab lines and all of
my e-mail addresses and maybe even moving to Brazil."
"Brazil sounds fun," said Roy noncommittally, lying down on the bed and pulling the blanket up over his legs then holding it open on one side in invitation. Ed hunched his shoulders and trudged over to the bed, promptly throwing himself onto it face-first. "That can't be good for your face, love."

"It wasn't," muttered Ed, muffled by the pillow. "Fu~ck my li~fe," he groaned loudly – or, it would have been loud if not for the aforementioned pillow. Taking it in stride, Roy drew the blanket over Edward, wrapped an arm around the young blonde's waist and rolled him over onto his side. "What is with that fuckwit's propensity for making my life suck?" asked Edward of the unfair universe.

But it was Roy that chose to answer, since the universe was so rarely forthcoming. "I think it's in the parenting manual, 'How To Ruin Your Children's Lives in Ten Easy Steps'. Unfortunately, I think some parents are just more enthusiastic about it than others." Roy wrapped his arms more firmly around Edward and pulled his lover close until Ed's back was pressed into Roy's chest. Roy rested his chin atop Ed's tangled golden hair and sighed. "But how about, instead of Brazil, we go someplace where they predominantly speak English. How about Canada? I hear parts of Canada are very nice. Or maybe England?"

"Nah, we're supposed to be smart. We could learn another language, easy. Maybe Spain? I took a semester of Spanish in high school. I can at least ask where the bathroom is and tell them they have a nice table," said Ed, starting to sound a little sleepy. The day – hell, the whole week – had been a hell of a rollercoaster for him. It was only fair that he'd be a bit worn out by now. Ed may be tough as they come, but even the strongest needed to rest from time to time. "How about we just go to Hawaii? At least then we wouldn't need passports. Oh, or how about Jamaica? Yeah, we could build a little shack right on the beach. I could use coconuts and tin foil to build a satellite so we could still get Internet. Then we could have all the naptime and Netflix we could ever wish for."

"See? This is why they call you a genius," Roy teased him, kissing the top of his head, and Ed laughed muzzily. "Sleep well, love. We can sort out the rest tomorrow."

Chapter End Notes
Root of the Problem

Chapter Notes

Finally, ch 10! Yay! All right, the reason this chapter took so long to put out is that I was fighting a long and bloody battle with ch 11 and had no time to finish the editing. Now that ch 11 is in its editing/tinkering stages, it was safe to take my eyes off it long enough to work on ch 10. I feel like a neglectful parent, leaving poor ch 10 alone for so long while I dealt with the problematic younger sibling ch 11. *pets chapter* There, there! Poor thing! I promise I still love you just as much as the other chapters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 10

Root of the Problem

Roy threw the balled up piece of paper back to Breda who then threw it to Fuery who threw it to Falman, and back it went to Roy. They were all unbelievably bored, but they had nothing to do but wait for the data to finish compiling. That's how four perfectly intelligent and mature adult men had been reduced to playing stupid games with a waded up piece of paper. It was a pathetic commentary on the lives of lab geeks.

Then Winry burst in breathlessly, shattering the quiet. "Roy! You've gotta come quick!" she called out frantically.

"What is it? What's wrong?" asked Roy, already jumping out of his seat with thoughts of Edward in danger blaring in his head. Ed had been allowed back into his lab to start trying to find something worth salvaging among the rubble. And since it was Monday, he only had one class, so he had been in his lab since early morning and only emerged to teach his class. After class, he had gone right back up to his lab. Roy had brought him lunch earlier, but Ed had been so distracted that Roy had actually had to remind him to keep eating several times. It would be annoying if it wasn't so bloody endearing (curse you Edward Elric for making that adorable confused face! Couldn't you see I was trying to be annoyed with you!).

"I just saw Uncle Van walk by heading for the elevator," she said quickly. "I thought I was hallucinating, but it was really him! Ed's going to blow a gasket when he sees him!" The name confused Roy for a moment, but then he remembered – "Uncle Van" as in Van Hohenheim. Holy shit!

Roy and Winry took off at a dead run, all but throwing themselves up the stairs, neither of them sure which one they were going up there to protect – Hohenheim from being brutally murdered, or Ed from being arrested for murder. When they exited the stairwell on the second floor they could already hear Ed yelling at the end of the hall.

"How dare you just fucking walk in here like you still have the fucking right!" he all but screamed. The man himself was nowhere in sight, so Roy figured the pair were likely in Ed's lab. Winry and Roy rushed over, ignoring the med students who were leaning close to their lab doors pretending not to listen. The pair practically leapt into Ed's lab like cheesy cartoon heroes leaping into action.
"Where the actual fuck have you been all this fucking time, huh? You fucking answer me that!
Where the fucking hell having you fucking been?! Wherever you were, you obviously didn't think we needed you, and guess what? We still don't fucking need you, so you can just go right the fuck back where you came from!"

"Edward, be reasonable, I left for a reason," said the man, his voice soft and almost soothing in its way. He really looked so eerily much like Edward. He even wore his hair long, brushed back in a loose ponytail from which stray bits of hair were escaping. His golden eyes were focused on his raging son, the older man full of regret and compassion that would never reach the young man who was blinded by the bitter years between the last meeting and this one. The man's jawline was hidden beneath a soft, closely trimmed gold beard, and his nose was just a little bit longer, but otherwise he was a vision of what Edward might one day grow into – handsome and self-contained, with a quiet sort of dignity and understated elegance but still a very compelling presence. "I know these years have been hard for you, but please understand. I never wanted to leave, and I never stopped thinking of you boys. If I had thought for one second you were on your own, I would have come back for you. But I knew you had Pinako and Izumi to care for you. I knew you'd be safe with them. I hardly expect you to forgive me, but I need you to understand that there was a reason for it."

With impossible speed Edward was suddenly right there, within inches of his father, his fiery glare wielded like a spear to pierce the man standing in front of him. When Edward spoke, his voice was very quiet but filled with so much venom, it should have, by rights, melted the walls. "Where were you when the doctors were telling me they couldn't save mom – telling me, a nine year old child, because there was no other next of kin to notify? Where were you during the two years that Al was in a coma? Where were you when I was waking up in the hospital to the realization that I had lost almost a quarter of my body? Where were you during the year of agonizing surgery and physical therapy while they were attaching my automail? Did you know that it normally takes three years to recover from automail surgery and get used to the automail? Do you even realize how hard it was to do that in only one year because I had to be able to be there for Al, because I was the only family he had left? Where were you when Al finally woke up and I had to explain to him . . ." Ed's voice had begun to falter, so he paused, closing his eyes for a moment. " . . . explain to him what had happened to mom and to me? You didn't have to watch that news hit him like a fucking freight train! You weren't there to watch how badly he needed to be held. But I couldn't hold him because he was so frail, so thin, so fragile, and I couldn't trust my metal fucking arm not to crush him! So there was nobody to hold him while he grieved for what we lost! Nobody to comfort him while he wept! Nobody to help ease his pain when I was helpless to do anything for him! So don't tell me you thought about us! Parenting isn't like a Christmas present because it isn't the fucking thought that counts! It's fucking well being there! You weren't there when your sons needed you so fucking badly, but now that your precious fucking research is in danger, you come running back? So I will ask you one more mother-fucking time, where the fuck were you when we needed our father?" Van Hohenheim said nothing. Really, there was nothing he could say that would fix the mess he'd made. Ed let out a disgusted sound and pointedly turned his back on him. "You make me sick," his hissed through clenched teeth.

"I can see it will take time. I'll go speak with your brother now, but I do need to speak with you Edward," said Hohenheim, his voice just as calm and soft as before. "I'll be back later, once you've cooled down."

The man walked away, looking only briefly at Roy who quickly brushed past him to go to Edward's side. Winry, on the other hand, followed Hohenheim out into the hallway. Roy could hear her introducing – re-introducing? – herself to the man. He seemed happy to see her, but was quick to excuse himself so he could go look for his younger son. Winry, in turn, offered to walk him out.

"You all right, love?" asked Roy carefully as he put his arm around Ed's shoulders.
"No, I'm really not," whispered Ed, sounding so weary. "I think I need a break. Can I come visit with you guys for a little while, please?"

"Of course," said Roy, relieved that he would be able to help in some way, even if only by providing a distraction. "We're actually not doing anything right now except playing catch while we wait for the world's slowest computer to finish crunching numbers. The computer's so old, we've nicknamed it Moses. Last year, on Halloween, Breda put a fake beard and a white wig on it then wrote the Ten Commandments on these two little plastic tombstones and set them on either side. I'll show you the picture of it when we get home."

"You guys really have way too much free time," said Edward, his laugh weak but enough for now. Winry caught them as they were heading down the first floor hallway toward Roy's lab. She gave Ed a tremulous smile, her eyes glistening as if she was about to cry. "Ed," she said, drawing him aside. "I know how upset you are, but can't you at least try to pretend not to hate him? For Al? I know you've been angry at him for a long time. I get it. I do. But Al's really missed him. You were at least old enough to remember him, but Al was too young. This is his first, and maybe last, chance to get to know him. Can't you let him have that?"

"You don't get it Winry," said Ed, his voice heavy with resentment. "Now Al will meet him, and sure they'll talk for a bit or whatever, but then that fucking bastard is just going to blow town. And who's going to have to clean up the mess he leaves behind? Huh? Me! Again! I'm so fucking sick and tired of cleaning up after that fucking loser! So no, I will not play happy fucking family! I will not wait around for that asshole to break my brother's heart!"

Ed spun on his heel and bee-lined straight for Roy's lab. Roy could only give Winry an apologetic smile and follow after Ed even as the first tear traced a trail down Winry's cheek. Really, it wasn't an argument in which anybody could win. Either Ed played nice for the duration of his father's visit and wound up picking up the pieces of Al's broken heart afterwards – and probably his own as well. Or Ed could do everything in his power to keep up the wall between the brothers and their long-absent father, which could be just as painful and twice as stressful. With neither path being preferable, Roy decided to leave the choice up to Ed. Nobody else had the right to decide which of the two painful paths he should take. If Ed asked for help, Roy would give it, and advise him as best he could. But Roy seriously doubted Ed would ask, because Ed also knew that it was a decision only he could make.

"You look like you're trying to decide where to hide the bodies," Breda was saying to Ed as Roy entered.

"Oh, I wouldn't try to hide the body," said Ed, smiling evilly. "All you have to do is chop it up really well then feed it to the pigs. Little known fact, pigs really will eat anything, including people bits."

"Yikes," said Breda with a dramatic shudder. "Remind me never to piss you off."

"No need to worry," said Ed loftily. "There are only two people in this world I would resort to murder to get rid of, and you're neither of them. If you pissed me off, I'd only break a few bones, but you'd definitely live through it."

"Uh, yeah, still not pissing you off then, just saying," said Breda, holding his hands up so as to look as non-threatening as possible. The rest of them could only chuckle at him – though Roy was a little concerned that Ed might not be entirely kidding, considering his current state of mind.

"So, are you going to be home in time to make dinner or should me and Al order take-out?" asked Roy idly as he picked up their erstwhile "ball" and tossed it across the room. Ed found a spare bit of
filing cabinet and sat himself down so he could take his place in the line-up.

"I'm probably just going to head home, cook dinner then come right back up here," replied Ed with a shrug. "I figure I can use it as an excuse to get a couple cups of real coffee."

"Yeah, some of the med students were looking at the coffee under a microscope earlier, and I didn't like some of the sounds they were making," said Fuery, frowning.

"They sounded like they were about to pile into their cars and head up to the nearest free clinic en masse," corroborated Falman and Breda gave a slow fearful nod.

"I could tell you what's in it, like the chemical composition or whatever, but you won't like it," said Ed grimly and every one of them begged off. "I still have nightmares. I wish I'd never analyzed it. I've learned since to be a little more fucking careful about what I choose to do when I'm bored."

"Yeah, but when are you going to get bored enough to make another one of those miracle-making coffee machines of yours?" asked Breda plaintively. "After seeing it at Roy's house, I'd sell my first born for one of my own."

"Well, first you'd have to get laid for that to be a reliable payment method," said Ed pitilessly, and in the next instant everybody but Breda roared with laughter. After a minute, even Breda added his own rueful laughter to the collective mirth. "But seriously, we'll see if I have some time to tinker during winter break."

"Seriously?" asked Breda, eyes wide in disbelief. Ed nodded with an indulgent little smile. "Dude, I'm going to have to plan on expanding our temple to you! For real!"

And they really had built a little temple to Ed as a joke. It was just two candles and a framed drawing of a cartoon character version of Ed with wings and a halo, complete with a pocket protector, nerdy glasses with tape on the frames, a pencil behind one ear, and wielding a protractor like a scepter. The picture sat within a cardboard cutout of the Lincoln Memorial from which they'd removed Lincoln. It had been drawn by one of the guys in the engineering lab at their request, and despite its strictly-comedic value, it was a pretty good drawing. They had even set sugar packets and a little coffee k-cup between the candles like an offering. Ed found the whole thing hilarious, which was pretty much the whole point. They'd done it because it was funny, and they'd known it would cheer him up. It got even funnier when the other labs found out about the Temple of Ed, and worshipping at it had become something of a running gag in the Science Department. One of Ed's ballsiest students had even called him "Great Science God Ed" when pleading for an extension on his assignment. Ed thought it was so funny and so incredibly gutsy that he'd granted his petitioner's humble request.

Roy and his team continued their game – and their banter – adding Ed into their rotation, all of them relaxing more and more as the time passed them by. Roy could tell that Ed was getting anxious to return to his lab, but Roy could also tell that the younger man was reluctant to leave. He seemed to be having fun, and if anybody needed a little fun right about now, it was Ed. Besides, none of them really wanted him to go. His cleverness and naturally sharp wit brought much-needed laughter to the previously boredom-drenched lab.

Naturally, because they were having so much fun, an interruption had to occur. "Mr. Elric please come to the front. Mr. Elric, please come to the front," squawked the intercom on the desk phones all over the building. Ed stiffened where he sat, and cast a glare toward the door, obviously worried about who could be at the front that didn't have security access. Roy gestured for him to stay put and went to the door to peer out. Roy's lab was near enough to the front door that it was easy to see the security desk without even having to leave the lab. When Roy saw who waited there, he let out a sigh of relief and gestured for Edward to come along.
"Oh, it's Teacher!" said Ed happily as soon as he had stepped out of the lab. "It's all right Phil, you can let her through." The security guard gave Ed a friendly smile then nodded and let Izumi step through the metal detectors, handing her a plastic visitor's pass once she was through. This was Roy's first time seeing her without the costume. She was much thinner than she had seemed before, but rather than looking willowy, it would be more accurate to say that she looked lean. It was like she had carved away everything unnecessary from her body and left only the muscles most essential to kicking ass and taking names. She walked with the fluid, economic grace of a true fighter, adding to the overall impression of somebody who could, on a whim, fold Roy into a pretzel without breaking a sweat. Her hair, which had been hidden beneath the bonnet before, was separated into dozens of tiny braids which had then been captured in a loose ponytail at the crown of her head. Her clothes were simple and practical, yet still feminine. Roy suspected that Ed hadn't just learned his scowl from her – he was pretty sure that it was from Izumi that Ed had learned to be magnificent even while standing still. "What are you even doing here? Shouldn't you be helping Sig close up the shop right about now?"

"I came because Winry called me to tell me that your no-account father had been by," said Izumi in her customary hard-edged tone. Ed instantly took three hasty steps back, already in a defensive stance – feet spread but arms held close his body with his hands up and loose and ready to catch whatever was coming and with his body positioned in such a way that he was presenting a narrower target. "You're not going to kick me this time?" asked Ed, confounded when no blow was forthcoming. "No, Ed, not this time," said Izumi, amused. "Believe it or not, I came just in case that bastard was still here. He deserves a good kick in the ass – or twelve – for leaving you brats for me and Pinako to watch out for. It wasn't so bad when you were little because at least you were still cute, but as soon as you hit puberty you stopped being cute and became nothing but a pain."

"Oh, come on Teacher, you know you liked having the slave labor," scoffed Ed, not the least bit fazed by her words. "Come over here. Let me introduce you to everybody."

"You seem to be in a remarkably good mood for somebody who just had to confront one of the two people he hates most in the world," Izumi pointed out as Ed dragged her toward Roy's lab. "I suppose you are responsible for the good mood then," said Izumi, turning to give Roy that minimal smile he was starting suspect was all she ever really gave. Roy didn't mind it, since Riza was exactly the same way. "It's good to see you again, by the way. Have you and our boy been having fun together?"

"Don't worry, Teacher, Al already gave him the shovel speech," said Ed, and Izumi seemed to actually be pouting a bit. "You boys take all the fun out of being your fake parents," she said a tad sullenly. Ed laughed brightly, the warmth of it lighting up his face. "Well, it wasn't much of a shovel speech, especially for Al," admitted Ed, his eyes still sparkling. "So how about I bring Roy by the shop sometime soon? That way Sig can get in on it too."

"Sounds good to me," said Izumi, satisfied, giving Roy a half-hearted "I've got my eyes on you" gesture as he followed them into the lab. Roy just smiled his acceptance, and Izumi nodded smartly. "Now, who are these other reprobates you're associating with Edward? Having one friend was miraculous enough. But now you have this many? You may give me heart failure yet."

"You're so funny," growled Ed. "Anyway, everybody, you've all heard me talk about my Teacher, right? Well, this is Izumi Curtis. Teacher, this is Roy's research team," he told her then pointed out
each person as he gave her their names. When he was done, he told them, "Izumi was once a physicist too. She got me and Al started when we were little. So, she should probably get an honorable mention over there in my temple."

"Most definitely," agreed Breda. "The first patron saint for the Temple of Ed."

"The what of what?" demanded Izumi, and Ed started laughing again before pointing to his modest temple. It was at that point that they were treated to Izumi's warm, rich and almost booming laughter as it filled the room alongside Ed's higher, brighter tones. "So, in short, they're not so much friends as worshippers and supplicants?"

"That's it in a nutshell," said Ed still snickering.

And the team, Roy included, called out, "All hail Ed!" They had done the same thing the first day they'd shown Ed his temple, and it never failed to win a laugh from him.

When the laughter died down again, Roy told Ed, "You should have your Teacher and her husband over to the house for dinner."

"Can we?" asked Ed, his eyes impossibly bright.

"Of course, love, I don't see why not," Roy told him.

"You two sound like a newlywed couple," snickered Izumi. He didn't even know women like Izumi could snicker.

Ed cast a dry look at Roy and said flatly, "I want a divorce."

"Only if I get joint custody of the coffee machine."

"Throw in support payments then. I can't be the only one keeping her fed and clothed."

"Deal," said Roy, holding out his hand, and Ed shook it. "And we didn't even have to call in the lawyers."

"I don't need lawyers to tell me that you only want me for my coffee machine," said Ed haughtily. "I feel so used."

"Such a drama queen," sighed Izumi melodramatically and the laughter erupted all over again.

"Look, Teacher, I hate to ask this," said Ed once general composure had been restored all around. "Could you maybe look in on Al? That jackass said he was going to try to talk to him. Honestly, I don't even think he knows where Al goes to school. But I worry about him trying . . . I don't know, I guess, trying to talk Al around to his side of things. I don't want to see Al hurt. He's got too big a heart to hate that bastard like he deserves."

"I know, Ed, don't worry," said Izumi, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I'll go check on him as soon as I leave here. Would you still like us to come for dinner?"

"Of course! That would be awesome!" replied Ed, his mood lifting again. "I'll dig out some of mom's old recipes and put together something special."

"Perfect," said Izumi then she pulled Ed into a hug. "Take care of yourself, kid."

"I will, Teacher," Ed promised.
Izumi stepped up to Roy and pulled him into a crushing hug too, much to Roy's shock. He didn't know whether he should hug her back or fight for his life, and he feared that the first option might necessitate the second. But she thankfully let him go after a moment, patted his cheek and told him, "Fuck over my Edward, and we'll serve you up in the butcher shop right next to the bacon." Roy could only stare, his mouth hanging open. "I feel better now," she declared, sounding almost refreshed as she strolled out of the lab, telling the team, "It was a pleasure meeting you." And then she was gone.

"Well, at least now we know how you got to be so . . . Ed," said Breda and even Ed had to laugh.

Chapter End Notes

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I hate to say it, but ch 11 and I have reached a stalemate. Neither of us will admit defeat, and yet neither of us can win. Therefore, what's left to be presented is the fallout of this epic battle. Ok, dramas aside, the whole point of this chapter is to essentially get us where we need to go for the chapters to come. That being said, it's not like it's strictly a filler. It has important stuff in there too. I tried to make sure of that because I hate "fillers" (what I call literary bridges that serve no purpose but to cover the gaps between more important events and carry the characters from point A to point B in an orderly fashion). I tend to skip over that sort of thing when reading if there's nothing interesting in it to make it worth my time. Hence, I make sure to pepper any filler nonsense with interesting bits and humor so that people hardly notice the gaps. And that's why ch 11 took so bloody long, cuz I hate fillers and wanted to keep things interesting. An "interesting filler" is sort of a paradox (not quite the right word, but such is life) like teaching somebody to be an honest thief. The two concepts simply do not like living in the same space at the same time - aka paradox. You can imagine how creating one tends to be problematic. And so I give you the problematic paradox that is ch 11! WOOHA! (yes, I really did just say "wooha", fight me)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 11

What's Been Broken

Roy was just sitting down at an outdoor table at the student union to eat a pre-packaged sandwich he'd probably be better off without when he was hailed from across the quad. It was Jean Havoc, waving like an idiot and trying to get his attention. Roy waved tiredly back so the man would know he could stop flailing before he made himself look more ridiculous than he already did. Riza was walking beside Jean, but she somehow managed to keep her dignity despite her companion's lack thereof.

The pair sat down at the table and Roy asked them, "What's up? You two wouldn't be hanging out together if there wasn't a reason?"

"Sorry to interrupt lunch, chief, but I was kinda hoping you'd know where Boss was hiding out." Jean ran a hand over his reddish blond hair and gave Roy a rueful sort of half-smile his blue eyes offering an apology. Jean looked like everything a stereotypical guy with a sports scholarship ought to look like – well-muscled, confident, carefree, and not too bright. He was truly "living the college life", complete with trying to pick up women, joining a fraternity, going to parties, and avoiding homework. The only thing he applied anything like a work ethic to was football. He attended every practice without fail, and when he wasn't practicing he worked out or went running.

"I am on a similar errand," added Riza, not even letting the fact that she was sitting on what amounted to a cafeteria bench mar the perfect posture with which she sat. Seeing Riza in a pose that was anything less than poised was so rare as to be classified as a mythical phenomenon, so even if somebody claimed to have spotted it, nobody would believe it. Her blonde hair, a shade of gold
slightly darker than Ed's, was always swept back neatly and curled into a bun with a single large barrette to hold it in place. Her expression was schooled into an impassive mask that made most people believe her to be cold at best – downright scary at worst – but Roy knew from experience that just because she didn't show her emotions, didn't mean she was without them. It just meant she was more cautious than most. Her smiles may be small, but they were always genuinely warm. It was also possible to occasionally see flashes of what she was feeling by watching for the hints of it in her deep brown eyes. "Apparently, you and Hughes are the only two who have reliable contact information for Edward. So the responsibility of putting us in touch with him falls to you."

"But why do you need to reach him?" asked Roy, already pulling his cell phone out of his pocket.

"Well, I was just trying to reach him because we'd promised to work out together today," said Jean with a shrug. "He was saying yesterday that he's going nuts spending all his time cleaning up. I know he works out sometimes, so I told him we should meet up and spend some time in the gym. But we were supposed to meet an hour ago, and he's still a no-show."

"I only wanted to go over the information that he had given Hughes," explained Riza simply. "Also, Edward had requested another book from me. It took some time to find, so I wasn't able to bring it to him until today."

"I was about to go to the lab to look for Ed when I saw Riza coming out of the lab, and she said he wasn't there and that you were at the student union, so here we are," finished Jean and Riza nodded curtly.

"But you hate going to the lab," said Roy, searching through his contacts on his phone.

"No sh-" Jean cut off the curse with a nervous look at Riza. "No kidding. I don't want nerd cooties. But did you see Ed's eyebags? Dude! He looks like he ain't slept in a month. And he was looking seriously strung out when I saw him earlier. If that kid doesn't get a break soon, he's seriously gonna explode – and I don't mean like 'aaargh' explode, I mean like 'boom' explode. I know the whole science nerd thing is high pressure and all, but damn."

"It's true, Edward has been looking a little tense lately, but I'm sure he'll be fine," said Riza serenely. "He's tougher than he may seem. From what I gather, he seems to me to be the type of man who only becomes more determined when outside pressures are at their strongest."

Roy tuned the pair out at that moment because Ed had answered his phone, and he did not sound like himself. "Hey, love, where are you right now?"

"Walking," answered Ed, sounding almost half-asleep somehow, like he wasn't even aware he was talking.

"Walking where?" Roy asked him.

"I don't know," answered Ed after too long of a pause. "I guess heading back to your house. Nowhere else to go, really."

"Good, I'll be there in a few minutes then," said Roy, trying to sound like it was just a casual decision and not like he was skating halfway down the hill toward panic.

"Why? Isn't it still early?" asked Ed absently.

"There's not much to do right now, and I was getting bored," lied Roy, ignoring Riza's hard-eyed glare. She seemed to have a sixth sense for when he was skiving off of work – and for when something was wrong. Which of the two she was sensing now was anybody's guess, since
technically both were true. "I thought now might be a good time for some real coffee."

"Oh, okay," said Ed as if he hadn't really heard and didn't really care. "See ya." Ed hung up and Roy was out of his seat and halfway to his car before his friends could even ask what was wrong.

"Something's up with Ed, I just know it," Roy told them as he fumbled with his car keys.

"Then we'll come with you," decided Riza without hesitation. She really was pretty fond of those Elric boys.

"Hell yeah, if anything's wrong with the Boss, I'm so there," agreed Jean, already jumping into Roy's backseat even as Riza climbed into the passenger seat. Roy didn't feel like wasting time arguing with them. Instead, he started the car and tore out of the parking lot. It didn't take them long to get to the house – Roy only lived a couple miles from the university – and Ed hadn't made it there yet when they arrived. Roy spent the first few minutes pacing, always keeping one eye on the door. When that got boring, Roy fixed himself a cup of coffee, but Riza took it away from him.

"You've clearly had too much caffeine already," she said, forcing him to sit on the couch by benefit of her glare – a glare which had been known to leave lesser men bleeding.

Edward finally walked in, and Roy jumped up, about to rush over to him only to stop short. "Ed, what happened to your face?"

"Oh, um, nothing much," said Ed a bit self-consciously, putting a hand over the blooming bruise on the side of his jaw. "I should probably . . . put something on it." He headed off into the kitchen, and Roy had to force himself to close his mouth once he realized it was hanging open. What could have possibly happened to make Ed's eyes look so . . . hollow? It was like all of the life had been drained out of him. The only thing he could think of that might affect him so deeply would be if something happened to Al, but he would be in a lot worse state than just looking lost if that had been the case. And that's exactly how he looked . . . lost. It was like he had somehow lost his mooring and was drifting without direction.

Roy and his two guests crowded into the kitchen and found Ed sitting on the countertop, holding a package of frozen strawberries against his jaw. Riza reached Ed's side before Roy did, and she made him move the strawberries out of the way so she could see the damage. "What happened Edward?" she asked, sounding downright gentle. It was enough to make both Roy and Jean blink at her in confusion.

"It's nothing," said Ed, looking anywhere but at her face.

"Edward," she said in the sharp tone of a Catholic school teacher – the sort of tone that carried echoes of rulers cracking across knuckles. "Who hit you?" Ed mumbled something in reply, looking down at the package of strawberries he was still holding. "What happened Edward?" she asked, sounding downright gentle. It was enough to make both Roy and Jean blink at her in confusion.

"It's nothing," said Ed, looking anywhere but at her face.

"Edward," she said in the sharp tone of a Catholic school teacher – the sort of tone that carried echoes of rulers cracking across knuckles. "Who hit you?" Ed mumbled something in reply, looking down at the package of strawberries he was still holding. "Louder, if you please."

"It was Alphonse," snapped Ed at last. "Look, like I said, it's not a big deal. Brothers fight, that's just . . . how it is." He tried to sound flippant, but that hesitation toward the end made it clear that this wasn't the usual tiff between brothers. And the look on Riza's face made it clear she wasn't going to settle for the non-answer. "It's just . . . Al wants me to do something I really don't want to do . . . and we're both being stubborn and stupid about it. And Al just sort of . . . snapped. It's really my fault . . . because I went over there pissed in the first place . . . That kid is supposed to be at school right now, not hanging out with . . . So, yeah, Al will calm down after a while . . . and I already apologized to him . . . so, yeah . . ."

No wonder he looked so lost. Ed lived and breathed for his brother. If Al was angry enough at him
to hit him, Ed had to be mentally beating himself to a bloody pulp. To be honest, it wouldn't even matter if Ed had really been the one in the wrong or not. He would still blame himself for the blow up, because to him Al could do no wrong. Al was all but a saint in Ed's eyes, and no one was allowed to hurt that precious saint, not even Ed. And for all of Ed's honesty about pretty much everything, he could be amazingly opaque when it came to showing his own weakness. He didn't just do it so he could appear strong, he did it so that others wouldn't worry. So, at that moment, for every single ounce of misery they saw on his face, it was likely there were ten more that they didn't see and never would.

"Oh, um, sorry about today, Havoc," said Ed absently. "I know I said we'd meet up. Can we do it another day?"

"Sure, Boss, not a problem," said Jean in a kind tone. "You know, I've got some ointment that's good for bruises. It's in my bag, back at school. I could get it and bring it back and maybe pick up some Chinese food on the way. How's that sound?"

"Sure," said Ed with a soft, tired sigh. "Sounds good." He jumped down off the counter and wove his way between the people in the kitchen. "I need a shower. I've got grass in my hair still." Once he was gone they all sagged – even Riza – all three of them a little relieved and at the same time disheartened.

"Roy, go ahead and take Jean back to the university to pick up his things and his vehicle. Besides, you have work to be getting back to," said Riza, pitching her voice low. "I'll stay here with Edward, so I don't want to hear any excuses from you. You may return home at your usual time."

"But, I should-"

"No argument," said Riza, that Catholic school whip crack voice making him twitch in place. Really, there was just no arguing with her when she was like that. Those who had tried had not fared well, and Roy was very much a fan of faring well. To his surprise, she said in a much softer tone, "Don't worry. Edward will be fine. After a little time and distance from the argument, I'm sure he'll bounce back. Go say your goodbyes."

Roy went upstairs and knocked on the bathroom door. "Are you naked? If so, can I peek?" asked Roy, keeping his tone lighthearted. There was a click as the lock on the bathroom door disengaged, and Roy took it as an invitation and walked in, closing the door behind him. "Hey there sexy," he said, wrapping his arms around the barely dressed blond and reveling in the red that lit Ed's cheeks. Ed still wasn't anywhere close to all right, but it was a good sign that he was responding to Roy's teasing. Roy would take any good sign he could get at the moment. "I have to head back to the lab, but Riza's going to stick around. She said something about peeking at your spy profiles and bringing a book you wanted to borrow. Also, I'm taking Jean back to get his stuff, so he'll be back in a few minutes to hang out too. If you need anything at all, just give me a call. I'll only be a few minutes away."

"I'll be fine," said Ed, but if Roy thought for a second that he meant it he wouldn't be worrying so much. "No slacking off on my account, remember? You should get back to work." He leaned up and kissed Roy in that soft sweet way that felt like coming home, and Roy wished fervently he dared stay. "I'll see you tonight."

"Yeah, I'll try to be home on time, love," promised Roy, stealing another kiss before leaving the younger man to his shower. Walking out that door when every single one of his instincts were screaming at him to stay had to be the hardest thing he'd ever done. Seeing his pitiful state, Riza almost relented and let him stay. But then she firmed her resolve and reinforced his banishment, and all he could do was head out with Jean in tow.
Contrary to what Roy had told Ed, there was actually quite a bit to be done at the lab. However, after
the first couple hours, his team sent him home because he was too distracted to do his work at all
well. He was a little annoyed about them ordering him out of his own lab, but at the same time, he
couldn't help but love his friends for worrying about him. They'd known he was distracted because
there was something wrong, and had told him to go home out of kindness. So he promised them he'd
return bright and early the next day, and grabbed his stuff to head home.

He had just gotten in the car when his cell phone rang, and he was a little startled by the identity of
his caller. "Hey Al, what's going on?" greeted Roy cautiously. "Is everything all right?"

"No, not really," answered Al, sounding miserable. "Have you seen my brother? Either he's in the
lab or he forgot to charge his phone again because I haven't been able to reach him."

"He's at the house," Roy told him, wondering if maybe he should ask about the fight. No, he
shouldn't. It really wasn't his place. "Riza and Jean are keeping him company. I didn't feel like he
should be left alone right now." All right, so Roy didn't want to interfere, that didn't mean he couldn't
put a little pressure on the younger brother to fix what he'd broken. Didn't Al know how important
he was to Ed? Didn't he know how badly his anger had hurt Ed? If he didn't know it already, he
should be made aware soonest. Al was the light of Ed's world, and you can't take something like that
away and not expect there to be consequences. "It's been a couple days since we've seen you back at
the house. You must have been busy."

"No, not really," Al said again, and this time his voice was somewhere between exasperated and
apologetic. "I've been with our dad. Has Ed told you yet who hit him? I know you've seen his jaw.
Well, it was me. He was being such a prick, and I lost my temper. He just wouldn't listen at all, and
he wasn't even trying to understand. But it's really important that he at least listen to what dad has to
tell him. He came back to keep us safe. I just wanted Ed to understand that."

"Look, I know I'm an outsider, and I'm not going to pretend to know even half of what's going on,
but I'm going to throw in my humble opinion anyway," said Roy frankly. "You and I both know that
Ed doesn't trust easily. He's open and earnest and honest even when he's trying not to be, but for all
the people he's drawn in with his looks and his kindness, he still only has maybe a handful of people
he calls his friend, because it takes enormous effort to give them his trust. Have you ever wondered
why? Sure, he's probably been hurt plenty over the years. No heart that big is ever going to survive
living in this world without getting wounded a few times along the way, but those wounds aren't
why he can't trust. It's because once upon a time, when he was still young enough to be
impressionable, he watched somebody he loved and trusted walk out the door. He was old enough to
remember watching your father walk away. Then, all down the years, every time he needed a parent
to shoulder the burdens a child should never have to carry, all the times he wished not to have to
handle everything alone, the one person who could have taken that weight away from him was
nowhere to be found. He was hurt pretty deeply, but he buried it over the years so that he could keep
moving forward. Now, the source of that pain has come back to dig up all that old hurt, and can you
really blame your brother for not wanting any part of it. Just because a wound has healed doesn't
mean the scar won't still ache, and once you reopen a wound that was once healed, it takes longer to
heal the second time. So, no, your brother won't talk to your father. But if what he has to say is really
that important, maybe he should tell you, and then you, who Ed loves and trusts above all others,
could convey the message to him. If Ed still refuses to listen, I'll help you make him listen to you. But
I won't help you make him talk to his father. I won't help you hurt him."

There was a long pause, and Roy started to wonder if Al had hung up somewhere in the middle of
that little tirade, but then he heard Al sigh. "All right, I'll discuss it with dad. Please tell Ed to turn on
his phone or charge it or . . . whatever. I'll call later."
Al hung up, and Roy leaned forward until his forehead hit the steering wheel. Al was such a sweet kid usually, so Roy felt like he'd just run over a fluffy bunny then backed up to do it again. But it was a necessary evil. Al was so caught up in how happy he was to finally meet his father, and he couldn't understand why his brother wasn't just as happy. He wanted to sweep away all the lonely years and just be a family again. He wanted his family to be whole. Roy could understand how he felt. He'd trade anything to have a chance to meet his long-dead parents, but that wasn't the same thing at all. Hohenheim hadn't died. He'd left. He'd broken their family all on his own, and had made no effort to fix it. So, no, their family would not be whole again anytime soon. Once something is broken, even if it's repaired, it can never be the same again. It can never be truly whole again. Broken things will always carry within them the memory of being broken. That's why it was easier for them to stay broken than to pretend to be whole.

With a long and weary sigh, Roy sat back and started the car. It was past time for him to head home to do some damage control. Ed would not thank him for the little speech Roy had given Al, but to be brutally honest, he hadn't done it for himself anyway. He'd said all that because Ed never would, but somebody needed to. Somebody needed to remind Al of what was important. Al and Ed were a set, not to be sold separately. It had been just the two of them against the world for more than half of their lives. Whoever else wove themselves in and out of their lives – estranged father included – that had always and would always be the one constant. The brothers would always come first for each other, and all others were secondary. Roy hadn't even been around them that long and even he knew that much. Al knew it too, but he had forgotten it because he was caught in the dazzling illusion of something he thought he wanted even more.

When Roy got home, he found Ed and Jean sitting on the floor in the middle of the parlor, surrounded by stacks of records and listening to Harry Chapin's *Cats in the Cradle* on the record player. "What in the world are you two doing?" asked Roy, stepping carefully so he didn't plant a foot on vinyl record instead of vinyl flooring.

"We're organizing," replied Ed distractedly. "First by genre then alphabetically after that. It's so we can find what we want to listen to more easily."

"We had some trouble finding the right records," Jean told him, giving a Roy look that all but shouted "save me".

Riza was sitting on the couch with Ed's open laptop on her lap and her own open laptop on the sofa beside her. Without looking up, she explained to Roy, "Since he was having so much trouble finding a suitable record, I suggested that he might be better served by organizing the collection. There was a little trouble initially, but things are running more smoothly now that we have system in place." She finally looked up, and thanks to their long friendship, she was able to communicate her intent to him without saying a word. Her message was clear: She'd given Ed this task to keep him distracted and focused, and so far it was working as intended. "What are you doing home so early? Was I not clear that you shouldn't be pushing your work off onto others?"

"They told me to go," Roy told her with a shrug, feeling a bit like a scolded twelve-year-old. He made his way through the forest of records to Ed's side and kissed the top of his head. Ed looked up at him, and Roy rejoiced to see at least a tiny spark of Ed's old self burning in those amber orbs. It was a weak spark, granted, but it was enough for now. "Would you like some help, love?"

"If you want," said Ed with a shrug. "I made you a plate. It's in the fridge."

"Thank you, love, I'll go eat then come back and help," Roy told him, and since Ed was still looking up at him, Roy stole a brief taste of warm lips before heading into the kitchen. He pulled his plate out
of the fridge and turned to put it in the microwave only to almost drop the plate, his heart just about leaping out of his chest upon discovering Riza standing behind him. How did she always do that? He’d accused Maes of being a ninja before, but they all knew that when it came to the ninja arts Riza was the real master.

"Roy, are you fully aware of what's going on?" asked Riza quietly, and Roy just looked at her, blinking slowly while his brain caught up with the question.

"How do you mean?" he asked in turn.

She let out a tiny frustrated sigh. "I mean the situation with the people that have been chasing the Elric brothers. I read the notebook where the boys had written their notes while translating their father's rather cryptic code. Do you even know what it is this company did with their father's research – what they apparently intended it to do all along?" Roy quirked an eyebrow at her in silent inquiry. "They used his discovery to wipe out an entire town, Roy. The place was obliterated and afterwards they simply covered it up. Hundreds of people died, and this company swept it under the rug. Are you really ready to put yourself in the crosshairs of a company that has the power to do that? Do you really want to go head-to-head with people who are willing to do that?"

As Riza's words hit home, Roy found that he really needed to sit down. "A whole town?" he asked, because, really, what else can you say to that? "It's no wonder Hohenheim doesn't want anybody to get their hands on his research. Is there really no way we can bring them to justice for that if for nothing else?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure," admitted Riza, and Roy felt the ground pulled out from under him all over again. There has never been a time in Roy's memory that Riza has been "not sure" about anything. "If we were digging into this alone, I would say 'no', there is no chance of making this right. However, with the Elrics help . . . maybe. If we're careful, we might be able to make these bastards pay for their crimes. Have you read through the Elrics' notes or those profiles that they've created? Those boys are much more resourceful than law enforcement agencies have been thus far. So, with their resourcefulness and analytical abilities, it might be possible to do the impossible."

"I see," said Roy, more to himself than to her.

"On a more personal note, I am concerned for Edward," she interjected neatly. "He seems to be a bit . . . I don't think 'stressed' is quite the right word for it. Are you certain you're up to the task of helping him through this? I have to be frank with you, I know how you usually handle relationships – on those rare occasions when one of your dalliances stray into deeper waters. Usually, when it gets too deep, you immediately sound the retreat. I don't want to see you do that to somebody like Edward."

Roy wanted to be horrified that she would think that about him, or at least offended, but he couldn't. He knew she was speaking the truth, just like she always did. Riza had been his voice of reason since they were children, and he would always count on her to keep him grounded firmly in reality. But, this time, there was one thing he was completely, totally certain that she had wrong. "To tell you the truth, Riza, I think I was in too deep from the minute I met him. I couldn't back out now if I tried," Roy told her, looking her in the eye so she could see that he meant what he said. The admission left a strange ache in his chest, a breathless feeling akin to fear – or maybe exhilaration – but it wasn't altogether unpleasant. He would live with that ache forever if it meant he could keep waking up to the spread of shimmering gold on the pillow beside him, keep delighting in the privilege of laying hands on the pale gold masterpiece of Ed's body, keep drowning in the sea of passionate emotions hidden in the molten honey depths of those bottomless, too-knowing eyes. When it came to love, Roy was a fool at the best of times, but even a fool would know better than to
ever turn aside someone as unimpeachably magnificent as Edward. "I'm not going anywhere. I would never dream of it. Actually, I almost kinda hope that after this is all over, I can talk them into living here in this house more permanently."

"Are you serious?" asked Riza, and it was her turn to look shell-shocked.

"I have plenty of space, and I like having him and his brother here," said Roy with a shrug that made the statement seem far more careless than the implications it dragged with it. Roy usually hated having people invade his home. Out of all of the people he'd dated, all the casual affairs that earned him his reputation, never once had he allowed anybody else to even stay overnight in his house. Occasionally, he would have friends come over, but only Riza and Maes – who were as close to him as family – had ever been allowed to stay overnight. Riza knew that, so it made sense that she would be confused. "Over the last several days, and in spite of all the craziness, I've been happier than I can remember ever being. It's weird, I know, but . . . I just can't help myself. And I don't think I'd want to."

Riza took in a long breath as if to sigh, but then her lips curved in a warm smile that was wider than any smile he'd ever seen on her face to date. "I'm glad," she said at last. "It's about time you found happiness. I wish you both all the best."

"Thanks, Riza," said Roy, grinning at her like the idiot he was. "That really means a lot."

Riza finally left Roy to reheat and scarf down his leftover take-out in peace, and when he was done he rejoined the trio in the parlor. He had to scoot over some of the stacks of records to make space to sit, but the small smile Ed gave him in greeting made up for the inconvenience factor. Ed explained his sorting system to him, saying that first they had to put the records in stacks by general alphanumerical groupings – A through D in one stack, E through H in another and so on. After that, they could alphabetize each stack then sort the already alphabetized records by genre. It would be more efficient than sorting by genre first then having to alphabetize each genre separately – it was clearly Riza's suggestion, since efficiency was the only temple at which she bowed.

It was a large collection, so the process took another hour-and-a-half to get through in its entirety. Once the last record had been placed on the makeshift shelves they'd created – let it never be said Ed wasn't good at improvising – Havoc stretched hugely and said, "I don't know about you, but I need to move around a bit to work the kinks out. Hey, Boss, weren't you supposed to show me some of those legendary moves of yours today? How about we go out back, and you show me how to do that stance or whatever that you were talking about?"

"Unbreakable stance," corrected Ed disinterestedly. "Since you helped me with this, I suppose I could. I'll go change clothes." Ed got up and stretched with his usual casual grace and made his way upstairs. Roy got up and stretched too, a little embarrassed that, unlike the two athletes, his joints creaked just a bit. He sat down in one of the room's two chairs with a sigh that spoke volumes for his gratitude that such a thing as a chair even existed (bless you chair, for not being the floor).

"Let me ask you a weird question," said Roy, turning to look at Jean. "Why do you call Ed 'Boss'? I mean, is it a reflex? Is it teasing? Or do you think he's just that scary?"

"All three?" replied Jean, earning himself an impatiently perplexed frown. "A while back, a bunch of the guys on the football team started having trouble with their grades. Not me, of course, since I had Breda helping me out. But it was enough of us that it became a real problem. So the coach bribed the Boss into helping out. I guess the guys gave Ed some problems at first because of," he moved his hand to indicate height, "and you know," he waved his hand to indicate his face, "so the Boss had to set them straight the hard way. Thanks to that, anytime somebody on the team hears the name Ed Elric, they look over their shoulder and make sure he's not there. Even the ones who weren't there
have heard the blow-by-blow. One of the cheerleaders commented that they were acting like they were a bunch of mobsters scared of the big boss. So, the football team has been calling him Boss ever since."

"And somehow, my complete lack of surprise is more surprising than your story," said Roy, smirking dryly.

Ed returned, wearing his close-fitting black sweats and a black ribbed tank-top that was so tight it was all but bonded to him on a molecular level. "Woah, dude! Is that the automail?" asked Jean with his usual stunning lack of tact. "The guys mentioned it and all, and they said it was pretty badass, but this is my first time seeing it. I've seen automail before, but it's always clunky. But yours is almost the exact same size and shape as your arm."

"That's mostly Winry's design. I just helped her decrease the size of the internal mechanisms so she could reduce the size of the casing without risking problems with heat exchange and conductivity . . ." Ed stopped at the complete incomprehension on Jean's face. "I made the insides smaller so that she could make the outside smaller," he enunciated and Jean made an "oh". Ed just shook his head and walked past them towards the backyard. He had his hands in the pockets of his sweats which naturally pulled them even tighter across his ass. This meant that as he walked by, three heads cocked to the side as one to appreciate his retreat. Roy was suitably shocked that Riza and Jean were staring, but considering the content of the show they were watching, he couldn't say he blamed them. "No staring at my ass. Don't think I can't feel your fucking eyes," growled Ed. Two of the three straightened and had manners enough to blush and look contrite. "That means you too Mustang. TPO."

"Say what?" asked Roy.

"Time, place, and opportunity," replied Ed, turning to glare at him.

"Well, it was at this time and in this place that I had the perfect opportunity," said Roy, unrepentant. "Besides, if you don't want anyone looking, you should take your hands out of your pockets. You're showcasing, love."

"I seriously feel that if you have not died by the age of forty of something whose first symptom is testicular necrosis, there is no justice in this world," said Ed wistfully before finally heading out the back door.

"Damn, harsh!" chortled Jean as he followed Ed out the back door.

Riza and Roy exchanged a look, Riza's lips twitching in the barest hint of suppressed laughter, then the of them followed after the pair. The pair of spectators sat on the porch swing under the shade of the overhead trellis and watched as Ed tried to explain concepts like center of gravity and weight distribution. He demonstrated by letting Jean try to tackle him – try being the operative term. No matter what Jean tried he simply couldn't budge Ed. He even tried lifting him, but Ed stayed rooted to ground. It shouldn't have been physically possible, but there it was.

"You weigh, what, two-ten? I weigh maybe a buck seventy with the automail, and yet you can't move me even with momentum on your side," began Ed in a very teacher-like tone. Because of Ed's age, it was easy to forget that he was, in fact, a university professor. This was Roy's first time seeing Ed in full teacher mode. He was patient – which was actually pretty shocking, given Ed's general lack patience at any other time – but he was also firm, demanding, persistent, and very unflappable. He brooked no nonsense and refused to take "I don't know" as an answer, but he was also willing to explain carefully and took notice of when the student clearly didn't get it. It made Roy want to try sitting in on one of Ed's classes.
The lesson went on until nearly sunset, and Jean had no choice but to leave to go to football practice. He thanked Ed profusely and promised to tell the other guys "hey" for him, then took off. Ed let out a heavy sigh and reached up to pull the rubber band from his hair, shaking his braid loose and working the knots out with his fingers. Roy started to say something but then stopped, unable to remember what he was going to say as he stared in awe at the vision before him.

The sun was sinking below the horizon and casting a ruddy glow over Ed, who stood there a moment with his eyes closed as he let the autumn wind cool the sweat on his skin. His automail fist was clenched at his side, the metal arm gleaming in the colors of the sunset, red and orange and vivid pink. With the dusk-painted sky as his backdrop and the waning sun setting the gold of his hair and skin ablaze, he wasn't just beautiful, he was radiant. The moment didn't last long, but it was well worth pausing to watch, putting all other thoughts on hold to simply drink in the sight.

"Yeah, I can definitively say I will never get tired of having him around," Roy whispered to Riza, the note in his voice the sort reserved only for prayers. Clearing his throat, Roy said for Ed's benefit, "Maybe you ought to take another shower, love. I think there's grass in your automail and a little bit of mud in your hair."

"Shit," muttered Ed then he let out a sigh. "I'll get dinner started after my shower. Are you sticking around to eat, Hawkeye?"

"What do you plan to make?" she asked him, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Don't worry, Ed's pretty handy in the kitchen," Roy reassured her.

"Then I would be delighted," said Riza, giving Ed her warmest smile. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Sure," said Ed, and this time he was giving Riza his "you may actually be an alien" look. After a moment of staring at her with his head cocked to the side, he finally shrugged then went inside to shower.

"Alphonse called me earlier," Roy told Riza since Ed was well and truly out of earshot. "He wants Ed to at least listen to their father, but Ed wants nothing to do with the man. I can't blame him, and won't force him. But I can't help but wonder exactly what it is Hohenheim has to say. Does it pertain to this case? Or is it just that he wants to explain his reasons for leaving?"

"It would certainly be easier if Ed would simply sit down and listen to him," said Riza, pondering the issue. "But you and I know a little something about what it means to cut ties with those whose presence is harmful to mental and physical well-being." They did indeed know, since they'd done exactly that with Riza's father. He had been a brilliant scientist once, and a mentor and father figure for Roy in his own way, but he had also been slipping toward insanity for years. Finally, Riza and Roy had both decided to have him committed, and eventually cut ties with him altogether for everyone's peace of mind. The man was paranoid, and in his fear, had treated his daughter cruelly. Much of Roy and Riza's closeness was born from the difficulties they'd suffered together as they'd broken off their connection to Berthold Hawkeye. It was no wonder Riza related so well to Ed who also shared a stormy and overall unfortunate relationship with his father. "Maybe if we can at least find out what the subject of his father's message is, we might be able to decide whether to advise Ed to keep his distance or attempt to listen. Are you able to contact Alphonse? He might be biased on the topic, but he would also be the best person to give us the perspective we need in order to proceed."

"I did tell Al that he'll need to be the one to convey his father's message to Ed, but you may be right about getting some perspective," said Roy, pulling out his phone as he thought about the problem. Rather than call Al, he decided to text him the question then waited impatiently for the reply. When
his phone sang out the ringtone Ed had given him to use for Al – the same one Ed used, because Roy could appreciate the pun too. "Hey, what's up?" said Roy in greeting.

"I can ask him, but I'd like to know why you want me to, if you please," said Al, his tone polite but crackling like a command.

"I was talking to Riza about the problem, and she suggested maybe if we knew a little bit more about what's going on we might be able to help Ed make the right decision," Roy told him bluntly. "We want what's best for him. If keeping him away from your father is better for him then we'll back his decision. If it's better for him to sit down and talk to him then we'll help convince him. What it comes down to is that if this conversation has nothing to do with getting you guys out of your current troubles then no dice. Anything else will just be to satisfy your father's selfish need for absolution and will have nothing to do with helping Ed, and may in fact only hurt him even worse than he's been hurt already. Like I said before, I won't help you hurt Ed. That's all there is to it."

"I get it," said Al with a heavy sigh. "Let me see what I can do."

"Thank you, Al," said Roy, and he meant it. It couldn't be easy for Al either. All he wanted to get to know the man he had spent almost his whole life wondering about. It's true that Ed had done his best to fulfill the roles of mother, father, and big brother, but there was only so much he could do. Al wanted to fill the gaping hole left in his life by the absence of any parents. Roy could sympathize. That didn't mean that Ed felt the same as Al, and it was important to respect that difference. Maybe if Hohenheim had returned even just a couple years ago, things may have been different. But the long stretch of lonely years had only fed the bitterness toward Hohenheim until it choked all other emotions Ed might have felt for the man he would barely call "father" and would never call "dad".

Returning his phone to his pocket, Roy told Riza Al's answer, and she simply nodded her acceptance. The two of them went back into the parlor and waited for Ed to come down. Al's return call didn't come until Ed was already in the middle of cooking dinner. Al said only that he was on his way to the house, and Roy didn't know whether he should happy about that or not. He did, however, know that he needed to let Ed know.

"Love, I just got off the phone with Al. He says he's on his way back," said Roy, and the reaction was not what he expected. Ed abruptly tensed, the spoon he'd been holding clattering to the floor to splash sauce all around where it landed.

"Shit, sorry," muttered Ed, bending down to pick up the spoon then carrying it to the sink to wash. "He probably won't stay though. He's just coming to talk me isn't he? Because I haven't been answering my phone?"

"Pretty much," said Roy, feeling like he should apologize for instigating the return. "Why haven't you been answering the phone? I thought maybe that was only incidental, but you intentionally turned off your phone, didn't you?"

"Yeah," said Ed, returning his attention to pot on the stove.

"But why?" demanded Roy. "Especially now when you have dangerous people after you, not being able to contact you scares the hell out of those of us who need to know you're all right."

"Sorry, I just figured it'd be fine since I was here, and you know the people I was with. I'd already attended my morning classes and got a sub to take my afternoon classes since I wasn't sure how long it would take me find Al. So, the only person who would be trying to call me right now would be Al, and . . . I wasn't ready to . . . to talk to him yet," explained Ed quietly. "I needed to get my head straight first. Still not quite there yet, but I'll make do I guess."
"Don't worry about it so much, love," said Roy, wrapping his arms around Ed's slender waist from behind and pulling him closer. Roy kissed the nape of Ed's neck and nuzzled the tense line of his jaw, pleased when Ed relaxed into his embrace. "It'll be fine. You two love each other, and you'll get through this just like you've gotten through everything else. You're too stubborn to do otherwise."

"I hope your right," whispered Ed. "I really do."

Chapter End Notes

.... Just to let you know, my sleep schedule is completely thrown off right now (I sleep in 3 shifts of 1-2 hrs each at random times throughout the day), so the update schedule is going to be even crazier than before. Projected estimate is about 3-4 days between chapters, give or take. I'm trying for shorter wait time, but I'm in this sort of brain-melted, sleep-deprived, quasi-narcoleptic, over-caffeinated haze right now, and the story is becoming more complicated as we near the end of the journey. Hard to keep up with the increasing level of complexity with a brain at half capacity, ya know? Thanks for reading so far, and look forward to chapter 12 - it's a doozy!
Late Nite Action

Chapter Notes

I fibbed. It wasn't 3-4 days. I got done with the chapter much, much sooner than expected. I was just sitting there in my sleep-deprived daze plugging away at it when suddenly WHOOSH, I was done. It was so abrupt, I had to just sit there blinking for a few minutes, wondering where the hell this chapter even came from. Was it chapter fairies, ninjas, maybe aliens with mind-control capabilities? It could just be part of the cockroaches evil plot to take over the world, but I doubt it. I don't think they're anime fans.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 12

Late Nite Action

"Oh my God, are you all right? I didn't think I'd hit you that hard," fussed Al, lifting his brother's bruised face to the light.

"I'm fine Al," said Ed with that smile that he only ever gave to Al, a smile that hid nothing and everything. "I already put ice on it, and I took something to bring down the swelling. It's not like it's broken or dislocated. It's fine."

"It's not fine. I never should have said what I did," said Al, radiating remorse and unhappiness. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of it-"

"No, Al, you were right," said Ed, his voice becoming quiet again, as if the effort to push out those words was almost too great for him. "You don't need to apologize."

"Oh, Brother, don't do this to yourself," said Al, all but whispering as tears gathered in his eyes. "I should never have said something like that to you. I knew how badly you'd take it, and I know you eat yourself alive with guilt. I know how you are. Nobody is as hard on you for your choices as you are."

"Enough Al, we can discuss it later," said Ed sternly. "Have you been eating right? Sleeping properly? I know you've been skipping classes, and don't think for a second that you're off the hook for that. I've already talked to your teachers and explained the situation to them. They said they won't dock your points for the unexcused absences if you do the list of assignments they gave me to pass on to you. And there's an extra credit assignment that will make up for the exam you missed. I told them that it may be a few more days before it's safe for you to return to class, and they said that's fine as long as you continue to keep in touch with them."

"Oh, Ed, do I even want to know what you said to them to get them to give me so many concessions?" asked Al, his expression somewhere between love and exasperation.

"I just told them about the break-ins and that the cops think it might be people coming after my research and that there's a risk to your safety so you'll be laying low," explained Ed, waving off the implied accusation. "It's all true. I didn't even curse. I just laid it out and left the rest up to their
imaginations. The guy who skipped school has no fucking room to complain."

"You're right, Brother, I'm sorry," said Al, once again repentant. "I shouldn't have put you in a position where you had to cover for me. I'm just relieved you didn't bully them like you did the high school gym teacher."

"He was a pervert!" protested Ed defensively. "And I'm not the one who put the French teacher in therapy. I wound up having to take Spanish because when I was signing up for the language classes, the counselor said that Ms. Alberts couldn't hear the name Elric without having a panic attack."

"She put herself in therapy. She should have known better than to flap her gums," said Al dismissively. "And what about Mr. Peterson? I don't think his eyebrows ever did grow back properly, and that was all on you."

"But Mr. Halder was all on you, little brother," said Ed, lifting an accusing eyebrow toward Al. "He has a nervous tick now. He even retired early."

"I get the feeling that your high school transcripts will read like the Devil's résumé," said Riza, shaking her head with a sigh. "I'm a little surprised that you got into so much trouble yet still managed to get into college and be considered respected scientists."

"There's a long, distinguished history of brilliant scientists who made trouble in school," said Al and both Elrics shrugged.

"It's the 'brilliant' that makes them act out," said Ed, and Al nodded his agreement. "I mean, think about it. Every lesson is boring and you don't have much social interaction to distract you and the teachers and students are resentful and confrontational. Add into that teenage hormones and moodiness and you get a perfect fuckin' storm for shit-stirring. Most of the famous geniuses throughout history have also been troublemakers and rebels."

"You also have to consider the correlation between genius and mental illness," put in Al and Ed reluctantly concurred. "If you examine the geniuses of the past, you'll notice that in those with higher IQ's, there's a startling preponderance of mental health issues. Some of the smartest men in the world suffered from clinical depression, bipolar disorder, borderlines personality disorder, schizophrenia, and the list goes on. It's common for those who suffer from mental illness since early childhood to be seen as 'acting out' because the adults aren't yet aware that the child is actually not fully in control of their behavior. Which is not to say that Ed and I suffer from mental illness... well, not the sort that's caused by chemical imbalance or anything. I mean, Ed has PTSD, but that's just the car thing. And I suppose there might be some separation anxiety, considering the whole orphan thing and-"

"Al, you can stop talking now," said Ed, putting a hand over his brother's mouth. "I told you taking those psychology classes would rot your brain."

"I guess you could say we're not crazy, just resistant," said Al with a helpless shrug.

"Not really rebellious," said Ed, thinking it over. "It's more like, when your teacher is in your face trying to call you a liar because you proved him wrong in front of everybody, what else are you going to do? When you're too smart you get one of three reactions. People either resent you, try to use you, or put you on a pedestal."

"You either learn to pretend to be dumber than you are to please people or you learn to put up walls to keep people away," said Al, and he and Ed exchanged a significant look. It was a pretty fair description of the Elric brother's behavior, and a pretty accurate explanation of Roy's own high school career. He'd learned in junior high that the nail that sticks out gets hammered down, so by the
time he hit high school he had a strategy in place for getting through it without anyone knowing that he was more interested in physics and chemistry than football and cars. Only his few close friends knew that he rarely struggled in his classes. He schmoozed his way into *every* social circle and was considered a king among commoners by many. It wasn't until halfway through his Poly Sci degree that he'd decided he no longer cared who he impressed. And perhaps that made Ed that much more admirable. He had *never* cared who he impressed, and that took a lot of guts.

"But, all that aside, I know you came back for a reason," said Ed leveling a hard-eyed stare on his little brother. "You know you can't hide anything from me. Spill it, Al."

Al heaved a huge sigh and sat down heavily on the couch. Ed did the same, crooking one knee so that he could turn to face his brother. Riza and Roy could only hunker back down too. "Let me start by saying, I'm not going to make you talk to dad. That's your choice. But I need you to please hear what I have to say, and really think about it, before you dismiss it. That's all I'm asking." He looked his brother in the eye until Ed finally gave a grudging nod. "Dad doesn't want to tell me what he needs from you. He said it's better if I don't know, for my own protection. He doesn't want to have to involve you either, but he says that you have more right to protect me than he does. You deserve to choose whether you want to help him do whatever it is he has planned, and he has a better chance of success with your help. I think he believes he might have a way to get those Ouroboros bastards off of our backs, but I haven't been able to find out if that's actually what he's really doing or not. He's cagier than you are, Ed. So, just keep that in mind when you think about whether or not to talk to him, okay?"

It was clear that Ed wanted to shrug off the offer and continue to ignore his father, however the need to protect his brother placed its own demands on him that had nothing to do with his own wishes. "I'll think about," growled Ed at last. "Are you staying here tonight?" asked Ed, his eyes silently pleading with Al. With a visible effort, Al looked away and shook his head slowly. Ed leaned away from his brother, as if intentionally creating space between them. "Okay then, but you should grab some clean clothes, and your toiletries. You're starting to smell like a hobo and your breath seriously reeks."

"Brother!" protested Al, scandalized but laughing as he playfully slapped his brother's arm. "You're such a jerk."

"But you wouldn't have me any other way," said Ed, and Al grinned at him. "But seriously, remember to grab your coat. It's going to rain I think – that or the temperature is about to drop."

"Oh my! Brother, have you taken any medicine yet?" asked Al, inexplicably concerned.

"Not yet," said Ed, shaking his head. "I'll have to go to bed before too much longer since I have an early day tomorrow. I'll take it when I go to bed."

"All right," said Al, not satisfied but willing to relent. "Roy could I talk to you while I pack?"

"Sure," replied Roy, getting to his feet to follow Al up the stairs.

For the first minute, Al simply bustled around the room, removing items from his duffle bag and replacing them with others. It almost felt as if he was trying to decide what to say – or maybe how to say it. "I guess I don't have to tell you to watch out for Ed while I'm gone," began Al at last, slowing in his packing. "If the weather is getting bad, he's going to be in a lot of pain. The automail is so hard on him, but it's always worse when the weather is bad. He gets colder easier than you or me, because two chunks of metal can't be expected to keep anybody warm. And all that metal is attached to bone, so of course it'll hurt like blazes once it's cold enough. If it gets too bad, you can call Winry. She'll know what to do." He stopped moving a moment and sighed then turned around to sit on the edge of
the bed. "Please, I need you to promise me that . . . you'll make sure Brother doesn't do anything stupid. Sometimes I think he has a screw loose when it comes to me, because he goes above and beyond to keep me safe, keep me happy. He pushes too hard and ends up hurt, but never once blames me for any of it or resents me for making his sacrifices necessary. So I know that it's entirely possible that he'd willingly do something really reckless if it means keeping me safe from these people. Brother can defend himself when push comes to shove, so you don't need to worry about that part. The thing you need to worry about is protecting him from himself." Al sighed again and got to his feet to resume packing. "I swear, he forgets to eat, forgets to sleep, forgets his automail maintenance – I'm surprised he remembers to brush his teeth every day. That's why I've never been comfortable leaving him on his own. I'm afraid I'd come back to visit to find him passed out on the floor, unable to remember the last meal he had. I'm trusting you to see to it that it doesn't come to that. Brother can take care of everybody but himself, so that leaves the rest of us to pick up that slack. I'll have my hands full keeping an eye on Dad, because he's no better at taking care of himself than Ed. I guess Ed inherited that along with Dad's looks. Just don't tell Brother I said that – unless you want to eat through a straw for a while."

"I promise I'll watch over Ed," said Roy earnestly when Al finally ran out of words. "You don't even have to ask. And it won't just be me watching out for him. All of my friends are wrapped around his little finger now. They'd never let anything happen to him if they could help it."

"That's good then," said Al – almost more to himself than to Roy. "And don't let that idiot fret too much. I know how he gets. Anytime I'm away for more than a day, he turns into an anxious old woman. He better enjoy his hair now, because at this rate he's going to end up bald sooner rather than later."

"I'll still adore him, even if he's bald," said Roy, amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes. He left Al to finish gathering his stuff and returned to Riza and Ed downstairs. Al came down not long after, his duffle bag slung over his shoulder. When Ed got up, Al set his duffle bag on the floor and the brothers shared a strong hug, their deep bond and reluctance to part clearer than ever in that moment.

"Just remember, the hotel isn't far, so I'm only a phone call away," said Al as they separated. "Did you pack the heating pads when we got our stuff from the apartment?"

"Nah, I didn't, but I can make do," Ed reassured him and Al nodded.

"Take care of yourself, and stay warm," Al admonished him gently. "I don't want to come back and find out you've gotten frost bite around your ports again because you were being stubborn. I'll try to come see you when I can. Maybe lunch at the lab?"

"Sure Al, sounds good," said Ed, putting up a cheerful front. None of them believed it for a minute, but they couldn't help but admire the sheer tenacity necessary for Ed to smile at his brother in that moment. He would always be strong for his brother, no matter what.

Once Al had left, Riza resumed her mission of distracting Ed, keeping his mind off of his concern for his brother. She drew him into working through the details of the profiles on the people he had earmarked as thugs working for Ouroboros. There were only four men, including Frank Archer, and one woman. Of course, Ed had the most details on Archer. The other four were what Ed jokingly called "button men", since, like the mob's hitmen who shared the same title, these were people that Ouroboros used for odd jobs – like breaking and entering, harassment, surveillance, and general . . . um, thugging – wait, "thugging" isn't a word. Whatever. Men who broke knee-caps for a living were a little outside of Roy's experience, so he was just going to roll with it.

Archer was bad enough news on his own, but those other four were worse. They had started out as soldiers, fighting in places like Iraq, Somalia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. Two of them went AWOL,
one was dishonorably discharged after serving time for war crimes, and the last one – the woman – was honorably discharged for "mental health reasons". Later they'd gone on to become mercenaries until taking on a permanent contract as "security" for Ouroboros. Roy just hoped he'd never have to tangle with any of them. The woman in particular had a special love for demolitions and dismemberment. Roy gave a mental shudder at the thought.

It was late when Riza finally left, and Ed and Roy were both more than ready to crawl into bed and sleep. It had been a long and trying day for both of them. Unfortunately, sleep was not meant to last. It seemed like no sooner had Roy fallen asleep than he found himself being shaken awake again rather insistently.

"...wake up, Roy, wake up," Ed was whispering, shaking his shoulder. As soon as Roy's eyes began to flutter open, Ed put a hand over his mouth. "Shhh, stay calm. There's somebody in the house." Ed wasn't looking at Roy. He was watching the door, wary and tense. "I want you to go into the bathroom and call 9-1-1. Tell them we have two intruders, maybe more. May or may not be armed."

"And what will you be doing?" whispered Roy as soon as Ed had removed his hand. He asked because Ed was already getting out of bed and donning the house shoes they'd got for him to protect the floors from his automail foot.

"Kicking ass. What else?" replied Ed, his grin maniacal. How was it even possible to move across the room that silently with one metal leg – one very heavy metal leg? Were all of Roy's friends secretly ninjas? Or was it just Riza, Maes, and Ed – and maybe Al? What was it about Roy that drew ninjas to him? Setting aside his insane inner rambling, Roy made his careful way over to the master bathroom attached to his room, not even turning on the light once he'd closed the door. It meant sitting in total darkness, but the light of his phone was plenty to see by. And speaking of which, perhaps he ought to cover that up so there was no chance of that light showing through the crack under the door. Grabbing the bath towel hanging on the shower curtain rod, Roy draped it over his head and hands, sitting on the floor so his raised knees could help form a tent out of the towel. He dialed 9-1-1 and explained the situation to the dispatcher as quietly as he could, giving the woman the address.

She wanted him to stay on the line, but he needed to get out there and make sure Ed wasn't getting himself into more trouble than he could handle. He'd promised Al that he'd keep an eye on Ed, and he didn't intend to break that promise. Normally, Roy would never hang up on anybody – except maybe Maes, but that was usually the only way to get rid of the lunatic – but under the circumstances, he didn't feel especially obligated to be polite. Once he'd hung up, he left his phone and the towel on the bathroom floor then went back out into the bedroom.

He carefully opened the closet and brought down the riot gun that had once belonged to his father. Roy's dad had been in the military, so there had once been a number of weapons hidden in the house. Roy had gotten rid of all but the riot gun, and he only kept that because he could use rubber bullets rather than live ammunition. Making sure it was loaded, Roy went back into the bathroom to cock it so that the sound wouldn't carry beyond the bedroom. After all, Roy wanted their new little friends to be surprised. Maybe those crazy ninjas he called friends were rubbing off on him.

When Roy inched closer to the door, he began to hear loud noises out in the hall. There came an alarming crash followed by some even more alarming thuds then a long moment of silence. The brief lull was broken by a noise that sounded like it was half-curse, half-battle-cry in Ed's distinctive voice followed by yet more thudding, the noises moving away from the bedroom and heading downstairs. Roy opened the bedroom door slowly while remaining plastered to the wall beside the door until he was sure the hall was clear.
When he finally turned to walk out of the bedroom, he noticed a silent figure stalking along the opposite wall, heading for the library. Even in the dark, it was obvious this wasn't anybody Roy wanted wandering around his house – the black clothes and black ski mask were a dead giveaway – so Roy didn't bother to wait around for introductions before taking aim and firing. He hit the guy center mast, just as Riza had taught him, and the poor idiot hit the wall behind him hard then crumpled to the ground. Just to be on the safe side, Roy tip-toed over to him and hit him over the head with the butt of the gun – not hard enough to do serious brain damage but hard enough to knock him out for a good long while.

Ed rushed up the stairs. "What the hell was that?" he demanded. Roy grinned and set the gun on his shoulder.

"Riot gun," he answered casually. "Rubber bullets are a beautiful thing."

"Hells yeah!" exclaimed Ed, his maniacal grin blooming on his face again. They both heard a sound of groaning and a curse floating to them from downstairs. Ed held up a finger, " 'Scuse me a minute." Ed headed downstairs again, but this time, Roy was right behind him, a fresh round chambered and ready to fire.

At the bottom of the stairs, a third man was helping the first man to his feet, but Ed was having none of it. Ed suddenly grabbed the banister with one hand and vaulted over it to land in a defensive pose on the ground floor. The third guy abandoned his buddy and pulled a knife from his belt. Roy yelled at Ed to stay back, and tried to get to a better angle to fire on the knife-wielder with the riot gun. Roy didn't want Ed anywhere near that knife. Ed gave the knife a quizzical frown then grinned anew and lifted his hand to beckon to the guy. "Bring it," snorted Ed.

The guy accepted the challenge and leapt to the attack. Ed caught the knife's blade in his automail hand, and before the guy could think to let go, took advantage of the enemy's surprise and head-butted him. When the guy reeled back, thankfully releasing the knife, Ed spun into a brutal back kick with the automail leg that almost made Roy feel sorry for the bad guy. The spin had added momentum to what would have been a crippling blow all on its own, and the poor guy actually flew through the air a few feet, going ass over ankles over the back of the couch. The guy tried to pick himself up, but Ed was already heading for him, pausing long enough to punch the first guy in the head and knock him out. Once Ed reached his newest playmate, he brought his leg down in a vicious axe kick, and that was that.

"Good Lord, Ed, did you, Maes, and Riza go to the same ninja school?" asked Roy, eyes still wide in awe and disbelief. "I mean, damn . . ."

"Turn on the lights and let's get these guys tied up before they come to," said Ed, keeping his guard up as he stepped lightly around his victims.

"What are we going to tie them up with?" asked Roy, the more logical part of his mind taking over as some of the adrenaline faded. "I don't have any rope."

"Grab phone cords, extension cords, or, hell, even charger cables," answered Ed without hesitation. Ed was so calm about the whole thing, Roy would swear he'd done this sort of thing a hundred times. It actually helped steady Roy's jangled nerves, giving him confidence he wouldn't otherwise feel in such a situation. Ed just had that effect on people in general though. How could anybody be around somebody so bold and free-spirited and not feel a little bit braver by default?

They scrounged three phone cords and Roy's cell phone charger cable and proceeded to hog tie their three assailants – something else Ed was able to do with a rather startling proficiency. It was as they had begun to carry the upstairs guy downstairs to join his friends that they finally saw the flashing
lights of police cars approaching the house. Roy breathed a long sigh of relief and went down to open the front door for the cavalry. Roy made sure to hold his hands up and give the cops enough time to see that he was not only unarmed but also a bit underdressed to be one of the bad guys then called out to them as they crossed the lawn, "Hey, I'm the homeowner. We've got the three guys subdued. Could you please come cart them off?"

Looking perplexed but still ready for action, the four cops that had jumped out of the two police cars entered the house, telling Roy to wait outside. However, it was a bit too cold to comply, so Roy walked back into the house to grab his coat off of the hook behind the door. It was then that he remembered how Ed was dressed. He'd been sleeping in his boxers when the whole thing started, and had barely taken the time to slip into a pair of sweats while they were hunting for things to tie up the assailants. Surely the police wouldn't make Ed stand out on the lawn in so little.

Apparently they would. A very disgruntled Ed was sent to join Roy, and Roy made sure to wrap his lover in the thickest, fluffiest jacket he had before the pair went to stand outside. "This sucks," grumbled Ed around a huge yawn. "I just hope these asshats don't take too long to figure out that there's nobody else in the house. I already did a room-by-room search. I told them the house is clear. But what do I know? I'm not the one with a badge and stick up my ass."

"Now Ed, it's not their fault," said Roy, though in truth the cold that hit them like a wall when they stepped outside was making him feel less charitable than he sounded. "They have to follow procedure. They have no way of knowing that the house already has its own badass guard dog."

"Woof," dead-panned Ed and Roy laughed, gathering Ed into his arms, for warmth as much as for affection.

It was in that precious respite, that Al suddenly ran up to them from out of nowhere, completely ignoring the officer in the driveway that was telling him to stop. The youngest Elric all but pounced on Roy and Ed, turning their embrace into a group hug. "Oh my God, are you two all right?" asked Al, sounding like he was close to tears. "I called to warn you! I even used our signal, so when I got no response I knew you were in trouble too!"

"Wait, 'too'? What happened Al, are you all right?" demanded Ed, pulling back so he could look at his brother.

"I'm fine except for a couple of bruises – mostly on my knuckles," said Al ruefully as he too pulled back. "Me and Dad were coming back from dinner when I noticed we had a tail. Dad drew them off and told me to run, but instead I waited until they were totally focused on Dad and caught them by surprise. I tied them up and called the cops then left dad to deal with the commotion so I could come check on you. So what happened here?"

"We had just crashed out for the night when I heard the phone go off. I was about to reply with the all clear signal when I heard somebody moving around downstairs," explained Ed, frowning toward the house. "I had Roy call the cops while I went to assess the situation. Since I only heard two people, I decided to take care of the pest problem. I didn't realize there was a third guy, but luckily, Roy went all Charles Bronson on the fucker. When did you become a badass?" he asked turning to Roy with a grin that promised a reward later for his bravery. Al just rolled his eyes at his brother.

"Anyway, Roy took out the third guy with a riot gun, if you can fucking believe it. We tied up our friends in the gothy pajamas, and the rest is history. The cops just got here, so they've got us standing out here like twits, freezing our balls off."

One of the police officers finally exited the house, using the radio on his shoulder to call for an ambulance. "Are either of you injured?" asked the officer, and they both shook their heads.
"Not hurt, just cold as fuck. Can we go back in now?" asked Ed testily.

"Yeah, we can go inside to take your statement," said the officer with a sigh to express his irritation at Ed's tone. The officer led them in and sat them down in disused dining room.

All in all, the questioning this time lasted for about an hour, and a more uncomfortable hour Roy couldn't remember. The officer kept making sarcastic comments that made it obvious that he didn't believe Ed's account of the burglars' takedown. Given Ed's size, Roy supposed it was understandable that the officer would be at least a little skeptical, but as the questioning wore on, it became harder and harder for Al and Roy to keep Ed restrained. He was so sensitive about his height and appearance, and yet the officer was making it clear that he didn't believe that someone as short and pretty as Ed could have taken down two men that were nearly twice his size. Then the moron finally came out and said it. "I honestly don't see how someone so small could have injured two men to this extent. You're not protecting anybody by lying," said the officer.

Ed started to unleash one of his outbursts, but Al put a hand over his mouth to shut him up. "As we've already stated, my brother and I are mixed martial artists, and we've been training since childhood – OW! Ed!" The last was said because Ed had bitten Al's hand. Freed at last, Ed leapt from his sitting position to land atop the table in a crouch within an inch of the officer's face, his eyes boring into the man with such intensity that the poor fool almost fell out of his chair. Roy and the officer were equally stunned – Roy because he had no idea how somebody could make such a leap from a seated position, and the officer because he got caught in Ed's cobra-cold stare before he'd recovered his wits from seeing the impossible leap.

"What more do you fucking want from me?" snarled Ed. "I can give you the kinesthetic breakdown of the weak points I took advantage of, the precise trajectory of every punch and kick I landed, and the numerical value in pounds of how much force each blow required along with the pressure applied by contact with the targeted surface." He reached out and the officer actually flinched, but all Ed did was straighten the man's tie. "Have you ever been hit by an automail fist Officer..." he looked briefly at the officer's nametag, "Bennett? The force of it produces a pressure exponentially greater than what can be produced by a normal fist to the face. Just imagine," he said in an idly dangerous tone. Then he swung his right fist, stopping within centimeters of the officer's nose, "How do you think it feels to have a titanium alloy club coming at you at a velocity of approximately 11 mps, which is to say 25mph? Let's just say, it ain't pretty." Ed rose to his feet with fluid grace so that he was standing on the table and looking down at the officer with obvious disdain. "Any more questions about my physical capabilities?" The officer simply shook his head slowly, the look on his face saying he wasn't about to even attempt to stick his foot any further in his mouth. Satisfied, Ed jumped down from the table and reclaimed his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. "Can we wrap this up soon? It's been a seriously long fucking day."

"Um, yeah, but it would be best if you went to stay with family or friends tonight," said the officer and when Ed turned his furious glare toward him he cringed. "You should be able to come back tomorrow! We'll call you as soon as it's safe to come back!" protested the officer quickly as Ed leaned toward him.

"Come on, let's go get dressed and pack some stuff for an overnight stay," Roy said, and Ed let out a wordless snarl but followed him upstairs. Al went with them, hovering close to his brother like a bodyguard. "It'll be fine," Roy reassured Ed. "We can go stay with Maes and Gracia tonight. They have a guest room. I've stayed with them before and they love having visitors. Besides, Gracia makes awesome pancakes." He wisely kept to himself that the reason that Maes loved having visitors was that it meant he could show off his gallery of Elysia and Gracia pictures. At the very least, the word "pancakes" should be enough to penetrate Ed's bad mood and sell him on the impromptu sleepover. "What do you say?"
"Sure, as long as there's a bed and a fucking heater," grumbled Ed grudgingly.

"Good," said Roy, kissing the top of his head.

"I'll pack your stuff for tonight, Brother," offered Al while Ed was pulling something to wear out of his bag in the spare room. "Tomorrow's your long day right? So, I'll make sure you have all your books in your laptop bag too. Just go get dressed and give yourself a minute to calm down. You can't hang onto that after-fight tension much longer. The last thing we need is to have to bail you out of jail because you hit a cop."

"I gotcha," growled Ed with a sigh. "I can't wait until you get married and have kids because you'll finally have somebody to nag at besides me."

"Nonsense Brother," said Al, smiling brightly. "I'll always save some nagging just for you."

"You're too kind," muttered Ed sarcastically.

Roy chuckled to himself as he and Ed went into the bedroom to get dressed. After they were decently clothed again, Ed went into the library to help get his stuff together while Roy packed a few things for himself. It was only going to be one night, but they both had classes and lab the next day. They couldn't very well leave their books and notes behind. Ed also had to teach classes and had a shift at the diner after that.

Roy was also thinking about calling his Aunt Chris. Given the nature of her business, she had a number of contacts among the less savory denizens of the city, and she might have some advice for how to deal with their home security issue. If her place wasn't so far from the university, Roy would have suggested staying there instead. Nobody messed with Chris Mustang or her girls, so they'd be safer there than in Fort Knox.

However, her place was on the other side of the city – about 30 minutes away or more, and probably an even longer trip by bus. Plus, Roy didn't like the idea of Ed taking the bus at all in that part of town. It's true he could protect himself, but he was pretty enough for somebody to easily mistake his profession. For that matter, having Ed in Aunt Chris's place might create the same exact problem. No good could come of putting Ed in a situation like that. Either the mistaken party would end up in the hospital or Ed would end up arrested. So, yeah, very bad idea. Maes may be a pain, but at least he lived in the suburbs. Speaking of which . . .

Roy pulled out his cell phone (it'd need a new charger cable since the other one had been sacrificed to their little improvised bondage incident) and found Maes's number in his contacts. "Hey, I know it's late, but we've got an emergency," said Roy when a very groggy Maes had answered. "Somebody broke into my house."

"What?" yelled Maes and Roy jerked the phone away from his ear. "Are you guys okay? Did they take anything? Did they smash the place up? Where are you now?"

"We're both fine, and mostly the house is too, which is where we are, but we need a place to stay tonight," said Roy, not any more pleased about it than Ed. "The police are going over the place tonight and they want us out of the way I guess. Can we stay with you guys tonight?"

"Of course," said Maes without hesitation, reminding Roy why he'd put up with the nut for so many years. He was seriously good people. "You don't even have to ask. We'll get the guest room ready for you. Ed and Al will be with you right?"

"Just Ed, Al's been staying with somebody else the last couple days" replied Roy, looking to the
brothers for confirmation, and once they figured out what it was he needed to know they nodded. "Yeah, only Ed will be with me."

"Then carry your carcasses over here," said Maes with way more cheer than a phone call at 1:00am really needed. "We'll put the porch light on for you."


"Sure, Roy," said Maes, and Roy could just picture the grin he was wearing – two parts affection to one part teasing and one part pure mischief. "What are friends for?"

Chapter End Notes

Fun bit of trivia, the punch speed mentioned in the chapter is actually the recorded speed for a jab by Ricky "The Hitman" Hatton, a former British welterweight champ. I thought it would be appropriate. I also discovered that the fastest recorded punch is just under 44mph, if you can believe it. Can you say "ow"? Another fun fact: the science behind a punch is remarkably complicated. The measurements are simple enough: force per unit of impact area (it's shown as pounds per square inch). Where it goes pear-shaped is that impact area varies based on the contours of the contacted surface and a long laundry-list of other conditions. Way too many variables in the end, so usually when they look at punches they look at the force applied rather than the pressure of the impact. Yay, the science of violence! ^.^
Sorry it took so long to get this chapter out. I really had to fight to get where I needed to go. Moreover, I've been overcome by a peculiar narcolepsy-like lassitude that's been making it hard to focus on anything at all, let alone writing. It's an odd sensation, hovering in the limbo between "too exhausted to do anything" and "too restless to sleep". But, challenges aside, the chapter is finally here. I think we might only have another two or three chapters before we reach the conclusion of our little tale. Until then, enjoy reading!

On a side note, I've been reading back over this mess (for consistency's sake), and I've noticed that there's an odd obsession with pancakes threaded throughout. I blame Cabin Fever for this (anybody who's seen this movie will know what I mean *shudder*, if you haven't seen it just Google "Cabin Fever, Pancakes" and watch the videos that come up - just don't do it if you have a low tolerance for mental trauma, it's seriously weird).
"Yes, of course," she said, smiling with pure amusement. She poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Roy who very carefully placed it in Ed's hands.

"I haven't put anything in it yet," Roy warned him. Ed grunted and slung it back like it wasn't bitterly black and scalding hot. That first sip of coffee seemed to humanize him a little bit more, and he got his other eye halfway open to match the first. He topped off his cup and added his usual copious sugar before letting Roy guide him into the dining room to sit and wait for breakfast.

Elysia climbed up into Ed's lap, but even she couldn't get more than inarticulate noise out of him. For some reason, though, she didn't seem to mind. "Can I brush your hair?" she asked, her eyes huge and brimming with hope. "I promise I'll make it pretty." Ed grunted an affirmative, and, at her command, turned to the side so she could stand on the chair next to his to reach his head. She asked Roy for a hairbrush with all the seriousness of a surgeon asking for a scalpel. Roy just barely managed to withhold his chuckle until he was out of earshot – he didn't want the evil beast Edward to smite him for laughing at him. It was a little early in the morning for smiting.

He returned with Ed's hairbrush and one of his rubber bands, and solemnly handed them to Elysia. Maes, of course, was already there with a camera, clicking away unbeknownst to the as yet not fully awake Ed. However, it was only a matter of time before Ed noticed, so it was probably best if somebody put a stop to it before Maes ended up eating the camera. It was best not to expose a child as young as Elysia to that much carnage. Roy finally had to sic Gracia on Maes to get him to stop. While Roy had been busy reining in Maes, Elysia had been busy fighting with the tangles in Ed's hair.

"Your hair is so pretty!" exclaimed Elysia. Ed twitched (he hated to be called pretty almost more than he hated being called short), but the expected outburst never came, so Roy breathed a sigh of relief. "It's so shiny!"

"I wash it every day," said Ed – the first English he'd spoken all morning.

"Me too, but mine isn't shiny gold like yours," said Elysia as if Ed had just told her a fib.

"Your hair can only be the color you were born with. Washing it makes it shiny but won't change the color," Ed told her. Was he blushing? "But your hair is pretty just the way it is. After you brush my hair, I can do something fancy with your hair if you want."

"Can you?" she asked excitedly, her goodwill restored.

"Yes, but you have to get my gloves out of my bag for me," he told her around another sip of coffee. "Is my hair all brushed, Princess?"

"Yes sir," she chirped and Ed nodded.

"Then bring me my gloves and I'll do your hair now," he said, and she jumped down off the chair then raced off to the spare bedroom. While she was gone, Roy took over her place and did a more thorough job of brushing Ed's hair. He melted almost instantly, like he always did. "I can't even do anything with it until I have my gloves on. It catches in the joints of my automail."

"Would you like me to try?" asked Roy, though, in truth, he'd never braided hair before and didn't have the first clue how to start.

"That's all right. I wouldn't want you to hurt yourself," snorted Ed.

"May I do it?" asked Maes, batting his eyelashes and pouting playfully. Ed laughed and gestured for him to give it a go. Maes shoved Roy out of the way and stood behind Ed. Apparently, being the
father of a little girl counted for quite a lot, because he had Ed's hair neatly braided in no time. Ed lifted his left hand and ran it along Maes's handiwork then gave his nod of approval.

"Thanks," he said, and Maes gave him an impudent little salute.

Elysia returned with Ed's gloves and a double-handful of brightly colored hair ties and barrettes and her own little brush. "Now, you'll need to sit still like a statue, okay? The robot hand is good as any hand for doing easy stuff like holding a book or eating with a fork, but you gotta be able to concentrate really hard to do hard stuff like making your hair pretty. You got it?" Elysia nodded slowly then sat down in front of Ed and held as still as she possibly could. The camera came out again when Ed started working on Elysia's hair. He created two neatly woven French braids traveling down either side of her head. "I can't do much better than braiding, but I can braid like nobody's business," said Ed as Elysia bounced up from her seat.

"Like daddy," giggled Elysia and Ed blushed, laughing with her.

"Yes, Princess, like your daddy," agreed Ed. "Next time, if you're really sweet, I'll braid your hair into a crown for you. Sound good?" She nodded happily and turned to hug him in gratitude, her kiss on his cheek lighting his cheeks up with an even brighter blush.

In a surprising show of good manners, Ed politely offered to help Gracia set the table, and while he was otherwise occupied, Maes showed Roy the pictures of Ed first having his hair brushed by Elysia then brushing her hair in return. Maes promised in an undertone to send them to him later, the friends shaking on it. What was it about Ed that seemed to turn Roy into something almost like a stalker?

After breakfast, Ed and Roy rushed off to the university so Ed wouldn't be late for his first class. Since Roy was once again at school earlier than he needed to be, he headed to the library to put in some study time. He had a test coming up, and he hadn't had much time or thought to spare for preparing for it. He stayed in the library until he began to feel his brain start to melt then he headed over to the lab.

He offered greetings to his team, of whom only Falman was absent since he had a class that day. Roy regaled them with the harrowing tale of their action hero-esque adventures the previous night. Oddly enough, of all the of Ed's wild maneuvers and martial arts prowess, the one thing the whole team seemed to focus on was Ed's jump from the chair to the tabletop. They felt it simply couldn't be possible to make a leap like that. Even leaping that high from a standing position seemed rather difficult as far as they were concerned, but to do it from a sitting position? Not possible.

When Ed finally arrived at the lab, Breda made sure to grab him on his way by. "Dude! We need you to settle our debate!" Breda told him excitedly.

"I told them about last night," said Roy with a dry smirk. "The only part they're having trouble with is your jump onto the table. For some reason, they've decided it's physically impossible to make a jump like that from a seated position. Granted, I saw it, and even I have a little trouble believing it."

"Ah, but that's the thing," said Ed with a sly little half-smile. "First of all, I wasn't completely seated, strictly speaking. Second of all, I didn't so much jump while seated. I stood then jumped in a single motion. Most people would stand, pause to set their feet and bunch their muscles, then jump. I was hovering in my chair, my muscles were already bunched, and my feet were already set. There was no need to pause at all. So it looked like I jumped from my seat."

"Show us," demanded Breda.

"I'd love to see it too," said Sheska a little more shyly.
"All right," said Ed with a resigned sigh. He waited while they cleared a spot on their worktable and brought him a chair that wasn't on wheels. They all watched closely as Ed's body tensed then he suddenly jumped to land on the table in a crouch."

"What the fuck?!" shouted Breda in disbelief even as they all applauded the feat.

"I'll show you the motion slowly – though, I can't make the jump that way, but I can show you everything leading to it," said Ed as he jumped down off the table. He demonstrated again in super slow motion. Looking closer, they could see that in the beginning he was hovering a couple centimeters above his seat. By the time he was nearly upright, his knees bent and angled slightly outward, every muscle in his legs was bunched and ready to propel upward motion. "It's just an application of Newton's Three Laws of Motion. In particular, 'An object in a state of uniform motion tends to remain in that state of motion unless an external force is applied to it.' Come on guys, you're physicists. You should know this shit."

"Yeah, yeah, Science God," said Breda with a dismissive wave.

"Well, I gotta go try to sneak past Winry to get to my lab," said Ed with a look of distaste. "If you hear yelling, you better come fucking rescue me."

They actually didn't end up hearing any yelling, which they took as a sign of Ed's success. But then almost two hours later, they heard a familiar voice echoing down the hall. Exchanging a shrug between them, they all got out of their seats and headed for the engineering lab down the hall. Falman had joined them by that point, and though he didn't know what was happening, he followed them on their raid anyway.

"Get off of me Grape Ape!" shouted Ed, struggling valiantly against the half-a-dozen engineering students that were all but hanging off of him, Winry among them. They were trying to drag him to a chair that looked like it had either come out of a dentist's office or a torture chamber – not that the two weren't mutually exclusive. No, wait, that wasn't a chair. That was a surgical table, complete with articulations for all four limbs. However, the back of it was raised and a bolster had been added, making it look like a chair. As if just to make the thing more horrifying, it had restraints straight out of a mental hospital attached to the middle, chest level, and to all four articulations. "I told you, you can't have my fucking arm! I have class in fifteen minutes!"

"Fine Ed! We won't take it off!" yelled Winry at last.

"Yeah right, Donkey Kong! You say that, but as soon as you sit me down, you'll disconnect it!" countered Ed.

"I swear on Granny's pipe, I won't disconnect your arm!" shouted Winry, and finally Ed stopped struggling. The engineering students all let go, some of them dropping to the floor to land on their rumps. Roy and his team, amused but knowing better than to laugh out loud, moved in to help them up. "Now sit, you big baby, so I can see what you did to my precious work of art."

"It may have got a couple scratches, but nothing to get your bananas in a bunch about," sniffed Ed, trying to reclaim some of his tattered dignity. He sat in the torture chair like a king taking his throne. "All right, guys," said Ed, looking at Roy and his team. "If they touch those straps, tackle them."

"All right Elric, strip," commanded Winry, and Ed's whole face turned fire engine red.

"On second thought, everybody get the fuck out," said Ed, and Roy and his team all laughed and vacated, followed by the engineering students who took it as their cue to head to the kitchen for coffee.
Five minutes later, Ed walked down the hall, hands shoved in his pockets and looking distinctly disgruntled. "Yo, Ed, how'd it go?" called Fuery. Ed stopped and turned back, popping his head into their lab.

"Magilla Gorilla took the casing and won't give it back until after classes," he grumbled, pulling up his sleeve just enough for them to see the exposed wiring and rods that the outer shell of the arm usually hid. "She says it's how she'll make sure I come back after my last class. But I have work after that, so I don't know what she thinks she'll be able to do in the thirty minutes I'll have available. Well, I never said she wasn't completely fucking cracked. That gorilla is so seriously unhinged."

"Is something wrong with it?" asked Roy, concerned. If she was insisting he return, it was a good bet she had a reason.

"Nothing major," answered Ed with a shrug. "It's just wear and tear on the bearings in some of the joints. It's an easy fix, just tedious and time-consuming. I swear, I go through more arms . . ."

"Do you need to take the arm off for that?" asked Roy, and Ed nodded.

"Yeah, but we take off my arm so damn often, I'm used to it," explained Ed uncomfortably. "Recovery time is shorter, and I can still move around. It's not like with the leg where I can't walk and feel like somebody hit me in the nuts with a sledgehammer. I mean, reconnecting the leg seriously feels like the whole pelvic area is shattered, every single fucking time. Whole lower lumbar is usually fried too. So yeah, 'hit in the nuts with a sledgehammer' is a fair description. Reconnecting the arm still hurts like fuck, but as long as I don't move that arm too much, I can deal."

"Yeesh," said Breda, and all the men in the room subconsciously crossed their legs, none of them happy to hear the words 'sledgehammer' and 'nuts' being used in the same sentence – ever.

"Anyway, I've gotta get to class," said Ed with a friendly grin. "You guys should sit in sometime. You might even learn something."

"Sit in on a class with the Kung Fu God of Science? Hells yeah!" said Breda and there was snickering agreement around the room. "But wait, what classes do you even teach?"

"This semester I've got Anatomy & Physiology I and II, Physics for Morons, Advanced Calculus, and Computational Chemistry," answered Ed. "Today is A & P II, Advanced Calculus, and Idiot Physics, in that order. Oh, Roy, since I won't be there to cook dinner tonight, you're welcome to come by the diner. I can feed you there. Plus I can slide you free coffee."

"A most benevolent god, I thank you," said Roy dramatically with a little bow, and Ed laughed as he left them with a backward wave.

Sadly, Roy had class so he wasn't there for his team's invasion of Ed's "Physics for Morons" class, but they told him all about it later. According to the team, Ed was a hard-ass – which they had somewhat expected – but none of the students seemed to take his hard attitude to heart. They knew that he was just pushing them to succeed, and he was only really rude to them when they weren't trying their hardest. He simply refused to accept half-assed effort. He praised them only rarely, but when he did, the fact that it was such a rare occurrence gave even the slightest praise exponentially greater impact. So, although his tests and assignments were brutal, the students all loved him. The team also said that his lecture was genuinely interesting despite the dry subject matter, with plenty of humor and Ed's signature sarcasm thrown in.

"I mean, yeah we already know the basics taught in that class, but you know, I think we really did manage to learn things we didn't already know," put in Fuery, and Roy nodded, impressed. Fuery
was a bright, straight A student. There wasn't much about physics he didn't know. For him to admit that, despite the elementary nature of the class, he had managed to learn something new was a little bit incredible.

"But then, after the lecture, we got mobbed," said Breda in the tone of somebody telling a horror story around a campfire. "As soon as they saw us talk to Ed and call him by his first name, they were on us like sharks on chum. They had a million questions about Ed."

"Mostly they wanted to know if he was single," giggled Sheska.

"But we also got weird questions like, 'does he sleep in a coffin?' and 'is it true he melts if you throw milk on him?' You know, really weird shit like that," Breda told him, chuckling and shaking his head.

"They don't know whether to worship at his feet or fend him off with crosses and garlic," said Falman, actually laughing along with them – to everyone's shock. Falman didn't often laugh, but Ed just had that effect on people, tearing them out of their comfort zones.

"Ed thinks the whole thing is hilarious," said Fuery, giggling so hard his eyes crinkled. "He just ignores all questions not related to the class and gives them leading looks when they ask really stupid questions, like he's encouraging them to think the most ridiculous things possible. It's too funny! I wish you could have been there. I think you would have got a huge laugh out of it."

"I'll see if he has any classes during the times I'm available and drop in to surprise him," said Roy with a wink, and they all giggled a bit, imagining the chaos that would ensue. If the buddies of the great Ed Elric got mobbed, imagine what would happen to Ed's lover. Roy was practically rubbing his hands together like a vaudeville villain just thinking about it.

As soon as the work in the lab got to a stopping point, the team all went their separate ways for the evening, Roy heading over to Dante's for his offered meal. It was an older diner, having been running since the early 40's, and the owner had chosen to make the most of its aged charm. A long age-darkened wood counter created an oblong barrier between the food prep areas and the dining room. Behind the counter a tiled wall hid the bulk of the kitchen with a large window with its own little stainless steel counter connecting the wait staff to their food source. The coffee came from two huge copper urns that looked like they'd been around as long as the diner. Even the cash register was seriously old, though Roy suspected it might just be there for show – he thought he caught a glimpse of a newer register hidden in a nook to one side.

As if to contrast the old school vibe of the diner, all of the employees seemed to boast automail, and none of them seemed the least bit shy about it. Normally, people with prosthetics felt more comfortable hiding them, the general opinions and constant pity of discomfited society making them feel an unfair sense of shame. Even Ed, who was as brazen as they came, tended to wear long sleeves and gloves, only showing his automail to those he considered friends – or when he had no other choice. He didn't talk about it much either unless the person he was speaking with was already in on the secret. But here, in Dante's, he wore no gloves. The wait staff uniform was a simple polo shirt with the diner's logo on the front and back, and though it was short sleeved Ed wore it without any sign of his usual reticence.

To be honest, Roy had a hard time imagining, until that moment, someone as proud and foul-mouthed as Ed waiting tables. The reality was something so far beyond what he'd expected that Roy's mouth unhinged entirely. Ed was actually smiling politely and charming customers. He used his fighter's speed and grace to advantage as he moved back and forth across the relatively small dining area with armfuls of plates and trays of beverages, moving so smoothly it almost looked he was like was dancing. When he saw Roy, he finished setting down glasses on the table he'd been
serving then hurried over.

"Long day?" Ed asked, leaning up to greet him with a soft kiss. Roy grinned and wrapped his arms around his lover's waist for a warm hug that lifted him off his feet a couple inches. Ed let out an indignant squawk, and the young woman behind the counter snickered at him behind her hand.

"All better now," said Roy, releasing Ed who cast him a half-hearted glare as he straightened his shirt and the black apron wrapped around his hips.

"Come have a seat at the counter, and I'll get you some coffee," said Ed, gesturing to the old-fashioned swivel-stools that were bolted to the floor around the counter.

While Ed was fetching the promised coffee, the young woman behind the counter sidled up to Roy and leaned forward, resting her weight on her folded arms. "You must be Roy Mustang," she said, her tone just this side of suggestive. She had deep brown hair with a slight reddish tint which would probably be shoulder-length if released from its tight ponytail. Her skin was the light brown of cappuccino, her eyes a deeper brown. Her coloring hinted at possible Middle Eastern or Hispanic descent, but the shape of her features made it difficult to tell for sure. "I've heard a lot about you – and not all from Ed. Actually, I've heard very little from Ed, but he doesn't talk much about his personal stuff. Ya know? But I've heard about a million rumors about you around campus. You're quite the notorious figure."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," said Roy, his smirk firmly in place. He'd heard those rumors too, of course. It was his habit to keep tabs on such things. Few of the rumors about him were kind, painting him as playboy and a flirt. They weren't entirely wrong, but they were grossly exaggerated. Between the classes and his experiments in the lab, not to mention his thesis, he stayed pretty busy. Frankly, being a playboy would require a lot more time and energy than he had available.

"Don't give him shit. He's a PhD candidate too. I don't see how he'd have time to break as many hearts as the rumors suggest," said Ed, echoing Roy's somewhat bitter thoughts. Ed set down a mug of coffee nestled neatly on a saucer with a spoon, two creamers, and three packets of sugar – just the way he liked his coffee. For some reason, it warmed Roy's heart every time Ed made such unconscious little gestures. They showed how much he cared. "He'd literally have to be screwing under the desk in class, on the desk in the lab, and possibly in the student union over sandwiches. There just aren't enough hours in the day."

"True that," admitted the young woman with a shrug. "I'm Paninya, by the way. Engineering Major, and manager of this lovely establishment." They shook hands, but Roy didn't bother to offer his name since she already knew it. No point in being redundant, after all.

"Hey, Paninya, all my tables are good for a little while. They just need drink refills. Can I take my dinner break?" asked Ed. Paninya peered around the room, craning her neck to check all the tables.

"Sure, I'll keep the rubes happy while you eat with your boyfriend," she said teasingly. Ed shot her a death glare, his face turning bright red.

"I hate you," he said flatly.

"No you don't, or you wouldn't put up with me," said Paninya with a wink before she sauntered off to check on the tables.

"You seem to know the most interesting people," snickered Roy as he looked over the menu.

"That's because most of the people I know are geniuses in one way or another," said Ed with a
shrug, idly writing something down on his order pad. "Geniuses are almost always eccentric as hell. It's the quiet geniuses who look perfectly normal that you have to worry about. Those are usually the ones who turn into mad bombers and serial killers." Roy laughed, but he had to admit that Ed did make a valid point. While waiting for Roy to decide what to eat, Ed pulled out his phone and sent a quick text then smiled at the reply. "Al's gonna come by and eat with us."

"Cool," said Roy, and he honestly meant it. "I know it's only been a few days, but it feels like forever since the three of us have eaten together."

"Yeah, but the last few days were eventful, so of course it makes them seem longer," said Ed with a thoughtful shrug. "Relativity in action."

Al was there less than ten minutes later – the hotel must be really close by – and he and Ed greeted each other with a strong hug. You'd think they'd been apart for years, seeing their reaction. Roy understood it right away, however. The Elric brothers had always been together, from early childhood and on into adulthood. They had rarely been parted for long – the only exceptions being the two years immediately following Ed starting college. Even while Al had been in a coma, Ed had been right by his side. As far as Ed was concerned, Al was his only family – his father didn't count, despite his sudden reappearance.

They had a pleasant meal together, Roy and Ed talking about their day while Al listened, laughing at all the right points. He also apologized for his "girlfriend the gorilla", which Ed accepted as graciously as Ed ever did – in other words, barely at all. As the boys talked about the little nothings of daily life, Roy noticed that something was a little off. There was a white elephant in the room that only the Elrics were aware of, and they were very carefully not mentioning it nor giving any hints as to the pale pachyderm's identity. Roy thought he might have an idea of what the subject they were avoiding might be, but if they didn't want to bring it up, Roy wasn't going to be the one to ruin whatever balance they were maintaining. If keeping the peace meant avoiding the topic of dear old dad, who was Roy to complain?

"Well, I need to get back to work," said Ed eventually, getting to his feet and picking up their mostly empty plates. He went behind the counter and deposited the plates in the bus tub before refilling Roy and Al's coffees then bustling off to care for his tables.

"Hey Ed, your regular is here," called Paninya, pointing outside. Roy couldn't see anybody outside, and no new cars had pulled into the parking lot. Nonetheless, Ed hurried behind the counter and grabbed a Styrofoam cup, filling it with coffee and stirring in several packets of sugar. When he was done, he popped a lid on the cup and ran outside.

"You know, everybody thinks that, because I'm more polite, that I'm the nicer brother," said Al, turning to watch his brother running across the parking lot. Ed stopped at the mouth of an alley and leaned down to offer the cup of coffee to somebody hidden by the night's deepening shadows. "But that's not really true. You or I would have walked right by that homeless man out there without knowing he was there at all. Paninya's at least a little better. She'd have noticed, and probably felt guilty for not helping, but in the end she would have justified her inaction and walked by. Ed can't do that. He gets offended when other people can. The first time that old man appeared out there, Ed was getting off work, and I was walking home with him. I never noticed the guy lying in the alley until I noticed that Ed had stopped walking. He crouched down in front of the guy and just talked to him for a minute. Ed's no good at social norms, and ignoring those less fortunate is one of the sadder social norms, so I guess it makes sense that Ed would be clueless. After he finished talking to the guy, Ed ran back across the street to the diner and got a cup of coffee and a sandwich to give to the man. The man wept in gratitude. So, that's my brother in a nutshell. People don't usually see that. They hear the crass language and the bravado, they see that scary scowl and the blunt manners, but
they don't see the Ed that gives sandwiches and coffee to a homeless man, waives the fee to teach illiterate parents to read, defends weak classmates he doesn't even like, and sacrifices his limbs to protect his baby brother." The last part startled Roy a bit. He'd heard about the accident, but not the details. He hadn't pressed for them either. He knew it was a sensitive topic and didn't want to upset Ed if he could avoid it. "He did tell you about the accident didn't he?" asked Al, frowning at Roy's expression.

"He told me that there was an accident, and of the aftermath, but that's it," replied Roy.

"I admit, I don't remember much," said Al with a small shrug. "I didn't even see the truck coming, but somehow, Ed saw it. He knew. He came over the seat, so fast, and wrapped himself around me seconds before impact. That's how I survived with nothing worse than head trauma, and Ed lost his arm and leg. If he would have stayed in his seat, he would have been fine. After all, the truck hit the side that me and mom were sitting on. I read later in the medical report the extent of Ed's injuries. Ed's leg was crushed beyond recognition and had to be amputated. He was covered from head-to-toe in contusions and stabbed with metal and glass – of the damaged internal organs, however, the only thing they couldn't save was his right kidney. The arm he lost because a piece of metal mostly severed it at the middle of the bicep, but the rest of the bone and tissue was so damaged by the injury that they had to amputate to the shoulder. I can't imagine the pain he was in, but if his arm hadn't been there, that piece of metal would have wound up embedded in my throat."

"But he said that his side of the car was the one hit," protested Roy weakly, but Al just shook his head.

"He tried to tell me that too," said Al, frowning deeply. "He doesn't know that I remember what happened, because at first I didn't. I'm not mad at him for lying, because I know why he did it. He's protecting me. He doesn't want me to feel responsible for what happened to him. He's kept up that lie for the last 13 years without ever even hinting at the truth to anybody who might tell me. For somebody who's usually so transparent, Ed can lie like a champ if it's for the right reasons." Al took a long sip of his coffee then let out a quiet sigh as he set his cup down. "Look, don't tell him I told you all that. He doesn't like talking about it. But I feel like you need to know. It's the reason I told you to make sure he doesn't do anything stupid. Because, with that damned righteous personality of his, if someone else is in danger, he's the kind of guy who gives up his limbs to save them."

"I see," said Roy, proud of Ed and, at the same time, a bit disturbed. It was one thing to be selfless, but it was quite another to be recklessly selfless. That was the sort of thing that could get a person killed. "I'll bear that in mind. The last thing I'd want is for him to get hurt trying to keep my clumsy butt safe."

"In that, we're in total agreement. I don't want him sacrificing himself for me either," said Al with a warm grin – the kind of smile shared between close friends and comrades. Roy couldn't help but return it in kind.

Ed returned from outside, his left arm wrapped tightly around him and his right held away from his body as he shivered. He went behind the counter and put an order ticket in the window with a wave for the cook who waved back with a wink. "You guys doing all right on coffee?" asked Ed, his teeth chattering a little, making his words slightly dicey.

"Ed! Are you trying to give yourself frost bite?" demanded Al incredulously. Ed rolled his eyes.

"It's not cold enough outside for frost bite," countered Ed. "Don't get me wrong, it's colder than a penguin's testies, and I'm willing to bet there'll be frost on the ground come morning. But it's not dangerous or anything, just uncomfortable." Two paper bags popped up in the kitchen window with a ding of the bell, and Ed grabbed them and headed back outside.
"What am I going to do with him?" asked Al rhetorically, shaking his head to himself.

"You wouldn't have him any other way," pointed out Paninya. "How you been Al?"

"I've been good. And how about you? Are your classes still going well?" replied Al, donning his polite persona with ease.

"I do all right," said Paninya with obviously false modesty. "So, Winry tells me that your father's back in town." And there it was, the Elric's white elephant dragged into the light at last. "I've got just three questions for you."

"I feel a Monty Python flashback coming on," groaned Al.

"No, I'm not going to ask you for 'the air speed velocity of an unladen swallow'," said Paninya dryly and Al chuckled.

"That's cool. I have no urge to cross the Bridge of Death today anyway," said Al with an imperious wave.

"Into the Gorge of Eternal Peril with you!" commanded Paninya and they both giggled.

"All joking aside, Brother's coming back in, and you know better than to mention Hohenheim in front of him," cautioned Al, and Paninya let out an unhappy sigh and gave up.

"Ah, tricksy you are Alphonse Elric," said Paninya with a moue of distaste. "You were distracting me with Monty Python until your brother could save you from my interrogation."

"One does what one can," said Al as if accepting his due. Ed returned, shivering all over this time.

"Here Ed," said Paninya, handing Ed a couple of small orange packets that turned out to be one-time use hand warmers. "Go do some work in the kitchen with Fritz or whatever. You'll thaw out faster in there."

"Thanks, Paninya," Ed said with a bright grin. "You're a doll."

"Actually, Brother, I'm going to head back to the hotel. It's getting late, and after last night I'm pretty tired," said Al, and he and Ed hugged. Al threw a wave back to Roy and Paninya then headed out to Vanzilla.

"Roy, you gonna hang out for a bit? You could always grab a table in my section and try to get some homework done," suggested Ed, and Roy had to admit, the idea had merit. Plenty of room to work, free coffee he didn't have to make himself, and a lovely blonde server to ogle sounded like his idea of a great way to spend his evening.

"Sure. I'll go get my stuff out of the car," said Roy. Ed left a kiss on his cheek then walked through the swinging door into the kitchen to warm up.

After Roy got his books and backpack out of the car, Paninya got him settled comfortably in one of the booths by the windows. While they were getting his laptop hooked up with the diner's free wi-fi and a power outlet to keep her battery going, Paninya questioned Roy relentlessly. She wanted to know all about his and Ed's as-yet-not-officially-defined relationship, and also about Roy himself. She even asked him intelligent questions about his research progress and his thesis, and even about what classes he's already taken and had yet to take.

When the kitchen door swung open a little too enthusiastically, it drew both Roy and Paninya's
attention. Ed stepped out yelling into his cell phone, "Hold on, I'm moving away from the kitchen so I can hear you better. Now *slowly* tell me what the hell is going on." He listened intently for a moment then his eyes suddenly went wide as saucers. "What do you mean 'they took Hohenheim'?!"

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I know, this chapter is sort of like a fluffy pillow with a brick inside. You think it's all feathers and softness then WHAM right upside the cranium. My bad . . . I blame the sleep-deprivation T-T
Chapter Notes

I know the last chapter was a cliffhanger, and since I hate cliffhangers, I tried to get this chapter out as quick as I could. I think I can officially declare that I should be wrapping this up by the end of Ch 16 . . . maybe. There's no telling with me, really. Writing is my addiction, after all, I may start throwing out twists and turns and turns out of sheer bloody-minded stubbornness. Probably not, though.

Special thanks to nately for the chapter 13 art (and for all the great comments). Seriously, that picture is entirely too adorable! I can't thank you enough. You kick ass!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14

Pigs Really Can Fly

"Say what?" demanded Roy and Paninya at the same time, both of them all but running over to where Ed was standing.

"Al, just grab your shit and get the hell out of there. Come over here where there are witnesses and bright lights and we'll call the cops. After that, we'll figure out our next move once you've had a chance to calm down. We need to handle this rationally, and if you're panicking you're definitely not being rational. All right?" Ed was saying, using the calm, soothing tone of a parent quieting their child. "No more dithering. Pack your stuff. Get in the van. Come to the diner. In that order." He hung up his phone and then, with a look of extreme disgust, dialed a number and hit the call button. He didn't get an answer, so he tried again and again. After the fifth call with no response, he let out an annoyed sound and went through the kitchen door. He returned with his laptop bag and set his laptop on the counter, typing furiously.

"What's going on?" asked Roy carefully.

"When Al got back to the hotel, the room had been tossed, and Hohenheim was gone," began Ed distractedly. "His stuff's still there, but he's gone along with his notebook. Thankfully, none of his more dangerous notes are in that notebook – as far as I know. I'm trying to ping his phone and see if I can use it to track him. I doubt it'll do any good. If these assholes know what they're doing at all, they'll have ditched the phone already. But if it's at least turned on still, I can track the phone's location and that could tell us where they were when they ditched it then I can use that information to give us a rough direction they could have been headed in. If the phone's dead, I can track the phone's signal retroactively to get its last known coordinates before it died."

"Damn, look at you in super spy mode!" marveled Paninya.

"Once I have a direction, I might be able to use current data and standard criminal behavior patterns to extrapolate a possible destination," continued Ed as if he hadn't heard her. "But I may need to expand my current data set before I can reach a provable conclusion. I'll also need to work on a plan of attack, which may or may not have anything at all to do with Hohenheim's location. It may not be possible to take him back directly. We may have to go to the root of the problem, cut a deal or maybe
I don't know. I just know that the first step is to secure my brother, make those closest to us aware of the danger, call the police to report the break-in and possible kidnapping then call in our own posse to start working on our strategy. To be blunt, the police won't even be able to file Hohenheim as missing for 48 hours, but in this game those 48 hours will be crucial. We can't afford to wait for the cops to get their thumbs out of their asses."

"Speaking of which," said Roy brightly, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. He dialed the old familiar number then waited while it rang.

"Thank you for calling Christmas, how may I assist you?" greeted a smoky voice on the other line.

"Hey Vanessa, it's Roy," said Roy, smiling to himself when the woman let out an excited squeal. The girls who worked for his Aunt Chris had always been like big sisters to him, and since he hadn't been home in ages, they all missed him. "Is Madame available?"

"Of course, I'll go get her," said Vanessa, her cheerful tone vastly different from the one with which she'd answered the phone. He could hear the phone being set down then the sound of a door closing in the distance. By the time his Aunt Chris had picked up the phone, Al had arrived at the diner to be greeted by hug from a relieved yet still worried Ed.

"Roy-boy, what can I do for you?" said Chris in her usual languorous tone.

"Our new friends have upped the ante," Roy told her, keeping his tone conversational. "We're trying to decide whether to take the bet or propose a gamble of our own. If we take the bet and lose, the debt may be more than we can pay. Even if we change the game, the stakes will no doubt remain the same. What I need to know now is how many players will be splitting the pot. We already know the main players, at least. I want to know who might just be playing to make a few bucks. Also, we need to know where they're planning to hold the game."

"I'll see what I can do," said Chris after a pause that had lasted long enough to make Roy nervous. "Just watch your ass kid. Oh, and bring that little blonde by to meet me sometime. Your boy Maes says he's a looker."

"Better yet, why don't you just come by for dinner?" suggested Roy in return, smiling to himself again. "You haven't been by the house in a while, and Ed makes a mean dessert."

"Interesting," said Chris, sounding as if she had taken more from the casual compliment than what was said aloud. Chris Mustang was clever as they came, and she could see a thousand meanings in a single word and entirely analyzed everything about a man after a single phrase. It had made getting away with anything as a kid the epitome of impossible. Sherlock Holmes had nothing on Chris Mustang. "I might take you up on that. I'll call to let you know when. I might even bring a present."

"Thanks, Madame," said Roy – not even Roy got to call her "Chris" while she was at work – and with a small derisive snort Chris hung up. Roy pocketed his phone and walked over to where Ed and Al were conferring quietly. Al was sitting on one of the stools, Ed was standing behind him with an arm around his shoulders to comfort him. Ed may not care much what happened to Hohenheim, but he would do anything for his brother, even save the father he hated. "I just spoke with my Aunt Chris. She has more contacts above and below board than the CIA. If anybody can get us the answers we need, it would be her. She may even be able to find out where they've taken him, or at least narrow the possibilities. In the meantime, we need to figure out a game plan. Rescuing Hohenheim won't mean a thing if we can't neutralize the threat Ouroboros poses."

"I might have some ideas for how to take care of that, but I'll need to do a little research first," said Ed pensively. "We need to call the rest of your knitting circle, and I mean the whole crew, and start
brainstorming. Also, we need to call the cops and make them aware of the situation. They may not be able to actually classify it as a missing persons case for 48 hours, but at the very least we need to inform them that the situation has changed."

"I'll take care of calling the crew. It'd be better if you or Al were the ones to call the cops," suggested Roy and Ed nodded curtly, his face clearly showing his displeasure. No doubt he was getting as tired of dealing with the police as Roy. "But why do we need to call in the whole crew? I can understand calling Maes and Riza, since they've been helping us with this from the start, but why everybody else?"

"Because I need to pick their brains," replied Ed absently. "Al, call Winry and Teacher, please. We'll need them too."

"Sure, Ed," replied Al with a heavy sigh. Their huddle broke so they could make their phone calls – and so Ed could check on his only two tables, both of which were occupied by studying students who'd only ordered coffee.

After they all finished their phone calls, Al and Roy settled into Roy's abandoned booth to await the police's arrival. Ed sat with them between customers, mostly just to check on some mysterious program he had running on his laptop – and to throw out glib comments to cheer up his brother. Al had his own laptop out, distracting himself by working on the assignments for the classes he'd been missing. Roy did much the same, slogging through his own assignments and transcribing his notes from the classes he'd had that day.

When the cops finally showed, it wasn't the uniformed officers they'd been getting so far. This time it was a pair of detectives, both dressed in cheap suits – the younger one at least moderately more fashionable than the other. The detectives introduced themselves in the contrived polite tone of people who had grown used to dealing with primarily uncooperative or confrontational responses. Ed joined their table again, and the detectives got all the hostility they could wish for with him, but he made up for it by bringing them coffee. Al moved so that he was sitting on the same side of the booth as Roy so that the detectives could sit opposite them. Ed just brought over a chair and sat at the end of the table.

"So, would you guys mind getting us up to speed? We were just handed this case a few minutes ago and haven't had a chance to go over everything yet," said the younger of the two detectives, Detective Roach. "I've been told this newest development is an escalation on the vandalism and break-ins."

Ed sighed and ran a hand through his bangs before explaining the whole miserable sequence of events, starting with the destruction of his lab and office then moving on to his stint as Bruce Lee and culminating in the phone call from Al about their father's disappearance. He then went on to reveal more than he had told to the officers who had originally been on the scene for the break-ins. In particular, he told them his speculations regarding the source of these attacks and the reason behind them. Roy noted, however, that the only things he told them were those things which they would already have on record – such as the release of Frank Archer – or which would be public record – such as the physics paper that had first brought the brothers to Archer's attention.

He also said something which Roy hadn't yet been aware of, and which both shocked and infuriated him to hear. He wasn't angry at Ed for keeping it to himself – well, maybe a little miffed – but he was definitely angry at Archer for what he'd done. "He's tried these tactics before, and worse," Ed explained. "He harassed us and our neighbors, tried to intimidate our friends, trashed our family home and what little memorabilia we had left of our family from when it was whole, and tried to hurt my brother and me."
"They didn't just try to hurt us. They did hurt us. Well, they hurt Ed. They sent people to attack Ed on his way back to the house from the market," clarified Al, and Ed turned a heated glare toward him. "Don't give me that look. I know it's not provable in a court of law, but you and I both know it was them. They put you in the hospitable Ed! They put a twelve-year-old kid in the hospital for not giving them what they wanted! They even destroyed your automail! They're monsters, and you won't ever convince me to keep that to myself, no matter how hard you glare."

"Hush, Al, it was a long time ago," said Ed in a comforting tone, one hand on his brother's shoulder. "I made it out all right, so just let it go for now."

"As soon as Ed got out of the hospital, we took steps to throw them off our trail and went into hiding with our Teacher," Al told the detectives, and though he seemed outwardly calm, his eyes flashed menacingly. "Our Teacher was a friend of our father, so she and her husband took us in, taught us how to hide, how to survive, helped us change our names, all so we could get away from these guys. Now, they've found us again, and they're up to the same tricks as last time all because they want Ed to take over our father's abandoned research."

"But now that they have the real thing, this could go one of two ways," said Ed as if he was thinking out loud. "Either Hohenheim gives them what they want, or he tells them to fuck off and gets used as a hostage so that I give them what they want. Either way, leaving that bastard sperm donor in their hands is a bad fucking move. It will not end well for anybody."

"And just what is it that they want from him that's so dangerous?" asked the older detective, Detective Murry. "What was he researching?"

"What he was researching was energy, but what he inadvertently created was a weapon of mass destruction," Al told them quietly.

"Ouroboros is, first and foremost, a weapons developer. Imagine what they could gain by owning a patent on the new generation of city killer," said Ed flatly.

"And you'd be able to do that? Just pick up your father's research and finish what he started?" asked Detective Roach. The brothers exchanged a startled look then they both, at the same time, burst out laughing.

"Sir, my brother could have done something like at the age of twelve," said Al as if almost pitying the detectives for their ignorance. "He's twenty-two now. How much more do you think he's capable of now that he's had ten years to study?"

"But, you have to admit, I've been trying to stay away from physics as much as possible," said Ed, getting a little self-conscious.

"Don't give me that, Brother," snorted Al. "You study it in your spare time when you think no one's looking. Or did you think it was normal to have a BS by the age of 18, a Masters by the age of 20, and most of a PhD by 22? Face it Brother, you're a big enough nerd that you can eat other geniuses for breakfast and pick your teeth with normal scientists. Even if you hadn't been studying physics on the sly, it's still your first love. It wouldn't take much effort for you to figure it out."

"You're not much better, so don't give me any shit," grumbled Ed uncomfortably. Al laughed and patted his brother's shoulder manfully.

"The point I'm making is that, yes, my brother can easily give them what they want," said Al as if pointing out the obvious. "The problem is that he would never do that, no matter who they held hostage. Brother's research has always been geared towards helping people. He'd never in a million
years create anything that might hurt others. He'd rather die first – literally. I haven't had much contact with my father until very recently, so I don't know which way he'd jump. But he and Ed are alike enough that it's possible he'd rather give up his life than be forced to create a weapon that kills thousands."

"Alphonse, I'm going to pretend I did not just hear you equate me with that man," said Ed in a very low, very dangerous voice, and he had said "that man" like he was referring to a particularly virulent and ugly STD.

"I take it then that you don't get along with your father," said Detective Roach, trying to sound compassionate.

"I don't have a problem with him, but then again I never really knew him until now," replied Al with a helpless shrug. "He left when I was too young to remember. It's Ed that remembers him from back then. Ed hates him. I, at least, can understand why Dad left. He wanted to protect his family. I know he did it because he loved us and wanted us to be safe."

"Bullshit," hissed Ed, eyes flashing with that unquenchable rage he saved only for Hohenheim.

"He was protecting himself," insisted Ed furiously. "He was saving himself from making the hard choices. He abandoned us without a backward glance because it kept him safe. If he'd really wanted to protect his family, he'd have taken us with him. He'd have come back to get you and me after the accident. He'd have at least come back for mom's funeral or to settle the hospital bills. But no, I was the one who had to approve all of mom's funeral arrangements. I was the one who had to find the life insurance policy that paid for your hospital care. I was the one who visited you every day while you were in a coma. I was nine years old and going through some of the most hellish pain of my life, and I did it alone, but I still had enough sense of responsibility to fucking be there. I at least loved you enough to be there. I've always done what was right by our family. I've never complained about it. I've never shirked it. I don't regret it for single fucking minute. But I was a child, and even I knew more about what it means to be a man than he ever will. So yes, I hate him. And no, I will not forgive him. But I will do what I have to do for my family, and . . . and if what you really want is that asshole in your life, I'll do what it takes to make it happen. That's what family does. Ask him sometime if he's ever done the same." Ed shoved his chair back and got to his feet. "If you'll excuse me, I need to check on my tables."

"Forgive him, he may hate our dad, but he would never do anything to hurt him," Al reassured the detectives, his gaze trailing after his brother. "He'd have to be willing to be in the same room with him first, and Brother would rather eat broken glass with a vinegar chaser. Besides, Ed's had his hands full just keeping up with two jobs, class time, and lab time, while also dealing with these break-ins. Then dad showed back up, and now this . . . he's not always the most reasonable guy, and recently he's been less reasonable than usual. It's only fair. And of course, Ed and I had a fight the same day as the last break-in – you know, the attack at Roy's house. Wow, was it really only yesterday?"

"What did you fight about?" asked Detective Murry, and Al squirmed, ducking his head as his cheeks turned bright red.

"Well, you see, I've been sort of . . . skipping school so I could spend time with Dad," began Al uncomfortably. "Ed found out because Ed is down as a secondary contact for my teachers in case they can't reach me. Ed's the one who got me my scholarship, and he pays for all the expenses the scholarship doesn't cover. So, he was understandably upset about me skipping. And also, there's the issue with Dad. Because Dad keeps saying he really needs to talk to Edward, but Ed wants nothing
to do with him. I got mad, and Ed was already mad. In the heat of the moment I said some things I really regret... and I also hit him. That bruise on his jaw isn't from the last night's attack. It's from me. Those guys who broke in never laid a finger on Ed. He's too well-trained. We both are. The same night of the break-in, Dad and I were also attacked. I took care of those guys, but I couldn't really stick around to make a statement to the police because I had found out Ed had gotten into some trouble too, so I needed to rush right over."

"How'd you find out your brother was in trouble?" asked Detective Murry.

"Ed and I have signals to indicate to each other that something's wrong," explained Al with a shrug. "There're different signals for different things. Like, if Ed's out on a date and the guy turns out to be some sort of psycho, or if Ed gets another stalker problem like we had last year, Ed can send me a signal. As soon as I get that, I know to drop what I'm doing and go pick him up, wherever he is. We can also signal things like fights, health issues for ourselves or for friends, and even public transportation issues. Last night, I sent Ed the signal for a major fight and the warning that trouble might be heading his way. If everything was fine on his end, he would have sent the 'all clear' signal back then tried to come to meet me. But there was no response. Usually, for a warning like that, if there's no response within a given timeframe, we know that the other is already in trouble. In such an instance, the next step is to attempt to rendezvous as quickly as possible so we can double our firepower, so to speak."

"You make it sound almost like military operations," said Detective Roach in an expectant tone, like he was suspecting that the Elrics might be more than just two hapless victims.

"Our Teacher taught us how to tackle problems the same way we would handle complex equations," Al told them with a bit of pride creeping into his expression. "We use logic, predetermined steps, and rational examination of all expressed parameters including variables and outliers. We look at the issue, determine what needs to be done to reach a solution, and take steps based on given rules. We're scientists. Logic comes easy to us. Ed will still act outside of the rules if he deems it necessary, but in the end he still sticks to the basic steps required to reach the most likely favorable solution. Speaking of which..." Al turned away from the detectives, leaning out to call across the restaurant, "Ed, the mapping is done."

"Awesome, I'll be right there," replied Ed. He finished scribbling in his order book then placed a ticket in the kitchen window before returning to the table and turning his laptop toward him again. He typed something in then leaned close to the monitor, squinting a bit.

"Brother, where are your reading glasses?" asked Al in an undertone. Ed looked like he wanted to argue, but then he sighed and hung his head in defeat.

"In my laptop bag," he admitted, and Al dug into his brother's bag before pulling out a black glasses case which he handed to his brother. Ed sighed again as he slipped his glasses on. Roy would never get over just how adorable he looked with those glasses perched precariously on the end of his nose – nor how eerily like his father he looked. "Not a word Roy. Not one word," growled Ed as if reading his mind. He looked up at the detectives, scowling a bit but also looking somewhat nervous. "I'm going to show you something that will help you with this case, but you have to swear you won't arrest me for it first."

"That depends on what it," said Detective Roach with a warning in his voice. "If it's something that can implicate you as being involved in serious criminal activity then we can't overlook it."

"Fair enough," said Ed with a shrug. "It's not that serious though. All I did was break a few federal statutes to hack into something I shouldn't have, but I did it for a really good reason." He turned the laptop around to show the detectives the monitor. "This is a map of the area surrounding the hotel
which was the last reported location of the asshole. That red dot is his cell phone, and you can see the timestamp at the bottom of the screen." Ed hit the enter key. "This shows the path the kidnappers took when they left the hotel, following them until the point where the cell signal went dark. I assume they smashed it or removed the battery. Even if it was only turned off, I could have still tracked it. The fact that I can't track it means that it's completely dead one way or another. And if you watch the timestamp, you can see the exact time of the attack. Plus, if I put in the a few extra variables," Ed turned the laptop and typed a bit more then turned it toward the detectives again. "I can show you the timetable for tonight's events. You can see the time at which my brother left the hotel to come up here to the diner, and the time the kidnappers arrived, how long they were at the hotel, and when they left with Hohenheim in their possession."

The single red dot had been joined by others, each with a series of numbers attached to it. At first there were two dots then one, once one of the dots moved away. Shortly after the main dot had been left alone, five more dots approached the lone dot that was Hohenheim. Roy hadn't noticed them before, but they had been sitting clustered off to one side until Al's dot had left. The five dots that had converged on Hohenheim then stayed in the same place for about ten minutes – which Ed had sped up so they wouldn't have to watch stationary dots for ten whole minutes. The six dots then left the hotel and shortly after became five dots once more as Hohenheim's dot winked out. Roy tried not to think about how strangely ominous that felt, watching that dot suddenly vanish from the screen.

"That's pretty slick kid," said Detective Murry, looking closer at the screen as if truly impressed. Ed ground his teeth, bristling at the "kid" comment, but managed to otherwise keep his cool. "How'd you manage this, or do I want to know?"

"You don't want to know," said Ed bluntly. "The math alone might make your head explode, and the source for my data might get me tossed in a cell. So let's just pretend that the cell phone signal fairy waved her magic wand," elaborated Ed dryly. "Also, it might be possible I have information on Ouroboros and on some of the thugs they typically hire for this sort of work. But, if you're going to get your panties in a bunch about where the information allegedly came from, I can't very well hand it over and incriminate myself, can I?"

"We'll say it came from a confidential informant," said Detective Murry just as dryly. His partner seemed scandalized at first but after a hard look from his older, more experienced partner, Roach nodded his reluctant acceptance.

"All right, here's what I've got," said Ed, spinning the laptop around again so he could type in the ridiculously long password to access his "spy files", as Maes called them. "Roy, I think Breda and Fuery just showed up. How about you go talk to them and get them seated. I'll be there in a second with coffee." Roy nodded, and Al got up to let him out of the booth. "Alphonse, you know what files to give them. I need to go take care of my tables. If you need me, just shout."

Ed had been right, Breda and Fuery walked in the door together and greeted Roy with subdued cheer. They'd likely ridden together since they both lived in the dorms. Jean wasn't far behind them since he also lived in the dorms. After that, the diner began to get crowded very quickly, filled with a mixture of Roy's close circle of friends and some of the few people that Ed and Al trusted – namely Izumi, Sig, Winry, and a miniscule, tough-as-nails old lady who turned out to be the one and only Granny Pinako that Roy had heard so much about. Despite the somber purpose for the gathering, such a crowd of eccentrics and miscreants couldn't help but be somewhat merry and raucous. As it turned out, Paninya was friends with Winry and Pinako, and had met Izumi and Sig before, so she was able to insinuate herself into the group without much effort.

As soon as Ed and Al had finally satisfied the two detectives and promised to go down to their station in the morning to sign an official statement – and to sign paperwork to designate them as
confidential informants – the detectives left, and the brothers joined the crowd that had taken over half of the diner. Coffee flowed and serious topics were set aside as old and new friends simply enjoyed each other's company and relaxed in the easy comradery.

All of Roy's friends were suitably stunned to witness Ed being polite to his customers. After all, he was The Edward Elric who only had a passing acquaintance with the word "please" and whose favorite phrases included liberal use of the word "fuck". That was just the way Ed was. He was naturally prickly – on the outside, at least. He was like one of those little pet hedgehogs. Just because he had spines didn't mean he wasn't adorable, or that he couldn't be cuddled as long as one was careful. People who liked having him around generally understood that although "polite" was not a normal descriptor for him, it didn't mean he wasn't kind.

"Hey! I'm all about the customer service!" Ed protested when Breda poked fun at him.

"When pigs fly!" snorted Maes, earning him a glare.

"You forget who you're talking to," scoffed Ed. "I'm fully capable of building wings for a few porkers. Maybe an automail frame attached to the shoulder joints to hold lightweight aluminum plates – like metal bat wings maybe."

"I still think we need to revisit the jet pack idea," suggested Al. "I'm sure we could come up with a way to keep from singing their tails."

"Either way the weight would be prohibitive," said Winry, waving her hand like dismissing smoke. "But we shouldn't get into this discussion again. I think we're scaring the stiffs."

"Plus, the last time we got into a discussion about how to make pigs actually fly, Fritz and Ed threw bacon at me through the order window," said Paninya with a glare for Ed who smiled innocently and batted his eyelashes at her like the angel he clearly was not.

"I was just disproving your theory that there was no feasible way to make pigs fly. I like to call it 'thinking outside of the box',' said Ed without even a hint of remorse. "It could have been worse. At least it was cooked," he pointed out with a wicked grin. "Or it could have been the pork chops."

"Ugh, now you've got me craving pork chops," moaned Paninya. Ed burst out laughing making Paninya glare harder. "Shut it Four-Eyes."

"Oh shit!" spat Ed, his hand flying to his face to discover his glasses still resting there. The rest of them howled with laughter. "Yuck it up, hyenas. You'll think it's a lot less funny when I start actually charging you for your coffee – refills and all."

"You mean it's free?" asked Fuery with a puppy-like look of amazement.

"Of course, we don't charge friends and family for coffee," said Ed as if it should have been obvious. "But don't even think about skipping out on my tip or next time I will be spitting in your coffee."

"Yeah, wise man say: never piss off the people who handle your food before you do," snickered Paninya, and her and Ed grinned evilly. Ed left to fetch more coffee, his threat hanging over their heads. Several people hastily grabbed out their wallets and started pooling together an offering for their benevolent provider of free coffee. When Ed returned they each held up their tip money like they were trying to flag down a stripper, and it was Ed's turn to howl with laughter. Nonetheless, he dutifully poured them fresh coffee and accepted their humble offerings, still chortling at them. Once they'd all had their coffee refreshed, Ed returned the pot to the counter then reclaimed his seat.

"All right, guys, we've fucked around long enough," said Ed, clearing his throat with a sheepish
smile. "I guess we really ought to get down to business. Ladies and gentlemen, as you all know, Al and I have recently found ourselves caught up in a shit storm. You're each only aware of different parts of this. You don't all know the whole story, and there's a damn good reason for that. It keeps you safe, keeps you from becoming victims. It's bad enough Roy got caught smack in the middle of it, and I'm seriously kicking myself for not seeing that as a possibility. There's no excuse for that sort of carelessness."

"Roy got himself involved in it, Edward," argued Riza gently, turning a lightly admonishing look toward Roy. "In fact, it could be argued that he was the one who got this ball rolling, so don't take any more guilt on your shoulders than strictly belongs there."

"Well, that aside, it needs to be stated up-front that getting mixed up in this is dangerous as fuck," Ed told them point-blank. "But, for most of you, what I need from you will only get you minimally involved. There's no need to get in deep enough to get hurt. On the flipside, even if you don't get involved any further, it's still possible you'll be harassed, at least, just for being our friends. It's happened before. As soon as they figure out that our father no longer has access to his old research notes, they'll come after me and Al again. Right now, the biggest issue is that we can't tackle this as a single problem. Written out, it looks like one big theorem, but looking closer you can see it's actually three smaller equations – much less overwhelming."

"So, you're wanting to split the work load?" asked Al, knowing how his brother's mind worked. Ed nodded slowly.

"Like I said we have three problems, meaning we need three groups," said Ed looking at each of them in turn. "The first problem is data. We have quite a bit of information, but it's still not enough. We need to know more about the people we're dealing with. We also need every gram of dirt we can possibly find on these bastards. I already have a plan for what to do with that dirt, but first I need to find it."

"I can handle that," said Roy, looking toward Maes. "And I think, among us, the best people to help me with it would be Breda, Maes, and Jean."

"Good, that'll work," said Ed, offering them a pleased smile that did nothing to hide the worry in his eyes. "I'll brief Roy later on the specifics, and he can relay it to the rest of you. Roy, you're in charge there, so I leave the delegation up to you. I'm also going to call Grumman in the morning, and he should be able to help you out here and there."

"The second problem is equipment. In order to make my plan work, there're certain things I'm going to need. Plus, some of what I want to build will help with the other two problems. The equipment group will be me, Al, Pinako, Winry, Paninya, Falman, and Fuery." Those he named all nodded, spines straightening as if glad they could be of help – making it clear they hadn't been sure they'd even be helpful. Nobody liked being helpless in an untenable situation. "Third problem is our father," Ed ground out as if wishing he could ignore that problem altogether. "Once we find out where he is, we need to get him to safety and hide him until my plan is complete. I can't let them keep their leverage. The search and rescue group should be Sig, Izumi, Riza, and probably with me, Al, Paninya, and Jean to assist if necessary, since there's no telling what kind of people they have guarding him or what kind of place he might be held in. Grumman may even be able to contribute some of his security guys, if it comes right down to it. I won't know until I talk to him." Once again, there were nods from those who'd been named, but their expressions were grimmer, the weight of their responsibility heavier.

"What about the police?" asked Riza, and Ed snorted. "I know the police are already involved in this case. Wouldn't it be better to let them do their job?"
"Precedent suggests that there isn't much they can do against these guys," said Ed gravely. "They've tried time and time again, and fucking failed every god-damned time. Well, now it's in my fucking sandbox, and I'm not going to let them play around as they please. I'll kick them out of the fucking playground altogether, and make sure they stay the fuck out from now on." The incredible intensity of his determination hit them all like the heat off of a napalm fire. Edward Elric didn't know the meaning of "standing still" or "giving up". He would move forward with or without them, because he didn't know how to do anything less. They could either fall in line behind him or wait to be bulldozed out of the way. No matter how hard the fight ahead, there would be no stopping him.

"But, look you guys, I know this isn't really your fight. This really is some scary shit, so if any of you want to tap out, I totally understand. But you need to decide now. Once we get this shit rolling, it'll be too late to back out."

There was a long moment of silence as they all looked to each and then to the brothers sitting as close together as they could, as if trying to bolster one another. They really would fight on alone if they had to, but the beauty of having friends was that they would never have to. "Like hell we're backing out," declared Jean fiercely, giving voice to what all of them were thinking. There were nods of agreement all around, smiles slowly spreading and becoming sharp grins. "If it was any of us going through this shit, we all know you'd be right fucking there beside us Boss. You wouldn't even take a second to think about it. So, yeah, we're there. Bring it on."

"Hell yeah," agreed Breda, fist bumping with Jean. "You couldn't keep us away if you tried."

"Edward, don't be an idiot. We're family. Family helps each other when they're in trouble," said Izumi with her trademark inarguable tone. "And if you hadn't asked for my help I would have kicked your ass for your stupidity." Her gargantuan husband Sig grunted in agreement.

Ed chuckled softly to himself then looked up at them with a smile so pure and so full of gratitude that not a one of them could say they didn't feel a bit misty-eyed. "Thanks guys," said Ed with blinding sincerity. "I mean it, really, thanks."

Chapter End Notes

The next two chapters are going to take a little while because there'll be a scary ton of research I have to do for them.

Also, the flying pig thing can be blamed entirely on the stale bologna sandwich at 6am. Such a time of day is unholy enough on its own without the stale bologna sandwich, but the mystery meat just adds that extra touch of madness to the indignity. So when in doubt, Blame the Bologna!!! @_@
Chapter Notes

This chapter really took a lot longer than I thought it would. Sadly, ch 16 may take even longer than this. Also, this chapter wound up being hella longer than I anticipated. I fear the next chapter will be uber long too, and will also likely be the long-awaited conclusion (I hope). I may include a little epilogue after that, too, cuz I love a good epilogue. Now, the question is, what will I write next? I'm totally stumped (tho I'm thinking of maybe doing a sequel to this one, but from Ed's POV this time).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 15

Who You Calling An Elf?!

Roy watched intently as Ed, Fuery, and Paninya worked together in a weird little bubble of silent communication. If one of them needed a tool that another one had, they didn't ask for it or even look up to see who had it. They just sort of seemed to sense when it was set down and reached for it as soon as it was free. Whenever one of them needed more space, all it took was a slight shift in their seat, and the other two would make room, also without looking up from their work. It was eerie and, at the same time, utterly fascinating. Roy had gone into his library, which they had temporarily converted into a workroom, with the intention of letting them know that lunch was ready, but then he'd gotten caught up watching the silent nerd-hive and hadn't yet been able to drag his gaze away.

The stalemate was suddenly broken when Ed seemed to finish whatever he was working on and sat up straight. He stretched his arms above his head and arched his back, as if he was waking from a nap. His spine and joints made a series of soft pops, and Ed released a sigh of relief. Ed's hair was a wreck – not quite as worthy as his typical bedhead, but pretty close – and his glasses were slightly crooked on his grease-smudged nose. He was a mess, but in the most delightful way possible. "Hey you guys, lunch is ready," offered Roy finally, smiling warmly at his disheveled lover.

"Awesome," said Ed, tired but pleased. Paninya looked up as if startled but then she grinned when she realized food had been mentioned. While she was stretching, Ed reached over and nudged Fuery gently. "Come on, it's time for a break," Ed told him. Kain blinked at him owlishly for a long moment then offered him a weary smile and stretched just like the other two had. Roy laughed quietly at them as he herded them downstairs to the kitchen table.

The night they'd all agreed to work together, they'd all gone to their respective homes to get some rest and gear up for the days ahead. It was good that they had, since none of them had been able to get much rest since. They were all too acutely aware of the short clock they were laboring under, and what was at stake if they fell short of the deadline.

Roy wasn't even aware of what everyone else was working on. He'd been too busy directing his own group and liaising with Grumman and with his Aunt Chris's people. Maes and Jean were handling legwork, with Maes collecting info on Ouroboros while Jean handled collecting info about the dean and his dealings. Breda was handling compiling the information gathered by Roy, Maes, and Jean, sifting through it all for relevance and organizing it into the categories given to him by Ed
ahead of time. It was a lot of work, but also a lot of waiting and watching and just listening. This translated to enough downtime that the four of them had taken over the basic care of Ed's group — meaning that they made sure that Ed and company took time to eat and that they stayed sufficiently caffeinated.

Ed, Fuery, Falman, and Paninya had been working out of Roy's library, since space at Pinako's automail clinic was limited. A few long folding tables were sat end to end to give them room to work, and they were using every inch of that space. They'd even had to liberate a white board from the university. Unidentifiable bits of electronics, various tools and measuring implements, piles of notes, and a teetering stack of rolled up schematics were strewn across every inch of those tables, making Roy wonder if it might be necessary to get another table. There was no telling if it really would be necessary though, since Roy couldn't even begin to guess what the three were creating under Ed's exacting direction.

Ed himself was giving the word *multitasking* a whole new meaning. He bounced between working with "the library crew" and helping with the mysterious project he'd given to Al, Winry, and Pinako. He also helped with organizing the data he received from Roy's group, and feeding the data into his "reenactment model" at the end of the day. On top of all that, sometimes, they'd lay down for a brief nap or stop for a meal break and return to find that Ed had already finished whatever somebody else had been working on. He was like the elves in that old story about the elves and the shoemaker — not that anybody hated living enough to point that out to him. Ed was starting to look a bit frayed at the edges — even without being aware of the elf comparison — but none of them had the courage to tell him to slow down. He had already been short on patience and sleep at the start of his little nerd decathlon, but now he was at the crumbling edge of collapse. Good thing Roy had a guaranteed time-out up his sleeve, and since it was also something that was necessary for the case, Ed couldn't turn it down.

"Where did Falman go?" asked Roy as they entered the kitchen.

"He went to scavenge more components for us," replied Ed with a shrug. "He's going to be a while though, so we probably won't see him until tomorrow morning."

"By the way, Ed," said Roy, making sure he sounded as casual as possible. "My Aunt Chris is coming by tonight for dinner. The dinner is just a pretense to deliver the rest of her findings without looking suspicious to outside observers. But when I told her you could cook, her interest was piqued. Is there any chance of you making dinner tonight? I know you're busy, but it'll be a nice change of pace I think. You can go back to working yourself into premature baldness after dessert. What do you say?"

Ed looked up, caught in the middle of taking a bite of his sandwich. Ed then said something Roy thought was supposed to be "the fuck you say?" but since his mouth was full it was more like "da uck oo ay?" Ed swallowed what he was chewing then turned a horrified look on Roy. "But, Roy, I look like patient zero for the zombie apocalypse, and I feel like the unholy offspring of shit and shit sandwich. I can't meet new people like this!"

"Nonsense, love, you look fine," said Roy, reaching up with one hand to smooth Ed's hair. "Since you just finished what you were working on, why don't you go upstairs and take a nice hot bath and a power nap. If you leave me a list, I can do the grocery shopping while you rest and wake you up when it's time to start dinner. It'll give everybody else a chance to get a little sleep too. You all need it. I know the four of you, at least, haven't had more than four or five hours sleep between you in the last two days. How can you expect to keep being brilliant if you never let your brain recharge?"

Ed looked like he wanted to argue the point, but he was just too tired to have enough active brain
cells left to fight with. "All right, all right," said Ed at last. "But this is me lodging my complaint. I'm still not fully fucking kosher with the idea of meeting the woman who raised you while I'm distracted and sleep-deprived and probably jellyfish witless because of it. And it's totally not my fault if she thinks I'm, like, some Dr. Frankenstein wannabe mad scientist."

"It'll be fine," said Roy reassuringly. "Aunt Chris is going to love you. The two of you have a very similar sense of humor. Besides, it's only fair since I had to meet Izumi before we were even seeing each other, and she's since threatened to chop me and up hang me in the window of the butcher shop as a deterrent for future suitors. As you and Al would say, this is equivalent exchange."

"Fair enough. I'm going to go bathe," declared Ed with a haughty sniff as he stood up and set his plate in the sink. "Paninya, Fuery, you two are welcome to finish up what you're working on, but Roy's right, we're all overdue for some rest – and a fucking bath. I feel like I could cook French fries with the amount of grease in our hair right now. So gross." Paninya and Fuery gave weary laughs and agreed with Ed's assessment wholeheartedly. "I'll just call Falman and let him know we're taking a break for the rest of the day." Roy offered to give Paninya and Fuery a ride to the dorms while Ed was bathing, and they both accepted his offer gratefully.

Roy expected Ed to be out of the bath by the time he got back, but instead he discovered that Ed was slumped over in the tub, fast asleep. Smiling to himself, Roy gently shook Ed awake. Ed's eyes snapped open, the poor boy startled and flailing as his brain caught up with his current location. "Have you washed your hair yet," asked Roy gently, and Ed shook his head then splashed water on his face to wake up. "Then allow me," offered Roy, already rolling up his sleeves. Ed frowned at him, giving him that "are you sure you're not an alien" stare, blinking slowly as the moment stretched. Roy's smile remained unwavering, so Ed eventually capitulated.

Roy scrubbed Ed's hair with sure but gentle pressure, massaging his scalp until the younger man was all but purring. Once his hair was rinsed, Roy proceeded to wash the rest of him, though he was careful to keep his touches firm and innocent. He loved nothing more than running his hands over every inch of Ed's skin, but to try to initiate anything sexual in this context felt like it would be a violation of the trust being placed in him. It felt like an unbelievable luxury to be granted such a high level of trust, and Roy would do nothing to risk destroying that.

When Ed got out of the bath, Roy left him to dry off and went to the spare room to dig in Ed's bag for a clean pair of boxers and something for Ed to sleep in. He found clean underwear, but was thwarted for something clean to sleep in. As a compromise, Roy dug in his own dresser and pulled out a pair of pajama pants and handed those to Ed with his boxers. "We've gotten spoiled with Al doing our laundry, so we've been neglecting it over the last few days," stated Roy to answer the lift of Ed's questioning eyebrow.

Ed gave the pajama pants a skeptical frown but pulled them on . . . then glared – hard. They barely stayed on him, clinging for dear life to his hips in a way that couldn't be anything other than lascivious. With a sigh of irritation, Ed yanked the pants up, pulled the drawstring as tight as it could go then rolled the waistband a couple times. He then bent neatly in half – something Roy would never get tired of seeing – so he could roll the pants legs up so they no longer pooled around his feet. Roy was wise enough to refrain from laughing, or even smiling in any way that might be construed as laughter-like. Ed may be tired, but that didn't mean he was above planting automail toes in vulnerable shins. To appease his annoyed lover, Roy brushed out Ed's damp hair and pulled it back into a simple tail secured at the nape of his neck so that it wouldn't annoy him while he was sleeping – since, according to Ed, sleeping with high ponytails led to headaches.

"Get some sleep, love," said Roy, wrapping his arms around his lover's waist and planting a soft kiss on his head. "I'll wake you up in a couple hours." Ed finally laid down and burrowed into the
The trip to the grocery store shouldn't have taken long, but throughout the trip, Roy couldn't quite shake the feeling that he was being watched. It made his shoulder blades twitch, but he made sure to give no indication in either his expression or manner that he had noticed. For all he knew, he could be imagining things, but it was better to be safe than sorry. So he was cautious, making sure that nobody looking at him would think anything was amiss, while in truth Roy was ever-so-carefully searching for some visual proof of surveillance. He was not disappointed.

He was standing at the butcher counter when he spotted furtive movement in the overhead security mirror. Roy idly sidled to the right as if perusing the meat selection, trying to get a better angle. His efforts paid off, and he was able to see a woman dressed in black cargo pants and a black pullover hoodie, her face one that Roy recognized from Ed's "spy files". Even if he hadn't recognized her face, he would have, at first sight, known her for a hired gun. It was in the way she carried herself, the casual readiness of her stance, and the suppressed tension in her every movement. Her body language screamed "military". If he remembered correctly from her profile, this was not a woman he wanted to tangle with.

What he needed was somebody to watch his back and act as a potential witness to any shenanigans his creepy new girlfriend might try to pull. Roy waited until he had placed his order with the butcher then texted an SOS to Maes. Maes's house was close to the grocery store, so he should be able to get there fairly quickly – he hoped. Should he text Ed? Would Ed even get the message, seeing as he was probably already dead to the world? And even if he got the message, he had no way of getting to the store in anything like a reasonable amount of time. One way or another, Roy did not need to walk out of that store alone, so Maes was his best bet. Thankfully, Maes settled Roy's weird little internal debate by texting him back, telling him, "Sit tight. I'll be there in 5."

Roy breathed a sigh of relief and waited patiently for the butcher to finish packaging the meat that had been on Ed's shopping list. After Roy had received his order from the butcher and placed it in the basket, he wandered around the store, taking his time to find the rest of the items on the list. When Maes finally found him, Roy could have hugged the man then and there. Maes waved at him as if surprised to have found a familiar face at the supermarket. Roy responded the same way, hiding away his relief.

The two of them ambled through the grocery aisles, talking about the little nothings of everyday life. Maes, of course, took advantage of the captive audience to show him about a hundred pictures of "the most adorable angel to ever drop from the heavens". Normally, Roy would have escaped long before they got to the hundredth picture, but he really had no choice but to stick it out and endure his torment to the bitter end.

At the checkout line, Maes shifted his focus a bit, and shared some of his beloved photos with the cashier whose expression became remarkably dazed shortly after Maes opened his mouth. Roy had to physically drag him away to save the poor girl from photographic bombardment. Roy quickly weighed his friend down with some of the grocery bags so he wouldn't have a free hand for pulling out pictures then the pair walked to Roy's car, Maes still pouting.

Maes rode home with him, asking after Ed as soon as they walked in the door. Roy explained that Ed was taking a much-needed nap, and Maes nodded with an almost fatherly smile on his face. "That kid really doesn't know how to do half measures, does he?" asked Maes, his tone fond.

Roy chuckled softly. "No, he really doesn't."

"And speaking of half measures, I think we might need to start getting a little stricter about security," said Maes with a look of distaste. "I think it might be a good idea to start traveling in packs. It'll be
safer if we're at least in pairs at all times. So, next time you leave the house, make sure you have Ed or Al with you. I'll tell them the same thing. We can't afford to be caught alone right now, since that's obviously what they're waiting for – for us to be alone, with no witnesses."

"I was thinking the same thing," said Roy, unhappily. Ed wasn't going to like it, but Roy was fairly sure he could convince him of the necessity.

As he was thinking of Ed, a horrible notion occurred to him and it had him all but running up the stairs. While Roy had been at the store, Ed had been alone too. And not only had he been alone, he'd been deeply asleep, making him vulnerable. When Roy reached his bedroom, he was relieved beyond measure to find Ed still fast asleep under his thick pile of blankets. He was safe and sound, though he looked like he was having a nightmare. Roy walked over to the bed and laid his hand on the top of Ed's head – the only thing the blankets didn't cover. Ed's forehead glistened with sweat and his face was scrunched up as if he was in pain. Feeling bad for him, Roy found his shoulder amidst the blankets and shook it gently. Ed's eyes snapped open and for a heart-stopping moment there was genuine terror in those golden depths. "It's all right," said Roy soothingly. "It was just a dream, love."

Ed drew in a long shaky breath and let it out slowly, the fear fading slower still. Roy didn't bother to ask him what his dream had been about. He knew Ed wouldn't appreciate questions. If he wanted to talk about it he would, but being asked would certainly make him not want to tell. Roy pulled Ed into his arms, holding him just tight enough to convey safety and comfort, and after a moment he was gratified to feel Ed wrap his arms around him in return. He buried his face in Roy's chest, and Roy was happy to let him hide until he was ready to face the world again.

When Ed began to squirm a bit, Roy released him and leaned back, tenderly brushing the hair back from Ed's face. "I haven't had that dream in years," said Ed hoarsely. "I mean, shit, I'm a fucking adult now. I'm so over that shit . . . but I guess all this crap's just been too much damn stress."

"I won't ask you what you dreamed about, but if you want to tell me, I'll listen," offered Roy, a compromise between his resolve to keep his nose out of it and the need to give Ed the comfort of knowing he wasn't alone.

"It's not a big deal," said Ed, leaning back against the headboard and running a hand through his bangs. "It's just replays of the past, of my regrets. It sort of makes sense I'd be seeing that shit now, of all times. Twelve years ago, I made a choice. I prioritized one life over another, and no matter which way I chose I was going to lose one of them. I don't so much regret my choice. You should never regret saving a life. Teacher made sure I understood that. But . . . sometimes I wonder if the one who lost her life would agree?" For the briefest, most breathless moment Ed looked so heartbroken, so wounded. But then the moment passed and he shook his head as if to clear it and pasted a smile on his face. "It doesn't matter. The point is that I'm working to make sure I don't ever have to make that choice again. Do you ever wonder why I know so much about medicine and biochemistry and biomechanics but never go into medicine? It's because I wouldn't be able to handle doing triage. It would kill me to have to decide who lives and who dies based on percentages and probabilities. Because, for me, if there is even a 1% probability that somebody can be saved, it's enough to make me want to try."

Roy looked at Ed for a long moment, utterly speechless, but then he reached forward, almost involuntarily, and pulled Ed into another hug. "I really don't tell you enough how amazing you are," whispered Roy into Ed's hair, the compliment making the younger man squirm. Roy laughed as Ed finally worked his way free, but then Roy pulled Ed in again for a fiery kiss. Ed let out a quiet moan and melted into Roy's embrace, and it was all Roy could do not to deepen the kiss still further. "Do you want to try to get some more sleep?"
"Not really," said Ed languidly, looking up at Roy with that sultry smile that set his blood ablaze. "But I can think of a more interesting way to relax." That was all it took to shatter Roy's tenuous control of his growling libido. Roy tried to maintain enough control to at least be a little careful with Ed since it was obvious his automail ports were bothering him. But Ed threw caution to the wind, ignoring his pain and pursuing his pleasure with his usual wild abandon. When a lover as fiery and beautiful – and flexible – as Edward wanted to be ravaged, only a fool would deny him – and Roy was no fool.

By the time they had collapsed onto the sheets, Ed was plainly sleepy, but also considerably more relaxed, so Roy chalked it up as a win. However, looking at the glowing face of the alarm clock made Roy curse out loud and hustle his drowsy lover into the shower, joining him to make sure he didn't fall asleep standing up. Once they were dressed and downstairs, Roy found Maes sitting on a chair in the parlor with a book and a shit-eating grin on his face that made Roy want to punch him. Roy ignored him as he guided half-asleep Ed safely into the parlor.

Maes followed Roy into the kitchen, leaving Ed to doze on the sofa while the coffee was brewing. "You totally panicked, so I followed you upstairs, but it looked like a private couples' moment when I got there, so I bowed out before either of you noticed me," said Maes, his unvoiced laughter dancing in his green eyes. Roy's face burned with the heat of a blush that would do a virgin choirboy proud. "But, next time, you might want to at least close the bedroom door. I'm not going to say you guys were loud or anything, but with the door open like that, the sound still carries." That's it, forget punching, Roy was feeling distinctly homicidal.

"Breathe a word of that to Ed, and I'll end you," growled Roy, but Maes just laughed, reinforcing Roy's surge of homicidal intent. An unexpected knock at the front door was the only thing that saved the asshole's life. Roy walked through the parlor, heading for the door, and was a little surprised to see that Ed hadn't stirred at the sound. Before Roy could quite reach the door, he heard it open and a second later, his Aunt Chris appeared in the foyer. She hadn't changed much since the last time he'd seen her. She was heavyset, and a little rough-looking, with long wavy dark hair and the same full mouth and sarcastic smirk that Roy boasted. It was the only thing aside from his build that Roy had inherited from his father's side of the family. His dark upswept eyes, almost-delicate pointed features, and pale skin were all gifts from his mother. Chris, his father's older sister, was the spitting image of her own father, Roy's grandfather, with broader shoulders than most women and a square-ish jawline.

He greeted her with a kiss on the cheek then gestured for silence, taking the covered cake pan out of her hands. Judging by the weight, there was no dessert to be found in the pan. If he wasn't mistaken, the only thing to be found in there was the information she had promised. He led her through the parlor then pointed at the sofa and its sleeping occupant. Chris lifted an impressed but inquiring eyebrow at him, and the look Roy gave her said, "Yes, that's him. Isn't he darling?"

"I can feel you watching, Roy. It's creepy," mumbled Ed and Chris broke out into hysterical laughter – and it only got worse at Ed's startled squeak.

"Morning, Sunshine," said Roy dryly when Ed lifted his head, blinking in incomprehension at the stranger in the room. "I'll go get the coffee I promised before you eviscerate me. Aunt Chris, be gentle, he just woke up, and he's not a morning person."

"I can see that," she snorted.

"Actually, you should come see this coffee machine," said Roy suddenly, grinning as he imagined his Aunt's reaction.

"What did you waste money on this time?" she asked with an exasperated sigh as she followed him
into the kitchen. Ed followed after them a bit more slowly.

"Hey, Hughes," said Ed around a yawn. "When did you get here?"

"I've been here for a while now, but I was downstairs hanging out in the parlor," said Maes, but luckily Ed wasn't quick on the uptake when he wasn't all awake yet. Though he did notice Maes's hand going toward his breast pocket before any pictures could emerge, and Ed threw up a hand to forestall the impending photographic onslaught.

"If I see so much as a single picture, I will get my blow torch," threatened Ed in a low growl. Maes knew when he was beat – Ed didn't make idle threats – so he held up his hands in surrender. Roy and Chris turned away to snicker quietly amongst themselves.

"How you been Maes?" asked Chris, giving him a hard slap on the back. Maes stumbled forward a step, but smiled and gave Chris a kiss on the cheek.

"I've been good," he replied simply.

Meanwhile, Roy poured coffee for Edward and handed it over before getting coffee for everybody else. "What in the world is that?" asked Chris, turning to glare at the coffee machine.

"Ed brought it with him for the sake of its safety, so, like I said, it's not something I bought," explained Roy, stepping out of the way so she could get a closer look at Ed's baby. "Edward designed and built it himself – in his spare time, if you can believe it."

Ed showed her all of the machine's features and explained to her a little bit about how he had built it. While Ed and Aunt Chris bonded over Ed's coffee hobby, Roy called Al to fill him in on what had happened during the grocery trip and told him he should come home for dinner and why. It took some fast-talking and cajoling to convince Al that he and the rest of them needed to rest before they burned out. Finally, Al gave in, and Roy reminded him not to travel alone. Al said he would call Izumi and Sig to escort him home since their shop wasn't far from Winry's place. Once he'd hung up, it occurred to him that he'd also have to fill Ed in on what happened, but he decided it would be best to wait until Ed was a little more awake – and a little less nervous.

Ed's nerves weren't overt. For the most part, he seemed like his usual witty self, if a bit grumpy from having just woken up. But there were small signs that only somebody who knew Ed would notice – though Chris had probably noticed too, if only by benefit of her ungodly perceptiveness. It was in the very faint tremor in his voice when he answered direct questions, the slightly off-kilter tilt to his smile, and the way he kept stopping mid-curse word and replacing it with something less offensive.

Eventually, Ed shooed everybody out of the kitchen, asking Roy how many they were expecting for dinner. Roy didn't know, but he promised to find out. But since everybody else had left the kitchen, and Ed was as awake as he was likely to get, Roy took the chance to explain the situation and the need for traveling in groups. To Roy's surprise, Ed agreed that traveling in groups and pairs would be safest for the time being. He also rather suddenly hugged Roy, saying in a voice as soft as a breath, "I'm glad you're okay."

"Me too, love," said Roy, simply folding his arms around Ed and kissing the top of his head. "Now, all that being said, your brother said he was going to have Sig and Izumi escort him here from Winry's. Whether they'll want to stay for dinner or not, I don't know."

"And Teacher's bad with texting," said Ed, rolling his eyes. "But could you text Al? He can ask them if they're eating with us. I just hope you bought plenty or we may be in trouble." About a minute later, Al messaged back to say that their foster parents had already eaten, and Ed breathed a
sigh of relief. "I'm actually a little worried about introducing Izumi and your Aunt Chris to each other. It's not that I think they'd fight. The problem is that I think they'd get along – which is much, much worse."

"Agreed," said Roy with a little shudder. "Well, I'm going to go chat with Chris and keep Maes from burying her in pictures. Want me to put on some music?"

"Yes please," said Ed with an endearing blush as he tied on an apron.

"How about a little swing? It is Sunday, after all," said Roy and Ed grinned brightly enough to make Roy's heart do a little dance in his chest. "If you need any help, just give me a shout."

He entered the parlor to find Maes and Chris sorting through the information Chris had brought over. Given the sheer volume of information, Breda and Ed were going to be very busy for a while just entering everything into Ed's model. "So, tell me more about this angel of yours," said Chris in an undertone, the jerk of her head toward the kitchen indicating Edward. "I won't lie and say I wouldn't sell my left foot to have him for the bar. Even if he never worked upstairs and just spent all his time slinging drinks, he'd be a serious draw. Those eyes alone should be against the law. I've never seen anybody with eyes that color."

"And he's not just gorgeous, he's absolutely brilliant," said Roy, unable to keep the genuine smile from his face. "He's a genuine prodigy and can learn anything he decides to without breaking a sweat, but that's not really what makes him brilliant. It's actually a little hard to explain. For instance, the reason he studied martial arts wasn't because he wanted to get into fights. He studied martial arts because it was something that would require effort and perseverance in order to do it well. Everything else comes easily to him, but this was something he had to really work for. He learned to cook so that he could help his mother who had to work two jobs to take care of him and his brother. He works two jobs to support his brother through med school. He didn't just become a scientist out of passion for science – though he definitely has that in spades. He did it so he could fulfill a promise to his mother that he would make the world a better place. So, like I said, he's absolutely, astoundingly brilliant."

"Good Lord, Roy-boy, what's an angel like that doing hanging around with you?" snorted Chris and Roy smiled dryly.

"I ask myself that every day," Roy told her honestly.

"Awww, aren't you just sweet?" said Maes in a squishy baby voice as he pinched Roy's cheek.

"I hate you," said Roy with his best death glare.

"Aw, how can you hate me when I bring you such beautiful pictures of sunshiny cuteness?" said Maes, reaching into his pocket. Before he could quite get the pictures clear of their nest, a shoe flew through the air like a ninja star, smacking Maes in the forehead with a resounding thump.

"What'd I tell you about those pictures Hughes?" shouted Ed from the kitchen. Ed stomped into the parlor and retrieved his shoe with all the dignity that a man wearing only one shoe and an apron could muster.

"I thought you were putting on music," said Ed after shoving his foot back into his shoe. "Is something wrong with the record player? I can come fix it real quick if it's acting up."

"Oh, no, sorry love. I just got sidetracked. I'll do it now," said Roy, but Ed dismissed his apology with a wave of his hand before he disappeared back into the kitchen. Chris was laughing so hard that
Roy feared she was about to fall out of her chair. He was fairly sure he'd never seen her laugh that hard in all the years he'd been with her. He decided to take it as a good sign.

"I had wondered why you'd dragged that old console player down from the attic," said Chris once she'd more or less regained control, eyeing the prehistoric record player over her shoulder. "I haven't seen it since I was a kid."

"Yeah, Ed and his brother Al have a thing for old music," Roy told her as he moved to the now neatly organized collection of vinyl. He pulled out a Benny Goodman record and got it started. "And Sunday is their one day off usually, so they set it aside for music, fun, and family. They made an exception today because of circumstances, but last Sunday we had a blast teaching Gracia and Elysia how to swing dance. Give it a minute then peek into the kitchen, and you'll see something really worth the price of admission."

They did just that, the three of them sneaking over to the doorway to watch Ed spin and sway, flipping food and utensils and even knives into the air with all the grace and style Roy had come to expect from Edward. They snuck away before they could start giggling like little school girls and returned to the parlor. "You see what I mean?" asked Roy with a broad grin. "I could seriously charge people good money just to watch Ed playing around in the kitchen."

The front door opened, startling them, and Alphonse entered followed closely by Winry, Sig, and Izumi. Winry ignored everybody else in the parlor and headed straight for the kitchen, leaving Al behind to apologize for her behavior. "You must be Roy's aunt," said Al, offering his hand with his signature sweetly polite smile. "I'm Alphonse, Edward's younger brother, but you can call me Al. The blonde girl that just rushed past was my girlfriend Winry, and this is Sig and Izumi Curtis, the people unfortunate enough to be stuck with the job of taking care of me and my brother." Chris got up and introduced herself in return, shaking hands with those who offered then resuming her seat.

Suddenly, a gold and black streak flew across the room and the next thing they knew, Ed was perched atop Sig's shoulders, hanging onto the massive man's head for dear life. A wrench flew after him, but landed just short. "Edward Elric, get back here you coward!" shouted Winry.

"Back off King Kong! You're not getting it! And I'm not coming down either. I'm not dumb enough to let you hit me over the head. Concussions don't make good appetizers!" Ed shouted back. Winry headed for Ed on his mountaintop perch, and Roy wondered for a second if she too was going to climb Sig like a tree. He never got to find out, though, because she was stopped by Al's icy warning tone.

"Winry, you promised," snapped Al. Winry tried to look pleading and contrite, but Al wasn't falling for it.

"But I-"

"No."

"I just wanted-"

"I said no."

"Just a-"

"Winry, I said no, and that's final," intoned Al ominously, and Winry finally deflated, huffing and muttering to herself about stingy brats.

"Hey Sig, how are you?" said Ed, looking down at head he was clinging to.
"Hello Edward. I'm well enough, how have you been?" replied Sig, and the pair of them honestly sounded as if there was nothing strange at all about having a petite blonde sitting on the huge man's shoulders and clinging to his head like a living hood. Apparently, this sort of thing was normal for them.

"You know. Same old, same old," answered Ed with a shrug. "Mind giving me a ride back into the kitchen? I don't trust Cheetah the Chimp over there to keep her mitts to herself."

"Sure, Ed," said Sig, with a deep rumble of laughter. He practically had to get on his knees to get through the doorway without running Ed face first into the lintel.

"So, will you be staying for dinner after all?" Roy asked Izumi, hanging onto his composure for dear life. He didn't want a wrench applied to his head any more than Ed did, so he wasn't going to risk Winry's wrath by laughing.

"No, they just came in to say hi," replied Al cheerfully. "I told them Ed is morphing into a raccoon, and they wanted to check on him. I guess he's doing all right if he's this energetic. Or has he reached critical mass on the caffeine consumption again?"

"I made him take a nap," Roy told him, and Al gave Roy a warm smile of gratitude.

"Good," said Izumi in her trademark decisive tone. "If he isn't minded, he'll keep working without sleep until he passes out."

"I'm not that bad!" protested Ed from the kitchen.

"Says the boy who fell asleep face first in his dinner because he didn't sleep for four days straight," snorted Izumi, unmoved.

"Hey! I was eight, and I was really close to a breakthrough!" retorted Ed.

"Which turned into a dead end, invalidating your argument," returned Izumi.

Ed entered the parlor, sans apron and with Sig right behind him. "I would like to reiterate that I was eight. And, anyway, I was still pretty new to quantum mechanics and I really thought I was onto something. That initial theory was the foundation for the thesis I wrote a couple years later, so technically the argument still holds true. Every great discovery in science is predicated on a single success landing on a cushion of a thousand failures. Since failures are the required stepping stones to reach success, a failure is a success by virtue of its necessity."

"You really do need sleep, kid," snorted Izumi and Ed sighed, rolling his eyes. "Either that or we need to keep you out of the philosophy section of the library."

"So I ran out of things to read during summer break. Sue me," mumbled Ed petulantly. Al laughed and hugged his brother's shoulders as if to comfort him.

"Regardless, you will be getting some sleep tonight Edward," commanded Izumi with a hard-eyed stare that pinned Ed in place. Then the stare pivoted to pin Al in turn. "You too Alphonse. I will call to check tomorrow that you've both done as you were told. If I have to come back, there will be consequences."

"Yes Teacher," chorused the boys ruefully.

Izumi hugged them, wrapping an arm around each boy then herded her husband out the door. Winry paused only long enough to give Al a hasty kiss, and to punch Ed's flesh arm, before hurrying out
after them. "Well, this place has gotten pretty lively, hasn't it?" commented Chris with the wry smirk that was a perfect reflection of Roy's.

"One thing you can say for Brother is that having him around is never boring," teased Al, earning a punch in the arm from the brother in question. "How much longer until we eat, Brother? I'm starving."

"Probably about 30 minutes," answered Ed with a shrug. "I can put the cobbler in the oven as soon as the chicken comes out, so it'll be ready by the time we're done eating dinner. Are you eating with us Hughes? There should be enough."

"Thanks, Ed, but it's probably better if I head home so Gracia doesn't worry. Riza and Jean are already on their way to pick me up," said Maes with a fond smile.

"Well, while we still have some time, how about you fill me in on everything that's going on?" suggested Chris, the look on her face promising that they weren't going to get out of it no matter how much they squirmed. "Roy-boy only told me the bare minimum so that I knew what information you needed. But if this is even half as dangerous as I think it is, I want to know what our boy is getting himself into."

Ed blanched, guilt briefly rippling the surface of the determination in his luminous eyes. "It's a long story, and the beginning goes back pretty far, but Roy's involvement was never meant to be anything this deep. It all started as something so simple and then snowballed into the cluster fuck we now find ourselves in."

Slowly but surely, Ed laid out the whole miserable string of events for her. He started the story with his father leaving, since that seemed to be the true origin of their mess. He spoke of his mother's death only as a chronological point of reference, and as additional background for the shit storm that followed the essay he published. Whenever he tried to be evasive or vague about the events of that initial battle with the cronies of Ouroboros, Chris would cut through his dissembling with concise questions and a tone no man would dare disobey.

"After we changed our names and went into hiding, everything was quiet for years," finished Ed at last, looking wrung out and edgy. "We were able to finish high school and get most of the way through college without popping up on these assholes' radar. But then, Wrinkly McGrabass had to go and get fresh."

"I thought his name was Grabby McSleezeball," said Maes, a grin twitching at the corners of his mouth.

"My favorite was Douchy McDickless," snickered Al.

"I call him a lot of shit," shot back Ed irately. "I gotta go finish dinner. Roy and Maes know the rest of the story from there, and Al knows all the stuff from my side of it."

Ed disappeared into the kitchen, and Al let out a long sigh that almost sounded like relief. "This has been so hard on him. Brother hates this sort of sneaky warfare. He prefers enemies he can hit. He's perfectly capable of outwitting an opponent, but he's straightforward by nature, so it's hard for him to think around corners like this. I'm surprised he hasn't started tearing his hair out yet."

"He's got so much hair, it'd take us a while to notice if he did," snorted Roy and Al laughed.

"And anyway, we have no way of knowing whether he's genuinely grumpy or just being his usual disagreeable self," said Al with a rueful little chuckle. "He's known as everybody's favorite resting
Maes began to explain to Aunt Chris what had led them to investigate the dean – their suspicion that the dean was stealing Ed's scholarship money in retaliation for Ed's reaction to the geezer grabbing his ass. Maes was able to tell a good portion of that part of the story, right up until Riza and Jean arrived and dragged him off – the pair offering only a tired greeting to those staying behind. Once Maes was gone, Roy picked up the tale where his friend had left off, going into a little more detail about how deeply rooted the corruption ran through the university.

Ed and Al's hacking talent had been enormously helpful in making those initial discoveries. Chris was fairly impressed by the Elric's ability to uncover the embezzlement and the dean's connection to Frank Archer. After that point, Al contributed to the story where necessary, answering questions about how he and Ed had obtained their information. Chris also agreed with them that, despite their precautions, it had been reporting the problem to Amestris's CEO that had tipped their hand to Archer, and ultimately to Ouroboros.

"And that's where the shit hit the fan," said Ed as he returned to them from the kitchen. "Fucking Heisenberg anyway."

"As in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle?" asked Al and Ed nodded. "The act of observance changes the object being observed or something like that."

"Close, but Heisenberg's principle is about more than just the relationship between observer and subject," corrected Ed, perching on the arm of the sofa. "Most people get it mixed up with the observer effect that notes that there are certain systems that can't be observed without the act of observation having an effect on that system. But Heisenberg's principle states that 'the more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known'. It's used to explain the inherent problems in observing the movement of particles on a quantum level, because you can't simultaneously measure both momentum and position without mathematical inequalities . . . but, anyway, it's not important. The point is that we were busy observing the position of the pieces, so we were unable to accurately note their movements on the board, and it just isn't possible to do both simultaneously – it'd be like trying to look left with one eye and right with the other. That's why I created the work groups the way I did. We have Roy and his group observing the position. We have Riza and her group observing momentum. That frees up me and my group to handle the analysis of the measurements and preparations for what comes after the observational stage."

"And what exactly does come after?" asked Chris with a sharply lifted eyebrow and deceptively lazy tone.

"I don't want to explain my plan until I have all the data I need," hedged Ed uncomfortably. "It's still in a more or less fluid state while I finish putting shit together and analyzing all the data that's coming in. Making any part of it too solid now might make it more difficult to change if the situation suddenly changes. But I can show you what the data is being used for and the progress of the rescue operation." He got up and went upstairs to the library, returning with his laptop and handing it to his brother. "Go ahead and unlock it. I need to go check on the food."

"Really, this reenactment model he's built is pretty ingenious, though the name doesn't make sense to me at all," Al told them as he opened the laptop and typed in the long password to unlock it. "He can explain it better than I can since I haven't seen the algorithm for myself, and he hasn't told me the details of the process, but basically, what he's done is create an algorithm which can take all of the thousands of data points and select the most probable location for the bad guys, along with all sorts of other things – how well-armed they are, how best to bypass their security, and our best entry and exit routes."
"I gave it that name because I was initially planning to use it to reenact the kidnapping itself so we could figure out where they'd taken Hohenheim," put in Ed as he returned yet again. "But then I figured out that I could use it both ways. In other words, I could use it to plan a kidnapping of our own. We can more easily identify where they won't look, routes they won't know to follow, and any factors they will have most likely overlooked, all based on quantifiable personal data and well-established precedent. It's hard to explain without a white board. Anyway, somebody go set the table please. Food's ready."

The food was delicious, just like always. Ed claimed that he'd learned how to cook in self-defense, since he ate so much. Al had told Roy the truth, though – Ed had learned to cook for their mother's sake. It had started on a whim while the boys had chicken pox. They couldn't leave the house, and they ran out of books to read pretty quickly. Al resorted to re-reading, but Ed started reading weird things like cookbooks and repair manuals. The rest, as they say, was history. His mom helped him through his first few kitchen forays, since he was still so young – and short, according to Al – but after their mom had bought Ed his very open stepping stool, he'd refused all help and insisted on doing it all on his own. Roy had no problem believing the story since it was so very characteristically Ed.

"This is incredibly good," said Chris as they sat in the parlor eating their dessert and listening to smooth jazz on the record player.

"Thanks," said Ed, an endearing blush lighting up his cheeks. "It was our mother's recipe."

"And I think mom said she got it from her mother," added Al. "Where we grew up we had mostly apple orchards, but in our back yard we had peaches, cherries, and plums too. In the autumn, before the first frost killed off the trees, we had to strip them bare of every last piece of fruit so nothing was wasted. We made all sorts of pies and cakes and cobblers and preserves. What we couldn't eat or preserve, we'd give away to neighbors or sell in town. Now, I'll forever associate autumn with the smell of pies baking. After mom started working so much that she didn't have time for baking anymore, Ed took over the tradition."

"Yeah, and every autumn we had to exercise with Teacher twice as much to keep from weighing 500lbs by Christmas," snorted Ed, and Al laughed, blushing. "I remember one year I had to forbid you from touching the pies because you were turning into a chunky monkey."

"I still say it's not fair that you've always eaten such a ludicrous amount and yet never gained a pound," said Al, disgusted. "I mean, you have an excuse now. The weight of the automail and the energy output necessary to make it move can take a toll – and we will be discussing the energy output later, Brother, because Winry told me how it really is, you jerk. Just getting out of bed is a workout. Even so, you were like this before the automail, you're just more so now. Even Teacher gets appalled with you sometimes."

"The only thing that appalls me is our grocery bill," said Ed dryly. "My wallet would be much happier if I could make do with normal portions of food."

"Next time you feel the urge to do some baking, make sure to send some goodies down to my bar. The girls will be thrilled to take them off your hands," said Chris, chuckling.

"Just let me know how much to make," said Ed with a dazzling grin. "I'm sure I can bribe Roy into being our delivery boy."

"Of course," said Chris with a wink, and she and Ed shared a warm laugh. "All right then, while we're on the topic of business, let's discuss the information I've brought. It would be best if you look through it and make sure this is what you'll need. I'd like to know now if I need to do any more
digging."

Ed nodded and picked up the stack of papers and folders they'd left sitting out on the coffee table. He opened up his laptop and began typing as he went through the new data, simply inputting basic descriptions and attaching numbers as he went. He was likely waiting until later to categorize and sort the data properly, but from what Roy could tell, the numbers Ed was entering should give him an idea of whether or not additional data would be necessary.

"What is it you're typing over there?" asked Chris, leaning forward and to the side a bit to try to see what Ed was doing.

"I'm assigning numerical values to each piece of information, the numbers representing the category of the information and the info's level of importance to the decision-making process of the people involved in the kidnapping," explained Ed distractedly. "The model utilizes game theory, a sort of vector analysis, and my own gutted version of sabermetrics to predict movement for each involved party. There are a lot variables involved in human behavior, so I've created this algorithm to break it all down into probabilities by percentage of likelihood. Basically, I'm mathematically analyzing and predicting human behavior. For instance, let's say we have a group made up of three men. The algorithm will first determine who is the likeliest to be the most dominant personality in the group and how likely it is that his decisions will be influenced by the other members of the group and who's input will have the most influence. Then it determines what decisions are likeliest to be made by using the numerical values assigned to each piece of data – values which are determined by relevance to the decision-making process – and feeding those numbers into the massive equations hidden within the seemingly simple algorithm. Will he fight or will he flee? If he fights, will he be capable of killing or will he be likelier to wound his targets? If he flees, will he head back to home base or will he go to ground and wait for instructions? How likely are the other two to obey, and how closely will they follow orders? It's actually extremely complicated, but what it all boils down to is that, once we hit the tipping point, we'll be able to figure out which of the hideouts that you've identified they'll have taken that asshole sperm donor to, and also how we should proceed to avoid getting shot during the rescue. Then, like Al said earlier, we'll be able to plot our course in and out of there so that we can get the asshole to safety – still without getting shot. I'm really insistent on the not getting shot, you see."

"Let me ask you this," began Chris, shrewd calculation gleaming in her eyes. "How hard would this little model of yours be to use for somebody who isn't a mathematician or scientist?"

"Not too terribly hard, with a little training," replied Ed with a shrug. "The model is programmed to do the actual math parts. And the data it outputs is plotted on maps and lists in plain English, so it's not like you need a nerd-to-laymen translator to figure out the results."

"Interesting," said Chris, one manicured nail tapping her chin. "Normally, the going rate for the sort of information I've been giving you guys ain't cheap. Even family only gets so much of a discount because getting the information requires the greasing of palms and monetary conscience-soothing. I'd go out of business if I let that sort of expense slide."

"I figured as much," said Ed, not the least bit offended. In fact, the wry little half-smile he gave her could almost be called affectionate.

"But, I like you kid, so I'll make you a deal," said Chris, her smirk just as fond as Ed's. "If you can give me a copy of that model of yours, I'll call us even. I'm not asking for the copyright or patent, or whatever it is you crazy scientists prefer to own. I just want free access and the training to use it. What you get in exchange is all the information I've already given you, as well as whatever else you need to make this little rescue operation succeed. If the model proves to be as profitable to me as I
think it will be, I'll be willing to slide you other favors later down the line. All within reason, of course. What do you say?"

Ed looked her in the eye, the full focus of his intensity almost overwhelming even Chris Mustang's indomitable calm. After what seemed like hours compressed into the space of a minute, Ed nodded, a grin breaking out on his face. "I think we have a deal then. The only addendum I'll add is that if any legal agency finds you in possession of this model, you didn't get it from me. But, I can add a failsafe to it so it can self-immolate if a situation like that arises. I'll leave it up to you."

"Makes sense," ceded Chris. "You have a reputation as a respected scientist. We wouldn't want legal troubles to tarnish that."

"Well, I'm more worried about legal troubles causing trouble for my little brother than for me. He's going into medicine, and in that field reputation is everything," said Ed, cutting a quick glance toward Al. "I already have a reputation as an asshole and a rebel. Nobody is going to care if I get into some dirty dealings. But I have to protect Al, at all costs."

"Admirable," said Chris with a nod. "We'll talk more later about that failsafe you mentioned then. I might even make a second deal if you can put that sort of failsafe on all the computers we use for the bar's business."

"I'd be happy to hook you up," said Ed with that bold, devil-may-care grin of his. "Also, I won't have time to hand the model over and train someone in its use until this whole Ouroboros nightmare is settled, but I can do it first thing afterwards. We'll handle that transaction when I come to work on your computer security. Sound good?"

"Sounds perfect," said Chris, all but buzzing with extremely well-hidden excitement. "Kid, I think this if going to be the start of a beautiful friendship." They all laughed a bit at the bad Bogart impression, Chris laughing along with them. "Ed, Al, it was pleasure meeting the both of you. If you're ever looking for a drink and some good music, feel free to check us out anytime. Bring some of those pies of yours and we'll let you drink on the house. Come on Roy, you can walk me out."

Roy got up, setting their bowls aside, and followed his Aunt Chris to the foyer, already knowing she was pulling him aside for a quick word. "Roy-boy, you've gotten yourself into some very heavy shit here," she said quietly enough that nobody would be able to hear them from the parlor. "Keep him safe, or you'll have me to answer to." Roy's jaw dropped while at the same time he felt the irrational urge to laugh. Had his own family really just given him the shovel speech on behalf of his lover? Wasn't she supposed to threaten the lover on his behalf? "Take care of yourself too, Roy. Don't overdo it and stick your neck out too far. I think it'd break that boy's heart if something happened to you." She patted him on the cheek with a fond little smile. "Keep in touch."

Chapter End Notes

*tired sigh* This chapter isn't all it could be, but I think my brain is seriously melting, so not unexpected. I mean, I love writing with every fiber of my being, but I've written
over 150 pages (over 88,000 words) in just under a month for this project alone (don’t even ask how much I’ve done in my novels this month - it's ridiculous too). Even at 92 WPM, that's just freakishly obsessive. I'm entitled to a little brain meltage (I know it's not a word and am too tired to care). Ugh, I need a hobby that doesn't involve typing. My keyboard and I have had a lovely affair thus far, but I think it's time we see other people . . .
When the Fit Hits the Shan

Chapter Notes

I know I said that 16 would be the last chapter, but I guess I sorta fibbed a little. The problem is that 16 was running super long and was no closer to completion, so I had to cut it off before it could get any bloody longer. Also, I mentioned possibly doing an epilogue, but I've decided that I'll just do a sequel instead. I have a metric ton of RL crap to take care of first, but I'll start work on the sequel as soon as I can. Last, but hardly least, now that I've finally more or less cured my computer of its ailments, I was able to finally do some proper editing for the previous chapters. It's hard to copy edit when your computer freezes every time you start to make progress. So, yay! Properly edited chapters! I'll post those at the same time as I'm posting this chapter.

Chapter 16

When the Fit Hits the Shan

Roy woke to find that he was alone in his bed, which was not that unusual these days. Ed had been sleeping very little, so it would actually be more remarkable to find him in bed then out of bed, but it was still a bit lonely waking up without that extra warmth and the tangled pile of gold on the pillow beside him. It was a bit strange how quickly Roy had become accustomed to having Ed living with him. It was as if there had been a slot in his life which had been made specifically for Ed, making his assimilation into Roy's life completely natural, a perfect fit right from the start. Roy sighed forlornly then got up after a long stretch and went about his usual morning routine, keeping his ear perked for any sign of movement elsewhere in the house.

He half-expected to hear Ed in the library, since that was where he had been spending most of his time. He was still teaching and attending his classes, trying, like the rest of them, to give the appearance that nothing was going on. But he had taken a brief "medical leave" from the diner, same as Paninya, the two of them claiming they'd been in the same "accident". A note from Pinako claimed they had issues with their automail due to a minor accident and that they required time to recover under her care – must be nice having a doctor able to write you notes on a whim. With his lab still in shambles and no need to work in the diner, Ed was able to dedicate the bulk of his time to developing whatever mad and mysterious inventions he'd been cooking up for the rescue operation.

When Roy didn't hear anything in the library, even after his shower, he decided to peak in. He was shocked to discover no sign of Ed. He wasn't in the library or in the parlor, or any of the other rooms in the house. It wasn't until Roy forced down his sudden panic and decided to finally make himself a cup of coffee that he saw the note on the fridge. The note was barely legible and raised as many questions as it answered. The main question was what in the world would Ed be doing with Riza and Jean at a firing range? A second, much neater, note claimed that Al had returned to Winry's place to get back to work on yet more of Ed's mad and mysterious creations – nothing unusual there, at least.

Since it was Wednesday, Ed didn't have class until the afternoon, so Roy wasn't worried about him being late. What he was concerned about was who was going to go with him to the lab. Normally, Ed and Al rode with him to the University because of the whole "traveling in packs" directive. Even
just Ed on his own was plenty enough protection for anyone, but both brothers together could probably take on a tank. The reason Al went with them was so that he could play bodyguard for Ed while he was on campus – and also so that Ed could keep eyes on his baby brother for the sake of his piece of mind. Roy had his own little campus escort – or rather, he and his lab crew were able to be each other's escort. None of them went anywhere alone. Riza, Maes, and Jean worked out a sort of rotating schedule between them to follow each other to and from their classes and to Jean's football practices and workouts. Paninya and Winry escorted each other, since they were both engineering students. The labs had become a sort of safe zone on campus since there were usually plenty of witnesses, plus cameras and security guards. Ed had even gotten temporary access for Maes, Jean, and Riza in case they needed a place to retreat to in a pinch.

The front door opened, and Ed's voice called out, "Roy, you better not have left yet!"

"I'm in the kitchen," Roy called back, smirking to himself. Ed was so overprotective. Roy should have known the younger man would return in time to accompany him. Ed would never leave someone he cared about in a lurch. It ran counter to his entirely-too-selfless nature. When Ed walked into the kitchen, he plopped down in one of the chairs tiredly. He was shivering despite the obvious extra layers of clothes, so Roy immediately poured him a cup of coffee, adding sugar to it before handing it over. Ed accepted it gratefully and wrapped both hands around it like it was his last hope of life. Al entered a moment later and poured his own coffee before sitting across from his brother. "What have you been up to so early in the morning?" asked Roy.

"Just testing some stuff," replied Ed vaguely. "But we went out early so we could be back in time to ride with you to the school. We'll be hanging out in the labs with you and Winry today except for my classes."

"Cool, I know the rest of the team will be glad for your company," said Roy truthfully. The team adored Ed, and having him there always made the time go by faster.

"Only the team?" asked Ed pointedly as he got up and wrapped an arm around Roy's waist. Roy put his arms around Ed's slim waist in return and smiled down at his lover.

"I'm always pleased to have you around," he said in soft bedroom tones. "It's sort of a foregone conclusion."

"I see," said Ed, his voice smug but his eyes glazing over with the first hints of awakening lust. "I'll keep that in mind in the future."

"Get a room," said Al, exasperated. Ed just blushed brightly, chuckling as he pulled away. "Ed, why don't you go get your stuff together? If we leave early enough we can pick up breakfast from the diner on the way." The promise of a breakfast from Dante's was enough to light a fire under Ed who hurried upstairs to gather everything he needed for the day. "I'm really starting to worry about him. He just looks so . . . worn out."

"It won't be much longer now and things will hopefully go back to normal," Roy promised, trying to sound reassuring, though in truth, he was more than a little worried himself. "When this is all done, we'll gang up on him and force him to rest."

"I just hope he doesn't end up getting that rest in a hospital bed," said Al under his breath, and Roy suppressed a shudder as he desperately hoped Al's comment didn't turn out to be foreshadowing. Even the thought of Ed getting hurt twisted a knife in Roy's gut and made his heart pound harder in protest.

Roy got his own stuff together and poured three travel mugs worth of coffee, handing one to Al and
carrying his and Ed's toward the front door. In the foyer, Ed held the coffees while Roy pulled on his coat and wrapped a scarf around his neck. As soon as he was fortified against the cold, he took back the coffees and followed the brothers out. When Roy got out to the driveway, he stopped and stared quizzically at Vanzilla who'd had something of a makeover since the last time he'd seen it. Roy hadn't really thought about the fact that he hadn't seen the monstrosity in the driveway over the last few days, nor had he thought much about the fact that they'd been riding in Roy's car to get to and from school, despite the fact that it was upsetting to Ed. Now, it made sense that he hadn't seen the van.

The outside had been painted light gray – just a primer coat, as if they planned to finish painting it in the near future. The back windows were covered by thick black fabric from the inside, the material pulled taut to block out all light, and the rearmost window were covered in a perforated film the same gray as the van so that it was possible to see out of the glass but not to see into the van. The front windows and the windshield were left alone – for obvious reasons – but a curtain stood between the back of the van and the front seat so that even looking in from the front, it would be impossible to see into the back seat. Roy's curiosity wasn't just piqued, it was propelled to all new heights of "what the fuck?!"

Ed and Al turned to peer at Roy then began snickering behind their hands at the look on his face. "Vanzilla needed an upgrade," Ed told him with a sly smile. He went around to the cargo doors and invited Roy to peek inside. "Once we give her the final coat of paint later, we'll have to keep her hidden so she won't be recognized. But, yeah, this will be our control tower for the rescue op. Isn't it super cool?"

Yeah, "super cool" was definitely an apt description. They'd gutted the inside, pulling out the seats and bolting four flat screen computer monitors side-by-side to the driver's side right above a long, narrow work table which had been bolted to the floor. Two stools had been bolted to the floor in front of the work table, with computer keyboards stuck to the surface of the table using what looked like strips of Velcro. On the passenger side, extra seats had been installed, but they were collapsible, the seats hinged so they could be lifted or lowered like the flight attendant's chairs in an airplane. Overhead, straps had been installed so that those sitting on the stools had something to hang onto when the van was in motion, and seatbelts could be seen dangling on either side of the three collapsible seats as well.

"Sweet baby Jesus, you really are spies," breathed Roy, and Ed let out a loud burst of laughter, echoed by his brother.

"Get in, we've gotta hustle if we want breakfast," said Ed as he ushered Roy toward the front seat then got in through the cargo doors. "Al can explain on the way."

"Teacher's friend, Mason, has a collision repair shop, and he's been helping us with the paintjob and hiding the van while we finished the interior," Al told him as they pulled out of the driveway. "Ed drew up the plans for all of this, Mr. Grumman provided us with the computer equipment, and me and Winry handled the bulk of the installation. The wiring for the electronic equipment is all Ed, though. He installed it so that the monitors and server will run off of the van's battery. It all hooks into our laptops and an external hard drive, and there's a power supply we can hook the laptops into so that we don't run the risk of one of them dying at exactly the wrong moment. We've also retrofit Sig's delivery van with some surprises, but this is going to be what Ed calls 'the control tower'."

"Next to you guys, McGuyver is a dumbass," said Roy, still in a bit of shock.

"The real bitch part of all this is going to be returning things to normal once all this shit blows over," said Ed grimly from the back, parting the curtain just enough to join the conversation. "But we
needed some sort of mobile command center in order to pull off what I intend to do. I should be done with the last little bits of the equipment installation tonight."

"Granny and Winry are just about done with the last of the pieces you asked for. They should be done by tonight too," Al informed his brother, but then he frowned as if deeply concerned about something. "I'm still not happy about the power output issue, Brother. What if it creates too much of a burden for your central nervous system or – heaven forbid – for your heart?"

"I've already taken all of that into account, Al," Ed reassured his brother gently. "Come on, Al, I do have a degree in biomechanical engineering, and I didn't get it out of a Cracker Jack box. I think it's entirely possible that I know what I'm doing. Hell, I helped design my arm and leg in the first place! You worry too much, Al. I'll be fine."

"If you say so, Brother," said Al, sounding resigned, as if he wanted to have faith in his brother but knew better. Roy knew better too. Ed had little to no sense of self-preservation, especially if somebody else's safety hung in the balance. If somebody needed help, Ed would jump into the fire to help them every single time and never once notice the burn. That was what made him so fantastically, amazingly, maddeningly Ed. Those closest to him could only make peace with the fact and get really good at first aid.

They arrived at the university and walked into the laboratory building then went their separate ways, with Ed following Roy into his lab and Al heading down the hall to Winry's lab. Roy and Ed greeted Fuery who was the only one of Roy's team to have arrived so far. Breda and Falman may or may not be busy with Ed projects, so there was a chance they wouldn't arrive until later. Fuery was between Ed projects, so he was there at his usual time – bright and way too damn early.

Ed made himself at home at the worktable, quietly doing his schoolwork and grading papers after that. Eventually, Breda and Falman arrived, but Ed was so focused on his work that he didn't even twitch, likely not even noticing their arrival. Breda and Falman had gotten as used to seeing Ed in his "extreme focus" mode as Roy was, so they didn't bother to be offended by his lack of greeting. Ed didn't emerge from his focus until an alert tone sounded from his phone, and Ed stretched in his chair and started packing his stuff. "Time for class," he said to no one in particular. When he turned he jumped as if startled. "When did you two get here?"

Laughter erupted around the room, but Roy spoke up before Ed could get annoyed with them. "They've been here for almost an hour already."

"Oh," said Ed, chagrined. "Sorry, I was catching up on some stuff. Anyway, I've gotta run. Who're today's babysitters?" Breda and Roy raised their hands and got out of their chairs to follow Ed to the building where his lectures would be held. They left him once he was safely inside and returned to the lab. Normally, Al would just go with him and sit in the back of the class until he was done, but today Al was "babysitting" Winry, so Roy and crew would take up the slack and make sure he got where he needed to go for the day.

After a while Al, Winry, and Roy gathered to go pick up Ed for lunch, but Roy's team decided they wanted to tag along. When they reached the lecture hall, Ed was talking to the teacher, a very angry frown on Ed's face. Roy moved forward, wondering if perhaps he should intercede, but Al, as if sensing his thought process, put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "That's Ed's thesis advisor, Professor Carter. You wouldn't have had him for any classes. He only teaches biochemistry related classes."

Finally, Ed ground out something through gritted teeth then turned on his heel and stomped toward his would-be escort. "Let's get the fuck out of here before I do something I'll regret," growled Ed, and they parted to let him through first then fell in behind him. Al and Roy left last, the two of them
casting narrow-eyed scowls at the professor before following their friends out the door.

"Where are we going for lunch today?" asked Breda, doing his best to inject a cheerier mood.

"Pizza?" suggested Fuery, and after a general murmur of agreement, they walked the few blocks down the street to Jimmy's. As soon as Ed and Al walked through the doors, several members of the Jimmy's staff seemed to grow fearful, or at least resigned. Remembering the "Elric special", Roy couldn't blame the staff for being wary of the Elric brothers.

The prevailing attitude of the staff seemed to actually cheer Ed up a little, which relieved his escort. The dark aura of rage he'd been carrying around had been heavy enough to choke anybody that got too close to them. Though they were reluctant to restore Ed's fury, they were nonetheless curious what had caused such a mood. But they decided by silent consensus that it would be best to feed Ed first, since a well-fed Edward was a happy Edward. Thankfully, Ed and Al took pity on their trembling waitress and ordered one of the simpler pizzas on offer so they could share with Roy and Winry. Breda, Fuery, and Falman got their own pizza to share, and it wasn't long before they were all devouring hot-from-the-oven cheesy goodness.

"How is it you can do that?" asked Breda with no little wonder after watching Ed pretty much inhale a whole piece of pizza in a single bite. "I mean, I eat a lot – obviously." He put a hand on his gut and shook it a bit, earning himself a chuckle from the rest of them. "But if I tried to do something like that, I'd throw up, no lie."

"It's a mystery to me too," said Roy, leaning his chin on his hand and looking at his lover. "Is this just one of your many divine skills which we mortals can never hope to understand?"

"Huh, I thought you, at least, would know, Roy," said Ed like he was thinking out loud. Then, in the marvelous way of the truly socially inept, a tone that never failed to make Ed sound like a complete innocent, Ed informed him, "I don't have a gag reflex, or not much of one anyway." Roy face-palmed and every man in earshot either gasped or gave a little whimper. No matter if they were straight or gay, those simple words were a siren's call no man could ignore – especially when those words were spoken by somebody as lovely and androgynous as Edward. He appealed to all the worst in males of any persuasion. Thinking back to their many adventures between the sheets, Roy had to admit that the lack of a proper gag reflex explained so much, and the more he thought about it, the redder Roy's face became. Ed placed Roy's soda a bit closer to hand, saying, "Drink that. You look like you just sprained something."

"Roy, I think I hate you just a little," said Breda with a mournful sigh. "And that worries me just a little."

Al sighed and hit his brother in the back of the head. "Ed, you'll never learn," said Al with a long-suffering sigh. "If it makes you feel any better Breda, Ed spent most of high school defending his virtue, and more than half of those creeps were straight – that includes students and teachers . . . and a few others I prefer not to think about."

"Yeah, so I'm a fucking pervert magnet, big fucking deal," grumbled Ed. "They made up a hefty fucking percentage of the fights I got into during high school. And I can't tell you how many times some jerk would try to kick my ass just to compensate up for his own wobbling sexuality."

"You would have had a lot easier time if you'd just been more discreet," said Al with another big sigh.

"Being discreet has got fuck-all to do with it," snorted Ed. "I didn't come out, I was outed. There's a huge difference. If that jackass had kept his fucking mouth shut, I would have been able to graduate
with nobody being the fucking wiser. But no, he had to shoot his mouth off because I didn't want to touch him, let alone date him. I'd have rather dated a sea slug. And anyway, I shattered his jaw and broke out half his teeth for running his mouth, so now it's water under the bridge."

"And now I'm hating you a lot less," said Breda cheerfully – probably glad he wasn't sleeping with somebody who was capable of shattering someone's jaw. Ed just scoffed then went back to vacuuming pizza.

When the pizza was nothing but a happy memory, Al finally broached the topic they were all wondering about. "What did Carter want this time?"

"He's bitching about my fucking dissertation again," growled Ed angrily. "He knows about the break-in, and he knows it's not my fault I can't make any further progress right now. But he's demanding I come up with a way to get results before the end of the semester. There's no way in hell I can rebuild everything in my lab in that amount of time, and I can't achieve the results I need without that fucking machine. And even if I can get him off my ass for a while longer, the most I might be able to buy is another semester. I only have two classes left to take after this semester is over. Next semester, I'll be able to spend almost all my time in the lab working on my research. Really, I don't have any fucking clue why he's rushing me like this."

"Um, Ed, have you thought about the possibility he's in on the thing with Dirty Grabbenstein?" asked Roy uneasily.

"Nice one," snickered Ed, but then the implications set in and he grew instantly pensive.

"I mean, think about it," continued Roy. "Ouroboros steals your research, hoping to find clues to your father's research, but instead find brilliant biomedical research on the verge of breakthrough. For all that they're the big scary bad guy doing all the worst weapons research, they're also a successful corporation who dabbles in just about every field of science. It's possible that they want to use what they stole from you, but can't because they don't have your machine or expertise. So, they get some putz like Carter to force you to complete the research so they can swoop in and steal the results. Since they already have all the notes, they can claim the breakthrough for their own and there wouldn't be a thing you could do about it."

"That makes a really twisted sort of sense," said Ed, blanching. "Well, too bad for them I'll be taking their asses down long before it becomes an issue. And too bad for them I have well-documented proof that the research is entirely mine, and I already own the patent on the machine I used for it too. Even if their little fucking corporate spies snooping at Amestris somehow 'lose' all that documentation I gave Grumman and their university cronies destroy proof of my thesis, I keep backups on my secure server that they have no hope in hell of accessing. I also have rock-solid witnesses to back me up. I never lose a fight, and I never back down. I'm not someone they should have made an enemy out of."

"That's my Brother," said Al, grinning and patting his brother on the back. "Now, we need to get you back to school. You have a class to teach in a few minutes."

Little did they know that the hits hadn't yet quit coming. It was about time for Ed's class to be over, and Al and Roy were about to head over to the lecture hall when Al got a text message telling them that Ed had gone to his office. Something about that worried them both since Ed was supposed to have stayed put in the lecture hall until they got there. Either he'd walked over with somebody else – one of his students or another teacher – or something was wrong. Given the law of averages, Roy was pretty sure that the likelier scenario was that something had gone wrong.

In the science building, Al and Roy walked down the hallway toward Ed's office, but when they
heard a loud crash from the direction they were already headed they took their heels. They burst through Ed's door to find him standing with his hair in disarray, his hunched shoulders tense, and his chest heaving. The look in his eyes was a mix of pure rage and the defiant glare of a cornered rat. His desk was overturned and it was clear from his posture that he had been the one to overturn it.

"Ed, love, what's going on?" asked Roy gently, he and Al approaching with the utmost caution.

"Close. The. Door," growled Ed, the words rumbling from deep in his chest. Roy reached behind him and immediately closed the door, locking it for good measure. Ed all but collapsed into his chair, leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

"Brother, what happened? I mean, we just got this place cleaned up," said Al, finally reaching his brother and putting a hand on his shoulder.

"That fucking piece of shit . . ." snarled Ed with overflowing hate. "He . . . he fucking threatened me! He . . . gaaah! I can hardly think of it let alone fucking say it!"

"Edward, take a deep breath," suggested Al, his voice slow and soothing. Ed took a deep breath in and let it out very slowly. "All right, now, Ed, tell us what happened."

"That old bastard was sitting in my class for the whole fucking thing, just watching me with this greasy fucking grin," began Ed, speaking very carefully, his tone tightly controlled. "After class, he waited until the students left then pulled me aside. He said . . ." Ed took a deep breath in and let it out as a snarl. "He said that if I don't go to his fucking house tonight and . . . entertain him, he'll see to it that they hurt our father."

"Mother fucker," hissed Roy, feeling dizzy with the sudden rush of raw rage and overwhelming sympathy.

"Brother," began Al, his voice all at once iron-hard and inarguable. "You are not going over there. Overblown sense of responsibility be damned, Dad wouldn't want you to go either and neither do I. Neither of us would ever ask that of you. And anyway, I seriously doubt that sleezeball has that much influence. He's a peon, nothing more. His only connection to Ouroboros is his dealings with Frank Archer, and that doesn't even have anything to do with what's happening with Dad. I know his threats caught you off guard, but if you think about it logically, you'll see that they're nothing but hot air."

"Are you sure?" asked Ed, clearly wanting to believe but not yet daring to. "Are you absolutely fucking sure? I won't have anybody – not even that no good asshole – hurt just to protect my nonexistent virtue."

"I'm sure Ed," said Al, letting his brother see the certainty in his eyes. "The dean is just a small man with delusions of grandeur. I don't even think anybody knows he made this move. There's no doubt in my mind he acted alone for the sake of his own sick interests."

Ed nodded slowly, deflating with a heavy sigh. "You're right, Al," he said at last. "This is nothing but a power play made by somebody who has none. And anyway, I recorded the whole thing. He made a big mistake approaching me on a day when I have to take classes. I had my mini-recorder in my pocket left over from my class earlier. Though I think I may have accidentally recorded over part of the lecture. It sucks because I hate borrowing notes from my fucking classmates."

Al and Roy let out a relieved laugh, Al shaking his head. "What am I going to do with you, Brother?" he asked rhetorically. "Come on, let's go back to the lab and get the rest of that data entered."
"But before that, seeing as you've had a wretched day, how about I spring for pastries and good coffee?" offered Roy, and Ed perked up immediately, his eyes shining at the prospect. Roy chuckled to himself and led the boys from the office.

Just because he was in the mood to be a nice guy, Roy also sprang for a box of donuts and coffee for the rest of his team. Needless to say he was greeted rather happily upon his return to the lab. Al stuck around instead of heading back to Winry, choosing instead to work side-by-side with his brother, helping to get the last of the new data entered more quickly. Eventually, however, they had to relocate because there simply wasn't enough room for everything they were working with. The boys went up to Ed's lab, Ed leaving Roy with a warm hug and a soft kiss, whispering to him before separating, "Thanks."

"You're always welcome," Roy replied quietly with a fond smile for his lover. Ed winked then joined his brother in the hallway so they could go upstairs together, leaving behind a chorus of "awwww" from the team.

In between phone calls to Grumman, Chris, Maes, and Riza letting them know about the dean's threats – they all marveled at Ed's forethought in recording the conversation – Roy worked on his own research. He hadn't had much time for his class work and research lately. He wasn't complaining, but as Ed had stated earlier, the end of the semester was swiftly approaching. He wasn't under quite the same amount of pressure as Ed to complete his dissertation, but he did still have deadlines for various phases of the research. If he didn't get back to it, he was going to end up having to request an extension. Maybe, once they were no longer in crisis management mode, Roy might be able to enlist a little of Ed's help. He wouldn't force it, of course. Ed already had a ridiculous workload as it was, but if he could even just offer them a little of his brilliant insight here and there, that'd probably be more than enough to help them meet their deadlines.

Roy's desk phone rang, and as he reached for the receiver he found himself hoping it wasn't yet another crisis. He finally manned up after the fourth ring and answered, "Mustang."

"Eureka!" exclaimed Ed without preamble.

"Oka~y," drawled Roy. "Do we need to take your coffee away again?"

Ed laughed far more enthusiastically than the quip called for, but he did, thankfully, explain. "Think less prank call, and more Archimedes reference – though there's no way in hell I'm running through the halls naked. Never mind, not the fucking point. The point is that we've hit the tipping point. We have a fucking location."

"Hell yeah! Good job!" cheered Roy, actually jumping up from his desk for a quick victory pose. "Do you have confirmation yet, or do you want me to get on that?"

"We worked a little magic and got confirmation," giggled Ed a little maniacally – meaning they'd done more of their "exploratory computing". "But definitely call in the troops. We need to get together at the house tonight for a war meeting. It's time we got this invasion under-fucking-way."

"Aye, aye, Captain," replied Roy, grinning ear-to-ear. "One war meeting coming right up!"

Later that night, they were all gathered in the parlor. Even Aunt Chris and Grumman were there, the two of them seated in the two most comfortable chairs in the room. Roy, Ed, and Al had grabbed every chair in the house and brought it down, but there were still people sitting on the floor. They'd also carried the white board down from the library, and Ed had borrowed one of the projectors from the university. It was a bit late at night, but Ed and Al still made sure that coffee was plentiful and that he'd fed everybody who was hungry. It was just their way of showing gratitude to their friends.
for the inconvenience they'd volunteered to put up with.

Once everyone was as comfortable as possible, Ed moved to stand at the "front" of the room – in other words, the place where the white board stood. "All right, let's get this show on the road," he said to get everyone's attention. "I'd like to start off by saying thanks again for everything you guys have done so far. You all put in a lot of work and a lot of long hours. Some of you practically put your whole lives on hold to help us. So, really, I can't thank you guys enough. But, now that we've got the sappy shit out of the way . . ." he paused while everyone laughed. "As you may or may not know, we've finally got enough data to be able determine the location where they're holding Hohenheim."

Ed paused again to let the full implications of this settle in their minds. It meant that the time for planning and preparing was over. It was now time for things to get serious – now the shit would really hit the fan. "It couldn't have come at a better time. Today the dean threatened me – or rather, he threatened Hohenheim if I didn't do what he wants. What he wants is fucking repugnant, so naturally I didn't comply. We believe he doesn't have the power to make good on his threats, but the possibility does exist that we've misjudged him, so it's more important than ever that we move quickly. Tomorrow morning – much, much earlier than I like – we'll begin to make our move.

"My plan is actually three-fold, since the problem at hand has three branches – Ouroboros, Hohenheim, the dean," Ed explained, turning and writing on the white board as headers the three things he listed. "The problem with the dean is the simplest of the three, and his ham-handed efforts to get in my pants have made it easier. I recorded him making his threats today. Plus I have the evidence of his embezzlement and a growing list of his conspirators for which I have damning evidence as well. That problem can now be handled by the appropriate authorities. I can even tie him to Archer, which will give us what we need to put him in jail for a while. However, none of this will be possible until Ouroboros is out of the picture. The chances are high that they'd let the dean swing, since he doesn't actually have any direct ties back to them. This whole embezzlement and coercion thing was only ever a side project for Archer, and not something initiated by or on behalf of the company. But it's better not to risk it, because it's also possible that Archer might try to call in a favor or two and get this thing quashed.

"So, first thing is to take care of the Hohenheim issue. Once we remove that leverage from them, I can take care of the second part of my plan, which will hamstring Ouroboros. The third part will bring to light university embezzlement issue, which will in turn take down the dean. The second and third parts won't require any help. The first part, I'll need quite a few of you. Here's how it's going to go down . . ." He stepped up to the white board again and began writing. "The first thing we need to worry about is securing the location." He pointed to where he had written "secure location" under Hohenheim's header on the board. "Ostensibly it's a warehouse owned by a one of Ouroboros' shell companies. However, underground are a series of laboratories and a large hollowed out area that looks like it's used for testing of some sort. Al, could you get the lights, please?" Al got up and turned out the lights, closing the curtains to block out the streetlights as well. Ed flipped the board over while Al took a second to flip on the projector, handing his brother the remote. With a click of the button, a picture showed up on the board showing a street view of what appeared to be a dilapidated warehouse. "It appears to be abandoned, but if you look closer," he clicked the remote again and a blurry close-up shot of the door came up, "You'll see that the security system is not only up-to-date but practically brand fucking new and state of the art. From what I've been able to gather, all of the outer door locks have numberd keypad locks with an 8-digit code and also actual key locks on the door itself. The interior locks are the real problem though. Don't get me wrong, if we go in at night then we'll have to worry about motion sensors and proximity alarms and floodlights, but during the day, all that shit will be disabled. So, during the day, first floor is a breeze and we can access the basement and sub basements through the fire doors leading off of the stairs. Once you get down to the second sub-level, locks become exponentially more annoying. We're talking thumb print
identification, 8-digit numbered keypad, *and* a magnetic card reader."

"I assume you have a way to bypass all that," said Izumi, lifting one eyebrow in Ed's direction. Ed winced and nodded.

"I do, but only if you won't kick me for it later, Teacher," he said, taking a healthy step away from her. "I know how you get when I start taking apart security systems . . . again."

"In this case, it's allowable Edward," she said, rolling her eyes.

"All right then," said Ed, grinning with relief. "I've already cracked the 8-digit codes. That was actually the easy part. As for the thumb print identification, we can get that off of the actual thumb of one of the guard-thugs once we're below – I created a special putty to get a mold of the print, so, no we won't be cutting off anyone's thumbs or toting around unconscious guard-thugs. I anticipate needing to incapacitate a few people once we get below, and we can get the imprint and a key card from one of them. They have approximately six people on guard as far as I can see – two on the ground level, two on the door I think hides Hohenheim's accommodations, and two more to wander between floors. There may be more, but that's as close to an accurate count as I could manage without more time for reconnaissance.

"The next part is where it gets a bit tricky," said Ed, clicking the remote again. He went through a series of images displaying the halls and stairwell as well as the doors and labs. There were very few people occupying the labs aside from the guards, and all of those people wore white lab coats, meaning that they were most likely scientists. "Our mission here is *not*, in fact, extracting Hohenheim. What we will be doing is knocking out the guards, making sure Hohenheim is safe and untouchable, and then locking down the facility so we can gift wrap the whole lot of them for the cops to find. While we're doing all this, we'll be recording footage of whatever we find down there. The experiments they're conducting are illegal. Moreover, the fact that they have Hohenheim at all makes them guilty of kidnapping and wrongful imprisonment. With the footage we're going to take and Hohenheim's testimony, we should have enough leverage to force either the guard-thugs or the scientists to turn state's evidence on the company. And after what I plan to do to them, Ouroboros won't have the credibility to refute the charges."

"You've apparently put a lot of thought into this little plan of yours," said Chris, her mild expression giving way to a look of pleasant surprise.

"I haven't slept much, and when my hands are busy, my mind sort of wanders," replied Ed with a shrug. "I think you'll really appreciate the second part of the plan, but I'm afraid I can't share the details of that just yet. But after this is all over, we can discuss it over drinks." He offered her a wicked grin and a wink, making her laugh lightly. "Now, for this plan to work, I need Breda and Roy in the control tower, which will be our mobile command center. The monitors in the van will show different aspects of this caper. Two monitors will show the footage from the cameras we'll be wearing." He reached down into the box sitting next to the white board and held up what looked a plastic loop with a tiny flashlight attached. Ed handed it to Fuery, and it was passed around the room so they could all get a look. He explained to them that it was a camera, and the loop on the device was actually a plastic-wrapped thin strip of metal, the purpose of which was to wrap around the wearer's ear and adjust to fit snugly. A second device would attach to it to secure it in place, which appeared to be a thin adjustable microphone attached by a wire to an earpiece that would sit inside the ear and attach in turn to the camera, the whole assembly held in place by a Velcro strap that went around the throat. "Think of this as Bluetooth on steroids. The little box on the microphone is placed alongside the windpipe so that it can detect the vibrations in your throat from speech. This means that even the softest whisper will still be heard loud and clear. It's all wireless, of course, though that causes problems all on its own."
He heaved a huge sigh before returning the devices to the box. "Communicating with each other while we're in the labs won't be a problem. The problem is getting the signal out to the control tower. The reason it's a problem is because I intend to prevent all the bad guys' communications, essentially cutting them off from each other and from the outside world. So how do we cut them off without cutting ourselves off too? The answer is simple. I'll be stealing all nearby cell towers and blocking all incoming and outgoing satellite signals for this zone." He clicked the remote again so that a Google Earth shot of the neighborhood around the warehouse came up, a red line marking off a specific area within the neighborhood. "The only signals passing through will be those I've granted permission to – ours, in other words. There'll be a lot of pissed off people, but it'll only affect a small area and it'll only last for about 30 minutes, which is more than enough time to do what we need to do.

"Fuery, you and Al will be manning Emma, and Al will explain to you what needs to happen. You helped build some of her components, so you're the best man for the job. You'll do your thing as soon as we're clear of the building, and not a moment before. The control tower can let you know when. The other two monitors in the control tower will be tapped into the facility's security cameras. Also, my laptop will have a blueprint of the structure and the 3D model of the building overlaid on thermal imaging to display people we on the ground may not be able to see until it's too late. On the ground will be me, Jean, Izumi, Sig, and Paninya. Riza, you'll hide out on the first floor with a tranquilizer gun. Tranq guns aren't known for their accuracy, so I'm counting on your marksmanship to compensate for that. Anybody trying to get out will have to pass through the main warehouse on the first floor. Take 'em out and make sure nobody walks out those doors that isn't us." Riza nodded, a hint of pride glinting in her steely eyes. "Paninya, Izumi, and I are all close in fighters so we'll be in the front, Jean and Sig are good enough with distance weapons that they'll take the rear. Obviously, we can't use live rounds, but I've made some toys for you that should get the job done."

"All hail the Science God," breathed Breda, stunned without needing to get by one of the bullets. "You are probably the scariest person alive, you know that right?"

Ed all but howled with laughter. "I guess you have a point," he said breathlessly, his eyes twinkling. "But sometimes you have to be scary when you're going against scary people, and believe me these people are about as scary as you can get. Speaking of scary people, Al's laptop will also be in the control tower and will give you access to a rundown of the people we'll be facing in the facility. They're all fed into the reenactment model, so if we need a change of plan or route in order to get around these jackholes, you guys will be able to give us the skinny at the drop of a dime. Al, can you turn the lights back on, please?" Al did so while Ed turned off the projector then flipped the white board over again. He wrote out a simplified list of each step of the operation under the Hohenheim header. "So, first step, secure the location – meaning we cut off communications, knock out the guards, deny access to Hohenheim, and lock down the facility.

"The next bit is where Hughes comes in," Ed turned and pointed his marker at Maes. "Detectives Murry and Roach are already aware of the operation – or rather, I told them what they needed to know so they'd be poised to make the arrest, but not enough that we'll be arrested too. Hughes, you'll be meeting with them at a pre-arranged location to deliver the evidence. Afterwards, you'll direct them to our location then lay low until we give you the all clear. The second part of my plan will go into effect as soon as Hohenheim is in protective custody. Old geezer, have the arrangements been made according to my instructions?"
"Everything is exactly as you requested," Grumman assured him with an impish sort of smile. "I know better than to question our resident genius."

"Awesome. I don't know what I'd do without you old man," said the resident genius with a warm smile of gratitude. "Hughes, if anything goes wrong with the meeting or with the evidence, I've copied every fucking piece of this crap in triplicate and hidden the other copies. Falman will tail you to make sure that there aren't any party crashers. I've made some toys for you two as well, to keep you safe. And while we're on the subject of safety," Ed reached into the box and pulled out what looked a shirt or vest of some sort. "We're going in loaded for bear. These vests are made of metal alloy molded into what amounts to tiny overlapping plates about a centimeter in diameter each then set into a heavy-duty polymer and bonded to the fabric. Actually these plates are made of the same proprietary alloy that Winry and I created for my arm and leg. So, it's lightweight and can stop all but armor piercing rounds. We tested these vests at the firing range, so I know they work. There'll also be leg and arm plates to protect as many vital areas as possible."

"Is there anything you didn't think of?" asked Paninya in blatant wonder.

"Probably quite a few things," said Ed uneasily. "But I wasn't about to repay you guys by letting you get hurt or killed helping us out. If anything happens to you guys I'll never forgive myself. I can't cover every contingency, but dammit I'll do everything I possibly can to keep you guys safe. Let me make this clear. Nobody gets hurt. If things get too hot, get the hell out. I've got multiple escape routes mapped out, and I'll make sure you know them too. Grumman even arranged a safe house for us in case it all goes sideways. So, please, please, be safe and don't do anything stupid. All right?" They could all only nod to that, moved by his determination to protect them. "Good. Now, go get some rest, we'll call you in the morning to tell you where to meet. Tomorrow starts really fucking early, so sleep while you can."
Chapter Notes

Ok, so, I know I said one more chapter, but I totally fibbed again. However, this chapter is over 10,000 words long, so I think you'll understand why I cut it in two. And anyway, I'm posting the final chapter in the next five minutes, so no worries. The reason it took so long . . . well, there are a multitude of reasons, a plethora even. Long story short, drama, research, other projects, and keyboard assassination. Seriously, I've lost count of how many times I've replaced my keyboard this year. A few guys at Best Buy know me on a first name basis now, but they call me the Keyboard Assassin. Luckily, I find it more funny (and pathetic that I've killed enough keyboards to be considered a professional slayer of keyboards) than offensive. Anyway, as for the chapter, I got a little carried away here and there, but I hope it turned out all right anyway. And I was not exactly one with the editing, so please forgive the mistakes. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 17

Have Fun Storming the Castle!

The early hours just after dawn found their little infiltration unit gathered in the parlor once again, bleary-eyed and clinging to coffee mugs like life preservers in a flood. Surprisingly, Ed was the only one wide awake, though Roy had his doubts that his lover had actually slept at all to begin with. He made breakfast for everyone – omelets filled with ham, sausage, bacon, and overflowing with cheese – then commenced their final briefing while they ate. He used the white board and projector to show them the buildings schematics, making sure they knew all the safe routes in and out of the building, using still shots from security camera footage to make absolutely sure they had a mental image of the routes.

Once he'd covered their entrance and escape, he then went on to detail the actual plan. Many of the details he left "fluid", as he called it, so that each person would be able to act independently based on the situation. He told them that the reason for that was because he didn't have an entirely accurate count on the guards, and two of the guards moved around quite a bit, as did the scientists. Remaining flexible was his way of accounting for variables. He told them, quite simply, that they each only had to achieve their objectives. The method for doing that would depend on how the cards were dealt. However, he also made sure they had all the information and equipment they might need in order to make good decisions on the fly.

After the briefing, they left in twos and threes, staggering their departure so that they didn't appear to be in cahoots or otherwise up to something. By the time the last group walked out the door – Ed, Al, and Roy – Riza and Izumi were already in place to take out their observers. Unbeknownst to their watchers, Ed had sent Maes and Riza up to the roof before the first pair had left. From there they'd spotted the spies pretty easily.

Riza handled the first one, and while the second one was distracted by the sudden collapse of the first one, Izumi snuck up on him and sent him off to lala land. After literally tying up their loose ends – as in with zip-ties, blindfolds, and gags – the infiltration team was free to head over to pick up their
mobile command center and Sig's delivery van from the body shop without worrying about their movements being reported. The watchers, who had been stashed in the trunk of Riza's car, would be left at the secret lab to be arrested with the rest of the thugs.

Their next stop was the auto body shop owned by the Curtis's friend Mason. Mason was a stalky man of average height with olive-toned skin, dark hair, and a friendly, open personality. He seemed remarkably excited to be in on their little clandestine caper, like a kid sneaking out in the middle of the night to play pranks. The Elric brothers seemed to like and respect the guy, treating him a bit like some kind of favorite uncle. Roy could remember Ed mentioning that when he'd first started at Central University at the age of sixteen, he'd had to move in with Mason. Since Ed was underage at the time, he'd needed to live with an adult, and Mason had apparently volunteered. If anything, that fact made Roy respect the man as well, since it showed a high degree of character to be so willing to help out someone else's child.

With a flourish, Mason pulled the tarp off of Vanzilla to show off the fruits of his labor. Replacing the primer gray was perfect white with a factory-finish sheen and a large blue, red, and gold logo for some random plumbing company. The back windows were painted over with white to camouflage the fact that they were covered in black-out fabric inside. Roy wouldn't have even known that it was Vanzilla at all if he hadn't already known about the changes that were being made to it.

The butcher shop's delivery van had received a similar makeover so that it couldn't be associated with the Curtises, and its presence wouldn't be questioned any more than the presence of the "plumber's van" would be. The freezers had been removed from the back and replaced with something covered by a drop cloth, the fabric falling in such a way that the shape seemed almost like a canon of some sort. Roy wondered if maybe it was the "Emma" Ed had mentioned before. Certainly it gave off an almost sinister feeling that concerned Roy a bit. He'd just have to trust in Ed's "no deaths" policy, which Ed had told them extended to enemies and allies alike. He told them bluntly that if he had any say in it, nobody was going to die during this incursion. So, sinister feeling aside, Roy would have faith that whatever jack was hidden in the box, it wouldn't be lethal at least.

While Ed, Riza, Sig, Izumi, Jean, and Paninya were getting changed into their new gear, Al explained to Roy and Breda how the computer network in Vanzilla operated. His tutorial also covered some tips for efficient use of Ed's reenactment model as well as tricks such as snapping still shots from the footage that would be fed to them through the ground crew's cameras – which they were jokingly referring to as "ear-cams". He also gave them a few more details about what Ed would be doing to kill all incoming and outgoing communications. It sounded remarkably complicated, and, for all that Roy was just as big a nerd as any of his fellow lab geeks, most of it was over Roy's head – far enough over his head that, with a little push, the whole mess could land on Mars. Roy just figured that as long as the craziness did what it was meant to do, he wasn't too concerned with not understanding how it did it.

When Ed and the rest emerged, they were dressed all in black from head-to-toe – black long-sleeved shirts, black cargo pants, black tactical vests, and black boots. They looked like they were either a SWAT team or a terrorist group, though, considering what they were about to do, they were actually a little bit of both. With the bulky clothing, Roy couldn't tell if they were wearing Ed's ingenious homemade body armor or not, but he had no doubt that they were. Ed even insisted that those staying in the vehicles wore the armor too, just to be on the safe side. Ed had stuffed his golden hair into a knit cap that was pulled low, and he'd even cut a little hole in the cap so that it wouldn't interfere with his ear-cam/microphone/earbud assembly. Everyone else on the ground crew had the same sort of caps and Ed helped them get the caps on and such situated properly, hooking up their ear-cams and communications equipment then making sure to have each person test the rig. Breda, Roy, Al, and Fuery got ear-cam assemblies too, just in case something went horribly wrong and they needed to prove and/or review what had happened. Ed really was leaving nothing to
"Let's mount up kiddies!" declared Ed once they were all prepared to his satisfaction.

They all climbed into their respective modes of transportation – Sig, Izumi, Al, and Fuery in the delivery van, and Ed, Roy, Riza, Breda, Paninya, and Jean in the former Vanzilla. Needless to say, everyone was in awe of the teched-out van – even Roy since he hadn't seen it since the finishing touches had been put on it. A server had been hooked up and was humming away in a little cubbyhole, a strange jury-rigged cooling system keeping it from overheating. Ed and Al's laptops were strapped down to little swivel-trays that swung out of the underside of the worktable, the two laptops hooked into the server with fire wire and their power cables winding away to vanish into the bundle of wires that ran up the wall of the van then along the join of the roof and wall. The wires all ultimately hooked into a black metal box that had a rather shockingly huge black cable running from the other end of it to the front of the van where it disappeared under the dashboard.

"All hail the Science God," murmured Breda, admiring Ed's handiwork with understandable awe. "Ed, I've said it before, but I'll say it again. You are The Man!"

"I admit, I probably had a little more fun with this than I really should have," said Ed sheepishly, a fetching blush coloring his cheeks. "But I haven't been able to really cut loose and design shit since I was a kid, so it's only fair that I get to go a little wild now that I have the perfect excuse for it."

"I would love to crawl inside your brain," said Breda wistfully. "I'd just hang out for a whole weekend on a lawn chair, sipping margaritas and watching the chaos go by."

"Nah, my head is crowded enough as it is without unwanted visitors," said Ed with a chuckle. They hit a bad bump in the road, and Ed's good cheer was quickly forgotten, Ed squeezing his eyes tightly shut and muttering to himself too softly for any of them to hear.

"You all right there, Science God?" asked Breda with friendly concern.

"Yeah, just not a fan of cars – or van, in this case," said Ed, mustering a slightly shaky smile. Roy reached out with the hand not holding the overhead strap and squeezed Ed's leg – just a gentle pressure to remind him that he wasn't alone, that comfort was close to hand. Ed flashed him a strained smile of gratitude. "Is it sad that, for me, the ride there and back is probably going to be the hardest part of the whole operation?"

"A little bit, yeah," responded Roy teasingly.

Ed shook his head and popped a stick of gum in his mouth before offering the pack to Jean who was sitting in the front passenger seat. "What is this for Boss? Some sort of super spy trick for staying cool under pressure or something?" asked Jean, sounding like he was only half joking.

"Nah, I just figure when I have to put the mask over my face, I don't want to have to smell stale coffee and chewed-up omelets. Haven't you ever worn a dust mask or whatever? You totally have to re-breathe your own funk-nasty breath. I think I'll pass, dude. I like my masks to be minty fresh thanks all the fucking same," replied Ed honestly, and though the others laughed, they also took a stick of gum. The mask Ed referred to fit over the nose and mouth and looked like some kind of gothic-style surgeon's mask – made of some kind of hard, lightweight plastic and painted with a black matte finish. Ed told them that, although the masks would work for disguises, that wasn't their only purpose. He'd mostly created them because he wasn't sure what sort of chemical or biological agents they might find hanging around down in those labs. He hadn't seen anybody running around in biohazard suits while he'd been snooping through their security camera footage, but he was too paranoid to risk it. Ed claimed that the masks could filter out most airborne contaminants and aerosol-
based weapons like pepper spray or tear gas. It would also serve to muffle their voices enough that they wouldn't be as easily recognizable. It was another reason why Ed's amazing little microphones were so perfect, because they didn't just pick up audio signals, but also vibrations from the throat, so the masks wouldn't make much difference in how well they would be able to hear each other. If Ed wasn't recruited by the CIA after this was all over, there was no justice in the world. The sort of shit he'd come up with on the fly for this operation would make even James Bond feel outclassed.

"And you know, now that I think about it, oxygen masks at the hospital smell funky too," continued Ed as he idly chewed his stick of gum. "But they don't really smell like bad-breath-funky. They always seem to smell like beef bouillon. And those fucking nose tubes are worse. They smell like rubber and beef bouillon. It's not happy, let me tell you. You'd think it'd make you crave beef, but it really doesn't. It just makes you loathe all things beef flavored. After I lost my arm and leg, by the time they took me off of oxygen, I ate nothing but chicken for a month. I couldn't even look at a cheeseburger without remembering that stench."

"Seriously? Beef bouillon?" asked Breda, incredulous but still laughing with everybody else.

"Of all the ridiculous things you guys could talk about, you choose bad breath and beef bouillon," chimed in Al over the radio, startling all of them. "Brother, I'm not sure what's wrong with you, but I'm pretty sure there's a medication for it."

"Thanks, Al, your vote of confidence is so uplifting," said Ed with heavy sarcasm. "You do know I have some of your embarrassing baby pictures on my laptop right? And a whole van full of people who have never seen you running around with a diaper on your head rather than on your-"

"Do that and I'll tell them all your middle name," counter-threatened Al, but Ed was unfazed.

"And I can tell them yours in return, and yours is way worse than mine," Ed riposted. "As long as this doesn't turn into another debacle like that prank war in high school . . ."

"Oh, you mean the one where you called me by my full name over the school's PA and the next day I returned the favor by calling your full name and upping the ante by announcing you were needed in the nurse's office to pick up ointment for an unfortunate rash?" asked Al and the brothers both chuckled.

"Yeah, and I retaliated by actually giving you an unfortunate rash that made everybody think you had the worst case of acne in the history of teenagerness. That'd be the one," said Ed, his grin impish and at the same reminiscent. "Good times . . ."

"And that's why geniuses should never be allowed to be involved in prank wars," announced Breda in his best school marm impression, shaking his finger at Ed.

"Or pillow fights," added Al. "To be honest, I may be nearly a match for brother in intellect, but even I don't know how he and Winry do it. They do something to the pillows that somehow makes them so hard that a simple application of the correct force can break wood." All but Riza, who was currently driving, turned to look at Ed in utter horror.

"It's not like I can do that with just any pillow," said Ed with a shrug. "It has to be a feather pillow. And it takes a little while to prepare it right. But if you think that's bad, you should see what I can do with a damp towel."

"Yeah, those rat-tails he makes can draw blood," said Al and they could practically hear him shiver at the memory.
"I liked having a way to defend myself in the locker room," Ed said in his defense. "The sort of bastards who like to bully guys of perfectly average fucking height, especially when the average person in question has long hair and a face like mine . . . I may be gay, but there's a limit to how much I'm willing to wrestle with naked men. I'd rather they keep their hands and dangly bits to themselves, and if they didn't agree, I made sure they couldn't use either for a good long while."

"And all mortal men should know better than to incur the divine wrath of the Science God," said Breda and everyone in the van bowed to Ed like worshippers, making him laugh uproariously. "Besides, pissing off geniuses is never a good idea. I mean, haven't they ever seen Real Genius or Revenge of the Nerds? Pissing off nerds never ends well. Next thing you know, there're surveillance cameras in the sorority house, jock straps full of liquid heat, ninja amateur dental work, and houses overflowing with tidal waves of fairly unsanitary popcorn."

"Breda, you're totally showing your age," teased Ed with another bright laugh. "I wasn't even born yet when those movies came out. I won't say I haven't seen them. I've totally seen every single movie featuring super awesome nerd-heroes that Hollywood ever produced. But yeah, half of them predate me."

"Dude, everybody in this van predates you," pointed out Jean, deadpan.

"Touché," conceded Ed.

"Time to put on our game faces, boys," said Riza as the van slowed. "We're here."

As soon as they pulled to a stop, Ed took a deep steadying breath to calm his leftover riding-in-cars jitters. Once he was a little more relaxed, he took over Roy's seat and began setting up the first part of their operation: take out their communications. He had already done the bulk of the work, so really all he had to do was open then execute the program he'd already created. As soon as that program began running – a waving pirate flag replacing the more typical hourglass that would normally indicate wait-time – Ed got all the video feeds up and running too. He had already showed Breda and Roy how to navigate all the surveillance measures he'd set up and had given them a crash course in how to use the reenactment model for route-scouting purposes. By the time he had finished teaching them, they were just as poised and battle-ready as the rest of their posse.

The plan was to move in around lunchtime. Nobody ever expected anything to happen during lunchtime. In fact, most people tended to let their guard down and think only with their stomachs. It was the best time to attack if only because an attack would be the last thing the enemy would expect. Night would have been better for stealth purposes, but Ed was more interested in the element of surprise – which really was a form of stealth all its own. If they could catch their enemy with respective proverbial pants down, they might have a chance of taking them out before they could get a shot off. After all, just because Ed's team wouldn't be using live ammo didn't mean that the enemy would be following the same rule.

There was no visible activity outside of the location which, as shown by their previous reconnaissance, was a huge run-down warehouse with boarded-up windows and a weed-choked courtyard. On the monitors they could see two black vans and a navy blue SUV – so cliché – parked in the loading dock around back, but there didn't appear to be anybody guarding the vehicles. "Are we going to do anything about their transport?" asked Riza, clearly thinking the same thing Roy had been thinking.

"Not necessary," said Ed with a shrug. "Emma will take care of them as soon as we haul anchor."

"But who, or what, is Emma?" asked Riza, but Ed just gave her a downright evil little smile and put a finger to his lips.
"I'm not the kind of guy to kiss and tell," he told her with a wink. "You'll find out soon enough. Let's go."

Their biggest challenge was going to be the approach. In broad daylight, they were more than a little conspicuous with their all black SWAT-like fashion statement. Having the towering Sig in their group didn't help either, especially burdened as the big man was with the hefty black gym bag full of equipment on his back. The approach was one problem for which Ed had few solutions. The best he could manage was to patch in a video loop on the feaux-warehouse's courtyard cameras to conceal their movements. It carried with it two basic flaws: One: as long as the loop was patched in, the control tower wouldn't be able to see what was happening in the courtyard any more than the bad guys could. They'd only have the views from the cameras worn by the invaders, and those were limited to the direction each person happened to be looking. Two: the bad guys could discover their little deception, thereby costing them the element of surprise. It was risky, but it was the best they could manage.

The next problem with the approach was avoiding being seen by those that were physically present. This was an easier problem to solve. All they had to do was calculate sight-lines from all available portals that would allow a person to spot them. It wouldn't be possible to look through the tall windows since they were all boarded up and also too far from the ground. Their only issue would be the small window in the front door. As long as they stayed out of sight of that one window, they'd be home free. It would be easier to avoid being seen the closer to the window they got, since the size of the area visible from the window was much wider further away from it but decreased as distance from the window decreased.

They parked the van where it couldn't be seen from that tiny window. As soon as a video loop began, Al and his team created a distraction a little ways up the street so that nobody would notice the pseudo-SWAT posse jumping out of the plumber's van. Ed and his team ran across the street and into the shadow that the faux-warehouse cast across its courtyard, staying low and just outside of the predetermined sight-line of the door. When they actually reached the door, they stayed under the window. Riza taking up a position that would allow her to be the first to enter, tranq gun at the ready. Sig took up a position immediately behind Ed and Riza, his gaze trained on the courtyard and the street beyond while his bulk hid Riza and Ed from view. Roy couldn't see what Ed was doing, but he could hear him cursing under his breath the whole time accompanied by a number of odd beeps and a distinct sound of something sizzling. Then, suddenly, Ed hissed, "Yesss! You're up." A jerk of his chin indicated he was referring to Paninya.

According to Ed, Paninya hadn't always been the law-abiding citizen she was now. She was an orphan and had grown up on the streets, surviving by less-than-lawful means for many years. Then she lost her legs and was left with no option but panhandling until a gruffly kind automail mechanic had taken pity on her and given her legs. He taught her a love of engineering, and of helping people, but she had managed to maintain some of her less law-abiding skills even into adulthood. Those skills included a deft hand at lock-picking. She had the door open in no time flat, her and Ed exchanging impish looks over the fruits of their labor. Roy didn't need to see the lower half of their faces to know they were grinning.

On the whispered count of three, Paninya pulled the door open, remaining behind it and under the window while the rest of them simply stayed out of Riza's way. When the guard suddenly popped up in front of her and grabbed the muzzle of the tranq gun, she didn't even have time to react before Ed had flowed around her and clocked the guy in the chin. There was a crunch as of bones breaking, and Roy and Breda both winced. The guy dropped to the ground like a stone, and Riza popped him with a tranquilizer dart before pivoting around Edward to take out the other guard on the warehouse level. This one was standing on a balcony of some sort fifty yards or so away, backlit by the large windows of what must have once been the boss's office once upon a time when the warehouse was
When the second guard had slumped to the floor, Ed quietly closed the door behind them while Jean and Izumi moved to secure the two guards with zip ties. All weapons and communication devices were stripped from them and either smashed, claimed, or otherwise rendered unusable. Even if the poor bastards woke up sooner than expected, they wouldn't be going anywhere any time soon. Assuming a loose formation with Ed in the vanguard, they headed for the shadowed wall beneath the balcony.

When they got close enough, it became easier to see through the shadows to Ed's intended target – two doors set into the wall, one directly below the balcony and one only a foot from the outer wall. He stopped at the door directly beneath the balcony and had Sig turn around so that Ed could get into the bag on his back. He pulled what looked like a strip of metal, approximately a foot-and-a-half long, five inches wide, and almost an inch thick. Holes had been punch through the metal on either end, and it seemed to have been molded so that the ends would sit flush against the wall while the rest of it arched away from it slightly. When Ed placed it so that one hole-punched end rest on the wall and the other on the door, Roy was able to figure out the purpose of the design. The curvature of the piece was meant to accommodate doorframes. Ed next pulled a huge bolt gun from the bag, and with a somewhat maniacal look in his eye that gave the impression of a hidden evil grin, he set bolts in each of the holes on the strip of metal.

"That takes care of the entrance to the foyer and elevator," said Roy, casting a quick glance at the displayed floor plan. "And the other door is undoubtedly the stairwell entrance."

"There's a guard on the third landing of the stairwell, heading your way," Breda informed the crew. "You might wanna do something about him before making your next move."

"Nope, I'm all about the multi-tasking," said Ed, sounding like he was having way too much fun. "Teacher, think you can take down the guy on the landing while I handle the door to the first sub-level?"

"Come on, who do you think you're talking to, brat?" snorted Izumi. Just before they entered the stairwell, Ed stopped and turned to everybody.

"All right, we've got 2 minutes max to get these exits locked down. You need to take out any guards that pop their ugly heads out, restrain them and catch back up with the rest of us. If we get separated, you know the drill," he cautioned his team, and once he'd gotten positive replies from all of them, he finally opened the fire door.

The stairwell was just generic white with concrete steps, the edge of each step grooved to prevent careless feet from slipping on them. The guard was almost right on top of them as soon as they entered, but he barely lasted a second against Izumi. She moved so fast, her own ear cam barely caught the movement. Roy was tempted to try to do a slow motion replay just so he could see what she did. Even as she was trussing up her victim, Ed and the rest of the group were already standing at the first sub-level door, bolting it closed like he had the first door he'd come to. A second later, there was pounding at that door and shouting. Breda and Roy could see a scientist and another guard just beyond the bolted door, the scientist panicking while the guard tried to smash the door latch with the butt of his gun – fat lot of good that was going to do him.

By that time, Ed and his crew had already moved on to the next door out of which someone was already stepping out to investigate. Ed used the piece of metal he was holding to brain the guy then left him for Paninya and Izumi to tie up. He was nothing if not efficient. Somebody else was apparently about to open the door – a guard from the look of it, but armed with a really big knife as opposed to a gun, and wearing a disturbing grin like he was looking forward to using his sharp and
pointy toy. At a nod from Ed, Sig grabbed the latch and held the door closed so Ed could bolt it shut, temporarily heading off the threat.

"The guy that was at the second sub-level door is already running to the elevator to try to get to you from another floor," Roy told them, and Ed gave a distracted hum to let Roy know he'd heard. "He'll most likely try the first floor or ground level for access, but failing there he'll be heading down."

"Just let me know which way he goes," Ed told him as he began bolting the third sub-level door. There was one more to go then they'd use the fifth, and final, sub-level door to enter the facility. "Do me a favor. Count up the black hats and let me know what numbers I can expect. I need a head count so I can adjust our strategy."

"Roger that," said Breda, and he and Roy looked to the security camera footage and conferred until they could agree on a number. "Well, good news or bad news, Boss?"

"Give me the good news first," replied Ed resignedly.

"All right, there are only two guards on the entire hallway where we think they're keeping Hohenheim," Breda told him.

"The bad news is that there are a lot more guards than we had initially guessed," said Roy, and the other ear cams showed Ed's wince from multiple angles. "It looks like we've got fourteen total with four down and ten more to go."

"Fuck my life," growled Ed then he heaved a huge sigh. "It's all good. We can do this. The only problem is that as we close up these doors, more of them are going to head to the fifth sub-level until they're all going to be concentrated on that door, waiting for us to go in. But there's nothing we can do about it. We just need to move faster."

And that was exactly what they did, all of them running down the stairs so quickly that watching their ear cam feeds became extremely nauseating.

"Jeezus, it's like Die Hard meets The Blair Witch Project," muttered Breda, rubbing his eyes for a moment, and there was a round of soft snickers from their mini invasion force.

"Sorry guys. Just bear with it a little longer," said Ed, his breathing quicker, but still carefully controlled. There was something to be said for the results of years of physical conditioning. After the fourth sub-level door, they all but leapt the last few stairs to get to their point of entry before the bad guys. "All right kids, looks like we got here in time to set up a little surprise for our skeevy little playmates."

He reached into the big black bag and pulled out something that looked like a black pipe – about three or four inches in diameter and three feet long – with some sort of handle attached halfway down its length. He also pulled out a jury-rigged tripod then set up his weird pipe so that one end was braced on the floor while the tripod propped up the other end at an angle. Three guards came in sight at the end of the hall, and Jean's ear cam showed Ed's eyes glittering maniacally. The running guards skidded to a halt, not at all sure what to make of what they found but well-trained enough to be cautious. "Fire in the hole," said Ed a little too cheerfully.

There was a sort of hollow popping sound, and a small spherical object launched toward the guards from the pipe. The men tried to duck back around the corner, but it was too late. The sphere suddenly burst open, blanketing the other end of the hall in some kind of gas. "What was that?!" demanded Breda.

"Modified potato gun," said Ed, a shrug implied in his tone. "Aaaand a modified smoke bomb."

While Paninya packed the no-longer-quite-a-potato-gun away in the bag, Ed signaled for Izumi and
Jean to follow him to the other end of the hall, the three brandishing little battery-powered handheld fans which they used to dissipate the gas. The guards were on the ground, rolling around and writhing, hands clutching their face as they hollered and whined in purest distress. "This is why fucking with geeks is a bad idea," said Ed with malicious glee.

"Jeez Mary Poppins, what are you going to pull out of your bag next, a coat rack and a rubber tree?" muttered Breda, and Ed snickered.

"Nah, next is a spoonful of sugar, baby," snorted Ed as he and Izumi knocked the guards out – which was actually pretty merciful at this point. As each one fell unconscious, Jean came up behind Ed and Izumi to tie up the guards and strip their weapons, keys, and keycards. Ed pulled a glove off of one of the downed guards and used the putty he'd created to take impressions of his fingerprints and thumbprint, squirreling them away for later use. "All right, fifth floor is mostly storage and shit. The fourth floor is where I think we'll find Hohenheim. Once we've made sure he's secure, we'll get to work gathering evidence."

"Let's get 'er done then," said Jean, and the whole group moved on toward the elevator.

Like a big metal Jack-in-the-Box, the elevator had a surprise inside. It was the guard with the knives that they had seen earlier. He (or was it she?) was small and slender and had long lanky dark hair that somehow gave the impression of a palm tree's fronds. Despite his (or her?) size, he wasn't so much skinny as whipcord lean, just like Ed, and he had a really appalling number of knives attached everywhere he could feasibly fit a sheath that he could reach with ease.

As soon as the elevator doors opened he/she came out swinging – or in this case, slicing. Ed managed to dodge, but Paninya caught a glancing cut across her right bicep. "Fall back!" commanded Ed, and the rear line stepped back, the vanguard leaping back to join them. Faced with a solid line of offense and defense, their knife-happy opponent dropped back just out of reach, wary and searching for an opening. He had a truly disturbing grin on his face that sent a shiver through Roy and Breda both, and they couldn't imagine it was any better in person. Ed made a quick gesture to Izumi who nodded minutely to show she understood.

Ed and Izumi leapt in at the same time, baiting Palm Tree Head until he was entirely engaged in trying to fend off two extremely formidable fighters at once. They would each leap into the fray, entirely distracting the enemy only to leap out and allow the other one to engage. They kept him so busy that he didn't even notice Sig taking aim, his gun tracking Palm Tree Head's every move. As soon as Ed and Izumi got him standing still for longer than a second, Sig fired, almost point-blank. Palm Tree Head went rigid, letting out a little whimper as strong spasms shook his small frame. The second the guy stopped shaking, Ed stepped in and punched him in the head with his automail fist. He went out like a light, and they were quick enough to strip him of his impressive number of knives. It was actually more knives than they could find room for in the bag, so they donned a few of them for lack of a better solution. Maybe they'd even come in handy or something. After making absolutely sure they had got every last knife, they zip-tied the guy's wrists and ankles just like the other guards then left him with his buddies.

They took the elevator to the next floor, and once the elevator doors opened they got to find out first hand just how well their body armor worked. The first shot caught Ed in the gut, the body armor keeping it from piercing his stomach but doing nothing to shield him from the impact. It knocked him back into Paninya who had been standing directly behind him. "We can't see a shooter!" exclaimed Breda, as the ground team threw themselves out of the line of fire, plastering themselves to the sides of the elevator while Havoc enthusiastically pressed the "Close Doors" button on the elevator control panel. As soon as the doors were closed, Ed curled forward with an arm around his stomach.
"Damn it, that suuuucked," he wheezed.

"You gonna be all right kid?" asked Izumi, leaning down to get a good look at his face.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. But go ahead and wrap up Klepto's arm while I catch my breath," Ed told her breathlessly. Since they couldn't call each other by name, and everybody knew that Ed often called Paninya a klepto, it was as good a handle for her as any. Really, they'd thought of everything under the sun, covering every eventuality, every minor detail, but somehow had completely forgotten to give each other handles so they wouldn't have to reveal their real names. One would think, as many nerds as they had in their crew, somebody would have thrown out some ideas on that score.

"I've got eyes on the shooter with the thermal imaging," Roy told the team. "He's just inside a doorway, in a small space between the doorframe and the wall that just so happens to fall in the cameras' blind spot. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Nothing's broken," answered Ed, sounding like he was already getting his wind back. "It's gonna be a bitch of a bruise later though."

"So, what's the next move?" asked Havoc.

"Smoke 'em out," said Ed with a little more glee than the situation strictly called for, not that Roy could blame him. "How about the guards on Hohenheim's door? Are they holding their positions?"

"Yeah, but if I'm reading these results from your model right, there's a high chance that the guy on the left will jump in if it looks like his comrade's in a pinch," replied Roy and he heard Ed sigh. "Also, it looks like they're better armed than our other friends."

"All right," said Ed as if he'd come to a decision. "This is gonna be a two-pronged attack. I'm gonna fire two smoke bombs. One is to take out the guy firing on the elevator, and the second will create a smoke screen to get us closer to the pair of goombas guarding the goal. Cancer-stick, you and me will go in low and take advantage of the smoke screen to get closer to the door. I have another trick up my sleeve, but I need to get close enough, and I need you ready to shoot them if I screw up. Teacher, Bigfoot, take out our lone gunman. Make a show of it, so they don't notice what's happening inside the smoke screen. Everybody, put on your goggles for this next bit, or you ain't gonna wanna my friend anymore once the smoke hits you."

"Gotcha, Boss," confirmed Havoc. "But why do I gotta be Cancer-stick?"

"Hey, if I can be Klepto, you can deal with being Cancer-stick. Man up. And you smoke too much, especially for a jock, so it makes sense," Paninya counter-complained, and Havoc could only slump in defeat. "Besides, we don't want to give him cause to call us anything worse."

"Good point," said Havoc, and Ed suddenly had a cheerfully evil gleam in his eyes.

"You ready to kick some ass?" asked Ed, and Havoc sighed and rolled his eyes before nodding. They set up the modified potato, using the control tower's directions to aim for the doorway where their trigger-happy little friend was hiding, since the control tower could see what Ed was pointing at even if Ed couldn't. Ed rigged the gun so he could pull trigger with a jerk of a rigged cord so he wouldn't have to put himself in danger in order to get that first shot off. As soon as they were set up, had their goggles snugly in place, and everyone was pressed against the walls of the elevator again, Paninya reached over and pressed the button to open the elevator doors.

Ed jerked his leg, and, with a "foomp" sound, a smoke bomb was launched at the doorway through which the gunman had shot at them. There was a loud yell followed by cursing, and a few seconds
later the cursing turned into tortured whimpering and begging. Ed wasn't generally cruel by nature, so he gestured for Izumi and Sig to rush forward and knock him out. Meanwhile, Ed and Paninya moved the modified potato gun into position. Because of the thickly billowing smoke, they weren't able to aim it well, but they didn't really need accuracy, just proximity.

The second smoke bomb sailed through the air to land within a few feet of the two door guards who had been alarmed by the first smoke bomb but had made sure to hold their positions. They were professionals and knew better than to get distracted from their given assignments. Sadly, the range on the modified potato gun wasn't great, especially shooting from the hip, so the smoke from the bomb wouldn't be able to quite reach bouncer 1 and 2, but Ed had said he just needed to get close. Hopefully, the smoke would reach at least far enough for what he had planned.

Once the hall had filled with smoke, Ed and Havoc ghosted forward, their feet hardly whispering across the floor as they passed through the makeshift cover. Breda navigated for them, calling out simple face-of-a-clock directions to get them right up next to the door guards while staying within the smoke's concealing folds. "Hey! Watch out! They've got their guns drawn!" warned Roy, but neither Ed nor Havoc was able to acknowledge the warning without giving away their position. Roy could only hope that they'd heard and that Ed, like always, had a plan.

Suddenly, something that looked a bit like a landmine, of all things, slid across the floor from within the smoke, coming to a stop right in front of the two guards. They looked down at it then up at each other with obvious confusion then there was a loud buzzing and a sharp fizzling sound like electrical discharge. Without warning, their guns were yanked from their hands to fly to the mine-looking device on the floor where they stuck like they'd been welded there. A second passed in stunned silence before one of the men crept toward the device, the other inching toward the smoke and peering closer as if to trying to see through it. Then the man who had approached the device shouted out in alarm and fell forward to land on the device. He pushed and pushed as hard as he could but couldn't seem to lift his upper torso from where it was stuck. He yelled at his friend to call for help, but as soon as the other man turned toward his downed comrade, an automail fist flew out of the smoke to connect with his jaw and send him reeling into unconsciousness. Ed and Havoc strolled out of the smoke wearing smug looks of triumph.

"Yep, this place sure is awesome," began Ed as if chatting idly. "Great security and safety measures, right down to the steel-reinforced floor. That's why you can't get up. My little super magnet here has caught the metal in your gear, your guns, and the floor and made you all the best of friends." Ed crouched down in front of his victim. "Oh no, don't get up on my account, buddy. You look pretty comfy." Ed punched the guy then stepped back. He reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked like a garage door remote and pushed the button on it. The fizzling sound stopped, and Ed turned to Havoc. "Do me a favor and get this guy tied up while I get started on the door. The rest of you, watch my back. Control tower, how are we doing on the body count?"

Breda and Roy took a minute to confer and make a tally then Roy answered, "Eleven down, three to go. They're upstairs on the second floor. They've put all the scientists in one room to guard them, and have settled in for a siege."

"That's do-able," said Ed with a little sigh. "Let me know if anything heads our way. Time to deal with Hohenheim."

"Good luck," said Roy, knowing that Ed was going to need all the help he could get. If he believed in God, Roy would be praying that this next meeting ended better than Ed's last chat with his erstwhile father.

Ed got started opening the door, working his magic with the keypad, swear words falling like the
words of a spell that somehow forced the stubborn thing to open. When he finally succeeded, he moved to stand in the open doorway, peering in. On the first pass of Ed's ear cam, the room appeared dark and empty, but then Ed stepped to the side and did something with the still open keypad lock and the room's overhead lights flickered on. And there he was, curled up in a corner, covered in a thin blanket and just starting to wake. There was a glint of gold as he lifted his head, and two more as he blinked owlishly the intruders. "All right, old man, even if you recognize any of us, don't say our names. This is being recorded for posterity, and it'll be better for all of us if our names aren't known."

"But what in the world are you doing here?" demanded Hohenheim, still groggy. Apparently, not being a morning person was something else Ed inherited from his father. "Do you have any idea how dangerous this is?"

"Tch, I know it better than you do," retorted Ed petulantly. "And that's not the fucking point. Look, we're not technically here to rescue you. The cops'll be doing that in a few minutes. We're just here to gather evidence and make sure the bad guys can't kill the scientists, eliminate their hostage, or bury evidence once the cops bust down the doors. We're giving them this lab like a gift and recording everything so Ouroboros can't pull their usual shit and get out of a conviction. I will see them swing. End of story. There's a kid out there who's been waiting almost twenty years to be with his dad. I may hate your guts, but I've never denied that kid anything. So, man up, and do your fucking part. When the cops question you, tell them everything. I've already taken steps to make sure that there won't be reprisals for your testimony. You just gotta make sure it's a testimony worth all the bullshit I've gotta go through to protect it. You got that?"

"Yes, I believe I do," said Hohenheim with a heavy sigh. "You've always been too stubborn for your own good."

"Look, do you know anything about what they're trying to pull off here? If I know what I'm looking for, it'll be a lot easier to make logical conclusions about where I might find it," asked Ed impatiently.

"I know they've been trying to interpret the research they stole from you, for starters. They're also trying to restart my own research, which is why they brought me here and not to one of the other labs," answered Hohenheim, and Ed indulged in a fit of cursing. "Talk to some of the other scientists upstairs. Most of them are here because their families are being threatened. They're as much hostages as I am. Some of them have been here for years under duress. If you can find a way to keep their families safe, I don't doubt they'll jump at the chance to help you."

"Old man, just hang tight here. By the time I'm done, the guards will be knocked out or tied up, and this door will be locked from the inside. By the time the cops come in, all of the electronic locks will be disabled. I'll leave you a device that will give the locks enough juice to open once per jolt. The cops know to come to you to gain access to the rest of the doors, so they'll come here first." Ed explained hurriedly. Ed pulled another curved metal bar out of the bag, but this one was split in the middle and had a weird cage wrapped around a keypad that had been placed to one side of that split. There was just enough room between the copper bars of the cage to allow someone access to the keypad.

"A Faraday Cage?" asked Hohenheim, watching as Ed bolted the split bar over the door.

"It'll protect the lock. Speaking of which," Ed dug an orange box out of the black bag and set it on the ground beside his father. "Don't open that box until the cops get here. There'll be a flashlight, a communication device that links only to my private network, and the device which will allow the cops to open the other doors. I taped the instructions to the device. I dumbed them down a lot, but
you may still need to interpret them for the cops. I highly doubt any of them are fluent in Nerd. The lock on your door is an eight-digit keypad. The key is the one day I won't ever let you forget."

Hohenheim thought about that for a moment than winced and nodded. Roy couldn't help but wonder what day that would be, but knew that now wasn't the time to ask.

Ed opened the lock so they could leave, telling his father how to lock the door behind them. He left without another backward glance – so much for father-son reunions. The ground crew went up and down the hallway, checking all of the rooms and making sure to catch pictures of everything that was even vaguely evidence-like. Once they'd done all they could on that floor, they finally returned to the elevator. However, this time they used a bit more caution and made sure they were all plastered to the sides before the doors opened.

It was good that they did, because as soon as the doors opened, shots rang out hitting the back of the elevator. Some of the bullets ricocheted dangerously before Ed could toss out their last smoke bomb then hit the button to close the elevator door. Since they'd known they were expected, it had been easy enough to prepare a couple tricks in advance. "That's two more down, and the last guy is in the room with the scientists. But I warn you, he's a big 'un," Breda told Ed, and Ed nodded.

"Then let's wrap this up," he said and opened the elevator door. This time, they were met with the sounds of men crying out piteously, and Havoc and Paninya rushed out to knock out then tie up their victims. "I think these next two floors are going to be Yahtzee, evidence-wise. So keep a sharp eye out. If anybody recognizes any of the scientists, don't keep it to yourself. We need info on them if we're going to talk them around."

"The scientists are in the last lab on the right, and the door is locked and barred by filing cabinets on the inside," Roy informed the team. Ed cursed in English and German interchangeably.

"Got any bright ideas, Science God?" asked Breda.

"I might be able to . . . nope, I got nothing," said Ed with a sigh, his shoulders slumping.

"I've got this," chimed in Sig, drawing all of their eyes to him in surprise. "Just get the lock open, Brat, and I'll take care of the rest."

"Roger that," said Ed, his grin apparent in his eyes though the mask covered all other evidence of his fit of glee.

Ed took care of the lock, and Sig went through the door like a bulldozer. The scientists all yelled and screamed and scattered, trying to get out of the way of the unstoppable force that had burst through the door. Once on the other side, he came face-to-face with a man that was easily his equal in size and breadth, and that's when two mountains crashed together. While Sig had the guy entirely focused on their contest of strength, Ed and Izumi slid into the room on either side of the mammoth men. They moved to stand behind the immense guard and jumped up as if to attack. Faster than should have been possible, the powerful guard disengaged and swept the two fighters aside, swatting them like insects. That sweep of his arm was strong enough to send both Ed and Izumi flying, Izumi landing atop Ed in an ungainly tangle of limbs.

Sig was having none of it. The guard had hit his beloved wife, and Sig was apparently intent on making damn sure the guy never got a chance for a repeat performance. Sig let loose on the guard like the wrath of God – or the Gates of Hell. The guard was scary fast, but Sig was as implacable as the mountain he resembled – and he was pissed. The problem was that the guy just would not go down. Sig hit him over and over again, but the guy just would not fall. Finally, Ed ran over and snatched Havoc's gun from him, turning and firing repeatedly at the burly guard. It took four shots before the guy finally succumbed to the electric shocks then Ed added one more to grow on, and Sig
was able to get in a last few hits to the guard's head. At long last, Goliath went down with a huge thud.

Unfortunately, zip ties were not going to be enough to rope this guy, so Ed had to improvise. He used the zip ties first—they were barely long enough to go around the guard's massive wrists—but then he took two of his curved bars and clamped them around the guy's enormous arms, bolting them together. The bars wouldn't work as shackles on their own, for obvious reasons, but they'd do just fine to keep the guy from getting enough leverage to break the zip ties. Not too surprisingly, the guy had no weapons, but he didn't really need any. The guy was a weapon.

Ed and the team turned to the scattered scientists, placing Sig at the door to make sure nobody got away. "You, I know you," said Ed suddenly, removing his goggles and peering more closely at a scruffy blond middle-aged man with hollow cheeks and dark circles under his eyes. "You did a lecture over at Central U a couple years back on the relationship between plant proteins and inert minerals. Nash Tringham, right? You probably won't remember me, but if you recognize me, please don't say my name out loud."

"How could I forget you?" asked the man with a tired chuckle. "Your eyes are very distinctive, and you were so outspoken and inquisitive, and so young. You're only a year older than my oldest son and already so far along in your studies. It was quite the shock. But what on Earth are you doing here?"

"That's sort of a long story," began Ed sheepishly. "Ouroboros took somebody important to my brother. I'm here to get the evidence I need to ensure that once he's freed, he stays free. We have plans within plans in place. When I'm done with them, Ouroboros won't have the clout to cover their sins anymore. I get the feeling that you're here because of your sons. Am I right?"

"Yes," replied Tringham, head bowed in defeat. "Their mother is gone. They're all I have left in the world. I can't let anything happen to them. I just can't. But if you . . . if you can guarantee that they'll be safe, I'd do anything, anything at all."

"Good, that's what I was hoping to hear," said Ed, his smile apparent in his voice. "Yo, Sexy, you got Dr. Tringham pulled up yet? He won't be in the model, but if you type his name into the search box you should be able to pull up his employment records, background checks, and anything else. Then you just have to click the little skeleton holding the flag in the corner of the screen. That'll feed the data pulled up in the search into the model. You'll do that with whoever else we can get names on too. We need to get the info so I can round up their families when we leave here. We can move them to the Old Coot's safe house until we get the all clear from the cops."

"Dude, we need to have a talk about your naming sense," said Breda, shaking his head.

"Why? You knew who I was talking about, didn't you?" countered Ed, unrepentant.

"Yeah, but I'm not calling him Sexy," said Sig, and Ed, Paninya, Izumi, and Al all burst out laughing, the four of them all but guffawing. Serious situation aside, Ed almost had to sit down he was laughing so hard. The scientists just looked horrified or puzzled.

"Ugh, if I laugh any harder, I'm gonna pee my pants!" exclaimed Paninya.

"The last thing we need to do is feed his ego," added Riza, though Roy could swear he heard a tiny chuckle out of the impassive blonde sharpshooter.

"Fine, we'll call him Pyro since he's that too," said Ed, dashing a tear from his eye. "That was great. Hah, I needed that. All right crew, listen up. We're running out of time and we still need footage of
the research. Let's get on it. We're burning daylight. Dr. Tringham, can you point me toward anybody else working here who might have people that'll need protecting? I need to know so my control tower can find them and get them laying low while we finish off Ouroboros."

With Dr. Tringham's help, they were able to identify those scientists who were there involuntarily, Izumi and Paninya pulling them aside to have a quiet conversation with them about their options. Those who were there for the money were given two options: turn state's evidence or go to jail for a very long time. It didn't take the greedy bastards long to figure out which was the lesser of the two evils, especially with Sig breathing down their necks and Ed giving them his hard-eyed glare.

Once they had the scientists squirreled away in the same room as Hohenheim, Tringham walked Ed and his team through the labs, pointing out which experiments were which, where the notes could be found, and which scientists were assigned to what research. He was even able to help Ed find his own stolen notes. Roy could tell just from Ed's body language that Ed was fighting tooth and nail not to just grab his notes and shove them in the bag. It was probably killing him to leave them behind, knowing that once they became "evidence" he most likely wouldn't see them again until after the trial. But he did finally force himself to turn away, making sure that these bastards would be caught red-handed with the stolen goods – which is not to say that he wasn't muttering curses under his breath for the rest of the time they were exploring the labs.

When they were sure they'd seen everything they needed to see, Ed started to gather the team to make their escape when Tringham stopped them. "There's something else," said Tringham uneasily. "I don't know if it actually is anything, but you seem to be pretty good at getting into places you're not supposed to be able to get into. There's a door at the end of the hall on the bottom-most level. I thought at first it was another storage closet, since that's mostly what we use that floor for, storage and such. Nobody goes in that door except the CEO and some older gentleman in a lab coat. It could be something. It could be nothing. All I know is that storage cupboards don't usually warrant locks that fancy, and CEO's don't usually descend from on high for just any old thing. So either something's in there or something was in there. Either way, it might be worth a look."

"Gotcha, and thanks. You really helped us out," said Ed sincerely. "We'll make sure your boys are safe. You know how to reach me when the cops are done with you, and I'll let you know where you can meet up with your boys."

They made sure to deposit Tringham in the same cell as the others then headed for what would be their last stop before leaving. Roy reminded Ed of the amount of time remaining for them to complete their operation – time which was quickly running out. Ed promised that they'd make it, but wouldn't be swayed from at least checking up on Tringham's tip. They found the door with relative ease, but it presented two problems. Problem one: the door wasn't on the blue prints or the 3D model, so they had no way of knowing what was on the other side – no cameras or other sensors for them access, either. They'd be going in entirely blind. Problem two: the security on the door itself was nothing to sneeze at. If anything, these problems just made Ed more determined to get into the room and see what was hidden there.

It took both Ed and Paninya to figure out the door, and the pair shared a high-five as soon as they got it, the door sliding to one side like a door on Star Trek. The party entered cautiously, the two armed combatants taking the vanguard with their guns cocked and loaded and held at the ready. There was a short set of stairs, and when they reached the bottom, the party all froze. Arrayed before them was a series of... the only word Roy could think describe them was cells. They looked like hospital rooms – white walls, single bed with white sheets and pastel blankets, machines and medical equipment all around the head of the bed – but the front of each room was a glass wall like exhibits in a zoo. There were twelve of them altogether, all of them occupied, a couple of the occupants little more than children.
Beside each cell was an intercom with a clipboard hanging right below it. Ed was trembling as he approached the nearest cell, its occupant a woman who looked to be in her early twenties but short and slender, almost pixie-like and wearing scrub pants and a plain white t-shirt. She got out of her bed at Ed's approach and stepped up to glass to look him over critically then she reached over and pushed the button on the intercom. "Who the hell are you guys?" she demanded, the intercom making her voice crackle through Ed's mic.

"We're here to make it possible for the cops to rescue you guys," Ed told her simply. "The cops will be here in a few minutes. I'm just here so they don't have to deal with pesky things like guards and tight security. You're gonna be all right, now."

"I've heard that before," she snorted. Ed picked up the clipboard and quickly read each page, making sure to point his camera at it. He was halfway through the various notes when he suddenly dropped the clipboard. A second later he fell to his knees and curled forward, panting heavily.

"What's wrong?!" cried Roy, alarmed.

"Hey! Get it together! You're almost out of time! Get out of there first, and you can freak out when you get back to the van okay?" insisted Breda. Izumi knelt beside Ed, and put a comforting hand on his back before picking up the clipboard and scanning every page so they would have it recorded. The others did the same with the other clipboards and reassured the cells' occupants that rescue was on its way while Sig and Izumi worked on getting Ed calmed down. Roy watched it all, feeling entirely helpless and wishing with every fiber of his being that he could be there to wrap Ed in his arms.

Izumi and Sig finally got Ed moving and the party rushed out the door and up the stairs, collecting Riza along the way. They all jumped into their respective vehicles, not even bothering to be stealthy anymore. As soon as everybody was in their seats, the van took off in a squeal of tires, following the route Ed had determined for them in advance. "All right, little brother, fire up Emma," said Ed, his voice a bit ragged as yanked off his mask and hat. Everybody else did the same, turning off the ear-cams and mics. There was a sudden boom then abruptly all the facility's cameras that they had been monitoring blacked at once.

"What the hell was that?" demanded Breda, and everybody in the van shared the same sentiment.

"Emma is the name of our homemade EMP cannon," explained Ed tiredly. "It'll take out their vehicles, disable their surveillance, and make the doors and elevators inoperable. I couldn't leave my code in place to block communications indefinitely – 30 minutes is the limit on that – but I couldn't risk word getting to Ouroboros of what we did. I don't want them to have time to do damage control. Even if the guards manage to cut themselves loose, they ain't going anywhere, anytime soon. The evidence, criminals, and captives will stay protected until the cops can do their thing. That's why the lock I put on Hohenheim's door has a Faraday Cage around it, to protect it from the EM pulse. The box I gave Hohenheim is also a Faraday Cage, and inside is a device that will give each lock just enough juice that the cops can get the doors open as needed. The cops know to go to Hohenheim's cell first for that reason. The pulse was calibrated to only effect a small area. Collateral damage will be minimal. Everybody's alive, and in a few minutes all hostages will be freed. Speaking of hostages, what do we have on the people those bastards are threatening to get the scientists to comply?"

"Breda is still running the data. As soon as we meet up with Maes, we can see what info he can dig up. He's freakishly good at this sort of thing," Roy reassured him. "But what about you? What was it you saw on that clipboard that freaked you out so bad?"

"Those bastards . . ." growled Ed, his hands clenching into fists in his lap. "Those bastards have been trying to reproduce my experiment. The difference is that they're skipping steps . . . they're testing the
enzyme on humans. It isn't anywhere near ready for human trials. The projected side-effects are still .
. . too fucking much for a human to tolerate. Worse, they gave that woman a degenerative disease
just so they'd have something for the enzyme to work on. Hell only knows what they did to the
others. But that woman is dying now just to test my unfinished fucking drug!

"Dear God," whispered Roy, completely floored by the revelation. "Is there anything that can be
done to help her?"

"Yeah, I guess," said Ed, running his hand through his bangs. He looked like he was almost in tears.
"The disease that woman had is in its early stages. It can be treated. But she's never going to be
completely all right. It's more important than ever now that I complete my research. Those people
didn't ask to become living experiments. That woman doesn't deserve to die like that, and I'll be
damned if I'm gonna let her die."

"For now, let's get finish taking down Ouroboros then we can work on cleaning up the mess they left
behind," said Roy, grabbing Ed's hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. Ed gave him a wan smile then
closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "Don't worry. It'll all be over soon."

Chapter End Notes

My mom and dad are former military, so I had to call them with questions about
regulations on weapons of mass destruction and EMP weapons and so on – adding to
the growing list of weird-ass crap that I call them about when I’m researching (like
congenital diseases and words that start with “s” that mean sneaky stuff – it was
“skullduggery” btw). I didn’t want to Google that crap and wind up flagged by the
government (probably waaaaay too late for that after looking up ways to create
homemade listening devices, keypad locks of various designs, and ways to bypass cell
signals and surveillance and security measures – but hey, we live in hope). So, mom and
dad, stepdad and stepmom, I salute you for your knowledge of shit that might otherwise
land me in Gitmo.
Chapter Notes

So, here it is at looooong last, the final chapter. When I finally finished, my happy dance was both boisterous and embarrassing. Ok, maybe not "boisterous". It's after 2am already, and I've only had 30 minutes sleep today, so boisterous may require a little more enthusiasm than I can muster on such short notice. The ending isn't great, but I tried to tie up all the loose ends I could. Whatever hasn't been addressed here, will most likely be addressed in the sequel (which I've already got a jump start on). However, I'm in the process of moving pretty far from my current location, so it may be after Christmas before I can start seriously working on it. Just keep an eye out. If there's anything you'd like to see in the sequel, let me know and I'll see what I can do.

For all those who followed, favorited, kudoed, commented, and otherwise showed their love for this story, I love you all and thanks for sticking it out to the end. Hopefully, the sequel is even better. Thanks, warm fuzzies, and smooches!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 18

Last Coffin Nail

While the cops were storming the labs, Ed and his accomplices dispersed to their homes to lay low and pretend they hadn't just engaged in Breaking and Entering, Assault, and Vandalism – not to mention utilizing what could easily be classified as a weapon of mass destructions. They had done their part, and now they could only wait to hear word that Hohenheim was safe and sound.

In the meantime, Ed and Al called Maes to join them and got to work looking for the people Ouroboros was using as leverage against the scientists. Every time they'd find one, they'd send a text to Grumman so the hostages could be collected and moved to the safe house. Roy and Breda helped as much as they could, which in Breda's case was quite a bit. The overweight physics student had always been good at getting information and making sense of data.

Ed also called Detective Murry and informed him of the hostages, letting the detective know that they were being moved temporarily to a safe house. The detective promised to send people to pick up the hostages once they were done sorting out the lab. The rest would have to be up to fate – and to the second phase of Ed's plan. Ed still hadn't told anybody what he planned to do next, playing his cards close enough to the vest that not even Maes could loosen the boy's grip.

They received the long-awaited phone call from the detectives just after midnight. Roy loaded Ed and Al into his car, since they didn't want their super spy van anywhere near the police department – or any government agency, for that matter. Ed wasn't pleased about riding in the car, but he endured it with a minimum of complaint. And, lucky for him, they weren't far from the police station.

When they arrived, they were directed by a tired receptionist to the third floor. As they exited the elevator they were met by a jittery young detective who said that he knew right away who they were there to pick up by Ed's resemblance. This, of course, made Ed grind his teeth, but he kept his peace and let the jittery guy lead them to the conference room where Hohenheim was waiting amidst a
gaggle of bewildered and exhausted scientists. Seeing his sons, Hohenheim rose from his seat and he and Al rushed to embrace one another. The man reached for his oldest son too only to have Ed dodge away. "Touch me and you'll pull back a bloody stump, old man," growled Ed, ducking behind Roy. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

"All right, love," said Roy, understanding Ed's discomfort. Just because he'd initiated the rescue of his father didn't mean he was any closer to forgiving the man for his abandonment. He'd made it clear from the start that the only reason he'd saved Hohenheim was for Al's sake. "Sir, you may stay in my guest room for the night. We can figure out what to do about living arrangements later."

"Thank you, young man," said Hohenheim simply. There was apparently some paperwork to fill out before Hohenheim could leave under his own recognizance, and while he worked through that, Ed stepped aside to speak with Detective Roach. He handed off a couple flash drives to the detective, which the older man seemed to be grateful for. Ed threw an impudent salute at the detective then returned to Roy's side.

Once outside, Hohenheim paused beside the car and turned to Roy. "We haven't been introduced," he said politely. "As you know, I'm Van Hohenheim, the boys' father. Alphonse tells me that you're working on your doctoral thesis in the field of physics."

"Thermodynamics, to be specific," replied Roy, grasping the man's proffered hand. "Roy Mustang."

"I understand you've been a good friend to the boys through all of the recent troubles," said Hohenheim, his expression mildly curious, but his eyes just as intense as Ed's ever were. "Though, I've also been told that you haven't known each other for very long."

With his usual fluid grace and complete lack of tact, Ed moved to stand between Roy and Hohenheim. "He's my boyfriend . . . wait, is 'boyfriend' still a thing?" Ed cast a slightly nervous and perplexed look toward Roy.

Roy flashed him a grin. "Even if it isn't, it can be a thing for us. Everybody else can go hang."

"Right, cool," mumbled Ed, blushing even as his eyes sparkled with an obvious flush of happiness. Then he returned his gaze to his father who was watching him with a look of consternation. Ed's expression turned icy again. "What? Did you forget my rather emphatic assertion that I bat for the other team? Anyway, Al and I have been staying with him, so that's where we're headed."

"Ed, don't be a jerk," Al admonished him, opening the back door and shoving Ed into the car.

"You little shit," protested Ed, not at all happy to be back in the car again. Al got into the backseat beside his brother. "That was dirty pool, even for you little brother."

"Sorry, Brother, but you'll be a lot less grumpy if we get you home so you can finally sleep," said Al in his defense. "You've done enough damage for one day, and you're less of a jerk when you're fed and rested."

"Says who?" snorted Ed.

The silence in the car stretched into the realm of definite discomfort as they drove back to Roy's house. A more awkward meeting with a lover's parent, Roy couldn't imagine. "So, Ed, what's next on the agenda?" asked Al, breaking the silence with the blissful sound of words. God love you, Alphonse.

"Next, we go back to Roy's and crash. In the morning, the next phase will begin," replied Ed, his voice quiet and shaky. He was still not at all happy to be in a car, but he was coping as best he could.
"I can't believe that you did something as reckless as breaking into a secret laboratory guarded by armed mercenaries and owned by a cutthroat corporation," said Hohenheim in a subtly admonishing tone.

"Hey, it got results. You're free now thanks to that. You don't get to complain, old man," Ed spat back. "And it wasn't reckless. It was carefully planned and executed jackass. We worked our asses off to make that operation happen, and the rest of my plan was no less of a pain in my ass. So, I think the words you're looking for are, 'thank you'."

"You are right about that at least, Edward. I do owe you my gratitude," said Hohenheim, all at once subdued. "But whether you like it or not, I am your father. I'm allowed to worry when my oldest son engages in dangerous activities that could cost him his life."

"Only if they got in a head shot, and I'm too fast for that," muttered Ed. "Seriously, can we stop talking? I'm starting to feel like I'm gonna hurl. For real."

"We're almost home, Ed," said Roy soothingly. "We'll get you some crackers before bed to settle your stomach. Do you want me to make you some tea?"

"We still got honey?" asked Ed pitifully.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure we do," replied Roy, smiling to himself.

"Then . . . yes, please," said Ed, and Roy's smile grew. It was taking a while to get Ed to let Roy pamper him like he wanted to, but they were making progress.

When they reached Roy's house, Roy made some tea to calm everybody's nerves and brought crackers for Ed. They were all way too tired for conversation or courtesies, so after the tea, Roy got everybody settled comfortably then all but carried Ed up to bed. Really, Ed was probably the most exhausted of all of them, and so far he'd been the least able to rest. Hopefully, tonight they could remedy that. Ed needed to rest soon or he'd burn out.

The next morning brought with it a few surprises. On the cover of nearly every newspaper and gossip rag was the story of how Ouroboros was conducting illegal testing of weapons and cruel medical experiments. The stories also told of how time and time again, the company got away with their misdeeds and were never brought to justice thanks to their strong-arm tactics and illicit paramilitary operations. On the internet, dozens of news websites, including CNN's site, featured the story, some in excruciating detail and with full-color pictures to support the accusations. Ouroboros hadn't just been outed, they'd been crucified. When Roy and Al confronted Ed about it, he just smiled.

"Before we can convict them in a court of law, we first have to convict them in the court of public opinion," began Ed, sipping his coffee contentedly. He looked like a spider watching as the fly he'd caught died. "You should check out the stock market too. Their stocks are plummeting. This is going to hurt their credibility so bad it'll be crying for its mommy. The people they had previously relied on to help them sweep shit under the rug are going to scatter like fucking cockroaches. Hell, they've already started to. Most of the people they deal with are rats, and rats know better than to stay on a sinking ship. So, when the police bring down the hammer, there won't be a damn thing they can do to fight it. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. I've still got one final nail to put in their coffin. After that we can finally send Handsy Grabbenheimer to prison so he can meet his new wife Bubba. I'm sure they'll be very happy together."

"I wish them all the best," said Roy, in a bit of a daze as he contemplated the sheer scope of what Ed had accomplished – what they had all helped him accomplish. "Remind me to never ever piss you
Ed just laughed, got up, and headed off to finish getting ready to go, leaving a kiss on Roy's cheek as he walked by. "By the way, Roy, I'm gonna need a favor later if you're free," called Ed from the staircase.

"Sure," called back Roy, shaking his head to free himself of his shock.

"So let me ask you this then," began Al as Ed returned to the kitchen with his bag in one hand and his shoes and socks in the other. "What did you rig the PCCM for?"

"That's part of the final act," replied Ed, carefully pulling a sock on over his automail foot then adding another – he called the second one his "safety sock" since one sock alone tended to end up holey like Easter Sunday.

"PCCM?" asked Hohenheim as he sat down with his own cup of coffee.

"The PCCM is the power conservation and conversion module," explained Al, giving his brother a hard glare. "As you may or may not know, automail is entirely powered by the human body – or, more accurately, by the electrical currents passed along your nervous system. However, the human body doesn't actually generate enough electricity to power something as big and heavy as a metal limb, not without vastly overtaxing the central nervous system, along with the brain, heart, and lungs. Not to mention the fact that the body only produces one type of electrical current, while the automail requires both alternating current and direct current. The PCCM gathers and stores these electrical currents and converts them to energy that can be used to power the mechanisms within the automail. If the PCCM malfunctions, one of three things will happen. One: the automail quits working – and that's the best case scenario. Two: the automail draws too much power, thereby overtaxing the body and sending the wearer into cardiac arrest. Three: a power surge could pass in either direction from the PCCM and essentially burn out the entire central nervous system. Generally, larger limbs – like legs or entire arms, as opposed to partial arms – will have more than one PCCM, with one of them handling incoming current and others providing stability and even distribution of power flow throughout the limb. Ed's automail was a unique design from the start. Its design was part of his Master's thesis. So the type of PCCM used in his limbs is constructed in an entirely new way, from the layout of the circuits to the calibration of the power input/output conduits. His design made it possible to use thinner wiring in the limbs and less of it, as well as making the PCCM itself smaller. This made it ultimately possible to create limbs that are comparable in size to natural limbs without sacrificing mobility, strength, or durability."

"Wouldn't it make more sense then to simply construct the limbs out of lighter weight materials so that extra power is no longer required?" asked Hohenheim logically.

"That's something that biomechanical engineers have been struggling with for years with no positive results as yet," said Ed soberly. "Some materials can't handle the heat produced by the mechanisms, others can't provide sufficient protection for the wiring, and some just can't handle the force of the hydraulics. Fiberglass works well enough for kids, for whom the weight of metal limbs has been proven to have a significant effect on their growth rate – not a word out of any of you smartasses. But the fiberglass was too light for full-grown adults who complained of a sense of disassociation, a feeling as if they still had no limb to use, which led to disorientation and an inability to make full and proper use of the limb. Since full and proper use is the goal, it was decided that fiberglass wasn't appropriate for use on most adults. Some still prefer it, such as athletes, elderly, and people living in especially cold regions like Alaska and Russia, but there's not enough demand to make mass production a viable option. So, since we couldn't replace the metal, we tried instead to develop alloys which would be lighter weight yet still retain metal's inherent durability. We've also been trying to
increase resistance to radical elements such as rust, oxidation, and calcium corrosion – the last one being a big problem for people living in coastal regions. We also wanted to create a metal alloy that could be machined down as thin as humanly possible and still not shatter. My current arm and leg are the culmination of our hard work – the first of their kind. Significantly lighter than previous models, and molded to be almost the same size and shape as the original limbs."

Ed rolled up his sleeve and removed the outer casing from his forearm to expose the wiring. He used the pen from his pocket to then carefully move some of the wiring to show the corner of a tiny box located near the elbow through which several thinner wires had been run. "This is one of my PCCM's and the first of its kind, made to distribute power more evenly in less time. The human brain has over 800 billion neurons, of which only about 1% are firing at any given point in time – so 80 million. Each neuron produces about one nanoamp, and put together those little bastards produce approximately 0.085 Watts. Now, people think, 'wow, that's a lot of power', and that's true in theory. The problem is that all that power has places to go, things to do. It's got to keep the rest of the body and brain running like it should, so although it seems like quite a bit of electricity there's actually only a small percentage dedicated to the moving of limbs and fine manipulators. The tricky part about automail is power efficiency, factoring in the weight of the materials it's constructed from, percentage of available wattage, and the rate of the flow of power from the central nervous system to the artificial limb. We've done all we can with current technology to make the materials lighter, so it's better to concentrate on power efficiency – sort of like the automail version of going green or whatever. You know, reduce the amount of necessary power and the drain on the body's natural resources without reducing functionality."

"And am I to assume that you have done something to alter the PCCM inside of a set of new automail limbs you intend to install on your own body in spite of the inherent risk involved?" asked Hohenheim, one eyebrow lifted in a very Ed-like expression.

"Yes. He's messed with the calibration and added additional storage within the module," said Al with a heavy sigh. "Theoretically, it will draw in the same amount of power from the body, but the delay between input and output is longer. Normally, the delay is like letting out one breath for every three breaths you draw in. Now, it's like letting out one really long breath for every six. In other words, the delay is necessary so the module can store enough power to make a difference after which it releases it in measured bursts as needed, and with a longer delay it'll be able to release more power than usual per burst."

"And what is the additional power being used for?" asked Hohenheim, leveling a stern glare on his oldest son who was tying his boots, thoroughly unconcerned.

"He won't say," said Al, sounding frustrated. "And what he's doing is so, so dangerous. If his calculations of the power requirements are off by even the most infinitesimal margin, he could be seriously hurt – or worse."

"Hey, give me some credit here," protested Ed at last. "Anyway, we're doing the installation tonight. That's the favor I needed Roy. I'm not going to be good for much after the installation, so I'm gonna need your help. And I wanted to do it upstairs so I don't have to try to find a way to get me up the stairs afterward. I don't think I'm going to be in the mood to sleep on the couch after it's done, so upstairs is the only option."

"Of course, Ed, not a problem," said Roy, though he wasn't entirely happy about the possibility that the limbs he'd be having installed could hurt him.

Later, "not entirely happy" became "really not pleased at all". Roy had thought that installing one limb was rough on Ed, but this was so much worse. It was like comparing a pleasant stroll in the
park to a rollercoaster ride through the worst parts of hell. Ed kept his teeth clamped shut, but that couldn't entirely keep his scream at bay, and that scream went on and on until everyone in the room was shaking and choking back tears. Finally, Ed passed out from the pain, and Al buried his head in his shaken father's shoulder. The man was unable to take his eyes off of his oldest son, as if he had never really seen him before and was frightened of the new creature he'd discovered in his son's place. "Is it always like that?" asked Hohenheim, his voice steady but soft and husky with emotion.

"Every damn time," growled Al. "And there's nothing I can do to help him through it. It hurts him so bad, and it's all my fault. If he hadn't been protecting me . . ."

"Hush now, Alphonse, you know your brother wouldn't want you to blame yourself. He took this burden on willingly to protect what matters most to him. The best thing you can do for him is honor his sacrifice by making the most of the life he bought you," Hohenheim told his youngest son gently.

Roy simply hoisted Edward into his arms and carried him into the bedroom. The younger man groaned as he was lifted but otherwise didn't stir. Once Roy had him tucked in bed, he returned to the library and the subdued men waiting there. Winry was packing away her equipment, just as subdued as the men were. None of them were happy, each for their own reasons. All they could do was wait for Ed to wake and explain to them why it was all worth it, what this terrible price was paying for.

Ed didn't wake until the next day, and he was as stoically cheerful as he usually was, never letting them know he was in pain, being strong for all of them. Roy's friends all came by in twos and threes to visit Ed. They were Ed's friends now too after all, and they wanted to help him feel better sooner if they could. They brought him pastries and good coffee, and Breda brought them take-out from the steak restaurant that was owned by Ed's friend. Roy stayed by Ed's side the whole time and catered to his every need – as much as Ed would allow him to, anyway. At one point, Ed's teacher instincts took over, and he forced Roy to bring their books into the bedroom so they could study for their semester finals – something neither of them had really had much time to do. It was kind of nice, though – studying together – so Roy didn't really mind too much.

The next day Ed was not only on his feet, but attending and teaching his classes. He warned Roy he might be home late because he had an important appointment. Roy shrugged this off until Detective Roach showed up at the campus and told Roy that there was trouble. Roy didn't even really have to ask why Roach was tagging in Roy. He was already 100% sure that Ed had to be involved somehow. Trouble and Ed weren't just friends, they were synonymous. If the detective was reaching out to Roy, it was because of Ed.

When Roy climbed into the back of Roach's car, he found Al already waiting there. The detective got into the driver's side and turned in his seat to look over his shoulder at his bewildered passengers. "All right, look, this is how it is," he began, the man looking harried and unhappy. "The warrants for our current operation haven't come through yet. They'll be here soon, but not soon enough to get surveillance set up. Ed can't reschedule his appointment with Mr. Bradley. If he doesn't do this now we could lose this chance altogether. He has to go through with it, but I don't want to send him in without back-up. So Ed's offered this alternative. We can't take surveillance equipment without those warrants, but he says he can uplink his camera and mic to what he said was your 'control tower' or whatever. He said you two would be able to run the thing and record everything. I'll be with you guys to make this all 'official', but I'll also have men ready to go full breach the second things start to go south. Warrants or no warrants, we won't leave the kid swinging in the wind after everything he's done for us. Damn I wish I could get that kid on the force. We'd have a crime free city in a week."

"I don't know about that," said Al, his mouth drawn down in a stern line. "Brother is a one man crime spree all on his own. He'd only end up being the last criminal standing."
"But, putting that aside, I take it we're in something of a rush. What time is this appointment of Ed's?" asked Roy, not caring about anything but keeping Ed safe. They could yell at Ed about his impetuousness later.

"We have less than an hour," replied Roach.

"Then we need to get over to the garage to pick up the van so we can be in place and ready to go when the time comes," said Roy, trying to stay as smooth and cool on the surface as possible so he could bury his rising panic. "Am I to take it that this Mr. Bradley is highly placed in Ouroboros?"

"It's his company," replied Roach, already pulling out of the parking lot. "He's the current CEO. His grandfather founded the company. Where are we going anyway?" Al quickly gave him the name and address of Mason's body shop, and they started hauling ass in that direction.

"Why couldn't Ed come and tell us himself?" asked Al.

"Two reasons," said Roach, pausing to cuss at a little old lady driving a beat up old Caddy at the speed of an arthritic snail. "One: He said he has to finish up preparations, though what in the hell he has planned is anybody's guess. Two: Because when I mentioned riding with me, he looked like he was going to hurl. I didn't want him hurling in my car like he did in Murry's. I don't think that smell is coming out anytime soon."

"Yeah, Brother's not a fan of riding in cars," said Al, suddenly sheepish on his brother's behalf. "If it helps, we have a cleaner we developed that's great for getting rid of that smell."

"Thanks, man, I'm sure old Murry will be grateful – when he gets over being pissed," said Roach with a laugh.

When they arrived at the body shop, Al greeted Mason as they walked in. Mason led them back into a fenced-in parking lot behind the shop where cars were kept while in the limbo between defunct and good-as-new. The van was nestled among the despoiled vehicles, hidden in plain sight. When they got into the van, Roach had to spend a few minutes on the requisite oohing and awing over the marvels of their James Bond-esque vehicle. "And you're sure Ed's not like NSA or some kind of escaped science experiment right?"

"I can't be 100% sure he's not a science experiment, since he was born first, but genetically speaking, there does seem to be a natural predisposition to higher than average IQs," Al told him mildly, his smile so sweet butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. "As for Ed's apparent spy equipment streak, he recently marathoned all seven seasons of *Burn Notice* and all five seasons of *Person of Interest* on Netflix. So, you can once again blame modern media for the corruption of the innocent. You should have seen what he built when he was into *Doctor Who*. I was starting to worry I'd wake up one day to find a blue police box in our living room."

"I wouldn't put it past him," snickered Roy.

"Detective, I will leave the driving to you while we get the computers up and running," said Al, as he and Roy took over the little stools in the back. Al pulled his belt from around his waist and used it to secure himself to the stool, Roy following his example, glad for Al's quick thinking. They wouldn't be able to hang onto the overhead handles since their hands would be busy typing, so they needed some way to stay in their seats while the van was in motion.

It took them about thirty minutes to reach the city's financial district, and Roach parked the van then pointed out their target. The building in question was tall as a New York skyscraper, its outer shell built of reflective black-tinted glass. The large sign attached to the front of the building didn't
proclaim the name of the company, only the logo, but the symbology of the logo made the name obvious. The logo was a circle formed by a winged red serpent eating its own tail. As dark and eerie as the building was, they may as well have put up a neon sign that said "Bad Guys Work Here".

Roach’s cell phone rang, and he pulled it out of his pocket and put it to his ear. After terse greetings, Roach made a comical expression of distaste then sighed and set his phone down on the work table, putting it on speaker. "Yo, how's life in the belly of Vanzilla?" said Ed, and Al sighed and hung his head. "Look, I know you guys are probably plenty pissed at me, but we don't have time for the Riot Act reading right now. You can chew me out later. For now, I need to walk you guys through setting up the uplink to my mic and camera."

"And how exactly are you planning to smuggle a mic and camera into the building?" asked Al peevishly. "I'm sure they have security, and I'm also sure that their security will have been briefed on your capabilities. They're going to be fully expecting you to start trouble."

"But that's why your arm and leg are now rigged for greater power output," said Roy as the answer dawned on him. "You've got the surveillance equipment installed into your automail somehow."

"Yep, Sexy gets a gold star," said Ed, laughing.

"Well, it's exactly the kind of sneaky, underhanded shit you excel at, love," returned Roy.

"I'ma take that as a compliment," snorted Ed. "But look, you have to remember, these guys are weapons manufacturers. They've got security measures on their security measures. Even just getting in the door, I've gotta go through two metal detectors, ease past the receptionist, lay some bullshit down for the three security guards in the lobby and two by the elevators and still stay under the radar of the two guys they got watching the security monitors. On top of that the security desk in the lobby checks everything you bring in with you, and they run it through one of those x-ray conveyor belt things you see airport security using. If I try to sneak this shit in any other way, we'll be boned, end of story. Don't worry, I have this all planned out. All I need you guys to do is get that uplink started and record everything. You won't be able to see what's going on until after I get through the metal detectors because the camera will be covered up, and the uplink may cut out for a couple seconds. I'll be wearing my hoodie when I go in, but after security does its thing, I'll take the hoodie off and tie around my waist like it's just too much hassle to put back on. After that, you'll have full audio and visual. But, regardless, record everything from the second I pass through those doors."

"Got it, Brother," said Al simply.

"Thanks," said Ed with a sigh that sounded relieved. "It's just about time, so let me walk you through this uplink . . ."

Ten minutes later, they had a full view of the inside of Ed's sweater and could hear his muffled voice greeting someone – a receptionist probably. They started recording at that point, figuring he had entered the building. Their suspicion was confirmed when they heard him tell the person he'd greeted that he had an appointment with Mr. Bradly. He gave the person his name, and a moment later they heard a woman's voice speak as if to someone else, announcing Ed's arrival. In the next moment she told Ed, "Just head through security, and you'll see a bank of elevators. You'll go to the top floor and the receptionist there will show you where to go."

"Thanks miss. You have a good day," he said to her politely. Ed next went through security, made obvious by the heavily sarcastic comments Ed made as the guards started fussing about his automail. Ed then threw a snit about the Disabled Rights Act and all sorts of other things that reeked of impending lawsuits, and before long they could start to hear how shaken the security guards were. Roy swore then that he would never underestimate Ed's acting ability again. Finally, Ed took off his
hoodie, just like he'd said he would then he emptied out his pockets into a little basket. The view was from the camera was at just about shoulder height, and it wasn't the most stable in the world, but it moved a lot less than it would if the camera had been further down his arm. The security guards, all of which looked either annoyed or mortified, gave Ed back his pocket change and keys but insisted on confiscating his cell phone, giving him a claim ticket instead and telling him he could pick it up on his way out. "Fine, whatevs," said Ed, his tone managing to sound both mildly annoyed and noncommittal. And the Oscar goes to . . .

"The picture quality isn't great but the audio quality is outstanding," commented Roach.

"Probably because high quality microphones require a lot less power than high quality cameras," theorized Al. "What I want to know is how is he maintaining the uplink without his phone?"

"Are you kidding? That ancient piece of crap never would have handled a link like this," snorted Roy, a little surprised that Al didn't realize that. "How much you want to bet he's got something rigged either elsewhere in the arm or in his leg?"

"Good point," said Al, thinking. "After all, he did recalibrate the arm and the leg. There's no telling with Ed. But after this mess, I'm forbidding him from watching anything spy-related for a very long time."


On the top floor, Ed encountered another receptionist, and this one was nothing less than drop dead gorgeous. She had long, thick dark brown hair that fell in soft waves around her heart-shaped face. Her eyes were a strange shade of reddish brown, almost the color of a good chianti, set into pale olive skin as smooth as fine silk. Her shirt wasn't necessarily low-cut, but her cleavage was still painfully obvious. Her full lips were painted a virulent red and cocked into a smile of smug confidence, as if she knew she was beautiful and that she could wield her beauty like a weapon – and did so, gladly. She clearly expected Ed to drool all over her. When they saw her smile slip, the Vanzilla audience figured it was because Ed had no interest in her . . . assets whatsoever. If she thought she could distract Edward Elric with big boobs and a smile, she was sorely mistaken.

Slightly flustered – and not hiding it as well as she thought she was – the receptionist guided Ed to an office with a frosted glass wall facing the hallway and frosted glass door cut into that wall that opened and closed soundlessly. The receptionist held the door open and gestured like Vanna White for Ed to enter then walked out again, letting the door close behind her. The office was minimalist and yet gave the impression of power and wealth with its glass and brushed metal furnishings, picture windows, and enormous presidential chair sitting behind the desk. There were no personal touches except for a single family photo sitting on the desk, the figures in the photo looking entirely too contrived, too artistically primped and posed, to be real – the woman in her designer dress with her perfectly coiffed hair and the little boy in his perfectly pressed suit with the precise red bow-tie. The man in the photo was the same man sitting behind the desk. At first glance he looked unassuming, even with the eyepatch covering one of his eyes. His mustache was thick but neatly trimmed, his eyes and mouth bracketed by laugh-lines, and at his temples was the beginnings of blossoming streaks of gray through his dark hair. But even with such a seemingly amiable expression on his face, there was just something about the man that all but screamed predator – and a hungry and cunning one at that. The engraved silver plaque on his desk read, "Mr. K. Bradley."

"So, you're the Big Bad, huh?" said Ed, sounding thoroughly unimpressed. "You already know who I am, obviously, or you wouldn't have been able to send your goons after me. So, let's skip the 'pretending to be polite' and 'pissing contest' phases of the conversation. The problem with pissing contests is that somebody always ends up with wet shoes. Yours are probably expensive, and I don't
have any other pairs, so I figure it's better if we not go there. Agreed?"

"My goodness, you're just as amusing as I had been told," said Bradley, his laugh sounding warm and yet, somehow, so very cold – a warm layer of cotton concealing razor blades and broken glass. "Am I correct in assuming that you requested this meeting for a reason?"

"You tell me," snorted Ed. "You're the one that's been doing all the underhanded shit like sending pricks to rough up me, my brother, and my boyfriend, not to mention trashing my lab, stealing my research, and kidnapping my useless father."

"I have a feeling that you've been up to some fairly devious activities yourself, Mr. Elric," said Bradley, smiling so blandly that they could have been discussing the weather. "Or should I say Mr. Hohenheim? After all, you are the eldest son of the great Van Hohenheim, aren't you? I imagine it's a legacy a scientist such as yourself would be proud to claim."

"The name is Elric," growled Ed, nonplussed. "As far as I'm concerned I'm the product of immaculate conception because I will never claim anything from that man – not his name, not his legacy, absolutely nothing. So if you're looking to con me into taking over his research, you're barking up the wrong tree. I want nothing to do with anything that bastard touched."

"I'm a father myself, so it saddens me to hear that," said Bradley with obvious disappointment. "If I'm not mistaken, I have you to thank for our recent troubles with the media. I also believe that you may have been behind our pest problem in one of our more clandestine research facilities."

"Now, the media thing is all on me – and I have to say, it's some of my best work," said Ed, his stance shifting slightly as if he had put his hands on his hips and stuck his chest out. At the very least they could hear the grin in his voice. "All I had to do was give them the evidence that got thrown out of court thanks to your bribery and bullying."

"Mr. Elric, tell me, what is it that you hoped to accomplish with this juvenile stunt of yours?" asked Bradley, his smile not even twitching, his tone still so friendly while at the same time so very threatening. Needless to say, Ed was not fooled by the façade, nor was he thrown by the contrast between his tone and mocking words. At least, as far as they could tell he wasn't thrown. It was hard to gauge since they couldn't see his face, but the camera didn't move so much as a millimeter and Ed's breathing remained even, his stance relaxed. Roy figured everything must still be within Ed's expectations.

"You can only rule by fear for so long before people rise up and decide that they're tired of being afraid. Every evil dictator has had to learn this lesson, and now you will too," said Ed, expressing not a hint of fear or remorse. "You may have arranged it so that the court can't do shit to you, and, sure, you could maybe get a dozen or so news organizations retract the stories. But, let's face it, the damage is done. On top of that, I contacted enough newspapers, magazines, and websites worldwide that there's no chance in hell of getting to all of them to kill the story. There ain't shit you can do. Maybe now you'll finally understand who exactly you've been fucking with."

"Are you just here to brag about your prank, young man, or are you actually here for a reason?" asked Bradley, his expression becoming serious as some of his composure slipped.

"I want my god damn research back and compensation for the proprietary invention that you destroyed," demanded Ed angrily. "You took my drug to human trials long before it was ready, and you infected people with lethal fucking diseases – ruined their fucking lives! – just to test a drug that obviously wasn't even ready yet. And by using my research as an excuse to hurt these people, you've made me complicit in your depravity!"
"All great men understand that sacrifice is necessary in order to achieve anything of merit," said Bradley as if speaking to a particularly slow-witted child. Roy didn't have to see Ed to know that he was grinding his teeth. "So, judging by your confrontational tone and angry demeanor, it's a safe bet that you will not be retracting your little media blitz or recanting on your testimony to the police. However, I have discovered over the years that everybody has a price. For some men, it's money – simple enough to obtain, and easier still to negotiate. For other men, it's power – because, as we all know, with power comes freedom and all men crave freedom. True freedom is the ability to do as we please without consequence, and I can provide that for them as needed, and within reason of course. And how wonderful would it be to conduct any research you want? No worrying about budget approvals or FDA or federal regulations or any of the other inconveniences that hinder a brilliant mind and keep it from achieving its true potential. And, really, Edward, just think of everything you could do if you were completely unfettered by the laws of the land or the rules of society." The intensity of Bradley's gaze as he eased his way into offering Ed a devil's bargain, silver-tongued as the first serpent. "Come now, Edward, save the self-righteous posturing for the lecture halls. There is no way you will be able to convince me that you don't long to stretch your legs and show the world what you can really do, to push your mind to its very limits and beyond. You can't tell me that you haven't begun to suffer from the greatest affliction of all true geniuses – absolute boredom. For a mind like yours there is truly nothing new under the sun, and at first there is so much to discover and always something new to learn. But then as you hit wall after wall, you find that there is only so much room to move, the world having found ways to hem you in on all sides until, like cattle in its pen, you find that you have already explored every inch of the ground they've limited you to. Which would you rather do Edward? Run free as far as your legs can carry you, or rot with the other sheep in the pen."

"Baaaah," said Ed, monotone.

"I see," said Bradley, as if Ed's attitude was merely a minor inconvenience. "Then I believe you are of the third type. You are the type of man who cannot be bought with money and power. They can't be tempted by the carrot so they must be urged by the stick, in a manner of speaking. So, tell me Edward, how is that little brother of yours doing? Alphonse, wasn't it? I hear he's now attending medical school. You must be very proud of his progress and the nobility of his goals."

"I don't appreciate hearing my brother's name coming out of the mouth of a skeevy old man with a sheep fetish and a receding hairline," growled Ed, taking a slow step forward, the camera angle changing in such a way that they could tell Ed was standing straighter.

To everyone's surprise, Bradley laughed heartily at the comment – though, like his smile, there was still that barely perceptible undercurrent of threat. Bradley's laughter died down to quiet chuckles as he put his hands on his desk, one hand reaching out to press one of the buttons on what looked like an intercom or small switchboard – it was hard to tell from the current angle of the camera. "Well, if you don't want us becoming better acquainted with your brother, it would truly be in everyone's best interests if you simply cooperated," said Bradley, sounding as if it was the most reasonable thing in the world, as if he wasn't subtly threatening Ed's family. "And think of those poor innocent souls now under a threat of terrible disease that can easily be saved if you complete your research as quickly as possible. With our help, you can easily manage that before the degeneration becomes irreversible. And all I'm asking in exchange for our help in saving those that your research has damned is that you help us with our own projects. It's a fair exchange all things considered. Please, Mr. Elric, make the logical choice. I don't want to have to get . . . insistent."

"What the hell does that mean? What are you going to do to me if I say no?" asked Ed, fearless as ever. Roy didn't know whether he wanted to kiss Ed or hit him upside the back of the head. Ed's boldness was what made him such a bright beacon to those around him. However, that same boldness also showed a stunning lack of self-preservation that was a guaranteed ticket to an early
"Let's just say I have friends that are most anxious to reunite with you, Mr. Elric," said Bradley like he was trying to talk Ed into coming to his family's barbecue. "I believe they had quite a bit of fun during your first playdate, and when I told them they'd get to have another chance to play, they became very excited." They heard a door open behind Ed, and Ed hastily spun so that his back was no longer pointing toward the door, though he didn't turn his back on Bradley either. Only a fool would turn his back on such an obvious predator.

The figures that entered the office were easily recognizable from the lab invasion. "Palm Tree Head! Goliath! Pervy Grin!" exclaimed Ed, recognizing them at the same time that Roy did. Al recognized them too, having helped Ed review the recordings from the lab invasion. Roy, Al, and Ed had called up the whole gang to watch the recordings, the group treating it like a movie night, even to the point of making popcorn. It had been fun at the time, but now Roy wished he had paid closer attention to the stats and fighting specs of the three guys – though Palm Tree Head's gender was still in debate, so "guys" was a relative term.

"Aw, did you miss me Pipsqueak?" asked Palm Tree Head, even his voice sounding somewhat androgynous.

"What did you call me?!" snarled Ed.

"Now, now children, this is no time to bicker," admonished Bradley lightly.

"Can we kill him? Please tell me we can kill him," Palm Tree Head all but begged.

"I don't know. I might have a few uses for him that just wouldn't be as much fun if he was dead," said Pervy Grin, looking Ed up and down with avaricious delight. The camera shook as Ed shivered.

"I knew you were a creepy pervert the second I saw you," declared Ed dryly.

"I'm bored. Are we really just gonna stand around all day? 'Cause if that's the how it is I'm going back to bed," demanded Goliath, his words slow and something in his voice making him sound like he wasn't terribly bright.

"Why don't you three make Mr. Elric more comfortable? After that, I need you to persuade him to see the benefits of working for us," said Bradley suggestively. "You may do anything you like. Just try to avoid damaging his head, and make sure you don't kill him."

"Fuck it! We're out of time!" declared Roach, and suddenly he was jumping out of the van shouting orders into his phone as he ran toward the Ouroboros building. Roy and Al didn't want to take their eyes off of the video feed, for fear that something would happen to Ed while they weren't looking, but they also both felt the desperate need to run to Ed's rescue. Murry solved the debate for them by poking his head into the van before they could jump out.

"You two, stay here," he commanded them firmly. He handed them each a set of headphones with an attached microphone and small, clip-on radios. "Keep an eye on what's going on and notify us of any changes. If they bolt or if they've got re-enforcements coming, we need to know immediately."

"Fine," capitulated Al grudgingly. "But, Murry," he continued, and the detective stopped and turned back around. "You better bring my brother back in one piece."

"Will do, kid," promised Murry, his tone insolent but his eyes sincere.

Unfortunately, the monitors showed them nothing useful except that Ed was still fighting and
moving, which they took as a good sign. The problem was that the movement made it impossible to get a clear picture for longer than a few seconds at a time, and they couldn't exactly ask Ed to stand still so they could see what the hell was going on. So, Roy and Al had to think outside of the box. Roy turned the audio way up and started working on picking out background noise and snippets of directives and insults, mentally sifting through it all for clues about Ed's status and what might be going on in the room. Al was taking the all too brief snippets of stillness, such as when Ed paused to assess his opponent or catch his breath, using one of the other monitors to slow each snippet down, cutting still frames from the scenes and trying to clean up the images to pick out details.

It was thanks to their diligent efforts that they were able to warn the police as soon as Bradley was tipped off to their presence, sending his guards to deal with the threat while his employees tried to head for the hills. Then suddenly there was a scream from Ed and the picture went wonky then cut out altogether, as did the audio. "Shit! His arm broke! Shit, shit shit!" exclaimed Al, and Al never cursed, so when he did, it was usually a pretty good indicator that the situation was serious – like "Oh God, Oh God, we're all going to die!" serious. "Damn it! You guys need to get up there now!" Al shouted at the cops. "We've lost all communications with Ed!"

"We're a little busy right now!" shouted back Roach and they could hear the sounds of fighting.

"Shit!" hissed Al, and without further warning he all but flung himself out of the van. Roy didn't even have to think about it before hurrying after the younger man.

When they reached the lobby of the building they found the flustered receptionist still behind the main desk with four security guards sitting on the floor leaning on the wall, their hands zip-tied together and an armed police officer watching them. "Who are you?" demanded the police officer.

"None of your damn business!" snapped Al. "You morons promised my brother would be safe. You can't keep your promise, I damn well won't keep mine. I'm going to save my brother, and there's nothing your Barney Fief ass can do to stop me."

"Woof," muttered Roy, taken aback but also horribly amused. Al was starting to sound more than a little like Ed.

They both ignored the police officer who couldn't actually leave his post to stop them before they were already long gone. They took the elevator up to the top floor and, having learned their lesson from the lab invasion, plastered themselves against the walls when the doors opened. When nothing happened, they crept cautiously out of the elevator. The sexy receptionist stood at the end of the hall, long thin knives in either hand. "Now, now, I'm sure we can come to an equitable arrangement that doesn't involve violence," said Roy, putting on his best coaxing smile as Al surreptitiously reached for something behind his back. Roy inched forward, making sure the woman's attention remained on him so that Al would have time to do whatever it was he intended to do. There was a faint snick sound, and suddenly something long and black flew from Al's hand and hit the woman squarely in the head, knocking her out. "That was easier than I anticipated. What was that anyway?"

"A retractable baton," answered Al with a shrug as he approached the downed woman cautiously. He crouched low and stretched out to retrieve the baton without getting any closer to the woman than he absolutely had to. His caution proved to be entirely called for, because no sooner had he closed his fingers around the baton's handle than the woman lunged towards him with the one knife she still held. Luckily, Roy was close enough to knock her out with a well-placed fist to her temple. He may not be the fighting machine that Ed and Al were, but he could hold his own when push came to shove. "Well then, first a riot gun and now a text book right cross. What other surprises do you have up your sleeve, Mr. Mustang?" asked Al, mischief glinting in his eyes. Roy smirked and threw up a peace sign.
"I'm all about love and peace," said Roy with false cheer, and Al laughed. "You can't be the foster kid of the infamous Madame Christmas and not learn a few things along the way. Now, since knife-fighting wasn't one of Aunt Chris's many lessons, let's see if there's something else around here I can use as a weapon." What they actually found, discreetly hidden in the back of a drawer of the receptionist's desk, was a small .22 caliber handgun with a very feminine pink mother-of-pearl inset on the grip. Why the woman had opted to try her luck with knives instead of just pulling the gun on them, Roy would never know – but he suspected it was because of how wimpy the gun looked. Nobody was going to be intimidated by a tiny pink pistol that looked like a Happy Meal toy. "Jeez, this thing's so girly, I feel like I need the right shoes and matching handbag just to carry this thing," said Roy, rolling his eyes. "It's the drag show version of assault with a deadly weapon. Let's get this over with before my testicles completely shrivel up."

"You know, of course, that Ed is never going to let you live this down, right?" said Al, giggling as they crept up to the door they had seen Ed go through earlier. They moved to stand on either side of the door, and with gestures, nods, and head shakes they determined that Roy would go in first since he had a gun and didn't want to accidentally shoot Al in the back – and Al didn't particularly want to accidentally be shot in the back. Al held up one hand and counted down from three, and when the final finger disappeared the two of them burst through the door into the office. Everyone in the room froze for a moment, all of them assessing the new situation and figuring out what to do next. Bradley was lounging in his chair with his feet on his desk as if watching the greatest entertainment. Pervy Grin was holding onto Ed's messily detached automail arm as if not quite sure what to do with it. Palm Tree Head was caught mid-laughter. Ed was dangling by one ankle from one of Goliath's meaty hands. All five of them stared at the intruders, just as shocked and confused – what with Roy standing there trying not to look quite so gay despite the super-girly handgun he was holding, and Al poised with the baton held over his head but his mouth hanging open.

"Oh my God, you sexy bastard! Your timing couldn't be any fucking better!" shouted Ed, breaking the tableau. Roy didn't waste another second, taking aim with the fabulous little gun and shooting out Goliath's kneecaps. It was better that than wait around to find out what the giant planned yank off of Ed next. Needless to say, the not-so-wooly mammoth dropped Ed who twisted adroitly in the air, just narrowly managing to turn in time to not land on his head. Instead he landed on the mangled wires and bits of metal hanging out of his shoulder port, causing him to cry out unexpectedly. Roy figured that some of those wire were probably still connected to Ed's nerve pathways, meaning that they were little better than exposed nerve endings. Even thinking about how much that had to hurt made him cringe inwardly.

Ed, however, didn't let it slow him for more than second, after which he flipped up onto his feet. In the next instant, he struck out at the screaming giant with a lightning-fast kick to the head, but still, just like in the labs, the mountain wouldn't go down. That's when Pervy Grin held Ed's arm out to him, which Ed accepted with a grin. He grabbed his arm—wait, what?—he grabbed the automail arm by the wrist then swung it like a cudgel, finally knocking out the behemoth.

"It's a home run! And the crowd goes wild!" said Pervy Grin then he actually shared a thumbs up with Ed before jerking his head toward the CEO who was trying to escape during the confusion. Roy swung the gun around to aim at the man, who froze in place at the heavy sound of a round being chambered. That's when Pervy Grin held Ed's arm out to him, which Ed accepted with a grin. He grabbed his arm—wait, what?—he grabbed the automail arm by the wrist then swung it like a cudgel, finally knocking out the behemoth.

"Oh, Al's already got that one in the bag," said Ed with a dismissive shrug. And sure enough, he did. Palm Tree Head had still been injured from the lab invasion, and Ed had clearly worked him over a bit before they got there, so it didn't take Al very long to lay him out. "Um, Roy, is that a firearm or a fashion statement?"
"Can't it be both?" asked Pervy Grin, and Ed howled with laughter.

"I hate you so much right now," said Roy, trying very hard not to pout.

"Aw, don't be like that. You guys pick on me all the time. It's only fair I get to return the favor," said Ed, sticking his tongue out.

"So, Ed's appalling sense of humor aside, what made you decide to change sides?" Al asked Pervy Grin, his eyes narrowing with obvious distrust.

"Come on Al, didn't you read the data?" asked Ed, snickering. "Yeah, Reed was always gonna be my trump card. He was never on the old bastard's side to begin with. He was being blackmailed just like the scientists – that and he got paid a fuck-ton of money. I couldn't offer him money, but I could promise safety for his peeps and a chance to pull the rug out from under the smarmy old jackass and punch Archer in the face. He even punched him one extra one just for me. If I wasn't already spoken for, I might actually be flattered by the gesture."

"Well, my offer still stands. If you ever wanna ditch the pretty boy and take a walk on the wild side, I'll gladly give you the grand tour," offered Pervy Grin – who apparently had a real name. Who knew?

"No thanks, I like pretty boys, please and thank you," said Ed primly, then he waggled his eyebrows with a suggestive smirk. "And we do wild just fine without the help."

"Oh God! I do not need to hear this!" cried Al, covering his ears. "Ugh! Hasn't anybody ever told you it's mean to traumatize your baby brother? I think it's sexual harassment. I'll sue."

"Yeah, you'll pay the lawyer with what money?" snorted Ed, and Al had to concede the point. "Besides, I already pay for your college, your apartment, your car, your clothes, and your food. What more could you possibly get out of me that I haven't already given you freely?"

"I could take your coffee machine," said Al sweetly.

"Alphonse, you're dead to me," said Ed darkly.

"So, what happens now?" asked Perv . . .er, Reed. "I mean, you promised you'd save my buddies, and I'm cool with that, but how are you planning on going about this little miracle?"

"Well, for starters, you're going to have to talk to the cops," said Ed with a sigh. "They owe me, so I'll make sure you get full immunity, but if we want to make sure the people we care about are safe, we have to be willing to step up to take Ouroboros down for good."

"I don't know, Ed," said Reed doubtfully. "I've done a lot of bad shit in Ouroboros's name. Are you sure bringing that shit to light is a good idea? I mean, if I gotta do some time, I get it. I ain't a saint, and I'll do whatever I gotta do to keep my people safe. They don't deserve to go through half the shit they have thanks to hooking up with these bastards. It's my responsibility to make this right, but once you go back to your normal everyday life, what kind of guarantee do I have that we'll come out of this all right on the other side? I don't have your insane IQ. The bigger picture is a little harder to see for the worker ants on the ground."

"Look, Reed, even if you can't see where you're going, as long as you're moving forward, you're never headed in the wrong direction," said Ed, that determined glint in his eyes again. "You don't have to be the smartest guy in the room to make smart decisions. You don't have to be a saint to do the right thing. You don't have to be the Devil incarnate to do something cruel. We all have the ability to be totally brilliant. Conversely, we also have the ability to royally screw up. But, you know,
best of all, we also have the ability to fix what we fuck up. We can't turn back time and erase the bad choices, but righting wrongs is never about reversing mistakes. It's about accepting the consequences and facing whatever happens next. Face forward. Accept the truth. Never waver."

"Thanks man," said Reed with a lopsided smile.

"It's what I do," said Ed with a shrug.

When the police finally made their way into the room, it was to find Ed and Al sitting on the giant like he was a piece of furniture. Roy was keeping eyes on the douche bag CEO, and Reed was making sure that Palm Tree Head didn't move an inch. Goliath they'd had to knock out again, which was why the boys were sitting on him. Palm Tree Head they'd tied up using various power cords and phone chords they'd found around the room. The police tried to do their job and secure the room, but since everything was already under control, they could really only make the next logical move and slap cuffs on the unconscious criminals in their midst. Ambulances were called, Winry was notified that Ed needed the immediate repair work, and criminals were hauled off to face justice. One of the EMT's tried to get Ed to go with them to the hospital – he was covered in bruises and had blood oozing from a spot on his temple and staining the corner of his mouth – but Ed sent the man packing with a number of emphatic curse words for his troubles. Before leaving, Ed made sure to speak with Roach and Murry, demanding immunity for Reed in exchange for the former minion's testimony and in honor of his cooperation, and the detectives promised they'd talk to the DA quick, fast, and in a hurry. There wasn't much they wouldn't do to make sure Ed stayed happy. After seeing what he'd done to Ouroboros, Roy couldn't blame them for being concerned.

"So, Ed," began Al as they drove home at long last. "What's the deal with your leg? I know you rigged both limbs, but what did you do to the leg that needed the extra power?"

"Um, for starters, both limbs were rigged with jacked up hydraulics in the joints to provide greater impact per punch – or kick as the case may be," explained Ed sheepishly. "I also put in the camera and mic in my arm, which you know about. But in order to link to outside monitors, I had to be able to send and receive a Wi-Fi signal of some sort. So, my leg is also a transmitter and its own Wi-Fi hotspot. I'd be tempted to keep it 'cause . . . well, come on, who doesn't want to be their own Wi-Fi hotspot? But it's so exhausting. Even with the work I did on the PCCM's, the drain on my body is still un-fucking-real. I feel like I just ran a marathon with a school bus tied to my back."

"Then let's get you home so we can put you back to rights," said Al kindly. "But, Brother, if you ever do anything this reckless again, I will tie you up and toss you in the loony bin so you can't hurt yourself or others! Do I make myself clear?!"

"Yes, baby brother," said Ed, rolling his eyes with a sigh. "I'll be just as happy to go back to my lab and not do anything dangerous for the rest of my life."

"Somehow I doubt that," muttered Al.

Overall, Ed's injuries weren't too bad, considering how hard he'd fought before Al and Roy busted up the party. He just had a cut above his eyebrow, a black eye, a split lip, some spectacular bruises all over his midsection, another bruise on his jaw, and strained muscles around his automail ports – apparently the added impact he'd calibrated the hydraulics for hadn't taken muscle strain into account, to which Ed only said "oops". In retaliation for the automail fiasco, Al and Winry refused to reinstall his limbs for three whole days. Ed was not a happy bunny.

After he'd recovered, the whole gang met up at Chris's bar Christmas. She'd closed it for the night so it would be reserved just for them to celebrate their victory. By the time everybody showed up, Ed had already been there all day, working on Chris's computers. He'd used his downtime to begin
training Chris and a couple of her girls in the use of his re-enactment model. All that was left was to install it for them and up their security. He installed the promised failsafe too, so if the law came to call there’d be nothing for them to find. A flip of the switch and everything on Chris's computers would be dumped into an off-site server, erasing its tracks as it went. And if that wasn’t already enough to make him the hero of the hour at Christmas, his pies certainly sealed the deal. When he’d gone over to work on the computers, he’d brought with him half a dozen homemade pies. The guys and girls working for Chris worshipped Ed now.

Everybody that had been involved in the takedown of Ouroboros showed up to what they had affectionately dubbed their "Wrap Party". Even Grumman was there wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt printed to look like a tux. Needless to say, the gang all loved the eccentric executive right away. "So, now that we're all here," called out Breda to get everyone's attention, standing up and lifting his half full mug of beer. "It's time for the magician to reveal his tricks. As we all know, Ed pulled off some shit even God wouldn't dare to do, and he dragged us along on that insane rollercoaster with him. As hair-raising as it was, we all have to admit we had the time of our lives. But we've all been dying to know, what the fuck did you actually do? How the hell did you just bring down a multinational conglomerate, a corrupt university dean, and a whole host of assorted freak show henchmen? More importantly, how the hell are you not in jail for the shit you pulled? Come on, Science God, inquiring minds want to know."

"Fine," said Ed with a mighty sigh. "Okay, we stormed the castle and made possible the rescue of the damsel in distress," he began, pointing to his father who actually did a Queen of England wave, to everyone's amusement. "After that came Phase 2, the first part of which was a media bombardment. All the shit those bastards never wanted to ever see the light of day was suddenly sunbathing. I made that happen by creating a Trojan – a computer virus hidden inside of a seemingly harmless file or function – and setting it to go off the morning after the cops busted up the lab. As soon as the virus hit, it dumped a huge Hiroshima bomb worth of info about the dastardly deeds of our favorite villains. The source for much of this information was Ouroboros itself. You see, while we were raiding the castle, I made off with some of their precious jewels. All I needed was an in for their servers. The rest of it was your classic candy from a baby scenario. I took every piece of data I could get my grubby hands on. When we went to pick up useless over there from the police station, I delivered all of the relevant data to the cops along with access codes to all of the Ouroboros servers. That gave the cops the juice they needed to tear the company apart. But to make it stick, we had to cut the head off the snake, otherwise it'd just slither underground and we'd be fighting the same damn fight all over again a few years down the road. So, we arranged for me to go in and poke the dragon with a stick. The point of that was so that I could badger him into ordering my disposal. That was the final nail in his coffin that I was going for. Now there's nobody to take over who knows how to turn the screws and get this crap swept under the rug like they'd always done before. This time, they all go down and stay down."

Roy and his team all looked at each then at Ed then they all shouted, "All hail the Science God!"
This time Ed laughed along with everybody.

"I could really get used to that shit," said Ed, snickering.

"So, now that you've bearded the beast in his lair, saved the damsel in distress, and single-handedly brought us one step closer to world peace, what are you going to do next?" asked Roy, only half-joking.

"Meh, I was thinking I'd take on world hunger, save the whales, and maybe try to get laid," answered Ed, scratching his cheek then he shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a simple man."

"Well, the getting laid part I can help with," said Roy, kissing his cheek as he laughed along with the
others. "But the whales and hungry will have to wait until after finals." Ed let out that beautiful, warm laugh of his and turned, kissing him deeply and earning them a few catcalls and wolf whistles.

"I can live with that," he murmured against Roy's lips.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Let me tell you a little story of the Pink Gun came to be:

I have a friend who teaches self-defense to women and also sells women's self-defense products (i.e. mace, retractable batons, tazers, etc.) (let's call her GunGirl for the time being). One weekend I went with her and two other friends to a weapons expo. I don't normally like weapons (and it's not so much because I'm a pacifist as it is because I'm uncoordinated enough as it is with the weapons I was born with, and have no urge to shoot out my own eye) but I let them talk me into going because I needed to do some research anyway. So, the other friends are on opposing ends of a very broad spectrum. One is 4 yrs older than me, 6'5", and tattoos bikers for a living (for the sake of this story let's call him TallMan). The other is a slender small-time actor who is probably the gayest man I know – or that he knows for that matter (I hereby dub him Tutu – long story, but I've called him this before at his instigation, Tequila and ugly wigs may have been involved, and I still don't recall where we got the wigs or why we decided to string them together to make a skirt). You would expect such a motley band of misfits to be found at a ComiCon, not at a Gun Show, but such is life. As we wandered, we came across a booth geared towards women, and this is where we spotted the tiny pink gun nestled on its little cushion in a glass case. So, TallMan looks at it and says, "I think I just heard one of my testicles screaming as it died." GunGirl says, "I wondered what that sound was. I thought it was the death of good taste." Now, those nearest us are already peering over our shoulders and giggling, but the show's not over yet. Tutu says, in the gayest voice I have ever heard him use (which is really, really saying something – bless his little rainbow-colored heart), "That may even be too gay for me to carry - unless it comes with a handbag and matching shoes." And I add, in my driest voice, "It gives me the urge to throw on a pink boa and start singing Liza." At this point, even the guy manning the booth is holding his side because he's laughing so hard. The death knell came when TallMan and Tutu both belted out the chorus of Life Is A Cabaret. That's the point at which even I couldn't keep a straight face. Next thing you know, all four of us are shoulder-to-shoulder strolling down the thoroughfare of a Gun Show singing Liza Minelli and chortling amongst ourselves. I don't know which shocked me more, our appalling singing or that we didn't get kicked out (please note that I wasn't the least bit shocked by our behavior. Frankly, we've done worse). I really need to stop hanging out with artists and theater people. And that is the story of the notorious Pink Gun and how it wound up in this story (Yes, Virginia, the Pink Gun does exist).

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