

## Two Steps Backwards

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# Two Steps Backwards

by [ellebells](#)

## Summary

“I know that, I just-” Ed cut off, before letting out a sigh sharp enough to slice stone. “It.. Reminds me of Mom, seeing you like this.”

Al thinned his lips, but didn’t speak, giving his brother room to elaborate.

“You have her face, you know. I’ve always been jealous of that, because I look more like the old bastard,” Ed commented under his breath. The flippant tone his voice carried juxtaposed his grimace, like coating a pill of cyanide in honey to make the process of eating it easier.

Al kept his own opinions locked up a moment more so he could give Ed the chance to get anything else he wanted to say out there. His brother seldom stayed vulnerable for long. He didn't want to interrupt.

As Al stared, waiting, Ed shrunk under his gaze. His expression walked the tightrope between guarded and thoughtful. It was as if he were trying to make his thoughts seem more like spit-balled ramblings than anxieties that had plagued him ever since Al emerged from The Gate with skin shades too pale and earthquakes rattling his frame with every feeble step.

Or; Al's recovery is slow, and that's a scary thing for a brother who's just barely gotten him back.

## Notes

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

Ed cracked the door open and popped his head in, "Hey."

"Hey," Alphonse said warily, alchemical book in one hand, and the other resting under the warm patterned quilt Teacher had sewn for him as a gift.

He hadn't imagined she was skilled in that regard until she'd stormed into his room, thrown an absolute beast of a covering on his feeble hospital bed, and announced that she was heading back to Dublith.

( She crossed her arms, huffing, "Next time you turn up at my house, it better be for a cup of tea or something equally stupid. You two boys have a knack for stirring up trouble, and it's giving me grey hairs," her glare softened and melted away like the sun heats the last remnants of winter, leaving something warm, *nurturing*, in its wake, "Stay safe." )

He guessed she needed to keep them on their toes somehow, though- if the random punches she threw their way in the name of "training" weren't enough. ( Although she was much gentler, now that they weren't her students, and Al's bones were on the same playing field as a grandmother with a severe case of arthritis. ) It wouldn't be in her character to lay out her skills from the beginning. She enjoyed being unpredictable.

Ed, however, had clearly lost his knack for catching others off their guard, because he was running through a well established routine. The one where he barged into Al's room, opened his mouth, closed it, glared at nothing in particular, and swiftly changed the topic to something inconsequential.

Just like he had yesterday. And the day before. And, you'll never guess it: the day before that.

So there his brother stood, in the doorway, hands wringing in the slight (obvious) cautious (worried) way they always did when words sat under his tongue and he kept them hostage, hidden away from scrutiny.

Al debated if he'd finally had enough of dancing around the obvious, or if he should keep quiet and give Ed the opportunity to unclog the verbal block that festered ever since The Promised Day by himself. Contrary to his scream-now-talk-never attitude, though, Ed was actually quite sensitive. That meant Al had to know when to push and when to let his brother do the conversational work for him.

But if he didn't point out the elephant in the room soon, it was just going to keep rampaging until it ran its course. Ed was stubborn, and that could take months. Absolutely *not* an option.

Al was incredibly, nearly painstakingly patient by nature, but he was also an Elric at heart. The Elric style of communication was *not* manipulative smiles sprinkled in between convincing words like Mustang utilized, nor the sentimental feel-your-feelings-*or-else* that Winry was so fond of.

No, it was scientific and precise. They were great at handling facts. Emotions? Not so much.

So Al opened his mouth and said, incredibly candidly, “You can stop fretting over me now, brother. I’m not going to disappear if you look away too long.”

He claimed he had patience in spades, not that he lacked snark altogether.

The book he’d been thumbing through was now sitting face down on his lap, the pages crinkled, its worn leather cover dull even under fluorescent lights. He ran his fingers over it, appreciating the dents and the texture and the countless minuscule details he took for granted as a child.

“Psh,” Ed waved his hand lightly, shooing away the remark in a way Al guessed was supposed to be flippant and unassuming, but with the crease in Ed’s eyebrows, and the way he coiled his shoulders a smidge too close to his ears- it just appeared strained, “I’m not fretting,” he said, frettingly.

“This is the 10th time you’ve checked on me today-”

“*Wrong*, it’s my only my 7th-”

“And you wouldn’t even leave my side to use the bathroom until a few days ago-”

“That was one time!”

“Brother,” Al sighed, 3 parts worry, and 1 part frustration. “You’re a terrible liar, and you’re driving the both of us half mad. I’m okay,” he smiled, reassuring, “Really.”

That didn't soothe his brother, rather, Ed rubbed his temples in a way Al was sure he picked up from Mustang, and entered the room fully with a huff, shutting the door with an obnoxious thump. Using all the grace of an angsty teenage boy, he begrudgingly plopped down onto one of the grey metal chairs that sat near Al’s bedside.

He was only a few feet away, but his stare made it obvious he was somewhere far off.

“You’re really thin, Al,” he said eventually.

“Yes,” Al said. “I know.”

“It’s fucked up. You shouldn’t look like-”

Ed waved his hands around, trying to make some kind of gesture. Al got the gist of it: *you look sick and that scares me*.

“That,” he finished.

Ever so eloquent with his words, wasn’t he?

Al frowned. Honestly, this wasn’t an easy conversation for him to navigate, either. Both of them had a lifetime of trauma that chipped away at their psyche anytime their minds

wandered outside their allotted plot of “stress free” thoughts, but Al was the only one who could admit that- even if only partially. Misery loves company, and damn it if he wasn’t one hell of an unwilling host when the moon gleamed through the cracks of his armor as his metaphorical mind raced with unpleasant memories. Evenings spent with nothing but silence and his own musings as his only source of mental stimulation gave him a lot of time to process. Maybe even too much.

Ed, however, rarely had to rest- truly rest- unchaperoned with no goal or responsibility, since before they were enchanted by alchemy books full of forbidden knowledge, and the seeds of desperation were sowed throughout the cracks their grief caused until they bloomed and became a sin.

“Brother, you’re not supposed to look the way you do, either,” Al said, “I promised I’d get you your limbs back, but you’ve only regained your arm.”

Ed cast his ever-present glare down to the tiled white floor and muttered, “That’s different.”

“Is it?”

*“Obviously.* You don’t deserve to be cooped up like this, after everything. You should be out experiencing the world, not stuck in a damn hospital for the next 6 months,” Ed grumbled, scuffing the sole of his shoe against the ground, his arms crossed.

“Nothing ever goes according to plan for us, you should know that by now,” Al teased with a soft shake of his head, “And the time will fly by before either of us realize it.”

“I realize that, I just-” Ed cut off, before letting out a sigh sharp enough to slice stone. “It.. Reminds me of Mom, seeing you like this.”

Al thinned his lips, but didn’t speak, giving his brother room to elaborate.

“You have her face, you know. I’ve always been jealous of that, because I look more like the old bastard,” Ed commented under his breath. The flippant tone his voice carried juxtaposed his grimace, like coating a pill of cyanide in honey to make the process of eating it easier.

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There was more to what Ed was stating than he was letting on, but reading between the lines of his brother’s mannerisms was a skill Al had picked up before he could tie his shoes.

“We’ve seen a lot of people die, brother,” Al said carefully.

Ed hummed in agreement.

“You know I’m not going to be one of them, right? Not anytime soon.”

“She looked frail, too, though, towards the end,” Ed said quietly. He closed his eyes, his small fingers tightening around the fabric of his sweatpants as he recalled moments better left untouched. The kinds that Al was sure he’d kept buried behind countless walls only for them to resurface at the worst times. He knew that because he knew his brother, and also because he knew himself.

The dark blue hoodie that replaced Ed’s usual offensively red coat was a few sizes too big for his frame, and its wrinkles pooled over each other, smothering his body in fabric. He kept his words as shielded as his clothes kept his figure, and held his tongue with a cautiousness that was borderline concerning, drawing his syllables out, leaving pauses sprinkled in between his phrases. “I’m.. sure you remember how she couldn’t even raise her hand without it trembling.”

Al understood his implication. He couldn’t exactly do that yet, either. His atrophied muscles didn’t allow him much movement other than sitting in bed and clenching his fist. He could barely write.

“I’m getting better, though,” Al said. “My voice doesn’t shake as much when I speak anymore, see? And I can hold myself up enough to read,” he motioned, keeping his hand as steady as he could, to the book sprawled in his lap.

Ed’s eyebrows furrowed and showed that the gears in his head were turning rapidly, and his thoughts were already miles ahead of reality. He carried a touch of anxiety with him at all times- Wandering eyes, tensed shoulders- and it made him incredible in a fight, but hindered him at times where his mind was left to traverse the possibilities unchecked. “The doctors said your immune system is compromised, and it’s still flu season-”

“You’re working yourself up over hypotheticals, brother,” Al interrupted, expression severe, but not without warmth. His throat was tight, and it strangled every breath he raked into his weak lungs- talk of death, even after everything, had a tendency to evoke his more sensitive side.

Ed clasped his hands in his lap, and tilted his head down until overgrown bangs shrouded the top half of his face in a wall of gold, “I just got you back,” he said. Al could hear the grit of his teeth. His words had a lisp to them that signaled a clenched jaw was the only thing holding back a waterfall of emotion from bursting through, “What if something happens while I’m not looking?”

“It won’t.”

“It might.”

“It *won’t*,” Al repeated, more firmly this time, “Do you really think I’d go down that easily, after all this? I didn’t help stage a coup only to die in a hospital, and besides, Truth has had enough of me hanging around The Gate. I think if I came back this early, it’d just kick me right back out.”

Ed mulled over that before chuckling, a sharp breath escaping his nose, “Probably,” he agreed. He fiddled with the drawstring of his sweatpants, his cheeks gaining a red tint that showed Al that he’d probably come to his senses enough to be embarrassed, “I’m being stupid, aren’t I?”

“A little,” Al joked, tilting the edges of his lips into a smile, “But that’s okay. At least I know you care.”

Ed’s head perked up, “Of course I do, you’re my little brother,” he responded, instantly. Like it was instinct, “We’re all we’ve got left.”

“Well, except for Winry,” Al quipped.

Ed rolled his eyes, but it lacked any real vexation, “Right. And Hawkeye, too, I guess.”

“Teacher.”

“The chimeras.”

“The Colonel.”

“Ugh, don’t lump *him* in with the rest.”

“I guess our family has grown quite a bit,” Al said thoughtfully.

“Yeah,” the worry lines on Ed’s face softened as he said, “Maybe it has.”

The air was noticeably lighter, and the hospital room filled with calm buzzing, courtesy of the breeze that steadily blew through the floor vent. Outside the sun dipped down into the horizon. It shimmered past gaps in heavy clouds, and crept through the window blinds, peppering golden streaks of sunshine around the room. The light breathed life into the surroundings, painting the uniform white walls and floor with a golden radiance.

Ed toyed with a strand of his loose hair, and twirled it around the edge of his finger, tugging on it twice, before letting go and slumping down even further into his seat. His posture was remarkably bad, even for him, but Al chose not to comment.

It didn’t take long before Ed’s stomach growled ferociously, shattering the stillness. He looked down at it, scowling, and asked, “Do you want anything from the cafeteria?”

Al licked his chapped lips at the prospect of eating, before saying, “Stew would be nice.”

He still had trouble with solids. It hadn’t been more than a few days since he was let off of the IV, and even the mildest dishes gave his stomach trouble.

“Gotcha,” Ed stood from his seat and stretched his arms above his head, letting out a massive yawn as he arched his back. He padded towards the door, socks sliding against the linoleum tile, his feet barely making noise beyond a soft shuffle. He rested his hand on the brass knob, and without looking behind him said, “I’ll be back in a bit.”

“You always are.”

Ed snorted, and Al could hear the grin in his voice as he muttered, “Smartass.”

“Idiot.”

Ed shook his head, but didn’t retort. He hovered for a lingering instant before he left, the door clicking behind him.



## End Notes

Thank you guys SO MUCH for reading!! I've always headcannoned that Ed worries a lot about Al's health post-Promised Day, so this fic is a manifestation of those thoughts. I wrote this in a frenzy over the past day, so if there are any errors, please feel free to correct them.

I hope you're all in wonderful health, and that life is treating you well <33

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