Mice of the Military

by RoseJennison

Summary

A lot of borrowers wouldn't consider living anywhere but a house. Even fewer would have the gall to carve out a home in the walls of a military base, but the Elrics and Rockbells had never been typical borrowers.

If the soldiers were the Dogs of the Military, does that make them the mice?

An AU in which Ed, Al, Winry and Pinako are all borrowers living in the walls of the East City military base.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
“How’s it look Al?”

“How’s it look Al?”

“The coast is clear Brother.”

“Excellent! You coming Winry?”

“You guys go on ahead, I’m gonna see if I can get this pulley to stop catching.”

“Alright, we’ll meet you back here when we’re done. Let’s go, Al.”

There were certain advantages to living in a military base, Ed mused as he stepped out of the tiny door he’d made in the pantry wall. One was that there was always a good amount of food on hand, and the majority of it was non-perishables. The humans probably weren’t as happy about that, but non-perishables were great for borrowing. You could get a bunch of stuff at once and not worry about it going bad for a while, and the fewer borrowing trips you had to make the better.

Ed and Al hurried over to the section of wall just in front of the shelves. Al made it there first, since he had been scoping the room. The short haired boy set down his electric lamp and took a piece of chalk out of his pocket. He started drawing a transmutation array on the wall, and finished it just as Ed arrived. Both boys paused, listening carefully for any sign that someone had entered the kitchen or cafeteria, but it was silent. The boys nodded to each other, and Al placed his hands onto the array.

The chalk markings lit up, sparking and crackling. The sparks traveled up the wall and ridges extended from wood, creating foot and hand holds. Once the process was complete the boys started climbing. They got off on the first shelf.

“Yes! Someone refilled the cereal container; that'll make things easier.” Ed declared happily. Al smiled and nodded in agreement, and they started prying the plastic box open. They could have transmuted an opening, but when they were outside of the walls they tried limit their alchemy use. Bright flashes tended to draw unwanted attention.

‘Alchemy does help with plenty of other things though.’ Ed thought to himself as they worked on getting the plastic bag open. He hadn't met a whole lot of other borrowers in his life, but so far his father, brother, and himself were the only ones he knew that used alchemy. Of course, most borrowers didn't grow up in a library; that had definitely helped them learn. Other borrowers probably didn't have a father that went out of his way to study alchemy either. That had helped too, as much as Edward hated to admit it.

They stuffed Al's large back pack about half full with cereal, and Ed's half full with some rice that was on the same shelf. They had to leave some space for the dried fruit that was kept on the next shelf; Granny Pinako wouldn't stand for it if they came back with only grains.

As convenient as it was to have access to things like dried fruit, Ed sometimes missed fresh fruits and vegetables. The borrowers that had lived in the librarian's garden had been eager to trade, so the Elrics and Rockbells used to have easy access to fresh food. Ed didn't realize how good that stuff was until they came here and had to do without.

Ed didn't complain. Well, he didn't complain much anyway. When it came to borrowing practicality always beat out pleasure.

The boys gathered the fruit and grabbed a few hand fulls of herbs and spices, which they put into the little pouches sewn into their back packs. Packs now full, the brothers climbed back down. Ed
activated the array this time; the sparks flew and the ridges disappeared. Not a single trace of their ladder was left when the light faded. For good measure, Ed used his sleeve to wipe away the array until it was just a white smudge on the wall.

They went back to the door they had entered through and found Winry still hunched over the pulley that helped them travel between floors. Her long blonde hair dangled in front of her lantern, making shadows dance within the wall.

“Did you fix it?” Al asked. Winry looked up and gave him a winning smile.

“Yep! It just needed a little maintenance and grease. It should work like a dream now.”

“You sure?” Ed asked. “Because I think my ass is still a little bruised from the last time you messed with the pulleys.”

“That was months ago and it happened ONE TIME! Let it go already!”

“I thought when it came to pulleys we were supposed to hold on.” Ed replied with a smirk. Winry growled and was about to start yelling at him, but Al interrupted.

“Guys! Don't fight while we're in the middle of borrowing. Save it for when we get home.”

There were a couple of places they'd built that could be called 'home'. That way if some part of the base became dangerous to live in they could relocate to another section of wall until things calmed down. Right now they using one that was in the corner of an office belonging to a 'Colonel Mustang'. The one thing that all the homes had in common was that they had been thoroughly sound proofed. Apparently, yelling had become a very important part of Ed and Winry's relationship. Plus, Ed tended to yell at Pinako's taunts, and occasionally at Al. Maybe being able to yell was just important to Ed in general.

“Alright, alright, you've got a point Al. Still, I think Winry should go first.”

“Fine, I will.” Winry said with a sniff. She stood up and walked past the pair, latching the rope to her belt. “Since Ed is too much of a scaredy-cat to test it out.”

“What!”? Ed whirled around, but Winry was already hopping off the edge. The pulley worked as well as she said it would, and Winry was quickly lowered toward the basement.

“You just wait till I get down there! I'll show you whose scared!” Ed ranted into the darkness. As soon as the rope went slack he was at the crank, pulling the rope back up to them. Al shook his head, but was smiling slightly as he grabbed Winry's forgotten lantern. Ed found the end of the rope, latched it to his belt, and started his descent; all while muttering under his breath. While Al waited his turn he used an alchemy array, carved into the inside of the wall, to dissolve their door to the pantry. He turned the handles on both his and Winry's lanterns, making them shine brighter for a few brief moments. Then he followed his brother.

Another good thing about the military was that they liked precise measurements and easy inventory. So when the researchers that worked in the basement ended up with bits of material that were too small or hard to categorize they were usually tossed aside. Which made them prime picking for the borrower children.

Winry got first pick of the scrap metal of course. She could always tell which bits would be the most useful for her mechanical projects. The boys picked up whatever else might be of use, which was practically everything since they were able to use alchemy. It had taken them a while to fashion a frying pan that cooked things evenly, but they'd eventually come up with one that met Granny
Pinako's approval.

Ed made a door just above a tall bookshelf behind the first office's desk. Winry took out a large metal hook and a rope from her pack. She fastened the two of them together, then stuck the metal hook into a crack in the wood. She lowered herself down to the next shelf, then the next, until she was just above the seat of the office chair. As usual, the alchemist who used this office left his chair sitting backwards; facing away from his desk and towards the shelf. Winry left the rope, took a running start, and leaped off the shelf. She had just enough momentum to get her to the edge of the chair's seat. She let out a small 'oomph' as she hit the wooden surface.

Winry recovered quickly and made her way to the back of the chair. As she was doing all this, Ed and Al had been making their own way down the side of the book case. Their destination was the floor, where all the large arrays would be drawn. Because large arrays meant chalk or charcoal, and the Elric boys could always use more of that.

Winry arrived at the chair's back, and wasted no time shimmying up the wooden spindles. Eventually, she'd climbed high enough that the spindle rose above the desk's surface. After that, she simply had to slide around to the other side and let go. Winry took a few moments to catch her breath once her feet hit the desk. Being a borrower certainly forced you to keep in good shape!

The girl looked over the crowded desk with an eager smile. This guy was a slob and she loved it! He always had bits and pieces of random materials littering his desk, probably from old projects. If he didn't have the initiative to keep his space clean then he was practicality asking for little things to get lost. After a few moments of looking around Winry let out an excited squeal. She grabbed a long piece of metal and ran over to the edge of the desk. The boys looked up at her from the floor.

“Oh my gosh, this is just what I need! Ed, Al, let's take this!”

“I think that's a little too big for us to borrow Winry.” Al said, eyeing the oddly shaped piece of metal. It was taller than Winry herself, and looked like something out of the library's 'modern art' section.

“Well, and it's up on his desk too. If he was using it as a paperweight or something he might miss it.”

“Oh come on, he always has weird stuff lying around. And it would be perfect for~”

“Just pick something else would ya? You're gonna get us caught if we take stuff like that.”

“Me? If anyone is going to get us caught it's going to be you!”

It was an old argument between the two of them. Al didn't even bother to scold them for it, knowing it was a lost cause. Winry insisted that Ed was more likely to get them caught, because of his yelling and habit of people watching. Ed insisted that watching the humans was just a good safety precaution, making sure their habits didn't change. Ed then made the counterargument that Winry would lead the humans to them, because she couldn't resist 'the perfect find' no matter how risky borrowing it would be. Winry would say that humans weren't as observant as Ed gave them credit for, and Ed pointed out that soldiers were a lot more paranoid than librarians. And so on and so forth, all the way home where Pinako was waiting for them.

In the end though, it was a moot argument. Because the first one to be spotted by a human was neither Winry nor Ed.

It was Al.
Chapter 2

Moving to the military base, after being forced to leave the library, was a surprisingly natural transition.

Where the library had business hours, the base had shifts and hours of operation. Both places were work based too, so the humans' movement patterns were fairly fixed. The borrower children had a few close calls right after moving in of course. There was a lot more people and places to keep track of at the base, and they couldn't rely on their parents to help them figure it all out.

Still, after living in the base for almost four years, each of the borrowers knew the comings and goings of the permanent residents like the back of their own hand. That's why Al had been so confident that his trip to a nearby garden would go well.

He'd waited until after curfew was in effect, he'd gone around and made sure all the night owls had gone home for the day, and he'd avoided all the spots that had night staff. He'd waited until it was late enough that most non-military humans wouldn't dream of being up, much less about. He'd brought his weapon of choice along as well, a long nail that he'd pilfered when some repairs were being done at the base.

Apparently, someone named 'Armstrong' had gotten over excited about something and accidentally broken a wall. Al shuddered a bit at the memory. None of them had been close enough to see it happen, but they'd all heard the crash and splinter of wood.

Anyway, Winry's birthday was coming up, and Al wanted to get her something special. Winry loved currant berries, and there was a garden nearby that grew them. As a general rule, none of them went borrowing alone. It was much safer that way, but Al really wanted this to be a surprise. He'd thought it would be okay this one time, because he'd taken every precaution he could think of and vowed to be extra careful.

Unfortunately, caution didn't always cut it.

It's not like he hadn't taken the local wildlife into consideration; that's why he had brought the nail with him after all. He just hadn't counted on this rat being so persistent.

Al had exited the base, made his way down the deserted street, scaled a couple bricks, and had entered the garden before he ran into any problems. One minute he was carefully picking his way through the flora, the next minute he was zig-zagging through it while a brown rat tried to sink its teeth into him.

'It must have built a nest somewhere around here. That explains why there are more weeds than normal, not even the humans want to deal with it.' The logical part of Al's brain noted. He needed to find a defensible position. His eyes landed on the very bushes he'd been coming here to visit. A smaller being like him could maneuver around the branches much easier than that big old rat could.

Al dove into the pointed leaves and jumped behind a branch with several prongs. That would help keep the rat at bay for a bit; hopefully long enough to convince it to find easier prey. Al spun around and got his nail ready. The rat burst through the leaves, and Al stabbed at it through the gaps in the branch.
The fight was a blur of squeals, fur, dirt and adrenaline. It wasn't at all like fighting his brother. After what seemed like an hour, but was probably only a minute, Al managed to nail the rat right in the eye. The beast let out it's loudest squeal yet and bolted out of the bush. Al listened as it's cries grew farther away, until only his own panting could be heard. Al sighed in relief and let himself sag against the base of the bush. For a few brief moments he reveled in his victory.

Then the adrenaline started to wear off.

Pain blossomed across his side, causing him to cry out. He bit his tongue, cutting himself off. There weren't any soundproof walls to keep him from being discovered out here.

Al looked down at himself. The right side of his shirt was torn. Bright red blood was soaking through the remnants of the cloth, and starting to run down his side and onto his legs.

'It must have gotten me with it's claws during the fight. How could I not notice until now?' Al wondered, staring at the injury. Though he looked mystified the gears in his mind were turning, trying to figure out what to do. He couldn't just let himself bleed all the way back to the base. If he lost to much it would make him weak, and the scent might attract other animals.

Al slipped off his pack, hissing in pain as he did so. He started to take his shirt off, intending to use it as in impromptu bandage. He tried to keep quiet through the process, but couldn't help whimpering. The cut may not have been deep but it was long, extending from the middle of his ribs down to his hip. He could bunch up his undershirt along the cut and then used his white shirt to bind it; that should last him the trip back at least. Maybe he could use some rope from his pack to-

All thought of bandages and berries flew from Al's mind when the leaves of the bush were suddenly pushed to the side, and Al found himself looking up at the predator that every borrower feared most of all.

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Maes Hughes knew his beautiful wife Gracia was going to be mad at him. He'd already been at the office later than he should have been, and then partway home he realized that there were some papers he needed to bring home that were still at the office. He'd have to call home again to let her know he'd be even later than he said during his last call. Not that he didn't treasure every chance he got to speak to his wife of course, but right now he'd rather talk to her while she was in the same room as him.

Hughes was drawn out of these thoughts by a high pitched squeaking, terribly loud in the quiet East City night. He quickly found the source of the noise, a garden that he was approaching on his way back to the base. One of the bushes was shaking, and the squealing was growing louder. The intelligence officer paused, knowing better than to get near two animals that were fighting. A few moments later a large brown rat burst into view, continuing to squeal as it ran away.

Ah, probably a couple of rats fighting over territory then. Hughes started on his way, but stopped again when he heard another noise. One that was definitely not a rat, in fact it had almost sounded like...

It was probably just some other animal. He didn't go out of his way to learn animal calls, but whatever it was sounded like it was in a lot of pain. He'd assumed the critter in the bush had won, but it might have been at a cost.

A high amount of curiosity was one of the things that made Hughes a great intelligence officer. That curiosity had him quietly approaching the bush and slowly crouching down once he reached it. He listened closely, barely hearing little whimpering of pain that still didn't sound quite right. He really
wanted to know what kind of creature was in there.

Oh! Maybe he could coax it into coming with him and then his wonderful Gracia could nurse it back to health with soft, gentle hands!

With that thought in mind, Hughes reached out with one hand and pushed a leafy branch aside. Then all his thought processes ground to a halt.

Normally, when presented with some mystery or problem, Hughes's mind worked overtime. His brain would focus on making connections and seeing possibilities, but the absurdity of what he was seeing threw a wrench into the works.

There was a tiny person sitting at the base of the bush. A tiny person with blonde hair, a white shirt, a black undershirt, dark blue slacks and brown shoes. A miniature boy was staring up at him, eyes wide with shock. The little boy had blood running down his side.

Hughes's mind latched onto that detail, his protective instincts kicking into gear.

"You're hurt!" he said, leaning down to get a better look at the injury. The small boy, his arms tangled in his partially removed shirt, did his best to scramble backwards.

"D-don't! Stay away!" the boy shouted up at him.

Quickly realizing his mistake, Hughes did as the boy demanded. He backed up as far as he could while still holding the branch to the side, and tried not to tower over the kid so much. Because that's what he had to be, a kid. His proportions weren't right for someone fully grown.

"I'm sorry." Hughes said, voice so soft it was almost a whisper. "I didn't mean to scare you. That rat got you pretty good huh?"

The boy shifted, and pressed his hand over his side. "I'm okay, I just have to get home and I'll be fine."

"Where's home? I could help you get there." That was the wrong thing to say, since the kid looked about ready to bolt. "Hey, easy now, I'm not going to hurt you. I see you don't trust me. That's okay; we just met after all. Maybe it would help to know a little bit about me. My name is Maes." His hand quickly dipped into his pocket and came out with a handful of photos. He laid them on the ground in front of the tiny boy. "And this is my lovely wife Gracia! She's the kindest, most thoughtful woman I've ever met, and she'd never forgive me if I hurt a kid like you. We're going to have one of our own someday soon you know, and I'm going to be the best daddy ever!"

The boy looked dumbfounded. A few moments later his expression shifted, and he seemed to take in Hughes's gushing rant. Hughes couldn't be sure, since the kid's face was so small, but he thought there was a bit of recognition in that expression as well. The boy looked down at the pictures; it was the first time his gaze had left Hughes since the two spotted each other.

"She does look really nice, and pretty." The boy admitted.

"She is, isn't she?" Hughes said with a happy sigh. He dug into a different pocket now, and came out with a roll of bandages. "Even if you don't want an escort home, I can at least help with patching you up. You got bandages in that pack of yours?"

The boy shook his head.

"Then here." Hughes slowly placed the bandages on the ground close to the kid, watching as he
tensed and shifted away from Hughes's hand. “You can have as much of that as you need.”

The kid's eyes flicked back and forth between Hughes and the bandages. Hughes waited patiently, and before long the boy was scurrying over to the roll of bandages. Hughes internally cheered at his success.

The intelligence officer chatted at the boy while he tore a strip of the roll and started winding it around his torso. A part of Hughes wondered why he knew how to bandage himself so well. Just as the kid was finishing up, Hughes mentioned that he was going to the military base for some documents. The boy stilled and looked up at him.

“You're going to the base? Right now?”

“Only because I have to. I'd much rather be at home with my gorgeous Gracia.”

The boy gnawed on his bottom lip, thinking hard and nervously playing with the end of his bandage.

“Well, if you are going there anyway, I guess you could help me get back.”

Hughes's eyes widened in surprise. “You live at the base?”

“ kinda…”

Hughes's mind was buzzing with the implications of that, and he wanted to question the boy about it. But he could tell that doing so would probably make the boy revoke his request.

“Well, since we're going the same direction it makes sense to travel together. You could sit in my shirt pocket if you like, that way you won't be seen by anyone else.”

“Um, yeah, sure, okay.”

It didn't take an intelligence officer to pick up on the nervousness of those rushed words.

“You don't have to if you don't want to.”

“No...you're right. It makes sense to go together at this point.”

“Alright.” Hughes said with a nod. He slowly extended his hand and placed it on the ground, palm up. “Whenever you're ready.”

The boy took a deep breath, and winced when it irritated his injury. Hughes frowned at that, but quickly wiped if off his face when he realized that the boy might misinterpret it. The tiny child slipped his small pack back onto his shoulders, and wobbled a bit as he stood up. Then, step after hesitant step, he made his way to Hughes's waiting hand.

Maes stayed as still as possible, not wanting to give the kid any reason to back out now. The boy's eyes kept shifting between Maes's hand and his face, as though the kid couldn't stand to look at either one for too long. When the boy finally reached Hughes's palm he pushed down on it with both hands, testing how much it gave, before climbing onto his palm on all fours.

Hughes took a moment to marvel at the little life he literally held in his hand. He was doing his best to just focus on getting this kid back to wherever he belonged, but this was still so bizarre...and amazing.

“Are you ready?” Hughes asked once the kid had settled, kneeling at the center of his palm.
The kid nodded.

“What's your name?” Maes asked suddenly. The boy blinked in surprise.

“It's Alphonse, sir.”

“Okay Alphonse, I'm going to lift you up now.”

Hughes raised his hand carefully, doing his best to ensure that no movement was too sudden. Once he’d pulled Alphonse out of the bush Hughes gently released the branch he’d been holding back. Now that he had a free hand he used it to pull open his left breast pocket. He brought his right hand, the one holding Alphonse, over to the pocket's edge and stopped there.

“What do you want any help?” Hughes asked, lowering his voice even more now that the boy was closer to his face.

“I've got it.” The boy replied. He crawled over to the edge of Hughes hand and sat down with his legs dangling over the pocket's opening. Biting his lip, Alphonse pushed himself off Hughes hand and into the pocket.

“Ow!”


“Yeah, I'm okay.” Alphonse's voice was muffled a bit from the layer of fabric. “I just bit my lip.”

Hughes couldn't help chuckling a bit. “Alright. I'm standing up now. We'll be back at the base soon.”

Hughes rose, and tried not to sway too much as he walked. He asked Alphonse where to take him in the base, and the boy directed him to a storage closet. Hughes mentally ran through what else was close to that closet, and was surprised to realize that Roy Mustang’s office was high up on the list.

Hughes waved to the guard standing by the door, missing the relieved look on the woman's face when he walked by without showing any pictures. He made his way to the closet, flicking the light on as he entered. He was glad to find that there was enough space for him to crouch down. He warned the boy before he did so, of course.

“Alright Alphonse, we're here.” There was movement in his pocket, and a little blonde head poked out.

“You can call me Al, if you want.”

“Oh! That's quite an honor, thank you Al.” Hughes held his right hand up to his pocket again, and Al managed to scramble into it. Hughes wondered how that cut was doing, but Al didn't seem to show any signs of pain. So either the cut wasn't as bad as it seemed, or Al was very good at hiding his reactions. Or maybe the tells were too minuscule for Hughes to pick up on.

“So you'll be okay from here?” Hughes asked, once he had lowered Al to the floor.

“Yes, my broth- I mean, yes I'll be fine.”

Hughes noticed the slip, but didn't acknowledge it. Instead he just gave the tiny boy a warm smile.

“Well, I guess this is where we part ways. It was a pleasure to meet you Al.” To Hughes's delight, Alphonse smiled back.
“It was a pleasure to meet you too, Mr. Hughes.”

Maes Hughes let the boy scamper away from him, watching as he ran to the far end of the closet. Hughes got up and turned the light off as he exited. He walked down the hallway, then he took off his boots and silently sneaked back to the closet. Just as he arrived, Hughes saw a small flash of light escape from the crack under the door, and then another a moment later. He waited, but nothing further happened. He put his boots back on and then went back in. He turned the light back on, and started inspecting the small space. He moved around boxes, towels, and bottles of cleaning solution, checked every shelf and wall, and found no sign of where the tiny child had gone. There were no cracks or holes in the walls, no loose floor tiles, nothing. The only thing he'd found that was even slightly out of place was a white smudge on the far wall, near the floor.

Maes Hughes kept playing the strange encounter over and over in his head, trying to organize all the little details. He went to the office to get his papers, at last, and remembered to call his upset wife before leaving. He promised her quite the story over the phone, which had intrigued her enough to calm her temper a bit.

_The way he cut himself off at the end, it sounded like he was going to say something about a brother of his. So that means there's at least two of them. But where are they hiding? How are they hiding? How did Alphonse get out of that room after we said goodbye?_’ Hughe's wondered. He smiled, thinking of the way the tiny boy had smiled at him and called him 'Mr. Hughes'. It had been so adorable. If only he could have gotten a picture to immortalize all that cuteness; he doubted the kid would have allowed that though.

Hughes paused, thinking of the way Al had addressed him. Hughes distinctly remembered using his first name to introduce himself, and couldn't recall ever mentioning his last name to the boy.

So how had Alphonse know to call him 'Mr. Hughes’?

Chapter End Notes

Looks like Al's going to have some explaining to do when he gets back home. Next chapter will be from Al's perspective, and will give some insight the decisions he made during the Hughes POV.

Also, I know that in canon Hughes worked at Central while Mustang was assigned to East City. In this AU he works at the East City base, and only visits Central when he needs to report something confidential to his superiors.

Thanks for reading!
Al raced through the walls of the base. Well, he tried to anyway; it was hard to vault over obstructions and scale ladders when he had a large wound in his side. So the last leg of his journey home took longer than he wanted, and that left plenty of time for him to berate himself.

How could he have let this happen? He had always been the most responsible and rational when it came to borrowing, and yet he was the one that had been spotted by a human. Not only had he been spotted, he'd talked to a human, let a human touch him, left no room for doubt that he did exist and hadn't been just a trick of the eyes. He never should have ventured out on his own, no matter the reason.

Thinking about what he should have done would not help him now though; he had to get back home and tell everyone what happened. When he finally reached their home, in the corner of the Colonel's office, Al immediately went to the room he and his brother shared. He wanted to avoid Granny's wrath for as long as possible. His brother was asleep, and was sleeping pretty deeply if the drool and exposed stomach were any indication. Despite this, Al didn't hesitate to wake him.

“Brother! Brother get up, I...I need help!” The pain in his side was starting to make itself even more pronounced. Ed's eyes opened, and he blinked blearily at his brother. It took a moment for Ed to register his words, but when he did his eyes went wide. His gaze swept over Al, and landed on the bandages. Edward was out of bed in an instant.

“What the hell happened?!” Ed demanded loudly.

“I got attacked by a rat.”

Ed didn't wait for further explanation before he started inspecting the bandages. “Damn, I thought we cleared all the vermin out of here. You found rats somewhere in the base? Did you get a chance to clean the wound?”

Al shook his head to both questions. Ed's eyes hardened.

“You went outside the base? Alone?!” His brother demanded. Al looked down shamefully, and didn't get a chance to respond before Ed pressed for more.

“Where did you get the bandages Al?”

“What?”

“We're nearly out of bandages. This morning we started planning a trip to get more, remember? From what I recall there wasn't enough left to bind up you whole side like this.”

Al took a slow, deep breath; and winced when it made his side hurt again. He had to stop doing that.
Ed's gaze softened, but it didn't waiver.

“I got them from a human.” Al admitted. Ed's eyes went incredibly wide. “And he carried me back to the base once I was done with the bandages.” Al confessed further, causing Ed's mouth to fall open. When he continued to stare at Al for several more seconds the younger boy got worried.

“Brother...?”

“I...you...you got captured by a human? How did you escape?”

“I didn't really escape, he just let me go.”

Ed returned to his dumbfounded stare. Al had expected some amount of shouting after his revelation, but none came. Ed was too shocked.

“Maybe you should continue where you left off.” Ed finally managed to say. So Al told him about how Maes Hughes had suddenly appeared.

Al had been terrified at first. Every adult borrower he'd ever known preached about the dangers of getting caught by a human. At least with animals one could usually predict how they would act, but there was no telling what a human would do if they saw a borrower. Humans could be unbelievably cruel to beings that were different from themselves; that had been backed up by history books they'd read in the library. When Maes Hughes had shown up Al was certain the human would immediately try to catch him.

But he didn't. The minute Al had backed up, shown that he was scared, the human had backed up too. He even went a step further by lowering his voice.

Then, instead of demanding to know who or what Al was, the first thing Hughes had done was express concern for Al's wound. Al had considered the possibility that the man was trying to get Al's guard down, and he feared that was true when Hughes offered to take him home. But the man backed off again once he saw how Al reacted; even changed the subject for a bit to try and make Al more comfortable. He talked about his wife and future parenthood, and every word was so incredibly earnest. Someone who expressed such obvious love and sincerity couldn't be so bad, right?

When Hughes found out that Al didn't have bandages, he offered Al some of his own. Hughes didn't even make the offer contingent on him taking Al anywhere.

Al still had hoped that he could escape the encounter with minimal damage done. Sure someone had seen him, but if Hughes was serious about letting him be after the injury was treated then the secret was mostly safe. Hughes hadn't found Al in the base, and wouldn't know where to look for him after they parted ways.

But then Hughes mentioned that the base was exactly where he was going next.

At that point, Al realized there wasn't much point in refusing help anymore. It was going to be hard enough climbing the short brick barrier and getting home all with a fresh wound in his side, but to also try and hide where he was going? If Al took the direct route, Hughes would probably notice him following along and they'd just be back where they started. If he let Hughes get a head start then more rats might come; they tended to live in groups. Taking a roundabout route meant more time outside, where something else could happen to him. Other predators might pick up on the scent of his blood, and he'd be forced to fight them while weakened. Or he could end up running into someone less kind than Hughes, or any other myriad of dangers that faced borrowers in unfamiliar territory.

At that point, going with Hughes honestly seemed like the best choice. Hughes had been so nice to
him, and Al wanted to trust the rambling man.

Wanting to trust someone and actually trusting them were two different things though. Al was the one to suggest traveling together, but had been unable to hide his anxiety. Still, Hughes was patient with him, and Al's nerves began to calm little by little.

Despite how tense Al was, a part of him was excited that he was getting this chance. He and his brother had studied so many different subjects, learned so much, yet neither of them had had the opportunity to study a human up close. Al had allowed himself a few extra seconds to examine the hand he was about to climb onto, noting the radiating warmth, the leathery feel, and how it gave slightly under his weight.

Being in Hughes pocket had also been interesting. Every time the man laughed or talked Al felt the vibration of it. The in and out of Hughes's breath, the sway of the man's stride; all the sensations were fascinating and a little overwhelming.

He was glad to finally make it back to the base, though strangely sad to say goodbye to the human. Their introduction had been strange and tense, but in the end it hadn't been a bad experience.

Of course, the consequences had yet to play out.

“You're sure he didn't see you transmute a door and enter the wall?” Ed asked at the conclusion of the story.

“Pretty sure. I listened for his footsteps to get far away, and didn't hear them approach again. I also wiped away to outer array when I was done with it. I...I did almost mention you though. I'm not sure if he noticed.” Al looked up at his brother. “Do you think we'll have to move again?”

Ed's looked conflicted. “That's...hard to say. We might risk staying if it was just one human, but this guy...you know who Maes Hughes is right?”

“I remember you talking about him, and I think I saw him a couple times when we first moved here. He doesn't actually work in this office, but he visits a lot. He works in Intelligence.” Al knew his knowledge was sparse. Ed watched the humans that worked around their home much more closely than any of the other borrowers did. In fact, he probably watched them more frequently than he should. Most borrowers stopped watching their humans once their habits had been memorized, but Ed still observed them on a regular basis.

“Hughes working in Intelligence is what could make this tricky. He's not cruel, and I don't think he would try to hurt any of us, but he's curious and persistent. He's not the kind of person to let questions go unanswered.” Ed said with a furrowed brow. When he noticed Al's worried look, his features softened.

“There's still a chance we could make things work here, but I think that's a decision everyone will have to make together.” Ed let out a weary sigh. “And it's definitely not one we're going to make tonight. You need to rest and heal, and you know how Winry gets if you wake her up too early.”

Al chuckled weakly, and allowed himself to be tucked into bed. After the exhausting night he'd had, it didn't take long for him to fall asleep.
Pinako Rockbell had seen a lot over the years. One would think that would make her immune to most of her grandchildren's antics, but Ed, Al, and Winry were no ordinary children. They managed to surprise her pretty frequently, and today was no exception.

“Well, this is certainly unexpected. We usually have to drag at least one of you out of bed.” The elderly borrower addressed the two blonde boys sitting at the kitchen table. “And it's even rarer for the two of you to wake up early enough to make breakfast. You do realize that Winry's birthday isn't until tomorrow right?”

The two boys shared a look over the food laden table, and Pinako immediately knew something was amiss.

“Y-yeah, we know.” Al said, refusing to look Pinako in the eye. The elderly woman sighed.

“Alright, fess up. What did the two of you get into this time?”

“It was just me this time. Ed only helped me out afterward.” Alphonse admitted. “And I'd really prefer to wait for Winry to get up, so I don't have to tell the story twice.”

“You mean you haven't seen her?” Pinako asked with a frown. “Her room was empty when I passed it on the way here.”

“What?” Ed and Al asked at the same time. Ed was the one who continued.

“We got up to make breakfast a while ago, but we haven't seen her. I thought she decided to sleep in.” Ed's eyes widened and then he slapped his own forehead. “Don't tell me she's decided to run off on her own too!”

“What do you mean 'too’?” Pinako narrowed her eyes at the brothers, and they both flinched.

“I guess you could say that I had my own solo adventure last night.” Al lifted his shirt so the bandages were visible. Pinako's eyes widened, and Alphonse rushed to reassure her. “I'm okay! We got the cut all cleaned up last night and the bandages are holding in place really well.”

“I will here the entire story behind this young man.” Al gulped at her tone. “But as long as you aren't in immediate danger we should first see if Winry left any clue as to where she was going.”

“Looks like we won't have to.” Ed commented, looking past Pinako. The elderly borrower turned around to see that her granddaughter had entered through the door behind Pinako. The girl was paler than she normally would be, and she seemed dazed. However, the strangest part, was the fact that her clothes and hair were damp.

“Winry.” Pinako addressed the girl firmly. Winry's eyes snapped into focus and she looked down at her granny.

“Yes?”

“Are you alright Winry?”
“Yeah, I'm fine.”

“Did you just go borrowing on your own?”

“...yes.”

Winry's voice had gotten progressively softer with each reply, until her volume was just above a whisper. The girl's face was now red with shame. Pinako sighed. These children would be the death of her.

“Go sit down at the table with Ed and Al, I'll be right back with a blanket for you. And for goodness sake all of you eat something while I'm gone! There's no point in letting it go to waste, and two of you look ready to keel over.”

She left before any of them could reply. She retrieved Winry's favorite blanket from her room, taking her time so the kids would have a chance to settle. When she reentered the kitchen she was relieved to see that the kids had started eating; Ed's plate was stacked with pancakes while Al and Winry had taken some cereal. Pinako draped the blanket around Winry's shoulders before sitting down to get some food. No one spoke aside from simple requests to pass things. Once everyone appeared to be done, Pinako cleared her throat. The kids all turned to her.

“Alright, now let's hear what happened. I don't care who goes first.”

Al glanced at Winry, saw how nervous she was, and decided to give his adoptive sister more time.

“I'll go first.” And he proceeded to tell them the same story he'd told Ed the night before. Winry gasped when he explained how Hughes had appeared, and Ed volunteered some information about the human, but aside from that his audience remained silent. Somehow that made talking harder, and Al started rushing and stumbling over his words. “And before you ask, I made sure his footsteps were far away before I drew the array and went through. It was dark so it took me a minute to get it drawn right, but I figured it out and I made sure to wipe it away before going through.”

No one spoke at first, and Al had to resist the urge to squirm. Finally, his Granny broke the silence.

“Alphonse, you know perfectly well that it's unsafe not to go borrowing by yourself, but I suspect Ed already reminded you of that last night.” Al nodded meekly, and Pinako continued. “I'm very disappointed that you went against your better judgment for the sake of a gift, and that you trusted your life to a human so easily. You were incredibly lucky to make it back unharmed, many humans would not give us up once they caught us.”

Al's shoulders slumped as Pinako berated him. Seeing that Alphonse actually did grasp the weight of what he had done, Pinako continued.

“However, the most important part is that you're safe, and did your best to hide our location. Ed mentioned that this human is highly curious, but he is still only one person. If we lay low for a while and be especially careful about any traps then we might be able to stay.”

Ed looked concerned, but didn't contradict her. Mainly because of how much Al brightened up when Pinako said they might not have to move.

“That's good. I'd hate to be the reason we have to leave, and laying low shouldn't be too hard. I'll need some time to heal before I can go running around after all.”

“You better give it time to heal, young man.” Pinako said sternly. “Don't think I've forgotten the times I had to guard your bedside to make sure you didn't get up while you were sick.”
“Hey! Ed's a way worse patient than I am!” Al argued.

“What?! I am not!”

“Are too!”

“You're both equally bad at being laid up.” Pinako declared. “Ed just manages to get hurt more so we have to guard him more often.” Al chuckled, Ed fumed, and Pinako smirked. Winry said nothing, and stared down at her food.

“Winry?” Ed prompted. When she didn't respond right away he reached across the table and nudged her. “Hey, what's wrong? You haven't said anything in a while, not even to tease me.”

“It's my fault.” She murmured. Ed tilted his head in confusion.

“Huh?”

“We will have to leave, and it's my fault!” Winry finally raised her head, and she looked ready to cry.

“You were also seen while you were borrowing, weren't you?” Pinako surmised. Winry nodded.

“Seriously? What happened?!”

“Oh no! Are you okay?”

Ed and Al talked over each other. Pinako cleared her throat again and they silenced.

“Please Winry, tell us what happened. Take all the time you need.”

Winry nodded again and, after a few deep breaths, started to tell her own story.

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

It had just been sitting there. A whole entire pocket watch was sitting there under the dresser in one of the bases temporary housing units (aka a guest room). The borrowers checked on these rooms every once in a while, seeing if whatever visiting officer had used it last had left anything useful behind. They were pretty open to taking things from here, because things left here obviously weren't important enough to be remembered by their owners.

But this was much better then what they normally found here. A pocket watch! It wasn't a fancy state alchemist watch, it was too small to be one of those, but it was still a fantastic find. Just thinking about all the gears she could get out of something like that made Winry desperate with longing. So of course they'd had to leave it behind. There wasn't much room left in their bags when they got to the guest room on their last borrowing trip, and it was difficult to navigate the walls while carrying something. Plus, even though she griped about it, they were all hesitant to take something so personal.

She couldn't stop thinking about it though. So many wonderful, beautiful parts just going to waste. She could hardly sleep thinking about it, so early that morning she made a decision. She would go to the guest room and see if the watch was still there. If it was still there, that meant whoever had left it hadn't asked anyone to look for it. So she could run out quick, put it in her empty pack, and bring it home with her. Then all it's mechanical goodness would be hers! It would be her birthday gift to herself.

Winry entered the guest room through a crack in the base of the wall. She was glad at least some of the rooms they borrowed from had natural entrances. Alchemy was very useful for crafting things
and keeping themselves hidden, but Winry disliked how dependent their family was on it. Alchemy
couldn't be used safely in every situation, so it was important to know how to get around without it.
She wondered if her brothers fully understood that.

Another good thing about this room was that the bed was placed along the wall with the crack in it.
That meant Winry could venture into the room a little bit without fear of being spotted, and what she
saw made her heart fall in disappointment. Someone had moved into the room since the borrowers
had last been there.

There were boxes on the floor, and a variety of nick-knacks on the table. Winry couldn't see much of
the table top, but what she could see looked like tools.

'A human after my own heart.' Winry mused. There were also a couple of dishes on the floor
between the bed and the dresser, one with water and one with some brown foodstuff in it.

'Who leaves dishes with food in them on the floor? That's just asking for bugs and mice.' Winry
thought with disapproval.

Still, despite the fact that someone now occupied the space, the watch was still sitting under the front
edge of the dresser. Winry observed the room for several minutes. She didn't see any sign of humans,
and Winry couldn't hear any movement or breathing to indicate there were just out of sight. If the
human was out, she could still run out and grab her prize. Even if the human returned while she was
borrowing it, Winry could hide under the dresser until they left again. With her resolve renewed,
Winry darted out from under the bed and made her way to the dresser.

Unbeknownst to her, the small unit was occupied by one being. A small black and white dog had
been napping in the other room, and it's sensitive ears picked up on the sound of the borrower's rapid
footsteps. Curious, the dog got up and padded into the bedroom.

Winry felt a small amount of relief as she slipped under the dresser. She was still out in the room, so
the danger hadn't passed, but pretty much any borrower felt better being undercover than out in the
open. She knelt beside the pocket watch, which was laying face down, and flipped it over so she
could see the front. The watch's hands weren't moving, though she didn't know if that was because
the watch was broken or it just needed to be wound. Now was not the time to figure that out though.
Winry slung her pack over her back and opened the top. She placed her hands on the watch face, ready
to heft it up, when she was interrupted by a snuffling sound.

The borrower girl froze. She turned toward the sound, and was greeted by a rubbery black nose
that was far too close for comfort. Winry yelped and stumbled back, holding the watch against her
chest as though it would shield her. The creature sniffed the floor along the dresser's edge some
more, and then crouched down enough so that Winry could get a look at it. She met the beast's black
gaze.

"Uh, nice...dog?" Winry guessed. She'd never seen a dog in real life before, just pictures of them in
the library books. They'd been a lot cuter when weren't so massive and staring at her.

Then the dog started pawing underneath the dresser, like it was trying to reach for her. Winry
scampered back further, until her back was pressed against the wall. Then the dog started whining.

"No, no, no, please don't do that!" Winry begged. She flinched when the dog actually barked. "Or
that!"

'Okay Winry, calm down. Breathe. You are a smart borrower, you can figure this out. Take it one
step at a time.' The girl thought to herself. 'Step one, sneak back and get your pack so no one finds it
later.' Winry took a deep breath and forced her muscles to relax a bit. She put the watch down and leaned forward, watching for her chance. If the dog tried getting at her from another side, then she could get close enough to snatch her pack.

Instead of the dog moving, the dog got distracted by a noise somewhere else in the unit. The dog stopped pawing for a moment, so Winry raced forward, grabbed the pack and raced back. It was only after she made it back to the wall that it clicked. The sound that had distracted the dog had been the door opening. That could only mean one thing, and Winry almost wailed when it was confirmed by a feminine voice.

“Hello Black Hayate. Did you miss me?”

'Don’t focus on that, move!’ Winry thought to herself. If the human was focused on the dog, and the dog was focused on the human then she might be able to escape notice still. She quickly shoved the watch into her pack, not bothering to secure the top. The snuffling had started again. Thudding footsteps were approaching.

“Hm? What do you have there Hayate?”

Winry put the pack on her shoulders, there was the rustle of yards of fabric. Winry got ready to sprint, looked over to see where the dog and human were, and her stomach dropped like a stone. Blonde bangs hung in from of startled brown eyes. The dogs face was back too, but now and enormous hand lay on the back of it's neck.

‘Run!’ Winry's instincts urged, and her body listened. She took off, running as fast as her legs could carry her.

“Wha- Hayate! Heel!”

The command thundered through the air. Winry risked a glance behind and saw the blonde woman holding the dog back. The sight cost her though. She veered of course just enough that her foot hit one of the dishes she'd seen before, and she fell sideways into a pool of water. In the back of her mind she heard something clatter, but she didn't let any of this slow her down. She clambered out of the water dish and kept running.

“Hey, wait!” The human woman called out. Winry pushed herself to run faster. She made in under the bed, but didn't stop until she'd entered the wall and had run part way home.

She collapsed against the walls dusty interior, giving herself a minute to catch her breath. As her heart slowed down, she felt relieved that she’d managed to escape without capture. But as she played back the events of the escape in her head, dread settled over her. That woman had gotten a good look at her, enough to know what she’d really seen. Then she fell in the water and made a bee line for the exit, which would leave a path of droplets showing exactly where she went. Then she remembered the clatter and pulled her pack around.

It was empty; the watch must have slipped out when she fell in the dish. All that trouble and she hadn't even gotten to keep the watch. Tears threatened to spill, but she held them back, telling herself to keep it together until she made it home. She was technically still out borrowing after all.

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Now that she had finished her story, Winry finally let her tears fall. Ed fidgeted, unsure of what to do, while Al carefully got up and moved his seat so it was directly next to her. He put an arm around her shoulders, wincing as that pulled on the muscles in his side.
“It's okay Winry, you did your best.” Al assured her.

“That's right.” Pinako replied sagely. “The initial decision was foolish, but you responded well to what happened after it. A lot of borrowers wouldn't have been able to calm down enough to time their escape like you did. And it sounds like Alphonse also held his composure well. Learn your lesson from this and those traits will suit you well when we find a new home.”

“So we will have to move.” Winry said miserably.

“Yeah, two sightings this close together, with people who see each other frequently, it's for the best.” Ed agreed sadly.

“You know that woman, brother?”

“Yeah, she sounds like the one from Mustang's office, Riza Hawkeye. I heard her talking about getting a dog recently. Don't know what she's doing here since she has a place of her own though. But the main thing is that Hawkeye works as Mustang's second-in-command, and Maes Hughes is good friends with Mustang. So those two end up seeing each other a lot.” Ed's serious expression suddenly disappeared and he grinned triumphantly. “I told you human watching wasn't a waste of time!” Winry gave a watery chuckle, and Al shook his head in amusement.

“That's good to know Edward, since it makes it even more important to be careful. We'll stay in the house or the walls as much as possible until Alphonse is healed enough to travel; we can use the time to pack things up here and get anything important from our other homes.”

“Sounds good, and if I don't hear any whispers about us we can fit in a little more borrowing before we leave. Get some provisions for the road.”

“I can salvage some of the parts from my machines too. We'll need them to make traveling equipment at our new place.”

“I may have to rest but I can still help pack-”

“NO!” Everyone immediately forbid Al from lifting things. Al insisted on helping out in some way though, and it was agreed that he could look over city maps they'd borrowed ages ago. He'd try to find a good place for them to set up next.

The children all went their separate ways, until Pinako was left alone in the kitchen with the dirty dishes. Once the kids were gone, Pinako let out a world weary sigh. Borrower's her age weren't meant to move so often. By now life should have been settled and she should have been taken care of by the family she'd helped raise. But of course, the Rockbells and Elrics weren't typical borrowers. Though her joints ached as she cleaned the kitchen, Pinako decided that she was overall glad of that fact. Life would have gotten far too boring otherwise.

Chapter End Notes

Let's face it, it's canon that these kids just can't catch a break.

Happy New Year everyone! Thanks for reading!

Here's an idea of what the watch looks like, if you are curious.
https://www.wayfair.com/Authentic-Models-Victorian-Pocket-Clock-SC058-
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The day before Winry's birthday wasn't supposed to be so solemn. Everyone was doing their best to lighten the mood of course, but the ever present knowledge of their upcoming journey put a damper on everything.

Well, just about everything.

Ed and Al couldn't allow themselves to be drug down, they had too much quick thinking to do. Al's gift had been ruined by a rat, and Ed's gift had, ironically, been ruined by Winry herself. The elder brother knew how badly Winry had wanted that watch, and had been planning a special borrowing trip to go get it on her actual birthday.

It seemed cruel to tell her that at this point though...

So the boys stole some time to themselves, put their heads together, and started to think of a way to salvage the celebration.

"We could make her something. If we thought of a plan now we could transmute it before we go to bed." Al suggested from his spot on the floor.

Both he and Ed were in their bedroom. The city map was spread out on the floor, and Al was sitting on one corner of it with his back pressed against his bed. Ed was laying on the bed, his upper half propped up so he could observe the map over Al's shoulder. The younger brother had already made several notes on the map listing the pros and cons of the neighborhoods surrounding the base.

"Not a bad idea, so long as we make it after she's already in bed. I don't want her to think its a rush job." Edward replied.

"But it will be a rush job."

"Not if we do it right. It only counts as a 'rush job' if you make it the quality of one."

That actually sounded like something Winry might agree with, so Al conceded the point. "That still leaves the question of what to make though."

"Something practical would make sense. I know she's been wanting a better way to lug her tools around to all the contraptions she's got set up; we could make her a carrying case for them. Shouldn't be too hard to make her a lightweight case with the raw materials we have."

"That's a great idea!" Al turned to his brother with a big smile. "We could give it all sorts of compartments and pouches, and a way to attach to her pack so she doesn't have to carry it in her hands the whole time." Al paused, and his face suddenly fell. "But there's a chance that would just remind her about the move all over again. I'm sure she would still appreciate it but..."

Ed frowned. "Yeah., I see what you mean. It would still be a good thing for her to have though."

"Maybe if we could think of another present to give her after that, a more sentimental one, so she doesn't get too down." Al said thoughtfully. "It would have to be something small though. She would hate having to leave a gift here just after getting it."
Edward hummed and then stared off into space for a bit, trying to think of something that would fit the criteria and Winry would actually want. Suddenly, Ed's eyes widened, and he rounded on Al so fast the younger boy jumped in surprise.

“Or we could make her something that's supposed to stay here!”

Al looked at his brother with wide-eyed confusion. Ed rushed to explain.

“Do you remember what Winry was like just after we moved here? What she said about the library burning down?”

Of course Al did. They had each been a mess back then, but Winry was the one who had shown her grief most plainly. That was natural. He and Ed had lost their home and most of their possessions, but Winry had lost her parents as well. He often wondered if Granny had hidden her own mourning so that she could continue to be a guiding light for the three of them.

“She said she'd wished it hadn't been a fire. She wished that something else had killed them and forced us to move, because the fire made it so we couldn't bring anything of theirs with us. And it meant that nothing of theirs would be left behind there, nothing to say any of us had ever been there at all.”

Fear wasn't the only reason most borrowers stopped watching humans after a while. Being such a small person in such a big world...it was hard not to feel insignificant at times. Borrowers prided themselves on being good enough that they went unnoticed by humans, but that came with a cost. When you left so little trace of yourself, left the world so unaffected by your presence, did anything you do really matter? Getting involved in the world and stories of humans tended to make those feelings worse.

And that's when Al understood what Ed was saying.

“You want to create a memorial. Something to commemorate the time we all spent here.”

“Exactly.” Ed said with a soft smile, which Al was quick to match.

“I have an idea of what to make.” Al said, a picture already forming in his head. “But I'll need you to make the array, and maybe do the transmutation.”

“I'll do that if you do the transmutation for the tool case.”

“Deal.”

With that said, Ed grabbed some scraps of paper and the brothers started designing their projects.

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“Oh my gosh this is perfect! Thank you both so much!”

The little borrower family was sitting in a circle on the floor, watching the birthday girl open her gifts.

The case Winry held looked like a briefcase made of shiny metal. The inside was lined with leather straps and wooden buttons, meant to hold each of Winry's tools in place. There was also a couple pouches in their to transport miscellaneous parts, and the boys had attached a strap to the top so it could be carried like a messenger bag.

While Winry explored the different features of the carrying case, the brothers explained how Ed had designed it and gathered the materials and then Al drew the array and transmuted it into being. Much
to Ed's dismay, his brother had not included the decorative skulls Ed had put into the design. Winry thanked Al for this, causing Edward to pout.

“My original design looked amazing. Now it's just boring.”

“Boring is okay sometimes.” Winry replied. “I suppose I'll have to switch shoulders while we travel with this, so I don't get all lopsided.” She said it with a laugh, but there was a note of sadness in it. “Thank you both, again. Is that everything?”

Winry had already received a couple of new outfits from Granny, to replace the ones she was starting to grow out of, and now she'd received a gift that was from both of her brothers. She figured that would be the end of the gift giving. So she was confused, and a bit wary, when both boys started smiling.

“Not quite.” Ed said. “Follow us.”

Ed helped his brother get up from the floor, and the two headed for the passage that lead to Mustang's office. Granny was becoming suspicious as well, which Al must have seen.

“Don't worry, we've got everything all set up. We aren't going to leave the walls or anything.”

When they were about halfway to the bookcase exit Ed turn to the wall and started climbing up. This baffled Winry at first, until Ed took a lantern out of his coat pocket and turned it on. Then she was able to see that there were hand and foot hold jutting out of the wall, reaching up to at least twice Ed's height. They were arranged in a circle, and inside the circle of handholds was an alchemy array drawn in charcoal. As Ed climbed around the array he deposited two lanterns near the top, one on each side. Apparently he'd also transmuted places to hang the lanterns. Once Ed reached the floor on the other side of the circle he went up to Al, and the younger boy took out a folded piece of paper from inside his shirt. Al handed it to his brother, and Ed looked it over critically before nodding firmly.

“Got it.” He said, and handed the paper back to Al. Ed then walked back to the array, clearly ready to activate it.

“What are you boys up to?” Granny asked. Al smiled at her.

“Something good this time. Promise.”

Ed took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and then placed his hands onto the array.

Everyone knew to shield their eyes, so thankfully no one was blinded by the crackling light that filled the passageway. When the light died down everyone uncovered their eyes, and Winry gasped.

There was an image now imprinted onto the wooden surface. A smiling Winry faced forward, her arms around the backs of her brothers. Ed on her right and Al on her left; the brothers both had an arm her shoulders as well. Ed grinned devilishly, while Al smiled softly and seemed to be waving with his free hand. Pinako stood on the other side of Al. Her weathered face was turned to the side a bit, which emphasized her knowing smile. The quality of the picture was almost as good as a photograph, the only discrepancy being that Ed seemed a bit taller than he actually was.

“Al drew the poses up last night. And when I said I was going to pack more while you guys got supper ready, I was really prepping this array.” Ed revealed. “Now if any borrowers move in after us, they'll know we were here once upon a time.”

“It's very well done.” Pinako said, a rare softness in her voice. “And you even made it big enough so
that a human builder could have conceivably carved it there. A wonderful way to mark the
occasion.”

“Thanks Granny.” “We thought so too.” Al and Ed replied.

“I was wrong before.” Winry's voice was strained as she looked up at the portraits. “The case wasn't
perfect. This is perfect.” She turned to face them all, tears streaming down her face even as she
smiled. She quickly strode toward the brothers and put arm around each of them, burying her face in
their shoulders.

“This is definitely going near the top of my best birthday's list. Thank you.” she whispered.

“Only near the top?” Ed teased. Winry swatted his head as best she could, making Al and Pinako
chuckle.

“Happy Birthday, dear.” Pinako said, placing a hand on Winry's back. Al found himself wishing
he'd have been able to immortalize this scene on the wall too.

Once the group hug dissolved they all headed back inside for dinner. They reminisced about the
years they spent in the base, all the good and bad times they went through. By the time the evening
ended, the kids were all feeling much better about what they would soon have to do.
Now at peace with their past here, they could look forward to the future.

Chapter End Notes

In the fanfiction posting of this story Pouda-P mentioned that they were looking forward
to Winry's birthday, which made me realize that my planned chapters hadn't given many
specifics about it. Whoops! We can't dismiss Winry's B-day, no matter what's going on!
So I had to quickly rectify this by planning a new chapter dedicated to the event. So I'm
sorry that this chapter took a bit longer than the others.
It had been a couple of days since Al and Winry's run in with the humans, and Ed was pretty sure that Hughes and Hawkeye hadn't mentioned the borrowers to each other yet.

After the decision to move was made, Ed had spent his nights packing and his days watching his favorite humans. He had never said as much to his family, but Mustang and his team were the most entertaining humans he'd ever spied on. The librarians he'd grown up with had all been so uptight and boring; all they ever did was organize books and nag the patrons. The one exception had been a girl named Sheska, who temporarily worked at the library. Ed had gotten a real kick out of the way she'd gush about the books and ignore the older librarians. The one time he'd almost gotten seen was because of her. He was curious if there was a pattern to the books she chose to read, and had ventured a little too far trying to see her book's title. It had been a close call when another librarian had stepped into the room to berate the girl.

After Sheska was fired he hadn't taken much interest in any other humans, not until the borrowers moved into the walls of Mustang's office. In the beginning he'd watched the group for purely practical reasons; it was smart to know what kind of humans you were living with. He'd planned to stop spying after he assessed their threat level, but he found himself getting sucked into their drama. Havoc was always going on about his latest love interest, about how amazing the new girl was and how blessed he was. But it never took long for Breda to butt in and drag his friend back to reality, sometimes with the assistance of Falman. Fuery was the quietest member of the group, but even he got into the teasing every now and then. These would be the easiest group members to borrower from. Since they were so focused on their work, and each other, they probably wouldn't think much about little things going missing.

The Colonel was a bastard, Ed could tell almost immediately. Riza Hawkeye knew how to keep him in line though, so Mustang's interactions with her and the team never failed to amuse. Mustang once told Havoc and Breda his plan to make mini-skirts mandatory for the female staff if he ever got promoted, and didn't realize Hawkeye was listening until he was done. Her payback had been glorious, and Ed had nearly cracked a rib trying to quiet his laughter.

Still, he had learned that borrowing anything from Hawkeye would be a bad idea. As her name suggested, she had sharp eyes, and would be more likely to notice if something vanished. She didn't seem the type to consider tiny people the cause of something like that, but better safe than sorry. Especially considering how accurate she was with that gun. Mustang though...he wasn't quite sure about Mustang. The Colonel played the fool a lot, but every now and then he'd show he was sharper than most would assume. He might not be as likely to notice if they borrowed things, but he would be more willing consider something crazy as the explanation. The fact that Hawkeye and Mustang worked so closely could make that a dangerous combination.

After he and the others had observed Team Mustang for a while, he gave a summary of his thoughts to his family. They'd all come to similar conclusions, and agreed that when they borrowed from Mustang's office they would avoid any areas belonging to the two lead officers, and focus on the other four desks.

In fact, that's what Ed and Winry had been planning to do tonight. Ed hadn't heard Hawkeye or Hughes speak about their encounter's with the borrower kids, and the way they acted didn't suggest they had told each other elsewhere. The two of them had been acting distracted, which Mustang had
picked up on, but both of them had brushed it off when the colonel asked. So Ed and Winry thought a normal borrowing trip would be alright.

Those plans were put on hold by the sight of Mustang passed out at his desk. Again.

“We should try again tomorrow night.” Winry said. The two of them were behind a shelf, peeking out just far enough to see the slumbering giant. If anyone were to actually see them, it would look like Winry's head was stacked on top of Edward's.

“We might not have to.” Ed noted. “By this point he's usually dead to the world.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, he get's like this around this time of year, stays at the office after hours and drinks himself silly. Not sure why, but it might have something to do with that war in Ishval that happened a while back. He talks about it with Hawkeye sometimes.”

Winry hummed in thought. “I don't know, with everything that's happened recently I don't want to push our luck. A couple more pens could be really useful though...”

Pens were popular items for the children. They always packed some cord with them when they went on borrower trips, so they could strap together pens and pencils that had fallen on the floor. The metal casing of pens were good transmutation material, and Winry liked using the internal rods and springs of click pens. The extra lumber from pencils was always useful too. But they would specifically need the inner working of the pens in the new place, with all the stuff they would have to build.

“Honestly, I think it will be okay. I can keep an eye on the bastard colonel while you borrow, and I'll signal you with the light if he shows any signs of waking up.” He tilted his head up to look at his sister. “Deal?”

Winry looked down at Ed, then up at Mustang, then over to the cluster of desks.

“Deal.”

Ed positioned himself in the doorway to the colonel's section of the office. This spot gave him a wide view, so all he had to do was turn his head in order to look between his two targets. He watched Winry throw her grappling hook up onto Fuery's desk, and start climbing. She looked secure, so he turned his attention to Mustang.

As Ed expected, the bastard was still out like a light. It was a little weird to see the man like this, since he was so dramatic and animated during the day.

Ed smirked, thinking of the ridiculous way the colonel would tilt his chair back and put his feet on the desk when he was trying to act cool and nonchalant. The bastard was lucky he'd never fallen on his ass doing that. In fact, Ed was certain that the only reason Mustang hadn't was because Ed and Al made a point of repairing the bastard's chair when they borrowed from this office.

Learning alchemy at a young age had made the Elric boys firm believers in the laws surrounding it, especially the Law of Equivalent Exchange. Ed and Al always felt compelled to give something back to the people they borrowed from, and did so by performing small repairs. They made sure not to do anything too obvious, like fixing things that had busted into a bunch of pieces. They just did maintenance on things like radios and furniture; the kind of things you wouldn't pay attention to until they started causing a problem.
Speaking of problems...

Ed's gaze shifted to the open bottle on Mustang's desk, wondering how much someone as big as Mustang would have to drink in order to pass out like that. He certainly hoped the man had a glass or something up there, drinking straight out of the bottle would just be pathetic.

Ed kept looking back at Winry now and then, to make sure she was doing okay. She was of course, aside from the unexpected guest this was a simple mission. When he looked back to the colonel his eyes kept lingering on the alcohol bottle, an idea forming in his head. By the time Winry was finished and got back to him, the idea was fully formed.

“I'm going to go up on the colonel's desk.” He declared.

Winry gaped at him and then hissed “No. you. are. not! It was risky just coming into the other room while a human was here and now you want to go up on his desk?! No way!”

“Come on Winry, he hasn't budged since we came in here. I just want to see if he has a glass that still has some alcohol in it, we'll need some for possible injuries.”

“We can get more from the medical wing.”

“That stuff is fucking hard to get to and you know it. This alcohol is right here, and I know the colonel drinks the good stuff. It will work much better than what we have now. What if something happens and Al's wound opens back up? If we don't have a source of clean water-”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” Winry said, sounding tired. After what happened with Ed and Al's mother she couldn't blame him for being worried, and she knew he wouldn't let this go.

“Let's just make this quick okay? Do you have a container on you?” She asked. Ed nodded and hefted his pack. She nodded grimly in return, and the two of them made their way towards the colonel's desk.

They stayed underneath the couches and table as much as they could, but soon they were standing exposed by the side of the desk. Ed couldn't help staring up at the conked out giant, it'd been a while since he'd been this close to a human, but he only allowed himself a few moments. He had a job to do.

Without thinking, Ed grabbed his piece of chalk and started drawing an array.

“Seriously?!” Winry snapped at him, flinching at the volume of her own voice. Edward blinked and then looked down at what he was doing.

“Okay, I'll admit, that was pretty dumb.” Edward whispered as he put the chalk back in his pocket. Since Winry had to lug the pens around, Ed got out his own rope and hook. He let her throw it though, she had a lot more practice. Once the line was secured and tested, Ed climbed up.

The good news was that Mustang did have a glass with some alcohol in it. The bad news was that he was still holding it. The human's head was resting on the desk, face pointed away from Ed. Both arms were on the desk, and the one further away from him had it's hand wrapped around the glass. That...was not ideal, but they still needed it and Mustang was still asleep. So Ed went for it anyway.

From the amount of papers spread around, Ed could only guess that the colonel was neglecting his paperwork again. Ed glanced over at the massive head of black hair, and was tempted to pat it in sympathy. The man would have to deal with both a hangover and Hawkeye come morning.

Ed carefully picked his way over papers and around the first hand, doing his best to ignore the
whooshing and shifting caused by the human's breathing. When the borrower reached the glass he got up on his tip toes and sniffed the rim of the rum glass. The smell made him cough, and he quickly covered his mouth with his hand. Oh yeah, the colonel was definitely into the strong stuff tonight.

Edward took his pack off and got out a metal container, similar in design to the flasks some humans carried around. Ed's was too big to fit in his hand though, since it was meant for storage. Edward stood as tall as he could, and dipped the homemade flask over the side.

It missed the surface of the amber liquid.

Ed strained and tried to push his arm down further, but he just barely missed every time.

'Dammit! Why am I such a pipsqueak?! I'm a pipsqueak even for a borrower!' Ed whined to himself. Maybe if he could tip the glass a little this would work.

As Ed scrambled to find a grip on the glass and purchase on the desktop, he didn't notice that the muscles in Mustang's hand had begun to twitch. Ed managed to tip the glass slightly, just enough that the surface of the liquid was within reach. He dipped the homemade flask into the alcohol- and suddenly the glass was pulled back. Ed lost his grip and fell on his back. This allowed him an excellent view of the colonel's bemused face.

Ed stared into the human's dark eyes, and his gut twisted in fear. He knew that he should move, that he should get up and run before the human tried anything. But the wind had been knocked out of him, and he couldn't move until he'd gotten it back.

"Huh, this ish...this is weird." Mustang said, his words slurring together. "Yer not Ishbalan, or a lady. Thas what I dream bout, ushually."

Ed was now able to breathe again, but didn't move yet. It was clear that the colonel wasn't really awake. There was the dream comment, and the slurring, but the most telling thing was the human's eyes. Mustang eye's were normally obsidian: hard, shining and sharp. But right now they were dull and dim, like charcoal. Running now might make Mustang try to catch him, and the action might make him more alert. But if Ed played this right Mustang might swing back into his drunken sleep.

"Well, aren't all dreams a little weird?" Ed said, trying to channel his mother's playful, soothing voice. He swore he could already feel Winry kicking him.

"Hmmmmm...........yeah, I guess." Mustang replied slowly.

"Still, I bet you want to get this one over with so you can get to a better one. I could help you with that."

Mustang stared at him for a long moment, like it was taking a while for him to understand what Ed had said.

"M'kay. Make it a good one."

"Sure. First you've got to close your eyes and lay you're head down."

Mustang did so, but he also moved his free hand so it was covering Ed like a blanket. Every muscle in Ed's body immediately stiffened.

"You go sleep too." Mustang slurred.

"Okay." Ed tried to keep his voice from shaking. "Now, you're going to have a nice dream about
Hawkeye, okay?"

“Those are the best.” The colonel said wistfully.

Ed took a deep breath, which was difficult with the heavy weight on his chest, and started to sing. His mother's lullabies had always put him to sleep, and he could only hope it worked as well on the human.

_Lullaby, and good night._
Now slip into your coma.
Dream of Hawkeye's bright eyes
And then let me go home.

Granted he was taking a few liberties with the lyrics...

Thankfully, the song seemed to be working anyway. Ed could feel the muscles in the colonel's hand relax, and the human's breathing soon evened out. Now Ed just had to get out from under the man's hand without waking him again.

Before Ed could act on that thought, he heard the pattering of familiar footsteps on the desk's surface. A few moments later Winry was staring down at him, looking caught between relief and anger. Ed smiled up at her cheekily.

“Great timing Win. Wanna help me up?” he whispered.

Winry decided then and there to settle on anger, and kicked Ed's exposed shoulder.

“Ow!”

“That's for scaring me half to death!” She hissed at him.

“Help me now, yell at me later!”

“I'm working on it!”

Winry did her best to lift up the colonel's hand, giving Ed some leverage to wiggle his way out from under it. Ed was almost free when the colonel shifted in his sleep. The kids instantly froze. Ed was so close to freedom he had to hold back a groan of frustration; only his feet and ankles had weight resting on them now. Winry was in a worse position. She had only been able to lift one side of the human's hand, and it was with strained arms and a bent back. The pause made her stuck in that position, and her arms were beginning to tremble from the combination of weight and nerves. Her lower back wasn't too happy with her either, but neither of them dared to move. They waited, and waited, but the colonel did not move again.

The kids looked at each other, and decided to risk escape. Ed quickly yanked his feet free and immediately got up to help Winry lower the colonel's hand without dropping it. Once he was free Ed grabbed his pack and flask. After that the two borrowers left as quickly and quietly as possible, throwing worried glances back at Mustang the whole way. They managed to make it all the way back to their door in the wall without further incident.

Ed used the carved array inside the wall to seal the entrance, and the kids finally started to relax. Which was evident by Winry taking a moment to smack Ed on the back of his head. Once he was done complaining about that, Winry sighed.

“Well, I guess the cycle is complete, we've all been spotted. Well, all of us except Granny.”
“Eh, she's probably been seen some time in her life, she ancient. Besides, you and Al getting into that kind of trouble when I didn't would've upset the natural order of the universe. I had to maintain balance.”

Winry snorted. “Oh yeah, whatever would we do without the Laws that govern the universe.”

“Exactly.” Ed said with a serious nod. Winry rolled her eyes and started walking home.

“You're impossible, and don't think you're going to get away with not telling anyone about this. Both Al and I did so you have to confess too!”

“Oh come on,” Ed whined, following after her. “you heard him right? He thinks the whole thing was a dream. Even if he remembers us it won't change anything.”

Unbeknownst to the bickering borrowers, Mustang's 'dream' wasn't over with Ed's lullaby. When the array was activated it flashed, and that flash had made the colonel's eyes open for a few moments before they drifted shut again.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for introducing Colonel Mustang into the series while he is passed out and drunk.
Also, I don't have much experience with drunk people. So, additional apologies in the event that Mustang's drunkenness does not seem genuine.
It was fascinating how the same pair of eyes could feature in Mustang's dreams and his nightmares. One minute he was gazing into brown eyes that sparkled with joy and adoration, and the next he was jolting upright to meet eyes that were as dry as the desert sand. Hawkeye stood in between the two couches in front of his desk, giving him a very unamused look. Her smallest gun was in her hand and pointing at the lower front of his desk; that explained what had woken him up. He was forever glad he'd replaced the original desk with one made of thick, sturdy wood.

“Have you been here all night, sir?” The Lieutenant demanded.

“Apparently.” Mustang grumbled, putting a hand over his eyes. Last night's alcohol was catching up to him already. His eyes burned from the sunlight streaming in through the windows, and his ears rung from a gunshot he didn't even remember hearing.

“Well, since you've been here all night then that means you had plenty of time to finish the reports that are due today, right sir?”

Mustang felt his stomach drop.

“Of course I did Lieutenant.” Mustang forced his hand away from his eyes and frantically sorted through the mess of papers on his desk. “I just need a moment to get them organized and double check them.”

“Of course sir.” Hawkeye replied, knowing full well that he needed to do much more than that. She'd be surprised if they were more than halfway done. “Bring them to my desk when you're finished and I'll send them.”

“Thank you Lieutenant.”

Hawkeye nodded, and then carefully walked out to join the rest of his team.

Mustang frowned, noting how precisely she moved. His Lieutenant had been acting odd over the past few days. Many people believed Hawkeye to be naturally stiff or tense, but Mustang knew her better. She always held herself upright and ready, but the fluidity of her movements showed that she knew she was in a safe place. Lately though, she was moving through the office like it was a recently captured outpost rather than home territory.

She also had been looking down at the floor a lot. When Mustang first noticed her doing it he thought she must have dropped something, but then she'd been confused when he asked her what she was looking for. He'd asked her again when he caught her looking behind one of the cabinets that lined the wall. She claimed she'd bumped into it by accident and was just straightening it out. It really wasn't like her to keep secrets from him, but Mustang couldn't help feeling that's what she was doing.

Maybe he was over thinking things. Everyone had a few secrets, and he wasn't entitled to know every little thing about his Lieutenant. He was still worried though, especially when he noticed similar behavior in his best friend.
Maes Hughes was a whirlwind of activity. Always rushing to show off new pictures and jumping on any potential leads and information, which lead to a lot of running around and bumping into things. He'd noticed during Hughes's last couple of visits though, that the man now paid much better attention to where he was placing his feet and what obstacles were in the way. Maes had also started coming later than usual for his daily visit. Normally he came near the beginning of the base's unofficial lunch hour, and recently he'd been coming around at the end of it.

Roy questioned him about this, of course. Maes told him that he was doing some research that wasn't directly related to any of his investigations, and didn't want to stay after his usual hours to do it.

'I can't have my wonderful wife worrying and wondering where I am you know!'

A phone call would have solved that of course, but if the 'research' was something involving Gracia then it would make sense that Hughes wouldn't want to tell her about it. So, both the behavior of his Lieutenant and his best friend could have perfectly benign explanations. Still, what were the odds of both of them adopting similar strange behavior at the same time? On top of that, they were both suddenly resistant to giving him straight answers. There had to be something going on...

Mulling over their strange behavior wouldn't get these reports finished though. So Mustang temporarily put his musings aside and did his best to focus past his hangover.

* * * * * * * * * *

“So, hard at work or hardly working?” Maes asked as he walked in.

“Depends on who you ask.” Mustang said. He'd barely left his desk that day, still desperately trying to catch up on the paperwork he'd neglected the night before. He'd had to send Fury to the cafeteria with a lunch order, because Hawkeye didn't trust him to come back if he left the office. Mustang took a bite of his sandwich while his best friend found a perch on the corner of the desk.

“I'm guessing you'd say the former and your favorite lieutenant would say the latter?” Maes asked with a knowing smirk.

“You guess correctly.” Hawkeye said as she walked into the room.

“Oh sure, just gang up on me.” Roy muttered around his food. He swallowed hard when he saw the papers Hawkeye was holding. “Please! No more, I beg you!” he cried, putting his hands together in supplication. As always, she was unaffected.

“If you didn't want to be stuck doing this all day then you should have worked last night instead of drinking. Or at least gone home and slept so today would be easier.”

“I thought your eyes were a little too red.” Maes said softly, taking on that disappointed tone that Mustang hated. “Seriously Roy, I know dealing with the memories is tough, especially this time of year, but you need to find a better way of dealing with them. I could help you...”

“Oh I don’t know, maybe,” Mustang forced a lecherous grin. “but what other method would give me such wonderful dreams?”

That made Maes frown. Hawkeye rolled her eyes and muttered something that sounded like 'pervert' as she sorted through the papers. Mission accomplished; Roy let his smile became less suggestive and more genuine.

“Though I have to admit, the dreams have been a bit strange lately. Just last night I dreamed that a
Their reaction was instantaneous and quite obvious, to the Colonel at least. Hawkeye stopped sorting and looked up at him; her gaze was now much more focused and interested. Especially considering how dismissive she'd been just a moment before. Maes tensed, and leaned more of his weight onto the desk towards Mustang.

“A tiny person?” Hawkeye asked, her voice sounding a bit to casual.

“Yeah, crazy right? Maybe I am getting too attached to my alcohol if my dreams are getting territorial about it.”

Roy tried to match his Lieutenant's offhand tone, and focused on gauging his two friends' reactions.

“Maybe.” Maes agreed. “So what happened to this little thief?”

Mustang thought back, and found he had to put some effort into it. The end of his dream was hazy, but a few details stuck out.

“He wanted me to go back to sleep, so he sang me a lullaby. And...there was a flash somewhere in the distance.”

“Well, your tiny thief sounds very considerate. And you're certain nothing happened to them?”

Maes voice was sliding into interrogation mode, and even Riza looked concerned about how he would answer. That's when Mustang decided that this conversation should be a little more private. He got up from his desk, and walked past Hawkeye so he could push his office door closed.

“I know you've both been avoiding this, but I'm not giving you that option this time. Why are you both so on edge and what does my imaginary person have to do with it?”

Mustang could see the wheels turning in his Lieutenant's mind, making her brow furrow and pressing her lips into a thin line. Hughes gave them both an appraising look, then nodded like he'd just made a decision.

“Roy, can I ask you a few things about your 'imaginary' alcohol thief?”

“What do you want to know?” Mustang asked, suspicious of further distraction techniques.

“Well, for starters, when you say 'tiny person' you mean really tiny, right? It was someone about this tall?” Hughes held his hand horizontally, and about four inches apart.

“Yes, actually, that's almost exactly how big he was.” Mustang said with surprise.

“Ahh, so it was a 'he'. Now, I'm willing to bet that your thief was young, a small boy rather than a small man. Would it also be correct to say that this boy had a fair complexion? How about golden hair and eyes?”

“Wha- how could you possibly know that?!” Mustang spluttered.

“Because we probably saw the same person.”

Mustang opened his mouth to reply, but Maes quickly continued.

“And before you ask, I haven't taken up drinking. Or anything similar to it.”

“What exactly are you saying Hughes?”
“I'm saying that I don't think that dream you had was just a dream. I think you actually saw a tiny boy, just like I did a few nights ago.”

“That's ridiculous.” Mustang scoffed, then turned to Hawkeye. “I suppose you're going to tell me you saw a tiny boy too?”

“No sir.”

“Thank God, for a second I thought-”

“I'm pretty sure mine was a girl.”

Mustang stared at her. “You...you're being serious aren't you?”

“Yes sir.”

Mustang ran a hand through his hair, then went over to the nearest couch and collapsed onto it with a groan. He could picture Maes pulling off some convoluted prank to get a rise out of him, but Hawkeye had never been the type to take an active role in one of his schemes. Plus, Maes pulling his leg didn't account for how accurate that description had been.

“Okay, so tiny people exist and somehow none of us knew about it until now. I assume you both have a story about how you came to the same conclusion, so who wants to go first?”

“Oh! Pick me!” Maes hopped off the desk and put his hand in the air. Mustang groaned again, which Hughes took as agreement.

The intelligence officer launched into a story about work keeping him from his darling wife and how his own forgetfulness forced him to go back to the office, and on the way back he was drawn to pained sounds coming from a berry bush. This lead to his fascinating encounter with a tiny injured child who eventually allowed himself to be brought to the base by Hughes, despite the boy's obvious fear.

Mustang always believed that Hughes would have been a wonderful village story teller, had the man actually been born in a small village. Hughes was always entertaining to listen to when he had an exciting story to tell, but right now he would have preferred something a little more straight forward.

“So this Alphonse kid you met supposedly lives somewhere in the base? Where could he be hiding that we've never seen him before? And how did the kid get out of the storage room so quickly?”

“Well, it's possible he hasn't been here that long, though I do have some ideas about where he could be if he has been here a while. But let's get all the cards on the table first, shall we? The more information we have the more certain I can be.”

“You're planning a dramatic reveal aren't you?” Mustang accused.

“No! Well, I am kind of hoping the opportunity arises, but the point still stands.”

“Alright, alright. Lieutenant, you're up.”

Hawkeye had taken a seat on the couch across from Mustang partway through Hughes's story. At her boss's prompting, she nodded and started her report.

“You recall that I've been staying in the base's temporary living quarters, yes?”

“Because a pipe burst in your house and it's getting repaired.” Mustang supplied, and Riza nodded.
“It happened the morning after I moved in. I went to my quarters about mid-morning, and when I came in Black Hayate started making a fuss, barking at something under the bedroom dresser. I looked underneath and saw a small girl, about the same size your both described. She wore simple clothes, had a pack on her back, and was blonde. She ran when she saw me, and I had to stop Hayate from chasing her. She fell down as she ran, and something fell out of her pack.”

Hawkeye paused, and dug something out of her trouser pocket. She opened her hand and held it out, showing off an ordinary pocket watch. Hughes sat down next to Roy and plucked it out of her hand. He looked at it closely while Hawkeye continued.

“Last thing I saw was her running under the bed. I looked for her after I got Black Hayate to calm down, but I couldn't find her.”

“You mean she disappeared on you like the boy did?” Mustang asked.

“No, I have a good idea of where she went. When I couldn't find her anywhere I moved the bed to have a better look at where she had been. I found a mouse hole at the base wall; it looked big enough for her to slip into.”

“Are you trying to tell me that we have tiny humans living in our walls?” Mustang asked in a deadpan voice.

“Well, the walls or the floor. Either one would fit with what I've found, as does everything else we've seen.” Hughes stated, putting the watch onto the table between the couches.

“What you've found?” Hawkeye asked curiously. Mustang was eyeing the walls and floor incredulously.

“You know that research I told you about Roy?” Mustang stopped looking around and turned his attention to Hughes. “Ever since my encounter with Alphonse I've been looking into any other historic reference to tiny, human-like beings. It seemed unlikely that Alphonse was the only one of his kind after all, and Hawkeye's story proves that he isn't.”

“I think mine does too, actually.” Roy suddenly realized. “Alphonse was injured when you met him, but nothing about the boy I saw suggested he was hurt.”

“Huh, I didn't even think about that.” Hughes admitted. “Maybe you actually met his brother. I think Alphonse was about to mention having one before he stopped himself.”

“Maybe they're all siblings.” Hawkeye suggested.

“Or maybe tiny people heal super fast. Anything's possible at this point.” Roy grumbled.

“Maybe, but I think Hawkeye's theory is more likely.” Hughes said glibly. “You see, on the first day of my research, I tried the base's library. I only found references to little spirits and such, though. You know, the kind of thing people once used to explain why meat went bad or milk turned sour. The first real lead I got was at the local library. I heard they finally got enough donations to have a decent children section, so I went there after work to look at books for when the baby comes. While I was there I found a series of books all based around the idea of tiny people living under the floorboards of someone's house.”

“Now, you know I love a good story, but I wasn't about to take a kid's story at face value. So I checked out the series and looked into the author, Katherine May, the next day. The author herself passed away unfortunately, but as luck would have it she has family living here in East City. I was able to track down an address for her daughter and arranged a meeting with her. Apparently, Mrs.
May based her books on stories her uncle used to tell her. Mrs. May saw them as just stories, but her uncle insisted he had actually seen these tiny people when he was younger. He referred to them as 'Borrowers', and claimed to have been friends with a family of them that lived underneath the floor of his childhood home. That wouldn't be enough evidence in and of itself, but add it to everything the three of us have seen...

“And we have enough determine that we probably have 'borrowers' living somewhere in the base.” Roy said wearily.

“Why did he call them Borrowers?” Hawkeye asked.

“I think that's what they called themselves, actually. Probably because of their tendency to 'borrow' things from humans.” Maes said with smirk.

“So, they're all thieves then.” Mustang concluded.

“Essentially, but I can't say I blame them. It must be hard to get by, being so small in such a big world, especially when you have to compete with any animals you come across. Plus I'm sure they go out of their way to avoid being seen by humans. We must seem pretty scary to them.”

“If they don't want to be seen, and are apparently so good at it that almost no one else knows about them, then why did we all see them recently? If they've lived this long they have to be good enough to get the essentials without being caught.” Roy pointed out.

“Something must have motivated each of them to take a risk they normally wouldn't have.” Hawkeye realized. “But what would make them desperate enough to do that?”

Maes Hughes grinned widely. “Well, I guess we'll just have to track them down and ask.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry this took a while to come out. I ran out of the chapters I'd written ahead of time, so I've been working on this one here and there. As a result, I can't guarantee when the next chapter will be out, but I will do my best to get it planned and typed up soon.

On a more plot based note:
The name of the author of the series that Hughes mentions in this chapter is a play off the characters mentioned in Mary Norton's 'The Borrowers'. In the book, the story of the borrowers is being told by a 'Miss May' to her niece, Kate. Miss May originally heard the story from her brother, who was the little boy that befriended the borrowers in the book. So I had Katherine May say that she heard about the borrowers from her uncle.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Okay, so, while I was writing this chapter I realized I made a really big continuity error. In the second chapter, I wrote about Maes telling Al that he was going to be a father soon, which implies that Elicia isn't born yet. But then in the last chapter I had him taking Elicia to the library to get books. I just...wow. I can't believe I let something that big slip by me when I posted the chapter. I can't believe nobody called me on it either...

In any case, my sincerest apologies for such a blatant mix up. I shall fix this continuity error shortly. Hopefully by the time you are done reading this chapter you will be able to go back to the last one and see the edits I've made. Now, on with the show!

Mustang stood in front of his desk, leaning his weight back against it, and gave his best friend a dry look.

"Hughes, remind me, why do you insist on searching my office first?"

The three of them had agreed to meet in Mustang's office once everyone else had gone home, to try and find some sign of their newly discovered residents. It was now well into the evening, and Roy really hoped Maes had remembered to tell Gracia he'd be home late. Roy didn't want to spend the week hearing about the fallout if Maes hadn't.

"Because this is where we're most likely to find an entrance to where the borrowers live." Hughes replied from his seat on the arm of the couch. Hawkeye, having just arrived, watched him curiously from the doorway.

"How do you figure?" she asked.

"Well, it was Al that gave me the first clue. Not only did he ask to be taken to a storage closet close to this office, but he also called me 'Mr. Hughes'. I'd introduced myself by my first name; never mentioned my last name. So he must have heard my name before, and often enough for the name to come naturally to him. This office certainly counts as a place I go often."

"Much to our dismay." Mustang grumbled good-naturedly. Hughes grinned.

"You know you love me. Anyway, add on the fact that his possible brother was seen right here, and there's a good chance that they live somewhere around here."

"At the very least they must have a way of getting in and out of here. Even if they don't live here we could find that." Hawkeye commented.

"Precisely! Plus, I have a theory about how Al got out of that closet, and I think this is a good place to check it out." Hughes stood up, and turned his full attention to Mustang. "On that subject, you said there was a bright flash in your 'dream', didn't you?"

"Right."

"Any idea on where it came from?"
Mustang wasn't sure where this was going, but he knew it wouldn't do any good to questions his friend about it just yet. Maes would get to his point soon.

“I think it was by the door.”

“By the door inside this room, or just outside the door and in the main office?”

“I'm...not sure.”

“Darn, guess we'll just have to search both!”

“We're looking for any openings near the the bottoms of the walls right?” Hawkeye asked.

“That, or anything that just seems out of place. Specifically, let me know if you find any marks in the area.”

Hawkeye nodded and knelt by the door frame, inspecting the area closely.

“Part of your theory?” Mustang asked, pushing himself away from the desk.

“Yup! I'll explain once we find something.”

Mustang rolled his eyes, but went along with it. If anyone could puzzle out the location of tiny people hiding in the base, it was Maes Hughes. And Roy wanted them found. He wanted answers! How long had they been here? What sort of things had they been taking? What have they overheard from the different officers? Depending on the answers, one of them could easily risk base security if they were caught by someone without clearance.

Plus, the idea that they were being spied on for years was just creepy.

Hughes had gone over to the other side of the door, just opposite of Hawkeye, so Mustang went into the main office and knelt down on the other side of the door. Despite what the others had told him, and what he himself had seen, this still seemed insane. He was staying late after work to search his office for children only a few inches tall, one of which had tried to steal his liquor. How surreal was that? It was the kind of story you expected to hear from someone who'd been put in a nursing home because their mind was going. Neither Mustang nor his team were anywhere near that old.

On second thought, he might not be as far from that as he thought. If he had to crouch down like this much longer he'd have to make an appointment with his chiropractor.
He shifted a set of shelves that sat in the corner by the office door, and his eyes zeroed in on a white smudge on the wall. It was on the side of the shelf furthest from the door, and was just a couple inches off the ground.

“Hey Hughes, is that was you were looking for?”

The man quickly stepped through the office door, and came to look over Mustang's shoulder.

“Looks promising. What's it made out of?”

Mustang pulled off one of his gloves and swiped a finger across the white mark. He immediately knew what it was, because every beginning alchemist became intimately familiar with the substance.

“It's chalk.” he reported. Hughes's mouth split into a victorious grin.

“Aha! Just as I suspected!”
“What's so important about chalk on the wall?” Hawkeye asked, coming out to join them. Mustang stood up and stretched his back.

“You recall that after my encounter with Alphonse that I searched the closet to see where he had gone, and found no openings, right?” His companions both nodded. “Well, what I did find was a white smudge on the wall, much like this one, that also seemed to be made by chalk. Plus, just before I went in, I saw something flash from the crack under the door. Roy also saw a light, and around this area too. Now I ask you, what process do we know of that involves both chalk and bright flashes of light?”

Hawkeye's brow furrowed in thought, but Mustang's shot up almost immediately. He knew, of course he did. He'd been thinking about just moments ago after all.

“Alchemy.” he blurted in surprise.

“You really think the borrowers know how to perform alchemy?” Hawkeye asked, sounding just as surprised as Mustang.

“I'm thinking that at least one of them does. It's the best explanation I have for how Al disappeared, and the correlations we've found here make it all the more plausible.”

“How would they even learn something like that?” Mustang wondered aloud.

“Interesting question Roy.” Maes replied, eyes sparking with intrigue. “It's possible those kind of skills are passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.”

“If they've been here a while, then they might have been able to teach themselves using the base's library.” Hawkeye pointed out.

“Good point. They might have even made books about it themselves, if they have the right tools for it.”

“How much could they have learned at this point though? We all agreed the children didn't look older than their mid-teens.” Mustang paused, thinking for a moment. “Though, I suppose you wouldn't need to be an expert to create a door in a wall and then set it back to normal.”

“Plus, just because we've only see children so far, doesn't mean that there are only children here. There could be adult borrowers we just haven't seen yet, and one of them might be the alchemist.” Hughes smile dimmed, almost becoming a frown. “Honestly, I'm kind of hoping that's the case, because I really don't like the idea of three kids living on their own, especially at their size.”

In all the excitement of discovering the borrowers' existence, neither of the other two humans had thought about the implications of only seeing children. Now that Maes had brought it up, they both hoped he was right.

“Well,” Hughes continued “I suppose the only way we'll know for sure is if we find them and ask them.”

Hughes knelt down, brought his hand up, and knocked on the wall like it was a door.

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The inside of the borrower home was much more barren now. They couldn't afford to take everything, they'd each accumulated far too many little possessions over the years, but by now everyone had packed up the essentials. That just left one more thing to do: decide where they were
going to go.

So they were now seated in a circle around the city map, debating the best place to move to.

“Would it really be so bad to try living in a house for once?” Winry asked.

“Human homes are more likely to have cats and dogs walking around the inside, so yes, it could be that bad.” Edward argued back.

Winry shuddered, remembering her recent run in with a dog.

“Yes, never underestimate the danger of animals.” Pinako chided “You all remember what happened to Pitt Renbak, don’t you?”

All three children grimaced at that. The garden borrower had been smart and friendly. He had been great at finding and mixing herbs to make medicine, so he often worked with Winry’s parents when someone got sick. They had each enjoyed spending time with him, and none of them would ever forget finding out that he had been killed by a stray cat.

“We definitely don’t want a place with pets.” Winry conceded. “But there are plenty of homes that don’t keep pets. I’m sure we could find one.”

“But we might not know they have a pet until we go inside and look around, and then we’d have to try a new house if they did. That could waste a lot of time that could be used for setting up a new place to live.” Al spoke up. “I mean, it’s not a bad option, because a house is guaranteed to have everything we would need to survive, but they have their own dangers to consider.”

“Offices and business have their own dangers too. That's why we're moving in the first place, isn't it?”

“Yeah, but better the danger you know. At least we're familiar with the stuff that goes on in businesses. And what about books? I can't live without books Winry!” Ed cried dramatically.

“Most humans do keep some books in their house, you know.” said Pinako.

“I think Brother was specifically talking about alchemy books.”

“If we want a guarantee of books we might have to move back to the library again. Do we really want to do that?” Winry asked fretfully.

“Well, I hear they've rebuilt it completely now...so I guess we could.” Ed said hesitantly.

Any further discussion was interrupted by a sharp rapping on the wall.

“Wow, their really active this evening. Are they having a meeting or something?” Winry directed the last part to Ed.

“Not that I've heard about.”

“Hello?”

The sound caused every borrower to stiffen. That greeting had not come from any of them; it had come from beyond the walls of their home. The barrier muffled the sound a bit, but it was still too loud and too close.

“Hey, if anyone is in there, could you please let us know? We just want to talk to you.”
They knew. The humans knew about them and were trying to coax them out.

Each of them responded differently to this revelation. Ed started cursing under his breath, while Winry pressed her hands to her mouth and tried to calm her panicked breathing. Pinako got a resigned look on her face, as though she had been expecting this too happen, and Al started babbling.

“We shouldn't respond to them right? They can't know we're here for sure, they must just be guessing! We could leave right now, and figure out where to go along the way...or maybe we could got to one of our rest points here in the base and figure it out there. Yeah, that's probably a better idea. Then we could figure out if they have traps set up and-”

“We know you're there.” A different voice interrupted Al's panicked planning. “If you come out and talk to us, I'm sure we can work out an equivalent exchange for all of you to stay here.”

“Dammit Colonel Bastard! We already pay you back for the shit we take! It's not our fault you're too dumb to notice!”

“Brother! Stop yelling at the wall!”

“Yeah Ed! Do you want them to hear us?!”

“Quiet, all of you!”

All arguing ceased upon Pinako's command.

“Edward, I want you to give me your honest opinion on both of the people we've just heard. What is your impression of them?”

“What are you going on about you old bat?”

“Just answer the question, boy.”

Ed grumbled, but still took the time to give a thought out answer.

“The first guy was Maes Hughes, the one who found Al. I figured he would be the one to figure us out, if any of them did, because he doesn't like leaving things unanswered or unsolved. He can be way too enthusiastic, too curious for his own good, but he's also kind. I honestly don't think he would try to hurt us, especially after the way he interacted with Al. As for the colonel, he's definitely a bastard. Way too fucking dramatic, and not very honest about how he presents himself to most people. But, despite that, I've never really thought of him as a bad person. He cares to much about the people he works with to be a bad person.”

Granny Pinako nodded slowly, considering everything Edward had said.

“I trust you judgment in this Edward. Because of that, I think we should assess this situation before running away. We'll see what they want, if there are no traps set up.”

“What?!” Ed practically shrieked. But Granny didn't answer, because she was already heading for the usual entry point for the office. The children were quick to protest, but even quicker to follow her.

“Granny are you sure? Mom and Dad, and Trisha, they told us so often not to interact with humans. That we should never try to get near them, and avoid them at all costs. That's why we were planning to leave.”
“They told you that because of how young you were at the time. Black and white rules are easier for small children to understand.” Granny replied calmly. “Avoiding humans is always the first choice, but sometimes that option isn't available. When that option is taken away things get more complicated. You're parents also told you to always let them know if you believed you'd been seen, right? That was because it was always the plan for the adults to deal with the humans if it came to it. So that's what I plan to do now.”

“Like hell you are!” Ed shouted. “We don't have to go out there, and even if we did the three of us aren't little kids anymore. We are just as capable of handling this as any-”

“Edward, please recall that I have more experience in these matters than all three of you combined.” Granny cut the young man off. Ed fumed, and probably would have started arguing again, had she not continued.

“But you are right. The three of you aren't small children anymore. You've learned and grown so much since we moved here, and I want you to know that I couldn't be more proud.” She turned to look at them all, and saw that each of them were hanging on her every word. “That's why I've decided to take this chance. Because, Edward, I trust your observations about these humans.”

“But what if I'm wrong?” Ed asked quietly.

“Well, your word isn't the only thing I'm going on here. I first started considering the idea when I heard them try talking to us. You have any idea why?” she asked, addressing the whole group.

“Is it...because of the way they talked to us?” Al guessed. “I mean, Hughes didn't try to threaten or scare us into coming out. The Colonel didn't sound as nice, but he also didn't talk to us like we were just animals or something.”

“Nicely put, Alphonse. The mere fact that they are trying to talk shows that they view us as intelligent beings, and the way they are talking suggests they could be reasoned with. I know that we could still leave, but, as Edward said earlier, it is easier to deal with trouble you are familiar with. There is a chance we could stay here if we manage to strike some kind of deal with them. I know you are nervous because of everything you've been taught about humans, I am as well, but it's important to remember that humans can be just as nuanced as borrowers when it comes to motivations and morals.”

“We're not letting you go out there alone.” Winry said firmly, despite the fear thrumming through her veins. She couldn't lose the only blood relation she had left. Ed and Al voiced their agreement.

“I had a feeling you would say that.” Granny said with a sigh. “I doubt I can stop you, but I would appreciate if someone could stay here and be ready to close the door. We don't need to make grabbing us any easier for them if things go south.”

“Good to know you're not going completely senile.” Edward muttered, which earned him a smack from Granny.

“Just for that, both you and your brother will stay here while we meet them.” Pinako commanded. “Now, if one of you would be so kind as to make a door, I'd like to go see what all the fuss is about.”

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Mustang couldn't help but admire his friend. Both for being so direct and apparently not caring that it looked like he was trying to talk to a wall.

“Hey, if anyone is in there, could you please let us know? We just want to talk to you.”
They all listened carefully, straining their ears in the hopes of picking up any kind of response, but none came. Hughes was about to try again when Mustang spoke up.

“Let me try something.” He crouched down next to Hughes. “We know you're there. If you come out and talk to us, I'm sure we can work out an equivalent exchange for all of you to stay here.”

That time he could have sworn he heard something, but it wasn't intelligible. The others must have heard it too, because they stayed just as still and attentive as he did. But after waiting a while, nothing further happened.

“Are you sure that was wise, sir? That sounded rather threatening.” Hawkeye sounded concerned, but Mustang stood up and stretched nonchalantly.

“I figured they wouldn't bother hiding if they think we are already sure about their location. Plus, one of them is an alchemist. Every decent alchemist holds a lot of respect for the Law of Equivalent Exchange, and a little guilt tripping can go a long ways.”

“You're terrible Roy.”

“Oh like you're any better-” Mustang cut himself off when Hughes held a hand up and leaned closer to the wall.

“Thought I heard something again.” Maes muttered. They waited again, and nothing happened for a while.

But then there was a subdued flash, a crackle of energy, and door just a few inches tall appeared right next to the white smudge. Each human subconsciously leaned in, and the little door swung open.

Out stepped two figures, one of them even smaller than the ones they had seen before. The gray hair and hunched posture gave away that this person was small from advanced age rather than youth. The person leaned on a cane as they walked just a few steps forward, staying close to the wall and well out of any human's reach. The taller one, who was obviously female, warily followed. She looked up at the gathered humans, eyes growing wider and wider as she took all of them in. The elderly borrower stopped, then looked up at them sternly.

“I certainly hope you have a good reason for interrupting our evening and scaring my grandchildren half to death.”

Hughes and Hawkeye startled a little at the gravelly female voice, and Mustang had to swallow a chuckle at the absurdity of getting scolded by a very little old lady.

Maes was quick to recover. He lowered himself further to the ground and scooted back a little. Hawkeye was quick to follow suit, with Mustang taking just a moment longer. All the movement made the young female tense and shift backwards, as though she was getting ready to run. The older borrower seemed unperturbed.

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“I'm very sorry for the intrusion ma'am.” Hughes starts off, keeping his voice low. “We didn't mean to frighten you or your family. We just want to talk to you, now that we know your here, and we weren't sure how else to get in contact with you.”

“Well, we're here now. What is it that you wanted to discuss?”

“What exactly you're doing here and how much you know.” Mustang said. That earned him a look from Hughes, who was quick to reply himself.
“What we mean is that we should learn about each other. None of us want to accidentally put you in danger, and I'm sure you want the same thing.”

“We want to help you.” Hawkeye said softly, looking at the younger borrower. She looked up when Hawkeye spoke, and their eyes locked. “Hello again, little one. I'm sorry Black Hayate gave you a hard time the other day.”

“It's okay,” she said, looking down. “And we've been doing fine on our own. We don't need your help,” the girl spoke loudly, but that made the shake in her voice all the more noticeable.

“You clearly do, if you survive based on stealing things from us.” Mustang countered.

“Hey!” A long haired boy suddenly rushed out to stand by the girl. “We are not thieves! We do equivalent exchange every time we leave home. You know that dumb way you lean back in your chair? We keep repairing the back legs so you don't fall on your ass and break something. You're fucking welcome!”

This makes Roy sputter indignantly, so much so that Hughes almost misses the surprised cry of 'Brother!' that announces the arrival of Alphonse.

“Granny told us to stay back and watch!” Al scolded the other boy.

“I've been warning you not to do that for years, sir. This just confirms that I've always been right.” Hawkeye says to a still incoherent Roy. Hughes ignores them in favor of greeting his small friend.

“Hello Alphonse. How is your wound healing?”

Al jumped at being addressed, but answered quickly. “I'm fine Mr. Hughes. Brother did a good job cleaning and reapplying the bandage, so I'm feeling a lot better.”

“Well, kudos to your brother then.” Hughes shifts his gaze to look at the other boy, who seems confused by how calmly the two are talking.

“I have a name you know.” The boy mutters, just loud enough for Maes to hear. The man put a hand on his chest and leaned back.

“How rude of me. I called you out here to talk and didn't even introduce myself properly. I'm Maes Hughes, though I had a feeling you already knew that. My friends here are Roy Mustang and Riza Hawkeye.”

“I know.” The boy says, which gets him elbowed in the stomach by the elderly borrower.

“I'm Pinako Rockbell. These are my grandchildren, Alphonse, Edward, and Winry.”

“It's nice to meet you all.” Hawkeye says with a small smile.

“Right, nice to meet everyone. When did my life become invaded my tiny stalkers?” Mustang wondered aloud.

“About four years ago, if you count the time we moved in as 'the invasion'.” Ed replied.

“You've been here four years?” Hawkeye asked in surprise.

“Is fixing my chair on occasion really equivalent exchange for four years of thievery?” Mustang challenged.
“Roy!”

“It isn't just the chair.” Alphonse spoke up. “We repair all sorts of things when we go out. The radio is probably the most common, and that's something we all help with since Winry knows more about machines than Brother and I. It's little stuff, but all in all I think we've saved you a lot of upkeep.”

“Yeah, you haven't had to get that thing repaired or replaced in ages because of us! That more than makes up for the little stuff we take, especially since you all hardly miss it to begin with. But I bet you'd miss that radio if it suddenly went out.” Ed said with a smirk, which made Mustang frown.

“You've been tampering with our equipment? Are you kids really qualified to do that?”

“I can assure you, Colonel, that Winry has an excellent mind for mechanics and is very capable. And before you ask, she wouldn't mess something up on purpose either. We have no interest in your politics, and avoid humans at every turn. You would never have known we were here at all if the children hadn't been acting so recklessly lately.”

All three of the children winced. Hughes's brow furrowed.

“That's one of the things I wanted to ask about. You say you avoid humans and did it so well we only just now figured out you were here, but your standing here now. You're talking to us, and things are mostly going well. Was it really necessary to hide yourselves so much?”

“Of course.” Pinako replied, very matter-of-fact.

“Why?” Hawkeye asked.

“Because human beings are dangerous.” The three children replied, almost in sync. They looked at each other in surprise.

“All borrower parents tell their children that, and with good reason. We are having a calm conversation now, but I've seen for myself that not all humans act reasonably when faced with our existence. Many refuse to believe their own eyes and dismiss us as mice or other pests, and take actions to exterminate us. That very event caused me to move more than once during my youth, I'll have you know.” Pinako explained.

Hughes and Hawkeye looked highly disturbed by this revelation, while Mustang's brow was furrowed in confusion.

“If that's the case, then why are you still here? With a risk like that shouldn't you have left as soon as one of you was discovered?” Ed snorted.

“Well, we could have been well on our way to doing that had you not come knocking.”

“What do you mean?” Hughes asked.

“We've gathered the necessities at this point, and I've been feeling better. So tonight we were trying to decide where to go next.” Al said.

“So, if you don't want us to be here you don't have to do anything. We're already leaving.” Winry added.

“You're still planning on leaving?” Hawkeye asked. “You don't have to.”
“She's right, we're not going to kick you out, and we'll leave you alone if you want.” Hughes was quick to confirm.

“Really?” Ed looked at the humans suspiciously. “You'll just go back to acting like we don't exist? You're all okay with us being here and not knowing what we're up to all the time?” He shook his head. “I don't buy it.”

“Yeah, why would you do that?” Winry asked.

“You...want to know why we would just leave you alone?” Hawkeye asked.

“Well, yeah. I mean you didn't have a choice before, since you didn't know we were here.” Al spoke up. “But you do now. We repaired stuff to repay for taking stuff, but keeping us secret is something extra. Shouldn't you want more payback because of that?” Winry nodded quickly.

“It doesn't have to work that way...” Hughes said, sounding sad.

“All relationships are based off of some give and take. It's not unreasonable to wonder what all of you would get out of this.” Pinako pointed out.

At that moment, Mustang's eyes lit up with realization and inspiration. Running with his idea, he jumped into the conversation before Hughes could reply.

“Alright, you caught us. There is something we'd like your help with.”

“I knew it!” Ed shouted. Roy ignored the confused looks his companions were giving him and pressed on.

“You see, a lot of the higher ups in the military aren't as good as they claim to be. There's a lot of corruption in this system, and I want to rise through the ranks so I can weed some of it out. In order to do that I need information, but certain kinds of information aren't easy for me to obtain.”

“How do we factor in to that?” Ed pressed.

“You can observe without being seen. If I know a time and place where desired information is going to be shared, then one or more of you can observe them in secret and report back to me. In return, we'll keep your secret and help you out if you're in danger of getting discovered by anyone else.”

“What would the risks of that be?” Pinako asked, narrowing her eyes at the Colonel. The look almost made him hesitate.

“So long as they are careful there wouldn't be much risk. Just go to the place ahead of time, find a good place to eavesdrop from without being seen, and close it after everyone has left. Simple. You wouldn't even have to leave the base.”

“Is that true Mr. Hughes?” Al asked the other human.

“That does sound about right.” Hughes admitted slowly.

“I guess we could do that.” Winry said, looking thoughtful

“It does sound reasonable, but we'd appreciate some time to think if over.” Granny said.

“Of course, and in the mean time,” Hawkeye pulled out the pocket watch and held it out towards the group. “I believe you wanted this.”
“Oh! Yes, thank you! Um...” Winry hesitated when she realized how close she would have to get to the humans in order to retrieve the watch. Sensing her discomfort, Hawkeye placed the watch on the floor and slid it over to the group. Winry practically pounced on it.

“All right, all of you back inside, we have some things to discuss.” Pinako herded the children back to the door. Once the kids were inside the wall, she turned back to the humans.

“We’ll meet you back here at the same time tomorrow. We should have an answer for you by then.”

Then the elderly borrower followed her grandchildren through the door. There was a crackle of energy, and the door's edges melted away.

Once the borrowers were gone, Hughes turned to glare at Roy. Hawkeye merely raised an eyebrow at him.

“I think that went pretty well.” Mustang said with a grin.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Roy, did you seriously just recruit children to do military spy work for you?”

Hughes's voice is strained. It's partially from keeping himself quiet, so the borrowers won't overhear him, but it's mostly from suppressed anger. Hughes's question is accompanied by a very disapproving look from Hawkeye.

Roy would be lying if he said that neither of these things affected him, because a part of him was quaking under their combined disappointment. Despite this, Roy kept his seat on the floor and relaxed into the wall behind him. He just needed to get them to understand his reasoning.

“First off, let me just say that I didn't come to this meeting planning to ask this of them. I was curious, just like the two of you. I only came up with this because the brothers admitted that they were all planning to leave. None of us want that, right?”

Mustang paused, his friends expressions telling him that they all agreed on that point.

“You saw how suspicious they all got when we tried to get them to stay here. They've been raised to fear people like us, so they obviously weren't going to believe that we would put up with them through sheer good will. So I had to get them to believe some kind of equivalent exchange was happening, something that we would get out of having them around that wouldn't threaten them or their livelihood. Asking them to do a little information gathering is a win-win. The borrowers are convinced to stay here, where it's relatively safe, and I get to add a new branch to my information network.”

Plus, Mustang really did want the chance to learn more about the borrowers themselves, since he still didn't know what they'd already heard. He didn't think that would strengthen his argument with his friends though.

“As much as it pains me to admit, you're probably right.” Hughes said with a sigh, only to resume his glare a moment later. “That being said, whatever plans you come up with better not put these kids in harms way. You make damn sure they won't be discovered before sending them anywhere.”

“I know my way around a chess board Hughes. I'll find out what they are capable of before asking them to go on any missions. Not sure how I'll figure that out yet, but I will. Honestly Hughes, you don't need to worry so much.”

Hughes had enough grace to look a little abashed. Hawkeye didn't say anything, but eased up on the look she was giving her commanding officer. She had jumped to conclusions herself. Colonel Mustang was very pragmatic, and could be conniving when it came to his career path, but he wasn't cruel. He occasionally needed to be reminded not to cross certain lines, but that's what her and Hughes were there for.

There wasn't much left to discuss at this point, so they all decided to go home and rest. It had been a long day, and each needed some time to take everything in before meeting up again the next night.

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As soon as the doorway closed behind the group of borrowers, Winry's legs gave out. The pocket
watch fell to the floor with a dull clang, but Ed caught Winry before she could join it.

“Oh God, that was intense.” Winry whispered breathlessly, shaking as Ed helped her straighten up.

“Are you both okay?” Al asked, looking over both Winry and Granny.

“We're fine Alphonse.” Granny replied, starting the march for home once she was sure Winry would be able to follow. Ed had to help her along, so Al grabbed the watch.

“Yeah, I'm okay, just the adrenaline leaving all at once, I'll be fine once I rest for a bit.” Winry assured them.

“What we really need to talk about is how you both recklessly rushed into the meeting instead of keeping your post at the door.” Pinako chided the boys. “You will both have to do much better if you plan on taking the Colonel up on his offer.”

They had arrived back at home now. Edward helped Winry into a chair at the kitchen table before taking one himself. The other two followed suit.

“Do we really want to make a deal with the Colonel?” Al asked. “Brother says he's not very honest.”

“I meant that he likes to present different versions of himself, not that he goes back on his word.” Ed corrected.

“And it is possible to make a deal with someone without fully trusting them, if one is cautious.” Pinako pointed out.

“Well, if I'm being honest, I'd really rather not move again.” Winry confessed. “The first time was bad enough.”

The move from the library to the military base had been awful. The fire had destroyed most of their possessions, and there hadn't been time to grab food on the way out. They were forced to scavenge for food and supplies as they went; which meant they spent a lot of time avoiding animals and finding last minute hiding spots. They also had to wait for foot traffic to die down before continuing their journey. That wasn't much of an issue in alleys and such, but was a major problem when they had to use main roads. They had wasted a lot of time huddling under street debris, just waiting to move, with nothing to occupy their minds but hunger and grief.

“Well, some parts wouldn't be as bad, because we've had time to prepare. We have food and supplies with us now, and we can plan a route made of alley ways.” Al reasoned. “Animals would still be a problem though.” Al's side throbed, reminding him of his last wildlife encounter.

“I think we should stick around for a little bit at least, give it a shot. I mean, all he wants us to do is eavesdrop, right?” Ed grinned proudly. “I do that all the time! I've been doing it since we got here, and I've never gotten caught. Fulfilling our end of the bargain will be a piece of cake. If he ever asks us to do something more dangerous, we can call foul and hightail it then.”

“That means we'll have to be ready to leave quickly then. If the humans suddenly decide to change the deal we might not have time to prepare anything.” Winry's words might have been critical, but there was a growing confidence in her voice. Pinako nodded.

“Yes, even if we do decide to stay, we shouldn't get cocky. People, be they human or borrower, can be fickle. We shouldn't let our guards down just because we are on speaking terms with a few humans.”
“We could keep some of our traveling essentials packed and waiting at one of our rest points. That way if things start to turn sour we’ll be able to just grab our things and go.” Winry proposed. The others agreed that was a good plan.

“I know none of us will be comfortable with it,” Ed said slowly “but I think we should actually let those three see us now and then while we’re out borrowing. They might get curious if they don’t see us at all after meeting us, and they could mess things up if they go looking for us.”

Pinako hummed thoughtfully, while the two kids fidgeted nervously.

“I think I’d be okay with that, so long as it’s just those three.” Al decided after a minute.

“As long as...we don't have to talk to them or something. I think I could handle just borrowing with them in the room, like we did with Mustang before.” Winry added a few moments later.

“Well, hopefully none of them will be drunk off their asses any time in the near future, but about the same otherwise.” Ed said with a smirk.

“We shouldn't tell them where we exit the building though. They can't block off our escape routes if they don't know where they are.”

“A good point Alphonse. We should check them now and then as well, to make sure no one has discovered them on their own.” Pinako added.

“It sounds like we're really doing this.” Winry said, both in wonder and trepidation. “Are we really doing this?”

“I think we are.” Al said softly. Ed nodded firmly.

“If everyone has decided to try taking this risk, then we should discuss the terms we want the humans to agree to.”

“What do you mean, Granny?”

“Keeping our secret in exchange for eavesdropping is too simplistic Winry. We should come of with things we would like the humans to promise, either to do or not do, and we must decide what we will be willing to promise in return. A task I believe will be better done after some rest.”

Mustang, Hughes, and Hawkeye all met up after hours again, same time as the day before. Everyone arrived a bit early, eager to hear what their tiny residents had decided. They moved the shelves out of the way right away, so they would have a clear view when the borrowers arrived. Then they all settled cross-legged onto the floor, Hughes in the middle with Mustang on his right and Hawkeye on his left.

At the exact time that the borrowers entered the office before, the light of transmutation flashed and a tiny door appeared in the wall. It is the elderly borrower, Pinako, that comes through. She is alone this time. Hughes gave her his best smile.

“Good evening ma'am. Just you tonight?”

“Good evening, young man. And yes, just me. The children wanted to come, but the boys already barged in when they shouldn't have yesterday. Winry had to stay behind and reassure them that this old bat actually knows what she is doing.” Pinako shook her head in exasperation.
“So Miss Pinako, has your family come to a decision?” Roy asked. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. She nodded.

“Yes Colonel, we have. We will agree to your proposal, but we would like some assurances from you first.” Pinako looked him square in the eye. Roy's lips curled in amusement. Simply based on who he was talking to, this promised to be the strangest negotiation he'd ever participated in.

“What kind of assurances?”

“You said the children wouldn't have to leave the safety of the walls or the base itself in order to do these missions of yours, and I will hold you to that. They should also be given plenty of time to travel to the location and set up a spot where they won't be seen.”

“We figured that was a given, but we'll make it official now.” Hawkeye replied.

“You keep saying that 'the children' should be given enough time. You don't plan on accompanying them?” Hughes prodded. Pinako shook her head, and leaned more heavily on her cane.

“Borrowing is a chore for the young, I had to give it up some time ago.” A hint of mischief entered her voice. “Don't think that means you won't be seeing me though. Someone has to keep the youngsters in line.”

“And that person is always you?”

“Well I'm not about to cede the position to you Mr. Hughes. No offense.”

“None taken.” The man said with a chuckle. “Was there anything else?”

“Yes, you've all been respectful so far, which we greatly appreciate; but I want to make this clear. None of you will pick us or touch us without our permission. Emergencies would be the exception of course, if picking one of us up would save us from injury or discovery.”

“That's reasonable.” Mustang acknowledged. He wouldn't appreciate someone significantly larger then him getting grabby either. His mind flashed to Major Armstrong, and he had to stop himself from grimacing.

“If it's not too much trouble, we'd also like to be told about 'major events'. Personnel moving in ways they normally don't can affect our borrowing.”

Mustang steepled his fingers. “Well, for something like that it would be helpful to know when and where you typically 'borrow'. We can't know what will affect you if we don't know where you plan to be.”

“A fair point. I'll call the children to come out and give you a basic run down of their trips once we are done here. Which should be soon since I have just one more thing to ask of you.”

“Let's hear it.”

“We ask that you not reveal the existence of us or borrowers in general to anyone else. If you think it would be beneficial to tell someone else, you must get permission from all four of us first.”

Hughes smiled sheepishly. “Well, unfortunately I've already told my wife about meeting Alphonse. I'm not sure she believed me though.”

“Perhaps that is the best for now.” Pinako replied.
“Right. It pains me, but out of respect for you I shall refrain from telling my lovely Gracia about meeting you all.”

“Thank you.” Pinako said with an amused smile.

“That brings me to another question I had. You said to get permission from 'all four of you'. Is it really just the four of you living here?”

“Yes, Mr. Hughes, it's just us here.”

“You said the kids were your grandchildren. I- Forgive me if this is too much to ask too soon, but can you tell me what happened to their parents?”

Pinako was silent for a long minute, as she mulled over the implications of sharing this information. Finally, she let out a sigh.

“I suppose telling you the basics now could save the children from being upset later. As of right now, three of them are dead and one's whereabouts are unknown.”

“Wait, four parents? That means the kids aren't all siblings, right? Are they cousins then?” Hawkeye asked.

“Edward and Alphonse are brothers. Winry and I are related to them in bond rather than blood. Our families lived right next to each other as the children grew up, and eventually we became so close we didn't bother to separate ourselves anymore. The boys are just as much my grandchildren as Winry is.”

“It sounds like you all share a very strong bond.” Hughes said softly. Hawkeye cleared her throat,

“May I ask, were any of their deaths caused by humans?”

Pinako hummed thoughtfully. “Not directly, no.”

When it became clear that Pinako didn’t plan on explaining further, Roy steered them back to their original purpose.

“So, you've got your conditions. What about us? If we find out you are taking something we object to, can we ask you to stop?”

“I suppose so, though I can't think of anything you would object to.”

“What about information you've overheard while staying here? I'd really prefer you not spy on us during certain times, or at all really.”

“You'd have to ask Edward about that. He's the only one that actively listens anymore.”

That seemed to surprised Mustang, but he covered it quickly. “We should be able to contact you when needed. How do you prefer we do that?”

“Knocking on the wall like you did last night should work fine. If any of us are awake to hear it we will come see what you want to talk about. Is that all?”

“For now, yes.”

“Very well, we can agree to the terms you've set out so far. Do you all agree to ours?”
All three of the humans voiced their agreement.

“Thank you all for being so agreeable. I'll be back in a moment.”

It wasn't long before she returned with all three borrower children in tow. Apparently none of them were too keen on giving out where they usually went borrowing, but they became more willing once Pinako assured them they wouldn't have to give the humans an exact account of where they would be and when.

The humans were surprised by how many things and places the borrowers listed off. Pens and pencils from various offices, food from the pantry, material scraps from the research offices, fibers and threads from carpet, pins and fabric scraps from the laundry, items left behind in the guest quarters, alcohol from the infirmary, soap from the kitchen and bathrooms, the list goes on.

Mustang is actually impressed at how creative they've gotten in their use of materials, as are the others. Just like Pinako predicted, he can't really think of anything the borrowers are taking that will be greatly missed by the people working at the base. The few things that might be missed are taken in such small quantities that he can hardly object to it.

He does get to question Edward about what kind of things he's heard in the office. Very, very, briefly.

“So Edward, I hear you like to keep tabs on us. What have you learned so far?”

“I learned that Havoc has dating problems, Fuery is shy, and you want all the girls to wear tiny mini-skirts.” Ed replies with a devious smirk.

The look Hawkeye gets from being reminded of that little incident scares Roy into silence for the rest of the meeting.

It's late by the time the meeting is over. The two groups part ways, each of them wondering how things will go now that the stage has officially been set.

Chapter End Notes

Not the most exciting chapter, but I feel it was necessary to go over some of these things. Thanks for sticking with this story everyone! I'm still open to suggestions for borrower human interaction if anyone has them.
Chapter 10

In all honesty, Roy hadn't expected to see much of the borrowers in the next few days. They had been so set on leaving after merely being seen by him and his colleagues that he figured they would be hesitant to be seen again so soon, and at first that seemed to be correct.

The only time he had talked to any of the borrowers since the meeting was when the kids had come into the office one day, after the rest of the team had gone home. They were toting a bundle of pens with them, which they asked Roy to distribute among the office. Apparently they had 'borrowed' the pens the night Edward had tried to sneak some of his booze, and decided to return them since they didn't need them anymore. He'd wanted to ask them why they were suddenly giving things back, but footsteps in the hallway had sent the trio running before he could ask.

So he was very surprised when his late night drinking session was interrupted by a small voice calling out to him.

“I know Hughes tells you this all the time, but you should really find a healthier hobby. Have you considered knitting?”

Roy startles and looks around. He'd only just started drinking, so he knows he can't be hearing things or dreaming yet. Which is good, he'd be a little concerned if his tiny eavesdropper started to invade his mind so soon after they met.

“Up here Colonel Bastard.”

Roy was able to follow the voice better this time, and it lead him to a bookshelf that stood to the right of his desk. The office was dark, only being lit by a lamp and the moonlight coming through the window, but Roy was easily able to pick out the spot of red among the book spines.

Edward was on the second shelf from the top, allowing him to look down at Roy rather than up. The Colonel narrowed his eyes at the tiny intruder.

“What did you call me, brat?”

“Whoops, I forgot you didn't know about that nickname.”

“You mean you've used it before?”

“More than you're actual name.”

On most days Roy would have continued the banter, laying on thicker and thicker layers of mockery as he went, but he wasn't in the mood tonight.

“Whatever, brat. Why are you here anyway? Finally decided to come and have a proper conversation instead of sneaking around?”

“Well, sneaking around is always preferable.” Ed said with a grin, leaning back against the books. “But I figured you'd appreciate a more direct approach if I was going to ask about the drinking thing.”

“Seriously?” Roy raised an eyebrow at him. “It's hardly your place to comment on what I do with my free time, no matter how closely you've watched me.”
“I don't watch *that* closely.” Ed rolled his eyes. “And no, I'm not here to guilt trip you or anything. If you wanna drink yourself to sleep that's your business; I was just thinking you could do it at home or something.”

Roy snorted. “You can't object to alcohol that much, you were certainly eager to get your hands on it the other night.”

“It wasn't—I wasn't gonna drink it!”

“Sure kid.”

“I wasn't!” Ed straightened up and took a step away from the books. “And you really should pick a new location. It's lucky that Hawkeye is the only one that's caught you doing this.”

“You're worried about me getting into trouble? Your concern is flattering.” Roy smirked up at the fuming borrower.

“It's got a lot more to do with us than you, Colonel Bastard.”

“What could my drinking or getting caught possibly have to do with you?” He lifted his glass and took a sip.

“It has everything to do with us! What if you got reassigned or something? Then you'd be moved to a new base and there would be new soldiers here, and who knows what they would be like! We'd have to adjust to all new people and all of their little routines and try to figure out all the unknown variables all over again and...” Edward took a deep breath and huffed it out, trying to stop himself from spiraling into a rant.

Roy gazed up at the boy, surprised at how stressed he sounded. Would Roy and his team moving to a different base, or even just a different office, really be that bad?

“Why is routine so important to you?”

Edward sighed, and sat down cross legged at the edge of the shelf. Might as well get comfy if he was going to be explaining things.

“We schedule our whole lives around the routines of humans. We need to know which rooms are going to be used and when, and who is to notice if little things change or go missing. If we don't know the routines then we risk being hurt or caught. Predictable behavior patterns was one of the main reasons we decided to live here.”

That actually gave Roy pause. Ever since he'd heard about the borrowers he'd been focusing on how intrusive it felt, and how aggravating it was that he'd been spied on without him having a clue. He'd been so focused on how the borrowers now affected him that he hadn't stopped to consider how much he must affect them.

Roy liked having his information network. He liked knowing who was on his side, who he should watch out for, and who fell somewhere in between. He liked knowing what they were all up to and how it might affect him. Was it really so surprising that these kids would want that knowledge too?

“What was the other reason you chose to come here?”

“The pantry.”

The blunt reply caught Roy off guard, and the man found himself laughing. Ed startled at the sudden
loud sound, but grinned widely as the human's laughter died down. For some reason it made Ed feel successful.

“So that's the reason you watch us, huh? Just to make sure we aren't getting to wild and crazy with our daily routines?”

“Well, a little crazy is okay. You guys wouldn't be nearly as much fun otherwise.”

“So glad we serve as good entertainment for you.” Roy replied dryly.

“You should be, it's a great honor.” Ed said with mock seriousness. “Anyway, yes, it's to monitor your routines. I do listen in on your 'business talk' sometimes, but I just keep an ear out for anything that might cause big changes. I don't bother keeping track of anything else.”

“I see.”

The pair lapsed into silence, neither sure where to take the conversation from there. After a minute of silence Ed stood up and brushed off his pants.

“Well, I guess I'll leave you to your drink then. See you-”

“What were you going to do with it?”

“Huh?”

“You said you weren't planning on drinking the booze you got from me, so what were you going to do with it?”

Ed hesitated, but then sat back down. “We use it to sterilize wounds. Figured we might need it on the road, for Al.”

Ah, that's right. Maes mentioned how the other boy had been hurt just before their first meeting.

“Should you really be encouraging me to take this home if you need it?” Roy questioned, lifting his glass a bit as he did so.

“We don't depend on your drinking habit for our medical supplies; we usually take a trip to the infirmary for that. I just didn't want to take up an extra day of prep to get that one thing.”

Roy was about to question why it would take a whole extra day to get alcohol, but then he recalled that the infirmary was in an entirely different section of the building. It must take them a while to travel that far.

“Hey, do you mind if I take a look at this?” Ed asked.

“What?”

“This book right here.” Ed said, gesturing to a red book directly behind him. “It's been a while since Al and I have been able to make a trip to the base library, and I don't think I've read this one yet.”

Roy narrowed his eyes, but couldn't make out the title of the book in the dim lighting. He stood up and strode over to the shelf; Ed quickly moved to the side. He took the book off the shelf and looked at the cover. He could see why Ed wouldn't have read this one; it was a fairly obscure text given to him by Master Hawkeye. He doubted that it could be found anywhere else in East City.

Roy turned toward Edward. The shelf was now eye level with Roy, which made it easy for him to
see how rigidly Ed stood. Despite how casually they had just been talking, the boy was still nervous around him.

“This is a pretty complex text. You sure you're up for it?”

“Al and I have been studying alchemy since we learned to read; I think I'll be fine.” Apparently Ed's fear wasn't enough to hold back his sass.

“You're welcome to give it a shot then. Where do you want it?”

“...what do you mean?”

“There's not enough room to prop it up on the shelf, so where do you want to read it?”

“Oh, um...how about the coffee table?”

“Sure.” Roy said, then he held his hand up so his palm was level with the shelf by Ed's feet. Ed instinctively shifted away, and his side hit the book spines.

“What are you doing?” Ed asked.

“Offering you a lift.” Roy said, unperturbed by Ed's suddenly skittish behavior.

“I'm perfectly capable of getting down from a shelf.”

“But it will take you a while, right? It's already getting late, don't you want to start reading as soon as possible?”

Ed gave Roy a suspicious look.

“Fine.” Ed grumbled after a few moments. He pushed himself away from the books and stepped up to the shelf's edge. He studied Roy's waiting palm before he carefully stepped onto it.

Edward was heavier than Roy had expected, but he kept his hand flat and steady. Ed crouched in the center of his palm, and gave a stiff nod. Roy did his best to keep his arm and hand still as he walked over to the coffee table. Despite that, Ed had to keep adjusting his position to keep from falling over. Roy carefully lowered Ed, and he jumped onto the table as soon as it was close enough. Roy set the book down in front of him.

“I assume you can take it from here.” Roy said.

“Of course, I masted the art of solo book opening long ago.”

Roy snorted in amusement, and returned to his seat. He watched Edward struggle to flip the cover as he finished off the last of his drink. Remembering what Ed had said, he didn't pour himself another. He couldn't say he was going to give up the practice cold turkey, but he could try to tone it back a bit. Plus, Ed had a point, drinking at home would be safer.

Ed had gotten the cover open and was skimming the index by the time Roy put his glass and the bottle aside. He watched in amusement as Ed turned a few pages, slipped off his shoes, and then ran to the top of the page. Edward's stared down at the page intently, his head going back and forth as he read the text at his feet. When he was done with that section he took several paces back and process started again.

Roy never realized someone could look studious and adorable at the same time.
Roy didn’t feel like going home quite yet, so he started looking through the materials on his desk. If he got a start on a few things now, then Hawkeye might be more lenient with him if he showed up late tomorrow.

For a while the only sounds in the office were the scribble of Roy's pen and the turning of pages.

Roy signed his name on the document he'd just finished reading, and decided that was enough for the night. As he straightened the pages into a neat stack, it suddenly occurred to him that he hadn’t heard Ed turn a page in a while. He glanced up and saw that Ed was kneeling on the table with his elbow propped up on the page he was reading.

Was he still reading? Edward was awfully still; he might have fallen asleep.

Smirking, Roy searched his desk until he found a sheet of scratch paper. He crumpled it up into a ball, took aim, and threw it. The wad of paper landed right on top of Ed. Bullseye!

Ed squawked and jumped up.

“What the hell was that!?”

“Language Edward. I was just making sure you weren't dozing off on me.”

“By throwing something at me!”

“It was only paper. Besides, that's the risk you take if you fall asleep in a the giant's lair.”

“I wasn't sleeping, I was concentrating.”

“Well, you think you can 'concentrate' on something else for a moment? I wanted to ask if you and your siblings would be willing to give me a demonstration of your abilities tomorrow evening.”

“So you can know what we're capable of, right?”

“Yes. I'll need to know if I'm going to send you on missions.”

Ed rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, I'm pretty sure Al would be okay with that. Winry might take some convincing, but I'll see what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

Ed suddenly snickered.

“What's so funny?” Roy asked, genuinely confused.

“I was just thinking about how crazy this is, talking to you and agreeing to meet with you like it's nothing. The borrowers I knew at our old place would have a fit. I can practically hear them. 'Steer clear of them beans, you hear? No good never really came to no one from any human bean!'” Ed sighed fondly, and Roy frowned.

“Beans?”

“Despite living right next to the library they didn't go in it much, so they weren't very book smart. Plus they lived in a garden, so they were very plant oriented.”

“Huh. Well, I think that fills my strangeness quota for the day. I'm heading home.” Roy pushed himself up from his seat, and Ed sighed again.
“Yeah, I should too. Al will come looking for me if I'm gone much longer.”
“I can leave the book out somewhere if you'd like to continue reading it.”

Ed looked up from putting his shoes back on.

“Really?” He asked in surprise.

“So long as you promise to be careful with it. It would be difficult to replace.”

“Of course, we're always careful with books.”

“Very well then. I'll leave it on the coffee table for a while, just let me know when you're done.”

“Okay.”

“Good night Edward.”

“Good night Colonel...Mustang.”

Roy was smiling as he left the office, though he wasn't entirely certain why.
“Are you sure about this?” Winry asked nervously.

“I spent a bunch of time alone with him yesterday and nothing happened to me; he let me read a book and everything. We'll be fine.” Ed assured her.

The trio of borrower children were gathering to meet Mustang for the demonstration Edward promised. After chewing Ed out, for agreeing to something like that without consulting them, Winry started to show her nerves again.

“I know it's scary, but this will be good for us.” Al said. “It will show we're cooperative, and that they don't have to capture us for us to work together. Plus, it's just Colonel Mustang tonight. That's better than meeting all three like before.”

“I didn't think of it like that.” Winry admitted.

“Great! All settled. Let's go put our best foot forward.” Ed clapped his hands together.

“You're just eager to show off.” Winry muttered.

Ed just grinned at her, and placed his hands on the carved array. The other two covered their eyes until the sparks died down, and they were able to walk out the small door and into the main office.

Mustang was already there and waiting. He was sitting at Hawkeye's desk, which was placed at the head of the room. The desks for the team were all grouped together in the middle, so during the day it looked like Hawkeye was a school teacher watching over her students.

Ed thought back to some of the things he'd witnessed in that office, and decided that 'adult presiding over a group of children' was a fairly accurate analogy.

“Hello Colonel, I hope we didn't keep you waiting.” Al called out.

“Hello Alphonse, you three are actually right on time.”

“Hey, how come you don't call him a brat?” Ed complained.

“Give a proper greeting, get a proper greeting in return.” Mustang said dryly.

“You called him 'Colonel Bastard' didn't you?”

“Shut up Al.”

Mustang cleared his throat; the bickering ceased.

“In any case, thank you for coming. I asked you here because I want to get a better idea of how you move around; that way I'll know where to place you on scouting missions.”

The kids nodded in understanding.

“I figured a good way to do that would be asking you to put these back in their proper places.” Mustang pulled out the bundle of pens the kids had returned a couple days before.

“You still have those?” Al asked, frowning in confusion. “We gave them back because we don't
"You were too lazy to put them back, weren't you?" Ed accused. He wished he didn't have to look up so high in order to glare at the Bastard.

“No laziness. I simply decided to kill two birds with one stone.” Mustang said with a shrug.

“Sure you did.”

Winry remained silent, fidgeting with her climbing equipment. Edward watched her worriedly out of the corner of his eye, then an idea struck him.

“Alright Colonel Laziness, we'll put the pens back for you. Just hand 'em over already.”

Mustang moved to get up, but hesitated when he saw Alphonse and Winry take an automatic step back. Ed had to stiffen to keep from doing the same. After a moment of thought, Mustang leaned down, placed the bundle onto the floor, and rolled it towards the trio. The three came to meet it once the Colonel had straightened back up.

Al took out a small knife and cut the bands binding the four pens together. As Al helped his siblings get a pen attached to their pack, Ed turned and grinned at Winry.

“You wanna race?” He asked.

“Race?” She blinked at him owlishly.

“Yeah, we'll race to the top of the desks. I'll use alchemy, you'll use your rope, and whoever makes it up first can officially say that they have the best way of getting around.”

“Wha- you can't decide that through one race Edward!”

“You're just saying that because you know you'll lose.”

“Oh I'll show you!” Winry growled.

“Guys! Not in front of company!” Al complained.

Winry glared at Ed, and his grin widened. The moment that Al had finished securing the cargo, Edward yelled.

“On your mark, get set, go!”

And started racing toward one of the front desks. Winry's footsteps followed a moment later.

“Cheater!” She yelled after him.

Edward reached the desk on the left first, but then had to stop and get chalk out. While he started drawing his array, Winry arrived at the desk on the right. She already had her hook in hand, and threw it as soon as she stopped moving. It soared up and stuck into the top of the desk. After making sure it could hold her weight, Winry started climbing. Edward finished his array and slammed his hands against it to activate it. As soon as the first rungs formed he was up and climbing, mere seconds after Winry.

Though the two were moving quickly, they were also moving cautiously. Years of ingrained habit would not allow them to do otherwise. Edward looked ahead to make sure the transmutation had gone as planned, and Winry always made sure that her grip was firm and the hook showed no signs
of slipping.

“I won!” They both proclaimed upon reaching the top. They looked at each other in surprise, then they both narrowed their eyes at the other.

“No, I won!” They said in unison, again.

“You're both ridiculous.” Al called up to them. He had opted to calmly walk over to the desks that were further away, carrying the remaining pens in his arms. He was just passing Winry's desk now.

“It looked like a tie from here.” Mustang pointed out, amusement coloring his voice.

“He's right, it was a tie.” Winry said with a firm nod.

“Whatever.” Ed rolled his eyes. He smiled after he turned away from her though. She wasn't mute anymore, and she'd shown off how talented she was without any nerves messing her up. Just as planned.

He wasn't sure he could say the same of himself. In his rush, the rungs of his ladder had gotten a little crooked. He could climb it fine, but it was definitely noticeable.

Each desk had a cup that contained the owner's writing utensils. Edward smiled as he approached the one on his desk. Kain Fuery had actually written his name on it, to make sure it didn't get mixed up with anyone else's. For a such a huge being, the guy could pretty adorable.

Once Winry was done with her own pen, she grabbed a spare rope out of her pack and ran to the edge of the back desks. Al was waiting patienty at the bottom, and easily caught the end of the rope when she threw it down to him. He tied the two pens together and gave the rope a tug once he was done. By this point Ed joined her. While Winry pulled the pens up Ed wrapped the excess rope around his forearm, making sure it didn't get tangled or knotted. Once the pens were at the top Winry quickly untied them and she and Ed put them in their proper place. Then all they had to do was go back down the way they came and meet Al on the floor.

“Mission Accomplished.” Ed proudly proclaimed.

“That was very efficient; you each play your roles well.” Mustang admitted.

“We've been playing them for a long time.” Al reminded him.

“Are the races common?”

“Nope. Borrowing is serious business after all.” Ed replied, nodding sagely.

“We usually only do stuff like that while we're in the walls.” Winry said with a blush, just now realizing how childish she'd been acting in front of the human.

“I see.” Mustang nodded, filling the information away for later. His eyes lingered on Winry. “That was an impressive climb. Do you mind if I take a quick look at your equipment?”

“Uh...sure. That's fine. As long as I get it back.”

“Of course.”

Mustang made sure to make his movements more gradual this time. It made him feel like he was moving through water, but the kids didn't flinch back when he got up and lowered himself to the ground. He extended one hand, palm up, towards Winry and let it rest on the ground. She hesitantly
approached, fiddling with the rope in her hand the whole time. Once she was close enough she quickly placed the rope and hook on the tip of his finger. She paused for a moment, then grabbed something out of her pack and added to the pile before scampering back to her brothers.

Mustang drew his hand back and had a look. The small metal hook was about the same size as a fish hook, but seemed to be made of a thicker metal. The rope looked to be made of multiple threads woven together. He had to wonder how long it took them to gather that much material.

The last item Mustang couldn’t identify right away. It was made of thin leather straps and tiny metal buckles. He didn't make the connection until Winry stuttered out:

“I know I didn't use it just now, but I usually do. We each have one for when we use pulley's to travel between floors. Don't want to fall off, you know?”

Ah, so it was a rope harness.

“This is good craftsmanship.” He said, placing the equipment on the floor for Winry to gather. “Did you make it all yourselves?”

“Yup, raw materials and a little alchemy go a long ways.” Ed said with a grin.

“Not without my plans they don't.” Winry said with a huff.

“I respect your plans Winry, we need the visuals to make the transmutation work right.”

“If you respect them so much then you should follow them!”

“Those sculls made the belts look awesome and you know it!”

“They were a little excessive, brother.”

“Why do you always take her side?”

“So,” Mustang’s interjected. “what I'm getting from this is that Edward and Alphonse can do alchemy but Winry can't.” The kids nodded.

“Brother keeps saying she should learn.”

“I am a perfectly good borrower, even without your precious alchemy.”

“But learning the basics would make so many things easier for you!”

“Brother has a point.”

“You two use it so much I wonder if you even remember how to do things the old fashioned way.”

“Now you're starting to sound like Granny.”

“You take that back!”

Mustang realized that, once these kids got going, it took a lot to break them out of their bickering. Thankfully, a ringing phone seemed to do the trick. The sound of Mustang’s phone ringing brought the argument to a halt. The kids watched as Mustang frowned and went over to his desk to answer it. After a few moments, the kids ran after him.

“Is it normal for him to get calls this late?” Winry asked.
“I don't think so.” “Nope.” Al and Ed replied in unison.

When the trio made it to the doorway they saw Mustang sitting at his desk with the phone to his ear, looking perplexed.

“Is that you Hughes?” Mustang paused. “Hughes. Maes! Maes I can't understand what you're saying!”

The children approached the desk while Mustang continually tried to get a coherent response out of his best friend. The Colonel was so distracted by the phone call that he didn't notice when Edward disappeared under his desk and came back out a minute later.

The point in which Ed rejoined the group was when Mustang realized that he'd need something to break Hughes out of whatever episode he was having. He noticed the trio had followed him, and were looking up at him from the floor.

“Could you guys help me with something?” He let the phone hang down over the side of the desk. The cord was just long enough that the top of the receiver hit the floor but the bottom part, the one you talk into, hung a couple inches off the ground. “Could you say something to Hughes? Anything will do. I think he just needs to hear something unexpected to jump start him.”

The three looked at each other, then nodded. It wasn't like anyone who heard them over the line would be able to know who or what they are. They whispered to each other for a moment, and then turned and gathered around the mouthpiece.

“Hello Mr. Hughes!” They called out in unison. The string of nonsensical noises that had been coming out of the earpiece ceased.

“Ed? Al? Winry?” His bewildered voice came over the line.

“Yeah Mr. Hughes, it's us.” Al stepped up closer to the mouthpiece. “Are you okay?”

“Okay? Of course! I'm better than okay! Everything is wonderful! And terrifying.”

Al frowned, unsure of how to respond.

“He better?” Mustang asked.

“I think so.” Al called up to him. He turned his face back to the mouthpiece. “Colonel Mustang is gonna talk to you again. See you later!”

Al barely caught Hughes repeating that last phrase before Mustang took the phone back.

“Now can you finally tell me what's going on?” he demanded. After a few moments the Colonel's eyes widened. “I'll be there as soon as I can.” he hung up the phone. “Looks like the meeting is ending early. You three better head home.

“What's the deal?” Ed demanded.

“Apparently, Hughes wife Gracia is having their baby.”

“Oh, well, I hope it goes well.” Winry said, a little awkwardly.

“Tell him congratulations when it's all over.” Al called up with a smile.

“Yeah, it's great, I'm sure we'll get lots of pictures soon. Let's go guys.” Edward grabbed Al and
Winry's hands and started rushing them towards their usual exit. His siblings let out noises of surprise, but went along without any fuss.

Mustang frowned at Ed's odd behavior, but brushed it off after a moment. He had other things to focus on, like getting to the hospital. Mustang pushed away from his desk, stood up, and nearly face planted.

Mustang felt something tug on his boots, and threw his hands out in time to keep himself from completely crashing.

“What the heck did I catch myself on?” Mustang twisted around to look at his feet, and saw that his shoes were tied together by his shoelaces.

“Brother, is that what I think it was?” Al's distant moan caught his ears.

“If you think it was the sweet sound of payback, then yes.”

“Edward!”

“Ow! Winry!”

Mustang growled to himself. One thing at a time, he was going to untie his shoes, visit is friend at the hospital, and THEN he would think of a way to pay the brat back for this.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes


I've never had anyone do fanart of a story of mine, so discovering this made me super excited. Especially since it's such a great drawing! I really love Roy's expression. :D My deepest thanks to Rockonewjeans for bringing it into existence.

Enjoy the chapter!

To the surprise of no one, it was Maes Hughes who got the borrowers and humans to start visiting more casually. Mainly because he was the one instigating the visits.

The night that Hughes called Roy, asking him to come to the hospital, was the same night that Gracia gave birth to a beautiful baby girl named Elicia. Not even a day had passed before Maes Hughes burst into Mustang's office with two handfuls of baby pictures.

It was near the end of the work day when Hughes arrived, which was fortunate because he immediately took over. It was hard to continue working when your desk was covered with photographs and Maes Hughes was gushing in your ear about how adorable and precious his baby girl was.

The team didn't mind it, for once. Work was wrapping up anyway, and everyone had been curious about the new baby. Fuery and Falman joined in with cooing about how cute she was, while Havoc and Breda teased that she would hopefully inherit more from her mother than her father. The teasing wasn't very effective, since Hughes wouldn't mind at all if his daughter took after her mother. Havoc tried to up the ante by saying that Elicia would drive all the boys wild someday.

He quickly learned never to put the words 'Elicia' and 'teenage boys' into the same sentence ever again.

Hawkeye politely examined the pictures as well. Roy had called her just before he left for the hospital, so she'd already seen both Elicia and Gracia late last night. She was glad to see that Gracia was looking less exhausted in the later photos. The variety of shots Hughes managed to get of a baby in a hospital crib was impressive as well.

Roy made a valiant effort to hide in his inner office, but Hughes was having none of it. Once he realized that his best friend hadn't come out to see the pictures, he gathered them all up and migrated to his friend's desk. The rest of the team beat a hasty retreat, knowing that if they lingered too long they would get pulled right back into the photo session. As cute as Elicia was, they did want to get home eventually.

Once Hughes had managed to drag Roy out from behind his desk, the new father spread the photos all over the coffee table and began to describe each one in detail.
“Why are you even here?” Roy asked. “Shouldn't you be at the hospital, so you can gush over your
daughter in person?”

“Well,” Hughes rubbed the back of his head bashfully “Gracia was very tired, no wonder after the
amazing job she did! But she definitely needed rest, and she and Elicia have to stay in the hospital
until tomorrow for observation.”

“So what you're saying is that Gracia kicked you out so she could finally have some peace and quiet,
and you didn't bring your daughter because the staff wouldn't let you.” Roy surmised with a smirk.
Hughes glared at him, and then started gathering up the photos.

“If you're going to be like that, then I'll show the photos of my beautiful baby girl to someone who
will actually appreciate them.”

“And who would that be? If you showed them to any staff on the way here then they've already had
time to warn the rest of the base.”

Hughes had managed to fit all of the pictures into one hand by this point. He smirked at Roy, then
got up and closed the office door before going over wall.

“Who said anything about the staff?” He asked, and then knelt and knocked on the wall. Roy raised
an eyebrow at him.

“You're really going to call them out here just to shove baby pictures at them?”

“They aren't just baby pictures, they are Elicia's baby pictures.”

Roy rolled his eyes, but didn't get a chance to retort before a small door sparked into being. Roy
straightened up to get a better look when the door swung open. Alphonse Elric poked his head out
and looked around before actually stepping out from the wall.

“Is everything okay? There was a lot of noise earlier.”

“Everything is wonderful! Gracia and the baby, my little Elicia, are both happy and healthy and I had
to come by the office and show everyone.” He held up the bundle of photos. Al smiled brightly.

“Really? That's great! Did Colonel Mustang pass along my congratulations?”

“He most certainly did! I wanted to say thank you in person, and show you all my favorite little
person.”

Al pretended to pout. “I thought I was your favorite little person.”

“Until last night, you were.”

Al laughed, but cut off abruptly. He turned and leaned back through the door to shout “It's Mr.
Hughes, he has baby pictures that he wants to show us.”

“Called it!” Ed shouted loudly enough that even Roy could hear. A few moments later Ed walked
out of the little door, pulling a bemused Winry behind him. Pinako followed them at a more sedate
pace.

Roy was worried that Maes's exuberance might cause him to frighten the borrowers, and closely
watched his friend interact with the group.

They did seem...a little taken aback when Hughes spread out his pictures on the floor and started
making wide gestures as he told his story. However, it didn't take long for them to calm down and get sucked into the details.

“She looks really happy.” Winry said, holding a photo that was as tall as she was. It was one of Gracia holding Elicia, smiling down at the baby despite her exhaustion. “Did Mom and Dad look at me like that when I was born?” Winry asked, turning to Pinako.

“They most certainly did, and so did I.” Pinako confirmed, looking very fond.

At this point, Hughes realized that Pinako had a hand in raising at least four children, which was more than any of the other parents he knew. So he drew her aside to pepper her with baby questions, which she answered with a great amount of patience and amusement. When he suggested bringing Elicia to the office sometime to meet the borrowers, Pinako was quick to remind him of babies tendency to put small things in their mouths. Hughes had some sort of minor conniption at whatever mental image that conjured up, and promised to hold Elicia the entire time when he did bring her over.

Meanwhile, the kids were inspecting the pictures more closely.

“The ones taken at this distance make it look like Mrs. Hughes and Elicia are our size.” Al noted. He propped the photo up against the wall and stood next to it. He struck a pose, making it look like he was standing by Gracia's bedside and admiring the baby with her. Before long there was a multitude of pictures against the wall, and the kids were trying to find different ways of posing with each of them.

Roy smirked as they got more ridiculous. Winry gave a high five to a restless Elicia and Al made it look like he was sprawled across the foot of Gracia's hospital bed. Al also informed Ed that, no it was not okay to outline his position with chalk because it might damage the picture.

“He has another picture exactly like this one, it's right there!”

“It's still rude.”

He wished Hawkeye could see this. Wait.

If Roy recalled correctly, Hughes had brought his camera in along with him. Roy turned around and found it was sitting on the corner of the coffee table. It was the one that printed pictures out right away. He quietly picked it up and took off the lens cap.

Now...all he had to do was wait for just the right moment....there!

Mustang pressed the appropriate button, and the camera flashed. The borrowers suddenly whirled around to stare at him.

“Colonel...what was that?” Ed asked suspiciously.

“The sweet sound of payback.” Mustang answered with a wide grin. In his hand he held a photograph of Edward leaning down to 'kiss' baby Elicia on the cheek. “Hughes, come look at this! It's absolutely adorable.”

Edward couldn't really see the photo from his spot on the floor, but it wasn't hard to deduce what image the Bastard had managed to capture. Hughes had gotten up and was now looking over his friend's shoulder.

“Oh that is just precious! Ed, I had no idea you were so affectionate!”
Ed’s face turned red, and for the first time in his life he wondered how difficult it would be to scale a human being.

“He can be, when he wants to.” Al admitted. “Did you get him kissing the baby? Can I see?”

Ed decided to turn his ire onto the closer target. He launched himself at his brother, almost tackling him to the ground before he managed to get his hand over Al’s mouth.

“Shut the hell your mouth! And no you can not because I'm gonna fucking shred it!”

“We could see it before you shred it.” Winry chimed in helpfully. Ed glared at her, and Al extracted himself while his brother was distracted. Hughes plucked the photo out of Mustang's hands and sat down by the group so he could show it off. He held it just high enough that none of them could easily grab it.

“See? Isn’t that sweet? I should ask Roy to be my back up camera man sometime.”

“No.” Roy said flatly.

“It's not that good.” Ed muttered.

“Well this is quite the treat.” Pinako said. “I don't think we've ever had any photographs of the family before.”

“You never had family pictures before?!” Hughes sounded absolutely scandalized.

“There aren't any camera's out size.” Al pointed out.

“Plus it's hard to keep your existence a secret if there's a bunch of photographic evidence.” Ed said with an eye roll. Pinako nodded.

“On that subject, I would request that you give us that picture before you leave. It wouldn't do to have anyone else see it.”

“Can't I at least show it to Hawkeye first?” Hughes asked with a pout. Pinako gave him a look, and he pouted more.

“We could hold onto it until she's available.” Winry suggested.

“It might not survive that long with us.” Al said, noting the way his brother was glaring at the photo.

“I'll keep it and show it to her in the morning.”

“Like hell you will Colonel Bastard!”

“I'll hold onto it.” Pinako said loudly. “As a personal keepsake. Like I said, it's a treat to have an actual photo of a family member.”

Hughes was swayed by the sentiment, and finally handed the picture over. Ed looked like he'd just eaten a sour grape. This was better than one of the humans having it, especially the Bastard Colonel, but he also knew it would be hard to destroy the photo now. There were consequences to messing with Granny Pinako’s things after all.

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Now that Hughes knew the borrowers were a willing audience, picture viewings became a common
practice. Even with the new baby to keep him busy, Hughes would find the time to visit during lunch or just after the regular work shift.

The borrowers were wary at first, since they were not used to being called out into the open so often. But, as Al had discovered during their first meeting, it was hard to be scared of an excited Maes Hughes. The human was very careful, and always made sure no one would be walking in unannounced. When it became clear that Hughes was making their safety a priority, the borrowers let themselves get used to the photo sessions. Roy simply weathered them as best he could.

Hughes, being an ever curious soul, started bringing in pictures of other things too. He wanted to know what things the borrowers would recognize and which things would need explaining. He took pictures of parks he wanted to take Elicia to when she was older, animals he saw on the walk to work, local art pieces, store fronts, anything he came across really.

Hughes was surprised at how little he had to explain in the pictures. He was expecting them to be knowledgeable about animals, since many of them would pose a threat to the borrowers. He had no idea why they could identify most of the playground structures though, or why Winry immediately knew that an unlabeled store front was an automail shop. It was Alphonse who finally took pity on him.

“We used to live in the library, just before we came here. So we had a lot of books to tell us about things borrowers don't usually see.”

“I loved going to the kid section when I was little.” Winry recalled fondly. “Picking out a bedtime story was how my parents taught me to read.”

“Do most borrowers learn to read?” Hughes asked. Ed shook his head.

“I don't think so, at least not very well. Pretty sure most others just learn red flag words, like 'poison' or 'danger'. I don't think the garden borrowers could read at all.”

“They didn't really need to.” Al pointed out. “It was more important for them to know plant and animal species, and they could just pass that on from person to person.”

“True, but more of them could have made an effort to learn. They were certainly grateful that Winry's parents could read, and that they had read all those medical textbooks.”

“They were pretty grateful for Dad being interested in alchemy too.”

For some reason, this made Ed glare daggers at Al. Winry immediately sensed the tension and changed the subject.

“So, after we had learned to read we kept wanting to learn more, and we moved on to the other sections of the library. I'm pretty sure that, among the three of us, we read our way through the entire encyclopedia set.”

“Winry made it to 'A' for automail, and then skipped forward to 'M' for mechanics.” Al said. Before long Winry was defending her love of all things mechanical and Ed had been drawn into the banter. Crisis averted.

This conversation made Hughes realize one other thing. The kids said they'd been here about four years, and used to live at the library. Four years ago was when the library fire happened. So Hughes now had a solid theory on why the borrowers had moved and why these kids were missing so many parents.
He explained the theory to Roy after the kids left. Roy frowned deeply, but thanked him for the insight before heading home.

Mustang examined his gloves before bed that night. He'd made some rules after Ishval, about how he would allow himself to use them. Tonight he added one more.

No large flame bursts around the borrowers, just to be on the safe side.

Chapter End Notes

The next time you are feeling down, imagine tiny Winry reading a giant picture book with her parents by moonlight.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Roy finally managed to hash out the borrowers' first mission after a photo session with Hughes. A couple of generals were going to be visiting from Central, and they would be meeting with some East City generals. The meeting was strictly confidential; not even Hughes had managed to find out what the subject matter would be. That made it a job for their newest allies.

“Before every classified meeting there is a routine bug sweep.” Roy explained to the borrowers. “After that is done, military personnel guard the doors until the generals arrive. That means there will be a brief window of time where the room will be empty and you can set up shop.”

Hawkeye drew up a schematic of the second floor meeting room, and described what all was inside: table, chairs, set of drawers, and a drawing board. Hughes provided a list of who he believed was going to be attending, along with a physical description of each person. From this, they were able to come up with a plan.

The borrowers didn't have to worry about being seen while inside the walls, so they could do some work ahead of time. They determined where the top of the drawing board was, and the boys used alchemy to create a ladder up to that point. They shaved a bit of wood off the inside the wall to make a platform big enough for all three borrower children to sit on. They didn't take wood from the meeting room side, just in case those inspecting the room would be able to tell that the wall was a bit thinner there. From that platform, they made a ladder that went further up the inside wall and into the room's ceiling.

Leading up to the day of the meeting, Winry memorized the list of meeting attendees and the boys created a few notebooks. Ed took great pleasure in showing off how many borrower sized pencils he could make out of one human sized pencil. Mustang raised an eyebrow at the display, Hughes tried to count precisely how many little pencils now lay at Ed's feet, and Al exasperatedly told his brother that they really did not need that many writing utensils.

The kids had everything ready by the day of the meeting, Mustang made sure of it. He quizzed Ed on everything the kids needed to have, and what to look out for. Mustang insisted that the internal politics of a group like this could be just as important as what was being said at the meeting; and Ed was going to be the one reporting on that. It made sense, since he had the most experience watching human behavior. That experience didn't stop Mustang from annoying the heck out of Ed by reminding him of all the different little things to look for: who seemed to be most in charge, who cut who off, who kept quiet, who talked the most, to make sure he had a place that saw everyone there but no one saw him and- “Oh my GOD Colonel Bastard I fucking get it!”

The others did their best to ignore what was becoming typical banter for the two of them. Winry mustered up enough courage to approach Hawkeye and have the woman quiz her on which description matched each name. Hughes kept asking Al if the kids wanted any help getting up to the second floor, and Al kept reassuring him that they would be fine. Once everyone was satisfied that the kids were prepared they disappeared into the wall.

Granny Pinako had decided to wait at home rather than in the office. She gave each of her grandchildren a hug before they left, as well as a warning not to do anything stupid. Then they were off.
It was still a while before the meeting would start, but it took time to travel through the walls like they did. Still, they had planned well and made it there with time to spare. They had a minute to rest as the bug sweep was being performed. It was easy to tell when it was happening; furniture was being moved and the searchers kept knocking on the walls. None of the borrowers wanted to climb the ladder while that was going on. Once the search was over, and all was quiet, the borrowers rushed up the ladder and to the platform they had made.

Edward continued up the next ladder so he could clamber onto the ceiling. He’d marked where the light fixture for the room was and maneuvered around wires and some insulation to get to the wood paneling. It took a few tries, but Ed was able to find a place that allowed him to see most of the room, but would be shielded from notice by the light fixture. Once that was done, he took the attendee description list out of his pack and went over it while he waited.

Meanwhile, Al and Winry set up their own monitoring station. Al helped Winry make a small opening in the wall, just big enough for her to see out of when she was standing up. They’d managed to place the peephole at the very edge of the top of the drawing board. It gave an excellent view of the room, and once people arrived they would face this direction. Their attention would be focused on the lead speaker or the center of the board though, so they wouldn’t be looking closely at the board’s edges. Once that was done, Al used alchemy to thin the wood of the wall and transferred the wood to their platform, so he could hear better through the wall. Then he got his notebooks out and readied himself to take notes. They were all done just in time for the first Generals to arrive.

Al listened to everyone talk, and took rapid fire notes. Winry would prompt him on who was speaking at any given time, and Al would add the name to the dialogue when he got the chance. Ed watched from his bird's eye view, making mental notes of how the different group members treated each other.

These tasks kept the boys very busy, too busy to worry about anything else. Winry had a simpler task though, so she had plenty of head space left for worry. She kept her voice low and did her best not to move at all, fearing that would somehow draw the humans' attention. Butterflies flitted around in her stomach whenever she thought someone was looking in her direction, but they were never actually looking at her. She kept her voice steady despite her anxiety, and eventually the meeting was over. Humans filed out the door, exchanging small talk, never knowing that two pairs of eyes were watching them. Winry did not relax until the very last human was gone and the door was closed.

Winry’s muscles trembled as she finally allowed herself to move. She sat down with a small thud, but did so with a smile on her face. They’d done it! Everything had gone as smoothly as possible for a first mission; now all they had to do was put the walls back to normal and head back. They could deliver the information they’d gathered and her family's place with their human neighbors would be secured. Everything was going to be okay.

The children removed all the changes they had made, and then headed for home. They met up with Granny in the house, and reassured her that they were all fine, before they all went out into Mustangs office.

All three of the humans that knew about them were there. Ed and Al did most of the talking; Winry held back with Granny and only spoke up when Ed or Al prompted her for a bit of information. Though it may have looked like Winry was nervous about talking to the humans, she wasn’t. Well, not as much as before anyway. She was still riding the high of having successfully spied on a bunch of powerful humans without being caught, and an idea had occurred to her on the way back home. The boys had the report covered, so Winry decided to focus on how she was going to execute her forming plan. Winry didn't completely zone out of course, she kept one ear on the conversation the others were having.
“I thought there were only four alchemy labs in Central.” Roy commented.

“Officially there are only four, so the repeated reference to a fifth laboratory is very suspicious.” Hughes replied, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “It's strange that they brought up chimera's so much too. It's not like chimera research is illegal; several alchemists openly specialize in it.”

“Not everything that is immoral is illegal.” Hawkeye pointed out.

Hughes sighed. “Don't I know it.”

“Do any of the alchemists that specialize in chimera research have space at any of the official labs?” Mustang asked.

“I'm not sure, I'll have to look into it.”

Pinako cleared her throat. “Forgive my interruption, but what exactly is a chimera?”

The males in the room all tried to explain at once, but stopped when Pinako gave them a disapproving look. While they were all occupied trying to figure out who was going to do the talking, Winry gathered up her courage and went over to where Hawkeye was kneeling.

Winry had realized that she was the only borrower in her family who had not interacted with a human while alone. Ed didn't hesitate to visit Colonel Mustang whenever he felt like it, and Granny and Al had no qualms about going out to meet Hughes alone if the others were busy when the human wanted to show off photographs. Winry had always been too scared to face any of them alone though. Well, that was going to change right now! If Ed and Al and Granny could do this then so could she!

“Excuse me, Lieutenant Hawkeye?” Winry had made herself walk right up to the woman, and placed a hand on her knee. Hawkeye looked down, unconsciously shifting forward to reply. Winry felt proud that she didn't flinch back.

“Yes Winry?” she asked softly.

“I was thinking, uh, you still live at the base, right?”

“For now, yes. The repairs to my house are taking longer than anticipated.”

“Well...you know that time you saw me in your room? It looked like you had some interesting tools on your table, so I was wondering if I could maybe see them? By visiting you?”

Hawkeye's eyes widened in surprise, and she hesitated just long enough that Winry started to backpedal.

“You don't have to, I mean, you could bring them here, or just tell me what they were or-”

“I'd be honored to get a visit from you.” Hawkeye gently interrupted. “You'll just have to give me enough time to decide what to do with Black Hayate.”

Winry paled slightly. “Ah, yes, that would be good.”

The two of them settled to meet later that evening, and Winry rejoined her family.

“Are you sure that's a good idea?” Al was asking Hughes when Winry walked up.

“It will look completely normal if we do it right. Even if someone saw it they would just assume they
“I found a random family picture.”

“To be honest, if anyone can pull it off it would be a camera freak like Hughes.”

“I'll choose to take that as a compliment Edward.”

“What are we arguing about now?” Winry asked.

“Mr. Hughes wants to take a picture of the four of us. He believes that if we get the right angle and location no one will be able to tell our true size.” Granny replied.

Winry’s first instinct was to reject the idea, but she forced herself to really think about it. Their first day playing with the photographs had shown that they could make things seem like different sizes, so it might actually work. Did they really need one though? Ed and Al had already made her that beautiful mural, and that would always mean more to her than any photograph. Granny nudged Winry with her elbow.

“Perhaps we should just let Mr. Hughes have this, yes? Besides, it's hardly fair that we only have a photograph of Edward right now.” Granny said, mischief gleaming in her eyes. Winry recalled the picture Granny had stashed away in her room, and that mischief was soon reflected in her own eyes.

The borrowers were finally cajoled into having their picture taken. Hughes would have gladly filled up an album, but he would settle for just one group shot for now. He instructed the borrowers to gather next to the wall, and then he lay down on his stomach with the camera out in front of him. He fiddled with it while the borrowers huddled together, waiting for his direction.

It was during this that Winry decided she didn't like having her picture taken. She had grown used to talking with Hughes, as well as Mustang and Hawkeye to a degree, but there was something about the camera lens. It made the focus on herself seem so much more intense, and that was not a comfortable feeling for someone who had based their life around hiding from humans. The pensive looks on her family's faces showed they were probably having similar feelings. She found it hard to look directly at the camera, and kept glancing away in random directions. She caught an encouraging smile from Hawkeye, and it actually helped settle her nerves a bit.

Finally Hughes was ready, and she forced herself to look back at the camera and smile. Hughes clicked the button twice, and the camera spit out two pictures right away. He grinned widely as he examined the photos, and slid one over to the borrowers.

“See? No one could tell the size difference from this.”

He was right. The blank wall behind them left nothing to scale their height against, and Hughes had angled the camera up so that you couldn't see where the wall met the floor. It cut their legs off a bit, but other than that it was perfect. They could easily be mistaken for a bunch of humans this way. Hughes pocketed his copy, and the borrowers decided to place their photograph right next to the mural of the four of them.

Once the meeting had officially broken up and everyone went home, Winry talked to Granny in the older woman's room. She told her Granny about her plan to go visit Hawkeye and chat. Winry wanted to let someone know where she was going this time, but didn't want to tell the boys until it was over and she could give them the whole story.

“I'm glad you are making attempts to conquer your fear. Just make sure it doesn't result in you becoming too complacent.”

“Yes Granny.”
“And if you are going to be visiting Hawkeye, I think there is something she still needs to see.” Granny said, gesturing to the space under her bed. Winry grinned.

“I was just thinking about that actually.”

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

Winry entered Hawkeye's temporary quarters cautiously. She wanted to make sure she was ready to run in case Hawkeye hadn't gotten around to tending to her dog yet. When she got to the edge of the bed, she could see Hawkeye sitting at a table, tools spread across it once again. Her hair was down; Winry had never seen it like that before.

“Hello Winry.” Hawkeye said. Winry would forever deny that she had jumped at the greeting.

“Hello Lieutenant, what did you end up doing with Black Hayate?”

“I told Fuery I needed someone to watch him while I did a few errands. He looked after Hayate while I was moving my things in here, and he's been eager to dogsit again.”

“I see...that was sweet of him.”

“He's a pretty sweet guy.” Hawkeye said with a smile.

Winry had left she shelter of the bed once Hawkeye had confirmed that the dog was gone. She looked around a bit as she walked, but mostly kept her eyes on the human. Hawkeye was doing something that involved a lot of clinking and clacking, and she was curious to find out what it was. She had brought her rope and grappling hook with her of course, and was just about to get them out when Hawkeye asked:

“Would you like some help getting up?”

Winry hesitated. Hawkeye hadn't been around when they did that demonstration for Colonel Mustang, so she might think that Winry didn't have a way of getting up without her brothers. A part of her wanted to refuse the offer so that she could show off how well she could get around on her own...but a major part of the reason she had decided to do this was so she could face down her fear. She was nervous about how the human would help her up, which would probably involve being picked up.

But Ed and Al had both let themselves be picked up, and they were fine. Granted neither of them had been picked up by Hawkeye, but Hawkeye actually seemed to be more reserved than her coworkers so that was probably a plus in this area...

“It's okay to say no.” Hawkeye's gentle voice reminded her.

“I...I was just thinking. I guess it would be nice to take a break, since it's a long walk here, so you could help if you wanted...”

Hawkeye nodded, then put down whatever she was working on and carefully lowered her cupped hand to the floor. Winry took a deep breath and stepped toward it.

There were spots of grease scattered across the hand, probably too small for the human to notice. Winry didn't mind that though, she was often covered in grease herself. She told herself that this wasn't going to be much different than using the pulley, and climbed into Hawkeye's hand.

It was very different from using a pulley. The surface below her was warm, pliant, and uneven. She
had to figure out exactly how to sit, and she wasn't where to hold on. Winry settled on finding a
stable position before calling out “Okay, whenever you're ready.”

Hawkeye lifted her hand slowly, but Winry still found herself gripping folds of skin when she felt the
hand move. Hawkeye kept her hand level though, and smoothly transferred from lifting her up to
moving her sideways. Winry felt relieved, and rather accomplished, as she crawled off of Hawkeye's
hand and onto the tabletop. That hadn't been as bad as she thought.
Winry's didn't dwell on it more than that, because her attention was immediately taken up by the
various tools and parts strewn around.

“What are all of these for?”

“I use these to clean my pistols. Regular maintenance is important to making sure a gun fires the way
it's supposed to.”

Winry stared in fascination as Hawkeye took apart one of her pistols. Her anxiety faded away as she
got caught up in examining the parts and asking Hawkeye which tools did what. She made sure not
to touch anything without permission of course. Winry gained several new vocabulary words, such
as 'cleaning rod' and 'jag' and she actually laughed when Hawkeye called one of the tools a 'gun
toothbrush'. She wondered why Hawkeye needed so many cleaners.

“There's extreme heat and friction when a gun is fired, and a lot of intricate little parts that have to
deal with that over and over. It's important for them to get really clean and well lubricated, and stay
that way for a while.”

Winry wondered if some of lubricants Hawkeye was using would help keep the pulleys from
needing maintenance so often, or maybe even help with the machine's she'd set up to divert water
from one of the base's pipes to their home. Maybe she could bring her blueprints next time to ask.

“Oh yeah! I just remembered!” Winry took off her pack and pulled out a thick piece of paper that
had been curled into a tube. “Colonel Mustang wanted to show you this, but we had to hide it to
keep Ed from destroying it.”

Hawkeye took the paper when Winry held it up to her. She unrolled it, and couldn't stop herself from
chuckling at the sight of Edward pretending to kiss baby Elicia. Hawkeye had heard all about the
incident from both Hughes and Mustang of course, but seeing the results in person was something
else.

“Guess I shouldn't have left so early. Looks like a missed out on a good time.”

“It was pretty funny, but they're the ones missing out now. Ed and Al are gonna be so jealous when
they hear how much I learned!”

“Well, then we better make sure they have plenty to be jealous of, right? You still want to hear about
how gunpowder works?”

“Yeah!”

Chapter End Notes

Who here wants to see Hawkeye teach Winry how to make smoke bombs and tiny
explosives so she has more ways to defend herself against hostile humans?

Don't worry, Hawkeye is very responsible and won't teach Winry anything dangerous at this stage. If she decides to up the ante later, she will make sure to impress upon Winry the importance of any and all safety precautions.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Chapter contains several references to episode 37 of the 2003 FMA anime.

The next several weeks were very busy for the humans. Hughes's intelligence team started to, cautiously, look into the existence of a fifth research laboratory. This was supposedly done based on an anonymous tip given to Mustang when he went to visit his aunt in Central, which of course gave Mustang and his own team a link to the investigation.

As a result, life for the borrowers became almost the same as it was before they had been discovered. The trio of humans were so busy that they didn't have much time to call on the borrowers, though Hughes made sure that they weren't forgotten. He needed to show off his pictures to **everyone** available after all.

The exception to this was that Winry continued to visit Hawkeye. No matter how tired she was, the Lieutenant made time for Winry to come over in the evenings. They became comfortable with each other much more quickly than either one of them had anticipated; soon branching out of practical talk and into funny stories about their mutual friends. Before long Hawkeye knew more tales of the borrower's antics than Mustang and Hughes combined, though she would never openly flaunt her knowledge of them. In turn, Winry found herself comparing notes with Ed, and figuring out which events he'd witnessed himself. It was interesting to get two perspectives on the same event. Sometimes when Hawkeye described herself as 'calmly defusing the situation' Edward would describe her as 'having murder in her eyes' or some equally terrifying description.

Winry was beginning to understand why her brother kept coming back to observe these people.

Coincidentally, it turned out to be a good thing that the humans and borrowers had so little interaction during this time period. Or, at least it was good that Roy Mustang wasn't interacting with them. The Laboratory 5 investigation must have been making someone nervous, because Mustang's team had been ordered to spy on him. It had been fairly easy to figure out, since they weren't exactly being subtle about it. Mustang wasn't sure if they were just bad at it, or if they didn't want to put much effort into investigating someone they had worked with for so long. He hoped it was the latter.

In either case, Mustang refused to acknowledge the spying and went about his days normally.

Okay, maybe he upped his ridiculousness a little bit. Those windows really did need a cleaning though, and asking out the flower girl Havoc liked had been too great of an opportunity to pass up. He made sure not to shirk his work too much though, and made sure his team didn't do so either. He also told Hawkeye and Hughes what was going on, so neither of them would talk to or about the borrowers until his team gave up. Hughes had been very excited about it, seeing the scrutiny as a sign that they were getting close to a good lead.

That lead came in the form of a man named Shou Tucker. Hughes and his team had been keeping a close eye on anyone associated with chimeras and chimera research. Shou Tucker was known as the 'Sewing Life' alchemist because he specialized in that field, so naturally he was high up on the list. The people assigned to tail the man began to notice him acting erratically, going out at odd hours to a seemingly abandoned building. This behavior increased as his license renewal date drew nearer, to
the point where he almost forgot to arrange childcare for his young daughter.

So Hughes's team started to watch Tucker, and anyone he associated with, more closely. They couldn't do anything just based on suspicions and odd behavior after all, they needed something that pointed to an actual crime. Eventually they were able to eavesdrop on a conversation between Tucker and a coworker that mentioned human test subjects. The only type of human experimentation that was legal in Amestris was consensual medical testing, and there was no record of Tucker or his coworker having been approved for that kind of work. Add in the observations of Tucker frequenting an 'abandoned building' and Hughes's team was able to get a search warrant.

Central became a chaotic mess when it became clear the building was being used to create human chimeras.

The only thing that had come even close to a human chimera before was a talking chimera created by Shou Tucker himself. Now they had several individuals, who seemed to be perfect blends of human and animal, who were being looked over at a secure hospital. Hughes and his team had their hands full: they had to figure out who was involved in covering this up, how the subjects were found and transferred, the human chimeras had to be protected, they had to make sure the human chimeras didn't run off... It was overwhelming, especially when it was unclear who in Central could be trusted to deal with this honestly.

So, Mustang's team was given orders to come provide some extra man power. The official reason being that East was quiet and didn't need them as much, plus they were already involved. Mustang suspected Hughes had hinted at the idea until someone went through with it, so that he could talk to Roy without worrying about tapped phone lines.

In either case, Mustang and all of his team would be in Central for a while. Roy figured that was something the borrowers should know about, plus he wanted to let them know the results of their recon mission. So shortly after his team departed for the night, Mustang knocked on the wall.

“Hey, long time no knock!” Ed greeted him jovially. “Nice to see that the team finally stopped dogging you.”

“Of course you know about that.” Mustang grumbled. Ed grinned unrepentantly.

“Is Mr. Hughes back yet?” Al asked as he stepped out from behind the shelf. Winry followed close behind, scanning the room. She looked disappointed when she saw that no one else was there.

“No, he's not. That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. Is Pinako coming?”

“She was busy altering some clothes. She said that if anything really important happened we could just tell her about it.” Winry explained.

Before Mustang could continue, he picked up on the sound of footsteps in the hallway. The kids wasted no time in running back behind the shelf, though they still peered into the room from the shadows. Mustang stood up to further shield the small space from view.

Thankfully there was no real cause for alarm, as the office door opened to reveal Hawkeye. Mustang saw she was alone, so he stepped to the side as she walked in and closed the door. The kids came back out when they saw who it was, and Winry even ran out to meet the woman. Hawkeye smiled when she saw them, and knelt down to return Winry's greeting.

“I thought you had retired for the day. What brings you back?” Mustang asked.

“I came by to ask you for a favor. It's going to be just a couple more days before I can move back
into my house, but apparently they need my room to be cleared out before then. Would you mind if I stored my things at your house? My own should be ready by the time we get back.”

“Of course, it's no trouble.” Mustang replied.

“Get back? Where are you going?” Alphonse asked.

Mustang let Hawkeye explain the situation while he went and called for a car to be sent to the base's dorms. By the time he got back Hawkeye and Ed were explaining what a chimera was to Winry and Al.

“So it was just Ed that read the C encyclopedia I take it?” Mustang teased as he entered.

“We read parts of it.” Al defended.

“It sounds so awful. There were humans who really did that to animals? To each other?” Winry asked. Mustang nodded gravely.

“Chimera research has always been a controversial subject, but human experimentation in that area was something even the most dedicated scientists didn't want to consider. At least that's what we thought until now. I've only gotten a few of the finer details about the situation, but it sounds like the test subjects weren't there willingly.”

The borrower children all shuddered.

“But they're safe now.” Hawkeye reassured. “And that's because of you. Without you're help we wouldn't have been able to figure out this was going on. Thank you.”

“Yes, thank you. You're work has turned up some excellent results.”

Alphonse and Winry were blushing, and Ed had gone back to grinning.

“You're welcome, I'm glad we could help.” Al said. Ed nudged him with his elbow.

“Told you we could do this job!” He said triumphantly.

The humans left then, not wanting to keep the car driver waiting too long. The pair started transferring boxes, but after just one trip Hawkeye paused and turned to Mustang.

“Sir, I just realized I mentioned that we were leaving, but not for how long. Should I go back and clarify?”

“Probably a good idea. I'll come with you actually; I want to make sure a certain someone doesn't get any ideas while we're gone.”

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“Guaranteed alone time in this office. Do you know how many pranks I could set up for Colonel Bastard with that?” Ed said as soon as the humans left.

“Edward! We just scored a bunch of points with these humans, don't mess it up!”

“I have to prank him back sometime, Winry!”

“No, you really don't.”
“Just remember not to go overboard, brother. If you do too much the Colonel's team might start to notice.”

“Al, please tell me you aren't encouraging this.”

“You realize he's going to go through with it whether we encourage him or not, right?”

“I know...”

“You both realize 'he' is still standing right here, right?!”

The three children stayed in the middle of the office floor while they continued to bicker. Which was quite the testament to how comfortable they had gotten interacting with their chosen humans. They were so at ease that they didn't notice the sound of approaching footsteps right away, and once they did they hesitated.

“It's probably just Colonel Bastard and Lieutenant Hawkeye. I'll bet she's forcing him back here to pick up some work he's trying to avoid. Could be someone from another office too.”

“It might not be though.” Winry said nervously, her eyes darting to various hiding spots. “Better safe than sorry, right?”

The boys found it hard to argue with that logic, especially since their own heartbeats increased as the footsteps grew closer. It was really starting to sound like more than just two people.

The trio made for the desks, since they were the closest cover. The footsteps were fast approaching, and they weren't sure they'd have time to reach the wall. Some cover was better than none, and their door wasn't in danger of being seen unless someone actually moved the shelf.

They moved as far under Havoc's desk as they could. The ground was starting to shake slightly, so there was definitely more than one or two people approaching. The steps grew louder and closer and the kids really hoped whoever it was would pass by. They weren't that lucky though. The footsteps paused just long enough for the office door to burst open.

“Colonel? Are you still here?” Falman called out shakily.

“I told you he would have gone home by now. He just likes to stay a little bit after us to make it seem like he's working longer.” Havoc fumed, sounding a little out of breath.

The kids tensed, clutching each others hands as multiple people stepped into the office. One person's boots came to rest in front of the desk they were hiding under.

“I don't know why we had to come back here to look for Mustang anyway.” Breda muttered. “I already said you two could walk home with me. You know, if you're honestly that freaked out over some shadows and a ghost story.”

“It wasn't just shadows! We really saw warehouse 13!” Fuery insisted. “I'm gonna see if the Colonel fell asleep at his desk.”

“That I could believe.” Havoc muttered.

Another pair of boots, presumably Fuery's, came into view. He wove around the person already standing there, which caused his hip to bump into the desk. The kids flinched when the wood around them shook. Something rattled on top of the desk, and suddenly a pen fell over the side and rolled towards the kids. Their stomachs simultaneously dropped.
Oh, sorry Havoc.

Fuery was moving, his knees were bending. Winry dropped to the floor and tried to wiggle under the divider, but could only manage to get an arm and a leg through. She was the slimmest among them, but the sides of the desk were almost flush against the floor. Al knelt down to help, see if she just needed a push, but immediately saw it was pointless. He looked up at Ed with wide, fearful eyes. Ed made a snap decision.

He whipped off his long coat and hunched over his siblings, making the red fabric drape over all of them. It was a long shot, but if Fuery was distracted by this warehouse thing then maybe he'd just grab the pen and pay no mind to the random scrap of fabric under the desk. The others caught on after a moment and tried to make themselves smaller. Al and Winry's hands found each other, and clasped together.

The trio didn't dare to move, they hardly dared to breathe. There was a thump, probably Fuery's knees hitting the ground. There was the rustle of fabric, and a metallic clatter. Next should be the scuff of boots as Fuery got back up. They strained their ears, desperate for the sound. They heard more fabric shifting, and then there cover was being tugged away.

Suddenly Fuery was staring down at them, his large eyes confused and uncomprehending. The kids froze. Al and Winry gripped each other tighter, knuckles turning white. The only one capable of movement in that moment was Ed, who had automatically moved to keep a grip on his coat.

Fuery seemed unsure of how to react. His jaw went slack, and he just stared at the little beings he'd uncovered. He absentmindedly pulled his hand a little closer to himself, which dragged Ed along with it. Fuery now turned his full attention to Ed, frowning at the odd behavior. Ed steeled himself, and tugged at the coat, trying to show that he wanted it back. Fuery's frown deepened, and Al managed to find just enough of his voice.

"P-please, don't take that. Mom made it for him."

Fuery's eyes widened in shock. The borrowers waited, muscles tense and hearts racing, for some other reaction. For Fuery to try grabbing them, or yell to his team.

But neither happened.

"Hey kid, you okay down there?" Havoc asked.

Fuery startled, and the kids jumped at the sudden movement. Fuery noticed that, and it seemed to make a decision for him.

"Sorry Havoc." He said, letting go of the coat and carefully backing out. "I just got lost in thought."

The next thing the borrowers knew Fuery was standing back up and talking to his teammates like nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"Did that really just happen?" Winry muttered, faint enough that Al could barely hear her.

"Actually, I was just thinking that Breda is right." Fuery continued. "Even if we did see Warehouse 13 we can wait till tomorrow to bother the Colonel about it."

"Well, not that I'm not flattered but that was a fast change of heart. What happened?"

"I...just had enough of a moment to calm down, I guess."
“Not you too Fuery!” Falman wailed. “You saw the same thing I did. We should try to do something about it while we’re still here.”

“I certainly don’t mind bothering the Colonel if he is here. Maybe a ghost story will help keep him from nodding off at work.” Havoc grumbled.

Falman seemed to take that as permission to go check out the inner office. He hurried around the other side of the desks, and just like Fuery he was more focused on his destination than his route. His foot caught the leg of a chair, which hit the side of the desk and caused it to shift. This was very unfortunate for Winry, as she was still wedged under the desk divide.

Winry let out a sharp cry of pain as wood scraped over her back and pressed her into the floor.

“What was that?” Somehow, among the sound of the chair and desk moving, Falman had heard her.

“Never heard the desks squeal like that.” Havoc admitted.

Winry started to wriggle her way out as desperately as she had tried to get under it before. She’d been shoved further under than she could get on her own though, and couldn’t move without her back hurting more. She had to move though, they all had to be ready to run if anyone looked into the noise. Al continued holding onto her hand and braced his feet against the wood, giving her more leverage to get herself out. Ed wadded up his coat a bit and shoved it at her. She immediately understood and clamped her mouth down on it; it would help with the pain and the noise. With a great amount of effort, Winry was able to yank herself free.

“What the- something moved under there!”

It hadn’t been fast enough. Falman had leaned down and seen Winry's limbs disappear under the other desk. The borrowers only had enough time to stand up before another human face blocked out the light.

Havoc had been the one standing in front of the desk this whole time. Fuery stammered out something about nothing being there, and tried to pull Havoc back, but he was too late to keep Havoc from seeing the kids.

“What in the world...” Havoc stared at them with open curiosity. He pushed Fuery away, crouched down, and started to reach under the desk.

Winry and Al sprinted away, heading for the open air. Ed grab the chalk out of his pocket and drew a transmutation circle at lightning speed. He slammed his hands down, and a pointed pillar of linoleum exploded from the circle, slashing at Havoc's hand. He pulled his hand away with a cry of surprise, barely avoiding injury.

Al and Winry made it out from under the desk, only to find Breda towering over them. They ran harder as Breda reached for them, but it was clear they wouldn't be able to out run it. Al shoved Winry ahead of him, putting her just outside Breda's grasp when his hand finally got close enough to grab them. Thick fingers curled around Al and lifted him up into the air at a sickening pace.

“What the heck are you?” Breda muttered. He kept Al in a tight grip, ignoring Fuery's protests. Given that this human wasn't even listening to his own comrade, Al held no hope that the human would listen to him. So instead of answering, Al struggled to get free.

Meanwhile, Havoc had realized that there was another, less violent target available to him. He turned away from Ed and managed to scoop up Winry. She immediately screamed and demanded to be let go.
“Calm down, I just wanna look at ya. What even are you?” Havoc asked.

“I'm just a kid! Put me down! Please!”

“No way you're 'just a kid'.” Havoc scoffed.

“Havoc, come on! Can't you let her down? You're just scaring her!”

Havoc ignored him, but opened up his hand. Winry rolled into the center of his palm, and pain coursed down her back. She choked back a sob. She couldn't cry now, she was already too vulnerable! She tried to lay still, but that became difficult when Havoc poked her.

“Hey, you alright?”

“No! Put me down!” She said through clenched teeth.

“I need a real answer first.”

Meanwhile, Alphonse had managed to pull a small blade out from one of his pockets and plunged it into Breda's finger.

“Ow! Why you little-gah!” Breda's second cry was caused by Ed. After a horrible moment of indecision, Ed went to help his brother first. He drew another circle and a pillar shot up and stabbed Breda's shin. Breda's grip loosened, and Al managed to get out of the human's hand and scramble onto his sleeve. Breda tried to grab him again, now afraid that the small being would fall off and get hurt.

Falman watched everything unfold in a state of shock, unsure if he should follow Fuery's example or if he should try to help Breda. Ultimately, the decision was taken out of his hands.

A gun cocked, and every being in the room stilled. All attention turned to the door, which had opened unnoticed in the chaos.

Hawkeye stood in the doorway, her hands still in place from pulling the hammer back on her pistol. Her cold eyes scanned the room, landing on each human and borrower in turn. Mustang was there too, standing just to the side and back a bit. In contrast to his Lieutenant, the Colonel's eye's burned. The humans became even more on edge when they noticed his fingers rubbing together.

“No one move.” Hawkeye commanded needlessly. She kept her gun low, not directly threatening anyone but showing she could use it at a moment's notice. She walked past Breda, who still had Al clinging to his sleeve, and went to Havoc. She held her hand out to him, palm up, and it wasn't hard to figure out what she wanted. Havoc cautiously moved his hand over to Hawkeye's and tilted it towards her. Winry went tumbling into Hawkeye's hand. She groaned as her back protested, but let herself relax into her friend's hand. Hawkeye gave Havoc a sharp look, and he held his hands up in surrender. Hawkeye cupped her hand and brought it to her chest.

Mustang entered a moment after Hawkeye, his eye's sweeping the ground as he walked. He began to breath easier when he saw Edward by Breda's foot. The boy seemed to be fine, except that he was missing his coat. Mustang nodded to Ed, and then turned and cupped his hands just below where Al was hanging off of Breda. Al let go and slid into the Colonel's palm. Roy shifted his gaze to where he'd seen Edward, and saw him walking out from under the desk with his coat now on.

“Hey, let me see Al!” Ed called up. Mustang nodded and crouched down. He lowered the hand holding Al to the floor, and was surprised when Ed jumped onto his hand rather than pulling Al off. He rolled with it though, and brought his hands together to support the brothers as he stood back up.
Each of his team were staring at him and Hawkeye with wide eyes.

“We're going into my office for a bit.” Mustang announced. “You can take a seat and wait for us to return. If any of you leave before we come back there will be consequences, is that understood?”

After receiving nods from each of his team, Mustang moved to his office. Hawkeye followed close behind, now looking down at Winry with a worried frown. Mustang didn't relax until Hawkeye's closed the office door and holstered her pistol. Mustang set the brothers down on the coffee table and collapsed onto the couch. Hawkeye tried to set Winry down too, but Winry didn't move off her her hand when she placed it on the table.

“Win? You okay?” Ed asked, leaning down to brush the hair out of her face.

“It kinda hurts to move right now...but I don't think it's anything permanent.” Winry replied tiredly. “Can one of you guys get Granny to look at it?”

“Shit! Granny probably heard all that! I gotta get home and let her know we're okay before she tries marching out there herself!” Ed ran to the side of the table and stamped his foot. “Colonel, get me to the wall!”

“Demanding brat.” Mustang muttered, though it didn't have much fire to it. He held his hand out and Ed climbed on. Mustang returned to the couch once Ed had vanished into the wall.

“Winry.” Hawkeye said softly. Winry turned her head enough to look up. “Did Havoc do this to you?”

Winry now understood what 'having murder in your eyes' looked like.

“No, no, it wasn't him. He didn't cause it, just didn't listen. It was more...I don't know his name. But he didn't do it on purpose.”

Seeing that Winry was having some difficulty, Al helped out by explaining the basic sequence of events. By the end Hawkeye looked less murderous and Mustang was complaining about how his hand picked team was now jumping at ghost stories.

Pinako and Ed emerged from the wall a minute later. Mustang immediately got up to offer them a lift, which they both took. It occurred to Mustang later that this was the first time Pinko had allowed herself to be carried by any of the humans.

Pinako was pale, but her hands were steady as she cleaned and bandaged the scrapes on her granddaughters back. She thanked Hawkeye for not insisting that Winry get off, since the elevated work space would be easier on her old bones.

When it looked like Pinako was finishing up, Mustang cleared his throat and addressed the group.

“I want to apologize for how my subordinates treated you. Such a thing should never have happened, and after I talk to them you can be sure it will never happen again. I know this meeting hasn't left you with a good impression of most of them, but I would like your permission to explain the nature of the deal we have together. Knowing that will take some of the mystery out of your existence, and make sure they don't try to find out more on their own.”

The brothers looked at each other pensively, and then turned to Granny and Winry. Pinako was looking down at her granddaughter, tightly holding her hand.

“You wouldn't have to interact with them if you don't want to.” Hawkeye assured. “Any official
meetings can be kept among us. We just want to make sure the others will treat you properly if they ever do see you again.”

Pinako remained silent for another minute. Then Winry squeezed her hand reassuringly, and gave her a determined nod. Pinako let out a world weary sigh as she stood up.

“Are you absolutely certain that your men will obey you in this matter?” Pinako demanded.

“Yes.” Mustang stated with complete confidence. They may have spied on him, but that was only because they would have gotten in trouble if they had not followed orders. He firmly believed that the only thing that might cause them betray his confidence was if he was doing something that was obviously going to get someone hurt. His deal with the borrowers certainly wasn't doing that.

Pinako held his gaze for a long minute, and was apparently satisfied with what she saw.

“Very well. You may explain to them. Now if its all the same to you, I'd like to take my grandchildren home for the night.”

“Of course.”

Mustang and Hawkeye gave the borrowers a hand getting back home, with the boys helping Winry get on her feet. Once they were all safely hidden the pair went back to the main office, where Team Mustang was still waiting.

“I hear we've got a ghost story to debunk.” Mustang said, putting on his coat.

“What...but sir-”

“I'll explain once we get there Fuery.”

Hawkeye bade them goodbye, knowing she couldn't put the car driver off much longer. The team didn't bother to hide the skeptical looks they shot each other as they followed Mustang back to the warehouses. It didn't take long to reveal that warehouse 13 was really just warehouse B. Once that was established, Mustang addressed his team.

“As far as anyone is concerned, this meeting was about the legend of Warehouse 13 and nothing else. What I am about to discuss cannot be shared with anyone besides this team and Maes Hughes. Is that understood?”

Once they all agreed, Mustang told the story of what the borrowers were and how the little group had been helping them. He was expected them to ask questions and such afterward, but they remained silent. They were all too stunned to think of anything right now. Maybe by the train ride tomorrow they'd have found their voices again.

“I know it will take some time for you each to come to terms with this, because I certainly needed it. But I hope that, by the time we return, you will come to see them as I have; as assets and allies.”

None of them saw the borrowers again before they left for Central. As Hawkeye and Mustang boarded the train, they thought back to what the borrowers had said during their first meeting. They had been so ready to leave at the first sign of trouble. Now the humans couldn't help but wonder if the small family would still be there when the team returned.
Scar's mouth twisted in disgust as he looked around him. South City was the first major Amestrian city he'd been in since he'd started his journey, his mission, and the slums his people were being forced to stay in only strengthened his resolve to get justice.

His fellow Ishvalans were easy to distinguish from the natives of this land. Few Amestrians had skin as dark as an Ishvalan, or hair as white. So it was obvious that Ishvalans made up the majority of the slum's residents. After the war in Ishval ended, his people were left homeless and were forced to carve a life for themselves wherever they could. Since they were considered second class citizens in Amestris, that meant they almost always lived in the lowest income areas or in makeshift settlements set up by the government.

Scar knew all this, but seeing it in person still made his blood boil. This area was poorly designed; the streets were too narrow and the buildings squished too close together. Add in how densely populated those buildings were and it was clear that both fire and illness would spread quickly here. The cobble streets were rife with loose stones, and he'd seen no sign of law enforcement since he'd gotten here.

The State Alchemists had stolen everything from him and his people, and now he knew that the government they worked for couldn't even be bothered to take care of their own cities. It was true that major cities in Ishval had poorer areas, but he'd never seen one that allowed things to get this bad.

"Why hello there sir, I haven't seen you around here before. Would you like to come and take a look at my wares?" The sickly sweet voice at Scar's side drew his attention, and he soon found himself scowling even deeper than before.

Very little attention was paid to this area. That meant that businesses tended to struggle here, unless they dealt in something illegal. The lack of law enforcement made it easier for smugglers and black market vendors to set up shop. The building he was looking at now wasn't much different than the ones surrounding it, but none of the windows were broken and the sign's paint looked fresh. And the balding Amestrian man who had spoken to him, his clothing was a step above what everyone else was wearing.

Scar could understand why he'd been singled out. He was also dressed a bit better than the others here; his trousers had no patches and his tan jacket was nearly new. Plus his most tell-tale Ishvalan feature, his red eyes, were covered by sunglasses. He looked like he could have come from a wealthier part of the city.

"I'm not interested." Scar said flatly, and started walking away. The wiry man was determined though.

"Don't be so quick to judge good sir. I know my little store looks humble, but I have a great variety
in my inventory. I'm sure we can find something to interest you. Perhaps some cigars or cigarettes? No? I've got some jewels too, in case there's a special lady in your life. I just got some exotic spices delivered to me, along with a couple of interesting critters.”

Scar paused. A couple of his people had mentioned being able to get spices native to Ishval at places like this, and he was going to be traveling quite a bit. It might be nice to get some for the road, and he could punch this man for trafficking animals while he was at it.

“Very well.” Scar turned and followed the smiling man into the shop.

The inside of the shop looked like any other. There was only one other door aside from the entrance, most likely a backroom for storage. The items displayed on the shelves were things one could have gotten via legal means, and the spices he was interested in were among them. As he began looking them over, the shop owner knelt down and started feeling along the wall. A moment later he was sliding a lower wall panel over to reveal a hidden compartment.

“I noticed the 'critters' comment really caught your attention. I was delivered some fascinating creatures from Xing, the like of which I've never seen before! I only procured a few, and they have been selling quite well. You're lucky I still have one remaining to show you.”

Scar turned on the man with narrowed eyes and sharp comment on the tip of his tongue. Both of them vanished when Scar saw what was inside of the jar the man was holding.

There was a tiny, human-like being huddled against the glass. Their face was buried in their knees, so their long black hair fell all around them. Tiny pale hands clutched at the pink fabric covering their legs.

'A sariraka?' Scar thought in disbelief.

Scar had heard stories about the sariraka when he was growing up. His mother had told him that they were benevolent beings that sometimes lived in people's homes, and took the shape of tiny humans. If you left offerings for them, then they would do you favors. Torn clothing would be repaired overnight, or you would find something you'd lost sitting out in the open. His mother and aunts said that some had lived in their childhood home, and Scar remembered placing food out for them when he visited his grandparents. Having a sariraka in your house was seen as a blessing.

It was also said that sariraka did all of their work at night, in secret, and would abandon the house if people tried to misuse them or lure them out. Thus, attempting to do so was considered extremely shameful.

The shopkeeper must have misinterpreted Scar's shock as buying interest, because his smile turned devious.

“Amazing isn't it? To think there were little creatures that looked so like us hiding under our noses...truly astounding. And you haven't even seen the best part yet! This little one is fully capable of human speech! Here, I'll show you.”

The shopkeeper suddenly shook the jar, and the little person was sent sprawling across the bottom. Now that the sariraka's face was revealed, Scar saw large dark eyes and a face still filled out with baby fat.

This wasn't just a sariraka, this was a child.

“Wake up girlie!” the shopkeeper called out in a sing song voice.

“Stop it! Leave me alone!” The sariraka shouted, their cry slightly muffled by the glass.
“See? Wouldn't she make the perfect- ACK!”

Scar moved at lightning speed. He grabbed a fistful of the man's shirt with his right hand and the jar with his left, doing his best to be gentle with it. The shopkeeper struggled, but Scar's grip was like iron. His thoughts immediately went to the tattoo on his right arm, and how much he wanted to reveal its true function to this pathetic excuse for a man. But there was something he needed to do first.

“What are you-” the shopkeeper cut off when Scar growled at him.

“Be silent.”

Scar looked to the jar he was now holding. The sariraka girl was staring up at him with wide eyes, and pressing herself as far back from him as she could.

“I'm sorry for frightening you.” he said, consciously softening his voice “Are you hurt?”

The sariraka slowly shook her head.

“That's good. Now, I'm going to set you on the counter while I deal with this filth. Then I'll come back and let you out. Is that alright?”

“You can't-!” the shopkeeper tried to interrupt again, so Scar let go of his shirt just long enough to wrap his hand around the man's neck. The shopkeeper went completely still. Scar turned back to the girl in the jar.

“Is that alright?” He asked again. She nodded. Scar put the jar down on the counter as gently as he could, then dragged the shopkeeper into the backroom.

The room was dim and full of crates, which Scar didn't really pay attention to as he slammed the shopkeeper up against the wall.

“Now you can talk now.” Scar said.

“What do you want? Money? Some of my stock? Whatever it is I'll give it freely if you let me go!”

“I want to know about the other sariraka.”

“The what?”

“You said you'd had others beside that little girl. What happened to them?”

“I only had two others beside her. A young man and a young woman, and they were sold together a couple of days ago. I can't remember who- but I have a record of the sale!” the man rushed to finish when Scar started to tighten his grip. “That should say who bought them.”

“Where can I find it?”

“I keep my records in the same cupboard the girl was in.”

“Good.”

“That's it right? That's all you wanted? Will you let me go now?” the shopkeeper asked, squirming in Scar's grip. Scar glared at the man, letting just a fraction of his inner rage shine through. The man squeaked in fear.
“I only have one more question for you. Would you like a moment to pray to your god?”

“Wh-what are y-you...”

Keeping the man pinned with his left arm, Scar took his right hand off the man's throat and placed it on the nearest crate. Then he activated the array tattooed onto his arm. Something like lightening bolts raced out from his palm, and the box disintegrated in a bright flash of light.

The shopkeeper gaped at the crate in shock. Then Scar placed that same hand over the shopkeepers face. The meaning of this was not lost on him, and his whole body began to shake in abject terror.

“N-n-n-no, d-don't, please! I'll do anything!”

“Nothing you saw or do could cause me to tolerate someone who buys and sells children.”

When Scar discovered what he could do with the tattoo his brother had given him, he'd only thought about exacting justice on the State Alchemists that took everything from him. He hadn't foreseen using it for this reason, but he considered it to be just as worthy a cause. He had given the shopkeeper a chance to repent, as he always did, but Scar lost his patience when all the mad did was continue to beg and blubber.

“You've wasted your chance to pray for redemption before death. Now you'll have to search for it in the afterlife.”

With a loud crackle and a flash of light, the man's head was reduced to a lump of blood and bone. The body slumped against the wall, and Scar wiped his hand clean on the dead man's clothes before walking out.

* * * * *

Ironically, what Scar needed to do next filled him with more apprehension than the act he'd just committed. Scar had grown used to killing during the war, but he had no idea how to talk to a sariraka. The stories had always emphasized how greatly they valued their privacy and how they didn't wish to be seen by humans. Would the sariraka girl find it rude or threatening if he looked at her while talking to her? Would she want to interact with him at all?

There was only one way to find out.

The girl was right where he left her, of course. She didn't have any other option, though it looked like she was trying to find one anyway.

She was standing on her tiptoes and reaching for the top of the glass. She stretched out as far as she could, and even hopped up and down to gain height, but she never made it closer than an inch to the top. When she heard the sound of the door closing she stopped jumping and whirled around to look at him. Scar lowered his gaze a bit, so he wasn't looking her in the eye.

“I'm going to let you out of the jar now.” Scar informed her.

“Um, excuse me, sir?” She squeaked out hesitantly. Scar looked up when he was addressed, and saw she was standing in the middle of the jar, fidgeting with her hair. “Is the shop owner gone?”

“Yes. You won't be seeing him again.”

“Does that mean...did you buy me?”

“No.” Scar's voice was harsher than he intended, and he instantly regretted it when the sariraka
stepped back in fright. “I mean you don't belong to anyone, least of all me. Once I let you out you are free to do whatever you want.”

“Really?” She asked, eagerly stepping forward and placing her palms on the glass. “Thank you so much! Can you let my friend out too?”

“You're friend?” Scar questioned, kneeling down in front of the counter so he could be eye level with the girl.

“She was captured with us, and that mean old man put her in a cage back in the wall!” She said pointing back at the opening. Scar nodded his understanding.

“Let's get you out first, then I'll look for her.”

“Thank you sir! I'm Mei Chang. What's you're name?”

“You can call me Scar.” He replied, reaching up to unscrew the top of the jar. “I've never met one of your people before, but I was told stories about them in my youth. They all said your people don't like to be seen by humans. So are you really okay with me talking to you like this?”

“Well, I think it's a little late to be worrying about being seen.” Mei said ruefully. “Since I was caught, you're the first human to talk to me like I'm an actual person. So I'm okay with talking to you.”

The last part came out crystal clear now that the top of the jar was off, and a small part of Scar warmed at being deemed safe by this little one. Scar started tipping the jar over, slowly and steadily so Mei would have time to adjust. Once the jar was on its side, Scar held it in place she Mei could climb out without fear of it rolling away.

Once she was out, Mei started skipping and running around on the counter top, reveling in finally being able to stretch her legs. He noticed now that her clothes were two shades of pink, one very light and one very dark, and looked similar to the 'kimonos' he'd seen some Xing women wear.

Scar got up and went over to the look inside the hidden compartment while Mei celebrated. He found the papers he'd been told about first. He pulled them all out, and quickly leafed through them until he found the ones covering the last few days. Before he could give them a closer look, he heard a small squeak come from the very back of the compartment. He peered into the darkness, but couldn't see anything. There had to be something back there though, Mei had said she still had a friend in there.

Though he wasn't sure why Mei would get a jar and whoever this was would get a cage...

Scar reached back until he felt cool metal on his finger tips. He moved his hand up until he felt the grid of the cage, but just as he tried to grip it he felt a sharp pain in his middle finger. He yanked his hand back with a hiss, and was bewildered to find tiny teeth marks on his finger.

“Xiao Mei! Don't bite him! He's trying to help us!” Mei called from the edge of the counter. There was an excited chattering in the darkness, and some kind of scuffle. Scar's eyebrows rose, and he looked at Mei over his shoulder.

“I think she'll be okay now, she was just scared.” Mei told him encouragingly. Scar shrugged, then reached back into the darkness. This time, he was able to bring out the small metal cage, and couldn't help staring at what it contained.

It was some kind of animal, that was obvious, but Scar had no clue what kind. It was covered in black and white fur, stood on four stubby legs, and had a fluffy little tail. Standing on all four legs, it
was about as tall as Mei herself. Scar placed the cage on the counter next to Mei, who was bouncing
up and down in excitement. Scar undid the latch on the cage, and the furry creature immediately
leaped out with a happy squeak. Mei flung her arms around Xiao Mei's head, and Xiao Mei nuzzled
her friend's tummy.

Scar felt his face getting a little warm, overpowered by the sheer adorableness of the scene.

“Xiao Mei! I'm so happy you're okay!” Mei sobbed into her friend's fur. Scar sank back down to the
floor, not wanting to disrupt their happy reunion, and started looking through the sales records.

Scar discovered that the shopkeeper was not only despicable, he was also an idiot. The man hadn't
made any attempt to code his records; he just stated inventory and sales plainly. If anyone had found
these the man's crimes would have been obvious.

He found what he was looking for under the heading 'livestock', which made him growl in irritation.
It appeared the shopkeeper had been telling the truth though, as the paper showed the sale of 'two
little people- one male, one female' and listed the name of the man who had bought them.

“Mr. Scar, what are you looking at?”

Scar craned his neck to look up and saw Mei and her animal companion staring down at him from
the counter's edge.

“The man who was holding you captive mentioned selling two of your people previously. I just
found the name of who they were sold to.” Scar informed her.

“You know where brother and sister are?!” Mei demanded. She dropped down on her stomach to try
and get a better look at the papers Scar was holding, and Xiao Mei copied her. Mei's eyes flicked
back and forth before she scowled. “Ugh, it's all in Amestrian! I can't read that!”

“They were you siblings?” Scar asked, voice uncharacteristically sympathetic.

“Yes, well, mostly. Ling is my brother, but he and his girlfriend have known each other forever, so
she's like a sister. We all got captured together, but the bad people separated us right away. So I
couldn't do anything when mean human sold them.” She said sadly. She was close enough that Scar
could see her eyes glistening. Xiao Mei whined and snuggled closer to Mei. If Scar hadn't made his
decision before, he would have then.

“Did you hear anything about the man that bought them?” Scar asked. Mei frowned in confusion, so
he elaborated. “When the mean human sold your siblings, did you hear anything about the man he
sold them to? Where he lived? Where he worked?”

“Um, I think he said he was visiting from a place called 'Central'. Why do you ask?”

“That's an important clue. You want to find your family don't you?”

“Of course I do!” Mei shouted, before suddenly huddling into Xiao Mei. “But the world is so big,
and there are so many humans, and I don't even know where things are here! I just don't see how I
can...”

“You're right. The world is big, but it's a little less so for me. I can procure a map easily enough.”

Mei stared at him for a minute before what he was suggesting clicked.

“You...you're gonna help me find brother and sister?” she asked softly, as if hardly daring to hope.
Scar had started his own mission; he'd already killed a few State Alchemists. No doubt word of him was already starting to spread. But State Alchemists were not the only evil in this world, and he was not the only one who'd had everything stolen from him.

“If you agree to it.” Scar confirmed. The tears in Mei's eyes finally overflowed, but she also wore a smile.

“Yes! Thank you! Thank you so much!”

Xiao Mei gave a happy squeak then flopped onto Mei, making the little girl laugh. Scar hated to interrupt the cute scene, but he felt he needed to ask...

“I've never seen an animal like your Xiao Mei. What do you call her?”

“She's a panda.” Mei replied, as she rolled free from Xiao Mei. “Their normally a lot bigger, but she got really sick when she was young and stopped growing. So she got left behind. I'm glad she stopped at this size though, because that meant she could fit into walls with us!”

Scar nodded, then moved so he was crouching at eye level with Mei.

“One more question. How old are you?”

“I'm still nine, I think.” Mei said thoughtfully. “I don't think we've been captured long enough for my birthday to pass.”

Hearing how young she was made another wave of anger surge through him, but he reigned it in so it wouldn't scare her.

“Very well. We should get moving. How would you prefer to travel with me?”

* * * *

Scar hadn't expected much when he entered the black market shop, aside from maybe acquiring a few jars of spices. He certainly never thought he'd exit the shop with a small panda on his shoulder and a sariraka hidden inside his collar.

* * * *

-Meanwhile, in Central....

Ling panted heavily as he plodded down the sidewalk, alternatively blessing and cursing the rain that fell around them. He was grateful that it had allowed them to escape from their captor, and that it had cleared the streets. He bemoaned the fact that they were both soaked to the bone, clothes weighed down and dark hair plastered to their faces. It was only making Lan Fan's condition worse.

Her right arm was slung across Ling's shoulder, and her left arm hung limply at her side. Blood and rain had already soaked through the make-shift bandages covering it.

“I'm sorry...should have been faster...dragging you down...” She murmured from his side.

“Don't talk like that, you are doing no such thing.” Ling replied. “Now come on. I can see the hospital just up ahead. We can find supplies to patch you up there.”

There were people there of course, there always were at hospitals. But they were all too concerned with the rain or their own problems to notice the two little figures that dashed past a uniformed soldier and into the hospital.
You know, when I first started this story I hadn't even thought of this additional plot line. It occurred to me some time after chapter five I think, while I was thinking about what all canon plot elements to try and work into the story. After thinking on Scar's character for a while I remembered his reaction to seeing Xiao Mei for the first time, and thinking that Scar had a secret soft spot for small, cute things. His relationship with Mei Chang is further evidence of that, and then I couldn't resist having Scar and an even smaller Mei interact with each other in this fic. Then I figured I might as well try to find a way to work in some of the other characters from Xing, and this plot line blossomed into being. I'm glad to have finally found a place I felt comfortable introducing them into the story. :)  

Trivia: It took a while for me to decide what Scar would call borrowers in his own language. I looked up Ishval in the FMA wiki and found out that the word they use for their god, Ishvala, sounds very similar to a Sanskrit word that can be used to mean 'lord' or 'god'. So I looked up an online Sanskrit dictionary and found a word that means 'small or tiny body'. The word was sariraka, and I thought that had a nice ring to it. So that's the Ishvalan word for borrower now. 

The stories Scar described are based off the folklore of brownies, which are more of an English or Scottish myth.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

My sincerest apologies for how long it's been. I hope you haven't given up on this story, and enjoy the new chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The beginning of the train ride to Central could be summed up in one word: awkward.

Hawkeye and Mustang seemed to be acting like everything was normal, and for them it probably was. They'd had plenty of time to adjust to the shift in world view caused by the Borrowers. The members of Team Mustang had only just found out, and were still consumed with their own thoughts on the matter.

'How can what I'm going towards be less confusing than what I'm leaving behind?' Havoc thought to himself as he stood smoking just outside the train car's door. 'I don't understand a lick of alchemy and at this point I'd much rather deal with human chimeras than mouse sized...coworkers I guess? Is that really a phrase that applies to my life now? Good God that's insane...just like holding that girl was insane. What did they say her name was again? I can't remember...but good grief I actually held a whole person it my hand! An entire fucking life in one hand! Didn't even do a good job of it. The way she looked at me...she must have been in pain, or maybe just really scared. Damn, why didn't I notice back then? I gotta remember to think before I act. Yes, remember to think before interacting with the tiny people living in the walls. This is all so crazy...'

'Last night was quite the information dump wasn't it?' Breda sat staring out the train car's window. 'It's already hard getting the Colonel's ambitions not to clash too badly with the current political climate so that he isn't shot down before he gets too far, now we'll have to figure out how to incorporate a small group of very unique players into things. Though it sounds like the Colonel might have a plan for them figured out already. I wonder how much he's thought this out...heh, I suppose I'm one to talk about thinking things out. Should've done more of that last night when we found those little munchkins. Too eager to satisfy curiosity I suppose, I'll have to watch out for that in the future. I just hope that lapse in judgment didn't damage the relationship the 'Borrowers' apparently have with the Colonel. Yeesh, leave it to Mustang to take the discovery of a new sentient species and use it to further his goal of becoming Fuhrer.'

Falman sat next to Breda, figdeting anxiously. Most days Falman enjoyed having such a spot on memory, but right now it was annoying. His mind kept running over every little detail of what had happened the night before, and thinking of everything he could have done but didn't. 'I can't believe I just froze like that. I'm a soldier! I'm supposed to be able to take things in stride and help my team when the unexpected happens. Though, I doubt any of us anticipated that the 'unexpected' would take the form of tiny people appearing under Havoc's desk...and it's hard to support you team when each of them is doing something different...but still! I should have done something more than just stand there!' Falman berated himself. He glanced up at Lieutenant Hawkeye and the Colonel, who were sitting across from him reading reports. 'What must they think of me now? Of us? They both looked so angry when they first saw us, so they must care about those kids a lot. And there I stood doing nothing while those kids were in trouble. Though I don't think Havoc or Breda would have really hurt them...not on purpose anyway. Gosh,
just kids...are we supposed to work with them now? I can't work with kids! I can barely figure out how to talk to the team without over complicating things! Colonel calls me a walking recording device...useful sure, but at this point I'd trade some memorization ability for a bit of charisma. Maybe I should bring them something back as an apology. Kids like candy right? I could do that...or would offering them candy just make me seem even scarier?

Of the team, Fuery was the odd man out. He sat next to Falman, by the compartment door, and leaned back with a dreamy look on his face.

'I can't believe the Colonel and Lieutenant discovered a whole new society of people! Tiny people that live in walls...that now live in our walls and we'll get to talk to them! Well, assuming they want to talk to us, but they seemed to have a really good relationship with the Colonel and Lieutenant, so I'm sure they'll come around. Gosh I have so many questions! How do they live? How have they kept from being discovered so long? Do all of their people live in walls? Why the name "Borrowers"? What are the borrowers themselves like? Hmm...I suppose I could get that last one answered right now.'

“So what are they like?” Fuery asked, sitting up a little straighter. Everyone turned to look at him, including Havoc, who had just slid open the compartment door.

“What is who like?” Havoc asked, sliding the door shut and sitting down next to Hawkeye.

“You know, the kids we met last night. We heard the basics of what they are and the deal you have with them, but nothing really about the people themselves. You guys seem pretty close to them, so I figured you would know.”

It was silent for a few moments, the team anxiously waiting to see how their superiors would respond.

“Well, to start with, Edward's a little bastard.” Mustang replied. Breda snorted, and the other three gaped at the Colonel.

“I think you're getting confused, sir. 'Bastard' is Edward's nickname for you.”

“That does sound more accurate.”

“Which one is Edward again?” Fuery asked.

“He's the long haired boy with the red coat.” Hawkeye replied, before Mustang could give a more disparaging description.

“How does he manage to be a bookworm?” Falman asked hesitantly. “Wouldn't most books be too big for him?”

“You would think, but he manages it anyway. Gets quite a work out turning the pages, but he manages. Works a little better when his brother comes with him, they've got a system worked out for getting books on and off shelves. It's kind of fascinating to watch.” Mustang said. Hawkeye nodded.

“I'm sure they had plenty of practice, since they used to live in the library.”

“So they didn't always live at the base?” Fuery asked.

And so it continued throughout the train ride. The reports Mustang and Hawkeye had been reading...
were put down in favor of telling stories about the Borrowers and how they had all met.

* * *

“The kid actually tried to swipe your scotch? Ha! Teenagers are the same across the board aren't they?” Havoc laughed at his own joke. Mustang loudly agreed and Hawkeye rolled her eyes.

“She was cornered under the dresser by Hayate?! Was she okay?!” Fuery asked in alarm.

“A little drenched by the time she got to the wall, but otherwise fine.”

“What?”

Hughes would just knock on the wall in the hopes that they would come out. Kinda surprised he didn't scare off Al when they first met.” Havoc said.

“It probably helps that they find his photos charming rather than headache inducing.” Mustang grumbled.

“So their size isn't the only strange thing about them then.”

“Three kids being taken care of by one little old lady? Man, that's gotta be tough.” Fuery said sympathetically.

“Winry asked you how to make gun powder?” Mustang asked with a raised eyebrow.

“It's a useful thing to know. They could use some better defense methods than just hiding or stabbing ankles.” Hawkeye replied.

“I'm not denying that, I'm just surprised you agreed to teach her.”

“We're starting small; we're trying to create a smoke bomb that would be small enough for her to carry and still provide enough cover for them.”

“The boys could probably transmute a gun if you gave them the design for one.”

“True, but I'm not sure such a small projectile would do them any good. Plus the size difference would make it hard for me to give them proper gun safety lessons.”

The team wasn't sure what to make of that conversation.

“Did you seriously manage to get into a prank war with someone who only comes up to your ankle?” Breda asked. Havoc was too busy laughing to interject.

“Laugh all you want, I'm the one winning.” Mustang shot back with a huff.

“Currently yeah, but now Ed has full access to your office until we get back.”

“...shut up.”

“How come I've never heard this story Lieutenant?”

“Winry told it to me while we were working on the smoke bomb.”

“So Al adopted a wild mouse AND tried to hide it in their house? How did that work?” Fuery asked.
“Not well, and not long.”

“I figured, it would be like a kid trying to hide a large dog under their bed or something.”

“How did they manage to soundproof their corner of the office?” Falman asked in fascination.

“You know, I’ve never asked. Remind me to do that when we get back.” The Colonel ordered.

“Do they have last names?”

“...remind me to ask about that too.”

By the time the train had arrived in Central, Team Mustang was feeling much better about the borrowers revelation. The stories they heard had taken some of the mystery out of the group of little people and made them seem more like...well, people.

“By the way,” Mustang addressed them all, just before they left the compartment. “we'll be obligated to tell Hughes that you now know about our little friends. Even if we don't mention it directly, he will find out how you all met them. It is inevitable. Brace yourselves.”

Mustang exited the compartment with Hawkeye in his wake. The Team gave each other uneasy looks. Good feelings: gone.

“We grew up in the walls of an inn. You know, before we were kidnapped.” Mei explained from her place in Scar's collar. “I really liked living there. There were guests from all sorts of places, so you got to hear a lot of fun stories if you hung out in the walls of the common room. Hearing about all those far off places, it was like getting new fairy tales every night. It was a great way to learn different languages too.”

Despite the fact that it would take longer, Scar had opted out of taking the train to get to Central. Mei had protested, until he explained how crowded trains and train stations were around here. Even with a protector, the thought of being around so many humans made Mei pale, and she agreed to a slower route. Scar also didn't want to go on the train because he feared being recognized, but he didn't feel the need to mention that.

He was traveling by road instead, either walking on foot or bartering a ride from passing carts. He was doing the latter now, which was why he didn't object to Mei talking to him. The squeaking and clattering of the wooden cart was making it so only Scar would catch the sariraka's voice.

“A lot of us live in the inn, so there were plenty of other kids, but Lan Fan was the one who came to hear the common room stories most often, just like me and Ling did, so we all got pretty close. I suppose it was kind of lucky, in a way, that we got caught instead of some of the others. We know foreign languages the best.” Mei's had been happy to talk about her past with her human rescuer, but her voice turned morose as she got to the last couple of sentences.

“How exactly did you get caught? Did the innkeepers not leave you enough to sustain yourselves?” Scar asked, hoping he wasn't prying too much.

“It wasn't that. I mean, they didn't leave us quite enough, but I think that's just because they didn't realize how many of us there were. Plus, they didn't really now what we were; they thought we were house guardian spirits. So they probably thought we didn't need all that much. But they always left
plenty out for Xiao Mei, so that helped.”

“The innkeepers knew about your panda?” Scar glanced at Xiao Mei, who was dozing on top of a bundle of apples. “I thought you mentioned her being able to fit in the walls.”

“Well, yeah, she's small enough to fit, but just barely. She couldn't live in them all the time. When I found her she was all alone, and pretty hungry. So I showed her the inn's garden. The owners came out while she was still eating, but they were nice humans. They kept her instead of chasing her away, and gave her a place to sleep in one of the storage rooms. She became pretty popular with the visitors, because she was so cute, but she always liked me the best!” Mei stated proudly. Scar couldn't help an amused smirk.

“Alright, we've arrived at Dublith.” The wagon driver suddenly called out.

Scar adjusted his collar, allowing Mei time to get out of sight and secure. Then he scooped up a still sleeping Xiao Mei.

“I'm sure you'll find a good vet here in the big city, stranger. Hope your cat feels better soon!” The elderly woman said as he murmured his thanks to her.

Whether by ignorance or poor eye sight, she had assumed that the panda was some kind of feline. Scar was not inclined to correct her, since it gave him a plausible cover story. It wasn't until Scar was walking into the city that he realized Mei had skirted around the question of how she and her family had been caught.

* * * * *

It was late afternoon when they arrived in Dublith, and Scar had decided it would be prudent to rest and find food before continuing their journey. He paid for a room at one of the cheaper hotels, figuring that more people meant less likelihood of either of them being singled out.

“I'm going to go get some provisions. Will you be alright waiting here for me?” Scar asked as he lowered the sariraka girl to the center of the bed.

Mei stood by her panda, and glanced around the room. After spotting several potential hiding spots, she smiled up at the human.

“Yes, I'll be fine.” She said. Scar nodded then left.

In a practiced move, Mei grabbed a fistful of Xiao Mei's fur and pulled herself onto the little panda's back.

“Come on Xiao Mei, let's explore!”

Mei hung on tight while the panda hopped onto the bedside table and climbed down its side. Mei's grip relaxed once they were on the ground, and she let Xiao Mei take the lead on what to explore. She paid attention to what was going on, knowing about one's surroundings was important after all, but her mind also drifted to other things.

A part of her had wanted to go with Scar. She heard about so many wonderful things and places from the human world, but she never thought she'd get the opportunity to see them. Markets always sounded like such bright, colorful places in the stories. But they were also described as being very lively, which meant they would be very crowded, and she really didn't want to be around humans other than Scar right now.
Mei sighed as she slid off of Xiao Mei's back. She hated feeling so afraid all the time. She wanted to be back home, where the nice human innkeepers left food out for them and she always had family or friends to turn to. But...did she really have a right to complain? It was her own fault she was so far from home and stuck with humans, and why the others had been taken too...

Xiao Mei sensed the girl's melancholy, and nuzzled into her side. The panda's nose tickled, and made Mei giggle. Mei retaliated by pushing Xiao Mei onto her side and giving her a belly rub, which made the panda's back legs twitch, and that made Mei laugh even more. When she finally ran out of breath, she collapsed into the panda's fur.

“Thank you.” Mei said, her voice muffled by the fur. Xiao Mei seemed to understand her anyway.

They stayed like that for several minutes, enjoying each others presence without having to worry about anyone else. But before long they both started to feel restless, and Mei decided they should continue looking for hiding places. They'd already looked under the bed, which gave them both plenty of space, but was rather obvious. They'd looked under the side table and dresser too, and there was only enough room for Mei to squeeze under those. The table and chair in the corner weren't designed for anything to hide under, so that just left the small closet in the corner.

As they made their way over, Mei's mind wandered again. She thought about what would happen if...when they found Ling and Lan Fan. Would the three of them try to make it back to Xing? Would Scar be willing to help? Would it be safer and easier to try and make a new life for themselves here? Surely there had to be other weixing in this country, or whatever her people were called here. Maybe they would be able to help, if only she could find some.

When they got close to the closet, Xiao Mei suddenly stopped. Her stance became rigid and defensive; her eyes focused solely on the ajar closet door. Mei automatically put a calming hand on the panda's back, and felt the beginning vibrations of a growl.

“What's wrong Xiao Mie? Do you smell something?” Mei asked. She wouldn't have been surprised if there were mice or rats living here. Her family sometimes had to drive vermin away from the inn and it's garden, and that inn was bigger than this one.

Before she had a chance to find out what had set off Xiao Mei, the sound of human footsteps drew Mei's attention back to the main entrance. Despite Xiao Mei's growls, Mei instantly darted for the closet. She didn't want to take the chance that it wasn't Scar, and figured she could better handle whatever was in the closet. Xiao Mei made a noise of distress, but quickly followed after. Once they were both inside Mei anxiously peaked out into main room, waiting to see who would enter. Xiao Mei's growling became audible once they were inside the closet, and Mei looked back just long enough to see her friend staring at a mouse hole in the closet corner.

“Quiet Xiao Mei! We have bigger things to worry about than mice!” Mei urged. The sound of the main door opening made Mei turn around, and she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that it was a familiar face.

Scar carried a brown paper bag in one arm. He scanned the ground before closing the door behind him and calling out.

“Mei?”

“I'm here! We're here!” Mei called back as she ran out towards him. Xiao Mei came out as well, but kept her attention focused on the closet. Scar's posture became a bit less stiff when he spotted the sariraka.
“Looks like you got a lot of stuff. Can you carry all of that on the road?” Mei asked as Scar set the bag on the room's small wooden table.

“I can transfer some to my coat pockets, and I got a pack for anything else.” Scar caught sight of Xiao Mei, still facing the inside of the closet. “Is she alright?”

“There's a mouse hole inside the closet. I think she can smell the mice, and it's putting her on edge. She helped us chase a lot of them off back home.”

“I wouldn't worry too much about that here.” An unfamiliar voice stated. Mei whirled around and her jaw dropped open. Standing just in front of Xiao Mei, seeming unaflfraid of the growling bear, was a weixing woman in a white dress. She was tall for one of their kind, with pale skin and long black hair done up in a high pony tail.

“The innkeepers here keep a couple of cats. They do a good job at keeping the rodent population down, and I end up taking on a few myself now and then.” She continued, hefting a thick wooden staff. “Now, would you mind calling off your companion? I only came out here to talk.” Mei nodded at the woman and immediately rushed over to her friend.

“Xiao Mei, be nice! She hasn't done anything!” Mei pleaded, running hand down the panda's back. Xiao Mei didn't back down, but she did stop growling. Mei looked up at the weixing woman. “Sorry, Xiao Mei’s gotten even more protective since we left home.”

“It's quite alright. It's a good thing to have companions that care about you so deeply.” The woman's eyes flicked up to Scar for just a moment before going back to the pair in front of her. She held out to Xiao Mei, who cautiously leaned forward to sniff it. The panda made a face and drew back, and the weixing woman laughed lightly.

“Sorry about that, I've been told that the butcher shop can leave you with some distinct scents.”

“Butcher shop?” Mei said, tilting her head. “Why would you smell like that?”

“That's where I live. I'm just visiting here, because the owner is making a delivery. I'll get a ride back with him when he's done.”

“Aren't you afraid he'll get done early and leave without you?” Mei asked, looking up at her with wide eyes.

“Even if that were the case, he'd find a reason to wait. The two of us have an understanding you see.” The woman's gaze went back to Scar, who was now sitting cross legged on the floor as he watched them. “I assume you two have something similar?”

Scar nodded deeply to the new sariraka.

“Yes, I am escorting this child. You may call me Scar.”

“And I'm Mei! And this is Xiao Mei!”

“It's nice to meet you.” The woman smiled down at Mei, then looked up at Scar. “It's good to hear you say that. I saw this young lady hide when you first arrived, and I feared she was all alone.” The woman gave Scar a slight bow. “It's a pleasure to meet you as well. You may call me Izumi.”

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

Ling and Lan Fan had made it into the hospital without attracting anyone's attention. Even more
impressive, Lan Fan had noticed a storage room, and Ling had steered them into it at the first opportunity.

The room was filled with shelves and cabinets. Ling was able to find a wooden cabinet that sat flush against the wall, but only because the top board jutted out further than the actual side of the cabinet. That meant that there was a bit of space between its side and the wall, just enough space for the pair to slide into. It was cramped, and a bit dusty, but it was about as safe as they could get for now.

Lan Fan was finally able to rest. She braced her back against the wall and settled her arm into a position that didn't agitate it's deep puncture wounds. Ling carefully scouted the room, and was mostly happy with what he found. He couldn't read the Amestrian medical terms well, but the bottles and containers were organized in such a way that he could tell the basics of what things were. He didn't waste any time popping open a jar of painkiller tablets and swiping a small packet of antibiotic gel. He crushed the tablet with the cap before putting it back on the bottle, then quickly gathered it up and returned to Lan Fan.

Ling watched her swallow the bit of tablet he gave her, and had never been so grateful for his elders' teachings. At some point his ancestors at the inn had figured out how to determine weixing sized doses from human medicine, and made sure the technique was passed down through the generations. He'd been taught how to dress wounds as well, they all were at some point, so that should be the next step. The problem was that he hadn't found any linens stored in this closet.

“Lan Fan, I'm going to go find something to replace you bandages. I'll be right back, so take the time to rest more.”

“You shouldn't risk being seen just for that...the bandages are holding in place, they can wait.” Lan Fan said slowly, her fatigue making speech difficult.

“No, they can't, they're completely soaked through. Besides, even if I didn't leave for bandages now, I'd still have to leave soon for food. We both need that.”

It went unsaid that he would need it sooner than her, even with her wounds. It had always been a funny joke back home, how quickly his body burned through energy. It wasn't uncommon to find him passed out somewhere when he'd gone too long without eating. Most didn't worry about it too much, since he always bounced right back after he got some food. Lan Fan always worried about him though, so the implication was not lost on her.

Lan Fan grimaced, then nodded. “Be careful out there.”

“I always am!” He said, giving her his best smile. Before she could make any comment on that, he gave her a quick peck on the lips and then he was off. He did his best not to let it show when his vision dimmed briefly as he stood up. Food was definitely a high priority.

There was a gap between the bottom of the closet door and the floor. Which was very handy for Ling, since that meant he wouldn't have to wait for it to be opened and he could get a peak into the hallway before venturing out. It was nighttime, so not many humans were up and about. The exception to this was a nurse wheeling a cart down the hall, and the pair of uniformed men standing outside the neighboring room. That was odd, because he was pretty sure that room was just another patient room. So what were they guarding?

The nurse with the cart arrived in front of the door, and thankfully rolled past it to stop in front of the guarded room.

“Um, I've got a change of linens and some food for...uh...them.” The nurse stumbled over her
wording, but the soldiers didn't seem phased by it.

“They've been pretty calm today, so you shouldn't have any trouble. Still, you want me to go in with you?”

“Yes! I mean, that would be appreciated.” The nurse said. The man who had spoken turned toward the door, and Ling made a decision. The rest of the hallway was empty, these humans were distracted with each other, and the nurse was delivering the two things he was seeking; this was his best chance to get what he needed without being seen. Ling quickly slipped under the closet door and ran for the room as the man began to open the door. He managed to get under the cart before the nurse started pusing it again, and moved with it as she entered.

“Oh, it looks like they went to bed early. Guess I didn't need to bother you after all, sir.”

“You want me to wake them for the food?”

“No! No, that's alright. I didn't bring any hot food, so they can just have it whenever they wake up. Could you help me carry it to each of their bedside tables?”

Both humans took something from the cart and then moved away. Ling took the opportunity to run out from under the cart and into the bathroom, and slid under the first cabinet he saw. The humans continued to chat lowly as they put things away, and soon he heard the cart being wheeled out and the door being shut. He waited a minute, and when everything remained silent he slid back out and turned to examine the cabinet he'd been hiding under. Most of the cloth items seemed to have been put inside of it, so it would be a good place to start.

Ling tried just pulling the door open, but the smooth metal didn't give his hands enough purchase. He sighed, then reached over his shoulder and carefully drew out the heavy duty sewing needle that he'd stuck through the back of his yellow shirt. Their 'owner' had been utterly enchanted by him and Lan Fan. The perfect pair of little people, he'd kept saying, and he'd been insistent on making them look the part. Being examined and measured by a seamstress for a whole new wardrobe had been one of the most embarrassing parts of their capture, the way she kept cooing over what sweet 'dolls' they were. The only saving grace of the encounter was that, while the seamstress was busy with Ling, Lan Fan had managed to steal this needle. He'd considered leaving it with her so she would have some protection, but knew it wouldn't do her much good when she had an arm full of holes and bruises everywhere else. At least with him it would speed things along.

Ling stuck the needle into the seam at the bottom of the door, and after a minute of wiggling and prying he was able to get the door to swing open. Ling grinned, and carefully stuck the needled back into his shirt. He climbed into the cabinet, and was delighted to find and actual role of bandages on the second shelf up. He couldn't take the whole thing, the more he carried the more likely he was to be spotted. So he wrapped the bandages around himself instead, tearing off portions and wrapping a couple layers of bandages around each of his limbs. He only hopped it would be enough.

Before hopping out of the cabinet he grabbed a wash cloth, thinking he could use it to carry food. It would be risky to carry a lot out in the open, but it had to be done. Neither one of them would last long without regular food, and it would be better to gather a lot now than to have to do repeat trips until Lan Fan could travel again. Maybe he'd be able to sneak out under another cart. And maybe when she had recovered enough they could find a way to get back to that shop, and maybe Mei wouldn't have been sold by then and they could...he shook his head.

'Focus, one problem at a time.' Ling thought to himself.

He moved into the main area when he was done, dragging the wash cloth behind him. The room
held four beds, two on each side, with a bedside table next to each. Curtains were hung up between
the beds, but all were drawn back. Thankfully, the residents of the room seemed to still be sleeping,
and he could see the plates of food at each of their tables.

Ling went toward the nearest bed, and was just able to make out one thickly muscled arm and a head
of black hair from his spot on the ground. The human breathed evenly, so Ling felt confident in not
being spotted as he approached the table. The table was made of metal, like the cabinet, and each of
the legs had circular holes going up and down one side. Probably so additional shelves could be
added, or the height of the top could be adjusted. Either way, they made perfect hand and footholds
for him. Luck seemed to be favoring him since they entered the hospital.

He spread the wash cloth on the ground and then started climbing. Pulling himself up from the leg to
the top of the table was tricky, especially with the bandages making his limbs a bit stiff, but he did it.
He froze when he heard movement from the bed, and slowly turned his head toward it.

He could see the human's face now. It looked like a man, with ears that stuck out a bit and a long
pointed nose. That nose twitched as the man sniffled in his sleep, but he didn't seem to be waking up.
Much more apprehensive now, Ling turned back to the plate. It's main feature were a couple of
biscuits, but there was a couple of wrapped foods on the plate too, and beside the plate was an empty
glass. He wasn't sure what the wrapped foods were, but right now he didn't care. He carefully picked
one of them up and then dropped it over the edge of the table. It landed on the wash cloth, which
helped muffle the sound of it hitting the floor. He did the same with the other wrapper, and then tried
hefting up a biscuit. It started crumbling in his grasp, and Ling cursed as he tried to get a better grip.
It slipped from his hands, and landed on the plate with a too loud 'clunk'. Ling gasped at the sound.

And he wasn't the only one.

His head shot up, and he met the gaze of the human in the bed. The human's eyes were large and
dark, with naturally angled brows. Yeesh, and people said Ling looked like a thug when he opened
his eyes all the way! They continued to look at each other, the human surprised and
uncomprehending, and Ling still and wary. His eyes flickered between the human and the spot he'd
where climbed onto the table top. He had to get out of here. He had to get back to Lan Fan. He could
try again for food later...but the door was still closed. He'd have to find somewhere to hide in the
room until someone opened it again, and hope the human didn't find him before that happened.

Ling took a deep breath, and slowly started to move toward the corner of the table. The human
watched him but did nothing, at first.

“What are doing?” The human murmured. Ling tried hard not to flinch, but wasn't sure he
succeeded. He tried to cover for it by giving the human his goofiest grin.

“You're dreaming silly goose! Go on back to sleep now!” he said cheerfully. The human raised an
eyebrow at him.

“Nice try kid.” He said with a snort. Ling laughed, and then dove for the corner.

“What the-stop!” The human hissed, but Ling kept going. He was so close! If he could just get to the
leg he could slide down and- sound exploded around him. He stumbled, then cried out in pain as his
face slammed into something very solid. Ling fell onto his back, and lay there stunned for a moment.
As soon as he could move again Ling sat up and opened his eyes, and his stomach dropped. He was
surrounded by glass on all sides, and the human was looking down at him.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” the human demanded.
“Dolcetto, shut up! I’m trying to sleep!” A feminine voice was just audible to Ling through the thick glass. The human man turned his head.

“Martel, you gotta see this.”

Ling tried to keep a lid on his rising panic, but as another human came into view his head started to feel light and fuzzy. His vision dimmed around the edges again. The cold of his still wet clothes, his hunger, the stress of everything that had happened and was happening now, it all came crashing down on him in that moment. Before the human woman could utter a word, everything went dark. He heard voices, felt himself falling back, and then there was nothing.

Chapter End Notes

In case it wasn't clear, 'weixing' is the Xingese term for 'borrower'. I figured if the Ishvalans had a word for 'borrowers' then people from Xing would too. As far as I can tell Xing is supposed to be mainly based off China, with a little bit of Japan mixed in. So I looked through a Chinese dictionary and found that 'weixing' (when it has the right letter accents attached to it) can be used as a noun to mean: 'a thing that is much smaller than normal, especially a small replica or model.' Considering that it actually has 'xing' in it, I found using it hard to resist.

I apologize again for the long break between chapters. I had a hard time deciding how to start this chapter, and then I kept reworking certain parts, and I had to make sure that this chapter would work with what I had planned for future plot purposes because that got reworked several times too, and then it was the holidays and everything got so busy...sigh. The trials of the writer, right? Anyway, I hope you enjoy the end result! Thank you for staying with the story.
Scar watched in fascination as the two sariraka conversed on the floor. He'd been shocked and amazed that he got to meet one sariraka, and that had occurred by simple happenstance. Mei had little choice in the matter, and it was pure chance that Scar had walked through that area in time to find her. Every story he'd heard about sariraka said they avoided being seen whenever possible. Yet this woman had decided to reveal herself after only seeing one interaction between himself and Mei, and hadn't hesitated to tell them where she lived. It was jarring, and made Scar wonder about the status of sariraka in Amestris.

“Well, naturally we weren't always like that.” Izumi said, replying to Mei's question about how she became so close to the human she lived with. “I was just like most borrowers the first few years I lived there; sneaking food and supplies while he slept, never letting him know I was there. As a way to pay him back for providing for me, I liked to take on the mice and rats that tried to get at his stock. He happened to come into the store room just after I'd finished off a particularly troublesome rat, and he saw me carrying it over my shoulders. He startled me so badly that I tripped and dropped this big brown rat onto the floor! He must have been startled too, who wouldn't be? But he never let it show. He just asked me if I was alright, and even offered to help me carry the rat. He was such a gentleman.”

Izumi told her story in a fond, wistful manner; like how one would recount first meeting their best friend or first love. Mei looked entranced by the story.

“I was always told that your people would leave if the humans you lived with tried to see you. Is that not the case?” Scar asked. Izumi hummed thoughtfully.

“If Sig had actually tried to lure me out I probably would have. But like I said, he was a gentleman. After he made sure I was unhurt he thanked me for getting rid of the rat, and said to let him know if I needed help with anything. He didn't demand to know who or what I was, just offered his help. Then he went back to business as usual. I'd never heard of a human who acted so respectfully and gave a borrower so much freedom after discovering them. I didn't feel like I had to leave, so I didn't. I didn't feel like I needed to hide so much either, so we ended up seeing each more and more...”

“He didn't demand to know who or what she was'? Do Amestrians not have stories about the sariraka?” Scar wondered. Now that he thought about it, the shop owner had implied that he hadn't heard of them before either.

“But enough about me.” Izumi went on. “I'd like to know how the two of you ended up traveling together.”

Mei was the one who told most of the story. She told Izumi about the inn she used to live in, and how she and her siblings had been captured by thieves and spirited away to Amestris. Izumi grew more and more serious as the story went on. Scar found himself rushing to assure the small woman that it was the mention of spices that had brought him into the store, and not any mention of 'exotic pets'. Izumi also gave him a suspicious look when Mei described him 'dealing with' the shopkeeper, but she didn't say anything. She glanced at him again when Mei told how he'd promised to help find her siblings, but this time the gaze was much softer.

“Such faithful friends you've found yourself, Mei.” Izumi said, patting Xiao Mei on the head. “They
are fitting companions for a brave girl like you.”

“I...I'm not that brave.” Mei said, looking away from Izumi. “I was scared almost the whole time.”

“You can be scared and still brave. Trying to find your family in a foreign country must scare you too, but you're still doing it. I'd say that makes you pretty brave.”

Mei shook her head. “No, it doesn't. I just...I have to find them! It's the least I can do; they're out there because of me!”

Izumi frowned. “What do you mean?”

At first it looked like Mei wasn't going to respond, but then she began to speak shakily.

“The three of us were in the store room when the thieves came in, because we were visiting Xiao Mei. We heard them coming and hid in the walls, but we didn't know they were bad guys so Xiao Mei didn't try to hide at all. When they started taking stuff Xiao Mei bit one of them, and they got angry and started trying to grab her. Then one of them got her and I...it was stupid. I was stupid. What was I gonna do against a bunch of humans? But they were hurting her and they said they were gonna take her with them and I...Xiao Mei is my best friend! I couldn't...I couldn't just leave her!”

Mei gripped the panda's fur tightly as tears began to stream down her face.

“The only reason Ling and Lan Fan went out there was because I went out there! It's all my fault that they got stolen and bought!” Mei sobbed. Her breath was coming in little gasps and hiccups, and she buried her face in Xiao Mei's fur to muffle the sound.

Anger began to slowly simmer in the back of Scar's mind as Mei told her story, a righteous fury directed at those who had hurt this young sariraka and her family. From the look on Izumi's face, she felt the same way. He wanted to do something for Mei, comfort her in some way, but hesitated. Would such a gesture be welcome from him?

Izumi got up and moved forward so she could kneel next to Mei. She placed an arm around the girl's shoulders, and spoke firmly.

“Do you think that's what your family will want to hear when you find them?”

Mei didn't stop crying but she shifted enough to look at Izumi, eyes wide in confusion.

“Do you think they'll want to hear you blaming yourself?”

“B-but it's all m-my-“

“Don't you dare say that again!” Izumi scolded. Mei jumped in surprise. “Are you the one who put your siblings into cages? Are you the one that carried them across the desert and sold them in a store?”

“No...”

“Then it's not your fault. If you need someone to blame, then blame the humans who did this to you. Pitying yourself and your situation will not help you, nor will it help your family. Do not put your energy into regret when it could be used to fuel your search instead.”

Mei's anguished expression shifted as she drank in Izumi's words. Her breathing stopped stuttering so much and she relaxed her grip on Xiao Mei's fur, but she still looked troubled. Hoping he wasn't
crossing any boundaries, Scar carefully reached out and patted Mei's head.

Izumi had looked at Scar when he moved, but showed not sign of disapproval. Mei had seen where Izumi was looking, so she didn't startled when something brushed her hair. She looked up at Scar quizzically.

“You still fear your family will be angry with you once you find them?” Scar asked. Mei nodded, fresh tears falling down her face.

“Are you angry at Xiao Mei?”

“No, why would I be?”

“What you did for Xiao Mei is exactly what your family did for you. If you do not blame her, then surely they do not blame you.”

Mei was still for a moment, then she put her arms around Scar's fingertip. He felt the squeeze of her hug, and the remains of her tears when she let her head rest on top of his knuckle.

“Thank you. Thank you both much.”

* * *

Unfortunately, Izumi couldn't stay long after that. Scar tried to offer her some food to take with her, but she declined.

“You've already given me something just as valuable. Other borrowers sometimes pass through or visit me at the shop, but it has been quite a while since I've met anyone with a story as inspiring as yours. I'm glad I got to play a part in it.”

Izumi asked Mei one last question before she left.

“Do you think you’ll try to go back to Xing after you find your family?”

“I don't know...I just want to find them first. It would be nice to go back but...” Mei trailed off, and Izumi nodded in understanding.

“If you need a safe place to stay while you figure things out, then try to make it back to Dublith, okay? I've got plenty of room, and Sig doesn't mind when I have guests. His shop is called 'Curtis Meats' and there's an entrance our size right by the back door. You can't miss it.”

“What if Scar wants to visit?” Mei asked. Izumi looked up and met Scar's gaze.

“Well, so long as he promises not to tell any other humans about it, then he can come in the front door and ask if Izumi is in.”

Scar solemnly swore to keep the information a secret. It was a bit overwhelming, having two sariraka place such a great amount of trust in him, and he did not take it lightly.

* * *

It wasn't often that Hughes got to use display boards during an investigation. Usually he worked multiple cases, as did his coworkers, so there simply wouldn't be enough space in the East City Investigations Office to display every one.

Now the only thing on his agenda was figuring out the mess that was the fifth laboratory. So he
didn't have to worry about how the boards were taking over his portion of the Central Investigations Office. Though, at this point, he was beginning to wonder if it was safe to display the information like this.

Brigadier General Basque Grand was the one in charge of all the research labs. He'd been outraged that some of his scientists had started an unofficial lab and had been performing illegal human experiments. He was determined to get rid of any remaining traitors, so he was following the investigation as closely as he could. At least, that was his story.

The more Hughes looked into this whole debacle, the more he began to suspect that the Brigadier General had known that the fifth lab existed, maybe even oversaw it just like he did the other laboratories. He just didn't have any proof of it yet. The scientists themselves hadn't said anything to him or any other investigations officer, yet, but the test subjects had given him a bit to work with.

Hughes grimaced, and internally scolded himself for thinking of the victims like that. He'd been to the hospital to visit them a few times, both to check up on how they were doing and to see if they would talk to him. He'd expected them to be wary of doctors, and thought someone not in a lab coat might have better luck talking to them, but they seemed suspicious of him as well. Once he figured out who each of them were it started to make a bit more sense, and this story started to get even darker. The majority of the victims had been in the military before they were sent to the fifth laboratory. More specifically, they were soldiers who had been severely injured in combat.

None of the fifth laboratory scientists had the kind of authority needed to transfer an injured soldier from a hospital to a laboratory. That would require either a number of mid level military officers working together, or one high ranking officer pulling strings, or possibly both. Sussing out who was taking orders from who was going to take time, and a lot of reading.

Hughes looked over at the mounds of paper at his desk, and let out a long sigh. He could really use a break.

Lo and behold, that's when some familiar faces walked into the room.

"Roy! Aren't you a sight for sore eyes!" Hughes said, rubbing his eyes for dramatic effect.

"You're just eager to have more people to put to work aren't you?" Mustang said with a huff. But he still gave Hughes a friendly clap on the shoulder. Hawkeye watched with a slight smirk.

"Speaking of that, where is the rest of your team?" Hughes asked. He'd been hoping to send Mustang and his team out to the lab itself to give it another look. It was amazing what a fresh set of eyes could do after all. Mustang took a subtle look around the room, noting that no other officers were within ear shot, and then steered Hughes towards the display boards. Hughes took the hint, and did his best to make it look like he was studying the board along with Mustang. Hawkeye kept a surreptitious eye on the rest of the room.

"They'll be along shortly." Mustang said quietly. "Before they get here, I want to give you an update of my own."

* * *

The smile that Hughes greeted Team Mustang with instantly had them on edge.

"Hey guys! It's great to have you here!" Hughes chirped. "Now, I know you all must be tired from the ride here, so I've got just the thing for you." Hughes herded them toward his desk. "These are some of the papers we discovered in the lab raid. I've been going through them and organizing them,
so I've got a system set up already. There's a page on the desk describing it. Also, here.” Hughes handed them Fuery a sheet of paper. “That's a list of things to keep an eye out for while reading through the various reports. Destroy the list after each of you has read it.”

“Wait, sir, where are you going?” Falman asked, as Hughes turned to leave.

“I'm taking Hawkeye and Roy over to the fifth laboratory. Roy's an alchemist, and Hawkeye is a fresh pair of eyes, so they could glean some new information.” Then he rushed out before they could say anything more.

“We have fresh eyes too…” Havoc pouted.

“So, we get here and he immediately dumps all the paperwork on us.” Fuery mused. “You think they told him?”

“Definitely.” Breda said with a sigh. “I knew we shouldn't have let the Colonel and Lieutenant leave first.”

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“Is he okay? Oh God, did I kill him?!”

“Calm down Dolcetto, he's still breathing. It's just hard to see with how tiny he is. Maybe he- Roa stop poking him!”

“I was just trying to wake him up.”

“Hmmmm, looks like he was trying to make off with some of your food, yes?”

“So?”

“It's not the first time I've seen someone pass out from hunger. Perhaps what he needs is the very thing he was trying to take.”

“Bido's got a point. Let's give it a shot.”

Ling was vaguely aware of the voices that surrounded him. Just like he was somewhat aware of the flat table top he lay on and the fact that the air around him felt more open than it did a minute ago. He was aware of these things, but he did not have the energy to focus on any of them. To his mind, there was only gnawing hunger.

So of course, when he smelled something edible and felt something press against his lips, he automatically chomped down on it. After the first few mouthfuls he managed to summon up enough energy to grab a hold of the food himself so he could stuff his face more vigorously.

“Huh. Score one for Bido then.”

“Thank you, Roa.”

Ling ate until his hands were empty, and a switch seemed to flip in his mind. His higher brain functions whirred back to life, and he was finally able to take in more than just the biscuit crumbs covering his hands.

A part of him wished that hadn't happened, because the sight of four human faces staring at him was not a comforting one. Ling instinctively scrambled back, but quickly realized that was pointless. He was on a four sided table and there was one human on each side of him. He had nowhere to go.
“Calm down little guy. Pretty sure you just ate your body weight in biscuit, you probably shouldn't be moving too much.” Said the one human he recognized, the black haired man he'd been stealing from.

“Yeah, take it easy. You almost gave Dolcetto a heart attack when you passed out earlier, I'm sure none of us wants a repeat of that.” A woman spoke up this time. Her face was level with Ling, so she must have been crouching by the side of the table. Her blonde hair was all cropped close to her scalp, save for one long lock that hung next to her eyes and disappeared under the table top.

“Shut up Martel.” Dolcetto grumbled.

“So what's your story kid? Crazy scientists get to you too?” Ling twisted around to find the source of the voice, and gaped. The man was taller than any human he'd seen before, and about twice as thick. His hair was gray, but there was a lot of it. It fell past his shoulders, and decorated his face with thick sideburns and bushy eyebrows.

“Hmmm, I don't recall hearing about any experiments that would do this, but I wouldn't put it past the scientists.” Said the last human. His face was also level with Ling, and it made his long nose and hairless head very attention grabbing.

“I don't know what 'scientists' means.” It is a testament to how flustered Ling was that this was the first thing he managed to say. He'd heard a lot of Amestrians speak over the years, heard a lot of stories, but this is one term that had never come up.

“Really?” the mountain man asked, squinting down at Ling. “What about bastards in white lab coats? That ring any bells?”

“No, not at-” Something touched Ling's arm and he immediately leaped to his feet and away from the offending, and sticky, human hand.

“Geeze Bido, didn't we just go over not giving people heart attacks?” Martel asked the bald man.

“My apologies, I was just trying to inspect the bandages on your arms. Are you hurt?”

*I'm not hurt.* Ling thought to himself. *The bandages are for-*

“Lan Fan!” Ling cried in dismay. His eyes darted between the humans, looking for a way out, and again found none. “How long was I out?” He demanded of no one in particular.

“Only for a minute or two. Why?” Dolcetto asked, leaning forward on his bed.

“I- please. You have to let me go! There's somewhere I need to be, someone's life is at stake! You can't keep me! I need to go!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, no one said anything about keeping you.” Dolcetto said. Ling glared at him.

“You put a cup over me when I tried to leave.”

“Well to me it looked like you were about throw yourself off the table. Excuse me for being concerned.”

“Why would I do that?!”

“I don't know but that's what it looked like!”

“Guys, keep it down.” Martel interjected. “You get any louder and the guards are gonna bust in here
to stop the 'fight'."

The reminder that there were guards outside made Ling hesitate. Was it a good idea for him to be demanding things and yelling at these people if they were being guarded by other humans? Guards get posted by things that are either valuable or dangerous, and he wasn't sure which category these humans fell into. Then movement caught his eyes and he turned toward the side of the table that 'Bido' was crouching by. There was something moving behind the bald man. Something long and tan, with a few gray spots, just like the man's skin...

"Is that a tail?" Ling asked incredulously. "Is that your tail?"

A tense silence fell over the group. The tail immediately whipped down, out of Ling's line of sight.

"So what if it is?" Bido asked defensively.

Ling opened his mouth with a question on his lips, thought about it for a moment, then changed direction.

"You know what? I don't care. Tail, no tail, something else entirely, I don't care. I just really need to go. Could we get to that part?"

"How about you tell us why you're trying to make off with food, and why you're covered in bandages, first." Martel challenged. Ling just eyed he warily, until mountain man let out a sigh and crossed his arms.

"Look kid, we aren't trying to pull anything. Dolcetto already said we aren't planning on 'keeping' you, we just wanna figure out what's going on here. Well, maybe get a little excitement out of the deal too. We've been cooped up in here for a while, with nothing to look forward to but interviews and doctor visits. Then a tiny human shows up in our room and says he's got a matter of life and death to attend to. Pretty exciting stuff, you know?"

"I'm not a tiny human, and I'm not here to provide you entertainment." Ling shot back.

"That was just a poor way to put it." Bido quickly interjected. "I think what Roa meant is that we want to know what's going on so we can assist you."

Dolcetto nodded. "What he said."

"So...you're offering your help?" He asked slowly, looking at each of them in turn. "In exchange for what?"

"Like the big guy said, we are REALLY bored in here." Martel said. "So, you tell us your story and what kind of trouble you're in, and we'll see if we can help you out in return. Deal?"

Ling's mind was whirling. It felt like everything was happening so fast. He didn't know who these people were, or if they were being honest, or if he could trust them at all. But did he really have a choice? Lan Fan was waiting for him, and these humans wouldn't let him go until they had more information about him.

Were they actually humans? The part of Ling that wasn't freaking out about Lan Fan was very curious as to how the bald one had gotten a tail.

Finally, Ling let out a long sigh and said

"Deal."
Hey, so, if anyone is interested, I have a tumblr now. I post stuff more specific to my stories at rosejenwrites309 (so right now it's basically just a lot of My Hero Academia, Fullmetal Alchemist, and jokes about the writing process). My main tumblr is rosejen8675. If you want to shoot me questions or suggestions without having to rely on ao3's comment system, you could use one of them instead.

Also, everyone should look at this awesome fanart that blueskimmer made and posted on their tumblr:

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!
Chapter 18

“Deal.” Ling said, crossing his arms. “But, not everything right away. You get basics right now and details after you follow through.”

“Not afraid to negotiate with the big bad chimeras huh? I like it.” Mountain man said with a laugh.

‘What the heck does 'chimera' mean?’ Ling thought to himself. He added it to the list of 'things to address once Lan Fan is safe'.

“Right, basics sounds good for now.” The woman agreed. “In fact, let's start at the very beginning. My name is Martel. The guy you tried to steal from is Dolcetto, baldy's name is Bido, and the big guy is Roa. Now who are you?”

“My name's Ling.”

“Are you from Xing?” Dolcetto asked, cocking his head. “Because that sounds like a name you'd hear in Xing.”

“Yes, I'm from Xing.”

“Okay...so what exactly are you?”

Letting them ask questions like this was going to take too long, Ling realized. He sighed, then took a deep breath.

“My people are referred to as weixing, meaning 'a smaller version'; I was stolen from my home and brought here against my will, so were my sister and girlfriend; we've been separated from my sister, but my girlfriend is in the storage closet next door; she's been badly hurt and needs to be tended to quickly, please help.” Ling gasped in a breath after he was done, and looked up at the group hopefully.

“Did anyone catch all that?” Roa asked. Ling felt like he was going to tear his hair out.

“I did, yeah.” Dolcetto said. “There's a tiny hurt girl in the closet next to our room, and we should probably get her in here before interrogating the kid more.” Roa raised an eyebrow.

“And just how do we do that?”

“Wait, you want us both here?” Ling asked warily.

“Well that would make it easier for us to help you both, and for you to expand your story a bit, wouldn't it?” Bido said. Ling gave him a look, but quickly deflated.

“I can move her, that's how we got in here in the first place. But the door is in the way.”

“And I'm guessing you would prefer it if the guards didn't notice you.” Martel commented. “So we'll need a distraction.”

“Hmmm, I have noticed that some of the guards are a bit taken with you Martel. Perhaps we could use that to our advantage?” Bido said, giving the woman a knowing smirk. She looked unimpressed.

“Seriously? Having me play damsel in distress is your go-to plan?”
“I'm merely trying to use all our cards to our best advantage. Plus, if you can get them to do something for you now it might be easier to take advantage of them later.”

“...he has a point.” Roa says hesitantly. Martel shot him a look, and he shifted uncomfortably. Dolcetto scratched his head.

“Honestly, a simple plan like that is probably better in this case. Plus it's better than distracting them by fighting or something; if we get physical they'll never take their eyes off of us.”

Martel let out a long suffering sigh. “Fine, what excuse should we go with?”

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The two guards outside the door were starting to feel drowsy, but were startled awake by a sharp knock on the door behind them. One turned and opened the door while the other stood ready.

Leaning heavily on the door frame, was the one woman of the chimera group. Her hair was in disarray, and she looked flushed. Beads of moisture shimmered on her forehead, and created dark stains on her black tank top.

“I know it's the middle of the night...but could I see a nurse or doctor? I just woke up, and I feel awful. My stomach hurts, and I feel so dizzy...”

“Well, it's a good thing you're already in the hospital then, huh?” The guard who opened the door quipped. The other signaled to a nearby nurse, who went to go prep an exam room. “Come on, I'll escort you. Though I'm sure you know the way by now.”

“Heh, I should.” Martel gave him a wane smile, and slowly pushed herself off the door frame. She shuffled along next to him, but after just a few feet she suddenly pitched forward, and the guard rushed to support her. She stood there for a few moments, gripping the guard tightly.

“S-sorry about that.” she said shakily.

“It's fine.” He said, his face going a bit red. “Better get you to that exam room before another dizzy spell.”

Martel nodded, and slowly made her way down the hall.

Unbeknownst to the guards, Martel was not feeling sick at all. Well, being forced to pull off a 'helpless act' sickened her, but in a different way. The guards didn't know that the moisture covering her was not a cold sweat, it was just water, and that Bido was the one to muss up her hair and pinch the color into her cheeks. They believed what they thought they saw. So, when her 'dizzy spell' hit, they didn't notice when a small form darted out from the hem of Martel's cargo pants and under the closet door.

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“Lan Fan. Come on Lan Fan, wake up! We need to go.”

Lan Fan's mind slowly wandered up from the darkness of sleep. Her limbs felt like lead weights, her mouth was cotton dry, and her arm throbbed in distant pain. It made focusing on Ling difficult.

“You...made it. Are...you okay?” She managed to ask. His responding smile was both fond and exasperated.
“I should be asking you that. But first, we need to move.” Ling leaned down and started pulling her up. She tried to cooperate, but her body was being so slow...

“Can't...stay here?” she tried to ask. Great, now her voice wouldn't even listen to her.

“I've managed to work something else out, hopefully something better. But to make it work we need to get to the door.”

Any other day she would have pressed him. She would have figured out what he had going on and made sure he wasn't getting himself into trouble. But just walking was so hard right now...

They moved in little phases, Lan Fan doing her best to fight her exhaustion and Ling murmuring encouragements the whole way. They were getting close to the door, but weren't quite there when footsteps sounded from the hall. Ling swore, then, as carefully as he could, maneuvered her into a fireman's carry. Then he ran for the door.

When he got there he gently lowered himself to the floor, until he was on all fours and she was sprawled across his back. She wasn't sure what they were waiting for, but she hadn't expected it to be a pair of humans. Just as the humans got in front of the door, a female voice stated how she needed a moment to rest, and lowered herself to sit right in front of the door. The human woman's leg folded so it was resting right across the gap under the door.

Lan Fan waited for Ling to react to this, to back up and hide so they could try again when the humans were gone. Instead he moved forward, slipping under the door and toward the wall of fabric. There was a bit of bunched up fabric in front of them, and it took her brain entirely too long to identify it as a pocket. Ling was inching his way toward it, then into it, and her mind couldn't make sense of what he was doing. Why would he...the woman was going to notice...this was bad.

“I know it's confusing, but please trust me.” Ling urged quietly. Had she been talking aloud? Whatever the case, she did as he said. Both because it was all she could do, and because she would trust Ling with her life.

Things became hazy after that. There was movement and hands and faces that were too large and too close. It should have been terrifying, but through it all she could feel a familiar pair of hands holding her own, rubbing soothing circles into her palm.

Ling was there for her, and she for him, as they always were. So long as they were together, things would end up okay.

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The door to the chimeras' room swung closed. As soon as that barrier latched shut, Martel glared at her three 'sleeping' companions.

“Just for the record, I'm never doing that again.” Her gaze softened when she looked down at her pants pocket and lifted the flap. “You okay in there? Mission successful?”

“I'll consider it successful when we both get out of here.” Ling's voice drifted up from the side of her thigh.

“Take it easy kid, I'm getting there.” Martel said, shuffling over to her bed. The others were getting up now, and migrating over to see what would happen.

“Did they buy it?” Dolcetto asked. Martel snorted.

“Did they buy it?” Dolcetto asked. Martel snorted.
“Hook, line, and sinker. That nurse was something else though.” she made her voice go into a higher pitch. “I know trauma induced dreams like this can be so upsetting but they’re just dreams. Get some rest and food and you’ll be just fine!” she let out an exasperated huff. “Lady, I was a soldier. Then a test subject. Pretty sure I know more about ‘traumatic dreams’ than you ever will.” The rest of the group muttered in agreement.

Martel sat down on her bed so gently one might think it was a bed of nails. After she’d been still for a moment, her thigh pocket flipped open and Ling's back appeared. He quickly dragged out a small, battered bundle of black fabric and bandages.

“Yeesh, kid, what happened?” Roa asked, looking over the tiny girl's pale face and wrapped up arm.

“Our most recent kidnapper had a couple dogs. One of them bit her before we managed to get away.” Ling said, unwinding the strips of black fabric from Lan Fan's wounds. Dolcetto shifted uncomfortably.

“Would you like some assistance?” Bido asked, leaning forward. Martel scooted back to give him more room.

“You could hand me things if that's what you're asking.”

“One of the others can do that.” Bido waved a hand dismissively. “In a previous life I was an assistant, once to a vet and once to doctor, so I can offer more specialized services.”

“Better than any of us could do. When it comes to medicine, soldiers only got basic field training.” Roa explained.

“How'd you end up among the test subjects with the rest of us anyway?” Dolcetto asked. Bido smiled wryly.

“I made two mistakes. I applied to work with the wrong doctor and got a little too nosy.”


“Well? The offer has been made.”

Ling looked at Lan Fan's wounds, then to Bido, then back again. The dog had, thankfully, only managed to get a hold of Lan Fan's arm before they shook it off and finished sneaking out. The dog had probably just been playing honestly, but the damage had still been done. Teeth marks had been left along Lan Fan's upper and lower arm, stopping just shy of her wrist. It could have been worse, but it was still very bad. The punctures were wide and deep, and he hadn't been prepared to handle anything this severe on his own.

Ling looked back to Bido, and swallowed his pride and fear.

“I would appreciate any help you could offer.”

Bido got to work right away. He rattled off a list of things he needed to his companions, and once they had delivered them the three relocated to another bed. Ling stayed by Lan Fan's side, watching Bido's work closely, and murmuring soothingly.

“So what we gonna do with these two?” Roa asked. Martel frowned.

“What do you mean?”
“I mean, we should set them up somewhere in here, right? They gotta stay someplace until we decide what to do or the girl gets better. But it's gotta be hidden so the guards and nurses don't see them. Who knows what they would do if they found these two.”

The average citizen of Amestris may not have worried about the safety of someone vulnerable in the presence of soldiers or medical professionals. Both were seen as noble and protective careers; the kind of people you would expect to help someone in need. But these three had a different perspective. They had seen things during combat that they could never unsee, and had discovered sides of people they hadn't thought existed. They had seen soldiers who were normal in the barracks but sadistic on the battlefield, and the doctors that should have healed them turned them over to be experimented on.

They knew not every soldier, nurse, or doctor would turn out to be so monstrous, but that didn't really help. It was impossible to tell who would turn out to be cruel and who wouldn't. Plus, even if all of the regular employees here were trustworthy, that didn't mean their superiors were. This was a government run hospital after all. What guarantee was there that the officers who organized that damnable lab couldn't influence this place too?

Those doctors, those officers, had been willing to do experiments on their own people, on the soldiers who had risked their lives to protect the nation. None of the chimeras wanted to think about what they would be willing to do to these 'weixing'.

The chimeras had talked about escape before. Each time they were called out for an interrogation or a check up they picked up on new bits of information, and their plans to break out gained more detail. Figuring in the two new companions that had been dropped into their laps would make things more complicated, but it couldn't be helped. They wouldn't leave a pair of vulnerable kids to be found by these people.

One way or another, they would ALL be getting out of here.

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It took three days, but they finally made it to the outskirts of Central City.

Scar could hear Xiao Mei grumbling from inside his backpack. It wasn't ideal for the small bear, but Scar had noticed how much attention she drew from the Amestrians. He couldn't be recognized now, not if he hoped to continue his mission and help Mei.

Scar was keenly aware of her presence in his front pocket, though she remained completely still. She seemed to understand the gravity of the situation, even if she didn't understand why Scar was so concerned over people recognizing him. Perhaps, being a sariraka, she did not think to question why someone would want to go unnoticed.

As Scar searched for a place to stay, his thoughts drifted to the sariraka that had once inhabited his grandparents' home. He hadn't really thought of them in the years following the war, so consumed by what he'd lost and his new goal. But since meeting Mei, he began to wonder.

What had happened to them? When his family had been forced to flee their homes, had the sariraka fled as well? Did they stay and try to survive in their own? Were they and other sariraka still living in the ruins of Ishval, or had they been scattered to the wind like his own people? Had they been killed by the Amestrian forces too? If they had been, it was another crime these people deserved to pay for.

The slums around him once again hosted a number of Ishvalans. Perhaps while he was here he could see if any of them had seen signs of sariraka since the end of the war. It would be good to have hope
that at least some of them made it out okay.

But that was a concern for another time. For now, he would have to decide how they would search for Mei's missing family. And decide what he would do if he came across State Alchemists while he was here.

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Al and Ed were sitting in the bedroom hallway of their home. They quickly jumped up when Granny Pinako exited Winry's room.

“How's Winry doing?” Alphonse asked.

“As well as can be expected. I'm certain now that nothing was broken, which is a blessing. Her scrapes from the wood are healing nicely, but the muscles in her back are going to be very sore for quite some time. I'll be relying on both of you boys to help take care of her, and make sure she doesn't push herself too hard.”

“Of course.” Al replied immediately. Ed nodded.

“Good. Now come, we have things to discuss, and Winry needs her rest.” Granny ushered them to the dining table. “Now Edward, you said you were absolutely certain that these new humans wouldn't tell anyone about us?”

“Positive. Even if they don't think much of us, they hold too much loyalty to Colonel Bastard to go against a direct order.”

“Didn't they spy on him though? That doesn't seem very loyal.” Al countered.

“Yeah, but I'm pretty sure that even if they did find him doing something 'suspicious' they probably would have skipped it over or downplayed it in whatever report they were doing. They couldn't ignore orders from higher up completely you know?”

“You're analysis when it comes to these things is usually trustworthy Edward. Still, I'd like to have other options available to us, just in case. After all, the more people know a secret the harder it becomes to hide it. So whenever you aren't needed here to help with Winry, the two of you will be checking our pre-planned escape routes and making sure we have the necessities packed and ready to go. Understood?”

“Yes ma'am.” Alphonse said. Ed rolled his eyes a little, but also agreed.

Later that night the boys lay in the dark of their room, thinking about the days ahead.

“Honestly, I think Granny is worrying too much.” Ed grumbled

“You ran just as fast as we did when the team came in, brother.”

“Yeah, but that was before Mustang and Hawkeye arrived and set them straight. No way they're going to go against the Bastard AND risk Hawkeye's wrath. At this point I'd rather be thinking of ways to booby trap the office than checking our escape stashes.”

“Do you honestly need that much time to think of your next prank?”

“This is a golden opportunity Al! Colonel Bastard may never be away from the office this long again! I gotta make it something good...plus think of something for the others too.”
“The others?”

“The team.”

“You're bringing them into the prank war? I thought that was between you and the Colonel.”

“The pranks are entirely between me and that Bastard! But they deserve something for hurting Winry like that.”

“They didn't do it on purpose...but I like the idea of warning them not to do it again.”

“Does that mean you'll help me think of something?”

“...maybe.”

Edward knew to translate that as a 'yes'.
Chapter 19

Lan Fan woke slowly, but with a clear head. The last time she remembered being awake, everything had felt so heavy. Now her body didn't exactly feel light, she had barely moved and she could tell her limbs were very stiff, but she felt more connected to herself than she did before. She could hear voices around her, and was puzzled. Only Ling had been with her, so who did the other voices belong to? Just humans going about their business? The voices seemed too close for that though. She cracked open her eyes, blinking a few times against the light. That worried her even more, because bright lights meant open areas and exposure and every one of her people avoided those. When her eyes adjusted, she could see she was laying out in the open, the room's ceiling in clear view. She turned her head to the side, and saw that the room was far from empty.

There were humans in the room, about four too many. They were talking to each other, and Ling...she couldn't see him but she could hear him. He was a part of their conversation; he was talking to the humans.

“Ling.” She called. Her voice scratchy, barely audible. Yet somehow, the dark haired human must have heard her, because he called for the group to be quiet. Within moments Ling was kneeling in front of her. He brushed her hair to the side and beamed down at her.

“Lan Fan! You're finally awake! How are you feeling?”

“Ling...come closer.” She instructed. Ling’s smiled turned into a worried frown, and he leaned down closer to her.

“What is it?”

Lan Fan jerked her arm up to slap him upside the head.

“Ow! Lan Fan!” Ling's reproach was loud, but it didn't drown out the snorts of amusement from the humans. Lan Fan ignored both.

“You went and got us captured again.” She said accusingly.

“That is technically true.” Ling admitted. “But I think we are in a better place than we were before.”

Lan Fan raised her eyebrows, making her skepticism clear.

“Just hear me out okay?” Ling looked up and across the room. “Dolcetto, could you get some water?”

“Sure thing, Ling.” The dark haired man answered.

They don't hesitate to use each others names.’ Lan Fan noted.

While Dolcetto did as he was asked, Ling helped Lan Fan sit up. Her damaged arm, now wrapped tightly in real bandages, gave some protest at the movement. It wasn't as much as she had anticipated though, and Lan Fan wondered if that first dose of painkillers was strong enough to be affecting her still. Just how long had she been out?

Now that she wasn't flat on her back, she could clearly see that she was sitting on a folded cloth on top of a dresser, and the humans in the room were sitting on the two beds on either side of it. Lan Fan couldn't help thinking that their positioning meant she and Ling were surrounded.
Dolcetto returned quickly, a small bit of water in a human sized glass. He walked up to the dresser, his shoulders being about level with the top.

“Sorry we don't have anything smaller.” he said, and started to move the glass toward Lan Fan. She tried to scoot away from him, but Ling caught her by the shoulders.

“It's okay, he's done this with me plenty of times now, and you really need to stay hydrated.”

Well, she couldn't argue that point. Nor could she argue that Dolcetto wasn't careful as he tipped the glass just enough for her to drink, but that didn't stop her muscles from being tense the whole time. She didn't relax at all until Dolcetto was sitting back on the bed, next to a bald human, and even then she didn't relax completely.

“Well, now that that's taken care of, I'm sure you'd like some introductions.” Ling said cheerily.

“I'd like an explanation better.” Lan Fam stated, wondering why Ling felt he could talk so freely in front of these humans. She had known him long enough to tell when he wasn't being genuine, and she felt his cheer wasn't forced.

“We'll get to that in a minute, names will make things easier.” Ling said, and waved a hand like he was trying to fan away her doubts.

Ling introduced each of the humans in the room, and went on to explain how she got here. He explained how he'd accidentally woken the humans up, and that they had graciously offered both of them protection and gallantly distracted the human guards so she could be brought here.

Lan Fan is not convinced, and Ling knows it by the look in her eye.

“Plus, they were just telling me how they're planning to escape from this place, and are willing to let us hitch a ride. Pretty great, right?” Now Ling's cheer was being forced.

“Escape?” Lan Fan turned her dark eyes onto each human in turn. “This is a human hospital. What need do you have for escape? Couldn't you simply leave whenever you no longer desire treatment?”

'What have you done to warrant the guards Ling described? Are they for your protection or others? Give me one good reason why I should trust our safety to you.' Lan Fan's thoughts go unspoken. She does not want to confront them so directly, not when they are all awake and focused on her and Ling.

“Would if we could.” Roa answers. “Military isn't too keen on letting us run off just yet, but we aren't about to wait around for someone else to stick their claws into us.”

“Military? Claws?” Lan Fan asks, thoroughly bewildered. Nothing has made a bit of sense since she woke up.

“You wanna do the honors, kid?” Martel asked, looking at Ling. He took a deep breath, and let it out in a long sigh. Then he sat down cross-legged in front of Lan Fan and looked her in the eyes.

“Lan Fan, what I'm about to tell you is going to seem pretty strange, and it took me a while to believe it myself, but it does explain everything.”

“Okay...I'm listening.” She said slowly. It was uncommon for Ling to speak so seriously. She still felt hyper-aware of all the humans in the room, but she did her best to focus on what Ling was saying.
“You know about Alkahestry back in Xing, right?”

“Or course. Mei was starting to study it, before...”

Ling nodded, and smiled sadly at the thought of his sister.

“Yes, she was. Turns out they have something similar in this country, called Alchemy. While we use Alkahestry mostly for healing, it’s apparently common to use Alchemy for a very wide range of things here. Some of them good, some of them bad. The humans in here,” Ling gestured to humans in the room. “they've seen the bad side...and aren't entirely human anymore because of it.”

“What are you talking about?” Lan Fan demanded, her frustration starting to leak into her voice.

“Most humans would refer to us as chimeras now. It’s what you call a being that is a mixture of two different creatures.” Bido explained, shifting his position as he did so. Lan Fan could see him from the side now, making it impossible for her to miss the reptilian tail the moved to curl around his feet.

“Someone, a human, used this 'Alchemy', to combine you with another creature?” she asked, staring wide-eyed at the tail. “Why?”

“Can't say for certain, scientists didn't exactly go out of their way to explain their plans to us.” Dolcetto said. “Our best guess is that they were trying to find a way to make soldiers with enhanced abilities and senses.”

Lan Fan felt dread pooling in her stomach. The thought of humans that could sniff her people out or hear them climbing around inside the walls...were these people like that? How would they ever get away?

“I see...were they successful?”

“Hate to admit it, but yeah.” Dolcetto continued. “We've all got some increased strength; Roa's got the most since he's based off of a bull. Martel got some kind of snake, so she's super flexible. We're not really sure about Bido, aside from it being a reptile of some sort, one that gave him the ability to crawl on walls, and I-”

“He lifts his leg when he pees.” Roa interrupted with a booming laugh.

“I do not!” Dolcetto barked back. “And you promised to stop saying that so loud! The guards already give me funny looks!”

“What they mean is that Docletto was combined with some breed of dog.” Martel explained while the two men bickered.

Lan Fan really hoped the pressure behind her eyes wasn't going to lead to a headache. She was just getting used to not having a pain muddled brain. There was a sudden bang on the door, and the arguing chimeras quieted instantly.

Ling jumped up and put his arms around her, like he was about to pick her up and carry her off. The others tensed and Martel stood up, placing her hand near the weixing couple.

“Keep it down in there.” A guard called from outside.

“Got it!” Roa called back. Much more quietly he muttered: “Can't do anything around here without them getting pissy about it.”
“What happens if someone else comes in?” Lan Fan asked. She clung to Ling with her good hand, even as he slowly sat back down.

“I was gonna hide you in the top drawer if it looked like someone was coming in. Had to do it once already.” Martel explained, also retaking her seat. “Hopefully won't have to do it again before we get out of here.”

“I'm still not sure I fully understand what is going on here.” Lan Fan admitted, trying to get back on topic, and will her heart to slow down. Ling squeezed her hand.

“Lan Fan, the point is that we have the same goals as these people. We all want to get out of here, and they have just as much reason to distrust other humans as we do now. So I think we can trust their offer to help.” Ling suddenly grinned. “Plus, they've even agreed to head towards South City once we get out of here.”

South City...where they had been separated from Mei. “Why would you do that?” She asked of the chimeras. Roa shrugged.

“It's as good a place to go as any. It's a decent sized town, so easier to blend in there. Plus none of us have any connection to it so no one would expect the four of us to head there. And if it helps you guys out too, then why not?”

“See Lan Fan? It all works out perfectly! We'll get out of here and be on our way back to Mei before we know it.” Ling said confidently.

Lan Fan wasn't as sure. The chimera may not trust other humans, but they weren't as vulnerable to them as she and Ling were. Plus the couple had no way of ensuring the chimeras would keep their promises. Not to mention how hard it would be to flee from these people if things went wrong.

She looked down at her hurt arm, an arm bandaged by one of the chimeras.

On the other hand, without help, it could take ages for her and Ling to find their way out and travel all the way back. Who knows what would happen to Mei, or to them, by then. Thinking about it like that, there really was only one option.

Lan Fan squeezed Ling's hand back, and looked around at the gathered chimeras. Determination glinted in her eyes and she asked:

“What's the escape plan and how soon can we do it?”

* * * * * * * * * *

“I'm coming with you!”

“I told you it's too dangerous.”

“But how will they know they can trust you if I'm not with you?”

Scar sighed. He had managed to find them a room at a modest inn and, after making sure the place was safe, he had told Mei he was going to go search for her siblings.

Alone.

Mei had not taken that well.

“I'm fairly certain my description of you will be accurate enough to sway them.” Scar argued back,
trying not to sound as frustrated as he felt.

“You could have just seen us in that shop and be saying stuff from memory. They won't know unless I'm really there!” Mei insisted, glaring up at him from her place on the bed. She wasn't about to be left behind when Ling and Lan Fan were so much closer than she ever thought they'd be again.

“You could write a note for me to take with and show to them. But I'm not risking going into a fight with you in my pocket.” He'd managed not to do anything terribly violent in front of Mei, so far. His first priority was keeping her safe, of course, but he also didn't relish the idea of showing off his unnatural abilities to her.

“Then I'll stay in the bag. You can set it down if you do start fighting.”

“I don't even know if I'll find them on this first outing.”

“The list thing said where the human lived right? So why wouldn't it be today?”

“That listed where the shopkeeper could send messages to the buyer, it might not be where he's keeping your family.”

“Doesn't that mean it might be safer for me then?”

“No.”

“But…”

“For the last time, no!”

“Fine!” Mei said, stamping her foot. The bed absorbed all of the impact. She marched over to her panda and climbed on her back.

“Come on Xiao Mei, let's find a place where we'll be safe and out of the way.”

Xiao Mei gave a high pitched 'hmph!' of agreement, and walked toward the side table with her nose in the air.

Scar let out a long suffering sigh, and went back to preparing to leave. He heard Xiao Mei scurry down and off the side table, and start inspecting things on the floor. He left his bag unattended to go over to the table and look down at the list he'd taken from the shopkeeper, making sure he was remembering the right address. He slipped it into his pocket and turned to face the room.

Mei and her companion could not be seen, but there were plenty of hiding places for the two of them, he'd made sure of it.

“I'm heading out now, I'll try to be back by nightfall.”

There was no response, and Scar shook his head. He'd grown up with a brother, and was familiar with moping after an argument. Hopefully when he returned, he'd bring with him a reason for her to smile again.

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

When Lan Fan had asked when the group was planning to escape, she hadn't expected the answer to be: today. She also hadn't expected, and was rather displeased, to hear that the 'how' would be brute force. Granted they had given a lot of thought to the timing; early morning would mean minimal staff and sleepy guards. She was even less pleased to discover how she and Ling would be leaving the
“Don’t hesitate to pinch my fingers if I’m putting you in any pain.” Dolcetto instructed, holding out his hands for them to climb into. He actually smirked when she gave him a dubious look. “Come on kid, I don’t bite.”

“Not outside of combat anyway.” Martel quipped. She was doing stretches on the other side of the room, similar to the ones she and other weixing had been taught to do right before borrowing. Lan Fan had never seen any of her people push the stretches as far as Martel was though.

When Lan Fan hesitated, Ling stepped into Dolcetto's hands with practiced ease. He didn't seem put off in the slightest by his new position, and turned to offer her a helping hand and encouraging smile.

“Don’t worry, I had to pinch him a few times at first, but he's gotten better really fast!” Ling enthused, missing the eye roll Dolcetto did behind his back.

Lan Fan had expected her protective instincts to go into overdrive when Ling casually walked onto a humans palm...but they didn't. Thinking back on it she hadn’t picked up on any immediate, present danger since she woke up. She sensed the potential for it, she always did, but it was like the difference between knowing someone could fall and actually seeing them trip or flail. She knew these human chimeras could be dangerous, but they weren't focusing it on her and Ling.

It wasn't an ideal situation, but Ling just might be right when he said they were better off now than before. And if they made it out of here in one piece, then she might just tell him so.

Lan Fan took a deep breath, then took Ling's hand. His grin widened when she did, and he helped her get settled before Dolcetto moved his hands. She instinctively tensed when he did, and had to remind herself to keep her breathing steady. Ling held her close, which allowed her to do the same even with her injuries. That helped, even as Dolcetto held them so close to his chest that it blocked out the light of the room.

“You two got enough room?”

“We're good, though if you wanted to make sure I could ride on your head instead.” Ling answered back cheekily.

“You aren't hiding in my hair as we flee a military hospital, kid.”

“What about after we flee the military hospital?”

“....maybe.”

Lan Fan is suddenly grateful for the darkness. It wouldn't do for Ling to see her smiling, even if it was just a little. It would only encourage him.

The darkness was less pleasant once things actually got underway. She was glad the human chimeras had discussed the plan in such detail, because otherwise the escape would have just been a cacophony of distressing sounds.

That bang and crash was Roa yanking to door open and taking a cart away from an approaching nurse, and proceeding to barrel down the hall with it.

Those shouts and grunts were Martel fighting off anyone who approached them, or maybe Roa as he used the cart like a plow.
The near endless crashing was Bido knocking over everything he could, so that people would have a hard time following them, and the thumping was from him leaping onto walls to avoid capture.

The grunts that she could feel as well as hear were Dolcetto shouldering someone or something out of the way.

Then, finally, there were new sounds. Sounds of random humans and vehicles and even a couple birds. They were street sounds, outside sounds, the sounds of potential freedom.

The ordeal was far from over. Nevertheless, Lan Fan found breathing to be just a little easier.
“So...did you learn anything?” Breda carefully asked.

Both Hawkeye and Hughes were sporting deep frowns and Mustang’s face was drawn. The three had just returned from their scouting of the fifth laboratory, and had rejoined with Team Mustang without saying a word.

“Sort of.” Hughes replied. “Roy was able to make better sense of the alchemical arrays, but it was mostly confirming things we already knew.”

“All but one of the arrays was for creating chimeras, and all of them had the symbols needed to for humans to be in the mix. There were different arrays for each human-animal hybrid they tried, and the number of arrays is higher than the number of subjects we found. So I'm willing to bet that the people we have now weren't their first try.”

The team had never heard Mustang sound this tired before, like someone had placed the weight of the world on his shoulders while he was out.

“Have any of you had success with your information gathering?” Hawkeye asked.

“I've looked over pages from several different authors, and it seems they all had an established code for talking about their experiments and victims. It's not a terribly complex one, but it does a good job of concealing names, both of their victims and the ones giving orders.” Falman reported, then looked to Fuery.

“We've been making note of all the code words we find, and trying to nail down a specific meaning for them.” He said, showing them a hand written list. “We're pretty sure about some of them, but are still working on the others.” Hughes took it with a slightly strained smile.

“That's good progress for the amount of time you've had to work on it, almost enough to redeem yourselves. Hopefully unraveling these will give us some clue about who was really in charge of all of this.”

“Actually,” Havoc spoke slowly “I think I may have something on that.”

“Huh?”

“Seriously?”

“What did you find?”

Havoc suddenly found himself surrounded on all sides, with four different faces trying to get a look at the pages he held.

“Geez! Give a guy a minute!” Havoc waved them all off, and the four reluctantly backed off. Mustang and Hawkeye continued to wait in their seats, but leaned forward in interest.

“Okay, every paper I've seen so far doesn't give the person in charge any kind of name or title. They just use the code word that we think means 'boss' or 'superior', but I've got a few early pages from
Tucker here referring to 'the boss' as 'FE'. Do we know any lead researchers or scientists with those initials?

“Can't think of anyone off the top of my head, but we could-”

“Let me see that.”

Much to Hughes's surprise, Mustang had suddenly stood up and put his hand out. His eyes were narrowed in suspicious anger, and Havoc wasted no time in handing over the papers. Mustang's eyes scanned the page.

“These aren't initials. Tucker consistently writes it as uppercase then lowercase 'Fe'."

“So what? I figured he just had troubles with capitalizing. His notes are pretty messy after all.”

“The handwriting is messy and the organization isn't great, but his grammar is fine.” Falman said.

“Which means that not capitalizing the 'e' was probably on purpose.” Hughes noted, looking at Mustang. “And 'Fe' means something to you?”

“On the periodic table, Fe is the symbol for iron.” he replied, looking at Hughes “And I can think of at least one person involved in this case who could easily get a 'nickname' like that.”

“The Brigardear General.” Hughes whispered, his expression starting to match Roy's.

“Why would Grand be called 'iron'?” Havoc asked, keeping his voice low to match Hughes's volume.

“You remember how all state alchemists are given titles by the government based off their specialization? Like how the Colonel is called the Flame Alchemist?” Breda prompted. Havoc nodded. “Well, the Brigadier General is a state alchemist too. Though people tend to forget that because he's in administration these days, despite him being in the Ishvalan War.”

“He was called the Iron Blood Alchemist, for his ability to manipulate metal and create weaponry,” Hawkeye explained. “So I can see someone trying to be clever and using that to avoid actually saying his name.”

“Makes even more sense given that these are early entries, made just after Tucker seems to have been drafted. He might not have been caught up on the, uh, 'approved terms' the lab workers had.”

They sat in silence for a minute, contemplating the implications of Mustang's theory. Hughes turned to look at Roy, and it was though the weight on Roy's shoulder's had been transferred to Hughes's gaze.

“We need to be sure of this. If we're going to accuse a Brigadier General we need evidence that's solid, and that means more than the implications of a code name. We'll need-”

The door to the office flew open. Everyone startled, and Havoc quickly stuffed the papers he'd found into his pocket. A vaguely familiar soldier stood in the doorway. She whipped her head back and forth to scan the room, until her gaze stopped on their group.

“Sirs! I was sent to report to anyone still in the Investigations Office that there has been an incident. The chimera survivors being held in the hospital have escaped, and everyone available is being called in to find them!”
'Looks like it could start raining soon.' Scar thought. He hoped it at least held off until he found the address he was looking for. He'd been walking for a while now, but hadn't made as much progress as he would have liked. He knew that Central, being the capital city, would have plenty of military officers out patrolling, but he still spent more time avoiding them than he would have liked. His sense of direction had gotten mixed up a couple times as a result, but he was pretty sure he was heading in the right direction now.

He turned a corner, and swore under his breath. There was a building up ahead that looked like a hospital, and the place was swarming with people in military uniforms. He definitely didn't want to get into the middle of that, so he'd have to find an alternate route again. He turned around, and managed to run right into someone.

The elderly woman stumbled back with a small 'oof!'. But Scar was much more concerned with the smaller, high pitched sound that went off just behind his back at the same time.

"You should watch where you're going sonny, I can't afford to be taking any falls at my age."

"My apologies, ma'am. I'll be more careful in the future."

She gave an indignant huff. “See that you do.” She walked off, but Scar was no longer paying attention to her. He took a quick look around before ducking into a nearby alley. Then he looked around again before kneeling down and opening his bag enough to take a look inside.

He sighed. “Mei, you're panda isn't nearly as good at hiding as you are.”

He knew the sariraka was in there. The noise he'd heard had sounded too human for it to have come from the panda that had it's head buried in supplies, plus he doubted Mei or Xiao Mei would have left each others company willingly.

"Dang it.” Mei's muffled voice came from deeper within the bag. Items shifted and fell over until Mei emerged from the depths. “Are we there yet? It's really hard to keep my footing in here."

"Mei,” he said with a deep set frown “I told you to stay in the hotel room so you would be safe.”

“And I told you I was coming with to find my family! I'm not letting them slip away again, and, and, I don't care if there's fighting because I feel a lot safer with you anyway!”

That declaration startled the frown off of Scar's face. His mouth fell open in awe and, once Mei realized what she'd said, her face turned beet red.

“I just, I mean-”

Whatever Mei meant remained a mystery. While the human and sariraka had been talking, Xiao Mei had lifted her head out of the bag and started sniffing at the air. Just as Mei tried to give a stuttering explanation, the panda jumped out of the bag and ran out of the alley.

“Wah! Xiao Mei! Come back! Mr. Scar, we gotta go get her!”

Scar mentally cursed. He scooped up Mei and transferred her to his jacket's breast pocket before grabbing his bag and running out of the alley.

How could something with such tiny legs be so fast?!
“I think...we've...lost them.” Martel said. She had her back pressed against the side of the alley they had hidden in, and was panting heavily. They all were at this point.

Bido crouched on the ground opposite of Martel, and Dolcetto sat on his heals next to him. Roa stood by the alley entrance, doing his best to both look casual and keep an eye on people who were passing by. Ling and Lan Fan were still in Dolcetto's hands, but his palms were facing up so they could have some fresh air. Though he still held them close enough to hide them from the sight of anyone passing by on the street.

“We got away from them for now.” Dolcetto muttered once he caught his breath. “But the longer we wait the more people will be out looking for us.”

“One more minute, then we'll split up as planned.” Bido said.

“You guys wanna stay with me when we split up, or go with Martel?” Dolcetto asked, looking down at his passengers. “She's got better pockets, so she'd be able to travel with you more casually.”

“They were comfy enough earlier, but I'm not sure about now.” Ling said. “With how many directions I heard her voice coming from while we escaped, I'm not sure my stomach could handle that much up and down.”

“Or my arm.” Lan Fan added. “Though if it comes to a fight, I don't think it will matter too much who we are with.”

“We should stay with Dolcetto then. Martel has a look that catches the eye, but I'll bet he can walk through a crowd no problem.”

Dolcetto raised an eyebrow. “Kid, are you saying I look boring?”

“Nah, just average.” Ling gave him a mischievous grin. Dolcetto smirked back at him.

“Well, if you guys are sure we should-”

“What the heck is that?”

Roa's exclamation immediately had everyone in the alley on edge. Dolcetto moved to hide away the weixing, but the sight of what Roa had seen made him pause. It was the size of a cat, but didn't really look like one aside from the fact that it had fur. Honestly, it looked like a stuffed toy had come to life. While everyone stared in confusion, the thing sniffed the air and made a beeline for Dolcetto.

“Wait, is that...?” Ling started, staring at the creature with wide eyes.

“It's Xiao Mei!” Lan Fan cried out in surprise. Ling threw himself off the palm he sat on, artfully grabbing folds of fabric to slow his fall and making Dolcetto's heart skip a beat.

“Hey! Be careful kid!”

Ling ignored him and ran right up to the strange creature. He scratched it behind the ears and it gave a happy squeak.

“What are you doing here?” Ling asked, voice laden with wonder. The creature didn't respond, just tilted it's head in the hopes of getting more ear scratches.

The sound of pounding footsteps made everyone look up again. Ling hid behind the critter and the
chimera's tensed and waited for whoever was in such a hurry to pass by. But they didn't pass by. A man with dark skin and white hair stood in the alley opening. He stopped there so deliberately that for a moment they thought he was looking for them, but the sight of the chimeras startled him, even if he only showed it for a moment.

“Sorry for intruding. I was just trying to catch my pet.” He gestured to the animal.

Rage flashed through Ling, and before he could stop himself he jumped up and glared at the man.

“She's not yours! She's my sister's friend!”

“Ling!” Lan Fan hissed, fearful eyes locked on him. The tension the chimera's felt mounted, and they readied themselves to react to whatever the stranger might do in response to seeing Ling. The only exception to this was Roa, who gaped and looked down at the stranger's chest at the same time the stranger himself did. The stranger seemed to mutter something to himself, then paused for a moment before reaching his hand into his breast pocket.

“What are you doing?” Martel demanded. The stranger stopped and eyed her for a moment, but then continued as if she hadn't spoken. He brought his hand out in a loosely closed fist. The people in the alley could tell that he had something in his hand, but could not tell what. Roa was close enough to see, but he only stood there, mouth slightly agape. Surely, if the stranger were doing something dangerous, Roa would move to stop him, right?

The stranger knelt down on one knee. He slowly brought his hand down to the ground, and when the side of his palm touched the ground he pulled his hand away.

And in it's place stood a tiny girl.

The chimeras could only stare. They had no idea how to respond to this development. Any expectations the chimeras had about what was happening or was about to happen flew out the window at the sight of a new little person, a new 'weixing'.

“M-Mei?”

The small, choked sound brought the chimera group out of their stupor. They all turned to look at Ling, who looked like he would have fallen over if he wasn't holding onto the critter's fur. The little girl looked back at him, the stranger towering over her like a silent guardian. Then she raised her arms and took a shaky step forward.

“Ling...”

The oppressive stillness shattered. Ling sprinted forward, and the girl ran to meet him. They were both going so fast they should have crashed into each other, but instead the girl jumped at him, and Ling caught her like it was the most natural thing in the world. Ling spun her around once, then stood still. He buried his face in her hair, and she clung tightly to his shoulders.

“I-I thought you were gone! When they- they took you away, I thought I was never gonna see you ever again!” The girl sobbed. Tears were hard to see on such a small face, but her voice left no doubt that she was crying.

“Me too.” Ling said, almost too soft to hear. “But I'm here now, you're here now, and we're gonna be okay.”

Dolcetto was so focused on the scene, that it took him a minute to realize Lan Fan was trying to get his attention.
“Put me down! Come on!”

Dolcetto nodded and carefully lowered her to the ground. She pushed herself off his palm with her good arm and ran toward the hugging pair. The little animal joined her as she ran by. It took Dolcetto that long to realize that, for the first time since he met her, Lan Fan was smiling.

“Don't leave me out.” She said, laying her unbandaged arm on the girl's back. The girl straightened, and leaned back just enough to turn toward the new arrival.

“Lan Fan! You're here!”

The girl flung one arm around Lan Fan's neck and pulled her into the hug.

“Where else would she be? No human could separate Lan Fan and me, she's not that easy to get rid of.” Ling teased. The girl laughed and, surprisingly, so did Lan Fan. The trio separated only when the critter bumped it's nose into Ling's back, tired of being left out of the action.

“It's good to see you too, Xiao Mei.” Lan Fan said warmly.

“Lan Fan! What happened to your arm?” the girl cried in alarm, only now seeing all the bandages.

“I got bit by a dog while we were running away from our ‘buyer’.” Lan Fan scowled, but her face softened when she turned to Ling. “Ling got me through it thought, and found us help, even if it wasn't the kind I was expecting.”

“Oh, right!” Ling put the girl back on the ground, but kept a hand on her shoulder. He turned so he could see all of the chimeras but Roa. “This is my sister, Mei!”

“I kinda figured.” Martel said with a small smirk.


“And the big guy is Roa.” Roa nodded. “I met them while I was getting stuff to take care of Lan Fan, and Bido even helped me patch her up. Their kind of on the the run from the local military, but they still agreed to help us get to South City to look for you...though I suppose we don't need to do that anymore.”

“Is the military in Amestris bad?” Mei asked, looking up at Ling. “Scar doesn't want to run into them either.”

Roa gave the stranger next to him a side-eyed glance, but the man either didn't notice or didn't care.

“I have been meaning to ask about your new...friend.” Lan Fan said. Her gaze shifted over to the man, who had barely moved since he set Mei down. Mei's face lit up. She ran a little ways toward the man, before she turned around and gestured like she was presenting a newly made statue.

“This is Scar! He came into the shop we were all being kept at, but he got really mad at the shopkeeper for trying to sell me and he made him let me go. He said I could go wherever I wanted to afterwards, but I didn't want to go anywhere without you guys, so he promised to help me find you and now we did!”

Ling and Lan Fan looked at each other, then turned to Scar. Ling put his palms together in front of him, then bowed at the waist toward Scar. Lan Fan mimicked the action as best she could with her stiff arm and hand.

“Thank you, so much, for saving my sister.” Ling said.
“And for looking out for her afterwards.” Lan Fan added.

“I don’t know what we would have done if we hadn’t found her again.”

Scar’s eyes widened as he took in the pair of bowing weixing, and then bowed his own head deeply.

“It was my honor.”

A moment of heavy silence reigned before Bido cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry to break up this reunion, but we were only planning to stay here a short while. We should really get going if we wish to avoid being caught.”

“Are we still going to the same place?” Dolcetto asked. “Like Ling said, we don’t have a reason to go to South City anymore.”

“We don’t have a reason to not go there. It’s still a big city where we can blend in.” Roa pointed out.

“Maybe we should also ask if these guys want to go with us now that they have their family back together.” Martel said. She looked at the trio of weixing, waiting for a reply.

“I honestly hadn’t planned anything past finding Mei.” Ling admitted. Lan Fan nodded.

“I hadn’t really considered going home an option, with the desert between Amestris and Xing. I figured once we found Mei we’d just...find someplace to settle. Where doesn’t really matter.”

“Oh!” Mei suddenly gasped, then ran up to Scar. “Is Dublith a big city?”

Scar raised an eyebrow, but didn’t hesitate to answer. “Yes, it is.”

“Yes! Let’s go to Dublith! Can you guys take us to Dublith? Please?”

“I don’t see why we couldn’t, though I am curious as to why you want to go there so badly.”

“Scar and I stopped in Dublith on our way here, and we met this weixing woman who lived nearby. She was really nice, and she said that if I found you guys we could all stay with her for a while until we decided what to do.”

“So there are other weixing in this country. I have to admit, having the support of someone who is like us and is familiar with this country would be very helpful.” Lan Fan said.

“Did she tell you how to find her again?” Ling asked eagerly.

“Yup! She lives in this store called Curtis Meats. She made friends with the human who owns it, so she said we could just go in and ask for Izumi. Or we could find an entrance our size by the back door.”

Ling looked around at his companions. “I know we’ve caused you a lot of trouble already, so I have no business to be asking you this-”

“We'll take you to Dublith and help you find your way to this Izumi woman.” Dolcetto interrupted, giving the trio a smile. “Like Bido said, no real reason we can't go there. Dublith is a big tourist destination, so it'll be even easier for newcomers to blend in, and if we can help you guys out at the same time, I consider that a nice bonus.”

The other three chorused their agreement. Ling looked at them with teary eyes.
“You guys are so nice!” He practically sobbed. Lan Fan patted him on the back, which turned into her steering him toward Dolcetto. She looked over her shoulder, and saw that Mei wasn't following.

“Do you need a moment to say goodbye to your friend, or is he coming with?”

Mei looked startled, like the idea of Scar not coming with hadn't even occurred to her. She twisted around and craned her neck to look him in the eye.

“Did you want to come?”

Scar’s brow furrowed, and Mei rushed to continue.

“You helped me find my family, and I'm so grateful for that and so, so happy. And if helping me get back to them was all you wanted to do then I'd understand...but I don't wanna say goodbye yet. So do you wanna come?”

Scar suddenly stiffened. Before Mei could ask what was wrong, she was being swept into Scar's hand and deposited back in his shirt pocket.

“Well, well, look what we found.”

Mei’s whole body went rigid at the sound of new voice.

“Lieutenant, go back to the hospital and give them a message. Tell them that the Iron Blood Alchemist will soon be returning their runaways.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for having another long gap between chapters. Life happened, plus this chapter and the next are getting into some plot stuff that I had a really hard time deciding how it should all happen. I kept changing my mind over the exact sequence of events, and eventually I had to say to myself “Just write it already! Once you get it down you'll know what feels right.” I'm hoping that works to get me started on the next chapter too.

Thanks for reading, hope you enjoyed it!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scar hadn't wanted to take Mei out of his pocket. There were strangers here and, while he didn't doubt his ability to fight four on one if need be, he wouldn't be able to fight at his best if he was preoccupied with protecting his small charge. But then another sariraka had appeared, and the sound of his voice made Mei cling to his shirt and look up at him with such desperate, fragile hope that he could not bear to keep her from her family a moment longer.

Still, he kept a close eye on her as she ran forward, and an even closer eye on the surrounding humans. He did his best to be discreet, keeping his body still while he focused on his peripheral vision. He noticed that neither of the young adult sariraka seemed to fear retaliation from the humans around them. It was a good sign, though it didn't stop him from calculating which humans he'd need to take out first should the group pose a threat.

He was so focused on being ready to leap to Mei's defense that her question caught him off guard. Similar to the sariraka, he hadn't thought past getting Mei where she needed to be. Once she'd reunited with her family he'd planned on getting back to his original mission. He hadn't considered that Mei would go off with a suspicious group of humans though, and wasn't entirely comfortable letting her go with people he knew next to nothing about. Yet she had found her family, and he had his own goals to achieve...

He wasn't even close to coming to a decision before he was scooping Mei up. His senses, still on high alert, had warned him of another danger before it officially made itself known. When he heard the title of the newcomer, his blood ran cold.

The Iron Blood Alchemist. He had been notorious during the Ishvalan War. The weapons he made had taken so many lives, and caused incalculable damage to his homeland. The realization of who was behind him filled every line of his body with a rage so intense that he barely reacted when metal walls suddenly appeared around them, plunging the entire group into darkness. Cries of alarm echoed through the chamber, but he only had ears for a single voice.

He could just make out the words of Iron Blood from beyond the wall. That had to mean that he was standing right on the other side; Scar could reach out and touch him if the wall wasn't in the way. And very soon, it wasn't.

Scar's palm slammed against the metal wall. There was a flash of light, and the metal beneath his skin disintegrated. Another second more and his arm was through the hole and grabbing the side of a bald head. There was a single moment where Scar's eyes met one of Iron Blood's. Scar took in the face of a man who tried to exterminate his people, and activated his tattoo. Another bright flash, and the hated face was erased.

The action allowed some of the rage clouding his brain to subside, the emotion now only lapping at the edges of his mind. He looked into his pocket and saw Mei huddled down as far as she could go, staring up at him with wide eyes. She'd only be able to see his face from that angle.

'That's good.' he thought. His mission was his and his alone; he didn't want her burdened by images of it.
He turned around. The hole allowed a single shaft of gray light to illuminate the interior of their box, so he could now see the rest of the group. His eyes latched onto the sariraka first, who were being held in the hands of the short, black haired man. They held each other close and stared at him with open mouths.

“Was- was that alchemy?” The young woman asked.

“Partially.” Now was not the time to discuss the intricacies of his brother's work and the tattoo's origin. He let his focus broaden, and took in the humans. Three of them, the woman, the black haired man, and the gray haired man, were all in fighting stances, and the bald man trembled behind the gray haired man. More importantly, however, was the fact that all of them had moved to shield the sariraka. He wasn't sure if the intention was to hide them or defend them, but he decided it didn't matter. For now, they would do.

“We have to go. Being without a leader will shock and destabilize them, but not for long.”

“Without a- what the hell did you do?!?” The woman demanded. He ignored the question as he strode over to the opposite wall. The humans tensed again as he got closer, but he doubted they would attack him without direct provocation. As he passed them he felt a tug on his clothes, and looked down to see that Xiao Mei was climbing up the side of his leg. He ignored that too. Arguing with the humans about custody of the sariraka would waste time they didn't have, and the same was true of trying to dissuade Xiao Mei.

He reached the other wall and placed his palm against it. With a crackle of light, the wall crumbled into nothing.

“Let's go.”

He waited only long enough to ensure that the others would follow him, and that they had tucked the sariraka out of sight, before he started down the street. It was only after the others joined him that he was able to see that the bald man had some sort of tail. He stared at the man, not knowing what to make of the sight, before resolutely looking forward. He couldn't stop to demand answers; he could already hear military officers shouting in the distance. Still, he couldn't help but wonder what he'd gotten himself into.

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Dolcetto was beginning to wonder just what he'd gotten himself into.

He'd heard stories about what some of the veteran State Alchemists could do, but he'd never expected to be on the receiving end of their talents. So it was bad enough when the walls went up, and he realized what exactly they were up against. Thankfully, his keen sense of smell and hearing had allowed him to find the weixing couple, and scoop them up before anyone accidentally hurt them. Roa hadn't exactly been subtle in his attempts to get the wall to cave.

Things happened very quickly after that. Lightning flashed across one of the walls, exploding into gray light that filtered through a new hole. Dolcetto scrambled back, holding his newest friends close, and had just enough time to make out the cold fury on Scar's face before he thrust his arm through the opening and the same lightning crackled again. He hadn't been able to see Scar's face afterwards, since the only light was dim and coming from behind the man. But considering that the man had just blown up a wall, and a State Alchemist, with just his hand...well, Dolcetto wasn't sure he wanted a better look.

He still followed Scar as the man ran down the street though. They might need that kind of fire
power if they hoped to get away from the rest of the military. He just hoped that whatever loyalty 
Scar had toward the weixing would keep him from using the same power on them later.

“'You got any idea what that was?' Roa huffed from beside him. ‘I ain't ever seen anyone use 
alchemy like that.’

Neither had he, to be honest. “He did tell Lan Fan it was only 'partially' alchemy. But heck if I know 
what that's supposed to mean.”

“We can grill him about it after we get out of the city, if anyone is brave enough for it anyway.”
Martel muttered. Then she looked up at the sky. “Shit, you feel that?”

It took a moment, but he soon understood what she meant. A drop of water hit the side of his head, 
followed by another on his arm, then another and another until rain was pouring out of the sky.

“Okay, none of you thought 'It can't get any worse' right? Because I didn’t.” Roa grumbled, his 
ponytail already starting to stick to his neck.

“Nah, I know better than to temp fate like that.” Dolcetto quipped. “This might be a good thing 
though. A bunch of people running in the rain without umbrellas? People will think we're just trying 
to escape the downpour.”

“Perhaps, but it is unfortunate for me.” Bido spoke up. “Wet walls aren't as easy to stick to.”

“Either way, can't change it. We'll just have to roll with it.” Dolcetto concluded. He glanced down at 
his pockets. He hoped the little guys were doing okay in there.

* * * * * * * * *

Mustang cursed the sudden deluge. The rain was making it hard to see out the car windows, which 
lowered their chances of catching sight of the runaway victims. He could only hope that Hawkeye's 
keen gaze would be able to work past it while he focused on driving. More personally though, he 
cursed the rain for how much it was going to hamper him. His gloves couldn't spark properly when 
wet, which meant he wouldn't be able to use his flame alchemy at all if they had to give chase.

'Though that might be for the best. I doubt their feeling charitable towards any alchemists these 
days, much less State Alchemists.' He thought to himself.

Hawkeye sat next to him in the passenger seat, her eyes sweeping the landscape outside. Fuery was 
in the back seat, and was reaching between them to adjust the radio. A garbled voice came through; 
Fuery made another adjustment.

“Please repeat the last message, over.”

“The subjects have been spotted heading southwest from the hospital.” A static filled voice reported. 
“All four subjects were seen together, and there is also one more traveling with them. Witnesses 
report that he has dark skin, white hair, and a large 'X' shaped scar on his face. This description 
matches a suspect in the murder of two State Alchemists in Welogl, and it is believed he is 
responsible for killing another that was pursuing the group. Please approach with caution.”

Well, now Mustang was cursing for a whole new reason. Who had they lost? How in the world did a 
bunch of runaway human chimera's manage to run into a serial killer right after escaping the 
hospital? Had they known him previously? Were they running away together now? They needed 
more information, before the situation spiraled even further out of control.
“Attention all units.” A new voice came over the radio. The signal was much clearer now, and a deep, familiar voice filled the car. “This is Major Armstrong, here to give you new instructions. We are setting up roadblocks at the following intersections. Please, pay close attention as I read off the assignments.”

“What do you suppose that's about?” Hawkeye asked quietly, conscientious of how Fuery was scribbling down the radio's instructions.

“I'm not sure.” Mustang murmured, understanding her meaning immediately. General Basque Grande should be the one in charge of coordinating the search teams. So why was Major Armstrong the one giving that kind of order?

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The chimeras weren't surprised when they spotted a roadblock of military vehicles. They also weren't surprised by the number of personnel standing around the vehicles, ready and waiting with weapons. Nor were they surprised that one officer held a megaphone, clearly tasked with attempting to talk them down. And because they were not surprised, the megaphone officer didn't get a chance to say a word.

The original plan was for each of them to take a separate route once they got away from the hospital, and attempt to meet up again outside the city. They had a better chance of avoiding notice if they were all separate after all. But that was before they'd gotten found and Scar had blown up a high ranking State Alchemist. Going off alone was much more of a risk now.

So it was time for plan B. When the group saw the blockade, they split. Bido and Martel went one way, and Roa and Dolcetto went another. They could hear yelling and fast movement as they made their way down their respective alley and side street, but they focused on moving forward. Martel and Bido could slip through almost anywhere, while Roa and Dolcetto had the strength to force their way through just about anything. It was the best they could do under the circumstances.

The problem was that they didn't have time to factor Scar into any of the plans they had made. When they split up, and saw that Scar was not following them, they each assumed he must have followed the other group. All of them were wrong.

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Scar hoped the other humans knew how to handle themselves. He wasn't sure he'd be able to face Mei if he had to tell her she'd lost her family again.

He didn't mean to get separated from the ones who held the other sariraka. He'd instinctively moved to avoid the barricade when he caught sight of it, and by the time he realized the others were taking different routes the military officers were already swarming after them. He thought about trying to redirect and find them again, but decided against it. He had to focus on getting out of the city without a fight.

He wouldn't mind one normally, especially not against these dogs of the military. But Mei was with him now, and he refused to put her in more danger. It is for that very reason that Mei was still in his pocket. Stopping to transfer her back to the bag would run the risk of her being seen by the military dogs, and trying to do it while running could have resulted in her falling off and getting hurt. But now that the sounds of pursuit were growing distant, he might be able to pull it off.

Checking his surroundings one last time, he ducked into another alley. He crouched behind some garbage cans, and finally felt free to speak.
“Are you alright Mei?”

“Yeah...”

Mei’s voice was strained and Scar looked down at his pocket in worry. Xiao Mei poked her head over his shoulder at the same time, similarly concerned. The panda, with her sharp little claws, had managed to cling to the very back of his jacket as he ran, her back paws stuck to his bag and her front paws between his shoulder blades. They both looked down into the pocket, and saw no sign of physical injury on Mei.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m just queazy, that was a lot of movement.” Mei said, pressing her hands to her stomach. She didn't mention how the pocket moving and hitting Scar's chest so much had made her side sore, she knew that hadn't been on purpose. She was also very wet, but that was obvious, and she had more important things to voice. “And I- I’m really confused. What just happened? Why were we suddenly in the dark like that? And what happened to the others? Where did Ling and Lan Fan go?”

“The darkness was because someone, a State Alchemist, used alchemy to create walls around us. I destroyed the wall so we could escape. We ran together for a while, but when the military closed in we split up to avoid them.”

Mei pursed her lips thoughtfully. She didn't know what alchemy was, but it kinda sounded like the word alkahestry, so maybe that was just the Amestrian word for it? She'd still been learning alkahestry when she'd been kidnapped from the inn, a budding skill that she’d been very proud to posses. Not everyone ‘had the knack’ for alkehestry, as Uncle Fu had said. She hadn't thought about it recently though. She hadn't been able to use it for escaping the shop since she didn't have anything to draw with, and it hadn't really been necessary afterwards with Scar looking out for her.

“Are Ling and Lan Fan going to be okay?” Mei looked up at Scar hopefully, and noticed how his facial muscles twitched.

“We have to believe they will be. We'll know for certain once we get outside the city. For now I'm going to put both of you back into the bag so we can move less conspicuously.”

Mei didn't find his answer to be very reassuring, but she didn't have time to dwell on it.

Noise suddenly exploded around them. Mei was pressed to Scar’s chest as he briefly became a flurry of movement before stopping suddenly again. The world had very suddenly devolved into just two sounds: Scar's heartbeat on one side of her, and a muffled, but loud, voice on the other.

’Why can’t everyone just leave us alone?!’ Mei whined to herself.

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“So, my hunch was right.” declared the bulky man that had just burst through the wall. “You did indeed go this way when you separated from the rest of your party.”

Even through the sounds of the pouring rain and crumbling wall, Scar could hear every word the man said. Scar's eyes quickly scanned the man, taking in everything from his bushy, yellow mustache, to the military uniform, to what appeared to be steel knuckles with alchemic circles engraved on the back. The man was a State Alchemist.

Scar's rage flared at the realization, but he forced himself to stamp it back down. “I don't want to fight you.” not right now “Please let us- me, leave in peace.” Scar internally cursed himself for the
slip up. The hand covering Mei tensed.

The eyes of the military dog narrowed, and his gaze briefly went to Xiao Mei. The panda had fallen off of Scar's back when he'd been forced to dodge the debris and was now standing on wobbly legs by the undamaged side of the alley.

“I have no intention of harming your pet. However, I must bring you in for questioning.” The words 'by force if necessary' were left unsaid, but were not unheard.

“I have no connection to the ones you were chasing.” Scar ground the words out. He's thankful now that, despite them being covered in droplets, he hadn't taken off his sunglasses. If this dog found out he was Ishvalan on top of everything else... “We only met by coincidence.”

The man's mustache twitched as he frowned down at Scar. “Assuming that were true, it does not explain why you killed in defense of them. Additionally, you are wanted for questioning concerning the deaths of two military officers in Welogl. Given this, I cannot let you leave. However, if you wish to avoid a fight, you could simply come quietly.”

“That's not an option.” If he got captured then they'd surely search him and they would find Mei. Who knows what those dogs would do to her. “I have to leave now. A life is at stake.”

The man's eyes softened slightly in concern. “If that is the case, then I will do everything in my power to ensure that whomever is in danger will be kept safe. You have the word of Major Alex Louis Armstrong, the Strong Arm Alchemist. But for me to do that you must be put into my custody.”

The man, Armstrong, held out his hand in invitation. Scar glanced down at it, then turned and ran out the alley. Within a second, heavy footfalls pounded behind him.

“If that is your decision, then I must detain you by force! I will show you the alchemy that has been passed down through the Armstrong line for generations!”

A familiar crackle sounded through the air, almost covering the sharp sound of metal striking stone. Scar quickly dodged to the side. He back slammed against the nearby wall as a stone fist bigger than his head sailed past his legs.

“Hmmm, not bad. You have to be quick to avoid my fist.” Armstrong mused. “Let's see how you handle this then!”

Armstrong slammed his fist into the ground. The cement in front of him reformed into spikes that burst upward and chased after Scar. He leaped backward, his right hand coming forward just in time to disintegrate the points before they reached him.

“Impressive. I didn't realize I was facing off against a fellow alchemist.”

“Don't compare yourself to me!” Scar growled. “The only reason I touch this cursed power is to carry out God's mission!”

“A mission you say? And just what mission would that be?”

Scar clenched his teeth. Talking to the dog would delay another attack, but staying here longer ran the risk of reinforcements showing up. Fighting the man head on would endanger Mei, but with attacks like that then running would also make him vulnerable. The choice was taken out of his hands when Armstrong scoffed.
“No answer? Very well, perhaps you will talk in prison.”

Armstrong slammed his fist into the ground again. And again. Scar ran and dodged the assault, but not to the best of his ability. He could only use one arm if he hoped to keep Mei safe, and the water on his sunglasses was obscuring his vision. Which was why he missed one of the spikes that jutted at him. It clipped him in the side, throwing off his balance. He tried to catch himself, but the rain slick pavement caused his feet to slip. He was falling, and it took one sickening moment for him to realize that hitting the ground like this could crush Mei.

Scar knew how to fall without hurting himself. It was one of the basic lessons taught to soldiers learning hand to hand combat, but they never covered falling with a tiny person in your pocket. He threw out his hands and twisted himself around, but in his haste to protect Mei, he didn't think about the damage the fall would do to him. When he hit the ground his temple slammed against the sidewalk’s curb. Pain pounded across his skull and gathered behind his eyes, making the edges of his vision grow dark.

A high pitched shriek forced him to focus, and he felt his heart stutter. Mei was tumbling head over heel across the wet cement. He tried to reach for her, but it was like his brain had disconnected from his body. Darkness continued to creep across his vision, and he only retained consciousness long enough to see Mei fall over the edge of the curb.

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Mei curled into a tight ball as the humans fought and yelled at each other. She clung desperately to the fabric of Scar's pocket as the world continued to jolt around her, and bit the inside of her cheek to keep from screaming. What was going on? Why was this happening? Why couldn't the loud man leave them alone already?!

Very suddenly the pressure around her vanished. There was a loud thud and everything lurched once again, but now there was nothing to keep her in place. She couldn't stop herself from screaming as she was thrown from her hiding place and found herself rolling across the wet ground. She flailed her arms, trying to find some kind of purchase, but it was no use. Moments later she was falling once again. Scar vanished from sight behind a gray wall, and she hit the next surface with a splash. A splash?

Mei's head had been dunked under water. She fought against the liquid until her head broke the surface with a gasp. She whipped her head around, and suddenly understood what was happening. The heavy rain had caused water to gather at the edges of the street, making a miniature river for her to fall into. A river that was sweeping her down the street and away from Scar.

'No!' Mei kicked her legs and moved her arms like she'd been taught at home, but the current was too strong. It was pulling her further and further away. She looked around, trying to find something to grab onto. She didn't find anything, but what she did see made her heart skip a beat. There was a metal grate behind her. All the water was flowing toward it, and taking her with it. What would happen when she got there? Would she get stuck in the grate? Would she slip through, never to be seen again? What would even be behind something like that? Whatever it was, she didn't want to find out.

She swam harder that she ever had before. But it was no use, the grate was getting closer and closer.

“H-help! Help m-me!” She choked out. “X-xiao Mei! Scar! H-help!”

Her strength was flagging. It was a struggle just to keep her head above the water. She was almost to
the grate. Mei gasped as the current dragged her down-

Something broke the surface of the water and wrapped around her. It pulled her up and out of the water, and Mei found herself laying down in the open air. She gasped and coughed, her lungs expelling as much water as they could. When it finally stopped, Mei lay there panting with her eyes closed. Her hands gripped the surface below her, and relief washed over her when she recognized the feel of skin and the twitch of muscles. She opened her eyes, and the relief instantly vanished.

She thought she'd been saved by Scar, but this was not Scar's hand. The dimensions were off, and the skin was far too light. She pushed herself up on shaking limbs, and looked up, and up. Her gaze crawled up the wall of blue fabric until she finally found a face. It was broad and square and had a bushy yellow mustache in the middle of it. The color matched the single curly-q of hair that sprouted from his head. Honestly, he looked kinda funny, but Mei couldn't appreciate that properly with his intense blue eyes pinning her in place.

“My word...” The man murmured.

Mei sucked in a breath. His voice may have been muffled before, but she could still recognize it. She had been picked up by the loud man.

“Are you alright little one?” The loud man rumbled. His other hand came into her vision, reaching toward her. She flinched back, and the hand stopped.

“I'm not going to hurt you.” he said, actually coming close to saying it quietly.

“If, if that's true. Then could you- can't you- just put me down!” Mei blurted, her stress making her stumble over the Amestrian words.

“I can't simply leave you here. This place is not safe for one as small as yourself.”

Mei opened her mouth to retort that he was the one making it not safe, but was interrupted by a familiar squeak. She scrambled over to the edge of the hand, and looked down to see Xiao Mei staring up at her and the loud man.

“No! Get out of here! Go away!” she yelled. She couldn't let Xiao Mei get caught again! Not because of her! She couldn't!

The little bear looked up at her, head titled in confusion. They were so focused on each other that not a single one of them noticed Scar start to stir.

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Consciousness came back to Scar slowly at first. He opened his eyes, and wondered why he was on the ground and why everything was wet. Then it all came back in a flash: finding Mei's family, the Iron Blood Alchemist, splitting up, trying to flee from the Strong Arm alchemist.

Mei falling over the curb.

He sprang to life and rolled to look over the edge. His stomach twisted when he saw what, to Mei, must have been a fast paced river. A river that would have carried her back towards the dog that attacked them. His head jerked up, and his whole body went rigid. There was Mei, in the hands of a State Alchemist.

Rage and fear warred within him, consuming his every thought. He jumped to his feet and flung himself forward with a roar. He had to take down the man now! Had to get Mei away from that
He was ready for it when Armstrong pounded his fist into the street, his hand already coming forward to demolish the spikes.

He was ready, but the street was not. The area between them had been used for Armstrong's transmutation's several times now. When it was used once again, and Scar palm swung down to disintegrate the spikes, the rest of the street went with them. Cement and stonework shuddered, cracked, and split apart.

Scar was falling. Debris rained down around him. He barely heard Mei screaming his name before he hit the water, and disappeared into the sewer.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter got planned out in a dozen different ways before I finally sat down and typed all this up. I thank you all for your patience and hope you enjoyed it. Also, my apologies for ending on another cliffhanger.

On a separate note, I found writing Armstrong harder than I thought it would be. He has such a unique way of speaking and holding himself, ya know?

End Notes

Not much action happening in this first chapter, but I wanted to get a few things set up first. The next chapter will have a bit more excitement in it. In the meantime, please let me know what you think. Thanks for reading!

A few things to note:

The kids are in their mid teens, with Ed and Winry being 14 and Al being 13.

Trisha Elric and Sara and Urey Rockbell are dead, though not for the same reasons as their canon counterparts. This will be explored in later chapters.

Ed and Al never attempted human transmutation in this story, so they can't transmute just by clapping their hands together.

While the government is still corrupt, it's not corrupt because of Dwarf-in-the-flask or Homunculi or anything like that. It's just regular corruption.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!