

human transmutation as metaphor

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human transmutation as metaphor

by [leapin_lizards](#)

Summary

When the time comes, Roy says no.

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what it says on the tin. character study leading up to and directly following Roy's role in The Promised Day.

Notes

I don't know what's wrong with me, but this is what I got out of episodes 58-59, and it kinda haunted me 'til I wrote it down. the archive warning applies to an overarching theme, rather than a specific incident; it is mostly mentioned in underhanded terms, and the r-word is never actually used. the closest we get is a mention of sexual assault carried out by an OC. aside from that, I think the tags cover it.

I really hope I did this justice. betaed by Wendy and Jo; Wendy because she's actually seen FMA:B, and Jo because she's my go-to beta even if she hasn't seen the show. I am told that I use too many run-on sentences. also there's a pun referring to the fact that fullmetal actually refers to stubbornness; I left it in despite the fact that it makes very little sense, because I like it.

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

When Roy is ten years old, one of Madame Christmas's operatives returns to the hold crying. Roy hears her two floors up, and it is the most frightening thing he remembers hearing, because his aunt's girls don't cry. They'll shed a few tears for pain or anger or hilarity or joy, but this-- sobbing, screaming, horror of the highest order-- is unheard of. He never learns who it was, but the next day he finds Madame Christmas-- no, Chris Mustang, in her office with a dress in her lap. The dress is torn almost beyond recognition, and it smells of alcohol and gunpowder and blood. Roy kneels at his aunt's feet and looks at the dress, and looks at her, and cannot bring himself to form the question.

"Y'see this, boy?" she says to him, shifting the dress between her hands. Roy nods, mute. He has never seen her like this. He has seen her angry; he has seen her pained; he has never seen this horrid combination of the two. It frightens him.

"This, boy," Chris Mustang says, "Is what happens when someone says no and someone else doesn't listen. You understand?"

Roy nods again. "Good," she says. "We'll talk about this again in a few years, but remember. Remember what happens when 'no' is ignored." She balls up the dress and tosses it into the grate. It smokes, and it reeks, but it burns, and then it is gone.

The smell of it, and the lecture, linger with Roy far longer than the actual conversation. They haunt him in Ishbal, where blood and gunpowder and pain become his life. Sometimes they are joined by the smell of smoke and ozone; sometimes the smoke is worse. Alcohol flows through the camps like cheap stand-ins for morphine, and depravity is an itch just below the surface. Roy himself goes out and drinks himself sick after learning that even Private Hawkeye sleeps with a gun under her pillow, unable to trust the safety of her own camp.

He never sees the horror that everyone knows about, but he hears it. He smells it on the other officers. It mingles with alcohol and blood and gunpowder and it steals into his dreams. He never mentions it to Maes, but Maes knows. He never mentions it to Riza, because Riza deserves to avoid its mention.

The so-called war ends, but its spirit follows Roy through promotion and assignment and transfer. It whispers at him in the halls of East Command, in the rumors that a man of his combined age and rank tend to generate. Terms like *Hero of Ishbal* and *Human Weapon* prevail, with others like *Attack Dog* and *Mass Murderer* just behind, but the worst are the ones whispered in dark corners where it is supposed no one will hear. Phrases like *warming better places than battlefields* get lewder with alcohol and make unnecessarily elaborate accusations about the nature of his rise through the ranks. He doesn't make mention of it. They say worse about Riza, despite her record, despite her accomplishments.

He builds himself a reputation, which has the dual benefit of drawing eyes away from his ambition and building rumors other than where he spent his nights in Ishbal. The insinuations remind him too much of his aunt's lectures for his comfort, and they steal into his nightmares.

He doesn't mention it to Maes, but Maes brings it up anyway. He shows up in East City on the weekend, with no pretense but with a whole pan of Gracia's quiche, and he eats half and

makes Roy eat the other half and they talk. They talk about ambitions, about coping mechanisms, about Maes and his work back in Central, and inevitably Maes leans forward and rests his elbows on the table and says, “Roy, I hear the rumors.”

“You’re in intelligence, Maes, I figured you heard everything,” Roy replies, resting his head on his knuckles. “They’re wrong, of course. I made my way on my own merit, if one can even call it that.”

“You mean you made your way by killing gratuitous numbers of people, and not by blowing them,” Maes says, and Roy flinches.

“To put it bluntly, yes,” he says. Maes frowns.

“There’s nothing in your history-- as you’ve told it to me-- to suggest you...” he trails off, but Roy picks up the hint anyway.

“No,” he says. “Not me. But with my mother’s background...”

“You mean your aunt?” Maes says.

“She’s close enough,” Roy says. “There was an... incident, with one of her operatives, when I was young. I never learned who, but the girls who work for Madame Christmas are practically family. It affected everyone.” He gets the instinct to reach for the bottle stowed on a high shelf, but the thought of the smell immediately turns his stomach. Maes narrows his eyes behind his steeped fingers.

“Do you know the numbers?” he says. “In the military?”

“I have a vague idea,” Roy says. It’s a lie: he knows the numbers. He looked them up himself. They keep him up at night. Maes narrows his eyes again and nods.

“I think you have a special circumstance, as an alchemist,” he says, unfolding his hands to poke his fork into the quiche. “Especially of your caliber. Even in the academy, rumor of your skill and your mentor’s name likely kept you safer than your own rank.”

“And now?” Roy says. His voice sounds hollow. Maes stuffs a bite of quiche into his mouth and chews and swallows and says,

“By now, you’re practically untouchable.”

The thought is little consolation when the Fullmetal Alchemist joins the team and the rumors make an abrupt tailspin. It’s almost a relief that Edward insists on taking his research to the far corners of Amestris, and when Roy’s ribbing evokes a reaction of unbridled venom his relief is certain. An attitude like that quashed rumors faster than any facts might try, and earned a few laughs to boot. It was infinitely easier to deal with rumors of insubordination, reckless endangerment, public disturbance, or superhuman alchemic abilities than... that.

Inevitably, the conversation comes to him: first in the form of a report from the Elrics' last known destination, and then in the form of Jean Havoc. Or perhaps they come in tandem. Havoc comes into his office without knocking and drops two sheets of paper on his desk and stands there without speaking as Roy reads them. He's chewing on a pencil stub like it's done him great personal offence, and Roy suspects that Riza will chew them all out later for wasting office supplies, but as Roy reads the report and Jean's mouth smears with pencil lead the concern flees his mind completely.

Roy sets the report down and braces his hands against the surface of his desk, begging them to stop shaking. Just for five minutes. He smells gunpowder and alcohol and blood: if he closes his eyes, he can see blood smeared against torn silk. Blood seeping into sand and cobblestone.

"Boss," Havoc says, and Roy opens his eyes.

"Was there something you wanted to say, 2nd Lieutenant?" He says. He looks up at Havoc, but Havoc drops his eyes and lowers the remains of the pencil and rubs graphite off his mouth. The set of his mouth and jaw is certain, but the look in his eyes is less so. It reminds Roy of something he saw once, but he doesn't want to remember where.

"You know your name's saved my ass more than once, boss," Jean says. His eyes focus on the desk. Roy's insides clench. "My bunkmate in the academy dropped out the year I graduated. I never asked where he'd gotten the bruises. But a coupla years back, I got jumped in the barracks. Before anything could happen, someone recognized me. 'He's one of Mustang's,' they said, and everyone bailed. Few months ago I dropped your name to another Colonel who was backing me into a wall, and he froze. And you know no one's ever laid a hand on Hawkeye, cause they know she's always at your back." Havoc's jaw clenches. He reaches across the table and taps the report, and Roy notes that his hands are shaking too.

"The kid's gonna need your support," he says. "Nothing's happened, but that doesn't mean it won't."

Roy clenches his fists and unclenches them and they don't stop shaking. "I know," he says, and Jean's eyes flick up to meet his. Roy sets his jaw and nods, with all the certainty he can muster. Havoc takes a breath and nods back. There is an agreement between Roy and his team, they all know. Roy protects his subordinates. He protects them, it seems, even without knowing it.

"Fullmetal has my full support," he says. Jean nods again and summons a half-smirk and leaves the room. Hawkeye enters and gives Roy a tilted, curious look.

"Get a call out to... Hallsport," he says, glancing down at the report. "Get Fullmetal back here. Find him a mission somewhere else. I'll handle the assignment." Riza frowns, and Roy pushes the report towards her. She crosses the room, takes it up, and gives it a quick look: her eyebrows furrow. Her mouth sets in a severe line.

"Done," she says.

“And this report should probably find its way onto General Grumman’s desk,” Roy adds. “This Major Mueller needs to face consequences.” He feels his own face set, grim and hard to match Riza’s. How well they work together. She nods again.

“I’ll see it handled,” she says. “You should probably get back to your paperwork, Colonel.”

Roy grimaces, although the normalcy is a bit of a relief. “Of course, Lieutenant.”

Riza’s face shifts into calm blankness and she leaves the room. Twelve hours later Fullmetal is back in town, raging about Roy tugging on his leash or some such nonsense. Within fourteen hours, Roy gets a call informing him that Major Mueller has been reassigned to Briggs.

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Grief over Maes’s death is pain crawling its way up through his ribcage, pushing against his lungs and stabbing between his heart and sternum and knotting around his windpipe. Following the funeral, he and Riza have the offer of a guest room and a couch in Gracia’s now half-empty apartment. They decline, taking empty rooms in Central barracks instead, and Roy pushes his bed against the wall connecting to Riza’s quarters. On the other side, just before lights-out, he hears the telltale click of Riza loading a pistol.

It takes him forever to get to sleep, and even then his dreams are of blood and sand and the smell of gunpowder, mixed with the memory of rancid smoke and burning flesh and cries of pain escaping through gritted teeth.

He visits Madame Christmas after his transfer, and the sight and knowledge of his foster mother’s enterprise running as smoothly as always does a little to ease his mind. He sits at the bar and drinks a whiskey and listens to the rest of the bar drink and laugh and gossip, and Madame Christmas watches him from the corner of her eye and grumbles that he’s gotten skinny. The pressure against his lungs loosens just a little.

Towards closing time, she sets a glass of water in front of him and gives him a stern look. Roy takes it, and takes a breath, and asks the question he’s sat on for over twenty years. Chris Mustang tells him, and Roy bows his head and sighs, because the woman who haunts him was working the room half an hour ago and she was smiling.

“People survive, then,” he says, looking down at the water glass. “It’s possible to survive.”

“It’s easy for the body to survive,” she says. “It’s the spirit that must be strong.”

Roy, in a moment of irony, thinks *the spirit must be fullmetal*. Then he wonders why the hell he thought that.

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He has been alone for almost four months, his team scattered to the four corners of Amestris and Riza held in plain sight and the Elrics AWOL, when he returns to his apartment on a Thursday evening and finds it occupied. It nearly gives him a heart attack. In fact, it takes

him almost twenty seconds to recognize the blonde youth at his kitchen table as Edward Elric. The boy's gotten taller, and his hair's gotten longer, and he's no longer dressed in gaudy red, though he's seemingly turned it in for a hobo's guise. The boots propped up on the tabletop aren't even the ridiculous heavy ones that used to boost him up a couple of extra inches. They're combat boots likely filched from a military outpost, since caked in mud.

Roy takes about a minute to stare, and then he stomps into the kitchen and knocks on the table and goes to get himself a glass of water as the Fullmetal Alchemist shakes himself awake and calms down.

"The hell was that about, Bastard," he grumbles, when he's done.

"Think of it as payback for all the gray hairs you tried to give me," Roy replies. "What are you doing here, Fullmetal?"

"Excuse me for wanting to visit someone who's never actively tried to kill me," Edward grumbles in reply, then adds, "thanks," when Roy hands him a glass. He takes his feet off the table when Roy sits across from him and adds, "thought about going to see the Lieutenant, but figured it'd do more harm than good. What with her being a hostage and stuff."

"Thoughtful of you," Roy says, because it was. "Where've you been?"

"Here'n'there," Edward says. "Been running with some mercenaries and this guy-- he's supposed to be a friend of mine from Xing, but sometimes he's not. It's complicated." He taps his metal fingers against the table.

"Where's Al?" Roy says. Edward presses his lips together and shrugs.

"I haven't seen him since we parted ways in Baschool," he says. His voice is hoarse. "I miss him a hell of a lot, but I know he's safe, which... it's something."

"I get it," Roy says. Ed looks up at him, eyebrows puckered and mouth opening to protest, and Roy says, "Maes Hughes was as good as a brother to me."

Ed drops his gaze. "Sorry." He pauses, then he looks up again, but judging by his expression the subject has changed.

"When I was at Briggs," he says slowly, "I ran into Major Mueller. From Hallsport, back east. I didn't know he'd been transferred."

"Mueller?" Roy says. He remembers. He doesn't want to remember. "How was he doing?"

Edward frowns. "He seemed tired. And quiet. I went over to say hello, but someone caught me and dragged me off to do... something else. I don't remember." He looks up at Roy.

"Reminds me of that time Riza didn't let me go to the Tucker crime scene, for some reason." His metal fist makes a funny noise when clenched. Roy drops his head and takes a breath and considers how to explain this.

"I got a report, the day I had you pulled out of Hallsport," he says. "Major Mueller had just been confirmed to be sexually assaulting his subordinates." He looks at Edward, and the

boy's eyes are wide, his mouth ajar. It's not shock, but comprehension.

"Wha- what," he says, and then, "Why the *hell* wasn't he discharged? Jailed? That shit shouldn't just stand!"

"There's only so much that can be done about in the military," Roy says, looking down again. "Moving him to Briggs was the next best option. Major General Armstrong severely disapproves of that sort of behavior, in or out of the ranks; under her command, he'd either die or get kicked out or get his act together."

"And you pulled me out of Hallsport to keep me from getting caught up in his shit," Edward says quietly. Roy nods. Edward clenches and unclenches his hands and says, "Thanks, bastard."

"I just did my job, Fullmetal," Roy says.

"I was never really one of yours, though," Ed says. "Not enough to matter."

"On the contrary," Roy says. "I felt responsible enough for you to be grateful when you spent the majority of your time outside the office." He allows himself a smirk. "I didn't like admitting that it was my subordinate causing all that property damage."

Edward snorts. "Megalomaniac."

"Runt."

"I'll *have you know*, I've had a growth spurt. My leg's not long enough anymore-- I had to stretch the metal. Winry's gonna kill me when I see her again."

Roy offers Ed his couch, and the youth accepts. He's gone before Roy gets up in the morning, but he leaves a note: *see you on the promised day. and thanks*. It's signed not with a name, but with a scrawled version of the flamel symbol Edward is so fond of.

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When the time comes, Roy says no. He says no, and he *insists* no, even when Riza is bleeding out and it kills him to watch, he knows there is no way he will do this, and when the chimeras and the Xingese girl join the party he thinks the choice has been taken from him.

As it turns out, the choice *has* been taken from him, but not to his benefit.

He says no. Wrath holds him down and Pride draws the circle and he says *no*, again and again, but they don't listen. He faces Truth, and it turns out Truth doesn't give a shit about circumstance. Truth throws Roy out and he falls through Everything, and when he lands on solid ground he can see nothing.

Edward Elric asks him, enraged and horrified, what he's done. Roy can't bring himself to say that he didn't do anything, but Wrath and Pride explain for him. Edward's anger turns on a dime.

After everything, after Edward Elric (assisted by everyone) beats the hell out of Father and (alone, by choice) brings Alphonse Elric back from the other side, after what remains of the hospital staff stitches up Roy's hands and announces mournfully that his eyes are beyond ordinary help, Roy thinks he comes to terms.

First, though, he curls up on the bed in his otherwise empty hospital room and lets himself despair. His hands hurt; his eyes are beyond the treatment of common medicine; he was put into this situation by the most unfair of circumstances; he has been violated, like an ironic metaphor for something he's feared his entire life. So he weeps, until the ache behind his sternum fades a little, and then he uncurls himself and wipes his eyes and he breathes.

It is possible to survive. His spirit must be strong, his mother said, for otherwise it is liable to implode. Well, he's allowed himself a moment to implode. Now he must be steady.

He calls for a nurse, and asks to be moved into shared quarters with Lieutenant Hawkeye. He learns she's made the same request. He's moved into a double room with Hawkeye. His team visits first in fits and starts, and then in shifts, bringing intentions with them. Roy breathes, and breathes, and they plan. On the rare occasion that he leaves his little brother, Edward Elric drops in to say hello.

It is on one such occasion that Roy dares to bring up Wrath. He cannot see them freeze when he says the name; he feels it, though, the tension and the sudden stillness of the air.

"Dead," Falman says. "After Buccaneer and Fu wounded him, he took off and I didn't see him again, but--"

"He finally died in combat with Scar," Edward reports, voice hard. "He's gone."

"As is Pride," Roy says. Edward grunts a confirmation.

"So you can stop thinking about them," he adds. "Damn glutton for punishment."

"Right," Roy says, and exhales. The rest of the room stutters back into action, and Edward calls a farewell and stomps out the door.

A day later, Knox and Marcoh visit with a solution. Roy accepts, with a qualifier. Havoc gets his legs back; Roy gets his sight; the Elric boys go home to Resembool. Roy's nightmares never leave, the smell of ozone and blank whiteness joining the ranks of smoke and screams and alcohol and gunpowder and blood.

End Notes

I have more feelings about this than I'd like to admit, so if you feel inclined to shout at me about it feel free. and please remember that a like and a comment go a long way to writers, who are gluttons for attention by nature.

multifandom feels explosion on tumblr @captainpeggys. currently on a voltron kick but probably only 'til next week. feel free to drop in and say hi! thank you for reading.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!