My name is Edward Elric. Most people know that, of course, even though they have names they prefer to use for me. I can't say that I blame them for some of those names. I'm not exactly fond of who and what I've become. Not for my own sake, of course, but someone else's. It's what I am, though.

No one knows the whole story. What happened that night, what I saw, what I did. Or what happened at that house. Or where I disappeared to. They don't understand why I'm the military's attack dog, why I...

They don't need to know. Because it's not about them. It's my duty, my crime, and my punishment.

Opening Pandora's Box of evils is a lonely burden. It's one only I have to carry. I'm the one that left Hope in the box. I'm the one that has to get him back.
I Have Nothing Left To Lose
The city around us began to come to life as the sermon ended and was quickly replaced with an ethereal hymn that made my teeth rattle. If the duration of the sermon had been eerie, this was downright creepy as people went back about their tasks as if they'd never stopped, like the dead rising from their graves and going back about their lives like they'd never been dead.

Wandering through a desert in all black is not pleasant in the slightest. My dark-colored coat wasn't helping matters much. The oasis city of Liore was finally in sight when I gave up, shucked my coat and tossed it on the sand. A clap of my hands summoned the necessary alchemical energy and within a minute, I had transmuted my dark coat into a light tan cloak with a balaclava to keep the blowing sand out of my nose and mouth. I probably should've done that before I wandered into the desert, but for all my genius, I sometimes lack common sense.

One of these days, it'll get me killed, but for now, I manage.

There wasn't much I could do about my clothing, besides change their color, although another quick transmutation turned the leather of the pants into a much more forgiving cotton blend. I definitely should've done that sooner.

Liore was once a pretty shabby town, from what I'd heard, but in the last couple years, it'd abruptly began to flourish under the leadership of some priest who'd come up out of nowhere. I didn't trust the abilities of a priest to be much of a ruler, and there were some kooky rumors coming out of the place that led me here. I would've been there much sooner than I had, but my automail required another surgery to accommodate my growth, and it'd delayed me.

I'll be honest. I didn't like what I was hearing. I'd heard a number of rumors about people coming back from the dead. And that just doesn't happen. Believe me, I'd know. The dead simply don't come back, no matter how much studying, praying or any other obscure ritual you do. It doesn't happen.

But it was apparently happening in Liore. I suspected trickery, but it had to be elaborate trickery, or
Or else someone had the Philosopher's Stone.

So wearing the most inappropriate outfit for travel in a desert in existence, I tromped my way across the sands to Liore.

The inside of the city was vastly different from the outside. From the outside, it looked like nothing more than a collection of stone buildings half-buried in sand, with one building jutting out from the middle like some sort of elaborate sundial. Inside the city, there was life, people walking around, doing their business, flowers decorating doorsteps and windows, giving off a deliciously foreign scent.

What bothered me, though, was how armed to the teeth the people there were. It seemed like everyone was armed with some sort of firearm, and there was a radio in every window and doorway, all of them playing the same station.

"If you become His disciples and listen to my words, this Stone will minister to you. For there are five trees for you in Paradise which remain undisturbed summer and winter and whose leaves do not fall. Whoever becomes acquainted with them will not experience death."

I didn't need to pause in my steps to listen to the sermon- like I said, it blasted from every damn radio in the town, and there were a lot of radios there. I glanced around. Everyone was stopped in place, hands folded and heads bowed, weapons and dishes and baskets and whatever else they'd been holding set aside and forgotten for the moment. It was like standing in the middle of a wax museum where nothing melted, even under the sun's unforgiving heat. Food sizzled on the grill of an outdoor eatery, burning away while the proprietor ignored it.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. Eerie doesn't even begin to describe it. I suddenly felt like a cat in a room full of sleeping dogs.

There was one woman standing by a fountain in the middle of the main causeway just ahead of me. Her head wasn't bowed, nor were her hands folded and she didn't seem to be packing anything, unlike the others in her town. She looked over at me as I crept through the streets like a thief.

She was pretty, I suppose, with sun-bleached bangs and otherwise dark hair. Her eyes are what stood out to me. They had the thousand mile stare, like someone who'd seen too much too young. She couldn't have been more than five years older than I was.

That kind of worried me. I'd seen a lot in my lifetime, probably more than most my age, or even more than most twice my age, but it always bothered me to see that look on someone's face. It usually meant abuse. Given the religiosity of the city, I was pretty much instantly suspicious about that. Of course, I'm sort of paranoid that way. Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not really out to get you, you know.

That's kept me alive over the years more than I care to think about.

The woman didn't say anything, which unnerved me, just kept staring at me. I began to wonder if I had something on my face or if my hair had turned into a windblown mess and she was trying to decide if she should laugh or if that would be too impolite.

"And now, may God bless you and keep you, may He make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you, may He lift up his countenance upon you, give you His peace. Amen."

The city around us began to come to life as the sermon ended and was quickly replaced with an
ethereal hymn that made my teeth rattle. If the duration of the sermon had been eerie, this was
downright creepy as people went back about their tasks as if they’d never stopped, like the dead
rising from their graves and going back about their lives like they’d never been dead.

My skin began to crawl.

Finally, the woman turned to face me fully and bowed slightly. "Pilgrims are always welcome in our
town, friend," she said with a hollow voice.

Notice how she assumed I was a pilgrim. Apparently, changing my clothing had been a good idea.
My coat had a tendency to stand out. Now I looked like any other traveler that town saw. The best
way to be inconspicuous is to look just like everyone else.

I nodded once in response to the woman, then walked over to her. She smiled, and it was just as
dead of an expression as her previous one had been. Something was definitely wrong with this
woman. Not that it was any of my business, or even any of my interest. I'd probably find out enough
to administer a quick brand of justice on my way out of town, but if I didn't, then it was up to her to
pull herself out of whatever she'd gotten herself into.

If she'd been a child, that would've been a different story.

Does that seem cold? When you carry around the job I have, you don't always have a lot of room for
compassion. I stumble over things enough to get a reputation, but mostly, I don't go looking for
wrongs to right. I'm not any sort of hero. I'm just a dog of the military with chewed ears and probably
a case of rabies.

"My name is Rose," she introduced herself. "I am in charge of welcoming pilgrims. It's my duty as
the Bride of Leto." Bride of a god, huh? That really made me suspicious, but I didn't say anything. I
didn't even offer her my name- I'm not much of a talker, and I didn't feel much like talking right then.
My brother would scold me for my bad manners, but I'm sure I didn't care.

Rose waited as patiently as a stone for me to offer my name in return, but at my continued silence,
she shifted on her feet, clearly becoming uncomfortable, then gave up. "This way," she said, turning
and leading me towards the cathedral in the middle of town.

The cathedral was stupidly enormous, towering several stories over the tallest buildings in town, and
done up in elaborate buttresses, towers, spires, and wings, and everything else a building could
possibly have without looking too slapdash. Like the other buildings in town, though, it was simple
stone, made to withstand the unforgiving sun (which was burning me to a crisp by that time) and the
harsh winds and the sands the winds carried. Erosion would eventually claim it, but not for a long
while.

Rose led me through the place like she lived there, which she probably did, I realized, once I thought
about it. Leto would want to keep his bride very close to him.

Maybe I would have to pay a little call to her tormenter. Hopefully, it'd turn out to be Cornello and I
could kill two birds with one Stone.

***

There was a service that evening, and as a pilgrim, I was expected to show up, or at least, that's what
Rose told me after she led me to a room to stay for the night. I decided I wanted to see this Cornello
to determine for myself if he had the Stone or if he was just another charlatan. I didn't want to give
away that I was there, though- even when I change my clothes and hair, I'm not much at disguises,
and I inevitably end up recognized. I didn't want to give myself away just yet. If it turned out the Stone wasn't there, I'd simply leave town and leave the place to its own devices.

That probably seems cold of me. The town was obviously being deceived and probably pushed towards war, with all the weapons being carried, but I knew the military would sit up and take notice eventually and take care of it. It wasn't anything of my concern.

Cornello turned out to be a giant man, even by my standards. I stand about 6'4", this guy was only shorter by maybe an inch or two, and he had a massive amount of girth and broad shoulders going on to make his size fairly relative.

He was bald, and somehow had managed to not burn that bald head of his. Probably spent more time hiding in the cool chambers of the church, communicating with his followers by radio instead of in person. Probably counted himself above the unwashed masses.

The sermon was a basic repeat of the one that had broadcasted over the radio, and my eyes glazed over until he started performing magic tricks. Oh, they were simple tricks, just little alchemical transmutations like turning the water into a wine that everyone went up and had some of, or turning some grass into bread, which everyone also went up and had some of in some obscure ritual. I refrained.

The man was a third rate hack, but I saw the distinctive red glow of his alchemy. It came from the ring on his hand that radiated alchemical energy like a fire radiated heat. The old fraud did have a Stone.

When I returned to my room, I realized I wasn't alone. There was a priest standing by my door, in the shadows. And I distinctly heard the click of a gun hammer. "Fullmetal Alchemist," he hissed, probably taking aim. My back was to him, I couldn't see him very well. "Enemy of God, how dare you profane this place."

I'd wondered how long it'd take someone to recognize me. I guess there's just no disguising me. The priest already had his gun aimed, but I was faster. Before he'd even pulled the trigger, I'd turned, aimed my own gun, and fired. The priest went down with a gunshot to the head. I put my gun back in my shoulder holster, then grabbed my suitcase. Guess it was time to make with the thievery and get out of this town before anyone else got any smart ideas.

I realized, of course, I had no idea where Cornello might be. I suppose I could've wandered my way through the whole church until I found him, but I prefer to be more efficient than that. I'd seen Rose staying behind in the chapel as everyone else had filtered out from the evening mass, so I figured I could just ask her.

Not that I really wanted to talk to anyone, and the risks involved probably should've made me find a different way, but I wanted to confirm some things with her anyway.

As I thought, Rose was still in the chapel, kneeling before the altar, weeping quietly. I wondered how many nights she did that. I didn't bother to hide the sound of my footsteps as I approached her. She startled, getting up and turning to face me, hurriedly wiping at her eyes to try to hide what I already knew.

When I didn't say anything right away, she clasped her hands in front of her. "Can I help you find something? Or did you come here to pray?"

I approached her, setting my suitcase down by the altar, looking up at the great statue of their god
that stood over the chapel. "Tell me," I said in a whisper to her. "What's the cost of a life for this
guy?"

She looked at me for a second, probably bewildered as to why I was whispering when there was no
one else in the chapel, then looked away. Her face was as blank as a statue's, and her tone was just as

I looked at her, my expression saying I didn't really buy that. "And prayer and faith, has it gotten you
anything?"

There was a long pause. "I'm the bride of Leto now, what more could I ask for?" The words
sounded rehearsed, and badly.

"Yeah, about that." She glanced at me, wariness written on her face. "How much does he hurt you?"

Her expression turned angry. "I don't know what you're talking about," she snapped quickly, then
turned away again. Sure, she didn't. I believed that, too.

"Lemme guess, you didn't get who you wanted back, did you?"

She put her hands over her ears, shaking her head vehemently. "Stop it, just stop it! I'm happy this
way, I truly am!"

No, actually, she wasn't, and it was obvious. I put a hand on her shoulder. "Where is he?" I asked
her, still whispering.

She looked at me with a haunted look, then bowed her head. "His chambers. Up above the
sanctuary." I turned to go, but she grabbed my arm, stopping me. I looked at her. She held out a gun.
"Please. Let it be mine that does it." I didn't ask where she got it, but I didn't take it. I didn't need it,
even if it would be a fitting justice to shoot him with her gun that he probably gave her.

I shook my head, then clapped my hands, changing my cloak back to my violet duster. "I have better
ways," I told her, then headed off to find Cornello. He may have been guilty of hurting Rose, but he
was more guilty of trying to play God. There were more brutal punishments that went with that
crime.

By the time I'd climbed the stairs leading to the upper level, the rage had begun to build in the back
of my mind. Nobody brought back the dead. There were consequences for that. I embraced the anger
and hatred that was wrapping around me like a cloak, letting it build up my temper and my
imagination ran wild with what would happen to this man for his false promises, his lies, his abuses,
and the crime of playing God.

Nobody played God, not without losing something. Cornello was about to find out what exactly
happened to those who played in God's realm. An arm for an arm, a leg for a leg, and a life for a life.
Equivalent exchange. I'd lived by equivalent exchange since that awful day.

By the time I got to his bedchambers, I'd spiraled down into a level of hatred and rage that blinds a
person to what they do or say. I woke him up rudely by transmuting his bed sheets into shackles. He
started to use the Stone to undo my transmutation, but I was faster. He was a third rate hack, I was
the State's best for a reason. I stole the Stone from his finger. He probably didn't appreciate losing
that finger to do it, but I was too far wrapped up in the rage to care. This man played at God and got
away with it, while my brother and I had suffered dearly.

No, there would be equivalent exchange.
The screams didn't bother me, while I took his arm and leg. I didn't hear his screams at all. All I could hear were Al's screams as he was broken apart by the Gate. I whispered Cornello's own benediction to him while I showed him what God was really like.

"And now, may God bless you and keep you, may He make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you, may He lift up his countenance upon you, give you His peace."

I woke up the giant statue of Leto beneath us in the sanctuary and made him reach up through the floor for Cornello's bleeding body.

"Amen."
Chapter Summary

A State Alchemist. Our teacher had always warned against the job, against the military in general, and it'd go against all her teachings and my own better judgment to go that route. I tapped the side of my head tiredly, hoping Mustang would get what I was trying to say.

"I wouldn't expect such a decision without taking time to think about it," Mustang replied, obviously understanding. "If you could make a decision that big in an instant, I'd accuse you of either being crazy, or being officer material."

I had a feeling I'd missed a joke.

Chapter Notes

I'm wanting to do a once a week posting on Mondays, but we have a gigantic ice storm coming our way and power might be out until Tuesday, if the ice gets heavy enough to bring down power lines. So here you go.

Epimetheus had in his house a jar, in which were kept certain noxious articles for which, in fitting man for his new abode, he had no occasion.

Pandora was seized with an eager curiosity to know what this jar contained; and one day she slipped off the cover and looked in. Forthwith there escaped a multitude of plagues for hapless man,—such as gout, rheumatism, and colic for his body, and envy, spite, and revenge for his mind,—and scattered themselves far and wide.

Pandora hastened to replace the lid! but, alas! the whole contents of the jar had escaped, one thing only excepted, which lay at the bottom, and that was hope.

Have I scared you off yet? Let's go back to the beginning. I probably should've started there, but I've never been good at storytelling. My name is Edward Elric. Most people know that by now. I've
gained a bit of a reputation that's sometimes burdensome, but it's what I have.

I grew up in a tiny town called Rizenbul, just to the south of East City. Most people farmed or raised sheep there, and I lived peacefully with my younger brother, Al, and my mother. My father had left us when we were young, and I didn't much remember him.

My brother and I started practicing alchemy when we were still five. It impressed Mom and made her smile, so we continued. Not a lot happens in a small town, so our alchemy studies dominated our time, and life continued on peacefully for a few years.

Then Mom fell sick and died. It left my brother and I devastated. So we tracked down an alchemy teacher, left town, relearned alchemy from the ground up, then came home and attempted something that we never should've done.

We tried to resurrect our mother.

I still curse the day that stupid idea presented itself to my mind. I was the one who came up with it, and I dragged Al along with me, despite a few protests from him that we shouldn't do it, but we both wanted to see Mom's smile again so badly, we ignored it.

Did you know there's a god of alchemy? Or something like it, anyway. It took my brother, and it took my leg. I offered my arm as payment for Al's soul, and failed miserably with that. I lost my voice for the extra time I stole from the damn thing.

I don't remember much about that night after that thing took my voice. I seem to remember a stranger coming in and taking me away. I remember Grandma Pinako and Winry's voices. I remember being in pain. I remember crying out for Al, but no sound came out of my mouth.

Then I remember nothing.

I woke up to a world I was certain I didn't like.

I watched out the window as Winry drained the tube in my throat, cleaning up mucus and watered down blood and god only knew what else from the skin around the tube and from the inside, which jarred my breathing. I felt like I was drowning, trying to breathe through that thing, no air passing through my nose or mouth but my lungs got plenty of oxygen regardless. I could hear the hollow sound of air being sucked through the narrow, plastic tube.

"Try not to play with it too much, all right, Ed?" Winry looked exhausted and strung-out as she talked to me; I looked at her out of the corner of my eye, trying not to watch her actions. There was something off and irreparably broken in her eyes as she focused on her work, something dull and lifeless that looked somehow more depressing than the expression she'd worn when she'd found out that her parents had been killed.

There was a stranger in the room, a dark-haired soldier that watched the two of us silently, and damned if I could tell what might be going through his head, or even who the hell he was, just by looking at his face. The man was a brick wall.

And in this strange, new, alternate reality that I had woken up into, Al was nowhere to be found.

I knew damn good and well I would not like the world my home had become.

When Winry withdrew her hands, I tried to reach for her, choked back a sob of frustration at the lack of response from my right side, and grabbed her arm with my left instead. She froze, looking back at me, then gave me a smile that made me wonder if it'd taken all her strength to give me even that
much.

It was fake. I hadn't even asked it, and she was already lying to me.

"What is it?"

My voice didn't work- of course it didn't, the breathing tube in my throat bypassed my vocal cords completely, so nothing came out but that awful sound of air rushing through a fucking straw. It didn't matter how many times I tried to say my brother's name, to ask where he was, ask if he was okay- maybe he was just in the other room, maybe he was still passed out, maybe, maybe, maybe. Not fucking likely.

Winry seemed to know what I was saying, at least- whether this was because she just knew me that well, or because it was really hard to mistake the lip movements involved in saying Al's name for much else, I couldn't tell, didn't know, and didn't care.

All I knew was that I didn't like the silence I got in response. I hated it. Hated the broken, lying smile and the shake of her head that could mean any-fucking-thing and the goddamn silence.

If I had to be stuck with that silence, I would go crazy.

I wanted to tighten my grip, not let her go until she gave me a straight answer, one way or another, but I still felt weak, almost helplessly so, as much as the frustration from it twisted up my guts. She pulled out of reach, and looked at the soldier. "I'm going to get some sleep, Lieutenant Colonel. Thank you again for helping us."

At least the soldier now had a rank I could think of him as. I wondered what the hell a lieutenant colonel was doing in the Rockbell home, helping them as if he were in their employ or something. Did he have a friend who was here, getting automail surgery?

The lieutenant colonel nodded, and Winry all but fled from the room. The clock on the nightstand ticked the seconds away, the only real sound in the room. Distantly, I heard Den barking out in the yard, probably digging up who knew what out of the soft ground. She always did after a good storm.

Absently, I reached up and played with the edge of the tube, flicking it, rather dully fascinated by the sensations of it lightly tugging at my skin around where the incision was.

"I believe Miss Rockbell said not to play with it."

I wasn't sure who'd spoken at first- I'd filtered the unknown officer out of my thoughts and had concentrated on focusing on anything but the changes around me.

I thought I recognized the soldier's voice. A brief flash of a barely-conscious memory, a scream, that rasping, that burning pain, and I could still hear that staticky hiss and that laughing in my head, and those goddamn words- 'One minute.'

I decided I wasn't going to pay any attention to what the man said. He was a stranger, he didn't know what had happened, and I didn't listen to strangers much anyway. Although it bothered me that I couldn't quite place how I knew the man's voice, or why it was tangled up with my father's lab, and the transmutation, and that... thing that had taken-

"Edward?"

I nearly squeezed the end of the tube in frustration, but my lungs quickly informed me that that was a
Very Bad Idea. Instead, I cast a glare in the man's direction, then went back to looking out into the blinding, hateful sunlight streaming in through the window at my side.

My voice failed me again when I tried to tell the man to shut up, to go away as footsteps approached my bed. A hand grabbed mine and gently pulled it away from the tube. "Edward? That will not help anything heal. You'd best listen to your friend."

The bitch of it was, I wasn't even strong enough to yank my hand away properly. I settled on fixing the man with a poisonous stare. 'Who are you?' I tried to ask, as if the man could somehow read lips or thoughts.

I was just as glad the man couldn't do the latter.

The lieutenant colonel pulled a chair up next to the bed, releasing my hand as he did so. "My name is Lieutenant Colonel Roy Mustang." After digging into his pocket, he produced a small, silver pocket watch. My eyes widened.

A state alchemist.

What the fucking hell was a state alchemist doing there in Rizenbul? They couldn't know, there was no way anyone knew what Al and I were planning on doing. We both knew it was a crime on top of being an unforgivable sin, and neither of us had cared. I suddenly cared a bit. After everything, the last thing I wanted now was to go to prison. I doubted I'd be allowed to just curl up in a bed and wait for my body to die in prison.

"I found you in your home after I went to investigate the light of an alchemical reaction going out of control," Mustang explained, and I felt my heart stop in my chest. So I was in trouble. I braced myself to hear 'you're under arrest for human transmutation.' Mustang continued. "I will tell you the same thing I told your friend, Miss Rockbell. I did not find anyone else in that house when I found you."

No Al. Not even that horribly mutated attempt at bringing our mother back. Nothing to make the loss of Al worth it. Fuck it, they could throw me in prison for all I cared. I didn't want to live in this new world. Maybe prison would come with a death sentence, too.

"I did find something that looked like it had passed for human, at one time." So that horrible-looking thing was there. Well, at least my pain-fogged mind hadn't hallucinated that. "It was gone when I went back to look for the other boy your friend mentioned. I suspect its chemical composition wasn't terribly stable."

So much for that. It was nothing but a wasted effort. A waste of a year of study, of hopes and fears and dreams, a waste of a life, of Al's life. I didn't bother biting back the tears that were stinging at my eyes. Al was gone, what did I care about dignity or pride? That had only gotten Al killed anyway.

"I suppose it would be pointless to ask what happened?"

For a moment, I blinked, my vision clearing from it, and stared at Mustang, then gave him a truly sour glare. Like I could talk with a fucking tube in my throat.

Either Mustang was a mind reader, or it was just an obvious thing I was trying to say with that look alone, because Mustang shook his head. "I can ask yes or no questions."

I didn't feel like answering any kind of questions, actually. I went back to looking out the window.

"Do you remember what happened?" Clearly, Mustang wasn't terribly deterred by the fact that I
obviously didn't want to even pretend to talk to him. A point that was further proven when, after receiving no answer, Mustang repeated his question. I didn't give him the satisfaction of an answer.

Truth was, I wasn't sure of the answer anyway. I remembered starting the transmutation, remembered the glow from the energy turning an ugly, violent shade of violet, remembered Al screaming my name, and then... that thing. The Gate. Truth. There was a better word for it, one that was well beyond my ability to articulate, and all my mind could do when I brought it to mind was sketch arcane arrays through my thoughts that I wasn't even sure I'd be able to interpret if I wrote them down.

The rest was a pain-hazy blur. Just the words- 'One minute.' One awful minute, and then 'Time's up.' And then my world fell apart.

I wasn't about to discuss any of that with this stranger who had... had brought me back from the dead, saved my life, and forced me to live in this hell they called a world without Al. Without my brother, my light and my heartbeat.

I had no intention of talking to the man at all.

"Edward?" Mustang, however, had no intention of not talking to me. Goddamnit. "Was that transmutation you and your brother performed human transmutation?"

Oh right. Like I would ever admit that to a military officer.

Several seconds ticked by as Mustang waited, giving me a chance to answer; I could feel his gaze on me the entire time. Finally, Mustang spoke up again. "I spoke at length with Missus Rockbell. She was only slightly less reluctant than you to explain anything. Don't worry, I'm under a vow of discretion, with the penalty of the creative unpleasantries a woman with tools can inflict if I break that vow."

That almost made me smile, actually. Good to see at least something hadn't changed. Pinako was still a foul-mouthed, scary little woman.

"I did manage to convince her to tell me a few interesting things while she had needles jammed in my arm, though."

I gave him a questioning look finally, raising an eyebrow and looking at Mustang's arm pointedly. Mustang, it seemed, was a smart man, and caught on to my meaning fairly quickly. "No, no injuries. I was just the donor."

So the man had saved my life. I hated him already.

"The first thing she was willing to tell me was that you are the one that wrote this letter, aren't you?" With that, he pulled an envelope out of his inner coat pocket and held it out for my inspection. My own sloppy handwriting stared back at me, addressed to another officer. One of the letters I'd written, looking for my father so the old bastard could come back and take care of our mother before she died.

Bastard never did come back.

I finally volunteered an answer, nodding mutely in response. Yes, I wrote that letter. There really was no denying it anyway; I was the one that had signed it, and the chickenscratch handwriting of a ten-year-old was hard to disguise.
Mustang put the letter away. "The military had been looking for your father. We'd been hoping to gain his assistance in the war. His alchemy would have been invaluable. Of course, that's a moot point now." Mustang's voice seemed to trail off a moment, then he looked at me, head tilted to one side in consideration. "Your mother is no longer with us, is she?"

Again, I reluctantly answered with a shake of my head. Another fact I couldn't exactly deny - there was a tombstone in the graveyard marked with my mother's name, after all.

"You tried to bring her back, didn't you?"

Suddenly, I didn't feel like giving any more answers.

For some reason, that bastard kept right on talking. "I wouldn't blame either of you, of course. It's hard being an orphan in this life." Like he would know anything about it. "I also don't have any intention of telling anyone about this."

Wait, wait, what?

The man was a lunatic. Who wouldn't turn in someone who had committed such a grievous sin? Who would agree to keep silent for a brother's murderer? The man was crazy.

Or had an agenda. If I had enough give-a-damn in me, I would've been fixing Mustang with a suspicious look. As it was, I settled for an apathetic one. Agendas were easier to further when the subject of the agenda didn't feel like curling up in a corner and dying from the pain in his chest where his brother's heart used to be.

Mustang's next words furthered my growing suspicion that this man must have been a mind reader, somehow. "I have ulterior motives, of course, before you wonder." Oh, good to know. Or have it confirmed, anyway. "Even with a terrible price paid, the fact remains that you have survived human transmutation. Perhaps barely, and perhaps not in one piece, but you are a child who performed human transmutation, and successful or otherwise, you are still alive to tell about it. I don't assume you will, of course, but the point remains."

I would bet Mustang thought he was so damn clever.

"If I had to guess based on that fact alone, I'd say you're a better alchemist than your father," Mustang continued. At one time, I would've crowed triumphantly at hearing that. Now, I really couldn't be assed to give a damn. If I was such a damn good alchemist, why couldn't I have saved Al? Wasn't an arm and a voice enough payment for one small boy?

The world could go hang itself, I decided.

"We could use talent like yours." Finally, I decided to give Mustang an answer, turning his head to give him a tired look and shaking my head. No, I didn't want any part of anything. Especially not the military. Mustang wasn't put off by my answer. "It'd be a shame to let talent such as yours waste away in obscurity, Edward. And besides, perhaps the knowledge to be had in the State Alchemist libraries might help you put your life back on track and find whatever you're looking for that would set things right for you."

He probably shouldn't have said that. A glimmer of an idea began to form in my mind, another one of those dangerous ideas that would end up shaping my entire life, much the way my decision to bring Mom back had.

That information in those libraries just might get Al back.
Of course, it might not, too, and who knew what condition I would be left in after a second failed attempt. Hope battled fiercely with the grief inside me as I listened as Mustang continued. "You could come to Central once you've found your legs. Look for Lieutenant Colonel Roy Mustang. Of course," Mustang smirked, "we'll have to arrange for special permissions for someone your age to take the certification test, so you'd best come prepared to make a spectacular entrance."

Somewhere past the conflicting emotions as I slipped back into reality out of the state of shock I'd been left in, some small part of me wanted to laugh. Anybody that knew me knew better than to challenge either of the Elric brothers to make a 'spectacular entrance'.

A State Alchemist. Our teacher had always warned against the job, against the military in general, and it'd go against all her teachings and my own better judgment to go that route. I tapped the side of my head tiredly, hoping Mustang would get what I was trying to say.

"I wouldn't expect such a decision without taking time to think about it," Mustang replied, obviously understanding. "If you could make a decision that big in an instant, I'd accuse you of either being crazy, or being officer material."

I had a feeling I'd missed a joke.

Mustang patted the back of my hand, getting to his feet. "Rest now, Edward. You've a lot of thinking ahead of you to do."

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I spent the next several days going over the offer in my head, even after Mustang had left. My failed attempt to bring back my mother had extinguished most hope for pulling off the impossible in alchemy, and after sacrificing an arm and a voice with no results, I wasn't sure what the hell kind of information I could gather from the libraries and research the State had that could possibly help me. Even with all those resources, getting Al back from that thing seemed pretty hopeless.

But another part of me said I had to try. I owed Al every bit of me it took to get him back, I knew that. Ultimately, I knew my duty to my brother would win out and I'd ask Grandma Pinako and Winry for automail limbs to replace my missing ones and I'd make my way to Central. I had to work out the worst of my grief before I could function enough to do that, though.

Winry did her best during those first few days to try to bring me back to the world of the living and away from what had happened at that house. She practically sparkled for how vivacious she was being, laughing more than she probably needed to, desperately holding onto the only one of us she had left. We'd grown up as siblings with her, so she'd lost family that night, too. I sometimes forget that, even now.

She'd helped me into a wheelchair and wheeled me out onto the front porch the day I made my decision to go to Central. I hadn't wanted to leave the bed, still grieving for my losses, but she'd insisted, had practically dragged me out of bed and into that chair. I had regained enough of my strength that I probably could've fought her, but I didn't bother. I decided to humor her for awhile.

"Isn't this nicer?" she asked, settling on the railing. "The storm's passed, so the air smells nice out here. You need the stink blown off you anyway."

I gave her a cross look for that, then returned to my decision making, idly looking off in the direction of my home.

Winry forced a smile into place. "We'll get you automail as soon as you're done growing- and don't
worry, you will grow. I know we've teased you a lot, but you know, that's why we don't do automail surgery on boys before sixteen or seventeen at the earliest. It's just because you haven't had a chance to hit your growth spurt yet, that's all. But once you do, we'll get you back on your feet and terrorizing the neighborhood again, I promise."

That got my attention again and I gave her a long-suffering look. 'Terrorizing the neighborhood'? I wasn't that bad either. She was just as much of a terror around there as Al and I had been, I didn't want to hear that from her.

She laughed, a nice sort of sound, then gave me a studied look when I tapped the tracheotomy tube in my throat. After a second, she seemed to get what I was saying. "Oh, Grandma says we can take that out sometime before the week's up." That made me feel better, until I realized that 'sometime before the week's up' could be anywhere from today to three days from now. I rested my chin on my fist in a look of profound suffering.

She hooked her feet around the support beams on the railing. "We'll have to come up with some other way for you to communicate," she finally said after a moment. "Unfortunately, you've lost almost all use of your voice." I looked up at her quickly. I remembered the Gate taking something from me in my throat for the extra time I stole in there, but I guess it hadn't hit home that this may be a permanent thing.

Winry looked down at the ground. "You remember that year you had a throat infection over your birthday? Your voice was kinda airy and weak, and whispering took effort? That's what you're looking at once we take that tube out. Half your vocal folds are gone, Ed, you don't have the control over volume or breathing you used to."

Well, fuck. That was going to make things difficult. There was no automail for that. I hoped this wouldn't interfere with trying to become a State Alchemist. Notice how I had already pretty much decided, but I was still being a bit wishy washy about it.

Before I had a chance to brood too much about that, the local stonecutter walked up to us. Winry looked back at him, then scrambled to her feet. "Grandma's inside!" she said quickly, as if she wanted to hide something from the man. I should've been suspicious, but I was still stuck on the idea that Al was not dead, but taken, which is closer to the truth anyway. If I'd been thinking of it as a death, I would've probably figured out right away what was going on.

As it was, I was massively confused. Grandma Pinako came out onto the porch. "I'm right here, child, settle down," she scolded Winry, then turned to the stonecutter. "Well?"

Winry practically ran behind me, kicking off the brakes on my wheelchair and turning me at a rather alarming speed and heading inside. "Come on, Ed, let's go back inside and let the adults talk, it's always boring when adults talk, right?"

"I have the stone you asked for, Pinako," the man said, unmindful of Winry's bizarre behavior. "You have the spot next to his mother, right?"

"I shot my good arm out, grabbing hold of the doorway as Winry tried to practically fling me through it, sending us in a circle away from the door. I knew exactly what was going on then, and it had sparked a rage in me I hadn't really expected. I felt betrayed by the fact that they were giving up on Al before I'd had a chance to tell them anything. Al was not dead.

Winry moved around to crouch in front of me, gripping my pant leg. "Come on, Ed, please, let's just go inside, we'll work on a way to help you talk again, you can even call me a dumb girl, just please, let's go inside and think about this later." She was begging, probably a little scared by the dark
expression on my face. I'd never looked at her that way before, and I sincerely pray I never do again. That stone and that look put a huge rift between the Rockbells and I that we never really did bridge.

Excuse me. I never really did repair that rift. God knows they tried. I stonewalled them at every attempt, though.

I tried to say something, I don't even remember what, but no sound came out except that awful sound of air rushing through that tube. Winry gripped my pant leg tighter. "Please, Ed, we'll think about it later, we'll have a ceremony just for the family later, but we had to do something, people were asking questions. Please, Ed, let's just go inside for right now, okay?"

"That's enough, Ed," Grandma Pinako snapped at me, coming up from behind me. I shot her the same betrayed look. She didn't flinch. "I'm the one that ordered it. I know it upsets you, but that doesn't give you the right to take it out on the family who still cares about you."

I let the accusatory look fade, but I was still angry and hurt. Al was not dead, and I resented them for trying to make that a reality for me. I very suddenly was over my grieving enough to make my decision.

Grandma Pinako picked up on that, and she set aside her pipe. "I suppose this means you've decided."

I managed to make myself nod, the anger not abating, but the tension loosening just enough to let me do more than clench my fist in impotent rage. She sighed. "You'll need automail just to make the trip. You know the risks at your age." Again, I nodded. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Winry looking between us in lost confusion. If I hadn't been so busy being angry, I might've felt sorry for her. I do now, in retrospect, but at the time, I couldn't see past my own emotions.

I went through a lot of years like that. I don't recommend it.

"Then we'll start as soon as your throat's healed," Grandma said.

And that was pretty much that.

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Automail surgery is a lot more complicated than most people think it is. It's not just a matter of hooking up some nerves, slapping on some metal and hooking in the limb. It's a whole series of surgeries, some very invasive, and there's about two to three years of rehab, sometimes longer, depending on what gets replaced.

The first set of surgeries involve inserting the weight-bearing screws into the bones and putting reinforcing steel plating around the bones to prevent breaking. These surgeries I was actually put out for- I know it's famously known that you can't have anesthesia during automail surgery, but that's only for the nerve connection part. The screw inserts can be done while the patient is out, thank god.

Nerve replacement comes next, and whatever you've heard about the pain, double it, at least. It's excruciating. I've experienced lots of different types of pain, and nothing compares to the feeling of having your raw nerves connected to wires like that. Nerve pain is a special sort of hurt anyway, but this was taking it three levels past your typical pinched nerve.

After that were two surgeries to install the power source and the external casings. Again, I was out for this part, which I was just as glad for after the pain of the nerve connection.

The power source is one of the most important components to automail, since it'd just be a dead limb
without it. It works by converting glucose the body uses for cellular energy into mechanical energy usable by the limb. I don't really understand how it does that—probably some alchemical principle, since we're talking about energy conversion, but I've never asked Winry about that. Maybe, if I ever see her again, I should.

The problem with me getting surgery so young was that I was going to grow, presumably, and a lot of that growth would not only be height, but shoulder girth, as well. My entire shoulder girdle was going to outgrow my automail casings. So Grandma and Winry would be seeing a lot of me over the next several years, and warned me my scapula and clavicle and probably part of my sternum would end up getting total bone replacement to accommodate the growth.

They also padded under the external port with PGA, or polyglycolide, something that my body would eventually break down and expel through the urinary tract, to allow my body the room to grow. Winry warned me that it'd feel like my bladder had shrunk while that broke down.

In the next five years, I'd gain about a foot and a half of height and over a hundred pounds in bone and muscle mass. This was very trying for my surgeons, and for me, as I kept having to go in for further surgeries. But I'll get to that later.

Rehab comes next. Normally it takes about three to four years to go through full rehab, especially for multi-limb replacement. I managed it just under a year. Grandma was right though, I ended up puking up blood more than once during rehab.

Rehab's very important for automail surgery. For one thing, the surgeries can have a person down and bedridden for about a month, and your muscles atrophy. So you gotta build them back up. Then you have to build them up further to take the weight of the new limbs. And train them to a new center of gravity. Being a preteen at the time, my body was already preparing for my growth and learning things like a new center of gravity anyway, so it wasn't too difficult on that point.

Occupational therapy is the last step. This was the hardest. Automail's a helluva lot stronger than regular limbs, so I had to relearn how to hold things like pencils and coffee mugs without snapping them. I also had to learn how to work the fine motor control on the fingers so I could even hold those things in the first place.

Learning how to turn door handles was interesting. There's very little friction on an automail hand—it's smooth metal. It's like trying to open a door with oil on your hands. Good luck with that.

One thing that I did as part of my rehab that confused poor Winry was that I cleaned. Oh, I didn't clean their house, Winry's a capable girl and Grandma isn't in the grave yet. I went up and cleaned my own house. I didn't even use alchemy to cheat.

Considering how much I made a point of avoiding chores when I was younger, this probably surprises some people. But I made it part of my penance to my mother and brother. I wanted Al to come home to a home that looked just like he remembered it. Clean, the way Mom kept it.

It was late October when Grandma and Winry declared me fit for travel.

That morning, I think it was the 18th, I dressed in the traveling clothes I'd created using alchemy. Sturdy leather pants and a turtleneck that would hide the tracheotomy scars on my throat. And a violet coat. I'd hemmed and hawed about the color of that coat, but I'd finally settled on the same color as that transmutation that night to remind myself why I was doing this, in case the going got rough.

I had no idea how hard it'd get.
I took my packed suitcase up to my house for one final inspection before leaving to meet the train to Central. Everything was as I remembered it. I wanted to preserve that from the elements somehow, and aside from that, there was something I felt I'd missed when packing.

I took some of Father's notes and books and packed them, those were obvious. But I couldn't shake the feeling I was missing something else.

"You're going to miss your train," Winry's voice interrupted me. I glanced over at the front door to see her standing there, hugging something to her chest. She looked lost, like she wasn't sure what to do with herself, now that I was leaving. Like she was losing something important.

In retrospect, she was. That was basically the last time she saw me, instead of Fullmetal, and I think somehow, some part of her knew this was goodbye for good.

"You look ridiculous in that coat, Ed," she told me with a weak smile. "Why purple?"

I scowled at her, tugging my coat on tighter. "I like it." I squeaked at her. I didn't feel like explaining my real reason. She wouldn't understand, and I don't think she ever would've forgiven me for what I was planning on doing.

When she did nothing more than shake her head, I went back to looking around. Mom's dishes were displayed proudly in the hutch, and the various flower decorations Dad and Al and I had made her were on shelves and every other possible surface in the house. I felt like I wanted to take something with me, something that I would need, not for any other reason than maybe my own sanity.

"Ed?"

I looked back at Winry again. She stepped forward, holding out the picture frame she was holding onto. "Here. I think this is what you're looking for."

Blinking, I took the picture, looking at it. It'd been taken shortly after Mom died, before Al and I left for Dublith, with the three of us collapsed in a sleepy pile around Den. Den looked like a long-suffering mother dog with her lazy human pups gathered around her. I gently touched my fingers to the picture. She was right, that's what I'd been looking for. A picture of the family I still had to get back to.

I packed the picture away in my suitcase, then grabbed Winry in a tight hug. I'd not really hugged her before, so it felt a little awkward, especially with her being taller than me. I tried not to notice that fact too much.

She clung to me for a long moment, then let go of me. "Get going, you dummy, or you'll miss your train."

I grabbed my suitcase, and her wrist, dragging her out of the house with me, and then handed my suitcase over to her. I knew I could do the transmutation I had in mind to seal off my house from the elements, and I knew I could do it without a circle. Our teacher had said I'd be able to once I'd seen the Truth, and I knew that's exactly what that thing that had taken Al was. I knew the information it gave me.

She watched me. "Do you pray now, Ed?" she asked, but I ignored her, stepping over to my house as I summoned the alchemical energy and commanded the ground to move. Stone rose up to cover doors and windows, sealing off cracks and gaps in the stonework that made up my house.

Satisfied, I gave where the front door had been a pat, then turned back to Winry, taking my suitcase back. "I'll be back," I promised, then headed to the train station alone.
"It's your brother, isn't it?" he guessed, out of earshot of his wife and Nina, who were busy talking about Gracia's baby.

I froze, putting my fork down, no longer interested in even pretending to eat as I nodded mutely. Hughes put his hand on my shoulder. "Losing someone is tough," he said. "And first holidays and birthdays without them are the toughest. But it does get easier."

Get easier? I didn't want it to get easier, to live without Al, without my light, my heartbeat. I was missing a piece of my soul without my little brother, and nobody seemed to get that. Instead of arguing, I just nodded miserably, forcing back tears as I wished once again that I'd managed to succeed in binding his soul to that armor. I'd still be here, trying to become a State Alchemist so I could fix that, but at least he'd be there.

I'd never get used to that absence of him.

Let me just say right now that trains are boring as hell. They may seem exciting if you've never been on one, but they're not. They're noisy, bumpy, hard to sleep on, and they're not very fast. Not when you're in a hurry. But they're the fastest transportation available, so I put up with them. Eventually, I even learned to sleep through most of the trip, grabbing precious hours of rest my body needed, since as the years went by, I'd often deprive it of sleep when I was anywhere else.

I'd been on a train before, once, when our mother took Al and I to meet her mother, shortly after Father left. But our grandmother wanted nothing to do with us; apparently, there'd been some drama about Mom marrying Father and she'd been disowned. I didn't like that woman for how she treated Mom, and I'm not even sure where she lives, exactly, which is probably a good thing. Especially now. I was too little to do anything about it then, but I'm not now, and I don't trust my own temper.

This trip was even worse for me than that trip had been. That trip, I'd had Mom and Al to keep me company. Now, I was miserably alone for the first time in my life. All I could do was stare at the empty seat across from me and desperately wish Al were there, even if all I could've done was sealed his soul in that suit of armor. I would've taken that over the loneliness.

As the train got going, I suddenly heard a small clatter, like someone ahead of me dropping
something, then a drawn-out groan. I stuck my foot down, stopping the small piece of chalk from rolling away from me as it got under my seat. I bent down and picked it up, a small smile starting to form on my face as I hoped it belonged to a fellow alchemist, and maybe I could have some company, even a stranger's, for this ride.

As I held it up to offer it to the person in front of me, a little girl's face popped up from over the edge of the seat. "That's my chalk," she said, holding out her hand.

Crestfallen, I handed the chalk back and sat back in my seat, letting the disappointment settle over me. I still wore my heart on my sleeve in those days, and I tended to wallow in my emotions, rather than controlling them. "Sorry," I whispered, although I doubted it was heard over the noise of the train as it started accelerating along the rails.

Whether she heard me or not, the little girl smiled triumphantly, snatching her chalk back and turning around, her pigtails flailing like a demented six-year-old's weapons as she did so, and plopped herself back down in her seat. A woman's hushed voice said something from next to the girl, then the girl's head appeared over the seat again, that same satisfied smile on her face. "Thank you and sorry!" The girl started to turn back around again, then paused and looked back at me. "Are you my age?" she asked.

I scowled. The girl had to be six, maybe seven. Who did she think was so small he looked like a little kid?! "I'm eleven!" I snapped, to no avail. This time, the girl clearly didn't hear me over the train.

She leaned forward, half-hanging over the seat, and cupped a hand to her ear. "What? I can't hear you!"

Flushing, I crossed my arms and looked away, refusing to speak to her anymore. The little girl frowned, then stuck out her tongue and settled back on the seat. "Mommy, he's grouchy."

Finally, the woman turned in her seat a bit, deciding her daughter had been given enough free reign for the moment. "Jasmine, mind your manners," she scolded, then sat up a bit, turning more to look back at me. "I'm so sorry, sir, my daughter-" The woman cut herself off, blinking. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you'd be a little older."

I admit, my thoughts jumbled up in a brief temper tantrum of rage. I wasn't that young! I didn't look that young! And I wasn't that short! I was officially decidedly unamused with this situation. So much for a quiet trip.

Unlike her daughter, the woman looked apologetic for the slip. "I'm sorry, I just was expecting an adult, not a child." She looked around. "Where are your parents? You're not traveling alone, are you?"

For a second, I could do nothing but look at her, uncertain how to answer that. Even if I could be heard, what was I supposed to say? 'Yes, I am, I'm a poor, crippled, mute orphan who's going to join the military.' Something told me that wouldn't be the best way in the world that I could put things. Finally, I just nodded in answer that yes, I was traveling alone.

The woman frowned, looking like she was considering something. "How old are you, honey?"

I fidgeted a moment, then pulled out my notebook and wrote my age, handing the page over to her. She frowned, then looked at me again. "Is something wrong with your throat, sweetie?"

I shrunk back a bit, ducking the bottom of my chin into my turtleneck a bit and not meeting her eyes. I glanced back up when she turned around again, wondering if perhaps she'd given up on talking to
me, before she turned back around to face me again. "Why don't you come sit up here with my family?" she said. "A boy your age shouldn't be traveling alone right now."

The 'right now' sounded vaguely ominous to me, and I wondered what news I'd managed to miss living in the sticks, but I didn't argue, accepting the invitation with a nervous smile. Grabbing my suitcase, I darted around the back of the bench seat separating them and settled in the open spot across from the woman, and next to a man I guessed was her husband, judging by his apparent age.

The woman smiled. "That's better." She held out her hand. "My name's Marianne Kendrick. This is my husband, Daniel."

I shook her hand tentatively, then glanced up at the man and shook his hand when he offered it as well, while the little girl announced that her name was Jasmine, apparently not wanting her mother to do it when she could do it just fine. They seemed like a friendly enough family; the man looked like he came from maybe one of the more northern districts, fairer coloring and green eyes, while his wife and daughter- who clearly inherited her looks from her mother- looked like they came from one of the far eastern districts, darker-skinned and dark-haired.

It took a moment for me to realize I ought to give them my name, so I pulled out the notebook again and scribbled my name out, handing the paper over to Marianne. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Edward," she said after she read the note. "So where are you headed to? Are you visiting relatives?"

Another note explaining I was on my way to Central, but no, no relatives, changed hands. While she was reading that, I scribbled out another note and handed it over.

Marianne eyed the second note a second, then glanced at Daniel, handing the note over to him, before settling her gaze on me. "You haven't heard?" she said, her voice lowering to just barely audible over the noise of the train. I shook my head. "A few weeks back," she explained, "there was a terrorist attack on a train taking General Hakuro and his family home from a vacation."

"Thankfully," Daniel picked up his wife's story, taking off his glasses and rubbing a hand over his eyes, "the general and his family were fine, and there weren't any deaths, although a couple soldiers got injured in the process. But now all the higher up generals are panicking and having their families brought to Central for protection."

Marianne's lips twisted into a wry smile. "Basically, my father and the others are being paranoid old coots and dragging us halfway across the country so they can keep an eye on us. I'm General Raven's daughter, but don't go making that big news. I doubt anything's going to happen at this point; that group got what they wanted already, but I suppose a little caution never hurts."

I blinked, looking between the two adults. Well, that certainly explained why they didn't think it was safe for someone my age to be traveling alone. I wasn't terribly worried, but I wasn't ungrateful for the concern and the company.

"But onto less gloomy subjects," Daniel said, voice at a normal conversational level again. "So you're not visiting relatives, what are you going to Central for? You're a little young to have to be working, aren't you?"

I looked up at him, then scribbled out another note. 'I got an offer to study alchemy from Lt. Col. Roy Mustang.'

Marianne laughed when she read the note. "Roy Mustang, that devil. Well, if you've been offered that by him, it can only mean you're a talented alchemist." She seemed genuinely amused by the idea. "You stay with us, then. When we get to Central, if the lieutenant colonel doesn't have someone there to pick you up, my father will help us get you to Mustang's office."
I liked that family. They were good company for the train ride, and quickly learned to just do most of the talking, as writing notes was cumbersome, but it kept me entertained and kept my mind off of things.

When we got to Central, a tall, dark-skinned general met us. He looked to be in his fifties, still fairly young for a general, and he greeted Marianne with a warm hug, then scooped up Jasmine. "And how's my favorite granddaughter?" he asked.

Jasmine giggled. "Grandpa, I'm your only granddaughter," she told him.

He laughed. "So you are! All the more reason for you to be my favorite." He greeted Daniel with a broad grin, then seemed to notice how close to his family I was sticking. "And who is this?"

"Father, this is Edward Elric," Marianne introduced me. "He says he received an offer from Roy Mustang to study alchemy here in Central."

I offered him a nervous smile and held out my hand. He took it with that same big grin. "Glad to meet you, Edward. I'm General Raven. So Mustang brought you out here, hm? Well, I'll take you to his office." He looked at an adjutant next to him. "Escort my family to the hotel," he ordered, the motioned for me to follow.

I waved to Marianne and her family and grabbed my suitcase, following after the general.

The office he led me to was crowded with people, who all stood up and saluted once he'd entered. "At ease," he told everyone, then turned to a blonde woman. "Lieutenant, is the lieutenant colonel in his office?"

She blinked, then nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll go announce you." She stepped around her desk and disappeared into the inner office, then reappeared a few minutes later. "The lieutenant colonel can see you now, General."

"Wait here, Edward," General Raven told me, then looked at the lieutenant. "Lieutenant, keep an eye on the boy while I talk to Mustang."

We looked at each other, then she nodded, saluting again. "Yes, sir."

Once General Raven had disappeared into Mustang's office, the lieutenant looked at me. "Are you from Rizenbul, by any chance?"

I nodded once. There was no point to using a note for that answer, after all. I glanced pointedly at Mustang's door, then back to her. She looked at the door, then back to me, blinking blankly for a second, then turned back to her work. "Yes, he told us he was expecting you. We were actually expecting you a little sooner than this." She set the papers on her desk down. "Your name is Edward Elric, correct?"

Again, I nodded. She studied me. "Would you like a drink of water?" I shook my head, and she got a mild look of consternation on her face. "Forgive me if I cause any offense, but how might one go about getting a verbal response from you?"

So Mustang hadn't warned anyone about my inability to speak. I felt sorry for the lieutenant, so I pulled out my notebook and wrote her a note that said "ask me to write it down."

She flushed. "I apologize, I didn't realize." I cut her off by waving my hands, shaking my head. I wasn't offended, she didn't need to get upset about it.
Anything further she could've said was cut off by the door to the inner office opening. General Raven stepped out with Mustang. "Well, Edward, as much as I hate to do this to you, I'm going to leave you in their capable hands now. Good luck." With that, he left.

"Edward, Lieutenant Hawkeye, I'd like to see the two of you in my office, please," Mustang said, motioning to the blonde-haired woman and myself. So she finally had a name I could think of her as.

"Yes, sir." She looked at me. "We'll put your suitcase under my desk. It'll be safe from any pranks the men might get in their heads to pull." She gave the others in the room a stern look.

"Hey!" an overweight red-head protested, "don't blame me for this guy's bad habits!" He motioned to a tall blond man.

"Whose bad habits are they?" the tall man replied, lighting up a cigarette. "Whose?"

"Children," Mustang said blandly, crossing his arms, "don't make me put you in separate corners."

I got the feeling these people were more family than coworkers. They certainly didn't behave the way I expected military to behave.

Hawkeye and I walked into Mustang's office, and Hawkeye closed the door behind us. "You wished to see us, sir?"

"I did." Mustang sat back in his chair, kicking his feet up onto the desk. "I want you to take Edward to Shou Tucker's place, Lieutenant. That's where he'll be studying for the State Alchemist exam. Here's Tucker's personnel file, feel free to share the non-classified information in it." He looked at me. "Shou Tucker is the Sewing-Life Alchemist. He specializes in biological transmutations." I tried not to turn pale at that. "He mostly works with chimeras. I'm sure you'll find plenty to study while you're there."

He sat forward, dropping his legs to the ground. "One more thing. Lieutenant, you're familiar with the sign language used in the field, correct?"

The look on her face suggested that Mustang knew damn good and well that she was. "Yes, sir."

"I want you to take some evenings in the week to go over to the Tucker's after dinner and teach it to Edward. He has an old throat injury and he'll need an alternative means of talking. Paper and pen are cumbersome."

I glanced at Hawkeye. That gave me a lot of studying in only two and a half months. I had to study for the exam, and learn a whole new language and something told me Hawkeye wasn't terribly confident in her ability to teach. But if anyone could do it, it was me, and quite frankly, I had to. I needed to do this for Al.

Mustang looked at me. "To let you know, Tucker has a four year old daughter named Nina and a fairly large dog. Try not to get lost behind them."

I turned as purple as my coat, I'm sure. I tried to yell at him, but all that came out was a few squeaky noises and some air, but I think he got my point, with some of the words I used.

All right, all right, I'm my own worst enemy, or at least was in that regard. I admit, most of the things I thought people said about me, the only person saying it was me. Shut up.

***
Tucker was a lean-faced man, with glasses and short-cropped hair. His daughter, by contrast, had a round face, still full of her baby fat, and long brown hair and big blue eyes that watched me shyly from behind her father.

Their dog, on the other hand, tackled me immediately.

"Get offa me!" I snapped at him with as much volume as I could muster as I used the strength I'd built up in rehab to shove him off.

Hawkeye sighed, then turned to Tucker. "This is Edward Elric, you've been told about him, I assume."

Tucker nodded. "Yes, we have. Alexander, get off our guest. Come here, boy."

"Naughty, Alexander!" Nina called to the dog. "Come here, right now. Don't be mean."

Thankfully, the dog obeyed its masters and got off me- it was one heavy dog, and even though I'd built up some impressive muscle with rehab, that doesn't say much for an eleven-year-old boy.

"Come in, Edward, please," Tucker invited, then looked at Hawkeye. "We'll take care of him. Anything else?"

"I will have to come by some evenings to teach him field sign, if that's all right," she said. "The lieutenant colonel has ordered I teach him."

"That will be fine," Tucker said as I straightened my coat and grabbed my suitcase, stepping up to the doorstep. He looked down at me. "Come in, and don't mind the mess. It's been like this since my wife left. We need a woman's touch around here."

He showed me to my room first, with little Nina tagging along. The room wasn't bad; in fact, it was bigger than I expected. I wondered if there were any small rooms in this huge place, really. I doubted it.

His library was what interested me most about his house. It was huge, with hundreds of books on alchemy, many on various biologies. I knew right away I had a huge job ahead of me, studying for this exam. Even with the knowledge the Gate had given me making it easier, it was still a daunting task.

Nina stayed rather shy around me. She commented on how much I ate at dinner, but otherwise, she seemed too shy to interrupt my studying. I noticed her sitting in the library sometimes with Alexander, just around the corner from me, but she never came out of hiding, and I was too engrossed in my studies to pay much attention at first.

Hawkeye showed up the third night I was there for my first lessons in field sign. I was the one to greet her at the door, Nina a perpetual shadow. I waved to the lieutenant and opened the door for her.

"Hello, Edward," she greeted, stepping in. "Where would you like to do this?" She seemed nervous, like she wasn't sure what she was doing. I had a feeling she'd never taught anyone before, and something else told me she didn't know how to handle children.

I shrugged, looking around. Nina spoke up. "We can use the library," she said. "Papa's down in his lab working on the rea-. .. rea- ... ssessment?" I was impressed- sure it, took her a couple times, but she got the word right, and for a four-year-old, that was a big word.

Hawkeye smiled. "Then we'll be sure not to disturb him. The library it is. I'll let you two lead the
Nina looked up at me. "Big brother?" I never did figure out what to make of her calling me that. "Can I learn with you?"

But even with my uncertainty, I couldn't say 'no' to that face and those earnest eyes. I smiled and nodded. Her face lit up with a big grin, and I had to hold back tears at the idea of that grin on Al's face. Everything served as a reminder of Al in those early days; I eventually learned to stop seeing him everywhere but in my mind, but in those days, it was hard.

I reached for Nina's hand, taking it as we led Hawkeye to the library, where we found a comfortable table and went to work. Field sign isn't difficult. It follows basic Amestrian grammar, and most of the signs are pretty obvious what they mean. It's extraordinarily simplified, though. You don't say things like 'we ran out of milk'. If you tried, you'd end up painting a picture of a little man literally running out of a bottle of milk, which, while hilarious, is not exactly helpful to communication. So you simplify it down to 'milk finished' or 'milk complete', however you want to interpret that sign. It means both things.

But full sentences could still be formed, and most things can be said pretty easily. I could tell I'd probably end up picking up or making up the bad words, since Hawkeye made a point of never teaching me any- I don't know if that was because of my age, or because of Nina's, or both.

My days fell into routine, with studying occupying most of my time from breakfast to lunch, from lunch to dinner, and Hawkeye coming over every other day after dinner for about two hours, before it was bedtime for Nina.

I was in my room, laying back on my bed and sneaking in some late night studying, when Nina came into my room with a timid knock. She wasn't quite as shy around me once she'd started learning sign with me, but she still stayed out of my way when I was studying.

I looked up. "What is it, Nina? Shouldn't you be in bed?" I signed.

She twisted one braid in her hand nervously for a minute, then lifted her hands and started to sign. "Can I talk to you, Big Brother?"

I set my book aside and sat up, crossing my legs underneath me. "You can talk, Nina," I told her. I patted the bed in front of me. "Come here, come sit down."

She tugged on her pigtail, then scurried forward, crawling up onto my bed and sitting cross-legged in front of me. "I thought if I spoke your language, you'd be able to talk to me."

I blinked. "Nina, Amestrian is my language. I just can't speak anymore. You can talk, I don't mind."

"What happened to your voice?" she blurted out, leaning forward and looking at me with those earnest eyes of a four-year-old.

I drew back, mind racing to figure out how to safely answer that. "I lost it in an alchemical accident," I finally told her.

She looked down at the bed. "Do you ever play? All you ever do is study."

Suddenly, her shadowing me made a little more sense. I was probably the closest thing to a kid her age she'd been around in ages, if ever. She was lonely. "I used to play with my little brother all the time. But he's not here right now, and I'm studying to help rescue him," I explained. I looked at her for a moment, considering. "Did you want me to play with you?"
She looked up at me hopefully. "Would you? I don't want to stop you from helping your brother, but... I mean, you need a break sometimes, right?" She tilted her head. "What happened to your brother? Who took him?"

Another question I couldn't safely answer. "I'm not sure, but I need to get him back," I finally lied. "That's why my studying is so important." I reached forward and ruffled her hair with my flesh hand. "But I'll play with you tomorrow," I told her in a whisper.

Her face lit up like it had when I told her she could learn sign with me, and she jumped forward and caught me in a hug. "Thank you, Big Brother! The radio says it's supposed to snow tonight, so maybe we can build snowmen tomorrow!"

I'd never seen snow, really. Rizenbul was too far south, it got a rainy season, not a snowy season. "You'll have to show me how," I told her. "I've never built one."

She looked up at me, sitting back. "Never?" She looked wide-eyed. "We'll fix that, definitely!"

"Good. Now, you, bed. I don't want you getting into trouble with your dad."

She grinned, hugged me again, and squirmed down off my bed. "Good night, Big Brother."

My days fell into a new routine after that. I'd study from breakfast until lunch, then play with Nina for about an hour before returning to my studies. Hawkeye continued to come over every other day and I grew more proficient in my new language. Nina was learning almost faster than I was, and frequently tried to correct my signs.

My birthday came that January, just a bare month before the test. Mustang's friend, Major Hughes, showed up and took Nina and I to his house to meet his very pregnant wife and have a small party with just the four of us. I wasn't as happy as I probably should've been, since that was my first birthday without Al. But I did my best to be gracious, even though I really wanted to curl up in bed and cry.

"Cheer up, Ed," Hughes told me. "It's your birthday. You're twelve. One more year and you can be a mouthy teenager to Roy."

I looked at him with a weak smile. "Thanks," I said, then went back to poking my dinner.

"It's your brother, isn't it?" he guessed, out of earshot of his wife and Nina, who were busy talking about Gracia's baby.

I froze, putting my fork down, no longer interested in even pretending to eat as I nodded mutely. Hughes put his hand on my shoulder. "Losing someone is tough," he said. "And first holidays and birthdays without them are the toughest. But it does get easier."

Get easier? I didn't want it to get easier, to live without Al, without my light, my heartbeat. I was missing a piece of my soul without my little brother, and nobody seemed to get that. Instead of arguing, I just nodded miserably, forcing back tears as I wished once again that I'd managed to succeed in binding his soul to that armor. I'd still be here, trying to become a State Alchemist so I could fix that, but at least he'd be there.

I'd never get used to that absence of him.

What a disaster that night turned out to be. Gracia went into labor while we were there, and a blizzard hit, meaning Hughes had to leave two young children alone with his wife while he went to get the doctor.
I cannot say how glad I am the doctor showed up before she actually gave birth, because Nina and I were both really useless.

Then the day of the test came. And I still didn't have that special permission I needed to take it. Panic overtook me as I ran to Mustang's office. Hawkeye and the others were there, but Mustang wasn't—being a high-ranked State Alchemist, he was part of the testing board, so I was stuck pacing the outer office while I waited.

Hawkeye kept watching me with that overly patient, bland look of hers, while Havoc started tapping his pen on the desk irritably as I paced back and forth. I ignored their irritation as my own grew. Every passing second was another second I wasn't taking that test, and another second of hope lost. If I didn't get this test and get that position, I had no idea how I was going to help Al. I'd have to wait for another year. Another whole year before Al had a prayer's chance of getting out of that hell I'd banished him to.

The thought turned my stomach and threatened my lunch.

Mustang finally showed back up that evening with Hughes in tow, and I could tell from the look on his face that he knew what I was there for, and furthermore, that he knew I was angry with him. He'd promised me. He'd led me out there to Central, set me up, and had failed me. I was probably radiating anger like a furnace.

"In my office, Edward," he said without much emotion, leading me into the inner office. Hughes and I both followed, my ire working up into a full-blown screaming fit, not that I'd do more than crack and squeak at him. How I wished for my voice back about then.

Mustang took a seat at his desk, with Hughes leaning against it. "Now, I'm sure you're very angry, Edward, but-

"Angry doesn't begin to describe it!" I snapped with as much volume as I could muster. "I've done everything I had to, you were supposed to get me permission to take this test!"

He sighed. "And I've obtained permission. For next year. General Raven has agreed to grant that permission, but he feels you'd benefit from another year of study first."

I slammed my hands down on his desk. "That's not what you told me," I snarled. "I busted my ass to get here in time for this year's test!" I wasn't about to tell him why I was so keen on becoming a State Alchemist. I let him think that it was something to do that would keep me from wallowing in mourning. He was a smart man, he'd probably figure it out eventually. In the meantime though, I wasn't going to let on.

But without telling him, I couldn't even begin to describe how desperate I was to take this test now.

"Hey, Ed, simmer down," Hughes said, reaching over to put a hand on my shoulder. I pulled out of his reach. He gave me a sympathetic look. "Look, you can stay with Gracia and I since you probably can't stay with Tucker after this. We'll help you study, you can take the test next year. That's more time to study so you can guarantee you'll pass, all right? Settle down."

My teeth were chattering with tension as I tried in vain to come up with a reason I could give them why I needed this test now and not in a year. The idea of another year without Al, another entirely unnecessary year that he was stuck in that Gate, it made me sick.

I gave Mustang a scathing look before turning on my heel and storming out, slamming both office doors behind me, I hoped to their consternation.
I stormed around Central Headquarters, not caring that I probably was not authorized personnel. I needed to cool off, and figure out something I could do to either get that test, or an alternative to being a State Alchemist at all. I wasn't having any luck on any front. My temper was still up, and nothing had presented itself to me. I supposed I could always track down the führer and demand a test, but I had a feeling that wouldn't help much.

The sound of crying caught my attention. It sounded like a little kid, maybe about Nina's age, and he sounded like he was miserable. Thinking he was someone's kid and maybe lost, I followed the sound, my temper cooling as concern took over. A little kid lost in the middle of a military compound wasn't exactly a good thing.

I finally located the source of the crying, a young boy, about four, holding a broken toy while a woman I assumed to be his mother crouched beside him, trying to comfort him. I walked over. "What's wrong?" I asked as loudly as I could.

The woman looked up at me. "Oh, dear, Selim broke his favorite toy, and I can't seem to fix it. If his father were here, maybe he could fix it, but we're still waiting for him."

I looked around. There was a group of men in military uniform, what ranks they were, I couldn't tell - I hadn't learned to read shoulder ranks yet, and I didn't recognize most of them, although I recognized General Raven at the back of the group. They started our way, a man with an eyepatch in the lead.

I looked back at the woman and Selim. "Hey, Selim," I said quietly, putting a hand on his shoulder. "What's the matter?"

Selim sniffed and held his toy out to me, as if asking me to fix it. I blinked, looked at the woman, then back to the boy. "Your toy broke? Here, let me see." I took the little toy car gingerly from him. The front wheel axle was broken, wheels hanging loose and threatening to fall off completely. I experimentally pushed the axle pieces back together, only for them to fall apart again.

"What's going on here?" the man with the eyepatch asked as he stepped over.

"Oh, darling, Selim's toy broke, and I can't calm him down about it," the woman said, standing up.

"I can fix it," I told her, then set the toy down and clapped my hands. It was a simple fix, and the transmutation took me maybe two seconds to mend the axle.

"Astounding!" one of the other men with the man with the eyepatch murmured.

"Thank you, boy," the boy's father said. "Where's your circle?"

I blinked, looking up at him as I stood. "Don't have one," I whispered, habitually signing as I did. The men looked at each other. "Come now, Edward," Raven said. "You must have one."

I held up my hands, showing off the fact that I had no circle, then took off my gloves once they'd ordered me to.

"Automail? At your age?" one of the men commented.

"Alchemical accident," I explained evasively.

The man with the eyepatch, who I assumed to be Selim's father, looked at me. "Tell me, what is a boy your age doing at Central Headquarters?"
Before I could answer, Raven spoke up. "He was probably seeing Lieutenant Colonel Mustang, sir. He came here to study for the exam. I've given permission for him to take the test next year."

I wondered exactly who this guy with the eyepatch was that a general was calling him 'sir'. "Hmm," the man said, tapping his chin. "Did you know about this talent of circleless alchemy?"

Raven shook his head. "No sir, I would've recommended him for testing this year if I'd known. That's a valuable skill. It's unheard of."

I decided not to tell them about my teacher. She'd kill me if I sicced the military on her by accident.

The men turned to each other, talking amongst themselves. Meanwhile, the woman stepped over to me, holding Selim's hand tightly. "Thank you for fixing my son's toy. General Raven said your name is Edward?"

I nodded, then smiled at Selim. "Don't break that again now, okay?"

He smiled up at me, and nodded firmly. "I won't, Edward. Thank you!"

"Edward Elric?" Selim's father turned to me. "Tell me, why do you want to become a State Alchemist?"

I looked over at him. "I promised my only remaining family member," I told him. "And I don't know what else to do if I can't get in this year."

The men all exchanged a glance. "Well, in light of your unusual ability, I think I'll grant a special exception," Eyepatch said. "Are you up for taking the test now? It'll be a late night for a boy your age."

What? I looked at him. "I - I would love to, but... um. Who are you?"

The men with him laughed. Raven shook his head. "Don't you recognize him, Edward? This is Führer Bradley you're talking to."

Leave it to me to catch the führer's direct attention. I took that news without a shred of grace. "Sir, I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you!"

Bradley shook his head. "Use that sign I saw you using earlier. I can hear how bad your voice is, it sounds painful. Now, about that test?"

"I'd be honored, sir, thank you very much." I felt elated, like I was walking on air. I was getting that test! And all I'd done to get it was fix a little boy's broken toy car! I needed luck like that more often.

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The test turned out to be much harder than I'd prepared for. I didn't even finish the written part. I got most of the answers, though, and I must've really aced what I did finish, because I passed and went on to the interviews the next day.

Thankfully, the testing council and führer all knew sign, so I wasn't forced to try to get more volume than physically possible out of my damaged voice for that. I passed that, too. Then came the practical exam. I had no research prepared for it, so I decided to do something off the cuff. I'd already impressed them with circleless alchemy, so I couldn't just transmute any old thing and call it good.

I decided to go for a perpetual transmutation. That alone was difficult, but doing it without a circle,
with sheer willpower ought to impress them. If it didn't, then nothing would impress these people.

Mustang looked utterly put out with me the whole time. I couldn't imagine why. I finally asked him while we were waiting to start the practicals. "Why have you been so grumpy at me?"

He looked at me. "Edward? What exactly did you do to get this test?" His voice was lowered, and he looked a bit harried.

I shrugged. "Fixed Selim's toy," I whispered, since he clearly wanted to keep subtle about this conversation.

He looked ready to throttle me. "That's all?"

"You'll see," I told him, giving him a smug grin. He didn't know about my circleless alchemy yet, and I wanted to see his expression when I did it. I'd missed out on my chance to see the generals' faces, I wasn't going to miss Mustang's.

I ended up going last, mostly because I couldn't speak up loud enough to claim a turn, which annoyed me to no end, but I consoled myself that we were saving the best for last. The displays in front of me were impressive enough, although I was hardly impressed. A tall tower that left the alchemist drained, a hydrogen balloon that looked like a sick child had formed it that drifted off into the atmosphere somewhere, a sculpture that looked too abstract to be anything in particular. Artists! Crazy people.

"Is that all?" a general asked after the final one ahead of me.

"We have one more, General Hakuro," Mustang said. "Unfortunately, he's not been able to speak up." He motioned to me.

I looked over at the generals, then stepped forward. Most of the other alchemists murmured amongst themselves, a bit of tittering at a 'child alchemist'. I could hear the derision and it made my blood boil. I was better than any of them there, and they were making fun of me?

I cleared away the remnants of the display before mine, then faced the generals. I took off my gloves and shoved them in my pocket, exposing my bare hands, and clapped my hands, summoning the alchemical energy required for this transmutation. I hit the ground with probably more force than necessary, forming a seven foot tall statue that looked like the suit of armor from Dad's laboratory.

"Hey, Al," I whispered, "ready to impress them?"

I heard noises of awe from the generals and other alchemists as I continued the transmutation, moving the armor through the paces my teacher taught us. I mimicked Al's style more than my own, for what masochistic reason, I wasn't sure.

Damnit. He should've been there.

"All right, thank you, Edward, that's enough." I barely heard the voice, still looking at the armor-statue as it turned to me. "Edward, that's enough."

With a sigh, I released the transmutation, returning the statue to the ground.

Needless to say, I was the one that passed the test that year.
Mustang didn't act as elated as I felt, though. I hadn't exactly expected him too, but it would've been nice if he'd done more than toss my new watch at me and say "here."

"That's it?" asked as I clipped my watch to my belt and stuffed it into my pocket.

Mustang looked at me blandly. "What did you want me to say? Congratulations, you're a dog of the military now."

I scowled. "Just remember, you're the one that thought this was a good idea."

"And you've suitably impressed me. For now, return to the Tuckers' place. You've been assigned to my command. I'll come up with a suitable assignment for you."

I wasn't happy with his attitude, but I figured something else was on his mind, so I let it go with another scowl as I left with Havoc, who drove me to the Tucker home. Nina greeted me with a running tackle, and Alexander tried to follow, but a scolding from Nina stopped him in his tracks.

"Did you pass?" Tucker asked as he walked out behind his daughter and dog. I grinned, and pulled out my watch. He smiled. "Congratulations. Do you know your second name yet?" I blinked as I put away the watch before the dog could grab it. "Every State Alchemist gets a second name, a title. Mine is the Sewing-Life Alchemist because of my chimeras. Lieutenant Colonel Mustang's is the Flame Alchemist, because of his ability with fire. He's your sponsor, right?"

Before I could answer, Havoc spoke up. "That's right. The boss is officially Ed's commanding officer. Oh, he wanted to pass along a message. He wanted to remind you about reassessment coming up and he looks forward to seeing what you come up with this year."

I didn't like the look on Tucker's face. He'd been stressing over the reassessment since I arrived, probably before that, and he got the same look on his face whenever his talking chimera was mentioned. I had a feeling he'd try for another one, and for some reason, that bothered him. I wondered exactly how he'd made one before.

It was later that day when I first met Brigadier General Grand, the Iron Blood Alchemist. I didn't like him, but I found out later that was a common feeling when it came to him. I was up in my room, practicing sign with Nina, when I heard the front door slam open and several people march in.

"Where is Edward Elric?" a voice boomed, and I stood, grabbed Nina's hand and walked down the stairs even as Tucker answered that I was in my room.

"Who wants to know?" I demanded as I got within sight of the man. God, he was tall, with a crazy mustache and evil little eyes. I didn't like him.

"I don't know what Mustang told you, but Shou Tucker's experiments are under my jurisdiction. You can't stay here."

"I was told I could stay here to study for the test."

"And now the test is over," he snapped testily. "Pack your things and leave."

I exchanged a glance with Nina, who looked miserable. "You're going away, Big Brother?" she asked, clinging harder to my hand.

I smiled, crouching down next to her. "Hey," I whispered. "I'll be back to play with you again," I promised, even though I knew I probably wouldn't be able to. Poor Nina, isolated by her father's work. "I have to go pack. You stay with your father."
I hurried back upstairs; Grand had armed men with him, I didn't want to push his patience too much. It took me very little time to pack everything, since I'd never really unpacked in the first place. I put the picture back in its spot, nestled amongst my extra clothes and coat, protected from getting jostled too much, then went back downstairs and outside, escorted by armed guards.

I had no idea where to go at first, and Grand's people left me at the front gate, while Grand stayed inside to talk to Tucker. After standing around for a few minutes, leaning against the wall that surrounded Tucker's home, I decided to go visit Hughes. He'd offered his home to me in case I hadn't been able to take the test this year, maybe he'd let me stay until Mustang figured out what to do with me. I wasn't even sure what area of research to go into to help Al yet, so I didn't know if I'd be looking for a permanent place to stay, or if I'd be looking into traveling.

I also had some suspicions starting to rise in the back of my mind about Tucker's experiments. Nothing in his library or research I'd gotten to read suggested a talking chimera was even possible. Nothing with animals that could understand human speech, like dogs. Nothing with animals that could mimic human speech, like certain kinds of birds. And his wife had abruptly left the family just before the chimera was made.

Something didn't settle right in my stomach. I didn't know if my nature was becoming naturally paranoid, or if it was because some part of me already knew exactly how to make that talking chimera because of what the Gate had shoved into my mind. If it was the former, I wondered when I became so damned paranoid. If it was the latter, I would've liked to know just how the hell I could access all that information, because surely there was something in there to rescue Al, which was more important to me.

And if I knew how that chimera was made, it would've been really nice to actually know and not just have a gut instinct that said it was bad news. If I had known, I could've stopped it.

Well, too little, too late.

I made my way to the Hughes residence, and was welcomed in. Hughes and I talked, or rather, he talked, showing off his new daughter, who he was head over heels for, so much so that he actually whined when Gracia took Elysia away from him and told him to actually pay attention to me.

I asked about Tucker's wife. Hughes told me she died around two years ago, the same time as when he'd created the talking chimera. That wasn't what Tucker had told me. I kept my suspicions to myself, and retired early that evening.

Okay, I didn't really go to bed. I hope you weren't expecting that I did. I snuck out, and went back to the Tucker house. There were guards there, which I didn't expect, so I went over the fence in the back and through a window.

There was noise coming from the basement, where I knew the lab to be, but had never been down there myself. My stomach kept dropping and twisting up into knots as I descended the stairs, and the smell of burnt ozone reached my nose, taking me back to Dad's lab, to that horrible night when I lost Al.

"In here, Edward," Tucker called to me from the room at the end of the hall. He seemed pleased with himself. My stomach tied itself into another knot and coherent thought began to escape me as I kept repeating to myself that I wasn't back there, that it had to be something else, that it wasn't what I was thinking.

Tucker stood in his lab, with a chimera about the size of Alexander, with long brown fur that looked like human hair draping down its back like a mane. "Just in time," Tucker said. "Listen." He
I crouched in front of the chimera. "Listen, this young man is Edward. Can you say 'Edward'?"

The chimera looked at me with blank eyes. "Ed-ward?" it said slowly. I walked over to it, crouching down by it. "Ed-ward. Big Brother." It nuzzled my hand. "Play. Let's play."

Everything in my body felt numb as my stomach finished dropping out my shoes. There was no mistaking it, that chimera was Nina. And if I had to guess by the size and roughly canine shape, Alexander, too. I could feel the formula for a human being mixed in with something I didn't recognize at the touch. I knew that formula by heart. There was a live human being in that sad, pitiful creature.

I stared up at Tucker as I stood. He rubbed the back of his neck. "I made it just in time, too. With this, I'm sure to pass the test."

"Why?" I couldn't make my mouth come up with anything more than that. All I could think was why, why would he do this to his own daughter, sweet little Nina? What had she done?

Tucker blinked. "Because talking chimeras are unheard of, Edward, just like your circleless alchemy."

"Where are Nina and Alexander, Tucker?"

He got very quiet at that, his smile dropping. "I hate perceptive kids like you."

At that, something inside of me snapped. All I could see was little Nina, and Al, my precious brother, victims of human experimentation, and I flew at Tucker, my automail fist raising and coming down on his face, again and again. Everything else turned to white noise as I kept hitting him, like making him hurt would make me hurt less.

It didn't work. All I got for my effort was a dead body as my fist began to hit wet cement under his head and the start of a kill count that would weigh on my conscience for the rest of my life.

Nina was what snapped me out of my rage, tugging on the corner of my coat with a growl. "Pa-pa?"

I pulled back and threw my arms around her. "I'm sorry, Nina," I whispered. "I can't change you back. I'm sorry, it must hurt so much." I sobbed wretchedly into her fur as she kept crying for her father.

Finally, I calmed down enough to think. Tucker was dead. I'd killed him. That thought nearly wiped away my coherency again. Tucker was dead and I'd murdered him. I needed an adult, someone who could take care of this.

I ran for the phone and called Mustang's place.

"Hello?"

"Mustang, you have to come," I whispered, desperately hoping he could hear me.

"Hello? Is someone there?"

I whimpered, clutching the phone tighter, willing more volume from my voice that my throat simply couldn't give. "Something's happened," I tried again. "Tucker's- you have to come to Tucker's. Something happened."
I hung up then, not willing to leave Nina alone with her father's body, or at all, really. I had to be with her, I had to protect her, the military would come eventually, and I didn't want them to take her away to some lab as an example of a rare transmutation.

I went back into the lab and sat down. Nina wandered away from her father and sat next to me, whining like a puppy. I put a hand on her shoulder, smoothing down the fine human hair there over the fur. I don't know how long we sat like that before someone finally showed up.

It wasn't Mustang who showed up, though. It was Grand.
I heard his footsteps behind me about a half second too late to turn around as he grabbed the back of my head and pushed me forward, headlong into the brick wall of the building. I stumbled and fell, striking a loose clip on the drain pipe with my forehead. I dropped to the ground, my face skidding along the brick as I landed on my ass in the mud.

I blinked in shock as blood dribbled into my right eye. I lifted my hand, pressing it to my forehead; my fingers came away bloodied. I looked up at my commanding officer. "That was an order, Fullmetal," he said as if he hadn't just shoved a child into a brick wall. "Get to it, then get to the infirmary."

me and a gun
and a man
on my back
but i haven't seen barbados
so i must get out of this
-Tori Amos

Nina was gone.

Huddled down under my coat in a tiny cell that stank of mildew, a horrible smell only slightly overpowered by the blood that still clung to me, that was the only thought I could muster past the cold and the numbness that had settled in somewhere in my chest. I couldn't think to try to clean myself up, not even with alchemy, instead ignoring the blood on my gloves, my coat, my face and my hair. All I could hear was that one thought that whispered like an accusing jury about to find me guilty on all charges.

Nina was gone. And I'd failed to protect her.

Just like him.

Footsteps echoed against cold stone walls, somewhere distant, approaching: two sets. The sound bounced against the corridor and seemed to fill my cell, ricocheting and folding back on itself and surrounding me. Each one hit my gut like a bullet, rattling my nerves and teeth like the threat of a death sentence. My fist tightened against my steel shoulder and I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block out awareness of anything around me.

Murderer.
Two shadows passed between me and the poor excuse for lighting coming from the corridor ceiling. I lifted my head just enough to peek out from under my hood warily. Bradley and Grand.

The threat of a firing squad hung over my head like an executioner's axe.

Bradley studied me quietly a moment. "It's a shame," he finally said, "to see a boy your age in a place like this. I'm a bit disappointed in you, Edward." I flinched, expecting to hear that my certification was revoked at the very least, and with it would go my one good chance at getting Al back. Bradley looked over at Grand. "What do you think, Brigadier General?"

The expression on Grand's face had all the warmth of chiseled marble. "Murder of a State Alchemist is a capital offense, sir."

"So it is." Bradley looked back at me and I withered under my coat, ducking back under the hood like a child trying to hide from the boogieman. "Of course, Edward is a unique situation. It wouldn't look good for the military to execute a child, now would it? And after all, seeing Shou Tucker's crimes would frighten anyone into such a thing, don't you think?" The whole time he spoke, he had that serene little smile he always had, as if talking about my fate was the same as talking about the goddamn weather.

Some tiny little part of my brain took satisfaction with the way Grand twitched at the underhanded reproach. "He failed to report his suspicions and entered a restricted area in direct defiance of orders. Shou Tucker's crimes were unforgivable-" I could hear the way his teeth were grinding from saying that "-but disobedience is disobedience. The matter should and would have been handled far better."

Right, like he didn't know. He knew what Tucker was doing the whole time. Nina's gone and he didn't give a shit.

Bradley looked thoughtful. "A very good point, Brigadier General. Edward can't be valuable if he cannot carry out orders. Then it's settled." That serene smile turned into a broad grin that I almost would've described as 'shit-eating.' "Thank you for volunteering, Brigadier General. I'm certain a little training with you will teach Edward the value of cooperating with orders."

My stomach tied up into tight little knots at the very idea. Grand was furious with me, that much was obvious. Being put under Grand would be like walking down the last mile to the firing squad range.

To his credit, Grand didn't seem any more impressed with the idea than I felt. "Perhaps there would be someone better suited for that task, sir," he protested through clenched teeth.

Bradley looked at him. "Nonsense! I have the utmost faith in your abilities to train our young alchemist here. And I'm certain he could be useful in sorting through the Sewing-Life Alchemist's research. Or are you saying you're not capable of training a young boy?"

Grand looked like he was swallowing down bile at that remark. "No, sir, nothing of the sort."

And of course, I didn't get a say in this at all.

"Excellent!" Bradley waved to someone down the hall, then glanced back into the cell. "Welcome back, Fullmetal Alchemist."

He was so damn perky, I wanted to scream.

Grand didn't waste much time trying to find use for me. Anything to get him out of his hair. Er,
relatively speaking, anyway. He immediately took me back to Tucker's house.

I huddled down under my coat as I followed Grand through the rain from the car to the front door of the Tucker residence. Memories of that basement made me feel sick to my stomach.

The two guards at the front door nodded and allowed us into the house. Grand didn't speak to me, something I was used to and just as glad for; the man was as cold and unfriendly as a fucking blizzard. His resentment towards me towered as high as he did, and I hadn't missed picking up on it. Well, I couldn't say I exactly had any warm and fuzzy feelings for the bastard either, so I supposed that made us even.

Grand stopped outside the doors to the basement, then turned and looked at me. "I am assigning you to sort through Shou Tucker's notes, Fullmetal," he told me. "I expect your analysis on the data within four days. This is classified information, as you should well know, so you will speak to nobody but me about your findings, and you shall make no copies for your own personal use. This is military research, boy, not information from a public library."

Like he needed to tell me that. If it hadn't been classified, I wouldn't have been in near as much trouble as I was in the first place. If it hadn't been classified, I wouldn't have been kicked out and maybe would've been able to save Nina. Like Grand gave a shit about any of that, I was sure.

"Four days?" I signed, glancing up at Grand and away from the basement door.

"Is that a problem, Fullmetal?" Grand asked, giving me a look that suggested any answer other than 'no' would be unacceptable.

I glanced back into the basement, looking at the stacks of books, the arrays on the wall and the notes and papers scattered everywhere. Four days. I'd be spending most of my time in here. "No, sir."

"Good." Grand started to turn to go. "You may have one of the enlisted men bring you meals to work in here if you feel it is necessary," he said, the concession apparently a last minute thought.

"Thank you."

The gratitude fell on deaf ears, or blind eyes, as the case may have been, as Grand turned away and left. I sighed, looking into the basement again. This was gonna be a monumental task, and in only four days?

The first thing I noticed as I set to work was that by and large, Shou Tucker was a second-rate alchemist. His only true genius shown in the production of chimeras, but he'd been so obsessed with replicating his first success with the talking chimera that any other useful discovery he might've made was lost.

Mostly useless garbage. Bet Grand would love to see that. I wondered if I could get away with putting that in my report.

The fact that Grand had put me on this assignment made me wonder if maybe Grand hadn't already realized that Tucker's work was mostly second-rate crap.

Hours passed before I remembered to request a meal, a meal I barely poked at as I read through page after page of notes that looked like they'd been scrawled by a madman. Tucker's grip on sanity wore steadily thinner over the years, it looked like, as pressures from Grand and the military and his own string of failures piled up. It wasn't hard to see how desperation would've driven him to using Nina to
replicate what he'd done before; if there was a god, only he knew how sane Tucker had been to start with, using his wife in the first place.

That didn't make me feel much better about it.

I was still chewing on a bit of roll from my meal when Grand stopped by to check on my progress. It was obvious Grand didn't trust or like me- the feeling was entirely mutual- so I wasn't surprised to see that he was looking in on me. The faster I worked, the faster Grand could get Tucker's research out of my hands.

"I trust your analysis will still be completed on time, Fullmetal."

I looked over at him and nodded, wiping some crumbs off my hands to the floor. "Yes, sir. You may not like it, though."

"Whether I like it or not is not your concern," Grand said, "as long as it is thorough, honest, and complete."

I nodded. "It will be." I glanced back over the notes, figuring Grand would leave, and then paused, seeing something. "Sir, may I ask a question?"

Grand hesitated at the doorway, looking at me. "That depends on the answer."

Fair enough. "Tucker was looking into ways to create a Philosopher's Stone. Is the military really interested in research like that, or should I assume it was personal research that can be omitted?"

Maybe I wasn't a soldier and couldn't speak like one, but I could speak like a scientist, which, in this case, wasn't terribly different.

"Include it in your report," Grand said somewhat dismissively. "I will decide what was personal and what was military business."

I took that to mean the research on the Stone must've held some interest to the military. The answer was too ambiguous, and Grand hadn't proved to be an ambiguous sort of person, unless he was discussing classified information. Which was interesting. I couldn't imagine why the military would be after something that was nothing but an alchemical fairy tale.

Unless there was something to the stories.

Something like the Philosopher's Stone, if even a prototype of it was real, could be exactly what would make up the cost for getting Al back. My arm hadn't been enough for more than a minute to try to grab just Al's soul, and my voice had only paid for a few stolen seconds when that minute had run up. I knew it would take something large to pay for Al's safe return, whole and healthy. Something almost legendary.

Something like the Philosopher's Stone.

I would just have to see if I couldn't choose that as my field of research once I was done with this 'training' I'd been sentenced to.

***

I spent the next week running around Grand's office, playing office gofer for him. It was like he didn't know what else to do with me, so he gave me menial tasks to do. I did them, of course, as mind numbing as they were, and I did it with a disgusting obsequiousness. I was still somewhat in shock over Tucker's death, and I didn't want any more trouble than I was already in. Quite frankly, I
thought I was getting off easy.

To be perfectly honest, I was.

Grand obviously decided he'd had enough of that, though, and his anger with me hadn't been
properly spent by demeaning me with mindless tasks. He sent for me one day, after I'd run some
papers down to Communications, and when I got to his office, I saw another man there with him, an
officer that I figured was a lieutenant colonel. His shoulder stripes looked like Mustang's had before
Mustang had been promoted and swept to the East.

The lieutenant colonel wasn't particularly tall, but he intimidated me nonetheless. It was his cold eyes
that did it; if I thought Grand was cold, this man was ice. I gave Grand a clumsy salute as he'd started
requiring. "You called for me?"

"I did, Fullmetal. I want you to take these papers to Processing, then go pack your bag. I'm
reassigning you for your training to Lieutenant Colonel Archer." I blinked, looking up at the man,
who looked back at me with an impassive face that chilled me. I did not like how that man looked at
me.

I took the papers down to Processing, not bothering to look at them. I wish I had, I'm pretty sure they
were the transfer papers that would take me to the north, and if I'd known, I could've warned
Hughes. So much would've turned out differently for me, better, maybe, but I wasn't going to stick
my nose where I was sure I'd get into trouble for sticking it, so I didn't look.

Once I was down in Processing, I discovered it was hectic, which wasn't surprising. Processing
usually was. What wasn't usual, however, was seeing Hughes down there. He typically sent one of
his own office workers that were low on the totem pole to do that kind of thing. Whatever he had to
deliver must've been important.

"Ed!" he called to me as soon as he'd spotted me. I gave him a small smile that I didn't entirely feel
and waved. He pushed his way over to me. "Where've you been? We've been worried sick!
Someone shows up at my house, demanding your suitcase, and we have no idea where you've gotten
to."

I shrugged. "Got assigned to Grand's command for training of some sort," I answered evasively. I
didn't want to confess to Tucker's murder, and I didn't want him to worry that I'd been in prison, or
what kind of training this was. So far, it was just learning to obey orders by being an office rat,
nothing big, but I knew Hughes, he was a perpetual fusser. And I had a feeling either he or Mustang
would try to get me under their command instead, and I didn't want them getting into trouble for it.

Hughes frowned. "Grand, huh? Who ordered that?"

"It sure as hell wasn't him," I said, still being evasive. "He hates me. I can't stay and talk, I'm just
dropping off some paperwork for him."

Hughes reached into his coat pocket and I sighed dramatically. Not the pictures again. Before I could
do more than lift my hands to protest, he held up a hand with a smile. "Just for the road," he said,
pulling out a picture and scribbling something on the back of it before handing it over. "Since I don't
know how long it'll be before you see her adorable face again, you can always cheer yourself up
with this."

I didn't want to tell him I had a picture of another face that cheered me up more than Elysia's,
because I didn't want to hurt his feelings, and I especially didn't want to get asked to show it off. That
picture was mine and mine alone.
I tucked the picture into my inner coat pocket, next to my travelogue, and waved him off. He gave me a rueful look, then waved and went back to his business while I went back to mine. Once he was gone, I took out the picture and looked at the back.

*Come to me if you need anything.*

It was nice to know I still had him on my side, at least. Not that it ended up doing me a lot of good.

After I dropped off the paperwork, I went off to pack my suitcase, which wasn't hard, since as usual, I'd never unpacked it. I lived out of that thing, and didn't want to put down any sort of roots until I was certain what I was going to be doing with my life.

For now, it looked like travel was in my future.

We left right away, on the first train out, which seemed unusual to me. I thought the paperwork had to process first, but Grand had Archer and I out of there ASAP, and I figured he just couldn't wait to get rid of me.

I tried asking my new commanding officer where we were going. He wouldn't answer, flat-out ignored my signing.

I kept quiet after that, watching the countryside fly by as the train chugged its way along the tracks, heading what direction, I wasn't certain, until snow started to appear on the ground and the air got increasingly cold.

"*Are we going up north?*" I asked Archer. He looked at me, then ignored me, the ass. I tried again.

After a third attempt, he finally scowled at me. "The train is quiet enough, you can use your voice, Fullmetal," he snapped in a coldly professional tone. "Your hand waving means nothing to me."

I recoiled a bit, not expecting to have my head bit off like that. Clearly, I was going to have a problem with this guy. He didn't know sign and probably refused to learn it, judging from his attitude. Which meant either a translator, or using what little remained of my voice on a constant basis. The idea didn't appeal to me.

"Where are we going?" I asked again, trying for as much volume as I could muster.

It was just barely enough, as he leaned forward, frowning, processing what I'd said, then sat back. "Up north, to a supply station called Acheron. It services several firebases just over the Drachman border. You will learn to be a proper soldier there."

I blinked. "Soldier? I'm a civilian advisor," I protested, looking at him as if he were somehow stupid.

The look he gave me froze a glacier. "Not anymore, you're not. Not until your training is complete. Get used to the cold, Fullmetal, we will be here several months."

"Several months?!" I squeaked indignantly.

"Yes, several months." Archer scowled at me. "Until you have proven that you can obey any order that you are given and obey it faithfully, the way a proper soldier should. And everything you have shown me proves that we have a lot of work to do."

I gaped at him, then settled back in. I could show him obedient. I'd lick his damn boots if it'd get me back to Central and back to my research sooner. I figured it'd be stupid shit anyway.
The train finally pulled in at Acheron a couple long, annoying days later, in which I was stuck in silence, refusing to talk to Archer, not willing to use my voice. It hurt to do that, and I wasn't sure why he couldn't just learn field sign. It was simple enough, and it just proved he had no experience in the field whatsoever if he didn't know it. Everyone who'd served in Ishbal seemed to know it.

I already missed Mustang, even though I didn't want to admit it to myself. He hadn't shown up when I needed him, so maybe I was better off without him. But even he was better than this guy.

When we got off the train, I stretched for the first time in days, then started for the main building, or at least, I guessed it was the main building. The whole place was run down, and in serious need of repair.

"Fullmetal," Archer called to me. "You will stop and help unload the supplies first."


"Fullmetal, that was an order," he repeated, ignoring what I said.

I finally had enough of his attitude and did something incredibly stupid. I flipped him off and started towards the building again, stomping through the muck and the mud as freezing rain pounded down on my head.

So much for licking boot polish.

I heard his footsteps behind me about a half second too late to turn around as he grabbed the back of my head and pushed me forward, headlong into the brick wall of the building. I stumbled and fell, striking a loose clip on the drain pipe with my forehead. I dropped to the ground, my face skidding along the brick as I landed on my ass in the mud.

I blinked in shock as blood dribbled into my right eye. I lifted my hand, pressing it to my forehead; my fingers came away bloodied. I looked up at my commanding officer. "That was an order, Fullmetal," he said as if he hadn't just shoved a child into a brick wall. "Get to it, then get to the infirmary."

I wiped away blood and went to work. By the time I was done, my hands were both bloodied from wiping blood out of my eye and I was shaking from cold, exhaustion, and the desire to puke my guts up as the blood brought back memories of Tucker, and of that blood array I used to try to save my brother.

I was probably looking pretty pale by the time I carted my sorry, muddy, wet, and bloodied ass into the infirmary, clutching my suitcase like a lifeline. The doctor looked over from some reading of some sort, and stared. "Good lord, how old are you? Nevermind, come in, come sit down, let's get you cleaned up and warmed up. You're not dressed for this weather. What were you doing out there? I haven't heard of any civilians in the area."

I shook my head, wobbling a little before I took a seat as instructed. I felt numb, and I wasn't sure if that was from the cold, which I really wasn't dressed for, or from the blow to my head. Either way, I felt shaky and numbed out, and followed through the motions as I was instructed out of my cold, wet clothes and into some medical scrubs.

"I can fix my clothes," I said a bit weakly as he began cleaning the cut on my forehead over my right eye.

He looked down at me. "Field sign? Did you learn that from an older sibling or something?"
I didn't dare shake my head as he started putting stitches in. Apparently, I'd hit my head pretty hard and ripped open a nice gash. "Lieutenant Hawkeye taught me," I whispered hoarsely. "I can't use my voice."

The doctor made a noncommittal noise. "So I hear. Now, tell me, what's a civilian doing here?"

I pulled out my watch and he froze, staring at me. "My god. A child your age, in the military? What are they thinking? And what is a State Alchemist doing at this nowhere little dump?"

"Training," I answered, starting to get some strength back now that I was in dry clothes, cleaned up, and in a warm building.

The doctor snorted. "Training? For what, hell? That's all this place is."

"I did something wrong," I explained, being purposely evasive about it. "And now I have to train to make sure I don't do it again." Incredibly simplified, and I realized after I said it like that that I sounded like a much younger child than I was, but I was still feeling a bit unsteady. People tend to regress a little when they're in shock.

The doctor drew back to look at me. "Hogwash," he said. "I'll talk with your commanding officer, we'll have you out of here in a jiffy. This is ridiculous, he must see that. Who gave him these orders?"

"Brigadier General Grand. On the führer's orders." That would stop the doctor from doing anything to piss Archer off at me.

The doctor stared. "The führer ordered this? He's gone mad." But he seemed to have abandoned his plan to talk Archer out of keeping me here, which I already knew would be an exercise in futility. Archer wasn't going to give up until I was obedient, whatever that meant. I hesitated to wonder what sort of challenges he'd throw my way.

I didn't even really get why I was there. I'd been obedient to Grand, I'd done what I was told. What, did I not salute well enough? Did he just want to get back at me still? I didn't understand exactly what was going on, except that I was now working under a sadist who thought it was funny to shove a kid against a brick wall and make him work in the cold he was under-dressed for.

A clap of my hands summoned the alchemical energy to clean my coat and clothes, and I quickly changed once the doctor had checked me over to his satisfaction. "I should go see what else he wants me to do," I explained.

"If he tries to send you into the cold without proper attire again, you let me know, I'll speak with him," the doctor said. "Medical decisions can override his."

I gave him a grateful smile and headed out.

Archer was waiting for me in his office. "Enter," he said once I'd knocked.

I opened the door and stepped in, leaving the door open behind me. "I assume you wanted to see me?" I said, not giving a shit that he couldn't read my sign. He'd just have to get a translator, wouldn't he?

"Come in here and shut the door, Fullmetal," he said, settling back in his chair. Once I'd closed the door, Archer continued. "You still have marginal use of your voice, correct?"

Reluctantly, I nodded. It was technically true, although I couldn't do much more than whisper.
Occasionally, sound crept through, cracking and whistling through damaged vocal cords.

"Good. When in an environment that is conductive to its use, you will speak when addressing others, particularly me. Your signing means very little to me, and accommodations to a handicap should only go so far as to allow you to work efficiently. You can speak, so you will."

The man was a lunatic. He'd never looked at my medical file, he couldn't have, or else he'd know I was missing half my vocal cords, or if he'd just listened to how I sounded before, he'd know that talking was really out of the question. I opened my mouth to say something in protest.

"I recommend you put that attitude away, Fullmetal. I am your commanding officer, and I have issued you an order. Obedience should be absolute. I care very little if you don't like my orders. All you should be concerned with is following them to the fullest extent of your abilities. Should this prove problematic for your health, only then will I amend the orders." He smiled congenially. "After all, I'm not here to destroy or endanger your health. A soldier who is sick is no more useful than a weapon that is busted. And make no mistake, while you are here, you are no longer a civilian advisor. You are a soldier."

That idea didn't make me comfortable. I didn't want to be a soldier, I didn't sign on to be a soldier, and even I knew I was too goddamn young to be a soldier. All the rest of my fellows up there would be at minimum six years my senior.

"If the call to true war goes out, you will have to wear a uniform," Archer continued. "When that time comes, you will already know what to do, allowing you to serve the führer faithfully. That is the soldier's creed. Serve faithfully."

I wasn't sure what to make of that. I hadn't considered that when I'd tried for that test, that the call to war may go out. I knew about it, of course. My teacher had warned us about it. But I hadn't really given it much thought. I was so focused on getting to where I could get Al back that everything else had become secondary. I finally squeaked out a pathetic-sounding "yes, sir."

"I'm glad you understand." Archer stood up and went over to the filing cabinet, pulling out some forms that I wasn't sure what they were supposed to be. "Now, I am requisitioning a uniform in your size for you, and a length of something called 'hairfelt'. It's an insulating material worn over automail to prevent the metal from becoming so cold it causes frostbite around the ports. You'll have to transmute it to fit your limbs. You will also be issued your sidearm. Is there anything I have missed that you may require for care of your automail?"

A uniform. They were really sticking me in a uniform. I couldn't believe it. But at least I was getting cold weather accommodations. I quickly thought what else I might need to take care of my automail that Winry hadn't already sent with me in my suitcase. "Nickel," I finally said.

He raised an eyebrow. "Nickel? Care to explain why?"

"To add to the alloy in my automail," I explained. "It makes the steel less brittle in the cold."

"Acceptable then," he said, going back to writing. After a moment, he waved me over and handed me the form. "Take that down to Sergeant Kelly in the supply office. He will see to it that you get what you need. And then report to the gun range. The corporal there will teach you how to disassemble and clean your sidearm. You'll be learning to use it once you've learned to care for it."

I made a face. I had no desire to learn how to use a gun. They were just weapons for killing, something I didn't need to do.
"Is there a problem with my orders, soldier?"

Archer's tone told me that I shouldn't argue, but I couldn't help myself. "I hate guns."

"And? I suppose you think you'll be allowed to not carry one?" Archer shook his head. "Your personal dislike is irrelevant. Every soldier has their sidearm. It will be used when necessity dictates it, and you will learn to shoot to do more than temporarily disable an enemy. Or would you rather sacrifice the lives of our own soldiers to save the life of someone trying to kill you?"

I hesitated. "But that's-

He cut me off. "Are you arguing with me?" He sounded unamused. I didn't get a chance to reply. "You will conduct yourself as a soldier in a war zone, Fullmetal. You will shoot to kill, you will defend your fellow soldiers and this base and the valuable supplies it has for the firebases across the border. You will salute when you enter the office and when you are dismissed, you will address me as sir, and you will stand straight and watch your attitude. I have been very patient with you today, but I will not allow you any more of such freedom. Failure to comply will be met with punishment. And Fullmetal?" Archer smiled. "The military's regulations on what is and what is not acceptable punishment are very lax in a war zone. You will learn to behave as a proper soldier and respect orders given you so that we never see a repeat of what you did to the Sewing-Life Alchemist."

I felt sick as my eyes widened. He was talking about corporal punishments. I was twelve! Was he insane?! But the reminder of Tucker brought back the guilt and I realized that this is exactly what I had coming. I was a murderer, you didn't treat them with any regard. If I'd just obeyed orders, Tucker would still be alive, and Nina wouldn't be any worse off.

Not that Tucker particularly deserved to be alive, I realized after remembering Nina, but at least I would not be there.

Archer went on when I said nothing. "If you push too far, I will submit to General Grand that you have failed your training and your State Certification will be revoked. Now, I don't need to know your reasons for obtaining it at your age in the first place, but I am quite certain you would not appreciate losing it."

The idea of losing my certification I'd fought so hard for, my one chance at getting Al back, made me feel even sicker and I felt like I was pale and trembling again. I'd do anything to hold onto that chance to save Al.

"Now," Archer continued, his tone more pleasant than it had been a moment ago, "have I made myself clear?"

I nodded vehemently. Oh, how I nodded. I understood, and I'd do whatever it took to make sure I toed that line, or so I thought at the time.

Archer waved me off. "Good. Now go on, you're dismissed."

I turned to leave, paused, then turned back, saluting clumsily before hurrying out with the forms to find the this Sergeant Kelly in the supply office.

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Supply stations are routinely fairly boring. I wasn't sure what Archer intended on training me in, besides how to shoot at targets, because there just wasn't much else to do there. Of course, that was just my first week, so I figured to give it time, something was bound to happen.
He ran me through hard labor in unmerciful conditions- I didn't get the cold weather wear the others got for many outside tasks while we waited for something in my size to be made and sent in from North Headquarters. He never pushed me far enough to really endanger my health, but enough to make me miserable.

My problem, I found very quickly, was not obeying the orders; I could take anything the bastard could dish out, as far as I was concerned, although the heavy labor he frequently had me doing was building me up faster than rehab had, that was for sure. No, my problem was I could never remember to salute or call him 'sir'. And I had a tendency to smart off. At first, he seemed to just mark it down as a point against me. I had no idea what he'd do when I got to whatever arbitrary number of marks he decided on, but I didn't care to find out.

I found out anyway.

I don't even remember what I said that sparked it; I mouthed off about something, probably the guns again, and he grabbed me by the ear, and dragged me the whole way across the compound to the main building from the shooting range, to his office. That hurt, don't let it fool you. Having your ear tugged like that makes the poor thing ache like a bitch.

He slammed the office door shut, dragging me across the room to his desk, where he let go of me and pulled a gun out of his desk drawer. "On your knees, Fullmetal."

I froze for a fraction of a second, thinking that he was about to play Drachman Roulette with me or something. He couldn't possibly be actually putting my life in risk, not with how valuable I was, right? But not wanting to push his patience, I sank to my knees in front of him, trying to hide the fact that I was now terrified out of my mind.

"Let's see you put that smart mouth of yours to a better use," he said, reaching for his pants with one hand while the other kept the gun trained on me. "Maybe in the future, you will remember this before smarting off again."

I was numb as he pulled out his dick. My life wasn't in danger, although he kept the gun trained on me, probably as insurance that I wouldn't try to bite or anything, but he was making me suck him off. A grown man was making obedience so absolute that a child was sucking him off with a gun to his head.

What choice did I have? I did what he told me to, even though my mouth was really too small for that kind of thing, even though it hit the back of my throat painfully and made me wanna retch, even though my mind whirled crazily and I gagged and almost vomited when he came and it shot down my throat.

I admit, I wanted to cry. I was twelve, I wasn't stupid, I knew what a violation that was, and it made everything inside of me wither as he straightened and zipped up his pants. "Now, Fullmetal. Every five marks against you, this will happen, or I will come up with something new when this loses its effect. I recommend you watch your mouth in the future."

It happened two more times before I finally got my thoughts to where they didn't vocalize. I had a short trip between my brain and mouth, and Archer pushed all of my buttons that would normally set me off. He even took to making comments about my height to purposely test me as soon as he found out how fast I'd start trying to yell at that.

I eventually learned to keep my mouth shut and take it. It was better than the alternative.

I suppose, in retrospect, it makes me feel a little better that there was no real attraction or joy in the
act for him, as much as it was just another form of punishment, just another way to force obedience. It doesn't make me feel much better, though, especially not with what it ultimately taught me.

Nobody at that base knew what was going on, either. Archer kept it carefully quiet, and I sure as hell didn't say anything. But I started dreaming about getting away. Forget making it through training, I had to get out of there. I remembered the picture Hughes gave me, and decided to try to contact him.

Archer kept me busy from wake up time to bedtime, so it wasn't until Doctor Remington put me on medical leave for a few days for my throat that I got a chance to make the call. I looked around for any sign of anyone besides the communications officer as I snuck down to the phones. All I had to do was pick a phone up, have the operator connect me to the Investigations Department in Central HQ, and I was home free. Hughes would get me out of there as soon as he found out what sort of treatment I was getting.

The idea of telling anyone made my stomach drop into my feet, but I wanted out of there so badly, I'd chance it. I picked up the phone, glancing around again, then ducked against the booth a bit. I had no doubt that Hughes would go to the führer with what Grand had done and I would be brought back, given an apology, maybe put under Hughes's command in Central. I wouldn't mind that, always having access to the First Library. I could get my research done, the very thing I had joined the military in the first place for.

Hell, I would just be glad to say goodbye that uncomfortable uniform and be free to wear my attire of choice again.

"How may I direct your call?"

Just hearing the operator's voice was a welcome relief and a promise of return to where things made sense again. I forced my voice to give as much volume as I could muster. "Major Hughes in the Investigations Department in Central Headquarters, please."

"One moment, please."

That moment felt like it stretched on into eternity until finally I could hear the ringing of Hughes's line. "Hello?" came Hughes's welcomingly familiar voice.

The connection abruptly cut off before I could say anything and I looked at the phone in my hand, then over at the base unit. Someone's hand was pushing down on the phone cradle. Fear coiled low in my stomach as I looked over, staring in fear at Lieutenant Colonel Archer. "I do hope that call wasn't important, Fullmetal," he said. "Particularly since you're supposed to be on medical leave to prevent use of your voice."

I swallowed tightly. "I'm sorry, sir, I just haven't had a chance to make any calls until now."

"There's a reason for that, Fullmetal," Archer snapped, grabbing the phone handset away from me and putting it back on its cradle. "This is specialized training, a mission from General Grand that both of us are to fulfill to the best of our abilities. This is also highly sensitive work, meaning it's not something you can go around advertising. You're to be allowed no contact outside of this station until you have successfully completed this training."

In other words, Archer knew damn well what I had been doing. And Grand did know what Archer would be doing in this training, and didn't want it getting back to make him look bad.

"And don't believe for a moment that you can send any other form of communication behind my back," Archer warned. "Now. I suggest you return to your dorm or find something else more
productive to do. And do take care of that voice of yours." The last part was said with a smile that
would've made a native Drachman shiver. I knew that I damn near did, that was for sure.

For the first time, watching my commanding officer walk away, I felt like going to the range and
working off some anger.
Who Was

Chapter Summary

I made another one of those life-altering decisions then, as I got dressed. I was going to get out of there. Even if I couldn't sneak anything past Archer to communicate with Hughes directly from there, if I could maybe get away to another base before Archer caught me, I could contact Hughes from there.

I would regret that decision, too.

Chapter Notes

I based the warfare tactics of the Drachman forces heavily on those used in Vietnam, as well as behaviors of Amestrian platoons and supply runs. You'll see more of that next chapter and in the 30screams fics that accompany this. I so original. :p

who was born in a house full of pain?
who was trained not to spit in the fan?
who was told what to do by the man?
who was broken by trained personnel?
who was fitted with collar and chain?
who was given a pat on the back?
who was breaking away from the pack?
who was only a stranger at home?
who was ground down in the end?
who was found dead on the phone?
who was dragged down by the Stone?
-Pink Floyd

Up to that point, I'd been teaching myself to shoot by just looking at the targets and avoiding picturing them as real people. I didn't want to think about killing another human being ever again, although part of me knew the day was coming when I'd have to.

Now, I was picturing the target as Archer, and all too gladly emptying my clips into the target. Shoot to kill. I didn't miss my mark once.

I think the only thing that kept me from actually following through on this little fantasy was the worry of how much trouble I'd be in this time if I did. Grand would not be pleased, and I doubted
Bradley would be on my side in things. I couldn't bank on him not approving of my treatment here, even though he'd somewhat been on my side with Tucker's death.

"Yo, Elric!"

I barely heard my name called over the sounds of gunfire and the muffled quality of any sound through my ear protection. I finished unloading my clip, and looked up with a scowl. Corporal Werner and Sergeant Shepherd were waving at me. "Get over here, Elric!" they signed at me.

I eyed the target, realizing there wasn't much left of the center for me to shoot, and called it quits. I decided I may as well see what those two assholes wanted. They weren't too bad, really, usually looking out for me as best as they could. Hell, they were just about the only ones that did. Most people didn't want to cross Archer enough to try to interfere. Doc Remington usually argued for me, but other than that, most people kept to themselves and stayed out of it.

That was the real bitch of my predicament. Nobody wanted to speak up for me, it seemed like. Werner and Shepherd tried to befriend me, but even they didn't mouth off to Archer. Remington didn't know half of what went on, he just argued against me speaking instead of signing because that's all he really was allowed to know about.

I walked over to where Werner and Shepherd were waiting, putting away my eye and ear protection. "What do you want?" I demanded, moving to sit and clean my gun.

"Haven't seen you yet today," Werner said. "Where you been hiding?"

I looked up at him. "I'm on medical leave for a few days. Doc says my throat is looking rough again." At least, I hoped that's what I said. I was signing one-handed at that point, and it was probably pretty sloppy.

The message seemed to get across to them, though. "Bless that doc, eh?" Shepherd said, taking a seat as I worked. "Hey, come to town with us. Don't waste your time off here in the range. We're on rec leave. We'll take you to town, get you a drink, a whore, and a harmonica. You'll be able to make more noise than that squeaking you call talking."

I gave them a cross look. "I'm underage, remember?" I snapped, pushing the firing pin spring into place. I wasn't interested in drinking, and I really had no interest in sex. Sure, I was twelve, my hormones were starting to make themselves known, but I didn't want to mess up anyone else the way I'd been messed up already. Why I thought just touching someone would do that, I don't know, but I didn't want to do it.

"And? You're old enough to be out here, that means you're old enough to relax, and enjoy a woman," Shepherd said. "Some of those whores aren't any older than you, anyway, so we'll find one in your age range."

That thought disturbed the hell outta me.

"And you haven't lodged a protest to the harmonica yet, Elric," Werner pointed out.

I snapped a fresh clip into place and put my gun away before giving him sidelong look. "When do I have time to worry about a harmonica?" I demanded.

"You won't be here forever, it's something to do, and it's easy to carry around," Shepherd said. "A lot of guys around here play, you'll find someone to teach you. You do get time off, you know. That old bastard in the office can't keep you running ragged forever."
I didn't want to count on that. But, I knew these two, they'd hound me until the end of my leave if I didn't agree to at least go with them and try one of the things they planned for me, and a harmonica sounded harmless enough, so I sighed. "Fine," I said. "But I'm only going for the harmonica."

Werner and Shepherd weren't to be thwarted, though, as they ordered me a glass of scotch as soon as we were seated at the tavern, a shiny new harmonica in my hands. I ignored the drink in favor of fiddling with the instrument, giving it an experimental try.

"Kid, we'll get you a teacher, take the scotch before you start to torture us," Shepherd said.

I cast him a baleful glare. "You're the one who wanted me to get one," I snapped, then eyed the drink warily. After some goading, that may or may not have included an accusation of cowardice, I took a drink.

God, that shit burns! I coughed, slamming the glass back down on the table as I struggled to get the burn out of my throat. Oh, that shit made my throat ache worse than it had been. "No good," I signed one-handedly, the other hand still clutching my glass tightly. "Burns my throat too much."

Werner made a face, but seemed to understand as he stole off with the glass. "Yeah, that's fine, Elric. We understand, gotta take care of the throat." He finished off the last of my drink with just a few swallows, then shook his head. "Man, that's the good stuff, though. Too bad, Elric, you missed out." He waved to a nearby waitress who looked like she doubled as a whore. "Hey, bring us some water for our friend here. Bad throat and all, you understand," he said to her with a grin, looking over her appreciatively.

I coughed a couple more times at the irritation, gladly taking the water once the waitress brought it back, and swallowing it quickly. It tasted like there was too much calcium in the water, but it was water and it didn't burn, that's all I cared about.

"Damn shame," Shepherd said. "You knocked that back like an old pro." He took a drink of his own alcoholic swill, glancing around at the women in the joint. "Okay, since you can't drink, and it's too early to pick out a girl, let's hear you try that harmonica. Might attract a beauty over for ya."

"Or chase them away," Werner said with a stupid grin.

I inspected the instrument carefully, making a couple test notes with it. Music was basically a set of patterns, a sort of natural alchemy, constructing patterns of sounds to make something pleasing to the ear. It shouldn't be too hard.

Of course, my first attempt was pitiful. Werner and Shepherd both made faces. "Oh god, stop killing it, Elric," Werner said, rubbing his ear.

I turned red, setting the harmonica down. "Just remember, you two assholes are the ones that wanted me to have that thing."

"Yeah, we wanted you to learn to play it," Shepherd protested. "Not torture us with it."

"I can teach to play," a quiet, feminine voice said from nearby. One of the waitresses- she looked younger than most of the others- stood by our table, a nervous look on her face. "I play," she explained in her heavy Drachman accent. "I can teach." She was a pretty young girl, probably no more than about fifteen, with light red hair, pale skin and dark eyes.

Werner and Shepherd exchanged a look that made my nerves knot up. Shepherd looked over at the waitress. "Young lady, that would be great if you could. You got a room or something you can take him to do that so he doesn't torture us while he's getting the hang of it?"
The girl gave me a shrewd look, and I could feel myself turning red and trying to sink under the table. "Music lesson free," she told Shepherd. "Room cost."

Shepherd yanked out a few bills, handing them over. "I'll cover the room then, just make sure his harmonica doesn't make our ears bleed."

The girl accepted the money, tucking it down her shirt before stepping around the table and holding out her hand for me. "Bring harmonica," she told him. "I teach. You learn. Promise. Leann good teacher." I inwardly spazzed, barely remembering to grab the harmonica as the girl led me away from the table. I flipped off Shepherd and Werner over my shoulder for getting me into this mess, which was met with laughter from the two men in question.

This was not happening. It couldn't be happening. Oh god, it was happening. I was going to a paid room with a whore. The world could swallow me anytime.

The room Leann led me to was small, with just a nightstand, a chair and a bed and a small lamp that barely illuminated the room. The purpose of the room was pretty clear, the bed just big enough for two people, and the headboard set up with two straps tied firmly to the end bars. I could feel my whole face practically on fire.

Leann looked at me and laughed. "No blushing," she told me. "First, learn music. Then blush." Well, she was certainly succinct.

The flush died a bit as I looked at my harmonica. "You mean you really can teach me to play this thing?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

She looked at me funny. "Voice bad. Will teach to play. You can speak again. Speak with music." She settled down on the bed, crossing her legs underneath her, and patted the bed in front of her. "You sit. I will teach."

Leann, it turned out, was quite the accomplished musician with the harmonica, leading me through the basic scales until I had the hang of where the different notes were without thinking about it.

Leann smiled. "You good student," she told him. I flushed at the compliment, and then again as she removed her shirt. "Reward now," Leann explained.

I desperately tried to look anywhere but at her as she removed her bra, exposing her breasts. My hormones were interested, but my brain and stomach were both rebelling violently, and winning against my hormones in a battle of who got say here. "Leann, put your shirt back on," I whispered. "I don't want to have sex with you."

She leaned forward, her hand brushing down over my groin, which only served to make my hormones fight harder. "Room paid, you get reward," she said quietly, then ducked her head. "No!" I tried to shout, grabbing her head and lifting it back up. "Please, just the music."

Leann's expression turned into desperate pleading that probably mirrored my own. "Please," she whispered. "They know. They find out. I get in trouble."

That giant 't' word loomed large in my face. I didn't want her in trouble, god only knew what her punishment would be.

"I'm twelve," I croaked, hoping against all odds that she could find a way to stay out of trouble without either of us being subjected to something we didn't want. She was young, she couldn't possibly enjoy being whored out.
"I fifteen," she said, just as miserable. "Please, I be nice. I be careful."

I didn't want her in trouble. So, despite the fact that all my experience in that area beyond study was with Archer, despite the fact that even though I wasn't really doing much to control the situation, I went along.

In retrospect, I could've transmuted some silly 'evidence' to keep Leann out of trouble without dropping us head first into an uncomfortable situation, but I was panicked at the time.

She taught me several things with the harmonica that night, which gave me music back in my life, something that had been missing since Mom's death. We only did anything but focus on the harmonica once, just enough to make it obvious that Leann had done her job, but we spent hours there. It was more comfortable there with her than it would've been staying down in the tavern, waiting for Shepherd and Werner.

I could've killed them for putting me into that situation.

I didn't offer them anything in the way of conversation on the way back.

"So Elric, how was she?" Shepherd asked, turning in his seat to face me.

I glared at him. "You're a pervert, Shepherd," I snapped. "She taught me to play harmonica, that's all." Like I was going to admit to those two assholes what'd happened. It wasn't any of their damn business.

"Yeah?" Werner looked at me in the rearview mirror. "Play us a bar, Elric. Prove it."

I spent the rest of the car ride back to base playing, proving what a quick study I was. I wasn't perfect by any means, I was still a little slow and clumsy, but I hit the right notes, and I didn't go off-key, which was the important part, so there was no comments of 'torturing' anyone's ears.

When we got back, I immediately hit the showers to wash off the feel of Leann from my skin. I hated that life up north so much. I was too young for a whore, I was too messed up to be touched, and I never wanted that kind of contact again.

I made another one of those life-altering decisions then, as I got dressed. I was going to get out of there. Even if I couldn't sneak anything past Archer to communicate with Hughes directly from there, if I could maybe get away to another base before Archer caught me, I could contact Hughes from there.

I would regret that decision, too.

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My first escape was planned. I waited for my next medical leave, which came about a month later, and grabbed my suitcase and snuck out of the building. I planned on hitching a ride on the train, figuring it'd get me so far away that they couldn't catch me before they even knew I was gone.

My problem was, I'd never been on a full unload of supplies, so I had no idea what they did after the train was fully unloaded. I waited for them to finish a car, then snuck past them, taking advantage of my small size to hide behind crates and boxes until I was up in the car, and settled in in a back corner to wait for the train to move.

This would've been a much more brilliant plan, except they went back and inspected each car to make sure they hadn't missed anything. So I was caught red-handed as an attempted deserter.
Normally, I think I would've just been sent back to my dorm and told to knock that shit off, since most people there didn't care to get involved with Archer if they could help it. But desertion is taken very seriously in the military, and I pissed off a few people that way, so the soldiers who found me held me at the train until Archer arrived.

"What is going on here?" Archer demanded as he walked over.

I gripped my suitcase hard, resisting the urge to just run. I probably would've been shot or something.

"We found him in the train car, sir," a soldier said, saluting.

Archer looked at me. It was obvious I was running away. What else would I be doing in the train, with my suitcase with me? "Going somewhere, Fullmetal?"

I wanted to close my eyes and will this all away as my stomach tied up in knots. "No, sir," I said, trying to summon enough volume to be heard over the general noise of the wind and the train and the workers.

I don't know if he heard me or just read my lips, but Archer seemed to get what I said. "Then what were you doing?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't. I felt tongue-tied. My mouth felt numb. I was terrified out of my mind as to what this would mean. Would I lose my certification? It almost seemed certain. There was nothing he could do that was worse than taking away my hope at getting Al back.

"Take his suitcase back to his dorm," Archer commanded one of the soldiers, then looked back at me. "Bring him with me."

One of the soldiers took my suitcase from me, and I followed Archer weakly, another officer keeping right behind me to keep me from running away. Like I was going to. I'd get shot. Or worse. Who knew what would happen to me if I turned and bolted? Besides, I was not leaving without that suitcase. It had too many valuable notes, and that picture that I would never give up.

They took me out back, where a tall pole stood, with straps hanging down from it. It didn't take much imagination to figure out what it was for. I was to get the lash, and I wasn't sure if I was relieved or not that at least it wasn't my certification that was getting shredded, and just my back, instead.

I was stripped from the waist up, including the hairfelt covering on my automail, and after some dicking around with the straps which were really too high for me, I was strapped to the pole, facing away from Archer and the soldier that had come with us.

"You will count the strokes, Fullmetal," Archer told me. "You get five. You miss a count, we will start over." The man was a raving lunatic.

The anticipation was almost worse than that first crack of the whip and the sting of the first strike. It wasn't quite like automail surgery- nothing would ever compare to that, and if I had gone through that for Al, I would go through this, but it still hurt, stung and burned as the whip smacked soundly against my back. It cut deep, I'm not going to lie. Even now, I still have the scars from every single whipping I got.

"One," I whispered through clenched teeth, sucking in my breath sharply against the pain.

The whip cracked again and opened a new wound on my back. I tried to make a sound, coughed out a broken squeak, and hissed out a two. I wasn't sure how Archer heard me, but he obviously did, and
I didn't lose count. But there were tears leaking out the corner of my eyes by the time we were done.

"Take him to the infirmary," I heard Archer order distantly, and just as distantly I was aware of being unstrapped and led inside to the infirmary. I heard Doc Remington talking, but I couldn't process what he said. I just laid there on my side on the bed as he treated my back.

I hadn't gotten away. And my reality had just gotten worse.

Archer decided to put me on actual assignments after that. Mostly supply runs. Which meant I was taught to use a bolt-action Springfield rifle and finally outfitted with a cold weather uniform, which consisted of overalls and trouser liners, a coat liner, a coat and trousers, and a parka, with gloves, goggles, and balaclava, and this was over my hairfelt automail covering and my undergarments. In the cold weather, it was necessary, especially as we tromped farther north with valuable supplies for firebases over the Drachman border.

My first few supply runs were quiet. We took the supplies to Firebase Ladybird the first trip, and I got to see a cold weather firebase for the first time. It was little more than a collection of half-underground shelters, with insulating materials creating an igloo-like top. About ninety percent of the shelter was underground though, so very little stuck out as a target, which was probably the point. We serviced a few other firebases around the area, and they all looked the same.

We somewhat irregularly got attacked by Drachman guerillas. The guerillas differed from Drachman army regulars in that these were civilians their military had handed weapons to and told to go have fun. They didn't like us in their country, and they let us know by attacking out of nowhere, leaving a trail of destruction behind them, then disappearing into the snow and trees like they'd never been there. Most encounters with them left dead bodies all over the place- both ours and theirs- but with me along, we mostly survived intact. Instead of firing back, I'd put up a wall around us that would block the incoming gunfire until the guerrillas gave up and left.

I refused to fight back. Defending like that was just fine for me. I refused to kill another person if I could help it, and it saved more lives than anything else we'd been doing, and my platoon was grateful for it. They got to live. Without lifting a finger.

I was usually at the back of the group when we would carry supplies, pulling up the rear, for what reason I didn't know, but it gave me the opportunity for a second attempt at an escape. I tucked the picture and Dad's notes into various pockets I transmuted on the inside of my trouser liner before going out for a supply run. I didn't worry about my extra clothes or suitcase- I could always transmute new clothes and get another suitcase. I had my papers, my military ID, my watch, and the picture, that's all I really needed that I couldn't replace.

I was pulling up the rear, as usual, and once we were well away from Acheron Station, I started falling back, just a little at a time, until I was well away from my group. Then I took off. I figured I'd just run until I found another supply station or something, which wasn't very clear planning, but I needed out of there desperately.

I didn't get far before I heard gunfire back from the direction of my platoon. I froze to the spot, listening as I heard yelling and gunfire mixing into one loud cacophony of noise. Those men were dying, and if I'd been there, they wouldn't be.

I was torn. My freedom was one direction, but the men I was supposed to help defend were needing my help in the other direction. Ultimately, my sense of duty won out; I was desperate to get out of that place, but I couldn't do it at the sacrifice of other lives.

Before I even got back to the group, the gunfire had gone quiet. I stopped again; at this point, I
wouldn't do any good, since I didn't know medicinal alchemy, and the best I could do would be to defend any survivors on the way back to get treated by Doc Remington and his staff.

Goddamnit, I didn't think they'd get attacked. With a sigh, I tromped back through the snow to where the group was waiting.

"Goddamnit, Elric, where the hell were you?" my L-T snapped as I came into view. Men were wounded, and a few were dead. I felt sick.

"Sorry," I whispered, hanging my head. It was pathetic, but what else could I say? Those men were dead because of me. It wasn't the same as when I'd killed Tucker, but the guilt was there, nonetheless.

When we got back to Acheron, the L-T reported my desertion. To say Archer was not pleased would be an understatement.

"You are pushing my patience, Fullmetal," he told me as he dragged my by my ear to the dorms. "Get changed into your uniform." I knew I was in for another lashing, or god forbid, something worse, so I didn't argue, went into my dorm room and changed into my uniform, taking care to put away the picture and the other things I'd taken with me.

"Fullmetal, it does not take this long to change," Archer snapped from the other side of my door. Knowing full well what was coming, and hating every second of it, I indulged in a childish urge to flip him off from the safety of my room, where he couldn't see before opening my door.

He grabbed my arm, dragging my bodily down the halls to the back where the lash was set up. "I had truly hoped you'd learned your lesson with the last time," he said. "It seems you must have your lesson repeated before it takes."

I was once again strapped up and the lash taken to my back. Five strokes leaving five more deep grooves that would scar me forever. Afterwards, I was taken to the infirmary.

"This is insanity," Remington muttered as he cleaned the blood from my back. "You're a child. What did you do to warrant this?"

"Tried to get away again," I whispered without any emotion, laying on my stomach, staring at the wall as he worked. "I deserved this, those men are dead because I wasn't there."

Remington leaned down into my field of vision. "Edward, you never deserve such treatment. You are a child, you should not even be here."

"They're dead," I repeated, not even wincing at the sting of hydrogen peroxide in my injuries.

Remington sighed. "Edward, that is the rule of war. Men die. They fight, and scream and die, and I can't change that, and neither can you. Should you have run away? No, you should not have. But this sort of treatment is barbaric for an adult, it's insanity for a child. Don't take the blame, Edward, you'll be carrying it around for the rest of your life."

He wasn't wrong, either. I still feel guilty for that, and it's been years.

***

I was kept on supply run duty, despite my attempted escape, and kept up the pattern of putting up a barrier wall whenever we got attacked by guerillas, which was less often than not, thankfully. Unfortunately, those guerillas got smart to my ploys and started their attacks with grenades that
would demolish my walls, leaving us prone to gunfire before I could put up more protection.

It got to where I was all but useless after that initial attack, and we had to start relying on our guns. I hated that thing. I was good with it, make no mistake, or at least, I was good when working with a paper target, but I'd never shot a human before, and I didn't intend to start, so after they'd demolish my wall, I'd lay low and let the gunfire go on above my head.

The last time I tried to run away was fully unintentional. We'd been on a supply run, when we got attacked. As usual, I put up my defensive wall around us and the valuable supplies we carried, which quickly got demolished, and then the gunfire started.

My fellows were so busy aiming their guns, I was the only one who noticed a guerilla approaching our supplies with a grenade in his hand. Without thinking, I whipped up my rifle and fired. The man toppled with a yell. I crawled towards the supplies to see if he was dead or merely injured- I hoped for injured, but if he was, I had to get that grenade away from him before he caused trouble. I was almost there when the grenade went off, scattering blood and bits of the guerilla's body everywhere, including all over me.

I laid there in shock for a moment, then panicked as the blood and tissue slid down my face. Even though it was the enemy and I would more likely get commended for the kill, all I could see was the blood from Tucker and fear of further punishment drove me to my feet and running.

Somehow, miraculously, I managed to avoid getting shot as I ran. Forget my ID, forget my notes, forget the picture, I was in trouble, and I wasn't going back for it.

I don't know how long I ran until I ran headlong into a patrol from one of the local firebases. "Hold your fire!" I heard their sergeant call. "It's one of ours!"

The lieutenant grabbed me by my shoulders. "Calm down, kid!" he snapped as I struggled. "What're you running from?"

I stared up at him, trying to reign my fear in. "Attack- we were attacked," I whispered hoarsely. "I killed him, it's my fault." I was babbling, but fear had me in a cold grip that was only barely starting to slacken.

The lieutenant and the sergeant exchanged a glance. "Sounds like a cherry to me, L-T," the sergeant said. "First kill, I've seen men run scared like that before. Kid looks like he's younger than most."

"Right," the lieutenant said, then looked at me. "Where's your patrol, kid?"

I shook my head, starting to calm down, and realizing that I was probably in more trouble for running away than I would've if I'd stayed. "Supply run from Acheron," I said, then motioned in the direction I'd come from.

"Probably takin' supplies to Ladybird," the sergeant said. "Come on, L-T, we aren't going to find any guerillas this way, and those men sound like they could use a hand. We need those supplies."

The lieutenant looked at me for a long moment as I felt increasingly foolish. "All right. Platoon, move out, we're getting this kid back to his men."

We marched back the direction I'd come from, with me stuck between the sergeant and lieutenant. Now that I was calm, I knew if I'd just stayed still, I might've gotten a commendation for protecting those supplies, and now that I'd run, I really was in trouble. A normal commanding officer might've had mercy on me, written me up at most, given that I was a child who just killed someone deliberately for the first time, but not Archer.
It was only a will of steel that kept me moving forward instead of trying to run again. I didn't want to get the lash again, I didn't want to go back and face Archer, I wanted out of there. But running away would lose me my certification and my last hope at getting Al back. I'd face whatever Archer could do to me to get Al back.

As I expected, I got five more with the lash. That was the last time I ran away.

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I got sick on my last supply run. I felt freezing, even with all those layers, and I thought something was on my goggles, because my vision kept going blurry. I didn't think it was a fever, since it'd been forever since I last had a fever where I wasn't completely and utterly incoherent. The pain fever I'd had with automail surgery had left me out of it. This didn't have me out of it, it just had me miserable.

I had been warned that I was likely more susceptible to throat infections, and I'd been doing a lot of talking without a medical leave to give my throat a rest, so it really should've been obvious to me that I was sick, but I didn't think I was for some reason. I just thought it was colder than normal that day, that my goggles were smeared or something.

The staff sergeant at the front of the line held up a hand in a fist, and everyone stepped to the sides of the trail, crouching down, waiting for either the 'all clear', or for hell to erupt.

For what had to be the longest minute of my life, nothing happened. Then the whistle of incoming artillery filled the air around us seconds before the artillery impacted, scattering the supplies and the soldiers guarding them.

The explosion was deafening, and my head spun and my ears rang as I tried to get to my feet, feeling around for my rifle almost blindly. Artillery whistled again and I clapped my hands, slamming them against the snow-covered ground quickly. A protective wall erupted from the ground, absorbing the impact of the artillery and providing a shield from the rain of gunfire from Drachman guerrillas.

Orders were shouted and fire returned; it sounded distant to my ears as I scrambled around, looking for the rifle I'd dropped in the explosion. Behind me, someone shouted something that sounded like my name. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement from the wrong direction- my fellows were behind me, not in front of me. I didn't think, I reacted, diving forward for my rifle and raising it, firing without aiming.

The Drachman guerrilla went down with a yell. Behind me, the sounds of gunfire tapered off as the remaining guerrillas were either killed, or disappeared back into the trees the way they always did.

"Elric!" The staff sergeant jogged over to me, picking his way through the snow bank. "You okay, kid?"

I almost didn't register him, staring at where the Drachman I'd shot went down. There was no sign of movement- I was fairly certain the man was dead.

"Yo, Elric! Snap out of it. This is no time to get shell-shocked on me," the sergeant snapped, shaking my shoulder.

I jumped, glancing up at him, the nodded in a way that only shock could produce. "Yeah. I'm okay. Sorry."

The sergeant looked over at the body, then looked at me. "Yeah, he's dead, kid. Don't let it get to you. If it wasn't him, it would've been you or one of us. You just helped save someone's life. Think of it that way."
I tried to. I had a feeling it'd be awhile before that trick worked.

"Come on. Let's get these supplies to FBO, then we can head back to base." The sergeant helped me to my feet; I wobbled, gripping the sergeant's arm to stay upright. "Hey, you okay? That blast knocked you a bit, huh?"

Right, the blast. I nodded, regretting the action. I still felt cold and now the world was spinning.

For a moment, the sergeant didn't say anything, then pulled down my balaclava. "God, kid, you look like you're burning up." He called over one of the other men. "Take Elric back to base," he ordered the other soldier. "Have him checked out by Doc Remington. I don't need a sick man on this run." He looked at me. "You hear that, Elric? Go get checked out."

I nodded, again regretting it, and let the private that had been waved over lead me back to the trail and in the direction of base.

Doc Remington put me into quarantine when I got there, and immediately started treating me for a throat infection. My fever had spiked quite a bit, although I was too incoherent to remember how high he said it got, but I knew it wasn't good. I spent the next couple days trapped in the infirmary, riding out the infection.

As soon as I was well enough to go back on duty, Archer called me to his office. This time, when I entered, I gave him a sharp salute and spoke as clearly as I could without being told to. "Reporting for duty, sir." It hurt, my throat was still raw from my infection.

"You can sign, Fullmetal," Archer told me, then motioned to a soldier next to him. "I've brought in an interpreter. I don't want you to relapse, after all."

"Yes, sir."

He signed off on a paper before looking at me. "You are being deployed. To Firebase Olivia. You will serve there two months, and if your behavior has been satisfactory to the captain in charge, you will be released to return here."

Two months of deployment, then who knew how much longer of hell here. I kept my back ramrod straight and looked straight ahead, not showing my disappointment. I would survive this, and he'd have no choice but to eventually let me go. "Yes, sir."

"You should be glad for this, Fullmetal," Archer said. "You can use field sign as much as you want. But don't forget, when you get back here, I still expect you to speak when you can."

"Of course, sir."
"All right, men. My name is Captain Kelley. For the next several weeks, I'm going to be your commanding officer. If you have any problems, I don't wanna hear about it. Now, go find places to bunk, get warm, get some food, then check the schedules. Guard duty change out is coming up soon. Dismissed!"

Fastest initiation I had ever seen. That's probably the way it was by necessity at a firebase. Things changed too fast out there.

---

More men had come into Acheron Station, awaiting deployment to firebases. There were enough men to almost form a company by themselves, and when I found out they were all going to the same one I was, I worried just how heavy of a loss this firebase had taken. And how many more it would take.

I couldn't afford to be one of those statistics. Al was still counting on me to get out of this frozen hell and get back to looking for him.

"Platoon! Move out!" the soldier at the front shouted, and I could only assume he was a second lieutenant; with everyone decked out in the standard winter layers and parkas and balaclavas, they all rather looked the same.

Except me, because none of these full-grown men could say they were just barely over five feet tall.

Goddamnit.

The march to Firebase Olivia was long and cold and more than once we stopped to rest, making seats on the snow lining the path. Thankfully, other than someone whining a bit that his legs were tired and one of the privates picking on him for it, the trip was uneventful. No guerrillas tried to attack, and no snow storms decided to bury us.

Firebase Olivia was a standard cold-weather firebase, with shelters dug halfway underground, the top coverings comprised of several thick layers of insulating materials and wooden supports. It
must've taken days of living outside in the elements for the men who built it to finish. It crossed my mind to wonder how many of those original soldiers were still there.

I pushed that thought away.

The second lieutenant- as I was still assuming him to be- approached what I now assumed was the company captain of the firebase. Papers and words were exchanged, then the captain approached the platoon.

"All right, men. My name is Captain Kelley. For the next several weeks, I'm going to be your commanding officer. If you have any problems, I don't wanna hear about it. Now, go find places to bunk, get warm, get some food, then check the schedules. Guard duty change out is coming up soon. Dismissed!"

Fastest initiation I had ever seen. That's probably the way it was by necessity at a firebase. Things changed too fast out there.

"I don't remember requesting any rats."

I inwardly sighed. Not this again.

The second lieutenant that had led the platoon to the firebase approached Kelley at that, snapping a salute. "Sir, this is Major Edward Elric, Fullmetal Alchemist. Lieutenant Colonel Archer assigned him along," he explained.

Kelley looked back over at me; what sort of expression he had was impossible to tell under the balaclava and the snow goggles. "Archer's a goddamn idiot. I don't need to be babysitting out here. All right, Major, find a bunk, get warm."

Picking one of the shelters at random, I ducked into it, grateful to be out of the wind. The layers made the cold and wind almost a moot point, but the layers weren't the most comfortable themselves, either.

"Hey, guys, we got ourselves a rat!" one of the men already bunking there said with a laugh.

Now out of the wind, I yanked back the parka hood, took off the snow goggles and the balaclava and glared evilly at the man in question for the remark about my height. I had learned to ignore most remarks, but I outranked this guy.

The laughter stopped and the grins disappeared from the faces of the men in there. "The fuck?" another one said. "When did we start recruiting babies for this shit?"

The first man to speak up, a ginger, sat up from his bunk, looking at Edward. "What's your name, kid?"

Still giving them all a collective dirty look, I signed out my name.

"Field sign off the field? Little weird, ain't it?" a third one piped up.

"I can't speak. Damaged throat," I snapped back. "Got a problem with it?"

The second man held up his hands. "Okay, whoa, whoa, don't get bent outta joint, Eddie. We're sorry for the bit about your size. Just the only grown men that size are snow rats, that's all. Relax, nobody meant anything by it."
The first man smiled. "So Elric is it? Nice to meet you. Name's Patrick. Second Lieutenant Patrick O'Riley. I'm the cap's second. I take care of these bums around here."

The second man to speak up reached over and smacked O'Riley on the arm. "Asshole," he laughed, then glanced over at me. "Come take a seat, Elric. Too damn cold out there to be just standing by the door."

"Ignore his lack of manners," the third man said as I hesitantly stepped over to stand with their little group and took a seat on an empty bunk. "I'm Jack. Jack Farrand. I'm a corporal in this group. That dick there is Brian McLaughlin, Private, First Class."

McLaughlin snorted. "Farrand here lets it go to his head that I gotta call him 'sir' when we're on duty."

Farrand smirked at him. "You're just sore, McLaughlin." He turned his attention to me. "What about you, kid?" he asked, digging a cigarette out of his coat pocket and lighting it up. "You're probably a private, ain'tcha? Just outta training, I'd bet."

I shook my head, digging my watch out of my pocket. Farrand choked on his cigarette and the other two stared.

O'Riley blinked a couple times, then laughed. "I'll be damned, guys. The kid here outranks the captain. Good to meet you, Major."

"Shit, if they're deploying state alchemists out here..." McLaughlin glanced at his friends, then back to Edward. "You been to Central recently? Is what they're saying true? This place is the next Ishbal?"

"Fuck, you'd've thought they'd learned," Farrand grumbled, coughing a couple times and eyeing his cigarette as if he were trying to decide if he still wanted to smoke it.

I shrugged. "I've been in Acheron the last few months. Haven't been to Central since I got certified in January."

The lieutenant eyed the answer, then raised an eyebrow. "Acheron? What've you been doing in that hellhole?"

Hellhole. Fitting.

"That's where my commanding officer transferred us."

McLaughlin shook his head. "Your commanding officer's nuts then. There ain't nothing up here but snow and barbarians ready to slit your goddamn throat. No place to be taking some kid, especially not a valuable state alchemist, fer god's sake."

"Damn fool could get you killed up here," O'Riley agreed, then looked at me. "You stick with us, kid. We'll get you through this mess until someone gets their head outta their ass and transfers you back to Central, where you belong."

For the first time since I'd left Central, I couldn't help but smile.

I liked those men. They accepted me easily, and took to watching out for me. I suspect O'Riley talked Kelley into assigning me to those three permanently while I was there.

Nights were colder than days were, that far north of the Drachman border. The world was in
perpetual winter in the northern latitudes, requiring several layers of insulating gear instead of standard uniforms. The entire methodology of the military had to adapt to the wintry environment, resulting in firebases that looked composed of igloos in the evergreen forests and uniforms that made everyone look about twice their normal size.

Even then everyone picked on me for my size.

Firebase Olivia benefited that it was one of the quieter firebases that was served by Acheron Station; situated against the foot of a mountain, practically under an enclave, it held poor strategic value to the natives that preferred hitting bases that didn't stand in danger of avalanches and had no cover to hide behind. The amount of action I had seen over my first two weeks there had been minimal and although I'd shot through several bullets already, I couldn't even begin to guess how many- if any -of them had hit more than a tree or a snowbank.

And being in the field had meant I could use field sign and be understood. I didn't have to push my throat to the point of getting sick again.

I was grateful for that.

My bunkmates weren't bad, although they picked on me incessantly for my size- snow rat, they called me, and I made sure they knew with creative signs that I didn't appreciate it much.

"So kid," Farrand said, sitting up in bed and lighting up a late-night cigarette. "You never told us how the hell a kid your age gets a silver watch. What's the story there?"

The hour after getting off duty and before sleep hit was spent listening to the others exchange stories; I had stayed fairly quiet in them, but had joined in from time to time. These were the men that were on duty with me during the day, that watched my back while I watched them. These were the men I had to trust with my life, and none of them had let me down, and I had no intention of letting them down.

I looked over at Farrand, pausing in the notes I was working on. Deployed or not, my whole purpose here hadn't been forgotten and I'd been puzzling over solutions as best I could without the research from Central I needed. I hadn't made much progress, but it'd made me feel better about how much time had passed.

"Yeah, Eddie," O'Riley said, putting away the magazine he'd been looking at. "Come on, story time. We've told you our life stories, your turn."

O'Riley was a farm boy, born and raised in an area to the west of Central, where the land was mostly prairie and plains, and the sod was uncooperative with the farmers settling there. He joined the military because he was a second son, the farm was going to his elder brother, and in the lean winters- which O'Riley claimed were just as rough as the weather up there in Drachma was, but with a biting wind and no mountains to stop it as a rolled in from the north -the family would need money, so military income could supplement.

I shifted on my bed a bit, tucking away the notebook.

"Oooh, Elric's in the notebook again, forget it, guys," McLaughlin laughed. "What is that, your alchemy notes? Or letters to a girlfriend back home?" He reached over, trying to snatch up the book from me.

McLaughlin was an only child from a family in Dublith, it turned out- he'd nearly had a heart attack when he found out who my teacher had been. "I know her! Scary lady, ain't she?" he'd said when I
mentioned I'd trained there in Dublith under Izumi Curtis.

McLaughlin had an interest in animals, but education was hard to come by for a family that worked for a living, so he'd enlisted, hoping to get an education. So far, it'd been a disappointment, he said. The only animals he saw were dead ones.

"Could've stayed home for that," he'd said of it.

I scrambled to keep the notebook out of their reach. "It's alchemy notes, you wouldn't understand," I snapped, tying the book closed and shoving it in my pack protectively.

"Look at who's so smart!" Farrand razzed me.

Jack Farrand had been a Ward of the State, living in Central at an orphanage all his life. "No idea who my parents were," he'd admitted with a nonchalant shrug. "So I joined the military when I got kicked outta the orphanage. Figured, the military was the only Mum and Pop I'd known, abusive bastard it was, why not stick around and be useful? Hadn't learned nothin' that'd do me any good outside of here, that's for sure."

O'Riley sat up, reaching forward. "Let me see, Edward. If we wouldn't understand, what's the harm?"


O'Riley flipped through a couple pages idly. "A fake travelogue at that," he finally commented. "You aren't anywhere near anywhere sunny and warm. You sure this isn't just your wishful thinking?" he teased, even as I snatched the book back defensively.

"I'm sure," I shot back, putting the book away again. "I don't have access to any of my other notes up here, so I'm having to go by memory."

"You never answered my question, kid," Farrand pointed out. "Instead of worrying about those notes, why don't you join the conversation? It's your turn to tell us your story."

I bit the inside of my lip, hesitating. These were the men I trusted with my life. They'd told me their stories. Equivalent exchange, right? But I didn't want to tell them the full truth.

Finally, I looked away, shrugging. "Not much to tell. Dad's been gone for years, Mom died a couple years ago, I'm on my own."

"Don't they usually hand kids like you off to an orphanage, rather than the State Alchemists?" O'Riley asked.

Farrand snorted. "Shit, if I'd known I could've become a State Alchemist instead, you bet your ass I
woulda gone that way."

That got him a tired look from me. "Asshole, that's not how it works and you know it."

"So come on," McLaughlin pushed, "whose dick did you have to suck to get that cushy title?"

I went silent, giving McLaughlin a frigid look to match the slush that my blood had turned into. "I earned the title," I said woodenly, with what little volume I could muster.

Silence answered me for a moment as the three men exchanged uncomfortable looks. "Sorry, kid, it's just an expression," McLaughlin apologized.

Feeling bad, I looked away, then shrugged. "Anyway, it wasn't anything like that. I just... showed them I knew how to transmute without a circle. Not many other people can do that. I joined..." I trailed off, not really looking at any of them. "I joined because I owe it to my little brother."

"You got a little brother?" Farrand sat up. "What's that like, having a kid brother? I never had one of them."

"He's waiting back at home for you? Is that who you keep trying to write letters to?"


"God, what happened?" Farrand asked. "He was awful damn young."

"An alchemical accident. Lost me my arm and leg and voice, and lost everything of him."

Which was true, technically, but they'd think he was dead. I knew better.

"I'm sorry to hear that," O'Riley said, reaching over and putting a hand on my shoulder. I looked at his hand, then at him pointedly, silently demanding to know if he wanted to keep that hand. I liked these guys, I really did, and I trusted them with my life out of necessity, but I'd gotten to the point where I didn't like being touched.

He withdrew his hand, holding it up in apology. "Come on, let's hit the sack," he said. "We got first patrol tomorrow, so it's up bright and early."

There was a mantra guys up at firebases had that I quickly learned about a week later. "It don't mean nothing" was what people told themselves to get through. I'd heard it before, but I hadn't processed what it really meant yet. Nobody I was particularly close to had died, and my supply runs had numbed me out to deaths a bit. They happened. As long as it was some nameless nobody, I could cope.

The four of us were on guard duty; Captain Kelley kept the four of us together, since those three guys were about the only ones that were willing to put up with having a kid along, and the captain wasn't about to have me get killed because of his men on his watch, not when I was a State Alchemist.

"Okay, you four," Kelley said as he approached us. "Lance and Scott were supposed to do a once
around on the perimeter and they haven't come back yet. Go find them, and so help me god, if those two assholes are getting high, their balls will be on my wall back in my office."

I fought back a snerk as O'Riley saluted for us. "Yes, sir. Find Lance and Scott and if they're high, their balls are on your wall."

"I oughta fire all of ya," Kelley grumped, although his expression betrayed his amusement.

"Man," Farrand griped, once we were on our way, "someone oughta smack the shit outta Lance and Scott. Those two stoners are a bigger pain in the ass than the Drachmans."

"Bite your tongue, Farrand," McLaughlin snapped. "You'll jinx us."

Farrand looked at him flatly. "Jinx jinx jinx. God, what are we, ten again?"

It was my turn to give him a flat look. Jack looked away. "Okay, point taken."

Snow crunched under our boots heavily as we veered off the perimeter, taking the path Lance and Scott usually took when they wanted to sneak off to get high. Druggies are creatures of habit, and it didn't seem to matter how many times they got caught and reprimanded, they continued to do the same stupid shit all the time.

As we continued along the path though, I started to get unnerved by the distinct lack of any sound. It was unnatural. And I could swear I smelled blood. I'd smelled enough of it to recognize it by then.

"Hey, kid, why don't we hang back?" Farrand said nervously, looking at the others.

I glared at them all. "It's best if we stick together. And don't you start treating me like a kid, I don't get out of here until I finish this training, which means acting like a soldier. So treat me like one." I can't count how many times I had that particular argument with them.

"Okay, Eddie," O'Riley said, "but brace yourself. We could be up against anything and it may not be pretty."

I thought I was braced. I was wrong.

We continued along, and the smell of blood got stronger. After a few more steps, we split up into groups of two like a well-coordinated unit, lining the path as spatters of blood began to show up along the way. I didn't think to look up until I saw a pile of something bright red and lumpy on the ground in front of me. A line of intestines went up from the piles to the two bodies held high overhead, arms splayed, midsections ripped open, held up by barbed wire.

Lance and Scott weren't dead, either.

I ripped down my balaclava and turned, spewing my lunch out onto the forest floor. I looked back when I heard Lance and Scott crying for help. It looked like wolves or some other animals had already been eating at the pile of intestines laying on the ground. I wanted to vomit again, but I held my unstable stomach steady as O'Riley lifted his rifle and put Lance and Scott out of their misery.

I stared at him. I realized on a detached level that there was nothing we could do to help them, but a part of me refused to just accept this and kill our own comrades, even though death was probably mercy to them by then.

"Don't say it, kid," Farrand snapped. "You sound like a demented dog toy when you try to talk. What the hell were you going to do for them? You ain't got the skill to reconstruct what's gone and
fix that. You ain't a doctor, you know shit all about medicinal alchemy."

Which was true, but I did know how to build a human body. Logic told me what O'Riley did was the smartest thing to do. The naive part of me thought I could've saved them. That part was rapidly dying.

"Besides, the bodies were probably booby trapped," McLaughlin explained, much quieter than Farrand had been. "That's what they do, they string you up and booby trap you so they can get any fellows who come along with an idea to help you. Just remember, kid. It don't mean nothing. It's just something that happens. You let it go and move on, no matter who it is that's strung up there."

O'Riley looked at me. "They're right. I'd expect you to do the same for me if it was me up there. Now come on, we'd better go report to the cap what happened. And get out of here before we run into some of these barbarians."

I looked one last time at the mutilated bodies as that little lesson sank in. Sometimes, bad shit happened and it didn't mean anything.

That lesson would follow me the rest of my life.

***

"Hey, Elric, heads up!"

The warning came too late for me to even turn around before I got hit squarely on the back of the head with something hard and cold. I jerked forward, then turned to glare at O'Riley. The second lieutenant was already packing a second snowball, the face mask of his balaclava pulled down to reveal a shit-eating grin.

I yanked my own face mask down, pushing up my goggles and giving O'Riley a glare to induce instant death. Lucky for him, it didn't work.

"Well? You gonna stand there glaring until another one pelts ya, or are ya gonna fight back?" O'Riley taunted, making a show of packing his second snowball.

Like hell I was going to let a grown adult beat me at a snowball fight. It looked like reinforcements were arriving in the form of Farrand and McLaughlin, although who they were going to be reinforcements for stood to be seen.

Forming my own snowball as quickly as I could, I flung it at O'Riley, hitting him on the shoulder. O'Riley looked at his shoulder, then back up at me. "Is that the best you've got, Eddie? Come on now, you can do-" He was cut off by another snowball to the face, this one thrown by Farrand. I started to laugh, only to get pelted by another snowball.

"Don't be laughing too hard," McLaughlin told me. "Snowball fights are only fun when it's a free-for-all."

Forgetting (and not particularly caring) that I was supposed to be on guard duty, I dropped my weapon and clapped my hands, transmuting the snow into a wall of wet powder that showered down on the three men.

"No fair cheating, Elric!"

"All's fair in snowball fights!" I replied, already scooping up snow to make more ammunition. The old-fashioned way this time, of course.
Part of me was genuinely surprised that Captain Kelley didn't come put a stop to the games, particularly when one of us was on guard duty - two of us, actually, I was pretty sure that Farrand was on duty too - but the captain didn't seem to mind. In fact, he and several others joined in, taking a moment away from the stress and the harsh reality of our situation to just be for a moment.

Just past the laughter of the men, I could make out a distinctive whistling noise and I froze, just as several others did as well.

"Incoming!" someone yelled, and men scattered like a strong wind had struck them and blown them about in all directions. O'Riley took off towards me while Farrand and McLaughlin joined the others in the scattering.

"Come on, Elric, move it! Get your weapon, let's go!"

All of my training seemed to be failing me as I ducked, scrambling around in the disturbed snow for my rifle. Training said it never left your grip. Training said you slept with it. Training said it became an extension of your arm. Training wasn't anything like the real thing, and the real thing was something I hadn't seen enough of to drive that training into my brain enough to overrule the part of me that was still too goddamn young to be out there.

Something hit my body with the force of what felt like a freight train and I went down just as something exploded, covered by the weight of another body. Panic tried to kick in and I shoved against the body without seeing it, trying to push myself up out of the snow enough to breathe, enough to see what was going on, but all I could see was the snow in front of my face.

The body on me was warm, but it wasn't moving, offering no resistance as I shoved at it and clawed my way free. O'Riley didn't react, didn't move when I pulled myself out from under the older man. He didn't move even as the entire base was alive with activity, returning fire on the artillery, trying to track down the unseen enemy that attacked.

"Lieutenant?" My voice tore painfully at my throat as I crept closer, shaking O'Riley's shoulder roughly. "Lieutenant? Get up, we're still under attack."

That was when I noticed the chunk of tree branch, about two centimeters thick, lodged in the center of O'Riley's back. "Lieutenant?" Tree shrapnel from the blast. They'd warned me it was shrapnel you had to watch out for. It could get you from yards away from the center of the blast. If you were hit dead on by the blast, you were lucky. You would die instantly. Shrapnel could either kill you instantly or fuck with you, leaving you in pain for hours.

O'Riley wasn't moving.

"Lieutenant! Get up, damnit!" My throat hated me for speaking, hated the use, hated the volume I tried to force out of it.

Around me the battle died, as it always did. Drachman techniques involved a fast hit and just as quick of a retreat, before they could be found and retaliated against.

I waved my arms frantically, trying to get the attention of somebody, anybody to call a medic over for the lieutenant; I couldn't shout for help myself. Farrand looked like he was responding, but it felt too slow to me, too sluggish. O'Riley wasn't moving, goddamnit, someone had to be quicker.

I lifted my hands to clap them together, when the image of that thing in the lab the night we tried to resurrect Mom came back to me. That's all I'd do to him, he was dead, human transmutation was impossible, and I had Al to worry about. I couldn't get Al back if I was busy sacrificing body parts
for some dumb nobody up in the snow.

I lowered my arms just as Farrand got to me. "Forget it, kid, he's dead," he said after a brief inspection. "Just you remember, it don't mean nothing. You gotta keep functioning for the rest of us."

I had to keep functioning to get Al back. Nothing at that point was more important than my own survival, so that I could save Al.

"I know," I said, getting up and shouldering my rifle.

Captain Kelley still had me working with McLaughlin and Farrand almost exclusively, but the group seemed different without O'Riley around. More professional. I don't know if it was O'Riley's loss, or the change in me that did it, but the older two men stopped trying to kid with me as much.

I spent another week out there with them before I got my chance to escape that place. I was still scheduled for another three weeks there, then back to Acheron for more of whatever Archer felt like doing to me, but opportunity knocked, and I saw no need to not answer the door.

Farrand I were on a night perimeter sweep. Night time patrols were some of the most perilous. The trees of the forest cast dark enough shadows during the day; during the night, the forest would turn almost pitch black. Farrand and I kept as silent as possible through the snow, trying not to jump at every shadow that so much as twitched in the evening wind.

"Mother Nature ain't the most cooperative bitch, is she?" Farrand whispered, gripping his weapon tightly.

I glanced at him. "You expected her to be?"

Farrand just shook his head at that, starting to step forward, then froze, crouching down. I crouched down as well, peering through the darkness, trying to see what had caught Farrand's attention. Farrand looked at me. "Sounds like more than the usual guerilla group coming our way. We weren't expecting any brass, were we?"

I choked on the snicker that wanted out at that as I shook my head. "You see what it is?"

Farrand indicated that no, he didn't, then crept forward a bit more. I heard him swear quietly, then started high-tailing it back towards me. "Drachman regulars," he signed. "Those ain't guerrilla's, those are military proper."

The Drachman military had been focusing on the border closer to North City, ignoring little podunk areas like where Firebase Olivia was. It didn't mean anything good if they were all the way over here. Among other things, it meant our little quiet firebase was about to stop being quiet.

We took off at a run, hurrying back to the firebase to report the oncoming attack to Captain Kelley. The artillery beat us back, and the base was already a flurry of activity as men rushed to return fire. I waved my gun above my head, trying to signal not to shoot, friendly fire. By some miracle, I managed to get back behind my own lines without getting my stupid ass shot as artillery pummeled the lines of the firebase.

Back in the command building, Kelley was yelling into the radio, angrily demanding arty to return fire and as usual, getting told we were less of a priority.

"Captain, they're at L-C-4-2-5-niner!" I reported, "We got army regulars in this group, this ain't guerrillas."
Kelley stared at me a second, then turned back to the radio, reporting the new coordinates and the newest development.

"See if you can capture one alive," came the reply. But no promise of artillery back up. Kelley slammed down the mic. "Kid, get out there and see if that alchemy of yours can't replace arty, it doesn't look like we're getting help on this one."

I ran back outside, forgetting to salute, shouldering the strap of my rifle to free my hands. Alchemical energy ripped up along the ground, sending snow flying and lumbering away from the base like a sleepy tidal wave, crashing nearly a metric ton of snow down on the attacking artillery. Soldiers continued firing, but the gunfire was hesitant and badly aimed as shouts from beyond the lines were heard, warnings shouted in Drachman that meant nothing to me.

There was an explosion as clogged up artillery blew, scattering shrapnel and snow across the countryside.

The night went silent again.

Kelley rounded up a squad to go investigate, to see if there were any left alive that could be taken prisoner and taken back to Acheron for questioning. I began scanning the camp for Farrand, uncertain when we'd gotten separated.

I stumbled across McLaughlin, already being treated by a medic. His right leg was torn up badly from about the thigh down, bone and muscle tissue glistening red under the piss-poor lighting of the camp. I crouched by him, grabbing the other man's hand with my own automail hand. "Squeeze my hand," I said quietly. "You can make it."

It didn't mean anything to me, as McLaughlin yelled in pain as the medic worked to stop the bleeding enough to get him to the infirmary. It didn't mean anything as joints in my hand creaked ominously under McLaughlin's grip.

McLaughlin's breath hissed through his teeth. "Where's that jackass, Farrand?" he asked, trying to pull himself away from the pain. Such a common technique. I wondered if it really worked.

"Don't know," I answered. "Lost track of him coming back."

McLaughlin nodded. "You tell that jackass he needs to give a quicker warning next time, when you find him." I don't know why he said that. We both knew Farrand was likely dead. He probably got hit by either arty from the Drachmans, or friendly fire from one of our guys. God only knew how I'd gotten through the lines.

I stayed with McLaughlin as the medic cleaned him up and took him to the infirmary shelter. I stayed out of the way, but I stayed there while the medic worked, finally declaring that McLaughlin was going to lose that leg, and he'd be getting a discharge. I saw my chance immediately. If he was getting discharged, he was going through Central, which meant he could look up Hughes for me.

"Ya hear that, Elric?" McLaughlin said, looking over at me. "I'm going home."

I smiled, and stepped forward, taking a seat next to him, my rifle propped against my leg. That thing never left my person anymore. "Lucky bastard."

"Yeah, that's what they tell me. The old lady's gonna pitch a fit at me."

"Just make sure you don't stop and try to tattle on me to my teacher," I warned him, "or your old lady's fit is gonna seem like a walk in the fuckin' park."
That got a laugh for him. "Don't worry, I won't go anywhere near that scary lady. Not with anything that might piss her off. I won't be able to even properly defend myself now."

I snorted. "Even if you had automail you wouldn't stand a chance."

"Yeah, exactly," McLaughlin said, "so like hell I'm gonna go finding her to rat you out."

I rested my hands on the butt of my weapon. "You thinking of getting automail?" I asked.

McLaughlin shrugged. "Hadn't thought much about it. I suppose I oughta, if I wanna be useful around the house to my folks still. I don't wanna be a burden on them."

I nodded thoughtfully, then unzipped my parka and coat liner, digging around inside the pocket on the coveralls and pulling out the picture Hughes gave me what felt like an eternity ago. "See that guy there?" I said, handing it over. "When you get to Central, look him up in the Investigations Department. Major Maes Hughes. Tell him I sent you, and he's to help you get out to Rizenbul to see an old broad named Pinako Rockbell."

The name 'Hughes' didn't get a reaction out of McLaughlin but Rockbell did. "Pinako Rockbell? Rockbell Automail? No way I can afford that, Elric, she's the best there is," he protested, trying to hand the picture back.

I shook my head, pushing McLaughlin's hand away. "You tell them I sent you. They'll give you a discount. If that's not enough, tell them I said to put it on my tab. I'll pay them when I get back. I'm a State Alchemist, I make enough, and yes, I'll rub your face in it if that's what it takes to make you go to them."

McLaughlin looked reluctant, but tucked the picture in his own pocket. "All right, Elric, I'll do it, but only because I think you'll come kick my crippled ass if I don't. But don't think I'll be taking any charity from you." He stuck his finger out. "I'll take a discount, but I won't take charity."

I eyed the finger pointed at me, then gave McLaughlin a look that threatened to bite that finger off if he didn't get it out of my face. McLaughlin laughed and switched the finger out for the middle one. "That better, you dick?"

I grinned. "If you can't afford it with the discount, take the money. You can pay me back over time if you really have to, you prideful bastard."

If McLaughlin knew what doing this might do for me, he wouldn't be protesting about charity. As soon as Hughes knew where I was, he could work to get me home, and I might get out of going back to Acheron. I would do almost anything to get out of going back to that hellhole.
Tell Me Would You-

Chapter Summary

I looked down at my hands. "Can I have my sidearm back?" I asked. "I'd feel safer with it."

Hughes didn't exactly look thrilled with my request. "You know how to use one?"

I scowled. "Of course I do. I was trained properly."

"Yeah, that's what upsets me," he said, then shook his head. "All right, Ed. I'll see if I can't requisition one for you. But only if you promise to get out of this dorm and go do something."

"As soon as I have my weapon, sir."

"And that's another thing. Stop calling me 'sir'."

As I hoped, before my time at Firebase Olivia was up, I got notice from Central that I was being transferred back. Apparently, the whole country had been looking for me, and nobody had known where I was. I was confused by that. I could've sworn that the papers I'd taken to Processing the day Grand put me under Archer's command were the transfer papers for us. Either they were something else, or someone destroyed the paper trail.

I decided to worry about it when I got to Central. My biggest worry right then was getting through Acheron without catching Archer's notice. I had the paperwork in my hands that said I was going back to Central- orders from the führer himself, so Archer couldn't do a thing about it- but I didn't want to face the man when he found out. He'd be livid. Especially since as far as I knew, this news didn't come with a transfer for him, too. At least, I hoped it didn't. I didn't want to see that bastard ever again, if I could help it.

Fortunately, I managed to slip back into Acheron and immediately onto the train, so I never saw Archer. In fact, I never saw him again. He remained in Acheron, forgotten and abandoned to his work there.

Hughes greeted me when I got off the train.
"Ed!" He looked happy enough to run up and give me a hug. He stopped short, seeing me in a uniform with a couple new scars on my face. I still sported a scar from where that drain pipe clip had snagged my forehead my first day at Acheron. I also had a thin scar under my left eye from a loading spring accident when reassembling my firearm.

I didn't offer him a smile, but I offered him a salute; his shoulders showed he'd gotten a promotion to lieutenant colonel while I was away, so he now outranked me.

Hughes adjusted his glasses. "Enough of that, Ed. We're friends here. You're not military, you're a civilian advisor. Come on, let's go get you out of that uniform and get you to the führer. He wants to see you."

"With all due respect, sir," I whispered, desperately hoping he could hear me over the noise of the platform, "I'll stay in my uniform until the führer releases me."

He looked at me, blinking. "You can sign, Ed. And if you're sure. We'll stop by the dorms first, set you up a place to put your things, then you can report in."

"Thank you, sir." I shouldered my duffel I'd transmuted from my suitcase with my deployment to Olivia, and followed Hughes back to Central HQ.

It was August by that time, and Central was miserably hot. I was melting in that uniform, although I supposed I could've been still in my winter weather gear, which would've been murder. I would've been melting in my own clothes, I realized, so I ignored the uniform. I was used to it by then, anyway.

"So you've been at a firebase, right?" Hughes looked back at me.

"That's right. Firebase Olivia." I didn't give anymore details.

Hughes sighed. "Edward? You're back in the world, you don't have to be so close-mouthed. You never had a shortage of words before."

"My training was classified, sir, I can only report it to Führer Bradley."

Hughes stopped in his tracks. "Ed, listen to me. Your 'training' was a bunch of bupkiss. You weren't supposed to leave Central. Bradley and the whole damn military's been looking for you."

I looked up at him. "Even so, sir, I'd rather only release what the führer allows me to. My training was authorized by him in the first place."

He stared at me. "My god, Ed, what did they do to you? The old you would've been ranting about being taken away from your research, or something."

I answered him with silence. I didn't want to admit to what had been done to me, not to someone who I knew would go completely postal about it. I felt ashamed of it, like it was some dirty secret to hide. I felt more willing to talk about attempting to bring back Mom, because at least that, I'd had a choice in.

After a minute, Hughes gave up. "All right, Ed. But you can come to me any time you need to. I know how to keep my mouth shut on confidential stuff. I won't even tell Roy if you ask me not to."

"Will I be returning to his command, do you know?" I asked after a long ten minutes that were filled with what felt like an awkward silence, all the way to the dormitories on Central HQ campus.
"He's hoping," Hughes answered, stopping outside a dorm room door. "Right after Bradley releases you, anyway. Here's your dorm, you'll be staying here until you get your new assignment."

I stepped into the dorm. It was much nicer than anything I'd been in since Tucker's, much more spacious and up on repairs. I dropped my bag by the bed and rejoined Hughes in the hall. He put his hand on my shoulder for a moment, causing me to pull my shoulder away. He gave me a worried look, then led me to Bradley's office.

We were admitted, and we both saluted sharply. Even the laid back Hughes knew how to become a soldier when the situation called for it, and talking to the führer himself called for it.

Bradley was facing away from us, looking out his windows. "At ease, you two." I immediately relaxed into proper position, as did Hughes next to me. Bradley turned to us. "You're dismissed, Lieutenant Colonel. I'd like to speak to our young alchemist alone."

My stomach tied up in knots. Despite Hughes's assurances that Bradley had been looking for me, I worried that I was in trouble for shortcutting my training. I didn't want to be in more trouble, especially not when trouble from the führer would lead to a loss of certification, at minimum.

Once Hughes had left, Bradley's stern look eased into a smile. "Welcome back, Edward," he said. "You can relax, you're not in trouble. Actually, someone else is. See, I never authorized for you to be sent anywhere. So I need to ask you some questions."

I relaxed a little bit, but not much. I didn't want to tell him anything that had happened to me, if I could help it, but I was not about to disobey the führer. "Anything that I can answer, sir."

"Where exactly were you transferred, Edward?"

"Acheron Supply Station, just this side of the Drachman border, sir. We serviced several firebases over the border."

Bradley sat down at his desk. "And who authorized this transfer?"

I shifted on my feet a bit. "Brigadier General Grand, sir. He placed me under Lieutenant Colonel Archer's command and transferred us for specialized training."

Bradley folded his hands on the desk in front of him. "That's interesting, because General Grand claims he has no idea where you were or why you disappeared."

That erased the practiced composure I was holding onto as I blinked in confusion. "It was General Grand, sir. He told me himself that he was reassigning me to Lieutenant Colonel Archer."

"I see. And the transfer?"

"Also his order, I would imagine, sir. He told me to pack a bag, I was going with the lieutenant colonel for further training."

Bradley continued to look at me, as if he were seeing something I didn't want him to. "Given your limited vocal abilities, I would normally assume the answer is no, but was this conversation over the telephone?"

I shook my head. "No, sir. I was called into his office."

"Hm. These are very serious allegations, you understand, son," Bradley told me as he sat back in his chair. "If this is true, then General Grand went against my very specific orders and knowingly
endangered the life of a valuable State Alchemist by sending him unnecessarily into a very hostile area. This is especially bad since the State Alchemist in question is not supposed to be wearing the uniform, as he never accepted a commission. You may turn that in as soon as we are done here, by the way."

I fought to keep my bland expression, hiding behind the disguise of the perfect soldier to avoid showing how afraid I now was. If for any reason, Bradley thought I was lying about Grand, I was in huge trouble. "I would not lie to my führer, sir."

"I don't doubt that, my boy. However, is there anyone who could verify what you say?"

Verify? I blinked, thinking. "Lieutenant Colonel Archer was in the room with me at the time, sir. He's still in Acheron, though."

"That won't be a problem," Bradley assured me, and I had the awful thought of them transferring Archer back to Central with me. Even if the man had no more command over me, I didn't want to be around him. "Your training, was it dangerous?"

I resisted the urge to shrug. "Yes, sir. I escorted supply runs to firebases, and was deployed to a firebase for my last month and a half there. " The danger hadn't been what had gotten to me. Danger to myself didn't bother me. It was being surrounded by deaths I couldn't do anything to prevent, it was deaths I had a hand in causing, it was the rape and the lash and the abuse that had gotten to me."

"Well, rest assured, Fullmetal, that was not my intention when I assigned you to training. You can consider this my formal apology for your troubles."

"Thank you, sir. What are your orders now?" I didn't know what to do with myself without something to do. I desperately hoped I was released from my training and could go back to doing research like I was supposed to.

Bradley smiled. "For now, worry about picking your field of research. Colonel Mustang has requested you be transferred to his command in the east. I am giving it serious consideration. But in the meantime, you are under my command, and mine alone, until this investigation is complete. You are dismissed, Fullmetal."

I saluted, and turned on my heel and left the room. It was only my practice with Archer that kept my hands from shaking as soon as I was away from that room. With nothing else to do, I returned to my dorm.

At first, I wasn't sure what to do. I already knew I wanted to make the Stone my field of research. I wasn't sure where to report that, or where to start researching. Without orders, I felt lost, adrift without a direction.

It took Hughes coming to see me for me to leave my dorm after I'd turned in my uniform and sidearm. I wanted that sidearm back; after so many months of relying on it, I felt weird without it. I didn't think I'd ever need it, but I wanted it available.

"How're you doing, Ed?" Hughes asked me after I'd answered the door.

I looked up at him with that same flat look I'd found myself sporting whenever I was around an officer in uniform. It was the only way I could keep from melting down into a puddle of fear. "I don't know what to do with myself, sir. I have no orders."

Hughes sighed, letting himself in and pulling up a seat. "Ed, you gotta relax a little. I know it's tough, coming back to the world, but you're not in a war zone anymore, and you're not military. You don't
need orders. You're a researcher. Why don't you go check out the First Library? Or just take a walk?"

I looked down at my hands. "Can I have my sidearm back?" I asked. "I'd feel safer with it."

Hughes didn't exactly look thrilled with my request. "You know how to use one?"

I scowled. "Of course I do. I was trained properly."

"Yeah, that's what upsets me," he said, then shook his head. "All right, Ed. I'll see if I can't requisition one for you. But only if you promise to get out of this dorm and go do something."

"As soon as I have my weapon, sir."

"And that's another thing. Stop calling me 'sir'. Just Hughes is fine. You're a civilian now, Edward. You have to get used to using our names again." He sat forward. "Tell ya what, you come over to my place for dinner tonight. Elysia and Gracia will be glad to see you. Gracia's been worried about you too, you know. We all have been."

I wasn't sure what to make of being a civvie again. Granted, it hadn't even been a full year that I'd been in the military, but in that short time, pain had conditioned me into a certain way of thinking.

But I accepted his invitation. "Thank you," I said.

That got Hughes to smile. "Come on," he said. "Let's go down to requisitions, get you your sidearm, then we'll stop back at my office, call Gracia and let her know you're coming, then head home. We're having roast tonight, I think."

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Dinner was tense, I thought. Nobody knew what they safely could ask me; I was a child who'd just come out of a war zone, what were they going to ask me, how have I been? That would've been a ridiculous question. I was clearly changed, and they thought not for the better, that much was obvious. I wasn't sure what I thought of those changes in me yet. I was still too scared to be any other way. Being a soldier would survive and get Al back, and that's what I'd clung to for several long months.

Eventually, they bid me good night and I started the walk back to my dorm. The warm night air was a welcome relief compared to the bitter cold I'd come accustomed to. I thought I'd never be warm again without looking like some sort of demented abominable snowman, wrapped up in countless layers and hiding behind a face mask and goggles to keep the stinging snow out of my face.

I thought of maybe taking walks more often; certainly, tomorrow I'd investigate the First Library, see if the military had ever pursued the Philosopher's Stone before, and it felt like walking was clearing my head from the fears I'd been keeping locked up tightly for so long.

I had a feeling that was more the novelty of freedom than anything else, and that time would take away this escape, and I wouldn't be able to walk fast enough to leave that all behind.

Behind me, a refrigeration truck roared down the street. I jumped, ducked into a nearby alley and pulled out my newly-acquired sidearm. The truck passed by and I slowly released the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. I felt stupid. It was just a truck. It didn't sound anything like arty or gunfire, but it'd been so out of place in the evening quiet, with distant cars and radios and all the other noises of civilization, that I'd instinctively moved to the defensive.
I wondered if I'd ever stop doing that.

I stepped back out of the alleyway and leaned against the building, not willing to go anywhere until my legs stopped feeling like jelly and my stomach unknotted. Behind me, headlights lit up the alley, and I stepped further to the side to give plenty of clearance to whatever vehicle was coming through.

Only, the lights stayed steady, and no sound of an approaching vehicle reached my ears. Paranoia and adrenaline spiking again, I peeked around the corner; that same truck that had just passed me and rounded the corner was parked there. The driver door was open as well as the back doors. I looked at the two stores on either side of the alley. A tailor's shop and a bookstore. Neither seemed likely to be receiving a shipment from a refrigeration truck at this time of night.

The driver dragged out what looked like a body from the back of the truck and started dragging it into the alley. I dismissed my initial reaction at first, thinking I was just going crazy from my time on the battlefield, until I noticed an arm sticking up oddly from whatever it was.

It was a body.

Going into an unknown situation wasn't fun, but not anything I wasn't used to. I kept my sidearm trained at the ground as I crouch-walked along one side of the alley. I heard whistling from the driver as he fiddled around with the body. He didn't see me at all, not even when I got close enough to see the body.

I guess to be fair, I should admit I was hiding behind a stack of crates, some with what smelled like wet paper.

The body belonged to a woman, long brown hair, somewhere around Mom's age. Her eyes looked like doll eyes, unmoving, staring off at something far away. She'd been carved up, like an animal handled by a butcher, flanks stripped down almost to the bone, her shoulder blades shining red and white in the street light.

My mind went back to Lance and Scott.

My aim became sloppy when I unloaded three shots into the butcher before he knew anyone was even there. One shot hit his left hip, another hit his shoulder, and the third caught his neck, far from the throat, far from a killing shot.

The murderer went down, screaming and yelling in pain.

I decided to not stick around. Someone else had to take care of this before I ended up killing someone again. I wanted to beat the man until there was nothing left of his face. I wanted to turn him into another Tucker.

But I was not about to find out where that trouble would lead me.

I returned to Hughes's house. Investigations would want to take over, and if I went to the police, I'd have to prove my identity and right to have that weapon, and possibly open a pandora's box of red tape that would keep me away from my research even longer. I didn't want to deal with the possibility of being temporarily jailed while the police decided I wasn't the murderer myself.

I knocked on Hughes's door. He answered a minute later, looking a little tired and clutching a mug of what smelled like tea. "Ed? Did you get lost or forget something?"

"I found something," I started carefully. "Is the Investigations Department looking for any murderers?"
That woke Hughes up. He pulled me into the house. "Okay, start explaining."

I told him about the body and the perp I'd shot, and gave him an approximate location. He ran a hand through his hair. "That sounds like the serial killer we've been looking for for months. You find all the luck, kid. You're sure he was alive?"

I nodded. He set his tea aside and hurried off, getting back into his uniform and then stopping at the phone to make some calls.

By the time we got back to where I'd left the butcher and his victim, other military cars were showing up. The butcher was in cuffs, being treated by a medic. Hughes pushed his way through the crowd of enlisted men gathering and setting to work, and crouched by the victim's body. "Definitely the work of our serial killer." He looked at me. "Congratulations, Ed, you just made the streets of Central safer." He looked back at the truck. "We'd wondered how he was getting the bodies through checkpoints. Looks like he had them hiding in his work."

The papers lauded me a hero when the case broke into the media. Central had been terrorized by this guy for months while I was freezing up in the snow, and one lucky night and I'd taken him down for the justice system to take over. Of course, the story in the paper wasn't fully true- it said that I'd gotten into a confrontation with the murderer first, then shot, rather than sneak attacking him. I had a feeling that was Hughes's doing. I guess it looked better that I'd been caught up in a forced confrontation, instead of taking matters into my own hands.

Either way, I was considered a hero, and I just couldn't wrap my head around it.

***

I spent several more weeks there in Central while Bradley investigated my disappearance, then he finally released me to Mustang's command out east. I was ordered to get a physical first, as part of my release, and the doctor noticed my automail casing getting too tight for my shoulder girdle.

"You're growing, boy," he said. "Here's the papers, you stop at your automail surgeon's place and get that fixed before you go anywhere."

So my train took me down to Rizenbul before I went to my post out east.

Winry was glad to see me. I wasn't so glad to see her. I didn't want to face her. I'd never had a problem keeping secrets from her, but she always could tell when I did have secrets, and I didn't want her prying and possibly finding out and becoming tainted with whatever had crept into my soul and taken hold.

Of course, I should amend something. Winry was glad to see me, but not until after she'd properly chastised me for showing up in the first place.

"Ed, you dummy!" she yelled from the front porch, flinging her favorite wrench at me. It used to be, I didn't duck that, taking my lumps from her- friendship with Winry was sometimes dangerous, but not always unwarranted. My battle-trained reflexes, though, wouldn't allow that and I erected a wall that the wrench thunked harmlessly against.

She seemed taken aback by that. "Well, at least you've gotten faster," she said, moving to fetch her wrench. "I told you to have someone call to warn us before you dump your sorry butt on our front step."

I didn't give her any facial reaction. "None of your other customers call ahead," I pointed out.

She stared at my hands. "You found a way around your voice," she finally said after a moment, then
smiled. "I'll have to learn that. You can teach me while you recover this time. Oh, your friend's here, Mister McLaughlin. He's done with the surgeries, he's ready to move onto attachment and rehab. Thanks for sending him to us."

I shrugged it off, moving to head inside. She hurried to keep up with me. "Hey, what's wrong? You don't seem yourself."

I mentally put up a wall between her and I, trying to keep her away from what I had already become. That was the damnable part of it all; I was still 'normal' enough to know how utterly fucked up I was. I didn't want her to be hurt by that. Better to lose her love than to ruin her.

I looked back at her, showing utterly nothing on my face. Before I could think of anything to safely say, McLaughlin limped out onto the porch with a crutch. "Eddie, you jackass, you used me to get out of that place," he accused with a grin.

I turned my gaze from Winry to McLaughlin. "I've told you not to call me that."

McLaughlin grinned wider. "Forget it, Eddie, I'm calling you that until the day I die. Don't tell me you came out here to visit me."

"You wish. I have to have my ports expanded."

McLaughlin winced. "Ouch. Sucks to be you, buddy." I stepped up onto the porch, breaking away from Winry, who followed after, looking a little dejected.

"Grandma!" she called into the house. "Ed's here!"

"So I hear, child," Grandma said, coming out into the main room from the kitchen. She looked at me. "You've grown, boy."

I hadn't grown that tall, yet, actually, but I'd put on a lot of muscle up north, and my chest and shoulders had outgrown my casing. Without my turtleneck and coat to hide it, I looked lopsided.

"Can you put a rush on it, Grandma?" I asked hoarsely. "I need to get out to my new command in East City."

"Ed," Winry protested, "you have to give your body time to heal from the expansion. You can't do a rush job on this. This isn't like having your automail repaired, you know."

"We'll see what we can do," Grandma said, pacifying us both for the moment. "Mister McLaughlin, why don't you go back to your exercises while we take a look at Ed? You'll have plenty of time to chat later."

I didn't return the wave he gave me as he hobbled off to obey Grandma Pinako's instructions, just followed her into one of the exam rooms. "Take off your coat and shirt, let's see what we're looking at," she instructed. I stripped down to my pants and took a seat.

Winry stepped up behind me to start examining my port, when she stopped, and ran a hand down my back. I tensed. "Ed? What... where did these scars come from?"

I wasn't about to tell her about getting the lash. I wasn't about to tell anyone about that. I shrugged it off. "I did serve on a battlefield," I reminded her, assuming McLaughlin had told her where we met.

"These don't look like bullet wounds, Ed," she said flatly. "What happened?"
I looked back at her. "Nothing of your business," I finally settled on. "Are you going to examine my port or what?"

I can't say I stopped treating her so badly over the years. In fact, my treatment of her became worse and worse. I was afraid of what it would do to her to find out what had been done to me, and I was even more afraid of what I would do to her for her prying if I didn't shut down completely on her. And Winry never did like being left in the dark.

I left it to McLaughlin to teach her field sign if she really wanted to learn, and left as soon as I feasibly could to go to my new command under Mustang out east. I wasn't sure what to expect with him. I remembered him being very different in how he ran things than Archer ever was, which was a welcome relief.

I still decided to be cautious. Once I got off the train, I made my way to East Headquarters, asking the woman at the front desk where Colonel Mustang's office was. With directions firmly in mind, I went about finding the place.

His office had an outer office, as I remembered from his time in Central. His subordinates were busy with work when I stepped in. Lieutenant Hawkeye was nowhere to be found, but I figured either she hadn't gotten transferred with the rest of them, or she was busy doing something else.

Part of me looked forward to seeing her; I remembered how nice she was to Nina and I, although she was terribly inept with handling children. Still, she'd tried, and had included Nina on things despite there being no reason to, and that had made me happy at the time. But I didn't want anyone seeing what had happened to me, so I kept my eagerness carefully contained as I greeted Lieutenant Havoc.

"I'll announce ya," he said, getting up. "The boss has been waiting for you, you know. Your automail's all good to go for awhile?"

I nodded, following him to the door leading to Mustang's private office.

"Good to hear," he said, then knocked. At Mustang's command to enter, Havoc stuck his head in. "Hey, Boss, the kid's here to see you." After a moment, Havoc looked back at me and held open the door. "Here you go. Glad to see you back, Ed."

I stepped into the office and saluted as I'd been trained to do. Mustang may have run a looser ship than Archer had, but I decided to toe the line until I knew exactly what to expect, and even then, I probably would continue toeing that line so I didn't get out of practice in case I was transferred away again.

"Welcome back, Edward," Mustang greeted me once he'd dismissed Havoc. Hawkeye stood next to him, a clipboard in her arm. "You're a sight for sore eyes and worried minds."

I didn't drop the salute. "Reporting for duty, sir," I whispered, willing as much volume as possible into my voice.

Mustang blinked. "Edward, I know you're used to a firebase, but you're back in the world, relax. Drop the salute, and stick to sign. That's why I had the lieutenant teach it to you."

"Yes, sir." I let my arm drop, habitually moving them behind my back in an 'at ease' position, then thought better of it, if I were back to using sign, so dropped them to my sides instead.

Mustang and Hawkeye exchanged a glance. "I don't have any assignments for you right now. I want you to focus on what a State Alchemist is supposed to be worried about; your research. Not military protocol or duties or anything of the sort. You're a civilian advisor again. Welcome back."
I could've died at those words. They made it more real that I was no longer a soldier, that my commanding officer was welcoming me back to the world. I didn't want to lose the habit of living otherwise, but the sheer relief that unknotted muscles I hadn't realized were tense was enormous. I wanted to cry.

Instead, though, I continued behaving 'correctly', and said, "Sir, I'd like to officially declare my area of research."

"Already? I didn't think you'd had enough time to decide that," Mustang commented, kicking his feet up on the desk. "Go ahead."

I actually hesitated a second, staring at his feet. I knew he'd done that on occasion back in Central, but seeing an officer in uniform- my direct commanding officer, at that -with his feet up on his desk made my brain blow like a vacuum tube in a radio.

No, pay attention. Don't show those reactions, just do your damn job. Let Mustang play whatever game he was on. I wasn't going to chance changing my behavior. "I'd like permission to research the Philosopher's Stone," I said, ready to present arguments if he asked why.

He went very quiet, watching me for a long, measured moment. "That seems reasonable. Of course, I would like to be kept apprised of your progress and informed of any breakthroughs. Fair enough?"

Fair? It was more than fair. It was freedom compared to what I was used to, and I wanted to dissolve with relief. I forcibly kept up the mask I wore as I replied, "Yes, sir."

Now that I had official permission for my research, it was only a matter of time before I'd get Al back.

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'A matter of time' became entirely relative as the years rolled by. I made several more stops at Rizenbul for surgery as I shot up like a well-watered weed, until I stood about six foot four with nearly two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle and steel. Eventually, my entire right clavicle and scapula had to be replaced with solid steel to hold up to the weight of my automail.

Cornello wasn't the only man I ever killed. He was the only one I'd come across guilty of trying to raise the dead, but I ran into my share of criminals, murderers, rapists, wife-beaters, the like. Happens when you stick to the seedier parts of cities. I should've turned them into the police, but all I was was an eye witness. I had no evidence. So instead, I'd administer my own brand of justice as the rage would well up, leaving me blind to the consequences of killing. Every one of them was another Tucker to me, another Archer.

Without any proof, though, I was left with a reputation that became a very heavy burden as people began to call me the Attack Dog of the Military.

It was late 1915 when I went to Liore and sent back a report to Mustang about the gathered weapons. The military would be interested in putting down an armed uprising and an investigation should be done. There weren't really laws against private citizens owning weapons, but some of those weapons were military grade, not civilian weapons.

With my report on its way to Mustang, I went back to searching for leads on the Stone. I found myself in a small town just south of Liore. Don't remember the name of it, it was something unremarkable. It was raining that day, as the rainy season was starting, and I'd been denied shelter at the local inn. I wasn't surprised; with my coat, everyone knew who I was right away.
So I found an old barn to hole up in until the morning, when my train would come, taking me to some other town.

I was up in the hay loft, curled up on the fresh hay when I heard the door below me open. I wasn't really asleep yet, and that had me fully awake, adrenaline coursing through my veins. I didn't think anyone had seen me come in, and I wasn't spooking the animals, so I hoped it was someone coming in for something else, and not to chase me out. I didn't want to go back out into the rain.

I peeked over the edge of the loft, hearing a little girl crying and a young man, no older than I was, snapping quiet orders. Finally, they moved into my view. The boy was maybe fifteen, wearing a soaked t-shirt and sleep pants, and the girl was eight, maybe nine, wearing an equally soaked nightgown. She was crying, while he had a firm grip on her arm.

"Hush up!" he snapped, pulling her in front of him and moving his hand from her arm to her hair. His other hand went for his pants. "You want me to tell Mom and Dad what you do? They'd disown you, now stop crying!"

"Brother, I want to go back to bed, please don't do this, I don't want to do this!" she sobbed.

I didn't need to see anymore. Another worthless abuser who destroyed everything he touched, needing to be made gone. I jumped down from the loft, letting my automail leg absorb most of the impact and grabbed the boy by the throat before he could get his dick free to shove into his sister's mouth.

He made a noise that sounded like a squawk, hands going for my automail hand around his throat, trying to pry it free. My grip stayed strong though as I squeezed, intent on snapping his worthless damn windpipe.

"Stop it!" the little girl shrieked over the noise of the storm outside. "Stop it, don't hurt my brother!" She started beating her fists against my hip.

I remembered another small child crying for his brother's sake, and let go of the boy. "Don't ever touch her again," I snarled at him, then turned, jumping up and grabbing hold of the hay loft edge. I swung my feet forward, and on the backswing, kicked my feet up against the edge and pulled myself back up into the hay.

I grabbed my suitcase and took off, out the hay loft door, out into the pouring rain. My hiding place had been discovered, there was no point in staying there.

I hadn't gotten more than a hundred yards when I heard a thundering crack behind me, and a sharp pain in my back, by my automail port. I went down with a thump. There were a few more shots that rang out in the night, and then it was silent. I risked pushing myself up, despite the pain, and looking behind me. I couldn't see anyone, but lights in the house were on now. I had to run, or risk getting shot again.

I could feel the blood running down my back, hot under the cold rain. I had a pretty good feeling I'd be fucked. I didn't know of any doctors in town, and it was questionable if any would or could treat me. And the nearest military base with medical facilities was a long train ride away.

I managed to get down to the station before I collapsed. The pain was burning, taking over my awareness, and I was feeling foggy-headed. It was blood loss that was going to get me, I realized.

I spent my last waking moments apologizing profusely to Al for failing him.
The Truth That You've Buried

Chapter Summary

I hurried out to the train station, bought my ticket, and sat guiltily at the platform, my stomach tying into tiny little knots. I’d never disobeyed an order from Mustang; Archer’s training had scared me out of the idea of disobedience ever again. I didn't know what kind of punishment to expect from him, if any.

With those thoughts racing through my head, I boarded the train and headed for Central.

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i'm searching for answers
not questioned before
the curse of awareness
there's no peace of mind
as your true colours show
a dangerous sign
-Within Temptation

I got goddamn lucky. I woke up in a small clinic that seemed to double as someone's home. I was laying on my stomach, looking out into the room when I reluctantly cracked open my eyes. The unfamiliar surroundings put me on my guard and I tried to sit up.

Ha. Fuck that.

With a muted groan, I flopped back down.

I heard a sigh from somewhere out in the room. "Why do the young always try to move before they're healed?"

I twisted my head around to finally spot the doctor, a middle-aged man with black hair that was graying at the temples. He was watching me with weary amusement, although I picked up a bit of wariness in that expression that I figured had to do with him knowing exactly who his patient was.

"We're stupid that way," I carefully signed one-handed, then let my arm dangle over the bed.

"Field sign. There's something I haven't seen in a very long time," he said with a sigh. "I can't say that I missed it. Well. I suppose I have to ask. What's the Fullmetal Alchemist doing in my town?"

"Just passing through, doc," I said, then tried again to sit up. The pain wasn't too bad, more of a dull ache that had simply caught me by surprise the first time I tried. "I'll be out of your hair as soon as you release me."
The doctor looked genuinely surprised. "You mean, you're not here to arrest me?"

I sat up, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed and leveled a sharp look at the doctor. "Why would I be here to arrest you?" I demanded. "What're you doing that I should arrest you for?"

The doctor looked at me, obviously hovering indecisively between confession and dismissal. "Who's your commanding officer?" he finally asked.


The man let out a sigh of relief. "So the military hasn't sent its attack dog after me. Did you come here looking for the Stone, then?"

I looked around for my gun. It was with my coat and shirt, still in its holster, on the other side of the room. I'd have to go for alchemy, then. I stood, transmuting a blade from my automail with a clap of my hands. The doctor's eyes widened at the transmutation, then further as I walked over to him and held my blade at his throat. "Tell you what," I whispered, "you start answering my questions, and I won't do a damn thing to harm you."

The man looked up at me, fearful. "I saved your life," he reminded me with a tremor in his voice.

I hesitated. I wasn't one to ignore equivalent exchange like that. He saved my life, I should spare his and not say a word to the military. Not that it'd do me much good, I didn't even know his name. But if he was a criminal, I couldn't ignore that. "We'll see if that was a good idea or not," I told him. "Start by telling me why the military gives a fuck about you, old man. I don't like leaving criminals running around to hurt people."

"Hurt people?" The man shook his head. "I help people. I go by Doctor Mauro, but my real name is Tim Marcoh. I'm not a criminal, I'm merely a deserter. And judging by the scars on your back, you would understand why I would leave."

I tensed. It was ridiculous that he wouldn't have seen them, treating my back for a shotgun wound, but I didn't appreciate the reminder. "Yeah, you oughta have them, too, if you're a deserter."

Marcoh looked at me sadly. "Equivalent Exchange? How old are you? Sixteen? You're not old enough to remember what happened to Ishbal, or know the truth, are you?"

"No, but I'm old enough to remember Drachma," I hissed. "And it's the same damn thing."

Marcoh shook his head. "Maybe it is brutal up there, but Ishbal was a massacre, not a war. The Ishbalans could barely fight back once we brought in the State Alchemists. It was a slaughter. My work was used to slaughter thousands of innocents."

I lowered my blade, watching him. The regret in his eyes was real, and I could sympathize - 'alchemist, be thou for the people.' That was supposed to be our creed. Finally, I transmuted away the blade. "Keep talking," I said, sitting down across from him.

"My area of research was alchemical amplifiers, such as the Stone," he said. "Which is why I'm surprised that it's a coincidence that you of all people came to my town. I developed a working prototype in the Fifth Lab in Central. When the State Alchemists were deployed to Ishbal, I was ordered out of the lab and to bring my research with me to the front lines. The combat alchemists were given small samples to wear as jewelry, and... well, after that, there was no more Ishbal. Everything was wiped out almost overnight. My prototypes worked too well, in my opinion."
I wasn't sure which had my attention more- the confession of a massacre that had been lied about back here at home, or the working prototype. Well, for a second, anyway, then the working prototype firmly overrode my sense of horror at the wholesale slaughter. "You made the Stone?"

Marcloh frowned. "A prototype. A true Stone would be many times more powerful, and much more costly. In all your research, have you discovered what the main ingredient is, Fullmetal?"

Main ingredient? "I haven't found a damn thing about how it's made," I snapped, a bit peevish at my own failure. "Just a lot of dead ends."

The doctor looked down, folding his hands in front of him and resting his elbows on his knees. "That's because the Stone is made from living humans," he said quietly. "We sacrificed prisoners and deserters to create those prototypes."

I stared at him, letting that sink in. It was one thing to maybe sacrifice criminals who hurt other people; they couldn't hurt anyone else if they were stopped like that, and maybe could be put to good use rather than just taking up space in the prison system, but deserters? They weren't criminals, they were just people desperately afraid of something. And I had a sinking feeling that it required a hefty price of people to make these prototypes. I couldn't imagine how many criminals I'd have to hunt down, adding to my reputation, to make a full Stone. Or how long that would take.

"My research sickened me," Marcloh continued. "But their use sickened me more. So I hid my research with the instructions for making more, and took the last of the prototypes and ran. Your commanding officer is the one that let me go. He's the only one who knows where I am." He got a wry smile on his face as he looked up at me. "Well, and now you."

For a long moment, I was quiet, looking at him. Finally, I lifted my hands to sign, ignoring the pain in my back. "What do you mean? I didn't meet any Doctor Marcloh, I met Doctor Mauro, who saved my stupid ass."

Marcloh visibly relaxed. "Thank you, Fullmetal." He looked like he was considering something. "Why are you after the Stone, if I may ask?"

I hesitated. Equivalent exchange demanded at least a partial confession, and if I wanted his research, I had a chance if he knew it was for Al and not for the military. "My family," I finally answered a bit evasively. "Something happened, and the Stone can pay the price to undo it. I can't get more specific."

A smile crossed Marcloh's lips. "That's a much better reason than I had, or that I figured you'd have. I can't give you my prototypes. I use those in my practice and without them, I could not help the people here, or have helped you. But I can tell you where I hid my research. Maybe you can make use of it." He paused. "How did a boy your age get the reputation you have?"

I shrugged. "People don't believe I only go after criminals," I said simply. That was truth enough, and while I typically didn't try to argue my defense, I didn't make a secret of it, either.

Marcloh blinked. "Then what were you doing harassing the Hawkins boy?"

My eyes narrowed. "He was trying to shove his dick in his sister's mouth. I don't like people who hurt little kids like that."

That took Marcloh aback, and he blinked rapidfire at me. "He was doing that to little Sofie?" He shook his head. "And we all thought he was such a good boy. I'll talk to Sofie, see if I can't convince her to tell her parents."
"Good luck with that. The abused rarely rat out their abusers." I would know. All these years and I still hadn't told Mustang what had happened to me or who had done it.

Marcoh raised an eyebrow. "You know from experience?"

I felt a tremor in my upper lip as it curled back into a snarl. "That's none of your business, old man."

Marcoh held up his hands. "I won't pry, as you said, it's not my business. But you might consider telling your commanding officer. He's a good man." I didn't say anything, staring at him unblinking. Finally, he sighed. "All right, all right, subject dropped."

"Where'd you hide your research?" I asked, changing the subject.

Marcoh blinked, looking at me blankly for a moment. "Oh yes. I hid it in the First Branch Central Library. Right under their noses." He gave me a bland smile. "The one place they wouldn't think to look."

"Sneaky old bastard," I said. "You said you worked at the Fifth Lab? Isn't that shut down now?"

"Officially, it was shut down when I worked there," he answered, sitting back. "Boarded up and condemned. All the work there was highly questionable, and carefully concealed."

I thought about that. "Do you think there might still be some samples of what you made there?"

That seemed to catch Marcoh off-guard, and he made a show of thinking about that. "Possibly," he said. "There was quite a bit of unused research in the main room I worked in. I don't know if Grand or anyone else has used it since or not. I haven't heard anything, and it would probably wait to come out until another war started up."

My lip curled back in another snarl. "Grand doesn't have anything to do with that research anymore, or Central at all," I told him. "He pissed off the führer and lost his watch and his rank. He's serving up at Fort Briggs under General Armstrong now, and I'm sure he just hates it."

"Do tell." Marcoh raised an eyebrow. "What did he do? He was one of the favorites when I served under him."

"He transferred someone off the books that he was supposed to keep close to him." I didn't feel like giving him the full story.

Marcoh seemed pretty shrewd for an old guy, if the knowing look he gave me was anything to go by. "Well, we'll leave it then. You lay back down, you're not done healing yet. My research isn't going anywhere while you finishing healing here."

My back was hurting enough that I agreed with his assessment, and went back to the bed to lay down on my stomach, turning my head to watch the room. He gave me some medicine, and pretty soon, I was asleep.

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I was there only a few days before Marcoh let me go. I don't know how long had passed between getting shot and waking up, but I figured it couldn't be long. That prototype he'd used had worked a miracle. I should've been dead.

My first stop was Central. I needed to get to that research.
I admit, I ignored an order. I stopped at a military outpost on my way to Central to grab some proper rest in a dorm, and as I usually did, I checked in with Mustang. He'd required I update him regularly, and I'd never failed to obey that order. I viewed it as my exchange for the freedom I had.

"Colonel Mustang speaking," Mustang's voice came over the phone.

"Colonel, it's Fullmetal," I answered, straining my voice.

I could hear him sigh on the other end. "Edward, what have I told you about getting someone else to make the call for you? You'll hurt your throat."

"Sir, my work is classified, that'd be a security breach," I reminded him for the thousandth time. "I have a lead in Central. You should have my report on Liore."

"Yes, about that." I heard papers shuffling in the background. "Besides the fact that your handwriting looks like you wrote it with the pen in your mouth, I need to speak to you about Liore. I want you on the next train back to East Headquarters. Your lead in Central can wait."

I went very quiet for a moment. "Sir, everything I know is in that report already."

"Yes, but I wish to speak to you in my office. Return on the next train east."

Something about his terse tone told me I was in trouble. I mumbled an obsequious "yes sir," and hung up. I could've imagined it, I thought. Maybe that tone didn't mean that, and he was simply stressed with all the other paperwork that crossed his desk that I didn't envy him for.

But right then, I couldn't afford to let Marcoh's research get found and taken out of my reach. Grand couldn't do anything about it anymore, but someone else might. I needed that formula desperately. I also needed to investigate the Fifth Lab, see if any of his research might still be there. I didn't want to follow the formula, but maybe I could find a way around that that Marcoh hadn't. And even if I couldn't, if he had leftover research materials in the lab, I could avoid having to use lives that were still living.

I decided it was too important. I would have to take a chance and go to Central and get that research, then run back to East City. I could investigate the lab afterwards, it wasn't going anywhere, but even if it did, I'd be screwed without the original formula.

I hurried out to the train station, bought my ticket, and sat guiltily at the platform, my stomach tying into tiny little knots. I'd never disobeyed an order from Mustang; Archer's training had scared me out of the idea of disobedience ever again. I didn't know what kind of punishment to expect from him, if any.

With those thoughts racing through my head, I boarded the train and headed for Central.

It was about five thirty in the morning when the train pulled into Central. I snapped awake from a light sleep as the train lurched into the station, sat up and stretched. Light sleeps, I didn't mind. I didn't dream during them. Of course, they're not really refreshing when you're bone tired because you've been running yourself too hard.

Either way, I didn't have time to stop and rest, I had to get Marcoh's research and get out. The library wouldn't be open yet, so I made my way to a small cafe that serviced early morning risers- business and military alike. I ordered a coffee and sat in a back corner, watching the clock and the door about equally. I didn't like being surprised by people coming in, so I always put my back to a wall and my face to the door.
It wasn't long before my quiet corner was eclipsed by a large shadow. I glanced out the window, noticed a figure in military sweats jogging by, and dismissed it.

Until the shadow came back.

He was a tall man, insanely so, with muscle mass that put me to shame. He peered down at me with bright blue eyes, mouthed my name behind a prominent mustache, then proceeded towards the entrance. I sank in my seat.

Now, don't get me wrong, even I can't hate Major Armstrong. He's too much of a giant teddy bear. But he's huggy, and entirely too jovial for my tolerance. I debated trying to escape, but he was a fast bastard, already inside and making his way towards me.

I sighed. "Hello, Major," I greeted as he sat himself across from me, blocking my view of the door, which made me nervous.

"Edward Elric!" he cried in too loud of a voice for five thirty in the morning. "It's been awhile since you've been to Central," he noted.

"Just picking something up from the library," I said evasively. I wasn't going to reveal Marcoh's secret and get him and myself into trouble.

"I can accompany you!" he suggested enthusiastically.

I shook my head. "My research is classified, Major, you know that."

He looked crestfallen, then perked up. "Do you have plans to stop and see the lieutenant colonel?"

Again, I shook my head. "I don't have time," I signed. "I'm just here for a book, then I have to go back east."

He gave me a shrewd look. "Were you ordered back east, Edward Elric?"

I shrugged him off, not liking how astute he was. "I won't take long here," I signed one-handedly, taking a sip of my coffee.

"Then I will accompany you to the lieutenant colonel's office," he declared, despite my earlier statement that I didn't have time. "He'll want to see you, he's at his office now, working on the Liore case you sent to him."

I blinked. "I sent that to Mustang," I said.

"Yes, and Colonel Mustang had to submit it to Investigations in Central due to the possibility of a rebellion," he explained. "It's now in Lieutenant Colonel Hughes's hands, and he's been at the office early every day the past few days to deal with it. It's turned into quite a mess."

"What kind of mess?" I asked, wondering what exactly had happened. When I left, Cornello was dead, so the whole thing should've fallen apart.

"The military was dispatched to investigate," Armstrong explained. "The people were armed and reacted. There's two factions of citizens. One that turned against the priest at the words of some girl that was declared clinically insane by our doctors, and the ones in the cathedral, who were loyal to Cornello. The faction that believed the girl sided with the military when the military promised to keep her safe."
“Where is she now?” I asked, with a sinking feeling that I not only knew where, but who that girl was.

"She's being kept in an asylum here in Central," he said. "She was completely insane, talking about an angel that came to save her from God's snake. No one could decipher what she meant."

I sighed. I decided not to tell Armstrong what I knew about Rose. He was a good man, almost too good to know such things. I couldn't stomach the idea of the face he'd make when he found out, like I was corrupting his innocent world view. That was one thing I was careful about; I never let them see anything that would make them anything like me, that would wipe my taint off on them.

Hughes, though, he'd seen enough to be able to handle it. I didn't want to see Rose in an asylum, I didn't like what I heard about patient treatment in those places. I was no psychiatrist, but even I knew some of their techniques were barbaric. So, despite my better judgment, I'd go talk to Hughes and try to get Rose out of that place.

I grabbed my suitcase. "I'll let you get back to your run," I squeaked out. "I have to go see the lieutenant colonel."

"I shall escort you!" he said, standing up. "The lieutenant colonel's nerves are a bit frayed, I don't think he'd appreciate your silent and stealthy approach to entering the office."

I gave him a flat look, then motioned for him to lead on with surrender. He stuck by me the whole way to Hughes's office, as I knew he would. Armstrong was one of those men, when he said he was going to do something, he stuck by it, come hell or high water. See why I can't hate him? God help me, I tried. Just to keep everyone distant, I tried to hate them all. Never worked out the way I wanted it to.

"Lieutenant Colonel?" Armstrong called into the office once we'd gotten there.

I heard a wordless noise from inside that sounded like Hughes trying to sleep noisily on his work, then he finally spoke. "Alex, is that you? Send rope, I'm buried in paperwork."

We stepped into the office, me hiding a childish snicker behind my perpetual wall. Armstrong-whose first name I'd never known before- saluted. "I'm afraid I'm all out of rope, sir, but I brought an excellent alchemist to transmute you some."

Hughes lifted his head, a sheet of paper stuck to his forehead, and peered out from under the paper at me. "Well. You're someone I didn't expect to see here," he said, grabbing the sheet of paper off his face.

I shifted uncomfortably. "Just here for something in the First Library, sir." Despite his insistings otherwise, I stalwartly refused to call him by his name, addressing him properly as an officer of higher rank than I. I refused to get out of that habit, should anything ever happen to me again. I spent my life in perpetual readiness to be abandoned, locked away somewhere in the military where nobody friendly would ever find me again.

"I'm never going to break you of that habit, am I?" he said, as he said every time I saw him. He was met with the usual silent stare. "Well, anyway, what're you two here for?"

"I simply am escorting him, sir," Armstrong said. "I assumed your nerves would appreciate a warning that he was coming, rather than his usual stealth."

Hughes glanced at me, then smiled at Armstrong. "Thank you, Major. If that's all, you're free to return to your run."
Armstrong saluted. "Yes sir! Thank you!" He looked at me. "Take care of yourself, Edward Elric." With that, he left, leaving me alone with Hughes.

Hughes sat back, shoving a stack of paperwork to the side so he could see me. "So, what do I owe the pleasure of this visit to?"

I set my suitcase down on the floor beside me so I could sign properly. "The girl who led the second faction in Liore, was her name Rose Thomas?"

Hughes blinked, then sat up and looked through some of the paperwork on his desk. "Uh... yes, it was. You knew her?"

"Briefly. She escorted me to the church and secured lodging for me. She was sexually abused by Cornello and who knows how many of the other priests. For quite some time, if I had to guess by her behavior. She wanted me to kill him with her gun."

"But you had other ideas," he said, pulling out another sheet of paper. "Specifically, hacking off his arm and leg and sticking him in a statue." He gave me a flat look. I kept my poker face on, revealing nothing in reply to that. I didn't have to justify myself to him, and the man I did have to report to would understand. He was there. He knew. He may not like it, but at least I wouldn't have to explain myself.

After a moment, he sighed. "All right, I won't push the issue. That's Roy's headache. But what're you asking about Miss Thomas for?"

"She needs to be gotten out of that asylum," I said. "Those places are barbaric and they won't help her. She's an abuse victim, we should be helping her, not institutionalizing her."

Hughes stared at me over his glasses. "And where do you propose we send her, Edward? She's not well, she can't function in the outside world anymore."

"Given a chance, she could," I argued. "Send her to Rizenbul, I'll send a note ahead to Grandma and Winry, they'll take care of her. She doesn't need to be electrocuted or tied up in a white coat or fed medicines that as soon will kill her than help her."

"You seem to care an awful lot, Edward," Hughes said, sitting back and pushing his glasses up his nose a little.

I shrugged. "I just don't think we should condemn an abuse victim to those places." Not that I wasn't scared at how easily that could've been me, if I hadn't changed in an 'acceptable' way. 'Acceptable' being used loosely, as I was pretty sure my family and commanding officer weren't too amused by the changes.

"All right, Ed, I'll see what I can do. But no promises." Hughes sat back again. "So what're you in town for?"

"As I said before, just something in the First Library, sir. I have orders to head east after this." I prayed he wouldn't follow up on that statement. He and Mustang were close and I knew there was practically nothing I could safely say to Hughes that wouldn't get back to Mustang and vice versa.

Hughes looked at me. "Yeah, I know about those orders. Roy called me, telling me to keep my eye out for you, in case you decided to stop here before going there. I seem to recall him saying that you were supposed to go there first, then come here."

I stayed ramrod straight, hiding behind my military training to keep from showing the fear I felt. "It
was an important matter, sir."

"Hmm, so I see. Have a seat, Edward."

I stiffly sat down in one of the chairs across from his desk, staring straight ahead blankly as he picked up the phone. It took all of my military training to keep my face straight as he asked to be put through to Mustang's office.

I was in trouble. That horrible 't' word echoed through my head as he waited for the other end to pick up. I'd taken a chance and then done something stupid. For a stupid girl I barely knew. If I hadn't gone to Hughes to get Rose out of that institution, I'd be in the clear and only have to figure out an explanation for my tardiness out east.

"Yeah, Roy? Guess who just dropped himself on my doorstep?" Hughes sat back, kicking his feet up on the desk in a distinctly Mustang-ish manner. "Mm-hmm. He says he's looking for something in the Library. Just stopped by to try to get that Miss Thomas out of the asylum and out east in Rizenbul. I know, what a philanthropist. So what should I do with him, Roy?" After a pause, he said, "you sure about that? All right, will do. See you when you get here."

That ugly 't' word echoed louder and a distant part of me wanted to cry. All I'd done was try to help one stupid girl and found myself in so much trouble that my commanding officer was coming out here to personally get me. I felt nauseous.

Hughes hung up the phone. "Okay, Edward. You're to stay with my family until Roy gets out here to pick you up. You'd better make sure you get whatever it is you came for out of that library."

"Yes, sir," I signed, not trusting my voice, even if it could muster volume without cracking painfully.

"Relax," Hughes said. "You're not in as much trouble as you think. Roy sounded more exasperated than angry. Mostly surprised, you've never failed to obey an order before. Why the change now?"

"Sir, it has to do with my work and my work is classified."

"And yet, it's no secret. We all know you're after the Philosopher's Stone. What we don't know is why."

And it was going to stay that way. I made up a lie quickly. "I saw Tucker had been researching the Stone and Grand was interested in it," I said. "I became curious. I didn't think the military chased after fairy tales, so I decided to see what there was to it."

"Better reason than Roy had for his research. He just likes fire." Hughes grinned.

I blinked. "Sir?"

"You heard me," he laughed. "Roy's a firebug. Has been as long as I've known him. Got him into plenty of trouble back at Academy."

I could easily imagine my commanding officer in trouble. For many things, namely his complete lack of regard for military regulation. Hughes wasn't much better. I sometimes wondered how those two kept their jobs.

That didn't mean I knew how to safely react. I stared blankly at Hughes, uncertain what to say to that. He watched me for a moment, then sighed. "Nevermind," he said. "Go on, go get whatever it is you need from the library, then head to my place. I'll warn Gracia you're coming. No stalling or goofing around, Edward. To the library and then right home."
Then he did something that I was surprised he hadn't done sooner. He leaned forward in his seat, hands folded in front of him. Everything about him was all wrong, nothing like Archer, but I still knew 'higher ranked officer upset with you' when I saw it. "Edward, I've let Roy take care of your leash, and I've helped him minimize the public attention to your crimes. But I swear to all that's holy that if you endanger my family, you'll find yourself in trouble that Roy can't get you out of."

I had to grip the edging of my coat in tight fists to keep from shaking. That was a promise, not a threat, and I knew the strength of the bonds of a family. Even so much as hinting at trouble for Gracia and Elysia, and I had no doubt that Hughes would find a way to kill me. I'd probably let him.

I floundered for a response that would satisfy him without getting myself into more trouble than I already would be if I screwed up somehow. "I don't hurt friends."

The dark clouds of impending danger scattered under a strong wind of confusion. "I didn't think you considered any of us friends."

"You've helped me. Does that count?"

No, that wasn't a dodge. I honestly couldn't consider them friends the way I was sure Hughes was defining it. They were my friends the way Farrand, McLaughlin, and O'Riley had been. I knew I could count on them, and I'd offer the same in exchange.

Hughes still had a note of bewilderment in his expression, but it was softer, with a bit of exasperation mixed in. "Good enough, I guess." Then he shooed me to the door. "Go on, library, straight home. I gotta call Gracia."

I saluted. "Yes, sir."

"And stop that."

I saluted again, then headed out. I had hoped, that since I was stuck in Central until Mustang got there, that I'd have time to go to the Fifth Lab and investigate, but obviously, I was on house arrest, so there went that idea. Maybe I'd get a chance to sneak away, but I was loathe to take it. I was already in enough trouble that Mustang was personally coming to Central to drag my sorry ass back east. I couldn't imagine the trouble I'd be in if I broke this house arrest I was under.

The library wasn't quite open yet, so I parked my butt on the steps and waited. It was another hour before anyone showed up, and by then, I was getting sleepy, despite having pulled out my travelogue to work on notes.

The woman that showed up was average height and build, with somewhat wild brown hair and big glasses that hid half her face.

"Are you waiting for the library?" she asked nervously, watching me.

I put away my travelogue and nodded, grabbing my suitcase and waiting somewhat impatiently for her to open the door. She adjusted her glasses, then went up to the door and unlocked it, holding it open for me. "You're Fullmetal, aren't you?" she asked as she followed me inside.

I wondered what gave it away. The recognizable coat, or the fact that I hadn't spoken. Either way, it was kind of obvious, so I simply nodded once, then wandered off to find my research journal.

I realized, very quickly, that I'd be looking forever in that library, if Marcoh had hidden it here. It could be anywhere, and probably in the 'wrong' spot for its author, title, and content. So I made my way back to the front desk and approached the young lady that had opened the library.
"Can I help you?" she asked, precariously balancing a stack of books.

"I'm looking for a research journal by Doctor Tim Marcoh," I whispered. "Have you seen it?"

She set the stack aside and adjusted her glasses. "I'm sorry, by who?"

"Doctor Tim Marcoh," I repeated, then pulled out a note and scribbled down the name for her.

She eyed the note for a moment, muttering the name over and over. "Ah, yes, I did see it. One Thousand Meals for Daily Living by Doctor Tim Marcoh. It should be in the back, second floor, on the third shelf. Do you need help finding it?"

I shook my head and headed for the stairs to the second floor, then to the back. I eyed the shelves. Even with her instructions, it looked like it'd take awhile of searching.

Actually, I ended up getting lucky. I found it in a back corner, wedged in between a copy of Ruther's Advanced Physics, seventh edition and an old copy of the Twelve Gates. Two books that never get used anymore hiding an invaluable book.

I grabbed the journal and took off, tucking it in my suitcase so nobody would know I was taking it.

"Did you find it?" the girl at the front desk called to me as I headed for the door.

I turned and nodded. "Didn't have what I wanted though," I called back as loud as I could, then continued on through the doors. It wasn't technically okay to leave with library property, but this wasn't technically library property anyway, so I wasn't technically stealing. The original author had given it to me. I liked how it worked out.

I ran the whole way back to Hughes's place, already coming up with excuses for why I was so late getting there. Mostly, I practiced telling Missus Gracia that the book was hard to find in my head.

Turned out I didn't have to. She smiled when she answered the door. "Come in, Edward. Maes warned me you'd be coming. Did you find what you were looking for?"

I nodded. "It was hard to find," I panted out as I tried to catch my breath. It's a rather long run from the library to Hughes's place.

"Well, I'm glad you found it. Come in, come in. Elysia's home from school, she'll love to see you." She stepped aside, holding the door for me.

I stepped in, and was immediately assaulted by Elysia. "Ed!" she yelled happily. I picked her up and got out of the front entrance. She squirmed in my grip as I walked to their dining room with Gracia following up behind me.

I set my suitcase down on the ground beside a seat, then turned my attention to Elysia. "Have you been behaving?" I whispered.

"Put me down, you can sign!" she said, squirming out of my arms. I set her down, relieved to not have to keep physical contact, then took a seat. She proudly lifted her hands and began signing. "I've been good in school, so Papa bought me a teddy bear! I can show you!"

Her clumsy hands were a little hard to read, but I understood well enough. "Why don't you go get it and show me?"

Elysia ran from the room, heading back for her bedroom, and I glanced at Gracia. "Her father spoils
her,” I said.

She laughed. "He does, but not so much that he's above disciplining her when she's misbehaving, which is all a child really needs. She's a good girl, why not reward her?"

"Where'd she learn sign?" I asked, pulling my suitcase up onto the table and carefully extracting the research journal from it.

"She learned from her father specifically so she could talk to you when you came over," Gracia said, taking a seat across from me. "I tried to learn, but I don't have a head for languages aside from my own, I'm afraid. I know a few basics, though."

I set my suitcase back down, locked up again, and gave her a grateful look. "Thank you for the effort."

She grinned. "See, 'thank you' I recognized. Didn't catch the rest of that, though." I repeated myself, speaking out loud this time, 'loud' being relative. She waved it off. "It's the least we could do for you, Edward. Now, if we could just get you to stop calling my husband 'sir', we'd be good."

I gave her a blank stare, only to have the moment rescued by Elysia dragging an enormous white bear behind her. "See? This is the teddy bear!"

I stared at that bear. It was at least as big as Elysia. Good god, Hughes, what the fuck. Even now, I still think that. Hughes, if this ever gets back to you... what the fuck is wrong with you?

Elysia hugged that bear like she might die if she ever let go. "Papa got it for me!" she declared happily. "I was a good girl at school."

I leaned forward, a little more on level with the little girl. "I'm sure you were. What grade are you in?"

"Kindergarten!" she announced proudly. "I'm head of my class."

"That smart, huh?" I said a little distractedly as I turned to my book.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her nod. "Mama says I got my brains from Papa."

I glanced at her. "Your papa is a smart guy, so I'm not surprised."

She lifted her head, trying to see over my shoulder. "Whatcha reading?"

"A research journal," I told her.

She set the bear down and half crawled onto my lap uninvited and looked at the cover. "It's a cook book. Ed, why are you reading a cook book? That's something Mama would read. Or one of those books with the smushy stuff on the cover."

I glanced at Gracia, who flushed a bit. "She's talking about my romance books," she said. "Elysia, I think Ed has work to do, why don't we let him work?"

Elysia looked back at me with a frown. "All right," she said, squirming off my lap and grabbing her bear. "Mama, I'm going to go play tea party with Mister Bear, okay?"

"Okay, sweetie," Gracia said, watching as Elysia dragged her enormous bear back to her room. Then she looked at me. "Don't worry, even if you didn't act too much like an adult for someone your age, I wouldn't make you play with a little girl. I know how teenage boys are with their dignity."
I snorted. "Less dignity, more lack of knowing what to do with her. Winry was a tomboy, not a girly girl. Except the time she dressed up Al in her best dress."

Gracia laughed. "I'm sure you never let him forget that, either."

One corner of my lips quirked up, mostly to hide how much both corners wanted to go down. "You know it."

"Have you eaten yet today?" I shook my head. She stood. "I'll go make you something for lunch. You enjoy your cook book," she said with a wink and a laugh, then disappeared into the kitchen.

I stared down at the book, telling myself that it was the key to getting Al back, even if I doubted Winry'd ever dress him up again, I could still give him crap about that one time again. Just like a big brother should be doing, not... this.

I opened the book and started reading.
Orders were waiting for us. Mustang took them, motioned for me to be seated outside his office, then disappeared into his inner office, reading over the orders. He came bursting out a few minutes later, staring at me hard.

I stared back, wondering what I did this time, when he motioned to Hawkeye, who immediately went into his office with him. Several terse minutes passed while I mentally squirmed in my seat, stomach doing somersaults. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Hawkeye left the office with forms in hand, and Mustang called me into his office.

I stepped in and snapped a salute. "Yes, sir?"

"Drop the act, Edward. I'm not interested," he said irritably. "We've received orders from Central."

Over the years, I had a number of what I can only assume are hallucinations. They always happened when I was sleep deprived, and I can't explain how else I was hearing my brother's voice so clearly but that my tired mind was conjuring it up to torment me.

It was my third night at the Hugheses'. The clock striking the half hour jarred me from the half-asleep daze I'd fallen into, and I jumped, sitting bolt upright in my seat. My vision abruptly settled into focus, colors defining themselves into shapes and then into objects with a startling clarity as adrenaline poured into my system. My heart pounded furiously, muscles trembling from the effort to not move as my mind struggled to catch up.

No gunshots.

No men screaming as they died.

No desperate cries.

No transmutation going horribly wrong.
Finally, I relaxed, rubbing my eyes as I peered at the clock. Eleven-thirty.

"Fuck," I swore, voice breaking as it tried to force volume when there was none to give. "Dummy. 'S the fourth time," I berated myself, giving my cheek a light slap. It was late, and my body was aching for sleep, but there was still so much work to be done, and time pressed heavily on me, marching on without a second thought to my attempts to fix things. Seconds ticked by and those were just that many more seconds I had to figure out how to make up for.

Stolen seconds from a stolen life.

I shoved back from the desk, beginning to stalk around the small bedroom the Hugheses fixed up for me. The room felt too small though, right then, too confining, my coat too heavy on my shoulders, my footsteps too muted against the carpet.

Sleep-deprivation was warring with my guilt, with that restless, never ending drive to-

I tightened my fist, stopping in my tracks and shoving the thoughts aside forcibly. They only made me less inclined to get the sleep I needed.

The importance of work was starting to fade under the need to stay awake, to avoid the thoughts that hounded me when I let myself stop running from them long enough to rest.

I sighed, shrugging out of my coat and tossing it on the bed. Trying to work would only make me fall asleep again, at this point, and I wasn't ready yet for that. A moment later, the holster strapped over my shoulders and my gun joined the coat, then I pushed the sleeves of my turtleneck up on my arms a bit, easing myself down into a battle-ready stance.

To exercise the mind, one must exercise the body. To control the mind, one must control the body. One must never lose control of either.

I started slowly, letting muscles that were stiff from sitting all day warm up as I moved through exercises I remembered from my days learning under Teacher in Dublith with my brother, movements my body knew better than my mind. My thoughts faded in behind my focus on following the pattern, my body taking control away from the frantic desperation that had begun to take hold of my mind. Left step, left punch. Right step, right punch. Switch. Step, kick, down block.

My shadow on the wall next to me moved along with me, mimicking my movements like a partner. I stopped, my left fist still extended, just beginning to repeat the pattern, glancing over at the shadow.

"Why'd you stop, Brother?"

"Did we ever figure out the point of those things before we went back to Rizenbul?" I whispered, letting my arms drop as I straightened. I swore I heard laughter.

"You didn't? Jeez, Brother, I thought you were supposed to be the smart one."

A wry little smile tugged at my lips. "Better at alchemy. Doesn't mean smarter." I shook my head, stepped over to the bed, and sat down cross-legged, flipping on the bright bedside lamp and reaching for my gun. "You know you'd been right? Shoulda listened to you."

Some part of my mind realized I must be really sleep-deprived, or possibly just dreaming at this point. There was no one there, no voice answering back, no body that made the bed shift a little as a weight that wasn't actually there settled onto it across from me.

"Mm, maybe. But you're my big brother."
As if that made any of it okay. I snorted, popping the clip from the gun and beginning to disassemble it, inspecting each piece for obstructions and malfunctions before laying them carefully on the bed in front of me. "Some big brother. Supposed to protect you."

"You're trying to now, aren't you?"

I laughed outright at that, bitterly, my voice cracking painfully as I did. "Wouldn't call this protecting," I answered, digging into my suitcase by the bed and pulling out a small box with a cleaning kit in it. Remove the slide, clean it and the rails. Then the brass brush, clean the bore. I knew this routine almost as well as I knew my exercises; I could about clean a gun in my sleep for as often as I'd done it.

"Then what are you doing?"

I froze, heart seizing up painfully in my chest, then I dropped the brush and grabbed a dry patch, focusing in on my work again.

"What I have to," I finally answered, smoothing a coat of gun oil down the bore. "Fixing what I broke." My expression didn't waver, brow knotted slightly in concentration as I worked, despite the icy lump that had settled in my chest and made every breath, every damn heartbeat hurt. "I'm sorry. Don't expect you to be proud of me."

Hughes found me an hour later, sitting up asleep on the bed, my gun almost reassembled. He shook me awake, taking the parts of my gun away from me and setting them on the desk next to the journal I had been reading earlier. "Come on, Ed, get some sleep."

I blearily opened my eyes. "Al? What time is it?"

"It's half past midnight," Hughes told me. "Come on, into bed with you."

"My sidearm. I need to finish cleaning it," I protested lamely, trying to pretend I didn't just think I was talking to Al.

"You can do that in the morning. Sleep now." Hughes had no problem pushing me back onto the bed, and little trouble pulling the blankets out from under me. "You don't want to sleep in and miss Gracia's famous pancakes, do you?"

I grumbled a bit, kicking off my boots and grabbing the blankets from him. "They're only famous because you brag too much."

He grinned at me as I settled into bed. "I can't help that I have the perfect wife. Now sleep. There'll be time in the morning to work more."

I was asleep before my head hit the pillow. Of course, I dreamed, the very thing I'd fought off sleep so valiantly for. Nightmares about that horrible night, reaching and almost touching Al's hand, only to have my throat burn as I was pulled back. I dreamed about O'Riley and Farrand and McLaughlin, and the lash and the gunfire and the artillery.

I woke up at about six in the morning in a cold sweat, feeling ready to lose my dinner from the night before. I sat and swallowed back the desire to puke, which wouldn't have done me any good anyway, as all the food was out of my system, so all I'd get would be dry heaves. After a minute, my stomach calmed down; at least until it decided it was hungry. And it was always hungry, between being a teenage male and my automail. Fortunately, I could smell Gracia's 'famous' pancakes cooking, so I got up and ran a comb through my hair, pulled it back up into a ponytail, and pulled my boots on.
I noticed my sidearm sitting disassembled on the desk. Compulsion led me to reassembling it as quickly as possible, and re-arm myself, pulling on my shoulder holster. I didn't feel safe without it on, even in Hughes's home.

I tromped downstairs, feeling a little bleary still from sleep, my eyes half-lidded as I navigated as much by smell as by sight into the dining room.

Where Mustang was waiting for me.

I stared in horror for a moment before snapping to attention with a salute. "Sir."

He looked at me blandly. "Unclench, Fullmetal."

I moved smoothly into an at ease position, ignoring the fact that I needed my hands to talk. I could use my voice, it was quiet enough in there. I kept staring straight ahead, not wanting to look at the disapproving expression on his face.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Elysia looking between us in confusion, and Hughes pinch the bridge of his nose. Mustang stayed stoic, staring me down, before sighing. "Drop the military act, Edward. We're in a friend's home." I hesitated, then straightened, letting my arms hang stiffly at my side. Mustang watched me, that unamused look on his face. "You're not in trouble, Edward," he finally said.

I wanted to collapse with relief, but I locked my knees and kept my back stiff. "Yes, sir."

"Edward, sign. I didn't have you learn sign just so you could ruin your voice like that." If anything, Mustang seemed to be getting angrier, and despite his assurance that I wasn't in trouble, I grew more afraid.

"Sorry, sir."

"Sit. Gracia's worked hard on this breakfast, it'd be a shame to let it go to waste."

I swallowed tightly, looking between him and Hughes, who just kinda shrugged and motioned to an empty seat across from Mustang. I awkwardly took the seat, carefully watching straight ahead without actually looking at Mustang.

Breakfast was painful to get through. Mustang stewed in annoyance, I was almost paralyzed with fear, moving through the motions of breakfast through some base function that overrode my fear. Elysia was silent for once, and so was Gracia. Even Hughes didn't try to lighten the mood.

Eventually, though, Elysia had her fill and started getting fidgety, so Gracia finished her breakfast and took the little girl upstairs to get her ready for school. Across from me, Mustang took a deep breath, then sipped his coffee before releasing the breath slowly. "Edward, I'm going to repeat myself. You're not in trouble. So kindly relax."

My shoulders slumped a bit, as I looked down at my empty plate. My stomach was too tied up in knots for seconds, but I knew I'd be hungry relatively soon again, as I hadn't had nearly enough to accommodate my automail.

Instead of reaching for more food, I apologized again. Which turned out to be the wrong thing to do. "Stop apologizing, goddamnit!" Mustang sighed, ran his hand over his face, and sat forward, resting his elbows on the table and his head on his hands. "Edward, I'm going to ask you a question you've refused to answer in the past, and I'm going to ask you to not dodge it this time. Who did this to you? Who made you so afraid of being in trouble that you act like this?"
I remained silent, staring down at my empty plate, refusing to say anything. It wasn't out of a sense of duty to Archer- Archer could hang for all I cared. Bradley would be very embarrassed if it came out that the military abused their child State Alchemist, and I'd threaten that before I let Archer come near me again. But even if I were not above threatening going to the press, I was not actually willing to talk about it, so it was more of a bluff than a threat.

I didn't think I could ever face Mustang or Hughes again if I told them who and what. Or even just one of those. It was my dirty secret, locked away where I didn't want anyone to see, even if the scars were visible.

Finally, I formulated an answer that might stop the line of questioning. "It was classified, sir," I whispered. "I can't tell you. Who or what."

Mustang's fist hit the table. "Damnit, Edward, you're civilian, not military. Quit- " Then he sucked in a sharp breath, closing his eyes and holding that breath before releasing it. "Edward? Abuse is not in the military handbook. I'm not blind, this wasn't caused by the time at the firebase, was it? War does all sorts of things to people, but abuse has a fairly recognizable set of symptoms. Stop protecting him, Edward, and give me a name."

I cringed. I supposed, in retrospect, I was acting like a classic case, so it wasn't much mystery how they figured it out. But I wasn't talking. So I diverted the subject. "I'm sorry I disobeyed orders, sir, but there was something important in the library I had to get."

"Doctor Marcoh's work?" Mustang asked, sitting back and at least temporarily letting me get away with drawing the attention off my past.

I nodded. "He gave it to me. I needed the full formula."

Mustang was silent for a long moment. "Maes, I don't think it has to be said-"

"Nothing leaves this table, Roy," Hughes assured him. "You know that."

Mustang nodded, then looked back at me. "Marcoh contacted my office on a secured line, Edward. Said he saved you from a gunshot wound."

I closed my eyes. "A slip, sir. Nothing more."

"Mm, comforting. You nearly died, Edward. I'm taking you out of field work until you've worked through that formula. Marcoh said something else to me. That the reason you got shot was because you were bothering a civilian. Who was trying to abuse his little sister. He said that you mentioned you've never gone after anyone but criminals like that. Is that true?"

I shrugged. "There's never any evidence. So I don't bother with the police."

Hughes and Mustang exchanged a look. Hughes pushed his glasses up on his nose a bit. "Well, that explains those deaths, Roy. If we can get evidence, we can start turning his reputation around."

"I'll let you work on that, Maes." Mustang looked back at me. "I'm going to ask you again for a name, Edward. Whatever was done to you, it was wrong, and I doubt even Bradley would've approved."

I gave him a stony stare in response. He waited for what seemed like forever as my resistance waned. I was not used to openly defying my commanding officer like that. Finally, Mustang shoved away from the table with a disgusted noise. "Pack your things, Fullmetal. We're going back east."
"Yes, sir," I whispered, then got up and went upstairs to pack. Again, not that I had really unpacked in the first place, but I had to stow the research journal and the notes I was making in my suitcase, hidden from sight. I wasn't sure yet if I'd tell Mustang about the main ingredient in those or not. On one hand, if I wasn't ordered to, don't volunteer the information. That's one thing about the military. Unless you're ordered to it, don't volunteer to it.

Plus, I was pretty sure he'd used one of those things in the war. I could only imagine how he'd feel knowing he used something so ghastly. Only people like me should ever know that and still be willing and okay to use it. Mustang was a good man, he'd done nothing but try to help me, I couldn't do that to him, anymore than I could let my corruption affect Winry, who I still loved dearly.

Which pretty much decided it for me. Unless I was asked, I'd keep that a secret from Mustang. Like so many other secrets I kept. I was sure he kept secrets from me, too; the military ran on secrets and information that was 'need to know' only.

I returned to the dining room, carrying my suitcase that held everything I had in the world. Mustang glanced at me, then whispered something to Hughes, before walking towards the door, waving to Hughes as he went.

Despite that, Hughes walked us to the door. He stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. I looked at him. "Edward, give Roy a chance. He only asks these things because he cares. More than you probably know."

I gave him that same stonewalled look I'd give them earlier. "I'll take that under consideration, sir." Then I walked after Mustang, following him to the train station.

***

The train ride straight east from Central lasts about three days, give or take delays. I spent the entire time buried in the research journal, just letting it filter into my brain to try to analyze it without my notes, since there wasn't a place to spread out and work.

Mustang remained quiet, letting me work for the most part, occasionally asking questions of the noninvasive variety, but mostly, he was just quiet. I was okay with that, continuing my reading, interrupted only by sleep and food. (Which was awful- avoid train food if you can.)

In the final leg of our trip, Mustang started questioning me again. This time about my research. "I assume, Edward, that you'll let me see your analysis of the text once you are done?"

I didn't look up as I signed. "Of course, sir. That was the condition of my research as I recall."

"Yes, so it was." Mustang glanced out the window, then back to me. "Tell me, what do you know about the text now?"

"That it was very well encrypted." Smartass, I know.

"Anything else?"

I glanced up at him. "Sir, I've had the text for six days, with no research material to correspond with it. I'm still looking for ingredients, much less an array."

"What did Marcoh tell you about the text?" Mustang folded his hands on one knee that was resting up on top of his other.

I froze. "It's the devil's work, he said."
"Why?"

I sighed and sat back. "He told me the main ingredient." Damn. It was like Mustang had read my mind and knew I wouldn't be telling him this unless asked.

"And that is?" Mustang's look was one of strained patience, like he was tired of playing my games, but tolerant enough to keep doing it.

"You won't like it, sir," I pointed out. "I don't even like it."

"I don't expect to like it, Fullmetal. I assume that anything that powerful would require a dreadful sacrifice. I just don't know what. And you do. I'd like you to tell me."

I stared at him for several heartbeats, before swallowing and looking away. "Live human beings, sir. Quite a large number of them."

Mustang stared in horror at me, then slowly turned away, looking pointedly ill. "I see. And you intended to make one of these prototypes?" He turned back to me.

I stared down at the journal. "I was going to see if he had any material left where he worked when he was in Central, but I never got a chance to investigate there. I don't know what I was going to do if there was nothing to be found there."

He looked to say more, but the train lurched, pulling into the station at East City. He looked up, looked at me, then shook his head. "You can stay at East while you decipher that text. Maybe you'll find something you can use."

"I intend to, sir."

We exited the train, making our way back to East HQ. Orders were waiting for us. Mustang took them, motioned for me to be seated outside his office, then disappeared into his inner office, reading over the orders. He came bursting out a few minutes later, staring at me hard.

I stared back, wondering what I did this time, when he motioned to Hawkeye, who immediately went into his office with him. Several terse minutes passed while I mentally squirmed in my seat, stomach doing somersaults. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Hawkeye left the office with forms in hand, and Mustang called me into his office.

I stepped in and snapped a salute. "Yes, sir?"

"Drop the act, Edward. I'm not interested," he said irritably. "We've received orders from Central. The situation in Liore has escalated and they're looking for a State Alchemist to put the fire out, as it were."

I dropped my arm, blinking at him. "Sir?"

"Specifically, they're requesting you, Edward. With promise of a clearance rank of lieutenant colonel if you succeed." He didn't look happy.

Me, I wasn't sure what to think. My commanding officer was clearly livid about this order, and I couldn't tell if it was because of me, or because he wasn't getting a promotion like he usually went for. After that argument in Central, and what Hughes said, I suspected it was out of some kind of concern for me, but I had trouble wrapping my head around that idea.

"Yes, sir. I'll do my best." Something occurred to me, and I felt the blood drain from my face. "Do I
"Have to wear the uniform?"

"No, Edward, you're not being drafted to war, just given a mission as a State Alchemist." I had to lock my knees to keep them from giving way with relief as he continued on. "I'm sending Lieutenant Hawkeye with you to act as your bodyguard. She was my bodyguard during the Ishbal War, she's good. She's the best, in fact. I trust you'll treat her well."

"Of course, sir." What a lie that turned out to be.

"She's gone to requisition the appropriate weapons. Is there anything you'll need?"

I mentally took stock. I had my sidearm, with enough ammo to last me awhile, my combat knife, and my alchemy, something that couldn't be taken away like a weapon. Everything I needed. I shook my head. "No, sir. I have enough ammunition to last me."

He closed his eyes for a moment, then sat back. "You and the lieutenant will depart immediately."

"Yes, sir."

I met Lieutenant Hawkeye at the train platform. She was lugging a duffel bag and a rifle case and had an intent look as she looked at me. "Hello, Edward."

I stared hard at her. "The name's Fullmetal," I corrected her. "I outrank you and we're on military business."

She looked mildly shocked, a break in her perpetual poker face, then she nodded. "As you wish, Fullmetal, sir."

The train showed up late, as usual, and we made our way up to Liore, making the last leg of the journey by way of a military personnel truck, with a few other soldiers being dispatched to make up for losses.

I wondered if Rose ever did get out of that asylum, if Hughes was able to pull the right strings, or if she remained there, locked up and probably drugged out of her mind, what was left of it. I didn't focus on that thought too hard, focusing on the mission as we slunk into town, stopping at a building on the outer edge of the city.

We made our way upstairs, where the site commander was waiting for us. She was a red-headed woman named Kris Sorenson, a captain over a company when the situation probably called for less and better led. Well, that's what I was there for, to end it and let these people go back to normal stations rather than battlestations.

"The rebels in the church seem to have a neverending supply of ammo," Sorenson said, pointing to a map. "And they never respond to calls to enter peace talks."

"They're fanatics, that's why," I pointed out to her. "They'll defend that chapel to the death, believing they won't die, or if they do, they'll be brought back."

Sorenson looked horrified. "Why would they believe such a stupid thing?"

"Because that's what Father Cornello was teaching them. They'd 'witnessed' examples of the dead really coming back to life, but every time, those so-called resurrected people had to leave town for one reason or another, which is why nobody ever saw them, but believed anyway. They're nuts, stupid, and fanatical, which is the worst combination in the world."
"We'd like to take some for questioning, to ask about this rebellion your report mentioned, Fullmetal. They certainly have the firepower for it, and they're doing it now, but you know how the military is."

"Yeah, I know, and I know it's not going to happen." Boy, was she naive. She'd obviously never encountered nutballs before. Given that she was an officer in the Amestrian military, she should've realized she already was one. "So we'll focus on eliminating their threat to us and the rest of the town," I continued. "If they all happen to die in the process, so be it. They're not civilians anymore, they're soldiers and soldiers who are defying the governing body of the land. Are they all in the church?"

I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Hawkeye looked shocked at the way I was talking, like she was still remembering that little boy from Tucker's house. They all really needed to get that image out of their head. Even if I hadn't been abused, I'd been in a war zone, and that alone changed people. I imagined Mustang and Hawkeye were both different from how they'd been before the Ishbal War.

Sorenson nodded in response to my question. "They are. They have a helluva range with how tall that thing is."

"I need to get as close as possible. Then I'll simply seal them in. They'll run out of oxygen within a couple days, if they don't bake first. Think you and your men can keep me safe until I get close?"

Sorenson stared at me. "Sir, that's hundreds of people. And a very horrible way to go."

"They'll have a chance to get out," I said. "If they surrender. If not, oh well, one more enemy of the state gone. Don't tell me that the military didn't do a thousand times worse in Ishbal."

Sorenson clearly couldn't deny my final charge, and sighed. "Whatever you think best, sir. We're here to protect you while you do the job."

"I'll position myself as optimally as I can, sir," Hawkeye assured me. At least she had the good grace to stay focused on her mission while she was busy being horrified at my willingness to make a human-berry pie out of a bunch of idiots.

I nodded to her. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

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"Citizens of Liore, please cease fire. Citizens of Liore, please cease fire." The words echoed down every street and alley in the town, making it hard for me to listen for signs of an attack, an ambush, of enemy fighters nearby.

They'd rigged speakers for the ham radio at the military's stronghold to send out the announcement of a ceasefire, giving the people of Liore a chance to listen, to stop the killing on both sides, to negotiate.

So far, they hadn't listened.

I ducked down behind some fallen stone from the house at my back, tucked in an alley. Hawkeye was on the roof of a nearby building, trying to cover me from above, but I knew she could only do so much when I was moving out of her sights more often than not, trying to work myself as close to the church as possible.

Cautiously, I started to glance around the corner towards the church, ducking back quickly as a gunshot went off somewhere nearby and a sharp piece of shrapnel- from what I couldn't be sure- nicked my ear. I hissed, jumping back and glaring in the general direction of the shooter as best I
could from my position.

Damn it.

I needed to get a little bit closer, just a little bit. I didn't want to waste energy on transmuting a cover wall for myself, I needed to save that. I knew I wasn't gonna get to an ideal distance for what I was planning. But if I couldn't even safely see around the corner to defend myself-

Wait. A mirror. I glanced around as I dug into my inside coat pocket, fumbling around for my coin purse. Messing with money was technically illegal, but then, so was murder, and human transmutation, and a few other things I'd already done. I was long past the point of caring about the legality of my actions.

A small, short transmutation heated and rapid-cooled some sand that had gathered against the wall of the building- the streets were usually dusty, but sand at least had been absent for the most part the last time I had been there. But the residents of the town were far more occupied with staying alive than cleaning up the streets. Another low-energy transmutation fused some silver from one of my coins to the back of the makeshift glass.

The mirror wasn't terribly clear, but it would do.

Holding the mirror up with my right hand, I tilted it back, looking around for my attacker. I caught sight of a Liorean up on the rooftop, just barely visible over the ledge, rifle trained down at the corner I was hiding behind.

Before I had a chance to decide how to line up a shot, the man yelled and flailed a hand up to cover his eyes, his gun falling from his hand as the reflection of the brutal desert sun on the mirror flashed into his eyes.

Well. Not exactly what I was planning, but it'd do.

Pulling my gun from its holster, I leaned out around the corner, aiming and squeezing off two rounds. More yells, and the man fell from the roof to the street below with a distinctly wet-sounding thump. Not bothering to reholster my gun, I pocketed the mirror and slipped down the street, pausing only to make sure the man was actually dead.

Really, I shouldn't have wondered with the headfirst dive the guy had taken off the fourth story of a building. The mess on the ground would've made most men's stomachs turn. Fortunately for me, I'd seen enough bloodshed to not let myself be affected.

Not when there was still work to do.

I only got a few more blocks closer to the church before gunfire forced me under cover again, ducked down in an open doorway of what had once been someone's home. A glance in my mirror didn't reveal where more than one or two of my attackers were, and unless Cornello had actually managed to secure something better than standard fare semis for his would-be army, there were too many shots too close together to be just the two.

This would have to be close enough.

After taking the time to move some rubble from inside the building to close off the doorway, I moved through the house, looking for a way to a lower level, a basement perhaps. With the heat of the desert in the daytime, subterranean living space would almost be a requirement, I would've thought.

Ah, there, some stairs.
The basement was significantly cooler, and my heated skin welcomed the relief, sticky with sweat under the black turtleneck and dark violet coat I wore, my heart beating a mile a minute, blood hot with adrenaline.

I realized I'd have to allow myself a moment to cool down, to gather the energy I had left. The transmutation I was planning would drain me, large scale to an extent I didn't often do. I shucked my coat and settled down on the floor in the darkest corner of the room, leaning back against the cool stone of the wall. The heat didn't touch down here that much, giving me a moment to catch my breath.

Memories of another cool basement crept back on me, memories of things not human, not entirely animal anymore, and god, poor Nina-

I shut my eyes tightly, shoving away the images, the memories that crept in past my defenses. No. No time to think about that, if I didn't focus, I could be dead.

Struggling back to my feet, I took a deep breath, forcibly pulling back control over my nerves. Summoning all the strength and concentration I had, I clapped my hands and pressed them to the wall. Move.

The ground began to tremble and heave at the touch, responding to my will as alchemical energy crackled across the wall and through the ground, under the streets. I only barely noticed the sounds of the stone streets cracking as the ground beneath shifted, moving towards the church.

Polished marble, sandstone, brick and mortar. Solid materials, all of them, and all at my disposal with the giant cathedral, along with the ground beneath the foundation. Slowly, the foundation shifted, slid up to cut off underground passages. Sweat dripped down into my eyes as I concentrated, visualized, and felt as stone snapped into place, closing off windows, exits, and doors. Stone slid up, melded with the archway of the front entrance, covered the front door and rendered it useless.

The transmutation faltered as the seal began to work over the open airways on the roof, material and energy running low, and I grit my teeth, called on reserves of strength my body was loathe to give after an afternoon of fighting and running. Slowly, surely, the last opening into the church closed off, sealing the building off completely.

Outside, the sounds of gunshots had died, leaving things deafeningly silent. I leaned back against the wall and slid down to the floor. "Let's see if you bastards will negotiate now," I whispered to myself.

I grabbed my coat and returned to the surface, getting smacked in the face with a dry, windy heat that made me want to pass out in my heavy clothes. Hawkeye met me on the ground. "Are you all right, sir?"

I nodded, rubbing my forehead. "Just a little tired, Lieutenant. Let's go back to base."

"Yes, sir." She shouldered her rifle and offered her shoulder to me. I shook my head, turning it down, dragging my tired, heat-exhausted ass along side her. We eventually made it back to base, and I immediately sought out water, guzzling down the better part of a canteen filled with warm water. I dumped the rest on my head- it was warm, but still cooler than I was.

"Sir, are you all right?" Hawkeye asked, putting a hand on my shoulder.

I shoved away from her, staring at her. "Don't touch me." I had a thing about being touched, especially by military. I let Winry and Grandma Pinako touch me out of necessity. Beyond that, I didn't want anyone to come into contact with me.
She withdrew her hand, watching me. "I apologize. I also repeat my question: are you all right?"

I nodded. "Just overheated."

"You're bleeding. Your ear, you got hit. Come here, sit down and let the medic look at that."

I lifted my hand to my ear, feeling where the shrapnel had ripped off part of the cartilage. I winced at the pain before I could help myself. Hawkeye waved over the medic, trying to herd me away from the canteens and over to where the medic could fix my ear. I'd always have a gnarled mess of scar tissue there, but I didn't mind. If it weren't for the fact that I didn't want infection, I would've refused the help.

I sat patiently, if a bit grumpily, as the medic patched up my ear, cleaning it for infection, which burned like a motherfucker, like it usually does, and then bandaged it to prevent it from getting dirty.

After I was patched up, I retreated to a second story window to watch out on the street below. I stayed relatively unmolested until the sunset, when brilliant reds and purples painted the desert. Hawkeye joined me then, giving me a respectful distance, but staying present. I resented her presence, and did my best to ignore it, watching the sun set in the west.

Eventually, I began to notice the sounds of children playing. I looked down at the street, seeing maybe a half dozen children running around in the cooling sands. I turned and looked at Hawkeye. "What are those kids doing there?"

Hawkeye strode over to me, looking out past me to the ground below. "It appears they're playing, sir."

I grit my teeth and resisted the urge to smack her. "No shit, what are they doing in a fucking war zone, Lieutenant?"

"Those are the children of the refugees from Liore," she answered, stepping back. "There was a group that followed an insane woman against Cornello's forces. Those are the orphans that will be shipped to East City, processed, and hopefully adopted out."

I settled back down, watching the children, before an awful thought occurred to me. "Where are the children from Cornello's group?"

"In the church with their parents, sir."

A church I'd sealed off and left them to die in. I didn't kill children, they were innocents, up until a certain age of accountability. My stomach dropped into my feet. I swallowed tightly, curling up tighter in my seat on the windowsill.

And then I remembered another child handed a gun and made to fight. Those children were just as much combatants as their parents were. It didn't mean nothing. I steeled my gut against the nausea and reminded myself of that little mantra. It didn't mean nothing. Eventually, my stomach settled and my conscience stopped aching so much. Just another enemy combatant. It didn't mean nothing.

"How long do we have to stay here?" I asked her.

"We're shipping out tonight, sir. There's a base not far from Liore that we'll be staying at tonight, and then we'll be on our way back east."

Good. I was done with that hellish place.
A Single Battle Lost

Chapter Summary

"Edward Elric."

Oh goodie. I just loved being approached by growling voices.

tomorrow's another day
and i am not afraid
so bring on the rain
-JoDee Messina

For what reason I still can't fathom, the military bunked us together. I decided to sleep on the floor, until Hawkeye- somehow telepathic or maybe just very observant- requisitioned a cot to go next to the bed. She insisted I take the bed, claiming it'd be easier for her to get up if something happened, and she was my bodyguard.

I thought the whole thing was stupid, so I said whatever and sat on the bed to start working on my report for Mustang. As soon as Hawkeye stepped outside though, I pulled out my notes on Marcoh's work and got to work. I needed that array, and fast, before the military pulled anything else with me. The fact that they gave me a clearance rank promotion, without putting me in uniform to do it, led me to believe that something was going on, and I didn't want to fall under Central's eyes again before I could finish with Marcoh's research and had exhausted it for possibilities.

Hawkeye returned to the room some time later, after the sun had gone down and the night had cooled, and I quickly hid my research notes under my report. She didn't say anything about my obvious deception, a fact I appreciated.

"How are you, Edward?" she asked, unbuttoning her uniform jacket and hanging it up.

I didn't look up from my writing, giving her a whispered, off-handed 'fine'. She stepped over to the bed, sitting crosslegged on the floor by it, on the side closest to where I sat. "Are you sure that nothing is bothering you?"

For a moment, I wasn't sure what she meant and I blinked blankly at her, before it occurred to me that she, like Mustang and Hughes before her, was trying to 'reach me' and 'save me' or whatever bullshit they were doing. Prying, is what. I turned back to my work. "Just these reports that the colonel requires."

"Of course," she said quietly. "Edward, I won't say that what happened in Liore was okay, because we both know it wasn't, or that everything's going to be fine. Because I can't promise that. However, I can say that the reason I am here is to help and."
"That's enough, Lieutenant," I interrupted her, not looking at her or away from my work. "You're out of line." I didn't know how to be a commanding officer, my only two real examples were Mustang and Archer, and my hostility to having my scars poked and prodded at tended me towards Archer's style, which would prove disastrous as time went on.

She tried again after a moment of silence. "Do you know why, on the field, a platoon lieutenant will follow the sergeant instead of the other way around, if they're a good one?"

I knew why, I'd seen it in action up north, in Acheron, in Firebase Olivia. But I decided to humor her, putting on a patient look and setting my pen down, half turning to her. "Why?"

"A platoon leader is straight from the academy. A sergeant has the years of field experience to recognize when a situation's a bad one. It's not out of line to advise a senior officer on matters to protect them. A subordinate helps their superior to their fullest extent."

I gave her a cold stare. "I have more field experience than you think, Lieutenant," I said with a bland tone to my movements. "Your advice is duly noted."

"I'm not saying you don't, Edward," she said quietly. "I know you do. Part of my job is to help you avoid making choices that could harm you as well."

"I don't need your concern, Lieutenant," I said one-handedly as I stacked my papers into neat piles. "And you will address me as Fullmetal." I put my papers away in my travelogue and Marcoh's book and tucked them away in my suitcase, then turned to face her and speak with both hands. "I outrank you, Lieutenant. I'm pretty sure officers are trained better than to act so familiar with their superiors."

She closed her eyes. "As you wish, Fullmetal. But I wasn't trying to speak to a superior officer, I was trying to speak to that boy I taught sign to all those years ago. Who I can still see behind those walls."

I jerked my head back, recoiled as if struck, my lips curling up over my teeth in a defensive snarl. "I didn't take you for the emotional sort, Lieutenant," I said as mockingly as I could force myself to do. I liked her, I didn't want to be an outright jerk to her, but she was pushing at all my buttons right then, and I didn't appreciate it.

She smiled. "Funny what walls can hide, hm?"

"I'm not interested in what you think you see, Lieutenant," I snapped, my gestures becoming marginally more animated with my anger. "I've taken your advice into consideration, and quite frankly, I don't give a shit. This conversation is over."

Her smile fell, flattened into a thin line as she pursed her lips in frustration. "As you wish, sir. I'll leave you to your work for now." With that, she got up and headed for the door, pulling her jacket back on as she went.

I let out a shaky breath. She was going to be difficult to work with if she insisted on trying to 'save me' from myself or whatever she thought she was doing.

Our train broke down in a small down called Andover and we were forced to take shelter at the local inn while the train was repaired so we could make it the rest of the way to East City. It was raining, of course.

It didn't typically rain in the east this time of year, waiting for when harvests had been gathered and people surrendered the land to the winter floods, too warm along the desert's edge for snow.
Rizenbul was the same, too far south, too far east for snow, and I preferred it that way. When I was little, Al and I both wished for a chance to see a good snow storm, to curl up by the fire as it raged outside, and then go play in it the next morning.

I hated snow now.

I wasn't exactly fond of rain though, either. Which is what it was currently doing, the weather cooled by the system that had moved in and started dumping rain on the land.

The fact that it was raining and rather cool out was made worse by the fact that I was out without my coat, only my long-sleeve turtleneck and my pants between me and the chilly rain that was soaking my skin and clothes and plastering my hair to my face. I huffed, pushing my bangs away from my eyes as I wandered the streets, avoiding going back to the hotel just yet. I'd had to pay the average man's daily wages to get someone to wear my coat to keep Hawkeye from realizing right away that I wasn't actually sitting at the bar so I had a moment's chance to escape, to get away from my newly-adopted shadow. Once she'd returned to the room the other evening at the base, I hadn't been given a moment's peace, the woman hanging just behind me, always within eyesight, silently fussing when I woke up in cold sweats, and I was sick of the forced company.

Now that I'd been out in the rain for awhile, I couldn't say with total certainty which was worse- the lieutenant or the damn rain.

I ducked underneath a storefront's awning, squeezing the water out of my ponytail as I cast the sky a baleful glare. It wasn't even storming, no thunder or wind or lightning to match my foul mood, just a steady, constant, downpour. Fucking rain.

I mentally snarled at the weather, crossing my arms and huddling back against the brick wall, debating about returning to the hotel. Hawkeye had no doubt discovered my duplicity by now, and possibly was already looking for me; if I went back now, I might actually have some time before she returned to try to unknot some of my nerves, or at least change and warm up a bit.

Brother, did you hear that?

I paused, half-straightened away from the wall, and glanced around. The sound had been so quiet, I almost hadn't heard it past the steady thrumming of the rain on the awning above my head, but it'd been distinct, a quiet little squeak of a noise.

Willing whatever it was to make a noise again, I began to look around, inspecting the edge of the building and down around storm drains a bit hesitantly, not entirely certain I'd actually heard anything, the more I looked and thought about it. It would've been easy to imagine- it'd been raining like this back then, too, hadn't it?

Brother, where are you going?

"'m not gonna get caught, dummy," I whispered without thinking, ducking my head around the corner of the building into the alleyway, peering through the shadows and the rain. A couple metal trash cans, some old crates and boxes, nothing out of the ordinary for an alley next to a store. Anything in there could've made the noise, maybe the hinges of the screen door that was half hanging open down the way, or something.

I was imagining things.

The noise came again, and I frowned, turning back again, crouching down and trying to peer behind the trash cans.
Something moved, and I crawled forward, wondering if perhaps I'd completely lost my mind to be crawling around on the streets in the rain like that, but a frantic scramble of movement told me that I at least hadn't been hallucinating.

The kitten was barely bigger than my fist, its black fur soaked and its entire body quivering. It let out another pitiful meow, trying to huddle down farther away from me without moving from its spot. I smiled, holding out my hand. "Hey," I whispered. "I'm not gonna hurtcha. C'mere."

At first, the kitten didn't seem too inclined to listen to me, but it wasn't leaving, either, so I reached out my other hand, slowly moving to pick it up. The kitten cried in protest as my soaked gloves covered it and I hauled it up off its feet, but didn't take long to settle down and cling fearfully to my shirt once I'd gotten it gathered up in my arms properly. "That's a bit warmer than the street, huh?"

My nerves began to jangle and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I abruptly realized I was being watched, and I whirled, tensed and looking around quickly for my observer. The only other person stupid enough to brave this wet and miserable weather was probably the lieutenant, looking for me.

A man in a faded old tan coat and sunglasses that did little to nothing to hide the large white scar that marred his face was watching me a few paces away, and I could swear he hadn't been there before. Walking by, maybe, and stopped to wonder what the hell the soaked blond kid was doing, crawling around like an idiot and talking to no one. I narrowed my eyes, taking a step back and holding the kitten away from the man defensively, giving him a challenging stare.

The man looked at the two of us over the rim of his glasses a moment, then lifted his head, pushing his glasses farther up his nose. "This is poor weather. You should find shelter," was all he said before he started walking away.

I didn't answer, just frowned in confusion as I watched the man leave, only relaxing once he was long out of sight, then looked down at the kitten. "Probably a good idea," I agreed under my breath, and turned and hurried back in the direction I'd come.

To my surprise, the lieutenant was waiting for me in our hotel room, her hair and clothes wet as if she'd already gone looking for me and given up. Well, at least she realized she wouldn't find me until I was ready to be found. She almost seemed to relax when she looked over at me from her place by the window, then the cold, professional demeanor returned as she stepped over to the dresser in the room and held up a towel for me. "Your coat is on your bed, sir," she said quietly, a hint of annoyance in her tone. She turned to the bathroom to change once I'd taken the towel from her hand.

"Lieutenant," I said, hoping she would hear me before she disappeared, unfolding the towel and carefully extracting my squirming companion's claws from my shirt. "Get another towel when you're done in there."

Hawkeye looked at me, then down at the black and white bundle of fur I was wrapping up in the towel, and I thought for a moment that her expression softened. "Yes, sir," she answered, then turned and stepped into the bathroom, pausing only to grab a dry change of clothing from her bag.

I dreamed that night, as I usually did. Also as usual, it was a nightmare, the children from the church accusing me of being a hypocrite, giving mercy and compassion to a cat instead of them. In my haste to keep the cat from their reach, I snapped its neck.

I'm sorry, but that's about as far as I want to relive that particular nightmare.

I woke up in a cold sweat, my stomach tying into unpleasant knots. A little paw batted at my hair,
mewing incessantly next to my head. I held perfectly still, staring at the little kitten, unwilling to touch it, lest I break it. Finally, I got up and went to the bathroom, retching into the toilet. I was sure by now that Lieutenant Hawkeye was awake, I doubted the military had let her ever become a deep sleeper, or had broken her of it back in Isbhal if she had been before.

I sat back against the wall, rubbing my hand over my face, trying to settle my muscles and nerves. The kitten mewed at the door, paws reaching under the door crack. I reached up and let her in, not touching her until I was sure my control over myself was absolute, then I picked her up and pet her behind the ears tiredly. After a moment of listening to the kitten's quiet purrs, I stood up and walked out.

If Hawkeye was awake, she gave no indication of it, so for the moment, I had the illusion of privacy as I changed out of my sleepwear into my daily clothes, a dry turtleneck and black pants, dried earlier with alchemy. I picked the meowing kitten back up, shushed it and sat on the table by the window, leaning against the cool glass as the kitten snuggled up on my lap and went to sleep.

I stayed like that until dawn, dozing in and out, always waking with a jerk and a check on the kitten, relieved to find it still purring away in sleep. Eventually, Hawkeye awoke, and sat up quickly after checking my bed. "Edward?"

I didn't bother to correct her this time. I simply raised my hands and signed a question to her. She blinked, rubbed her eyes, then frowned. "I'm sorry, say that again?"

"You've got a pet already, don't you?"

She looked confused. "Yes, I do. A dog that the sergeant found about a year ago. Why?"


She shook her head. "Edward, you're the one that fou-"

"Traveling isn't a good life for a pet," I interrupted. "If you don't want her, I'll just leave her. Someone will want her." I was bluffing, of course, appealing to Hawkeye's sense of compassion that I knew she had to have, since she was taking on a pity case like me.

"No, I'll take her," she said quickly. "If Hayate doesn't appreciate the newcomer, I'm sure the colonel will be happy to take her."

I resisted the urge to laugh at the thought of Mustang with a kitten wrapping him around her little paw, which is exactly what this ball of fluff would do to anyone that chanced across her. If I didn't have to travel in my work, I'd keep her myself, she had me owned already.

But I didn't, just made a derisive noise, turning my head to rest my check against the cool glass.

"Edward?" I turned my head to look at her, still not correcting her slip. "I'll make you a deal. I'll take the cat, but as soon as your life settles down and you're able to, you have to take her back. She's grown rather attached to you."

I looked down at the cat. "Fine," I whispered. "Get dressed, we have a train to catch."

"Yes, sir." She pulled out her uniform and disappeared into the bathroom, while I packed my sleepwear I'd left on my bed. I used one of the pillows and a bedspread to transmute a small soft carrier for the cat, and set her down inside it, snapping close the mesh door. She made unhappy noises, pawing curiously at her new abode.
"Relax," I told her. "You'll be safe this way."

Hawkeye emerged a few minutes later, fully dressed, and immediately looked at the carrier, then at the bed, then at me. I gave her a sour look. "I planned on paying for it," I said. "Despite my reputation, I don't break the law unless I have to."

"Yes, sir." She packed her night wear and followed me out of the room.

***

"Edward Elric."

Oh goodie. I just loved being approached by growling voices. I glanced behind me, looking at the man who'd spoken. He was the guy in the coat and sunglasses from the night before. And he looked pretty pissed this time. I had no idea who shat in his morning oatmeal, but it was obvious it was about to be taken out on me.

Damn. So close to the train station, too.

I turned, facing him down with both hands full- one with my suitcase, one with the cat carrier- and stared him down. Hawkeye moved in front of me slightly, drawing her sidearm, her duffel abandoned beside me. "What do you want?" she demanded on my behalf after I tried an abortive attempt at speaking to the man.

"I'm not interested in you, woman. My only interest is State Alchemists." He pushed up his sleeve, revealing a very elaborate transmutation circle tattooed around his arm. It looked like it went higher up the sleeve, but his coat was only pushed up to his elbow.

I quickly dropped my suitcase and grabbed Hawkeye's arm, shoving the cat carrier into her free hand. "Get her out of the line of fire, I'll handle him until you get back," I ordered, then drew my own sidearm.

Hawkeye looked like she wanted to disobey orders, but a stern look made her obey, and she moved out of range, heading for the platform where the ticketmaster was. I aimed my sidearm. The man lunged forward at an incredible speed, giving me no chance to fire. I jumped to the side, putting away my firearm, realizing that he wasn't going to give me a shot with it.

He followed my movements, right arm raised and crackling with alchemical energy. I didn't know what he intended to do with that arm; human transmutation would just rebound on him, but I knew it probably wouldn't be for my health, so I transmuted a blade from my automail, swinging it at his head.

He ducked, reaching up his right hand for my ribs. He had a crushing grip, and I felt the alchemical energy start just as there was a loud crack of gunfire, and then he jumped back, dropping me and the transmutation. Hawkeye had her sniper rifle raised behind him, although he'd been moving too fast for her to get a killing shot lined up.

I used the chance to lunge forward, my blade piercing flesh just under his ribs on his right side. He grunted, then reached down to grab my blade. A flash of alchemical energy, then my blade shattered, as if he was stopping his transmutation at the decomposition stage. I staggered back, drawing my firearm. He was fast, but there was no way he could dodge a goddamn bullet.

Which he did, as I shot at him. Either that, or I'd lost my skill at shooting, and I knew damn well I hadn't. What the flying fuck.
Hawkeye lined up another shot, which this asshole completely dodged, pissing me off further. I fired off another round, hitting him in the shoulder. Ha, he couldn't dodge two bullets aimed at the same time at least.

Instead of turning to me to fight me for that shot, he ducked, slamming his right hand against the ground, sending a wave of destruction right towards Hawkeye. The building behind her bucked and heaved, then began to tip as its foundations gave way.

I swore, putting away my sidearm as I dashed past the asshole to get to Hawkeye in time to save her. Dust and debris kicked up as I got closer, slamming my hands together and smacking the concrete, which rose up to form a defensive enclosure around the lieutenant, just as the building landed against it soundly and broke into pieces, chunks of cement and support steel dropping down the sides of my barrier.

As soon as the dust cleared, I opened a doorway into the enclosure, coughing. "Lieutenant?" I called as loud as I could. I coughed again.

"I'm here, Edward," she said, moving towards me with unsteady legs. I didn't blame her, she'd nearly had a building dropped on her. "Where is the attacker?"

I turned around, looking through the dust, but saw nothing but bystanders. I hesitated at the sight of one woman. I swore I saw an alchemical mark on her, maybe a sign that she was connected to Scar, but I had to be imagining things. She just had a tattoo. She studied the wreckage, but turned and walked away. "Gone, I think," I answered, pushing aside the odd thought and helping Hawkeye out.

"I don't hear him."

We did a sweep of the area, but I was right- the asshole, whoever he was, was gone. I don't know why he left, he had perfect opportunity to get me while I was protecting the lieutenant. Maybe he was one of those erratic psychopaths, I decided. I doubted he'd given up, although with two gunshot wounds, he might've had to. Plus the injury to his side.

That reminded me. I pushed up my sleeve and looked over the damage to my automail. It was superficial, at best; just the tips of what I made into my blade, which was the cover to the wires on the back of my forearm. I'd need it repaired, but it wasn't dire.

"Are you all right, sir?" Hawkeye asked me, watching me inspect my automail.

I nodded. "Superficial damage. My ribs feel a bit bruised, too. Not as bad as his side probably feels."

"I'm not worried about his side," she said. "We should report this to the colonel and get checked out with a doctor. Then see about getting your automail repaired."

"Winry'd have a fit if I let anyone besides her touch this," I told her. "It can wait until we've gotten back to East and are released from this assignment."

"Very well, sir. Let's find a phone, I'll report in."

We borrowed the ticketmaster's phone, who was watching the kitten for us anyway. I took the carrier from him while Hawkeye called East and reported in. I didn't bother listening in; I knew she'd give me a full report of what was said as soon as she hung up. I kept a look out for the asshole who'd attacked us. And dodged bullets. My head was having trouble getting around that one.

She hung up after a few minutes, then turned to me. "It seems we encountered a serial killer the military's been after for quite some time. He's called 'Scar' and he targets State Alchemists specifically, so it was definitely you he was after. Our orders are to drop off radar and hide for awhile
until either the military can confirm Scar has been apprehended, or until he's at least lost our trail. With his injuries, I imagine he'll lose our trail fairly quickly. He'll have to tend to those wounds."

I looked at her. "So we're not supposed to go after him? The military can't handle him, the motherfucker was dodging bullets, Lieutenant. I was just barely fast enough to keep up with him, and even then, he got my automail."

"Those are the colonel's orders, sir. Hide."

I sighed in frustration. "What about this girl?" I asked, holding up the carrier. "We can't take her with us."

She smiled. "I made arrangements, the colonel will take care of her. We'll ship her to East."

I couldn't picture the colonel being happy with that, but as long as he did it, I didn't care. "Fine with me."

Hawkeye handled handing the kitten and her carrier off to the conductor, with strict instructions to make sure Colonel Mustang got her, safe and sound, at East HQ, then rejoined me. "Where to now?"

I shrugged. "Pick a direction. Any direction but east." I grabbed my suitcase and started walking.

Behind me, she hurried to catch up. "Are you intending on walking?"

"It's what I always do."

She shook her head. "I can get us a car."

I stopped and stared at her. A car had never occurred to me, since I was too young to get one, and didn't know how to drive anyway. Finally, hiding my glee behind indifference, I shrugged. "If you'd rather do that than walk."

She frowned. "I simply think we'd be able to outrun Scar easier if we were in a car. He seemed to be traveling on foot."

"Then we'll get a car," I said.

She requisitioned one from the nearest military base, and we walked there, although that was a good day's walk and none of the trains ran in that direction. So even with a car, we were stuck hoofing it. But, it'd make getting away from this area that much faster. I told Hawkeye since she was driving, she could pick a direction for us to go in.

I wouldn't have said that if I'd known she was going to pick north. We were still far too east to be anywhere near Acheron, and she never went far enough north to hit Drachma. But it got cold. Fortunately, the car was relatively warm, definitely warmer than walking outside, but it was still chilly.

I asked her her reasoning for going north. "Because, sir," she answered, not taking her eyes off the road, such as it was, "I've spent years processing paperwork related to your travels. I know you've never gone north, so I don't expect Scar to be looking up here. My job is to protect you, and that means trying to keep ahead of the serial killer out for your blood."

I accepted that explanation and huddled down against the cold.

The cold and fatigue combined into a horrible mess of thoughts in my head, thoughts that wanted
voice, but damned if I'd give that. I had no voice to give anyway.

But the thoughts came, and that fatigue became worse the longer we drove.

The first problem with traveling on your own so long is that you have plenty of time alone with your thoughts beating against the inside of your skull. You spend all that time aching to give them voice, to scream, even wordlessly, and get them out because they drive you completely fucking crazy.

I think I'm half the reason I'm as much of a lunatic as I am.

I'd been traveling for five years on my own at that point. That's a lot of time to spend with yourself, twenty-four seven trapped in your own head, trying to beat the whispers and fears that lock themselves up back there before they can get to you.

The second problem with traveling alone is when you're suddenly not alone, you've lost the practice to keep up the walls that keep those thoughts from leaking out everywhere like some sort of toxic waste that needs to stay contained.

It was a lot easier to hold up walls and masks to people when I didn't have to have them around all the goddamn time.

I was sick of the forced company.

It was cold and I was tired and it was so fucking cold, it was like being back there again.

I wanted to curl up and sleep.

I didn't want to sleep though. I couldn't stay asleep, stay down in my unconscious mind enough to keep the nightmares away.

Somehow, the idea of puking up my guts and watching it freeze in the snow because my inner ghosts like to kept me from sleeping didn't sound very appealing.

It's hell being trapped in your own mind like this. It's like being in a glass coffin and pounding on it and screaming for all you're fucking worth and knowing that nobody can hear you. But as soon as someone lets you out, as soon as someone can understand you, you want nothing more than to crawl back into that coffin. Because you forgot what it's like on the outside. Because you don't want to share that misery with anyone else.

Because you're scared to relive it enough to share it in the first place.

Fuck. Fucking snow and fucking Lieutenant Hawkeye and fucking lieutenants. Fucking Mustang and fucking Tucker and fucking Bradley and fucking Gate and... fuck.

Worse than all of 'em was this miserable little voice that sat in my brain and used the inside of my skull for target practice. I couldn't tell if it was me or Fullmetal, or maybe it was all the other way around.

All I knew was that someday, I was gonna figure out how to kill the little fucker before he split my head in two. Last thing I needed on top of everything else fucked up about me is to start having multiple personalities or something. I was crazy enough as it is.

I had no idea at this point how much of this I was saying out loud anymore, whispers let loose here and there while the lieutenant listened, without saying anything in reply.
I was pretty sure I was too tired to care what I might've been saying out loud or not. Hard to be afraid when everything in you is ready to just collapse. Nothing left to give. At least not right then. Strength always comes back. After rest.

But I couldn't afford to rest. Not yet. Someday, I'd be able to tell someone. Maybe I'd get lucky and find someone as fucked up as me that I could stand enough to talk to. Someone I couldn't taint. Someone I couldn't poison with this shit I'd been fed all these years, this infection I'd given myself by picking at things over and over and over again. 'Cause I couldn't fucking stand for something to not leave a mark.

It was cold.

I wondered if it was cold where Al was.
The Chain

Chapter Summary

I hesitated, then lifted my hand in salute. "It's been an honor, sir."

That dark look melted at the edges as he smiled faintly, then saluted. "It's been an honor, Fullmetal. Now go on, you have a train to catch."

With reluctance, I dropped my salute and left, taking my suitcase with me and leaving behind four years of my life.

and if you don't love me now
you will never love me again
i can still hear you saying
you would never break the chain
-Fleetwood Mac

Riza spent the entire time we were out fussing at me. Drove me crazier than a shithouse rat. I couldn't stand her fussing. We'd stop at an inn for the night, and she'd set out my clothes for me after I'd changed, fresh and ready for me in the morning. Appreciated the thought, didn't actually care for that, because it meant she got into my suitcase. Probably found that picture. And that picture was private, I didn't share it with anybody.

The first time she tried to clean my weapon for me, I snarled at her and pulled it away before it could even be disassembled. "I can do it myself," I growled. Cleaning that thing was one of my few stress relievers, I wasn't about to let her take it away.

She constantly pushed at me to talk to her, to tell her what was wrong, what had happened. I could stonewall her easier than I had Mustang, because I outranked her. I didn't have to listen to shit from her.

I corrected her every time she called me by name, instead of rank, getting more and more prickly about her invasive behavior. I started hiding behind my military training to keep her out. Which was a bad thing. My training had involved abuse- sexual, physical, and verbal. The more she pushed, the nastier I got towards her.

Notice, though, how I now call her Riza. There's a reason for that.

One night, I was working on my research notes before bed, sitting in my sleepwear, a simple pair of sweats and a t-shirt. Riza still had not changed for bed, sitting in her uniform across from me.

"Edward?"
I didn't look up. "You know better than to call me that."

"Yes, sir, I do, but I'm trying to speak to Edward, not Fullmetal. I know you're hiding behind that wall, Edward, I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to help."

"Shut up," I snapped, my pencil breaking in my hand as I clenched my hands into fists.

"Edward-"

I admit, I lost it. After what had been, at this point, a week of this constant bullshit, I was at my wits' end. I didn't have much patience to begin with, the invasiveness scared the shit out of me, I have always had a tendency to react to fear with anger, and my temper had become violent over the years. I grabbed my weapon out of its holster, slung over the back of my seat, and got up, grabbing Riza by her hair and yanking her out of her chair and onto her knees.

Just like I'd been taught up north.

"I said don't call me that, soldier, I expect obedience, I fucking outrank you," I snarled, holding the sidearm to her head.

She trembled, looking up at me. "I'm sorry, Edward, I-"

It was out of my mouth before I could help it, echoing back words I'd heard before. "There are better uses for a soldier's mouth than to smart off to a superior officer. Obedience should be absolute, Lieutenant"

I'm ashamed of those words, that they ever came out of my mouth. But abuse creates a vicious cycle, and those of us who were trained by those words sometimes spit them out ourselves. To be fair, I never intended on her actually doing anything, but maybe piddling in submission. The safety on my gun was on, I had no intention of her touching me like that. I just wanted to scare her into getting off my back.

Unfortunately, she didn't realize this and did exactly what I didn't intend. I was in too much shock when she reached into my pants that I couldn't do anything but hold her hair and ride it out.

Afterwards, I dropped my gun and dashed for the bathroom, where I promptly got sick and started crying like it'd been me in her position again. I was horrified by what I'd done, and despite what Riza said, it was me that did it, even if I'd done it unintentionally. I'd never meant for her to actually do that, but she had, and rape isn't one of those things that can be mutual.

I don't know how long I spent puking my guts out before Riza came in, crouched beside me and put her arms around me. "Oh Edward, I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't know the safety was on, you didn't mean to. I'm so sorry. Is this what they did to you?"

I heaved again, trembling from head to toe as there was nothing left to give, but still I kept dry heaving, retching painfully. She began to pet my hair, kissing the top of my head. "Edward, it's okay, they'll never hurt you like that again. You didn't mean to, I know that, it's okay. I'm okay, see? And I'll never let anyone hurt you like that again."


"Because it wasn't you that hurt me, it was him," she said quietly. "I'll be okay, I'm a big girl. Now come on, let's get you laying down, you'll feel better. I've already put away your notes and weapon."

For once, feeling too battered to fight her, I let her lead me back out of the bathroom to the main area.
of our inn room and lead me to the bed. I waved her off wordlessly- I didn't need tucked in. I was actively hoping this was just another nightmare as I crawled on top of the bed and curled up on my side, facing away from her bed.

The next thing I knew, I felt the bed shift as Riza laid down next to me, curling up against my back and holding me. "We'll make this all right, Edward. You didn't do anything wrong," she whispered, petting my hair.

I felt dead. Like everything inside of me had temporarily shut down instead of facing what I'd done. Make it okay? How? Such a thought seemed foreign to me. I'd hurt her, the way I'd been hurt. Just because she seemed to be handling it well didn't mean it hadn't hurt her somehow.

I turned to face her, feeling too tired to do more than a slight narrowing of my eyes. "How is this okay?" I demanded in a voice that cracked more than usual.

She pulled me against her, kissing the side of my face. "Because," she whispered, "I'm not doing anything that I don't want to do. I want to help you. That's all any of us have ever wanted to do. You didn't do anything wrong, I'm not hurt."

It was a lie, but it broke me anyway. A temporary break, because the walls I hid behind never truly went away, but they cracked, letting out a flood of emotions I'd held back, stomped down, ignored, and ran from as I curled up tighter against her, crying hysterically.

Riza kissed my forehead, kissed that goddamn scar that would probably never fade from the first time I defied Archer, petting my hair and holding me tightly. "It's okay, Edward," she whispered, over and over again until I almost started to believe her.

We started carrying on an affair, after that. It was the only way I could bring myself after that first time to let her touch me and hold me like I needed to be touched and held. I'd been out of contact with people for so long, I hadn't had a simple hug since the day I left Rizenbul. But my walls remained up, still unable to let her just fuss at me, except through something more primal.

I'm not exactly a gentle lover. I never hurt her, I would've as soon as never touched her again as hurt her. But neither of us were interested in gentle lovemaking. It was raw, animal sex, a basic human companionship that I had been denied so long, it seemed foreign to me that I would have it now, in the form it came in.

I had never wanted to be touched that way again, but it felt like it was washing away all the negative associations it'd had for me and making it something good, something okay, an actual sign of love. I knew she didn't love me like that, any more than I loved her that way. But I believed, at least during that time, that I was cared about, and safe to accept that. I wasn't tainting her, she was healing me.

We took to a daily routine of driving all day until we found another inn, then dinner and then upstairs to settle in. She would sit quietly with a romance book she'd read three times already while I tried to decipher Marcoh's notes. Then we'd fall into bed until we were tired and sore and curl up together, the only time I could allow anything resembling real affection. She'd wake up early the next morning, fuss around in the bathroom, get two cups of coffee from downstairs and bring them up, set out clothes for me on the unused bed, and then set out our weapons and our cleaning kits. I'd wake up about then, take my turn in the bathroom, then change into my clothes for the day. By that time, the coffee had cooled to drinkable temperature.

One morning, I woke up with her at the table instead of in bed with me, as usual. I had grown to hate the feeling of being alone in bed. "Riza?"
She looked up at me. "Yes, Edward?"

"Next time, wake me up when you get up," I signed. I didn't like being alone in bed. It let the nightmares come back.

That was one thing I noticed about sleeping with her (literally, not the other way, although I'm sure it contributed). I didn't have nightmares nearly as often, and I was given to fewer nocturnal wanderings. I stayed in bed, instead of having to get up to puke and wander around until I was calm enough to try to sleep again.

A month passed before I thought to check for new orders. I'd been told to stay off the radar, and I'd done that, but I realized through the haze of everything going on, that we should check to see if we'd been ordered back to East finally or not.

I didn't want to, because that meant losing Riza. Losing my only human contact. But those walls I'd hid behind were patched, no longer broken, only temporarily cast aside. I could feel them, sturdy as ever, as I slipped back behind them to protect myself from losing Riza. I'd lose her company, there was no question, so now it was time to hide behind Fullmetal and take the loneliness.

Over the years, I would slip back into a town with a military station every once in awhile to find out if orders had come in since I'd left the last one. It was a good way to put off orders I didn't wanna do without outright defying them.

I'd been putting it off longer this time than usual, not quite willing to go back to the real world. I hated myself for it; Al was counting on me to keep going through this real world I hated until I found the Stone, or something- anything- that could pay the cost to get him back. But back in this new world I'd discovered, this world where none of that existed, didn't matter, it was like a siren's song to me. It was a rest from the fear and the anger and the hate that had become so much a part of my world.

I didn't want to stop at that military base. But enough time had passed- long since passed, actually- that I didn't have much choice.

"May I help you?" The sergeant at the front desk questioned me with a tone of disdain, eyeing my civilian attire. I held up my watch and the sergeant saluted. "My apologies, sir. How can I assist you?"

I tucked my watch back in my pocket. "Are there any orders for the Fullmetal Alchemist from East Headquarters?"

"Yes, sir, there are. They've been going out all over the Eastern District," the sergeant confirmed, digging around through paperwork as he spoke.

I bit back a noise of frustration. First Mustang tells me to be impossible to find, then he sends out orders all over the district?

At least I knew I'd done my job right this way.

"Here you are, sir," the sergeant said, handing over a thin folder with papers secured inside. "Your orders."

"Thank you," I signed- a violent nutcase I may have been as far as some people were concerned, but ill-mannered I was not- taking the orders from the man. A glance inside showed what I expected; Riza and I were to report back in to East HQ.
I wondered what Mustang was up to that he wanted Riza to stay with me. I doubted it was just because of Scar. Mustang was up to something that kept him occupied all this time, I would bet money on it. It was just a matter of what.

Well, I'd find out soon enough. For right now, I had to figure out how to tell Riza her assignment with me was over. Then I'd have to figure out how to tell myself.

Play time was over. It was time to get back to work.

I didn't tell Riza right away. I hid the orders in my suitcase and we traveled aimlessly for awhile that day. I sat on that little secret all day, actually, until late that night, after we'd had what was essentially one last roll in the hay before I said anything.

I got up a couple hours after she'd fallen asleep, grabbing my old harmonica out of my bag and settling in at the window, quietly playing a song I learned on the field. It was one of those songs designed to make you cry, one that one of the other men at Olivia had taught me.

Riza sat up shortly after the first few notes, covering herself with the blanket as she peered around in the darkness, finally spotting me. "Edward? What's... what is it? Did you have another nightmare?"

I stopped playing, looking at the harmonica instead of her. "You know, I learned to play this from a whore. Took it out into the field with me. O'Riley loved it. Couldn't play it to save his life, but he tried."

She looked at me in confusion, but she remained quiet, letting me speak.

"Farrand hated this thing," I went on, "because O'Riley couldn't play it. We were already dying in the field, we didn't need killin' any faster, he'd said."

"O'Riley and Farrand, they were friends of yours?" Riza asked.

I shrugged. "We worked the field together. You don't have a lot of choice about trusting your life to them. Didn't work out so well." I looked up at her. "You know that this, all of this, it wasn't because of love or anything, right?"

She closed her eyes. "I'm well aware of it, Edward," she assured me. "May I ask what has brought all of this up?"

I hopped down out of the window sill, walking over to the other bed where my suitcase lay. I opened it up, searching through some papers that were in there, before pulling out the thin manilla envelope. I tossed it onto the bed in front of Riza. "We've been ordered back to East Headquarters."

She released a slow breath. "Immediately?"

I nodded. "Those orders have been going out all over the east district."

"There should be a train we can catch tomorrow morning. I'll turn the car in."

"Good idea. You may as well get some sleep, Lieutenant, we have a long day's trip in front of us tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," she said, and just like that, we slipped out of the affair and back into our military roles. It was kinda depressing how easy it was. I drew back behind my walls and she was no longer Riza, but Lieutenant Hawkeye. Just two well-trained dogs of the military.
We arrived in East City late in the work day, but not so late that Mustang would be gone from
the office. We went straight to his office, and both of us ignored Havoc and the others in the outer
office as we knocked on Mustang's inner office door.

"Come in," we heard from the other side and Hawkeye opened the door, letting me go in first. We
both saluted once the door was shut.

"Fullmetal and Lieutenant Hawkeye reporting for duty, sir," Hawkeye said.

Mustang looked up at us, and I can only imagine what went through his head, seeing both of us
saluting and presenting ourselves like perfect soldiers. "At ease, you two," he said, setting his pen
down. "Glad to see you both back, safe and sound. Any further troubles with Scar?"

"No, sir," Hawkeye said, taking over for me in speaking. That was fine with me.

"Good, good." He looked over at me. "And Liore, Edward. I know I got your report, and I saw the
site myself-" he looked at Hawkeye "-and you can shoot me for the deceit later-" he looked back to
me "-but I have to ask myself. Why did you choose that route? There were children in there."

Ah, there it was. He didn't want Hawkeye to come storming after him to Liore.

Not my business though. So I just answered. "It was a field of battle, sir, I couldn't assume anybody
was unarmed. They were given a chance to surrender and failed to take that chance. So they were
treated as enemy soldiers."

He frowned, then sat back. "Very military of you, Edward."

"Thank you, sir." I knew he hadn't meant it as a compliment, but I pretended to take it as one
anyway, to avoid another conversation like at Hughes's place.

"Mm. Fullmetal, will you step out for a moment? I have to speak to the lieutenant alone. But don't go
far, I have new orders for you."

I saluted and stepped out, mentally groaning to myself. More orders, meaning more time away from
my research. I settled against the wall outside his door, staring blankly at nothing as I waited.
Minutes ticked away. Mustang closed the blinds to his window in the door. More minutes ticked by.

Finally Hawkeye stepped out, looking all the world like she'd just been beaten, by the look on her
face. She looked at me with a thousand mile stare, then walked back out of the office. I hurried back
into the office, closing the door. "What'd you do to R- the lieutenant?" I demanded.

Mustang caught my slip. "Riza? I sent her home for the day. She needs a day to recuperate from
traveling before she settles behind a desk again," he said with a dark look on his face.

I froze. Fraternization was a highly punishable offense in the military, and I worried for not my
safety, but the safety of my rank and watch. I went ramrod straight, staring at a spot just over
Mustang's shoulder. "Of course, sir."

Mustang opened a folder on his desk, and held a sheet of paper out to me. Wordlessly, I took it,
reading over it. Then I paled, snapping my gaze up to Mustang quickly. "Is this a joke, sir?"

Mustang shook his head. "It's real. You're to transfer to Central to be under Führer Bradley's direct
command immediately, barring anything medical that needs to be taken care of."
I looked back down at the orders in dismay, carefully trying to conceal it. "It was because of Liore, wasn't it?"

Mustang sighed. "Well, I can't say you didn't catch some attention for how you handled that. It was... efficient, and properly military, just the kind of action Bradley likes. I don't know what's caught their attention, Edward, but you've caught it, and you're being transferred out of my command and into the führer's. I wish you well."

My stomach fell down somewhere around my knees as I looked back at the orders. "I have to make a stop in Rizenbul. My automail was damaged by Scar," I said quietly, wanting to ball up the orders and throw them away like they'd never existed. I had angered Mustang plenty, but he'd always been enormously fair, and always gave me a long leash to run on. Bradley would inevitably run a tighter ship and continued failures in the Stone were not likely to be tolerated.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. And just for good measure, fuck.

"I'll pass that along to Central, then. They'll know when to expect you."

"Thank you, sir." I hesitated, then lifted my hand in salute. "It's been an honor, sir."

That dark look melted at the edges as he smiled faintly, then saluted. "It's been an honor, Fullmetal. Now go on, you have a train to catch."

With reluctance, I dropped my salute and left, taking my suitcase with me and leaving behind four years of my life.

I didn't like the end; I realized I'd grown attached to Mustang and his crew. They'd been kind to me, despite my continued efforts at stonewalling them at every turn, and that kind of devotion and affection was hard to find. It had actually kept the edge off the worst of my demons for those years. I don't think I would've been able to keep myself from hurting more people than I already had if I'd had a commanding officer like Archer the whole time.

It was about two in the morning when my train pulled in at Rizenbul, jerking me awake. I sat up, rubbing blearily at my eyes before grabbing my suitcase and getting off the train. Once away from the tracks, the nocturnal sounds of crickets and bullfrogs serenaded me as I made my way up the hill towards my home. I'd stop at the Rockbells' in the morning, I wasn't going to wake them up at two in the morning. The last thing I needed was a wrench to the head. Not that Winry had done that in quite awhile; somewhere along the way, she stopped, about the same time she stopped smiling at my return. Her worry over me had gotten in the way of smiles, I knew that.

Part of me wished I could tell her something, the way we used to be able to, way back before Al and I started harboring the terrible secret of plotting to resurrect our mother. But those days were done and the more that happened, the more concerned she got until she couldn't even give me a smile. Some tiny voice in my head accused her of being afraid of me and if she was, that was just fine. Being afraid meant they didn't pry. I didn't want my family to see where that went. I hadn't wanted anyone to see that far into my world, really. But that damn lieutenant...

A transmutation opened the sealed door on the house and I stepped in, coughing at a breath full of dust. All the dust that had been aloft in the air when the house was sealed had settled and greeted me with a musty, old sort of smell. The house felt stuffy. I would have to unseal windows and open them tonight and clean it up tomorrow. More time I could borrow before having to go see the führer. Maybe, if I were lucky, Bradley would die of a heart attack or something before I got there if I could just buy enough time.
A glance back outside at the sky proved that there was unlikely to be a storm overnight at this point, so opening the windows would be safe enough. That was the first thing I tended to, heading around the house and unsealing and opening each one just enough to draw the musty smell out of the house. Once that was done, I lit a candle, taking it with me up the stairs to the bedroom that used to be Al's and mine.

It hadn't changed since the last time I was here, just a few short months ago, but I never stopped being amazed at how small it seemed in comparison to my memories. Of course, I was a lot bigger than I'd been in my memories, too. The whole house seemed smaller, actually, and I wasn't sure I liked the change in perspective, no matter how much I used to wish I were taller and bigger. I wondered if the house seemed this small to my mother, too, or if it was just me.

Venturing into my mother's room, I checked on all the ghosts that haunted the house, making sure everything was asleep for the night. Nothing stirred, just the breeze through the open windows.

Back downstairs, the kitchen lacked my mother's singing, and the scent of her apple pie. The living room was deathly quiet, empty of the comforting sound of our mother's knitting needles clacking away into the nighttime hours as she hummed. The only sounds to be heard was the nocturnal orchestra outside and the only sign of life was the reflection of my candle off the glass of the windows.

Heading into my father's study, I kicked off my boots. Until the day Al was home, I couldn't stomach the idea of sleeping in my own room alone. Here in the study, on the couch, I could sleep there. The open door to the laboratory stared at me as I unfolded the knitted blanket from the back of the couch and spread it out in preparation for bed. I glanced behind me, staring at the doorway.

Inside, the lab was clean, having used alchemy to help me remove all traces of the transmutation that had changed my life so much. I'd wanted the home perfect, the way it had been before so Al had a home to come back to that wouldn't frighten him, or remind him of that awful night.

I carried enough reminders of that night, Al didn't need to carry them too.

"I'll have to teach you sign," I said to no one in particular. "That's okay, you always liked language class better than I did." I frowned. "I'd ask Riza to teach you, since she did so well with me, but I can't ask anything more of her than I already have."

So much I'd taken from her and I knew it. Our short time together had damaged something in her, led her too far into the darkness of my own world. My dirty little secret I hoped to keep from the world. Everything in Drachma, I'd sooner tell it than what I did to that poor woman. But she'd been right there the whole way with me, hadn't she?

I settled down on the couch, curling up against the nausea in my stomach at the thought of Riza. I already missed her, the comfort of the warm presence of a person next to me, someone who didn't flinch in the face of my rage, didn't back down from everything as I tried to get her to leave me alone. Someone who cared. I'd missed that feeling of being cared for so much that it physically hurt. Winry cared, I supposed, but I was even more loathe to let her into my world than I had been with the lieutenant. The lieutenant, at least, was an adult and had seen far more than Winry ever would, god willing.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. Sorry to whom, I couldn't even be sure. Riza, for everything I did to her. Al for failing him. Winry for shutting her out so hard. Anybody. Everybody. Anyone that could grant me a reprieve from the overwhelming guilt I kept stockpiling into my life. But nobody could do that, not really, and I knew it. This burden was one I was stuck with for the rest of my life. Maybe getting Al back would make up for some of it. Maybe someday, I could explain to Winry what those scars
on my back were from. Maybe someday I could do something to make things up to Riza.

For now, though, the guilt weighed heavily on me. I closed my eyes, letting myself cry one last time, alone this time instead of with the comforting presence of the lieutenant, until I fell asleep.

***

I sealed up my house about midmorning, after I'd gone through and dusted the place a little, and closed the windows back up. I tromped down the hill to Winry and Grandma Pinako's place and knocked on their door. Winry answered and watched me silently for a moment, then frowned. "Ed, what're you doing here? We just finished the last surgery you'll need. What- ... what happened, is something wrong?"

I set my suitcase down and pushed up my coat and shirt sleeves, showing her the damage to my arm. She sighed. "Ed, how did you manage that?" she demanded, leading me inside.

"Got in a fight," I said. "Bastard used alchemy to deconstruct it."

Winry gave me a sharp look. "You shouldn't go into such dangerous things."

I gave her a flat look. "I'm military, it's part of the job. Besides, I didn't pick this fight, he did."

"That was always your excuse when you were younger," she said. "Out of the coat and shirt, lemme see what I'm working with."

I set my suitcase down, draped my coat over it, and shrugged out of my shirt.

She stepped over, looking over my automail arm. "Seems superficial. Only one piece was damaged." She tested responses from my hand, making sure the damage hadn't caught any of the wires nestled below the piece of steel I used for my blade. "What kind of fight did you get into?"

"Serial killer after State Alchemists. He didn't like the fact that I could transmute a blade from my automail, so he destroyed the blade."

She looked at me in horror. "A - Ed, you... oh god. Ed, you could've been killed!"

"I've almost been killed a lot of times, Winry, now's not the time to worry about it. Mustang had me on the run for a month to avoid this guy. I know better than to tangle with him if I can help it." I sat down on the couch. "I have an assignment in Central. How long will it take to repair?"

She stared at me with a sad look. "You've been in a lot of danger since joining the military," she said softly. "Maybe you should consider finding a new job."

"I like my work," I lied. Well, partially lied. I liked the actual research part of it, it was everything else I hated. "Your automail takes care of me."

That got a faint smile from her, the first I'd seen from her in a long time. It turned into one of those dazzling smiles that were so fake they were painful to look at. "That's right it does. 'Cause I'm the best automail mechanic in Amestris. Well, except for Grandma."

"You didn't answer me before," I reminded her. "How long will this take to repair?"

Her smile dimmed back to the dull look I'd become used to. "Oh, only a couple hours at best. Did you want to visit your mom and brother while I do that?"

I looked down at the floor. "Yeah. A walk would do me good, anyway." After she'd detached my
arm, I redressed and stepped outside, feeling a bit off-balance. After a few minutes of orienting myself to the new weight distribution without my arm, I started down the road towards the cemetery. I'd walked that road a lot of times since Mom died. I used to walk it just as part of my rehab when I first got automail, just like I'd used cleaning my house as part of rehab.

Both graves were waiting when I got there. I ignored Al's for the moment, crouching down in front of Mom's. There were no flowers in front of the grave this time; it must've been awhile since Winry had come up here.

"Hi, Mom," I whispered. I had a habit of talking to graves as if someone could answer me, probably because of Al's grave. I knew he wasn't dead, and maybe, somehow, my words reached him in the Gate. I could dream, anyway.

I didn't know what to say this time, though. 'I miss you' didn't seem enough, even though it was the truth. God, I missed her. I missed the way she made everything seem all right. I missed the comfort. I missed her singing, her hands, the way they'd ruffle my hair when I did something good. I missed the smell of her apple cobbler baking, and the taste of her homemade bread.

There really wasn't much about her I didn't miss, honestly. But she was gone, for the last six years, and nothing was bringing her back.

I looked at the other, hateful grave. The sign of giving up. The false declaration that my brother was dead, when I knew damn well he wasn't. He was trapped in that hellacious thing, not dead... but not here, either. And that burned. It burned like a hole in my chest where a heart should be. "I'm sorry, Al. I know I keep promising, but I do promise to get you out. I almost have the research figured out, and I'll be in Central soon, I can investigate that lab. Maybe it'll have what we need. Soon, I promise."

I ran my fingers along the carved name, then balled my hand into a fist and smacked the grave soundly. Not dead. He wasn't dead.

After lingering a few more minutes, I stood and headed back towards Winry's place. My arm wasn't quite done, but I told her to take her time, I was in no hurry to get to Central. That puzzled her- usually I couldn't get away fast enough, but I wasn't eager to go to Bradley's command. I had no idea what it'd mean for me and I didn't like unknowns like that.

I caught the evening train bound for Central, my arm in full repair. I killed the time sleeping or reading Marcoh's work, although that made me hungry. I wished I could remember the name of the town I met him in so I could go there and smack him for disguising his work as a cook book.

Central hadn't changed in the short time I'd been away. As I started to make my way out of the station, an officer in uniform stopped me. "Fullmetal, sir?" he said. I raised an eyebrow at him expectantly. He snapped a salute. "My name is Captain Marsters. I'm to escort you to Führer Bradley's office, sir."

I looked at him like someone watching a bug under glass, just to scare him a little. Oh go on, say it. I'm an asshole. I never pretended I wasn't.

Marsters, to his credit, held his salute and didn't betray any sign of fear. Finally, bored of trying to break him, I shrugged. "So lead the way." He escorted me to a vehicle, which he held the door to the back seat for me at. I wasn't used to this kind of treatment, but I decided to just play along, rather than causing a ruckus. I didn't need more trouble.

I slouched in my seat the whole way to headquarters, where Marsters stopped the car and again, held
the door for me before I had a chance to open it myself. "This way, sir," he said, leading me through the front door and down halls that I had only been down once or twice in my entire time in the military.

I recognized the führer's office when we got there. The captain stepped in ahead of me, standing to the side and saluting as I stepped past him. "The führer is expecting you," he said.

I barely glanced at him as I walked over to the führer's inner office door and knocked. I heard Bradley tell me to come in, and I opened the door, walking in. "Fullmetal reporting for duty, sir." It was vaguely like stepping backwards in time and it wasn't a pleasant stroll as I pulled on my best military training.

He looked up and returned my salute with that perpetual smile of his. "Welcome back to Central. Glad to see you finally made it. Did you have to have much work done on your automail?"

I shook my head, dropping my arm to speak. "No, sir. Just a single part replaced. The casing had been damaged in my tangle with Scar."

"Ah yes, Scar. Handling him will be one of your assignments while you're here." That thought cheered me somewhat. If I had to be in a shitty situation, at least I got to beat someone's face in for it. "Now, Colonel, I'm sure you'll find your stay in Central quite satisfactory."

I blinked as my brain careened into a rock. "Colonel, sir? I thought that promotion in clearance rank was only to that of a lieutenant colonel."

Bradley grinned. "Oh yes, did I forget to add that into my transfer orders? You're officially a uniform-wearing colonel, with an office of your own, here in Central, and you answer to nobody but me."

I stared at him. I squeaked a bit. I stared some more, then raised my hands to sign. They tangled up on themselves at first, then I tried again. "An office, sir? I don't know how to run an office, I'm not even seventeen. I know how to research, that's about it."

That was a desperate grab onto something to avoid the thought of the uniform. I didn't want it, and I hoped protesting something else would get me out of it, without having to admit to anything.

"Nonsense, you have several other talents. You've proven yourself an admirable officer and a damn good soldier. I'm sure you can handle your other duties."

A soldier. I was an actual soldier again. My throat closed up as fear made me feel cold and pale. I barely had the strength to keep my hands steady.

"And what would those be, sir?"

"Documenting your research, evaluating the information from other alchemists pertaining to the Philosopher's Stone, and eventually you'll likely be considered for a staff position to speak on the behalf of State Alchemists, particularly in time of war." In other words, from everything I remembered from my brief time under his command, I was taking over Grand's old job.

Holy fucking shit.

"Are we expecting a war any time soon?"

He laughed. "Not that I know of! But it's never too early to be prepared. Settling into a new job during war time is never fun."
"No, sir." I hesitated as an idea began to form. "Sir, may I make recommendations concerning the other State Alchemists?"

"That's part of your new job, Colonel, yes. You have a suggestion already?"

I nodded. "Colonel Roy Mustang, the Flame Alchemist. He got banished out East by General Hakuro, and he's been wasting away out there. He's serving no real purpose beyond administrative. His last reassessment was pitiful as a result." Not that I knew for certain, but I'd heard Mustang complain loud enough to be reasonably sure.

"I'm sure General Hakuro knew what he was doing when he transferred Colonel Mustang," Bradley said a little dismissively.

No, I needed someone I could trust there in Central with me. I had to come up with a good reason to get Bradley to let me get Mustang to where he could help me. He hadn't been there with Tucker, but he'd been there in so many other ways since, ways that I had refused to see at the time, but in a panic, I could recognize as something I could depend on.

"So do I, sir, but I have more use for him than General Grumman or Hakuro either one do."

That made Bradley raise an eyebrow and he sat back, folding his hands behind his head. "Oh? Do tell. I assume you want him transferred to Central?"

"Yes, sir. I'd like him under my command. He was a valuable resource for me. And he knows how to run an office better than I do. I could use someone experienced to delegate work to."

Bradley continued to laugh hard enough I worried he'd fall out of his chair. "I'll put in for the transfer for you, Colonel Elric. I think that's a wonderful idea. He can help you settle in, I believe. In the meantime, I'd like you to meet your new adjutant." He picked up the phone. "Captain Douglas? We're ready for you." He hung up and looked up at me. "You'll find her quite agreeable. See, she has a little secret. The same secret that you do, Edward."

Before I could evaluate that statement, everything inside of me stopped as the door behind me opened and she walked in. Her hair, her eyes, her face, it was all painfully familiar to me. She could've passed for my mother, easily. Without even trying.

"You see, that transmutation you think nobody knew about? That one you performed that night in Rizenbul?" Even as Bradley kept talking, I couldn't take my eyes off this woman, this doppelganger of my mother. Although I began to pale and sweat a bit at his words. That giant 't' word hovered over me again. "It wasn't quite so unsuccessful as you or Colonel Mustang thought," he said. "All it needed was one more ingredient. But as you can see, that's been taken care of."

I turned my head to look at him, wide eyed and trembling. "She- ... you mean..? She's a ... a homunculus? A created human?"

"Your created human, Colonel Elric. Whether you accept her as your mother or not is up to you, but know she was made to be that. You made her, so what will you do with her?"
I turned back to this Captain Douglas, this woman I created and fashioned after my mother. She was Mom; she'd never be the same woman as Trisha Elric, but... she was my homunculus. The mother I built. "M-mom?"

Douglas smiled. "Hello, Edward. I see you are in better health than the last time I saw you."

I gave her a weak smile. "Winry and Grandma fixed me up."

Her smile was Mom's smile. "They always were taking such good care of you. Made my job easier over the years. Now come, we have to settle you into your new office. Your subordinates will be here soon. We can get you into uniform and set up things to your liking in the meantime."

I looked back at Bradley. "Am I in trouble?"

"For what?" Bradley's purposely dumb expression was bad enough I could've slugged him for it. But then he smiled, nodded his head at Douglas. "You mean for her? If I were anyone else, yes, but I'm friends, you might say, with the lady that takes care of homunculi like Captain Douglas here. I'm sure she'll be thrilled that one of her homunculi was actually accepted by her creator." That smile turned into his obnoxious 'everything's funny to me all the time' grin that he usually was sporting. "Now go on, you have lots of work to do. I'll put in for Mustang's transfer. Anyone else I should include in that?"

"His normal crew," I answered, feeling too unsteady for the full relief at his words to crash in just yet. "Lieutenants Hawkeye, Havoc, and Breda, and Sergeant Fuery. I don't know their first names, but they've been with Mustang since he was in Central last. If he trusts them to get the work done, then I do too."

"Very well, I'll include them. I believe that fully staffs your office, doesn't it?"

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Dismissed, Colonel. Go settle in."

Both Mom and I saluted, then we left the office, with me starting to walk on somewhere up on a cloud. I was dizzy, with what, I wasn't even certain. I had my mother back. We weren't unsuccessful, not as much as I thought. It hadn't been a complete waste. Al still needed to be rescued, but I would get to tell him when he came home that his sacrifice hadn't been for nothing. That there was a mother to come home to.

I wanted to cry.

I also wanted to meet this woman who 'took care' of the homunculi and find out how she'd found Mom and what she'd done to finish the transmutation, but that would come later. For now, I had Mom back and a new job to settle into.

The job part I wasn't looking forward to, so much.

There was one thing I wanted to do before I settled in, though. I asked Mom to go ahead and go requisition me a uniform, and I signed off on it, having to authorize something for the first time in my entire life. Then I made my way down to Hughes's office.

"Mustang's going to kill me," I said upon entering.
He blinked and stood. "Ed? You got here all right? What'd the führer want, and what do you mean, Roy's going to kill you?"

"You'd better sit down," I said, taking a seat across from him. As he warily sat back down, I started explaining. "For one, I now outrank you. I got commissioned, and as a colonel."

Hughes groaned. "Roy's going to eat his own liver."

"Not yet, he won't. Wait until you hear what's next."

That got me a stare. "Okay, Ed, start talking."

"I have Grand's old job. And I got Mustang transferred back to Central."

Hughes brightened. "Well, that's good news! Sure, he'll be jealous of your new job, but he's needed out of the East since he got sent there."

I held up a finger. "Under my command."

The happy expression on Hughes's face fell and shattered on the floor. "What?"

"You heard me. Under my command. He's in my office as my subordinate. Bradley thought it was the most hilarious idea he'd ever heard."

For a second, all Hughes seemed able to do was stare at me. Then he burst into laughter, much the way Bradley had done. "Oh my god, he's going to murder you in your sleep, Ed," he howled. "Lemme call him, I get to be first to tell him." He grabbed his phone and motioned to his help for a secure line.

I waited patiently as Hughes and Mustang went through their little routine of Hughes telling Mustang all about Elysia, although actually, it was more like trying to tell him through peals of laughter, until finally both sides signaled the line clear. "Roy, that boy of yours is something else," he said. "He's here not even a day and already he's causing hate and discontent."

"And yet you're laughing about it, Hughes," I heard Mustang's voice over the other side.

"He's been commissioned, and as a colonel, so you no longer outrank him, for one thing."

"What a disgusting thought. Go on. Something in here is funny to you, I demand to know what."

Hughes laughed harder. "Well, for one, he's got Grand's old job. And before you make noises of jealousy, so do you. He got you transferred back to Central. As his subordinate in his office."

There was silence from the other end. "Hughes? Your joke is in poor taste."

"It's no joke, Roy," Hughes said, sitting up straighter as his laughter died down. "He's right here with me, you can ask him yourself."

"Let me speak to him."

Hughes handed the phone to me. "Yes, sir?" I said into the mouthpiece.

"Edward, what the hell are you doing over there?"

"Getting you back to Central. I need help with my new office and I don't trust people here."
Mustang was quiet. "I will set you on fire, boy."

"No, you won't," I said. "I run too fast. I'll see you when you get here, sir." With that, I handed the phone back to Hughes. "I have to go see my adjutant," I said. Hughes waved me off, taking the phone back.

I left before I heard any more of their conversation. I caught up with Mom at requisitions. She smiled at me. "They have your size, but you might have to transmute the right shoulder and left leg a bit to accommodate your automail," she said.

I shrugged. "That's fine." I'd had to custom make my clothes to fit me anyway, and I'd had to do that with the uniform I had up north, it didn't bother me to do it again.

My office was clean, but empty and devoid of life. Even the desks had been cleared out. That was the first thing we put on the list, was desks and chairs. I counted out how many we'd need and Mom put it down on the forms.

I had nowhere to stay that night, so Mom invited me to stay with her, until I could either find a house of my own, which didn't appeal to me, or a military dorm that was to my suitting. I decided I'd rather stay with her, even if it looked weird to the outside world.

She made my favorite stew and an apple cobbler to celebrate our reunion. Despite how hungry I was, I didn't eat much at first, because I couldn't. It was so much like the old times that it constricted my throat as tears threatened me. It wasn't right, not without Al there, too.

"Edward, what's wrong?" she asked as she set down her spoon and put a hand on my shoulder.

I swallowed hard, shying away from the touch. "I'm sorry, it's good, it really is, Mom," I tried to assure her through a broken voice.

Mom lifted her hand slightly, but didn't seem to focus too much on my reaction to the contact. "It's Alphonse, isn't it?"

I nodded wordlessly, resting my head on one hand as I valiantly fought off the urge to cry.

Mom got up and pulled me into a hug. It took everything in me to not duck away. "You'll get him back, Edward, I know you will. The person that helped me knows a lot about the Philosopher's Stone, she'll be able to help you."

"I already know what it's made from, Mom," I told her, swallowing tightly one more time before sitting up in her embrace a bit. "I just haven't had a chance to look for the leftover research in the labs."

She kissed my forehead. "Then you can do that as soon as Colonel Mustang is here and you've got him set up doing paperwork for you. Just a few more days, sweetie."

I cringed, sighed and smiled at her. "I see you still remember my favorites."

She ruffled my hair. "How could I forget? You used to beg me for that stew and cobbler every night."

"Not every night," I protested lamely, starting to attack my food with the fury of a teenage boy with a psychotically high metabolism.

She laughed. "Close enough, Edward, close enough."
"It's a shame I only have incomplete Stones, like those," Dante said, her tone idle. "If I had the true Philosopher's Stone, I could turn them all human."

your skin's a lot like plastic
some kind of bad disguise
transfusing blood for paper
so sweet, you're drawing flies
-The Vincent Black Shadow

Office work, I found over the next couple days as Mom and I got the office ready for Mustang and his men to come in, was extremely boring. Forms to sign off on, most of which I didn't even have a chance to actually read. Reading took time I didn't have, if I wanted to get my work done in time, so I skimmed, and even then, that was slow going. I learned to scan quickly for anything that I didn't want my name on, then sign off and move onto the next form.

The pure amount of bullshit and red tape that crossed my new desk was mind boggling. If anyone ever says an office job is easy, they have never had an office job. I thought being out on the road was tough, good grief, this was worse. I was now tethered to my desk by paperwork.

I was entirely all too glad to greet Mustang and his people at the train station when they arrived. Havoc and Breda went off to their own lodgings. Fuery went to a preassigned military dorm. Mustang was there, with a scant few boxes and a carrier in which was that cat I'd found over a month ago. She looked bigger and quite a bit healthier than I'd last seen her.

I didn't see Lieutenant Hawkeye though. That worried me.

"Edward, sir this was your idea, I'm leaving it to you and your adjutant to find me a place to live," Mustang said. "Or at least someplace I can put Fuzzball down before she meows herself to death. She didn't like how noisy the train was."

I stared. "You named her Fuzzball? What kind of a name for a cat is that?"

"An apt one," he replied. "She is a regenerating ball of fuzz. See this uniform? It used to be pristine. Now it's full of cat hair."

I smothered a smirk and put on an annoyed face. "No one said to keep her, Mustang. I recall giving her to Lieutenant Hawkeye."

His irritated look turned distant. "About that. She was given a medical discharge before the transfer
That startled me. She'd been in perfect health when I was with her. "Medical discharge? What happened?"

"Is there a car waiting, Edward? I'd like to put Fuzzball's carrier down for awhile."

I nodded, still watching him. "Yeah, my adjutant is waiting by the car. We'll get your boxes and get you to the house we picked out for you. It's a two bedroom, not far from work."

"Perfect," Mustang said, following me to the car. He set the carrier down inside while Mom and I got his boxes loaded into the trunk. He lived very simply, a couple boxes labeled 'books', two labeled 'clothes', and one mandatory 'misc' box. Except the books boxes, none were very heavy.

I was surprised to see how easily Mom lifted those boxes of books. I wasn't joking when I said those were heavy, probably full of research material, and Mom lifted them like they were nothing. I didn't remember her being that strong.

Mom held the back door for Mustang and I both, and we crawled in. This wasn't normal protocol for moving a soldier into his new home, but I wanted to see to it personally that Mustang got settled and into work so he could start helping me with that mess I called an office.

Mustang didn't say anything about the fact that his new commanding officer and adjutant were personally moving him into his new house, but he did start signing once we got in the car. "To answer your question, she had a miscarriage that triggered a nervous breakdown. The doctor discharged her. She'll not be coming to Central."

I stared at him, turning pale. "Oh god," I whispered, probably barely heard over the noise of the car. "A mis- I didn't know she- shit." I couldn't make my hands work to complete a goddamn sentence.

"No, Edward, it wasn't yours. It was mine."

If the pregnancy I hadn't known about had floored me, this made my brain completely stop. Terror crept in in the absence of other thoughts. My (former) commanding officer had been involved with a subordinate who'd cheated on him with me, who also outranked her and dear anything that might exist, strike me down before that trouble fell on my head. "Yours? She- shit, she was involved, I swear to god, I didn't know, sir. I wouldn't have let anything happen if I'd known."

"Of that, I have little doubt, Edward. She told me what happened, before they put her on medicines." Mustang did not look happy through any of this conversation, his face held into a stern mask of an unhappy military officer.

I shrank away, that terror shriveling into an overwhelming sense of shame. My mouth tasted like cotton, and was about as dry as it. "Everything?"

He nodded. "She told me what happened to you up north. She also told me about the lash marks on your back. Why didn't you tell me?"

I looked down, playing with my hands in my lap. Shame, mostly, but I wouldn't admit to that. "It didn't matter," I finally spat out.

"The hell it didn't," Mustang growled, before switching back to sign. "Edward, what was done to you was wrong, period. I could've helped you so much more if I'd known why you were acting the way you were, instead of how you'd been before you disappeared."
I shrugged. "You can't change it, so why bother?" I asked, turning to him again. "Can you change what I learned up there? No, you can't. So don't worry about it. Just help me out with this goddamn office." I sat back, letting myself coast away from the carnival ride of fear by immersing myself in my present situation and dealing with it. The office was part of things, and a part I could throw at Mustang to keep him from focusing any more on the subject we'd just drifted away from. "I have to leave for a little while, someone I gotta meet with about my own research, so you'll be in charge. Captain Douglas is coming with me, so I'm counting on you."

He sighed. "Very well, Edward." He paused, then grit his teeth. "Sir."

I grinned before I could help myself. "That's going to kill you, isn't it?"

He stopped and looked at me for a long moment, smiling faintly. "Yes, it is," he finally answered. "And that's the first time I've seen you smile since your qualification exam."

My grin fell and I shrugged awkwardly. "Don't do it very often, that's all."

"I know. I hope to see it more often after this." He looked up as Mom came to a stop. "This is the place?"

I nodded. "This is it."

We helped Mustang get his boxes and the carrier inside, then left him to unpack himself. Mom spoke on the way back to the office. "So what did you two talk about, Edward?"

I looked out the window. "Nothing, Mom," I said quietly. "Just a mutual friend who's had some medical problems lately." I wasn't about to tell my mother about Riza, what I'd done to her, or what had been done to me. She'd go on a warpath for one thing, for another, I couldn't stand to see the disapproval I imagined I'd get if she knew what I'd done to Riza.

"I hope your friend gets better then," she said in that patient tone that said she knew I was hiding something, but she wasn't going to pry, she'd wait patiently for me to tell her myself.

"Thanks."

When we got to the office, I asked Mom if I could get my hands on a medical record. "Depends on which records, sir," she said, slipping into work mode now that we were in the office.

"A soldier's records. She recently was given a medical discharge. I want to see why and what they've put her on for the why."

"It shouldn't be too hard. What base was she stationed at?"

"East Headquarters. Her name was First Lieutenant Riza Hawkeye. She served as Mustang's adjutant in the office. She was on the list to transfer here, but she was discharged before the order came through. I sat down at my desk, eyeing the mountain of paperwork I had waiting for me. "And put in for our leave to go to Dublith as soon as Mustang and his men are settled in here."

"Yes, sir," Mom said with a bow, then stepped out of my inner office to go do what I'd asked her. It felt weird, ordering around my mother, but I also knew how to act like a soldier, and soldiers obeyed ranks. Still, it was massively weird.

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Our leave came up before Riza's medical records from East could be shipped to me, so I was forced
to hope Mustang didn't pry into that and hide it from me. I wasn't sure if he would or not. On one hand, he'd shared the information about her with me readily enough, even if privately. On the other hand, I'd been 'the other man' for awhile, and I didn't know how much he'd appreciate me snooping where I didn't belong.

No use worrying about it.

Mom and I caught an early train out, heading down to Dublith. I was a little apprehensive about the trip; I was paranoid of this woman that took care of the homunculii, mostly because I couldn't come up with a reasonable answer to a question that had been bugging me since I first was reunited with Mom. How the hell had this woman found Mom? Mustang had said that he'd gone back to the house to find Al right after dropping me off at the Rockbells', and in that time, somehow, what had been Mom had disappeared.

Either Mom had made it all the way to Dublith in that form, or this woman had known and been there in Rizenbul. Which didn't make sense, nobody knew what we were going to do that night. But it made more sense than that mess my mother had been making it to Dublith. Or even having reason to go that way. So somehow, that woman was in Rizenbul and knew to watch for her.

The other reason for my apprehensiveness came in the form of my teacher. If she saw me, she'd kill me. I went against her teachings and tried to raise the dead, no matter how successful I was or wasn't. And then I joined the military. I could only imagine the humiliating asskicking she'd give me, and I couldn't be certain my instincts wouldn't take over and make me dodge, or worse, fight back. I'd had good fighter instincts before, the military had polished them until they shone.

I decided to forgo the touching reunion with my teacher and avoid town as much as I could. Thankfully, Dante's place was just outside of town, up a hill in a forest. The chances of running into my teacher were slim.

The train pulled into Dublith late, and Mom and I walked down the road and up the path leading to Dante's. Mom entered like she owned the place, holding the door for me as I stepped in. The place was huge.

It wasn't the size of the house that astounded me, though. It was the person wandering past the foyer in a thin little nightgown. What the everloving hell was Rose Thomas doing there?

"Oh dear," Mom said, setting down her briefcase at the door and walking after Rose. I followed, keeping hold of my suitcase. "Rose? Rose, dear, are you still nightwalking?"

Rose stopped and looked back. "Oh. Sloth. I'm sorry." Her words were distant and slow, as if coming from the other side of a tunnel. I wondered how much of that was because of Liore and how much was because of the insane asylum they'd tossed her into. Her face brightened when she saw me. "Angel!"

I faltered to a stop. Me? An angel? There was something to make my brain crash into a tree. I shook my head. She frowned. "Yes, you are. You're the one that saved me. I recognize that coat."


Mom came to my rescue, putting a hand on Rose's shoulder. "Rose, dear, let's get you back to bed. You'll have plenty of time to talk to Edward in the morning."

Rose gave me a longing look, which made me tense, but she let Mom lead her away. I stayed where I was until Mom came back several minutes later, wondering how Rose ended up here and not in
Rizenbul, where I'd asked Hughes to send her. Another question to get an answer from someone in that house, probably Dante.

My thoughts stopped running in circles when Mom rounded the corner into the atrium. "I'm sorry, Edward. She had a very hard time of things before the military released her from that asylum. I don't know what they did to her there, but she's more than a little vague now. Lady Dante is working to help her through it with her herbal medications."

I had the horrible mental image then of Riza in one of those places. That's where they put patients with 'nervous breakdowns.' I had the sudden urge to run back to Central to eye those medical reports. But I had things to take care of here, like finding out who this Dante person was and how much of a threat she was to my family before I could do anything else.

"When will we meet this Dante?" I asked her one-handedly.

"After breakfast," she said. "Lady Dante is eager to meet you."

I slept fairly fitfully, when I slept at all. Something was very much not right in that house, and it put me on edge. Maybe it was the sickly sweet smell of perfume that permeated everything, I didn't know, but my instincts were telling me to get out of that house.

It turned out my instincts weren't wrong.

The next morning, I was going through my morning exercises when Mom knocked on the door. I pulled my shirt back on and answered the door. "Yeah?"

She smiled. "Breakfast is ready. Lady Dante is eager to meet you."

"Okay, I'll be right down." Once Mom had left, though I was loathe to leave her alone with this woman, I cleaned up with the rag and water basin there and changed into clean clothes, then headed downstairs, fully armed.

At the breakfast table were Rose, Mom was serving, there was an old lady, and someone so androgynous, if not for his otherwise broad shoulders, I wouldn't have been able to guess what gender he was.

Rose lit up when she saw me. "Edward!"

"Well, look who finally decided to meet us," the androgyne purred. "Fullmetal Shorty himself."

I blinked. Not only had I long since outgrown short jokes, but it'd been ages since anyone had made any. I was too stunned to react beyond staring at him like he'd lost his goddamn mind.

"You must be Edward," the old lady said. "It's a pleasure to get to meet you. My name is Dante, I'm known as the town's chemist." I nodded in greeting. "Your mother was quite pleased this morning, I've never seen her so happy. It's not often a homunculus is accepted by their creator."

I shrugged, taking a seat by Rose, who watched me with little hearts fluttering about her head. Oh god. I couldn't handle anyone's infatuation with me, much less an insane girl's.

"Can you sign?" I asked the old lady known as Dante.

"Of course," she said. "When Pride mentioned you'd earned the State Alchemist certification at twelve, I knew I'd be seeing you sooner or later, so I made an effort to learn."
I paused. That sounded entirely creepy, to me, but I don't think normally. I assumed I was supposed to be grateful for that so I thanked her. On the other hand, even if she was the embodiment of evil, she was more courteous about it than Archer, who didn't bother learning my language at all.

"I have some questions for you."

"I'm sure you do," Dante said, sipping what smelled like tea. Mom set a mug of coffee down in front of me. "But those should wait for a better place than the breakfast table, don't you think?"

I gave her a stony stare for a moment, then shrugged. "Fine with me." It didn't matter when I cornered her, as long as I cornered her.

Breakfast was eaten in silence, without even minimal conversation. I felt a chill at that; what kind of household didn't talk over breakfast? Not even to ask 'pass the salt' or something? The androgynous man occasionally shot me looks that were bordering on hostile, while Rose continued to make moon eyes at me, like I was the greatest thing in her world since sliced bread. Dante seemed oblivious, and Mom just kept looking at me with a smile like she couldn't quite believe I was really there.

Fucking creepy all the way around. Except Mom.

After breakfast, Dante asked Rose to help Sloth with the dishes, and it took me a moment to realize that this 'Sloth' she was referring to was my mother. After she'd told Envy- the androgynous man, I assumed- to leave the girls alone and go find something to do, I spoke up.

"Why'd you call Mom that?" I asked.

Dante looked at me. "Because that is what I named her. All the homunculii I have cared for have been given names like that. They are, after all, mankind's forgotten sins."

I bristled a bit. "I didn't forget her," I told her.

"I know you didn't, Edward, and we're all very grateful for that. I've never seen a homunculus accepted by its creator before. Not even Envy, and he's quite old. You'll have to excuse his poor manners, by the way, he's gotten cranky in his old age."

I shrugged. "I've dealt with worse." I'm not exactly polite myself, although I was doing my best to mind my manners around Mom. "But now that Mom's been accepted, shouldn't you call her by her real name?"

Dante sipped her tea. "No," she said calmly. "Accepted or not, she is still a homunculus, and not the same woman who you'd called 'Mom' before."

"And as her creator, I don't get a say in this?" I demanded testily.

She finished her tea and stood, taking her cup over to the sink where Mom and Rose were busy with dishes. "Thank you for the tea, dear," she said to Mom.

Mom smiled at her. "Of course, Lady Dante."

Dante stepped over to a cupboard and pulled out a basket. "Edward, come to the garden with me, please. We can talk more out there."

I stood warily, glancing at Mom and Rose as I went. I knew she was only an old woman, but something about her demeanor and the way she ordered homunculii around put me on edge. Every instinct I had screamed that this place, and especially this woman, were evil.
I followed Dante out to the garden, where she crouched down on her knees and started digging around, harvesting long sheaves of... some herb I didn't recognize.

Give me a break, I'm not a botanist. I can't know everything.

After a moment, she began explaining. "Edward, I know this is probably very difficult for you to hear, since you clearly love your new mother very much, and homunculi are a new concept for you. But they're not human. We cannot treat them as such. You can love them, you can call them whatever you want, but the fact remains, they are not human. They are...hmm." She turned to look at me. "Have you read much science fiction?"

I shook my head. "A little, but not much."

"Mm, too busy with scientific readings, I assume," she smiled. "Well, perhaps you have heard of the concept of clones, then? Genetic copies of someone else. They are new people unto themselves, even if they also fill the role of the person they were cloned from. I am not arguing that she is your mother. You have accepted her as such, and as her creator, you may do with her as you wish. But you must remember, she is not Trisha Elric. Which is why I call her Sloth, even now."

That made sense to me, but I didn't like the implication of not treating them as humans, despite the fact that they weren't. "What makes them not human?"

Dante went back to her work. "They lack a soul. And they have specific abilities that I'm sure your mother hasn't shown you yet. She can turn herself into water. Envy can shapeshift. Lust has long claws that she can form from her fingers. Gluttony can eat and digest any matter in the world. Pride has the ultimate eye. The former Greed could harden his body into an impenetrable shield. Abilities humans could never have. They are also faster and stronger than humans."

That explained how Mom had handled those boxes of books of Mustang's. "But why not just treat them like any other person, instead of ordering them around and treating them like lesser people? Even if my mother isn't human, she's still a person and she deserves a little respect."

Dante laughed. "Was I not polite enough for your tastes? I'm sure you've forgotten your manners a time or two around her. You're a soldier, few soldiers have proper manners."

I crouched down by her so she didn't have to turn to see me sign. "What was the missing ingredient in her?"

She paused, then looked up at the sky. "Well, I suppose someone should know to take over for me. I'm getting old, I won't live forever. They must feed on red stones. I'm sure you know what those are. Incomplete Philosopher's Stones. They need the souls of others to make up for their lack of one."

That made my stomach drop. The thought disgusted me, but I refused to let it cloud my judgment of Mom. It wasn't her fault for what she was.

"It's a shame I only have incomplete Stones, like those," Dante said, her tone idle. "If I had the true Philosopher's Stone, I could turn them all human."

I stiffened, staring at her with the stony look I'd mastered as a mask to hide what I was thinking or feeling. She was trying to play me. I didn't know what she really wanted that Stone for, but I recognized manipulation when I saw it. I'd spent too much time with an abuser not to. She wanted whatever Stone I could get my hands on, and I had a feeling she'd hold my mother hostage to get it, if she had to. A plan of my own started forming in my mind, although I was loathe to go through the first step.
"How'd you know Al and I were going to create her?" I asked, diverting the subject for the moment. That made her pause. "What do you mean?"

"Mom wasn't in the lab anymore by the time Mustang went back to look for Al. Either she made it all the way here in that poor shape she was in, or you were in Rizenbul, waiting for her. I'm not stupid."

"I never said you were, Edward," she said, returning to her harvesting. "But you're right, I was waiting for her. I am Izumi's teacher. Everything she taught you, she first learned from me. When I heard who her students were, I had a feeling. I knew your father once, long ago, probably long before he met your mother. He'd tried the same thing. Envy is the result, and unlike you, your father was not as magnanimous towards his creation and left. I worried that the sins of the father might fall to the sons, and I'm afraid it's not in me to turn away a homunculus in need of help."

I took all that with a grain of salt; although I was sure there was truth in there, it was wrapped up in some very ripe bullshit. I played along, though. "Thank you, then. I wouldn't have her if you hadn't followed us."

I noticed something else she said, and glanced towards the house. "Who was Envy? If my father tried to bring him back, I mean."

Dante didn't answer for the longest minute, then she stopped harvesting and looked at me. "I think that's Envy's to decide to tell you or not. It's not really my place."

I didn't for one second believe that. Her whole attitude towards homunculi, convinced that they were not human, and maybe they technically weren't, but she obviously thought of herself as better than they were because of this fact. So I highly doubted she respected Envy's privacy enough for that statement to hold water. She was keeping a card close to her chest.

I'd have to see what I could pry out of Envy. If he lived up to his name, he was probably jealous of the family my father left him for, which meant Mom and I and Al. I could probably play off that to get him to slip up.

I straightened and headed inside without saying anything to Dante. I'm sure she found it rude, but I was sure I didn't care.

Inside, Mom was just finishing putting away the breakfast dishes with Rose's help. I waited and watched for a moment, watching Mom with a look that said I wanted to talk to her. She looked at me nervously. "Rose, why don't you go help Lady Dante in the garden?" Mom suggested to Rose.

Rose looked longingly at me, then nodded. "Okay," she said quietly, and brushed past me out the back door. I had to resist the urge to draw away in revulsion. Nothing against Rose, she wasn't revolting on her own. I just didn't like being touched, and especially not by her. Not by a woman fixated on me with a messy past that could manifest in any sort of fucked up way.

Mom folded her hands together over her abdomen. "You look angry, Edward."

I shook my head. "Not angry, just wondering why you didn't tell me about these abilities you had."

She wrung her hands together slightly. "I feared I couldn't explain it in a way that wouldn't upset you. I knew you'd listen better to an alchemist who specialized in homunculii than me."

I stared at her. "Mom? I may not have been good at following instructions as a kid, but that doesn't mean I didn't listen to you when you told me something. I don't like this Dante woman, she says things that I don't like. Things about you homunculii that come more from her own conceited arrogance than from any actual fact."
Mom frowned. "Edward, there's no better expert on we homunculii than Lady Dante. She's been studying us for centuries."

If I'd been looking at the ground, or anywhere else, I would've given myself whiplash for how fast I'd look at her at that. As it was, I tensed to the point of my muscles hurting. "What?!"

She put her hands over her mouth, wide-eyed, like a child caught saying something they shouldn't. "Oh, Edward, please don't tell her I said that. She won't turn me human if she knows I'm blabbing her secrets."

I scowled. This woman was holding my mother hostage to the idea that she could turn her human. If the main difference between a human and a homunculus was the soul, I knew damn good and well Mom could never be made human. Souls can't be recreated, even with the Stone.

I stepped over to Mom and put my flesh hand on her arm, reading her chemical composition. "Mom? You're chemically identical to a human. You are human. So what if you don't have a soul? Doesn't matter to me, won't matter to Al. You're still you."

She smiled, a bit wet-eyed, and pulled me into a hug. "You're a dear, dear boy, Edward," she said.

I glanced over her shoulder towards the back door. Dante could come back in at any time, and I didn't like the chances of walking into anyone else around here. "Why don't we take a walk, Mom?"

She looked at me curiously, then neatly folded up the towel that had been used to dry dishes next to the sink. "All right. There's more housework to do, but I suppose it can wait awhile."

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I stuck my hands in my pockets as we walked down the forest path from Dante's. Once we were suitably far away, I took my hands out to sign. "I want to stop by and visit my teacher," I told her. "You'll like her, after she's done kicking my ass."

Mom shot me a sidelong look. "I hope that was figurative, Edward."

I shook my head. "No, it wasn't. How do you think I learned to fight? She taught us that by fighting with us, like a teacher should. I don't know if she's better than me still, or if the military's given me an edge on her, but she's probably going to hit me a few times for joining the military, then a few more times for you. She taught very hard against both, and I've disobeyed her teachings."

Mom pursed her lips tightly. "I'm not sure I like this woman, if she treated you so poorly."

That made me shake my head again. "No, Mom. She taught us, then bandaged us up afterwards with a pat on the head and a 'good job'. She made us help with chores, then gave us dinners that there was no way we could possibly eat it all."

We walked in silence while Mom decided her opinion of my teacher. I hoped it'd end up favorable enough to not get into a fight with her when Teacher kicked my ass.

"She took care of you, then?" Mom finally asked, as if my answer would make her decision for her.

I nodded. "She was never a mother, she was a teacher, but if it hadn't been for what she taught us and how she taught us, I probably would be dead by now. The military taught me how to shoot, but to actually fight, hand to hand? That was all my teacher."

"Then I'll try to control my temper when she greets you," Mom promised.
I sighed with relief. "Thank you. Teacher wouldn't take it well if someone else attacked her for disciplining her student. And from what I hear about your abilities, you'd be able to take her on."

My teacher's husband was out on the front walk when we arrived. He looked me for a long minute. "She's been waiting for you," he finally said that stoic growl of his. "I'll get her." Then he turned and headed back into the house.

My stomach did a flipflop as I grabbed Mom's arm and directed her a few steps to the side, out of the way. "Stay here," I told her. "And don't move, no matter what she does."

Mom could've been ice for the tone she had when she said, "I don't like the sound of that, Edward." Her eyes were narrowed, and she damn near looked ready to roll up her sleeves and get in between her kid and a charging rhinoceros.

I gave her a helpless facial shrug, and stepped back up to the door, awaiting my executioner. I didn't have to wait long, either. Teacher came storming down the hall to the door and her foot connected with my face with the force of a freight train.

As I stumbled back, she cracked her knuckles. "You stupid apprentice!" she all but yelled. "I didn't teach you to join the military!"

I heard Mom start to say something and I held up a hand, silencing her. My teacher ignored Mom, swinging a right hook at me. For the first time in my life I managed to block her, and more than managed, I defied her to do it. I caught her fist before it connected with my jaw, giving her the stony stare the military had taught me. It wasn't what I should've done, maybe, but it was my first reaction.

Her eyes narrowed, then she swung her other fist in a controlled wide arc, probably expecting me to block with my right hand, busying both hands in the process. I ducked instead, letting go of her right fist as I did so. I finished my drop and swept my leg at hers. She jumped over my leg and I used the momentum to stand up as I turned, bringing my automail arm up at her face.

She lifted her arm and blocked, then immediately withdrew her arm, drawing her head back out of the way of my attack. She took two large steps away. She glanced at Mom, studying her for a long moment, as Mom seemed to turn to ice, staring coldly at my teacher. Then Teacher looked back at me and walked over.

I knew she'd figured out who Mom was, so I forced myself to lower my arms and defenses. She struck me across the jaw, then pulled me into a hug. That surprised me, and scared me a little more than her punches did. She'd never hugged me before.

"You fool," she whispered. "You genius fool. You got it to work?"

"She has no soul," I said, relaxing in her grip. "And it cost me Al."

"More than that," she noted, eyeing my right shoulder as she pulled back and let go of me. "Come on, inside, both of you."

I stepped over to Mom and hugged her. "It's all right, Mom. I promise. I'm not hurt. I deserved that, for what happened to Al and I when we brought you back. She lost a lot when she tried it," I explained. "We defied her teachings. I had it coming. Okay?"

She pursed her lips tightly while Teacher watched us from the doorstep. "You don't deserve to be beaten, Edward."

I faintly smiled. "That? That was a love tap. I can handle more than that and she knows it. She
wouldn't be so rough with me if I weren't capable. Please? We can trust her, and we need to have a long talk about this Lady Dante of yours, and I want her in on it."

Mom gave me a concerned look, brushing her hand over my jaw. "If you say so, Edward. I'm not sure I like her, if that's how she treated you and your brother, though."

"She trained us to be strong," I corrected, offering her my arm to escort her in.

She sighed, taking my arm. "All right, Edward. I'll play nice. I got the message."

My teacher led us into the house, shutting the door behind us and leading us to the kitchen, motioning to seats. I let Mom pick her seat, then sat where I could stay between the two women in my life and still allow Mom to translate my signing for me, which I silently asked her to do.

"Of course," she said.

Teacher settled down in the seat I left for her. "Okay, Edward. Start explaining."

"You want me to start at the beginning?"

"You can start by telling me what happened to your voice that you can't tell me this yourself," she said.

I sighed. Figured. "After we transmuted Mom, that... thing, it took Al as payment for her. So I tried to bind his soul to a suit of armor Father had in the lab. I lost my arm and my voice for the effort."

"And didn't get Al back," Teacher noted. "That's extraordinarily against equivalent exchange."

I shrugged helplessly. What could I say? That's what happened, and equivalent or not, that's what the Gate did. Then Teacher looked at Mom. "And she is the result of your attempt to resurrect your mother?"

This time, Mom answered for herself. "Yes, I am. My name is Sloth."

"That's an unusual name."

"There are others like me," Mom said. "We're all named this way. Lady Dante calls us 'man's forgotten sins'. However, now that Edward's accepted instead of rejected me, I might be able to take a new name."

"You will," I snapped irritably. "I don't like this Dante person and how she handles the homunculii."

"You're not talking about Dante the Chemist, are you?" Teacher interrupted, looking between us.

"You know her?" Mom asked.

"She was my teacher," Teacher said, nothing I didn't know, but apparently Mom hadn't. "She seemed harmless enough, although I greatly disagreed with her philosophies. I didn't understand the point of learning alchemy just to not use it to help people. She claimed, in not so many words, that she wasn't human and was above people. I thought perhaps senility had overtaken her."

I shook my head. "She said that because she's not human. Or if she is, she's one fucking weird one."

Mom translated faithfully, then looked at me tiredly. "I suppose telling you to watch your language won't work?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, I'm very familiar with how men in the military talk. You're a vulgar lot, all of you."

I shrugged helplessly. "I've always been a foul-mouthed brat, I just learned more words."

"Well, that I won't deny." She sighed. "My apologies, Missus Curtis. I didn't mean to go off topic."

Teacher waved it off. "Like he said, he's always been a foul-mouthed brat. I remember dealing with him on a regular basis."

Mom raised an eyebrow rather imperiously at that, but didn't say what she clearly wanted to say. "So do I, actually."

I ducked my head. "Back on topic. Dante has supposedly lived for centuries, taking care of homunculi."

Teacher blinked dumbfoundedly, straightening in her chair. "How is that possible?"

"I'm not sure," Mom said. "Envy is the one that told me this, and I believe he was trying to rattle me."

"Envy's kind of an asshole," I remarked. "And more than that, Mom, he was created by Father. At least according to Dante. She wouldn't tell me who he was that Father risked human transmutation to bring him back, but she told me he belonged to him, at least."

Mom looked at me in shock before hesitantly translating. "Your father created Envy? When was this? Envy said he's almost as old as Dante, but that would make your father-"

I nodded. "Centuries old, just like Dante. And I think she uses the Philosopher's Stone to do it. I'm not sure what exactly she does, but the Stone's definitely involved."

"How can you be so sure?" Teacher asked."

"She pretty much just asked me to hand it over to her," I said. "She knows I'm looking for it, and probably has guessed why, and yet she tried to manipulate it away from me by holding Mom hostage."

Mom practically snapped her neck turning her head so fast to look at me. "She did what? How? Edward, what did she say?"

"After she got done lecturing me about treating you like a human being, she said 'of course, I could turn them all human if I had the Stone.' Which is total bullshit."

"Edward, if she's been working with we homunculi as long as Envy says she has, then perhaps she can."

I shook my head. "Any alchemist that's tried human transmutation can tell you that it's horseshit. You can't recreate a soul, that's what goes wrong and summons the Gate in the transmutation so it can proceed to-." I bit off what I wanted to say. I'd heard the saying often enough in the military, but not only were my teacher and mother listening, I just couldn't bring myself to bring up the imagery of a rape joke.

Teacher sighed. "Edward, watch your language. I don't know what you were about to say, but watch it." Then she frowned. "But what our boy says is right. There's no way to recreate a soul in someone."
"Best I can think she could do is attach a foreign soul to your body," I said. "Like I tried to do with Al's soul. But even that is damn hard, and-" I cut myself off, dropping my hands as I thought about that. "She could be attaching her soul to different bodies as the old ones get close to death." It was a gross idea, but it made more sense than random immortality. Her body was too old; if she was scared of death enough to go after a Stone, she was probably too vain to want to be an old woman forever.

Teacher sat back a bit, arms crossed. "What happens to the original body's soul?"

I looked at her. "Probably shoved into Dante's old body. She's too arrogant to use a homunculus's body. They're sub-human to her."

"But she's been nothing but kind to me," Mom protested.

I shook my head. "To use you to get to me, more than likely. She followed us back to Rizenbul the night we left here, because she figured we'd make you, just like Father made Envy. She knew we'd leave a homunculus behind and purposely followed us to get you. And now she's using you against me."

It occurred to me, unhappily, that she might've manipulated Mom into manipulating me without Mom realizing she was doing it. Even worse, Dante might've convinced Mom to do it purposely.

I'd take the chance that Mom wasn't aware of what Dante was doing. Like with Dante, I could smell the underhandedness of that sort of mental fuckery, and I hadn't picked up on that from Mom. I knew I was biased, but I had to make a choice on whether to trust her. And my first thought would always be my mother was there for me.

"Quite frankly, I don't want you anywhere near that woman, but until I can figure out how to get rid of her without pissing off Envy and the rest, I have to play along," I said, pushing aside my decision and the possible consequences of it.

"The rest? How many homunculii are there?" Teacher asked, looking to Mom as the most likely source for an answer.

"There are five of us. Six if you count Greed," Mom explained. "But Greed's been sealed for more than a century. There's Envy, Lust and Gluttony, myself, and Pride."

I tilted my chair back on its back legs, thinking. This, for the record, is never a good idea. The... chair, not the thinking part. "Yeah, about Pride. She said he told her about me getting certified as a State Alchemist. Is he hiding in the press the way you were hiding in the military or something?"

She shook her head. "No. I thought you knew when you met him. I could always tell, but I guess I was already familiar with him before I finished forming. He's Führer Bradley."

I bet you can guess what happened next. Yeah, that chair and I went ass over kettle. "What?!" I squeaked out as I struggled to get out from under that chair and back upright.

Mom stood up and helped me to my feet. "Edward, are you okay?"

"Aside from the mind-blowing shock, sure." I rubbed the back of my head, hoping I wouldn't end up with a lump there. I'd been hit harder on the head without a lump, but sometimes it's the stupidest things.

Teacher slumped in her chair. "Edward, what have I told you about that?" she said almost vaguely, staring down at the table. "This country is being run by a homunculus."
"I'd be fine with that, except it's Dante running things. You know he listens to her the way Mom did."

"That's an even worse prospect, with her anti-human ideologies," Teacher said. "No wonder we keep getting into wars with no ends."

Wars with no ends.

Drachma closed in on me. O'Riley's and Farrand's deaths, Lance and Scott strung up with barbed wire, the snow and the cold and the whistling sound of artillery. All because of a misanthrope. That blind rage built up again, until I couldn't see, until I couldn't breathe, until every bit of me trembled, until I had to lash out at something. I chose the wall.

"Edward!" Mom snapped when my automail fist left a nice hole in the drywall.

My teacher sighed. "Did that help?"

"It made me feel better for a second." I carefully withdrew my hand and fixed the wall. "Sorry, Teacher."

She waved it off. "No harm done, you fixed it." She crossed her arms as I righted my chair and sat back down. "So these wars are caused by Dante, if we follow this train of logic. Is it just because she dislikes people?"

"Who knows," I snapped grumpily, then stopped and thought about that. Dante needed the Stone. The Stone was made from live human beings. Oh dear god. I sat up straighter. "She starts them to get the Stone. The Stone is made of live human beings, she uses the wars to make the Stones."

That caught both Mom's and Teacher's attention. "They're what?" Mom asked, horror sketched across her face in a way I didn't remember ever seeing. "Oh god, she fed those to us."

"She told me, Mom, and I don't give a fuck. You're still my mother."

"What things? Stones?" Teacher stared. Then her expression hardened. "How do you know this, Edward?"

I returned that look with a flat one. She couldn't possibly think I-

Okay, with my reputation, maybe she could.

"Not from making one," I said. When Mom failed to translate- she looked way too distracted by the revelation about the red stones (and I didn't blame her) to even notice I'd signed anything, I repeated myself 'out loud'. "I found a guy who'd made some prototypes. He didn't act like he was happy about it. He told me, and gave me all of his research to work on on my own."

Teacher seemed satisfied by that, a small nod and a look that suddenly looked a bit distant from the conversation. Something was going on in her head. "If she had them to feed to the homunculii, why does she need you to make her one?"

I shook my head. "Red stones are incomplete Philosopher's Stones. They can amplify alchemy, but not like a real Stone could."

Mom finally came to the rescue to translate. "I'm sorry, Edward," she said, almost woodenly. "Please, sign. I'll translate."

"Thank you." Her tone worried me, but I could understand it.
"So she couldn't transmute them together to form a bigger Stone?" Teacher asked.

"That, I don't know. I would think in theory that doing that would work, but I'd say theory's wrong if Dante hasn't already done that. Unless having her trained homunculii around to do her bidding is important enough to do things the hard way."

Mom winced. "We do tend to listen to her fairly faithfully. But we owe our existence to her. Without those stones, we don't progress past the stage that I'm sure you saw in the house, Edward. Eventually, we die in those forms."

"She does it to use you," I pointed out. She looked down at her hands on the table. "Mom, it's okay. I doubt anyone would blame you. I don't."

"Nor I," Teacher said. "You can't help what you are, nor that Dante may have used that against you. It's speculation, but now that we think Dante is potentially dangerous, what do we do about her?"

I was starting to get a horrible, terrible idea. I didn't like it but it started to seem like the only way. "Mom, what's the status of the other homunculii? I know Pride's running the country for her, but what are the others doing?"

"Stirring up trouble," Mom said. "Lust and Gluttony were originally responsible for giving Cornello the red stone."

"Mother!" I stared agape at her. Liore took its turn at crowding on me. Those children, the hot sun and sand and the rape Rose was subjected to and the losses and one more step on a dark road that I doubted I could be saved from anymore.

She gave me a helpless look. "I was never told why, or even about it by Lady Dante. Lust told me after she and Gluttony returned. Envy tends to do the same sorts of things, according to her. I couldn't understand at the time why, but if Lady Dante is pushing the country into wars, then that's exactly why they were there. To cause strife. If you hadn't killed nearly everyone before a Stone could be made there..."

At that, Teacher's expression darkened. "You did what, Edward?"

I stared at the table, trying to keep my hands still. "Nothing I wasn't trained to do."

Both women watched me. It was nerve-wracking. "Ed, what did they do to you?" Teacher demanded.

I shrugged. I would never let them see that. I'd tell Winry before I told either my mother or my teacher about the north, about Acheron and Olivia, about Archer. I forced as much of a cavalier tone into my cracked voice as I could. "I obey orders when the call to kill goes out. It's what all State Alchemists know can and will happen. It's the equivalent exchange for the resources to get Al back."

Mom gently rested her hand on mine on the table. I twitched, trying to keep from yanking my hand away. With the past so close behind me, getting touched made me want to recoil.

"You two were always inseparable, even when you were fighting. I suppose neither of us should be surprised how far you've gone to get him back."

I looked away. "I owe it to him. It was my idea to bring you back, it's my fault he's in that thing."

"Nonsense," Teacher said, still sounding immensely unhappy with me. "Your idea or not, Al went along with it. He's like you, even you could never make him do something he didn't want to do. So
your idea or not, he went along with it. It is not solely your fault that he is where he is."

I didn't believe that, but I chose not to say anything. I took my hand back from Mom to sign; my voice was getting tired. "Mom? How can I get Dante to Central? And the other homunculi?"

"Lady Dante rarely has them far from her person," she said, letting my topic change slide. "Since you're dedicated solely to the Stone, she'll bring them in to her. As far as getting her to Central with them, there is an opera house in an underground city ruins that she likes to use from time to time. She said it's where she goes to be reborn. I thought it was some religious thing for her, since she was so old-fashioned, but if she switches bodies, then she must take who she wants to switch with and the Stone there. So, get the Stone for her, she'll go there."

I nodded. "And I'll bet Rose is the sacrificial lamb."

"Oh, poor Rose. She's been through so much already."

"Yeah, well, it's obviously not over for her. If Dante hates humans so much, why else would she help some girl from an insane asylum?"

"I know," Mom sighed. "If you tell her you have the Stone, or are very close, she will come to Central to use it. And she'll have the homunculi close at hand, I'm very sure of that."

"That include Envy?"

"More than likely," she said.

I looked at my teacher. "Teacher? I want you to come back with us to Central. I'm going to send Mom on vacation. I want you to take her to Rizenbul and keep her there. Our house is still there, I just sealed it. Protect her from anything the other homunculi might try."

Mom finished translating, then gave me one of her Mother Looks. "Edward, what are you planning? Don't send me away, I can help you."

I put aside the quiet worry that her protest was less about helping me and more about making sure I did what Dante wanted, and shook my head. Something I'd have to risk. "Not with what I'm going to do, Mom. I'm going to turn them all into the Stone and I can't risk you getting caught up in the reaction."

She frowned. "That'd be a very small Stone, Edward. Where are you getting the rest?"

"I'm hoping Marcoh left research behind in the Fifth Lab that I'll use," I lied. Honestly, I knew I'd probably need more than whatever Marcoh left behind. I just wasn't sure until that moment where to get it.

"And if he hasn't?" Teacher asked, sounding not quite sold on the idea of following this thought train into conclusive action. I'd have to convince her some more.

"I don't know yet. But I'll think of something," I assured them. I was lying through my rotten teeth to the women who meant the most to me in my world, just like I'd always been lying to Winry. But I couldn't tell them what I had as a back up plan. I needed them to cooperate with what I wanted them to do.

"Then I will help you," she said. "You've raised questions I want answers to." She sighed, then got up and put a hand on my shoulder. I resisted the urge to roll my shoulder out of her grip. "I'm not prying into your past. Not yet." There was a threat in that- I had a feeling she'd get the story from me
somehow, or if not me, then someone else, if she could find someone who knew. I tossed aside that thought and let her continue. "But I won't let it repeat."

"Nor will I," my mother added, reaching over and taking my automail hand. It was only the lack of sensation in it that kept me from twitching away. She glanced up at my teacher, and I got the impression that somehow, they'd both just passed some test they were putting each other through, though I wasn't sure what it was.

I felt bad, playing them, but Dante was leaving me no choice. If she thought she could get us to do what she wanted, she was very, very wrong.
Chapter Summary

She smelled strongly of perfume as she got near me, and I had to tighten every muscle in my body to get my feet to stay put and not run. That perfume smelled sickly sweet, almost like it was covering up the smell of something more disgusting.

But I managed to stay still, feeling my skin on my lips warm up as the wound closed up when she put the stone near my face. She lifted her hand towards my eye, and I felt the soreness there disappearing.

She stepped back, admiring her work. "It will do. I'm afraid you might still have a scar there. A shame, some young lady might've liked to kiss those at some point."

I wanted to retch.

this is my temporary home
it's not where i belong
windows and rooms that i'm passing through
this is just a stop
on the way to where i'm going
i'm not afraid because i know
this is my temporary home
-Carrie Underwood

Mom and I returned to Dante's house with a promise that we'd let Teacher know when we were leaving so she could follow, preferably without anyone at Dante's knowing about it. That would be difficult, since I was sure Dante would send someone after Mom and I to make sure we made a Stone for her like good little lackeys, but I'd find a way.

Not wanting to be near Dante, and completely avoiding Rose's little infatuation, I decided to explore the house a little bit, see if I couldn't find some evidence of who Envy was, or if not that, Envy himself to beat it out of him. He seemed to have completely disappeared while Mom and I were in town.

As I got closer to the back rooms, the amount of dust increased, as if that part of the house was no longer in use and was being left to ultimately rot. I was a little surprised that Dante would let that happen, with her pet homunculi around to clean it for her like good little slaves, but apparently, she had no interest in this area of the house. (Yes, I was a little bitter about how she treated Mom, can't you tell?)

I started inspecting the rooms, seeing a lot of old furniture under cloths to protect them from dust, but
not from age. The rooms were all arranged, and stepping into one and lifting the dusty sheet revealed very old-styled furniture, as if from another century. I wondered how long Dante had been living in that house.

In one room, instead of carefully preserved scenes that looked like something from another time and place, I found total chaos and destruction. Like someone had come through like a whirlwind and tossed furniture around, drawers and ancient papers and linens. I stepped carefully inside, looking around. I bent down to examine one of the papers. Transmutation circles and alchemical notes were scrawled in an old hand, in a form of Amestrian that I barely recognized.

There were only two items in the whole room that hadn't been ripped, toppled, or otherwise destroyed. On the bedstand next to the bed was a clock, still ticking away from what unknown century, who knew. And on the wall above the fireplace was a painting, covered in a sheet. Both looked undisturbed.

I glanced around, then stepped over to the painting. I grabbed the sheet and pulled, revealing under it an ancient-looking painting of my father and another boy, with the family gold hair and eyes. He looked about thirteen, while my father looked ageless, forever trapped the way I remembered him.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that the young boy in that picture had to be an Elric boy. I didn't know who, but whoever he was, he was mostly likely long since gone and died, as centuries marched on without him.

"What're you doing in here?" Envy's angry voice came from the doorway.

I reluctantly tore my eyes away from the picture to look at him. "Who's that?"

Envy had his arms crossed, leaning against the door frame with a look of spit and vinegar growing on his face. "What does it matter? The kid's dead. Long time ago."

I wondered why Envy was so hostile over this boy, until my brain kicked into gear. It also did not take a genius to figure out, my father would've only risked his life on human transmutation for someone important to him. Like a son, perhaps, or a nephew close enough to count. I couldn't imagine why my father would leave the homunculus of someone so important to him behind to Dante's care- and I suddenly wondered if Dante was the mother if the kid was a son and not a nephew or some other relative, and the thought made me very uncomfortable- but it made sense.

"That was you, wasn't it?" I asked, watching Envy carefully in case that hostility turned violent.

Envy narrowed his eyes. "What of it? The old bastard abandoned me to get married to your pretty little whore and have you and your brat brother."

I was over in his face in a hurry as I grabbed him and slammed him up against the wall. "I don't care what you say about our father," I snarled, "but don't you ever talk about my mom or brother that way." The shock of the presence of a half-brother took second place to my temper. Mom and Al were the two most precious things in the world to me, and I had little that mattered left. Talking shit about them was a good way to get me pissed.

Envy laughed. "Look who's all big and bad. You really think you could take on a homunculus, Shorty?"

I bared my teeth. "I'd be happy to give it a shot. Just for you, Envy."

"Such brotherly affection," he said with a manic grin. He grabbed the front of my coat and pulled me close. "I should return the favor." Then he... well, I won't say he kissed me, that was a flat-out bite. I
I stepped back into reach and slugged him hard across the jaw. He smacked back against the wall, then graced me with an almost manic smile. "That's what you give just for calling them names? I can't wait to see how much you'll try to kill me for sending you up north."

I paused, giving him a wary look. His smile became toothy. "That's right," he said in a smug tone to match that evil grin on his face. "Grand really had no idea where you were. Because I was the one that sent you off with the psychopath, just to piss off the old bitch."

What he was saying made me taste bile. The bite of the lash, the smell of blood and the ice and a swollen feeling in my mouth all came screaming into my mind. Somewhere, I heard Archer's voice telling me to get to my knees.

The rage took over.

I gave him a hard right hook, then aimed my hands at his scrawny damn neck. He lunged at me before I could. He was damn fast, I'll admit, and every bit as strong as I was, possibly a bit more. I was barely able to keep up.

But I managed, spurred on by adrenaline and that blackness that blotted out everything, and wrestled him to the ground. I earned a good sock to the eye in the process, but I pinned him down, bringing my automail fist down into his face repeatedly.

He laughed between blows. I didn't care that for whatever reason, the damage was healing as fast as I'd leave it, a flash of alchemical light that couldn't blind me to my target. "What's the matter, Shorty? I didn't hurt you, it was-" A brilliant flash of light blinded me, and I was abruptly left with, not Envy, but Archer. "-me, Fullmetal. You're out of line. On your knees, soldier."

I wheeled back off him onto my ass. Archer stood up, reaching down for my hair.

I scooted back, trying to get away. His eyes were the same cold ice, the tone was as angry as he ever was at me, and the smell of him was strong. It all made it impossible to breathe; I was too scared to catch any air.

God no no no, please no, I got out of there, don't take me back-

My brain unscrambled itself back into the present- I'd pay for the forcible jerking around, but I didn't dare let Envy throw me back into the past and back on my knees. I kicked my leg up right between his legs.

Envy doubled over, that same flash of light returning Archer's form to Envy's. I got up and tackled him. "Don't you ever think you can get me that way," I snarled at him.

Envy smiled up at me. "What if I take your precious brother's form? Would you hit even him?"

"It wouldn't be him, it'd be you," I growled, my throat aching at the use. "Sorry, Brother, but you and your tricks are beneath me." I got up, kicking his side once before moving to leave.

"Fuck you!" Envy shouted after me, sitting up and rubbing his side. "I'm better than you pitiful
human, don't you walk away from me!"

I turned and stared at him. "Why don't we see what my alchemy will do to you, Envy? Should I transmute that Ouroborous on your leg? See what happens?"

A bluff, a cold one, one I almost hoped I could be called on. If that mark could be transmuted, Dante might've already used it on my mother, and god only knew what that might've done to her. It was a variable I wanted to eliminate.

But more than that, I wanted to make Envy hurt very, very badly. It was only that need that kept me from panicking and running, kept my stomach from twisting into a pretzel right then and there.

Envy recoiled as if struck. "You're no better that that old bitch," he spat. "How long before you make the same threats to your precious 'mother'?

"I won't. Her, I actually like. You can die for all I care."

Why he let me go, I don't know, but I heard him throwing things around in his room as I left. Maybe he was afraid of that lie I cooked up on the spot. Maybe there was something to it. I didn't know, but it didn't matter. I got away with minimal damage.

Physical damage, anyway.

Once I was certain that Envy was too busy destroying whatever was left of his room to follow me, I broke into a run and found a room as close to the main living area as possible, without chancing running into someone. I closed and sealed the door behind me, then dropped down onto the floor, shaking like a leaf in a strong summer storm.

I'd gotten away from there. I had. But Envy had almost dragged me right back to it, and I was terrified, of him, of Archer, and of everyone in that house in general. I wanted out. I wanted home. I wanted life to go back to before Mom and Al had left me.

In a desperate attempt to stay hidden, to avoid Envy, or Dante, or god forbid, my mother, I crawled to the corner, curling up until I was hidden from sight on the far side of a bed. I stayed there as my teeth chattered, my stomach threatened, and my mind sung white noise at me. The noise was a raging crescendo, battering me around, then slowly, it dimmed until a thought was able to break through.

Mom. I needed my mom.

I dragged myself up off the ground and headed out of the safe little room, where Envy might find me and try something worse. I heard silence outside in the hall, and that made me nervous. I kept my hands close together, ready to transmute in an instant as I slunk back to the inhabited part of the house, to where Mom might be.

She was in her room, quietly humming as her knitting needles clicked away. I felt the ice in my bones thawing at the sight this image from my past, a sight that soothed away the noise of Acheron that Envy had pulled up in front of my eyes. She looked up at my entrance. "Edward! What happened to you?" she asked, eyes wide, bordering somewhere between panic and anger- she didn't even know what had happened and she already seemed ready to beat whoever or whatever had caused the blood on my lips and the red swelling over my eye that would probably turn into a bruise.

I waved it off. "Got into a fight with Envy, I said. "I won."

Mom stood, and while that panic abated into mild concern, the anger stayed strong. "You should put something cold on that to prevent swelling," she said. I wanted to balk at that tone. That tone was
murderous. That awful 't' word hung over me.

"I know," I said instead, trying to calm her down by sounding cavalier and hopefully distracting her anger. I didn't want her trying to take on Envy, even if she could probably beat him senseless. "I probably won't, though."

She sighed in a way only a woman dealing with a stupid man could. "I wish you were still young enough for me to baby your injuries for you," she said, seeming to let the issue of Envy go for the moment. "You grew up behind my back and I wasn't there for it. It's a bit shocking to think of you as almost seventeen."

I gave her a lopsided smile. "I think it's a little more shocking that you're alive, Mom," I pointed out.

She made a humming noise of agreement. "I suppose so. Now, what was it you wanted to tell me?"

I closed the door to her room before answering. "Envy was Father's son."

She gave me the shock I was expecting and hoping for, though bringing Envy back up had her ire back up as well. "He-"

Mom took in a deep breath- when was the last time I'd defied her that much? -then lifted her hands. "He's what?" She was a superb translator, but a terrible signer.

"Father's son. I discovered a painting in his bedroom of the two of them, and I suspect Dante's his mother, which might explain a few things about why he acts the way he does, with her attitude towards him. I noticed no mother was in that painting."

For all the possibility that she was playing me as much as Dante was, Mom was certainly a better actress than the old bat. "Edward, are you sure about this?"

After having her repeat herself so I could understand her, I nodded. "He confirmed it during our fight," I said. "He also called you and Al some unflattering names, which is why I had to kick his ass."

There, make it sound like it was a typical teenage fight and not the result of something worse.

Mom rolled her eyes. "Don't let him get to you, Edward. He's always like that. I don't mind, and I doubt your brother would care."

"Yeah, well I care," I snapped, leaning against the wall.

Mom was quiet a moment, looking off somewhere else. "Can he be saved, like me?"

I shook my head vehemently, resisting the urge to yell at her for suggesting it. She had no idea he was the one that transferred me, and in the name of avoiding bringing up Acheron in general, I decided against telling her. "The only one who could do that would be Father, and Envy gave me the impression that he hates him. He's a lost cause."

Mom blinked, probably caught off-guard by my subject switch. "She's a nice enough person, I suppose. She's very loyal to Lady Dante's promise of humanity."

"Think she'd listen to me if I told her it was impossible?"
Mom shook her head. "I highly doubt it. She's very determined to become human again. I think I may be your only ally among the homunculi, Edward. And you're sending me away." Boy, there was some scolding.

I sighed. "Mom? I need all of the homunculi and Dante in Central. But not you. I'd chance you getting caught up in things and disappearing. I can't lose you again. And I am getting Al back. He'll need you, too."

She sighed in resignation. "All right, Edward. I won't argue. You're as bad as your father. When you make a decision, god help anyone who wants to argue against you."

I looked down at the floor, toeing the ground. "How soon can we leave here?" I was uncomfortable with comparisons to my father, so I tried to sidestep it gracefully. Didn't quite make it to graceful, but at least I got away with it.

"I think that depends on how you handle Lady Dante," Mom said, sitting back down. "Stay polite, Edward, tell her you'll get the Stone, she'll let you leave as soon as you want."

I let my thoughts wander over that, then pushed away from the wall. "I'm going to go get us out of here," I said. "Might want to start packing."

I headed out, looking through the house for Dante. It wasn't hard to find her- she was in the kitchen, washing the herbs she'd picked that morning. Rose was with her, helping, but she turned to me with a smile best suited for a lover than a barely-known acquaintance. "Edward!"

I had to stomp down on the desire to run at that look.

Dante glanced back at me at that. "Oh, hello- goodness sakes, what happened to you?"

I shrugged, wiping away a bit of blood from my lips. "Got into a fight with Envy."


"Been a long time since I had a fight that evenly matched," I said, hoping to scare her a little with the idea that I could keep up with her precious homunculi. I was still processing that I might've been bluffing without meaning to, if all the homunculi could heal as fast as Envy appeared to.

"Well, here," she said, setting aside the plants she was cleaning and grabbing a towel. "Let me get a red stone to heal that. That cut looks deep. What did he do?"

"Bit me."

I was almost amused to see Dante wearily put a hand over her eyes. "That boy. I'll speak to him, Edward. He'll behave himself. Now." She looked back at Rose. "Please keep cleaning those, Rose. I need the pennyroyal for your nightly tea." She smiled at me, and I suddenly felt as unclean in her presence as I did in Rose's.

No. Noooooo, no. This was all not going to happen. If my first thought that I was suddenly a replacement Elric was anywhere close to accurate, I was going to stop and hurl somewhere.

"I'll be right back, dear." Then Dante left, and took with her a feeling of grime.

"Edward?"

Rose's voice was so soft that I almost didn't hear her. I looked over at her, and in the name of not
upsetting her further - that woman had a hard past, and not much of a future in front of her, I didn't need to make the presence worse than my jitters probably already was - I forced my facial muscles to relax instead of tensing up into a defensive scowl. "Yeah?"

Rose's eyes were as solemn and haunted as I remembered, but perhaps more unfocused than before. "You got me out of there. Why do you hate me now?"

I wasn't sure how to safely answer that. I glanced off at the door Dante disappeared to, waiting for her to come back with that damned red stone so I could stop bleeding and get out of there. "I don't," I finally said, then shrugged. "I'm just not much good with people."

"You made God save me."

I took a moment to draw in a deep breath. "Rose, that was a statue, not God. I'm just an alchemist."

Silence stretched another thirty seconds, and I was getting antsy for Dante to get back. Rose started washing the herbs again. "Did the snake eat you too?"

It took me a few seconds to decipher that. "No," I said. If I was understanding what that statement meant, then I was lying, but even if I was wrong, I wasn't going to tell this woman anything about me that might get back to Dante.

Speaking of Dante, the old broad came to my rescue. She opened her hand to reveal a tiny red stone nestled in her palm. "Here," she said. "I'll heal you. I'm sure you'd be able to, but I have experience, and a tired old lady likes to do something good now and again."

She smelled strongly of perfume as she got near me, and I had to tighten every muscle in my body to get my feet to stay put and not run. That perfume smelled sickly sweet, almost like it was covering up the smell of something more disgusting.

But I managed to stay still, feeling my skin on my lips warm up as the wound closed up when she put the stone near my face. She lifted her hand towards my eye, and I felt the soreness there disappearing.

She stepped back, admiring her work. "It will do. I'm afraid you might still have a scar there. A shame, some young lady might've liked to kiss those at some point."

I wanted to retch.

"You said you can turn them human. How soon can you do that?" I asked, shifting the subject quickly.

She blinked. "As soon as I have a Stone," she said. "Why?"

"I'm going back to Central with Mom tonight. I'll make your Stone as long as you turn her human like she and the others deserve. And I get a piece of it to try to get Al back."

"That seems fair enough," Dante agreed. "You are, after all, the one doing the work."

"After that, the rest is yours, and I don't care what you do with it," I added, which was a total lie, but she didn't need to know that.

"That's very generous of you, Edward," she said. "I'll keep it on hand in case any other homunculii come to me."
I refrained from reminding her that she'd gone to Mom, rather than the other way around, and in fact, she'd probably gone to all of them except Envy, who was handed to her on a platter.

"That's fine." I looked at Rose. "You stay here and help her," I said as loudly as I could. I felt bad about her, I knew damn good and well that Dante had her around for a new body. But no choice. I looked back at Dante. "I'll send word when I have the Stone ready. Mom says there's a place you like to stay in Central when you visit?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I do have a place. I'll take Envy and Rose with me when you call for us, as I assume you were about to say. The place I stay at will be less conspicuous for such a transmutation than even out here. Did your mother tell you where it was?"

I shook my head. She smiled. "Well, I'll show you when we get there, then. You'll be quite impressed with it." Yeah, I'd just bet. An underground city is pretty impressive. I wondered how it got down there, but I wasn't about to ask and tip my hand.

"You might want to call the other two- Lust and Gluttony? -home to Central, too, since I'm going to want that piece for me back pretty fast."

Dante nodded slowly. "Yes, yes, them too. I promised them too. Now, you're sure you can get the Stone, Edward? I'd hate to see everyone so disappointed."

I nodded. "We'll have it within a month."

"Very well," Dante said. "A family trip." She looked at Rose. "Doesn't that sound exciting, Rose?"

Rose looked up at her, wide eyed, then nodded slowly. "Yes, Lady Dante. Is Edward going to be there?"

Dante looked at me and I nodded. "Yes, dear, he will be. It'll be quite lovely."

"Sorry to grab Mom and run like this, but I have a lead in Central I want to follow up with before it disappears and we lose our Stone," I said.

"Of course, Edward, I understand. Go pack, we'll be fine here until you send for us."

I signed thank you to her quickly, then ran back up to Mom's room. She wasn't there. I panicked, running to my room on the off chance she decided to pack up for me- it would've been pointless, I was still living out of my suitcase, but she wouldn't have known that -only to find she wasn't there. I searched a couple other nearby rooms, and was about to go outside when I saw Mom stepping out of her room.

I had no idea what just happened. She hadn't been there a minute ago.

"It's time to go?" she asked, and there was something very cold but self-satisfied in her eyes.

Oh god, please say she didn't go confront Envy over the issue. I wouldn't be surprised if she had, Mom had never tolerated bullies, but if she did, Envy might've said something about Acheron and I just didn't want to get into that minefield.

I nodded. "Are you packed?"

"I am," she said, stepping back into her room. She returned about thirty seconds later with her suitcase and the small duffel that held her knitting in hand.
"Let me grab my stuff," I said, deciding to let the issue go instead of bringing it up at all. I headed back into my borrowed room to grab my things. I paused in reorganizing my suitcase to something more sensible than the mess I'd left that morning, looking at the picture that needed to be refolded into the clothing. "Almost, Al," I whispered. "I'm almost there. Just hang on." With that, I tucked the picture away and closed my suitcase.

I joined Mom out in the hall, and we made our way back into town to get Teacher. She and her husband weren't expecting us back already. "I'm terribly sorry, Missus Curtis," Mom said, speaking up for me. "Edward says we need to leave right away, to keep ahead of anyone Lady Dante might send after us."

"It's that bad?" Teacher asked, even as her husband went to pack for them.

I nodded. "I suspect she'll send Envy after us, and I'd rather get out before he does so we can hide you two until I need you to take Mom to Rizenbul. By then, I'll be doing enough interesting things to keep him occupied."

Teacher raised an eyebrow. "What sort of interesting things, Ed?"

"Making the Stone," I said.

She frowned. "Edward. You said the Stone was made from live humans."

"I think there's still research left over from when Marcoh worked the Fifth Lab," I reminded her. "I'm going to see if there's enough there to make a Stone big enough to get Al back. I told Dante she got a piece to make the homunculi human, but she can jump off a cliff for all I care."

Teacher pursed her lips together. "Very well." She looked back towards the bedroom. "Are you almost done, honey?"

Teacher's husband emerged, two suitcases in hand. "Ready," he said.

Teacher grabbed her coat. "Let's go, then." We left, hurrying to the train station, silent the whole way, like a bunch of thieves sneaking through the night. In a way, I suppose we were. We were going to steal Dante's empire right out from under her arrogant little nose.

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We arrived in Central a day later. I hoped we had beaten Envy there, assuming he could take on animal forms. I didn't know if he could or not, and neither, unfortunately, did Mom. All she knew was that he was a shapeshifter and could take human forms, because he'd used my form to mock her once. Which pissed me off beyond reason, but there wasn't much I could do about it, so I marinated in it.

After we'd gathered our luggage and gotten off the train, I turned to Mom. "We should keep them at your place. Better than a record of them checking into a hotel. Think your place can handle that many people?"

After she translated to Teacher and her husband, Mom nodded. "I have plenty of room there." She looked at the others. "This way. We'll take a cab. I'm afraid I don't have a car. When I do drive, it's a military car."

"We understand," Teacher said. We gave them the address and a little money for the cab, since there was no way we could all fit in one cab, not with Teacher's husband being as massive as he was. Mom and I waved down our own cab and piled in.
She looked at me. "So how well thought through is this plan of yours, Edward?"

I refused to meet her gaze. "Too well," I replied. "Now I just gotta hope Dante cooperates."

"You think she might not?"

"I'm not sure. I just want her and at least Envy in Central when I need them there. I can deal with Lust and Gluttony on my own if I have to. But Envy's too loyal to that old bitch, and she's too evil to be allowed to live."

"How do you know he's loyal to her?"

I side-eyed her. "Let's say for a second that we're right about her being his mother. She may treat the homunculii like shit, but she's still the parent that stayed. How would you feel if I walked away from you and left you with a kid that didn't even like you?"

Mom was quiet, taking that in. I knew that look- she was thinking hard about what I'd said. I was making a lot of assumptions, I knew, but I was also paranoid and too scared of the damage this woman had the potential to do to the family I had left to me to be willing to move slower. I had to keep ahead of the monsters before they caught up to me.

Besides, I really wanted Envy dead, with minimal losses on my side.

Finally, Mom seemed to accept my reasoning and crossed her arms, tapping one finger on her arm. "And what about Pride? Will you leave him?"

I shook my head. "No, I'll get him at the same time I get the others."

"You're going to leave this country scrambling," she pointed out, voice hushed under the sound of the car.

I shrugged. "Someone will step up to take his place."

"I suppose so."

The car ride went in silence after that, right up until we reached the house. We paid the cabbie, then I had Mom take our suitcases in while I waited outside for Teacher and her husband. They arrived not long after us, and I showed them into the house.

"You've done well for yourself, Missus El - er, Slo- ... what are we to call you?" Teacher asked as her husband brought in the luggage.

"Juliet Douglas while we're here," Mom answered. "That's my assumed name in the military."

"Very well, Miss Douglas."

"Thank you," Mom said. "I used to be the führer's secretary. It came with a comfortable income. Now I'm Colonel Elric's adjutant."

Teacher gave me a tired look. "Colonel Elric, huh?"

I held my hands up in self-defense. "Bradley dumped it on me, blame him."

Mom chuckled. "Bradley has an odd sense of humor. Come, this way, I'll show you to your room."

While Mom got them settled, I got into my suitcase and pulled out Marcoh's book and my own notes
on it. I still wasn't done unlocking all its secrets. Most notably, I didn't have the array, which I would desperately need.

I largely ignored it when Mom went into the kitchen to start a late dinner for us, and Teacher's husband went to help her. In fact, I kinda ignored it when Teacher went in to help her and both were summarily banished to the living room, where I was.

"What are you working on, Edward?" Teacher asked, moving to sit next to me. "I thought you knew how to make the Stone."

I shook my head. "I know what it's made from, but I don't have the array yet," I told her, not bothering with more than whatever my voice felt like giving. The room was quiet and any more would just hurt my throat.

She held out her hand. "May I?"

I looked at her, but handed over my notes and slid the book over. "It's encrypted as a cookbook, and some of these recipes actually sound pretty good, so it's been murder going over it. I've been working without any reference books. It's been slow going."

Teacher looked over my notes, raising her eyebrows every now and then. "Edward, you've become very skilled at alchemy, to be able to do this." She looked at me. "I think the student just passed the teacher."

I grinned, feeling a swell of pride at the compliment. "I've been studying a lot the last few years," I pointed out. "But thank you."

Her eyes softened. "You still have a good smile, I see."

I blinked, my whole expression dropping, then I looked away and shrugged nervously. "I don't do it often."

"I've noticed. Has having your mother back caused this?"

"What, smiling? Yeah, I guess. Didn't have any reason to before. Al was gone, Mom was dead, the Rockbells ... well, I don't talk much to them anymore unless I have to." I looked off somewhere past the wall in front of me. I knew exactly why I'd become so awful to be around, and I knew I couldn't tell Teacher, or Mom. They'd go on the warpath and quite frankly, I wanted them focused on what I needed them to do. And besides, I really didn't want to confess to anything. The last time I had, it'd ended badly for the one who dragged it out of me. I'd shoot myself before I did something to hurt my teacher or mother.

Teacher put her hand on my shoulder. "We'll get Al back, and you can rebuild your family and have reason to smile again."

I gave her a lopsided, probably pathetic smile at that, hiding exactly what I was thinking. I'd never have that family back, and I knew it. I was enjoying the time with Mom for what it was worth, but I'd never see Al smile at me again. Not because I'd fail, but because I couldn't stay, not with what I was planning.

I didn't say that, though.

Teacher and I worked on my notes together until supper was ready. Mom and Teacher chatted a bit, while Teacher's husband and I remained silent, focused on our food. Housewives. Always can find something to talk about. Especially when they could swap embarrassing stories about me. Sigh. I
wanted to crawl under the table and die an agonizing death.

Teacher's husband insisted on helping Mom with the dinner clean up, leaving Teacher and I to go over my notes again. We sat down at the couch and hunched over my notes.

"Edward, your handwriting is atrocious."

"You're just now noticing?" I asked her, looking at her.

She leveled her gaze at me. "A serial killer has better handwriting."

"... I'll take that as a compliment."

She rolled her eyes, setting down the paper she was looking at. "I just don't see an array in here, Edward. Are you sure he included it?"

"Yes. I don't see why he wouldn't. This is his complete research, he'd have to record the array somewhere in here." I sighed in frustration.

"Are you sure these are complete? He might've kept some of it with him."

I shook my head. "He wanted this as far away from him as possible, in case he was ever found."

Teacher picked up the book again, reading through it again. Or part of it, anyway. That was a big book. After a moment, she put the book down and frowned in thought, then grabbed my notes. She flipped through them, while I watched and waited, hoping she might catch something I hadn't. I idly flipped a pencil in my hand while I waited.

"What's this here, Edward?" she asked, holding my notes out and pointing to something.

"Oh that?" I studied it. "That's- ... actually, I'm not sure what that is." I scratched my head with the eraser of my pencil. "We studied my badly translated bit of notes from Marcoh's research for about two hours before we finally found the radial hidden in it. It was part of the circle for the Stone.

"I ran right over it," I grumbled, smacking my forehead with my flesh hand.

"Don't worry about that now," Teacher said. "Let's find the rest of it, see if it's in what you've already translated."

Mom looked up from where she'd settled in with her knitting to wait out our study. "It's getting awfully late. Perhaps you should wait until tomorrow, with fresh eyes."

My teacher and I looked at each other. I shrugged. "I'm not due back at the office for a few days," I said. "So I can afford to stay up late."

She nodded and looked up at Mom and her husband. "We will stay up. We have precious little time to find this array."

Teacher and I worked long into the night. Mom was with us most of the time, her knitting needles clicking in a quiet sort of melody, keeping us awake and focused as we went through pot after pot of coffee. Teacher's husband had long gone to bed by the time Mom finally did at around 3:30 in the morning; she was tired, but not exhausted. Homunculi, I was finding, only needed a little sleep. Which I rather liked, as it meant she'd be able to look after Al later, even while he was sick or not sleeping well.

Mom woke up around six, coming out with a shawl wrapped around her shoulders, yawning. "Are
you two still at it? Haven't you gotten tired yet?"

"Tell tired to talk to the caffeine in our systems," I replied.

Mom sighed. "You two would do better to get some sleep and come back refreshed. You're probably missing things you would not with sleep."

"We're fine, Juliet," Teacher said. "We've almost completed the array."

Mom stepped over. "How is it looking so far?"

"Stupid," I said.

"Focus, Edward, we're almost done," Teacher scolded, whapping me on the back of the head.

We studied awhile longer, both of us growing progressively more tired. Our last pot of coffee was starting to wear off. Teacher ran a hand down her face, sighing. "I'll go put on another pot," she said, standing up and stretching.

Her husband came out of the spare bedroom about then. "Izumi," he said pointedly, seeing us still awake.

She gave him a tired smile. "I know, honey. But we're down to the last piece of the array. If we can't find it by the time we've gone through this last pot of coffee, I'll go to bed."

I yawned, rubbing my eyes tiredly, then went back to looking through notes. I was starting to get bleary-eyed, and a bit desperate to find this last piece before I fell asleep and drooled all over the notes. Teacher brought me another mug of coffee a few minutes later and I took a grateful swallow, then went back to looking.

It was another hour before I finally spotted the last piece. "Here," I said, pointing to it, then sketched out the missing piece. "This is the strangest array I've ever seen," I said as I added it to the rest of the circle.

"I imagine it would be, since this is a transmutation like none other. Even human transmutation doesn't compare to what this is doing," Teacher said.

I finished sketching, then held up the paper with the array. "Is it just me or does it look like a bird?"

Teacher took the paper from me, studying it. "A phoenix array. Magnificent."

"Oh, is that what it's supposed to be?" I yawned again, popping my jaw as I did. "Okay, bed. I'll study that more in depth after we get some sleep."

"I agree," Teacher said, getting up. "Come on, Edward, we need our sleep." She walked over to her husband and kissed him. "I'll only sleep awhile so I can sleep tonight," she promised, then headed back to the back rooms.

I gave Mom a sleepy smile, then waved good night to Teacher's husband and went back to my own room and collapsed on the bed.

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"What's our next order of business, Edward?" Teacher asked over dinner that night.

"Get Marcoh's research out of the Fifth Lab. I've cased the place, it's locked up pretty tight. I may be
pulling another all-nighter."

"Doing what? Breaking in?" Teacher looked at me. She shook her head. "How many more days off do you have, Edward?"

"After this? Two."

"Then tonight you'll rest properly, and nap tomorrow, and then we'll go see about this place tomorrow night."

I blinked. "You plan on coming with?"

"I've come this far with you, I'll see it through until you need me to take your mother to Rizenbul to protect her," Teacher said matter-of-factly.

I sighed. "Nothing's going to change your mind, is it?"

"No. Now eat your broccoli."

While I reluctantly began to eat that stuff, Mom looked at me. "Take me with you, Edward. I don't like the idea of you going somewhere potentially dangerous when I can't protect you."

I hadn't been prepared for that, and I sat with my fork poised halfway to my mouth. I set my fork down. "Mom, no. The only danger I'm expecting is maybe a rotted floor or something and you can't help me with that. We'll be fine on our own. I don't want you anywhere near that transmutation circle if we find it there. I don't know what will happen to you and your red stones if it accidentally goes off."

Mom looked down at her plate, a broken-hearted expression on her face. I felt like I'd kicked a kitten. "I understand, Edward. Just don't get yourself hurt."

The guilt in the pit of my stomach made me lose my appetite, but I knew if I didn't eat, my body would be starving for food very soon, so I forced myself to choke down my food. Teacher helped Mom clear the dishes while I went back to my notes, more for something to do than any studying. We'd found the array, I had the ingredient list, which really just amounted to 'live humans'. I could go over it for anything we missed, but that was about it.

Teacher's husband stepped into the living room with me. "Don't worry about it, Ed. Mothers are protective. I'll keep her here."

I blinked, looking up at him. He rarely spoke up, so hearing his voice surprised me. "I'll take care of Teacher, promise," I told him.

He nodded, then went to take a seat.

We turned on a radio program as soon as Mom and Teacher rejoined us, and the evening passed quietly and slowly. I waited until Teacher and her husband went to bed, while Mom sat in her chair, continuing to knit.

I walked over to the chair and settled myself on the arm, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "What're you working on?" I asked her.

Mom didn't stop knitting as she leaned her head against me. "A new blanket for yours and Al's bed. I imagine you'll need a bigger one now, which means a bigger blanket."
I hugged her, burying my face in her hair, taking in the smell of her, the same as I remembered, committing it to memory. "Sorry, Mom," I whispered. "I know you're worried, but the military raised me in a battlefield. I'll be fine with an abandoned laboratory."

She set her knitting down and wrapped her arms around me, holding me tighter than I remembered her being able to. "Oh, darling, I know. You've always been like this, I've never been allowed to protect you the way I wanted to. Remember the time you jumped the ravine and broke your leg? You wanted so badly to walk to the Rockbells' instead of me carrying you. The only difference is then, you were small enough I could boss you around and carry you anyway."

I laughed a little, a demented-sounding little squeak of a noise. "I remember that. I was such a stupid kid. Hell, I'm a stupid teenager."

She pulled back and looked up at me. "That's normal, dear. Teenagers are naturally stupid. I'm sure even I was, but my memory doesn't go back that far."

"You met Father when you were a teenager," I said. "You loved to tell us this story. You met him when you were a teenager and pretty much told off your mother to run away with him to Rizenbul. You were nineteen when he married you."

Mom blinked, then laughed. "Oh goodness, I only remember your grandmother from one incident, and I remember hating her strongly. That must've been what started the bad blood. Oh well, she was a snobby old bat, anyway. You had a good grandmother in Pinako, you didn't need her."

I looked down, my smile at Mom's laughter fading. "Yeah, I did." And I'd ruined that relationship with how I blocked out her and Winry.

"Edward?" She looked at me in concern. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing, Mom," I assured her, then kissed her forehead. "I'm going to bed. Tomorrow night's going to be a long one."

"All right, dear. Sleep well."

She resumed her knitting as I headed back into my room. Once there, I changed for bed, and pulled out the picture I'd carried around as an increasingly heavy burden ever since I first left Rizenbul. It was the family I'd never have again; I'd already shut out and shut down Winry, Al would be next. With what I was planning to get rid of Dante and her homunculi, there'd be no coming back. I'd have to run far to get away from that crime.

At least Al would have Mom. I wasn't sure who I'd ask to watch out for them, though. Maybe Teacher would be willing to take them in. I wasn't sure yet.

Well, I'd figure it out. Right then, though, I needed sleep.
Chapter Summary

We hurried out, not quite at a run, although I was impressed with the speed Mom was able to put on when she had to. Back on the surface, it was like stepping into a whole different world. The light was harsher, there was background noise that underground tomb had lacked, and the smell of civilization. It was almost as if the city had been a lost holy place, with light that came from nowhere, and sacrifice written into its very streets.

I had use for that city. Ugly, ugly use.

The next night started late; we waited until long after sunset, and being winter, that came early. So once nine hit, Teacher and I headed out, leaving Mom and Teacher's husband to worry, but hopefully to get some sleep rather than trying to follow us. I didn't know if Teacher's husband would, but I had a horrible feeling Mom might try.

When we got to the Fifth Lab, we found it locked up tight. Barbed wire on the top of a very high wall, the front gate double locked with chains. Beyond that, the front door was locked and boarded up. We looked at each other, then circled the building until we found a secluded spot hidden by trees in the back. I wanted to just make a door with alchemy, but Teacher made me remember her lessons about only using alchemy when necessary.

She made me remember with a smack upside the head.

I rubbed the spot she hit- sick or not, that woman had a mean arm -and glared. "How do you think I've survived all these years?"

"I'd hope with the lessons I taught you," she said. "All of them."

I want to make it very clear right now- there is not a single man in the world who would get away with hitting me like that, my brother aside. I never considered Teacher's love taps abuse, but coming from anyone else, and I might've flipped and fought back until whoever had hit me was no longer going to move ever again.

I let Teacher get away with it, and would my mother, but that's because not only are they in positions of being smarter than me, they're female. I'd probably let any woman in the world hit me if I was
being dumb, but a man raises his hand to me and he'll find himself picking out a gravestone.

So don't bother.

"Fine," I said, dropping my hand and looking up at the wall. "I can get up there easy enough. I'll make sure I land on my automail. I don't mind my clothes getting a bit snagged." Then I eyed her. "I'll lower the wire to you, but I will transmute it into something that's not gonna shred your hands."

"That's a necessary use for alchemy," Teacher said, agreeing to it.

I normally wasn't grateful for my abnormal body parts, but since it made my teacher feel better about not entirely 'cheating', I took it for an asset.

"Now the building itself. Without tripping any possible alarms," Teacher said once we were both inside the compound, examining the building.

I looked at her. "We could just make a door, but we might open up into nothing but supports and the wiring and pipe system."

"Yes, that's the problem," she said, examining the walls. She stopped. "There's a vent up there, but I suspect we're both far too big to fit into it."

I eyed the vent. "I know I am," I said. I was pretty sure there wasn't a vent invented that could fit me, actually. "There's a prison next door that would've supplied ample ingredients, maybe there's a connecting pathway?"

"Too risky. You really want to break into an active prison?"

I shook my head. "You're right, too risky. Looks like we make a door and hope it goes into a room," I said, taking the glove off my flesh hand and pressing to the wall. Concrete, steel, and beyond that, nothing. I didn't know if that was because it was a room beyond that wall, or if there was something that just wasn't touching the wall.

"Have you found something, Ed?" Teacher walked over at me.

"Hopefully an empty room," I whispered, feeling along the wall until I wasn't picking up steel anymore. No need to collapse a structural support beam. I clapped my hands and transmuted a hole in the wall. It opened up into darkness. I stuck an arm in, feeling for anything like furniture or wires or pipes. Nothing. Just open air.

"Looks like the way's clear," Teacher said quiet, cautiously stepping in, feeling around for a floor. "It's a room. Let's go." She stepped in, leading the way, arms in front of her in the darkness.

I glanced back around briefly, then stepped in after Teacher, who had finally located a door. The hallway beyond was lit up with small lights along the ground. I looked at her. "Abandoned, my ass," I said.

"It does seem suspicious to keep lights on in an abandoned lab," Teacher agreed. "So. Which way?"

I nearly shrugged and suggested a direction on a whim, then I stopped and made myself think. "Let's look for a way down to an underground part of the facility," I said. "With an array like that, it'd take a huge part of the facility, and in all the other labs, the bigger experiments are underground."

She nodded. "Very well then. Relative to our position, I'd say left leads back towards the front of the facility. So we'll go right."
The Fifth Lab wasn't particularly huge on the first floor, we discovered, but as the floor sloped downward towards the basement, it seemed enormous. Eventually, we came to a set of large doors that led into an equally enormous room.

"Welcome," a male's voice up ahead said to us before we even had chance to take stock of the room. I squinted into the darkness, my hands slowly moving to clap in case this voice turned out to be hostile, or just block my way. Beside me, Teacher eased down into a ready stance.

"Who's there?" she called.

The owner of the voice stepped out into closer light, proving to be a man in full armor with a katana in his hands. "I am Number Forty-Eight. I am the guardian of this place."

Teacher and I exchanged a glance out of the corner of our eyes. "Number Forty-Eight?" Teacher said. "Interesting name."

"It's my work name," he admitted. "I'm glad to see worthy opponents after all this time. You seem like fighters. Shall we test that?"

I transmuted my blade from my automail. "Glad to," I murmured softly.

"Easy, Ed, don't go ballistic," Teacher warned in a quiet tone. "He's just one man against two of us. This shouldn't require whatever training the military gave you."

"They taught me to shoot," I told her. "I wouldn't use a gun on this guy, ricochet would kill us."

Teacher and I crept forward, moving to opposite sides of Forty-Eight. He watched us both, then ran at me, swirling his blade. I raised my arm and blocked the slice with my blade, then pushed back against his. He kept his balance, swung back the other way just as Teacher approached him. She ducked, her leg kicking out to his knee.

His left knee buckled, but he remained upright, as he stabbed downward at her.

She jumped back, as I swung my arm out, stabbing it through the leather glove holding his sword. He dropped the sword as I pulled back. I paused, looking at my blade. No blood. I looked at his hand as he picked up his sword back up. No blood. His hand was hollow. Empty.

On his other side, Teacher spun, kicking him square in the ribs. There was a hollow thud as she did, but he didn't flail, didn't move back, simply turned to her and swung his sword out.

He was empty. He was an empty suit of armor. I know my teacher warned me not to go ballistic, but I did. Someone else had the same idea I had, someone else was successful. I felt my shoulder ache and my throat burned. I smelled burned ozone.

I transmuted away my blade, and lunged at Forty-Eight even as he swung at Teacher again. I clapped my hands and grabbed his sword arm, stopping the transmutation at the deconstruction stage, sending pieces of armor flying everywhere and the sword skittering across the floor.

Teacher backed away. I ignored her as I knocked Forty-Eight to the floor with a swing of my leg, then pinned him and yanked off his helmet.

There was a blood seal just below the neckline. That fear-driven rage that I'd been carrying around like a security blanket ever since Tucker flared up and I was punching the blood seal with my steel hand with all the force I could get out of my automail. The iron where the blood seal was began to crack and splinter. Forty-Eight cried out in pain, even as the helmet said something that didn't register
until I'd completely shattered the blood seal.

"Edward, that's enough!" Teacher barked, grabbing my shoulder.

I swung back towards her in a stupefied rage. She caught my fist with a grunt and kept a stern gaze on me, forcing eye contact. I relaxed, shaking from head to toe and breathing unsteadily with the fear and anger and regret that hadn't abated yet.

"That's enough, Ed," Teacher said in a quieter voice. "I know, it doesn't seem fair. But life isn't fair. And you'll get him back soon enough."

"You're here about the Philosopher's Stone?" The helmet asked.

I looked at him, then down at the shattered remains of the blood seal that had been in the body.

"There were two of you in here?" I said.

"My younger brother and I," the helmet replied. "We were the mass murdering brothers known as Slicer in life. We lost, death is what we get for such a loss. That is our way."

"Condemned prisoners," Teacher said, walking over to the helmet and picking it up before I could do anything to it. She looked at me. "You were right about the government using them in experiments here."

I stood up, leaving the body of the younger Slicer brother on the ground, and stepped over to her. I looked at what was left of Forty-Eight. "What do you know about the Philosopher's Stone?"

"I cannot say. Destroy me."

I glared and snatched him out of Teacher's hand, giving him a shake. "Not until you tell me what you know," I snarled as loudly as I could. Which didn't sound terribly threatening, come to think of it.

The elder Slicer brother was silent for a long moment. "Keep following this hallway, you will find the room where the Stone was being made. Now. Destroy me."

"With pleasure," I whispered, grabbing the helmet with my automail hand, and snapping the blood seal off and crushing it.

I tossed the pieces aside.

I could smell Teacher's disapproval, but this time, she wisely refrained from smacking the back of my head to express it. "You've become brutal, Edward," she finally said about it as we started down the hall.

"Drachmans would string up prisoner Amestrian soldiers with barbed wire, booby trap the body, then slit open their stomachs and let their guts fall to the forest floor where wolves and bears would eat them. While the soldiers were still alive," I replied. "You tell me why."

Teacher held her placid expression securely in place. She was good at withholding her thoughts when it was needed. If I didn't already well know that it was Archer who'd trained that into me, I'd almost wonder if I'd actually learned from Teacher. "How old were you?"

"Twelve."

Her hand made contact with my shoulder, a touch that I dipped my shoulder out from under. She let me get away with it. "That's in the past now, Ed. I'm sure it haunts your nightmares and probably always will, but you have the future to think about now."
"Yeah." A future of nothing, but I didn't say it.

We walked for awhile in silence, until we came to a room with the door cracked open and a red glow coming out of that opening. We looked at each other.

"This looks like the place," Teacher said, grabbing the door and opening it.

I stepped in, my jaw dropping as I stared around the room. The very walls were filled with red water, with seven large tanks full in the middle of the room. A very elaborate array was drawn along the walls, and I paused, studying them.

"My god," Teacher said, following me in. "How many people must've been sacrificed for this?"

"No idea, but I've seen this circle before. Same with the array for the Stone, now that I think about it. Scar's arm. The sonuvabitch has a Stone."

Teacher glanced at me as she stepped into the room. "Scar?"

"A serial killer that targets State Alchemists. We're not sure why, but it's suspected he's an Ishbalan."

"And you've encountered him?" Teacher gave me one of those looks that women like to give men when the male is being stupid. "You're lucky to be alive."

I knew that, but I wasn't going to show a lot of fuss over it. "I had a bodyguard that helped." I studied the tanks, then clapped my hands, changing the six point array on the floor to a seven point. "Help me push these things to the points," I said, moving to push one into position.

"Whatever happened to 'please'?" she demanded, even as she started helping me.

"I forgot," I said, doubting I was heard over the scraping of the tanks against the floor.

It took us several minutes to move all those heavy tanks into position. After we were done, Teacher looked around. "There's a transmutation circle on the ceiling".

I glanced up where she was looking. "I wonder what's up above that," I said. "If more red water, we could collide the two transmutations into one and get a bigger Stone."

"I'll go check," Teacher said. "Don't do anything rash while I'm gone."

I gave her retreating back a tired look. Like I would do anything that would potentially endanger her! I was an asshole, but I wasn't going to endanger an innocent person, much less one that actually meant something to me. I bit back a yawn as I started studying the walls again, waiting for my teacher to return.

It didn't take her long, and I jumped when she reentered and started to talk, drawing my gun instinctively. She looked at me flatly. "I see battlefield instincts take awhile to die. You can put that away."

I let out an explosive breath as I reholstered my weapon. "Don't do that," I grumped at her.

Her lips twitched as if she wanted to smile but wasn't letting herself. "What, sneak up on you?"

"Yes. What'd you find?"

She glanced at the ceiling. "There's another container of this water up there. You were right, we can collide the two transmutations."
"Good. Shall we?"

We took up positions between the containers of red water. "This is repugnant, Edward," Teacher said.

"Just remember, the lives are already lost, we can at least make their deaths worth something," I told her. She grunted, then pressed her hands together after a further prodding that specifically, those deaths would save Al.

I clapped my hands, and we both hit the transmutation circle.

The red glow in the room turned blinding as red sparks of energy flew around the room. For a brief moment, I was back in that tiny lab back home when the transmutation went horribly wrong. I grit my teeth together against the sounds of Al screaming, and kept my hands in place, directing the energy into a solid Stone.

Finding that flow of energy was easier to slip into than I would have thought, and Teacher's energy melted in with mine, joined the transmutation; older, wiser than my brother, with a grimmer sort of determination than had haunted that first transmutation six years ago. I held onto that, onto Teacher's strength, letting that dim the noise of the lives that were melting into the Philosopher's Stone.

I wasn't sure if I was hallucinating it at the time, but I caught a glimpse of the Gate as the Stone formed out of the red water, and then it was gone, and the room was dim except a shiny red stone in the center of the floor.

I was shaking and breathless from the energy the transmutation took, and Teacher didn't seem in any better shape. Actually, she seemed in worse shape as she coughed, spitting up blood. I crawled over to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, rubbing her arm with my other hand. "Easy, easy," I said quietly as she trembled, leaning against me for support. "I've got you, Teacher."

After a minute, she pulled away, looking towards the Stone. "We did it." She got up carefully, walking over to the Stone and picking it up. "This is about the size of a fist," she said. "Is that enough to get Al back?"

"Possibly," I said, standing up and walking over to her. "But I want Scar's Stone to be sure. I can add this one to his." To be truthful, I knew that would be enough, but I couldn't justify what I was going to do to eliminate Dante's threat, not to mention Scar's, if I just used that. Besides, I had too much work to do yet for it to be safe for Al here.

She handed it over. "I saw that thing again when we transmuted this," she said. "Be very careful with this, Ed."

I nodded, tucking the Stone in my inside coat pocket. "I will," I promised. That thing was more precious than anything I'd ever held in my hands. My key to getting Al back, just as soon as I was done with my work. "Come on, we should get back."

Mom and Teacher's husband were both still up when we got home. Teacher's husband began to immediately fuss over Teacher. She waved him off. "It was a taxing transmutation, that's all. Ed took care of me." She gave him a reassuring smile.

Mom frowned. "So where's the Stone?"

"I have it," I said, grateful to be able to switch to sign after talking so much with Teacher. Then I dug into my coat pocket and pulled it out. Mom gasped, and I'm pretty sure it even got a reaction out of Teacher's husband.
"My god, Edward, that thing is huge." Mom got up and walked over to me, staring at the Stone. "This should be enough to get Alphonse back, right?"

I shrugged, putting it back in my pocket. "Maybe," I said. "I want to combine it with Scar's Stone to be certain."

"Scar? That lunatic?" Mom glanced at Teacher.

"The markings in the laboratory match the markings on Scar's arm, according to Ed," she told Mom. Mom frowned, looking at me. "You'd better take help for taking on Scar. He's killed several high profile state alchemists already. Between your reputation and your new job, he'd be all too happy to go after you."

"He's already been after me once before, Mom, and I was fine. I can handle him. I have a plan to trap him anyway. Don't worry so much. Besides, Bradley said taking care of him is one of my jobs now."

Mom sighed, putting a hand over her eyes. "I'm going to slap that man."

"Don't worry about it, Mom," I told her. "Let's just get some sleep and enjoy a day off tomorrow."

***

We mostly lazed around the next day. I idly poked at my notes, resisting the urge to use that Stone right away to get Al back. I had too much to do before I could do that, things I had to do to make the world safe for Al to be back in it. I kept repeating that to myself as I read over my notes for what felt like the millionth time.

"What are you doing, Ed?" Teacher asked, walking over to me. "Was there something we missed in the notes?"

I shook my head. "I'm just looking for something to do," I said. "I don't handle days off very well."

She sat down next to me at the table. "And how many have you given yourself?"

I shrugged. "Only when I was sick or injured. Reveled in them up north, meant I got time off from that miserable work. Hate it now. I got too much to do to rest."

"But if you don't rest, you'll slip up eventually," she said, brushing back hair from my face.

I tilted my head away. "Haven't yet," I said, conveniently glossing over the time I got shot by a shotgun because I was stupid.

Teacher smacked me on the back of the head. "You idiot," she scolded.

Mom approached, a mug of coffee in hand that she set down in front of me. "What'd he do this time?"

"He refuses to take a break," Teacher said. "Our boy is getting restless."

Mom made a thoughtful noise, looking at me. "Hm. How about a walk, after you finish that coffee? That's nice and relaxing and still doing something."

"I think that's a good idea, unless he wants to spar with me," Teacher said.
I choked on a gulp of coffee. "Rather not get my ass kicked, thanks."

She grinned. "My boy still knows me, I see."

I scowled. Two could play that game. "I also don't want to hurt you with my automail. I tend to favor it in a fight because I know it's stronger." She frowned, and I took that as a victory.

"Okay, you two," Mom scolded. Teacher knew how to be a gracious guest, and probably to defer to a student's mother when said mother gave an order, so we settled back to get some warm coffee in us before we went out.

Once my mug was empty, Mom set aside her knitting. "Get your coats on, it's chilly out." She grabbed her purse. "There's a specific area I wish to show you, but it's about a twenty minute drive from here. So we'll have to take cabs." She handed Teacher some money. "We'll meet you there."

Teacher looked at her. "We'll have our cab follow yours. Why are we going so far out?"

Mom had an enigmatic look on her face. "There's something very specific I should show you, particularly Edward, and I think you might want to see it as well."

That made Teacher and I both raise an eyebrow, but we put on our coats without question, Teacher taking the offered money and calling to her husband to get ready to go. Mom called the cab company and asked for two cabs to be sent to our address.

Mom wasn't kidding when she said it was out there a ways. We actually ended up driving for about a half an hour, due to traffic. I noticed the area was getting a bit shady, buildings run down and the like.

Mom paid the cabby when we were a few blocks into the bad part of town. Teacher's cab stopped behind us, and we piled out.

"This way," Mom said when we were all together again. I exchanged looks with Teacher and her husband, then shrugged and followed Mom. She led us around the ghetto, past people impoverished and living in the streets. I wished I could do something, but even with my generous income as a colonel and a state alchemist, I couldn't possibly help them all.

Finally, Mom stopped in front of an old, rundown church. "In here," she said, pushing open the rotting door. Once again, we exchanged looks, but followed her anyway.

"Juliet, what's so special about this church?" Teacher asked.

"It looks like someone couldn't even remember it was here long enough to knock the place down and pave over it," I commented.

Mom looked around. "Yes. It's been purposefully left alone, though. By Dante's orders." I noticed she'd dropped the honorific from Dante's name. "Can one of you alchemists come here?" she said, walking over to the altar, which was rather tall for an altar and made from thick stone. I walked over, wondering if my mother had lost her mind or something.

She pointed to an area on the front of the altar. "Transmute a hole right here, please."

Now I knew my mother had lost her damn mind. But I did it anyway, and immediately jumped back as if bit when the hole opened to a set of stairs going down. "Holy shit!" I squeaked.

Teacher approached. "What is i-" She cut herself off and looked at Mom. "The underground city you
Mom nodded. "I felt you should both know where it is, in case of emergency. Come, I'll show you around." She ducked into the doorway I made, which made me worry that Teacher's husband may not fit at all, if Mom had to duck. I followed her, Teacher right behind me, and miraculously, her husband managed to squeeze in behind her.

"Be careful," Mom warned. "Some of these steps are crumbling." We stepped carefully, and I was personally amazed that the walls were lit by some sort of bioluminescent algae or... something, because what should've been a pitch dark underground passage was lit up like torches lined the way.

"Look at these statues." Teacher touched one, then had to wipe luminescence off her fingers. "These must date back to the Christian calendar."

"They do," Mom said, glancing back at her. "This city was sunk four hundred years ago when the Stone was first made. It unseated the Church's power. I am not certain if it was Dante or possibly Hohenheim that created the Stone."

Teacher looked away from the statues. "The city was sacrificed?"

Mom nodded, then resumed walking. "There are no records of what city this used to be, but it was vast, and had a very different culture from what we have in Central now."

Eventually, the stairway opened up to a landing overlooking the city. I couldn't help but stare, forced to break my gaze only by the fact that I had to move over to let Teacher and her husband out of the stairwell.

"Oh my god." Teacher looked out over the city with the most bewildered look I'd ever seen on her face.

If I weren't too busy being impressed by the city, I might've been amused.

I probably was looking for it, knowing that the city had been sacrificed for a Stone, but I noticed that hiding in the layout of the city was a seven point array. "Teacher, look. The city, it's still an array for the Stone."

Teacher squinted, staring out over the city, the nodded. "You're right. That could be useful, or it could be a terrible thing."

I looked down at Mom, which I was still getting used to. "Anything we need to see in this city?"

"This way. Hopefully nobody is there yet." She led us down some more stairs to our left, taking us down into the city proper. She walked as if she'd been born in that city, leading us down streets to a central building that looked in better shape than the rest of the city. "This is the opera house. Dante uses it as her safe house when she comes to Central. If you need to, Edward, you can use the entrance you made up in the church to get here. She comes here by another way."

She pointed upwards. "If you look carefully, you can see some chain link fencing. That's the shaft for an elevator that goes between here and Bradley's office. She uses that to get down here. Do you wish to tour the opera house?"

I was staring up at the ceiling of this great underground tomb. She said my name to get my attention again, and I blinked. "Huh?" Then my brain caught up with the rest of me and I shook my head. "No, that's fine. We should get out of here before someone finds us."
Teacher nodded. "I agree. We know about this place now, and how to find it. We should leave before we're discovered."

We hurried out, not quite at a run, although I was impressed with the speed Mom was able to put on when she had to. Back on the surface, it was like stepping into a whole different world. The light was harsher, there was background noise that underground tomb had lacked, and the smell of civilization. It was almost as if the city had been a lost holy place, with light that came from nowhere, and sacrifice written into its very streets.

I had use for that city. Ugly, ugly use.

***

I had work the next day, but I didn't get proper rest for it, which I'm told is a common ailment. I waited until Mom had gone to bed at about three-thirty, then I headed out. The cabs were out of commission for the night, so I stole a car that someone had left the keys in.

Someone remind me to never drive again. I suck at it. Fucker stalled out three times before I got there.

I didn't have a lot of time- Mom didn't sleep long and I did have to get up early for work. I returned to the church, quickly reopening the doorway down the stairs. Once I was down onto the level of the city, I studied the ceiling for a few minutes before clapping my hands.

Alchemical energy traveled up the walls to the ceiling, carving out the phoenix-array of the Stone. I studied it for a moment, making sure the array was perfect, then headed back up the stairs as fast I dared.

I was back in bed by five-thirty, with my alarm going off an hour later. I sat on the edge of my bed, dressed for work, staring at the alarm clock as it rang at me. After about thirty seconds of that obnoxious noise, I worked up the energy to turn it off and leave my room, heading into the kitchen.

"Morning, Mom," I greeted with a tired yawn and sloppy sign.

She gave me a concerned look. "Didn't sleep well, dear?"

I waved it off. "Never do." The last time I had was the last night I was not alone in my bed. I didn't say that, though. Mom didn't need to know anything about my sex life or current lack thereof.

She stepped over and kissed my cheek. "Maybe a nice breakfast will wake you up," she said. "There's eggs, pancakes, sausage, and toast on the table. Have a seat and eat up."

That sounded insanely good to me, especially since I'd been up half the night and demanding energy for my automail and the rest of me. My body was starved for food.

Teacher and her husband joined us just before I finished my breakfast. There was still plenty of food left for them; Mom had really gone all out. I looked at them. "I'll leave some money with you two so you can do whatever you want today. Mom and I get home about five-thirty and Mom starts dinner immediately after we get home."

"You don't need to leave money, Edward," Teacher said. "We have our own."

"I also have a bigger income than you do," I said. "Let me spoil you a little. You're doing a huge favor for me."
Teacher sighed. "Equivalent exchange? All right, Edward, go ahead and leave us some money. We'll accept it."

I had a feeling they'd secretly leave the money back where I could get it and use their own money, but I'd give them some anyway, in case they needed more than they had. I left them the money, then headed to work with Mom, calling for a cab to get us there.

I dozed on the trip there, jerking awake when the car stopped outside of Central Headquarters. I yawned, paid the driver, and got out, heading up the stairs to my office with 'Captain Douglas' in tow. The only one in the office yet was Mustang, who was surprisingly early.

I glanced at my watch. "Aren't you known to be the procrastinator?" I demanded upon seeing him. "What're you doing here early?"

"There's work to be done," he said simply, taking a cup of coffee from the percolator and settling at his desk. "There's a file on your desk." He paused, then frowned. "Sir."

"That's going to kill you, isn't it?" I asked.

"I'll get used to it," he said dismissively. "Good morning, Captain Douglas."

"Good morning, Colonel Mustang," Mom said, settling in at her desk.

I grabbed a cup of coffee and headed for my inner office, still not used to this whole routine. I hadn't had a proper chance to settle into it before shipping off to Dublith, and it still struck me as strange.

The file waiting for me turned out to be Riza's medical records. I set aside my coffee and ripped into them, reading it over. Most of it was what Mustang had already told me; miscarriage triggered a nervous breakdown exacerbated by battle fatigue. Probably from being back out in the field with me after Ishbal had theoretically been left behind, I imagined.

What I was looking for, however, was her treatment. Thankfully, she hadn't been institutionalized, but she was on several medicines, a hormone regulator to rebalance everything after the miscarriage, sedatives, painkillers, and another medicine I didn't recognize. I wrote down the chemical formula based on the chemical name- nice thing about organic chemistry, names are assigned based on the chemical composition, so if you understand naming patterns for it, you can hear any compound by name and immediately write down its composition.

It won't necessarily tell you what it's doing, but you can at least get how much hydrogen is in it.

I wrote down the formula, then wrote a few equations based on what I knew about brain chemistry from making Mom. One advantage to building a live human being, you tend to understand how everything in them works.

Whatever kind of medicine it was, it was fucking with her dopamine receptors, and not in a good way. She had anxiety and battle fatigue, not schizophrenia, for god's sake. That medicine was going to permanently damage the way her brain functioned.

My pen snapped in my hand and spilled ink all over the file as I ground my teeth together, baring them in a snarl. Those doctors were going to turn her into a nigh-vegetable, no more coherent or capable than Rose had been. After taking a number of seconds ticked off in my head to try to wipe the ink off my glove and only serving to smear it on the other, I cleaned both with a quick transmutation, then stepped out into the outer office.

Havoc and Breda had shown up by then, Fuery just coming in the door. "Colonel, sir," I said as
loudly as I could.

Mustang was already looking my direction from my door opening. I crooked a finger at him. "My office. Now." I'd been deferring to him a great deal and still treating this as his office before I'd left, but I was pissed. And deeply, deeply scared. I'd hurt Riza enough by letting her into my world, I didn't want to see her turn into another Rose.

Mustang looked worried, following me back into my office. "Shut the door," I said, taking a seat behind my desk. I could see worry in his eyes, although he kept his face carefully neutral. I couldn't think of a single time I'd acted authoritatively at him, and the change in the status quo, however brief, made him nervous. It probably would've made me nervous if I weren't too busy being pissed off.

He shut the door and stood at attention in front of my desk. "Yes, sir?"

I handed him Riza's file, ink stain and all. "What's this, Colonel?"

He took the file, looking at it. "It appears to be an ink stain, sir."

I didn't rise to the bait, sitting still and staring at him hard with an unamused expression on my face. I hated myself for it, but I was taking a page out of Archer's book with that expression.

He looked like he wanted to sigh before turning back to the file. After a moment, he frowned. "This is Riza's medical file. Why do you have this, Fullmetal?"

"Concern," I answered. "It didn't tell me much more that you hadn't already, so relax. What it did tell me that you hadn't, however, was the names of her medication."

He set the file down. "And what do those matter?"

"The sedatives and pain killers are too strong of a dose," I said. "For starters. For another, there's one medicine on there I don't recognize. The last one. But I played around with the chemical composition of it. Care to guess what I discovered?"

"Concern," I answered. "It didn't tell me much more that you hadn't already, so relax. What it did tell me that you hadn't, however, was the names of her medication."

He set the file down. "And what do those matter?"

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"You mean her neuroleptic." It wasn't really a question.

"Oh, is that what it is?" I reached for the paper I'd been scribbling chemical equations on. "This is what it's doing to her. It's shutting down her dopamine receptors."

Mustang took the paper, looking it over. "This is a terrible reaction," he said, then he looked up at me. "I don't understand. Dopamine receptors? How can you get that out of this?"

"I studied to build a human body, remember? I know how the brain works. She needs off that medicine or she's going to be non-functional for the rest of her life. Call General Grumann and get her off that shit."

Mustang's expression turned hostile. "The doctors said it's helping calm her down. And I have no legal rights to take her off what her doctor put her on."

Oh, if he wanted to get hostile, I could beat him at that game. I stood up and walked around my desk, grabbing him by the collar and pulling him right into my face. "Get. Her. Off. Those. Now." I snarled. "It doesn't matter what I did to her, she can't be on that shit, unless you want a vegetable for a girlfriend."

I can't even express now how scared I'd been in that moment, that Mustang might not listen to me and Riza would become brain damaged and mentally crippled for the rest of her life. Mustang had to
listen to me, or the consequences were something I couldn't handle thinking about.

For a moment, Mustang looked genuinely scared. My reputation of violence was not lost to him, and I was clearly in a murderous mood.

The he pulled out of my grip, frowning deeply. "I'll call the general," he said. "I can't guarantee anything."

"If you married her, you'd have the legal authority," I pointed out with irritation.

"Don't you start, I get enough of that from Hughes," Mustang snapped. Then he took in a deep breath. "Edward, are you sure about this?"

"I know what I'm looking at with brain chemistry," I said. Then I switched to sign. "You see that woman out there? Looks like my mother's twin?" I waited while he glanced towards the door, before signing once he was looking at me again. "That's the homunculus I built of my mother. I can't tell you details of how, but she's what I made that night. You tell me how much I know of brain chemistry, if she's perfectly functional."

Mustang stared, wide-eyed at me. "She- what?" He set down the sheet of paper I'd handed him and started to sign. "Edward, are you saying that Captain Douglas is your dead mother resurrected? I thought human transmutation was impossible."

"It needs another ingredient I didn't have at the time," I said vaguely. "I can't tell you details, not yet. You'll find out eventually, that much I can promise you. But only if you get Riza off that shit before it fries her brain." I'd already decided to trust Mustang to take care of Mom and Al for me when it was all over, though I hadn't realized it until I gave that promise. It was only fair he knew who she was before I asked him.

He gave me a hard stare for several seconds. "I'll do my best, sir," he said, then stepped out of the office.

I sank down into my desk chair, staring at the paperwork in front of me. It all seemed so inconsequential, especially in face of the fact that if I had my way, Central HQ wasn't going to be there anymore soon. But it had to be done, to buy me some sense of normalcy before anyone knew what was about to happen. And I needed a little time to think how I was going to get certain people out of town before disaster stuck.

The others I could just order away. Hughes would take his family and go if I said just enough to make him feel like they were in danger. Mustang would be a problem though. From all indications from the years serving under him, he was determined to try to help me in every way possible. Which meant he might try to stick around and help me with Scar, which would be disastrous for me. I'd have to order him away somewhere before he knew what was going on.

The answer didn't come to me until that afternoon. Mustang wanted the name of who'd abused me up north. I could distract him with that. I sent Mom on the errand of finding out if Archer was still at Acheron or if he'd been moved somewhere else. Meanwhile, I had something else to do.

I went to Bradley's office. I waited several minutes out in the outer office until Bradley was ready for me. Hakuro walked by me from the inner office and gave me a dirty look when I refused to salute. He didn't say anything though; it wasn't unknown that the führer had said I answered to no one but him. Most of the generals were not happy about that, either.

I was admitted into Bradley's office finally and I snapped a sharp salute. He smiled. "At ease,
"Fullmetal. What can I do for you today?"

"Two things, sir, if you would. First, we have a mutual friend out in Dublith that's supposed to be coming to Central soon. Would you please tell her it's safe to come out? I almost have what we're looking for, and she'll want to be here as soon as it's ready."

Bradley's smile didn't waver. "Is that so? I'll certainly tell her that, then. What's the second thing?"

"It's related. I have discovered that Scar has what we're looking for. Permission to leave my office for a few days while I flush him out of hiding?"

"Permission granted. I trust your office will function fine without you?"

"It has this last week, sir," I pointed out. "Captain Douglas and the others know what to do without me."

"Excellent." Bradley sat back. "By all means, go have fun, Colonel. I'm sure this job will be more to your suiting than paperwork."

"Yes, sir," I said, saluting.

I made my way back through the halls of Central HQ to my own office, where Mom was waiting for me. "Sir?" she said as I entered. "Here is the information you requested." She handed me a small personnel folder.

"Thank you, Captain," I said, then took the folder and disappeared back into my office. I opened the personnel file and grimaced, Archer's picture staring harshly back at me. There was a face I'd hoped to never see again. I could hear him scolding me, the click of the gun, the sound of a zipper, an order to count lashes.

I stopped my line of thinking there. I couldn't afford to get distracted and worked up into a tizzy, and I was already halfway there. I hadn't noticed how fast that flashback snuck up on me until my hands were trembling.

After taking a minute to settle down, I flipped through the file, looking at deployments and transfers. There was no record of him being transferred to Acheron, of course, but there were no records of him going anywhere else, either. So either he was still there, or he'd just fallen off the radar completely. Which was possible, I supposed. The führer had been pretty angry at Grand when I'd disappeared, but Archer had simply been doing what he'd been ordered to do by a superior officer.

But, on the other hand, he had deployed me to a firebase, which had pissed Bradley off almost more than Grand destroying the paperwork of my transfer and the denying it. (Or rather, Envy doing it behind everyone's back, which still pushed me past all sense of reason, and made me very glad that I was catching him up into what I was planning.) I was a precious state alchemist, and a child to boot, never mind that I was quite certain that Dante had a hand in me being in the military in the first place, lined up to get the Stone for her, since I was my father's son. I doubted that the homunculi did much to piss her off, Envy aside.

So basically, the personnel file wasn't telling me a damn thing I wanted to know. I took it back out to Mom's desk. "Hate to send you on another errand, but this can go back to Personnel," I said. "Can you put in a call to the Acheron supply station and ask the receptionist there who's the commanding officer there?"

"Of course, Colonel," Mom said, in perfect form of a soldier answering to a commanding officer, not a mother forced to accept her son's commands.
Fucking weird.

I waited patiently while she put in the call. She wrote something down as she spoke, then hung up with the receptionist. "Here you are, sir. The name you wanted." I loved how discreet she was being around the others. It was perfect for my needs.

I took the paper, looking at the name. So the bastard was still up there. Good. I turned to Mustang and motioned for him to follow me into my office. He looked wary, which I didn't blame him after the last time I'd called him in.

He came in. "You wanted to see me?" Another pause, then he grit his teeth. "Sir?" He was clearly not used to that yet. I resisted the urge to laugh.

Instead, I sat back. "I have a name for you, Colonel," I said. "And an assignment, but it depends on you."

Mustang frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You get Riza off those drugs, and I give you the name you've been wanting for the last four years, and an assignment to where he is to do whatever you want to him," I answered.

He narrowed his eyes. "I already called the General, and explained the situation, Edward. He's agreed to pull the neuroleptic and start weaning her off the sedatives and pain killers."

"Then, here you are," I said, handing over the slip of paper Mom gave me.

Mustang looked at the name. "Never heard of him. He worked under Grand?"

I nodded. "He taught me everything I know about how the military works. He's currently commanding officer at Acheron Supply Station. I'm sending you there on a routine inspection."

He saluted, then headed out to prepare for his trip. There. One gone, now to get Scar out of hiding and send the others running. I couldn't do that though, until after Dante and her other homunculi were all cozy underground. I could start luring Scar out, but Dante and Bradley would become suspicious if all my friends started heading for the hills.

I grabbed my coat I still wore over my uniform, at least for while it was cold, and pulled it on. It looked weird over the military blues, but I wasn't going for fashion, I was going for function. Besides, that coat held the Stone. Couldn't leave that at home and there was definitely no place on the uniform to hide it.

I looked at Mom. "Captain, take over. I've got work from the führer to take care of."

"Yes, Colonel," she said, hardly looking up from her work. "Be careful, please."

I waved at her as I left, not really answering that. Which was probably enough answer to worry her, but at the time, I was too focused on figuring out the how of what I needed to do. I needed Scar to crawl out from underneath whatever rock he'd gone into hiding under. But short of taking out a
newspaper ad, I wasn't sure how to find him. That trail had long since gone cold.

As the Stone bounced against my chest inside my pocket, I started to get an awful idea. A really awful idea. But if Scar was an Ishbalan, as we suspected, it'd draw him like flies to shit.

Well, if I had the stomach for what I planned later, I had the stomach for this.
Hughes stared at me in horror. "Ed- what's the matter with you? Innocent people live here."

I kept a hard look on my face. "It's the only way to save the country from a threat."

"You're a colonel now, you can deploy troops to help you with this threat."

"Who do you think is the threat?"

Hughes paused. "It goes that high?" he asked in a quiet voice. I nodded. He frowned. "There still has to be a better way. Central is full of over two million innocent people."

"I'll have to live with that on my conscience, won't I?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

i'd listen to the words he'd say
but in his voice i heard decay
the plastic face forced to portray
all the insides left cold and gray
there is a place that still remains
it eats the fear, it eats the pain
the sweetest price he'll have to pay
the day the whole world went away
-Nine Inch Nails

I left my idea for the next day, dressing in my usual turtleneck and black pants instead of my uniform. I was officially on assignment from the führer, so I had a bit more freedom to wear what I wanted. And I needed to be in my usual and highly recognizable clothing to make sure Scar got word of who exactly was doing what I was about to do.

I stopped at headquarters to seek out some information about where the Ishbalan refugee camps had been set up; the city dump, part of the sewer system, and one more just on the outskirts of town.

With a map firmly in hand, and the Stone in my pocket, I headed first to the one on the outskirts of town. There wasn't much to it, just some tents lined along the dirt road, fairly isolated all told. I walked down into the middle of it, receiving strange stares. I debated how to do what I was planning. I couldn't exactly project my voice to get their attention, and I hadn't taken any soldiers with me to
Finally, I grabbed a middle-aged man, drawing my gun and sticking it against his side. "Gather the men. Leave the women and children alone. Tell them Fullmetal says to do it, or I destroy this whole place," I snarled at him.

I don't know which scared the poor man more, my gun, or my name. He raised his hands, staring back at me. "F-Fullmetal?"

"You going to do what you're told, or do I have to shoot you and find someone else?"

The man shook his head, visibly trembling, then ran off. While the men gathered, I clapped my hands and transmuted the phoenix array into the ground. I drew my gun again, watching as everyone showed up to watch what I was going to do. Family was very important to Ishbalans, and what you do to one, you do to the others. Which is what I was banking on, was Scar's loyalty to his people.

I straightened from my crouch, motioning one of the men over. "Have them all gather in that array," I said in my cracked whisper of a voice. "Do it, or the children go first."

The man returned my hard stare evenly. "Leave our children be. We'll do whatever you want, Fullmetal, just leave the children be."

"Lucky for you I don't tend to like hurting children, then, huh? Now do as I say."

I put away my weapon once the men had all gathered in the circle. The women watched on worriedly, but I really doubted anyone had any idea what was about to happen.

I circled around the array, making a show of making it look perfect, but mostly I was bracing myself. I was about to start taking my first innocent victims. These people had nothing to do with Dante or the homunculi or even Scar, really. But I was starting to accept that the good of the many outweighed the good of the few.

At least these men wouldn't be around to carry the burden of saving the many at the cost of the few.

Having finally worked up my nerve and taken what was left of Edward Elric and shot him behind the shed, I took out the Stone and put it on the edge of the array, then clapped my hands and activated the transmutation.

Yeah, I know. Go ahead and say it. I've been saying it to myself for years.

My expression twisted slightly as the men disappeared in a red glow and my stomach flopped down into my feet somewhere. I picked up the slightly bigger Stone as the women and children made distressed noises.

"What did you do?" one woman demanded, clutching her children to her legs.

Steeling my gut and screwing my practiced military expression back into place, I walked over to her. "I know your people are hiding Scar somewhere," I said. "You find him and you tell him Fullmetal's waiting for him. And if he decides to not show up, I'll be starting after the children next."

The woman drew back, hiding her children behind her. "You're a monster."

I gave a thoroughly unpleasant smile, then turned away, letting my expression screw up as my breakfast threatened to evacuate. I didn't like doing what I was doing, but nothing would draw Scar out faster, and if I had to kill innocent people, I may as well make use of those lives so they weren't
wasted.

I hit up the other two camps in the area, doing the same thing. Scar was around somewhere, and he'd inevitably hear about my activities after basically being off the radar for so long. I was looking for a fight, and I knew he'd be happy to oblige me, especially since I was annihilating his people.

My next order of business was to see if Dante and the others had arrived yet. I doubted it'd be before the next day, and I needed Scar to have time to show up, so I chewed on my liver the rest of the day, restless and unable to eat except through necessity.

Teacher commented on it, but I passed it off as poor sleep. I think she knew I was lying, she knew I was plotting something big, but she let it pass. Mom almost gave me more grief about it, but I went to bed right after dinner that night to demonstrate just how tired I was.

That forestalled arguments.

The next day, late that afternoon, I headed to Bradley's office.

I was admitted quickly, and I stepped in, saluting. Bradley eyed me curiously. "What happened to your uniform, Colonel?"

"I was out yesterday, trying to lure out Scar, sir, and I intend on trying again today. I'm more recognizable like this than in a uniform," I answered.

He laughed. "You certainly are. Any luck? I would assume I would've heard about property damage if he'd shown up."

"He'll come out. I sent out messengers."

"I leave it to you to know what you're doing, Colonel," he said with that frustratingly unreadable smile.

"Thank you, sir. Has our guest arrived?" I gave the room a discreet visual sweep to see if I could locate where that elevator might be hidden. No luck.

"She has," Bradley confirmed. "Would you like to meet with her and the others that arrived with her?"

I debated. On one hand, I should confirm that all of them were there. On the other, I didn't want to be around that woman's slimy presence again. But it'd be best to confirm, rather than leave to chance. "Yes, sir."

Bradley stood up and walked over to the bookcase at the side of his office. I didn't catch what he did, but the bookcase slid back, revealing the elevator I'd been looking for. How I didn't think of the classic 'hiding behind the bookcase' thing, I have no idea. Bradley stepped back. "There you go. Just step on and push the button. Our guest is waiting for you."

I looked at him, feigning more bewilderment than I really felt, then stepped on the elevator. As soon as I hit the button, the wall closed up in front of me and the elevator started to move. The whole shaft was dark, until I passed through the ground and into the underground cavern. My stomach decided it didn't like the speed I was falling at, and I crouched down, focusing on keeping my lunch from trying to make an encore.

The elevator finally stopped with an unexpected lurch that sent me toppling onto my ass. I stood up, my legs shaking a little as I stepped off the elevator and looked around. The hallway around me was
well-lit, with electric lights along the ceiling. Dante had done a helluva lot of work to preserve this place and make it as comfortable as possible for her. Four hundred year old city left to rot, this place should've been a wreck.

I imagined the homunculii over the years had done the vast majority of the work. Of course, who knew, she might have done it with alchemy.

I wandered kind of aimlessly, truth be told, until I heard music coming from somewhere above me. I followed the sound to a staircase, and started to climb.

"Can I eat him?"

The question made my blood turn cold as I paused and turned to see a grotesquely overweight man in a form fitting suit of some sort staring up at me. Behind him was a woman with black hair and violet eyes. Her dress left little to the imagination up top. "No, Gluttony," she said, putting a hand gently on Gluttony's head. "Edward Elric, good to finally meet you. I'm Lust. This is Gluttony. Don't worry, he's harmless once he knows you're on our side."

The hair on my neck stood up. I recognized her. She was the woman that had been where Scar first attacked Riza and I. That alchemical mark on her chest was the same, and a better look at it revealed it to be an Ouroboros, the same as on Envy.

I nodded in greeting, pretending to not realize I knew who she was. "Do you speak sign?"

She raised an eyebrow. "If you just asked if I could read field sign, I'm afraid the answer's no, but I can learn. Lady Dante says you're getting the Stone to turn us human?" I nodded, not bothering to answer with my voice. She smiled. "Good. Then Gluttony and I will help you however we can."

"Just keep Dante and Pride from getting involved," I said. "I don't work and play well with others, and the last thing I need is people mucking up my work."

Lust laughed. "Well, Lady Dante is certainly happy to let you do the work. She's an old woman, she couldn't possibly keep up with you. Pride is content to delegate. Come, I'll show you were Lady Dante and Rose are staying. Envy's with them right now."

I did a mental tally. "That's all of you, isn't it?" I asked as she stepped past me on the stairwell, Gluttony taking up the rear behind me.

"That's correct. Well, there's still Greed, but he's sealed up in somewhere here in town, I believe."

"If I have need of help, I'll ask for you and Gluttony. Envy can stay and protect the women."

Lust laughed again, a pleasant sound. "He'll love you for that. He hates being still. He's been restless ever since we got here."

I frowned. "He can kiss my ass, I want someone protecting them. And Mom said you and Gluttony make a good team. I don't want to break up that team when it can help me more than one person with a chip on his shoulder. Does he even want to be human?"

"No," Lust said. "He's been a homunculus for quite some time and is content to remain so. He doesn't crave his lost humanity."

"What about you?" I glanced at her as she led me down a hall once we reached the top of the stairs. She stopped, going unnaturally still, as if she suddenly had no more need to breathe. "I have few
memories of being human," she said with a voice that sounded like it was coming from another time and place. "What I remember makes little sense to me. I want to be human again so I can be who I was and make sense of everything." She rested a hand on Gluttony's head fondly. "I suspect Gluttony's happier as a homunculus; he can eat what he likes in this form. And your mother?"

I shrugged. "She wants to be human again for Al and I. I want her to be human so we can retire from the military and go home."

"Will there be enough Stone to turn us human and help your brother?" she asked, clearly worried about that.

"Yes. If you wanna stick around, I'm telling Dante what I plan to do, you should be reassured by it." Obviously, I wasn't telling everything, and I wasn't going to, either. That'd be counterproductive to what I wanted to do. I wanted to eliminate the threat Dante and the homunculii posed to the country.

Although Lust was giving me the impression that she wasn't much of a threat if someone just explained to her that there was no way to make her 'human' again. A feeling in my gut told me to take a chance, if I was given the opportunity to take it.

Lust stopped at a set of double doors at the end of the hallway and knocked before opening the door. "Lady Dante? Edward is here," she said, moving to let me in.

Dante straightened in her seat, quietly writing while Rose sat nearby; Rose looked more out of it than she had been the last time I saw her. Envy was sitting on the back of a chair not far from Rose, looking bored out of his skull.

"Come in, child, come in," Dante beckoned, setting aside her pen. "I was so glad to hear you were ready for us."

I stepped in, resisting the urge to piss in Envy's direction with a snarl to freeze a lion's blood. I wanted that man dead so much it ached. Instead, I kept my attention fixed on Dante. "I found the Stone. It's not transmuted yet, but I'm luring the person who has it out now. It won't be long before he shows up."

Dante raised an eyebrow. "It's not transmuted yet, but someone has it? How?"

Lust and Gluttony stepped into the room behind me, Lust taking a seat by Rose, and Gluttony sitting like a dog at her feet. I spared them a glance before continuing. "Scar has it. It's in his arm, and probably has all the lives from the Ishbal war. I harassed some Ishbalan camps yesterday to lure him out. He'll be here any day, and I wanted you guys close for when he showed up. But stay down here, he's dangerous and I don't know how much property damage there'll be before I can take that Stone from him."

Dante frowned. "It sounds exceedingly dangerous, Edward, please be careful. Would you like Pride to dispatch some soldiers with you to help? Or I could send Lust and Gluttony with you."

I shook my head. "No. I can't watch out for other people when I'm fighting, we'll trip over each other. I at least want Envy here and guarding you and Rose."

Envy bristled. "I am not a guard dog," he snapped.

I glared at him. "I don't want you in my way," I snapped back. "Scar's mine. I owe him. There'll be plenty of Stone to go around. I expect that thing to be huge."

"Perfect," Dante said. "We'll wait here then, while you work. Just please, be very careful. We
couldn't bear to lose you."

Yeah, I'd just bet. "I should get going, then. I just wanted to make sure everyone was accounted for so we don't have to go chasing anyone down once the Stone's transmuted. I don't have patience for that shit."

Dante chuckled. "Ah, to be that young again. Well, then, go on, Edward, go back to work. We're all here, safe and sound."

I nodded, glanced at Envy one more time, before turning to leave.

Lust offered to lead me out. "You seemed lost when we ran into you."

Perfect, my chance. "Thank you."

Gluttony stayed behind as Lust walked out with me. "Are you sure about this?" she asked. "With respect to your abilities, you're moving very quickly."

I pretended to focus on our surroundings. "If you know anything about the last few years, you know this is normal for me."

She made a noise of agreement. "You're certainly efficient. Pride must love you."

"Wouldn't be surprised." I stopped, waiting a moment while she caught herself and turned to me. "I need someone out of town, trying to herd Scar here, in case he didn't get my messages. Can you and Gluttony do that?"

Lust glanced back down the hall. "Of course. Why are you just now mentioning this?"

"Because I don't want Envy deciding to join you and getting in my way," I said. "I don't want to deal with the bastard."

She looked behind her again. "I can't say that I blame you. He takes a special hand, and Lady Dante is the only one that seems to be able to consistently." She crossed her arms, covering all of her chest but her Ouroborous. "I will do this. Gluttony and I will leave immediately. Just get the Stone."

"I will."

I knew I was taking a huge chance with her, but I was good at sussing out who could be trusted and who couldn't. It was a survival skill that Acheron and Drachma had polished until it shone. But something about Lust made me think of Mom. She was just as much a victim of Dante's lies as Mom had been. I just hoped that she wouldn't try to take revenge on my family. I'd have to warn Mom that Lust and Gluttony were still out there, somewhere.

I worried that the whole lot of them were growing suspicious- Dante didn't get as old as she was by being stupid, I knew that much. But I also knew that she expected Mom to keep me in line. As long as I made noises about wanting Mom to be human, she should think I'm right where she wants me. Making her a Stone for body swap.

Yeah, I know, assumptions. Like I said, extreme paranoia and too much sick logic to ignore. I would've normally preferred something more than a line of reasoning that made a disturbing amount of sense, but I couldn't risk being right and things going pear-shaped.

If Dante, as I suspected, was pushing these wars to create Stones, then the best way to save the country, to make it safe for Al and Mom and the others... I'd have to make some sacrifices.
Lust and I parted ways at the elevator, and I got back in and prayed that Bradley didn't have an unconnected person in his office at the moment. Fortunately, he didn't. The bookcase moved aside, assaulting me with light, revealing the office just as I left it.

"Welcome back. That was fast. Was everything to your satisfaction?" Bradley asked, looking over.

I nodded. "I wanted to be sure everyone was here and safe," I said. "I should go back to work now."

"Good luck, Fullmetal. I do hope Scar shows up soon."

I nodded at him, and left as soon as he dismissed me. I was taking a huge chance that Scar would show up in time, so I sure as hell hoped so too.

***

I made my way to Hughes's office. Now that I'd confirmed that Dante and her people were there in Central, I had to get everyone else out, and pray that Scar showed up before Bradley figured out what was going on. I could spin it, theoretically, but I was really running on hope and a prayer.

"Hey, Ed," Hughes greeted me when I got there. "What happened to your uniform?"

I rolled my eyes. I loved how that was the first thing people noticed. I hadn't been in that uniform long enough to make it a common sight. "I had work outside the office to take care of."

I took a seat.

"You're going to want to collect your family and anyone precious to you here in Central and get out of town."

That got him to blink stupidly. "Why? What's going on?"

"I opened a can of worms. I sent out a message to Scar to come fight me. And he has the Stone. I can't guarantee safety. With how he is, I can't even guarantee Central will still be here."

Hughes paled. "The Stone can do that?"

I nodded grimly, trying to bullshit my way around here. "Scar's going to be pissed at me, too. So get out of Central. Oh, and would you take the men from my office with you?"

Hughes gave me a calculating look. "What about you?"

"Someone has to try to stop him. If I don't get out, that's fine, as long as the rest of you are safe." I seriously hoped he'd believe that line of bull.

He didn't seem to. "Ed, you should at least keep Roy around to help you. None of us want to see you dead."

I shook my head. "Mustang's away on assignment. And none of you are an alchemist, you can't help me."

Hughes frowned. "Damnit, Ed, let someone help you. I'll stay."

"No, you won't. Listen to me, Hughes. If Scar has his way, Central won't be here. So you worry about getting your wife and little girl and the others to safety. Let me worry about Scar. If Mustang comes back in time, great, if he doesn't, I'll be fine."

Hughes wasn't buying my line of lies. "Forget it, Ed, I'm not leaving you to handle Scar on your own, especially not if he's a threat to the entire city."
"What do you expect you can do?"

That made him falter. "We can organize, deploy people that Roy and I trust." He was really reaching there, I could tell. I had him off-guard.

"How many times has the military tried to do that with Scar? I'm as fast as him, and I have an ace in the hole that he probably doesn't even realize exists. He's going to try to make the Stone, and he's doing it soon. That's going to destroy a large part of the city. We don't have time to mobilize. I want you out."

The look he gave me hovered between that of a military officer demanding information, and a concerned father trying to play the protector against his kid's will. "Ed? What's the Stone have to do with destroying the city?"

I kept my military masks screwed firmly in place and clung to them like a security blanket. "You think there wouldn't be a cost involved?"

I counted down seconds as Hughes kept that steady gaze on me, clearly running over his thoughts, trying to find a way to stop me from going through with taking this kind of threat on by myself. Without being an alchemist, he was probably having trouble.

Finally, he drew himself up, the military officer taking over. I sincerely hoped he wasn't trying to spook me into giving something away. "No, Ed, we will find a way to-"

My lips curled back over my teeth in a snarl as I slammed my hands down on his desk, leaning forward to look him in the eye. If reason wouldn't work, scaring him would have to. "Hughes. Leave. Town. I'm making the Stone. I'm the one destroying Central, and I'm not going to give a shit who's still in town when I do it. So unless you want to make Elysia grow up without her father, I suggest you do what I say."

Hughes stared at me in horror. "Ed- what's the matter with you? Innocent people live here."

I kept a hard look on my face. "It's the only way to save the country from a threat."

"You're a colonel now, you can deploy troops to help you with this threat."

"Who do you think is the threat?"

Hughes paused. "It goes that high?" he asked in a quiet voice. I nodded. He frowned. "There still has to be a better way. Central is full of over two million innocent people."

"I'll have to live with that on my conscience, won't I?"

For a long moment, all Hughes seemed able to do was stare at me, pale and in shock. "What happened to you? My god, those are innocent lives. I thought you only killed criminals."

"I have too many people to protect from the lunatic on the throne," I replied, switching back to sign as I straightened. "Besides, I thought the good of the many outweighed the good of the few. This'll save the entire country, Hughes, possibly more than just ours. One city in exchange for the entire country. I'll take my chances with the city."

Hughes didn't look impressed with my line of reasoning. "And I suppose you're not going to explain how the country's in danger?"

"No time and the wrong ears knocking about in here. My teacher can explain it when she gets back"
"from Rizenbul," I said. "She's watching after someone for me right now. When you come back, call out to the Rockbells and have them send her back. I'll tell her to look for you. I don't expect Mustang to be back yet."

"You're set on doing this, aren't you?" Hughes slumped down in his seat. At my dead stare in return, he sighed. "Fine. I'll get people out. I'm not happy about this, but you're not leaving me any choice, it seems."

I wasn't sure I bought how easy he was giving in on that.

I shook my head. "No, I'm not. Please, Hughes. There are some people who need to be safe."

"And all the rest of the people who live here?" he demanded.

I shrugged. "It don't mean nothing."

He stared at me over his glasses. "The field taught you nothing but bad," he finally said. "You expected it to teach me anything good?"

Hughes took off his glasses and ran a hand down his face. "No, I suppose not. All right, I'll get people out of town, if only because I can't tell how serious you are about this. Either way, you'd better make it out of this all right. Or there are a lot of people who are going to be upset."

"I'll try. I make no promises. If I do this right, Central just might survive, but I can't chance you guys. I don't have many people I care about, don't make me lose them."

Another bald-faced lie, but as long as I was spitting them out already, right?

That seemed to get his attention, and he straightened. "I'll get the men and families out tonight. We'll be safe, I give you my word. How long can we expect before we can come back and start cleaning up?"

"Give me two days. If the city's still here after that time, I'm probably running as fast as I can to hide from the people I'm trying to take down," I answered. "You'll probably want to run at that point, too. We'll meet up and either I'll have fixed this without that kind of trouble, or we'll have to come up with a new plan. And that one will include all of you. I promise."

That was actually the truth. If I couldn't pull off what I wanted, I was gonna need the help to try again.

Hughes gave me an aggravated look. "You, Edward Elric, are a troublemaker."

I couldn't even be assed to flash a toothy grin to go with my lackluster words. "Thank you, I try my best." I wasn't happy with myself, and I knew that I had to move even faster than I'd originally planned. Hughes was going to get everyone out, I knew that, but I also knew he'd try to come back, and probably with Mustang on his heels. I absolutely had to have gotten rid of Dante and the others by then, or two of the only people I cared about would be gone.

I frowned. "I mean it though, Hughes, get out of town. I'll handle Scar."

"I already said I will," he said. "Now go on, I've got work to do if I'm going to evacuate all these people."

I left without a word, hoping and praying that he'd actually listen. He was craftier than anyone gave him credit for. I wasn't sure exactly what he was planning to do, and make no mistake, I was one
hundred percent certain that he was going to do something, but it probably involved coming back to the war zone.

As long as it didn't result in the death of any of the few people I could even hope to consider friends, I didn't care what he tried. The place would be gone by then. I hoped they were up for the task of cleaning up after me.

I headed back up to my office. Mom and the others were still working, another half hour before five and quitting time. I turned to the others, whistling once sharply to get their attention. They looked up at me. "Yeah, Boss?" Havoc asked, pen still poised mid-word.

"You guys are officially answering to Lieutenant Colonel Hughes for the next few days. No matter what he says, do it. This is a temporary assignment."

Breda and Havoc exchanged a look, then Breda looked at me suspiciously. "What's going on?"

I wanted to give as few details as possible; I wasn't about to tell them as much as I told Hughes. "Scar's coming, and I'm evacuating as many personnel as possible. Don't argue with me, just do it."

I think both of them knew something else was going on, but they were used to Mustang enough that they knew they'd get told the reasons for an order when they could be told. "Yes, sir. Should we finish our work for today first?" Havoc asked.

I shook my head. "Go down and report immediately."

They set aside their work and headed out of the office, Fuery giving me a puzzled look before following them out.

"Edward?" Mom's voice said from her corner desk. "What's going on?"

I turned to her. "Let's go home. It's time for Teacher and her husband to take you to Rizenbul."

She set down her pen. "Already?"

I nodded. "Come on, we don't have much time."

She reached under her desk and fetched her purse, then got up and followed me out of the office. "Are you sure about this, Edward? I didn't know you were evacuating everyone. What are you doing?"

I slowed down so she could walk next to me. "Something you're going to scold me for later, but I'm not asking for permission, or even forgiveness. Just do what I say, and you'll be safe."

Mom looked around cautiously, then stopped me by hugging me. "Come back safely, Edward. That's all I ask."

I returned the hug. "I'll do my best, Mom," I promised, then broke away. "Just so you know, Lust and Gluttony are out of town, hunting down Scar. If they don't try to find you, don't worry about them. It means I've found them." Lies, I wasn't going to be looking for them, but I didn't want Mom, or anyone else, borrowing unneeded trouble by looking for a couple of rogue homunculi.

"I thought you weren't going to bother with them."

"Something tells me I should," I said. "Just leave them be, they'll be fine on their own."

She didn't argue, and I worried what that might mean. But since I had no inclination to start anything,
I kept quiet. The trip back to her house was silent, my heart taking a swim in my stomach while I went over everything I had to do before Scar showed up. I think I'd covered everything. These goodbyes were the last ones, and I didn't like it.

"Missus Curtis?" Mom called upon opening the door into the house.

Teacher came out of the kitchen wearing Mom's apron and smelling of food. "You're home early," she noted.

"Edward insisted," Mom explained. "After dinner, we're leaving immediately for the train station. Edward says it's time to go."

Teacher looked at me, and I nodded. "Very well. After dinner," she said. "Come in, we've started cooking already. We thought we'd give you a night off, Juliet."

Mom smiled. "Thank you, it smells wonderful."

Dinner was quiet. Mom was solemn, occasionally stealing worried glances at me, and I refused to show any emotion, simply eating as if nothing was wrong. Teacher probably saw through that, but she kept her mouth shut, and her husband was never exactly talkative.

After dinner, Teacher and her husband repacked their bags while Mom packed a little for herself. I waited by the door for them. Teacher's husband stepped out to the cab Mom had called for, putting bags in the trunk. Teacher put a hand on my shoulder. "Be careful, Ed. Good luck."

Someone else that I had a feeling would try to come back to help. I really needed to move quickly. I knew Teacher held a sense of duty to me, and to Al, and I'd made it clear that the most important thing in this upcoming fight was that my mother absolutely had to be safe. Teacher would take her away from Central, but she probably would double back at the first layover on her own and let her husband take Mom on to Rizenbul.

The sense of urgency I was feeling was mounting and making me jittery enough that I'd probably stay up all night, pacing.

I nodded and gave her a small smile. "Don't worry, I've always pulled myself out of trouble."

She smiled. "That, I'll believe. Call us when it's safe to come back." Then she stepped outside to get into the cab.

Mom stepped over to me and threw her arms around my neck, clenching tightly. "Please stay safe, Edward. Don't make me lose both of you."

I held her for the last time, savoring the smell of her perfume and the warmth of her hug, fighting desperately to keep my emotional masks in place. "You won't, Mom, promise." She was getting Al back, that was technically not losing us both. I hated myself for lying to her.

She let go, giving me a wet-eyed smile, then hurried out the door. I shut the door, refusing to watch them go, afraid I'd try to stop them to take me with them, unwilling to lose the mother I'd lost so much to get back. But Al needed me, and more than that, I needed to stop Dante and Bradley's threat to the country so it was safe for my mother and brother. And there was no coming back from sacrificing an entire city. Even if I survived, which I wasn't sure I would, I couldn't stay and bring down trouble on them. So I planned to leave. Didn't know where I'd go, but there was somewhere out there for a criminal like me.

Mom's house was on the western side of Central, beyond the borders of the underground city, so
when Central collapsed, as I assumed it would- that powerful of a transmutation would inevitably crumble the rock holding Central up overhead- the house should be safe. Relatively. I could leave my suitcase there and retrieve it safely after the dust cleared enough to get Al out and in a safe place.

I wasn't worried about my clothes; like I've said before, clothes can be transmuted. But that picture was my last piece of Al I'd ever have once this was over. Now I wished I'd grabbed the one of Mom and Al and I together instead of the one Winry gave me. I hadn't known Mom was alive.

I went to bed immediately after Mom left. I had a long day tomorrow, and I needed my sleep if I was going to keep with a man who'd proven he could dodge bullets, the asshole.

My field training let me sleep instead of pacing all night.

***

I was out and about early the next morning, prowling the streets for Scar. I hadn't thought how to do it, short of going to the Ishbalan camps again and demanding to know where he was, see if I couldn't get anything out of them. I didn't really want to, there were nothing but women and children left, but I wasn't left with a lot of choice. I had to find him and quickly, before Dante caught on to what I was doing. I'd pushed things a little fast, hoping if I moved fast enough, Dante wouldn't have time to catch on.

But my timetable really depended on Scar, who was an irritating bastard in general, and I wouldn't put it past him to be fashionably late just to piss me off.

I went back to the Ishbalan camp in the junkyard, that being the closest to the underground city. There were men there again, as if another group had joined up with them. That brightened my spirits considerably. It was possible Scar came in with the group and was now suitably pissed.

I crested a hill of junk, then pulled out my gun and fired it into the air.

Don't do that, by the way. Bullets that go up come back down eventually. I don't know where that one landed, but it wasn't on my head, at least.

The crack of thunder the shot caused stopped the activity in the camp and people looked up at me, many beginning to look fearful at my all-too famous coat. One of the children ran into a tent, yelling something indistinct while I holstered my weapon.

Before I even had a chance to go down and start making demands, Scar stepped out of the tent the child had gone into. "Fullmetal Alchemist." My name was wrapped in hate, dripping in his tone. "Have you come back for more?"

I reached into my pocket and held my Stone up where he could see. His eyes widened, then narrowed again as he started after me.

Yup, he knew what that was. I wasn't sure how, but it didn't surprise me. And I'd been banking on it, so lucky for me that someone explained those arrays to him. Either that, or my travels had become more talked about than I thought. It was never a secret I was looking for the Stone, all he would've had to do to recognize what I held was know the Stone was red.

Good for me that he did.

I don't know if there was any hesitation in his mind as he charged up the hill at me when I didn't do more than dodge the fissure in the ground he created beside me, but there sure as shit wasn't any in his body language.
He went at me like a savage. His arm crackled and alchemical energy sparked in the air as he reached for me, swinging wide at my side. I didn't do anything but dodge. I didn't run away, barely left more than a ten foot by ten foot square area. He brought his left fist around at my jaw, a shot I only narrowly avoided, his weapon arm moving for my side even as I dropped down out of the way of the first hand.

I slammed the Stone against the ground and used it as a pivot to bring both legs around at Scar's knees. He jumped over my legs, and I was already back on my feet by the time he was bringing that right hand of his around to try to grab the Stone.

That was a mistake.

His arm glowed red and he fell back a step, like he'd taken a hard kick to the face. I decided to help that along by giving him an actual kick to the face, hopping up and smacking both feet soundly into his face, before spring-boarding off him and sailing back several feet.

Scar gripped his right arm just above the elbow. The Stone was practically humming in my hand. "What is this?" he demanded. His actual knowledge of alchemy was pretty poor. He must've been running that Stone by instinct all those years.

I tossed the Stone up in my hand once, then gripped it tightly. "Interested in taking down the military?"

In all the history of the world, I'm not sure there was ever a man as confused as Scar was at that moment. His body language remained wary, ready to fight, but the way his eyebrows curled up into a facial question mark actually made my grin that I was giving him genuine, instead of a show to get him to play along.

"I'm taking down Central Headquarters. Keep up."

Sure that Scar was going to follow, I pocketed my Stone and took off.

I got goddamn lucky that he had shown up with that group, or Dante and Bradley would've brought down the wrath of the military on me and my family and friends. I don't know where we could've gone to escape them.

I didn't have time to think on that anymore. If Scar's god existed, he'd smiled on me, and that was all that mattered.

I kept checking behind me to make sure he was following, which he was, and gaining ground on me. Shit. I stopped and shot at him, hoping to hit him enough to slow him down. I couldn't afford to engage him until I'd lured him down into the city.

My first three shots missed, but my fourth hit him in the left shoulder. Wouldn't slow his legs, but the blood loss might do it. I took off again, trying to make up for the ground he'd covered while I was shooting at him.

He was falling for my trap, obviously willing to follow me even though it was so clearly a trap, but he also obviously wasn't going to let me do it easily. I had a feeling it had to do with the Ishbalans from the other day.

The ground ripped up under my feet- a sweet love note from the serial killer behind me -sending me flying. I compensated, twisting my body to catch myself with my hands and handspring away. Then the bastard tried to drop a building on me. I countered the transmutation, turning the huge chunks of cement into a spray of dust and pebbles as I copied Scar's technique and deconstructed the rock.
Scar lunged for me in the time I took to save my ass. I ducked his right arm, dropping down onto one hand and using momentum to swing my legs up, my automail foot kicking him hard in his injured shoulder.

He staggered back and I flipped back onto my feet, taking off at a run again, wondering how long before Scar got tired of my games and tried to corner me and make me let him in on things.

It was tempting, actually.

Patience was one of his virtues, clearly, as he followed me when I ducked into the church and started down the stairs. I quickly changed the composition of the rock overhead to something he wouldn’t be able to analyze quick enough to destroy it and block me in.

Every few steps, I changed the composition, thwarting any attempts at causing a cave in he might try, which turned out to be a good idea, when I glanced back to see how far behind me he was. He was damn close, only slowed down by the unfamiliar stairs that crumbled under his feet as he ran after me.

I wasn’t that familiar with those steps either, so they were crumbling under me, too. Several times I nearly went down.

When I reached the landing overlooking the city, I clapped my hands, touching the last of the walls before I jumped. Alchemical energy sparked and sent out a ramp from the landing that curled down towards the city. I landed on the ramp and slid, glancing back as the back end of my ramp started to disappear under Scar's destructive alchemy. I jumped the last ten feet into the city, stopping to catch my breath as Scar made his way down the rest of the stairs that I'd skipped.

It bought me a few seconds. A few ticks of the watch in my pocket. Enough to gather my energy I'd need for the transmutation, but not enough time to second guess myself, to think too hard on what I was about to do.

A city for a country. Ugly, but someone had to do it. And I'd been formed into the perfect person to pull that trigger.

Maybe Scar's god wasn't smiling on me. If he existed, he was laughing at me.

I ran to meet Scar, trying to keep him near the wall and the edge of the phoenix array. He swung his arm at me, trying to grab whatever of me he could get his hand on. I grabbed his wrist with my automail hand, relying on the superior strength of Winry's machine to hold it still while I snapped up my other hand, smacking Scar in the nose soundly. I was hoping to shove bones around in his head, but all I did was break a few.

He jerked his head back, bringing his non-destructive-but-still-dangerous fist into my gut. I staggered back, letting go of his destructive wrist. He lunged for me again, and I ducked down, clapping my hands and transmuting my blade from my automail arm as his hand sailed over my head. I jabbed my arm forward, blade piercing his midsection. He coughed up blood as I shoved him back against the wall again.

Scar moved his arm despite his injury, grabbing my automail arm. The alchemical energy crackled and my forearm exploded, chunks of metal and wires scattering everywhere. 'Pain' doesn't begin to describe how that felt, electrical shocks traveling straight up into my nerves. I wanted to scream. I tried.

The force of the explosion knocked me back a few steps, and I pushed through the pain to grab the
Stone out of my pocket. I had no more chances, I couldn't fight him with a mostly missing arm. I grabbed the Stone I had and threw it at Scar's tattooed arm.

I wasn't sure what exactly would happen, so I stared a bit as his arm began to absorb the Stone. Scar leaned back against the wall, right in the groove of the array, yelling in pain. I clapped my flesh hand to the stump of my automail hand and stepped forward, grabbing Scar's glowing arm and pressing to the array.

The arrays in the city and on the ceiling lit up like fireworks, the ground above us shaking. Scar disappeared into the array as I kept my hand on the edge, trying to make sure I wasn't caught up in the reaction.

The Stone that dropped at my feet when the light went dim again was about the size of a watermelon. The ground above me began to crumble, Central above collapsing inward from the energy that just ripped through it. I clapped my hand to my stump again and touched the Stone, summoning the Gate just as Central fell in on me.

I don't remember much of what happened in the Gate. I remember a burning in my ports, and in my throat, and seeing Al, so close. I remember falling to my knees beside him and holding him tightly, then I remember coughing as dust became thick around me.

I blinked, staring around as I realized I was on top of some of Central's ruins, sunlight clouded by dust. As I coughed, I realized I had my voice back, the volume much too loud for any noise I'd made before. My left leg tingled with nerve response it hadn't had in years and my right hand was flesh as I wiped my eyes.

Laying in front of me, not three feet away, was the thin and ragged form of my brother. "Al!" I crawled forward, checking him over frantically. No injuries, and he was breathing, he just wasn't conscious. Next to him was what remained of the Stone, a faceted jewel about the size of a honeydew melon.

I pulled Al onto my lap, holding him tightly like he was the most precious thing in the world. He was, to me, and at that very moment, the only one that mattered. Any joy I felt at getting my limbs and voice back was far eclipsed by the joy knowing Al was back and going to be okay.

"Edward!"

I looked up, blinking at the sound of Mustang's voice. I shouldn't have been surprised that he'd doubled back on me. I wasn't sure how he survived the transmutation.

Never mind that, I needed someone to take Al to one of the hospitals that should still be left on the outer edges of Central. "Here!" I called to him, for once able to answer him with my own voice.

After what felt like hours, but was probably only a minute, Mustang appeared over the rubble. "Edward! God almighty, what happened here? Are you okay?" He carefully picked his way over the broken streets to where I was. "What- ... who's that?"

I stood up, cradling my brother against my chest. "My brother," I answered. "I'm fine, but I can't stay. Please, take him to a hospital."

Mustang was kind enough to not argue with having a small boy's body shoved into his arms, and took my brother from me. "Edward, what happened here?"

I looked down at the ground. "I sacrificed the city. There were threats in the military and this was the only way to ensure they all got eliminated." I bent down and picked up the Stone, holding it tightly
against my chest. It was too big for a pocket. "Please, take care of him. My mother's in Rizenbul right now, please watch after her, too. And tell them I'm dead. I'm leaving. I can't bring this trouble down on their heads."

Mustang frowned, adjusting my brother in his grip as the ground below us shifted slightly. "I won't tell them you're dead, Edward," he said, and I could hear the old lieutenant colonel I'd called for help that night at the Tucker home. He hadn't arrived in time to stop me, but this time, he was there for the person I had killed for. "You fought to get them back, why the hell would you leave now?"

I stared at him, probably looking more like a lost little kid than the hardened soldier he was used to. The idea of leaving before seeing that smile I'd missed so much, of never taking another aimless walk with Al, of never tasting Mom's home cooking, it tore at me. But I didn't see any other way—couldn't see any other way. I had destroyed Central. If they didn't have me associated to them too much, they could go home to Rizenbul and live peacefully. If I stuck around, they'd be forever trapped under Fullmetal's shadow.

"If you want to help me at all, you'll do this," I said quietly, then ran off before he could protest, leaving him with Al to take care of to keep him too busy to chase after me until I was long gone.

I stopped back at the house; I'd been wrong about it being too far from the underground city to be affected more than a little rattling, but it was sorta still standing. Mom would have to find a new place to live if she moved back to Central. Another thing she'd just have to forgive me for.

I grabbed my suitcase, pausing once at the door, hearing my mother's voice one last time in my memory before I headed out.

Chapter End Notes

More to be seen in *From Hephaestus's Forge* (in progress!) and *Fire Of Prometheus* (mostly done!).

(I will edit this note when those go up. For now, I'm almost done with Hephaestus I am so sorry this is going to take awhile.)

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