

Of Danger, Diplomats, and Dress Blues

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Of Danger, Diplomats, and Dress Blues

by [boredom](#)

Summary

After years of alternating between war and uneasy peace, the Cretans have finally extended an olive branch. They want to end the bloodshed and forge a bright future between them and Amestris.

It should be a joyous event. It should be a peaceful weekend. There should be nothing to worry about.

So why does Colonel Roy Mustang get the feeling the Cretans are up to something? Why wasn't Edward Elric invited to the event? Can Mustang figure out what's going on before he loses a member of his team?

Notes

Trigger Warning for Fic:

Torture, violence, blood, vomiting, mentions of sexual assault (it doesn't happen, but it is mentioned), general injury, waterboarding, broken bones, torture, torture, more torture.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Mustang was not looking forward to this weekend. After years of alternating war, border conflicts, and uneasy peace, the Cretans were finally ‘interested’ in creating a more permanent diplomatic arrangement between them and Amestris. Fuhrer Bradley leaped at the chance; taking to the radio and going on and on about how this was a new chapter between the two countries and they were foraging ahead a new era of peace and prosperity for all parties involved and maybe other nations could follow in their great footsteps. This was good and all, Mustang didn’t want any more war.

However, this also meant that some idiot diplomat decided that a photoshoot and a signed piece of paper weren’t enough. Oh no. They decided the best way to go about forging peace between the two nations was two full days of speeches, luncheons, speeches, dinner, speeches, drinks, and even more goddamn speeches. So many goddamn speeches. What was even worse was the schedule. When Mustang first got the invitation almost four months ago, it was a respectable six-hour day on Saturday and Sunday. It would be torture, but it would be doable. When he got the updated schedule about two months ago, he almost followed in Marcoh’s footsteps and deserted the fucking military. Saturday’s schedule was changed from six hours to twelve fucking hours. And Sunday’s schedule was changed to eight hours.

Who the hell thought spending twenty goddamn hours with a group of people who were trying to bomb them a year ago was a good idea? What politician possibly thought this would go well?

He couldn’t even bow out of the festivities and spend his weekend out on a date. Oh no. He wasn’t *just* a colonel. He was a well-known war ‘hero’. He was famous for his unique alchemy. He was famous for being the youngest colonel in Amestrian history (curse his ambitions!). And he was famous for finding Edward Elric, the youngest state alchemist in Amestrian history.

Speaking of Edward Elric... “You want to go?” he asked, raising an eyebrow at his major.

“I mean, everyone else is going. I don’t know why I wasn’t invited.” Ed shrugged.

“Chief, if I could get out of sitting through nonstop toasts and speeches, I would,” Havoc said. “Count your blessings. You won’t be stuck inside with a bunch of stuffy diplomats wearing uncomfortable dress blues like the rest of us.”

“Yeah,” Fuery added. “You and Al should get out, enjoy the city. You’ve been here for nearly four months now. Have you two done anything fun?”

Ed shrugged. “I just think it’s weird that everyone else, literally everyone else, was invited but I wasn’t.

This was... unexpected. Mustang knew that recruiting a teenager with a massive amount of past trauma and an unhealthy disrespect for authority into the military was going to cause some, ahem, issues now and then. Ed normally balked at anything that had to do with official

military business. He refused to wear a uniform. His hair was not to code at all. He couldn't convince him to leave Al out of official military business. He couldn't convince the kid not to destroy buildings during a simple mine inspection. Hell, half the time he couldn't get the kid to do simple mine inspections. The only time Mustang could get him to do anything was when it related directly to the philosopher's stone. Even then, it was a toss-up as to whether or not Ed would do what he said instead of inciting an uprising against the local military leaders. Yeah, most of them were corrupt, but it was still a pain in the ass paperwork-wise for him to figure out how to spin a story so Ed didn't get court-martialed and executed!

"I told you before, you weren't part of the military yet when they planned this. It's not my fault you were too slow when it came to joining." When in doubt, throw insults at the kid. That was a quick way to get him out of Mustang's hair and onto something else.

"Too slow!" He recoiled. "I was recovering from a double amputation and automail surgery!" He jabbed his hand at the metal arm.

He noticed the rest of the team flinch at the admission. Other than Hawkeye, they didn't know the specifics of what happened to Ed and Al. They didn't need to. They did, however, seem more sensitive about Ed's missing limbs than Ed himself. This was either because Mustang had a team full of bleeding-heart wusses who didn't understand that sometimes people lost limbs. Or because Ed could fool just about anyone into believing the accident hadn't affected him, but he couldn't fool his team. And his team, knowing Ed was suffering, were sympathetic because the kid wouldn't be sympathetic to himself. He hoped it was the former. He had a sneaking suspicion it was the latter.

"You want to sit through twelve hours of political talks?" Falman asked.

"And then another eight hours the next day," Breda added, shuddering.

Ed crossed his arms and huffed. "Not really. It sounds like it's going to be a bunch of old guys droning on and on and on about peace this and politics that."

"Then why?" Mustang groaned. The familiar migraine he got started to pound at his temples. It took him a few weeks to figure out what it was, a little afraid it was a brain tumor or something. Then, he noticed a pattern. He only got this particular type of migraine when he was forced to be with Ed for more than five minutes. If only there was some way to shut him up.

"I think it's rude that they didn't invite me. I know I'm new and everything, but I'm the youngest state alchemist. They didn't want me there?"

Mustang groaned and pinched his brow. As much as he loved not having to fill out paperwork, this conversation was mind-numbing and painful. It was useless. No matter how much Ed complained, there was nothing Mustang could do about it.

"Fullmetal, what are you hoping to get out of this conversation?"

At this, Ed smirked. "I was hoping to annoy you. Is it working?"

“Out!”

Thankfully, Ed did as he was told and skipped (actually skipped!) out the door. Not so thankfully, he laughed the entire time. Havoc and Breda couldn't hide their snickering. Even Hawkeye seemed amused by his antics. Traitor. Why did Ed get to skip out on twenty hours of political talks, but he didn't? He had tried. Hawkeye shot up his living room wall. He never tried again.

“Now that Edward's gone, sir, do you think you can finish that paperwork?” Her voice was calm and even, but there was a threat bubbling just beneath the surface.

He grabbed a file off the top and started working on it. “Have a heart, Hawkeye. I'm going to be stuck inside from nine in the morning to nine at night with a bunch of Cretans!”

She dropped another stack onto the desk. For a moment there, Mustang was worried the whole thing would collapse under the weight of his work. Great! Not only was his weekend completely shot, but he also would have to stay late tonight to finish all of this. This weekend couldn't possibly get any worse.

“We all will, sir.” She dropped yet another stack onto his desk. Where was she keeping all of these files?

“All except for Elric,” Breda sighed. “Lucky kid. Hey, colonel, do you think you could sign off on some emergency leave for me? I think my mom's going to be sick this weekend.”

“Is that an option?” Falman asked, perking up.

Mustang's eye twitched. He dropped the file in the done folder and pulled off another one. The stacks were taller than Ed. Not that that was hard, though.

“No one is getting out of tomorrow. And if there was some way to drag Fullmetal to it, kicking and screaming, then I would! Now, quit chatting and get back to work before I sign off on permanent leave for all of you!”

Hawkeye pulled out her gun and cocked it.

“Yes sir!”

Fuck him. His men respected her more than they respected him. Then again, he didn't blame them. But did they have to make it so obvious?

“Isn't it a bit odd, though?” Fuery asked.

Mustang started looking for something on his desk to throw at him. One good hit ought to do it. There were so many papers piled on his desk that he couldn't find anything. Maybe a pen? If he threw it hard enough, it would hurt.

“What's odd?” Havoc asked.

Alright. He needed two pens.

“That Ed wasn’t invited.” Fuery clarified. “I know he hasn’t been with the military for very long, but he’s been here long enough that the Cretans would be able to update the guest list.

“Maybe they don’t want a kid there?” Falman suggested.

Three pens. He needed three pens. Where the hell were all his pens?

“Nah,” Breda said.

Four pens.

“This whole thing reeks of them trying to feel us out, figure out what our strengths and weaknesses are. They may say it’s for peace, but that’s just until they can find our weak points. That’s why the colonel’s invited. They want to know if he’s as powerful as the rumors say. Fuery’s right. It is weird they wouldn’t invite the youngest state alchemist who also, just so happens to do alchemy without a circle.”

Alright, screw the pens. The only one he had was in his hand. And if he threw that one, he was certain Hawkeye would shoot him.

“Didn’t I tell you to stop chatting and start working?” Mustang growled.

“Right. Sorry, sir,” Fuery said.

Finally, everyone turned back to their work, which meant that the office was silent once more. No more Edward Elric purposefully making himself a nuisance. No more conspiracy theories from his team looking to bail on work. And no more sounds of Hawkeye cocking her gun, ready to shoot at something. Just him and some goddamn fucking paperwork that seemed to grow every time he looked back at the stacks.

He leaned over the file and started to read it over. The words seemed to slide off the page and his brain refused to focus on them.

Fuery’s right. the little voice in the back of his head whispered. And Fullmetal’s right. Why didn’t they invite him? They changed the schedule two months ago. They could have invited him. Why didn’t they?

Mustang forced himself to focus on the form in front of him. Just fill it out. Then he could move onto the next one. He’d get through this weekend, one minute at a time. Just focus and it’ll be over a lot faster.

Ever since he got the invitation and saw the updated schedule, he thought it was odd. There was something weird about this whole event. That feeling in his gut, so fine-tuned to potential threats it was almost like a sixth sense, was going haywire. The Cretans were up to something. He may be slightly jealous that Ed could do whatever he wanted this weekend while he had to be stuck inside, but he couldn’t help but be glad he wasn’t going. It saved him the hassle of trying to wrangle that brat and figure out what the Cretans were doing.

At least Hughes and his team were going to be there, giving him support and backup. Whatever they were up to, Mustang could handle it.

Dress blues were not meant to be worn for twelve hours. Dress blues were meant to be worn for ceremonial occasions and then immediately stripped off. They were uncomfortable. Hot. Itchy. Stiff. Difficult to move in. Pinching shoes. Tight in places that suggested whoever designed these things, did not know the first thing about human arms and legs.

He hated dress blues.

“Quit fidgeting, sir,” Hawkeye said. She was standing beside him, tall and alert as ever. She didn’t seem uncomfortable by them. She didn’t seem like she was dealing with uncomfortable itches and pinching dress shoes.

Fuck, the event hadn’t even started yet and he was already trying to figure out how to light himself on fire without his gloves.

This invitation was very clear. No weapons. Even if he did try to bring a pair in, they’d likely be found during the *extremely* intensive pat-down he had received at the door. At one point he started to suspect the security guard was trying to come onto him. No human rubbed down a human-like that unless they were trying to start something. The least he could have done was bought him a drink first.

“I’m not fidgeting, lieutenant,” he said, his voice even. Probably, to the outside observer, he would appear as calm and collected as Hawkeye, but there were little clues that gave it away. He was trying to suppress these urges. No need for anyone, Cretan or Amestrian, to notice how uncomfortable he was.

“Roy, how’s it going?” Hughes practically leaped onto his back.

Mustang had to stumble forward and throw out his hands to keep his balance. “Hughes, how many times have I told you—”

“Did I show you my new pictures of Elicia? Look, she’s smiling!” Hughes shoved approximately three dozen pictures under his nose that all looked the same. He quickly flipped through the pictures and shoved them back at Hughes. Hughes didn’t take this as a sign that Mustang wasn’t in the mood and started going through each and every one.

“How do you not have a massive amount of debt?” he groaned.

“What do you mean?” Hughes said, briefly pausing his explanation on every picture.

“With the amount you waste on film, I’m surprised you haven’t had to take out a loan.” He could see Breda and Fuery on the other side of the room, talking quietly amongst themselves. Falman and Havoc were somewhere behind him. He could hear Havoc speaking with another member of the military.

As for Ed, well that brat was holed up with Al in the library. They’d probably remain there for the entire day. Hell, it was likely they’d remain there longer than Mustang remained here. More than once, the library shut down for the evening, not knowing the two boys were still

inside. It was a shock to the morning crew to come in and see Ed and Al sitting in one of the study rooms. Mustang had to send out a lot of apologies and assure a lot of people that they weren't trying to steal secrets. Somehow, Al convinced the staff to let them be. He wondered if Ed would ever realize that by being pleasant and polite, you could get a lot done. He needed to study his brother more than he needed to study archaic alchemy books.

Hughes gasped. "Pictures are not a waste of money! Nothing is when it comes to cataloging every cute thing my little girl does."

"You think everything she does is cute."

"That's because everything she does is cute!"

Between the hot uniform, his complaining team, Hughes' obsession with his family, and Mustang's suspicions that something here was wrong, this was going to be a long day. He was glad Ed didn't get an invitation. The kid complained enough as is. Mustang couldn't imagine how much of a hellspawn he would be if he had to suffer through all of this. Come to think of it, did the brat even own a pair of dress blues?

"Sirs, I believe the event is about to start," Hawkeye said, effectively interrupting their argument.

Hughes glanced over at the door. "Right you are, lieutenant. Thanks for letting us know." He shoved the pictures back in his pocket and sighed mournfully. "I didn't even show you the one of her eating."

"Did Major Armstrong manage to make it?" Mustang asked. The more people he trusted here, the better. He knew the Armstrongs both got an invitation, but the General wasn't likely to leave Briggs. He thought Major Armstrong might have made it, he loved events like this. As he scanned the crowd, however, he didn't see the man anywhere. And Armstrong was not someone you could miss. Ever.

"No, still stuck down in New Optain," Hughes said. "With any luck, he'll manage to get here tomorrow afternoon, but I already suggested he not bother coming."

"At least Major General Armstrong isn't here," he said. "I have enough to worry about without also trying not to piss her off." Then again, if the Cretans were plotting something, having Olivier here was possibly the best option out of all the generals. Except for maybe Grumman, who also wasn't here. He was down in New Optain as well, helping Hakuro and Armstrong.

Hughes narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean by that?"

He paused before answering. He knew he could trust Hughes. He knew Hughes wouldn't think he was crazy. But Hughes likely had his own problems to worry about during this event. He had spent months constantly investigating every single person at the event. Running drills and checking for potential security breaches. Spending days away from his family to make sure nothing would happen. He didn't need Mustang's unfounded paranoia

adding to what was already a stressful two days. And he didn't need Mustang to accuse him of not being able to do his job, albeit in a roundabout way.

But that worming sensation in his stomach hadn't gone away since yesterday. His mind couldn't stop trying to convince him that something was wrong here. The Cretans were up to something. And if they were up to something, he needed all the help he could get. He needed Hughes' mind.

"Do you think something is weird about this?" He decided to ask. If Hughes said no, then he'd drop it. He'd accept that he was a paranoid bastard and get shit-faced at the bar the first chance he got.

Hughes hummed, his cheeriness dropping into a face Mustang knew all too well. He was analyzing things, going over the possibilities, scanning the crowd, looking for clues. "There were a lot of last-minute changes that gave me quite the headache."

"The schedule?"

He nodded. "They said something about how a few of their cabinet members managed to clear their schedule and wanted to come. And their coming was dependent on them being able to make speeches. Then they asked for even more time because they thought if they were going to give more speeches, then we'd likely want to give more as well."

"And that's suspicious?" Mustang asked.

"It's too nice of them. Normally, setting these things up is more complicated than a divorce. You have two bitter parties desperate to get the last word in. They were almost... too pleasant throughout this whole experience. Anything we asked of them, they gave without much of a fuss. They allowed us access to all their personnel files. They removed certain guests we asked them to. And so on."

"And you don't think they're doing this because they want peace?"

"Please, Roy. You and I both know how much a pain in the neck Creta has been. Just last year they were bombing us to shit."

"And do you know why my entire team is here, minus Fullmetal? I get why I'm here and even Hawkeye. But Fuery, Havoc, Falman, and Breda are not notable enough for the Cretans to even know who they are."

"There are a few other lower-ranking members of the military here. Most of them also serve under state alchemists."

"How convenient," Mustang said. Because it did seem convenient. Like adding in some extra distractions so the actual target wasn't as obvious. "Do you think I'm being paranoid or what? Because if I am being paranoid, I'll get drunk."

Hughes was quiet for a few moments. He was thinking over everything they had talked about. Everything about this situation seemed weird. Was he the target? Was a member of his

team the target? Was someone else the target?

“Maybe,” Hughes finally answered, “but I want you and your team to stay on high alert. Don’t get drunk and don’t go anywhere alone, especially with a Cretan.”

Mustang sighed, resisting the urge to slump back. “I hope I’m being paranoid. The last thing I want is to be the target of an assassination or to be part of a hostage negotiation situation while wearing this damn uniform.”

“Eh,” Hughes shrugged, “at least your cologne smells good.”

He rolled his eyes. “Seriously. That’s the best thing you can say about today? The cologne I’ve been wearing for years smells nice?”

Hughes scratched the back of his neck. “Your hair looks good.”

Mustang glared at him.

“I’m trying here. These dress blues are awful. The room is too hot and I’m going to have to suffer through fake laughing at bad jokes for the entire day.”

“And the Cretans are probably up to something,” he added.

Hughes sighed. “At least the booze is free.”

“You told me not to get drunk.”

“True.”

The prime minister of Creta and the Fuhrer came up to the podium and the conversation around the room quieted.

“Thank you all for coming today,” the Fuhrer said, smiling and looking as relaxed as can be. “Now I know our two countries have had problems in the past, but I’m hoping that the events of the next few days can forge a stronger bond between us.”

The Cretan prime minister laughed. “It probably won’t help that we’re stuck in a room all day,” he said, his voice heavily accented. “I don’t think I could be in the same room as my mother for twelve hours.”

There was polite laughter around the room. Mustang didn’t even bother pretending. He’d save his pompous laugh for when he was brown-nosing with people one on one.

“Then it’s a good thing there’s plenty of food and drink to keep us occupied while we listen, learn, and forge strong bonds.” The Fuhrer never stopped smiling.

Mustang looked around the room again, trying to see if anything stuck out to him as being suspicious. There were an awful lot of beautiful women in the room, dressed to the nines and showing just enough skin. He furrowed his brow. Madame Christmas didn’t say anything

about an increase in requests for escorts. It'd be easier if he had Vanessa here, running interference and gathering information.

Other than the random beautiful women scattered about, no one looked out of place. No one seemed nervous. No one seemed to be studying him or his team members.

He looked over to see his team, now scattered about the room. Even Hawkeye left his side and was now over next to a potted plant.

"If you can," he said, keeping his voice low as the Fuhrer and the Prime Minister continued to make bad jokes, "tell my men to keep on high alert. As of right now, we're on a surveillance mission. Do not attract attention to yourself and keep casual."

Hughes nodded. "Will do. We'll have to come up with a system to report in, so they don't become suspicious."

"Note passing?"

"Like in class?"

He nodded. "If we spend too long talking to one another, they'll probably figure out that we're onto them. Notes can be passed discretely."

"Alright. I hope you're wrong, Roy. This would ruin my weekend if I had to be stuck in the office doing more paperwork because the Cretans couldn't play nice for two days."

"I'm hoping I'm wrong as well."

"And here I thought the hard part was over. This weekend was supposed to be easy. Keep drunk soldiers from killing other drunk soldiers. Make sure the kitchen doesn't run out of cocktail sauce and shrimp. Make sure every diplomat has at least ten minutes to make a speech and not one second longer." Hughes sighed. "This is going to ruin my day."

Mustang let his friend grumble. His mind was focused on more important things.

He mulled over the possibilities as to what the Cretans could want. The biggest potential threat was to that of the Fuhrer. He was here, out in the open, mingling amongst people who had been their enemies. All it would take was a poisoned champagne glass or a needle jabbed into his side and he'd be dead. But even that didn't seem to fit what was going on. Why would the Cretans want to have more time on Day One of a two-day event if they were going to kill the Fuhrer? If he was going to kill the Fuhrer, he wouldn't do it now. The potential to strand several high-ranking Cretan military members and political leaders was too great a risk. Were they going to go after a lower-ranking member of the military?

They could be going after him. He was well-known and an invaluable asset to the military. Perhaps they called the rest of his team here with him so they could take them all out? No, that didn't make any sense either. Again, killing anyone at this high-profile event was too risky. The moment any Amestrian military member died, even if they were the fucking privates stationed as guards out front, the Cretans would be taken as political hostages. For

God's sakes, the Prime Minister himself was here. This was the worst time to kill anyone. For as much as Amestris would be thrown into chaos, the military would respond quickly and kill every Cretan in this room. They'd be out a lot more than just a leader.

Maybe this all was him being paranoid. Maybe the Cretans had to extend Day One by six hours because everyone wanted to give a speech and no one wanted to be the bad guy and say no. Yeah. That was it. It wasn't some conspiracy to bring down Amestris due to a poorly planned assassination. It was simply a bunch of egotistical politicians who wanted to say their piece at an overblown banquet. That was it.

The good thing about Colonel Bastard being otherwise imprisoned for twelve hours was that Ed could do whatever he wanted. No one could scold him. No one was in the office. No one was wandering the streets. No one had communication with the outside world. Mustang, Hawkeye, Havoc, Breda, Falman, and Fuery were all stuck in some building in the middle of the city for the next twelve hours. Nine AM to Nine PM. And then Nine AM to Five PM the next day. He was completely unsupervised for two days. Even once Colonel Bastard and the rest of the squad finally managed to weasel their way out of the building, they'd be too tired to come look for him.

He and Al could do whatever they wanted. Life was good.

He did feel slightly bad for the rest of the team. It wasn't like Havoc's presence was essential for maintaining peace. It wasn't like Fuery's absence would cause war to break out once more. Mustang may deserve to get locked in a building for two days and forced to brown-nose his way through the weekend. It served the man right since he was so focused on his career. The rest of them, though, didn't deserve such harsh and cruel treatment. Unlike Mustang, they were nice.

There was nothing he could do about it. He was glad he didn't have to go and he'd be sympathetic to the plight of Team Mustang, but he wasn't about to sacrifice prime research time in solidarity.

"We probably could have gone to visit Winry and Granny," he said.

He picked up a large and archaic-looking alchemy textbook and flicked through it. There was nothing on the Philosopher's Stone, he could tell just by looking at the index. What there were, however, were theories he was unfamiliar with. When dealing with something as complex as the Philosopher's Stone, they were likely to need multiple theories and equations. It'd be better to understand as much as possible now so he could better utilize what he needed to later.

"I thought you wanted to stay and research in the library?" Al said. He had his own ceiling-high pile of books he was looking through.

"I do. I want to get your body back as soon as possible, Al." Every time he looked at Al's metal body, he was wracked with so much guilt, he felt like he would drown in it. He was the older brother. He was the one who was supposed to protect Al. He was the one who was

supposed to make sure he was safe. And instead, he had led him down the wrong path; didn't listen to his protests that something was wrong; made him commit a taboo and confine him to an unfeeling prison.

Ed didn't care about getting his arm and leg back. The pain of the automail was his punishment. Every time the nerves were reconnected, every time he had to undergo an adjustment, he wouldn't complain because he deserved it and so much worse for what he did to Al. If Al ever heard these thoughts, however, he'd be horrified. He'd argue and say that Ed deserved to have his body back just as much he did. Even if he did hate and blame Ed, he was too good to ever admit it out loud.

"We need to take as much time as possible to research," Ed continued. "But, it would piss off Colonel Bastard to know I went back to Resembool without a pass." He snickered, thinking about how the colonel's face would look when he realized Ed had disappeared right under his nose. It'd serve the bastard right for that mission he gave them two weeks ago. Seriously, he did not have time to deal with land disputes in the middle of fucking nowhere! And that smug smirk of his when Ed trudged back into his office to hand in his report. He almost decked the bastard, only being held back by nice, kind, *courteous* Al.

"Brother," Al sighed, "you should be more respectful."

There was that goddamn word. Ed hated it. He'd be respectful to those who deserved it. And Mustang didn't deserve it. He was a smug, pompous bastard with an inflated ego who thought he was better and more important than everyone else around him. He saw the world as a chessboard and everyone else as mere pawns.

"I'll be respectful when the jackass does something to deserve it." He turned back to his books. He should have known better than to think that Al would join in on his teasing of Colonel Bastard. Al always ruined his fun when it came to him. Why did he look up to him so much anyway? Maybe because Al was nice like that. Nice and trusting and respectful. Nice enough to not admit out loud how much Ed ruined both their lives.

"He does deserve it though."

Ed scoffed, knowing full well the lecture that was about to come. 'Colonel Mustang's kept our secret. Colonel Mustang helped you get into the military. Colonel Mustang gives you missions related to the Philosopher's Stone.' And on and on and on and on. He wanted to shake Al and scream that Mustang was using them for his own personal gains. He was using them because the second Ed and Al managed to find an actual, working Philosopher's Stone, that'd guarantee his spot as Fuhrer. Then, as soon as he got what he wanted from them, he'd toss them aside. He'd leave them behind and forget all about them. He didn't like them. He didn't care about them. He was using them.

Ed didn't mind it. He was grateful Mustang was so open and honest about it. It certainly beat Hohenheim pretending for years only to up and disappear one day without so much as a goodbye. And because their goals aligned, he couldn't argue. Besides, he was just as open about using Mustang as Mustang was. As soon as he got Al's body back to normal, he was out of here. He wasn't going to sit idly by and say 'yes sir' and 'no sir' like a good little

soldier. Besides, Colonel Bastard's ego was big enough. He could handle a few insults from Ed. It'd probably do him some good to get knocked down a few pegs now and again.

"Whatever. How's your research going? Find anything interesting?" He was done talking and thinking about Mustang. They had two whole days where they weren't going to get called away on a mission and he wanted to use those days to the fullest. The fact that Mustang already inhabited such a large part of his thoughts annoyed him to no end. Stupid bastard. He was probably laughing about this, cackling and making short jokes like he always did.

"Oh, it's going well," Al said, thankfully recognizing and accepting Ed's dismissal of the topic. "Nothing on the Philosopher's Stone, but I found some early hypotheses that look like they might be the start of a rudimentary form."

"Really?" Ed perked up. "Where are they from?"

A lieutenant burst into the room before Al could answer. "Major Elric, Colonel Mustang has requested your presence immediately."

He couldn't help the groan that came out. "Really? What now?"

Mustang was supposed to be locked in a room with a bunch of boring politicians for two days. How could he possibly arrange to inconvenience Ed like that?

"There has been an incident at the Embassy. You're to come with me immediately."

"Just when I thought we managed to get the colonel off our asses for once." He stuck a bookmark in his book and got to his feet. "Come on, Al. Let's get this over with."

"I'm sorry, but he can't come," the soldier said, stoic as ever.

Ed narrowed his eyes. Mustang knew he never went anywhere without Al if he could help it. He may be an egotistical bastard, but he would never purposefully try to separate the two of them. Not without good reason.

"Why not?"

"Given the sensitive nature of the issue, we don't want any civilians to know the details." The soldier wasn't looking at him. He was looking at the wall.

Ed crossed his arms and glared. "He goes on all of my missions with me. Mustang knows this and approves of this."

He didn't know if Mustang approved of Al tagging along on official military business, but he never complained.

"I'm sorry, Major Elric, this is above him. The orders were to bring you and you alone."

He narrowed his eyes. "Who did you say you worked for, again?"

“It’s alright, brother. I can keep researching while you’re out,” Al said, clearly trying to get Ed to follow orders and not argue.

He didn’t budge. “Whatever’s going on, it’ll be faster with the two of us.” Most people in the military gave up on trying to boss him around. They took his disregard for rules and difficulty following orders as a byproduct of his youth. Which, in a way, it was.

“I’m sorry sir. Those were the orders.” This man was not backing down.

“Don’t be mean to the colonel, brother.” Al sighed. “You heard it yourself, this is out of his hands.”

“But—”

“I’ll be fine. I’m sure whatever’s going on, you and the colonel will figure it out quickly. Then we can get back to our notes. Besides, if I’m here, I can still research and make lots of progress.”

He hated it when Al made good arguments. And Al always made good arguments.

“Sir, we have to go.” The lieutenant said, firmly.

Ed was a bit surprised. He said something was going on at the embassy, which was packed to the brim with all the most important people in the Amestrian Military, except for Mustang, of course. And yet, he allowed him and Al to have this conversation. Whatever was going on, it must not be that urgent.

“Are you sure you’ll be alright, Al?” Ed asked, glancing once more at his brother. He hoped Al would say ‘no’ and then he could dig his heels in and refuse to leave. If it was an emergency, then that would probably be enough to convince the soldier to let him come.

“I’ll be fine, brother.” Al was starting to sound exasperated. Ed should probably leave.

He sighed. “Alright. I’ll be right back.”

“Actually,” the soldier said, shifting from one foot to the other. “It might take a while. These things normally do.”

Ed narrowed his eyes. “And what exactly are these things?”

“I already told you, sir. I can’t tell you, not with a civilian here. I’ll brief you on the way.”

“Brother quit stalling,” Al scolded. “The longer you stay here the longer it’ll take to get your mission done.”

Finally, Ed relented. The lieutenant was just doing his job. There was no need to make his life hell because Colonel Bastard was being, well, a bastard. “Alright, alright. I’ll go. Don’t get into trouble, Al.”

“Shouldn’t I be telling you that?” Al scoffed.

Ed grinned and followed the soldier out. Mustang was supposed to be at an overly hyped dinner party with a bunch of diplomats fake laughing about things like the cheese course and taxes. What could have possibly gone wrong? His mind flipped through the possibilities.

Hostage situation?

No. A hostage situation would make sense in any other situation, but it wouldn't make sense to call him in to deal with it. He had only been a member of the military for a few months. If it was a hostage situation, then how could Mustang possibly send out a soldier to come to get him? A soldier who, even now, didn't appear to be in a rush.

Maybe an assassination?

The lieutenant didn't seem panicked. If it were an assassination, he'd be moving a lot faster. As is, they took a brisk, but manageable pace to an unmarked car not far from the front door. The lieutenant's driving was careful and deliberate. No rush. No-fuss.

"What's going on? We're alone so you can tell me," Ed said, staring out the window at East City. It was a nice day out. Plenty of people were out doing their shopping, spending time with their families, enjoying the bright, sunny day. It almost made Ed guilty that he had Al hole up in a windowless room in the library with the intent of not leaving for two days. Maybe when he got back, he'd push him to get out and go for a walk while he continued their research.

"A transmutation circle was found at the event," the lieutenant said.

Ed dragged his eyes away from the window to look at him. "Really? What's it do?"

"We don't know, sir. We don't even know if the Cretans are behind it. Colonel Mustang was alerted and suggested we come to get you so as not to draw attention to it."

Was it just him, or did the soldier speak with a slight accent? It wasn't impossible that he immigrated to Amestris and then became a soldier, Ed supposed.

"So, the Colonel needs me to sneak in, figure out what the transmutation circle does, and keep it from being activated?"

The soldier nodded.

"I don't know why you couldn't have told Al that. Or why he couldn't come along."

"Given the nature of the event, we want to keep civilians as far away as possible. If it is activated and leads to the deaths of those inside the building, it'll be a lot worse if a civilian is caught up in it. Also, your brother is very tall and would attract a lot of attention. We can sneak you in, but I don't think we can sneak him in."

Ed's eye twitched. It almost sounded like the man was calling him short, but he did so in such a roundabout way that Ed couldn't possibly yell at him for it without seeming like a bratty child.

The car turned. They were heading away from the city center, not towards it. Wasn't the event being held in the Cretan Embassy? That was near Eastern Command.

"Where are we going?" he asked, sitting up and looking around.

"There's a warehouse just outside of the city that's being used as our base of operations."

"Base of operations?"

The lieutenant gave him a look. "You think we'd have an event with the Fuhrer and not have a base to monitor it. You'll need to get set up with a radio, bulletproof vest, and some other equipment for the mission. We'll also need to brief you on how to enter into the building."

Ed nodded, and returned to staring out the window. That made sense... he guessed. Mustang never bothered to tell him what proper protocol was for reconnaissance missions, but it made sense that they would have another base of operations set up somewhere outside the city. Maybe just in case Eastern Command was attacked, they'd set up shop elsewhere. It made sense... kind of. Sort of. Ed didn't really know. The military was weird when it came to protocol and whatnot.

They pulled up to a warehouse that was just on the outskirts of East City. Ed's heart pounded in his chest. He never really had contact with members outside of Mustang's crew. For the most part, the higher-ups didn't bother him. This was the first time he'd be surrounded by other soldiers and possibly taking orders from someone other than Mustang. Alright, 'taking orders' was a bit generous since he did everything in his power to ignore everything Mustang told him to do. He didn't think he'd be able to get away with that now. He swallowed and got out of the car, following the soldier to the door.

What if he made a mistake? What if he pissed someone off? What if they wanted him to kill someone?

His stomach lurched and he felt like he was going to throw up.

No, they're not going to ask you to kill someone. They just want you to take a look at a transmutation circle and make sure it's nothing bad. Besides, once you're in the building, you'll be with Mustang. He won't have you kill someone. He tried to calm himself down, think logically about the situation. Amestris wouldn't risk a war with Creta, not when Creta was trying to mend the broken relationship between the two countries.

Except, there was the transmutation circle. What if this was all a ploy to kill the high-ranking members of the military?

That didn't help his anxiety. An image flashed in his head. It looked like the body of his mother after he tried to bring her back to life. Twisted, contorted, bleeding, in pain, suffering, broken. Except, this time, it had Mustang's face. Then it had Hawkeye's face. Then Havoc's. Then Breda's. Then Fuery's. Then Falman's. Then Hughes'.

He swallowed, trying to calm down and not vomit at the thought of walking into that banquet hall and seeing Mustang's body contorted like his mom's. Gasping for air like his mom.

Dying like his mom.

The soldier opened the door and Ed stepped in. He narrowed his eyes. When he was told this was the base of operations, he was expecting... something? Like a radio. Maybe a few tables? A bunch of soldiers in blue? Maybe a general or two? Instead, he got... a room with a handful of people not wearing an Amestris military uniform.

In the center of the room was a transmutation circle. Ed's eyes widened when he realized what it was.

He went to put his hands together so he could run, but something hit him on the back of his head and he blacked out. His last thought was on the human transmutation circle in bright red paint on the concrete floor.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Torture, blood, vomiting, some non-consensual touching (not sexual, but still not consensual), also Mustang drives home slightly buzzed so trigger warning for that.

Then again, this is the early 1900s. He could probably drive home actively drinking from a bottle of vodka and it wouldn't be illegal.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He woke up with a splitting headache, slumped over, and chained to the wall. His body jerked, the left hand rattling the heavy chains that bit and pinched his skin. His right arm... His breathing picked up and his body jerked again, this time desperately attempting to move his right arm. No matter how much he twitched, no matter how much he jerked, he couldn't get it to move because it wasn't there. And now that he was more awake, he realized his left leg was also gone.

He opened his eyes, desperately trying to control his breathing by breathing in and out of his nose. It came out in short puffs and his heart beat faster. He looked around the room, trying to see what was happening. A few men were milling about. One looked at him and then shouted something in Cretan.

It was cold in here, he realized, shivering. Horror dawned on him when he realized the reason it was so cold was that most of his clothing had been removed. Coat, jacket, pants, shoes. All gone. He hoped, *he prayed* it was just to make it easier to get his automail off. The only good thing about this whole experience was that it looked like they had removed it properly. The ports seemed intact.

His eyes swept over the room. There, on the floor, was that blood-red transmutation circle. He slammed his eyes shut, desperate for this to be revealed to all be a dream. He had to be dreaming. There was no way he was kidnapped by Cretans and taken to a warehouse in East City where a human transmutation circle just so happened to be drawn. It couldn't be real. If it was real... He promised he would never do human transmutation again. He would never put Al through that again. He would never risk everything again. He swore he would never be so stupid again.

The day he got his pocket watch, Mustang called him in to talk to him, alone. His dark eyes boring into him, studying him. Mustang had an unnerving stare that made him feel like he was being taken apart and stripped down to the core where all of his secrets were revealed. He did his best not to be intimidated, but it was hard not to wither under that stare. The only

one with a worse stare was Hawkeye, and thankfully she wasn't in the room. If two people were studying him, he might just combust.

"Fullmetal," he said.

Ed perked up. He liked his codename. It sounded cool. Certainly better than the 'Flame Alchemist' at any rate.

"I'm giving this to you because technically, I have to." He slid the watch across the desk.

"Weren't you the one who wanted me to join the military?" Ed didn't take the watch. Not yet. He had a feeling Mustang didn't ask to talk to him alone just to give him a watch.

"I didn't want you to do anything," Mustang said in that annoying, smug, satisfied voice. "I merely gave you a suggestion."

"Whatever you say." Ed rolled his eyes and went to grab the watch.

"I'm only giving this to you because I think you've learned your lesson."

His hand froze. His heart rate sped up. He knew what Mustang was talking about. He hated to be reminded of it. Every time he looked at Al's body, or felt the pain in his arm and leg, he was reminded of it. He didn't need Mustang to pile on as well. He might just break.

"You tried to play God and got burned," he continued. "I'm being lenient because you are a child who made a mistake. I trust you now understand your limitations and will never try something like that again."

"Of course I won't," Ed scoffed grabbing the watch. He was desperate to leave, to get back to Al, to start using military resources to get his brother's body back to normal. "Do you think I'm that dumb?"

"You were that dumb the first time," Mustang said with an even voice.

"Yeah, well, I swear I'm not going to do it again." He tore his gaze away from his unnerving stare. His hand twitched, wanting to grab onto the shoulder where flesh was melded with metal. "I learned my lesson the first time."

"Good." Mustang's chair squeaked as he leaned back. "Because you only get one chance, and you've already used yours up."

That didn't seem fair. Everyone made mistakes. Granted, theirs were usually much smaller and much less deadly than his had been, but he shouldn't have to be perfect all the time. That was unrealistic.

"I'm not going to do it again," he said, gritting his teeth. Did Mustang think he was an idiot? Did he think that after watching his brother get torn away from him and then going through automail surgery on both his arm and leg that he was keen to hop back on the human transmutation wagon? He wasn't. He was never going to do human transmutation again. He

had learned that nothing good ever came from it and the cost was too high. He wouldn't lose Al, not again.

Mustang hummed. "Glad to hear it." He tossed a folder on the desk. "I have a mission for you. You're leaving tomorrow."

Ed looked up and saw the colonel smirking at him, still studying him. "Already getting me to do your dirty work?" He asked, pulling the folder off the table and flicking through it.

"Of course. Why else would I want you in the military?"

Ed rolled his eyes and tucked the folder under his arm. "Bastard," he muttered, turning to walk out the door.

"Weekly check-ins are mandatory, Fullmetal," Mustang called.

"Yeah, yeah." He waved dismissively at him and slipped out the door.

Despite his snark and sarcasm, Mustang's words weighed heavily on his mind. He never outright stated it, but the implication was clear. *If you ever do human transmutation again, I won't cover for you.*

Ed thought not doing a taboo would be easy enough. He literally just didn't have to do it. But the transmutation circle was there. He wasn't imagining it.

Someone came up to him. Ed almost gagged at the scent. Thick, heavy, suffocating. Whoever was standing in front of him smelled like fish and eggs, but not in a food sort of way. The smell certainly didn't help his concussion-induced nausea.

A hand cupped his cheek. He flinched away, feeling disgusted by the way he was being caressed. He didn't flinch very far. He was chained to a wall, after all.

"It looks like our volunteer is awake," the smelly man said with a heavy accent.

Ed let out a pitiful moan and squeezed his eyes shut, still praying this was a bad dream. He twisted his arm, trying to see if the chains would give. Instead, he only succeeded in causing his shoulder to cramp and seize up. He rapidly untwisted himself to get some relief. That damn hand never left his face.

"Now, now," the man said, his voice soft and gentle. "Why don't you open your eyes and we will explain what we want? Does that sound fair, Fullmetal Alchemist?"

He shook his head, still keeping his eyes squeezed shut. The sudden, jerky movement caused a wave of nausea to wash over him. He wrenched his head to the side, coughing and vomiting the breakfast he had eaten a few hours prior.

The man tsked but didn't move. He could smell him there, staring at him, lingering. It made him want to curl into a ball. He tried but having only one leg made that difficult and pitiful.

“Are you finished?” He almost sounded like a father weirdly, tender and loving. But there was something sinister bubbling beneath the surface; something in his voice. He was enjoying this.

He knew there was a circle in the room. They likely wanted him to do something with it. He should probably open his eyes and figure it out. If he knew what they wanted and what their timeline was, then he could come up with a plan.

He opened his eyes and looked up. In front of him was a man, probably in his forties or fifties, smiling at him. His smile broadened. Ed struggled to focus on him. The concussion was making his head all fuzzy. He probably needed to get that looked at quickly. Something about how the brain could swell and kill him? He couldn't remember.

“There we are. Welcome back to the land of wakefulness, Fullmetal Alchemist. I could not believe my luck when I heard about you.” That damn hand was back on his face. Stroking him.

He wanted nothing more than to shuffle away from him and curl into a ball. He couldn't. He physically couldn't move, but he also needed to be strong emotionally. He was a soldier. There were people in the military who had been through worse than a creepy, smelly man stroking their cheeks. This was probably child's play compared to what some of his fellow soldiers had been through. He could do this.

“Who are you?” He swallowed down the panic steadily building inside of him. There was a training he attended, right after joining the military, about being a prisoner of war and the kind of treatment he could expect. Drachmans were the worst. He remembered that being the main topic. But Cretans... he couldn't remember exactly where Cretans fell on the scale of ‘do not get captured’. Besides, was he even a prisoner of war? Creta wasn't in an active war with Amestris. Did it count if he was captured by an enemy soldier, regardless of whether or not an active war was going on? What did the training say to do? Shit, were they going to torture him?

He was shaking now, the bravado he had built up to ask that simple question vanishing as his mind concocted all sorts of painful situations he would be put through.

“Who I am isn't important.”

“I disagree,” he snapped back before he could control himself.

He was afraid. Holy fuck was he afraid. His head was pounding. His body wouldn't stop shaking. His mind kept listing everything they could do to him. He felt like crying.

Al! Oh, shit they knew about Al! The soldier knew where he was. They could go back for him. They could hurt him. Whatever fear that had been plaguing Ed's mind was quickly replaced by the terror that whatever he went through, his little brother might have to go through as well. He had to be strong. He had to keep Al safe. He had been through automail surgery when he was eleven. That shit was torture but he came out the other end. He could withstand this. Whatever they were going to do to him, he could withstand it. He had to withstand it.

Smelly Man laughed. “You are a little... how do you say? *oxythymos*. My superiors, they are most interested in your alchemy. They are skeptical, but I know you can do what I need you to do. I have faith in you.”

He stood and motioned for two other men to come to him. Ed flinched but all they did was unchain him. His arm was numb from being held in the air for so long. One of the men grabbed it and dragged him over to the transmutation circle. He bit his tongue, humiliated at the fact that they wouldn't even let him walk. Even with one leg, he could make it over to that nightmare of a circle on his own. He didn't need to be dragged.

The man let go of his arm, dropping him to his stomach; a heavy foot placed on his back, pinning him to the ground. His cheek was pressed into the dirty floor of the warehouse, tiny pebbles stabbing into him. He went cross-eyed looking at the blood-red circle in front of him. The foot pressed down harder, squeezing his ribs. It fucking hurt.

Even from this awkward angle, he could see, clear as day, the purpose of the transmutation circle. It was the one he had used to resurrect mom. Almost the same except for a few minor alterations. A jolt of absolute terror shot through his body. The torture seemed minor compared to what would happen to him if he opened the gate again. He tried to take a deep breath, but the foot on his back made that impossible. Even if he hadn't already been hyperventilating, he would have started.

“I see you recognize it. Good. Good.” Smelly Man came around to kneel by him. “My hypothesis was correct. We are scientists, no? We have a hypothesis that we need to test. I have been testing human transmutation for a long time. I am curious how you managed to survive with minor injuries.”

Losing an arm and a leg was considered minor to this man!

“I want to know how you did it.”

If that was the case, then maybe Ed would tell him what he wanted to know and then get the hell out of here. If Smelly Man wanted to lose his body, then Ed wasn't going to stop him.

“It is simple, Fullmetal Alchemist. Tell us what you need to do the human transmutation. We will get it for you. Check to make sure the circle is correct and make any changes you need. Then, you will activate the circle and we will let you go. That is all we need from you, Fullmetal Alchemist.”

Ed tried to jerk away. He wasn't going to do human transmutation. Not again. Not in a million years. These guys could torture and touch him all they wanted. He wasn't ever going to do human transmutation. The memory of the pain, the loss, the fear, the agony, the suffering, the terror was so thoroughly etched in his mind that he couldn't stand to even attempt it again. Already he imagined those tiny black hands, emerging from the shadows, clawing at him, desperate to take something else away. He could imagine Al finding out what he had done and turning away from him in disgust.

“How could you? After everything you've put me through!”

He could imagine Mustang, shaking his head and pulling on his gloves. *“I warned you, Fullmetal. I wasn’t going to cover for you again.”*

“No,” he said, still trying to squirm his way out from underneath the heavy boot. “No, I won’t do it. You can’t make me do it.”

The man sighed and said something in Cretan. He was yanked off the ground and dragged back to the wall. Chained to it like a dog.

“Why not? You did it once. It will hurt more if you do not do it now. I promise you that, agori.”

“I already did it once, so I know what happens. I’m not going to do it again.” He gritted his teeth and steeled himself for what was coming next. Over and over in his head, a mantra, he reminded himself that nothing they did to him would be worth doing the taboo.

“We will make you do it. You will not have any other choice.” He still sounded so calm, so... caring. It freaked Ed out even more.

The men were moving around, pulling something out from the corner. His eyes widened when he saw the flash of metal. It was his leg.

“What are you doing?” Were they going to destroy it? Beat him with it? Damage the ports?

“I am giving you an incentive. Do the transmutation, agapito agori.”

Smelly Man put the leg in the port. Wait... they were going to reconnect it? That seemed like a stupid idea. If he had the leg, he could kick them with it. He might be outnumbered, but from experience, an automail leg was a formidable weapon.

He put the lever in the notches and then twisted it. Ed bit the inside of his cheek as white-hot pain surged through his body. He had been through this before. The pain was immense, but he knew how to deal with it. How to breathe through it. Besides, now that he had his leg, he had a chance to get out of here. The Cretans underestimated him. They assumed because he was a child he would cave to their demands easily. He’d show them. He’d kick all of their asses, bust out of here, and then storm into the Embassy so he could let everyone know the Cretans were planning on hurting Amestris.

Finally, the pain subsided and he let out a sigh of relief. It’d take another minute for the leg to be fully functional. Just one more minute and he’d get out of here. The first thing he was going to do was put his foot through Smelly Man’s face.

“Will you do the transmutation for us, Fullmetal Alchemist?” the man asked.

Ed took a deep breath. Thirty more seconds. Thirty more seconds and he’d be able to fight back. “Never. I’m never going to do it,” he growled. He could do this. He could stay strong.

The man tsked. “That is too bad.”

Ed's eyes widened as he disconnected the leg from the port. What was he doing? Why was he taking the leg off already? He wasn't pulling it off. He was keeping it there. Dammit! He had been so close! He should have said yes.

"You will do the transmutation for me. I am a patient man, agapito agori."

He turned the lever. Ed bit the inside of his cheek, this time drawing blood. Fuck, that hurt. It hurt worse than the first time. Was this what was going to happen until he said yes?

He could do this. He could withstand this. It was just his nerves reconnecting. He was used to this. He wouldn't break.

"I would suggest you do the transmutation. This is only the beginning. You will know what pain is."

The fire coursing through his nerves subsided.

He took a shaky inhale and steadied himself. "No."

Smelly Man tsked.

Disconnect.

Reconnect.

This time, he couldn't stop the cry that escaped from his lips. Grown men would cry and pass out from the reconnection of the nerves. He had come close a few times with Winry and Granny. He had a feeling if this kept up, he would pass out and cry like a little kid. Each time everything hurt worse than before. The fire was more intense. The pain spread further up his body. The rest of his muscles seized with the sudden jolt of electricity.

"I am very good at my job, agapito agori."

Disconnect.

Reconnect.

He cried out, louder this time. His voice echoing off the walls of the near-empty warehouse.

"I'm not gonna do it," he said, his words slurring.

Disconnect.

"You will." He sounded so certain, so confident.

Reconnect.

Tears slipped down his cheeks. This time, he felt the jolt of electricity rattle in his teeth. The concussion pulsed and he wrenched his head to the side to vomit once more.

"Do the transmutation."

“No. There’s nothing you can do to make me.” He looked up at the man, glaring at him with as much hatred as he could muster. “I can do this all night.”

Disconnect.

“We will see about that.”

Reconnect.

This time, Ed screamed.

Mustang checked his pocket watch for the time, shivering in the back alley he and Hughes agreed to meet up in after the event. His men would call Hawkeye and tell her their reports. When he got back, he’d call her. It was a way to ensure they didn’t seem too suspicious. But he wanted Hughes’ now. If he had any idea what was going on, it’d be easier to rally his men.

The problem was, on top of keeping track of the Cretans, Hughes still had his general duties he needed to complete. And those included an after-event meeting with the heads of security and safety with both the Cretans and Amestrians to ensure nothing had gone wrong. Mustang almost ordered his men to wait around for him, but if he was the target in any way, it was likely they were all still being watched and their phone lines possibly bugged. One could never be too careful with espionage.

Lucky for him, Aunt Chris just so happened to know a guy who owned a bar next to the Embassy. Mustang was able to slip out a back door, giving any potential stalker the slip while he waited for Hughes.

Other than his own paranoia, the day had gone smoothly, almost too smoothly. They couldn’t find any evidence of suspicious activity. Sure, there were a lot of pretty women fluttering around, but he had been in the industry long enough to know that men were willing to pay anything for a pretty face to hang off their arm for the night. The drinks and food were plentiful. Most of the Cretans were content with talking about mundane things. They didn’t try to weasel any secrets out of him. They didn’t try to get him alone or take him out of the room. His men likewise stayed safe inside the main hall the entire event. It just didn’t make any sense.

“Thank God that’s over,” Hughes said, slipping out the back door and undoing his dress shirt and tie, his jacket already slung over his arm. “I swear, General Grossing loves paperwork and meetings. He’s the only bureaucrat I know who actively searches for more forms to fill out.”

He sighed and slumped against the wall. He looked exhausted. If Mustang were a better friend, he’d insist Hughes go back to his hotel and get some rest. He could handle it. He didn’t need his friend to be there, acting like some sort of cheer-leader to his crazy conspiracy theories.

He was not a better friend. He crossed his arms and stared at Hughes, waiting for him to stop complaining.

Hughes looked up and quirked an eyebrow. “Why do you look so glum? Do you want the Cretans to be up to something?”

“Yes, then I wouldn’t feel like a paranoid idiot,” he said, leaning back against the wall. “I feel ridiculous for even thinking this was a setup. This is how battle fatigue starts. You see enemies even when there aren’t any.”

“Please,” Hughes scoffed, “you don’t have battle fatigue.” He paused, looked thoughtful for a second, and then continued. “Or you do, but it’s not suddenly manifesting itself at a diplomatic event with a bunch of Cretans.”

He pushed off the wall and started pacing. He was exhausted beyond belief, but his mind wouldn’t stop racing. “Then what do they want? What are they after? Is it me? My team? The Fuhrer? What is their goal?”

Hughes was quiet. Quiet enough to get him to stop pacing and look at him.

“You think something’s going on. Don’t you?”

“Yes. It was subtle, I doubt you’d even notice it, but they were focusing almost all of their attention on you and your team. Whenever anyone was alone for more than a few minutes, someone would go and talk to you. And no more than one person was out of the room at any one point in time.”

Mustang shook his head and started to pace again. “Are you sure? It could just be mingling.”

“I’m sure, Roy. The rest of them would talk with other people, particularly the higher-ups, but they were nowhere near as focused on them as they were with you. They wanted you to stay in that room and away from each other.”

Hughes was right, like usual. There were a lot of diplomats to distract him whenever he got close to one of his men. And there was always a diplomat or speech that stopped him from leaving the room. He damn near used a potted plant as a toilet around hour five when he could not, for the life of him, escape without making a scene. He had been to his fair share of annoyingly formal military functions, but never one at this scale and with this much riding on its success. His making constant small-talk with Cretans, because they never did talk about any of importance, did not immediately send warning bells off in his head.

“Shit,” he cursed. “That means my team is the target. But why? What about me or my men are so important that they would risk everything just to distract us?”

“I think it’s safe to say it’s not an assassination attempt,” Hughes said. “Nothing they’ve done matches that possibility. And it’s not a hostage situation. The Cretans are the ones who are outnumbered and cut off from any means of help. They would be absolute idiots to even try something. And as much as I don’t like Creta, I know they’re not idiots. Their military is full of brilliant tacticians. Nothing they could do to sabotage the event makes any sense.”

Mustang continued to pace the alleyway. “So they’re after me or a member of my team. Who and why?”

“They haven’t asked about flame alchemy or anything?” Hughes tugged on his dress shoes and scratched at the stiff collar around his neck.

Mustang’s feet had gone numb hours ago. “No. Not really, not any more than I’ve been asked in the past.”

“Could be Fuery?”

“Fuery?”

“Yeah, he’s a genius when it comes to radios and communications. Creta has a fairly robust communication system, but not as good as ours. They could want to try and convince him to desert and give them our secrets.”

“Could be. He also knows all of our emergency codes and communication systems. If they had that information, it’d be easier to spy.” Something about Fuery being the target didn’t sit right with him.

“What about Falman?” he suggested. “Photographic memory, he’s seen a lot of sensitive documents. They could be going after him.”

Hughes let out a sigh. “I mean, maybe? I couldn’t keep track of all the conversations, but it never seemed like they were trying to do anything.”

Mustang groaned and resisted the urge to bash his head into the brick wall. The last thing he needed was to give himself a concussion while the Cretans were being shady bastards. “There has to be something we’re missing.”

“We’ll have to keep on our guard tomorrow then. Hopefully, after you talk with your team you’ll have a better idea of what conversations were had.”

“Tomorrow is when they’ll likely make their move, though. They only have eight more hours to do whatever it is they need to do.”

“I agree that it’s not ideal, but we don’t have any other choice. We have no leads. Don’t eat or drink anything they give you and do not go anywhere alone with them.”

As much as he hated to admit it, Hughes was right. They still had no idea what the Cretans wanted or why. They only knew they were focused on Mustang’s team for some reason.

“I’ll have to figure out some way to smuggle my gloves in,” Mustang said. He could fight hand to hand if he needed to, but he didn’t want to. Whatever the Cretans were up to, he wanted to make sure they got the full wrath of the Flame Alchemist.

“You mean you didn’t have them today?” Hughes sounded offended.

“The invitation said no weapons. And with the rub-down I got at the door, I doubt I could sneak so much as a safety pin in.”

Hughes scoffed and rolled his eyes. “I still have five throwing knives on me and I guarantee Hawkeye has at least one gun.”

Mustang balked. “Where the hell are you keeping all of them?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Hughes was right. He didn’t want to know.

“Go home, talk to your team, get some rest. Maybe tomorrow we’ll have some new ideas.” He patted him on the shoulder and went to go get a taxi.

Mustang waited until he drove off to slip back into the bar and grab his car. He had just spent the last twelve hours on high alert, looking for any suspicious activity. The solution might have been staring at him in the face, but he didn’t see it because of exhaustion and the pleasant buzz of alcohol he had been steadily ingesting for the last few hours. Not enough to get drunk, just enough to take the edge off. Why was it, when he drank alcohol at nine in the morning, he was an alcoholic. But, when he was given alcohol at nine in the morning at a military-sanctioned event, he wasn’t?

He got to his apartment, no one apparently following him. Though, one could never rule it out. The apartment itself was exactly like he had left it. Being the paranoid bastard he was, he set up traps all over the place to tell him if there had been an intruder. Only Hawkeye and Hughes knew where they all were. Nothing seemed to be out of place.

Still, he checked through each room thoroughly, even looking in the cupboards and oven to make sure there wasn’t an assassin lying in wait.

“What the hell am I doing?” he asked, staring at the open medicine cabinet as if a fully grown adult (or child for that matter) could manage to squeeze themselves in there.

“This is getting ridiculous.” Content that his apartment had not been broken into and there was not an assassin waiting in the shadows, he kicked off his uncomfortable dress shoes that had been pinching his toes for hours. There were blisters all over his feet, a few of them popped and bleeding.

“Why couldn’t I wear my normal uniform?” He grumbled, peeling off his socks to assess the damage.

He grabbed some gauze and hydrogen peroxide from the cabinet and went to the phone, dialing Hawkeye. He hopped up on the counter and started cleaning the blisters. His jacket slung over the back of a chair and his shirt completely untucked and unbuttoned. As much as he wanted to crumple it into a ball and chuck it out the window, he needed it again for tomorrow. Why couldn’t he wear a normal suit? He had nice ones! No, he had to wear his stupid dress blues with his stupid, pinching dress shoes, and his stupid, hot, scratchy dress shirt.

Shit, he was starting to feel like Ed. Damn brat was starting to rub off on him with all that complaining. No wonder Hawkeye looked like she was going to shoot him regularly.

“Hello?” she said, sounding alert and awake as ever.

“Want some flowers?” he said, slurring his words slightly. “I found a woman selling them on the street and they were all so beautiful, just like you.”

The phone slipped from his shoulder and clattered to the counter. “Shit,” he cursed, setting down the peroxide to pick it back up.

“Colonel, are you drunk?” Hawkeye asked.

“Maybe just a little.” Finally, he managed to dump enough peroxide on his foot to stave off any infection. He started wrapping it with bandages. “She had some lovely jasmines that I picked up.”

“Jasmine?” Hawkeye asked, sounding slightly amused. She probably was. They switched their codes regularly. Falman was the one who suggested flowers. He was really into gardening and flower arrangements of all things. Everyone had to have a hobby. Havoc’s chosen code was spices. Fuery’s was the most complicated and involved a lot of numbers. Breda’s involved music.

“Yeah, jasmine. What do you think?”

“Can’t say I have anything particular to say about jasmine. There isn’t anything exciting about it. Though, I do know a lot of people are interested in it.”

Similar to what Hughes and he had observed, a lot of people talking to Havoc, but not a lot happening.

“What about,” he paused, trying to remember how to pronounce the flower’s name.

“Kalanchoe?” That did not sound right.

He trusted Falman that these were the names of actual flowers and he wasn’t making a fool of himself to any green-thumb spies that might be listening in.

“Not interested in Kalanchoe, colonel.”

Nothing to report on Fuery either. Damn. He was hoping something would come up.

“What about hellebores or verbena? I told you, my beautiful lieutenant, I bought a lot of very beautiful flowers.”

Now that his feet were taken care of, he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

“Colonel,” Hawkeye’s voice was still the picture of calm professionalism. “I’ve told you before. It’s unprofessional to buy me flowers. As much as I love fresh-cut flowers, I’m going to have to say no. Someone might accuse you of favoritism.”

“That obvious?”

“Only if you keep buying me flowers whenever you get drunk.” She shifted the phone. “I don’t even like roses. Everyone loves roses, but they never do anything with them.”

“Really? I didn’t know you had such strong opinions on roses. What flowers do you prefer? I bought all sorts.”

“I prefer rain lilies.”

Mustang resisted the urge to snap. When Havoc found out there was a flower called a rain lily, he insisted on that being Mustang’s code. He hated his team sometimes.

“I think I have some rain lily and marigold bouquets in my pile.” He slurred. “The seller said the rain lilies were very popular. The marigolds, not so much.”

“I wonder why. They’re both beautiful flowers.”

“I don’t know. All the flowers look the same to me. But there must be something.”

“Marigolds and rain lilies are not the least bit similar.”

“Then maybe tomorrow, you can explain to me the difference, because I am coming up blank.”

He could practically hear her rolling her eyes. “Don’t bring me flowers tomorrow, colonel.”

“Then what am I supposed to do with all these?”

“Don’t you have a sweet old lady as a next-door neighbor?”

This time, Mustang was the one to roll his eyes. Ms. Rutter was not sweet. She was a demon. She was always yelling at him about something.

“Fine,” he sighed dramatically. “No beautiful flowers for my beautiful lieutenant.”

“Goodnight, colonel. Try to sober up before tomorrow. I don’t want the Cretans to think our army is run by a bunch of alcoholics.”

“Not even that drunk, lieutenant. But I will be sure to be sober and dressed to kill. Make sure the rest of the team is up to snuff.”

“Will do.” She hung up the phone.

Mustang sighed and stayed on the kitchen counter for a few more minutes. Nothing. His men had nothing. They had spoken to the Cretans all day and were not a single step closer to figuring out what they were after.

He hopped off the counter and stripped off the rest of his clothes to get a pair of well-worn, comfortable pajamas. Something would hit him. He’d figure it out eventually. Granted, he

only had tonight and eight hours tomorrow, but he would figure something out.

As he passed by the phone while brushing his teeth, desperate to get the taste of booze off his tongue. He paused. He should probably call Ed and Al and make sure they weren't working themselves into an early grave. That would be the responsible thing to do.

Al didn't need to sleep or eat, but Ed did. And as much of a mother hen as Al was, Mustang learned very quickly that it was best to tag team Ed into submission. Al alone didn't have much sway when it came to convincing his brother to take care of himself.

He stared at the phone. The phone stared back at him. They were probably still in the library, which was definitely closed by now.

He thought about how the conversation would go. He'd call. Al would be the one to answer because he was an agreeable and polite child. Then Ed would tear the phone away from him and shout and carry on for several minutes, making Mustang's headache worse than it already was. In the end, someone would slam the phone down and hang up. It was unlikely Mustang would convince Ed to go back to the dorms and get some goddamn sleep. It was unlikely that he was going to come out of this conversation without a headache. He was tired. He had to get up again tomorrow and schmooze for another eight hours while also trying to figure out what the Cretans were up to. Besides, if he did call, Ed would figure out something was up. If he figured something was up, he'd try and insert himself into the situation. If he did that, he might get caught in the crossfire for whatever the Cretans were planning.

"Screw it," he grumbled. "I'm going to bed. The brat will be fine for a night." He chucked his socks into the laundry basket and collapsed in his bed.

"There, I think that should do it," Smelly Man said as he finished breaking Ed's hand.

Ed shuddered and slumped over on his side, his breath coming out in short bursts. His hand was on fire, throbbing, painful in ways he didn't think possible. When he was around six or seven, he had broken it. He was out playing with some other kids. One thing led to another and a heavy rock was dropped on it. He had to be in a cast for over a month, but it wasn't all bad as the other kids thought it was cool and signed the cast. He didn't even cry when it was broken!

Now he couldn't stop crying. Smelly Man had sat there for almost thirty minutes with a hammer repeatedly slamming it down. Over and over and over again. On each of his fingers. On the bones in the palm. On the wrist. Over and over again until his hand was swollen, broken, bleeding, and unable to so much as twitch without pain exploding up his arm.

He tried to remain optimistic. He tried to assure himself that Al would notice something was up soon. He had to. At this point, the first day of the event had to be over. Mustang and the others had to be making their way back to their homes. Someone had to notice he was missing and come looking.

No one is going to notice. That hissing, hateful voice was getting louder. Sometimes, it was so loud, it would drown out his thoughts.

Think about it, it continued. *This is the first time in months Al's been free to do whatever he wants. He doesn't have to deal with your temper, your complaining. He doesn't have to look at you and see the person who ruined his life. He can just relax and be normal.*

"Mustang," Ed mumbled to the voice, some blood spilling from his lips and dribbling onto his chin and the grey concrete floor. As if he could make a good argument to himself that Mustang would notice he was gone.

"Mustang?" Smelly Man said, his voice still soft and gentle. "Your colonel, yes?"

Shit, he hadn't meant to say that out loud. He had meant to try to convince the annoying, Hohenheim-sounding voice in his head that Mustang would come looking for him.

"He will not be looking for you, agapito agori. He does not know you are missing." He stood up and walked away.

Ed heard him messing around with tools that occupied one of the only tables in the room. Most of the soldiers were milling about, looking bored and playing cards with one another. Apparently, watching him get tortured wasn't exciting enough for them.

"We watch him always." He came back with a long, thin knife.

Ed flinched but couldn't move. A cold jolt of fear shot through him. They knew where Al was and they were watching Mustang. If they couldn't get him to do the transmutation, would they go after one of them? His mind flashed to Al's broken, lifeless armor. This time, there was nothing for the gate to take but his soul. And Mustang... what would the gate take from him? Would it take his body? His arm and leg? It couldn't take his arms. He needed his hands. If he didn't have his hands, how could he do his alchemy?

"Don't—" He coughed; his broken ribs screamed. "Don't touch them." He may be a mess of bruises, gashes, and broken bones, but he wouldn't let anyone else go through what he went through. If they went after Al or Mustang... he'd figure something out.

Yes, because you're clearly in a position to protect them.

Smelly Man reached down and ran a hand through Ed's hair. He whimpered and tried to shift away.

"We are not going to hurt him. We are watching him to make sure he does not come looking for you. We follow him at the event. We tap his phone lines and listen in. We follow him home."

So, Mustang hadn't come for him because the Cretans were messing with him! He hadn't abandoned him. He hadn't left him behind!

"It is strange," Smelly Man continued, flipping Ed over onto his stomach and cutting off his shirt.

Ed whimpered but couldn't gather up the strength to move.

"He has not mentioned you once. He does not even notice you are gone and has not checked in on you."

He slid the knife up Ed's back. The pain wasn't immediate. The cut was shallow, like a papercut. It was stinging a bit as the man continued to make long slices up his back, but nowhere near the pain he had grown used to during the day.

They broke his leg very early on after he successfully broke the nose of one of the soldiers holding him down. They had broken his ribs after he headbutted another soldier. Throughout the day, he tried his best to fight back, to kick and punch and headbutt his way out of this hellhole. At one point, in a particularly desperate move, he managed to get the chain wrapped around the neck of a soldier and was fully intent on strangling him to death. Smelly Man had sat there, watching him with mild curiosity as the soldier struggled and flailed against the chain. It was only then that Ed realized what he was doing and released the man, horrified that he would ever even think about killing another human being. Sure, these people were torturing him and trying to force him to do a taboo, but they were still people.

He had broken down after that, sobbing and shaking while the man once again disconnected and reconnected his automail leg.

"It is strange," Smelly Man stopped making shallow cuts in his back and stood up.

Ed tensed. That could not have been it. There had to be something more. It didn't hurt enough.

"When we researched you, we thought Mustang would be a major obstacle. We thought he would notice something was up and come for you immediately, so we set out to distract him and track him, to make sure."

He could hear the sounds of something being poured into a container.

"However, I think we were too cautious. He does not seem to care about you in the slightest. As I said, he has not noticed you are missing. How does a superior not notice his subordinate missing for an entire day?"

"He—" Ed started, but what could he say? Mustang does care about me? Maybe he's just distracted by being stuck in a room for twelve hours? Maybe you're lying and have him locked in another warehouse? "He—"

The smell of fish and eggs overwhelmed him again and he gagged. That damn hand (He wanted to cut it off so badly) was back on him, stroking him, touching him. It burned where he touched and made Ed feel more disgusting than he already was.

"I see it in your eyes, agapito agori. You care much for him, but he does not care for you. Why else would he not notice you missing?"

“No—” He didn’t know if he was trying to convince himself that Mustang did care for him, convince Smelly Man that Mustang cared for him, or convince him that Ed didn’t care for Mustang. Either way, he couldn’t get the words out.

“Now then, enough talk. Will you do the transmutation for me?”

Would he do the transmutation?

You only get one chance, and you’ve already used your up. He could see those dark eyes in the corner of the room, watching him, staring at him, silently judging him for all his sins. If he did the transmutation and Mustang found out, would he turn him in to face the firing squad, or would he kill him himself?

“No,” he whimpered. Again, not entirely sure what he was saying no to.

The man sighed. “I thought as much. You are much more difficult to break than I assumed. Oh well, it is more fun for me.”

Before Ed could ask what was happening, ice-cold liquid was dumped over his back. The cold was enough to shock him. But the pain...

He screamed, arching off the floor despite the protests of his broken bones. Lemon juice. That bastard had poured lemon juice all over his open wounds. It was so simple but so painful. Everything was on fire now. The juice dripping off his back and sliding into the cuts and broken skin on the rest of him. The acidic smell of lemons mingled with the fish and eggs that had choked him for the past several hours and gag even more. This time, between the pain and the smell, he couldn’t stop it. He vomited again. There was nothing in his stomach at this point. He hadn’t eaten all day. It was just stomach acid and bile piling on the floor.

Smelly Man grabbed his broken wrist and yanked him away from it and back to the wall. His shoulder popped out of its socket from the force. He didn’t care. He knew what was going to come next.

The hands of soldiers, rough and painful, slammed him upright against the wall. He could see the trail of blood and lemon juice from where he had been laying previously.

“No, please...” he whimpered. “Please, not again. Please.”

It was useless to beg. The man would only stop once he got what he wanted. He couldn’t stop himself though, useless whimpers and words spilling from his lips as if they were attached to the blood pouring from his mouth. He couldn’t stop himself, couldn’t make himself strong, couldn’t make himself stop screaming and begging.

Pathetic. This voice sounded much more like Mustang than Hohenheim. Ed flinched. *Stop whimpering like a child and man up. You’re in the military, Fullmetal. You’re a soldier. Stop cowering and deal with it!*

He shook his head, more tears slipping down his cheeks. "I don't want to. Please, I don't want to. Stop, please." Who was he talking to? Mustang? Smelly Man? Hohenheim? Himself?

"Do the transmutation, and then we can stop," the man said. He attached the leg to the port and turned it on.

Ed shrieked. The ends of his nerves were so badly abused by the constant reconnection and disconnection. It couldn't be good for them. Winry drilled into his head all the things that he could do to damage his automail. She made him memorize everything that could possibly go wrong with it and how to mitigate it in case of an emergency. She never mentioned this. He never thought to ask about this. In that training about torture, they never talked about this. Even in his worst nightmares, he couldn't imagine someone using his automail to hurt him in this way.

The pain lessened. The leg throbbed. The man disconnected it.

Even if he hadn't, Ed wasn't sure he could use it for anything. Everything hurt so badly.

One of the soldiers came up to them and started talking in Cretan to Smelly Man. Ed was grateful. He couldn't be tortured if they were focused on something else. Instead, he just sat there shivering. He was so cold. Was it shock or was he cold though? Blood dripped from a cut above his eyebrow and into his eye. His shoulder down to his hand throbbed. His throat ached from screaming and vomiting. Even his lips were bleeding, both because they had been split by a few punches to the face and because they were so chapped.

Their voices were getting louder. Their conversation became more animated as both seemed to grow in anger, gesturing to him. He couldn't bring himself to care. He slumped over, coughing in a puddle of his blood.

Fullmetal! Do something while they're distracted!

"Gotcha, Colonel Bastard," he mumbled. There was enough blood around him to use to draw.

He twitched his hand, the pain was blinding. How would he ever manage to focus long enough to draw what he needed to draw? Maybe... maybe he didn't need to use his hand. He had other body parts that were less broken. He thought for a moment about what he could use. Then, grimacing, he stuck out his tongue and dipped it in the blood. He shouldn't get sick if it was his blood, right?

He focused every bit of strength he had on drawing the transmutation circle. Even now he could tell it was sloppy. He had never done something so bad. Teacher would kill him if she saw his work. It was good enough, though.

He finished it up and shifted so his hand was on the circle. He took a deep breath and focused on what he wanted to do. It was so hard. He was in so much pain. But he focused nonetheless. Until... there! That's what he wanted.

He closed his eyes and let the energy flow through him. Even now his concentration was fading and he could already feel the energy shifting.

Shit. No! Keep focused.

With one last push, he let the energy shoot out of him and through the circle. There was a cry as the concrete warped and shot out at the soldiers. It wasn't enough though.

Pain shot through his shoulder. Literally. He had been shot, he realized in almost a daze.

Rough hands gripped his hair and yanked him away from the circle, the connection severing and the commotion dying down. A fist smashed into the side of his head.

Smelly Man was yelling something, screaming it as he kicked and punched him over and over and over again.

He whimpered and didn't bother trying to shield himself from the blows. He had failed. He had failed miserably. That was possibly his only chance to escape and he hadn't even managed to do that.

Pathetic, Mustang hissed in his ear. *You only get one chance, and you've already used yours up.*

The blows didn't stop for what felt like hours, breaking and smashing and bruising more of his body.

"I am done being nice," Smelly Man said, yanking him upright, jamming the leg into the port, and turning it on. He no longer sounded gentle and kind. He sounded venomous.

Ed screamed.

Disconnect.

"You will do the transmutation for me, Fullmetal Alchemist."

Reconnect.

"No." He choked, his body shaking.

"You will. You have no choice."

Disconnect.

"No."

Reconnect.

Ed screamed and blacked out.

I have read a lot of FMA fics, but I don't think I've ever seen someone write about using Ed's automail in this way to torture him. I've seen people have the ports be damaged or send electricity through it, but I don't think I've seen anyone simply have it be turned on and off over and over again.

I also find it hilarious that had the Cretans not changed the schedule, Mustang probably wouldn't have noticed anything. In extending the day to distract him for longer, the Cretans made themselves more suspicious. Don't worry, he'll find Ed eventually. We just got to make it hurt a bit first so that it'll hurt even worse later.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: Torture, blood, gore, waterboarding, vomiting, non-consensual touching, hyperventilating. All the fun stuff

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Brother.”

Ed hummed and shifted. He didn’t want to respond to the voice, not yet. He was still so tired.

“Brother, get up.”

“Al?” He mumbled opening his eyes and sitting up to see his brother sitting across from him. Fear spiked in his gut. “Al! What are you doing here? Did they get you? Did they hurt you?”

Ed wasn’t in any state to win a fight, but he would be damned if he let these people hurt his brother and get away with it.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Al scoffed. He sounded so... hateful. That normal, chipper voice was replaced by something Ed couldn’t recognize.

“Al?”

“I came willingly,” Al said, getting up and walking over to the glowing red circle.

“Al, don’t go near it! It’s—”

“I know what it is, brother. How could I possibly forget? After all, it’s your handiwork.” He knelt and started drawing on the circle, making minor changes and adjustments. “You think I wouldn’t recognize your circle? The circle that ruined my life? The circle that made me into a monster.”

“Al.” Ed whimpered. He wanted to say something, but what could he say? Al was right. That circle did ruin his life. And that circle was Ed’s work. He was the one that did all the research. He was the one that came up with that stupid plan. He was the reason Al was an empty suit of armor.

“I thought we agreed to never do human transmutation again,” Al said. He stood back up and walked over to Ed.

He wanted to push himself up, to run to Al and beg him for forgiveness. To convince him to run away from this awful place. But he couldn’t move. Invisible ropes tethered him to the

ground, cutting into his skin. Blood dripping from the wounds and onto the ground. They didn't puddle on the ground, though. Instead, they were sucked up into the veins of the floor, transported to the circle. Which was now pulsing in the center of the room like a heart.

"I'm not going to do it, Al. I won't do it for them." He tried to sound confident. Instead, he sounded pathetic; whimpering like a small child.

"Then why are you still here?" He stopped in front of him, his large shadow looming and covering Ed completely in darkness.

"I tried—"

"You didn't try." Al spat. "The brother I know wouldn't have gotten to this point in the first place. He would have fought like hell from the very beginning."

"I did." He thought of the feeling of that soldier, choking against him as he strangled him, almost to death. He thought of the noses he broke. He thought of his sloppy transmutation circle and the bullet now in his shoulder. "I tried."

"Don't lie to me!" Al snarled. The armor started to chip away, flaking off like ash. Underneath, Ed could start to make out a person. "You want to do the transmutation again! You're just looking for an excuse. Well, guess what brother?"

The breastplate fell. Organs spilled out into a gruesome pile on the floor. Ed gagged. He couldn't look away. No matter where he turned his head, Al was there, his armor decomposing and his twisted and mangled body spilling from the suit.

"You can do it again." He knelt, the armor completely disintegrating away, leaving only a familiar, twisted, inhuman body in front of him.

Ed shrieked and scrambled back. "No!"

"If you're going to do it, then do it." Al's disembodied voice floated through his head.

"Maybe this time, you can give me a proper burial," mom said. Her legs and arms spilled out, unraveling and stretching. A clawed, charred hand reached up and swiped him across the face, causing deep gashes in his cheek.

"This is enough for a soul, right brother?" Al asked.

Mom took her bloody hand and wiped it on the transmutation circle. "Do it, Ed. And do it right this time."

"No." He was still tied down to the floor. His leg and arm disappeared at one point. When had that happened?

"Brother quit stalling and get it over with." Al sighed.

"I don't want to."

“You do though.”

“Please, don’t make me.”

“Do it right.”

“Please.”

“You only get one chance, and you’ve already used yours up.”

Searing pain washed over his body and he shrieked, his eyes flying open to see he was in the warehouse, surrounded by Cretans. The familiar stench of eggs and fish choked him, making him gag, which was quite a feat considering he was also hyperventilating.

“Good, you are awake again,” Smelly Man said, setting down a bucket of more ice-cold lemon juice.

Distantly, Ed wondered if he had sat there for hours, juicing lemons. The thought of a bunch of torturers, sitting with a pile of lemons by their side, juicing them diligently, almost made him laugh. Almost.

“You cannot go to sleep just yet. We need you to do the transmutation. Then you rest.” That sickly sweet, caring voice was back. As was the hand on his body, stroking his hair, cheeks, shoulders, back. He must have gained control of himself after last time.

He shuddered and tried to roll away. His broken ribs did not like that one bit.

“Will you do it now? I can see it in your eyes. You are almost broken.”

Was he? Was he almost broken? Was Al right to think he would be performing the transmutation shortly?

“No.” He said, his voice barely above a rasp. He had already made the mistake of performing human transmutation once. Al wasn’t in the room with him. That was just a dream, a horrible nightmare thought up by his subconscious because of the stress and trauma he had endured non-stop since the morning. He wished his subconscious would make Hohenheim visit him, at least then it would be easier to argue against him. When it was Al and mom, though...

Smelly Man tsked. “I think your resolve is admirable. But it is also tiring.”

“Then leave me alone.” He meant for it to be snappish and sarcastic. Instead, it came out pleading and broken.

“I will. I have things I need to do tonight. I must meet with my superiors and let them know how my research is going.”

Wait... Was he going to leave Ed here? He probably wouldn’t leave him here all alone, but he might stop torturing him, at least for now. Other than that brief nightmare, he hadn’t had a chance to sleep. Maybe if he could only get an hour or two in, he’d be refreshed enough to find another way out.

Smelly Man stood and stepped to the side. “Let me introduce you to my colleague. He is also an alchemist.”

Ed’s stomach dropped. No. Please, not another one. He couldn’t take much more of this. He was trying. He was trying so hard. Mustang, Al, mom, they had to know that he was trying. But even he couldn’t try forever. If what Smelly Man said was true, then he was close to breaking.

Fullmetal! Mustang’s sharp, commanding voice tore through his mind. He is torturing you. Torture isn’t just physical. It’s mental. He’s trying to get inside your head. Don’t let him. You are not about to break.

At least this Mustang sounded nice. Or as nice as the bastard could sound.

Right. He wasn’t about to break. Smelly Man was just saying that so Ed would start to think that. And if he started to think that, then he really would break. He wouldn’t break. Not if Smelly Man and his colleague tortured him for years. He had to believe that.

Al was safe at the library. Mustang and his team were safe at the event, or their homes by this time. He could do this. He could keep saying no.

Another man knelt, looking him in the eyes.

Ed did his best to hold his gaze, which was difficult considering his eyes did not want to focus on anything.

“I will break you.” At least this one had the courtesy of not sounding like a nice, old man. He sounded like what Ed thought a torturer would sound like. He still smelled gross, though. Like stale sweat.

Ed gagged and coughed. Couldn’t one of these people smell decent? Did no one take a shower in Creta?

Sweaty Man stood up and said something to Smelly Man.

Smelly Man reached down to brush his hair from his face. “I will be back. I hope you will do the transmutation soon. I am very excited to see your work.”

He stood and walked out the door.

“Now, we start.” Sweaty Man grabbed Ed and yanked him off the floor, bring him over to a chair and letting him collapse down in it.

He furrowed his brow. What was he doing?

Horror settled in his gut when a soldier yanked his head back and put a cloth over his face. He only had a split second to realize what was happening before the water started to pour on it.

He gasped and flailed, his mind panicking and lungs burning. Some water slipped into his mouth. He was so thirsty. They hadn't given him any food or water since he showed up. They weren't interested in keeping him in good condition. They were interested in making him do the transmutation before the two-day event was up.

If that was the case, then his refusal to do it was the only thing keeping him alive right now. The longer he said no, the more likely he was that someone would notice he went missing and come looking for him. Al had to be getting suspicious by now. He had to be. And Mustang, he was smart. He was calculating. He had to know the Cretans were up to something. Lieutenant Colonel Hughes was at the event as well. Surely, between the two of them and the rest of Team Mustang, they'd realize something was wrong and come find him.

The cloth was pulled away from his face. He took gasping breaths, pitching forward as he tried to calm down and get air into his lungs.

He had to stay strong. He had to keep saying no. No matter what they did, no matter how many times they reconnected his leg or beat him or waterboarded him, he would say no. He was tired, thirsty, hungry, cold. Everything hurt and his headache had gotten worse. He couldn't stop vomiting, crying, and whimpering.

His head was pulled back again and more water was poured on the cloth. He gasped and jolted. His body was on fire.

"Will you do the transmutation?" So cold, clinical, straight to the point.

The cloth was removed.

Ed pitched forward once more, gasping and coughing. His head felt like it was going to explode.

"No."

The man grabbed him and threw him on the floor. His crushed ribs shifted from the impact and another scream tore from his throat.

He was flipped on his back. The leg was back in the port. Sweaty Man turned the levers.

He screamed and thrashed against the hands holding him down.

Disconnect.

Do not let them get to you, Fullmetal!

Reconnect.

Scream.

You saying no is the only thing keeping you alive right now.

Disconnect.

Reconnect.

Scream.

Maybe he should say yes. The pain would stop. He could die and the pain would all go away. Al and Mustang would understand. Right? They'd understand why Ed was willing to do a taboo again? They wouldn't be angry. Right?

Don't you dare give up now, Fullmetal! Mustang's voice was shouting at him. Screaming in his ear.

Disconnect.

Reconnect.

Scream.

Someone is going to notice you're gone. Someone is going to come looking for you.

"How do you know?" he slurred.

"What?" Sweaty Man asked, pausing his torture.

Because you know me. You know I'm not going to let you disappear.

"Do I?"

Sweaty Man cursed.

Disconnect.

Reconnect.

Scream.

You do, Fullmetal. That's why I'm here talking to you and not Hohenheim.

"Then why aren't you here?"

Disconnect.

Reconnect.

Scream.

Give me a break, kid. I'm only human. Don't let them get into your head. Don't give up. You think I want to go through all the trouble of finding a corpse.

Disconnect.

You better be alive when I find you.

Reconnect.

And you better not have done the transmutation.

Scream.

“Armstrong will be back in East City in about two hours,” Hughes said as they once more stood in the entryway to the event.

Mustang nodded. He hadn’t slept well the night before. His mind kept him awake, screaming at him that he was missing something. At around three in the morning, he finally gave up on sleep and started writing down everything he knew and everything the Cretans could be after. None of it made any sense. There were always missing pieces, holes in the story that made him pause.

“I told him to stay at Eastern Command and near a radio. If they are going to do something today, I want him on the outside to provide any backup we need.”

“Good thinking. Have you told anyone else about our suspicions?”

He shook his head. “If we had something more to go on, then I would. However, because we have nothing...”

“We don’t want to look like paranoid warmongers looking for a chance to start fighting.” He finished.

“Exactly. I’m fairly certain that most of the higher-ups want to continue fighting with Creta, for god knows what reason. However, because the Fuhrer made such a big deal out of this peace summit, they’re pretending like they don’t want to fight.”

“I don’t want to go to war either,” he muttered. “It’s the Cretans that are the problem.”

Hughes sighed and slumped down slightly. He looked just as tired as Mustang, with dark circles under his eyes, slightly rumpled dress blues, and mussed-up hair. As much as Mustang didn’t want the Cretans to be up to anything, he also hoped they were to legitimize his friend’s and subordinates’ sacrifices.

“Did you at least bring your gloves today?”

Mustang nodded. “I managed to sneak them in. Then again, they didn’t seem as concerned about weapons today as they were yesterday. He only ran his hand up and down my leg twelve times instead of thirty times.”

“I’ll say.” Hughes snorted.

A speaker came up to the podium, calling for the attention of all the guests.

“Remember, don’t eat or drink anything today,” Hughes whispered. “And keep on high alert. I agree with you, Roy. They’re up to something. I just wish I knew what it was.”

He stepped away, going back over to General Grossing and the head of Creta’s security team, likely to put out any fires that had come up during the morning.

Mustang turned his attention back towards the speaker, but let his gaze wander to the crowd. His gut was still going haywire, still screaming that these people were a danger to him or one of his subordinates. He just couldn’t figure out what they wanted or why. It frustrated him to no end. He was supposed to be a brilliant tactician, a colonel who was on his way to becoming Fuhrer. He had a hand-selected team of some of the brightest and most brilliant people he could find.

There was Hawkeye. Sure, she was the best shot he had ever seen, but she was also calm and collected. She knew how to read people and how to lull them into a sense of easy calm that could be taken advantage of.

The speaker finished and they all shuffled into the room and took their seats while the next speaker got up and started making speeches.

Then there was Hughes. He wasn’t in Intelligence for no reason. While he came off as sort of a family-obsessed airhead, he was anything but. He could sense patterns and find connections with next to no information.

The speaker finished making her speech and the room quickly got up to grab some breakfast from the spread laid out before them. Mustang would have wanted nothing more than to grab as much as he could carry, but he didn’t want to risk it. So he fake laughed and flirted his way through the second part of the event.

Havoc, Fuery, Breda, and Falman, all brilliant men in their own rights. All experts on gathering information, putting together clues, coming up with plans, getting inside the enemy’s head, and coming up with the exact strategy to break them down.

Even Fullmetal was brilliant, though Mustang would never tell him that. The brat did not need his head to be any bigger.

His team was filled with the best and the brightest. His team could crack any code, gather any information, discover any plan.

So why then did they not have any leads whatsoever? Why then, even after spending all day yesterday gathering intel and all night analyzing it, did no one have anything to say except ‘a lot of people are talking to you’?

A woman tripped in front of him. He helped right her. She laughed and started flirting with him, putting her hand on his bicep more than strictly necessary. He played along.

Maybe it was a mistake not to call Fullmetal last night. True, the brat probably wouldn’t know what the Cretans were up to, but maybe he could have gathered some intel on the outside, instead of being stuck in here like the rest of them.

Mustang finally managed to wiggle his way out of the woman's grasp and went to mingle with some generals he vaguely recognized who had taken up a post near the shrimp and cocktail sauce.

No, Fullmetal may be brilliant, but he was still a brash and difficult child. If Mustang had told him something was up, he was more likely to try and solve the problem himself than to listen to Mustang's orders. And if he got caught by the Cretans while Mustang was stuck here, there was little he'd be able to do to help the kid.

He excused himself from the generals and went up to the bar.

Three hours. He had been here for three hours. They only had five hours left before the Cretans were finished. Each second that passed without an answer made his heart beat a little faster. Even if Hughes hadn't told him not to eat anything, he doubted he'd be able to get anything down. His stomach was churning with anxiety and nerves. Three hours and he still didn't know jack shit about the Cretans or their plans. He felt like a failure.

"They're distracting us," Havoc murmured, sliding up beside him at the bar before ordering a drink.

None of his men were drinking today, but they had to keep up appearances. It'd send alarm bells off to the Cretans if the entire team suddenly decided to go sober. So, they grabbed a glass whenever possible, putting it to their mouths and then dumping it in the nearest plant or trashcan. Sometimes abandoning it on a table or chair.

"Distracting us?" Mustang asked.

Havoc got his drink and they turned to make their way through the room. "They're not trying to get information out of us. They're trying to keep us here."

"Why do you say that?" He believed Havoc. Every conversation he had yesterday and today with a Cretan had been almost too mundane. Unless they thought knowing about Amestris' cheese making was imperative to the destruction of the nation, of course. However, he didn't entertain wild theories and accusations without at least a little proof.

"Women keep flirting with me."

"Is that such a bad thing?"

"Cretan women."

Mustang pressed his lips together into a thin line and put them to the rim of the glass. He'd have to get rid of it soon. If they were watching him, they'd notice that despite him seeming to drink from it often, the actual amount hadn't gone down any.

"And they've been doing it to everyone else. Except for Hawkeye. She gets a bunch of men."

Mustang snorted at this. The idea of any man, Cretan or otherwise, trying to flirt with Hawkeye to distract her was hilarious. He could imagine her cold, unblinking stare as the

men gradually lost confidence until they gave up and ran away with their tails between their legs. She probably wouldn't even have to say anything.

He thought about the woman from earlier. He thought about all the pretty women scattered about this event, but, now that he thought about it, they didn't seem to be hanging off the arms of anyone in particular. Mustang knew how escort services worked. He knew that those women should be hanging off the arms of their clients until they were finally able to leave. To pay for an escort and then not have your chosen man or woman stay with you for the entirety of the event was, frankly, a waste of money.

"And they're not asking about anything in particular. They're trying to distract us. I know they are." Havoc finished.

Mustang had noticed an awful lot of young, pretty, attractive women that hovered around him and his men. They tripped and would put their hands on their arms, giggling as they helped them back to their feet. One of them whispered something in Falman's ear that made him turn bright red. It would have been funny under any other circumstance.

They had been passing notes since they got here, but it still wasn't getting them to where they needed. Which was probably why Havoc risked the Cretans realizing they were on to them to come to talk to him. He needed to have an actual conversation with someone to bounce ideas off of, not scribble vague plots onto napkins and stuff it into whoever's pocket was closest. Hughes had disappeared about an hour ago. He was the best choice to talk to since no one seemed to care that much about him. However, Mustang couldn't wait. He needed to speak with someone, openly. Not through codes or choppy sentences. He needed to have an actual conversation.

They stopped by the food table. Fuery was standing beside him but had his back turned and was listening intently to a general go on and on about his marital issues.

"Tell Hawkeye to go to the bathroom," he murmured. He put his glass on the side of the table, clapped Havoc on the shoulder, and started laughing as if the man had just said the funniest joke he had ever heard.

Havoc got the hint and doubled over, laughing as well and wiping tears from his eyes. Fuery politely excused himself from the general and went back into the crowd.

"Is something funny?" a very pretty young woman asked, batting her eyes at the two men. Where had she come from?

Havoc grinned and stepped in front of her. "I was just telling my commanding officer a funny joke."

"Can I hear it?" If she batted her eyes anymore, she might just take flight.

"I don't know if I'm supposed to be talking to the enemy." Havoc winked at her. The girl giggled in a surprisingly stiff way. Alright, these girls needed some lessons from Aunt Chris if they ever hoped to flirt successfully for a living. Seriously, she was laying it on way too thick.

He ignored this and slapped Havoc on the back. “Ah, go ahead. What better way to forge strong bonds between our countries than to forge strong bonds between individuals?”

The woman fake giggled again at the innuendo. Havoc offered his arm and she took it, barely suppressing an eye roll. Mustang knew what a suppressed eye roll looked like. He had seen his sisters give many men the suppressed eye roll. They disappeared into the crowd, her laughing at Havoc’s terrible jokes, and Havoc creating a distraction so Mustang could meet with Hawkeye.

He noticed his lieutenant leaving, slipping quietly out of the room. At least they were letting them go to the bathroom today. His eyes narrowed as he watched an older man, definitely Cretan, follow her, only to return a few moments later back into the room. He was probably trying to make sure she wasn’t meeting with someone.

He picked up another glass (wine this time) and started wandering. Just until the man watching them determined he hadn’t noticed her leave. The man slipped over to Falman and Breda, who were chatting by the buffet table. That was his cue.

He excused himself from a conversation with a few other Amerstrian Diplomats (he had been trying to just talk to Amestrians so it’d be easier to avoid suspicion) and slipped out of the room.

Hawkeye reached out and pulled him into the coat closet. He almost decked her in the face, certain it was a Cretan who was finally (*Finally!*) making a move.

He deflated slightly when he saw it was her. “The coat closet, really? Isn’t this kind of a cliché?” He dumped the rest of his drink on the ground, delighting as it splattered on some *very* expensive Cretan coats. Okay, so that was a bit childish, but who could blame him?

Hawkeye crossed her arms and glared at him.

“What? I don’t have to deal with it later and they’re being shady bastards. Besides, given the number of fluids on the ground, this is the least of the janitor’s worries.”

“Please do not remind me people have been using this as their own personal sex room for the past two days. Now, what did you want to talk to me about? Make it quick. They’ll realize we’re both gone soon and come looking.”

Right, straight to the point. Even if this was a conversation, they still couldn’t waste a lot of time. Mustang estimated they had about two minutes before the Cretans realized he and his lieutenant were gone. It wouldn’t take them much longer to put two and two together and possibly make their move.

“They’re keeping us here and distracting us. Hughes noticed it last night and Havoc confirmed it for me today.”

“Are they keeping us here at the Embassy, or are they keeping us from each other?”

“Both, I assume. As soon as Havoc and I were together for more than a minute, some woman, who is terrible at flirting, came and split us up. And after you left, a man followed you out.”

“I noticed him.”

“When he came back, he went straight to Breda and Falman. Hughes says no one else has gotten this kind of focus, not even him or other generals. It’s us they’re after.”

Hawkeye crossed her arms and looked down, eyes narrowed. “It doesn’t make any sense. I know you’re well-known, but even you aren’t worth potentially losing dozens of high-ranking politicians and the prime minister over a pathetic assassination attempt.”

“Gee, thanks. Besides, I don’t think this is an assassination attempt. They’re focusing on distracting us, but if they were after Bradley or one of the generals, they wouldn’t be so focused on us. Personally, I’d focus on Hughes.” He was pacing again, his pathetic attempt to take care of his blistering toes hadn’t helped much today. Already he could feel the blood seeping through the bandages.

“But they haven’t done anything to hurt us. They haven’t tried to take us out of the room or get us in a position where they might hurt us. You say that they’re trying to distract us, which I believe, but from what? What could they possibly be doing that would make us and us alone suspicious?”

The coat closet did not make a good pacing room. It was too narrow and he kept stepping on Hawkeye’s toes. She, being the dedicated lieutenant that she was, just glared at him, instead of shooting him like she would with anyone else.

“Let’s go through what we know. One, two months ago they changed the schedule to twenty hours total instead of twelve.”

“And they were more than compromising for all of Hughes’ demands,” Hawkeye added.

“Which means that whatever they’re doing or planning on doing, having the schedule extended was worth more than anything else to them.”

“They need time. That’s what they’re after. Whatever it is they’re doing, they need more time to do it.” Hawkeye said.

Mustang narrowed his eyes. It still didn’t help them. “Two, they are focused exclusively on me and the other members of my team. They haven’t shown this level of interest in anyone else at the event.”

“Which means whatever they need more time for is something you or one of the others is directly affected by.”

“It can’t be related to alchemy though,” he said. “There are other alchemists here.” He shook his head and kept pacing. “Three, they’re trying to distract us, not get secrets from us. Four, they’re not necessarily trying to keep us apart. The man who went up to Breda and Falman

and the woman who came up to Havoc and me earlier didn't seem worried about separating us from one another."

"Which means they want to make sure we're not talking and not growing suspicious."

He finally stopped pacing and leaned against the door. They were running out of time. He wasn't sure if he could get Hawkeye, or even Hughes at this point, alone again for an extended brainstorming session. The answer was right in front of him. He knew it. He just had to figure it out, pick apart the problem, ignore everything else about this event.

"Five," he said. "Whatever they're doing isn't directly tied to the event. Otherwise, they wouldn't have had to change the schedule so late."

That was everything he knew. Forget the event, forget the ambassadors, forget Hughes. This had nothing to do with the event. This was something else, something that came later, something that made them risk everything to try and succeed. It wasn't an assassination attempt or a hostage negotiation.

They needed time to do what they were planning. Mustang or one of his men were directly involved somehow. They didn't need specific information from Mustang or his men. They needed them to be distracted but not necessarily separated.

He went through every conversation. Every suspicion. Every scribbled note on a cocktail napkin he received.

It hit him like a ton of bricks.

Isn't it a bit odd that Ed wasn't invited?

They had separated them.

You weren't part of the military yet when they planned this.

They had separated them yesterday.

The schedule changed two months ago.

Fullmetal joined the military four months ago.

He ran a hand through his hair and let out a shaky breath, trying desperately not to fall apart.

"What is it?" Hawkeye asked. She didn't sound as sharp as normal. He must have looked awful.

"What if we aren't the targets? What if no one here is the target? What if the target is Fullmetal?"

Her eyes widened a fraction. Pieces that had confused him before were starting to fall into place.

“They’re keeping us here and distracting us so we don’t know he’s missing.”

“Two long days of meetings and speeches would make us exhausted and unlikely to look for him or notice he’s gone.”

Mustang felt his soul get slammed with guilt. Just yesterday he talked himself out of calling the boys and checking in on them. He didn’t even think... even in his worst nightmares he didn’t think Fullmetal would ever be the target. Even now his brain was desperately trying to come up with some solution that made sense, but this was the only thing that fit all the puzzle pieces he had been given.

“They changed the schedule a few months ago, Lieutenant Colonel Hughes said.” She added. “But they didn’t add him to the list.”

“So, they could have more time with him and ensure he was alone.” Maybe he had gotten lucky and Fullmetal had taken back off to Resembool for the weekend. Maybe he and Al successfully barricaded themselves in the library with so many books, the Cretans couldn’t get to them.

“What would they want with him, though?” Hawkeye asked. She didn’t sound like she was trying to piece together a mystery. She sounded afraid and guilty.

Right, if Fullmetal was the target, he needed to find out where he was and get him into protective custody immediately. He couldn’t break down with guilt, not yet. Just like how he felt with Ishval, he couldn’t break down. He still had people counting on him and things he needed to do.

“That’s what we need to find out. We’ve spent too long in here. They’re going to realize.” He pulled himself together and pulled out some napkins and quickly scrawled two messages on them. He couldn’t fall apart. Not yet. Ed was counting on him whether the kid knew it or not. And he would not let him down.

“Give this one to Falman,” he said, handing it to Hawkeye. *Call library. Ask about Fullmetal.* was written on it.

“I’ll give this one to Hughes when he gets back.” *Target Fullmetal. Cause Distraction.*

She nodded. “Yes, sir. I hope you’re wrong.” She must be terrified if she was hoping he was wrong. He couldn’t blame her. As much as he wanted the Cretans to be up to something, he didn’t want it to be at the cost of a child’s wellbeing.

“I hope I am too.”

He poked his head out of the closet and looked around. When he saw no one was there, he stepped out, Hawkeye following close behind him. She took off back towards the hall, marching with purpose. He decided to linger in the hall, hoping that by spacing it out enough, no one would realize the two of them had been together.

A drunk Cretan stumbled down the hall, singing off-key. Mustang smirked. Perfect.

“Are you with Creta?” he asked, stumbling up the man.

“Aye? You?” he said with a thick accent.

“Amestrian.” Mustang slumped against the wall. He didn’t think the man was sober enough to realize if he was drunk or not, but just in case anyone else slipped out, he wanted to have an alibi.

“Ah, you Amestrians. You make good cake.”

“You think so?” He was itching to get his gloves out and light every Cretan here on fire. They were putting his subordinate in danger. He didn’t want to talk about cake. He wanted them all to suffer.

“Yes. Yes. What is your favorite kind of cake?”

Mustang stuttered a bit. He hadn’t expected that to be a question. “Devil’s food cake.” It was the first cake that came to his mind.

“Pish!” The Cretan slapped him on the back. “It is a terrible cake. It is too dense. Cake should be light and fluffy.”

He was about to answer but was distracted by Falman who slipped out of the room. They locked eyes briefly before he disappeared down the hallway.

“I disagree,” Mustang slurred. “The richness means you get all the flavor.”

“No, my friend, you are wrong.” The Cretan snorted.

The diplomat who had followed Hawkeye out earlier stuck his head into the hallway. Mustang made his gaze as unfocused as possible. He was leaning heavily against the wall, barely standing up, and he had one arm around the Cretan.

“Devil’s food cake is the best cake. Can’t convince me otherwise,” he slurred, practically falling into the Cretan.

He said something in Cretan, probably a long explanation about why Mustang was wrong. This seemed to convince the diplomat that he and Hawkeye hadn’t been discussing them and he slipped back into the room.

Mustang let the man ramble on about what he assumed was a particularly heated diatribe on devil’s food cake and then slipped out of his grasp.

He stumbled back into the room, trying to find the perfect balance between falling down drunk and stoic, put-together colonel. The last thing he needed was for someone in the military to see his display and use it against him. But he couldn’t pull himself together too much because otherwise the Cretans watching them would get suspicious. God, he hated this type of balancing act. There were too many people with too many different expectations.

At least his constant critiquing of his balance between too drunk and not drunk enough kept his mind from other things. Mainly, how much he had fucked up. Anxiety and adrenalin welled up inside of him. What if the Cretans had gotten Ed? What if they had gotten Al? Were they transporting them back to Creta? What could they possibly want with the kid?

How was Mustang so stupid that he managed to talk himself out of calling Ed?

There was a wave of emotions crashing through his body, each bringing with them different, almost instinctual reactions.

The fear made him want to freeze, ignore the problem and hoped everything just went away.

The anger made him want to start snapping. He wanted every single Cretan in this room burned to ash for daring to hurt his subordinate in any way.

The guilt made him want to turn that fire onto himself. Ed and Al were counting on him to keep them as safe as possible. They were counting on him to relay threats, to have their backs, to watch out for them. And he had failed.

If the Cretans had hurt Ed and Al in any way, what right did he have to pursue his goals? How could he set his sights on becoming Furher if he couldn't even protect those he cared about the most?

Externally, he was as easy and confident as ever. He continued laughing and smiling and talking with various politicians, women, and military higher-ups. If anyone was suspicious, they didn't show it. He kept moving from conversation to conversation, making his way slowly towards Hughes.

Luckily, the man noticed him and managed to get General Grossing off his back for the time being. He didn't move. He stationed himself by the buffet table. He was showing a Cretan diplomat his latest pictures of Elicia. The way he was talking, though, he could tell something was wrong. He seemed worried.

Finally, Falman came back into the room and made a beeline over to the buffet table. "Hey, Breda, do you know if the shrimp is all *gone*?"

Mustang's heart pounded.

Hughes stiffened.

"I heard some *soldier* took the last of it and wanted to be sure."

The crumpled note in his hand felt like a thousand pounds. He slipped it into Hughes' pocket. The diplomat from earlier came up to Falman and Breda and started asking them questions. Mustang continued walking, as steadily as possible, to the bar. He couldn't bring himself to stumble. The blood was roaring in his ears, demanding to light someone on fire. Preferably the Cretans, but he'd settle for himself.

He heard Hughes excuse himself as he sat down heavily on the stool. A woman sat down next to him. God, please, not another one. He wasn't in the mood to pretend like these

women were good at their job.

“I’ll have an old-fashioned. Hold the ice,” she said before turning to Mustang. Her eyes swept over him.

Luckily, she was better than the others. She held herself with a sort of confidence that came from experience. That didn’t mean Mustang didn’t want to burn her.

“What’s a guy like you doing at the bar all alone?” she asked, her voice dark and rich.

If Mustang hadn’t grown up in a brothel, didn’t know how these sorts of things worked, and weren’t currently contemplating mass homicide, he would have fallen for it.

“A guy like me?” What the hell was taking Hughes so long?

“Tall, dark, and handsome.”

He laughed and pretended to take a sip from his drink. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were trying to seduce me into giving up the secrets of my country, Ms?”

“Clara.” She held out her hand, grinning.

He shook it. *Hell will look mild compared to what I have in store for you.* “Ms. Clara.”

“Oh, please, just call me Clara.” She laughed. “And I don’t care for your country’s secrets, Mr?”

“Colonel Mustang,” he said.

There was no flash of recognition in her eyes. She either knew who he was, or she didn’t know enough about the Amestris military to know his name. The latter was unlikely, given the situation.

“Hmm, I do like a man in uniform,” she said, leaning closer. At least she wasn’t batting her eyes. A definite improvement over the woman who had taken Havoc earlier.

“Is that so?” He leaned forward as well. He had picked up a few tricks from his sisters over the years. It was surprisingly easy to con people when they thought they were the ones in control of the con. Almost too easy.

“Shrimp?” a waiter stepped by them and offered a tray of freshly replenished shrimp. He must have heard Falman ‘complaining’.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Clara (that probably wasn’t her real name) plucked one off the tray and dipped it into the cocktail sauce. “Colonel, would you like one?”

I’d like to know what the hell you’ve done to Fullmetal. He shook his head. “No thank you. This is a landlocked country and I’m a little suspicious of any seafood I eat here.”

She laughed and popped the shrimp in her mouth. “You have a point. But I like to live dangerously.”

“Eating questionable seafood is living dangerously?”

“Start small, work your way up.” She put her hand on his thigh, right where he had hidden his ignition gloves. “I’m sure a man like you understands that.”

“I do indeed.” He smiled at her.

She didn’t smile back.

She furrowed her brow, her skin turning pale.

She wasn’t pretending.

“Are you alright?” he asked. Maybe he had jumped the gun a bit on this whole ‘this isn’t an assassination because it would be stupid to assassinate someone here’ theory.

“I’m fine. I’m fine.” Clara slid off the stool, stumbling slightly.

Mustang grabbed her elbow to keep her upright. “Really? You look sick.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing.” As soon as she said the words, she gagged. “Maybe I should have listened to your warning about bad seafood. Excuse me.” She took off to the door so fast, Mustang was a bit shocked. But she wasn’t the only one.

Around the room, several people, Amestrian and Cretan alike, started gagging and turning green. A few of them didn’t even bother to try and get to the door as they turned and vomited in the potted plants around the room.

A hand grabbed his elbow and yanked him out of the stool. “Come on, Roy,” Hughes hissed. “While everyone’s distracted.”

He saw the rest of his team run to the door as well, blending in perfectly with the stampede.

“You’re responsible for this?” he hissed back as Hughes led him through the halls.

“You said cause a distraction!”

Fuery, Falman, Breda, Havoc, and Hawkeye managed to peel off from the group and caught up with them.

“That didn’t mean poison over a hundred high-ranking politicians, diplomats, and military members from two countries!”

“They’re not poisoned,” Hughes said, rolling his eyes. “It’s just a mild toxin that will cause them to puke their guts out for a few hours. And cause some mild diarrhea. Like a stomach bug.”

“Why do you even have something like that on you?”

“In case I need to poison over a hundred high ranking politicians, diplomats, and military members from two countries. It was in the cocktail sauce, by the way.”

He led them to a small office and shut the door behind them, the chaos from the mass food poisoning now silenced by the heavy door. Mustang wanted nothing more than to break down. He could feel his mask and his control slipping every second he didn't have answers. His mind decided to make things even worse by playing out the worst scenarios.

No. He couldn't break down. He was the only thing that could help Fullmetal now. He took a deep breath and slipped back into control mode, dissociating himself from reality.

“Falman, report. What did you find out about Fullmetal?”

“According to the front desk, he and Al came in yesterday at around eight AM. At around nine-thirty AM, a man dressed as a lieutenant came in and asked about them. He left with Fullmetal not long after.”

“Shit,” Breda started pacing and running his hands through his hair, clearly fixing to hit something.

Mustang couldn't blame him. Not only had Ed been missing since yesterday. He had been missing since yesterday morning. It was now the afternoon. A lot could happen in twenty-four hours. His mind had a field day with this. What if he was no longer in the country? What the Cretans had taken him back to Creta? How the hell would he be able to get him back?

“It gets worse, sir,” Falman said, looking away. “About fifteen minutes ago, the same lieutenant came and got Al.”

Havoc paled. “Al? Why would they come and get Al? They already had Ed. Since he was their target, they wouldn't want to risk anything by coming back to get him.”

More pieces fell into place. Pieces that Mustang didn't like. He'd rather deal with a hostage negotiation or an assassination attempt. “Because, they want Fullmetal to do something, but he won't unless they threaten Al. At least this means they're likely being kept in East City instead of transporting him across the border.”

“And at least that means he's probably still alive,” Fuery said, his voice shaking.

His men weren't nearly as good at controlling their emotions as himself, Hawkeye, and Hughes were.

“How are we going to find them, though?” Falman asked. “This city is huge. They could be anywhere.”

“You people,” Hughes scoffed. “Didn't any of you notice? They were so preoccupied with keeping you guys busy, they didn't even notice anything I was doing. Seriously, I walked straight into the kitchen and dumped a bottle of poison into the cocktail sauce bin and no one even batted an eye.”

“You found something out?” Mustang asked.

“I’m not in Investigations for no reason,” Hughes said, pulling out a map and laying it flat on the desk. “Tada! A map of East City and every single building registered to the Cretans in one way or another. You owe me, Roy. I had to spend all of last night at the office researching some of these places.”

At least his all-nighter had been more productive than Mustang’s. He owed his friend one. Despite Hughes’ work, though, there were still too many places to check.

No less than fifty buildings were circled on the map, spread out all over the city. It would still take them too long to search all of them, especially if the Cretans got Al fifteen minutes ago. Whatever they wanted Ed to do, he’d be doing soon.

“If this whole thing turns out to be a hoax,” Hughes continued, “I still think I can make a very good case for the Cretans doing some shady, shady stuff with their funds.”

“Breda, does anything stick out to you as a potential location to hold him?”

Breda looked over the map, eyes darting from building to building. He muttered to himself as he looked over the list. Mustang forced himself to breathe and to stay calm. They were so close. There had to be something that stuck out, something that would clue them in to where they were holding Ed. They couldn’t get stuck here. They had to save the kids

“Do you know how long they’ve held each of the buildings?” he asked.

“Yeah, hold on. I have a list.” Hughes turned to one of the filing cabinets and pulled out a piece of paper. Mustang was impressed. His friend had managed to turn an office in an enemy’s embassy into his own personal investigation unit. It was a testament to how focused the Cretans were on distracting his team. He was almost glad.

Breda took the paper from him and looked it over, muttering to himself some more. “Alright, I have an idea of where they might be keeping Ed and Al. This warehouse here.” He pointed to a location on the map, just barely on the outskirts of East City.

“Wouldn’t the chief notice something was up if he was taken there?” Havoc asked.

“We don’t know what exactly they told him,” Breda said. “And it’s one of the only ones where they could...”

Torture him without raising suspicions. That’s what Breda was going to say.

Mustang didn’t allow himself to dwell on that fact. He’d deal with the state of his subordinate later. Right now, he needed to focus on getting him out of there alive. “Come on. Breda, I want you to list all of the locations from most likely to least likely, just in case. You can do it on the way.” He commanded.

“Yes, sir!”

“I hope you all brought your weapons. We’ll likely be outnumbered.”

“Shouldn’t we tell someone?” Fuery asked.

“No, not until we know what they want Fullmetal for.” If they were forcing Ed to do something, he wanted to be in complete control of the narrative. There were a lot of illegal things they could want him to do. And the Amestrian military wasn’t known for being lenient.

“There’s a fire escape we can use here,” Hughes said, shimmying a window open. “Luckily, everyone should be vomiting for the next few hours, so they likely won’t notice us missing. We have to work fast though, as soon as they know that we know...”

They’ll kill Ed and Al to remove all evidence they were behind it.

Mustang pulled on his gloves. He wouldn’t let that happen. He wouldn’t let Ed and Al die this way.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Mustang finally knows that Ed's the target. Hopefully, he can get there in time. I have a feeling Ed won't be saying no for much longer.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

This is either going to be very good news or very bad news, depending on how you're liking the fic. So, when I was getting ready to post I realized that we only have one chapter left, and there is a lot that still needs to happen. Upon looking at my document with the draft, I realized that I was missing the back half of this fic! I don't know where it went or what happened, but several chapters are missing! Curse the folly of overtrusting modern technology! So I'm going to have to rewrite what I already wrote. I still plan on updating once a week, however, I make no promises now that I have to rewrite and re-edit the fic. I estimate that it'll only be another three or so chapters that are missing but we will see. Anyways, now back to your regularly scheduled torture.

Trigger warnings: Torture, blood, drowning, blood, broken bones, gore, hyperventilating, panic attacks.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They were speaking in Cretan again as they dragged him upright and put him back in that damned chair.

Ed tensed, waiting for the cloth and the water. There were windows along the top of the warehouse wall. Each time Ed looked out them, his heart sank. He had watched as the windows steadily grew brighter with the sun. And then steadily grew darker with the night. Now, they were bright again.

The sun had come up again.

The sun had come up again and he was still here.

Hallucination Mustang said he was looking for him. He said he wouldn't let him die. Ed believed that. He *needed* to believe that. His saying no was the only thing keeping him alive right now. But if Mustang and Al weren't coming for him, if they weren't even looking for him, then why was he dragging this out?

Fullmetal, do not do the transmutation! You swore to me!

"I'm so tired." He panted, slumping down in the chair. He was shaking violently, cold from the lack of clothing and the steady drip, drip, drip of water from his hair. He was also afraid. The waterboarding was worse than he thought possible.

Do not do the transmutation!

“It’ll be so quick.” He coughed; more blood dribbled from his lips and slipped down his chin. “Just hand on and done.”

I said I wasn’t going to cover for you again.

“I can see mom again.”

Sweaty Man was back. He gripped Ed’s hair and yanked his head back, pulling out several strands. Ed whined and let his head be snapped back.

“Do the transmutation.” He demanded.

Ed blinked and lolled his head to the side to face him. Sweaty Man was angry and frustrated. They probably didn’t expect him to be so stubborn about this. They probably thought he’d break the first fingernail they ripped from his hand. He’d break after the first beating. He’d break after the first disconnection and reconnection of his port. He’d break after the first waterboarding session.

He never did. He just kept saying no.

No. No. No. No. No.

Just keep saying no.

Except, he could say yes. He could say yes and this would all end. It’d all be over.

What about Al? Hallucination Mustang asked. You’ll die and he’ll be stuck in that body forever. Are you so weak and selfish that you’d be happy letting your little brother suffer for the rest of his life because you wanted to see your mother again? Do you care so little about him that his wellbeing means less than your comfort?

“No.” He directed that towards Hallucination Mustang.

Al’s wellbeing meant more to him than anything in the world. He’d give up his other arm, his leg, his voice, his heart, his mind, his soul. He’d give up everything to give Al his body back. If he was willing to do the transmutation, then that spat in the face of all the words he said. If it took being tortured by crazy Cretans for days to get closer to finding a philosopher’s stone and getting Al his body back, then that’s what he would do. It would be pathetic to talk such a big game only to give up now.

Sweaty Man was angry but didn’t look surprised. He took a step back and raised a gun.

Ed followed it with unfocused eyes.

Holy shit.

They were going to shoot him.

After all this work, they were going to shoot him now.

His breathing picked up. He wanted to look away. He tried to look away. His eyes wouldn't let him. Even as Sweaty Man pressed the gun to his temple.

He was going to die.

He was going to die.

He was going to die here alone and in pain. They were going to kill him.

Sweaty Man pulled the trigger. There was a loud bang and searing pain on his temple. It felt like he was getting burned by something.

He pitched forward with a cry, but someone was there to shove him back into the chair.

Wait.

What the fuck?

He was alive?

What the fuck? What the fuck? What the fuck?

He had just been shot in the head. He should be dead. He felt the gun. He heard it. His ears were ringing.

He should be...

His chest felt like there was a car sitting on it.

He couldn't...

He couldn't breathe.

His head... everything was spinning.

Oh God, he should be dead. There was a gun to his head. He should be dead. Why wasn't he dead? What the fuck? He couldn't breathe.

Oh, God, he couldn't breathe. He had been shot but he wasn't dead. There was no bullet in his head. What the fuck?

The hands shoved him back in the chair, snapping his head back once more. He was still panicking, still trying to get some air into his lungs but the oxygen was being expelled as soon as it went in. He was dying. Oh, God, he was dying.

Someone help him!

Anyone!

Please!

Someone come and help!

The man put the gun to his head again.

No. No please, not again.

He pulled the trigger.

Another loud bang ringing in his ears. Another burning sensation across his temple.

Why wasn't he dead?

How was he not dead?

Again. He put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger. It was so loud. And the echo, it never seemed to stop. Was he still hearing the sound of the first shot ringing in his ears? Or was he now on the third? Why was he still alive? Why couldn't he breathe?

Again. The gun went off. The burn and pain exploded across his forehead, his face, his temple, his body. Why wasn't he dead?

Again. The gun went off. The bang resounded in his ears, splitting his head open figuratively because it seemed like no matter how close the gun was to his head, it would never split it open literally.

Again. Please make it stop. Please someone make all of this stop.

The man lowered the gun. "I am out of blanks. Do transmutation for us."

Blanks? The gun had been filled with blanks? That was why...

Sweaty Man slapped him. Hard. His lip split open again.

"Tell me about the transmutation. I am getting tired of your games."

You said you'd give up everything for your brother, Fullmetal. Now is the time to prove it. Prove that you're willing to do anything to get his body back.

"N-" His tongue didn't want to work. His mouth didn't want to move. He was still panicking, though thankfully the attack seemed to be waning. He could take deeper breaths now.

"N-" Everything hurt. His ears were still ringing. His forehead and temple were still burning.

"I'm waiting for an answer." Another slap, snapping his head to the other side.

He took a deep breath. He had to stay strong. He had to keep up with this. He was willing to do anything to get Al's body back. Including going through all of this.

"No. I'm not going... I'm won't... I'm not doing it." He finally managed to bite out.

The chair was tipped over and he was shoved onto the ground. He instinctively tried to throw out a hand to catch himself. That was a mistake. Pain exploded up through it, sending him back into a panic as it overwhelmed all of his senses. He had forgotten. He was in so much pain that he had forgotten what all of his injuries were.

He was flipped over onto his back. The second man stuck the leg back in the port.

“No, please don’t. Please. Please stop.” He’d rather they do anything but this.

Sweaty Man turned on the leg.

Ed screamed.

“I am impressed. I hear reconnecting automail is very painful. You seem to be withstanding it well.” He turned off the lever.

Ed only had a second to compose himself before the leg was turned back on. He shrieked and thrashed against the ground.

Why hadn’t anyone come to help him? Why was he still there? Was it true that no one noticed that he was gone? Or did they notice and just not care? Did they finally see a chance to get rid of him and latch onto it? Was he such a burden on everyone that they didn’t even care how much pain he was in?

He disconnected the leg and tossed it aside. Only twice? That was unusual. Ed coughed, more blood filling his mouth.

“You are tougher to break than most men.” Sweaty Man motioned for the other soldiers in the room. They got to their feet and started setting something up.

“It is a shame you are with the enemy. We could use more soldiers like you.”

A soldier bent dragged him to another part of the room. They passed by the circle as they did so, the bright red paint still as vibrant and damning as ever.

“What are you doing?” he asked, flailing as best as he could, which wasn’t that great and more like pathetic twitching.

He was dropped on the ground, his right leg screaming in pain as they started tying him up with ropes. The rope bit into his leg, burning it as it snaked up his body. They bound his thighs together, flipping and twisting him without care to get to a new part. The rope wound up his torso, crushing his broken ribs and tearing open the scabs on his back. Blood started to drip out once more, staining the concrete an ugly, brownish-red. His broken, dislocated shoulder was wrenched behind his back.

He screamed at that one. It hurt. It’d hurt less if they’d just pop the shoulder back in place, but no. They decided it was better to keep it dislocated. Why were they tying him up? It wasn’t like he could move. And he hadn’t tried to attack them in hours.

Finally, they finished up with the rope. Ed didn't let himself feel relieved. There was still one man at his foot, fiddling with the bindings. He could feel the broken ankle get jerked around. Finally, the man stopped whatever he was doing.

Except, it didn't get better. It got worse.

He screamed as the rope yanked his broken ankle and his body dragged across the floor, his leg steadily rising until he was hanging completely upside down.

There was more talking in Cretan. There was a barrel that looked to be filled with water that was placed beneath him. Blood dripped from his wounds and down his body, into his eyes. Everything hurt.

"It'll be quick," he mumbled.

Do not give up, Fullmetal.

"I'm so tired."

I won't cover for you again.

"It hurts."

You'll leave Al all alone. What kind of big brother does that?

"I want it to stop hurting."

You only get one chance, and you've already used yours up.

Someone let go of the rope. For a brief second, he felt like he was floating. Then the icy water tore a scream from his lips. Water went up his nose and in his mouth. He took an instinctual gasp for air, water filling his lungs and causing spots in his vision.

Never before had the feeling of someone yanking on his broken leg come with such a feeling of relief. He was lifted out of the water, coughing sputtering, and removing all the water he had inhaled in his first dunk. It wasn't enough time, though. Mid-cough he was dropped back into the bucket. This time, the icy water didn't shock him as much. But it still made his heart skip a beat and made him gasp.

He was yanked from the bucket. Coughed, then dropped back in.

They repeated this ten, fifteen, twenty times. He lost count. They didn't rest. They didn't stop.

The water had turned a murky brown as the blood and vomit washed off his body. It was probably the only good thing that came from being dropped into the barrel so much. At least he was getting cleaned off. And it had steadily risen in temperature. Now it was no ice bath.

He was pulled back up, coughing, sputtering, choking as the bloody water dripped and splashed from his body. The floor around the barrel was flooded and he could see the water

level had decreased significantly.

“Do the transmutation for us,” Sweaty Man said.

He finished coughing. “No.” He couldn’t say no for much longer. The pressure from the blood steadily gathering in his head made him want to explode. His broken ankle was the only thing supporting all of his body weight and he felt like it might tear clean off if they left him there for much longer.

Sweaty Man started shouting. He was lowered back to the ground. He heard the distant crackle of a radio coming to life as more Cretan sounded in the air. The door opened and closed. The leg was put back in the port and reconnected. He couldn’t even manage a scream this time, eyes rolling back in his head.

Disconnect.

“Do the transmutation,” Sweaty Man snarled.

He didn’t even bother saying no this time. His mouth finally decided to stop working. Maybe he had bitten through his tongue in pain. The blood had to be coming from somewhere. Or maybe he broke his jaw somewhere along the way. He couldn’t remember breaking his jaw, but he wouldn’t put it past these guys.

Reconnect.

Nothing. Not even a sound.

It still hurt.

Holy fuck did it still hurt. He just couldn’t bring himself to so much as whimper.

Disconnect.

Sweaty Man slapped him. “Do the transmutation!”

He let himself stare blankly at the circle. Why was he saying no again? Why wasn’t he just getting it over with?

He had survived human transmutation before. Surely he could do it again. Maybe... maybe Mustang and Al wouldn’t have to find out about it. He could figure out another reason why he was missing another limb.

Sweaty Man let out a roar and started beating him with something. It felt like a rubber hose. Over and over and over again. He hit his unprotected body. His stomach. His chest. His leg. His face. Over and over and over again.

It fucking hurt, but he couldn’t bring himself to try and protect his body. What was the point? He was going to die here and there was nothing he could do about it. Trying to shield himself would just delay the inevitable.

Sweaty Man threw down the rubber hose and lunged at him. He wrapped his hands around his neck and squeezed. This got a reaction from Ed as his arm jerked to try and claw Sweaty Man off of him. He couldn't breathe. He needed to breathe.

The arm wouldn't move.

Nothing would move.

He wanted to move.

His last sight before blacking out was of Sweaty Man's bulging, bloodshot eyes.

Ed blinked his eyes open, squinting into the darkness. His metal arm and leg were back on his body. He lifted his right hand and rotated his wrist. He felt relieved to hear the familiar sounds of machinery humming softly. He pushed himself up and looked around.

It was dark out. Nighttime? Had to be. He was still in the goddamn warehouse though. The transmutation circle seemed to glow bright red in the darkness, pulsing slightly.

He licked his lips and slid back against the wall. His body hurt... less than it should. He should be in excruciated pain. He shouldn't be able to sit up without some help. He furrowed his brow, took a deep breath, and looked down. He was prepared to see his twisted, mangled, bloodied form.

He furrowed his brow, even more, when he looked down and saw that he looked... normal. He was no longer covered in bruises, cuts, and blood. His skin wasn't bulging and swollen from where bones had been broken and were now pressing outwards at awkward angles.

"What?" he whispered, his voice hoarse from screaming and lack of water. This couldn't be real. Even if he had been unconscious for several hours, he couldn't have healed this fast.

"So, you're finally aware."

He jumped and looked to the far wall to see Mustang of all people. He was dressed in his normal blue uniform, leaning against the wall, arms crossed and looking bored.

"Colonel!" Tears prickled in his eyes. In any other situation, he'd be embarrassed to be so openly happy (*and weeping!*) to see his commanding officer. Now, though... he wasn't going to stop himself from crying. He didn't think he could. All this pain was finally over. Mustang was here to help him. He could keep him safe. He could stop the Cretans from hurting him. Finally, this nightmare was over.

"You're pathetic, you know that?" Mustang uncrossed his arm to examine his ignition glove.

The phrase gave him whiplash.

The words hurt more than any torture ever could. He knew he was pathetic. He knew he was a waste of space and didn't deserve to live. But to hear Mustang say it out loud...

“What do you mean?” That was a stupid question. What did he mean? What did Ed think he meant? He bullied his brother into committing a taboo and cost him his body. His mother died. His father left. What did all these things have in common? Him. He was the common denominator. He was the pathetic worm ruining everyone else’s life. The tears in his eyes weren’t because of relief now.

“You’re thinking of doing it.”

He couldn’t help but look over at the glowing, blood-red, pulsing circle. It was now tattooed on the back of his eyelids. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see it there.

“No, I’m not. I swear I’m not.”

“Don’t lie to me!” Mustang snarled. His eyes were flashing hate and fury. Emotions Ed had never seen on his face. “After all, I’ve done for you. I lied for you. I covered for you. And this is how you repay me?”

He wasn’t shouting like normal. If he were, Ed might have been able to shout back. He might have been able to pretend like they were arguing the same as they always had. Instead, Mustang was keeping his voice low and even. It made Ed afraid. Very afraid.

“No, I swear. I’m not going—”

“I swear. I swear. I swear,” Mustang mocked. “Didn’t you swear you’d always look after Al? Look how that turned out? Your brother is a monster because of you.”

“No... that’s not—”

“And instead of letting your poor mother rest in peace, you selfishly resurrected her because you swore it would work. And look what happened! She died, again. Probably in more pain than the last time. And you couldn’t even bother to bury her.”

“I’m not going to use the circle,” Ed said, hot tears starting to leak down his cheeks, dripping from his chin and soaking the floor.

“We both know you are going to use it again. Because you’re weak, pathetic, and an awful human being on top of it. You always complain about me having an ego. What about you? You’re the one who thought the rules didn’t apply to him. Truth didn’t take enough from you.”

There was something acidic in his voice, pure venom Ed wasn’t used to hearing. He was scared. He wanted someone to help him but the one person he wanted to come and save him was currently leaning against a wall and confirming all his self-hating thoughts.

“You’re the one who deserves to be trapped in a metal shell. Not Al. You’re the one who deserves to live the rest of your pathetic life never being able to touch, smell, or taste anything ever again.”

He let out a sigh and stepped forward. “Here I thought you learned your lesson the first time.”

Ed pressed back against the cold wall. It was... wet, and sticky? He turned to see it had started to bleed.

“What are you doing?” He said, forcing himself to turn away from the wall. It was starting to grow softer, feeling more like flesh than stone.

“We both know you’re going to do it. Might as well get it over with.”

Ed tried to scramble to his feet and run away, but he fell over, pain erupting out of the left one. He screamed and looked down to see the black hands grabbing at it, ripping it from his body, port and all.

Mustang bent over and grabbed his left wrist.

The little black hands reached out for his right arm.

He yanked him away as the arms pulled in the opposite direction. Ed screamed again as once more the automail was physically ripped from his body. His wrist snapped in Mustang’s hand.

“Why are you doing this? Why aren’t you helping me? You’re supposed to... you’re my...”

“I’m you’re what, Ed? What am I?” He tossed him down on the circle. He walked away, only to come back and set down a bowl of ingredients.

“Besides, I don’t have to help you. Al is safe in the library. None of my men are in any danger. What makes you think I would ever risk my life to help you? What makes you think that I would ever lift a finger to help you? You don’t deserve my help. You went through the Gate twice and you’re about to go through it again.”

“No—” Before Ed could finish his pathetic attempt at begging, he felt water fill his lungs. He hacked desperately to try and get it out, writhing around on the circle.

“No, please. I’m not going to. I swear,” he said as his hacking quieted down.

Across his body, cuts and bruises started to appear. His remaining arm snapped in half. His ribs crushed under an invisible force. Even if he wanted to scream, he couldn’t.

Mustang came back over to him and kicked him so he was lying on his stomach.

“Don’t worry, Edward. If you survive this, I’ll be sure to execute you myself. You’ve never burned to death before. Have you?”

He grabbed Ed’s wrist and yanked it forward so it was hovering over the circle.

“No! No, please! I don’t want to do it. Don’t make me do it!” He shrieked, hysterical now as the blood-red circle got closer and closer and closer to his hand.

“Don’t you get it? I don’t make you do anything. I didn’t make you do human transmutation last time. I didn’t make you join the military. And I’m not making you do human

transmutation this time. You're doing this of your own free will."

He tried to wrench his hand out of Mustang's grasp, but his grip was tight. Crushing.

"Please! Please don't make me do it! I don't want to! Please, I'll do anything!"

"Oh, shut up and accept your fate. Just know, whatever you get, you deserve it and much worse."

He touched his hand to the circle. White-hot electricity jolted through Ed's body and he let out another shriek. It felt like every nerve in his body was on fire.

He struggled and thrashed and did everything he could to try and get away, but it was no use. He couldn't leave. He was pinned there.

He could hear the familiar wheezing of his mother as she formed in front of him. More black hands reached out. To rip. To tear. To take.

He let out another shriek. And opened his eyes.

He was still in the warehouse, but it wasn't dark. And there was no Mustang. Just the same soldiers he had passed out on. Some of the soldiers briefly glanced his way, but otherwise paid him no attention.

He swallowed and struggled to regain control of his breathing. It was a nightmare. It was just a nightmare. There was no Mustang threatening to burn him to death if he did the transmutation. It was just him. In a warehouse. Full of people who had been torturing him for almost two days now. Somehow, that didn't seem like an improvement. At least... at least his head seemed a bit clearer. The rest he had had, no matter how brief, shook off some of the cobwebs and allowed him to focus for once.

He swallowed and looked around. Sweaty Man was kneeling on the floor by the main entrance, his back turned to Ed. He furrowed his brow. The last time he had passed out, they woke him up quickly to continue torturing him. This time, though, they were leaving him alone. What was Sweaty Man doing by the door? Why were they suddenly ignoring him?

Sweaty Man didn't ignore him for long, however, standing up and marching back over to him. The stench of stale sweat washed over him, mingling with the rest of the horrible smells lingering in the air. Ed's heart rate and breathing picked back up. Sweaty Man grabbed his wrist and dragged him back to the shackles, attaching him to the wall. He hacked up more bloody water and felt a small sense of satisfaction when it got onto Sweaty Man's sweaty shoes.

He wrinkled his nose and tightened the cuff around Ed's wrist. The limb was so twisted and swollen, it didn't fit right. Already he could feel the circulation in his wrist getting cut off.

He whimpered again. Out of everything he had experienced, this should be nothing. And yet, here he was, letting a tight shackle cause him to cry out.

A car pulled up. Some soldiers called out. Sweaty Man kicked his broken leg and went back to the door, kneeling on the ground.

Hang on.

Let me introduce you to my colleague.

Were those... metal footsteps walking to the door?

“Al?” It was the first word he managed to speak in several hours. His throat felt like it was on fire. Even that small word took so much out of him.

He is also an alchemist.

Shit! They had gotten Al from the library. He was walking into a trap. These people... they were going to hurt him. They were going to hurt his little brother.

“Al!” He cried out, trying to make his voice loud enough for his brother to hear. “Al, run!” It was barely above a whisper. He didn’t even know if the people in this room could hear him. If there was ever a time for their brother's telepathy, it was now.

The footsteps got closer.

Ed thrashed, trying to get his foot to draw another transmutation circle in his blood. “Al! You have to run!”

The door creaked open. “Brother?” Al stepped inside.

“Run!”

Sweaty Man put his hands on the ground and there was a flash of alchemy. Al let out a shout and tried to dodge, but it was too late. The floor warped up and around him. His arms and legs were pinned in place. Stone completely encased most of his body. He couldn’t move.

“Brother!” he cried out. “Brother, what’s going on? What’s happening?”

The lieutenant from yesterday and Smelly Man stepped through the door.

Ed didn’t care about him. He cared about the exact moment he could tell Al laid his eyes on him. He went still. Rigid. Those soul fire eyes flared in a way Ed wasn’t familiar with.

“Brother, what did they do to you?” He sounded horrified. He probably was. Ed hadn’t gotten a good look at himself since he left his dorm yesterday morning. Even if the previous dunks in the bucket had gotten rid of a lot of the blood and vomit, there was still more caked on him.

He licked his lips. He should try and comfort him, right? He should try and assure him that everything would be okay.

“Al,” he croaked. He couldn’t do much more than that. Even if he could string together more than a few words, his very appearance was a testament to how not okay the situation was. They were both trapped, unable to move or use alchemy. No one knew where they were and no one would come looking.

Ed was content with letting himself get tortured to death. But things were different with Al here. He couldn’t let him get hurt. It was his fault that he was stuck in that unfeeling prison. It was his fault they did human transmutation in the first place and lost everything. It was his fault he got himself captured by the enemy and let himself get tortured. He would not let Al suffer any more than he had to.

The stench of eggs and fish washed over him. “Now then, agapito agori,” Smelly Man said, smiling and rubbing his hands together.

“I’ll do it,” Ed croaked, not even letting him finish his sentence. He took a deep breath to steady himself and regather his strength. “I’ll do it. Please, just don’t hurt him.”

Smelly Man honestly looked shocked. Sweaty Man muttered something that caused Smelly Man to glare at him.

“Had I known it was that easy, I would have gotten him with you yesterday. You are a very stubborn boy. I did not expect you to be this difficult to break. Oh well, let’s take a look at the circle.”

“Circle?” Al asked, his voice shaking. Ed watched as he turned his head to the damn circle, still untouched in the middle of the room.

Ed wanted to tell him not to look, to just ignore everything and let him handle it.

It was too late. Al saw it and recognized it. “Brother, no! Don’t do it!” He screamed and resumed trying to break out of his stone prison.

Ed tore his gaze from his brother. He was doing this all for him. All to protect him. He still felt ashamed. Al would hate him for this.

He was unshackled and dragged over to the circle, leaving a bloody trail in his wake. He was forced to his one, broken, dangling foot, held up by two men who did not care how much pain he was in.

Al was in the background, begging with him, pleading with him.

Ed blocked him and the pain out and just focused on the circle in front of him. It looked almost exactly like what he and Al had used. The cold feeling in his gut uncurling and spreading through his body, feeling much different than the freezing numbness he had grown accustomed to. It brought him back there. Back to that place. Back to that basement. Back to that thing he created.

Smelly Man sighed and grabbed his hair, yanking his head to look down at the circle. “Now, now, agapito agori, you have wasted enough of our time already. You will tell us about the

circle now or we hurt you brother. You do not want him to go through what you went through?”

Al wouldn't get hurt like him. But if they dumped water on him, the blood seal tethering his soul to this world could get damaged and Ed might just lose him forever.

He forced himself back to the present. “Those two symbols, at the top.” He licked his lips and forced all of his energy on focusing. “I used different ones. Carbon and calcium.”

“Is that all the differences?” Smelly Man asked.

“Yes.”

“Think carefully about this. If you do not successfully do it, we will kill your brother. There will be no second chances here.”

You only get one chance, and you've already used yours up.

“Please, brother, don't do it. It's not worth it!”

But it was worth it. It was worth it because it brought him and Al some time. He wouldn't be making it out of this alive. Even if he did survive the transmutation, he'd be put in front of a tribunal for his crimes and then in front of a firing squad. Regardless, he would do everything in his power to make sure Al made it out of this alive.

“Yes, those are the only differences. Everything else looks the same.” He couldn't bring himself to look at Al. He could imagine the hate, the fury, the anger in his eyes. This was all his fault. He deserved everything the Cretans did to him and more.

Smelly Man smiled and let him drop to the ground, jarring his broken arm. “What about the materials you need?”

“I'll be fine. I'll be fine, please don't do this. I promise I'll be fine.”

“Water, thirty-five liters. Carbon, twenty kilograms. Ammonia, four liters.”

It was a poem he had memorized and was now reciting without really feeling. The words washing over him without their true meaning being understood. Al continued to thrash in the background, but the stone held firm.

A few times, he had to stop and cough up more water and blood. The growing puddle of fluids should have worried him, but it didn't. It was almost over. Even Al had stopped trying to escape at some point, finally realizing how hopeless the situation was.

“Is there anything else you need?” Smelly Man asked.

“Something for the soul,” Ed said, tears dripping down his cheeks. His face felt itchy and hard to move.

“How do you get a soul?”

“Blood?” Ed said, his voice cracking.

Smelly Man ran his fingers through Ed’s tangled, greasy strands. “I think you have enough of that, hmm?”

Ed flinched and squeezed his eyes shut. “Please, don’t hurt my brother. He had nothing to do with this.”

Once more, the door opened and closed. They were gathering the materials now.

“Do you not understand? We need you to do the transmutation. The only way you will do it is if your brother is unharmed. It would be unwise of us to harm him before you have completed your duty, agapito agori.” He finally stopped touching his face.

Ed was almost relieved, except then he stood up and walked over to Al.

“Leave him alone!”

Smelly Man ignored him and plucked the helmet from Al’s head, letting out a small gasp. “A soul transmutation?”

He turned back to Ed. “You are the one responsible?”

Ed froze, afraid that no matter how he answered, Al would suffer.

It didn’t seem to matter as Smelly Man turned back to Al without waiting to hear his answer and started studying him. “You are a living suit of armor. This is very advanced alchemy. I have never seen one done successfully. Truly skilled. You are truly skilled, agapito agori.”

“Get away from him!” Ed finally managed to shout. “I’m doing your damn transmutation. Leave him alone.”

“You cannot blame me for being curious. We, scientists, are curious. That is why you did the transmutation in the first place, no?”

“No, that wasn’t...” He started coughing again. Hacking up more blood, water, and mucus.

“How did you know brother could do human transmutation?” Al asked. He was forcing himself to be calm.

“Oh, because of the...” Smelly Man put his hands together, a pantomime of Ed’s normal clap. “An alchemist who can do a transmutation without a circle. That is the only way I know how it can be done. It was a hypothesis. My hypothesis has been proven correct.”

“Why do you want him to do human transmutation?” Al’s voice was shaking, but it wasn’t because of fear. He was angry, furious. If he had been free, Ed doubted there would be anything to stop him from going on a rampage.

“Al, I’m sorry,” he whimpered, still trying and failing to move. Everything hurt so badly. Even if he wanted to do a simple transmutation at this point, he doubted he had the energy

and the focus to do it properly. He should be trying to save up, store his energy so that when he did need to do the transmutation, he could do it properly. Or as properly as one could do a human transmutation.

Smelly Man put the helmet back on and waved at Al dismissively. “That is none of your concern.”

He turned back to Ed. “If you survive, agapito agori, we will take you both back to Creta so you can show us soul transmutation.”

Ed’s eyes widened and he let out a pitiful moan. He was hoping they’d just straight up kill him after this. But now they were taking them both to Creta? It was bad enough Ed was constantly worried about Al getting shipped off to a lab here for experimentation. How much worse could it be in another country as a lab rat?

“No, let him go! That wasn’t the deal!” His body was screaming. His head was pounding.

Smelly Man patted Al’s head and stepped away from him. “Truly skilled alchemist you are. Very exciting to see you work.”

Sweaty Man stepped back in the door with a bowl. Al sucked in a breath and Ed’s eyes widened.

That was it. That was everything you needed to make a human.

Sweaty Man set the bowl down in front of him. The stench of ammonia, metals, carbon and other elements swirled around his head, making him dizzy.

“Brother, no! Please, don’t do it!” Al started to scream again. “Please, I’ll be okay!”

The radio crackled to life again. One of the soldiers called out.

Smelly Man turned red and started swearing, storming off to go talk to him. There was more swearing and shouting in Cretan. Ed strained to listen as if he could understand a word they were saying.

Sweaty Man started arguing with Smelly Man, the two growing louder and louder and louder as Smelly Man threw on a coat and stormed out the door.

Sweaty Man let out a roar and punched the wall, pacing back and forth.

Ed hazarded a look at Al, who was just as confused as he was. They... weren’t going to make him do the transmutation? What? After all that build-up?

After a few minutes, Sweaty Man grunted and stomped over to him. “We do not have time to waste. You will do the transmutation now.”

“But... he isn’t here.”

“This was his stupid plan!” Sweaty Man grabbed him by the arm and yanked him off the ground and over to the bowl.

He whimpered as the broken bones jostled and ground together. He pulled out a knife, the metal gleaming in the flickering, fluorescent lights of the warehouse. Ed only had a brief moment to realize what was about to happen before the knife was plunged into his forearm, causing him to shriek as rivulets of blood ran down his arm and plopped into the bowl. It caused a slight depression in the pile of dry ingredients.

Sweaty Man dragged him back to the edge of the circle and threw him down.

“Activate the circle. Do that, and we let your brother live.” He positioned Ed’s hand so it was just touching the edge.

“No! Brother, don’t do it! Please!” Al’s screams echoed in his mind, clambering around and causing his headache to worsen.

Ed managed to pull his head up to look at him.

“Al,” he whimpered, hating that his brother had to see him like this. Hating that he was breaking his promise. Hating that he was going to do human transmutation again. “I’m sorry.”

He took one last breath to study Al, to take in the lines of his armor, the scuff marks he had been careful to buff out. He thought he could see Al’s body, Al’s actual body in front of him. His short blond hair and bright, cheerful eyes. Ed’ would never see his brother again. He’d never get to hug him or fall asleep next to him or chase after him. This was it. This was... he’d never get to see Al’s smile or hear his voice. This was it.

He dropped his head back down, unable to look at Al any longer. Smelly Man said they only got one shot at this. If he screwed up, if he failed, Al would die. He wouldn’t let that happen.

He focused his energy, trying to ignore the pain, the burning, the suffering, the terror that encompassed his entire being. He focused on the array in front of him. He focused on what he wanted the result to be. He focused solely on the task in front of him. He could do this. He had already done it once. What was one more time? He didn’t know what Truth would take from him, but he wasn’t worried about that. That bastard could take whatever they wanted as long as Al was alive and safe.

He could handle Al hating him.

He could handle Mustang turning him in.

He could handle it all as long as Al was safe.

“Brother, no!”

He closed his eyes and focused his energy.

Chapter End Notes

Boy, Ed is... not having a good time. It doesn't help that Dream Mustang and Hallucination Mustang don't seem to be on the same page when it comes to helping out. Is he going to do the transmutation? Will Mustang and the others get there in time? Will we get the satisfaction of Cretan BBQ? I guess you'll just have to stick around to find out.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

After reading this chapter you can probably see why I got to the end and went, 'Wait, where's the rest of it?' I do have a scene written out of the next chapter so not all is lost! But there is still so much to do. Anyways, I'm going to be out in the field for the rest of the week so you get a chapter early! Enjoy!

Trigger warnings: broken bones, gore, blood, mentions of torture, mentions of sexual assault, graphic depictions of people burning to death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hughes knew they had the right place as soon as they rounded the corner. They had left their cars at another warehouse not far from the location so they could sneak up. Good thing because guards were standing outside the door. But that wasn't what gave it away.

What gave it away were Al's screams.

God, he sounded terrified. Hughes had grown used to the two brothers' being almost worryingly unafraid. Of course, Al was the more emotional one between the two of them. However, neither seemed to get scared that easily. It worried Hughes because that meant they were more likely to be reckless. He didn't think that either brother could get scared. However, Al was more than scared.

He was *terrified* in a way Hughes had never heard before.

He didn't even wait for Roy to give the command. His knives were out and embedded into the skulls of the two guards before he could snap. Good thing too. The smell of burning flesh would likely alert the Cretans to their presence.

"Guns are good and all, but sometimes you need something a bit quieter," he said, trying to lighten the mood. It didn't work because Al was screaming his head off, sounding downright hysterical and begging for Ed not to do something. No child should ever sound that scared.

They needed to deal with this and deal with this now. Already, Hughes could see Roy's self-control waning with each passing second. He almost took charge of the situation, to ensure Roy didn't do anything reckless.

Roy beat him to it. "Hawkeye, Havoc, take the stairs on the west and east side and give us cover from up top. Breda, Fuery, you take the back. Hughes, you're with me. We'll go through the front. Keep as many alive as possible but use deadly force if necessary. Our mission is to get Fullmetal and Alphonse out alive."

He was surprised Roy gave the order to keep them alive. Maybe he underestimated his friend's self-control after all. God knows how. Hughes wasn't as attached to the Elrics as Roy was, and even he was thinking of taking up flame alchemy just to watch the Cretans suffer.

"Yes, sir!" They all took off without question.

They were fast, but it still took too long in Hughes' opinion. Roy tugged on his gloves, clearly itching to burst in there and light everything on fire.

Just hold on, Ed and Al. We're almost ready. Just thirty more seconds. He pulled the knives out of the two guards.

"They'll be okay." He put a hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him down.

Roy's fingers twitched. "You don't know that."

Hawkeye gave the signal, gun drawn, eyes blazing. Everyone was in position.

"Move in!" Roy commanded, rushing forward and bursting through the door.

Now, Hughes had served with him in many different situations. He had seen Roy at his best and his worst. He had seen him blackout drunk because of guilt. He had seen him elated because of a promotion. He had seen him happy, sad, depressed, anxious, guilty, content, worried, even scared on more than one occasion. He did not recognize the emotion that fell over his face the moment they stepped through the door.

He went *bone* white. For a second, Hughes was afraid that Ed was dead. And God helps the Cretans if that boy was dead. As much as Roy pretended not to care about the boys, Hughes could see right through that mask. He had an over-protective streak that did not extend to any other member of his team in quite the same way. It reminded Hughes of his own feelings towards Elicia. If anyone, *ever* did anything to his daughter, they would not live to tell the tale. Roy was the same way. If Ed were truly dead, there would be nothing to stop him from burning everything and everyone to the ground. The safety would be off and every single Cretan in this room would be ash in a matter of seconds. Then, once their ashes were scattered in the winds, Roy would march right back to the embassy and burn the rest of them, death penalty be damned.

Hughes could talk Roy down from almost any ledge. He could reel him back in when his emotions became too much. And when he couldn't, Hawkeye definitely could. But if Ed were dead, he doubted either of them would be able to get through to him. With his alchemy, he'd raze any city to the ground and crush anyone who stood in his way.

But, that didn't make sense based on what Hughes was seeing. Roy wasn't angry. He was *terrified*. He was terrified like Al was terrified. Hughes had never seen him so afraid in his life. His eyes fell on Ed, in a crumpled heap on the ground next to what appeared to be a transmutation circle. His eyes were open, glassy but still conscious. He was alive. He wasn't even looking at them. Just staring at the circle.

Roy lifted his hand and snapped, sending a ball of fire right at Ed.

This spurred Hughes into action as he yanked his friend's arm down. Maybe Roy had actually snapped psychologically. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Colonel, he can do alchemy!" Al cried before Roy could answer why he thought it was a good idea to shoot fire at a child who had been held in captivity for almost two days.

Roy reacted immediately, tackling Hughes to the ground as a stone pillar came crashing right where they stood before.

From this angle, sprawled out on the ground with Roy's elbows and knees digging into his gut uncomfortably, things just got more confusing. He could see Ed, still alive and not even burned. The circle, on the other hand, was ash, complete with an upturned bowl that had been sent crashing across the ground from the force of the fire. So, Roy was trying to destroy the circle? What the hell was going on here?

Roy pushed himself off Hughes, face contorted with rage. Hughes couldn't stop him this time. Roy snapped his finger and the alchemist by Al was on fire in the blink of an eye, screaming and thrashing as he fell to the ground. Roy didn't even flinch. Hughes could tell he hadn't made the fire as hot as he could have. The enemy alchemist would die, and it'd be a slow death. At least the man managed to stumble away from Al. Flesh melting off in greasy layers as the skin slowly blackened. Even from here, Hughes could see the man's hands had been destroyed, burned to a crisp before the fire even touched the rest of his body.

"Hughes, get Ed out of here. I'll get Al." He snapped his fingers again, this time lighting two other soldiers who were busy cornering. These he kept alive. It was strange, seeing his friend swinging back and forth between pure, unadulterated, uncontrolled rage, and someone calmer and more level-headed. Hughes decided not to comment and instead focus on getting Ed out of here. He could deal with his friend's strange emotional state later.

He sprinted to Ed's side, throwing a few more knives into some soldiers for good measure. Thankfully, it seemed like Hawkeye had taken over commanding the men while he and Roy were distracted. Already they were gaining the upper hand on the Cretans. Most of them were laying either burned or in pools of their own blood. Most of them were still alive.

"Shit," he hissed as he saw the state the kid was in. He collapsed to his knees, briefly horrified and frozen as he took in the boy's twisted and broken body. He knew, logically, he had been tortured. It was another thing to see it up close. It seemed like every part of him was bruised, bleeding, and broken. Sometimes all three. His hair seemed damp and his clothes...

Hughes squashed down the growing horror in his gut when he realized the boy wasn't wearing any clothes. It was a good thing Roy had decided to focus on the less damaged Elric. His self-control was already hanging on by a thread. Fuck, once Roy saw the state Ed was in... Maybe it was a good thing the alchemist was already dead. He died painfully and it was definitely torture, but Roy could make it much, much worse.

"M' sorry," Ed mumbled, there was blood dripping out of his mouth and landing on the floor. His eyes were opened and glazed.

How was the kid even still conscious like this?

“Edward,” Hughes said as softly as he could manage. He went to put a hand on his shoulder only to have it hover awkwardly when he realized it would probably hurt. A lot.

There were more gunshots. Ed tensed, eyes wide and breathing rapidly. “M’ sorry, colonel. Didn’t want to. They made me. Please...”

“Ed, it’s me. It’s Hughes.” Shit, the kid was out of it. Really out of it. “Roy’s right over there helping Al.”

“Please don’t burn me.”

Hughes froze. Already he was planning on giving Roy a good tongue lashing for sending a ball of fire at a traumatized child. Now though, now he was going to get decked in the face. Seriously, what was that idiot thinking?

“Ed, it’s alright. We’re going to get you out of here.”

“They were gonna hurt, Al. Couldn’t let them. Please, don’t want to get burned.”

“Ed, it’s okay. You’re not in trouble.” It was no use. The kid wasn’t going to listen to him. He was afraid of Roy of all people. Even after everything the Cretans had done to him, he was afraid his commanding officer, a man who undoubtedly loved the Elric brothers in his own weird, constipated way, was going to burn him for this. What the hell did these people do to him?

“Roy, I shouldn’t move him. He’s too injured,” he called over the racket. He didn’t want to keep Ed in here, but he could wait until they got an ambulance.

“Get him away from that circle!” He sounded venomous. Hughes wasn’t sure if it was directed towards him or the general situation.

And the command—Not out of here. Not away from the fighting. Away from the circle.

Between Roy’s out-of-character reaction to the entire situation, Ed’s insistence that he was going to burn to death because of this, and Al’s sheer terror, he knew it was best not to push. He didn’t know the first thing about alchemy, but he did know that Ed couldn’t stay here any longer.

“Sorry, kid, this is going to hurt.” He tried to be as gentle as possible as he lifted Ed off the floor. Ed didn’t cry out. He didn’t even seem to understand what was going on. He just kept apologizing and begging Roy not to burn him. Over and over and over again.

Yeah, Hughes was starting to think the Cretans weren’t suffering enough. He might have to slip some bribes to some prisoners to make the survivor’s lives a living hell. If they survived the state-sanctioned torture, that is.

Hughes managed to stagger to his feet and run to the door. Most of the insurgents had been taken care of, but a few were still up and fighting. One caught sight of Hughes trying to escape and lunged at him. Shit, with Ed in his arms, he couldn’t reach his knives.

He didn't have to.

Roy snapped his fingers and the man burst into flames, his body charcoal before he even hit the floor. Ed went rigid in his arms, not even making a sound.

"Roy, maybe stop burning them for a bit," Hughes said, finally managing to make it to the door.

Roy was working on a transmutation to get Al out of the stone that encased his entire body. The boy was giving him instructions, but it was clear from the shaking in his voice he wanted to hurt someone, badly.

He didn't make it far out the door before he was collapsing once more to his knees. The rough gravel tore holes in his dress blues and Ed's blood stained his shirt.

"Ed? Are you with me?" He set the kid down gently on the pavement.

Ed had practically gone catatonic, not crying out as his many injuries were jostled. He had to be in pain. There was no way the Cretans would do this much damage and then turn around and give him morphine. And what the hell was with that transmutation circle? What did they want him to do that made both Roy and Al freak out like they did? He needed Roy out here and he needed him out here now. It was the only way he could figure out what was going on and what he was going to tell his superiors.

"Ed?" he tried again.

Ed stiffened and curled into Hughes' chest. He seemed so much smaller than normal. Much more fragile. Hughes was never afraid of accidentally hurting Elicia. But with Ed in his arms, even his own hands seemed like they might snap the boy in half.

"M' sorry," Ed mumbled. "I didn't want to. Al, colonel—"

"Al and Roy will be out here in a minute, Ed. Roy's just getting him out of the stone."

"I didn't want to."

"I know. We all know. You're not in trouble, kid."

"M' sorry. I—" Tears began to slip down Ed's cheeks. "I didn't want to. M' sorry."

"I know. No one is blaming you, least of all the colonel," Hughes said. At least, he hoped Roy wasn't blaming Ed. If he was, then he was going to get more than a punch to the jaw. "No one is going to punish you."

Ed apologized again.

"No one is going to burn you," Hughes said, holding the boy as closely and as tightly as he dared.

"Brother!" Al came running up to them, Roy following close behind.

Al skidded to a stop in front of him, hands hovering as he desperately wanted to touch his brother, but was likely afraid of hurting him. Roy explained to him once that Al couldn't feel anything in that armor. While he was extra careful to watch his strength, it was still, apparently, a fear of his to one day hurt someone he cared about.

"What did they do to you?" Al sounded horrified.

Hughes opened his mouth to reassure him, not quite sure what to say. But hey, thinking on his feet was always a strong suit of his, when his eyes landed on Roy. He was standing beside Al, arms at his side, body rigid, hands curled into fists so tight, he briefly wondered if Roy would tear through his gloves.

If Hughes had never seen Roy looking as terrified as he had when he had stepped into the warehouse, well now he had never seen him looking this *murderous*. The pure, unadulterated rage that was now plastered on his face was enough to make Hughes shiver. This was a man mere seconds from losing all control.

He didn't know how he did it, but he did manage to reach up and grab Roy's arm before he turned and walked back into the warehouse, torturing the rest of the survivors to death.

"Don't," he said. He tugged on his arm, forcing him a few inches farther from the warehouse. As if that would make any difference.

"Let go of me, Hughes." He sounded like he would light him on fire if he didn't let go. He understood why, of course. Torturing the enemy to death wouldn't erase what had happened to Ed, but it'd probably make him feel a hell of a lot better. At least temporarily.

Hughes swallowed and steadied himself. Somehow, he got the feeling he was currently the only one thinking clearly. He needed to stay calm and keep in control.

"No, they need you right now." He jerked his head over to Al, who was now on his knees and talking softly to Ed. He was trying to soothe him as best as his traumatized, eleven-year-old mind could. "They don't need you to kill someone."

Damn if those five seconds weren't the most hair-raising of Hughes' life. Roy briefly let his fists uncurl only to press his thumb and forefinger together, ready to snap. Then his shoulders slumped. The rage that had been consuming him lessened and his hand finally uncurled.

Hughes held his arm for a few more seconds, just to be sure. When he was satisfied, he let go.

Roy fell to his knees beside him and stripped off his jacket. He put it over the child and then pulled him away from Hughes and into his own body, curling around him protectively. Hughes let him. At least if Ed was in his arms, he wouldn't snap and go back into the warehouse. He let out a shaky exhale and ran a hand through Ed's matted, bloodied hair.

"Colonel," Al said. His voice was still shaking. Like Roy, he seemed to be teetering between terror and rage. "Please, don't get mad at brother. It's my fault. If I hadn't been there, he would have never..."

Roy held up a hand, silencing the boy and at the same time seeming to regain some self-control. "I know, Al. We'll deal with this later."

Hughes wanted to shout, to scream, to demand that someone explain to him what the hell was going on. He had never seen Roy lose control like that before. He had never seen Ed so afraid of his commanding officer before. He had never seen Al so terrified before. He needed answers. He needed to know what was so awful that it shook three of the bravest people he had ever met to their core.

He continued to take deep breaths. He wanted answers, but the answers could wait for a little while longer. He wouldn't push. Not yet. Not while the kids were still here and scared.

Ed whimpered and curled into Roy; his remaining arm twitched but otherwise hung limp at his side. Hughes winced upon seeing the fingers and hand. The entire appendage was swollen and bright purple. Right above was the wrist, where he could see two bones sticking out of the skin. Again, how the kid was even conscious at this point was a mystery. How he was conscious and able to even talk was an even greater one.

Roy shushed him and squeezed him tighter to his chest. "Hang on, Ed. We're getting you some help."

The boy gave a mumbled and choked reply that was likely another apology, confirmed when Roy responded, "I know. It's not your fault."

Thankfully, this final attempt at an apology seemed to drain the last of his energy and he went limp in his arms. Roy tensed for a fraction of a second.

"Sir," Hawkeye came out, marching with purpose as she walked up to them. "All the insurgents have been incapacitated or killed. Havoc, Falman, and Breda are..."

She stopped talking as soon as her eyes fell on Ed's bloody and damaged form. Right. In all the commotion the others likely didn't have a chance to get a good look at the kid. Her eyes widened and she put her hand to her mouth. Just briefly. Just a flash of horrified sickness at the state the child was in. Then, the mask came back up.

She cleared her throat, composed herself, and continued. "Havoc, Falman, and Breda are restraining the survivors. There are around twelve still alive, all injured. None life-threatening. Fuery found a radio and wants to know if we're calling this in?"

Roy ran a bloodied hand through his hair, leaving streaks of red across his forehead. "Hughes, how long until the toxin wears off?"

That was not the question he was expecting. "Um, maybe another hour, hour and a half."

He nodded and uncurled from around Ed. Hawkeye let out another small gasp, now seeing even more of the boy's bloody and damaged body.

"Lieutenant, take them to the hospital. Do not let anyone interrogate them until I get there."

“Yes, sir.” She turned on her heels and walked briskly back to where they had parked the cars.

“We do need to call this in, Roy. We have twelve enemies and an injured state alchemist. Brass is going to ask questions.”

“I know, I know.” He ran another hand through his hair. “Just, give me a bit of time.”

He studied him for a moment. “You should go with them,” he said, mostly because the longer Roy was here, the more likely he was to snap and kill all the survivors.

“Later. We need to figure out what we’re going to say.”

Figure out what we’re going to say. Not, Figure out what happened. The only reason Hughes allowed this was because he trusted him. He wouldn’t be so desperately trying to control the narrative if it wasn’t important. And as long as the Cretans were punished for what they did to a child, Hughes would let it slide.

Hawkeye pulled the car around and jumped out to open the door.

“Al,” Roy reached up and put a hand on the boy’s shaking shoulder. “Go with Hawkeye to the hospital and stay with your brother. Tell the doctors any injuries you know about. Other than that, do not say anything to anyone until I get there, especially if they’re from the military. If anyone tries to question you or Ed before then, get the lieutenant. She’ll take care of it. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, colonel.” He stood and shuffled to the car.

Roy took one last look at Ed before gently shifting him in his arms and standing up. Ed let out another whimper but otherwise didn’t make a sound.

Al smashed himself in the back and the two worked to situate Ed in a position that was least likely to cause further injury. Once he was situated, Roy tugged his jacket over him, tucking it around him and shielding the worst of his injuries from the cold, biting air.

“Brother didn’t want to do it.” Al sniffed.

Of course, he didn’t want to do it! No one beat a kid to hell and back because he wanted to do something! Why did both of these kids seem convinced that Roy was angry with them? Why were they so afraid of him?

Roy reached over and squeezed Al’s forearm. “I know. Go with Hawkeye.”

Once the doors were closed, Hawkeye sped off. If anyone could get those boys to the hospital in record time, it’d be her. They were in good hands now. They were safe. Which meant Hughes was going to start asking questions and getting answers.

He turned to Roy, wincing when he saw the state his friend was in. He wasn’t injured, but blood was smeared all over his clothes, staining his shirt, hands, neck, and face. He had soot and ash staining his body and his hair, which had been expertly slicked back earlier in the

day, was a mess. He looked like death warmed over. A kinder, softer part of Hughes wanted to wait, to postpone his questioning until his friend felt better. That was a very small part and he shoved those thoughts aside. Nothing could be gained by dragging this out. He opened his mouth, ready to start making demands.

“Fuck!” Havoc shouted. “They had cyanide!”

“Shit.” Looks like his questions were going to have to wait. He and Roy sprinted back to the room.

When they got inside, they saw twelve people in handcuffs along the wall. They all had white foam spilling from their mouths, some of them convulsing on the floor. Most of the men were unmoving. Their eyes opened and their bodies slumped over. Breda and Falman were to the side, trying desperately to save at least one of them. But it was too late. He slumped over dead.

“Fuck!” He couldn’t help himself as he kicked a dead man, snapping his head to the side.

Roy’s hands were curled into fists, his entire body shaking.

Havoc slumped back against the wall, running a hand through his hair. “What happened with the chief? Is he okay?” He pulled out a cigarette and stuck it in his mouth.

Hughes was acutely aware of the rest of the men, staring at them expectantly.

Roy stiffened. “Hawkeye is taking him and Alphonse to the hospital. His injuries were very severe.”

Hughes had a feeling the only reason the men didn’t completely lose it was because they hadn’t seen Ed up close. He could only imagine what would happen when they had a chance to fully comprehend the extent of what Ed went through.

“Well, the kid fought back,” Breda said. “There are defensive wounds of a couple of these guys. Mostly broken noses. A few bite marks. One guy looks like he was strangled with a chain. There’s bruising on his neck.”

Hughes shuddered. He had killed a lot of people in a lot of ways, but he had never strangled someone before. He heard it was one of the worst ways to kill someone. Much more intimate than a gun or even a knife. And Ed, a kid who swore to never kill someone, almost went through with it. He must have been terrified.

“There’s a transmutation circle by me,” Falman said. “I think it was drawn in blood.”

He and Roy stepped over to take a look. Hughes didn’t know a lot about alchemy but he did know enough to know that circle was sloppy. Lopsided. If Ed did manage to get it to work, it would have been a miracle. Not far from the circle was the enemy alchemist, hands burned clean off and face contorted in agony.

“Sir,” Falman said, drawing Hughes back to the present. “We need to call this in.”

“I know.” Roy turned back to the room and snapped, sending another huge fireball to the other end of the room. Then he snapped again. Another massive fireball crashing into the concrete.

Hughes was done playing this game. He grabbed his arm and yanked it down before he could turn the entire floor into charcoal. “Dammit, Roy! Tell me what the hell is going on here? What did they want him to do? Why are we not immediately contacting the higher-ups?”

His mouth pressed into a grim line. His eyes narrowing. It was honestly lucky the insurgents had all committed suicide. Roy’s control was hanging by a thread. It was a lot easier to explain twelve handcuffed bodies that had died by cyanide poisoning than it would to explain twelve handcuffed bodies that had burned to death.

“Human transmutation.” His voice was cold, detached.

He dropped his hand and turned to face him fully. Hughes was taken aback by how... worn down he looked. He looked older than he was; lines of worry etching themselves deep into his face.

“They wanted him to do human transmutation. If anyone finds out he almost did it—”

“They’ll punish him,” Hughes finished grimly. “Even if he was forced to do it under duress.” At least now he understood Al and Roy’s extreme reaction. Hell, even Ed’s fear made sense given how serious the penalty was.

“And the punishment for human transmutation is death.”

“Hang on!” Havoc said, scrambling to his feet. “But he didn’t do it! Unless you’re telling me one of these fuckers is a transmuted human. He was just near the circle.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Roy said, shaking his head. “We can’t risk them finding out. Ever.”

Hughes groaned and ran a hand through his hair. “Nothing can ever be simple with you. Can it? Alright, we won’t tell them about the circle, but we do still need to explain why he was here. The Cretans risked a lot taking him.”

“Maybe they just wanted information?” Falman suggested. “He’s young and new to the military. It wouldn’t be a stretch to assume it would be easier to get information out of him?”

“No, that wouldn’t work,” Breda said. “This level of risk means they wanted something big from him. Simply wanting information wouldn’t explain all this work.”

“He’s right,” Hughes sighed. “Any investigator worth their salt would immediately sense that something was off. I’ll do my best to lead the investigation, but there are going to be other people working on it. Whatever we say, it has to be believable.”

“What about gold?” Havoc suggested.

“Gold?” Where the hell had he come up with that?

“Yeah, the chief was telling me about it once. Alchemists can make gold, but it’s illegal and difficult. Something about the second law of alchemy?” He shrugged. “I couldn’t follow it. But, he specializes in metal, right? It can ruin the economy or be used to buy better weapons. And, like Falman said, he’s young and new. Maybe they thought he’d be easier to break or to convince to come to their side.”

“There’s also no evidence that gold was made,” Fuery added. “And given the state, Ed was in, I think it’s safe to say he didn’t make any for them.”

“What do you think?” Roy asked, staring at him. He was desperate for some good news.

“That might work. Especially if you get Ed making it on a massive scale, you could easily destroy an economy, fund opposing armies and terrorists, and easily topple a country without ever having to technically go to war with them. Yeah, I think I can make that work.”

He nodded. “That’s all I need. Fuery, get Armstrong on the radio and tell him to meet us here with twenty kilograms of lead. He is not to tell anyone about this. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir!” Fuery rushed back to the radio. Hughes could hear it crackle to life as he got to work finding the off-the-books emergency channel they used when they wanted to make sure no one was listening in.

“Is that going to be enough?” he asked.

“They wanted to see if he could do it before they risked transporting him over the border. Havoc’s right. Turning lead into gold is incredibly difficult. He may be a prodigy, but I wouldn’t risk it unless I knew for sure.”

“Alright, that makes sense. I think I can make it work. We’ll have to let Al, Ed, and Hawkeye know before they’re questioned.”

Except, Roy wasn’t listening to him. Roy wasn’t even looking at him. He was staring at the charred remains of the transmutation circle and the upturned bowl. Only a small section wasn’t burned. Likely where Ed had his hand. He was still in awe at the fact that even when Roy was beside himself with rage and terror, he still managed to maintain enough control to not even singe Ed.

“Is that?”

“Everything you need to make a human.” He picked up the bowl and handed it to Falman. “Make sure no one ever finds this.”

Falman nodded and left the warehouse.

He turned his attention back to the circle and snapped once more, lighting the last remaining bit of it on fire. Now there was just a giant burn mark in the middle of the floor. Try as Hughes might, he couldn’t make out any evidence that something was originally painted on the floor. That coupled with the other burns on the floor hid the true intentions of the Cretans well. Hughes hoped it was enough.

“It wouldn’t have worked, though. Ed was too injured to even attempt it. And even if he had managed to gather up enough energy to activate the circle, he would have been killed in the rebound.”

Ah. That explained some things about Roy’s reaction, but not about the Cretans. “Then why would they want him to do it? What was the point?”

He shrugged. “Probably experimenting with different techniques. Theoretically, if you get it right, you can create an entire army. But human transmutation is dangerous. Even if you’re healthy, well-rested, and not injured. I don’t think it’s ever been successfully completed.”

“Why use your own people when you can use enemies?” Hughes said, feeling sick to his stomach.

Ed was just a kid. He should have never been put in this situation. The fact that there were people out there willing to put a child through this reminded him just how fucked up this world truly was. Sometimes, he wondered if Roy becoming Fuhrer would solve any problems. Especially if people like this existed.

It took about thirty minutes for Falman to return. When he did, Major Armstrong was with him.

“Sirs, we have the lead,” he said, stepping back into the warehouse.

“What on earth happened here?” Armstrong’s eyes widened as he took in the chaos. “When you said the Cretans might have been up to something, I assumed it had to do with the diplomatic event?”

“Not quite,” Hughes said. “They were using the event to distract us from what they really wanted.”

“What did they want?” He put the lead down in a corner, eyeing the charred remains of the enemy alchemist.

“They wanted Fullmetal to do a transmutation,” Roy said, practically snarling. “Major, you are not to tell anyone that you brought us this lead. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

“If you do, I will execute you. Is that clear?”

The fact that they were surrounded by corpses that had been burned so much that overkill wasn’t a good enough descriptor made it clear that Roy’s threat was not an idle one. And Hughes was willing to bet he wasn’t going to go through the proper channels to get Armstrong arrested and put in front of a firing squad. He wondered if Roy realized just how much sway those boys had over him. He wondered if the boys understood how much Roy was willing to risk for them. He wondered if maybe he should start sending Roy Father’s Day cards.

Armstrong looked down at the enemy alchemist. “I suppose if I do, Edward would also be in danger?”

He nodded.

“I won’t say anything. You have my word.”

Screw having power over Roy. Did those boys know how much power they held over everyone? Everyone in this room was knowingly, willingly, committing treason for them. And he hadn’t heard one noise of protest. Not one man seemed uncomfortable by the idea. Not one man argued. If anyone ever found out about this, they’d all be arrested and executed. And not one man batted an eye at this risk. They took it, willingly, enthusiastically, unquestioningly.

“Fuery, call it in.”

The radio crackled to life once more. This time, Fuery was going through the proper channels. He listed off numbers and codes and talked to multiple people over the radio. Reiterating over and over again that the Cretans had taken the Fullmetal Alchemist and imprisoned him at a warehouse on the outskirts of East City.

Armstrong knelt to look at one of the handcuffed men. “Cyanide?” he asked.

“They wanted to die making sure their country’s involvement stayed a secret.” Roy sighed and pulled his gloves off. “You’re dismissed, Armstrong.”

“Yes, sir. If you need anything, please, let me know.”

An idea flashed in Hughes’ head. “Actually,” he straightened up, “Go to the military hospital and stay with Lieutenant Hawkeye. We don’t want anyone questioning Ed and Al until we have a chance to talk to them first.”

“Of course, sir. I’d be more than happy to help.”

“If anyone asks, just say we wanted to make sure it wasn’t an inside job. Therefore, until Ed can tell us that it wasn’t, we want to keep others from interrogating him.” It was a good idea even if they weren’t lying. Hughes very much doubted this was an inside job, but you never could be too sure.

“Of course. I’ll go right away.” Armstrong bowed and left them in the warehouse.

Now that that was taken care of, he had to deal with his friend who still might be in the midst of a mental breakdown.

“You can go too. You should go too,” he said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Roy shrugged him off. “I need to be here to give a statement. I’ll go later.”

“Roy—”

“I need to be here to give a statement. I’ll stop by later.”

He sighed and shook his head. “You can’t run from this. You have to talk to them.”

“He thought I was going to burn him, Hughes. He thought I was going to kill him.” He was shaking again, shock and reality setting in.

“And it’s not going to go away until you talk to them.”

He opened his mouth, snapped it shut, and turned from him. “Falman, see if there are any files they have and start translating them. Make sure anything relating to human transmutation is destroyed. Breda, Havoc, start taking an inventory of everything in this warehouse.”

Hughes let him go. He’d force Roy to break down and face the situation eventually, but if he wanted to hold onto his threadbare control for just a bit longer, then he’d let him. Besides, Hughes wasn’t about to punch his friend in the jaw surrounded by dead bodies and his men. That’d wait for later.

Chapter End Notes

I think this is honestly one of my favorite chapters. Especially with Hughes' inner monologue at the beginning. I am really proud of this chapter.

Roy, I love you man, but you were definitely stupid in this chapter. He really just went out there and made everything worse. At least we got a bit of comfort to justify that hurt/comfort tag. We're about to get so much more so that's something to look forward to. Hopefully, Team Mustang doesn't suffer a collective breakdown in the meantime.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Fun fact, this was originally much longer, like double the length. But I decided to split it up because I like watching people suffer.

Trigger warnings: Mentions of sexual assault, non-consensual touching, panic attacks, blood, surgery, broken bones, intrusive thoughts, burning to death

All the usual good stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Everything erupted into chaos once they finally managed to get through to Eastern Command and relay what had happened at the warehouse. The generals reacted quickly, detaining every Cretan at the event and immediately closing all borders. Generals from all over the country were being called into Eastern Command to run a task force dedicated to a full investigation. Though they didn't react fast enough. In Mustang's hesitance to call it in until absolutely every hint of human transmutation had been wiped away, the Prime Minister of Creta had already fled. Hughes tried to assure him that he likely left as soon as people started puking from 'bad seafood'. It didn't help. The man who had approved of this whole operation would likely never face punishment.

Mustang didn't care about the investigations. He didn't care about the Cretans. He didn't care about politics. He only cared about the children he tasked himself with protecting. He only cared about the fact that Edward Elric, the kid who threatened the Fuhrer with a spear during his state certification without batting an eye, was now terrified of him. He only cared about Alphonse Elric, who just had to witness his brother almost committing the ultimate taboo again, and this time all to protect him.

He wanted the higher-ups to finish their investigation and declare war on Creta. He wanted to walk into that country and light the whole fucking thing on fire. He had plenty of practice with Ishval. Might as well put it to good use. He didn't even need a squad to command. He could do it all himself. Just with the snap of the fingers. Turn every fucking soldier into ash.

These extreme thoughts scared him. While he cared deeply for each of his subordinates, he wouldn't dream of burning down a country if Havoc or Breda was captured and tortured. He'd be livid. He'd want to seek justice and punish those involved. But he wouldn't want to start a war. There was something about Ed and Al that made him lose his head. Made him lose all the carefully constructed walls he put up to reach his goal. He wanted to lash out and burn anyone and everyone who had ever hurt them. In only a few short months, those two managed to rip off every mask he had ever worn and force him to reconcile with a part of himself he thought was long dead.

Which brought him to the predicament he was in now.

As much as he wanted to rage and demand answers and action from the top, he couldn't. The Cretans weren't the only enemies he had to watch out for. If anyone ever found out about his feelings, in either Amestris or another country, those two boys would be in more danger than they already were.

"We're here, sir," Falman said, parking in front of the hospital Hawkeye had taken the boys to. It wasn't a military-run hospital as that one was farther away. At least, officially that's why she took them here.

Unofficially, Mustang suspected she believed it would be easier for certain people to be kept in the dark. Civilian doctors did not operate under the same rules and regulations as military doctors. They tended to value the privacy of the patients more and no amount of flashy ranks and increasingly high titles would get them to back down.

"I'll go talk to Alphonse and let him know what's going on. You see if any Brass has shown up and keep them distracted," he said. Now that he had some distance from the warehouse and also wasn't listening to Ed beg him not to execute him, he had some more control over his emotions. He (probably) wouldn't lash out. Though his dress blues were still covered in soot and blood. The smell of burning flesh clung to him.

Hughes and the rest of his team were still at the warehouse, helping with the investigations. There was... a lot. It appeared the Cretans traveled light and made do with everyday items. Seeing the bloody hammer that had likely been used to smash Ed's hand sent Fuery outside for almost an hour. Once Havoc and Breda figured out what the water-filled bucket and rope were used for, they had to leave as well. Falman lost it when they discovered a bucket of lemon juice. Each man came back to continue, but it was clear that this was taking a toll on all of them.

Mustang remained steadfast and stoic. He didn't flinch. He didn't curse. He answered any question thrown at him and kept himself from staring at the bloody knives. After about four hours, Hughes practically forced Mustang into a car by knifepoint demanding that he get his ass to the hospital and talk to Al. Falman volunteered to drive him.

"Yes, sir."

They stepped out of the car and walked through the bustling front door of the emergency room. He stepped up to the front desk, catching the attention of a frazzled-looking nurse who seemed to be doing eighteen things at once.

Somehow, she managed to hand him a clipboard without even looking up. "Fill this out and bring it back when you're done. The doctor will see you as quickly as he can, but he will take care of people who are in greater danger first."

"We're not patients, ma'am," Mustang said. He was too frayed to flirt. He just wanted to know if his boys were alright. "We're here about a patient. He came in about four hours ago. His name is Edward Elric."

This got her to finally stop her frantic scramble of work and she looked up at them, eyes narrowing. She took in the dress blues, the stars and bars (though Mustang's were missing given that he didn't have his jacket), and their frankly disgusting state.

"I'm sorry, sirs. I'm not at liberty to discuss a patient's status with anyone. Not even the military." She turned back to her work.

"I'm his guardian," he blurted out. It was technically true. He signed a lot of papers when Ed first joined the military. He had signed a lot of papers for Al as well. However, he didn't make a habit of telling people that. Again, he didn't want the target on Ed and Al's backs to grow.

"Do you have any proof?"

"Proof!" Well, at least he knew these people weren't going to tell the military anything. "No, I didn't stop to get proof. I kind of had other things on my mind." Shit, he was losing control again. He had to wrangle his emotions back in. This wasn't her fault. She was doing her job. He wanted her to keep the military from the kids. He was grateful she was steadfast.

He still wanted to strangle her.

He took a deep breath and massaged his brow. "Falman, go to my office. I think there's a copy of the forms in the top drawer of my desk."

"No need, sir." Armstrong's booming, cheerful voice echoed throughout the waiting room.

They turned to see him jogging up to them, papers in hand.

"Lieutenant Hawkeye had me go get them when Lieutenant Colonel Hughes called to say you were on your way." He handed Mustang the papers.

He immediately shoved them in front of the nurse. She was just doing her job. He was grateful that she was so protective over Ed's privacy.

His boys might be dying and he couldn't afford to waste a second not knowing where they were.

"Is this enough for you to at least tell me if he's alive?" Shit, he did not mean to say that out loud. Because that was his fear, running deep in his veins. He had gotten there too late. Ed was dead and Alphonse was all alone now. Ed had died scared and in pain. He had failed to keep him safe. All of his big talk and powerful alchemy and he had let Ed die. Falman and Armstrong either didn't notice his shaking voice or were polite enough not to say anything.

At this, the nurse softened, finally seeming to believe that he wasn't just here to interrogate a traumatized child. "He's in surgery. Dr. Frost is his primary physician. He really is excellent. One of best in his field."

Oh, thank God. Ed was still alive. He was alive and in surgery. That was good. He could work with that.

“Do you know if he’ll have to lose his hand?” That was something else bothering him, burrowing deep into his guts. Even with his limited medical knowledge, he could tell the hand was destroyed. He didn’t want Ed to die, but he also didn’t want him to lose another limb. Especially when he had barely recovered from his automail surgery a year prior.

Falman gasped. “His hand was that bad?” Right, his men hadn’t seen the state of him up close. And from far away, all the injuries just kind of blended. Mustang had told them what the hammer was likely used for, but they hadn’t seen the mangled and twisted fingers. They hadn’t seen the swollen, deformed limb that barely resembled a human hand.

“I’m sorry, sir. I don’t know anything about his hand. I’m sure the doctor will tell you as soon as he knows. Will you be staying?”

“Yes. Thank you for your help.” He stepped away from the desk to let her get back to her work.

“Sir, I know we were cataloging everything and trying to piece together...” He sounded horrified. “Sir, how injured was he?”

Mustang should have reassured him. He should have been a good commander and taken charge of the situation, telling Falman to get himself under control. They still had a job to do.

He was so tired.

“Very injured. I’ll relay the injuries to you and the others as soon as I know them all. I want you to stay out here and intercept any soldiers that aren’t on our team. They can’t talk to Fullmetal yet anyways, but I also don’t want them interrogating Al.”

Falman briefly looked like he wanted to argue. “Yes, sir,” he said, sounding dejected.

Mustang sighed and put his hand on his shoulder. “I know this is overwhelming, but we need to control ourselves. Any slip-up could put those boys in danger. Do I make myself clear?”

He straightened up and nodded. “Yes, sir. I’ll keep the military from getting to Al. As soon as you know something, let us know?”

“Of course.”

Falman finally seemed more at ease and went to post himself by the door of the hospital. Once Mustang was satisfied that he wasn’t also going to suffer a mental breakdown, he turned his attention to Major Armstrong.

“Take me to Alphonse and Hawkeye.”

“Of course, sir.” He led him away from the bustling waiting room and down a series of halls where it was much quieter. “Are you okay, sir?” he asked.

A few of the rooms had patients in them. He could hear the radio playing softly. Someone else coughed, a great, hacking cough. A doctor walked by them, muttering to herself and flicking through papers on her clipboard.

“I’m not injured. Why do you ask?” He kept his voice even and his eyes staring straight ahead.

“I meant mentally. You don’t seem to be doing very well.”

They stopped in front of a wooden door with a placard that announced it was the employee break room.

“I’m fine.” He put his hand on the handle, only for Armstrong to stop him.

“Sir, you’re not fine. I don’t know what Edward went through, and I never saw him, but it was enough to shake both Lieutenant Hawkeye and Alphonse very badly. It’s okay for you to not be fine.”

He gritted his teeth. “No, it’s not.”

“You can’t ignore your feelings forever. You have to face them.”

“I’ll do it later.”

“Sir—”

“Major, remove your hand and let me in the room, now.”

Armstrong hesitated for a second but did eventually relent. “I hope you know what you’re doing, sir,” he said. “I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

Mustang nodded and opened the door. Hawkeye was next to Al, arm on his back and murmuring what he assumed were comforting words. As soon as she heard him enter, she looked up, eyes immediately narrowed in suspicion. She relaxed a bit when she saw it was him.

“Sir.” She said. She looked as tired as he felt. And if she looked like crap, he must look like hot garbage. She wasn’t covered in blood like he was and her dress blues were still relatively intact and pressed. However, her hair was messy, falling out of her normal clip. She had dark circles under her eyes and her entire face was worn and haggard.

“Colonel?” Al sniffed. He was hunched in on himself, arms wrapped around his torso and shaking. It must be so hard to be a seven-foot-tall unbendable tank but still wanting to shrink and hide. There was nowhere to hide with that armor.

“Alphonse,” he said softly, shutting the door behind him. “You and your brother aren’t in trouble, but I do need to find out what happened. Are you okay to answer some questions right now?”

Al nodded. “Yes, sir. I can. Are you—are you sure we’re not in trouble?”

Hawkeye looked at him questioningly. Right, she wasn’t there when they discussed human transmutation. She was possibly one of the most knowledgeable people when it came to

alchemy, but he couldn't assume that she recognized the circle or how close they were to losing Ed entirely. He'd have to fill her in later.

"I promise, you Alphonse, you're not in trouble. I'm not mad at you or Ed."

"Okay."

He could tell Al didn't fully believe him. He could convince him later. Right now, he had to make sure they weren't going to be overheard. "Did you check to make sure we aren't being watched and there is no way to listen in?"

"Yes." She answered. "There is no evidence of bugs or recording equipment. There's only one door in and out of the room and there are no windows. The room next door is an X-ray room with enough lead in the walls to completely soundproof us. On the other side is there are no other rooms. No one will be able to listen in."

"Good, wait outside with Major Armstrong. Make sure we aren't disturbed." *I'll explain everything later.*

"Yes, sir. Call if you need anything, Al." She rested his hand on his shoulder briefly before pulling away and stepping outside.

Great. No more stalling. No more nurses keeping him from getting information. Just him and a traumatized eleven-year-old stuck in an expressionless, unfeeling suit of armor. How was he supposed to do this? Why didn't Hughes come with him? He was better at this sort of thing.

He sat down at the table.

"You're not wearing your usual uniform," Al said. "And neither was the lieutenant."

"We came straight from the event when we realized you two had been taken. There wasn't any time to change."

"Oh." Al looked down at his hands.

He should say something? Right? He should say something comforting.

"Your shirt's ruined. Sorry about that."

He looked down. The blood had dried and was now a rusty brown color, panting its way across his arms and chest, right where he had held Ed in his arms. There were some minor rips in the material. Scuff marks from the floor and ash from the people he burned. At least Al didn't have a sense of smell.

He could mend it if he wanted to. And it wasn't the first time he had had to scrub dried blood out of clothes. "It's fine, Al. I never liked this shirt anyways. I'll get a new one."

Al was still afraid of him and what he would do. That bothered him, more than he cared to admit. He knew these kids didn't fully trust him. He knew they (especially Ed) had a

complicated past with authority figures. He knew they were in a precarious situation where any wrong move could result in Ed being executed and Al being shipped off as a lab rat. He knew that he held more power and control over them than either would care to admit. He knew he was the only one who had complete power to ruin their lives at a mere whim. It still hurt that he didn't trust him.

Al was stalling. And Mustang was letting him stall. He knew what he had to do.

"Colonel—"

"I'm serious, Alphonse. I'm not mad at you or your brother and I fully intend to keep what happened to you a secret until I die."

Al let out a shocked gasp. Then he hunched in on himself even more. "But... we did it again. Even after the last time... Brother... he told them how to do it. He told them everything they needed to know. He was going to do it... You're not mad?"

"No, of course not." A rush of new, unpleasant emotions welled up inside of him. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know what he wanted to do. He wanted Al to trust him, to confide in him, to understand that he wasn't blaming them for what happened. But how do you go about doing that?

Maybe he should call Hawkeye back in here. She wasn't much better at being emotionally supportive. Especially since her version of emotional support tended to involve the liberal use of firearms. However, two heads had to be better than one. Right?

No. He wouldn't call her back in here. He needed someone standing guard outside just in case an overly nosey general managed to bulldoze his way past the front desk and came marching up, demanding answers.

Well, that meant he was on his own. Dammit. Nothing ever could be straightforward with these two.

He took another deep breath and thought carefully about his next words. "Alphonse," he said, his tone even and his voice gravely serious, "you and I both know that Ed would have never done it willingly. The state he's in proves that. I cannot be mad at either of you for being forced to do this. I'm angry at the Cretans, but I'm not angry at you. Do you understand?"

"But... he was going to do it. He told them how to fix the circle and all the ingredients that they needed. He was going to activate the circle. If you had been just a second later, he would have died. I would have watched my brother die!" He brought his hands to his face and started sobbing. Or, sobbing as well as he could, given his current state.

He should comfort him. He should say something comforting. Maybe put a hand on his shoulder as Hawkeye had done. Instead, he was frozen in place; watching a child break down in front of him because his brother was beaten and tortured into committing a taboo. He committed a taboo knowing full well what would happen if he did it again. Knowing full well what would happen if he survived, but was found out.

“He didn’t die, though. And he didn’t activate the circle. We got there in time. Ed is alive and he didn’t activate the circle.”

“How’d you even know where we were?” *Why didn’t you come earlier?*

The guilt that had previously been crushed under the weight of terror and rage he had been feeling since he got to the warehouse came rushing back to the surface. The fact that this went as far as it did was his fault. He didn’t call last night like he should have. He didn’t think of Ed as a viable target until literally no other possibility remained. He had failed these boys on so many levels and now one of them might lose his only hand and the other one was forced to watch his brother throw everything away to keep him safe.

He did his best not to let any of these emotions show. If Al knew he was breaking down, he’d try to help. That wasn’t his job. He needed Mustang to keep focused and stay in control. He needed Mustang to support him, not the other way around.

“I thought there was something up the moment I received the revised schedule,” he explained. “I mistakenly thought they were using it to assassinate one of the guests, so I had the team on high alert. Hughes was using their focus on us as a distraction so they could rifle through their files. When we realized the target was Ed, I had Falman call the library and see if you two were there. Once it was confirmed that you both had been taken, we simply used Hughes’ information to narrow down the search and find you. I’m sorry it took so long. I honestly thought you were safe in the library.”

“It’s okay,” Al said. His voice was still shaking.

Mustang didn’t feel like it was okay. He felt like everything was crumbling around him, including Al.

“Did you get all of them?” He asked.

“Yes.” No need to tell him about the mass suicide just yet. He’d hear about it eventually, but he’d probably feel guilty. The Elric brothers had a weird and intense relationship with death. Even though these people tortured them, they wouldn’t want them to die.

Al let out a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness. I was afraid you wouldn’t catch the one who left.”

Mustang’s heart stopped for the third time today. He felt his body go cold and the blood drain from his face. “What do you mean? One left?”

Al nodded. “Yes. The leader, I think. The other alchemist, the one who attacked you and Lieutenant Colonel Hughes, he said something about how this was all his stupid plan. He left not long before you guys got in here.”

He finally looked up and saw Mustang’s face.

“You... you didn’t find him?”

This day could not get any worse. “Shit.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Do you think you could describe what he looks like? We’ve shut down the borders so he won’t be able to get back to Creta.”

“But... that means he’ll be here. He’ll come after brother again. He—” Shit, he sounded like he was having a panic attack. And Mustang couldn’t ask him to breathe because he literally couldn’t.

Mustang decided he had to do something to comfort him because sitting across the table wasn’t working. He sat down next to Al, where Hawkeye had been earlier, and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. He pulled him close, mindful of the spikes. Was this helping? Was this comforting to him? He should probably say something as well.

“Al, he’s not going to come near you or Ed. Alright? I’ll have someone guarding you two all day and night. We’ll find him.”

“How? What if he manages to make it over the border? What if he’s already gone? What if he’s here waiting?”

“Kid, I’ve got an army of spies all over Amestris. Hughes does as well. Trust me, these people will be able to sniff him out with little more than a picture. Also, the Cretans may not know if he’s alive or if he was caught up in the fight earlier. We’ll use that to our advantage. We’ll find him.”

“Promise?”

He probably should not be making promises that he may not be able to keep. Especially after he had failed these kids so badly. “Promise. Do you think you can describe him to Major Armstrong? He’ll be able to draw up a sketch that I can distribute to get a start on tracking him down.”

Al took another shaking breath and nodded. “Yes, I can describe him. He—” He whimpered and curled in on himself. “He took off my helmet and was studying me.”

He winced and pulled him closer. Between Ed’s state of undress and Al’s response to having his helmet removed, his mind couldn’t help but conjure up the worst possible scenario.

“I’m sorry, Al. I promise you; he won’t come near you or Ed ever again.” Madame Christmas was going to get a call tonight. If anyone could find him, it would be her. And when she found him, well, Mustang let the other alchemist die far too quickly.

Al nodded and leaned into him some more. He stayed like that for a few more minutes, waiting for the boy to calm down. Finally, he figured he was calm enough to describe the missing alchemist to Armstrong.

“I’m just going to the door, Al. And it’s just going to be Armstrong in here.”

“You’ll stay too?”

“Of course.”

There was something so childish about the request. Both brothers were fiercely independent. They seemed to dive headfirst into danger and had no qualms about finding their own way and doing things their way. They were so insistent about being independent that it was easy to forget that they were children. Young children at that. Al was only eleven years old. Ed was only twelve. These kids might not bat an eye at fighting or danger, but they were still children. Scared, desperate children without a lot of people they could trust. If Al wanted him to stay, he would stay.

He stepped to the door, took one last look at Al, and then stuck his head out.

“Is everything alright, sir?” Hawkeye asked. She wasn’t looking at him. Instead, she was staring down the hall, her eyes tracking every single movement. Mustang couldn’t see much activity, but she always could see what he couldn’t.

“No. Alphonse has informed me that there was another doctor there, likely the leader, who left right before we got there.”

“That’s terrible!” Armstrong said.

He nodded. “Thankfully, he got a good look at him and was willing to describe him to you for a sketch.”

“Will we be distributing the sketch to the military?” he asked.

Mustang thought about it for a second. He did want to play by the books as much as possible. The more they cooperated, the less anyone would suspect that they were keeping secrets. However, he also knew how the military worked. There was always a chance they didn’t bother looking for the missing Alchemist, believing him to be over the border much like the prime minister. Or, they could find him but not punish him. Instead looking to get information from him about Creta and convince them to join their side. Or they could torture him until he revealed what the actual plan was. Then, not only would Ed and Al be in trouble, but everyone else would as well.

No. If Mustang wanted this dealt with his way, then he was going to have to deal with it his way.

“Not yet,” he said. “It’s too risky to allow the military access to him. I’ll have my spies see if they can’t track him down first.” If they couldn’t, then he would go to the military and let them know. He wasn’t going to risk having that monster walking free.

“Understood, sir.” Armstrong bowed his head. “Lieutenant, will you be alright out here? I think they’re wrapping up the warehouse and are going to be headed here soon.”

“I’ll be fine, sir.” She said, still not looking at them.

Content with the fact that everything had been taken care of, Mustang lead Armstrong back into the room.

“Alphonse, how are you, my boy?” he asked, sounding much more cheerful than he had outside.

“I’m fine, major.” He sounded anything but fine. However, Mustang understood. There was probably a lot going on in his head, a lot he was struggling to process. And they still didn’t know anything about Ed. Chances were, Al was about as far from fine as one could get, but there wasn’t much anyone could do about it. Comforting words were great, but they only got you so far.

“That’s good to hear. I hear you have someone you need me to sketch?”

Al nodded and went started describing the other alchemist. Mustang went back to sit beside him, hoping that his being near would help calm the boy, though he still wasn’t sure how. Maybe it was just wishful thinking on his part. The desperate need to do something so he didn’t feel so helpless.

After about twenty minutes of Armstrong asking questions and tweaking the sketch several times, he came up with what Al deemed to be close enough.

“Did you get his name?” Mustang asked.

“No, sorry, colonel.” Al hunched in on himself once more.

“It’s okay. This is already a big help and we’ll likely be getting his name from the Cretans. I need to go make some calls. Do you want Major Armstrong or Lieutenant Hawkeye to stay with you?”

One of them would have to be standing guard outside. Especially since it was likely the military was already here and itching to interrogate. It was a good thing Ed was still in surgery and would likely be unconscious for a few days. It gave him time to get everything he needed lined up and ready to go.

“Lieutenant Hawkeye, please,” Al said quietly.

He nodded and stood up. “Major, ensure that no one talks to him. I’ll be right back.”

“Of course, sir.”

Hawkeye gave him a look as he stepped out the door. After he finished making the necessary calls, he’d talk to her and Al and let them know what the plan was. He knew that Al would go along with it, especially if it meant protecting his brother. He just had to keep the military away from them until then.

He got to some phones lining the walls. It was busier here. He looked around, not seeing any soldiers. He dug through his pockets and fished out the appropriate amount of change, dialed, and then waited.

“Madam Christmas’ Bar, how can I help you?”

He could hear the familiar sounds of his sisters getting ready for the night. The bar would be opening soon and he hoped she'd be able to help him out.

"I'm going to send one of my men to central with a picture of a Cretan alchemist. I want him found. I want him alive. As soon as you have him, contact me." He didn't mean to sound so angry, but he couldn't help it. There was another monster out there. Ed and Al were still in danger. He wouldn't rest until he watched as his charred remains turned to ash and were blown away in the wind.

Madam Christmas sighed. "You don't sound too good, Roy-boy. What happened?"

He wanted to break down and tell her everything. He wanted her to comfort him like she had when he was a child. He wanted someone to tell him that everything would be alright. The same way he was assuring Al. He couldn't. Too many eyes watching him. Too many variables. Too much blood on his hands. He signed away his right to ask for comfort the moment he signed up for the military. He signed away his right to break down the moment he decided to climb the ladder and become Fuhrer.

"I'll explain later. Can you do this for me?"

She was quiet for a few seconds. "Of course, I can. But I'm serious, you don't sound good. I hope you're at least talking to someone."

"I will."

He won't.

"You're a terrible liar." She sighed again. "Alright. Let me know what train they're on and try and get me a name. I'll see what I can dig up."

"Thank you." He hung up the phone, not wanting to risk staying on for any longer. Even after he hung up the phone, though, he still stayed in the booth, hearing everything but not comprehending any of it.

Finally, he pulled himself out of his daze and started walking back to the room.

"Wait, hold up!" Someone shouted.

Mustang turned to see a doctor running towards him, dressed as if he had just been in surgery.

The doctor skidded to a stop in front of him, briefly hunching over with his hands on his knees, out of breath. Mustang stayed, curious as to what the doctor wanted.

Finally, he straightened back up. "Are you Colonel Roy Mustang?" He looked to be about his age. He also looked like he had been through hell. Deep, dark circles under his eyes, hair looking like it had turned prematurely grey, his scrubs hanging limp and wrinkled on his body, covered in blood and other various fluids.

"I am," he said, guarded, ready for anything. This doctor could have been another Cretan spy, ready to kill him and take Al and Ed back to Creta to force them to finish the experiment. He

still had his gloves on. They were stained with Ed's blood, but they'd still work. He pressed his thumb and forefinger together, ready to snap the moment this man decided to try and end him. He wouldn't let it happen. He wouldn't let anyone else near these boys.

"My name is Dr. Frost. I'm the surgeon in charge of Edward Elric. You're his guardian, right." He pulled out a clipboard and started scribbling something on it.

Mustang nodded stiffly. He didn't look like he was about to give him bad news. Doctors had a certain way of talking when they were going to give bad news. This one seemed calm, relaxed.

"Are you going to the other brother? We can walk and talk. I'll give you the updates on the boy's condition."

Mustang nodded again and let Dr. Frost lead him through the hospital. He was trying desperately to keep his emotions under control. The war between anger, worry, fear, and hopelessness were battling it out. And he didn't want any of them to win. He had to stay in control. He couldn't afford to break down.

"How is he?" he asked, surprising even himself at how even his voice sounded.

Frost flipped through the file in his hand. "It might just be easier to tell you what isn't injured."

His stomach dropped.

"The port on his right shoulder is remarkably untouched. There does seem to be a bit of water damage, but that was easy enough to fix. Neither of his femurs were broken and he should still be able to walk, hear, and see properly when he heals."

His stomach kept dropping. That was it? That was everything that wasn't injured? "What about his injuries?"

Frost finally stopped walking, looking grave for the first time. "I'm going to be honest, colonel, I've seen some truly horrific stuff on this job, and this beats out all of them. This kid went through something no one should ever have to go through. Honestly, I'm surprised he's still alive. I wasn't hopeful when I first saw him in the theater."

He said nothing. He thought since it had been hours since he last saw Ed, that the rage he had felt in the warehouse was diminishing to a more manageable level. Turns out that was wrong. Already his mind was working through how to sneak into the Cretan's holding cells and burn them all. He would burn them all.

"Most of his ribs were broken, the rest were bruised. The tibia, fibula, radius, ulna, and humerus on his remaining limbs were also broken. The hand was smashed repeatedly with a hammer."

"Will he lose it?" Mustang asked, desperate for someone to tell him.

“No. The reconstruction surgeon is working on it now. It’ll have a couple hundred pins in it, but with enough physical therapy and time, he’ll be able to use it again. There was a very deep stab wound on his forearm and several cuts on his back. Some of them are in the early stages of infection. He sustained a pretty nasty concussion. We had to put him in a medically induced coma until the swelling goes down. His orbital socket of his left eye was shattered. There’s evidence that he had been waterboarded and repeatedly dunked in water. He had pneumonia and an ear infection in both ears. Severely dehydrated. Early stages of hypothermia, and burns on his temple and forehead.”

His body went ice cold.

He...

He thought he had enough control.

Did he...

He felt like he was going to be sick.

“Burns?” he asked, his voice raspy. He was acutely aware his forefinger and thumb were still pressed together. Still ready to snap. Still ready to burn. His legs were shaking and his body felt like it was seconds away from collapsing. In his rage, did he...

“I was confused about them as well,” Frost said, not even looking up from his files. “I asked a forensic expert. She thinks based on the pattern they likely came from a gun being fired close to him.”

Mustang barely kept himself from collapsing. He didn’t know if he was selfish to be relieved that he wasn’t the one who had hurt Ed.

“If you fire a blank close enough to the skin, it’ll leave a minor burn. It shouldn’t scar, but it does explain some of the hearing loss I found.”

Frost was either oblivious to his panic, or nice enough not to mention anything.

“Is that all?” He asked, still battling between growing horror and relief.

“The broad strokes, at least. Oh, there is one thing,” Frost said, flicking through the papers once more. “His automail port on the left leg.”

“It was damaged?”

“Not exactly,” Frost said. “Like I said, the port on the shoulder looks mostly fine, but the one on his leg, well, no one knows what the issue is. The way the nerves are acting up, it’s something we’d expect to see with certain autoimmune diseases. But, he has no history or evidence of having such a disease. And the fact that it’s concentrated to just his leg suggests some sort of trauma happened there. At first, we thought it was phantom limb pain, but that’s characterized by brief and intense spikes in nerve activity. This is sustained and chronic at a level it should not be. We just can’t find any evidence that it was damaged.”

Mustang frowned. "Did you have your resident automail engineer check it?"

"After he's out of surgery, we'll run some tests. Because it doesn't appear to be life-threatening, we decided to focus on his other, more serious injuries."

That made some sort of sense, he supposed.

"Any questions, colonel?"

There was one that he had, but he didn't want to ask it. Ed had already been through enough. He couldn't stand if he had gone through something else. But he forced himself to ask it anyway. Because him being kept in the dark due to his selfishness wouldn't help anyone.

"When we found him, most of his clothes had been removed," he started, his voice catching in his throat. He took a deep breath, steadied himself, and then continued. "Was there any evidence of..." he didn't steady himself enough. He didn't want to say it out loud. He didn't want to know. "Was there any evidence of sexual assault?" he forced the words from his throat and into the open.

There. He couldn't run away now. He had to face what had happened to Ed, everything that had happened to Ed. Even if it made him sick to his stomach. Whatever he was feeling, Ed had to be feeling ten times over.

The doctor shook his head.

Relief flooded through Mustang's veins. They'd have a lot to deal with, but at least they didn't have to deal with that.

"No evidence," Frost said. "That doesn't mean that nothing happened. But if it did, it didn't leave a mark."

He nodded. He understood, but chances are if they were this rough with him, there'd be some sort of evidence.

"He is going to be okay, though?"

"We'll have to run some more tests once he's out of the coma, which should only be a week. And there is the issue of trauma and mental health issues stemming from the experience. However, if he has a good support system, I expect he'll make a full recovery."

"Thank you, doctor. Is he out of surgery now?"

"Maybe about another hour and then he'll be out. I'm assuming you'll relay this to the brother?"

"Of course."

"Then, if you'll excuse me, I'll head back to the theater and help the other surgeon finish up. I'll come get you when he's out."

Mustang watched as he left back down the hall. It was empty now, quieter than it had been all day. Most of the patients were likely in their rooms, getting ready to eat. Visiting hours would be over soon. He needed to get back to Al. He had to tell him his brother was going to be okay. He needed to tell them about the gold cover story. He had to get the sketch to Breda and send him to Central so he could pass it on to Madam Christmas. He had to keep it together. He was a colonel who would one day be Furber. He couldn't allow himself the luxury of breaking down.

The hallway was spinning. It felt like all the noise had been sucked out of the air. He couldn't breathe. Something heavy was sitting on his chest. His hands were shaking. His body was shaking. His heart was pounding and blood was roaring in his ears.

He stumbled his way to the end of the hall and found a small alcove. It was likely where they stored carts that were not in use. From the main hallway, it was impossible to see from any direction. And given that there were no links to other portions of the hospital nearby or people in the rooms around him, it was unlikely for anyone to come this way. It was unlikely for anyone to stumble on him.

He pressed himself into the corner and buried his face in his hands. He could feel the rough material of his gloves scratching at his face. Irritating his face. His legs gave out and he sank to the floor, trying desperately to get his breathing under control.

He didn't cry. That would leave obvious evidence. The last thing he needed was to go into an interrogation with puffy red eyes and a runny nose. He couldn't appear weak. He had to stay in control. Besides, any sign of weakness from him would take Hawkeye and Armstrong's focus from Al. He needed them. He needed all of them.

And Mustang needed to get up. He needed to keep going. Alphonse and Hawkeye were waiting for him to let them know what the plan was. Hughes was waiting for him to call for an update. Madam Christmas was waiting for him to send one of his men with information on the Cretan Alchemist. His men were waiting for him to lead them through this tricky situation. He knew all of this.

Knowing didn't matter.

He didn't care.

He just sat there. The events of the day and the knowledge of what his youngest subordinate had gone through crashing into him. The guilt from earlier increased tenfold. This was all his fault. He didn't think through all the options. He forgot to consider all possibilities and all pieces in play. He didn't take the potential threat to Ed and Al seriously and now there was a very real possibility that Ed would be too traumatized to even function.

So, he sat there. On the floor, head in his hands, dress blues still pinching uncomfortably and restricting him.

He should get up and continue to lead.

He didn't.

He didn't care.

Chapter End Notes

If I had a nickel for every time I had Mustang break down alone because Ed was seriously injured, I'd have two nickels. Which isn't a lot, but it's weird it's happened twice.

Ed's going to be missing for a few chapters. Poor kid needs to rest some before we get going with Hurt 2: Electric Boogaloo. But you get yourself some nice Al & Mustang bonding time instead. Hope you enjoy it!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Remember how I said this was part of the previous chapter but it was long so I split it in half. Yeah. Over 15,000 words total. Editing it nearly killed me!

I'll respond to comments later today so if you left one on the last chapter, thank you! I'll answer them later.

Trigger warnings: mentions of alcohol abuse, strangulation, medical stuff. The usual.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He didn't stay on the floor for very long. The training (trauma) he picked up in Ishval made him restless. A mantra pounding through his skull over and over again, keeping his eyes from slipping closed and his body from resting.

Don't stay in one place for too long.

Get out of the open.

There are enemies everywhere, waiting to walk in on you and take you out.

You've stayed here for too long. Get out of here. Find someplace safe. Here isn't safe. No one can find you like this. If they do, they'll hurt you. They'll kill you.

There are enemies everywhere.

Except, the enemies he was afraid of weren't enemy soldiers. They were his own colleagues. They were the people he was supposed to trust with his life. They were the people who he was supposed to trust would always have his back.

He was afraid of an army of men and women in blue. He was afraid they'd march into the hospital and strong-arm the doctors and nurses out of the way. He was afraid they'd rip Ed and Al from him. He was afraid he'd have to sit in the gallery and watch as they put a bag over Ed's head and fill his body with bullets. He was afraid that Al would be taken to one of their labs, dismantled, and never to be seen from or heard from again.

He was afraid of many things, which is why he couldn't sit here and break down. He may not have enough power to stop Ed and Al from getting taken, but sitting here, hiding away like a child wasn't going to help. He had to be strong. He had to keep it together. He was the only thing that could stop those kids from going through hell again.

He took a deep breath. He wasn't in Ishval anymore, but he was still in a war zone surrounded by enemies. He stood back up, straightened out the rumpled dress shirt, and walked back to the room where Al was staying. He couldn't show any weakness. He couldn't let anyone see he was afraid. He couldn't let his guard down.

He'd break down later. In his apartment. Alone with nothing more than a bottle of whatever liquor he had stashed away in his cupboards. That was a good plan. He'd break down later.

Later, later, later. It's always later. This isn't sustainable.

It didn't matter if it wasn't sustainable. He had no other choice. Al still needed him. He still needed to find the missing alchemist. He still had to keep the military from suspecting them. He still had to help Hughes cover this whole mess up. He still might have to go to war with Creta and burn the entire country to the ground. He still had to keep it together so others wouldn't know how much he cared for the boys.

If he didn't, then he couldn't blame the Cretans for their deaths.

"Has anyone been by?" he asked Armstrong, pausing in front of the door.

"No sir. No one has been by. I suspect the nurses are withholding Alphonse's location. At least for now."

"Good." He nodded. He was about to step through the door but paused. He should probably assure the major that Ed was still alive, and was expected to make a full recovery. It was the least he could do considering he asked the man to commit treason, threatened to execute him, and was now having him stand in front of a door (thus committing more treason) to keep the military from interrogating Al.

"Fullmetal is going to be out of surgery in a few hours. He's expected to make a full recovery."

Armstrong let out a sigh of relief. "That's good to hear. I was worried. I didn't stay long at the crime scene, but the little I did see... What exactly happened to him?"

Mustang opened his mouth, ready to list the numerous injuries Ed had sustained. He felt sick again. "I have a list of injuries, but I don't know what happened to him. I'm going to talk to Alphonse now and see if he can't fill me in."

It felt like he was lying. Al had only been at the warehouse for about thirty minutes or so and most of Ed's injuries were probably done in the hours beforehand. And he doubted either any of the Cretans had taken the time to monologue about what they had done to him. In Al's honesty, Al would probably provide very little insight into the horrors Ed faced. He didn't let Armstrong know any of this. He didn't want to tell him anything because, selfishly, he was still hoping that if he didn't say out loud what had happened to the boy he had come to care for in such a short amount of time, then it'd all go away. He knew this was ridiculous. He knew this wasn't going to help anyone. He didn't care. He couldn't list the injuries to Armstrong.

“Of course, sir. I’ll keep an eye out for any soldiers and let you know when one is approaching.” He returned to his post. Mustang took that as his cue to leave and knocked on the door.

When he opened it, he saw Hawkeye and Al in much the same position they had been in earlier.

“I spoke to the doctor about Fullmetal,” he said, stepping fully inside and closing the door quietly behind him.

“Really?” Al looked at him. He looked so hopeful, and yet so afraid.

“Yes. He expects that he’ll make a full recovery, though it will take some time.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Al collapsed back in the seat. Hawkeye also looked equally relieved, but like she still had questions.

Mustang took a seat in the chair opposite of them. *Keep it together. He needs you. He doesn’t need you to break down.*

“Can you tell us what happened, Al?” he said. His hands were shaking and his stomach wouldn’t stop doing somersaults. He vaguely wondered if there was a trash can somewhere in here for him to throw up in. *No, you can’t throw up. You need to be here for Al. Whatever you think you’re feeling, these kids are feeling it a thousand times worse. Be here for them.*

Despite the relief that was flooding through Al, he froze up and hunched in on himself again. “It’s all my fault,” he whispered, his voice shaking.

He and Hawkeye exchanged a look.

“What do you mean?”

“Brother didn’t want to go with him, but I made him.”

Falman had mentioned something about a soldier coming to pick up Alphonse and one of the dead Cretans was dressed like a lieutenant in the Amestrian military. It wasn’t too far of a stretch to imagine some soldier coming in and telling Ed that he was needed.

“This isn’t your fault,” Hawkeye assured him. “You couldn’t have known and the uniforms were legitimate.”

“No,” Al sobbed. There was something so wrong about hearing the voice of an eleven-year-old sobbing, but knowing that no tears were coming out.

He should comfort him. He should walk over there and say comforting, soothing words about how it wasn’t his fault and everything was going to be okay.

He was frozen in the chair. He was never very good with crying people, especially crying children. Whenever his job called for him to deal with a distraught member of the public, he

often handed them off to someone else. Usually Havoc or Armstrong. He never knew what to say or how to handle them. Whenever he did try, people usually ended up just crying more.

But this was different because this was Al. This wasn't a stranger on the street. This was a kid he specifically designated himself as a guardian of. This was a kid he knew and cared about. This was a kid he wanted to see happy. So, he should help comfort him.

"No, he didn't want to go." Al started sobbing harder.

On second thought, Hawkeye seemed to have this under control. He'd let her handle this.

"He kept trying to come up with a reason not to go and I forced him." He continued. His armor was making horrible screeching and groaning sounds as the entirety of his body shook with grief. "I— it's all my fault he got hurt. I didn't listen to him. If I hadn't forced him to go..."

"If you hadn't forced him to go, the soldier would have adapted and taken you both," Mustang said. At least some part of his brain still appeared to be thinking calmly and rationally. "And you and I both know as long as you were there, he would have done the transmutation and likely died in the rebound." That... didn't seem like a very comforting thing to say.

Despite his reservations, his words did seem to mollify Al, however slightly. "I—yeah," he said, hunching in on himself. "Yeah, you're right. I know you're right. He looked just like any other soldier. Everything he said sounded so official and he didn't even have an accent. He said that you requested brother."

Anger flared up in Mustang. How *dare* these monsters use him to get to his boys. How dare they use his name to trick and control them. The fake lieutenant died by cyanide. Mustang's fingers twitched. He should have never given them the choice to kill themselves.

"What exactly did he say?" he asked, still shocked at how even and calm his voice was.

"He was vague about it. He said that something had happened at the event and they wanted brother to come. Just him. He said I was civilian and they didn't want to risk me getting caught in the crossfire, which would make the military look bad."

To be fair, that is exactly the kind of thing the military would say.

"What did he say when he got you?" Hawkeye asked.

"He said that they had found a transmutation circle at the event and brother was trying to figure out what it did but was stuck. They didn't want to come and get me, but they were afraid it was going to be activated and needed my help."

It was likely Ed was told the same thing the day before, which was probably why he didn't suspect anything until it was too late. He wondered how long it took him to realize something was wrong. He wondered what he thought right before he was captured. They had to have

knocked him out. There was no way that kid went along with their demands. He would have fought like hell to get out of there if he was conscious.

“Then what happened?”

“They took me to a warehouse. They said it was a base of operations just in case the Cretans decided to attack Eastern Command.”

Once again, a very plausible explanation that even he wouldn’t suspect.

“They said they needed to brief me on what they did know. I stepped through the door and...” Al hunched in on himself even more.

“I think... I think brother was trying to warn me to run. I remember hearing him say something but it was too quiet. I didn’t listen and the other alchemist trapped me before I could do anything.”

Great, he was sobbing again. Shit, what could he say to get him to stop sobbing and blaming himself? Could he maybe call Havoc here so he could deal with this?

“It’s okay, Alphonse,” Hawkeye said. “You’re doing great. If you need to stop, we can stop for now.”

Al took a deep breath and shook his head. “No. You need to know what happened. I can do this.”

His fortitude always impressed Mustang.

“I—I looked up and saw him lying there. They just left him chained to the wall. There was so much blood and his hand looked... it looked wrong.” Al’s voice cracked and he started shaking again.

Hawkeye was rubbing his arm though he couldn’t feel it. Perhaps her presence alone was enough to calm him.

“The alchemist who escaped, he started saying something to brother. He didn’t even finish his sentence when brother agreed to do it. That’s when I saw the circle.”

Hawkeye’s eyes briefly flickered over to him. A silent question.

“What did the circle do, Al?” Her voice was even, calm, steady, but still forceful and powerful.

This time, Al didn’t hunch in on himself. He physically pushed her away. Hawkeye’s control over her emotions broke as she looked at Mustang in shock.

Al turned from them and curled in on himself as much as he could. “He... he didn’t want to. He only agreed because I was there. This is all my fault. Please... please don’t hurt him. He didn’t want to. I swear, he didn’t want to. Please, if you’re going to punish someone, punish me. He wouldn’t have done it if I wasn’t there. Please.”

“Al, what did he agree to do?”

Mustang decided to cut the kid a break. He had already told him, several times, that they weren't in trouble. He didn't know if Al didn't believe him. Or if he was so traumatized by everything that had happened that he couldn't comprehend that Mustang did not blame him one bit.

“Human transmutation,” he said.

Hawkeye once more lost her composure. A cascade of shock, horror, and anger fell over her features. Her fingers twitched in a way that told Mustang that she was seconds away from pulling a gun and shooting someone.

“They wanted Fullmetal to perform human transmutation.”

“Colonel, I'm sorry. I know we said we'd never do it again.” Al turned from them more, so now all he could see was his quaking back.

Hawkeye, thankfully, decided she wasn't going to let Al run away from her and wrapped his hulking body in her arms again. She held him as tightly as she could, practically hauling him off of his chair and onto her own so that he couldn't run away without toppling them both over. She looked ridiculous hugging a suit of armor that was double her size. Her arms didn't even wrap around his torso. Al's sobs made the entire situation less comical.

“It's not your fault, Al,” she said fiercely. “None of this is your fault. You did nothing wrong and Edward did nothing wrong. Neither of you will be punished.”

She glared at Mustang. He couldn't stop the small smile that spread across his lips. Ah yes, he had chosen a good team.

Al wasn't listening to her. Both brothers had an unhealthy relationship with guilt. They took on every bad thing that happened to the other as if they alone should be able to stop it when that wasn't the case. Mustang and Hawkeye knew this better than anyone. Sometimes, bad things happened to people and no amount of skill or power could stop it. It was almost egotistical, in a way, the fact that they clung to this belief that they and they alone could stop every bad thing from happening, at least to each other. But he understood where it was coming from. Ed was all Al had left, and vice versa. And, while Mustang didn't know their entire story, he did know that there wasn't anyone to regularly take care of them and protect them for a long time. Ed, being the older one, took most of the burden for caring for Al on himself. He hid the fact that this wore him down through brash actions and biting words, but Mustang could see how tired he was. And if he could see it, then Al likely could as well. So, Al did what any normal, good person would do. He tried to help out where he could protect Ed when he could. Except, he wasn't perfect. He wasn't all-knowing. He made mistakes.

“It's all my fault,” Al whimpered.

“It's not.” Mustang sighed. Havoc wasn't here. Al wasn't listening to Hawkeye. He was still scared and upset. Mustang was the one who took on this burden, so Mustang needed to be the one to help him. He wanted to help him. He wanted them to trust him with their lives. He

wanted them to come to him when they needed help. He wasn't going to get that sitting here like an interrogator while someone else did all the comforting.

"You know it's not your fault. And, when Ed wakes up, he won't blame you for a second. Why should you blame yourself, then?"

"He should though. I..." Al let out another sob. "All those injuries. They stabbed him and then just left him on the ground. They just left him there like he was... like he was nothing. He was in so much pain and there was blood all over him. Coming out of his mouth. His leg was twisted the wrong way. He's not nothing. He's my brother and they didn't even care."

Mustang suppressed a groan. They weren't getting anywhere with this. Besides, if anyone was at fault (other than the Cretans, of course), then it was him. He knew something was up but was still naïve enough to think Ed and Al wouldn't be affected. He knew the Cretans were focusing specifically on him and his team but was still egotistical enough to believe it had something to do with the diplomatic event. If he had just called the library last night like he wanted to, then he would have found out immediately that Ed was missing and they could have stopped a few of the injuries from happening. Instead, he allowed his selfish desires to dictate his actions. He allowed his laziness to make decisions instead of the duty to keep his team safe. He decided that he would rather risk Ed's safety for a few hours instead of call and deal with the inevitable headache. And look where that got him. In a hospital desperately trying to console a traumatized child while his other one might be so damaged by the experience that he would never be the same! Al wasn't the one at fault here. Mustang was. He should have known better. He should have done better. He should have been better.

How ironic. Here he was trying to convince Al it wasn't his fault, and yet he was blaming himself. Maybe that's why he and Hawkeye were having such a difficult time getting through to him. He could sense their guilt and latched onto it to feed his own. Misery does love company.

He decided to try a different tactic, for Al, Hawkeye, and himself.

"You know, kid," He made it a point to never show any ounce of affection towards Ed and Al, at least no more than what he would show to any of his other men. He was careful to ensure a barrier of professionalism, or in Ed's case, insults and fighting, was there to distract people, to cause them to come to other conclusions. He wasn't soft. He wasn't kind. He wasn't caring. He didn't want Ed and Al to get hurt, but there was nothing deeper there. Just a superior officer looking out for his subordinates.

And yet, it was just him, Hawkeye, and Al in this room. He trusted Hawkeye with every fiber of his being. And he knew she knew his feelings towards the Elric brothers. She held many of the same feelings herself. He knew that she wouldn't see this as a weakness to latch onto. She wouldn't see this as something that kept him from reaching his goals. If anything, having these two boys to look out for solidified his goals even more. He was no longer fighting for a vague future. He was fighting because Ed and Al were going to be in this world after he died. And he wanted to make sure he was leaving behind a good one.

He stood up and walked to the other side of the table. He wrapped an arm around Al's shoulders, letting his hand fall so he was touching Hawkeye's arm, his thumb stroking the

rough, scratchy fabric of her dress blues.

“We are all probably going to blame ourselves for a while. But make no mistake, the only people who are at fault here are the Cretans and the Cretans alone.” He wasn’t sure if Al believed him. Hell, he wasn’t sure he believed himself. But somehow, saying the words out loud made him feel better.

“Fullmetal is going to need all of us to help him when he wakes up, and it’ll be harder for us to be there for him if we’re feeling guilty.”

Al’s shaking gradually slowed and his sobs softened to hiccups. Mustang was still unsure how this whole soul bond thing worked but he was fairly certain Al didn’t have a diaphragm or lungs to create hiccups. Maybe it was just a force of habit? Whatever the case, he was calming down, leaning slightly into Mustang’s side. His armor digging into his ribs uncomfortably. But he’d take. He’d take years of discomfort if it meant that Al felt safe.

“And he’s the only one who can see right through us.” He continued. “He won’t focus on himself if he thinks you or any member of the team is negatively affected by this. This guilt is never going to fully go away, but you can control it. You can focus on helping him and you can keep moving forward.”

This was a much different type of speech than what he had given to the brothers when he first found them. The circumstances were similar, but the situation was completely different. These kids didn’t need to be yelled at. They had done nothing wrong and were forced into an awful situation. They needed support. He hoped he was doing a good enough job at supporting them.

“You really aren’t mad at him?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Even though we promised to never do it again?”

He tried not to get annoyed. Logically, he knew it would take a long time for Al to fully believe that Mustang wasn’t mad or lying just to pull the rug out from under him and hand them over to the military.

“Yes, because I know this was not willing for either of you. And even if Ed had done the transmutation, I wouldn’t be mad at him.”

“I’m glad you see it that way, sir,” Hawkeye said evenly. “However, the military will not be so charitable. What are we going to tell them?”

Mustang sighed and pulled back. Slowly, Hawkeye released Al as well. He didn’t turn away from them. In fact, he looked up at Mustang, his eyes still filled with fear and trepidation.

“I had Major Armstrong bring some lead over to the warehouse. The Cretans wanted Ed to make gold and he refused.”

“What about the surviving insurgents?” Hawkeye asked, still staring at him, unblinking, her fingers twitching. Yeah, it was probably a good thing they were all dead. If anyone could kill them in a prison with no windows and hundreds of guards, it was probably Hawkeye.

He did not want to admit the fact that everyone was dead in front of Al, but he also didn't see any other way. Now that Hawkeye had brought it up, it would eat away at him until Mustang admitted what had happened. Besides, his motives for keeping the deaths hidden were more selfish than practical.

“They decided to not risk going through interrogation. They used cyanide.” Was that vague enough for Al not to understand?

“They're dead!” Apparently not.

Mustang suppressed a wince. “We tried to save them, but it was too late. There are no survivors. The diplomats at the event were rounded up and taken in for questioning, but it's unclear how much any of them knew beyond the fact that we needed to be distracted. The Prime Minister has already fled the country. The only people who know what they were actually after are the team, Fullmetal, and you.”

“And they're willing to lie about this?” Al honestly sounded shocked.

Havoc and Breda would probably feel insulted. Of course, they would lie about this! His men were in a unique position within the military. At the end of the day, they weren't loyal to the military or even to him. They were loyal to doing the right thing, even if that meant going against the military's orders. And this was undoubtedly the right thing. Yes, they did follow Mustang's orders, often without question, but that was because Mustang made it a point to work towards a better future. He didn't doubt the moment he started showing signs of desiring power over peace, everyone, Hawkeye, and Hughes included, would drop him.

“Yes, they're willing to lie about this. Hughes says that gold is plausible enough to stop the military from getting suspicious. I destroyed the transmutation circle and got rid of the... remains. Falman says there's no evidence of human transmutation in the notes. If the military is looking for something more, they won't find it.”

“It's that easy?”

He nodded. “It's that easy. The fact that there was no gold or evidence of a transmutation circle, other than the one used to trap you and one Fullmetal made in an attempt to escape, means he won't be punished at all. He'll be seen as a hero, most likely.”

Not that that made things any better. Mustang wasn't about to pretend like Ed withstanding nearly two days of non-stop torture wasn't brave, but somehow, calling him a hero felt hollow. There was nothing heroic or honorable about what he went through. He should have never been there in the first place.

Al straightened up slightly. He finally seemed to be in control of his emotions and trusting in what Mustang said. He wasn't sure how much more sobbing and self-blame he could take.

God he couldn't wait to get blackout drunk tonight. The hangover would be awful, but he did not want to wallow in his self-pity sober.

"Do you think you can remember that? Some other members of the military are going to want to question you, even though you weren't there for very long. Hughes will do his best to be there, but I want to make sure you have the story straight?"

"They wanted to make gold, but brother wouldn't do it. Even after I was taken." Al nodded to himself. "Yeah, I can remember that."

He glanced at Hawkeye, sure she was okay with all of this but still wanting to check. She nodded to him. Great. Now they just had to get to Ed before anyone else did.

Hawkeye stood up. "I should check in with the lieutenant colonel to see if he wants to question me now," she said.

"Of course, lieutenant. Let me know if anything changes."

Damn, that meant he had to stay here alone with Al. While he was feeling better about comforting him and while Al did seem to have calmed down significantly than when he first walked in on him, he still wasn't quite sure what to do.

The door clicked shut, leaving them in awkward silence. Mustang's mind started to race with things he should be doing, each time managing to talk himself out of doing something like hugging Al or talking. He just didn't know what to say. He was still standing by Al. He should sit down. Right? Should he sit down in the chair he was sitting in earlier or Hawkeye's chair? Did Al even want to be comforted by him? Maybe he should get Armstrong back in here. The muscle show wasn't going to help, but it couldn't exactly hurt. Right?

"Sir," Al asked carefully after a few minutes, breaking the silence, "why did you shoot fire at brother?"

Oh, shit. Yeah. That was not his best decision. It likely was a major reason Al seemed so fearful of him. And Ed... Mustang shuddered as he remembered the boy's pleading as he held him in his arms. The fact that Ed, who was in so much pain and had been tortured by strangers, was so terrified of *him* that he was intent on using every ounce of strength he had left to beg Mustang not to burn him would play on a loop in his mind until he died.

"Alphonse, I am so sorry I did that. I swear I wasn't aiming for him. I wanted to destroy the circle before he or anyone else could activate it."

"Did you..." Al stopped and took a deep breath. "Did he get burned?"

Mustang swallowed. Technically, he didn't burn Ed. There wasn't a singed hair on his head because of his alchemy. However, there were still burns on him and when Al saw him, he'd likely assume the worst.

"I didn't burn him. However,"

Al tensed up.

“There were burns evident on his forehead and temple. The doctor thinks it was the result of a firearm going off near him.”

“How do you know it wasn’t you?” Al asked. He preferred angry and protective Al over sobbing and guilty Al, but that didn’t mean that he enjoyed the interrogation. Even if it was necessary if they were ever going to move forward.

Mustang couldn’t bring himself to be offended. He had every right to be angry. He should have found another way to damage the circle and stop it from working. Even though he didn’t hurt Ed, he very well could have. Fire was unpredictable and uncontrollable. One wrong calculation and he very well could have killed the child he was trying to protect.

“The placement of the burns and where they were in relation to the fire. If I did burn him, it would have also burned his arm and hand, but there was no evidence of burns in that area. Also, if the burns look how I think they look, they’re very distinctive.”

“I didn’t know guns could do that,” Al said, the fight leaving him as quickly as it came.

“Hawkeye has a few scars from similar injuries. You can take a look at it if you want. But I promise you, Al, you can’t mix up burns from my fire and burns from a firearm.”

He nodded. Mustang didn’t feel like it was a victory. Shit, he had really messed up the rescue operation.

There was a knock and then the door opened.

“Sir,” Major Armstrong said, popping his head in. “Dr. Frost said Edward is out of surgery if you two would like to go see him.”

“Really?” Al perked up. “We can go see him? Is he awake?”

Dr. Frost stepped in. He glared at Mustang and seemed even more tired than he had a few hours ago. Had this man been performing surgery on Ed non-stop for the past five hours? “I’m afraid not yet. We had to put him in a medically induced coma. He should wake up in a few days. I hope this is good enough to convince the military not to interrogate him?”

Mustang didn’t falter under that glare. “Yes. I’ll pass your diagnosis along to my superiors. He’ll be questioned when you deem him healthy enough to do so.”

Frost continued to glare at him.

“A medically induced coma?” Al asked, his voice quiet.

This seemed to snap Frost out of his attempts to glare Mustang to death. He pulled Al aside and started talking to him quietly. He decided to let them have a bit of privacy. Besides, he still had things he had to take care of.

Mustang turned to Armstrong. “Do you know if Falman is still here?”

“I can go check, sir. Why?”

“I want him to stand guard outside of Fullmetal’s room. Just in case any Cretan spies are still impersonating Amestrian Military officials,” he said. It sounded plausible enough. They did find a Cretan wearing an authentic Amestrian uniform, though he was a lieutenant and not of a higher rank. Still, it should be enough to dissuade any members of the military from getting to Ed and Al without at least one member of his team to help control the situation.

“Oh, but he must be really tired. And he’s still in his ceremonial uniform,” Al said.

“He’ll be fine for a few hours, Al. It’ll give us enough time to set up a more permanent schedule.”

“I can continue standing guard,” Armstrong said.

Mustang shook his head. “You should help Hughes with the investigation.”

“Of course, sir. If I may, Lieutenant Ross and Lieutenant Brosh, two of my finest lieutenants, are also in East City. I can recommend them to be on guard duty, especially tonight. I’m sure you and your men need to rest.”

He wasn’t sure how much rest he or anyone else was going to get tonight. He was so tired. His body wanted nothing more than to collapse in a bed and sleep for a thousand years. But his mind... He wasn’t sure if he’d ever sleep again.

Ed had begged him not to burn him.

Ed and Al were scared he was going to hurt them.

As for Ross and Brosh; he wasn’t too familiar with the two lieutenants that served under Armstrong. However, if he trusted them to recommend them for such a precarious mission, then he would trust them as well. At least for tonight. It wasn’t like Ed was going to be awake to answer any questions anyways.

“Alright. Debrief them and have them relieve Falman in four hours. I’ll have Havoc come by tomorrow morning to relieve them.”

“Understood, sir. Alphonse?”

Al looked up at him. “Yes, major?”

“Do not fret. Your brother is in capable hands.” He bowed to them and walked out the door.

“Glad to see he’s taking this seriously,” Mustang muttered.

“What do you mean?” Al asked.

“He hasn’t taken his shirt off once. Normally, you can’t keep the damn thing on him.”

Al and Dr. Frost looked at him, confused.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get the full show later, I’m sure.” He straightened up. “Ready to go see him?”

Al nodded and the two of them followed Dr. Frost through the maze of hallways once more.

“I’ll give you a list of people who are going to be standing guard outside his room,” Mustang said. “Anyone else, you have my full permission to refuse.”

“Of course. Patient confidentiality is one of our top priorities. I don’t care how high you rank in the military,” Frost said. He reminded Mustang a lot of Knox. Maybe, if Knox had stayed a civilian doctor instead of going to Ishval, this could have been him.

The area of the hospital they were keeping Ed in was as far from the entrance as possible. Mustang had a sneaking suspicion that most of the rooms in this level were empty.

“Pulling out all the stops, doctor?” he asked.

“Some of your *colleagues* have been very insistent on talking to the patient regardless of what my staff and I have said.” Frost’s face darkened. “I believe this area of the hospital will provide the patient with the peace needed to make a full recovery.” He turned to Mustang, glaring at him. “I understand you will need to talk to him about his experience, and I would also like to have a full list of details in case we missed something, however, I will do everything in my power to postpone that inevitable interrogation with the military as long as possible. Is that understood?”

Mustang could have laughed. Did Ed and Al realize how quickly people latched onto them? Hell, the kid wasn’t even conscious and here Dr. Frost was, threatening him with everything he could. If Mustang were any other member of the military, he could have had Frost arrested for interfering with a military investigation. It made him happy.

“Of course, Dr. Frost. I would rather we wait to get an accurate report, rather than rush and get an inaccurate one that conflicts itself later and causes confusion.” He hoped Frost could read between the lines.

This seemed to ease Frost’s mind a bit as he nodded and pushed open the door. Mustang let Al walk in first, though his mind was screaming at him to push everyone aside and rush in.

Al gasped and stumbled backward, stepping on Mustang’s toes and causing Frost to stumble to avoid getting hit by the armor. Mustang put his hands up to steady the boy and to stop him from completely knocking him over.

“It’s okay, Al,” he said.

“No, it’s not.” Shit, he sounded like he was crying again. “He looks...” He shuddered and turned to Frost, who had managed to right himself. “He’s alive?”

Shit, the kid must have looked awful if Al was asking that. Mustang still couldn’t see him, his vision blocked by Al’s armor. He swallowed and shoved down the desire to push Al out of the way so he could see for himself. He’d see soon enough. Right now, he had to help Al.

“Yes,” Frost said. He managed to squeeze past Al and into the room. “This machine here is measuring his heart rate. Each beep corresponds to a beat of his heart.”

He could hear it. A soft, steady beating in a slow and methodical rhythm.

“And these machines here are monitoring his breathing and giving him oxygen to help fight off pneumonia.”

He could hear those too. A slight hiss of air, steady in and out.

“He’s going to be alright? Even though you don’t know what’s wrong with his leg?”

“I have faith he’ll make a full recovery. Already the nerves are returning to a normal level of activity, with the occasional spikes. It’s common for amputees. Still, I’m hoping when he wakes, he can tell us what happened so we can plan for potential complications.”

Finally, Al seemed convinced that this wasn’t a long, drawn-out way to reveal that his brother was dead, and stepped inside the room.

Mustang thought he was prepared to see Ed. There was no way he could have looked worse than he did at the warehouse. Frost had given him a list of injuries so he knew what sorts of bandages, casts, and machines to expect. Al had already asked if he was dead, despite everyone telling him that he was still alive. Mustang knew the kid still looked bad.

Despite all of this knowledge, despite spending most of the day picturing Ed’s body in various states of horrific mutilation, he wasn’t prepared to see him in the flesh. It wasn’t worse than his dark thoughts from earlier, but somehow, that didn’t matter.

Somehow, seeing him surrounded by machines, most of his body swathed in white bandages with so many tubes and wires sticking out of him made even his worst nightmares look pleasant. He swallowed down his horror once more. He couldn’t afford to break down. Not now. Not yet.

Later.

“If he continues to heal as he has been,” Frost said, breaking the silence, “then he should be awake in about a week. We caught the pneumonia in its early stages and have him on an aggressive antibiotic regimen to get that under control so he should be breathing more easily by tomorrow. We might even be able to remove the oxygen tube. He will have to go through physical therapy, specifically for the hand, but he’s been through automail surgery so I’m sure physical therapy will be no problem for him.”

“When can he get his automail back?” They had found the arm and leg untouched in the warehouse. Normally, he wouldn’t want to rush giving him back his metal limbs. However, his remaining arm and leg were in casts and would be useless for several weeks. Ed would be going through enough. He didn’t need to continue to feel humiliated and weak because he couldn’t even feed himself.

“I want to hold off on the leg until we’re sure that nothing was done to the port. As for the arm, as soon as his pneumonia is under control and he’s awake, we can talk about reattaching the limb. Do you have any more questions?”

Mustang’s eyes fell on dark bruises around Ed’s neck. He reached a hand out to them but stopped himself. “He was strangled?”

Frost looked down at the neck and nodded. “As far as we can tell, there was no brain damage. This wasn’t done to kill him.”

Mustang swallowed. That didn’t make things better. That just made everything worse.

He nodded and forced down his anger, guilt, and horror. It wouldn’t help anyone. Besides, as soon as he got Al situated and got Breda on a train to Central, he could go back to his apartment and drink himself into a stupor.

“Al, any questions?”

Al was over at Ed’s bed, hands hovering awkwardly above him, wanting so desperately to reach out and touch him but afraid of hurting him.

He jumped when Mustang spoke. “Um, no sir. I don’t think so.”

“Alright, then. I’ll have a nurse escort your man to the room. Get me a list of names and faces so I can grant them access. Then go home, take a shower, and get some rest. You both look like you could use it.”

“I’m staying here,” Al said, a note of finality in his voice.

“Um, young man—”

“Trust me, doctor, he doesn’t need to go home,” Mustang said, hoping his tone left no room for arguments. It was hard enough explaining Al to the military, he didn’t know how he was going to explain him to Frost as well.

Frost looked between the two of them and sighed. “I’ll make an exception for a few days, but you do need to go home eventually.”

He’d convince him later. For now, he just wanted to get through the night.

“Thank you, doctor,” he said.

Frost nodded to him and walked out of the room, leaving Al and Mustang alone. He collapsed in a chair by the bed; his feet and body aching; his head pounding. Everything felt like he had been shoved through a meat grinder and then flattened with a car. Al may not have had a physical body to feel tired or worn out, but he must be hurting mentally. Even as Mustang observed him, the steady beeping and whirring of machines in the background, he could tell the kid still didn’t know what to do with himself. His hands kept moving over Ed’s body, hovering awkwardly and occasionally jolting as he seemed to finally decide to touch Ed only to reconsider a split-second later. It was exhausting watching him.

“He’ll be okay, Al, you heard the doctor. By the end of the week, his breathing should be better and he should be awake.”

“I know. It’s just—” Al finally dropped his hands and slumped down in another chair in the room. “I feel so helpless. I’m not... I’m supposed to help him and I couldn’t this time. I was trapped. They trapped me.” His voice cracked.

He reached out and rested a hand on Al’s shoulder. “I know. They did a damn good job at trapping all of us. But not a good enough job. He’s alive. You’re alive. No one did any illegal transmutations. The doctor is confident he’ll make a full recovery. You’ll get through this just like last time. Except now you have a bigger support network. We’ll all be here for you.”

He felt like he was lying to the kid. Even now he didn’t know what to do or say. He didn’t know if this was even helping. How was he supposed to be someone these boys could lean on if he was barely keeping it together? He was pathetic, looking forward to downing a whole bottle of hard liquor just because he felt guilty. What right did he have to promise support and comfort to these kids?

“I’m sorry. You... we shouldn’t be relying on you.” Al brushed his hand off.

“Why not?” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Falman stick his head in the room. He acknowledged him but kept his focus on Al.

“Because it’s not your job!”

“As in it’s not in my official job description?”

“You have more important things to do. Shouldn’t you be helping Lieutenant Colonel Hughes with the investigation? Shouldn’t you and the others all be going home instead of standing guard?”

“Believe it or not, Al, I do make decisions that aren’t solely based on what I’m paid to do,” he said. If this was how Al felt, then he couldn’t imagine how Ed, who had an even bigger distrust of authority, felt. He’d have to talk to them both and fix this. How were they supposed to make it to old age if they didn’t allow others to help them? He may be a shitty person and an even shittier source of support, but at least he *was* something.

“But—”

“Did you ask me to stay?”

Al looked up at him. “No.”

“Did you ask me to have someone stand guard at all times outside the room to keep the military from interrogating Ed?”

“No.”

“Did you ask me to commit treason and lie about why the Cretans wanted Ed?”

“No.”

“Then? You’re a smart kid. You can figure it out. If you didn’t ask me, and this isn’t something that’ll help my career, then why did I do it?”

Al was silent for a few moments. “Because you wanted to?”

Mustang nodded. In all honesty, want was too strong of a word.

Wait.

No.

Want was too weak of a word. The choices he made weren’t made because he wanted to do them. He didn’t want to lie for Ed and Al. He didn’t want to ask his men to stand guard outside a hospital. He didn’t want to stay. He had a burning need to. Something etched deep within his bones that couldn’t be ignored no matter how hard he tried. He didn’t mind doing all these things. Quite the opposite. But it was deeper than want. It was much more powerful and frightening. He didn’t say any of this to Al, though. Something told him now was not the right time to express such fierce and intense emotions.

“That’s—” Al looked back down at Ed. “That’s nice. It’s been so long since we—I’m not sure how brother will like that.”

“Well, he’s just going to have to deal with it,” Mustang said, crossing his arms.

Al laughed softly. “Yeah, I guess he will.”

They sat in comfortable silence, probably the first comfortable silence Mustang had had all day. His body felt tired and, distantly, he started wondering when it would be acceptable for him to go home. He’d get showered, change into something other than scratchy, ill-fitting dress blues, and then raid his liquor cabinet until he passed out on the sofa. Al couldn’t smell him, but he smelled awful. The scent of burning flesh clung to his skin, marking him as the monster he was. Ed’s blood was still smeared all over him, marking him as the failure that he was.

“Colonel?” Al said, a bit nervous.

“Yeah?” Mustang closed his eyes and leaned back. He needed to call Hawkeye and Hughes and let them know what was going on. He needed to give Armstrong’s sketch to Breda so he could get on a train tonight and get it to Central. He needed to give a list of approved visitors to the hospital. He needed to get out of here so he could break down in the privacy of his own home. But just a little bit of sleep wouldn’t hurt.

“Can you do something for me?”

“Sure, kid. What is it?” He mumbled.

Al didn’t answer right away.

“I can’t help you if you don’t ask me out loud what you want me to do.” He sighed. God, it was like pulling teeth with these two.

“Oh, right. Um, you can say no.”

“Alphonse.”

“Right. Um, it’s just, sometimes brother gets nightmares and usually, I calm him down by running my fingers through his hair but I can’t feel anything like this and usually, that isn’t a problem but he won’t wake up if I accidentally hurt him and with all his injuries, I’m not sure how to go about doing that and also my hand is pretty big and my fingers are pretty clumsy so I’m not sure how easy it will be for me to work around the bandages and bruises—”

Mustang opened his eyes as Al continued to ramble. He was asking him to... comfort Ed. But not just comfort him, actually be gentle and tender towards him. To initiate physical contact with the kid. He hadn’t known Ed for very long, but he was fairly certain other than the time he hauled him out of the wheelchair to yell at him and today when he held him while waiting for Hawkeye, he hadn’t touched the kid. And certainly not in a way that could be described as almost loving.

Mustang sighed and scooted his chair closer to the bed. “Yeah, I can do that. Only for a little bit, though. I do need to contact Breda, Hawkeye, and Hughes.” And drink.

“Oh! You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Alphonse, we talked about this.” He reached out a hand and winced when he realized he still had on his ignition gloves. The white cloth was now brown because of the dried blood. He’d burn them later. He could clean them. They were still usable. But he didn’t want to. He didn’t think he could. They’d always be tinged brown. He’d always be able to tell which ones they were.

He pulled both of them off and stuffed them in his pockets. He reached out and started running his fingers through Ed’s hair. It felt weird. The strands were greasy and limp. His hair had been washed as there was no blood, soot, or dirt in it, but it wasn’t quite enough to clean it fully. And it was so tangled. He’d have to bring a comb and get some of these knots out. For now, he worked on the bigger ones with his fingers, carefully picking apart the tangled hair until the knots were undone.

It may have just been his imagination, his desperate need for Ed to do something other than lie there like a corpse, but he did think he saw the boy move closer to him. No, it had to be his imagination. There was no way Ed could ever find comfort in him.

“Got any dirt on him?” Mustang asked, breaking the silence. He wasn’t going to sit here and awkwardly detangle Ed’s hair with his fingers while Al watched him. That was too weird.

“What?”

“Ed? Got any embarrassing stories to tell? Siblings always have the best dirt.”

Al giggled at that. “Well, I do have a few. Did you know he broke his arm trying to impress Winry when he was six?”

“His automail mechanic?” He had a feeling there was something a little more between those two. More ammo for him when (*if*) they got back to a state of normalcy.

“Yeah. He dropped a heavy rock on it.”

Mustang stopped detangling his hair. “How do you even get in that position?”

Al shrugged. “I don’t know. I think Den was involved somehow. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Yes, because you’re not a trouble maker like your brother. Don’t grow up to be like him, Al. He’s a menace to society.”

Al laughed. The tension in the room eased. Mustang continued to untangle his hair. A part of him still wanted to leave so he could drink away the day’s events. But he couldn’t. Al had asked him to stay. Al had trusted him not to hurt Ed and to provide him comfort when he needed it the most. He couldn’t leave now.

He still had so much to do and so much to worry about. In an hour or two, he would have to leave before the last trains to Central stopped running. He would have to go home and get showered. He would have to talk to Hughes and Hawkeye to make sure the investigation was going his way. For now, though, this was all he felt like doing. This was all he was expected to do. This was all he would do.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Some nice Al, Mustang, and Hawkeye bonding time. But, I wonder what the rest of Team Mustang has been up to?

Have a great weekend everyone!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mustang only stayed with Ed and Al for another hour. That was all he could spare. While he would love nothing more than to spend the rest of the night running his fingers through Ed's now detangled hair and talking softly to Al about fun anecdotes from their childhood, he was an adult. He was a soldier. He didn't have the luxury of taking time off, of sitting here in peace while everyone else worked in the background.

The most pressing issue was the train to Central. It was coming up on nine-thirty in the evening. If he waited much longer, he'd miss the last train and would have to wait until five the next morning to send someone out. That was too much time. The missing alchemist could already be making his way to the border. He could already be over the border. If he was...

Mustang may not want to go to war with all of Creta, but he did want the man to pay for what he did.

So, with a heavy heart and already mourning the loss of such a simple, mind-numbing, and comforting task, he said goodbye to Al, promised he'd be back tomorrow and went to find a phone to get an update from his team.

"Lieutenants Ross and Brosh, two of Armstrong's, are going to come to relieve you in about three hours," he told Falman as he closed the door behind him.

"I'm aware, sir. Major Armstrong filled me in earlier. Is there anyone else I can trust?" He sounded exhausted.

Mustang would have felt guilty, asking him to stay here, standing guard for four hours with nothing but his thoughts for company, but he knew his team. Even if he did ask Falman to leave, the man would politely but firmly decline. God, he was grateful for his team. All of them. He couldn't imagine trying to do any of this with people he didn't fully trust.

"Other than the rest of the team, Hughes, and Armstrong?" He sighed. "No. I don't think there's anyone else I want talking to them. Especially now. Al's... Al's not doing very well and I don't want to put him or Fullmetal in any danger."

"Understood, sir. Hawkeye received a call from General Grumman stating that you were acting in his stead on this case, which means I can do my best to keep other members of the military from interrogating the Elrics."

Hawkeye was a godsend. He really was going to buy up an entire flower shop and send them to her. Tulips were her favorite.

"Don't get yourself court-martialed," he said. "Did any general stop by? I'm surprised I haven't seen or heard from any of them. Fullmetal's doctor said a few stopped by earlier, but

I find it hard to believe they left willingly.”

“General Grossing and a few soldiers stopped by about two hours ago, sir. I told them that Edward and Alphonse Elric were unconscious and unable to be interrogated. The nurses agreed with my assessment. However, they will be back again tomorrow to carry out a full investigation.”

Mustang sighed again. He was hoping to give Al a little more time to heal and recover from what he had been through. “Fullmetal is in a medically induced coma and won’t be awake for at least a week. Al on the other hand... we probably can’t keep Al from them. I’ll see if Hughes will be able to sit in on the interrogation.

Falman nodded, his stoic façade finally cracking. Surprisingly, despite being one of the more analytical members of the team, he was also one of the more emotional members. When things were going well, he looked and acted as stoic as the rest of them. But, when things weren’t going well, when their backs were up against the wall, he was often one of the first ones to break down.

The fact that he was staying as in control as he was surprised Mustang. Maybe he was in shock and not fully processing everything.

“You should go and get some rest, sir,” he said, pulling himself back together and standing a little taller. “I’ll make sure no one gets to them tonight.”

Mustang clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t commit treason. When you’re relieved, go home, get changed, get some rest.”

“Of course, sir.”

He finally managed to drag his feet away from the hospital room, away from Ed and Al. They would be okay. They were surrounded by doctors and nurses who would do everything in their power to keep them alive. Falman would be able to keep any nosey members of the military from them until tomorrow. Everyone was alive. Everyone would be fine. Mustang could leave them and come back tomorrow to visit. Besides, he had things to do. He was an adult and a soldier. He needed to keep those kids safe. As much as he wanted to stay by Ed’s bed for the rest of the night, he couldn’t. Not if he wanted to make sure every threat was burned before it could touch them again.

He’d stop by the phone booths and call Breda to get him to the train station immediately. Then he’d call his aunt and let her know who she was meeting. Then he’d call Hawkeye and have her drive him to the station to give Breda the sketch. Shit, he also had to provide the staff with a list of names and faces of who was allowed to be near Ed and Al. He also needed to meet up with Hughes to figure out what other information they had uncovered and to get prepped for the interrogations tomorrow. He should also call General Grumman to give him a report. Then he had to shower and change.

He was so tired.

He was so tired and yet he knew he wouldn't sleep tonight. The nightmares, Al's screams, Ed begging him not to burn him, with his eyes opened he couldn't get them out of his mind. He couldn't imagine what it would be like when he fell unconscious and let his mind come up with the worst scenarios imaginable.

His jaw dropped to the floor when he rounded the corner and stepped into the waiting room at the entrance to the emergency room.

His entire team was there. Sprawled out on uncomfortable chairs. All still in their dress blues. All looking like complete crap.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. How long had they been here? They must have come after Falman had gone to the room, otherwise, he would have said something."

"Waiting for news," Havoc said. He had an unlit cigarette in his mouth. It was clear he had been chewing on it for quite some time.

"The lieutenant told us everything she knew," Fuery said, "but we haven't gotten any news in hours."

"And they won't tell us anything," Hughes grumbled, glaring at the nurse's station.

The nurse, a different one than the one Mustang had talked to when he first got here, looked far too innocent not to be listening in on their conversation.

"That's good. I don't want them talking to anyone," he said.

"I know. It's still annoying." He knew Hughes' frustration had less to do with the nurses and more to do with the overall situation.

"I told them about the missing alchemist," Hawkeye said. Always one to stay focused and force them to take care of important business first.

"Did you get anything?" Mustang asked. He prayed they got a name. Names would make it easier to track him down and make him pay.

Hughes whipped out a thick folder and grinned. He didn't look happy, just tired. He was trying, though. "Did we ever? The Cretans were practically leaping to give us this information. I don't I've ever been in an interrogation where people volunteered information this willingly."

Mustang took the file and started flicking through it.

"The man you're looking for is Dr. Tasos Gianellis. The one you killed at the warehouse is Dr. Markos Dimoulis. Both are alchemists that used to work for the Cretan military."

"Used to?" Mustang finally got to a photo of a man that matched Al's description nearly perfectly.

"They're wanted criminals in Creta."

He furrowed his brow.

“They’ve only been wanted for about four months now. And the crimes they’re wanted for are vague,” Hughes said. “According to the Cretans, they must have assumed that by kidnapping the Fullmetal Alchemist, it’d cause them to regain favor with the prime minister. I have their arrest warrants and everything.”

“What about the other soldiers in the warehouse?”

“Technically mercenaries,” Havoc said. “They’re all from Creta, so they’re probably contracted with the military in some way, but they aren’t technically a part of the Cretan military.”

He handed the file to Breda. “Get on a train to Central tonight and give this to the usual contact.”

Breda nodded and took the file. “I should be able to make the ten-thirty train.” He didn’t wait for Mustang to say anything, already out the door.

“So?” Fuery asked. He looked dead. His face was pale and there were dark circles under his eyes. His glasses were smudged and his hair looked messy. “What’s going on with Ed? Is he alright?”

Mustang resisted the urge to groan. He knew why they were asking so many questions, why they were so desperate for answers. It didn’t mean he had to want to deal with it.

“Depends on your definition. He’s in a medical coma now and there were a lot of injuries, so many that I don’t think I can remember them all. However, the doctor is confident that with enough time and physical therapy, he can make a full recovery.”

The air in the room noticeably shifted. The thick cloud of anxiety and worry seemed to dissipate and leave in its wake relief. Things weren’t done yet, but they were on their way.

“General Grumman would like a more detailed report tomorrow afternoon,” Hawkeye said.

“Not tonight?”

She smiled at him. “He’s heading back to East City tonight. I doubt we can get ahold of him now. He said tomorrow is fine.”

God, he wanted to kiss this woman. His team, his brilliant, loyal, fantastic team made his life so much easier. Already, his to-do list was so much shorter than it had been mere minutes ago. Hawkeye wasn’t the only one who would get an entire flower shop’s worth of bouquets shoved into their apartments.

“Good to hear. Hawkeye, can you provide the nurses and doctors with a list of people who are allowed to see Fullmetal without permission from me.”

“Of course, sir.” She pulled out a stack of manila folders. “I was working on that while I waited for the team to arrive.”

“Thank you.” *You’re a lifesaver. I don’t know what I’d do without you.* “Let the nurses know. I need to make a call. You’re all dismissed for the evening. Go home and get some rest. This day has been hard enough on all of us.”

He turned before they could call him back with more questions, he didn’t have answers or didn’t want to answer. By marching away so steadily, they’d understand his orders were final and would finally go home. They all deserved it after the hell they had been through today. And it was only going to get worse. As soon as they saw Ed and got a complete list of his injuries, everything would become tense again. He wanted them to have at least a bit of a reprieve from the awful situation their youngest (*and most vulnerable*) team member had been forced to endure.

He dialed the bar. She still sounded worried. She still pestered him to talk to her before he killed himself with grief.

He still assured her that he was fine and could handle it.

She wasn’t convinced but agreed to meet up with Breda and see what she could find on Gianellis.

“What did he do that sent you on a warpath, Roy-boy?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does, considering my girls and your sisters are going to be dealing with this creep.”

She was right. If Gianellis was willing to torture a child, there was no telling what else he was capable of. He had to tell her to protect his family. Especially since he had failed them so spectacularly in the past two days.

“He kidnapped Fullmetal and—” The words were stuck in his throat. They didn’t want to come out. He had to say it. He had to admit what had happened to his kid. A tear pricked in his eyes and he took a shuddery breath, desperate to regain control and put back on that carefully constructed mask he showed the world.

He was so tired.

He couldn’t admit what happened.

“I’m at the hospital now. The doctors think he’ll be awake in about a week.”

He was a coward.

“Shit.” Her mask also slipped. “Well, I’ll see what I can find out. I can’t guarantee he’ll be in good condition when you get him, though.”

“That’s okay. He won’t survive long enough for it to matter.” He clamped down on his emotions once more and let his righteous fury swell up within him. This he could deal with. This he didn’t mind showing the world. He wanted everyone to know that he was furious and was going to take action against those who dared to hurt the people closest to him.

“Don’t lose yourself, Roy-boy.”

Ishvalans screaming as he burned them alive. Whole cities razed to the ground with the snap of his fingers. Kimblee laughing as he gleefully compared body counts. Edward in his arms, broken, bloody, begging not to be burned. Al sitting across from him, terrified and pleading to be punished in his brother’s place.

“There’s nothing left to lose.” He hung up the phone before she could answer.

He stayed in the phone booth for a few more minutes. Despite it being late into the evening, the hospital was still a flurry of activity. He could hear beeping and shouting and running. A few phones down from him, a woman was crying softly on the phone. Somewhere else, he could hear a baby wailing. He took deep breaths to compose himself. He needed to walk back out into the world after all. Hawkeye and Hughes would probably both still be here, waiting for him. He didn’t know if any of them were in a state to drive. Maybe they’d just share a cab and crash at his place for the night. It wasn’t the first time they had had to do something like this.

Finally feeling a bit more composed, he walked back to the waiting room. This time, he didn’t suppress the groan.

“What are you guys still doing here?” Other than Hawkeye, everyone was still in the same positions he had left them in.

“We want to see the kids,” Havoc shrugged, finally getting rid of the cigarette only to put another one in his mouth.

“You know they make actual tobacco products you chew, right?”

“Don’t like the taste,” Havoc said. “Now come on, where are they at?”

“Ed’s asleep.” Mustang crossed his arms. He wasn’t going to win this one. Especially since Hawkeye seemed to be on Havoc and Fuery’s side. She hadn’t said a word and was just sitting there, staring at him.

“But Al’s not!” Fuery said much too brightly for someone who had been in a firefight and had cataloged nearly two days’ worth of torture only a few hours prior. “He could probably use some company.”

“We are all covered in dust and blood. And ash! Ash that was once human skin.” Several people in the waiting room turned to look at him and then inch away from the dirty group of soldiers.

“And we’re still in our uncomfortable dress blues.” He gestured to the disgusting state of his shirt.

“There are showers in the room and I had my secretary bring us all fresh uniforms,” Hughes said brightly, standing up. He somehow managed to materialize a neatly folded uniform and handed it to Mustang.

He didn't take the uniform. "Visiting hours are over."

"Given Edward's unique situation, sir," Hawkeye said, as calm and collected as ever, "I feel they can make an exception. At least until Lieutenant Borsh and Ross show up to relieve Falman."

He groaned again.

"Come on," Hughes said, clapping him on the shoulder. "We all know that none of us are going to sleep tonight because we're all going to be worried about Ed. Might as well ease that worry some. Besides, I need to fill you in on some stuff we uncovered."

Mustang looked at the faces of his men, so clearly and desperately needing to see this. And Hughes was right. He was going to go home and probably drink himself into a stupor. Sleeping in an uncomfortable chair next to an unconscious child and a child stuck in a suit of armor was probably better for his health.

He sighed. "We have work tomorrow." He took the uniform, turned on his heels, and started making his way back to Ed's room. The nurse at the front desk didn't even look up at them.

"You're going to be interrogated tomorrow," Hughes said as the noise from the waiting room slowly was replaced by the quiet humming and beeping of machinery.

"Great, just what I needed."

"So it's imperative that we get everything as nailed down as possible. You need to know what you're walking in on. Al too."

Dammit, he was right. Even if he wasn't right, given the team's worry, he didn't know if he would ever be able to convince them to go home.

Slowly, the humming and beeping became less and less as well, until they too became silent.

"Wow, there is no one down here," Havoc whispered. "It's a little creepy."

"I think our fellow soldiers pissed off Dr. Frost enough that he felt keeping Fullmetal away from the general population to keep unwanted visitors to a minimum."

They turned the corner to see Falman, standing there as alert as ever. He looked at them and frowned.

"What are you guys doing here?"

"You think we're going home after everything that happened?" Havoc asked.

"We just want to make sure Ed and Al are alright," Fuery added.

"Where's Breda?"

“Delivering some information,” Mustang said. He opened the door. “Al, you have visitors. If you tell me you want them to leave, I’ll make them.”

If Al wanted to spend the night alone, they’d listen to him. They were soft like that.

Al looked up and visibly brightened. “You guys are here! You didn’t have to come.” The sheer joy and relief in his voice made Mustang smile. He couldn’t help it.

“Of course we came,” Hughes said, going over to rub Al’s head. “We wanted to see how you were holding up.”

“Well, brother’s going to be asleep for a while. Dr. Frost said he’d probably wake up in a week or so.”

“That’s a relief.” Fuery sighed, going to sit by Al. “How about you?”

Havoc somehow procured another chair and sat down on his other side.

Al started talking with them, mostly relaying the same information Mustang had relayed to them in the waiting room.

“Sir, you should get a shower and clean up,” Hawkeye said.

He looked down at the uniform in his hands. “Of course. The rest of you should also clean up. I’m guessing tomorrow is going to be even more hectic than today.”

“Is he okay?” she asked, still looking at Al.

“I don’t know. But, I think he will be with time.” He reached out and squeezed her forearm before turning to use the cramped shower that was in the room. One by one, they all took turns, looking much less like harbingers of death than before.

“Boss, can I ask you to burn these stupid things?” Havoc asked, chucking his dress blues into the growing pile in the corner of the room.

“That is military property,” he said stoically.

“Please,” Hughes snorted, “we all know you were planning on burning yours after today. You always do.”

Al giggled at that. “Really, colonel? That’s not a responsible thing to do.”

“He’s not responsible in the least,” Hughes said. “Don’t let him fool you, Al.”

“Hughes,” Mustang growled, though there was no bite to it. Already, Al was much more relaxed than even thirty minutes ago.

“Let me tell about a time he pissed off one Olivier Armstrong, Major Armstrong’s sister.”

“Hughes, don’t you dare say anything.”

“It all started with a duck.”

“I swear to God, if you say one more word, I’ll get you transferred to Briggs.”

Hughes continued without acknowledging Mustang’s threats. It was nice to hear Al laugh again, even if it was at his expense. Slowly, they all started to unwind and relax, each sharing stories and just being in each other’s company, relishing in the fact that they were all alive.

After about an hour, he heard Falman talking to two new people, likely Ross and Borsh. Sure enough, he stepped into the room not long after. Mustang didn’t know what Ross and Borsh or what Armstrong told him. But, as his eyes started to droop and he slumped down in the chair, he found himself not caring. For the first time in his life, he didn’t care what anyone thought of him or his actions or his feelings. He simply cared that his entire team was alive and could heal with each other. That was all he ever wanted.

Despite the relative peace, he felt that evening, it was all gone Monday morning when he stepped into his office.

He had never seen so many generals crammed into Eastern command and there seemed to be an endless amount of meetings, questionings, and parades of people who wanted to know what had happened. Breda managed to burst into work almost ten seconds before he would have technically been considered late. Thank God because there still seemed to be some suspicions among the brass that Mustang wasn’t telling the whole story. With all the generals in the room, he couldn’t ask if he had managed to get the picture to Madam Christmas, but he was confident in Breda’s abilities. Besides, they had interrogations to go through.

He felt like he had answered the same questions a thousand times.

‘No, we didn’t know the Cretans were planning anything.’

‘We didn’t immediately contact Eastern Command because we wanted to make sure Fullmetal wasn’t taken over the border.’

‘As far as I can tell, there is only evidence that they wanted gold. There was no evidence of any other alchemy being performed.’

‘Yes, it is necessary to have the Fullmetal Alchemist under guard until we determine there were no spies.’

‘No, I did not force the enemies to ingest cyanide.’

‘Yes, it was necessary to burn the alchemists beyond recognition.’

Only some of these were lies.

He also couldn’t keep the military from Ed and Al. However, Dr. Frost was just as cranky and bitter towards them and practically threw General Grossing out the window when he didn’t seem to grasp the fact that Ed was in a medical coma and therefore couldn’t just be ‘woken’ up. That didn’t stop him from demanding an interrogation with Al.

Luckily, General Grumman, Hughes, and Mustang were all able to be present. Grossing finally seemed capable of reading the damn room and didn't question Al nearly as harshly as he had Mustang and his men.

Al played his part beautifully. He told the events almost exactly as they happened, only switching out gold for human transmutation and skipping the part where Ed agreed to do the transmutation as soon as Al stepped through the door.

Grossing didn't seem pleased. Grossing could also fuck right off back to Central if he wanted to interrogate traumatized children so badly. Grumman stepped in and gave Dr. Frost the final say for when Ed could be interrogated, which pissed off Grossing even more.

Finally, the long day of questioning and report writing was winding down. Mustang was taking Al back to the hospital, along with Havoc, who was going to be the night guard.

"Did I do good?" Al asked, wringing his hands as they wound through the hall.

"You did great today," Mustang said, patting his back.

"Yeah. Grossing can be kind of a hard-ass, but to be fair, he has to be if he wants his job done right," Havoc said.

"Okay. I was just... there were so many questions. I was worried that they were getting suspicious."

"They weren't suspicious," he said. "Interrogations always have a lot of questions. They want to nail down every last detail for the report."

"Ah, there you are Colonel."

Mustang and Havoc froze when they heard the Fuhrer's voice coming from the hallway they were just about to turn down.

"Um, sir!" He and Havoc snapped into a salute just in time to see him step into view, smiling.

"Um," Al looked at them and then decided to bow. "Sir, what are you doing here? Brother isn't awake yet."

"Oh, I know that," Bradley laughed. "Dr. Frost was telling me all about it."

He gestured to the man, who looked like he wanted nothing more than to punch the Fuhrer in the face. Yes, Mustang was starting to like Frost.

"At ease soldiers." He waved a hand at them.

"If you know Fullmetal isn't awake, why are you here? If you don't mind me asking." There was always something about Bradley that rubbed Mustang the wrong way. Maybe it was the way he smiled. Or rather, maybe it was the way he never stopped smiling. It always felt condescending; like Bradley was playing some sort of chess game with them but only he

knew they were playing. Just one of the many reasons Mustang wanted to take over this goddamn country.

“Just because he isn’t awake doesn’t mean I can’t visit him. After all, that’s why you three are heading there now. Right?”

Something about the way he said that made Mustang’s skin crawl. He did not want this man anywhere near Ed, especially while he was asleep.

“I suppose.”

“My wife’s flower garden is in full bloom right now so I thought I’d stop by and drop off a fresh bouquet. Hospital rooms are always so dreary.”

“And who am I to ignore the request of our beloved Fuhrer?” Frost said, forcing himself to smile.

“Yes, thank you, Dr. Frost. You’ve been a wonderful help. Your expertise is no doubt the reason a beloved state alchemist will make a speedy recovery.”

“I’m more concerned with him healing correctly rather than quickly,” he said, gritting his teeth practically to dust.

“Yes, yes. I’m sure. Anyways, I’ll let you visit your brother, Alphonse. Colonel Mustang, Lieutenant Havoc, I look forward to reading your detailed report on the matter in the coming weeks.”

“Yes, sir.” They saluted as he walked off.

“How long was he here for?” he asked once Bradley was out of earshot. He knew Ed wasn’t awake to answer any questions, but the thought of him being alone with anyone other than his team made him uneasy.

“About twenty minutes,” Frost growled. “But, I have some good news.”

“Really?” Al perked up and they followed him to Ed’s room.

“Yes, we think we figured out what was wrong with the leg.”

“That’s great,” Mustang said, glad that some of this mystery was getting unraveled.

“Of course, we can’t be sure until the boy tells us himself, but after looking over his charts, our automail engineer suspects it was reattached and dethatched several times, often in quick succession. At the initial attachment, the nerve endings are working overtime to produce enough energy to move the limb. But, as time goes on, the output levels out to a more consistent level. It’s sort of like how to start a car, you need a lot of energy, but once the car is running, the amount of energy needed decreases.”

“He didn’t have the leg on when we found him.” Havoc said. “And why would they attach it? I’ve been kicked with that thing before, he could have caused a lot of damage.”

Frost glanced at them, suddenly looking uneasy.

“It’s because it hurts,” Al said softly. “A lot.”

Mustang clenched his jaw. He had heard stories of grown men crying or passing out from the pain. However, he still never fully understood just how much it hurt. And Ed never seemed bothered by the damn thing which only furthered his belief that perhaps reattaching the automail wasn’t as painful as people made it out to be. He realized now that he should never use Ed as a measuring stick for pain on *anything*. If reattaching an automail limb hurt as much as the stories said it did, then what Ed went through with the leg alone was no less than hell.

“Imagine lighting your leg on fire,” Frost added. “And then doing it again and again and again for nearly two days.”

Mustang clenched his fist and nodded, struggling to keep his expression neutral and calm. Inside he was shaking. Aunt Chris hadn’t alerted him to finding Gianellis, but when she did, that man would know what hell was before he died. How apt of Frost to use a fire metaphor to describe what Ed went through. Mustang would make sure Gianellis felt everything tenfold.

“Shit,” Havoc ran a hand through his hair.

“Is there anything wrong with him? He’ll still be able to use his automail, right?” Al asked, his voice shaking once more.

“The engineer believes so. It might take a few weeks for the inflammation to go away completely. I’m more worried about the psychological aspect of it. Reattaching automail is already a painful process, but each time he has to have it reattached, it’ll likely trigger a flashback to his time as a captive. I’m going to recommend he see a psychologist to work on handling these triggers. If he can’t, then he might not be able to use it because the association will be too intense.”

Even when they had good news, there was always something bad waiting in the corner.

“We’ll have to see how he is when he wakes up.” Frost continued. “Like I said, I won’t sign off on reattaching it for several weeks and we can start with the arm to see how he reacts. As long as he has support, though, he should be able to return to a somewhat normal state.”

“Of course, thank you,” Mustang said. It didn’t sound like Ed was going to return to a normal state. And they still didn’t know everything. Sure, Frost could list off the injuries, but Mustang had no idea what they said to him, what he was thinking, the possible dreams he was having. He had no idea about any of this. And the last time Ed had been conscious, he thought Mustang was going to burn him. It made his stomach twist and suddenly, he felt unworthy to be visiting Ed. To be comforting him. To be the one who was told all of his injuries. He was a terrible person. Why did he get to appoint himself the protector of these two boys?

What gave him that right?

“Colonel?” Al’s voice pulled him from his mind. Shit. He needed to do a better job at keeping it together. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Al.” He said as they stopped in front of Ed’s room. He could still hear the steady beeping and whirring of machines. The kid was still alive. Thank God.

He couldn’t stay as long tonight as he had last night, but he had a feeling there would still be a steady stream of visitors to keep Al company. Besides, what he really wanted now, was a strong drink.

Havoc and Hawkeye stayed outside to talk. Mustang and Al stepped through the door. He brought a comb with him today to get rid of those knots.

“Al, is it alright if I keep working on his hair?” he asked.

“Oh, of course!” Al said. He reached down and took Ed’s casted hand in his own. “I hope he wakes up soon. I want him to get better quickly. I know Dr. Frost was talking about how we needed him to recover slowly and correctly but... Is it selfish for me to want him to get better fast?”

“No,” he said, taking the comb out and starting to work through the knots. “Dr. Frost was saying that to the military so they wouldn’t push Fullmetal to answer questions. For you, though, there’s nothing wrong with wanting your brother to be out of pain and back to normal as soon as possible.”

Al nodded. “Okay. Thank you, sir. For everything.”

“Al, we talked about this.”

“I know. But, just because you want to help me and brother, doesn’t mean that I shouldn’t thank you. Without you... I don’t know where we’d be.”

Not sitting in a hospital after getting tortured because I brought you into the military. Mustang thought bitterly.

“Getting into trouble, no doubt. You and Ed are both trouble magnets. I don’t know two people who can’t even walk down the street without getting into some trouble.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know anyone else who thinks it’s a good idea to put a duck in Major General Armstrong’s bed.” Al sniggered.

“I regret letting Hughes ever tell you that story. Do not tell Fullmetal about it. I can’t let him get any other *ideas*. He’s enough of a hellspawn when he just has his brain to use.”

“Seriously, sir. Thank you, for everything.”

Mustang swallowed and didn’t look up at him. “Don’t mention it, kid.”

He reached out to knock his knuckles against Al’s armor, something he had seen Ed do on a few occasions. Maybe it brought him comfort because he could hear the sound, so he knew

someone was touching him. Or maybe it was just Ed's way to know that his brother was still there. Either way, it grounded him, brought him back to the present, the here and now. It kept the dark thoughts away for just a little longer. That was all he could do for now. That was all he wanted to do for now.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, finally, a nice, not very depressing chapter. I'm sure this peace will continue. I'm sure things will keep getting better. I'm sure nothing bad will happen next chapter. I'm sure of it.

Also, Sorry Breda for forcing you to leave! But someone has to go to Central.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Me while writing this chapter: Should I tag this with Dark!Roy?
Me remembering him killing Envy: No, I think this is just him.

So... you remember how last week I said things were going to get worse? Well...
Trigger Warning: Graphic Depictions of a man burning to death, torture, gore, violence, a sprinkle of PTSD, a pinch of disassociation, and dash of intrusive thoughts for flavor. Mix together and bake at 350 degrees for 45 minutes and you have yourself a delicious Mustang Breakdown. Hope y'all are ready.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The end of the week came and there was no word on war happening. In fact, most of the diplomats had been released back to Creta to 'avoid an international incident'. Most of the generals that had been rushed to East City returned to their respective posts without much fanfare. The newspapers didn't even report on the event. They and the radio broadcasters all lauded the diplomatic event as a successful step forward to a peaceful future. There were no rumors on the street. There were no whispers about the People's Alchemist and the hell he went through to keep this country safe. There wasn't even a massive pile of paperwork to fill out on the incident.

There was nothing.

According to everyone but Mustang's team, the diplomatic event had gone off without a hitch. Amestris was marching forward to a new dawn of peace and prosperity with their neighbors. They were forging bonds of friendship instead of war.

Only the unconscious child laying in a hospital bed, wounds crusted over with scabs and muscles atrophied from lack of use, was proof of what happened.

Mustang was furious. His government was so trigger-happy when it came to war that it sent him, Hawkeye, and Hughes, each barely older than children themselves, to wipe out an entire group of people for no goddamn reason. The Fuhrer never stayed his hand on anything and was always looking for an excuse to create more bloodshed. Now, though, when a state alchemist and actual child was tortured and forced to perform a transmutation that would rock the country when their enemies created an entire peace summit just to get access to him, was when Bradley would talk peace instead of blood.

When Grumman called him into the office to give him the news, Mustang pretended he wasn't livid. He kept his mask up and his voice calm as he agreed with Hakuro and the Fuhrer's assessment that war was not the answer. He agreed that this was the best option.

His hands were shaking. He wanted to grab Bradley by the throat and demand to know why he wasn't using this as an excuse to march right into Creta and burn the whole fucking place to the ground.

He could rectify the situation. He could desert the military and be at the border by tomorrow morning. He'd start with the Prime Minister. He was the one who signed off on this after all. He'd march right up to the Presidential Palace, drag him from his bed, and light him on fire right on the lawn. Then he'd turn to the rest of the cabinet members. When he was done with them, he'd move onto the military, slowly burning his way through the generals, colonels, lieutenant colonels, and majors until everyone was gone. He could be finished in a matter of weeks. Anyone who stood in his way would be a pile of ash.

Bradley was smiling at him during their meeting.

No. As much as he wanted to take matters into his own hands, he couldn't. He wouldn't just be deserting his post; he'd be deserting Hawkeye and Hughes. He'd be deserting any chance his country had to finally get on the right track. He'd be deserting Ed and Al. Both of them needed him, especially after what they just went through.

Al continued to put on a brave face. He continued to say he was feeling fine and doing better, but Mustang could see. He could see as the hours wore into days Al became more and more despondent. When someone wasn't in the room with him, talking to him, he'd just sit unmoving by Ed's bed for hours. More than once a nurse mistook him for a weird statue, only to have a heart attack when Al finally moved after hours of just staring at his brother.

Everyone tried to cheer him up and visit as much as possible. Major Armstrong had a butler or maid or something raid his library and drop off approximately four dozen books on alchemy for Al to read. Frost gave up on trying to force him to go home. Hughes kept telling stories of his and Mustang's time at the academy. He tried to teach Al how to play chess.

Al put on a façade and pretended to be alright when each of them was there. Mustang could see he was crumbling, though. He was worried about what would happen when it all came crumbling down.

As for Ed, Mustang knew him well enough at this point to know the last thing he wanted was a war. No matter what these people did to him, if he found out Amestris was at war with Creta and people were dying because of him, the guilt would eat him alive. He wouldn't allow that to happen to the kid. Begrudgingly, he had to agree that war wasn't the best option here. Besides, he would have enough trouble dealing with Ed without also dealing with the massive guilt of being the cause for hundreds of thousands of casualties.

Ed would try to play the whole thing off as not that big of a deal. He'd pretend that he was perfectly fine and capable. He'd hide his pain from Al, from him, from everyone. He'd probably break out of the hospital as soon as he got one working leg back regardless of how long Frost demanded he stay here. He'd try to run from his trauma. He'd try to outrun the memories of what happened to him. Except, you couldn't outrun something like this. Mustang knew better than anyone what happened when you tried to outrun your demons.

He worried that Ed would run away from him and everyone. He'd be in a fight or on a mission or chasing a new lead, and everything would catch up to him. He'd make a mistake. He'd freeze up. He'd flinch. Then, because the world was cruel and didn't care about your age, it'd kill him.

So, Mustang swallowed his anger. He swallowed his desire to burn Creta to the ground. He swallowed his wrath, his rage, his fury. He buried them deep within himself. He hadn't been hurt during this. He hadn't been frozen in stone while he watched someone he loved get beaten and stabbed. He hadn't been waterboarded and strangled. He had been schmoozing with a bunch of rich people and escorts and talking about fucking shrimp. Al and Ed were the ones who needed his help. They needed him to be calm. They needed him to not break down.

He spent as much time with Al as possible and put on a hopeful façade. Ed would be waking up soon. He was stubborn and would be back to normal in no time at all. They'd help him heal. He wasn't angry at them. He'd keep them safe. He was *fine*.

It was Saturday. This was the day Ed was supposed to be waking up.

Breda, the one on guard duty, promised he'd call as soon as Ed was taken out of the coma.

Mustang was at the office. Even if he didn't have a ton of paperwork on the whole *incident*, he still had to catch up on all the work he had missed spending time with Al. He'd rather work seven days a week so he could spend a few hours with the kid than have his weekend back. It wasn't like he was planning on doing anything today anyway. Though, to be fair, he wasn't getting much work done. He spent most of the morning staring at the phone, waiting for it to ring. As the morning wore on into the afternoon, he got jittery and nervous. What if something was wrong? What if Ed wasn't waking up? Maybe he should go over there anyway. Just to check. There'd be no harm in stopping by before Breda called and seeing how Al was doing. Maybe he could get an update from Frost or one of the nurses.

The phone rang.

He jumped, knocking over a bottle of ink and staining the sleeve of his uniform. He cursed and frantically reached for something to soak it up before yet another one of his uniforms was ruined.

"Colonel Mustang." Somehow, he managed to get the phone in his hand.

"It's Breda." He sounded tense.

Mustang stiffened. His mind swirled with all the bad news he could receive. He swallowed that down. Ed would be alright. He *had* to be alright.

"What is it?"

He had to be alright. He had to. This couldn't keep him down. This was Edward Elric they were talking about. This was the kid who performed human transmutation, bound his brother's soul to a suit of armor while he was bleeding out, shoved in years' worth of automail surgery and rehabilitation into only one year, threatened the Fuhrer with a spear

during his examination, and somehow always managed to come out on top. He had to be okay. Mustang had to see him and confirm. This couldn't destroy him. This couldn't keep him down.

Mustang needed...

"He's awake," Breda said hesitantly.

He long abandoned trying to keep the ink from staining his sleeve. He needed— Ed had to be — If he wasn't, Mustang didn't know how he would move on.

No. This wasn't about him. This was about Ed. This whole thing was more of an inconvenience for him than anything. Ed and Al were the ones who were still suffering. They were the ones who needed all the support he could give. He could do this. He could focus and give Ed everything he needed to heal and get back to normal.

"I don't have time to beat around the bush. Tell me what's wrong. That's an order!" He didn't mean to snap. His men were all suffering from this as well.

Havoc was chain-smoking at a rate Mustang had never seen before. Fuery was spacing out more and more during work. Breda looked like he hadn't slept for more than a few hours in the entire week. Hughes barely talked about Elicia. Even Hawkeye was more despondent than normal. He had to keep it together. They all needed him and he couldn't afford to snap and snarl his way to an answer. He had to keep it together.

Breda sighed. "He's not calm. No one can seem to get through to him. I think you should get down here. Frost hasn't been able to do a full examination because the kid won't let him get close enough to try. Al's doing his best, but they're talking about sedating him again if they can't get him to calm down soon. I managed to convince him to hold off until you could get here and try."

Please, don't burn me.

Mustang's hand tightened on the phone. Considering those were the last words Ed said to him before he passed out, he very much doubted his presence would be of any comfort to the kid. Despite this, he was already pulling on his coat.

"I'll be there in ten minutes." He needed to see the kid. He needed to talk to him and assure him that he was not in trouble and Mustang would never turn him over to the military to be executed. And he certainly wasn't going to be executing him.

He hung up the phone and yanked on the rest of his coat before walking calmly out of the office. There weren't many people here, given that it was a Saturday, but he didn't need to be seen sprinting out the door like a madman. *Too many enemies. Too many people looking for ways to hurt you. Don't let them see your weaknesses. Don't let them see how you can be hurt.*

It took exactly nine minutes and thirty seconds. Nine minutes and thirty seconds of worry and rage and guilt crashing through his body. Nine minutes and thirty seconds before he got to the

hospital.

“Good, you’re here.” Frost was waiting for him at the door, likely told by Breda that he was on his way.

“I heard Ed was awake?”

Frost didn’t waste any time chatting by the door. Instead, he started walking briskly towards Ed’s room.

“Yes, he’s awake. Thankfully, it doesn’t appear that he has any brain damage.”

“But?” Mustang tried not to get angry at Frost. He tried to keep all of his negative emotions buried deep within himself until it was safe to let them all out. Frost was helping Ed. He was the reason Ed was alive at all. He couldn’t get angry at him. He couldn’t shout and carry on and demand Frost’s cooperation with him.

“But,” Frost sighed, “he either doesn’t realize he’s safe or he doesn’t believe he’s safe. He’s been very combative with the nurses and is refusing to calm down. If we can’t do a full examination, we’ll have to sedate him again.”

Frost stopped, nearly causing Mustang to run into him. He turned to stare down at him. “He is safe, right?”

Guilt. Shame. Rage. *Too many enemies. Don’t let them see. Don’t let them know. Burn them. Burn them before they can hurt you. Before they can hurt the kids. Burn them all.*

“Of course he is.”

“He seems to be under the impression that you are going to execute him.”

Mustang’s blood ran cold. His heart may have completely stopped beating for a second. His hands were numb and all the sound had been sucked out of his ears, leaving only the ringing and pounding of his heartbeat. “I’m not.” His voice cracked.

Get ahold of yourself. You can’t break down. Fullmetal needs you. Al needs you. Your team needs you. Pull yourself together.

“How much do you know about why he was taken?” If anyone found out he was telling a civilian doctor classified details that could end in war, he’d be the one facing down the firing squad, not Ed.

“Not much.” He crossed his arms and glared at him. “Your military won’t tell me anything.”

“Technically, you don’t have to know why they took him. And, in the interest of national security, you probably shouldn’t.”

Frost nodded. “I suppose this falls under patient-doctor confidentiality. Anything you tell me will not be repeated to anyone. Not even the nurses.” He started walking again, taking them away from the more crowded part of the hospital.

Mustang took a deep breath and composed himself. “They wanted him to perform an illegal transmutation. If he did it, he would have been arrested and executed.”

“I ask again, is he safe?”

“He didn’t perform the transmutation. My team has been working tirelessly to ensure no one is planning on executing him. Why do you think I’ve only allowed a handful of people to stand guard outside his door day and night? I will make sure that he never gets punished for what he went through. He never did the transmutation. The government has no reason to punish him.”

“Yeah, well, the government isn’t exactly fair when it comes to certain topics.” Frost sighed. “And he doesn’t know any of this because he wasn’t very aware when you found him and you haven’t had a chance to assure him yet and bring him up to date. I suppose that makes sense. Nothing is ever easy with you people. I’m assuming you’re here to help convince him he’s safe.”

“Of course.” And because he loved those two kids with every fiber of his being and was seriously considering deserting all his goals to carry out an ill-conceived revenge plan to make sure the people who hurt them knew what hell was.

“His brother has managed to calm him down when no one else is in the room,” Frost continued, “however the moment anyone steps in the room, all hell breaks loose. Maybe if you manage to convince him he’s safe, my staff and I can finally take a look at him, see if he needs to be on so many pain killers, and start getting him back to normal. I’m certain as soon as we can get him off some of those pain killers and sedatives, he’ll be able to think more clearly which will, in turn, make him feel safer. It’s just this first hurdle that’s proving to be difficult.”

“What if we can’t calm him down?” What if he’s never the same? What if he lives the rest of his life in a perpetual state of fear and it’s all Mustang’s fault because he didn’t pick up the fucking phone that night?

“Then we sedate him and try again later. He was in a coma for a week and has been through something mentally and physically traumatizing. You don’t just walk something like that off. It’s going to take time. We can’t rush this.”

“I understand.”

They finally made it to Ed’s room. It was quiet on the other side of that door. Mustang’s heart beat faster. *Stay in control. Pull yourself together. They need you. If you feel angry towards anyone, he’ll pick up on it. He’ll shut himself off from you. Pull yourself together.*

Breda was still dutifully standing outside, though he looked a bit dazed.

“Sir.” He straightened up when he saw Mustang and Frost approaching.

“Is he doing better?” Maybe Al had managed to calm him down in the ten minutes it took him to get here. Maybe both brothers were working their way through Armstrong’s traveling

library. Maybe Frost was wrong and everything was back to normal.

He shook his head.

Frost scribbled something down on the clipboard.

“I’m not hearing anything.” Mustang furrowed his brow.

“That’s because the nurses left and Al’s the only one in there. I was hoping that if he saw we were letting Al call the shots, he might calm down.”

“He was held captive by strangers. It’s possible he thought they were Cretan and this is another way to get him to perform the transmutation.”

“He didn’t seem too keen to see me either. And I know he recognized me, he said my name.”

Mustang should have expected as much.

“I was thinking,” Breda continued, “instead of Armstrong standing guard later, maybe we should have Fuery do it.”

“Fuery?”

“He’s afraid we’re going to execute him, right?”

Mustang forced himself to nod.

“Well, Fuery’s one of the only members of the team that largely fills a non-combative role. I don’t think they’ve ever even seen him hold a gun. He’s not very threatening. He’s younger than the rest of us and the newest member of the team, besides them of course. This makes him more of a peer than an authority figure. It might make Ed feel safer. Besides, most of Brass has stopped harassing us and if we’re still worried about the Cretans, we can have Armstrong stand somewhere else. It’s worth a shot.”

“Go, call Fuery. See if he’s willing.”

Breda saluted and left. Mustang knew he would be willing. Everyone would drop what they were doing at a moment’s notice to help the brothers.

Frost finally stopped scribbling on the clipboard and looked up at him. “I should warn you, if your presence stresses him out, I will have to ask you to leave.”

Mustang clenched his jaw. “Of course.” He knocked on the door and waited.

As much as he wanted to burst in there and see with his own eyes how Ed was doing, he knew he couldn’t. He had to take this at Ed’s pace. He had to ask for his permission. He had to be patient. He was an adult. He was Ed and Al’s guardian. Part of those responsibilities included setting aside his own needs and wants for the sake of the kids.

Besides, if he could just see Ed sitting up, awake, somewhat aware of his surroundings, that would be enough for now. He wouldn't like it, but it would be enough.

The door opened. It never ceased to amaze him just how expressive and open that armor could be. Al looked exhausted. Dead on his feet and like he was barely holding it together.

"Colonel." His voice was barely above a whisper.

"I heard he was awake. Can I come in?"

Al stiffened. His hold on the door tightened.

"With all due respect sir, I don't think that's a good idea right now. Especially while you're wearing your gloves."

He felt like he had been hit in the chest with a sledgehammer. All the wind was knocked from his lungs and he just now realized that yes, he was still wearing his ignition gloves. How could he have been so stupid? How could he have forgotten to take them off? Ed was afraid of burning to death and here he was waving around the very weapon that could do it!

And the way Al said it... He knew he had messed up by dealing with the circle using fire. He knew he would have to convince Ed that he wasn't angry at him. But he thought he and Al had come to an understanding this past week. He would never do anything to hurt Ed. He wasn't going to execute him. He couldn't even see Ed past Al's armor. Was he even awake?

He started pulling off his gloves. "Alphonse—"

"I'm sorry, sir," Al said, shifting ever so slightly as if Mustang were going to try and push past him. "Now's just not a good time. Dr. Frost, do you need something?"

He felt a hand on his shoulder, gently pulling him away from the door.

"I think you leaving would be for the best," Frost said.

Mustang opened his mouth to argue. He needed to see Ed. He needed to see with his own eyes that the kid was awake. He needed to beg for his forgiveness and promise him that he would never, *ever* burn him.

He closed his mouth and nodded, shoving those feelings as far down as they could go. He was an adult. What he needed did not matter. The kids were counting on him to stay strong. His team was counting on him to stay in control. Ed was awake and hadn't suffered any brain damage. He was calm when Al was in the room. That was all he needed to know right now.

"Al," he said calmly and clearly, hoping Ed could hear him, "you and your brother are not in trouble. I am not going to let the military or the Cretans hurt either of you. Understand?"

"I know, sir. Now's just... maybe later."

He didn't know it was possible to be in so much pain when he wasn't even injured. It was like Al had ripped his heart out and stomped on it repeatedly.

He straightened himself. "Of course. Fuery will be by later. Call any of us if you need anything. The generals will not interrogate Fullmetal until Dr. Frost gives his consent. Understood?"

"Yes. I understand. Thank you, sir." With that, Al closed the door.

He could tell Frost was staring at him, studying him. He turned on his heels and started walking back to the entrance. He still had work to do. Al was with Ed. Ed was calming down. Breda was right that Fuery would be less threatening. He was in control.

"Colonel," Frost called after him.

Mustang picked up his pace. He didn't want to stay here another minute.

"Colonel, are you alright?"

"Fine." He bit out.

"With all due respect," since when had Frost ever respected him? "You don't seem like you're handling this very well."

"What gave you that impression."

"Literally everything you've done since you showed up at my hospital a week ago."

Everything was crashing down around him. What little control he had over his emotions and actions was quickly slipping through his fingers. He needed to be alone when he finally broke. He couldn't risk anyone else seeing and taking advantage. He had to stay in control.

He stopped and turned to face Frost. "Doctor, I am perfectly capable of handling this situation."

He didn't look convinced. "I'm just saying this as a doctor."

"And I'm just saying this as a member of the military. I am handling this situation. Now, if anything changes with Fullmetal, contact me immediately." He turned once more and marched out of the hospital, leaving Frost behind.

The only thing that had kept him sane through the week was the knowledge that Ed would be awake by the end of it. In his mind, he had some fantasy that he'd show up at the hospital, they'd have a good talk, and then everything would go back to normal. He knew it was a fantasy. He knew that things were going to be messy and complicated. That didn't prepare him for Al's cold words and the fact that he hadn't even caught a glimpse of Ed. He hadn't even heard him. He didn't know what he looked like, what he sounded like. He didn't hear with Ed's own words what he was afraid of or how afraid he was. He was back in the dark, separated from his subordinate, and forced to pretend that everything was okay.

He didn't realize he hadn't gone back to the office until he pulled up in front of his apartment building.

He still had a lot of work to do. He still had paperwork to fill out and forms to sign. He needed to get back to the office.

He parked the car and stepped out. He couldn't... he needed...

He stumbled into his apartment in a daze. The phone was ringing.

"Not now. Please, not now," he groaned, wanting nothing more than to collapse on the couch and sleep for the rest of his life.

He could ignore it. He could ignore it and pretend like he wasn't home. He didn't want to talk to anyone. He didn't want to pretend like he was okay any longer.

Isn't this exactly why you're in this mess in the first place? You didn't call the library because you were too lazy. You didn't want to deal with work. And look what happened? You're pathetic.

He just barely managed not to be sick and reached for the phone.

"Colonel Mustang," He said, only barely sounding calmer and in control than he felt.

"Roy-boy, a friend of yours came to visit," Aunt Chris said.

This sharpened his focus. He sat up. "A friend of mine?"

"Yeah, a real piece of work too."

The blood roared in his ears. His heart pounded. His entire body was shaking, taut, ready to lash out.

"I'll come to pick him up tonight. Meet me in the warehouse district."

"Roy—"

"Tonight." He hung up the phone before she could argue with him. He quickly stripped out of his uniform, put on his dirtiest civilian clothes, and dug his ignition gloves out of his pocket. He was out the door less than five minutes later.

The train ride to Central was hell. Never before had it felt so long or made him so angry. He painted himself quite the terrifying figure. Despite the train being crowded and the lack of available seating, no one dared to sit next to him. He didn't care. He was going to make Gianellis pay for what he did. He couldn't do a lot for Ed right now. Hell, it seemed the kid, both kids, didn't *want* him to do a lot for them right now, but he could do this. He could make sure the last of their tormentors was gone. He could make sure he suffered as much as they had suffered. Granted, he didn't have two full days to torture him, but he didn't need two full days.

He stopped by a liquor store on his way over to the warehouse district and picked up a few bottles. He didn't know if they were for drinking or to make the fire worse. He'd decide on the way.

The warehouse district was a maze of similar-looking buildings and sketchy people doing all sorts of illegal things. Thankfully, no one stopped him. No one tried to start anything with him. They let him storm by to where his aunt would probably be. She knew a guy who owned one of the warehouses here. He usually used it to smuggle in embargoed goods from Amestris' many, many enemies.

He got to the warehouse and practically broke down the door, slamming it open and storming in.

"Roy!" Vanessa jumped.

Aunt Chris didn't seem phased. Beside her was Gianellis, tied up and looking dazed and confused. There was a cut above his eye bleeding sluggishly.

"Maybe you should calm down," Vanessa said, putting a hand on his arm.

He brushed her off and continued forward. His knuckles were white with how hard he was clenching his fists. He wanted to burn him and he wanted to burn him now. But he had to wait. His aunt and sisters had seen their fair share of pain, torture, and death. That didn't mean he wanted them to see someone burn to death. He didn't want them to know what burning flesh smelled like and how a human slowly turned to ash as fire consumed them. He didn't want to see him snapping and killing someone so callously. He was in control. He could hold off for a few minutes while they left.

"I'll take it from here," he growled. He knew exactly what he wanted to do to Gianellis; how he wanted the rest of the night to go. He'd make it slow.

"Roy," Aunt Chris stepped forward, blocking his view of Gianellis. Why did people always block his view? "I know you want to hurt him, but—"

"But nothing. I can't risk the military getting ahold of him and I can't let him go free. This is the only option."

"Is it?" Vanessa asked.

Aunt Chris sighed. She looked... sad of all things. "Make it quick. Don't waste your anger or your energy on this man."

"I'm not wasting anything on him," he growled. He could feel his heart pounding, threatening to rip from his chest. His entire body felt like it was on fire. His brain was screaming at him to do one thing and one thing only.

She sighed again and stepped aside. "Maybe I should have dealt with this myself instead of calling you."

He would have been hurt by her words if he cared. Right now, he didn't. There was only one thing he cared about. Once this one thing was taken care of, then he could start to move forward. Then everyone could heal and his boys would be safe.

"Leave," he growled.

They hesitated.

"Now!"

Aunt Chris shook her head, took Vanessa by the arm, and pulled her out of the warehouse. He could hear Vanessa protesting. Then, silence. Nothing but his blood roaring in his ears. His own heart pounding in his chest. His own hands clenched into fists so tight the knuckles threatened to rip through his skin.

He stepped up to Gianellis and stared down at him. This was the man who's was the reason Ed was in the hospital right now. This was the man who made his kid's life hell for nearly two days.

"Look at me," he said in a low voice.

Gianellis groaned and managed to loll his head to the side so he was staring up at him.

"What?" he blinked a few times. Recognition slowly dawned in his eyes. "Flame Alchemist?"

All of time stood still. The entire world was empty except for him and the monster in front of him.

Gianellis dropped his head back down. "So, you've come to kill me, Flame Alchemist? I should have expected as much. My own country abandoned me, even though I was correct. I knew we should have taken the boy back to Creta, instead of proving my hypothesis here."

The guilt and shame that had been at the forefront of his mind were replaced with rage. That was his original plan? To take Ed out of the country and into Creta where Mustang wouldn't be able to get to him?

"You should have followed in the steps of your comrades and killed yourself. It would have been less painful." He took a few steps back.

"People will hear my screams."

"And they'll think you're just another worthless junkie that pissed off the Drachman mob. They won't look twice."

He was far enough away now. The fire wouldn't hurt him. "You should have never laid a hand on that boy."

Before Gianellis could get another word out, Mustang snapped.

He screamed, his body writhing in pain as the flames circled his hands. The transmutation Mustang was performing was complicated. He needed to keep the oxygen high specifically around the hands so the flames would hover there, while also creating areas of dead air so it didn't spread to the rest of his body. It couldn't spread to the rest of his body. Not yet. That would be too simple. Too quick. Too painless.

The skin of his hands blackened. The epidermis blistered and tightened until it was completely burned away. The fat and muscle of the hands were exposed. Soon that too melted off, leaving only the bones. Gianellis stopped screaming and writhing fairly quickly. He might not even be conscious anymore. The bones blackened and crumbled to ash. There was nothing left of his hands.

Mustang stumbled back, breathing hard and barely keeping himself awake. The amount of heat required was enormous and that transmutation alone nearly knocked him cleanout. But he wasn't done yet. He was far from done. He let the fire go out, wiped the sweat from his brow, and stumbled up to Gianellis.

The enemy alchemist was on the ground, moaning in pain. He was surprisingly still conscious. The blackened stubs of where his hands once were hovered above him, shaking.

"There," he growled, "now you'll never touch either of them again."

He held out his hand again and snapped. Nothing happened. He had used up too much energy on that one transmutation. Pathetic. Years of only using his fire to do the barest harm possible had made him weak. He started breathing heavily. He needed to continue burning. He needed to rip tortured screams from his throat to drown out his symphony of guilt and blame that refused to leave his head no matter how hard he tried. He had to wait to get his strength back.

He let out a roar and kicked his head, snapping it to the side. As the man so painfully showed with Ed's own body, there was more than one way to hurt someone. Over and over and over again he kicked him. Blood spurted from his nose where it had been smashed. A few teeth were knocked loose. At one point, Mustang was pretty sure he had pulverized the man's ribs. He managed to hit the blackened stub of a hand, forcing Gianellis to make an inhuman sound. A shriek echoed in the night. Did Ed make a sound like that while he was alone and in a similar warehouse? Was this what he looked like while Gianellis and his crew of mercenaries used every trick in the book to get him to perform a deadly transmutation?

The blows he rained down on the pathetic alchemist did little to quell the rage inside him. Instead, it was like pouring gasoline on a wildfire.

He wanted to hurt him even more. He wanted to crush him.

Finally, he felt his strength returning. He felt his hands steady and his body stop shaking from exhaustion. He took a few steps back, aimed, and snapped once more.

Gianellis screamed as his legs were engulfed with flames. It barely blistered the skin. Maybe be weakened like this had its upsides. This was going to take a lot longer. Good.

"Reattaching automail is like lighting your whole leg on fire."

He snapped. Gianellis screamed. The fire went out.

“Again and again and again.”

Snap.

“But I’m guessing you already knew that.”

Snap.

“Otherwise you wouldn’t have done that to him.”

Snap.

“I don’t have time to put you through automail surgery so you can feel everything he went through.”

Snap.

“So, I’m improvising.”

Snap.

Slowly, the skin blackened and peeled off.

Snap.

The fat melted off in horrific, greasy layers.

Snap.

The entire warehouse started to smell like cooked meat, but not the normal kind.

Snap.

The ligaments snapped and peeled back.

Snap.

The air was choked with the smell of burning flesh.

Snap.

Smoke hung around him and stung his eyes.

Snap.

Bits of ash floated in the air.

Snap.

Gianellis stopped screaming.

Snap.

He might be dead by now.

Snap.

The shock alone would be enough to kill someone.

Snap.

He couldn't control the fire anymore.

Snap.

It spread to the rest of his body.

Snap.

Gianellis' head lolled towards him, his eyes still open and staring at him.

Snap.

This time, the fire went straight for them.

Snap.

Al was so shaken by Gianellis studying him.

Snap.

He'd make sure he never looked at him or Ed like that again.

Snap.

His body was spasming; the last energy from the nerves causing whatever muscles were left to jerk and shake.

Snap.

His eyes were completely gone now. Empty black holes with fluid leaking down his face.

Snap.

He wasn't even aiming for anything, in particular. He was just burning it. Burning everything.

Snap.

There was a giant, black mark around the body.

Snap.

His heat caused the concrete to buckle and crack.

Snap.

Some of the glass in the warehouse shattered.

Snap.

Some of the metal melted.

Snap.

This time, there was nothing. No fire. No flames. No heat. He looked down, rage overcoming him when he saw he had worn a hole in his gloves. Both of them, useless. And he hadn't even brought an extra pair.

He tried to snap again. Over and over and over again. There had to be a spark. There had to be something. He couldn't be done yet. Gianellis hadn't hurt enough. He hadn't paid enough for what he had done.

There was nothing. He couldn't burn him anymore.

The pads of his fingers were raw and bleeding. Parts of his exposed skin were blistered and tight. He kept coughing, choking on the smell of burning flesh and smoke.

The man's body (or what was left of it) was still on fire. It'd probably burn for another hour or so. He bent over and picked up a bottle of liquor he had bought earlier. He opened it and paused. He took a shot, and then went over to the body and poured the rest out. Briefly, the flames grew bigger, chasing the alcohol and burning brighter. They dimmed down much too quickly.

He picked up another bottle to dump on him, then thought better of it and started drinking. His legs gave out beneath him and he collapsed next to his victim. Gianellis was dead. Ed and Al were safe now. So why did he feel so... wrong?

"What did you do?"

He didn't hear the warehouse door open. He turned to see Hughes of all people, staring at him. He couldn't see his eyes. The fire was reflecting in his glasses. He was also dressed in civilian clothes. From the looks of it, he had gotten dressed in a hurry. He was wearing two different shoes and his shirt wasn't buttoned correctly. He wondered why.

"What are you doing here?" His voice was dull. He couldn't pretend to be in control anymore. Not after that. He turned back to watch the rest of Gianellis burn.

"Your sister called me a few hours again in a panic saying you had gone off the rails!" His voice echoed around the warehouse, bouncing off the walls in Mustang's head. "Is that Gianellis? What did you do to him, Roy?"

“Killed him.” Wasn’t it obvious?

“Killed him? This doesn’t look like you just killed him! What did you do? What is wrong with you?”

“I burned him to death. Just like I did in Ishval. Happy?” He took another drink, finishing up the bottle. That was going to cause a hangover tomorrow.

“No, I’m not happy! This isn’t like in Ishval! What the hell were you thinking? What the hell is wrong with you?”

Mustang rolled his eyes. He wasn’t going to explain himself. He didn’t need to be lectured by Hughes of all people. He wasn’t going to feel guilty about what he had done. This man would never hurt his kids again. He made sure of it.

Hughes didn’t take his lack of response very well because the next thing Mustang knew, he was hauled off the ground and punched in the jaw.

Damn that hurt.

The bottle flew out of his hand and shattered on the ground as he stumbled back, his jaw throbbing.

“Hughes, what the fuck?”

“Pull yourself together!” Hughes shouted, grabbing his shirt and shaking him. “I know this is difficult for you, Roy. I know you’re going through hell. But you’re falling apart.”

He felt another surge of rage build up in him. He shoved Hughes back, forcing him to let go. It was probably a good thing his gloves were ruined and most of his skin was covered in minor burns.

“You don’t know anything! You’re sitting here, telling me to pull myself together when I know for a fact you wouldn’t be so calm if it were Elicia or Garcia sitting in that hospital bed. Don’t you dare lecture me!”

“I’m not lecturing you! I’m telling you to pull yourself together and stop for ten seconds so you can think! Just think before you act!”

“I am thinking!”

“So that’s why you ran off to Central without telling any of us? That’s why there’s a body of a Cretan that was tortured to death? That’s why you stepped into that warehouse and you immediately launched a ball of fire at Ed?”

That last one knocked his breath out of his body. He was done getting yelled at. He was done trying to keep himself together in front of everyone. Hughes knew nothing. He launched himself at him, managing to land a solid punch. Hughes, however, was much better at hand-to-hand combat and pinned him to the ground in a matter of seconds.

He tried to throw him off, but he was too worn out from all the alchemy he had done earlier. He was too tired. He couldn't get Hughes to move.

"Face it, Roy, you haven't been thinking since you realized Ed was the target. You're pretending like you're in control but everyone can see you're falling apart! There are two kids back in East City that need you and you're not there!"

"I went to help and they didn't want me there," he growled.

"So, you decided to fuck off to Central and torture a man to death?"

"He needed to be taken care of. You know this!"

"Then why didn't you let one of us take care of him for you? Why did you kill him and not me? Or Hawkeye? Or Havoc? Or, shit, Roy, even your aunt knows enough people to get him taken care of!"

He finally stopped struggling against Hughes' hold. The broken concrete was digging into his back. The flames from Gianellis' body still burned hot. His body was still weak and shaking from exertion and exhaustion.

"Just stop, Roy. Just stop for ten seconds and think." He was much quieter than before. Much calmer.

"I—" His voice cracked. "I can't." There were too many variables. Enemies around every corner. His men all needed him to hold it together. He couldn't let anyone see his weaknesses. He couldn't let anyone know how much this hurt him. If they knew, they'd have an easy way to control him. He couldn't let that happen. He couldn't put those kids in danger.

Besides, he didn't even deserve to have it hurt. He wasn't the one who was stuck in that warehouse. He wasn't the one who was forced to commit a taboo. He wasn't the one who nearly died. He wasn't the one in a hospital bed afraid of getting executed for something he had no control over.

"You can." He loosened his grip on his wrists. "It's just us here. No one else is around. You're right, I may not know what you're going through, but I can imagine. I know this is hell for you. It's okay."

Mustang clenched his jaw. His breathing picked up. The smell of burning flesh hung in the air. He could see bits of ash floating through the sky, reflecting in the lights.

"It's not okay. It's all my fault," he said. There was a lump in his throat he couldn't seem to swallow. His eyes were wet.

"It's not." Hughes finally let go of him and pulled him into a sitting position.

Mustang felt boneless. No muscle in his body wanted to work. He slumped forward, resting his forehead on his friend's shoulder. "It is. I didn't... I didn't call them Saturday night. I was going to but I talked myself out of it. I knew the Cretans were planning something but... I didn't think..." He struggled to breathe.

Hughes wrapped his arms around him and hugged him tightly. “You didn’t know.”

He was crying now. Growing up around a lot of women who didn’t hold back their emotions for anything made it so he wasn’t ashamed to cry, get angry, or even just feel melancholic. It was normal. It was healthy. Of course, once he got to the military, that emotion was beaten out of him. After Ishval, he cut out every part of himself that felt negative emotions because if he allowed himself to feel them, he would drown. He couldn’t afford to drown. Not if he was going to lead his men and this country towards a future where Ishval wouldn’t happen again. He had to keep these emotions hidden and buried. Except, this time, they weren’t staying buried. This time he couldn’t get them to go away.

He couldn’t stop the tears and the shuddering breaths and his shaking body. Hughes was there, though. He was warm (not hot like the fire). He was steady. And he was there.

“He thinks I’m going to kill him, Hughes. He thinks...” He wrapped his arms around his friend and used every ounce of his remaining strength to hold onto him.

“What if he never trusts me again? It’s all my fault. I can’t....Hughes, I love them. I can’t... I need them.”

“I know,” Hughes said softly. “I know. We’ll have to take it one day at a time. Ed just woke up. He’s disoriented. He’s on a lot of painkillers. He’s confused. You have to give the kid some time, Roy. You have to give both of them some time.”

“What if he can’t recover from this? What if they never want to see me again?”

“What if that happens?” Hughes asked. “Are you going to abandon them? Leave them to their own devices?”

This time, instead of rage or guilt or shame, the emotion that surged inside of him was protectiveness.

He shook his head. “No. Even if I ruined my relationship with them... I won’t abandon them. I won’t let anyone else hurt them. Even if I can only keep them safe from afar.”

“There you go. We’ll deal with it one day at a time and make plans as we get more information.”

Hughes pulled back to look at Gianellis and sighed. “Well, the good news is you basically burned him to ash, so it’ll be pretty easy to hide the body.”

Mustang didn’t laugh. He had done something so horrible to another human being. How could he even pretend like Ed was wrong to fear him after this?

“Hey,” Hughes put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay. We’ll figure it out. Maybe you should see a psychologist as well? Not a military one. God knows I don’t trust them, but a civilian one. I’m sure Frost has some recommendations.”

“I wasn’t even injured because of this. I don’t think I need to see someone.”

“Just because you didn’t get a scratch doesn’t mean you aren’t affected. Roy, your kids were nearly killed. You’re not alright given what you did to Gianellis. Do you think this is all going to go away just because he’s dead?”

The fire finally went out. He and Hughes gathered up the remains and carried them out of the warehouse.

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s not. You’re right. I don’t know what I would do if it were Elicia in Ed’s place, but I do know I would be traumatized by this. Please, promise me you’ll at least think about it?”

They tossed the bones into the nearby river, the current taking them away and scattering them so no one would ever find out what happened.

Mustang sighed and nodded. He was right. It was foolish to think that killing Gianellis would bring him any sense of peace. His death was necessary, but it wouldn’t erase what had happened. He didn’t know if he’d ever get back to normal. At this point, with everything that had happened to him and everything that he had done, he wasn’t even sure what normal was. However, there were two kids in East City who were counting on him to keep them safe and to help them get their bodies back. He couldn’t go breaking down like he had today.

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up. If we hurry, we can make the last train back to East City and you can visit Al.”

“I don’t think he wants to see me.”

“At least stop by and get a report from Fuery to see how he’s doing. It’ll be okay.”

They got to his aunt’s bar. She took one look at him, shook her head, and then shoved them both up to the bathroom with a change of clothes and the orders to get themselves looking presentable again. He managed to get himself cleaned up, wincing when he realized his jaw was bruising, as was Hughes’. His face didn’t look too terrible, but his skin was red and his hands were still basically destroyed from earlier.

“I’m not sure how I’m going to explain this,” he muttered as he wrapped bandages around some of the worst blisters.

“You got into a fight with the oven and the oven won,” Hughes said.

They didn’t stay long, though he did assure Vanessa and Aunt Chris that he was fine and wasn’t going to do anything stupid. They did make the last train to East City. Mustang did get back to see Al. And he did finally get to see Ed. The kid was asleep when he got there, but they had gotten rid of a few machines and wires. He looked much less like he was dead and much more like he was sleeping. Mustang was more relieved than he thought possible.

“What happened to you?” Al asked, quietly shocked.

He opened his mouth, trying to come up with an excuse as to why his hands were covered in burns and he had a giant bruise on his jaw. “I got into a fight with the oven, and the oven won.”

“Um...”

“Just because I’m the Flame Alchemist doesn’t mean my hands are immune to hot baking dishes, Al.”

Al laughed softly at this. “Okay, sir. Whatever you say.”

He was standing awkwardly by the door, unsure if he was allowed to come in or not. He wanted to. He needed to. He didn’t want to scare Al or overstep his boundaries. Fuery was doing a damn good job pretending like this wasn’t incredibly weird and awkward, doing his best to not look at Mustang at all.

“Sir, I’m sorry for earlier,” he said.

Mustang smiled at him and knocked against his armor. “It’s okay, Al. I understand. We’ll try again tomorrow.”

Al let out a sigh of relief and hugged him. “Thank you. I was afraid you were mad.”

“Not mad. Just worried. I wanted to see if he was okay. But it’s important that he feels safe. If I can’t be in the room for a while so we can convince him, then that’s what’s going to happen.”

“I tried to tell him you weren’t angry. He didn’t seem to believe me. Though, he did calm down later on in the day. Dr. Frost didn’t have to sedate him and he says that tomorrow he should be even more clear-headed.” He finally let go of him and walked back over to Ed’s bedside.

Mustang took this as a silent invitation that he was allowed in and stepped in as well, closing the door behind him. “It’s okay, Al. We’ll work on it one day at a time.”

He got to Ed’s bedside, relieved to see the kid breathing softly and looking like he was asleep.

He frowned when he saw what he was wearing. “Is that my dress blues jacket?”

He had wondered where it went after he got home and went to burn the rest of his dress blues. He figured the hospital would have gotten rid of it. Lord knows it was a bio-hazard with all the fluids that were on it.

“Yeah. I don’t know why, but it helped calm him down. He wouldn’t explain it to me. Do you want it back?”

“No.” He collapsed in the second chair by Ed’s bed, feeling older, more worn out, and more exhausted than he had felt in his entire life. “I burned the rest of them. Burning the jacket too

would just be excessive. Besides, I think this is the closest I'm ever going to get to putting Fullmetal in a military uniform. I should enjoy it while it lasts."

He reached out his hand to start running his fingers through Ed's hair, just like he normally did. The screams of Gianellis and countless other Ishvalans echoed in his mind. The sounds of him snapping over and over and over again while the heat got hotter and hotter and hotter. More and more unbearable, louder and louder until that was all he could hear. He could hurt Ed. He could burn him until he was nothing more than ash. He couldn't touch him. Not after what he did. Not after how he killed a man only hours earlier. He couldn't... He needed...

Al gently grabbed his wrist and tugged at it so his hand was resting on Ed's head. "It's okay," he said. "Dr. Frost said they have brother on some sleeping pills at night to help him rest. He won't wake up."

I forgive you. I trust you.

Mustang smiled and let his fingers run through Ed's still greasy and slightly tangled hair. It had probably gotten tangled during the day when he was panicking. He'd have to help the kid comb it later since he still didn't have a working arm.

Al picked up a book. It was one of those archaic tomes that made Mustang's head hurt just looking at it. They had long since stopped talking at night while he was doing this, no longer feeling awkward and unsure around one another. He leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes and just focusing on the feeling of Ed's hair in his fingers. It was nice. Quiet. Peaceful.

Soon, his eyes began to droop and his hand stilled, though never leaving Ed's head. The last thing he remembered before fully falling asleep was the soft sounds of Al's clanking armor and a warm blanket being draped around him.

Chapter End Notes

Literally everyone in this chapter: Hey, Roy, maybe you should see a therapist, take up meditation, pet a dog, not torture a man to death?

Roy: No, I don't think I shall.

Also, if your friend is going through a mental breakdown, punching them is not a good way to help them out of it. Hughes, I'm looking at you.

I also almost (almost!) cut this chapter in half. But I decided to be nice and let y'all see Roy-boy break down now instead of later. Aren't I kind? But hey! Ed's awake and next chapter, we actually get to catch up with him and see how he's doing. I'm sure he's fine.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Ed woke up, it didn't smell like stale sweat or fish and eggs. It didn't smell like anything. The fact that it didn't smell like anything panicked him more than if he woke up to see Smelly Man hovering over him, watching him, smiling at him as he asked calmly, *Now, will you do the transmutation?*

Because it only didn't smell like anything in his dreams.

Being awake was painful and awful, but at least there was the comfort in knowing the Cretans were purposefully trying to hurt him. In his dreams, listening to Mustang and Al blame him and force him (no, never force. He was never forced to do anything. It was always his choice) to do the transmutation. He wanted the physical pain to end, true, but he wanted to stop seeing his mother's organs spilling out of Al's armor. He wanted Al to stop blaming him for trapping him in that suit of armor. He wanted to stop listening to Mustang calling him weak and pathetic. He wanted everything to stop. He deserved all of this and more, of course. But Mustang was right. He was weak and pathetic.

And now, he was awake. Or... awake in the dream? It had to be a dream. He didn't feel any pain and didn't smell anything. It had to be a dream. A dream with bright lights and people he didn't recognize. He tried to fight back; tried to show Mustang, mom, and Al that he had learned his lesson and would never do human transmutation again. Except, he couldn't move his arm and leg. His entire body was numb and no matter how hard he tried to move, he couldn't move it. Hands were holding him in place. Maybe this wasn't a dream? Maybe the Cretans had moved him. Smelly Man mentioned something about that, mentioned taking them back to Creta. The last thing he remembered was gathering his strength to do the transmutation.

Was it a success? What did Truth take from him this time?

Where was Al? They had Al trapped last time. They were also going to experiment on him! He had to find him. He had to save him! It was his fault for getting kidnapped in the first place!

He had to fight back. He had to fight back before they hurt Al; before they hurt him. They were going to put his leg back on.

Over and over and over and over again.

He thrashed to throw the hands off of him. Thrashed to get some blood to draw a transmutation circle with his tongue once more to cause hell and maybe escape. It didn't work and soon everything was dark.

He didn't know if he passed out or if someone had knocked him out. What he did know is the next time he woke up he saw Al standing above him.

Panic surged through him once more. This was proof that they had Al and were going to hurt him. Did they want him to do the transmutation again? He'd do it a hundred times, a thousand times, until there was nothing left of his body to take if it meant keeping Al safe and giving him the chance to escape.

Al was saying something.

He couldn't hear him. He couldn't understand him. It didn't matter. He needed to run before they hurt him. Ed wasn't going to let them hurt him.

Everything went dark again.

The third time he woke up, he didn't see real Al or dream Mustang standing over him, and he was in the same bright place as before. This time he saw Breda.

The relief was immediate. He wasn't with the Cretans anymore. Mustang had found him and gotten him out. He wasn't with Smelly Man or Sweaty Man. The military had found him.

Oh, God, he wasn't with the Cretans anymore. He was with the military. He had done human transmutation, the one thing that could guarantee you a firing squad in this country for even attempting it. He was with the military and they were going to execute him. That's why he couldn't move his arm and leg. That's why Breda was here, to keep an eye on him until Mustang could burn him. He warned him.

You only get one chance, and you've already used yours up.

He warned him and Ed did it anyways. He helped the Cretans perform human transmutation. Would Mustang make it quick? Would he let Al off the hook? Would he make sure Al didn't see?

There was a lot of shouting. Al was back again. He was trying to move but couldn't. Breda was saying something. He looked sad. Eventually, he left.

Ed kept trying to move.

Someone put something around his shoulders. It was scratchy and uncomfortable, but familiar. So familiar. He wrapped himself up in it, let the scratchy fabric keep him safe. He needed it. It was the only thing keeping him safe right now. He didn't pass out again.

Eventually, Al managed to chase away most of the people in the room. The military was letting him call the shots even though Ed was a prisoner? A man came in, not one of the Cretans. He tried to ask him questions. Ed refused to answer them.

Eventually, he gave up and started talking to Al. Ed didn't like that he was talking to Al, he didn't know what he wanted.

Someone tried to take the thing around his shoulder. He fought back as best as he could. They left it alone.

The man left. Al was at the door talking to someone.

Al was by his side. "It's okay, brother. You're safe now."

He couldn't believe it. This had to be a trap, a trick. There was no way he was just... safe. Just free. He tried to stay awake so he could ask Al what was going on.

The exhaustion was too much. He couldn't fight it anymore. He fell asleep with Al still in the room, reading out loud from an alchemy book.

His dreams were weird.

He was back in Resembool. Mom was there. She wasn't saying anything to him, just smiling and petting his hair like she always did when he was sick. It smelled slightly smokey, though.

Slowly, mom faded and he woke back up. This time, he didn't feel like the entire world was muffled. He could feel things and hear things and smell things. There was an annoying and regular beeping coming from somewhere. It sounded like it was raining outside. He recognized the sound of rain tapping on the glass. He was lying on something that was probably supposed to be a bed, but it was very uncomfortable with stiff and scratchy sheets. Ed had had his fair share of sleeping in uncomfortable places, from rickety train seats to alleys when he and Al couldn't find a hotel willing to house them. Somehow, this bed was more uncomfortable. And then there was the smell. It smelled of smoke, cologne, and alcohol (a lot of alcohol). It wasn't bad. It was... familiar. Comforting?

Finally, he realized someone's hand was in his hair. Not moving, just resting in it, the fingers slightly tangled in the strands. He thought it was Al's at first. It wouldn't be the first time he woke up to realize Al was petting him in some way. But it wasn't Al's hand. It was too small and the bit he could feel on his forehead felt like skin; not metal or leather.

He was in a little pain, but nothing like what he was before. More than anything, he felt stiff and sore. Exhausted beyond belief. There was still the fear that Al was in danger. Either he was with the Cretans and needed to figure out a way to escape. Or he was with the military and needed to beg Mustang not to punish Al. Either way, he couldn't do that without first opening his eyes.

He was greeted by the sight of his little brother hovering over him. "Brother?" His voice was so soft, wobbling just a bit as if he were seconds from crying.

"Al?" He winced at how scratchy his throat was. "Where am I?"

"You're at a hospital." Al sounded relieved. "You're safe now. The colonel and the others dealt with the people who took you." Underneath that relief was a slight edge.

Given what Ed knew about Mustang, he didn't have to wonder what 'dealt with' meant. He felt guilty he didn't feel bad that the Cretans were all either dead or horribly maimed. He

couldn't bring himself to feel guilty. He was just glad they were gone now.

He furrowed his brow. His mind was still a bit slow and fuzzy like it was trying to wade through molasses. Al was above him and he could see both of his hands. Who else would put their hand on his head? Was Winry here? Or maybe Hawkeye? He looked over and froze to see none other than Colonel Mustang himself slumped over in an uncomfortable hospital chair, a scratchy blanket around his shoulders. He looked like absolute hell. His entire face was worn and haggard, slightly red as if he had been sunburned. There were dark circles under his eyes that Ed recognized all too well as circles that came from not getting enough sleep. There was a bruise blooming on his jaw and the hand resting in his lap had bandages on it. He was wearing his military uniform, but it was rumpled and creased. Even his hair looked messy, with random bits sticking up. The other hand was the one that was resting on his head. In any other circumstances, Ed would be trying to bite it off. He couldn't bring himself to even pretend he wanted to.

Tears welled up in his eyes.

He was really out of there?

The beeping rate increased.

The Cretans were gone? He was safe? It couldn't be. This had to be another dream. This had to be a trap or a trick or something.

"Do you want me to ask him to leave?" Al said.

"What?" He tore his eyes away from Mustang and looked back to Al. Right now it seemed like the only thing he could move was his head. The movement, however, caused Mustang's hand to slip so it was resting on the pillow beside his head, fingers grazing his cheek.

"It's okay if you're afraid of him."

"I'm not—" He was afraid of being executed, yes, and he was afraid that Mustang was going to be the one to do it, but he wasn't afraid of him. He was the one who messed up. He was the one who did the transmutation despite knowing the consequences. How could he be afraid of Mustang when he was just doing his job?

"It's okay. You don't have to pretend. I know you're worried about it."

The beeping increased. He was having trouble breathing. This was another dream. Al was going to rip open his armor and the pieces of his mother's body would spill out. This was the first time Mustang and Al had been together in his dreams. He couldn't handle both of them at the same time. It didn't smell like anything. The smoke and cologne and alcohol were all just his imagination. It didn't smell like anything. He was still with the Cretans. They were still torturing him. He couldn't breathe.

Al stood up. "Brother, it's okay. You're safe, I promise." Al was reaching out to him. Any minute now he'd rip off the sheets to reveal a transmutation circle. Ed would use it. Mustang would burn him alive.

“Fullmetal, what’s wrong?” Mustang’s voice came from the other side.

He shifted. The scratchy, rough material around his shoulders rose, just enough to get a whiff of the scent. Smoke, cologne, and a whole lot of alcohol. It made his head hurt. This couldn’t be his imagination. It was too real... This wasn’t a dream. Al and Mustang were there. He was in a hospital with his brother and his...

I’m you’re what, Ed? What am I?

He wasn’t sure anymore. Nothing made sense.

“Brother, it’s okay. You’re safe now.”

No. That couldn’t be possible. The penalty for attempting human transmutation... and the fact that he did it for an enemy...

“You’re not in trouble, Fullmetal.” He had a hand on his shoulder.

“Not... but I—”

“You did nothing wrong,” Mustang said.

Ed was shaking now, cold and afraid. As much as he was relieved to no longer be with the Cretans, there was something else. He was still in trouble with the military. He couldn’t feel relieved. He wasn’t scared of Mustang, that was true. He still didn’t want to get executed.

“You’re safe. No one is going to hurt you,” Al said. There was something in his voice that made him ache. Al was trying to be gentle with him. He was trying to protect him. That wasn’t... he was the one who should be protecting Al. That was his job. He didn’t need to be coddled and treated like he was fragile. He needed...

The military knew. He had to keep them from hurting Al.

Cold, metal arms wrapped around him, cutting him off completely from the world. He was freezing. He wanted to be warm. He didn’t want his brother to let go.

“They were going to kill you,” he said. He felt like he was screaming at the top of his lungs. It only came out as a whisper.

“I know. I’m so sorry.” Al said, his voice shaking as if he were crying. But he couldn’t cry because Ed had stuck him in an unfeeling suit of armor.

He sat there in his brother’s arms for what felt like hours. He was really out. He really managed to get away from Smelly Man and his unending wave of pain.

“Fullmetal,”

Ed flinched. He had forgotten that Mustang was in the room with him. He needed to speak with him, alone. He knew he had already used up his one chance. There was no way Mustang would be able to cover for him this time. The evidence of what he had done, or almost done,

was all over that warehouse. He couldn't let Al get caught up in this. The fact that Mustang was allowing him to heal up at all was kind of weird. Then again, maybe they wanted him awake to stand trial. Maybe he was hopeful Ed hadn't actually done the transmutation and this was all a big misunderstanding.

He swallowed. He could lie. He could pretend like they hadn't actually wanted human transmutation. Al would probably be willing to go along with it if it meant keeping him alive.

He looked over at Mustang, in all his fatigued and shitty-looking glory. He couldn't... he couldn't lie to him. Mustang had given him another chance. He had trusted him. Ed was willing to lie to the military, but this man was the reason he was even here in the first place, the reason he had hoped to get Al his body back. He couldn't... He had to tell him the truth. He deserved to know the truth. Even if that meant Ed would die. He knew what the punishment was and he did it anyway. He needed to accept that.

Mustang opened his mouth to say something.

"Al, can you go get me something to drink, please?" There was water in his lungs and mouth. They had a cloth over his face and were pouring water on it. They were dunking him in a barrel of water over and over and over again. He thought he might be sick. He turned away from Mustang so he was now staring at the scratchy bedsheets.

"Something that isn't water."

Al pulled back. "Um..."

"Please, I don't want to drink water." Would the military torture him? They shouldn't have to. He wasn't going to hide any of this from them. It would be stupid for him too.

"If you're sure."

He didn't want Al to leave. He wanted him to stay here and keep him safe from Mustang's fire. Except, he was the older brother. Protecting Al was his responsibility. He had already failed when the Cretans managed to get their hands on him. He wouldn't fail again. Once Al was out of here, he'd tell Mustang everything and beg him not to charge Al. It wasn't his fault. He didn't do anything. Maybe, if Mustang was feeling particularly charitable, Ed could convince him to let Al use the library even after his death. He didn't know if that would work, considering what he'd be executed for, but it was worth a shot.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

Al hesitated once more but eventually let him go and stepped out the door. "I'll tell the doctor you're awake while I'm out. Is that okay?"

"Yeah. That's fine."

"Oh, do you know what kind of juice you want? They have lots of different kinds. You know what, I'll just get you one of each. I think they have hot chocolate and apple cider too. I'll get that as well. It's a little cold out with all this rain." He sounded cheery, but it was forced. "I'll

be right back.” Al waved to him and stepped out the door. It clicked closed, leaving them completely alone.

He couldn’t force himself to look at him. Tears of shame were prickling in his eyes. He had to say something. He had to start begging for Al’s life. He had to ask him to make it quick and not let Al see.

“I’m not mad at you and I’m not here to punish you,” Mustang said before Ed could gather the courage to speak.

He flinched. So, Mustang knew what he did. “But I—”

“You had no choice in what happened.”

Ed jerked to his leg to draw it up to his chest. Now that he was a bit more awake and less drugged out, he realized the reason he couldn’t move his arm and leg was that they were both in casts. It made sense, considering he was pretty sure a hammer had been used at some point on his body. Stupid cast making it impossible for him to curl up. Instead, he was forced to hunch over on himself. His ribs were screaming, cutting through whatever pain medication they had put him on. It hurt to breathe. He was struggling to even get one breath in. He deserved it. He deserved it after what he had done. Or... almost done. Had he done the transmutation? It was a little hard to tell if something was missing in this state.

“You need to sit up straight and lean back against the pillows,” Mustang commanded. “It’s not good for your ribs or lungs to be in that position. You have pneumonia.”

Pneumonia was a new one. It made sense though. There was a lot of water involved.

He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut. The tears that had gathered in the corners of his eyes were now slipping down his cheeks. He was tired. Tired of crying. Tired of being in pain. Tired of being afraid. He was going to face this head-on.

“Don’t lie to me. I know what the punishment is. Please... just take care of Al. Help him get his body back. He did nothing wrong here. He deserves...”

He deserves to be free.

He couldn’t be mad at Mustang for turning him in. His hands were tied and it wasn’t like he could hide anything, especially if there was a body there like last time. He fixed the circle. He told them what ingredients they needed. He did everything.

“You didn’t do the transmutation, Fullmetal.”

Well, that solved that mystery. It wasn’t a surprise. Chances of him going through the gate and surviving a third time were next to impossible. “I still tried.”

At least he got to see Al one last time. At least he had the chance to say goodbye. That was more sympathy than he deserved.

Mustang sighed. “Were you not listening to me? I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. You never listen to me. You aren’t in trouble and you aren’t being punished.”

“That’s not possible. The circle, the ingredients... someone would recognize what they’re for. I know what the punishment is.” He realized now that Mustang had yet to reach out and touch him. He had woken up with his hand on his forehead, but now there was nothing. He wanted someone to comfort him. Everything hurt so much.

No, you don’t deserve to be comforted. You only had one chance and you’ve already used it up. Just be glad they’re not torturing you as well.

Mustang sighed again. It was a heavy, exhausted sigh. “Fullmetal, look at me.”

Ed shook his head, feeling like a little kid as he continued to stare down at his blanketed legs and desperately convince himself that he wasn’t crying even though tears were running down his cheeks and there was a lump in his throat he couldn’t swallow down.

He heard the chair creak as Mustang shifted in it. He wasn’t sure what he was doing, what he was planning. Then, he felt a hand on his shoulder. The right one. The one that hadn’t been dislocated. Heavy and grounding. Just like the scratchy fabric around his shoulders.

“You are not in trouble. The military is not going to punish you. You did nothing wrong.”

Except break the first rule of alchemy for the third time. “You don’t have to pretend. You didn’t last time.”

“Last time you and your brother did something incredibly stupid of your own free will. That time, you could have said no and things would have been better for both of you. You could have continued living your lives like normal kids. This time is completely different. I have your list of injuries. I’m looking at you now. I held you while Hawkeye got the car. I helped catalog the scene. I have Al’s account. I know what they did to you for over twenty-four hours. I can honestly say, you had no choice. The fact that you didn’t break until someone else’s life was in danger is honestly amazing. Soldiers, grown men, have broken under much less.”

He flinched at his words and desperately curled in on himself even more even though he could feel the fluid rattling in his lungs with every breath and his ribs were so painful. He didn’t want to hear this. He didn’t want to hear Mustang’s pity. It didn’t matter how he felt about the situation, the even Mustang couldn’t protect him from the military.

“Please, stop.”

“Why?”

“Because the military—”

“Is not going to punish you.”

He snorted. “How? No offense, but I don’t think you’re powerful enough to convince them not to punish me. Even if they decide to go easy on me for not committing it, they’ll still

wonder why I was even taken in the first place. How they knew I could do it. They'll figure it out eventually."

He heard Mustang snort. "I find your lack of faith in me a little insulting. Do you really think I just let the military waltz into the warehouse and look at whatever they wanted?"

What? Did Mustang just admit to hindering an investigation? That was... Well, he wasn't sure what that was. He wasn't surprised. That's for sure. But there was something else, something that made his heart twist uncomfortably in his chest. Something that he hadn't felt in a long time.

"But—"

"It was only the team and Hughes that showed up at the warehouse. And we all agreed it would be for the best if the military didn't know the true intentions of the Cretans. With a little bit of help from Armstrong, we staged the scene so it looked like they wanted you to turn lead into gold. The military considers you a hero."

His words washed over Ed. He... they didn't know? They thought the Cretans took him to turn lead into gold? Mustang had... he had lied about this, again? Even after he made it clear that he wouldn't be giving Ed another chance?

His breath started hitching. He... he wasn't... they weren't going to... Mustang had lied to them? Fresh tears were now spilling down his cheeks. He couldn't be safe. He wasn't safe. That's not how this worked. This had to be a dream. Another illusion. After he almost...

"Fullmetal?"

He had almost died. He had almost killed himself in front of his little brother. The Cretans had tortured him for hours. For so long. He wasn't even sure what day it was anymore. It couldn't... it couldn't be this easy. It couldn't be this simple. Summed up in a single sentence. One measly little lie. That was it?

"Edward, you're okay. You're safe now."

It wasn't that simple. It couldn't be that simple. All the warnings, all the fear. That was it? He had nearly done it again. He had nearly committed a horrible taboo again. Mustang had to be mad. He had to be holding something back.

Someone wrapped their arms around him and hugged him close. "You're okay," Mustang said. "I won't let anyone else hurt you. The military will *never* find out what they wanted. Do you understand?"

No. He had broken the rules again. He had tried to complete human transmutation again. Someone had to be angry at him. Mustang, Dream Mustang, and Dream Al were angry with him. They had threatened him.

"I'm sorry," Ed gasped. He didn't want to do the transmutation. He didn't want to but he did it anyway.

“I know,” Mustang said softly, hugging him tightly, but not so much that his injuries ached. Even his chest felt better like this.

“I’m sorry. Please... I didn’t want to do it.” He shifted so his face was buried in Mustang’s chest, his broken, battered arm coming up in a desperate attempt to cling to the fabric. He had to make sure Mustang understood. He had to make sure he knew. He didn’t want to. He was sorry. He would have never tried if they hadn’t taken Al. He didn’t mean to. He didn’t want to.

“I know. I believe you. You’re safe. You’re okay.” Mustang just held him tighter. It almost felt like he was trying to squeeze the broken pieces back together.

“It hurt so much. I just wanted it to stop.” He didn’t try to hold back the tears anymore, instead letting himself sob. Everything that he had held back, everything he tried to hide. He couldn’t even pretend like he was trying to keep himself upright. He let himself collapse fully into Mustang. Let him hold him up for a bit.

“I know. I don’t blame you for any of this. You aren’t in trouble.” One hand was on the back of his head, running his fingers through his hair. Petting him, just like mom used to whenever he had a bad dream.

“They were going to hurt Al. I couldn’t let them... he’s my brother. I couldn’t let them hurt him.” It was funny, he had slept for so long but he still felt so exhausted.

“I know. And they didn’t hurt him because of you.”

He didn’t know why Mustang was being so nice to him; why he wasn’t yelling at him or scolding him or anything. It felt nice. It felt warm. He didn’t deserve it. After everything he had done, he didn’t deserve it. The only thing that kept him from thinking this wasn’t a dream was the smell of smoke that seemed to surround him and a warm, comforting body there supporting him.

“I thought I was going to die.” He couldn’t stop the sobs that were escaping from him. Al wasn’t in the room with him. He didn’t have to worry about worrying him. He could let go. When’s the last time he just let go?

He couldn’t stop crying. He couldn’t stop apologizing. Everything was just too much. He should probably try and stop, pull himself together so he wasn’t leaving snot and tearstains all over his superior officer’s shirt. He didn’t have the strength to.

Mustang didn’t seem to mind. He was steady and warm, heart beating beneath Ed’s ear and chest slowly rising and falling in time with his breaths. This was real. He wasn’t there anymore. There were no more dreams. No more danger. He was safe.

He still couldn’t believe it. His mind was still screaming at him that this was a trap. Something would happen. Something would change. But the scratchy fabric around his shoulders and Mustang just being there convinced him otherwise. He let himself cry. He cried until his head hurt and his throat was raw from the sobs. Even after the tears seemed to stop, he kept sobbing. He had almost died. He had almost died in that warehouse. He had been

tortured for so long. Non-stop practically. He had been in so much pain. He had been so scared. He thought no one was coming for him. He thought he was going to die there.

Finally, the sobs slowed.

“Feeling better?” Mustang asked, sounding a little smug.

“Jerk.” He huffed. He was feeling better.

“How am I a jerk? I just let you sob all over me.”

“That’s just your default. You’re a default jerk.” There was so much he needed to deal with. The fact that he had almost strangled a man to death. All those things Dream Mustang and Hallucination Mustang had said. The fact that Smelly Man seemed convinced that Mustang wasn’t looking for him. He wanted to ask him about all of this. The lump rose in his throat. He wasn’t ready for that. Not yet.

He pushed back against Mustang, ready to regain at least a little of his dignity. He took the hint and helped him sit back on the pillows. Fuck, everything hurt.

“You’re really not mad?” He still couldn’t believe it. There had to be something else... something he was missing.

“Not at you. Not for this.”

“You shot fire at me.” He could remember the heat being so close, and burning so hot.

Mustang looked away, ashamed. “When I saw the circle, I panicked. I wasn’t thinking about how you would react, I just wanted to make sure it couldn’t be activated while you were still on it. I was afraid you were the... well, the ingredients so to speak.”

“I guess that makes sense.” He hadn’t even thought about that. He wasn’t technically on the circle, but there was a possibility that is Smelly Man or Sweaty Man had activated it instead of him, he couldn’t have been the one transmuted.

“And the military doesn’t know?”

“Of course. Lucky for you, I happen to know someone in investigations.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Hughes?”

“Yep. With his help, we’ve steered the investigation and the military fully believes that the Cretans wanted you to turn lead into gold.”

“There was no lead at the site.” It’d be suspicious if that was the story Mustang was going with, but there was no lead or gold anywhere. Someone had to have picked up on that.

“You’re very much mistaken, Fullmetal. There was twenty kilograms found in the warehouse.”

Ed's eyes widened. "You're willing to lie about this? Not just you, but the team? The Lieutenant? Everyone?" That was... surprising. He didn't know everyone cared enough to do something so illegal. It made sense for Mustang to want to lie about it. It wouldn't look good for his career if his prodigy attempted a taboo transmutation (though, now that Ed thought about it, he might be willing to lie for other reasons. Reasons he wasn't comfortable thinking about just yet). But everyone else? What could they possibly gain from this?

"Of course, you're part of the team. What you went through, no one should have to go through. And you don't deserve to be punished for this. You had no choice; it wasn't your fault."

He reached up to attempt to pull the fabric tighter around his shoulder, before realizing that he still couldn't. Stupid cast. He wanted his arm back. Fear surged up in him. Would he be able to handle reconnecting the automail after everything that happened? What if he couldn't? What if he could never use his arm or leg again? How was he going to fight? How was he going to travel? How was he going to get Al's body back?

"Like my jacket?" he asked, pulling Ed from his panic.

He jumped and furrowed his brow. He looked down at the grimy cloth around his shoulders. He hadn't thought much about what it was, whose it was, or where it came from. It certainly wasn't his. He was pretty sure at some point Al just plopped it around him in a desperate attempt to calm him down.

"This is yours?"

Mustang nodded.

Ed felt his cheeks heat up as it suddenly occurred to him that he was using his superior officer's jacket as a blanket. Furthermore, the jacket was possibly the only thing that was helping him keep his grip on reality at the moment.

"Want it back?"

Mustang shook his head. "I was planning on burning it after the event anyways. I hate that stupid thing. Why, do you want it? I didn't take you for someone who would ever willingly wear a military uniform."

He should shrug off the jacket and hand it back to him. He should let go of it and grow up and act like a fucking soldier instead of clinging to something like it was a fucking baby blanket. He couldn't do it. He couldn't give up this one piece of comfort that reminded him he was in the real world. It smelled absolutely disgusting. Like old blood, smoke, a lot of alcohol, and the general mildew of being folded and kept in a dark, slightly damp closet for days, possibly weeks (he still wasn't sure how long he had been unconscious).

Mustang made that decision for him and the jacket was being pulled off his shoulders. Right. He was a soldier. He wasn't a little kid anymore. He needed to grow up.

Then another jacket fell on his head. “There, this one’s less of a bio-hazard. Probably smells better too.”

Ed shook his head to drop the jacket off it and onto his shoulders. Craning his neck, he could see Mustang’s normal jacket on him now. There was a stupid lump in his throat and tears were prickling in his eyes once more.

“Aren’t I going to get in trouble for impersonating a superior officer?”

Mustang snorted. “I don’t think Dr. Frost cares enough to report you. And the rest of the team is standing guard outside so they’ll stop any random general from walking in here.”

“Oh, right.” He still couldn’t believe that the rest of the team was going out of their way to keep him safe even when they didn’t have to.

“Just to warn you, they are going to be a bit clingy,” he continued. “Havoc and Falman especially.”

“Falman, really?” He didn’t take Falman for being an emotional person.

“I know, it’s shocking. If they overwhelm you, just let me know and I’ll take care of it. And if Major Armstrong starts ripping his shirt off... you’re on your own for that one, kid.”

Ed furrowed his brow. “Why would he rip his shirt off?”

“Who knows what goes on in his head,” Mustang smiled. He reached out and ran a hand through his hair. Ed surprised himself by not flinching. Maybe, because he was no longer being horrifically tortured, he could think more clearly. Mustang wasn’t going to hurt him. He didn’t want to hurt him. He could trust him.

“I’ll go talk to the doctor and Hughes about your interview. The military does need your side of the story and the doctor needs to know the full extent of everything in case he missed something.”

Ed hunched in on himself again, despite the screaming protests of his ribs. “Do I have to? Can’t they just piece it together based on what you told them?”

Mustang sighed, once more a deep and heavy sigh of someone who had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“I’m sorry, kid. If I could keep them from you, I would. However, the military needs your side to make sure there was nothing they missed. Just switch out human transmutation for gold. Don’t tell them you agreed as soon as Al walked through the door. Other than that, just tell them everything like it happened.”

“The doctor shouldn’t need to know all of that. He can just look at my list of injuries.” The thought of reliving it all again and again and again... he didn’t want to. He wanted to forget about everything and leave it alone.

“I’m sorry, kid, but he really can’t.” Once more, Mustang sighed. “Torture...” he cleared his throat. “Torture is complicated. A lot can happen and certain issues can go unnoticed because of other trauma. I can see if Dr. Frost will accept the written report from your interview with General Grossing and Hughes.”

“You’ll be there too, right?” Fuck, he hated how dependent he was being on Mustang. He should be able to just go through with it. It wasn’t like he was going to get hurt again. Besides, Lieutenant Colonel Hughes would be there. He trusted Hughes. He shouldn’t need Mustang to be there. He shouldn’t need him to be there, but he did.

“Of course I’ll be there. You are my subordinate after all.” He ran a hand through Ed’s hair one last time and then adjusted the jacket so it was sitting properly on his shoulders.

“I think Al’s back with your juice. I’ll go see if I can find Frost and let him know you’re awake. That okay?”

He nodded. “Yeah. That’s fine.”

Mustang was almost to the door when Ed finally managed to speak up. “Thanks, Colonel.”

He hesitated at the door. “Anytime, kid.”

Sure enough, Al was on the other side with what seemed like hundreds of cups of juice and several steaming mugs. Ed couldn’t help but smile. He wasn’t looking forward to talking with General Grossing and relieving everything that happened to him, but he would deal with that later. For now, he just wanted to be with his brother and finally feel safe.

Chapter End Notes

Ed has awoken! And has had a talk with Mustang! I’m predicting only two or so more chapters so we are almost at the end. That being said... obviously going through something like this would take forever to heal and recover from with effects still being felt (physically and psychologically) potentially for the rest of his life. Good thing he’s got a group of people literally willing to die for him. Now, if only he could accept that.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Look at that, there's actually an end in sight! The next chapter will actually wrap up the story, but the last chapter is a bit of a fluffy epilogue. You've had enough angst. You deserve some pure, unadulterated fluff. But, first, Guilt! Anxiety! PTSD! And the Elric Brothers' inability to properly deal with, convey, and communicate their emotions!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ed didn't know what he expected from Mustang, but it wasn't for him to stay the entire day. Surely, he had better things to do. Surely, he was bored out of his mind sitting there while Al and Ed talked about alchemy. This alone made something in the back of his mind whisper that this was all a trap. Something was going to happen. People didn't stay for him. They didn't take time out of their busy lives to help him or to make him feel comfortable.

He had tried several times to give Mustang a gracious way out; to show him he could leave and Ed would be perfectly alright (even if he did jump at shadows and froze up when a nurse came in to check on him).

"Fullmetal, I am an adult. If I want to stay here, I'm going to stay here," he snapped after Ed's fifth attempt to tell him to leave. "Unless you really don't want me here, but you're going to have to come out and say it."

Ed really wanted him and Al here. He didn't want either of them to leave. It wasn't a trap. This was real. He didn't have to worry anymore. After that, he quit trying to give Mustang an out.

Dr. Frost came by a little later in the day. He looked very tired and worn out, but spoke with a calm, even, and authoritative voice. Ed recognized him from yesterday. He was pretty sure he tried to kick him at some point. He didn't ask. Dr. Frost didn't seem to care.

He tried to get him to open up and talk about what happened. He explained he needed to know so he could make sure he was treating everything properly. Ed understood this. He tried. He really tried. It was no use.

This made him even more frustrated. What was his problem? Al was here. Mustang was here. The military thought the Cretans wanted him for gold. He was pretty sure everyone in that warehouse was dead (something he should be feeling guilty about but wasn't). He was safe.

He was fine.

He couldn't talk about what happened. Being back in that warehouse, even in his mind, was too much.

Dr. Frost sighed and said they'd try again later.

Ed felt ashamed.

Al started talking about a new alchemy book he had found. Mustang's hand found its way back in his hair. He felt useless.

Finally, after Mustang sitting there for most of the day, through both lunch and dinner (why was hospital food so crappy?), he started to yawn.

This time, Ed wasn't trying to give him a chance to leave. "You should go home. You look like shit," he said, trying to lighten the mood.

Seriously, he wasn't lying. Mustang looked like shit. His jaw was bruised, his hands were bandaged, he looked like he hadn't slept in a week (he still couldn't believe he had been in a coma for a week. It didn't feel real). He didn't remember Mustang getting into a fistfight with anyone. He didn't ask, though. Mostly because he was afraid of the answer.

"No," he yawned again, "I can stay." His head jerked forward as he dozed off briefly, nearly toppling out of his chair.

Ed rolled his eyes. And people said he was stubborn. "Asshole, if I could throw a pillow at you, I would." He thought for a moment, then grinned. "Hey, Al—"

"No, brother, I'm not throwing a pillow at the colonel." Al sighed while he fussed with the blankets over Ed's legs.

"Betrayed by my own brother!" He moaned dramatically.

"Thank you, Alphonse, for showcasing some modicum of self-control."

"Modicum, that's a fancy word. Did you exhaust your one brain cell to think of it?"

Mustang put a hand over his heart. "I can't believe, after all I've done for you... I gave you the clothes off my back and you respond by threatening me with bodily harm and insulting my intelligence."

Ed's hand came up to pat the jacket still on his shoulders. He wasn't afraid Mustang would take it from him. At least, he was consciously afraid Mustang would take it from him, but there was still a small kernel of doubt. Something he realized would never fully go away. He hated it. He hated not being able to trust people completely. He should be able to, especially after everything Mustang had done for him. Why was he so fucked up in the head?

"Really, sir, you should go home and get some rest. You were here all night and you have work tomorrow."

"And you look like shit," Ed muttered, trying to distract himself from his own thoughts.

Mustang winced. “Don’t remind me. The paperwork never stops coming.” He stood up and straightened out his rumpled clothes. “I suppose you’re right, though.”

Of course, he was right. This was Al they were talking about. It was nearly impossible to argue against Al.

“I should get going. I’ll have a meeting with Hughes, General Grossing, and General Grumman tomorrow about your interview. I’ll try to hold it off until next week.”

Ed nodded. If he had his way, he’d never have the interview. Everything he went through would stay locked up in his own head. Surely that wouldn’t lead to any negative outcomes.

He knocked against Al’s armor and ran a hand through Ed’s hair. “Havoc should be here in an hour. Call if you need anything.”

“They don’t have to stand outside the door and guard us. Not anymore,” Ed said.

“They’re doing this to get out of work. Isn’t that right, Falman?” Mustang called.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, sir.”

He smiled at them. “Getting out of work.”

“But, sir,” Al said, “won’t Lieutenant Havoc be here at night? That’s not getting out of work.”

“Havoc’s doing this to ignore the fact that he was dumped again. Don’t let him start talking about it. You two do not need to know all the details.”

“We’re not little kids.” Ed rolled his eyes.

“Fullmetal, I’m doing you a favor. Do not talk about Havoc’s love life with him. I’m an adult and even I hate how much I know about it.”

“Alright, sir, we’ll keep that in mind,” Al said, ushering him out of the room.

The door closed and Ed sank back against the pillows. He was on pain medication, but every once in a while, he’d move just right or cough hard enough for his body to hurt. He knew he should sleep. He was desperate for dreamless sleep, but he wasn’t tired. Not yet. He had spent all day in bed. Dr. Frost was worried about aggravating his injuries and didn’t want to plop him in a wheelchair just yet. And then there was the leg. He likely wouldn’t get it back for at least another month and he was in no position to be hobbling around on a prosthetic.

Al sat back down on his chair and picked up another book. Ed took a look at him. He was alright. The Cretans didn’t hurt him. They didn’t experiment on him. He was fine.

He felt guilty. Because Al couldn’t eat or sleep, Ed was just expecting him to not need to leave. From what he gathered, Al hadn’t left his side for the entire week. The time he went to go get juice earlier in the day was the first time he had left the room. That couldn’t be good

for him. Ed should tell him to go and take a walk. Maybe go back to the dorms and clean his armor. He didn't need him here. He was safe.

He was fine.

"You should go to," he forced his mouth to say. The words choked him.

Al flinched and looked up at him. "What?"

"You don't have to stay here. Seriously, go outside, take a walk, polish your armor. You don't need to sit by my bedside."

"Um..." Al's voice was shaking. He put the book down. "If you're sure." He sounded like he was crying.

Ed furrowed his brow. "What's wrong, Al?"

"It's nothing." It didn't sound like nothing. Al stood up and started fussing with the piles of books.

"If you don't want to go, you don't have to go. I just thought you've been here all week. It might be nice for you to get out and do something else other than sitting by my bedside."

"Do you want me to go?" Al looked up at him.

Shit, why did he have to ask that question? Ed didn't want him to go. He didn't want Mustang to go. He wanted them both here at his side day and night. He couldn't be selfish. They had done so much for him. They deserved a break.

"Is it because you're mad at me?" Al asked his voice thick with tears he couldn't shed.

Wait, what? Where had that come from?

"Huh?" That was all he could manage. What could Al have possibly done to warrant him being mad?

"It's okay if you are. I'd be mad if I were you." Al crossed his arms and stared down at the floor.

Ed was still very confused. "Why would I be mad? Did you turn our dorm room into a cat sanctuary this past week?" He smiled at him. Al didn't return it.

"When the man came to get you, you didn't want to go. I made you go. It's all my fault... I forced you..."

Ed reached out and put a hand on Al's armor. The cast made it so he couldn't feel the metal directly, but he could feel the cold radiating off of him.

"What are you talking about? If you had known he was a Cretan spy, you would have kicked his ass to Xing and back."

“But... I still... you didn’t want to go. I made you go. I argued with you about it.”

“Al, look at me,” he said.

Al took a deep breath and looked up at him.

Ed smiled. He was more comfortable like this, slipping back into the role of protective big brother. It certainly beat dealing with his own roller-coaster of emotions.

“You didn’t make me do anything. I would have gone eventually, whether you were there or not.”

“No, I... this is all my fault. I was sitting at the library, at night, wondering where you were or why no one had called me yet. I didn’t reach out. I didn’t go to the Embassy to see if everything was alright. I stayed in the library. You should be mad at me. Why aren’t you mad at me? They were hurting you while I was in the library.”

He didn’t realize Al felt this way. He hadn’t thought Al would feel guilty about any of this. It wasn’t his fault. He didn’t kidnap him. He didn’t almost do human transmutation again. He did nothing wrong. Ed was glad he stayed at the library. Ed was glad they didn’t make him come with. It kept him safe. It honestly kept them both safe.

“I’m not mad at you, really. You didn’t know. I didn’t know. No one knew. Well, the Cretans knew, but no one that would have helped us knew. I can’t expect you to constantly keep track of me. You thought I was safe with the Colonel.”

“But you weren’t. I should have known something was wrong. I should have checked.”

He wished he could hug Al like Mustang had hugged him earlier. There was something so grounding about having someone else’s arms around you, squeezing you, holding you together. Even if he could wrap his arms around Al, he wouldn’t be able to feel it. He wouldn’t even know Ed was touching him.

He reached out to rap his cast against Al’s armor, a hollow metal sound echoing in the room. “This entire situation is fucked up. Don’t go blaming yourself for any of it.

“But—”

“I’m serious, Al. You did nothing wrong. You’re my brother, and you trusted that I was safe. Next time, we’ll just have to make it more of a priority to check up on each other if we’re separated.”

“You’re an idiot if you think I’m letting you out of my sight ever again.” He sniffed and wrapped his arms around Ed. This was the first time since Ed had woken up that Al touched so much of him. He was still awkward about it, though. His arms were hovering awkwardly so as not to touch too much of him at once.

Ed leaned against him, resting his cheek on the cold armor. It felt kind of good against a few of his bruises.

“Hey, now. That’s weird. I’m not completely useless. I broke a few noses if I remember correctly. And I managed to do some awesome alchemy that knocked them on their asses.” He didn’t mention the outcome of those actions was him getting beaten within an inch of his life. Al didn’t need to know the details. It was bad enough he was looking at the aftermath.

Hell, Ed didn’t even want Mustang to know everything that had happened. He could tell both of them were guilty over this whole thing. He couldn’t pretend like he didn’t understand. If the situation was reversed, if he was the one sitting by Al’s bedside, he’d feel guilty as well.

“You almost died. And you’re still injured. How can you be so calm about this?” Al sniffed again.

Ed shrugged. “Drugs?” Dissociation. His inability to admit what had happened to him. He couldn’t even admit he had had nightmares about Al blaming him for everything.

Al let go of him and settled him back against the pillows.

“I’m serious. I’m not mad at you in the slightest. This isn’t your fault.”

“I know that. I *know* that. I’m just...”

“I understand.” And he did. He understood what Al was going through.

“Do you still want me to leave?” Al asked. He sounded so small.

Ed shook his head. “I never wanted you to leave. But, you’ve been here for a week. I thought you might be getting a little stir-crazy.”

He rested a hand on his cast. “No. I’m not stir-crazy. Do you want to try and get some sleep?”

Ed bit his lip. His sleep was likely to be plagued with nightmares. He hoped Dream Mustang and Dream Al didn’t make another appearance, yelling at him about human transmutation. He didn’t want to return there.”

Al was pushing him down on the bed and covering him with blankets. “I’ll wake you up if you start having a nightmare. I promise.”

Ed slipped his hand into Al’s. The tips of his uncasted fingers brushing against the leather and metal. “You won’t leave?”

Fuck, he sounded like such a child.

Al squeezed his hand. “I won’t leave. I promise.”

With that, Ed let himself drift off once more into a dreamless sleep.

Yay, Ed and Al have talked to each other. I'm sure that nothing else needs to be dealt with. Absolutely nothing else that could cause Ed to have another breakdown.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Ah! The last official chapter! Next week's is no plot, all fluff. Everyone deserves it after the wringer we've been through. For now, though... Hey, would you look at that, more trigger warnings!

Trigger warnings: Graphic depictions of a man being strangled to death, dissociation, PTSD, parental abandonment, anxiety, depression, mentions of blood, torture, and other gore.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ed knew something was wrong the moment Mustang stepped into the room Tuesday evening. His face was shifting between grim acceptance and anger, and he was trying unsuccessfully to keep both hidden.

“What’s wrong? Did Hawkeye get on your ass for skipping out on work?” Ed said, trying to joke. His voice was shaking though, betraying his true emotions.

He trusted Mustang to keep him safe. He trusted Mustang to keep true to his word and protect him from the military. However, he knew, deep down, the man was human. He wasn’t all-powerful; he wasn’t all-knowing. There were things in this world that were simply out of his control. As much as Ed hated to admit that, he also accepted it.

Mustang sighed and sat down heavily in his usual spot. “General Grossing is demanding an interview with you tomorrow. I’m sorry, Ed. I can’t do anything. He’ll be here tomorrow at one with Hughes.”

Ed’s smile fell. He felt his heart rate speed up. He was going to have to tell them what happened? No, he wasn’t ready yet. He didn’t want to talk about it yet. It... he couldn’t... he didn’t want to. It hurt too much.

“Brother, are you okay?” Al asked. He rested his hand on Ed’s shoulder, grounding him, bringing him back to reality.

He swallowed and nodded. “Yeah, Al. I’m fine.”

He opened his mouth to make another joke of the whole situation, to poke fun at Mustang for being useless. He couldn’t get the words out of his mouth. His brain refused to focus on anything except for the highlight reel to his brief stay in the warehouse. He couldn’t do this.

“Al, can you leave us for a few moments?” Mustang asked.

Al let out a shocked noise.

“I’m just going to talk to him, okay? You can wait right outside if you’d like.”

He looked down at him, his armor creaking as he nervously shifted from foot to foot.

“Brother?”

Shit. He was asking for his permission. Did he want Al to stay here? Was it pathetic to want his brother by his side at every waking moment (and his non-waking moments), even if he trusted Mustang?

“You can leave Al. It’s fine.” He managed to choke out. It didn’t feel fine.

“Okay. If you’re sure?”

“Yeah.” He couldn’t make himself say anything else.

Al squeezed his shoulder and then walked out of the room, the metal footsteps echoing throughout the room until it was just him and Mustang. He’d like to say they were sitting in silence, but Ed couldn’t seem to get his breathing under control. He was letting out loud, short, gasping breaths that seemed to fill the room.

“Can I sit with you?” Mustang asked after a few seconds of listening to him wheeze.

“You already are, bastard,” Ed forced himself to say. There wasn’t his normal bite to it.

He wasn’t looking at him, but he could imagine the comment made Mustang roll his eyes. He shifted over so he was sitting on the bed instead of the chair. The bed itself was fairly large (because the bed was big, not because he was small, dammit!), but even with the extra space, Ed could feel Mustang’s own body brushing against his own. Grounding. Warm. There.

His heart rate decreased slightly.

“Ed,” he said, his voice firm but gentle. “I know you don’t want to do this, but you have to.”

“I know. The military—”

“I’m not talking about the military. I’m talking about you.” Mustang sighed and swung his legs up so he was sitting fully on the bed, leaning back against the pillows. “I know you. I know you’re going to try and push all of this down so you don’t have to think about it. That’ll work, but only for so long. And the longer you force yourself not to feel anything, the worse it’s going to be when those emotions do finally get out.”

Ed didn’t look at him. He kept staring at his legs. His favorite place to stare when he didn’t want to look at anyone else in the room.

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience,” he said.

Mustang dropped a heavy arm around his shoulders. “I am. It’s not fun. It’s not pleasant. I think I just made everything worse when I did it.”

There was a lump in his throat and tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. No. He wouldn't cry. He had done enough of that already. He didn't need to. He could do this.

"Ed, I know you don't like listening to me, but just this once, please. Talk about what you went through."

He shook his head. The lump was getting bigger. The tears were getting heavier. He was sniffing now, trying to keep the snot in his nose.

Mustang pulled him closer to his side. "It's okay. I know you don't want to talk about it to Grossing and Hughes, so don't talk about it with them."

"But—"

"Just talk to me." He continued. "I'll be in the room. I'll be leading the interview. They'll just be there as observers, in the corner. I know it's not ideal, but it's better than nothing. Don't talk to them, kid. Talk to me."

"I—" Ed's breath hitched. The tears were flowing once more. Fuck, he hated how much he had cried this past week. "I can't."

Mustang finally wrapped him fully in his arms. "You can. You're strong and I'm so proud of you. You can do this."

"What if I start crying?" His voice was muffled by Mustang's clothes.

"Then cry. Do you think you're the first soldier who's had to go through something like this? Trust me, the fact that you're this collected is honestly amazing. People at HQ don't believe it. Ah, but they don't know you like I do."

Ed may have been very much mistaken, but he thought he heard a hint of pride in Mustang's voice. He smiled and hugged him as hard as he could with his one arm.

"Do you want to talk about it tonight? You'll still have to do the official interview tomorrow, but it might help make it easier."

Ed thought about it. He didn't want to talk about it at all. He'd rather move on from this whole experience, keep looking for the philosopher's stone, get Al's body back, and never think about what happened again.

Even though he trusted Mustang, even though he wanted to tell him everything, he didn't feel prepared. He didn't feel fully safe. He knew he'd have to talk about it. Mustang may have been correct that talking about it now would make tomorrow easier. No one could say Edward Elric ever took the easy way out.

He felt blindsided, off-balance, and like he was freefalling all at once. As much as he wanted to just start talking, he couldn't bring himself to do it. He shook his head.

"No. I can't..."

“That’s okay.”

“But I’ll feel better? You promise?”

“Probably not tomorrow, I’ll be honest. You’ll probably feel worse tomorrow. But trust me, this will help in the long run.”

Ed pushed Mustang back, breaking the hug. He went to scrub at his eyes with the cast, trying furiously to erase any evidence that he had once again broke down sobbing like a child.

“Ed, it’s okay. You’re allowed to be upset about this. If Al was crying, would you tell him to stop?”

He finally stopped trying to scrub at his eyes. The only thing he was succeeding in was scratching up his face. “That’s a low blow, using Al like that.”

Mustang laughed. “What can I say? It’s the easiest, most reliable, and effective way to get your stubborn ass to do anything.”

“Bastard,” Ed muttered, leaning against Mustang, his head resting on his shoulder.

He once again wrapped an arm around him, drawing him close.

“You promise you’ll be there tomorrow.”

“I promise.”

“And you’ll be the one asking all the questions.”

“Yes.”

“I just have to talk to you.”

“You just have to talk to me, kid.”

Ed swallowed and let himself relax fully into Mustang’s side. He wished he didn’t have to do this. He wished there was some other way. He wasn’t ready. Though, in a way, he realized he would never be ready. Maybe Mustang was right (not that he’d ever admit it). Maybe he would feel better after getting into all of the details.

“And I have to tell you everything?”

“Switch gold for human transmutation and don’t admit that you agreed to do it as soon as Al showed up. Other than that, yes, everything.”

Ed didn’t answer him this time. He didn’t know what else he could say. He simply closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep once more.

He was gently shaken awake sometime later.

“I got to go to work, kid,” Mustang said softly.

“What?” Ed squinted up at his superior officer, who was still in bed with him. Judging by the turning of pages to his right, Al was back in the room.

“I got to go get ready for work. I’ll be by this afternoon. Until then, get some rest. And don’t worry too much about the interview.”

Ed nodded, though he didn’t believe that this was nothing to worry about. Mustang slid off the bed and helped him lay completely down. It was much colder in the room now that he wasn’t here.

“Call if you need anything,” Mustang said before leaving the room for good.

Ed swallowed and looked up at the ceiling. He wasn’t ready. He couldn’t just say what happened like it was nothing. He didn’t want to.

Al rested a hand on his forehead. “You’ll be okay, brother. Everything will be okay.”

Once more, Ed drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

Once more, he was shaken awake sometime later.

“Brother, they’re here,” Al said.

Shit! He hadn’t meant to sleep through the entire day! Sure enough, outside his window was bright and cheery sunshine.

“The colonel said he can stall them for an hour or so if you’d like something to eat.”

Ed should eat. He really should. If only he could convince his twisting and nauseous stomach of that fact.

He shook his head. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Al briefly looked like he wanted to argue, but eventually thought better of it. “Okay.”

He went to the door and poked his head out. It was only a millisecond before he was shoved out of the way, General Grossing storming into the room with Lieutenant Colonel Hughes trailing behind him, looking ready to murder someone. That someone probably being Grossing.

“Was that necessary?” Hughes asked.

“The boy has been awake for almost a week and we have yet to talk to him. I’m tired of waiting, Lieutenant Colonel. If this were any other soldier, we’d have him interrogated as soon as he woke up! I can’t believe how many exceptions we’ve had to make for the boy.”

“The Fuhrer himself requested those exceptions,” Mustang said, walking in after Hughes.

Holy shit. If Hughes looked like he was ready to murder someone, Mustang looked a thousand times angrier. It was as if he was trying to light Grossing on fire with nothing more than his eyes. Could Mustang perform flame alchemy with just his eyes? The thought alone was very terrifying. Besides, Ed was more surprised that Mustang looked as put together as he did. Didn't he spend the night at the hospital, again? He should look rumpled and exhausted. He didn't look exactly like his normal self, but he didn't look like he had slept upright in an uncomfortable hospital bed either. It was kind of amazing.

Mustang caught Ed looking at him, briefly softening his murderous glare to a much more neutral one.

"There are reasons we do things a certain way," Grossing grumbled.

"It doesn't matter now. We're here to do the interview," Hughes said, just barely sounding professional.

Mustang came over to Ed's side and put a hand on his uninjured shoulder, just enough pressure so he knew it was there. Mustang wouldn't abandon him. He'd stay by his side. He was going to talk to him. To tell him everything about what happened. The Cretans wanted him to make gold. He didn't do it, even after they brought Al to the warehouse. That was it. That was all. He could do this.

"Then let's get this over with. I've already wasted enough time on this case."

Hughes sighed. "Al, can you wait outside, please?"

Al made a noise to argue. In the corner of his eye, he saw Mustang shake his head.

Al looked down at the ground and nodded. "Okay." He slipped his hand into Ed's and let his large, leather fingers briefly brush against his. He let go of him, much too quickly, and slipped out the door.

"The doctor will also get a list of injuries from the interview today," Hughes added.

"Lieutenant Colonel..." Grossing growled. Wow, this guy was really annoying.

"Just the injuries Major Elric tells us about, nothing more." He assured him.

"He shouldn't even be in a civilian hospital," Grossing grumbled. "We should have transferred him to the military one as soon as he was stable."

No one made any comments or arguments against this, so it must have been Grossing complaining just to complain.

"Well, come on, I don't have all day," he said. Hughes immediately jumped in to start helping set up for the interview, their focus taken off of him for the time being.

Ed watched them, wanting to know exactly what they were doing. It looked like they were setting up recording equipment of some kind. He didn't get to watch for long as Mustang blocked his line of sight.

“Fullmetal,” he said quietly, sitting on the edge of the bed to look him in the eyes.

Ed swallowed, not trusting his voice. If he opened his mouth, he’d start sobbing.

Mustang brushed the hair out of his face and tucked the loose strands behind his ear. “I’m sorry I couldn’t delay it any longer.”

“It’s okay. It’s not your fault,” Ed mumbled, finally wrangling his emotions back under control.

“I know. I’m still sorry.” He glanced back behind him, then turned back towards Ed.

“Remember, don’t talk to them. Talk to me. Pretend they’re not there and just focus on me. Okay?”

He nodded.

Mustang stood back up and took a seat in a proper chair, pulling out some papers and a pen.

“Major Elric, are you ready?” Hughes asked. He didn’t like this more formal version of Lieutenant Colonel Hughes. He never thought he’d say this, but he could do with a few hundred pictures and stories of Elicia right now.

He looked at him and Grossing, standing at the foot of his bed; pens and papers out; ready to record everything he told them. He felt sick. He was going to throw up. Everything hurt and the last thing he wanted was to remind himself what they did to him.

Mustang’s hand was in his. He squeezed his fingers. The small action forced Ed’s eyes away from Grossing and Hughes and back on him. He was still sitting by his bedside. His eyes were focused and determined like they always were.

Don’t talk to them. Talk to me.

It hit him just how much he wanted to talk to Mustang. He could talk to him. He needed to talk to him. He was desperate to get this off his chest. He was desperate to have someone listen to him and tell him everything was going to be okay. He was desperate for someone to tell him that he went through something terrible but he wasn’t weak or pathetic for breaking down. He wasn’t a horrible person for trying to kill someone. He wasn’t broken or damaged beyond repair. He could still live. He could still be a good person.

He could talk to Al. Al probably wanted him to talk to him, but something was stopping him. Some protective urge that wanted to keep Al from all the bad things that happened in the world. He knew it was stupid. Hell, Al had watched him get stabbed. He knew Ed had gone through something horrific. It didn’t matter though. Because at the end of the day, Al couldn’t bring him the comfort he needed. He did bring him comfort and stability, make no mistake about that. One of the only reasons Ed was doing as well as he was laid solely with Al and his ability to be there for Ed, to pull him out of whatever dark hole he was heading down. To keep him calm and ground.

Mustang provided something entirely different. With Al, he was supposed to protect him. He was the older brother. It was his job. Therefore, he could never fully let Al take on all his burdens. Maybe this wasn't fair to Al. Maybe he should rely on him more. But at the end of the day, Ed wasn't going to let his younger brother take on all of his burdens. Mustang, on the other hand, didn't need protection. He didn't need to keep an innocent and optimistic view of the world. He didn't need to believe deep down that people were good and could be trusted. He had seen the worst of the worst. He had dealt with more death and destruction than anyone should deal with in a lifetime. He was a powerful alchemist. More powerful than Ed had ever seen (other than himself, Al, and teacher, of course). He didn't need Ed to protect him. And that in and of itself made it so Ed could lean on him. He could trust him to take charge of a situation. He could trust him to know what he was going through and help him. He could trust him to keep him safe. He had found them when no one else was even looking. He had gotten them out of that warehouse. He had taken care of the Cretan Alchemists so they would never hurt them again. He had committed so many crimes just to make sure Ed wouldn't get caught committing a taboo again. He was there. He was here. Ed could talk to him.

So, he opened his mouth and started to talk.

He talked about the lieutenant and how he had told him they had found a transmutation circle at the embassy. He talked about how each of his questions was met with a plausible answer and the excuse itself seemed legitimate, so he went with the lieutenant. He talked about his immediate realization about the fact that it was a trap the moment he stepped into the warehouse and realized there were no generals and no one else was wearing a uniform. He talked about his failed attempt to fight back. He talked about the main Cretan, the alchemist who kept asking him over and over again to do the transmutation. He talked about how they promised to stop hurting him if he did the transmutation for them.

"What transmutation did they want you to do, Major Elric?"

"Gold. They wanted me to make gold."

"And did you make any?"

"No. I refused. Each time they asked, I refused. It didn't matter what they did to me. I kept saying no."

He talked about the leg. The water. The knives. The lemon juice. Torturer One leaving sometime in the night and being replaced with Torturer Two. He talked about how they praised him for withstanding the torture so well and saying it was a pity he was an enemy soldier. He talked about his attempt to strangle one of the guards to death with his chains. He lied and said the reason he didn't go through with it was because the others jumped in to stop him and he wasn't able to put up much of a fight. He knew Mustang didn't believe it for a second. He wondered about Hughes and Grossing.

Mustang continuously rubbed his fingers, unable to do much more with an audience.

There were points Ed was talking so quickly and so much, he'd forget to breathe. When he did finally pause to take a breath, he let out a rattling, hacking cough to remind everyone in

the room that he had been waterboarded and it lead to a pretty severe case of pneumonia he was still fighting off.

He talked about his transmutation circle, drawn up in his blood, using his tongue as the pen so he could attack.

”Was this an escape attempt?”

He thought about it for a second, then shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. At this point, I knew I wasn’t going to get out of there with some outside help. I wanted to take a few of them down. Or force them to kill me faster. Or both.”

It was funny. Something he had been dreading, putting off for so long, was now here. The lock on his throat that had kept him from speaking was off. Now all he could do was keep talking. He wanted him to know. He *needed* him to know everything that had happened.

He needed him to know that he hadn’t just sat there and accepted his fate. He needed him to know he had tried so hard to fight back. He needed him to know he tried so hard to make sure the Cretans didn’t get what they wanted. In many ways, he was still afraid that the Mustang from his dreams was the Mustang sitting in front of him now. A Mustang that thought he was weak, pathetic, and willing to give in because he was in a bit of pain. He needed him to know that wasn’t the case. He needed him to know how much they hurt him. He needed him to know they only stopped when he was unconscious, and that they never let him stay unconscious for very long. He needed him to know all of this so that he knew he hadn’t made a mistake giving him a second chance. He hadn’t made a mistake covering for him the first time. Ed had learned his lesson. He hadn’t used up his one chance. Mustang could still trust him.

He kept looking at Mustang, talking to him.

However, despite Mustang’s request that he tell him everything, he couldn’t. He couldn’t fully ignore the fact that two extra sets of eyes were on him. He liked Hughes well enough, but he didn’t trust him to know about his nightmares. He didn’t want him to know about his nightmares. As for Grossing... it was never even a question. He understood the man had a job to do, but he was still a dick. Ed didn’t want him knowing about his more vulnerable moments. Especially when it came to the fact that he almost killed someone with his hands. The military would probably treat that as a heroic action; something a soldier was supposed to do. All Ed could think about was the feeling of the man struggling against him as he slowly choked to death. He felt sick just thinking about it.

So, while Mustang asked him to talk about everything, he didn’t. He couldn’t. He kept to what happened while he was awake and pushed those feeling as far down as possible. That should be enough for the investigation. That should be enough for now.

Finally, he was done talking. He had given them everything he remembered. He had listed every injury he could think of. He had given them as concrete of a timeline as he could manage.

He fell back against the pillows, exhausted.

General Grossing was saying something. Mustang and Hughes were responding to him. Ed didn't care anymore. Despite sleeping all night and for most of the day, he was exhausted. He wanted this to be over and done with. He wanted to see his brother again and then sleep for another thousand years. His lungs hurt. His ears hurt. His bones hurt. His body hurt. Everything hurt. Maybe, if Grossing would fucking leave, he'd get a chance to go back to sleep.

Finally, Mustang and Hughes managed to chase the man out of the room.

"You did good, Ed," Hughes said, smiling at him. "I'll give these to Dr. Frost so he can make sure he got everything. Other than that, it's over. You can focus on healing now."

It didn't feel like it was over. And in many ways, it wasn't over. The physical healing would take forever. He didn't even want to think about the mental healing. He wasn't sure he could ever heal mentally.

Mustang frowned, studying him in a way that made him feel so small.

"Thank you, Hughes," he said, looking back at the man. "While you're out, can you go find Al? Tell him that we're done?"

"Make sure he doesn't have a cat on him," Ed mumbled. Though, having a cat to cuddle with at night might be nice.

Hughes laughed. "Yes, I'll go find Al and make sure he isn't smuggling any cats into the hospital." He paused at the door. "Oh, but I almost forgot, I have new photos of my darling Elicia!"

"Hughes," Mustang warned.

"She's getting so big! You should see her! And guess what she said to me on the phone the other day?"

"Out." He pushed him towards the door. Hughes refused to walk, digging his heels into the ground as he kept rambling on about Elicia.

"Don't pretend like you aren't just as in love with her as I am, Roy," he said.

Ed couldn't help but grin. He loved it when people made Mustang's life more difficult for him. In a fun way, of course.

"Go find Al and Dr. Frost," Mustang huffed, struggling to get the door open so he could push Hughes through it.

"Alright, alright. I'll let you talk to your kid."

Ed's smile dropped.

"But don't think you're getting out of this! I will make you admit that she is adorable and perfect!"

“Get out of here.” Mustang finally managed to shove him out the door and shut it behind him.

Ed wasn’t paying attention anymore. His head spinning around what Hughes had just said.

Your kid.

Surely, he didn’t mean anything by that. It was a slip of the tongue or something. Not anything to freak out about. Right? Besides, it wasn’t like Mustang felt anything towards him other than basic tolerance.

He did stay by your side all night last night and several other times these past few weeks.

But he would do that for any member of the team. Right?

Really? Do you think he’d cuddle up in bed next to Havoc or Falman?

It didn’t mean anything. Mustang was his superior officer. Nothing more.

He is more to you, though. Isn’t he? That’s why his jacket is the only thing that calmed you down. That’s why you wanted him to tell you that you weren’t a failure. That’s why you wanted him to know about everything bad that happened to you.

Mustang sat down heavily in his regular chair. How funny, he now had a regular chair in the hospital room.

Hughes’ words meant nothing. He wasn’t anything more to him than a superior.

You know that’s not true. Okay, the voice in his head was starting to sound more and more like Mustang.

He tugged at the jacket around his shoulders. He really should give it back. He didn’t need it anymore.

It’s okay to need people. It’s okay to need him.

Mustang reached out and readjusted the jacket on his shoulders. Yet another weird thing that had become normal in such a short amount of time.

“Now that they’re gone, how about you actually tell me everything,” he said.

“I did tell you everything. There’s nothing else to talk about.” Now that Hughes and Grossing were out of the room, he felt more like he was going to cry. He was surprised he didn’t break down sobbing during the actual interview. He was close a few times. Then it was like he had taken a step out of his body and was observing rather than experiencing. That didn’t feel like something he should be doing. It felt unhealthy.

Besides, he was currently dealing with a lot of emotions right now, emotions he wasn’t used to dealing with. He wasn’t... mad at what Hughes said. Quite the opposite. There was something warm in his chest. It didn’t feel good. It didn’t feel bad. But it did feel right.

Dream Mustang's words echoed in his head. "*I'm your what, Ed? What am I?*" Dammit, maybe these new emotions weren't as new as he thought they were. That scared him. The last person he felt this way towards left him in the middle of the night, never to be seen again. What if the same thing happened here? He had tried so hard to keep himself safe from all of these emotions. People left. That's what they did. He didn't want to get too attached to Mustang because one day, he'd leave too. Just like Hohenheim.

"How about we talk about the man you strangled? You glossed over it during the interview." It was weird how he could switch from business-like to affectionate and gentle then back to business-like so quickly.

Ed flinched. His breathing hitched slightly. No, not that. Anything but that. He had almost... he was going to. He wanted to.

Mustang pulled him into another hug. Yet another weird thing that was just normal now. Fuck, now that he was starting to look for signs, he was starting to see them everywhere.

"It's okay," he said, slipping back into a much more caring tone of voice. "They were hurting you. You were trying to escape. And, you still didn't kill him, even after all of that."

It was too much. There were too many emotions in him right now, each fighting to get out. He wanted to ask Mustang what he thought about him. He wanted to know if he was planning on leaving. He wanted him to keep hugging him. He wanted him to yell and punish him for almost doing human transmutation again. He wanted someone to call him a monster for almost killing a man. He wanted to know if he really was weak and pathetic. He wanted to know if Al and mom hated him for what he did to them. He wanted someone to hug him and tell him everything was going to be okay. He wanted to scream. He wanted to get out of the hospital. He wanted people to quit poking him with needles. He wanted his arm and leg back so he could move around. He wanted his lungs to stop rattling in his chest. He wanted to stop talking about everything that had happened. He wanted to keep talking about everything that happened. He wanted everything and nothing.

"But..." He wanted to talk. "I almost did." He wanted to cry. "I was going to." He started to sob.

"But you didn't."

Was it even right to sob about this to Mustang? He knew (even if he didn't like to think about it) that Mustang had killed people. A lot of people, if the rumors were true. He had only *almost* killed one person. Surely, he couldn't be this shaken up about it?

"Edward," Mustang said, gently but firmly, "what you did is something that no one should ever have to do. You wouldn't have done it had you not been in that situation. You were trying to survive. You reacted on instinct. You did try to kill someone and that's something you're going to have to live with for the rest of your life."

Ed whimpered. That wasn't the pep-talk he was hoping for.

"We all have dark sides to us, sides that can do horrible things to other people."

Maybe his hope that Mustang actually cared about him was a little far-fetched. He should have known better.

“But,” he continued, “at the end of the day, even when you could have been completely forgiven for taking a life because of the situation, you still didn’t. That says a lot about you and who you are as a person.”

He was sobbing, clinging to Mustang and his words. He couldn’t believe them. Even though they were exactly what he wanted to hear, he couldn’t believe them. How could he, when it was so easy for him to wrap that chain around the man’s neck and pull? He had turned purpled under Ed’s hands. His eyes and veins bulged. His hands desperately clawed at the chain until fingernails ripped out. And he almost went through with it. A few more seconds and that man would have been dead. Gone. His life snuffed out because of him.

“Edward, you are not a bad person.” He hugged him tightly. “You didn’t kill anyone. You defended yourself. Those men did much worse things to you than you did to them. Anyone who wants to argue that somehow makes you a bad person can answer to me. Got it?”

He didn’t answer.

“And that includes you. I won’t let you walk around depressed because you think you did something wrong. You didn’t.”

“Asshole,” was all Ed managed to say. Although, he couldn’t argue it came from a place of actual hatred, considering he was still wearing Mustang’s jacket and clutching at him, sobbing into his chest like a little kid.

“You can call me all the names you want. I didn’t let you wallow then and I’m not letting you wallow now. Especially since none of this is your fault.”

It was amazing how Mustang could always find the words to say to snap him out of whatever funk he was in so quickly. “I know.” He did know. It was nice to know. Maybe one day, he’d believe it.

“Good, now let me hear you say it.”

He would have pinched him in retaliation if any of his fingers worked. Fuck, he wanted his arm on as soon as possible. When he did get it back, he was going to throw so many fucking pillows at Mustang.

“I’m not a bad person.” He did his best to mumble it in as monotone of a voice as possible.

“Riveting performance. I almost believed you.” Mustang deadpanned.

Ed smacked his arm.

He pulled back. “What else?”

He bit his lip and looked down at the sheets, shaking his head. He didn’t need to talk about the dreams. They weren’t real. Since he had woken up, Al hadn’t spilled mom’s guts all over

the floor. Mustang hadn't once called him pathetic (even if he did deserve it) and even said he was proud. Or, Ed remembered him saying he was proud of him last night. That may have been a dream, though.

Mustang sighed. "Don't make me order you to tell me what's going on."

"Nothing's going on."

"Look me in the eyes and tell me that."

Asshole. Jerk. Bastard. Fucking motherfucker. He knew as soon as Ed looked up, it was game over.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Mustang cross his arms. He could feel his stare on him. He couldn't tell Mustang about the dreams. What if he agreed with them? What if he realized that he didn't like Ed after all? That he wasn't proud of him after all? What if he decided to kick him out of the military and leave him forever? He couldn't risk it.

"What aren't you telling me? I can get Hughes in here again. He went easy on you today, but you should see him with Elicia. He can get her to admit things in ten seconds or less."

Ed wrinkled his nose. He did not like the fact that he had just been compared to a literal toddler.

He wasn't going to win this fight. Maybe if he told half-truths, that'd be enough for Mustang to leave it alone. "It was just some bad dreams, okay? I get them all the time. No big deal."

"It doesn't matter if you get them all the time. It still is a big deal. What were they about?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't remember them."

"Please," Mustang scoffed. "You remember alchemical equations so specific there is an entire team of alchemists to double-check your research sources to make sure you didn't just make them up on the spot. I'm sure you can remember a few bad dreams. You couldn't have had that many while you were there. From your account, you weren't unconscious that much."

"It was just some stuff about Al and mom." *Don't say it. Don't you dare say it. Things are weird enough already. Don't make it worse.* "And you." *God-fucking-dammit.*

"Me?" He didn't sound surprised. Ed didn't know if that made things better or worse. "Well, since I'm the one here, how about we start with that one. What about me?"

He shrugged his shoulders. He was fighting a losing battle. He had already given up too much information. Mustang wasn't going to let go, no matter how stubborn Ed was. And, the longer he waited, the more likely Al was going to show up. And then he'd have to talk about them with him as well. Might as well get it over with.

"You were just saying some stuff. About me."

Mustang didn't say anything. He was still staring at him. The bastard. Why couldn't he just leave like Hohenheim did? Why did he actually seem to care?

The longer he stared, the more Ed realized he had to say something. He didn't want to, but it'd be easier if Mustang left now, rather than later.

"Saying I was pathetic and stuff for thinking about doing the transmutation. You pulled me over to the circle and said I should do it. I only have one chance and I've already used it up so might as well get it over with." He finished lamely. When he said it out loud, it made it sound like he hated Mustang, didn't trust him in the slightest. He hated himself for thinking those things.

He was silent for a very long time. He was trying to figure out a way to let him down gently. To tell him to pack his things and leave. He couldn't blame him. Those were awful things to think about someone who put their life on the line for him.

Mustang pulled him into yet another hug, squeezing him tightly and currently acting as the only thing holding him together.

"I don't think that about you. I've never thought that about you. I told you I'm proud of you and I mean it, even now. Especially now. Especially knowing everything you went through."

He let himself slump bonelessly in Mustang's arms. Let him hold him up for a while. It was nice to have someone else shoulder the emotional burden. Fuck, he was so tired.

"I know." He did know. "But I needed to hear it."

Mustang flinched. "In what universe did you need to hear from me that you were pathetic while you were being tortured to death?"

"In the universe where doing the transmutation would have killed me," Ed stated simply. Now that he had some time away from the situation and the ability to think, he realized his brain came up with a scenario that would guarantee he didn't do the transmutation. Whether he admitted it or not, he did care what Mustang thought about him. He did want to make him proud and do the right thing.

"Al said similar things. Mom did too. I'm not stupid. The fact that I survived going through the gate twice is a miracle. I wouldn't have survived a third time. I didn't need to be coddled. I needed to be told straight-up what would happen to me. I'm not going to lie and say that I liked hearing you call me names, but it wasn't all bad either."

"Oh?"

Shit, he hadn't meant to let that part slip.

"I mean, when I was awake, you were giving me advice and stuff on how to handle the situation. Nothing major."

"Why Edward, are you admitting that you actually like me?" Mustang seemed content that he wasn't going to break down again and pulled back.

“Shut up asshole, you were probably the only one I wanted to hear giving me advice. It’s not like Al’s ever been through something like this.”

“I’ll have to let everyone at Eastern Command know.”

“Stop it, you bastard!”

Mustang grinned at him and ran a hand through his hair. Ed leaned into the touch.

“Do you want to go into any more detail? It sounds like something else is bothering you.”

Ed opened his mouth. He did want to tell Mustang everything, everything he saw, every word that he heard. He wanted to tell him about mom’s organs in Al’s armor. About the threat to burn him to death. Right now, though, he was tired and drained.

“Later?” He asked, his voice cracking.

Mustang squeezed his shoulder. “Later. I’m serious, you did good today, kid.”

Ed smiled. The room wasn’t quiet for long. They heard Al’s metal footsteps down the hall. It sounded like he was practically sprinting.

“Brother!” Al burst into the room. “Your interview is over? How was it? Did it go okay? Did General Grossing believe you? Are you okay?”

Behind him was Hughes, who exchanged looks with Mustang. They were having a silent conversation. Jerks.

“It went fine, Al. I think I’m done being interviewed.” He looked at Hughes.

“Yep. Mind you, it’ll take me weeks to get all the paperwork in,” Hughes sighed. “But, as far as I know, you’re all done. Focus on healing up and resting.”

“Thank you so much, Lieutenant Colonel,” Al said.

“No problem, Al.” He knocked against his armor. “Since there’s nothing else, I’ll be heading out now. Frost has the report and will be by in an hour or so to come up with a more thorough treatment plan. Enjoy the rest of your afternoon, boys.”

“Thanks, lieutenant colonel, we will!” Al waved to him as he stepped out the door.

“Ha, an entire day around him and not one photo of Elicia,” Mustang grinned, sitting back in the chair.

“Just wait until he realizes that,” Al said.

Mustang’s smile dropped. “If I were to leave the country for a bit, do you think you two could cover for me?”

“Of course not. The lieutenant will want to know where you’re at.”

Mustang's face paled even more, causing Ed to laugh. "Aren't you supposed to be her boss and not the other way around?"

"She's a scary woman, Fullmetal."

Al started talking about a stray cat he had seen outside of the hospital. No, it wasn't in his armor, he assured them, but he had been petting it and bringing it food the past few days. As he continued to talk, Ed started to shift, hand coming up to his hair only to remember that he couldn't use it. He let it drop back down to his lap, defeated. The hair on the back of his neck was driving him crazy. It was tangled and constantly stuck to it. He wanted it braided so badly. Al couldn't do it, though. He couldn't feel anything in the armor and his fingers were too big and clumsy.

The fourth time he went to fruitlessly try and make his hair more comfortable, Mustang finally spoke up.

"Do you want me to braid your hair?" he asked.

Ed and Al both looked at him, shocked.

"Like you can braid," he scoffed. He refused to believe Colonel Bastard could do anything with hair, much less braid it.

He maneuvered Ed so the back of his head was pointed towards him and started running his fingers through the strands, detangling them. The bandages on his hand had been removed Monday. Ed kept asking what had happened. Mustang kept giving him some vague answer about a fight with an oven and a hot baking dish. Both he and Al concluded that he was lying out of his ass. But Al, being the more agreeable person, said they shouldn't push it if the colonel wasn't comfortable talking about it. Once again, Ed hated that Al was right about something. He wondered if Mustang not talking to them was similar to him not talking to Al. He wanted to protect Al. Maybe Mustang wanted to protect them. The thought made that warm feeling in his chest spread just a bit more. He stopped asking.

"I can, in fact, braid hair." The fingers felt so nice. The tangles were coming out little by little. Mustang separated the strands, though he started at the very top of Ed's head and not at the base of his neck.

"Where'd you learn how to braid? Doesn't seem like something they teach you at the academy." Ed said, his eyes slipping closed.

He had been through the emotional wringer today. He felt like crap. His body ached. His head ached. His eyes were dry from all the crying he did. So to have someone just methodically run their fingers through his hair did wonders. It was amazing how something so simple could bring him such comfort.

"What is it with you two thinking I have absolutely no life outside of the military. Do you think I just exist at Eastern Command and in my uniform?"

"Yes." Ed said at the exact time Al said "No."

“If you need to know—”

“I need to know.”

“I grew up with a bunch of sisters and it was my job to help them with their hair before they went to work.” He finished.

“Really? How many sisters?” Al asked, scooching closer and listening with rapt attention. Ed was also intrigued. He didn’t know much about him outside of what he was like in the office. Though, these past few days had been enlightening in several ways and he was starting to realize he didn’t know much about Mustang at all. He didn’t peg him as the sort that came from a big family. Come to think of it, he didn’t peg Mustang as the type to have a family at all. He just... assumed he sprang fully formed as an asshole colonel one day.

“Eh, I guess it depends on your definition.”

“That’s stupid. The people you’re related to,” Ed said, rolling his eyes. It felt so good to have the hair off the back of his neck.

“Then zero.”

“You just said—”

“Foster home, Fullmetal.”

“Oh.” He didn’t know how to respond to that. Somehow, it didn’t surprise him, but he supposed he never really thought about Mustang’s parents or family situation that much. He never needed to. It was important to note, though, this didn’t disprove his theory that Mustang sprang fully formed into the world. He just sprang fully formed into the world a bit younger.

“Don’t go around telling people, by the way. There are some things I’d rather my colleagues not know.”

Before Ed could ask what he meant by that, Mustang moved on. “Let’s see,” He continued as if he didn’t just drop a bomb of information on them. “If you count everyone that’s technically been fostered by my aunt, maybe fifty or so.”

“Fifty!” Al cried. “That’s so many.”

“Yeah, but I only know about fifteen and am only really close with about ten of them.”

“That’s still a ton of siblings, sir. I don’t know how you do it.” Al looked at Ed.

“Hey, is that supposed to be a dig at me?”

Al didn’t say anything.

“So you would do their hair?”

“Yep. Not all of them, but at least a few of them. And all of them had incredibly long hair. It shed everywhere. I’m still not sure how none of them were bald. There were just clumps of hair all over the place. Whenever I had to sweep, it was awful because the hair just went everywhere. And clearing out the drains...” He shuddered. “So much hair.”

Ed thought about his hair. He didn’t think he shed too much. Then again, he had never really been in one place long enough to tell. Maybe it wasn’t just a girl thing. Did Winry shed hair all over the place? He couldn’t remember.

“That sounds like it sucks.”

“Oh, that wasn’t the worst part.” Mustang laughed. “I had to share a bed with my sister Vanessa for the longest time. She refused to tie her hair up at night. Every night I’d wake up with it either covering my nose and mouth, suffocating me, wrapped around my neck strangling me, or, worst of all, I’d roll on top of it and she’d roll away, only to be jerked awake. Then she’d kicked me out of the bed as if the whole thing was my fault. I think I still have bruises from all the times I landed on the floor because she couldn’t bother to tie it up before she went to bed.”

Ed laughed. “I think I like your sister. You should introduce us.”

“Why would I ever do that?”

“Cause she probably has really good dirt on you. Siblings always have the best dirt.” He looked over at Al for some backup. Al looked away, guilty. “Wait, Al, why do you look guilty?”

“It’s nothing, brother.”

Mustang chuckled behind him, finishing up the braid.

“You didn’t tell him anything, did you?”

“No! Of course not!” Al said.

“Liar, I know you did. What did you tell him? How could you betray me like this?”

“It was nothing bad, I promise!”

“He’s telling the truth, Fullmetal,” Mustang said, returning to his normal seat and smirking at them. “Just the story of how you broke your arm trying to impress your automail mechanic.”

If Ed could look at himself in the mirror, he’d probably be bright red.

“Well, did you tell him any of your embarrassing stories?”

“I don’t have any embarrassing stories,” Al sighed.

“That’s right. Because you are an actual good child who doesn’t cause headaches for his superior officer,” Mustang laughed.

“Oh yeah,” Ed grinned, he knew just the story he was going to tell. “What about the time you snuck a fully grown raccoon into our room, convinced you could tame it?”

Al went very, very still. “Don’t you dare.”

“Actually, I’m curious about this. Fullmetal, continue.”

“Oh yeah. I’m still not sure how he caught it, but he snuck it into the house. It managed to get out of the room and into the kitchen and ate everything. It was so stuffed by the time we got back home, it couldn’t move. We had to roll it out of the house because neither of us was strong enough to lift it. Every time we tried, it just slipped from our hands.”

Mustang started laughing.

“It was cold and needed a place to stay!” Al protested.

“It’s a raccoon. It’s supposed to stay outside!”

It was strange to Ed, to be talking like this so casually. He felt like so much had changed in such a short amount of time. Already, his relationship with Mustang had been changed so dramatically he wasn't quite sure what it was anymore. He kind of liked it. It had been so long since he had someone else to lean on; someone else to trust to care of things, to take care of Al when he couldn’t. And he knew Mustang was here to stay. He was here to support them and keep them safe as much as he could. That alone made Ed happier than he could admit.

He knew this wasn’t over. He still had to put his arm and leg on. He still had to go through physical therapy for all his broken bones. He still had pneumonia and ear infections he had to deal with. And the nightmares were going to be awful. However, there was something in the back of his mind that told him not to worry about it. He didn’t have to do this alone. Not anymore.

Chapter End Notes

The raccoon story was based on the photo of the possum that snuck into the donut shop and ate so many donuts, he couldn't move. I could find a picture of it, but it lives rent-free in my head.

Thank you to everyone who commented last week! I will respond to them all, I've just been pretty busy this week. Anyways, like I said, next week's chapter is pure fluff. No hurt. No angst. All comfort. A little end cap to end this story. I hope you enjoyed this chapter though. Try not to be too hard on Grossing, he is trying to do his job. It's not his fault the Fuhrer decided that having a literal child soldier was a good idea. And Mustang, my lovely Mustang, getting a little bit open with those parent feelings. Might want to get those under control before rumors around Eastern Command start flying.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They were sitting at the station, waiting for Hughes' train back to Central. Mustang was sad to see his friend go. He felt more in control (of himself and the situation) when he was here. He felt like he had someone to watch his back and, more importantly, to watch him. Hawkeye did an excellent job of keeping him in line, of course. But it helped for Hughes to be here. After all, Hawkeye would probably never punch him in the face. Hughes would give him a beat down if he felt it was necessary. And he had to admit, it was necessary.

"And this is her in her new dress. Doesn't she look adorable?" Hughes gushed, shoving yet another picture under Mustang's nose.

Hughes had panicked when he realized he went a whole day without gushing about Elicia and was now doing everything in his power to make up for lost time, much to his chagrin. He grinned and bared it. Hughes did help him cover up a murder and protected Ed and Al throughout this whole investigation. The least he could do was pretend to care about Elicia learning how to say 'blue'.

"If this is how you act after I've helped you cover up a murder, maybe you need to murder people more often." Hughes chuckled. He finally put away the photos. "I haven't heard one complaint from you this whole time."

He shrugged. "It's the least I can do. You're the reason Ed and Al are still alive right now."

"Don't put everything on me. If you didn't realize something was fishy, we would have never known they were gone."

Mustang clenched his jaw, guilt bubbling up in him once more. He should have called. He should have called that first night when he knew something was wrong. Every injury Ed suffered after he decided not to call the library was his fault.

"Hey," Hughes put a hand on his shoulder, "I don't think there's anything I can say that I haven't already said, but this isn't your fault. Ed and Al don't blame you in the slightest. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen those boys act so affectionate towards you. Or anyone for that matter."

"Just because they don't blame me doesn't mean I'm innocent." They had had this argument many times. Hawkeye and Hughes spending hours in his apartment yelling at him and telling him to get a grip. He understood. He really did. He didn't think he'd ever get rid of the guilt though.

"Yeah, that's the one bad thing about being a parent. Even when it's not your fault, you still blame yourself."

He glared at him. "I'm not their father." Even as he said those words, he knew they rang false. Everything he had done these past few weeks had shown just how attached to those boys he was. He couldn't lie to Hughes, especially after what he did to Gianellis.

Hughes seemed to agree with his thoughts and the ass started laughing. "Whatever you say, Roy."

"Besides, if I am a parental figure, I'm not a very good one." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and watching the people walk by. Some were rushing to catch a train. Others were meandering and taking in the sights. There were a few families scattered about. His eyes drifted towards them and watched them with something akin to wistfulness aching in his bones.

"Oh please, you're not giving yourself enough credit."

"No, I am. Let's face it, this entire thing is completely foreign to me."

"It's foreign to everyone!" Hughes cried.

Mustang rolled his eyes. "Yes, I'm sure it's foreign to you, Mr. Perfect Father of the Year."

"It is! Do you think I know what the hell I'm doing? I'm just as lost as you are, Roy. We all are, in a way. Am I doing good? Am I doing bad? It's not like they have annual reviews of parenthood where they rate you on a scale of one to ten for various topics."

The pep talk was doing the opposite of helping him. "Great. If you don't know what to do, then how the hell am I supposed to know what to do?" He couldn't believe they were even having this conversation. If Aunt Chris knew, she'd have a field day. If you had told him, even two years ago, that two kids would so thoroughly entangle themselves in his life to the point where he was willing to risk everything he had worked for just to keep them safe, he'd call you a liar and light you on fire.

"Just be there for them, you idiot," Hughes said. "That's all most kids want anyways. They just want you to be there for them."

"That's not enough. Maybe for normal kids who don't have an entire lifetime's worth of trauma shoved into a few short years, but not for Ed and Al." He couldn't fathom how the answer could be this simple. He wasn't dealing with normal kids. He was dealing with two prodigies who suffered more than anyone should ever have to suffer. He was dealing with two kids who were thrust into an adult's world and expected to deal with it successfully. He was dealing with two kids who were fiercely independent and almost comically unwilling to accept help from others, instead of relying solely on each other to make it out alive. He didn't know how 'just being there' would ever be enough. He didn't know if anything he did would ever be enough.

Hughes sighed and thumped him on the back. "You asshole, even after everything I've done for you. You underestimate how important it is just to have someone at your side, willing to support you through anything but also willing to tell you when you're doing the wrong thing. Ed and Al are very unique kids. They're going to struggle with everything they've been

through for the rest of their lives, but they are still kids. They need you to be there for them. They trust you to be there for them, to keep them on the right path, and to help out when things get rough.”

“That feels like a mistake on their part.” He was going to fuck those kids up. He was going to say or do something, push them too far, ask them to do too much. He was going to shatter any trust they had towards him and then they wouldn’t have anyone.

“Seriously? You cannot tell me, with a straight face, that you think they shouldn’t trust you. You literally spent your nights by Ed’s bedside waiting for him to wake up. You engineered an entire investigation just to keep him safe. You hunted down the man who hurt them and made sure he never would again. My god, man, have some faith in yourself.”

He couldn’t argue with that, that was true. It still didn’t feel like it was enough.

“You’re such a stubborn asshole,” Hughes said, turning to rummage around in his bag.

“Thanks. It’s part of my charm.”

Finally, he found what he was looking for and pulled out a wrapped package. “Here.” He shoved it at Mustang.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a present.”

He furrowed his brow and took the package from him. “A present? I feel like I should be giving you something after everything you’ve done.”

“Yeah, well, I’m nice like that. Come on, open it.”

He rolled his eyes. It felt like a picture frame. It was probably another picture of Elicia, this time framed so Mustang could display it on his desk because ‘no one at Eastern Command knows how precious Elicia is’.

He ripped off the paper, his eyes widening when he saw what the picture was. It was Ed and Al. Ed was beaming at the camera, the biggest smile Mustang had ever seen. Al was behind him, also looking ecstatic. In Ed’s hands was his State Certification. Hughes must have taken it the day Ed passed his exam.

“I didn’t know you took this,” he said.

“You have to celebrate the milestones in your kid’s life.” Hughes shrugged, grinning like an idiot.

“Hughes, this was right after the exam. I didn’t... They weren’t mine yet.” He finished lamely.

“Please,” Hughes scoffed. “I knew you were a goner the moment that kid pulled out a spear.”

He hated the fact that Hughes was correct.

“I’m not putting this up in my office.” He forced himself to put the picture down.

“I know, I know. No one can know that Colonel Roy Mustang has a heart. But your home is lacking in personal effects.”

“My home is functional.”

“It’s depressing.”

Hughes’ train pulled up. Mustang didn’t want him to go just yet. He still felt like he was two seconds away from breaking down and doing something else stupid. He was glad they weren’t going to war with Creta, but he still wanted to hurt someone. Even after everything he had done to Gianellis, he still wanted to hurt someone.

“Are you okay?” Hughes asked, making no move to get on his train.

He thought about it for a second. Was he okay? The simple answer was no. He wasn’t okay. He was far from okay. However, there was something in him that was also hopeful, at peace.

“No,” he admitted.

“Do you want me to stay? I can see if I have any leave.”

He opened his mouth, unsure of what he was going to say. He thought about it some more, then shook his head. “No, you don’t have to stay. I’m not okay, but I’m better.”

Hughes smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. “Good. I’m glad to hear it. If you need anything, I’m just a phone call away. And if you do decide to go and commit rage murder again, tell Hawkeye first so she can shoot you.”

He rolled his eyes and shoved Hughes off the bench. “You have a train to catch.”

“I’ll send you more photos for your home,” Hughes called. “It’s disgraceful for a father to not have at least fifty photos of his kids.”

“I will light you on fire, Hughes!”

“And get yourself a wife!”

He hopped on the train just as it started to go, making it so Mustang couldn’t respond without looking like an idiot. He briefly thought about sending a small fireball Hughes’ way but decided that was an incredibly unprofessional thing to do.

The train rounded the corner, and he was gone. Mustang stood on the platform for several more minutes, feeling like the entire world had gone quiet. He felt very much alone right now. He didn’t know if he would ever be okay. He didn’t know if Ed and Al would ever be okay. How was he supposed to move on with so many variables and unknowns?

Finally, he got his feet to move. He turned and went back to the office.

It must have been later than he thought. The office was empty. It looked like it had been for a while. He hadn't meant to spend so long with Hughes at the train station. He had meant to drop him off and then leave.

He could hear the ticking of the clock on the wall, see the shadows grow as the sun slowly set. It felt so odd to be here. Normally, this place was bustling with activity, petty arguments, and work. Now, not even Fuery's radio was crackling with messages.

He slumped down in his chair. Hawkeye was still here. Her things were tucked away in the corner. If he remembered correctly, she had a meeting this afternoon. That's likely where she still was. He pulled a packet of paperwork off the top of his desk and started to work.

It didn't take long for his mind to wander. Ed had been in the hospital for about three weeks now. His pneumonia was under control and the nerve activity in his leg had returned to normal levels. In the last update he had, Dr. Frost said they could put the arm back on tomorrow. Then, next week, they'd try the leg.

Ed was handling the entire situation surprisingly well. He had nightmares, terrible nightmares that had Mustang holding him and soothing him in the early hours of the morning. He flinched whenever things got too loud, or there was a sudden burst of activity. He would go very still when he saw Hawkeye's gun. And he absolutely refused to give Mustang his jacket back (Not that he ever actually tried to take it back, but he did suggest he take it to get it cleaned once or twice. The results were not good).

Despite all of this, Ed was doing so much better than Mustang could have hoped for. He was afraid Ed would be catatonic. He was afraid Ed would need to leave the military, unable to continue working. He forgot that Ed was a fighter. He wouldn't let something like this keep him down.

He was still worried, though, that this was the calm before the storm. Ed had broken down a lot that first week he was awake. That was good, he needed to break down. But Ed was a lot like him. He'd try to push things down and not feel things that were deemed 'unnecessary'. He'd keep moving forward no matter how much he needed to stop and reflect on what happened.

He shuddered as he remembered how his coping mechanisms ended with Gianellis and punch to the jaw. The boys would never find out how he died. As far as they knew, Gianellis died quickly and painlessly with a bullet between his eyes. Mustang would live with this. He'd live with the knowledge of what he was capable of. The kids had enough to deal with.

He was doing his best to help the kids out, but he felt so out of his depth. It didn't help that Ed needed to be pushed past the breaking point for him to talk about what he was feeling. Even now, even after everything he had been through, he still tried to put on a brave face, still tried to act like he was fine.

Hughes seemed confident that all Mustang needed was to simply be there for the kids. He worried it wasn't enough. He worried one day it would all come crashing down.

He sighed and leaned back in his chair, paperwork now completely forgotten. Hawkeye was likely to be gone for the rest of the day. His men had already bailed on him (Not like he could blame them. It was Friday and everyone deserved a break after the past few weeks.) He was finished with everything due immediately. There was nothing more he could do. Or, at least, there was nothing more he wanted to do.

Was he being too clingy visiting the kids every chance he got? Often staying for hours at the hospital even to the point of sleeping there some nights?

The kids were independent. They were used to being on their own. Now that Ed was more mentally healthy, he didn't need Mustang there every day. It might even scare the kids if they felt he was getting too comfortable around them.

He could go home and visit tomorrow. They didn't need him hovering over them every minute of every day. They were independent kids and might start to feel stifled.

Just be there for them, you idiot.

He'd stop by, just for a bit. If the kids didn't want him there or asked him to leave, he would. There was no harm in just stopping by.

He looked around the office once more. Hawkeye wouldn't be angry about him leaving work to go to the hospital. The rest of his men were likely to be gone until Monday. No one else would need him or miss him. It was decided, he'd go visit the kids.

The drive to the hospital was automatic at this point, so ingrained in his brain he could probably do it blindfolded. He walked through the familiar front doors of the busy building.

"Oh, Colonel Mustang, are you here to visit your kids?" the nurse at the front desk asked, smiling.

It was a testament to how worried he was these past few weeks. So many cute nurses and not one phone number to come out of the entire experience.

Normally, he'd argue they weren't his kids. Especially since he didn't want strangers knowing where he could be hurt so easily. However, he had spent the past three weeks shoving guardianship papers under practically every staff person's nose to make sure he got some goddamn answers from these people. It'd be a bit ridiculous, after all that, to protest and say they weren't his kids.

"Someone's got to make sure they're not causing too much trouble," he said as he signed in.

She laughed. "They're such good kids. I'll miss them when they're gone, but I do hope they get to go home soon."

The staff had, predictably, fallen in love with Al. Especially once he stopped sitting by Ed's bedside like some haunting statue. The staff also seemed to like Ed. It helped that most of the drugs were administered through an IV and not through an individual needle. They'd probably be less kind towards him if they got a good automail kick to the face.

“Me too. Thanks for watching out for them.” He waved to her and walked towards Ed’s room. Now that he was stable (and the military wasn’t trying to interrogate him all the time) Dr. Frost moved him to a busier part of the hospital. He still had his private room (Mustang may have used some money to make sure that happened), but there were more people in the area. More noise. He wondered if this was Dr. Frost’s way of trying to acclimate him to noise so he wasn’t so jumpy when he went into the real world again.

He opened the door. His jaw dropped.

“Hello people who are definitely supposed to be at work and not sitting around a hospital room,” he said.

Crammed into Ed’s room was his wayward team, minus Hawkeye. Al, Fuery, and Breda were sitting on chairs at the foot of Ed’s bed. Havoc was by his side, feet propped up on the bed, one hand on Ed’s knee, right where his cast ended. Falman was actually on the bed with Ed, the kid leaning against him and looking very content.

Somehow (likely through unauthorized use of alchemy) the little table that was used for eating was now much larger. There was a pile of cookies in the center and everyone (except for Ed) was holding a handful of cards.

“You can’t get on our asses,” Havoc said, chewing on a toothpick, “you’re here too.”

“I’m only here because I finished all my work. Did you finish all your work?”

“Yes, sir, we did,” Falman said.

Shit, he couldn’t get mad at them for that. Wait a second, what card game were they playing?

“Is that poker? Are you gambling?” He did not like the idea of Ed and Al gambling. They were a little young, weren’t they? Or was this okay because they were using cookies and not money? Should he be mad at this? Who should he punish? Why couldn’t Hughes stay a little longer to help him out?

“Relax, boss,” Breda said, throwing a few more cookies into the pile. “We’re not using money.”

“Thank you, Breda. I was briefly concerned the Amestrian economy decided to switch to a cookie-based currency.”

“They might have to,” Fuery sighed. “Falman and Ed cleaned us all out twenty minutes ago.”

“Seriously?” Havoc said, glaring at him. “Don’t admit that!”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

Mustang felt his eye twitch.

“I told you it was a bad idea to let brother and Falman be on a team,” Al said.

“Why are they on a team anyways? Poker isn’t a team event.”

“I only have one arm and I can’t use it to hold cards, bastard,” Ed said, holding up his still casted hand and wiggling it in the air.

Right. How could Mustang forget about that?

“And they’re only winning because they’re cheating!” Havoc threw down his cards and glared at the cookie pile.

“For the last time, it’s not cheating,” Ed said. “It’s just... using statistics to our advantage.”

The brat had the gall to turn to Mustang and grin. *Do not grin back. You are supposed to be mad. This is not a good example to be setting.*

Dammit, he smiled. He should scold them. He should scold Ed and Falman and Havoc and Breda, and Fuery. He should definitely not be smiling and feeling the slightest bit of pride in his chest.

“Still cheating,” Havoc scoffed.

“It’s not cheating if you can’t control it. I can’t control my photographic memory,” Falman said. “And Ed can’t control the fact that he can quickly determine the probability of us having a winning hand.”

“Which is why brother should have teamed up with someone else,” Al said.

“You guys would still say we were cheating,” Ed said. “Falman’s right. I can’t control it.”

There was a spark in his eye, a spark that usually spelled property destruction, paperwork, and a massive headache for Mustang.

“Just like Havoc can’t control the fact that he can’t get a date,” he said nonchalantly.

Breda threw down his cards and howled with laughter. “Oh my god, I can’t believe he went there! Good one kid.” He gave Ed a high-five.

Havoc started sputtering. “I can get a date!”

“Sure you can, buddy,” Fuery patted him on the back.

“I can! I go on lots of dates with lots of beautiful women.”

“Whatever you say, Lieutenant Havoc,” Al sighed.

Dammit, Mustang should not be feeling proud about what Ed just said, even if it was a glorious example of trash talk.

Ed leaned up and whispered something into Falman’s ear. Falman nodded and put some more cookies on the pile.

“Why did you guys have to pick poker?” He groaned, deciding it was easier to just complain. “There are so many kid-friendly, non-gambling games out there.”

“Like what?” Al sounded much too innocent to actually be innocent.

“Like...” shit, what was a kid-friendly game. “Like Go Fish.”

“And?” Breda was smirking at him. He was getting Latrine Duty after this.

“And... dominos?”

“How do you even play dominos?” Ed asked.

“I think it has something to do with the dots on the tile.” Fuery threw a few more cookies on the pile.

Mustang should be mad. He should be yelling at these idiots for getting his kids addicted to gambling before they were old enough to drive. He should be scolding them for skipping work early.

He watched as everyone showed their cards only to (predictably) have Ed and Falman win. Ed gave Falman a high five and managed to grab a cookie to munch on.

“Cheaters, both of you,” Havoc grumbled.

“You’re just a sore loser,” Ed said, happily munching on another cookie. The kid was cocky, confident.

He couldn’t have that, now could he? He pulled up a chair.

“Deal me in. You win.”

Everyone looked briefly shocked, but Fuery complied and dealt him some cards. Ed and Falman may have swept the board before with their combined evil genius of a photographic memory and a child prodigy, but Mustang was no saint when it came to card games. These guys were going to learn just how amateur they really were.

When Hawkeye got back to the office after her meeting, there was no one left. Normally, she’d scold the colonel for slacking off. This time, however, he did finish everything. As did the rest of the men. Besides, he was probably going to visit the boys and everyone needed a break after how much they had been through. She couldn’t be mad at that.

She decided to visit them as well. Ed was healing up nicely, considering everything he had been through, but he still needed their support. The colonel had taken to the role surprisingly swiftly. She wanted to do the same. The more people the boys had on their side, the better they would be. She was worried about Ed. It was impossible not to be when the boy shouldered the entire world and more. It was a miracle he hadn’t broken yet and she was worried he wouldn’t be able to take much more before he shattered completely. That’s why

they needed to be there for them. That's why they needed to visit them and check up on them and make them understand they weren't alone anymore. They had people they could rely on, turn to if they ever needed help.

She worried they weren't doing enough. She worried they weren't enough.

After everything she had done, could she be there for the boys when they needed her most? These were the thoughts that kept her up at night.

She sighed and turned down the corridor to Ed's new room. She supposed it didn't really matter. Who was good at this anyway? So long as they were trying their best and giving them all the support they could, that was all that mattered.

Besides, compared to her father, the colonel was downright amazing and she was practically a saint. Maybe using her father as a gage for being a decent guardian was not the best idea.

She was pulled from her thoughts when she heard shouting at the end of the hallway. It sounded like someone had overturned a chair. Hawkeye's heart rate sped up.

Was Ed in trouble? Had the Cretans broken in and tried to kill the boys once more? Were they alright?

She didn't hear any snapping. The colonel would not let anyone get to them without a fight, but she didn't know if he was here. They had stopped putting guards out day and night a few days ago. None of the other men were here to protect them. This was a mistake. She should have convinced the colonel to keep someone guarding the boys while they were still at the hospital, at least until Ed had his automail back and could defend himself.

She burst through the door, guns drawn, ready to protect those kids with her life.

Luckily, she didn't fire. Mainly because the sight that greeted her made her confused.

Ed and Falman were on his bed. Ed looked like he was laughing (or trying to, but with his ribs and lungs the way they were, it was probably painful). Al was standing, waving his arms awkwardly. Breda was grinning. Fuery had his head buried in the bed and was groaning. And there were cookies all over the bed and floor.

More confusingly was Havoc, on top of the Colonel looking like he was trying to strip the shirt off of him.

Everyone froze when she burst in.

"Oh, hey lieutenant," Ed said, managing to choke back some laughter.

"Does anyone want to tell me what's going on?" She put away her guns. She'd shoot them all later when they weren't around Ed and Al.

"He's cheating! I know he is!" Havoc cried. Thankfully, he stopped trying to rip the colonel's clothes off him.

“Cheating at what, exactly?” She crossed her arms and glared at them.

“Poker.” Ed and Al said at the exact time everyone else (including the colonel) said “Go Fish.”

Her expression darkened. Everyone shivered.

“They were bored and that’s the only game we all knew how to play,” Breda said quickly.

“Besides, we weren’t using money, lieutenant,” the colonel said, shoving Havoc off him and standing up.

“Only because you wouldn’t let us,” Ed grumbled. “I know you have a ton of cash on you.”

“Exactly why I didn’t want to play with money.” The colonel reached and ruffled Ed’s hair, ignoring the boy’s indignant squawk of protest.

Hawkeye shook her head. “I’m disappointed in all of you.”

“Holy shit, I think that’s worse than the guns,” Havoc said as he helped right some of the chairs that had been upturned during the scuffle.

Falman slid off the bed to help him pick up the cookies scattered on the floor. Ed managed to get his fingers around one on the bed and munched on it.

“Oh, Major Armstrong stopped by today,” Al said cheerfully as everyone settled back into their places.

“Yeah, man’s a freak.” Ed huffed. “He ripped off his shirt and I swear there were actual sparkles around him.”

“The man’s insane, that’s for sure,” Havoc agreed. “Hey, colonel, is that an alchemy thing or something?”

The colonel glared at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you’re insane, the major’s insane. You both have alchemy in common. I’m just wondering if our dear chief over here is destined for insanity when he grows up.” He dropped an arm over Ed’s shoulders. Ed seemed to be torn between just leaving it there and biting it off.

“What? No! I’m not insane! You’re on latrine duty for a week for that.”

“But we’re not at work!”

The two started squabbling again. Falman and Breda left the room to get some food. Fuery was desperately trying not to take sides in the petty argument before him.

With everyone else distracted, she could finally talk to the boys. “How are you two doing?”

Al swept cookies and crumbs off the sheet and deposited them into a bucket.

Ed shrugged. "I can breathe better than before, so that's pretty awesome. And my fingers work now." He held up his hand, grinning as they wiggled in the cast. "So I can actually feed myself."

She smiled and glanced over at the three men still in the room. They were still quarreling amongst themselves. She turned back to the boys and hugged them.

"And you know we're here for you, whatever you need, right?"

Both boys hesitated but hugged her back.

"Yeah, lieutenant, we know," Al said.

This experience was far from over. Ed was nowhere near healed physically and she knew better than anyone that the mental scars would take much longer to heal if they ever healed at all. So long as they knew they had people willing to do anything to keep them safe, however, she had a feeling they would be just fine.

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe this is over! I'm going to miss this story and I'm so glad people liked it. It was not supposed to be this long. Maybe only about 20,000 words. And I feel like there's still so much I could add to it. However, I like where it's ended for now. Everyone has a lot of healing to do, but they can do it together. Hopefully, now Ed and Al know that they have people willing to look out for them and keep them safe.

Epilogue 2: Electric Boogaloo

Chapter Notes

It's a Christmas Miracle! Or a Solstice Miracle? Perhaps a late Hanukkah miracle? Or an early New Year's miracle? And this time, the fic really is finished. I promise!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dr. Frost wanted to reattach Ed's arm before releasing him from the hospital. Mustang was nervous it'd cause the kid to break down and have a full-blown panic attack. After all, Gianellis had used his automail to torture him for hours. Ed himself also seemed to think it was a bad idea. However, Dr. Frost was insistent that they try with the arm. The psychologist who had been working with Ed agreed it was best to start with the arm since the automail trauma was confined to the leg. It took a lot of late nights and coaxing, but eventually, with the help of Al, Hawkeye, Havoc, Breda, Fuery, Falman, and Armstrong, Ed agreed to have it reattached.

Surprisingly, the whole thing went off without a hitch. Ed was a little tense and nervous during the ordeal, but he didn't cry out. He didn't collapse. He didn't have a panic attack. The automail engineer was impressed. He even complimented Ed on not crying out. The complement made Mustang angry.

You're lighting his arm on fire and he can't be unconscious or on any painkillers! This isn't a quick vaccine shot; it's torture and he shouldn't have to be going through it in the first place! He thought as he tried not to glare daggers at the engineer. There were too many people around who could see this and (rightfully) think it was a weakness. A weakness that could be exploited. And Mustang was not about to give anyone else a reason to hurt this kid, especially if it was because of him.

Besides, he was angrier with himself than the engineer. He knew automail wasn't fun to have. He was just unaware of how awful it was. Ever since learning about the amount of pain Ed was in every time the limbs were attached and detached, he understood why the boys were so desperate to get their bodies back. He never fully understood just how much Ed was putting his body through until he sat down to read up on all the complications that came with automail. It both amazed him and made him feel guilty. Why anyone would choose to get automail without already being an amputee was beyond him. It was no wonder the military was so strict on who got automail and why. Anyone who *chose* this was fucking insane.

Still, he couldn't dwell on the fact that Ed was in constant pain because of his automail. He didn't dwell on the fact that this kid apparently had the pain tolerance of a god (something he'd have to keep an eye on in the future). Instead, he focused on the victory. Ed's pneumonia was gone. He had his arm back. The cast on his hand was going to be removed next week and he'd start physical therapy. He still seemed relatively stable mentally.

The only thing they still had to deal with was the leg. Once he had the leg on, Mustang felt like they could well and truly begin to move past what had happened. He had a feeling Ed would agree with him.

He learned that normally, Ed had his arm and leg done at the same time to cut down on the amount of trauma his body had to endure. However, Dr. Frost was still worried there might be some underlying issues with the port on his leg that they may have missed. After a lengthy discussion with the engineer, Mustang, Ed, and a few other specialists, it was decided not to reattach the leg at the same time as the arm. They'd monitor Ed for a few more days to be certain he was completely healed and there was no damage to the ports, then they'd reattach the leg.

Despite being one of the people who supported this decision, he wished they had just put the damn leg on when they did the arm because Ed was now refusing to have it done, despite getting the all-clear.

"You don't want them to put it on tomorrow?" he asked, furrowing his brow and hazarding a glance at Al. Al didn't meet his eyes and looked ashamed. He had a feeling the two brothers had already had this conversation. That wasn't good.

"Yeah, well, I'm still not a hundred percent healed and automail is so finicky. I'd hate to cause even more damage." He laughed nervously and refused to look Mustang in the eyes.

Well, shit. What was he supposed to do about this? Everything had been moving so smoothly he thought this wouldn't be a problem. He should have known better. Nothing was ever easy with these two.

"Do you want to call your mechanic?" As far as he was aware, Winry had not been notified that Ed was in the hospital or that he had had trauma to the port on his leg. He didn't want to push either brother into doing something they didn't want to do. And, Frost seemed confident in the abilities of his team so there was no reason for her to come here. But maybe he should have been pushing?

"If you're worried about the parts," he continued, "maybe it'd be better if Ms. Rockbell—"

"No! She doesn't need to come here!" Ed cried, finally looking him in the eyes. He looked panicked.

Instead of being suspicious and not getting any answers, he should be asking these two outright what was going on. "Have you even told her you're in the hospital? And have been for over a month now?"

Ed looked away from him again. He was feeling guilty about this. "No. There hasn't been enough time and I haven't been able to move around well to go call her."

He conveniently left out the fact that Al was still very mobile and could easily operate a telephone. And, if he couldn't, then Mustang could.

“Besides, there’s no need to worry her. Dr. Frost is good at what he does and it’s not like my automail was damaged in any way.” He smiled and held up his arm, twisting the hand around. “See. It’s like nothing ever happened.”

Mustang studied him for a bit, trying to figure out what he needed to say and what he needed to do. He didn’t know much about Winry Rockbell, but she did remind him of his sisters. If he had been tortured for nearly two days and was now stuck in a hospital for several weeks with several severe injuries and he never told them, there would be hell to pay.

And now he had two problems to deal with. Ed didn’t want his leg reattached. And he didn’t want to call Winry Rockbell. He decided to deal with the first problem. It seemed like the easier issue to deal with. Especially since the arm was already done.

“You know, the longer you put off having your leg reattached, the longer it will take for you to get your bodies back—”

“Sir,” Al said in a firm, almost threatening tone.

He was still very over-protective of Ed. And who wouldn’t be? Hell, Mustang was still very over-protective of the damn kid and he had made sure none of the Cretans would come after them again. He couldn’t judge after what he had done to Gianellis. He also couldn’t blame Ed for not wanting the leg reattached just yet. They had used it to hurt him for hours. That wasn’t something he could just get over in a few weeks. And while the arm was also traumatic, it still hadn’t been used to hurt Ed in the same way. If he wanted Ed to get his leg back and continue to heal, he had to go about this a different way.

“Alright, I’ll go tell the doctor to hold off on the leg,” he said. He left the hospital room to search for Frost.

Unsurprisingly, he was already nearby, hovering. Pretending to be working on a patient’s chart, but Mustang knew better. He seemed to constantly be near Ed, ready to help at a moment’s notice.

“Well? Is he ready to reattach the leg?” He looked up from his notes. He always seemed to be glaring at Mustang for reasons he didn’t fully understand.

He shook his head. “He says he wants to heal more. I think he’s stalling.”

“Of course, he’s stalling. I wouldn’t blame him if he never wanted it reattached again. Besides, he doesn’t need to go through this. A lot of amputees don’t have automail and still live perfectly happy lives. I hope you’re not pushing him.” He narrowed his eyes at Mustang as if daring for him to argue.

Mustang allowed himself a moment to think. Of course, he knew people could still be happy even if they were missing a limb or two. Automail was expensive and traumatizing to get so most normal people who lost limbs couldn’t have it done. It was perfectly reasonable to assume that Ed could continue and live a relatively normal life, even without an automail leg. However, Ed wasn’t a normal child. He didn’t have normal goals or a normal life. He wanted Al’s body back. He wanted his body back. And he couldn’t do that if he didn’t have the leg.

Furthermore, he liked the freedom that automail gave him. He liked that it still allowed him to fight and move quickly. He liked that it allowed him to keep up with Al and explore the world. Mustang knew Ed, and he knew the kid wasn't going to be happy until he had it back on. He knew he wasn't going to be able to truly put this experience behind him until he had control over his body and emotions once more.

"No," he finally said. "I know him better than that. He wants it back on, he's just scared. And I'm worried the longer we wait, the harder it will be for him to heal from this mentally."

Dr. Frost sighed. "Well, we can't force him to do anything. And you will not be forcing him to do anything. I don't care how well you think you know him. Understood?"

"Of course. Maybe once he's out of the hospital and able to move about better, he'll feel more comfortable."

"That's a hopeful thought, at least. He's stable enough that he can be released from the hospital."

Mustang breathed a sigh of relief. "That's great news."

Ed hated hospitals at the best of times, and being stuck in one for five weeks (even if he was unconscious for one of those) was taking a toll on his mental health. He had a hard time sleeping. He wasn't eating enough and had lost a worrying amount of weight. He was starting to snap more at the people who came to visit. He was being difficult with the nurses. Again, Mustang couldn't blame him. He was a scared child in an unfamiliar environment after he had been tortured for over twenty-four hours. The fact that he was doing as well as he was continued to be a miracle. But everyone would probably agree that his healing process was beginning to slow and the longer he stayed here, the worse it would probably be.

"Does he have someplace to stay?"

"The dorms with his brother."

Frost gave him a look that Mustang was all too familiar with. Hawkeye was usually the one who used it on him. Hughes was another regular user of The Look. Even his aunt and sisters had perfected their versions of The Look. The Look screamed 'you are an idiot and I will give you one chance to change before I punish you'. He shuddered to think how Frost would punish him. Hawkeye usually shot at him.

"I think it would be better," Frost said slowly, "if he had adult supervision to monitor him. He's still suffering mentally from the trauma and he'll have to do painful physical therapy if he hopes to use his hand again. I don't feel comfortable asking a child to take the burden of caring for someone who's suffering from battle fatigue."

He had a point. Al was strong, smart, and capable. Stronger, smarter, and more capable than most adults he knew. But he was still a child. There was no way Mustang could, in good faith, ask him to be a caretaker for his brother. It wasn't just the physical therapy that was the problem. It was flashbacks, the disassociation, working through the guilt, and trying to convince him to put the leg back on. Even if Al could do these things, it was only a matter of

time before he burned out. Then both boys would be in trouble. Mustang, on the other hand, knew how bad (and how dangerous) battle fatigue could get. Add to the fact that Ed could now do his normal, circleless transmutation again, he was even more of a danger to himself and others. He needed someone who could help him through the flashbacks and panic attacks. He needed someone he could trust to keep both him and Al safe.

But who would take him? Havoc, Breda, and Falman didn't have room. Fuery was in the dorm. Hawkeye was a possibility, but something about asking her to house these two didn't sit right with him.

Oh, who was he kidding? There was only ever going to be one person who took them in while they healed.

"Um, I guess I can take them in until they're able to live on their—"

"Perfect. I'll draft up a care plan for you and give you the physical therapist's number so you can schedule at-home visits. I'll also include some suggested accommodations for him to move around easier until he has his automail back." He turned and walked briskly down the hall, leaving Mustang stunned.

"Why do I feel like I got conned into that?" He muttered, still watching as Frost disappeared around a corner.

He looked back at the room, wondering how his life got so complicated in such a short amount of time. He needed to tell them they were going to be staying with him for the foreseeable future. Hopefully, that'd go over well. He couldn't imagine Ed, who fiercely prided himself on his independence, being thrilled about having to live with him. He also had to deal with the leg problem. And the Winry problem. Ed couldn't be on his own right now. He needed to get his leg back on to prove to himself he was no longer being held captive. And Winry deserved to know at least the basics of what happened. She'd find out eventually. She'd either see the scars. Someone would let it slip. Or Ed would have a flashback in front of her. It was bound to happen. Ed was putting this and the leg off because he was scared. The longer he put it off, the more scared he would get until it eventually consumed him.

He realized how ironic it was that he was avoiding dealing with all three of these issues because he was also afraid. So, he sucked it up, went to the room to tell Ed and Al they were staying with him, and then left before Ed could throw a book at him and argue they were perfectly fine staying on their own. He then found his way to the hospital phones and called the one person who might possibly understand his predicament and how to help deal with all these problems.

"And then, she started singing the cutest song! Hold on, let me see if I can remember it. I don't have the voice of an angel like my darling Elicia, but you can just imagine her singing it instead!"

It took a lot of self-control not to burn the phone down. "Hughes, can you stop talking about your daughter for two seconds? I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to deal with Ed and Al living with me, get him to use his automail again, and call that girl from Resembool to tell her what happened!" He snapped. Verbally, not literally. The phone was still not on fire.

Hughes stopped talking immediately. Mustang hadn't had the opportunity to tell him why he called before the man started gushing about his daughter. If Hughes knew, he wouldn't have spent so much time talking about Elicia. He would have waited until later.

"Oh, Roy, I'm sorry. I thought his automail was back on already. I didn't realize it's still a problem."

He sighed and slumped back against the wall. He felt older than ever, more tired, less optimistic about the future. Is that what children did to you? Made you realize how fucked up the world truly was and how little hope you had to ever make a meaningful change?

"The arm is back on. There wasn't any trouble."

"Not even a panic attack?"

"What can I say? He's a tough kid. It's the leg that's the issue. He keeps stalling putting it back on. And he's stalling on telling Ms. Rockbell what happened."

"Can you blame him? He went through hell. You and I both know a month and a half of recovery isn't enough time to be even close to normal."

"No, I can't blame him. But he can't hide it forever. Ms. Rockbell is going to find out eventually and the sooner she does, the less angry she'll be. As for the leg, I know it frustrates him to no end. He's still being controlled by his fear."

"More importantly, if he doesn't get his automail back, the military won't want to keep him on."

Mustang didn't respond, instead clenching his jaw and forcing that bit of anxiety to go away. Hughes was right, though. State Alchemists had a lot more freedom within the military than regular soldiers. However, Ed still needed to be combat-ready in case... Well, in case of a lot of things. The military was willing to consider him able-bodied because his automail largely functioned the same as a normal leg would; if anything, the leg made him more capable than a soldier with two flesh legs. A flimsy prosthetic, though? That wouldn't fly. The team had managed to get Ed a hefty amount of medical leave, which the Fuhrer was more than happy to sign off on. However, that came with the caveat that he be making active progress in recovering. If people found out he still didn't have his automail back on despite being cleared by a doctor to have it reattached, Mustang might be forced to discharge him. And if that happened, no more military resources. No more chasing after the philosopher's stone to get their bodies back. No more access to the best alchemical libraries and minds in the world. No more support from the team. They'd be on their own.

"I don't want to guilt him into putting it back on. The kid already has enough guilt and I already tried to tell him he was delaying getting his body back."

"You didn't!" Hughes gasped.

"Well, I didn't mean for it to make him guilty. That was just an unfortunate side effect. Besides, Al shut me down before I could damage the kid too much."

“And you told him you’d be there?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve had him talking with a therapist and doing exercises to help his battle fatigue?”

“Yes. I’m not sure if he’s talking to the therapist, but one shows up in his hospital room for an hour, and no one’s died yet, so I hope he’s saying something.”

“You can’t rush these things, Roy. He has to take it at his own pace.”

“Yes, but the longer he puts this off, the more he’ll work himself up or, the more likely it’ll be that I’ll have to discharge him due to medical reasons. The Fuhrer is willing to let him heal up and rest up, but only for so long before the military gets tired and forces him out.”

“Caught between a rock and a hard place,” Hughes sighed. “Have you tried talking about your trauma?”

This caught Mustang off guard. “My trauma? How in the hell would that help anything? If anything, it’d make everything worse.”

“Why would it make everything worse?”

“Because I’m a horrible person and if I went into detail, it’d probably scare the kids off for good. You know they don’t have a lot of people looking out for them. I can’t risk pushing them away.”

He could practically see Hughes rolling his eyes at this. “You don’t have to go into the details of why, just tell them about what happened after the war and how you got over it. I don’t know Ed as well as you do, but I do know you. And you both are a lot alike.”

Mustang wanted to scoff at this. He didn’t see the similarities between him and Ed.

“He feels stuck, trapped, and thinks that he’s the only one who knows what he’s going through. In a way, he does, but just because he’s the only one who knows doesn’t mean that other people can’t help him. Talk to him, Roy. Be open with him so that he knows you understand.”

“And you think that’ll help?”

“Eh, it can’t hurt.”

“Do you think I should call Ms. Rockbell and have her come down?”

“No, that needs to be their decision. But, I think if Ed can get the leg on without a problem, then he’ll be more comfortable in letting her know what happened.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, especially since by that point he’ll look and probably feel a lot better. It won’t be as overwhelming for her to see him like this.”

He sighed again. “Alright. I’ll get them settled at my place and then talk to Ed.”

“You got one week, Roy. Then I’ll sic Hawkeye on you.”

He rolled his eyes but took the threat seriously. He was going to be putting this off just as much as Ed was. “I’ll keep that in mind. Now, let’s deal with the more immediate problem. I’m about to have two trouble magnets living with me for the foreseeable future. And, as you’re the only person I know with a small human—”

“Seriously, small human?”

“How do I make sure I don’t fuck them up anymore?”

“Oh, my God, you are fishing for compliments!”

“I am not fishing for anything, Hughes! This is serious!”

Hughes laughed. “How many times have I told you you’re doing fine. You’re there for the kid. You’ve comforted him when he needed it. You’ve provided him support and structure.”

“I just told you how I accidentally made him feel guilty for not sticking the leg back on before he was ready!”

“Okay, so think before you speak.”

“I do think before I speak!”

Now that he was thinking about it, he realized how much he would have to do with two kids in the house.

“Shit, I’ll have to cook dinner every night. I don’t have any food in my refrigerator. Maybe I’ll just get take out every day. Oh, but kids normally eat several times a day. Right? And there’s the bed situation. Al doesn’t sleep but should I get him a bed? Dining table. I don’t have a dining table. Is it bad for them to eat on the couch for every meal?”

“I can’t believe you are seriously trying to run this country one day. You’re a mess,” Hughes groaned. “Roy, you are, once again, overthinking this. They’re kids, not bombs. It’s not that hard.”

“Maybe not for normal kids. We are literally talking about Edward and Alphonse Elric here. They are as far from normal as you can get.”

“You’ve been taking care of him the past few weeks, though. I know you’ve stayed the night at the hospital more than once and you’ve taken charge of his healing and recovery.”

“Yes, but he’s still been in the hospital. Other people have also been helping out. Once they’re in my apartment, I will be solely responsible for them. I’ll have to make sure Ed’s

doing his physical therapy. I'll have to make sure he's getting to his therapy appointments. I'll have to make sure he's eating. He does have a sweet tooth. Maybe I can just buy a bunch of cakes from the bakery and let him eat those."

"Maybe you're right to be worried. Do not feed the kid nothing but cake. Eat like you normally would, just make a few extra portions."

"You want me to give him rum for breakfast?"

"Roy!"

"I'm kidding."

Hughes sighed with relief. Mustang decided to mess with him some more. It was currently the only thing keeping him slightly sane through his panic.

"Everyone knows Bloody Mary's are for breakfast."

"Roy! I swear to God I will tell Hawkeye about all of this."

"I'm kidding. I won't give the kid alcohol."

His panic and his desire to mess with Hughes subsided and he was left with residual anxiety, which was the worst kind in his opinion. The type of anxiety that made him feel constantly on edge. The kind of anxiety that hummed in the back of his mind and never truly went away. The worst part? He wasn't even sure what he was so anxious about. Hughes was right. He had been taking care of Ed for several weeks now. The kid, while not doing great was doing better. And, he and Al were very independent kids. If Mustang didn't have enough food in his house, Al would likely go out and get something for Ed to eat.

Still, there was something in the back of his head that made his stomach churn.

"You'll be fine," Hughes said, pulling him from his spiraling thoughts. "The boys will be fine. And, you're not alone. I'm sure the rest of your men would be happy to help out if you need them."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"When am I not right?"

Mustang rolled his eyes; glad he called his friend so he could talk him down from the ledge. He was still feeling nervous and anxious, but less so than he had been. He had a week to get Ed and Al settled into the apartment, then he'd try the leg again. Once the leg issue was sorted out, he'd deal with the Winry issue. Then, Ed would finally be on his way to actually heal.

"Oh, and one more thing."

"Yeah?"

“Get yourself a wife!”

He slammed the phone down, briefly contemplated lighting it on fire again, and then decided not to. He didn't want to have to pay for a new one. He flipped through Dr. Frost's care instructions and the number for the therapist and physical therapist. There was a long road of recovery ahead of them.

The kids settled in surprisingly well. There were customary complaints and arguments, mostly from Ed, but they took to the routine of living together very well. Al was outwardly ecstatic about the prospect. Ed wasn't so open, but Mustang could read him well enough to know he was happy about the idea, despite the constant arguments and attempts to convince him and Dr. Frost he would be fine on his own. In all honesty, Ed's arguments were probably less from a place of actual annoyance and dislike. He didn't know why the kid was still arguing. He didn't know if he was afraid, nervous, or if it was simply a force of habit. All Mustang knew was that deep down, Ed was happy to be living with him. He even gave him back his jacket (finally!). And, something about Ed being happy about the move in made Mustang feel more secure in his position. Better equipped to handle the inevitable problems that would arise by having three people in an apartment together, all three of them suffering from trauma in one way or another.

He didn't mention the leg or Winry at all in the first week. He wanted the boys to get settled into the new routine and for Ed to start physical therapy for his hand. Ed didn't leave the house much. He was still in a lot of pain from his injuries and sometimes struggled to balance on the prosthetic. If he did leave, it was usually to read a book at a café that was only a few blocks away from the place. The owner of the café grew to like Ed very quickly and would give him free food regularly.

Al left more regularly and for longer periods. It was usually to go to the library to get more books. If Ed was out on medical leave for any longer, the brothers would probably read the entirety of Eastern Command's library. Falman would be impressed. Falman was impressed, regularly stopping by to talk to the kids about the books they had picked up for the day. Hawkeye would stop by in the morning when she came to pick him up and spend some time with the boys, not as worried about getting to work on time as she normally was. Havoc, Breda, and Fuery would sneak away during lunch to visit the boys and Mustang would pretend not to notice when they came back late. Then, at the end of the day, he'd come back home to see his apartment building still standing, and the boys in the living room reading.

If it weren't for the flashbacks and nightmares, one could almost assume they were normal. But they weren't. He learned very quickly not to use lemon juice in anything. Ed could smell it the one time he used it in his tea. It led to Ed having a very bad flashback and it took the combined efforts of Mustang and Al to calm him down again. Even then, it took almost all night. By the time Ed did calm down enough to realize he wasn't being held captive in the warehouse and then the time it took for Al to calm down, Mustang was so frazzled he ended up calling Hughes so that he could calm *him* down. All and all, it was very stressful for all of them and Mustang wasn't ready to repeat it.

The flashbacks were bad. The nightmares were worse. Mustang thought he was used to hearing Ed in the middle of a nightmare considering he had spent several nights at the hospital. Maybe he was sleeping more deeply now that he was away from the constant beeping and activity because they had gotten so much worse. Nearly every night he woke to Ed screaming and begging. Sometimes, it was about the warehouse. Other times, it was about the night he and Al failed to bring their mother back. Sometimes it was about things Mustang didn't even understand. Al seemed better equipped to deal with the nightmares and told him they were fairly regular, even before the whole warehouse incident. That made the entire situation worse.

Still, for the most part, it felt kind of nice to have the kids in the apartment. He liked hearing them talk while he made dinner. He liked waking up in the morning to see Al already in the kitchen. He liked having arguments about alchemical theories with Ed when he got home from work. Al was usually the tie-breaker for these arguments. These were such simple things, but they meant the world to him. It reminded him that they were alive and not so damaged that they could never heal. He could tell the kids liked being around him as well. There was a sort of relief he could feel from them. The relief of not having to worry about themselves. The relief of being able to pass off some responsibility to Mustang. The relief of simply having another person there to watch out for them. It put more responsibility on his shoulders. He didn't mind one bit.

Of course, all good things come to an end and that end came exactly one week after Ed and Al had moved in with him.

It started with an innocent ring of his phone. He was the only one in the office as everyone had already gone to lunch. He was trying to finish up as much paperwork as possible so he could get back home earlier. He thought about ignoring the phone. He was so close to finishing up the stack of paper on his desk. However, after what had happened with Ed, he was paranoid something else would go wrong if he ignored a phone call. What if it was one of the boys and they were in trouble? What if the Cretans had come back to get them and they were calling for help? What if Ed was having a flashback and Al couldn't calm him down?

He picked up the phone, heart-pounding, and mind racing. On the outside, he looked as cool and calm as ever.

"Colonel Mustang," he said. His voice was still even. Still commanded respect and authority. Ed and Al were not weak points of his. He was not worried for their safety. There would be no reason for anyone, inside or outside the military to suspect how anxious he was when it came to them.

"Hiya, Roy!" Hughes said brightly.

He breathed a sigh of relief. Hughes wouldn't use his emotions against him. He actually dared to suggest that it was a good thing.

"Oh, it's just you."

"You sound disappointed. Hoping a lovely lady was on the other end instead? Perhaps a certain lieutenant? Hmm?"

“Hughes, these lines are monitored. Besides, I was hoping to go to lunch. Thanks to your incessant need to tell me every little detail about Elicia’s life, I know that’s no longer happening.”

Hughes dared to laugh. “I’ll make this quick, then, Mr. Grumpypants. Is Ed’s leg on yet?”

Mustang froze. In his attempts to make the boys comfortable and his honest enjoyment of his company, he had completely forgotten about his conversation with Hughes. Furthermore, he had gotten so used to Ed’s prosthetic it was normal for him now. He had forgotten about his conversation with Hughes or the fact that things still weren’t normal, no matter how they may appear on the surface. Sure, when Ed had a particularly bad nightmare or flashback, he’d be reminded of just how not okay things were. However, those were still happening rarely. For most of the day, Mustang could exist in a state where Ed and Al were fine. They weren’t traumatized. And Ed not having an automail leg was normal.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“I’ve been busy.” It wasn’t a lie, but it kind of felt like a lie.

“Roy.”

He sighed. He knew it was no use arguing with Hughes. Furthermore, he didn’t want to argue with him. Yes, for most of the day he could pretend like everything was normal. But those nightmares and flashbacks made it clear that Ed still wasn’t healed. He still had a long road of recovery ahead of him and he still was letting his fear rule him by avoiding Winry and the leg. Maybe Mustang was being selfish in not talking to them sooner. Maybe he was putting his own desire to snuff out his guilt above the wellbeing of those boys. He was the adult here. He had to help Ed and Al even if it was going to hurt them all in the short term.

“I know. Ed’s been doing much better though. I think the hospital was stressful for him. I promise I’ll talk to him tonight.”

“You better, Roy. You’re right, the kid wants the leg back on, he’s just scared.”

He knew he couldn’t put this off any longer. That didn’t mean he wanted to have this conversation with Ed. The kid wouldn’t take it well. And if Ed didn’t take it well, Al wouldn’t either. He couldn’t blame him, he was still a child trying to deal with very complicated feelings and probably torn between wanting what was best for Ed in the long term versus what was best for him in the short term. But, this is what Mustang signed up for.

“Roy,” Hughes said, bringing him back from his thoughts, “this will help him in the long run. You know this. The longer you put it off, the worse it’ll be. Hell, it’s probably going to get worse before it gets better, but he’ll thank you one day. And he’ll remember that you were there to help him through one of the darkest parts of his life.”

“I’m going to mess it up.” *I’m going to mess him up, even more than he already is. Why do people keep trusting me with these kids? Why do these kids keep trusting me with their lives?*

“No, you won’t,” Hughes said. “You don’t give yourself enough credit. You’ve handled those boys at their lowest and they’ve made it to the other side. All you have to do is push them just a little bit more and they’ll be out, and finally able to move forward. You can do this. I believe in you. Those kids believe in you. Your team believes in you. You’re the only one who doesn’t think you can do it. You have to believe in yourself, Roy. Otherwise, yeah, you’ll mess it up and those kids will live the rest of their lives scarred and scared.”

“Fine, tomorrow—”

“Tonight, Roy.”

He frowned and glared at nothing in particular. “Fine. Tonight. I will talk to Al about it and see how Ed’s doing, though. If he’s not doing well, I’ll wait. No need to force him to confront something when he’s in the middle of a breakdown.”

“I’m going to call you every day until you do it.” Hughes threatened. “So, the sooner you rip off the bandage, the better.”

If only Hughes was here to see the particularly chilling glare he was sending at Havoc’s empty chair. Even if he wasn’t afraid of it, it would make Mustang feel so much better.

“Tonight, Roy. You both need to get this over with. And you know once he has his leg back, he’ll feel better about calling Winry.”

“Tonight,” he said. His stomach started twisting once more with anxiety. Why was he so anxious about this? It wasn’t like he was going to force Ed to do anything he didn’t want to do. He was just going to spill his guts about the aftermath of Ishval in an attempt to get Ed to confront his own demons. What could possibly go wrong?

For the rest of the day, he couldn’t focus on work. He must have been telegraphing something to the rest of the office because Hawkeye didn’t once scold him for slacking off. He wasn’t even trying to slack off. He wanted desperately to focus on something else other than the conversation he was about to have. Instead, the words on the page blended and he could think of nothing else but what he was going to say and all the potential ways Ed might react. He didn’t even know how he wanted the kid to react! Did he want him to break down like he had in the hospital that first day he was lucid? Did he want him to yell and make snarky comments so he could pretend things were back to normal? Did he want him to quietly accept what he had to say, which would be much easier to deal with?

He didn’t know. And he hated that he didn’t know.

He was distracted, irritable, and antsy. He didn’t even finish all of the paperwork. At first, he thought it was a perfect excuse to put off a conversation he did not want to have. That is until Hawkeye put a gun to his head and ordered him to leave. He wondered if Hughes had told her what was going on? She knew Ed was refusing to have his leg reattached and she and Hughes tended to talk behind his back. So, it wasn’t a stretch that they were in on this together. Either way, he couldn’t argue with his lieutenant and knew that stalling would only make it worse.

He drove back almost in a daze; surprised he didn't cause a collision as he barely remembered the drive home. He could barely focus on the road. His mind was preoccupied with all the things that could go wrong and likely would go wrong.

Finally, he made it back in one piece. No collisions were caused due to his distracted driving. He was relieved to see that Al was the only one in the common areas. It would be better if he and Ed had this conversation alone. As much as Ed loved his brother, he hated being vulnerable around him and admitting weakness, even if Al wouldn't judge and would understand completely. Yet another thing Mustang should really be working on with the two of them.

Al himself didn't seem too worried or nervous, which meant that Ed likely wasn't hiding away due to a flashback.

"Where's your brother?" he asked, dumping his bag down on the floor and kicking off his shoes.

"In his room," Al said. It was amazing how fast the guest room became Ed's room.

He didn't focus on that right now. Right now, he had more important things to deal with.

Al looked up from his book. "Are you okay, sir?"

"Hmm?" Shit, he had to keep it together. Just a little longer and they'd be good to go. He could break down later. Now, Ed and Al needed him to be strong. "Yes, I'm fine, Alphonse. How's he doing? Any issues today?"

"Not that I know of." He shook his head. "I think it's going to rain soon so he's not feeling well. It's normal." He assured him.

"I guess that's something else Fullmetal and I have in common."

"Yeah, but he's not completely useless when it rains, sir."

"Ouch, not you too, Al. I get enough of it from Havoc."

"Just trying to keep your ego in check, since brother's not going to feel up to doing it."

He smiled and knocked against Al's armor. Maybe he should wait until they had nicer weather and Ed was feeling better. Surely, getting a leg reattached was worse when the ports were already sore from changing air pressure?

"Are you sure you're okay?" Al asked. "You seem nervous. Did something happen at work? Is there anything I can do to help?"

Since when had it become so easy for these kids to read him?

"I want to talk to your brother about reattaching his leg. Tonight. If we can get him to reattach it tomorrow, he'll have a much easier time healing mentally," he blurted out before he could talk himself out of it.

Hughes was right; the longer they put this off, the worse it was going to be for everyone. Ed was doing much better now, but that was only an illusion. Eventually, his fear would catch up with him and what little progress they made would be undone.

“Oh,” Al’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t know if you’ll be able to convince him. I’ve tried but... You won’t guilt him, right?”

“Guilt him?”

“I know he already feels guilty that we haven’t done any work to get our bodies back these past few weeks. With him like this, we can’t travel and we can’t chase any leads. I’m fine with waiting, especially because I don’t want him to hurt himself more. And, if he never can travel, then I’m fine with it. If I’m stuck like this for the rest of my life, I’d be okay as long as Ed’s safe.”

That was... one hell of a sacrifice for a kid to make. These brothers never ceased to amaze him. The idea that Al would be willing to be trapped in an unfeeling suit of armor for the rest of his life because he didn’t want Ed to suffer was remarkable. It also reinforced Mustang’s determination. These kids did not deserve to suffer as much as they had. And he was going to do everything in his power to make sure they didn’t suffer anymore. Whatever his anxieties were about being vulnerable to Ed, whatever reaction he was afraid of receiving, however damaged their relationship might be after this whole thing was over, they were scraps compared to the hell they had been through. He had known the burden he was taking on by taking responsibility for their wellbeing. If he refused to help them when they needed him most because he was a little nervous, then he did not deserve to be in their lives.

“I’m not going to guilt him,” he said, much calmer and more collected than before. “I have an idea of how to convince him, but he may not react well. We both know he’s scared and he might lash out to protect himself. It’s normal and I don’t want you thinking I’m purposefully stressing him out or trying to hurt him. I know he wants to get his leg back and get back on the road. But he’s avoiding dealing with his trauma head-on. I think I can get him to open up and start moving forward. Do you trust me?”

Al studied him for a bit. These kids still didn’t know what he had done. They didn’t know how much of a monster he could be. But for now, they didn’t need to know. They only needed him as he was now.

“Alright, I trust you. Please, help him. I can’t get through to him and... I don’t know what else to do.” Al sounded like he was about to cry.

Mustang smiled at him and put a hand on his shoulder. “I know. You’ve done a great job so far. Let me take it from here. We both know he wants it; we just have to give him a little push.”

“I know. Thank you, for everything.”

Al let him go to the room by himself. Despite his conversation and renewed drive, each step towards the room at the end of the hallway made him more anxious. It made his resolve crumble just a bit more until he felt like there was nothing left. Still, he kept moving forward.

He kept moving forward because he had two kids counting on him, relying on him. He couldn't stop now. He couldn't stumble now. He had to keep focused.

He stopped at the door and took a deep breath to steady and re-acquaint himself with what he was going to say. When he felt a little calmer, he knocked.

"Who is it?" Ed groaned.

"The person who pays the rent," he said, trying to lighten the mood just a bit.

"What'd you want?" He sounded like he had been asleep. Maybe Mustang should do this when the kid was a bit more awake. He turned to see Al hovering at the very end of the hallway, watching him. Waiting. A thick cloud of nervousness surrounded him as he sat there, still as a statue.

He turned back to the door. "I need to talk to you. Can I come in?"

"I don't know. Can you?" He could hear Ed snickering. At least Al was correct in saying he was in a good mood.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "You're giving me flashbacks to my schooldays, kid. Please don't. They were very harrowing."

Ed's snickers turned to full-on laughter and he decided it was safe enough to enter. Inside, it was dark and Ed was burrowed under several blankets, looking more like a lump than anything else. He poked his head out and glared at Mustang, the laughter ceasing.

"What'd you want? Here to kick us out?"

This took Mustang aback and for a brief moment, he felt unbalanced. "What? No. Why would even think that?"

"Cause you look guilty." Ed managed to shrug despite being buried under what appeared to be every blanket Mustang had ever owned. "If you want us to leave, just say it. Al and I are used to being on our own."

There was something about the way Ed said that that made Mustang's heartbreak. He didn't sound angry. He sounded resigned like this was an inevitable conclusion even though he had made it clear these boys were A) not living on their own until Frost cleared them, and B) welcome to stay as long as they'd like afterward. Seriously, did these kids have no one they could reliably count on? And why did it feel like he was the only one taking on the responsibility of keeping these two alive?

"I'm not kicking you out. You two are welcome to stay here as long as you need. Al especially. He cleans up after himself." He attempted the joke.

Ed didn't laugh and didn't argue that he was a perfect houseguest/roommate/whatever the hell he was turning into. Instead, he sat up. He thought he had a pretty good handle on how to read Ed and his emotions. He thought he understood what the kid looked and acted like when he was happy, scared, nervous, etc. And, in many ways, he was. He did not doubt that he

could read Edward Elric better than anyone who wasn't Alphonse. However, these past few weeks had taught him just how much Ed controlled his outward emotions and just how much more was going on below the surface. Hell, he gave Mustang a run for his money when it came to masks!

Maybe it was the painkillers. Maybe it was the fresh trauma. Maybe he was tired of constantly putting up a façade. Whatever the case, this Edward Elric was incredibly easy to read. This Edward Elric was just like any normal child; scared, anxious, and wanting nothing more than to be told everything would be alright. He didn't know when the last time Ed allowed himself to be so open with his emotions around another person. It was both humbling and terrifying to think this was their relationship now. That this was his job now.

"If you're not here to kick us out, then what is it?" he asked. He was trying not to sound nervous and scared. It wasn't working.

Mustang decided to put the kid out of his misery. By forcing him to confront another misery. Wasn't he just the best guardian anyone could ask for?

"Your leg. When are you going to have the engineer reattach it?"

Ed blanched and looked away from him. "I told you, I want to make sure I'm healed up enough before they do it. I don't want to damage the nerves. The nerves are so finicky when it comes to automail."

Nope, he was not going to use that excuse again. Mustang wouldn't let him.

"Dr. Frost and the engineer have both signed off on reattaching it. Unless you think you know more about the human body than a man who went to medical school and is one of the top surgeons in the country?"

Ed didn't look up at him. His hands were gripping the blankets. Even in the dim light, Mustang could see the knuckles of his flesh hand turn white. That had to hurt so much. He was still very early into his physical therapy and didn't have the normal range of motion.

"Maybe I do know more about the human body than they do. I spent years researching it, remember?"

And now he was basically using his own trauma for a game of hopscotch, jumping over the bits he wasn't comfortable dealing with in a desperate attempt to ignore the issue at hand. Mustang had to hand it to the kid, he was a master at avoidance. And he wasn't going to let him get away with it. Not anymore.

"Knowing the parts and chemical make-up of a human body is much different than knowing how it heals and functions. I can list everything that's used to build a house. That doesn't mean you want me anywhere near a construction site."

"You said you wouldn't force me! You said we could wait until I was ready. I'm not ready!" He shouted.

And now he was trying to guilt Mustang into leaving this alone. Hughes told him kids did this occasionally, play to that desire to avoid confrontation and damaging a relationship by giving in to the demands. Mustang wasn't going to fall for it. He wasn't going to let Ed run away any longer. It might damage their relationship forever. He might want nothing to do with him after all was said and done. He didn't care. Or, he did care, a lot. But he realized that Ed's wellbeing was more important.

He crossed his arms and looked down at him. He looked so small on the bed, so fragile. Easy to hurt and to destroy. "I think you are ready. I think you're just scared."

"So!" Ed shouted, now looking at him. The mask was back up. He looked angry, furious. But tears were shining in his eyes. The small cracks that showed he was close to breaking.

"So, what if that's the case? Maybe I'm waiting until I'm not scared anymore! What's the problem with that? I know I'm being a fucking coward by not sucking it up and doing it. I know I'm delaying our progress in getting Al his body back! You don't think I don't know that!"

"I didn't say that—"

"You didn't have to! I want to put my leg back on but every time I think about it, I get scared. I can't breathe. Everything hurts and I'm back... I'm back there. In that place. And he's there with me talking to me and telling me to do the transmutation and if that's what happens when I just think about putting the fucking leg back on, what's going to happen when it actually goes back on? What if I hurt someone? I already almost killed a man but what if I forget where I'm at and someone gets hurt? What if it breaks me completely and you through me in some fucking asylum with padded walls for the rest of my life? I already feel like I'm breaking and this is going to finish me off! What do you want me to do? You said you wouldn't force me!" His voice cracked at the very end. Tears started to slip down his cheeks.

Despite all of this, Mustang wasn't anxious. He wasn't rushing to comfort Ed and promising them that they could wait. Surprisingly, he felt like he was in complete control of himself and the situation. Maybe it was because someone had to be, and clearly, he wasn't going to put that burden on Ed. It was his job to keep these boys safe; to keep them on track. This was the job he had taken on when he brought these boys into the military. Maybe a naïve part of himself thought he could just let them run wild while he sat back and reaped the rewards. Maybe a naïve part of him refused to believe that things would change for him. Thankfully, that part was small. He knew when he saw those two in that house that he would take on the burden of keeping them safe and helping them move past their own mistakes. Maybe it was a selfish desire to try and wipe the blood off his own hands. Maybe he was projecting and trying to atone for his past sins. Or maybe he saw these two genius alchemists going down the same path he had gone down and desperately wanted to stop them before it was too late. Whatever the case, these kids and their wellbeing, both mental and physical, were his responsibility now. What he did and did not want to do didn't matter anymore. If he could help these kids move forward, he would. Even if it was the last thing he wanted to talk about. Even if it would bring up painful memories and emotions he had spent so long trying to bury.

Besides, now that Ed had broken down, he had told Mustang what was really bothering him. Why he was scared. He knew there was nothing he could say to make these fears go away.

But just because he couldn't make them go away with encouraging words didn't mean he couldn't help. He understood Ed's anxieties about the leg. He understood why he was so adamant about waiting. He understood why he was so scared to hurt people. And he finally understood how to help him.

He slipped off his jacket and dropped it around Ed's shoulders before sitting next to him on the bed. Ed flinched but brought his hand up to tug the jacket around him more securely. It was amazing how a simple piece of scratchy fabric could help calm him so quickly. Or, at least ground him so quickly.

He waited for a few seconds longer to give the kid a chance to collect himself. Once he seemed calmer, he started talking.

"You're right, Ed. I'm not going to force you. At the end of the day, no matter what Al and I say, no matter how many times we ask you to go through with it, only you can decide to put your leg back on. And you are also not a coward for not wanting to reattach your leg, or for being scared about what might happen. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. You went through hell. You should have never gone through what you did, but you did go through it. And you made it out the other side alive. And then you made it through the follow-up investigation alive. And then you made it out of the hospital alive. I'm not going to lie and say the leg is the end of everything and once you're through this you'll be back to normal because you and I both know that's not going to happen. But you and I both know that this needs to happen if you ever want to find peace again."

Ed didn't answer. He refused to look at him; his eyes glued to his lap as Mustang spoke.

"Look, kid, I can't say I know exactly what you're going through, or how you're feeling, but I do think I have an idea."

"How could you possibly have an idea?" Ed scoffed quietly. He sniffed but refused to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"Because I went through something very similar." He felt his throat close and the words stuck on his tongue. He swallowed and forced the impending panic attack back down. He was not going to break down now and have a child comfort him. His only goal was helping this kid who he brought into this world, and then subsequently ignored when he needed him the most. Yes, he didn't know what was going on with Ed, but he still refused to pick up the phone and check upon him. And that was a mistake he'd have to live with for the rest of his life, like all his other mistakes. If he could help Ed, even just a little bit, then he would take it. It was the least he could do after everything he had already done.

"After Ishval," he finally managed to choke out. "After Ishval, I went through something similar to what you're going through now."

This got Ed to look at him, not angrily, like before. He was curious. Still a bit nervous. But curious. Calmer.

"What happened?"

“Well,” he cleared his throat, “well, not to get into the gory details,” *I refuse to let you know how bad it got. Maybe someday, but not today.* “I acted like a soldier and killed people. With my alchemy.”

It was his turn not to look at Ed, afraid of what he might see on his face. He still forced himself to continue.

“I hurt and killed a lot of people. I didn’t wield a gun or even a knife. I used flame alchemy. A technique that no one had ever seen before, and that no one’s been able to replicate. During the war, I didn’t process very much of it. Dissociation. That’s what it’s called. I’m pretty sure you experienced something similar in the warehouse. But afterward, it hit me like a train what I had done. Something in me broke and I refused to use my alchemy. I was scared of hurting myself. I was scared of hurting the people close to me. I was scared I’d hurt innocent bystanders. Like you so helpfully pointed out, if I was willing to do it once, what would stop me from doing it again?”

“Clearly you’re still not scared to use your alchemy. I’ve seen you use it,” Ed said.

Oh, but I am. Especially after what I did to you in the warehouse. Especially after what I did to Gianellis.

“Yeah, kid, but it took a while. I kept trying to get over it. The military was getting frustrated having an alchemist on their payroll that refused to do any alchemy. But I couldn’t. I was too scared. Whenever someone asked, I made excuses to stall. I needed to do more research. I needed to work on the theory more. I was too tired. I was sick. I wanted to wait until the full moon.”

“The full moon?”

“I was desperate, kid. Give me a break. The excuses never stopped. No matter how many excuses I gave, no matter how hard I tried to convince myself that it was something else, I couldn’t run from the fact that I was scared. I was scared that I’d lose control and hurt someone or destroy something.”

“How’d you get over it?” Ed asked quietly.

He sighed. “I’m going, to be honest with you, I never did,” he answered, finally hazarding a look at Ed. He wasn’t looking at him with hate, disgust, or fear. He was just... looking at him.

Until he noticed Mustang looking back. Then he rolled his eyes and looked back down at his hands. “Some pep talk that was. You’re telling me I’m going to be like this for the rest of my life? Thanks. So glad you stopped by.”

He reached out and wrapped an arm around Ed, pulling him close. Feeling the slight rise and fall of his chest that proved he was alive and breathing. Feeling the warmth of his body against him.

“To be fair, I haven’t lived out my entire life yet. Maybe in ten years, it will finally go away.”

“Doubt it.” Ed huffed.

“I didn’t tell you this to make you feel hopeless or to fuel your anxiety even more. You said it yourself, I’ve used flame alchemy before. Recently, in fact. Just the other day I tried to burn a stack of paperwork I didn’t want to fill out. Hawkeye caught me and put another bullet in my wall.”

He saw Ed smile, just a bit.

“I told you this so you would know just because you’re scared doesn’t mean you need to let your fear control you. Right now, you feel like you have no control, over yourself or your emotions, or the situation, so you’re exercising it the only way you think you can. You’re putting this off because you feel like it’s the only thing you can do. But it’s not.”

“What else can I do, then? Huh? Do you think I want to be like this? You think I want to be here limping around on some crappy prosthetic until I die?”

“No, I don’t. And the other option you have, the other thing you can choose, is to stop avoiding your fears and your anxieties and instead go through them. That’s how I moved on. That’s how I moved forward. The only way out is through. There is no other way unless you want to destroy yourself first.”

“But what if I can’t do it?” Ed asked, crying once more. Mustang could feel his shirt dampen from the tears. He wrapped his other arm around the kid and held him even closer.

“What if I have a panic attack or try to hurt someone because I’m back at the warehouse.”

“Then I will help you. You know you aren’t back at the warehouse, no matter what. You know that Al is strong enough to hold you back if something were to go wrong and you know that I can help bring you back if you need to. You probably will freak out. That’s to be expected. But the only way to start working through your fear is to literally work through it. You have to feel it. You have to deal with it head-on. No more excuses. No more stalling. Come on, kid. I believe in you, so you need to believe in yourself. You trust me, right?”

Ed sniffed and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Then trust me on this. I won’t leave you and I won’t make you deal with this by yourself.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll try it.”

“I’ll give Dr. Frost a call and set up an appointment. Does tomorrow sound good?”

“No,” Ed said miserably. “But do I have another choice?”

“Of course, you do.”

“No, I don’t. You’re right. I have to do this. I have to deal with this.”

“Good, I’m proud of you, kid.”

Ed didn't respond. He just hugged Mustang tight; his shoulders shaking as he continued to cry. Eventually, he grew heavy against Mustang. He had fallen asleep. That was probably for the best. The kid had been through enough for one day and tomorrow was going to be even worse. Mustang maneuvered him so he was lying back down. He almost left the room, wanting to give the kid some space, but decided against it. If there was one thing he learned throughout this whole ordeal, it was that Ed didn't always want or need space. This was probably one of those times he needed it the least. He was emotionally drained after their conversation. His mind and body were preparing for the trauma of reattaching the nerves tomorrow so he was likely anxious with anticipation. He needed someone here. And that someone was Mustang.

There was a knock at the door. Mustang looked up to see Al peeking his head in.

"Is he okay?" he asked, eyeing Ed.

"Yeah. He agreed to try reattaching his leg. I'll give Dr. Frost a call tomorrow to set up an appointment."

"Really?" Al breathed a sigh of relief. "That's great news. Thank you, colonel. For everything."

"No need to thank me. I'm just—" Just what? What was he just doing? It certainly wasn't his job. It wasn't something he had to do. What was he doing?

Al sat beside him and nodded. "No, really, thank you for everything. I don't know where we'd be without you."

He wanted to argue the kids would probably be better off without him. They'd be living quiet lives in Resembool where they'd grow old and never know the horrors of the world.

He slipped his hand into Al's and squeezed it. "I guess we'll never know."

With that, he settled back and finally let sleep take him. Despite his predictions that they were all in for a rough night, it didn't come true. Maybe having him near helped keep Ed calm and sane. Whatever the case, both of them slept soundly through the night.

"You know, you don't have to be there with me," Ed said, picking at the threads of his coat. "I mean, it's not like you're always going to be there every single time I need to get the leg put back on."

Mustang crossed his arms and shot the kid a look. "Just because I won't be there forever doesn't mean I can't be there now. Besides, now is when you'll need the most support. If everything goes according to plan, you'll find it easier to deal with each time you need to reattach it."

"Yeah, but—"

“But nothing, Fullmetal. Al and I will be in the room with you. We will be distracting you and comforting you in case anything happens. Yes, this isn’t what’s going to happen every time, but it’s what’s happening now. So, deal with it.”

Thankfully, Frost and the engineer had the opportunity to put the leg on the day Mustang called. He had practically jumped at the chance to do it. He was certain the longer they waited, the more likely Ed would work himself up again. He wanted to deal with this now before they ended back at square one.

“I’m just saying, it might be better for us to replicate how reattaching my leg would actually go.”

Mustang sighed and pinched his brow. First, he couldn’t get the kid to stop clinging to him like a limpet, and now he couldn’t get the kid to accept that he’d be in the same room as him. “Why are you being so combative about that?”

“I’m not being combative—”

“Yes, you are, brother,” Al responded tiredly.

They had been having this fight all day. Everyone was exhausted. Mustang was trying to keep his frustrations from boiling over but damn this kid was stubborn.

“Fullmetal,” he said in a sharp tone. He had been trying not to be so short with him since the warehouse. He understood the kid was going through a lot and getting mad at him wouldn’t help anyone. However, it was also one of the most reliable ways to get Ed to stop arguing and listen to him. And right now, he needed him to listen.

Ed crossed his arms and looked down at his feet, scuffing the floor with the heels of his boots. “I’m just... what if I panic?”

“What if you panic?”

“I don’t know. I just... if I flip out or something... I don’t want you to have to deal with that.”

Oh, for the love of God this kid was frustrating. “You’ve been crying all over me for the past month and a half. Do you think today is the day I’ll reach my breaking point?”

Ed shrugged and refused to look at either of them. Mustang and Al shared a look. Al looked like he thought Mustang knew how to deal with this. The only problem, he didn’t know how to deal with this! He was still shocked he managed to deal with everything as well as he had. The fact he hadn’t fucked up either of them, even more, was a fucking miracle and he stood by that no matter what Hughes or Hawkeye said.

“Fullmetal,” he stared, hoping to find the words he needed to say to Ed. “You will probably freak out today, more than you normally would. That’s why Al and I need to be in the room with you, to help you through it.”

“Yeah, but—”

“But nothing. I have been helping you with your flashbacks and trauma for weeks now. I am not about to stop now. Al is not about to stop now. We are here to help and we are not leaving you, no matter how much you argue.”

He pulled the last trick he had and prayed it would work. “If Al was in your position, would you want him to go through this alone? Would you want him to be in that room alone while you waited outside?” When in doubt, use Al. Sometimes, it was enough to get Ed to see how absolutely moronic he was being. Sometimes, though, he held fast to his idiotic double standards because for some ungodly reason he thought he deserved to suffer more.

“I guess not,” Ed grumbled.

Fantastic. They hadn’t switched the argument to Ed’s worth and how he didn’t deserve to suffer more just because he was older. He only wanted to deal with one traumatic episode today, thank you very much.

“Great. Then Al and I will be there. You will have whatever response to the leg that you have. And well will help keep you calm and help you through it. Understood?”

“I got it. I got it. Jeez, you’re such a fucking jerk, ordering me around when I’m like this,” he grumbled.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Don’t worry, brother,” Al said brightly, relaxing slightly now that Ed had agreed to accept some help. “It’ll be over before you know it. And then you’ll be able to fight like you normally do. Hey, we might even be able to spar later this week, if the doctor allows it.”

Mustang shuddered. He had seen those two spar before. He hoped Al would have enough sense not to use his apartment as a battleground. Still, the thought of being able to spar perked Ed up enough as he was no longer glaring at the ground.

They only had to wait a few more minutes before Dr. Frost came to tell them they were ready. Immediately, Ed’s demeanor changed. He lost all color in his face and Mustang was nervous he’d pass out. But, the kid took a deep breath, stood up, and followed Frost into the room. Mustang was surprised they didn’t already have the leg out as they had with the arm. Perhaps they were trying to keep Ed from seeing it and freaking out even more. Regardless, Ed sat down in the chair, jaw clenched and body fidgeting. The fidgeting got to the point where Mustang was worried he’d vibrate right out of the chair.

“You’ll be fine, brother,” Al said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah. Of course, I will. It’s just a stupid leg. I’ve done this a dozen times before,” he said. His breathing was shallow and his eyes tracked Frost’s every movement.

“Are you okay, Fullmetal?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. They’re not... they’re not going to do this more than once. Right?” He tore his eyes away from Frost to look up at him, once more looking like the actual twelve-year-old

that he was.

“Of course not. Remember, you’re not in that warehouse. You’re at the hospital with trained professionals. They’re not going to do it more than once.”

“Yeah, but if they do?”

“They won’t.” *I’ll turn them to charcoal if they do.* “Take a deep breath. You’re safe. Al and I are here. No one is going to hurt you.”

“Ready, Mr. Elric?” Frost asked.

Ed looked at Mustang and Al, seeming to search for something. Mustang didn’t know what. Whatever it was, Ed must have found it because he turned back to Frost and nodded.

“Yeah. Let’s get this over with.”

“Excellent. And how are you feeling today? Any pain? Trouble sleeping?”

He shook his head. His right leg was bouncing up and down and his hands were shredding this coat. Mustang put a hand on them to stop before he completely destroyed the garment. Frost made no mention of it.

“Great. I’m going to put your leg on this tray here. The nurse already took your vitals. Correct?”

“Yeah.” He said through gritted teeth. “I hate hospitals.”

“I don’t think anyone likes hospitals, Mr. Elric. Don’t worry, you’ll be done in a few minutes and then you can go back home. Colonel Mustang, Alphonse, if you want to be on either side of him, you can. We’ll just need easy access to the port on his leg.”

He heard Ed inhale sharply. He reached down and squeezed his shoulder. “It’ll be alright. You’re safe here. Al and I won’t let anything happen to you and you’ve done this before. You know it’ll be over quickly.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m safe here. Definitely safe here.” Ed said, nodding. He was looking pale and staring at nothing.

Mustang knew today wouldn’t be easy. He knew Ed would be on the verge of panicking. He just wasn’t prepared for how bad it was going to be. And they hadn’t even gotten to the leg yet!

“I changed my mind. I can’t do this.” He made to get up.

Mustang quickly sat beside him and put his hands on his shoulders. Not enough to trap him, just enough to ground him and calm him down.

“You’re safe here, Fullmetal.”

“I know that. Totally safe here. I just decided that I’ll use the prosthetic for the rest of my life. Lots of people don’t have automail and they manage to live rich and fulfilling lives. Why can’t I be one of them? Besides, I have my arm back on and that’s good enough. No need to be an overachiever and have two automail limbs.”

He heard something moving in the background. Frost and the engineer hadn’t said anything and were likely moving ahead as planned, no matter what Ed said. Which meant it was up to him to keep him calm until this was over. He knew that if they could just get through the initial reconnection of the nerves, Ed would be fine. He just had to get them there.

Al looked at him, helplessly. He had probably never seen Ed so worked up before.

“Edward, look at me.”

Ed tore his eyes from whatever was happening in the background to look at him. He kept his gaze locked and ignored everything that was happening around him. His only focus was on Ed.

“Look at me. You’re not back there. You’re here, at the hospital. You’re safe.”

“Can I really be sure? I mean, you were there with me. Fake you, at least. Not real you, obviously. What if I’m still there? What if this has been one long hallucination?”

Shit, they were losing him, and fast. He was already looking for ways to ignore reality. He might shut down completely if he didn’t get this under control, now.

“Did you ever see me?”

“In my dreams. Yeah.” His breathing picked up. His entire body was shaking.

“Do you want me to pinch you to prove you’re awake?”

“You’re an asshole if you pinch me like this, bastard.”

Mustang couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah, I suppose I am. But I also know the dreams you had and what happened during them. Al and I are not asking you to do the transmutation. You’re in a different location than the warehouse. Okay? Does that sound like any of the dreams you had before?”

Ed shook his head. “They’ve changed the location, though. That’s got to be it.”

“They haven’t changed, Ed. You know this. Your brain knows this. You know that you’re not back there. That Al and I are here to help you. And that you are only going to reattach your leg once and then you’ll be done.”

Mustang felt Ed’s leg move slightly and the sound of something heavy and metal being placed on the table. Ed’s breathing picked up once more. He didn’t know if Frost was being an asshole by not waiting until Mustang had calmed him down, or if this was all going according to plan. It wasn’t like he could ask, given that Ed was so close to losing it

completely. He couldn't afford to leave this kid for a second. Even if it was just to turn around and ask them to hold off for a few seconds.

"It's going to hurt."

"Yeah, it will. You know it will. But they're only going to do it once and then you're done. We can go home, get you some hot water bottles for your ports, and relax. Okay?"

"How do you know? They always did it several times in a row. I think ten was the most? I lost count. That's only an estimate."

He moved his hands from Ed's shoulders and touched his hands instead. He squeezed them gently. He thought he could feel the pins that were holding Ed's flesh hand together.

"They're not going to do that. I won't let them do that. I've got my gloves. I'll light them on fire if they try."

Dr. Frost didn't say anything to the threat. They knew each other well enough by now to know he wasn't a threat. Well, he wasn't a threat to Frost specifically.

"But," he continued, "you and I both know I won't have to because you're safe. The people who took you will never hurt you again. And Creta now knows better than to go after you."

"I highly doubt that," Ed said. He turned his head, trying to see over Mustang's shoulder. They couldn't have that. At least, not now.

He put a hand on his cheek and guided him back so he was looking directly at him and not at the leg.

"Believe me, kid, they won't go after you again because they know better than to get on my bad side."

"Really? You think you could take on all of Creta?"

"Yes. And I'd win."

Ed snorted, his breathing finally slowing down, just slightly. His leg was no longer bouncing up and down. "No, you wouldn't. You're too lazy. You'd have Hawkeye and Havoc do all the hard shit."

"That's a good point."

"Are you admitting that you're lazy?"

"No, I'm admitting that Hawkeye and Havoc are formidable in their own right. The whole team is. They'd help me overthrow a country if I asked nicely and had a good reason. And I think they would agree that you and Al are good enough of a reason."

Whatever Ed was going to say next was cut short by the reconnection of his nerves. Mustang thought he might cry, or shout. There was a very real possibility he would pass out. It wasn't

uncommon with automail patients and most of them didn't have to go through what Ed went through. He should have known better than to underestimate this kid.

He did open his mouth as if to scream, but no sounds came out. Instead, he gripped Mustang's hands so tightly, so hard he was worried his fingers might break. But they didn't. And, eventually, the pain must have subsided because Ed did release his hand from the death grip.

"There you go, Mr. Elric," Dr. Frost said, standing up. You're all done. The leg should be working normally."

Mustang was about to thank him and leave when he noticed Ed hadn't said anything. He hadn't moved. He hadn't acknowledged what had just happened. He was still sitting there. Except this time, instead of fidgeting and being a bundle of nerves, he was rigid, back ramrod straight and pupils were blown wide.

"Shit," he cursed under his breath.

"Brother?" Al asked nervously.

"Is he—" Frost started to ask.

Mustang held up a hand. "You three need to get out of here. I'll handle this."

"But—"

Whatever Al was going to say next was cut short by a very painful kick to Mustang's face. He went flying across the room, smashing into some equipment and slumping down in a daze.

"Brother, wait!" Al shouted, probably to chase off after Ed. Shit, Ed. The kid had had a panic attack, or a flashback, or both, and was now running scared around a hospital. He had to get this under control before someone else got hurt.

"Are you alright?" Frost asked, gripping his elbow and pulling him upright.

He tried to push Frost off of him but the man held fast.

"I need to go calm him down."

"And I need to make sure you don't have a concussion."

"If I do have a concussion, it can wait until I make sure Fullmetal isn't running wild all over East City in the middle of a flashback!"

The hospital would have the tools to help sedate Ed if it came to that. But out in the world? Someone might panic and hurt him. They might shoot him or hit him with a car or something. He had to get this situation under control before the kid went through anything else.

Frost sighed and stepped aside. “Alright, but as soon as he’s calm, you’re coming back here so I can check you out.”

“Got it,” he growled, shoving the stunned and frightened engineer to the side and taking off down the hallways to try and find the kids. Each second it took made him more certain that Ed had managed to escape the hospital and was now running around East City in a panic.

“They went that way,” a familiar nurse said, pointing down a hallway towards the emptier portion of the hospital. Throughout the weeks, most of the staff in the hospital learned to recognize Mustang and Al and were even friendly with him.

He thanked her and took off in the direction she pointed. Sure enough, at the end of it, he could spot Al’s hulking armor. He had his hands up and was saying something that Mustang couldn’t quite hear.

He slowed his frantic sprint and cleared his throat.

Al jumped and turned to see him.

“I can’t... I can’t calm him down. He won’t listen to me and I don’t know what to do.”

Some more doctors and nurses were hovering at the end of the hallway. He thought he saw one with a needle in her hand, likely a sedative if they could ever get close enough to Ed to jab him with it.

He stepped closer. He thought this hallway looked like the one he had had his breakdown in weeks ago. Then again, the hallways likely all looked the same. Either way, he remembered being in Ed’s position, curled up on the floor trying desperately to regain control over his emotions.

“I know, Al. Let me try.” He said.

“But... what if he... he can’t hurt me, no matter how hard he kicks me.”

“I’m fine, Al. Just, let me try. Okay?”

Al glanced back down at where Mustang assumed Ed was huddled. He sighed and nodded.

“Okay. Please, help him.”

“I will, I promise.”

He looked over at the army of nurses and doctors still waiting in the wings, ready to sedate Ed if needed. He saw Frost come up behind them and start shooing them away.

Content that he had at least a few minutes to try and bring Ed back down to reality, he took a step forward. Sure enough, Ed was smashed up against a wall, breathing heavily and curled into a ball. His automail arm was raised, poised to strike anyone who got near him. Al shuffled further back, wringing his hands and watching on nervously.

“I didn’t try to hold him down,” he said. “I didn’t know if—”

“It’s fine, Al,” Mustang hurried to cut him off before he could spiral further. “You did well. Just be patient.”

Ed flinched and looked up at him, still panting as if he had run a marathon. Sweat was pouring down his face and it looked as if he had some new bruises. He wondered if the kid got those from falling or running into something.

“Fullmetal?” he said, trying to use his normal commanding tone.

Ed flinched again. “I’m not going to do it.” He gasped, shoving himself further into the corner.

Mustang knelt in front of him. “I know. And you didn’t do it. Do you know where you’re at?”

“You can’t make me do it. I won’t. I won’t do it.”

“I know. And I’m proud that you refused to do it, no matter what they did to you. You don’t have to be afraid anymore. Remember, I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.”

He heard Frost start talking to Al. He couldn’t make out much of the conversation but did manage to deduce that it was about how they’d have to sedate Ed if he wasn’t calm in a few minutes. The last thing Mustang wanted to do was put the kid under. He’d wake up dazed and confused, likely even more combative and panicky than he was now.

“Here, you look cold.” He shrugged off his jacket (he should have had it around the kid from the very beginning) and dropped it on Ed.

Ed gasped, jumped, but quickly grabbed ahold of it and wrapped it tightly around his body. He looked back up at Mustang.

“What do you want?” he asked brokenly.

“I want to help you. Can I hug you, Fullmetal? I think it might help.” Something about weight helped people suffering with anxiety. He remembered reading that somewhere.

“They’re going to turn it off again. I don’t know why they didn’t before, but they’re going to find me and turn it off again. I have to get out of here. I have to... before they make me do it. I don’t want to do it but they won’t stop hurting...” He gasped for air again and started clawing at his throat.

Mustang reached forward to grab his arms. Ed fought him, weakly struggling against his hold until Mustang managed to wrangle him so he was leaning against his chest.

“It’s okay, kid. I’ve got you. No one’s going to hurt you or force you to do anything. They didn’t turn it off because you aren’t at the warehouse. We found you. You’re in a hospital. Okay? You’re safe.”

“No. It can’t be that easy. They wouldn’t... they weren’t... I can’t be out.”

“Yes, you can.”

Ed told him one of the many hallucinations he had involved Mustang asking him to have some faith in him. To trust him that he would find him in time.

“Have some faith in me, kid. Do you think I wouldn’t be able to find you? I’ve got the best team in the country. We found you. We saved you. You are safe now.”

Ed shuddered. “No. No, it’s... they’re going to come back. You’re lying.”

Now that he was starting to calm down, now that he no longer looked like he wanted to fight Mustang, he decided to start grounding him even more. He was so close to pulling himself out of this. He just needed a little bit of help.

“Here, I’ll prove to you that you’re not there anymore. Can you tell me five things you see around you? Anything, big or small.”

“What?”

“Trust me, kid.”

Ed pushed back against him slightly and looked around. “Wall. White wall. Um, you. Lights overhead. Al’s behind you. And then... there’s some sort of medical cart.”

“Good, now were any of these things in the warehouse with you?”

Ed shook his head.

“Great. Now tell me four things you can touch.”

“Really? How is this helping?”

“Trust me, Ed. Four things. Come on.”

“Um, you again.” Ed let his fingers brush against the floor. “Floor. Tile, cold tile, I guess. And the wall. It’s a little bumpy.” His hand faltered for a moment before coming up and grabbing the end of his hair, rubbing the strands between his fingers. “My hair. It doesn’t feel dirty. Or tangled. Or wet. It was tangled and wet in the warehouse. Knotted. It felt disgusting against my face and neck.”

“Don’t focus on that. Focus on what’s going on now,” Mustang said, though he was relieved that Ed was starting to detangle what had happened in the warehouse with what was happening now. “Next up, three things you can hear.”

This time, Ed didn’t fight him or ask why he was doing this. He instead closed his eyes and listened for a few seconds. Mustang could feel his heart rate decrease and his breathing slowly returned to normal.

“You. Or, your heart to be more specific. It sounds like it’s beating kind of fast. You should get that checked out.”

“I’ll bring it up with my doctor,” Mustang deadpanned. “Come on, two more.”

Ed’s brow furrowed. “There’s some sort of beeping, in the background. Sounds like a heartrate monitor or something. And... I hear people talking. They’re pretty quiet though.”

“That’s fine. You don’t need to know what they’re saying.”

“One of them is a woman. There were no women in the warehouse. And they aren’t speaking with Cretan accents. They sound Amestrian.”

“Great. Can you tell me two things you can smell?”

Ed’s breathing and heart rate may have been decreasing, but he was still shaking like a leaf. The only upside was that this pathetic attempt to calm him down did appear to be working somewhat.

“You.”

That wasn’t surprised considering he was still holding him tightly against his chest. Hopefully this time he didn’t smell so much like a bar that had been burned to the ground.

Ed’s nose wrinkled. “That stupid cleaner that they use in hospitals. It’s supposed to smell like oranges or some shit but it doesn’t. It just smells like chemicals.”

“I’ll keep your strong opinions on cleaners in mind,” Mustang said, smiling. “Alright, last one. What’s one thing you can taste?”

Ed’s tongue darted out of his mouth to lick away either sweat or tears that had gathered on his face. He wrinkled his nose. “Salt. I can taste salt.”

“And there you go. Feeling better?”

Ed shuddered and collapsed into Mustang’s chest, wrapping his arms around his waist and squeezing him tightly. “No.” He moaned pathetically.

“Do you at least recognize that you’re not in the warehouse and that you haven’t been for several weeks now?”

He nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about. We knew something like this might happen. And we dealt with the situation. It’s only been a few minutes. I’ve seen flashbacks that can last much longer and cause a lot more damage.”

“But, I kicked you. In the face! You weren’t... no one was supposed to get hurt.”

Right. His nose was still throbbing from that and he would have to deal with Dr. Frost after this. Still, best focus on one thing at a time.

“Kid, you are not the first person who has accidentally hurt me.”

“You’re lying. And sparring matches don’t count.”

“Nope, not lying. There’s a nice scar on my forearm from where Hughes stabbed me.”

Ed froze, then pushed back to look up at him. “Lieutenant Colonel Hughes stabbed you?”

He shrugged. “It was an accident. It started with ‘Hey, Roy, check out this cool trick I just learned!’ and ended with him launching a throwing knife right into my arm. To be fair, his aim has gotten a lot better. And now, as a bonus any time I want him to do something that he doesn’t want to do, I just have to remind him of the time he stabbed me at the academy. Has a ninety-five percent success rate.”

Ed did not seem as amused by the story as Mustang was. He looked over to see Al and Dr. Frost still standing in the hallway, both looking worried.

Ed burrowed himself back into Mustang. “I want this to stop. I want to be done with this. I don’t want to be this fucking afraid anymore. I’ve reattached that fucking leg dozens of times. And it didn’t even hurt as much as the actual surgery and look at what happened!”

“What happened was you had a flashback, which we predicted would happen. Then you calmed down relatively quickly. I won’t have you beating yourself up over a normal reaction, Fullmetal. You and I both know this was never going to be easy, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t worth it.”

“Can we go home now? Please?” Ed said.

“Of course. Can you stand?”

Ed nodded, but still leaned heavily on him as they shuffled out from the little alcove.

“Hold on, Colonel,” Frost said, stepping in front of them.

Right, he still might have a concussion. “Dr. Frost, can’t this wait?”

“It’ll only take a second.” Before Mustang could argue, Frost shined a bright light in his eyes. Grabbed his wrist to take his pulse. And, true to his word, it was over before he knew it.

“Alright, you’re good to go. Call if you start having symptoms.”

“I know. And thank you for your help.”

Ed still wasn’t wearing a shoe on his automail leg, but he didn’t seem to care. He was more focused on putting one foot in front of the other and getting out of the building as fast as he could. Mustang didn’t argue with him or stop him. After all, it wasn’t like the kid was at risk of getting tetanus in his fake leg.

He got them home quickly, not making any detours or stops. He was exhausted beyond belief and had a feeling that Ed felt even worse. All of them practically collapsed as soon as they got through the door. But, as Al helped Ed upstairs and into bed, Mustang couldn’t help but feel grateful. One big hurdle was dealt with. They just had one more to go.

Hughes was a huge help in talking him down after the events at the hospital. Even Hawkeye decided to take pity on him and make up an excuse as to why he couldn't work the next day. He was grateful to his friends for having his back after everything that had happened. And that day off was definitely needed as Ed had regressed so suddenly and sharply, he was afraid he had pushed him too hard and now all of the work they had done to move forward was destroyed.

However, after a few panicked calls to Ed's therapist and many, many hours spent grounding him, he did eventually calm down. After a few more days, he was relatively back to normal. He even went with Al to the library one afternoon and picked up dinner for them all on the way back. It was on that evening that Ed asked if he could give Winry a call and if she could possibly stay over for a few days.

Mustang agreed, happy to see the kid take initiative in his own healing. He wasn't sure what Ed told her on the phone or what her reaction was, but whatever the case, she was coming over on the first train she could catch.

That train happened to be the first train of the morning. Which is how Mustang came to be standing on the platform before the goddamn sun was even up, waiting for a girl he had met like once so that he could take her back to his apartment where she would see Ed still looking like he had been tortured recently. He was not looking forward to anything that would happen today. He only hoped the brothers had enough of a grip on their sanity to stay calm and not freak out.

"The things I do for you, kid," he yawned and snapped his pocket watch closed. In the distance, he could see the lights of the train growing closer. The few people who were also milling about on the platform started to gather closer to the tracks.

He stepped to the side and watched as the passengers started disembarking. Some met up with family members and hugged one another. Others rushed off to complete whatever business they had in East City. His eyes scanned the crowd for bright hair and bright eyes.

"Colonel Mustang, over here!" He heard Winry call through the crowd.

He turned to see her elbowing past some people. A few of them turned to glare at her. She didn't seem to care, instead looking very worried as she made her way over to him.

"Ms. Rockbell, how was your trip?" he asked, feeling stupid for making small talk when he knew what was waiting for her at his apartment.

"It was fine. Is Ed okay? He said he got hurt on the phone. How bad is it? Why is he staying with you? Why didn't anyone tell me anything?" She was getting louder by the second. The same people who had glared at her for shoving through the crowd were now watching them, worried and curious.

"Come on, let's get back to my place where we can explain everything." Though he didn't know how he was going to explain anything.

“You knew he was hurt. Why didn’t you say anything? Why did you keep me in the dark?” she asked, following behind him.

“Because it was their choice,” he said simply. He glanced down at her. Her eyes were downcast and she seemed distressed by everything that was happening. He imagined the same anxiety he had felt when the hospital refused to tell him anything until he could prove he was the boys’ guardian was similar to what she was feeling now.

The frustration of knowing that someone she cared about was hurt but not being able to get any answers from people who could give them to her, it was an awful feeling. He decided to take pity on her and give her a very abridged version of what happened. If only to ease her mind.

“I wanted them to call you earlier, and they wanted to call earlier, but things were.... Complicated. Fullmetal suffered several severe injuries and he and his brother were focused on healing both mentally and physically. This was the first chance they had where they felt like they were ready to tell you. I’m sorry you weren’t told, but their well-being comes first. His automail is fine. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“I don’t care about his automail!” Winry cried. She stopped walking, her entire body shaking as she gripped her suitcase tightly. Around them, more people were stopping to stare.

Great, now he was dealing with three semi-hysterical and traumatized children. One more and he’d have a full set.

“I know,” he said quietly, hoping to calm her down. “I know. I’m not going to lie to you and say everything is fine because it’s not. But Full- but Edward is healing. He’s doing much better now. Come on, they want to see you. And when they do, please go easy on him. As I said, what he went through was complicated.”

Winry sniffled and scrubbed at her eyes, but followed without arguing. God, all of these kids were too stoic for his comfort.

“How mad do you think she’ll be?” Ed asked as he paced back and forth across his room.

“Oh, what if she starts crying? How am I going to handle that? I hate it when she cries. Maybe having her come here was a mistake. Do you think it’s too late to send her back? I’ll pay for her return ticket.”

“Brother, you know she’s going to see you eventually. She deserves to know the basics of what happened at least.”

“I don’t even like that you know what happened!”

“Brother.”

“I’m serious, Al. I don’t like that anyone knows what happened to me. Not you. Not Mustang. Not the fucking military. Having Winry and Granny know... I don’t want them to

know. They didn't even damage my automail so why would they need to know?"

"It's not about your automail, brother. It's about you. And why don't you want us to know?"

"Because." He couldn't think of a good answer that wouldn't just hurt Al even more.

If he were being honest with himself, he didn't want anyone to know because if they knew, that made it real. He didn't want it to be real. He wanted it to be a horrible nightmare that he'd wake up from any minute now. Then, he could go back to his normal life. He could go back to eating things that tasted like lemons. He could walk past a bucket without hyperventilating. He could just fucking exist!

He knew that was a stupid, childish dream. He knew that wasn't how the world worked. He knew that it was real and even if no one knew what happened, that didn't make it any less real. But he couldn't help himself. He didn't want to live with this anymore. He didn't want to live with the nightmares or the scars or the pins in his fucking hand or the constant fear that someone was going to jam his leg into the port over and over and over again until he fucking passed out!

"It'll be okay, brother," Al said softly. "You made through the warehouse. You made it through the hospital. You made it through the leg. You can make it through this too. Winry's worried about you. She deserves to know what happened not because she's your mechanic, but because she's your friend and she cares about you. Wouldn't you want to know if something like this happened to her?"

Damn Al for learning his weak points. It was like he and Mustang were in cahoots, using other people to point out how stupid he was being. Just because he accepted Al's argument didn't mean he had to like it!

"I'm not telling her everything." He snapped. He hadn't even told Al everything. He hadn't told the military everything either.

The only person who seemed to know every last detail of his captivity was Colonel Fucking Bastard. He didn't know how that smug asshole managed to weasel out every last detail. The only thing he was glad about was the fact that he seemed sincere in his desire to help Ed and not to use what happened to make fun of him or something.

If someone was forcing him to be honest, though, he would have to admit that Mustang was a godsend through all of this. He couldn't imagine how much worse off he'd be if he only had Al to rely on. Make no mistake, Al was helpful through all of this. He needed him to be there and to help keep him sane. But there was something nice about having an actual adult to help him out. One that seemed to have gone through a lot of what Ed had gone through. His advice, him being there to help calm him down, his grounding techniques, had all been invaluable to him and the stupid process of going through his pain and fear instead of avoiding it. Without Mustang's help, Ed was willing to bet he wouldn't be doing as well as he was. And for that, he was going to be in the man's debt forever. Even now, with the prospect of facing down Winry looming over him, he felt like he could handle it better because he had Mustang to rely on.

The door opened.

“She’s here. Tell her I’m not home!” Ed hissed.

“Brother, you’re going to have to face her eventually. Might as well get it over with.”

“I’ll get it over with tomorrow!”

“Brother!”

“Edward, Al?” Winry called.

He heard Mustang talking to her quietly. The traitor was likely giving her directions to their very location. And here he thought Mustang was on his side.

“Brother!” Al hissed.

“Fine!” He yanked open the door. “Coming, Winry. Give us a second.” He turned back to Al. “Do I look okay?”

“What, Since when has that ever been a concern of yours?”

“I mean, do I look like I’ve been tortured. Is she going to cry if she sees me?”

“No. Quit stalling and get down there before I make you!”

“I don’t want to scare her—Hey! Put me down!”

Apparently, Al had had enough of Ed’s pathetic attempts at stalling and picked him up, carrying him to the stairs. Ed kept flailing, despite knowing it wouldn’t do anything.

“I can walk, you jerk! Put me down!” The last thing he needed Winry and Mustang to see was Al carrying him like a sack of potatoes down the stairs.

“Only if you promise to quit stalling and go talk to her,” Al said, stopping at the top step.

“Fine, I promise. Besides, what am I going to do? Sit at the top of the stairs?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.” Despite his apparent suspicions towards Ed, Al did put him down.

As much as he wanted to spend the rest of his life at the top of the stairs instead of facing down Winry, he knew it was impossible. So, he kept up his end of the bargain and went down the stairs. At least he had his automail back instead of the prosthetic. That would have made everything worse.

“Hey, Winry. How was your trip?” He asked as nonchalantly as he could manage when he got to the bottom.

She didn’t answer. Instead, she stared at him with tears shining in her eyes and looking slack-jawed at the both of them. Mustang was standing behind her, looking like he would rather be

anywhere but here.

“What—what happened?”

“Um, a little incident with some Cretans. Nothing to worry about. I’m almost completely healed.” He smiled the biggest smile he could muster at her, trying to break the tension.

It didn’t work. She burst into tears.

Mustang briefly raised his hand as if he were about to pat her on the head, but dropped it immediately. He cleared his throat.

“Well, I’m going to go get us something to eat. Don’t burn my house down.” He turned and left before Ed could say anything.

Ed was actually kind of grateful. As much as he wanted Mustang to be around him to comfort him, he didn’t want him to stay. Not for this. He had helped throughout this entire ordeal. He had been there for him at his lowest. He was going to continue to be there for him even after Winry left. But this was something Ed needed to do on his own. And he could do it. He could go through this just like with the warehouse and the hospital and the leg. Besides, this was Winry they were talking about. She had seen him that night after they failed to bring back mom. She was the one who did his automail surgery and saw him delirious with pain. She had been there through all of it. And she would be here now.

“What happened? Why did I get a call saying you had been in the hospital for a month? Why am I just finding out about this now?”

“To be fair, I was unconscious for a week of the hospital stay.”

“You were unconscious?” Winry cried.

Ed winced and rubbed the back of his head. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I deserve to know what happens to you when you’re hurt. You’re my friend and I don’t want to hear several weeks later that you were injured enough to spend weeks in the hospital. I could have helped!”

“Do you think I wanted to tell you?” Ed said. “I didn’t want to tell anyone. I don’t even like that Al knows what happened. I just... if you didn’t know, then I could pretend it didn’t happen. At least with you.”

“But that isn’t how this works, Ed.”

“I know. And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I don’t think I was in the right headspace to tell you until recently. But I’m telling you now. I’m letting you in now.”

Winry put a hand to her mouth and took a few deep breaths, clearly trying to control herself before she broke down once more.

“Oh, Edward,” she said, her voice shaking, but it had that strength to it that he knew all too well. “You said you had been taken. Did they hurt you? Oh, that’s a stupid question. Of course, they hurt you. Why else would you be in the hospital?”

He stepped forward, wrapping his arms around her. She broke down once more, hugging him tightly and crying into his shoulder. Her crying made him tear up as well. He still hated that he was crying more in these past few weeks than he ever had in his life. He was tired of it. Tired of his eyes being dry and itchy afterward. Tired of his throat and head hurting. Tired of scrubbing the tears and snot away with scratchy sleeves.

“I know you probably want to know everything,” he said, hugging her even tighter. “But I really don’t want to talk about it with you. I don’t want to relieve it all over again. I just—is that okay?”

Winry gripped him hard and sobbed even harder. Al joined the hug. The difference between the cold, hard metal and Winry’s soft warm clothes were almost too much for him. But it also wasn’t enough. He wanted more. More hugs, more tears, more proof that he was alive and had made it through something very few people managed to survive. He was here, with his arm and leg back on, his brother and best friend hugging him.

“Of course, you idiot. I just want to know when you’re hurt,” Winry said, sniffing and shaking against him. “The colonel said your automail is fine. Is that true?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s true. Arm and leg are in perfect working order. You can take a look at them if you want.” He wasn’t afraid of Winry attaching and reattaching his leg. Especially since they were in Mustang’s apartment, he felt safer, more secure in potentially going through the reattachment again.

Besides, Mustang had already sent Pinako the run-down of what happened with the automail. Ed didn’t want him to, but he said it was important that at least one of his mechanics know about the trauma just in case there were long-term consequences. From the looks of it, Pinako hadn’t told Winry. She probably would, eventually, but for now, Ed had to live with the fact that the bastard was right. After spending so much time with him, he was starting to think the bastard was right more than he was wrong. Not that he would ever tell him that. His ego was big enough.

Finally, everyone stopped crying and detangled themselves from the pile on the floor. Ed wasn’t sure how they even ended up there. They made their way to the living room where Winry spent some time examining his arm. Despite the fact that he felt more comfortable with her looking at his leg, he didn’t want her to just yet. She was okay with this and didn’t bring it up again, even though he knew she was burning with questions. Maybe before she left, he’d let her look at it. Just to prove to himself that he was going through his fear and not avoiding it any longer.

After she finished with the arm, they settled down on the couch and spent the time talking. They didn’t talk about what he had been through and it relieved him more than he could ever express. It felt like he was finally regaining control of his life and moving forward.

About an hour later, Mustang came back home. He hadn't even realized he had been gone for that long. He wondered if he was trying to give them space and enough time to talk and settle down before barging back into the apartment.

"What the hell? Did you buy everything in the bakery?" Ed asked as he eyed the dozens of bags Mustang had managed to get through the door, each of them bulging with pastries. It looked like he had cleaned them out of everything they had in stock. How had he managed to carry all of them back to the apartment?

Mustang looked down at the bags. He scratched his neck, which Ed had figured out was a sign he was embarrassed. "They were having an end-of-the-month sale," he lied.

"At the bakery?" Al asked.

He cleared his throat and looked at them with that sharp gaze that could normally make people wilt. Ed learned very quickly not to be afraid of that gaze. He wouldn't say Mustang was all bark and no bite. He certainly could wreck anyone who stood in his way, but he did learn that Mustang was more bark than bite when it came to him and Al.

"I was also unaware of what Ms. Rockbell might want or any dietary restrictions she might have."

"Hey, don't use her to justify your poor spending habits, bastard!"

"Besides," he continued, ignoring Ed. "Fullmetal will eat anything we don't consume."

"Oh, thank you," Winry said as she began to dig through the bags. She eventually pulled out what looked to be a mini quiche. "You didn't have to spend all of this money. I would have been fine with anything. Besides, I'm already causing you enough trouble by staying here."

"Nonsense. Besides, anything I spend on you I'll take out of Fullmetal's paycheck."

"What? I didn't ask you to do this, you bastard!" Ed seethed.

Mustang walked past him and ran a hand through his hair. Ed seethed even more, even if he did like when Mustang did that.

"And yet, I did it anyway. You're welcome."

Ed twisted around to continue the argument.

"Brother, just eat the cake," Al sighed, shoving into Ed's hands what was, indeed, a full-size chocolate cake. Alright, that was weird, even for Mustang. Who goes to a bakery for breakfast foods and comes out with... Hang on, Al was handing him another full-sized cake. And another. And one more. Seriously, was Mustang briefly possessed by some sort of cake-loving ghost?

He came back into the room with knives, forks, and plates, handing some to him and Winry. Ed glared at him until it hit him what Mustang had just done. He couldn't help but grin.

“What?” Mustang asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Oh, nothing. Just happy to be eating cake.” Ed said, digging into the treat in front of him. It had buttercream frosting and three layers.

“What are you up to?” He hadn’t even touched his own fully loaded bagel, still studying Ed.

“Just thinking about what Lieutenant Hawkeye is going to say when she finds out you gave me a cake for breakfast instead of something more... nutritionally sound.”

This time, it was Mustang’s turn to have the color in his face drain. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, but I would. Don’t worry, I won’t tell her. But, you never know when I’ll need to ask you for a favor.”

Mustang shook his head and finally started eating his bagel. “You are evil, you know that? Absolutely evil in every way. Can you believe him?” He asked Winry.

“Yep. I grew up with him. You wouldn’t believe the amount of blackmail material he has on everyone in Resembool.”

“Brother really is the worst,” Al sighed.

“Hey, you guys are supposed to be on my side, not his!”

Al handed him yet another cake. Okay, so maybe this was the most awkward thing Mustang had ever done around him, but it was still nice. He had his friends, his arm and leg, his sanity even after everything. He knew things were far from over. He knew that despite putting his leg back on and talking to Winry, he hadn’t come out the other end of anything yet. But he had a start. He had support. And he had about half a dozen full-size cakes at his disposal. He could keep going until he was out the other side. And for now, just knowing that, was enough.

Chapter End Notes

When I first started writing this fic it quickly got very long. I mean, with this chapter we're well over 100,000 words. And while I do like the story (obviously, I wrote and edited it) I was getting tired and drained emotionally from all the heavy stuff. I wanted to move on. I wanted to work on something different. That being said, it's always stuck in the back of my mind as not being finished. They didn't tell Winry what had happened and the leg and arm still weren't on. Ed had started to heal, but there was still a long road of recovery ahead of him. So, after I finished up Nugatory Night, I finally felt ready to return and deal with some of the loose ends that I had left dangling previously.

Is Ed 100% healed? Absolutely not. Not even close. But am I finally happy with how this fic ended? Yes, I am.

Anythings, thank you for reading. I hope everyone who is celebrating a holiday this December enjoys those holidays. And to those who aren't, enjoy a lovely weekend!

End Notes

Re-reading popular YA media as an adult is a wild trip. When you're like nine (I can't remember exactly how old I was when I first started reading FMA) you think 'Ed's not that young. He's older than me which makes him practically an adult!' And then when you're an adult you're like 'What the hell? Why did anyone sign off on this? Why are two children left to their own devices? Everyone here is an awful human being. I can't believe any sane person would ever sign off on this. Why is no one horrified by the fact that a twelve-year-old is taking on serial killers and terrorists?' Another thing that I noticed is a lot of children's fiction tends to put their character's starting points at around the same age. Pokemon trainers start when they're ten. Ed joined the military when he was twelve. Harry Potter got into school at eleven. Even Naruto became a ninja at 12 (yet another series that has child soldiers). What is it about ten- to twelve-year-olds that makes them prime 'throw them into danger and see what happens' material?

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